

The Search for My Place: Jewish women and assimilation in the early twentieth century America

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Abstract

In early twentieth century many Jewish immigrants poured into America from countries and regions of Eastern Europe. Many of them struggled to accommodate themselves to new world, while they were reluctant to abandon their old world. Though deep pain and sorrow accompanied their struggles, some had strong desire to become an “American” and secure a “home”. In this paper I try to describe some patterns of adaptation to America by Jewish daughters of immigrants in the early twentieth century and explore about the meaning of becoming American for them.

Introduction

“I can’t live in the old world and I’m yet too green for the new. I don’t belong to those who gave me birth or to those with whom I was educated,” cried one of Anzia Yeziarska’s characters, who was a daughter of a Jewish immigrant and college-educated.¹ Mary Antin, who had emigrated from Russia with her family, said, “All processes of uprooting, transportation, replanting, acclimatization, and development took place in my own soul. I felt the pang, the fear, the wonder, and the joy of it. I can never forget, for I bear the scars. But I want to forget – sometimes I long to forget. ...It is painful to be consciously of two worlds. The Wandering Jew in me seeks forgetfulness.”² In early twentieth century America many Jewish immigrants, especially daughters of immigrants, struggled to secure their places in the new world while they hoped not to lose their old life and family ties. Deep pain and sorrow accompanied their struggles, and they often suffered the feeling of loneliness and spiritual homelessness. But even through the pain, the goal was to become an “American” and secure a “home.”

To become an American they first had to figure out what that meant. Young Jews dreamed of freedom and opportunities in America while they were living in European towns. For them, especially those lived under the reign of the Russian Czar, America was “the promised land”, where all men were equal.³ After their immigration, however, poverty, unemployment, hunger and prejudice awaited them. While living in ghettos they began to grope for the meaning of being “American”, and that process often caused many kinds of tension among them, as well as pain and sorrow. For example, rifts opened between parents and children, in particular daughters, over American lifestyle. Other tensions were drawn from the different components of their identity which did not sit comfortably alongside each other. As a result these women considered themselves to be drifters, outsiders to either the Jewish or the American world, or to both.⁴

The feeling of spiritual homelessness or alienation from the world in which one lives, was painful and bitter. Daughters of Jewish immigrants of the early twentieth century also might have felt bitterness and thus perpetually sought a place to belong. In this paper I'll try to describe some patterns of adaptation to America by Jewish daughters of immigrants in the early twentieth century and explore about the meaning of becoming American for them. I will focus on five women: Mary Antin, Elizabeth G. Stern, Anzia Yezierska, Rose Cohen and Marie Ganz.

I The exodus to America: education and reading

I-1 The Exodus

“The Story of the Exodus was not history to me in the sense that the story of the American Revolution was,⁵” wrote Mary Antin. Antin, who emigrated as a young girl from Russian Poland to America in 1894 at thirteen, published her autobiography, *The Promised Land*, in 1912. She was born in Polotzk, Russia, in June 1881, three months after the assassination of Czar Alexander II. This assassination triggered a series of violent pogroms that spread to hundreds of communities throughout the “Pale of Settlement” where Jews had to live. The Passover in that year reminded Jews that Russia was “another Egypt.”⁶ Since the assassination, conditions for Jews in the reign of Russia worsened, and more and more Jews fled to America. Between 1880 and 1914 almost two million Jews from Eastern Europe, of whom 43 percent were women, settled in the United States.⁷ Antin's family were some of them.

In the beginning of her book, which became an immediate best-seller, Antin gave reasons for writing the autobiography though she was still young. She explained that she had been

driven to writing by her private need, a matter of her own salvation. "A long past vividly remembered is like a heavy garment that clings to your limbs when you would turn. And I have thought of a charm that should release me from the folds of my clings past," she said, "I will tell my tale, for once, and never hark back any more. I will write a bold 'Finis' at the end, and shut the book with a bang!"⁸ Writing the book was an exodus from the past for her. Antin, however, might have a feeling of antinomy about the exodus and assimilation. In the book she described her contradictory feelings of triumph and loss engendered by her complex identity as a Jew, a new American, a daughter and woman.⁹

