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Jews and Italians in Greater New York City, 1880 to World War I

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New York City had been offering refuge and economic opportunity for Jews since Dutch colonial times, first to Sephardic Jews of Spanish and Portuguese origin, later to Ashkenazim primarily from western and central Europe. What the city's Jews could not have foreseen in 1880 was the massive influx of their co-religionists from eastern Europe, which would in a few decades radically alter the size, shape, and character of Jewish New York. Between 1881 and 1914 two million Jews left Europe for the United States, 75 percent from lands of the Russian Empire, the rest primarily from Austrian-ruled Galicia and from Hungary and Romania. Nearly three quarters of these immigrants established residency in New York City. By 1910 Jews from Russia constituted the city's largest immigrant group. The *Jewish Communal Register* of 1917–18 required more than 1,500 pages to catalog the organizations and institutions established by and serving the city's approximately 1.4 million Jews.[1]

The nature and character of those who made up the great Jewish migration cannot easily be described in broad, general terms. Who came and when they came had much to do with economic, political, and even spiritual conditions. During the early years of the migration the bulk of emigres were *shtetl* (small town) dwellers, least prepared of all for urban life and labor, but they amounted to only approximately 170,000 of the two million who were to emigrate prior to World War I. Most of the others hesitated to leave in the 1880s and early 1890s. Quite the contrary, those with industrial skills saw opportunity in the towns of the Pale; others placed their hopes in movements like the Bund (Jewish branch of the Social Democratic Party) and Zionism; still others sought escape and salvation by abandoning their Jewishness and identifying with Russian culture and Russian radical politics.[2] Those for whom religion was of central importance also rejected emigration. They viewed America as a land where spiritual values had no place: "The New World stands on three things: money and money and again money. All the people of this country worship the Golden Calf."[3]

The leading rabbis and their followers never did join the mass migration, but as persecution intensified and economic conditions worsened, Jews representing every other walk of life became part of the flow. By the turn of the century well over half of the eastern European Jews arriving in New York came from urban centers and could be categorized as skilled or semiskilled workers.[4] Official immigration figures for the period 1899–1914 reveal that 40 percent of all Jewish arrivals had been employed in the clothing industry. Among other trades represented in sizeable numbers were building and furnishing workers, machine and metal workers, and food industry workers.[5] Irving Howe points out that some of the arrivals may well have declared occupations which they did not possess in order to get through Ellis Island and many of those who were listed under the category "skilled laborers" were likely to have been "small craftsmen and artisans without industrial experience." But Howe also acknowledges that "the statistics do indicate that the Jews coming to the United States had a considerably better

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preparation for urban life than did most of the other immigrants from eastern and southern Europe."[6]

Particularly after 1905, intense oppression by the czarist government swept a goodly number of well-educated, politically active and cultured Jews into the immigrant stream: Bundists; radicals of all stripes; Zionists; Yiddish poets, authors and dramatists as well as those Russophiles who had sought acceptance through assimilation. The immigrants of the immediate pre-war years mirrored the changes that had occurred within the Pale. Compared with their *shtetl* forerunners they were more urban-industrial in experience and outlook, less likely to be faithful to orthodox religion, and more likely to have received some secular education.[7]

Forty-three percent of the Jewish immigrants were female; 25 percent were children. For other nationalities the percentages were 30.5 females and 12.3 children. The rate of returnees among non-Jewish immigrants was in the vicinity of 30 percent; among Jews from 1905 to 1920, it never rose above 8 percent.[8]

As Jewish immigrants swarmed into the city, occupying the streets and tenements that had been the domain of the Irish and Germans, Yiddish became the dominant language in a 20 square block area from the Bowery to the East River and from Market Street to 14th Street. However, within this district of Jewish settlers and in the Yiddish they spoke could be found variety aplenty. Historian Moses Rischin detailed the district's cultural geography:

> Hungarians were settled in the northern portion above Houston Street, along the numbered streets between Avenue B and the East River, once indisputably *Kleindeutschland*. Galicians lived to the south, between Houston and Broome, east of Attorney, Ridge, Pitt, Willett, and the cross streets. To the west lay the most congested Rumanian quarter . . . on Chrystie, Forsyth, Eldridge, and Allen streets, flanked by Houston Street to the north and Grand Street to the south, with the Bowery gridironed by the overhead elevated to the west. . . . [F]rom Grand Street reaching south to Monroe, was the preserve of the Russians—those from Russia, Poland, Lithuania, Byelorussia, and the Ukraine—the most numerous of the Jewries of Eastern Europe.[9]

To add a particularly exotic note, after 1907 a community of Levantine Jews settled among the Romanians between Allen and Chrystie streets.

These approximately 10,000 refugees from upheavals within the Turkish empire with their distinctive customs, religious practices, and languages were an island in a sea of east European Jews. The majority conversed in Ladino (Judeo-Spanish), but there were also some one thousand Arabic-speaking Syrian Jews and a slightly smaller contingent whose first language was Greek.[10]

Of course, while the various sub-ethnic groups tended to dominate specific neighborhoods, no part of the Lower East Side was the exclusive domain of any one. Also, several commercial streets drew residents from throughout the district; for example, Canal Street became the place to shop for clothing and to purchase religious articles, and one could find almost any item imaginable for sale in the pushcarts that jammed Hester and Orchard streets.[11]

As the Jewish population of New York City grew, the Lower East Side became by far the most congested district in the five boroughs.[12] The area's Tenth Ward, embracing about one half a square mile of Manhattan, was by the turn of the century reputed to be more densely populated than the worst districts of Bombay.[13] By 1900 the Jewish population had risen to 330,000, and the Irish and Germans had virtually abandoned the area.[14]

The Lower East Side was never the only area of Jewish residence in New York City. Though a most impressive 75 percent of the Jews lived there in 1875, the percentage dropped to 50 in a little more than ten years and fell to 28 by 1915. Yet in terms of absolute numbers the population continued to rise to a peak of 542,061 reached in 1910.[15]

New bridges and subways opened Brooklyn up to mass Jewish migration into Williamsburg, Brownsville, New Lots, East New York, Rego Park, and even Coney Island. Jewish neighborhoods also arose in Manhattan's Washington Heights and Harlem and in East and South Bronx. The rapidity and scope of the rise in Jewish population in several of these areas were remarkable. For example, Brownsville's 4,000 Jews in 1890 rose to 60,000 in 1904 and to 230,000 by 1915.[16] In 1904 the Yiddish *Forverts* (*Jewish Daily Forward*) described Harlem as "a Jewish city . . . as busy and congested as our East Side, with the same absence of light and air."[17] As the *Forverts* comment suggests, not all of the Jewish neighborhoods beyond the Lower East Side offered significantly improved living. Slum conditions prevailed in areas such as Williamsburg, the east Bronx, and in the tenements of Harlem which lined the streets between Fifth and Lenox avenues.[18] Furthermore, despite the proliferation of new Jewish neighborhoods, as one historian put it, "the Lower East Side maintained its position as the center of gravity, the focus of intellectual, cultural, and political life of American Jewry well into the twentieth century."[19]

Faced with a rising anti-Semitism in the late nineteenth century, German-Jewish community leaders feared that the eastern European Jews would fan this prejudice. They and the German-Jewish newspapers voiced their concerns with terms like "uncouth Asiatics" and "superstitious vestiges of antiquity," and warned that "only disgrace and a lowering of the opinion in which American Israelites are held . . . can result from the continued residence among us . . . of these wretches."[20]

Despite such sentiments, the German-Jewish community was by no means insensitive to the suffering endured by Jews of the Pale. What the uptown Jews wished for most dearly was to see the victims of pogroms resettled in western Europe.[21] However, western European Jewish community leaders would have none of that. They directed their philanthropy in large measure toward getting emigrants to ports of embarkation to America. Ultimately New York's German Jews had to acknowledge that they would have to share the city with thousands upon thousands of their east European brethren. Something would have to be done about the "uncouth," "jargon-speaking," "superstitious," Eastern Jews, and the prosperous, "civilized" uptowners concluded that it would have to be done in the city and in large measure by them. It was not the poverty and overcrowded conditions of the Lower East Side that posed the great problem but the customs, manners, and practices of the residents. These people would have to be Americanized, which in effect meant they would have to become as much like the uptown German Jews as possible. With seemingly boundless energy the leaders of the German-Jewish community set out to accomplish this goal through the establishment of associations and agencies, the largest of which was the Educational Alliance, designed to provide both vocational and citizenship training.