Antin experienced anti-Semitism in Polotzk. When she was tormented by a gentile child, named Vanka, she ran home and complained to her mother. Her mother brushed off her dress and said resignedly that the Gentiles had always done as they liked with Jews. Then young Mary – Maryashe in Hebrew – accepted the fact "as one accepts the weather", and realized the world "was made in a certain way."¹⁰ For the girl, the America of her father's letters appeared to be a dream. Her father left Polotzk for America in 1891, three years before his family's arrival, and sent letters to his family. He boastfully wrote that it was not disgraceful to work at a trade in America.¹¹ He also explained in a letter that the employer addressed the employee as *you*, not as *thou*, and the cobbler was called "Mister," the equal of a teacher.¹²

I-2 Sexism and free education

Young Mary was especially impressed by free education for everyone, boys and girls, Jews and Gentiles, and dreamed of the ideal country where men and women were equal. Opportunities of learning were not equally divided between men and women in traditional Jewish society in Eastern Europe. Their scanty income had had to be divided so as to provide for the boys' tuition. Most boys were sent to heder [Hebrew school] as soon as they could speak, and continued to study until confirmation at thirteen, or much longer if talent and ambition carried them. "After boy entered heder, he was the hero of the family," Antin bitterly said. "If the family were very poor, all girls might go barefoot, but heder boy must have shoes. ... No wonder he said, in his morning prayer, 'I thank Thee, Lord, for not having created me a female.'..."¹³ For a girl it was enough to be able to read prayers in Hebrew and do a little arithmetic. A real schoolroom was a mother's kitchen for a Jewish girl in Eastern Europe. There she learned to bake and cook, to knit, sew, and embroider. While the mother taught her daughter housework, she instructed her in the laws regulating a pious Jewish household and the conduct proper for a

Jewish wife. Antin wrote that every girl hoped to be a wife, because “a girl was born, for no other purpose.”¹⁴ What is more, a wife’s duty was to follow her husband in all things. “He [her father] still rated the mental capacity of the average woman as only a little above that of the cattle she tended,” said Antin.¹⁵

For these Jewish women America seemed to offer the opportunities to remake themselves through free public education. When Antin began to go to public school on a September morning, 1894, her “civic” pride and contentment reached on apex, and she gradually cultivated the sense of “my country.”¹⁶

Many immigrant Jewish girls, like Mary Antin, saw the most significant element of American freedom in education. Most of those who discovered that learning in America was not the prerogative of males only, took to schooling with a zest unmatched by other ethnic groups.¹⁷ Many of them fiercely hoped to learn in school, though they actually often had to work in a factory or a store. The popular way for most youthful workers to get any education was by attending evening school. Contemporary Gentile observers were surprised at the disproportionately large number of Jewish women among the students in evening courses. In Philadelphia, for example, Jewish women accounted for 70 percent of the night-school students.¹⁸ But it was not easy for working women to get a high school degree at night even if they were fortunate enough to go to advanced schools.¹⁹ Most young Jewish immigrant women, such as Anzia Yeziarska and Marie Ganz, could not attain a formal advanced education because of economic hardship.²⁰

Many Jewish parents wanted to send all of their children to school if economic conditions allowed. Compared with other major ethnic groups, familial support for children’s education in Jewish homes was remarkable. Most Italian and Polish children, especially girls, would work to enable their parents to buy a house or land, and in their communal tradition education often seemed irrelevant and not a prerequisite. School was often judged to be superfluous for girls. “The Italian girl,” wrote Lillian Brandt, “expects to be occupied [in work] and at an earlier age than the average girl.”²¹ After girls had learned to read and write, they were taken out of classrooms at an early age. Children raised in homes with such traditional attitudes often shared their parents’ views and wanted to leave school and begin working.²²

The family was equally important among Jews, but their attitude toward acquisition of a house or land differed from that of the Italian and Polish immigrants. Jews in Eastern Europe had seldom been permitted to own land and thus did not consider property the ultimate security.