The immigrant Jews resented the patronizing attitude of those who founded and ran the Alliance, and they resented the hostility toward all things Yiddish so pronounced in some German-dominated organizations. Nevertheless, there was much that attracted the Lower Eastsiders to the five-story Alliance building on East Broadway and Jefferson

Street. And the Alliance directors, while upset by the stiff-necked resistance to aspects of their Americanization programs, learned to be less heavy handed in their approach so that, by the turn of the century, they had become more responsive to the interests of their constituents, even to the point of offering classes in Yiddish language and culture.[22]

The result was enthusiastic participation in numerous programs. From 9 A.M. to 10 P.M. the Alliance conducted classes in literature, history, philosophy, art, music, vocational subjects, and more. English-language classes, offered throughout the day and evening, were popular among all ages. In addition the library, numerous clubs, a gymnasium, lecture series, a day care center, and other facilities and programs drew approximately 37,000 people each week.[23]

Where the German Jews perceived potentially embarrassing problems among the new immigrants, they countered with organized remedies. They established the Hebrew Orphan Asylum, the Clara de Hirsch Home for Working Girls, and the Jewish Big Brothers and Sisters designed to keep the young from straying off the straight and narrow. The Jewish Prisoners Aid Society and the Lakeview Home for Jewish Unwed Mothers directed their efforts at those already in trouble, and the National Desertion Bureau addressed the serious problem of Jewish husbands who out of poverty and despair had abandoned their families.[24]

Poverty, despair, and dislocation ever breed crime, and the Jewish Lower East Side was no exception. While violent crimes were uncommon, other forms of illegal activity, among them arson, gambling, fencing stolen goods, picking pockets, and juvenile hooliganism, victimized the neighborhoods and attracted wide attention. Most disturbing of all was the prostitution that ran rampant on Allen, Chrystie, and Forsyth streets.[25] In 1909 an article in the muckraking *Mc Clure's Magazine* referred to the Lower East Side as "the world's brothel," and the Dillingham Commission reported that three quarters of the more than 2,000 prostitutes brought before the New York City Magistrate's Court between November 1908 and March 1909 were Jewish.[26]

A number of books and articles had called attention to crime among east European Jewish immigrants. However, it was an anti-Semitic piece in the September 1908 issue of the *North American Review* by New York City's police commissioner Theodore Bingham that galvanized the Jewish community, particularly the uptown German branch, to action. Bingham had not only exaggerated the extent and variety of crimes committed by immigrant Jews and Italians, but also argued that Jews had a particular "propensity" for crime. Under pressure Bingham apologized and retracted some of his more outlandish claims, including the charge that Jews, who made up 25 percent of the city's population, constituted 50 percent of the criminal element.[27]

Still the stir caused by the Bingham incident, the reality of criminal activity, and a sense that the Jewish immigrants were generally unruly convinced German-Jewish leaders of the need to take action to bring a semblance of order and unity in the community. Led by Rabbi Judah Magnes they created the New York City Kehillah, an umbrella confederation of Jewish organizations. Launched in 1908, some 200 organizations participated in the activities of its several bureaus charged with addressing issues ranging from improving Jewish education to supervising the preparation of Kosher food products to harmonizing worker-employer relations to dealing with the issue that provided the initial incentive for founding the organization, crime.[28]

The crime problem was the province of the Kehillah's Bureau of Social Morals, which acted as a sort of detective agency, gathering information about criminals and turning its findings over to the district attorney. The Bureau did some good work, but a measure of prosperity and improved living conditions ultimately mitigated the problem. By the outset of World War I criminality had ceased to be a major issue within the Jewish community or to attract much attention from the outside, but the Kehillah itself barely lasted out the war and officially disbanded in 1925. The Kehillah never did succeed in unifying the community. Socialists and labor unions refused to enroll, and many Orthodox Jews mistrusted the organization's secular thrust and its Reform Jewish leader.[29]

For all the attention to the differences between the "civilized" and assimilated Germans and the refugees from the Pale, both groups shared hundreds of years of a common religious and cultural heritage. The Jews of eastern Europe no less than those of the west had a long tradition of communal organization and philanthropic activity, and they lost no time in instituting them in New York. Quite understandably the earlier arrivals sought out familiar faces from their native *shtetlach*. Around these reunions of old country townspeople (*landslayt*) emerged the *landsmanshaft* organizations. The *landsmanshaft* provided its members sociability and a sense of cultural continuity. Perhaps most important, it offered a variety of social services that to a considerable degree relieved them from dependency upon outside charities, among them life insurance, sickness and death benefits, aid in finding a job or housing and, of no small import, burial plots. While these were male organizations, several had women's auxiliaries. Early in the new century some loose, nationality-based federations of *landsmanshaftn* (*farbands*) were formed: a Galician in 1904, a Polish in 1908, a Romanian in 1909.[30] Some of the larger *landsmanshaftn* eventually established vocational or business subgroups.[31]

Probably most eastern European Jewish immigrants at one time or another belonged to a *landsmanshaft*. But there were other sources of aid and comfort in the community. In emergencies family and neighbors often provided assistance. Synagogues, trade unions, and fraternal organizations like the Independent Order B'rith Abraham (1887), the Workmen's Circle (1900), and the Jewish National Workers' Alliance (1912) engaged in benevolent-society activities.[32] As the community grew, so did the number of benevolent organizations; increasingly they were formed along national lines, and some even transcended nationality to embrace all immigrant Jews. With greater resources upon which to draw, they launched projects far more ambitious than those of the *landsmanshaftn*.

One of the most significant of the organizations, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), actually grew out of concerns of one of the *landsmanshaftn* for the need to provide burial facilities for immigrant Jews who died on Ellis Island.[33] Other major undertakings included the Hebrew Free Loan Society and several hospitals, among them Beth Israel, Lebanon, Beth David, the Hungarian People's Hospital, Har Moriah (sponsored by Galicians and Bukovians), and the Jewish Maternity Hospital (founded by a group of Lower East Side physicians).[34] As one scholar put it, "no ethnic group quite as thoroughly enmeshed itself in consociational activities as did immigrant Jews from Eastern Europe."[35]

The urban experiences and cultural traditions with which the eastern European Jews arrived had prepared them far better than most immigrants of their day to take advantage of the opportunities of New York City's world of commerce and manufacturing. By 1900 approximately one-third of the Jewish immigrants were engaged in some form of commercial enterprise, ranging from owners of retail shops to pushcart vendors to door-to-door peddlers.[36] Going from one tenement to the next selling notions or hardware or whatever a housewife might buy was no easy task. Multi-storied stairways had to be climbed to reach potential customers, many of whom "refused to open the door, shouting they didn't need anything. Some did buy a couple of cents worth of goods, but with the air of giving alms, as though to pity a poor immigrant."[37] But for a poor man it was a start, a means of accumulating capital. Abraham, who had been a butcher in Europe, "became a peddler on the advice of his landslayt. . . . He still has hopes of becoming a butcher again. America is young."[38]

The swelling numbers of potential customers pushing into Jewish immigrant neighborhoods did indeed offer opportunity to work and save one's way up the retail ladder from peddler to pushcart operator to storekeeper. An overwhelming majority of the 25,000 pushcart entrepreneurs in the city in 1900 were Jews.[39] As for storekeeping, within the Tenth Ward alone in 1899 were 140 groceries, 131 butcher shops, 36 bakeries, 14 butter and egg stores, 62 candy stores, 21 fruit stands, 10 delicatessens, to mention but a sampling of the 631 food mongers doing business in the area. Religious and cultural demands as well as numbers drove New York City's ghetto commerce. For example, in 1910 five factories specialized in the manufacture of Passover matzos. The Jewish penchant for soda water resulted in the growth of firms producing the product from two in 1880 to more than one hundred in 1907.[40]

For those arriving in the city prior to 1905, the best available opportunity to earn a livelihood lay in the direction of the economy's most rapid expansion, in manufacturing—specifically in the garment industry, which by 1890 had grown to some 10,000 firms employing 236,000 workers.[41] By the end of the century Jews constituted three-quarters of the labor force in this industry; six of every ten Jewish workers were engaged in the production of clothing.[42]

Jewish dominance was no coincidence. Possibly as many as 10 percent of the eastern European Jewish immigrants were skilled tailors, and many more of the semi-skilled and unskilled had some experience in European garment factories. Learning to press a garment or to run a sewing machine was neither a difficult nor lengthy task. That 80 percent of the garment factories were located below 14th Street and thus within walking distance of most Lower East Side tenements was of some significance as was the fact that during the 1880s some 90 percent of the businesses were owned by German Jews.[43] Though, as we

have noted, a shared Judaism was no guarantee of harmony between German and eastern European, not to mention between employer and employee, workers took some comfort in knowing that in those shops anti-Semitism would not appear and that religious needs would likely be respected.[44] When during the 1890s German-Jewish proprietors began to abandon the garment industry for other branches of commerce and Russian Jews took their places, workers and employers were even able to converse in a common Yiddish language.[45]

The tenement sweatshops began to decline as a result of legal restrictions, starting with the 1892 Tenement House Act. Increased mechanization of production also contributed to moving more of the work into factory lofts. Between 1900 and 1915 the number of workers employed in licensed tenement shops dropped from 21,000 to 5,700.[46] Those who labored in the factories of the primary manufacturers were only slightly better off than the sweatshop laborers. They generally worked a sixty hour week and, according to an 1885 report of the New York State Bureau of Labor Statistics, "the very best workers" were getting ten dollars a week. Top weekly pay for women in the industry that year was six dollars.[47] And part of those salaries had to go toward paying for needles, thread, knives, and, up to 1907, for most workers even their own sewing machines. During the height of the season hours were increased to sixty-five and even seventy a week and so was the pace of production under the piece work or, as it was called, the "task system."[48] Particularly hard times came with seasonal layoffs and, even worse, with economic depressions like that in 1893, when "[by] September it was estimated that 32,000 of the city's 100,000 unemployed were clothing workers."[49]

Garment workers, hardly content with their lot, protested when conditions became unbearable, and resorted at times to strikes when their objections went unheeded. Jewish socialists, with the financial assistance of German unions, established an umbrella labor organization in 1888, the United Hebrew Trades, which published the weekly *Arbeiter Zeitung*. Workers attempted to organize Yiddish-speaking locals of garment workers, bakers, waiters, bookbinders, upholsterers, carpenters, and architectural iron workers, but a true, mass-supported Jewish labor movement did not arise until the second decade of the twentieth century.[50] Striking cloakmakers might accept union leadership, assistance, and even membership, but once the strike ended and until the next crisis, the flow of dues all but ceased. So many of these early immigrants, with their *shtetl* backgrounds and loyalties, their previous experiences in crafts and commerce, were not yet attuned to the idea of working-class identity and organization.

The socialists who sponsored the early unions, though Jews themselves, tended to be hostile to Jewish religion and culture, which they believed hindered the promotion of universalistic ideals. Such sentiments certainly were not conducive for enlisting members among the newly proletarianized immigrants. However, the union cause would be better served after 1905. The failure of the Russian revolution that year resulted in the emigration of large numbers of Bundists, who not only proved to be more able organizers than the earlier socialists but also, as Irving Howe noted, were "'more Jewish' Jewish radicals" [sic].[51] Among them were men who would gain fame as union leaders in New York and nationwide: Sidney Hillman, David Dubinsky, and Jacob Potofsky. While by no means religious, these leaders saw themselves as belonging to the Jewish community and freely drew from religious traditions and historical experiences in their call for unified action to achieve social justice—a secular messianic age—through union and socialist activity. Their speeches, sprinkled with centuries-old Jewish concepts of *tzedakah* (charity) and *tikun olam* (repair the world), drew positive responses from Lower East Side audiences. By offering mutual aid benefits through the unions and the socialist-oriented Workmen's Circle lodges, they succeeded in weakening the bonds that tied the immigrants to their *landsmanshaftn*, heretofore the chief competitor for the Jewish workingman's loyalty.[52]

The years between 1909 and 1914 witnessed the spectacular growth of union membership and power within the Jewish dominated needle trades. From this surge of strikes and union organizing emerged the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers' Union.[53] Twenty thousand workers, mostly young women of the shirtwaist shops, initiated the most dramatic strike, a walkout begun on November 22, 1909. Never before had there been a massive strike of women in the United States. The justice of their cause and the courage and commitment of the young strikers won broad public sympathy and support from the well-bred, college educated reformers of the Women's Trade Union League as well as from members of German Jewish establishment led by Rabbi Stephen Wise. But of all those involved none were more impressive than such youthful worker-orators as Rose Schneiderman and Clara Lemlich. It was Lemlich who on November 22 spurred to action a mass meeting of union members and their supporters. Leaping to her feet, she cried out in Yiddish, "I am a working girl, one of those striking against intolerable conditions. I am tired of listening to speakers who talk in generalities. What we are here for is to decide whether or not to strike. I offer a resolution that a general strike be declared—now."[54]

It was sad irony that many of the women who walked the picket lines in 1909–1910 were involved in an event that aroused even greater sympathy from beyond the ghetto and elicited even greater support for trade unionism from within. That was the aforementioned Triangle Shirtwaist fire of 1911, which took the lives of 146 workers, mostly young Jewish women.[55] The tragedy of Triangle and the small and large triumphs of strikes over a five year period culminated by 1914 in an immigrant Jewish community in which union membership was of central importance. That year the United Hebrew Trades represented more than one hundred constituent unions with a membership exceeding 250,000 workers.[56]

For Jewish immigrant workers, the socialists who so effectively organized and led unions were much admired; the socialism that spoke out for social justice and brotherhood, and often employed traditional Jewish concepts and Biblical references in doing so, was widely applauded. Jewish working people enthusiastically joined the socialist-sponsored Workmen's Circle, enjoying its social and cultural activities as well as its excellent program of life and medical insurance. But, while nearly one-third of the members of the Socialist party in Manhattan and the Bronx in 1908 were Jewish, the vast majority of Jewish unionists and Workmen's Circle members were not enrolled in the party.[57] There is a good deal of truth in Selma Berrol's assertion that "as a group the eastern European Jews were capitalist to the core, willing to endure self-exploitation and privation to amass the reserve that would enable them to become bosses and landlords themselves."[58] Furthermore, in pre-World War I New York City immigrant Jews did not gravitate by experience to ballot-box, party politics. Working-class politics was the arena of the Irish. In 1912, the Assembly district with the lowest percentage of registered voters was the predominantly eastern European Jewish Eighth.[59]

When Lower Eastsiders did go to the polls, they tended to support the candidate and party whose positions at the time were in close proximity to their own. On the national level, until the candidacy of Woodrow Wilson, they generally followed their German brethren in casting their votes for the party of Lincoln. The Republicans' progressive wing in particular had proven responsive to Jewish concerns regarding immigration policy and was vocally critical of Russia's anti-Semitic policies. At the local level two political strains competed for the East Side vote. On one hand stood Tammany, expertly playing the ethnic card. In 1900 the Hall's Henry Goldfogle won election to the first of several terms in Congress. The next year Tammany maneuvered Jacob Cantor into the Manhattan borough presidency, to be followed by a string of Lower East Side Jews to hold that office.[60] On the other hand was a considerable segment of the population for whom corrupt Tammany was an anathema and who voted for candidates—regardless of party—who offered clean government, legislation to improve living and working conditions, strong opposition to immigration restriction, and criticism of czarist Russia. Back in 1886 they had supported Henry George's candidacy for mayor; in 1901 they helped elect Fusionist Party's Seth Low mayor; Theodore Roosevelt's progressivism and defense of Russian Jewry gained considerable Lower East Side support for Jewish Republicans running for state and local offices. William Randolph Hearst, a non-Tammany Democrat, considered an advocate of Jewish interests here and abroad, carried the Lower East Side in unsuccessful bids for mayor in 1905 and for governor in 1906. In the 1912 three-way race for governor the Lower East Side gave the majority of its votes to Progressive party candidate Oscar Straus. He was irresistible: a Jew; a Democrat who served as Secretary of Commerce and Labor in Roosevelt's Republican administration; and in 1905, following the second Kishinev pogrom, chairman of the National Committee for the Relief of Sufferers by Russian Massacres.[61]

The real beginning of Lower Easter Side politics, a politics truly of the area, came in 1906 with Morris Hillquit's candidacy for a seat in Congress, running on the Socialist ticket in the Ninth Congressional district. An immigrant Bundist from Riga, Hillquit brought to the campaign the same message socialist union leaders were espousing in the shops, one of brotherhood, of material improvement, and of protest against corruption and inequality. He ran and lost five times. Despite their enthusiasm, his supporters were unable to overcome Tammany's vote-buying and the cooperative efforts by local Democrats, Republicans, and Hearst's Independent League to ensure his defeat. But another Socialist party candidate, running from the Lower East Side's Twelfth District, won a seat in 1914 on his third attempt. Meyer London, Ukrainian-born labor lawyer, received broad community support in this campaign, including that of the Orthodox religious community and the Zionists, both traditionally hostile to the Socialist party.[62] Perhaps this backing was due to a growing realization that socialism was, as Moses Rischin characterized it, "Judaism secularized."[63] More likely, as Rischin also suggests, the voters showed their appreciation for a much-admired labor lawyer and his platform, with less attention to his affiliation with a party which "In an era of reform, prosperity, and a new internationalism" had "lost much of its distinctiveness and merged into the urban progressive stream."[64]