There, as in America, subconscious family strategies relied instead upon investing in the future of chiefly male children so they could advance either by means of an education or by building up a small business.²³ Antin's father hoped for his children to have an education because he believed that equal education was the essence of American opportunity and the treasure "that no thief could touch, not even misfortune or poverty."²⁴ As education was given a special emphasis among Jews, more Jewish daughters were permitted to remain in school than those of other ethnic groups, unless their wages were badly required. Some parents – especially mothers – wanted their children to stay in school even in times of economic hardship.²⁵ In 1907 a fourteen-year-old girl explained her problem with a *Jewish Daily Forward* editor in the newspaper's advice column:

There are seven people in our family – parents and five children. I am the oldest child... . We have been in the country two years and my father, who is a frail man, is the only one working to support the whole family. I go to school, where I do very well. But since times are hard now and my father earned only five dollars this week, I began to talk about giving up my studies and going to work in order to help my father as much as possible. But my mother didn't even want to hear of it. She wants me to continue my education. She even went out and spent ten dollars on winter clothes for me. But I didn't enjoy the clothes, because I think I am doing the wrong things. Instead of bringing something into the house, my parents have to spend money on me. I have a lot of compassion for my parents.²⁶

When serious economic disasters came, however, most Jewish parents made their older children quit school and go out to work, or didn't send their children to school from the beginning.²⁷ In the Antins, Mary could go to school, while her older sister Frieda wasn't permitted to go to school because their parents were unable to feed their children by themselves. Thus Frieda, "the oldest, the strongest, the best prepared, and the only one who was of legal age to be put to work", helped the parents.²⁸ Mary regretfully remembered that she had accepted the arrangements made for her sister and herself without much reflection, and that everything that had been planned for her advantage she had taken as a matter of course. "I took everything from her hand as if it were my due," said Mary.²⁹ Her father was unable to master English and maintain a steady income, and then he became bitterly disillusioned. Instead of him, her mother

and the older sister, Frieda, supported their family and allowed Mary to attend school.³⁰

I-3 The meaning of reading

In addition to formal classes, immigrant women had other opportunities to acquire knowledge. One of these opportunities was to attend radical schools. Minnie Fisher, for example, worked in a millinery shop all day and attended the *Yiddishe Arbeiten Universitet* (Jewish Worker's University) at night. This school was founded by workers themselves, and it had dual goals. In this school young immigrants studied English and American culture, while the American-born Jews learned about Jewish culture. Its founders tried to cultivate a sense of class consciousness among all students. Other radical schools and institutions also gave immigrants lectures. For a while, Minnie attended the Rand School, a Socialist institution, where many students were sent by their unions. Minnie recalled that, following attendance at this institution, they started to understand capitalism and their awareness of class deepened.³¹ Speeches at street corners or meetings by anarchists and socialists also helped poor immigrants to learn to do their own thinking. Marie Ganz, for example, always felt her lack of educational opportunities keenly, and longed to attend college courses, but she couldn't have a formal education. Instead of school, she acquired knowledge and learned to do her own thinking from her own experiences, real and hard life. "My attitude toward the capitalistic class and toward the law was the natural result of a childhood spent in destitution, of bitter experiences in the sweatshops, and of a mental development fostered by men and women driven desperate by the sufferings of the same sort of environment and who, with quick, eager minds hungry for knowledge which was so hard to get, had picked up most of their education, as I had done, in the night schools and the libraries... . Radicalism is just as certain to be bred by poverty as conservatism is by wealth," recalled Ganz.³²

Libraries and books also helped immigrants to educate themselves. E. G. Stern was one of the immigrants who loved reading. She graduated from college in New York, studied social work, married a professional man, and became a social worker and writer.³³ In her book, *My Mother and I*, she writes:

My teachers told me that in our city was a library, a "house full of books," I exclaimed to mother. From the library they brought me books to read. ... Far more marvelous than the fairy stories were to me in the ghetto street the stories of American child life, all the Alcott

and the Pepper books. The pretty mothers, the childish ideals, the open gardens, the homes of many rooms were as unreal to me as the fairy stories. But reading of them made my aspirations beautiful. My books were doors that gave me entrance into another world. ...³⁴