At the time of London's 1914 election, membership in the Socialist party among Lower East Side Jews had fallen to a handful. In like fashion, the Zionist cause had minimal success during the pre-war years. Many considered it a movement of dreamers, too far removed from the realities of the American ghetto. That the American Zionist movement was fragmented and actively opposed on ideological grounds by leaders of both Orthodox and Reform streams of Judaism as well as by the socialists didn't help matters. When the first World Zionist Congress assembled in Basel, Switzerland, in 1897, the American Jewish community of one million sent only a single delegate.[65]

The limited attraction of both socialism and Zionism was undoubtedly related to the immigrants' view of their new country. If the United States was not quite the promised land, it was at least the land of promise. Such an outlook also contributed to the failure of the messianic Judaism of the *shtetl* to travel well across the ocean. Indeed, the impact of urban life on the centrality of religion among Jews during this period was evident in eastern Europe as well, as the core of residence moved away from rural centers. In cities and towns, secular "isms," secular education, and the day-to-day struggle for survival substantially weakened Orthodox piety. On the Lower East Side in 1913, 60 percent of the retail shops and pushcarts were doing business on Saturdays, the Jewish sabbath, as were most of the garment factories. And Friday nights and Saturday afternoons were favorite times for attending the Yiddish theater.[66]

Jewish culture was too firmly rooted in religious ideals and practices to permit a complete break by more than a few. A minority of New York's East European Jews remained truly orthodox, but most others held to some forms of religious identity, such as joining a synagogue, attending High Holy Day services, observing Passover or conforming to dietary laws. Journalist Harry Golden's father found no inconsistency between his adherence to socialism and his regular attendance at synagogue: "These people are my brethren; they are the people among whom I was raised, and I love them. Dadja Silverberg goes to Shul [synagogue] to speak with God. I go to shul to speak with Dadja."[67]

The synagogue as a place of sociability as well as prayer was by no means unique to the one attended by the elder Golden. From the mid-1880s to World War I immigrants established hundreds of *landsmanshaft* congregations in New York City bearing the names of the towns or regions of their members' origin and often offering services similar to the ones provided by the *landsmanshaft* societies.[68] Despite the multitude of synagogues, the future of religious observance did not look promising in the Jewish immigrant community at the turn of the century. In addition to the secular outlook of the majority, trained rabbis were in short supply, and religious education was in a dismal state, the result of inadequate facilities, poor teaching, and, in many cases, parental indifference. In 1914, when nearly all of the 275,000 Jewish children between the ages of six and fourteen were attending public school, fewer than a quarter of them were receiving religious instruction.[69]

Lack of adequate religious training was not the only barrier between immigrant youth and the faith of their fathers. Religion as practiced in the *landsmanshaft* synagogues appeared foreign to many of them, dominated by Yiddish-speaking elders and lacking in the decorum they associated with American houses of worship. Reform Judaism was too "uptown" German, too far removed from familiar traditions to win more than a few East Side converts, but when Reform rabbi Stephen S. Wise spoke in Clinton Hall in 1911, many young people in attendance were impressed with the "eloquence and sophistication" of his English-language sermons.[70] In 1887 the city's Orthodox leaders attempted to bring some semblance of order and prestige to their community. That year Rabbi Jacob Joseph of Vilna accepted an invitation offered by an association of East Side synagogues to assume the title of Chief Rabbi. But the attempt to duplicate in New York City the

authority such a title bore in the Pale proved fruitless. Lack of unity within the religious community, jealousy, and resentment by many of its leaders, along with simple indifference by the masses, made his job impossible.[71]

The downward spiral of religion in the eastern European Jewish community would eventually be halted, but not by imposing European models of authority or by mass defections to Reform Judaism. Rather, it would in large measure result from significant adaptations in traditional Judaism initiated in New York City and leading to what historian Jeffrey S. Gurock termed "the emergence of the Americanized synagogue."[72] Though its impact would not be felt to any extent prior to World War I, efforts to significantly revitalize Orthodox Judaism culminated in 1912 with the formation of the Young Israel movement. Young Israel synagogues would come to offer decorous services led by broadly educated rabbis able to deliver sermons in English and to converse on matters secular as well as religious. In 1913 the organization of the United Synagogue of America by theologians based in New York's Jewish Theological Seminary marked the formal beginning of a third stream of Judaism in America, the Conservative movement. In their efforts to maintain the essentials of tradition while recognizing and adapting to change, in seeking to achieve "a synthesis of the old and the new, the rational and the spiritual" the Conservative synagogues ultimately attracted many of the children and grandchildren of the immigrant generation.[73]

Young Jewish immigrants were less attracted to religious observance than their elders for reasons stemming from without as well as within the synagogue. There were simply so many other seemingly more exciting, vibrant and, in their minds, more relevant distractions all around them. The schools offered them knowledge, which was highly valued in Jewish culture, and even before emigration most eastern European Jews had subscribed to the idea of secular education as a vehicle for attaining economic success and social status. Progressive reformers and German Jews believed the city's schools provided the very best hope for Americanizing immigrant children, a process involving the elimination of perceived cultural traits as well as introducing new values. As superintendent of schools William H. Maxwell put it, the school, "is the melting pot which converts the children of the immigrants . . . into sturdy, independent American citizens."[74] Children would be taught English, proper manners and hygiene, and receive a solid grounding in the essentials of democracy. Improving economic and social conditions was viewed at best as a possible "by-product of their efforts to achieve a productive citizenry."[75]

In their passion to succeed school authorities could be overbearing and sometimes stumble badly. In the schools of district superintendent Julia Richmond, a German Jew, speaking Yiddish resulted in demerits, and even a trace of accent could bring down the wrath of a teacher. A young Jewish woman recalled an English teacher's response to her reading of a passage from Shakespeare: "I must have had an accent, because she said, 'You people come here and don't want to learn English!' And she really made me feel like dirt."[76] Perhaps the most notorious incident of heavyhandedness occurred when teachers at PS 2 on Henry Street attempted to have students' adenoids removed. It was commonly believed that enlarged adenoids inhibited learning. "When the mothers of the fifty intended victims heard of this, they descended on the school screaming 'pogrom! pogrom!' and the plans for surgery were hastily dropped."[77] Countering such incidents were examples of sensitive, dedicated teachers like the one remembered by her former Lower East Side student as "an absolutely beautiful person. She changed the course of my life. She gave us everything she had and more. . . . And I was introduced to everything that was cultural and good in the United States."[78]

No immigrant group matched the Jews in enthusiasm for schooling. Jewish children were less likely to fail, less likely to be tardy, and more likely to stay in school longer. Jewish parents valued education for more than its cultural contributions. They knew that schooling could lead to jobs. Even their daughters, whose participation in traditional religious schooling had been historically limited at best, were not discouraged from attending public school. Learning to read and write could be a step toward becoming a bookkeeper or typist. Vocational courses in the needle trades were also popular among Jewish girls.[79]

Support for schooling was very much related to the middle class aspirations of the Jewish immigrants. They strongly desired that their children enter the professions or become manufacturing or retail entrepreneurs; many wished their children to attend high school and the City College of New York (CCNY). But during the years of mass immigration, reality stood in the way of educational attainment for all

but a few. For one thing, facilities were limited. In 1914 Bronx and Manhattan combined had only five high schools, and though by 1910 80 percent of CCNY's graduates were Jews, mostly of eastern European origin, the total class consisted of but 112 students.[80] But even if more facilities were available, necessity required children to leave school for jobs at an early age. Tradition still dictated that boys stay in school longer than girls, and in large families younger children were often granted more years of schooling than their older siblings. However, very few Jewish students in immigrant neighborhoods remained in school beyond the eighth grade.[81]

The belief that education provided the ladder of success for immigrant Jewish children has attained mythical proportions. But, it *is* largely myth. The numbers of doctors, lawyers, dentists, and pharmacists produced by the community did increase, approaching 200 in the first three cases and slightly over 100 in the last by 1907. But the relatively rapid mobility of immigrant Jews and their children was attained largely through the crafts and commerce, endeavors that did not require diplomas.[82] The desire to learn, however, was no myth. Forced to leave day school for work, the night became prime education time for thousands. Figures for 1906 reveal that the majority of the roughly 100,000 enrolled in the Board of Education's evening elementary, high school, and Americanization classes were Jewish immigrants, and that 40 percent of the students were women.[83] Probably two thirds of those enrolled were there to learn English.