Mary Antin also frequently visited the library. "After I discovered the public library I was not impatient for the reopening of school," she recalled, "Anything so wonderful as a library had never been in my life. It was even better than school in some ways." Antin, like Stern, enjoyed Alcott's stories as well as the encyclopedia.³⁵ Marie Ganz also enjoyed reading, but her taste for books was different from that of Stern and Antin. Ganz, once an anarchist, read Dostoyevsky and related writers, and these books were treasures for her.³⁶

Reading was a joy and at the same time one of factors which constructed readers' identities. *Little Women*, which Stern was absorbed in reading, was very popular among mainly middle class readers, and not only women. Barbara Sicherman said that reading Alcott became a necessary ritual for children of the comfortable classes. On the other hand, the story didn't appeal to working class readers. Some working class women found *Little Women* too banal, and others felt the story too "realistic" or "rustic" for their taste.³⁷ But many Jewish immigrant girls were drawn to Alcott's stories, especially *Little Women*. Rose Cohen, who emigrated from western Russia to Lower East Side at the age of twelve in 1902, had memories of *Little Women* too. When she found *Julius Caesar* too difficult, she asked the Jewish-American librarian at the Educational Alliance, a Jewish agency that assisted recent Eastern European immigrants, for an easy book, and the librarian recommended Cohen *Little Women*.³⁸ Thus, for some working Jewish immigrant women early in the twentieth century, Alcott's story provided a model transcending their status as ethnic outsiders and for gaining access to American life and culture. These women saw Alcott's story as a vehicle for assimilation into American middle class life.³⁹

It seemed that Ganz's reading, on the other hand, led to the development of class consciousness, not a feeling of being American or female. Just before she was arrested on a charge of disorder, she said a following to a boarder in her house, who offered her his savings as bail:

I couldn't take your money. It wouldn't save me, anyway, and what's more, I'm not afraid of going to prison; I want to go. I'll get a good rest there, which is more than I could ever get here, and I'll have a chance to do some reading. Look at me, trying to help solve big

social problems and with so little education to do it with. I'm like a carpenter who hasn't any tools. I've got to read a lot to make up for all the schooling I've missed."⁴⁰

For her reading was pleasure and, at the same time, a tool to correct the unequal system in America. At least until she was imprisoned, her reading promoted a sense of class consciousness – the lower class, the working class – , not a sense of solidarity as women or desire to assimilate with the American way of life. After her release, however, Ganz deepened her solidarity with Jewish housewives in the food boycott of 1917, and a spirit of national pride – pride for America – suddenly awoke in her when America entered WWI. At the same time, she parted from socialism and anarchism.⁴¹

II Assimilation and alienation

II-1 The choice of a new life

Mary Antin, unlike Ganz, didn't hesitate to Americanize from her early days in America. When her Hebrew name was changed into an American name, she didn't show a lingering attachment to the past at all and rather said, "With our despised immigrant clothing we shed also our impossible Hebrew names."⁴² Moreover, her faith in America was surprisingly strong in her youth. "Occasionally, indeed, I was stung by the wasp of family trouble," she writes, "but I knew a healing ointment—my faith in America."⁴³ George Washington was a beloved hero for young Mary since had studied about the American Revolution. Washington "was like a king in greatness," and Mary grew excited when she thought that she was a "Fellow Citizen" alongside Washington. With regarded to being an American citizen she said the following:

Undoubtedly I was a Fellow Citizen, and George Washington was another. It thrilled me to realize what sudden greatness had fallen on me: and at the same time it sobered me, as with a sense of responsibility. I strove to conduct myself as befitted a Fellow Citizen.⁴⁴

Antin gradually formed a sense of "my country" through studying American history in school. She couldn't see Polotzk under Russia as "my country." She realized that she and her fellow people originally were "people without a country," and that as a result it was difficult for them to "understand" a sense of country and a spirit of nationalism. Antin said, however, that she could "feel" it, as one felt "God" or "myself." Now she came to feel America as "her country,"

and when she stood up to sing “America”, she was urged to proclaim loudly to the world “my love for my new-found country.”⁴⁵ Mary Antin, who grew up empty-hearted but hungry-minded for hero, flag, and country to love and worship, rapidly accepted “outspoken patriotism” in America as dry sand absorbed water. She wrote, “naturalization, with us Russian Jews, may mean more than the adoption of the immigrant by America. It may mean the adoption of America by the immigrant.”⁴⁶

E. G. Stern also rapidly assimilated into America. As she grew older she refused to speak anything but English, and she persuaded her parents to follow the American way or scientific knowledge. For example, she tried to get her parents to abandon fried food and eat food prepared according to the recipes which she learned at school. She also intimated to her mother that overprotection, such as too much feeding, made children ill. Young Elizabeth intensely felt herself to be a part of America through speaking only English and obeying the American way.⁴⁷ When she graduated college, left home and mother in Soho and lived alone in New York, she came to feel herself to be completely a part of America. In her youth, she had read “The Man Without a Country” and felt terror and grief. Then, Stern, after growing, held a strong conviction that her mother country had always and only been America because she hadn’t been able to have any mother country in Europe.

Rose Gollup Cohen, a Jewish immigrant woman, published her autobiography *Out of the Shadow* in 1918. The predominant motifs of her book concern Cohen’s assimilation, her loss of faith, and her struggle for independence from familial control.⁴⁸ Rahel Gollup, late Rose Gollup, was born as the first child in her family on April 4, 1880. As was common in Russian Jewish families, her father migrated first in 1890. Two years later, she and her unmarried aunt migrated to America.⁴⁹ After immigration, her process of assimilation into American society was different from that of Antin or Stern. She was not able to go to public school and college because of the economic standing of her family and her birth order. Instead of studying in school, she continuously worked in garment sweatshops on the Lower East Side and served as a domestic servant from the age of twelve. When Cohen met Lillian Wald of the Henry Settlement, a prominent settlement worker who visited the Cohen household in their plight while Rose was seriously ill, a new life started for her. Wald sent her to uptown hospitals and to country rest homes, where she came to know “real” American – Gentile doctors, nurses, and kind visitors – , learn the American way, and then rapidly assimilate into America. As a consequence of these encounters, she lost her “intense [Jewish] nationalism.”⁵⁰ Cohen wrote about her first “true” en-

counter with America:

Although almost five years had passed since I had started for America it was only now that I caught a glimpse of it [the New World]. For though I was in America I had lived in practically the same environment which we brought from home...But now that I had had a glimpse of the New World, a revolution took place in my whole being. I was filled with a desire to get away from the whole old order of things.... And then I was able to stand between the two, with a hand in each.⁵¹

Cohen, like Antin and Stern, took America at its word and tried to live by its ideals. She, however, didn't wholly want to loose the old ties. Consequently her assimilation caused friction between the older members of her family and herself, and she came to feel herself torn apart between the old world and new world. As the friction became deeper, a sense of loneliness and alienation from both the old world and the new world grew stronger. In a Christian institution, where she stayed to restore her health, she "felt alone, a stranger in the house that had been a home to me" when one of her Gentile mentors, whom she had known for several years, admitted that she believed in the Jewish "blood libel." At that time she longed for her own people whose heart she knew.⁵² When she returned home, however, she yet felt alone. "It was all stranger than ever, the home, my people."⁵³ Antin, Stern and Yeziarska also had comparable experiences.

II-2 Pain and sorrow in a new life

In the beginning of her book Mary Antin described her relationship with her parents as follows:

Nor I am disowning my father and mother of the flesh. ... Did they teach me from books, and tell me what to believe? I soon chose my own books, and built me a world of my own.