For those who aspired to higher levels of learning, a variety of institutions offered classes and lectures on all matter of subjects drawn from the fine and practical arts, humanities, social sciences, Biblical and classical literature, and contemporary politics. For example, among the lecture topics offered at New York State's "Peoples University" were "The Times of the Roman Emperors," "How to Breathe," "Pictures from Hindu Life," and "Practical Electricity." Lecture series in Yiddish offered by the Board of Education drew 75,000 people a year by 1915. The sponsors of evening enlightenment were as numerous as the topics: the Educational Alliance, the Peoples Institute at Cooper Union, the Workmen's Circle, the William Morris Club, the unions, the Zionists, and the socialists, to mention but a sampling.[84] And enthusiasm for libraries was no less. A *New York Evening Post* reporter commented in 1903; "The Jewish child has more than an eagerness for mental food: it is an intellectual mania. He wants to learn everything in the library and everything the libraries know. He is interested not only in knowledge that will be of practical benefit, but in knowledge for its own sake."[85]

For information and opinion mixed with light entertainment, readily available and capable of access in the privacy of a tenement apartment, nothing could match the Yiddish newspapers. Between 1885 and 1914 twenty Yiddish dailies had been established, representing every shade of belief and opinion within the immigrant community: from orthodox to secular; from conservative to socialist to anarchist. Most of them lasted a short time, including the *Yidisher Velt*, established by uptown Jews in 1904 as part of their campaign to Americanize the new immigrants. That paper died after two years; William Randolph Hearst's *Yidisher Amerikaner*, launched in 1904 to win support for the publisher among Jewish voters, lasted only a few weeks. By the turn of the century six dailies competed for readers. Though they bitterly attacked one another on ideological grounds, they were alike in many ways. Their style was sensationalist in the manner of the yellow journals of Hearst and Pulitzer. In addition to local, national, and international news, their pages included advice and encouragement in adjusting to the American urban environment. Furthermore, readers were treated to Yiddish translations of classics of western literature as well as to poems, stories, and political tracts by contemporary Yiddish writers.[86]

During the mid 1890s the leading daily was the culturally traditionalist, religiously orthodox *Yidisher Tageblatt*, but with the introduction of the *Forverts (Jewish Daily Forward)* on April 22, 1897, its prominence was challenged. Within a decade of its founding the *Foverts* had become the largest Yiddish newspaper in the world. By 1912 its ten-story plant on lower Broadway was producing a paper reaching 140,000 readers.[87]

As much as any business success can be attributed to one individual, the success of the *Foverts* was due to its brilliant editor, Abraham Cahan. Under his direction the paper espoused a Lower East Side brand of socialism, promoting the cause of organized labor and taking stands on bread and butter issues. Increasingly sensitive to the beliefs as well as the material needs of his readers, Cahan turned away from socialism's traditional vocal hostility toward religion. The socialism of the *Foverts* was never that of narrow, partisan politics or ideology, but rather, in Cahan's words, that of "justice, humanity, fraternity—in brief, honest common sense and horse sense."[88]

With such an approach, Cahan and the *Forverts* played major roles in winning converts to unionism, support for strikers, and votes for Hillquit and London. As committed as he was to the humane ideals of socialism and to the pragmatic goals of trade unionism, Cahan was no less determined to lead his readers into full participation in American life. He spoke out on behalf of public schooling and particularly supported education for girls and women.[89] He explained to his readers the intricacies of baseball, and urged parents to allow their sons to "play baseball and become excellent at the game." On no account must they "raise the children to grow up foreign in their own birthplace."[90]

Under Cahan's direction the Yiddish of the *Forverts* was attuned to the Yiddish of the streets, increasingly adding English words while at the same time stripping away German influences. His most successful vehicle for communicating, for teaching, for helping was the "Bintel Brief" ("Bundle of Letters"), a column introduced in 1906. Through it readers wrote for advice and assistance on a whole range of problems pertaining to living and surviving in the new land. Needless to say, the column had many readers.[91] Abraham Cahan and the *Forverts* were teacher and textbook to thousands of Jewish immigrants.

While newspapers, night classes, and lectures provided educational outlets for the masses, the numerous coffee shops and cafes served as gathering spots for the Lower East Side's Yiddish intellectuals. Many of these eateries had their own special clientele representing a particular political philosophy or cultural specialty. The arguments varied, but the atmospheres tended to be uniform: smoke from Russian cigarettes and an aroma of hot tea and lemon emanating from glass tumblers.[92]

Authors, poets, literary critics—they employed their talents in the service of the immigrant masses and to advance Yiddish culture. Many, like the "sweatshop poets" Morris Winchevsky, David Edelstadt, Morris Rosenfeld, and Yosef Bovshover, had themselves experienced factory labor. Their works mirrored and protested against life in the shops. To the Jewish men and women who attended their lectures and read their pieces in the *Forverts*, they were heroes.[93] Not until 1907, with the arrival from Russia of a group of writers and poets who promoted an "art for art's sake" outlook, was the proletariat position in Yiddish literature challenged.[94]

Street games and street gangs abounded on the Jewish Lower East Side as they did in Italian and Irish neighborhoods. While thousands found sociability, entertainment, and enlightenment at the settlement houses and lecture halls, others—young and old alike—spent their leisure hours hanging out in the candy stores that proliferated in the neighborhood. Dancing was a rage among young adults. In 1907 thirty-one dance halls dotted a ninety-block area between Houston and Grand streets, east of Broadway.[95] A year earlier the movie theater appeared on the Lower East Side and quickly became popular. In 1908 the *Forverts* reported, "There are now about a hundred movie houses in New York, many of them in the Jewish quarter. Hundreds of people wait in line."[96]

Of all the vehicles of Jewish immigrant culture none could match the popularity of the Yiddish theater. The first Yiddish play produced in New York appeared in 1882; by 1918 twenty Yiddish theaters were attracting an audience of two million people to one thousand performances.[97] Initially the theaters offered broad comedies, highly romantic musicals, melodramas on Biblical and historical themes, and "greenhorn" plays dealing, sometimes seriously and sometimes comically, with immigrant experiences. These theaters also produced corrupt Yiddish versions of European dramas.[98] Popular with the masses, the productions were dismissed as *shund* (trash) romances by the Yiddish intellectuals, who called for serious theater. Their fondest hopes came to fruition beginning in 1891, with the arrival from Russia of a talented playwright, Jacob Gordin, and the establishment soon afterward by actor-director Jacob Adler of the Independent Yiddish Artists Company. Adler declared that he would offer "only beautiful musical operas and dramas giving truthful and serious portrayals of life" and would reject "all that is crude, unclean, immoral."[99]

The first collaboration of actor-director Adler and playwright Gordin, *Siberia*, became an instant success. Gordin's *Jewish King Lear* followed three months later and was a sensation. The Yiddish art theater had arrived. Gordin wrote more than seventy plays, championing the cause of "realism" in the Yiddish theater and earning for himself the title "the Yiddish Ibsen," and he inspired a whole generation of Yiddish dramatists, among them Sholem Asch, Peretz Hirschbein, Leon Kobrin, and David Pinski.[100]

The art theater never totally defeated *shund*. Each had its periods of popularity, and each had to compete with such other diversions as Yiddish vaudeville and the movies. But the Yiddish theater, whether serious or frivolous, was unique in its ability to provide its audience an evening's escape from poverty and drudgery while at the same time holding up a mirror to their own lives. The patrons of those theaters were unrestrained in their response to the action on the stage—laughing, crying, at times shouting out advice or cheering heroes and hissing villains. The subject matter of the plays was rarely far removed from what they daily experienced or witnessed, for example generational conflict, balancing ethnic identity with loyalty to the new nation, dealing with opposing pulls of secular and religious life and of materialism and spiritual values.[101] The Yiddish theater, like New York's Yiddish community, began in eastern Europe but really was of the American ghetto, particularly of the Lower East Side, that way-station on the road to full participation in American life.[102]

ii

The flourishing Jewish culture of New York City should not cause one to overlook the city's second largest immigrant group arriving in those years—the Italians. Italians also came for a better life, but they differed from the Jews in substantial ways. As we noted, many Jews arrived with skills, and a good number were literate. The newcomers from Italy were usually *contadino*, Sicilian and South Italian peasants or laborers, most of whom were illiterate. Italians more closely resembled the Irish of the "old immigration" in their lack of urban-oriented skills upon arrival. While they had not undergone a famine such as Ireland's Great Hunger of the 1840s, Italian newcomers, nonetheless, left a land of much suffering and poverty. It should come as no surprise then that they, like the Irish before them, encountered many difficulties in adjusting to life and getting by in New York City. Poverty, low-paid unskilled laborers jobs, inadequate housing, and prejudice were shared by both groups. At the same time, Italians arrived at a later period in the city's history, and they carried with them their own cultural baggage, thus making their experiences in New York somewhat different.