In these discriminations *I* emerged, a new being, something that had not been before. ... And so I can say that there has been more than one birth of myself, and I can regard my earlier self as a separate being, and make it a subject of study.⁵⁴

She, still young, comported herself with confidence and was satisfied with herself as "a new

being.” In the last section of the book, she said, “Steadily as I worked to win America, America advanced to lie at my feet. ... I was a princess waiting to be led to the throne.”⁵⁵ Ignoring the economic forces that exploited immigrant workers, Antin, unlike Ganz, never joined the protests that other immigrant women helped initiate. She emphasized her own success as an individual within the Gentile world and America’s “open workshop” and insisted that a “certain class of aliens” could make use of her new country’s freedom.⁵⁶

The freedom, however, was just a source of confusion to her mother. According to Antin, her mother did not have the initial impulse to depart from ancient religious usage and bore the yoke of prescribed conduct. The Jewish faith was deeply rooted in her mother. For the mother, individual freedom, which Antin enjoyed, was the only tolerable condition of life. On the other hand, her father was always skeptical of orthodoxy. He, therefore, commanded his wife to take off “the mantle of the orthodox observance.” The process, however, gave her mother pain, because “the fabric of that venerable garment was interwoven with the fabric of her soul.”⁵⁷ Antin, like her father, was skeptical of religious orthodoxy, and gave up her religious customs almost immediately. In place of the God of her fathers, she substituted a worship of American heroes such as George Washington. She was willingly “emancipated from the yoke of indefensible superstition,” and this was, for her, the essence of Americanism.⁵⁸

As Antin grew up, she left behind her parents, people in Lower East Side and traditional practices, and she proclaimed her desire to become an American citizen with confidence. As “a new being”, an American citizen, she wanted to live a life disconnected from the past, but it was not easy to cut the past out of one’s life. Indeed she continued to be a Jew and feel herself as an outsider in America, as well as an American citizen.⁵⁹ For example, influenced by her Jewish friends such as Josephine Lazarus, she insisted that the “community of sentiment,” “culture,” and “memories” of the Jewish people could survive as emblems of Jewish nationality, though much Jewish life became absorbed within American life.⁶⁰ In 1901, Antin married a non-Jewish geologist – naturally her marriage displeased the parents – , but she separated from him when America entered WWI. After the separation Antin continuously suffered from physical ailments and nervous breakdowns. She couldn’t care for her daughter, and the girl was sent to boarding school. After that, she changed hospitals repeatedly and roved from one religion to another as if to ease her agony and search for her own place.⁶¹ Finally she died at an institution in a Christian restorative community, not a Jewish community.

As the speed of Elizabeth Stern's assimilation increased, the friction with her parents became deeper. When her father took out his naturalization papers, his daughter, who had wanted to become an American completely, was happy and said to him, "Now you are an American, father." But he just heavily answered, "No, I am not for America, and America is not for me."⁶² Her father grew irritated about her daughter's schooling and English books. One day he told his daughter in his intense restrained angry voice that her English books and her desire for higher education was making her an alien to her family and, thus, she should give up studying beyond grammar school. She, however, firmly desired a full education, and stormy arguments between father and daughter arose.⁶³ After that, the rift between father and daughter was never repaired. Feeling that her father still lived in "a world of the past, a world built by the ancients," she decided to break her life away from that of her parents and live alone in New York after graduation from college.⁶⁴

It was the mother who had been the buffer in the Sterns. She always gave priority to her daughter's happiness. She was a tender and generous mother, and, at the same time, a good adviser and the closest friend to young Elizabeth. Giving thanks for her help, Stern said that her mother had been intensely proud of her.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, when she became a high school student, she made comparisons between her mother and the mother of a friend, and said:

All my standards fell before the vision of the strange mother I saw at the party given by my classmate. ... A woman in white! ... And this mother sang to us. ... I had always thought mothers never "enjoyed," just worked. This strange mother opened a new window to me in the possibilities of women's lives. To my eyes my mother's life appeared all at once as something to be pitied—to be questioned.⁶⁶

As she grew older, the distance between Stern and her mother became wider. During her college days, she and her mother no longer talked closely, even when she was at home. Thus, she began to feel as if she were an alien at home, even with her mother. Moreover, she came to see her mother as old-fashioned, as she held the ideals of the new women which female college students were to be. "I heard of the serene and wise and conscious motherhood," she writes, "the strong and sane and effective women in professions, the fine and cultured wives that it was our destiny to become."⁶⁷ Then, she left home to seek her true place. In 1911, she married a fellow student in New York, a Jew born in America with American tastes and values, and re-

religious indifference. Nevertheless, she agreed to an Orthodox wedding service, although Elizabeth may no longer have considered herself to be a Jew in a religious sense by 1911. In her fiction, *I Am a Woman—And a Jew*, she described the attempt to discover a way in which a Jewish heroine could religiously once again identify herself as a Jew.⁶⁸ The heroine said in the end, “I am a Jewess, though I do not belong to any church, nor have my world enclosed among my people. The divisions are in my memories, in my heart.”⁶⁹