In 1850 Italian New Yorkers numbered 853 in the city's official count. The pace of emigration picked up after that, and grew rapidly from 1880 to 1914. Unlike Jews, who came largely as families, and the Irish immigration, in which women were in the majority for many years, Italian newcomers were at first mostly young men who often emigrated with the intention of making enough money in America with which to return home and purchase land. In contrast to Jews, who rarely returned to Russia or Poland, the return rate among Southern Italians was more than 50 percent in some years. Those who intended to establish permanent homes in America usually found lodging as boarders and saved as much as they could to bring their kin over. Many married men returned to Italy in order to bring back their wives and children to America. Bachelors often returned home to find spouses and then remigrated. Thus, the early pattern of migration of men ultimately gave way to a family immigration that was so important to Italian life in New York City.

These migrant streams of men, women, and children swelled the Italian population of the city. By 1900 New York City counted nearly 250,000 Italians, and numbers continued to grow during the years of peak immigration between 1900 and 1914. Immigration slumped during World War I, but resumed again when hostilities ended. By 1920, the 391,000 foreign-born Italians almost equalled the number of foreign-born Irish and Germans combined. With their children, Italian Americans numbered over 800,000 in 1920, second only to the Jews among the city's ethnic groups.[103]

In the late nineteenth century the Little Italy of lower Manhattan's Fourteenth Ward rapidly became the city's most famous Italian colony, but it was by no means the only center of Italian population. Even before 1900 Italians were settling uptown. Northern Italians from Genoa, Piedmont, and Tuscany located in Greenwich Village as early as 1890.[104] After 1900 southern Italian immigrants sought housing in Greenwich Village and began to move to other parts of Manhattan and to cross rivers to settle in Brooklyn and the Bronx. By 1913 Brooklyn claimed 235,000 Italians to Manhattan's 310,000.[105] One author estimated that in 1913 New York's five boroughs had more than 25 individual Italian districts, ranging in size from 2,000 to 100,000. In addition, other smaller groups of Italians were scattered throughout the city.[106]

Building projects like the construction of reservoirs, bridges, and especially subways after 1900 were factors influencing the pattern of Italian settlement.[107] Just as Irish men had done before them, Italian males provided manual labor required for a growing city, and they preferred to live near their places of work, for example along the subway routes in the Bronx, Brooklyn, and even Queens. Historian George

Pozzetta pointed out, "Indeed, settlement patterns of Italians were often exclusively determined by local employment opportunities."[108]

Upper Manhattan's "Italian Harlem," above 96th Street on the east side, is a case in point. The first Italians to live there were workers brought in by an Irish-American contractor as strikebreakers to build the First Avenue trolley tracks. These laborers lived in a shanty town along 106th Street.[109] Others followed, and Italian Harlem claimed 4,000 residents by 1880. It reached its peak as an Italian neighborhood by the 1920s. Initially, Italians shared the neighborhood with Irish and Jews, but the latter gradually moved out as the Italians moved in.[110]

In the Bronx a small colony of Calabrians, Campanians, and Sicilians developed when Italian workers built streets and railways in that borough and helped construct the Croton Reservoir in neighboring Westchester County. The workers were followed by more prosperous Italians who left lower Manhattan to invest in Bronx real estate. As was often the case elsewhere, they moved into frame houses vacated by the Irish.[111] The first settlement in Brooklyn was located at Hamilton Ferry. Other Italian laborers followed and found homes near the waterfront where they gained employment.

The *padroni*, as labor contractors, also had a hand in determining settlement. They took a share of the newcomer's wages for their services in finding jobs and housing, but some also wrote letters home for the illiterate immigrants and helped them find their way during the early days of settlement. *Padroni* were looked down upon by native-born Americans who disapproved of their promotion of contract labor, which appeared to many scarcely different from slavery. Such activities were outlawed by the federal government in the 1880s and later by New York State. Despite the laws, the *padroni* continued their activities for a while. After 1900 they became less important in the Italian migration process and by 1910 were virtually out of the immigrant trade.[112]

As important as jobs were in determining residence among Italians, type of employment was by no means the only factor. Indeed, many who thought of themselves first as Genoese, Calabrian, Neapolitan, or Sicilian rather than as Italian preferred to live among persons from their own regions and villages. Some had traveled on prepaid tickets provided by their relatives or neighbors, who were on hand to greet them at Castle Garden and later Ellis Island. The *New York Times* estimated that each Italian was met by five others. The paper reported in 1897 that when the *SS Trojan Senator* arrived, the 1,100 Italians on board were welcomed at the dock by over 5,000 friends and relatives.[113] Other immigrants came on their own but with knowledge of where friends and family had located in New York City. Hence, districts existed that were predominantly of folk from particular villages, towns, and regions in Italy. For example, historian Donna Gabaccia has traced the pattern of Sicilian (and especially the village of Sambuca) immigration to Elizabeth Street in Manhattan, a finding supported by the state census of 1905 and the Dillingham Commission.[114] A federal government report in 1908 noted the clustering of Italian immigrants:

> For instance, in the Mulberry Bend district are to be found Neapolitans and Calabrians mostly; in Baxter street, near the Five Points is a colony of Genoese; in Elizabeth street, between Houston and Spring, a colony of Sicilians. The quarter west of Broadway in the Eighth and Fifteenth wards is made up mainly of North Italians who have been longer in New York and are rather more prosperous than the others, although some Neapolitans have come into Sullivan and Thompson streets to work in the flower and feather trades. In "Little Italy," One hundred and tenth to One hundred and fifteenth streets, South Italians predominate. In Sixty-ninth street, near the Hudson River, is to be found a small group of Tyrolese and Austrian Italians.[115]

No matter where the immigrants settled, their housing was often overcrowded and unhealthy. Arriving with few, if any, economic resources, possessing little marketable skill, and not knowing English, Italian immigrants could not earn enough money to afford decent quarters. They took over the unwanted tenements abandoned by Irish, Germans, and others who were improving their lot. Italian residences were described in 1884: "These houses are old and long ago worn out. They are packed with tenants, rotten with age and decay, and so constructed to have made them very undesirable for dwelling purposes in their earliest infancy."[116] Yet even new housing was of poor quality. One scholar reminds us of East Harlem, "Housing stock in Italian Harlem was deteriorating from the moment it was built. Unlike West Harlem, which was constructed with the care lavished on luxury neighborhoods, East Harlem was always a working-class community and the immigrants inhabited substandard buildings from the first days of the community."[117]

Danish-born journalist and reformer Jacob Riis more than any other observer brought the city's slum conditions to public view. In *How the Other Half Lives*, published in 1889, Riis painted a grim picture of neighborhoods such as Mulberry Bend. Riis noted of that neighborhood, "Under the pressure of the Italian influx the standard of breathing space required for an adult by the health offices has been cut down from six to four hundred cubic feet."[118] Housing built prior to the enactment of the Tenement Act of 1901 contained too few rooms for too many family members. Immigrants and their families sometimes found themselves living in dark and damp cellars. Not a few, including children, literally lived on the streets. To make ends meet, families took in boarders or lodgers. Sometimes they were relatives, but they nonetheless took up space and aggravated the already overcrowded dwellings.

In addition to their cramped quarters, buildings were foul smelling and unhealthy.[119] To add to the misery of their residents, these neighborhoods had more than their share of crime. Robert Orsi noted that "Italian Harlem was plagued by crime and juvenile delinquency."[120] Sensational press reporting soon imposed upon Italians in general an unwarranted reputation as criminals. Especially prominent were the charges that Sicilian immigration brought with it members of the Mafia and that Sicilian criminals resorted to written threats—"Black Hand" letters—demanding money in return for protection of businesses. Black Hand threats and violence were certainly common in the city's Italian districts, but little evidence existed of a supposed, large-scale Mafia migration to the United States. Nevertheless, charges about the Mafia prompted the New York City police in 1904 to establish a separate Italian division to investigate crime and extortion threats in Italian neighborhoods and possible ties to criminals in Sicily.[121] When Lieutenant Joseph Petrosino of the Italian detective squad was murdered in Palermo in 1909 while investigating possible Mafia connections to New York City, public opinion was inflamed and "tremors of terror" traveled though Little Italy communities.[122] Images of dangerous and violent Mafia and Black Hand criminals also helped feed the anti-immigrant sentiment that resulted in the restrictions imposed by Congress during the 1920s.

Yet Italians also had their defenders who insisted with reason that they were no more apt to be criminals than other immigrants or native-born

Americans and that the vast majority of Italian immigrants struggled to make a living at physically demanding, low paying jobs. Kate Claghorn in her 1908 *Report* for the U.S. Industrial Commission wrote, "All classes [of Italians] are highly industrious, thrifty, and saving. They are strict in keeping to their agreements; always pay their rent, doctor's bills and lawyers fees. They are considered very desirable tenants."[123] Moreover, Black Hand activities ceased around the time of World War I.[124]

Among the most fortunate immigrants were those who found employment on the municipal payroll; the sanitation department claimed the greatest number, although the police department employed a few in its special Italian division. That the vast majority of Italians became common laborers is hardly surprising. Jobs demanding muscle power were plentiful in the expanding city and attractive to unskilled immigrants from rural Italy.[125] However, as important as common labor was to Italian males, they found jobs in other occupations as well. The colorful organ grinder was noted by many observers as were rag pickers, those who rummaged "the garbage cans, gleaning paper, rags, bones, [and] broken glass."[126] They also became barbers—providing half of New York's supply—shoemakers, masons, waiters, teamsters, and bartenders. Historian Thomas Kessner notes that musicians were about the only Italians categorized as professionals in the 1880 census. A few Italian immigrants opened small shops, while others attained the position of *padrone*. But the most noticeable entrepreneurs were the street merchants, the peddlers who sold their wares on New York City's streets. Kessner found a few who began as peddlers and acquired dozens of pushcarts and control of vending stands.[127]

Increasingly Italians gained entry into the city's rapidly expanding garment business. Some shop owners turned to them to counter the union organizing efforts of Jewish needle trade workers. Initial employment as longshoremen was also achieved in many cases as strikebreakers. In 1880, just when Italians began to arrive in large numbers, practically all of Manhattan's longshoremen were Irish. When a strike led by the Knights of Labor temporarily crippled the shipping industry, employers looked to Italian laborers for relief. Once begun, their employment on the docks, which were riddled with corruption and payoffs, increased rapidly. One scholar noted that bosses loved Italians because of their "eagerness . . . for the work, their willingness to submit to deductions from the wages, leaving a neat little

commission to be divided between foreman, saloon keepers, and native bosses."[128]

Because some Italian workers were used as strikebreakers, they earned reputations as scabs. Most had no contact with trade unions before emigrating to America, and for those who intended only to stay in America for a few years before returning home, unions appeared to offer few benefits. Thus, employers were quick to use Italian immigrants to break strikes or as a source of potential replacement workers with which to threaten employees contemplating union organization.[129]

Few Italian women emigrated to New York City by themselves. Mostly they came as wives, daughters, or sisters and lived within kinship networks. Rarely did the census takers find unmarried Italian women living alone.[130] Once here, women, if single, were expected to marry, raise the children, care for the home, and in general not participate in the larger society as paid workers. While most did conform to the greater part of this formula, the reality about work was quite different from cultural expectations. Because so many males held low-paid, unskilled construction jobs, which often meant layoffs during slack and seasonal times, and because Italian immigrant families were large, these women lived in households that desperately needed extra income. Various governmental and private studies revealed that Italian immigrant family incomes were among the lowest in the city, often below the "essentials of a normal standard of living in New York City."[131]

The rapidly expanding New York economy at the turn of the century provided numerous jobs for women workers. The garment industry was a particularly rich source of employment, and many Italian daughters found places in the mushrooming shops of the city; in 1905 some 85 percent of young, single Italian women were working in garment and garment-related jobs.[132] Even married women were to be found in the sweatshops and clothing factories, but once children came, continued employment was difficult. Yet money could be made within the home by doing finishing "homework" on garments and by taking in paying boarders. The Dillingham Commission reported that nearly one fourth of South Italian families took in boarders.[133] The artificial flower and feather industry, mostly home based, was dominated by Italian women in early twentieth century New York City.[134] Some women began homework as young children. One mother, in whose household two daughters age three and four and a grandmother worked, reported, "We all must work if we want to earn anything."[135] Of course young girls were socialized at an early age to clean house, cook, and help care for younger children, but their wages were needed too.

While the working conditions of Italian men were hardly ideal, with their long hours and dangerous tasks, women's work was no less arduous. As noted in our discussion of immigrant Jews in the garment factories, the small shops that also claimed so many Italian women workers were unsanitary, unsafe, dirty, poorly lighted places that paid their laborers low wages.[136]

In time many within the Italian immigrant community were able to improve their lot. The upward path of occupational mobility was not easily traversed, but many laborers did abandon the pick and shovel for more skilled jobs by the time of World War I. This was particularly true of the children of the immigrants, who were more likely to speak English, to be familiar with American mores, and to have received some education in the city's public schools. Some even managed to find white collar work.[137] Members of the second generation might have achieved even better jobs if they had been permitted to stay in school longer and acquire additional skills. Unlike Jewish parents, Italian mothers and fathers generally were distrustful of the city's public schools, which they saw as, among other things, competitors for control of their children. South Italians, Miriam Cohen tells us, "came from a society in which, given the social, demographic, and political conditions, schooling had little place." She notes further that "if Italian families invested in advanced schooling for their offspring at all, they were more likely to invest in the boys than the girls."[138] Family life was extremely important to these immigrants. They had arrived in America from a society with strong family structures in which outsiders were viewed with distrust. As strangers in a new world, many continued to view nonfamilial institutions like public schools with suspicion.

Moreover, economic factors loomed large. Their low family incomes prompted many to withdraw their children and send them into the workforce at an early age, even before the permissible school leaving age of fourteen.[139] Young girls made artificial flowers or finished garments in their tenements, and young boys sold newspapers on the streets until they were old and strong enough to find jobs requiring prolonged and hard physical labor. "In short, economic and demographic conditions encouraged Italian parents to view their children as wage-earners, rather than as students."[140]

New York unions and labor struggles were on the rise during the first two decades of the twentieth century and, despite an early association with strikebreaking, many Italian workers found themselves drawn into union activity. As we noted, Jews formed the backbone of the emerging garment unions, the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, but Italian men and women were involved too. The great clothing industry walkout of 1909 found Italian workingpeople divided. Most opposed the strike; some resisted union pleas for solidarity and took jobs as scabs. Yet newspapers like *Corriere della Sera* backed the strikers, and Salvaroe Ninfo, the chief organizer among Italians, said that more than 1,000 Italian workers had joined the strike.[141] Subsequent strikes in the garment trades, including an important and successful one in 1913, won increasing Italian support.[142]

Unskilled construction workers were rarely touched by union organization, but among skilled Italians, unions of bricklayers and hodcarriers and the like were more successful in their recruitment efforts. Those Italians replacing Irish at the docks were initially slow to organize or join unions.[143]

While the bulk of New York's Italian-American men and women still held laboring jobs, by the outset of World War I a middle class had emerged. The city's Little Italys contained bankers, real estate promoters, newspaper editors and publishers, white collar workers, shop owners, importers, owners of large barber shops that employed other Italian haircutters, and a few professionals, among them musicians, lawyers, and doctors.[144] They acquired property and moved to districts with better housing. A house with yard was high on the wish list of upwardly mobile Italians. One immigrant, Guiseppe Tuoti, began selling real estate in lower Manhattan's Little Italy in 1887. He branched out into New Jersey, Brooklyn's Coney Island, and Staten Island. In 1906 he was honored by the Italian government for his success, and by the 1920s "million dollar transfers of property" were reportedly daily occurrences for Tuoti.[145] As we noted in previous chapters, the city's Irish Americans had moved quickly into politics and began to dominate municipal affairs in the early 1880s, just at the outset of the massive Italian immigration. During the last decades of the nineteenth century, despite their growing numbers, the Italians were virtually ignored by Tammany Hall. They were unfamiliar with electoral politics, and because so many came with the intention of returning to Italy, they had a very low naturalization rate. Rocco Corresca, an Italian bootblack, recalled in 1902 of his contact with the Irish-run Democrats, "There are some good Irishmen, but many of them insult Italians. They call us Dagoes. So I will be a Republican."[146]

After 1900, however, Tammany showed greater interest and began competing with the Republicans in forming political clubs in Italian districts. Even then few from those communities ran for office, and only a handful were elected; most Italian officeholders gained their positions by appointment. Fiorello La Guardia, the most successful Italian American politician to emerge in New York City just before World War I, faced an uphill battle to win a seat in Congress. In 1914, seeking election in a solidly Tammany district, he ran as a Republican and lost. Yet in the next contest, by marshalling Italian and anti-Tammany voters, he narrowly won election to the House of Representatives, the first New York Italian American to do so. Substantial success at the polls for Italian Americans, however, would have to await a later day.[147]

Some Italians, who found both the Republicans and Democrats unresponsive to the problems of poverty and working class life, joined the Socialist party, even though in New York City it was dominated by Jews. A few had experience with both socialism and anarchism in Sicily and took the lead in forming Italian-American socialist clubs such as Brooklyn's Club Avanti. The most well known Italian radical was Carlo Tresca, who founded and edited the anarchist newspaper *Il Martello* and who attempted to organize Italians for political action until his assassination in 1943. Radicals published another newspaper, *Il Proletario*, the official organ of the Italian Socialist Federation. Socialists drew their Italian members from among shoemakers, garment workers, and even barbers; but at their peak they attracted few from this immigrant community, whose members largely remained outside political circles in the years prior to World War I.[148]

Settlement houses, which had success serving the Jewish community, were hardly more attractive than political parties among Italians. Settlement house workers were seen as outsiders, competing for control of the family. But if political parties, radical groups, and settlements made only slight headway in the city's Italian neighborhoods, their own ethnic associations were more successful. Though not as wide-ranging or influential as were the Jewish associations, the Italian organizations, nonetheless, served their constituencies well. Some, in typical immigrant fashion, aimed at helping newcomers adjust to their new environment and protecting them from unscrupulous persons who preyed upon the innocent. Most notable was the Society for the Protection of Italian Immigrants, formed in 1901. As did other ethnic groups, Italians also organized mutual aid societies to provide death benefits, sickness insurance, funds for emergencies, as well as to serve as social centers. Dozens of these societies appeared in New York's Little Italys. Mostly with small memberships, they were usually organized around men from particular villages in Italy. Many locals finally banded together to form the Sons of Italy, a national organization which became influential within the Italian communities of New York City.[149]

The professional elite within the immigrant community became members of the *promineti*, "a loose confraternity of successful wealthy (by immigrant standards) Italians."[150] Northern Italians also had their *promineti*-like associations, which made certain to remain apart and aloof from their southern countrymen.

In true immigrant fashion, Italians published newspapers in their own language, both of the radical stripe noted above as well as those appealing to a more general audience. Dozens appeared after 1880, and many failed. The most prominent newspaper to emerge was *Il Progresso*. It began with a small budget and a staff of three, but by 1915 had a circulation of 82,000.[151]

Italian immigrants came from a country where practically everyone was at least nominally Catholic. But as we have noted, the church in New York City was Irish-run, and it "differed greatly from the institution that they left behind, although it carried the same name."[152] An Italian priest had been appointed to serve northern Italians as early as 1859, but his efforts were not successful nor was the church prepared for the great influx after 1880.[153] To meet the needs of these newly arrived Catholics, Italian priests were appointed to serve in "annexes" of parishes, usually a basement room provided for services.[154] This accommodation permitted an Irish-run parish to offer its Italian members a separate service.

The Irish hierarchy was critical of Italian parishioners, whom they thought were lax in observance, anti-clerical, and ignorant of doctrine.

To the Irish clergy, Italian peasant beliefs about the evil eye and the power of magic were little more than paganism. The Irish believed that Italian priests were poorly trained and represented the "dregs of Italy."[155] One Irish priest wrote:

> The Italians are not a sensitive people like our own. When they are told that they are about the worst Catholics that ever came to this country, they don't resent it, or deny it. If they were a little more sensitive to such remarks they would improve faster. The Italians are callous as regards religion.[156]

Irish clergy could be similarly harsh in their views of other ethnic Catholics. Cardinal McCloskey refused a request from Polish Catholics for their own church, remarking that "what they needed was not their own church but a pig shanty."[157]

Italian Catholics in turn were distrustful of the church they found in their new country. To begin with, they had viewed the church in Italy with some suspicion as a hierarchical organization unresponsive to their needs. The men, especially, scorned church-going as "women's work." The Irish-dominated church here seemed no better and ill suited to their concerns. Moreover, whereas Catholicism was the established religion in Italy and individual churches often the only social organization in a village, in America Catholicism was a minority religion, competing with other denominations and with other social organizations. As a result many immigrants, particularly the men, did not attend church at all and had little to do with it.[158] Richard Gambino, a sociologist who was raised in Brooklyn, recalled of his father, "Typical of males of contadino origins, my father had been an infrequent churchgoer, attending Mass only on major holidays like Christmas and on these traditional occasions when family loyalty made presence compulsory—weddings and funerals."[159]

It is understandable that Protestant groups believed that Italians represented a fertile field for evangelism. They sent missionaries into Italian neighborhoods and did manage some successful conversions.[160] Methodist, Baptist, and Presbyterian activities included summer camps for the children and other social programs. Yet in spite of these energetic efforts, not many Italians found a permanent home in the city's Protestant churches.[161] In the long run a modus vivendi was

gradually achieved between the Irish-run church and the Italian immigrants.

To solve the "Italian Problem," the hierarchy, beginning with Archbishop Michael A. Corrigan and followed by John Cardinal Farley, neither of whom displayed the anti-Italian prejudices common to the Irish, requested more Italian priests and expanded parish activities in Italian neighborhoods. To counter Protestant missions and settlement houses, Catholic charities were established to serve Italian immigrants.[162] By 1911 the city had fifty Italian Catholic churches served by more than eighty Italian priests. Church leaders also encouraged Italian parishes to build parochial schools. While the new parishes enjoyed some limited success in this endeavor, Italians, poor to begin with, were not especially keen on raising funds to pay for Catholic schools when the public ones were free. Besides, the parochial schools were inevitably staffed with Irish nuns who appeared indifferent to Italian pupils.[163] Early efforts to recruit Italian girls as nuns were not successful.[164]

Some parishes like Our Lady of Pompei, located in Greenwich Village, became very important to Italian immigrants. Founded in 1892, Pompei was headed by Father Antonio Demo from 1898 until the Great Depression. Father Demo, who was born in Italy and was fluent in Italian, served as an important link between his immigrant parishioners and secular American institutions. Members of his flock came to him for help in locating jobs, dealing with immigration authorities, coping with the judicial and prison systems, and finding financial assistance. One woman even wrote him for a character reference for a potential husband.[165] Father Demo also worked with Protestant groups and agencies like the Charity Organization and Mary Kingsbury Simkhovitch's Greenwich House, one of the city's most prominent settlement houses.[166]

Central to Italian parishes were the *festa*, elaborate religious celebrations, each associated with a particular saint. The churches themselves and various fraternal orders raised money for these festivals, which sometimes lasted several days. Their processions, headed by a statue of the saint, drew thousands who gathered to honor the festival's namesake but also to socialize, eat food, listen to music, and enjoy the fireworks. The most famous *festa* were the one held at the Church of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel, the feast of Saint Rocco, and those of San Gennaro and St. Anthony of Padua.[167]

The gradual upward mobility of some Italian immigrants and their children, their growing accommodation with the Roman Catholic Church, the emergence of a second generation, and the beginnings of political activity all pointed in the direction of acculturation. But like the massive number of Jews who arrived at the same time, Italian New Yorkers remained a tightly knit community on the eve of World War I. Indeed, many were just beginning to abandon the primacy of their provincial identity and to see themselves as Italians, let alone as Italian Americans or as just new Americans. The outbreak of World War I in Europe and the drastic decline in immigration after the restriction acts were passed in the 1920s stimulated the Americanization process for European immigrants and their children. But even then the transition was gradual. Many retained strong ethnic attachments for years.

6

Ethnic New Yorkers from the Great War to the Great Depression

In New York City's immigrant neighborhoods World War I was both a cause for anxiety and a generator of pressure for assimilation. The city's German Americans did not want the United States to align itself against their native land, but neither they nor other opponents of war could halt the drift toward involvement on the side of the Allied Powers. Before America entered the conflict, New York's Germans had called upon the government to be even-handed in its treatment of combatant nations. Some raised money for war relief in Germany. A ten day New York bazaar sold 56,000 tickets and raised considerable funds for that purpose.[1] A few German Americans, such as New York's George Sylvester Viereck, a poet and publisher of *The American Week-*