Anzia Yeziarska was also a Jewish woman writer who continued to seek her place all her life. Yeziarska became the “sweatshop Cinderella,” when Samuel Goldwyn paid her \$10,000 for the film rights to *Hungry Hearts*, which described immigrant life in ghettos, and brought her to Hollywood to assist the production at \$200 a week. But she left after two and a half months, because she became disillusioned with the false values of the film colony and was unable to work apart from the ghetto community that had given her inspiration. She left Hollywood and unhappily returned to New York. A few years later, in an article in *Cosmopolitan* magazine she explained that money alienated her from her own people and left her lonely and alone. A fairy tale that should have had a happy ending had turned into a story of self-betrayal and loss.⁷⁰ Having abandoned her roots, however, Yeziarska found she could no longer return home.⁷¹

Yeziarska had come to America from Plotsk, the Russian-Polish village, with her parents, three brothers, and three sisters in 1890, at eight or ten years old.⁷² Being too young for labor, she went to public school and learned English. But her father, a rabbi and scholar in the old country, thought women’s education was a waste of time, and soon she was forced to leave school to work full-time.⁷³ Her own experiences as a worker in a sweatshop and as a domestic servant were reflected in her novels. Yeziarska left home at the age of seventeen, rejecting her parents’ attempt to mold her into acceptable roles, because she wanted to become a “person,” an American.⁷⁴ She enrolled into the Department of Home Economics of Columbia University’s Teachers College with help from a wealthy German Jewish patron. Around 1910 she married an attorney, but only a few months later this marriage was annulled. The following year she married a high-school teacher again at a religious ceremony, and a daughter was born in 1912. This marriage ended three years later, and she left her daughter with the child’s father in order to concentrate on writing. Her behavior was revolutionary from both Jewish and Gentile perspectives. Having been unsuccessful in traditional relationships with men, she sought male companions and lovers. After failed marriages and love affairs, her literary success came in the

1920s with some autobiographic novels. Her heroine was usually a young and struggling immigrant girl. In her stories, Yeziarska was the young girl fresh from the ghetto whose perseverance and talents led to her eventual conquest of America. The theme of her novels was usually the same; the conflict between immigrant dreams and American realities, the pain of becoming a real American and of fighting the men who denied women their independence.⁷⁵

After becoming disillusioned by Hollywood, she realized her muse lay in the ghetto and without it she could not write. But it was too late. Her father did not accept her daughter, who succeeded as a writer but deviated from traditional Jewish life and norms. Despite her success, she felt that without her father's approval, she had "no life."⁷⁶ She was "without a country, without a people," and she "could not write any more. I had gone too far away from life, and I did not know how to get back."⁷⁷ Apart from family and community, without lasting friends, she was tortured by a fierce loneliness and a sense of homelessness. She came to see herself as a drifter between two worlds.⁷⁸

II-3 Separation from anarchism: Marie Ganz and assimilation

While Antin, Stern, Cohen and Yeziarska took America at its word to a considerable degree and tried to live by its ideals from the beginning, Marie Ganz rebelled against the American system, especially American capitalism.

She was born on a Galician farm in 1892, and emigrated to America with her mother in the summer of 1896, following her father. Her father was a peddler, but he died when she was seven years old. The Ganzs soon fell into poverty soon, and Marie had to work very hard in sweatshops and factories from that time. From early childhood she'd often seen scenes of unemployment, eviction and despair of the homeless and pennilessness. As she entered adulthood, she hated wealthy philanthropists, unlike Cohen, as well as wealthy employers and landlords. "The rich! Why don't they come themselves to our streets and see what is going on? What do they know of all the misery among us? They send a few dollars and their cast-off clothes, and their consciences are satisfied," she cried, "the rich man's idea and the poor man's are never going to agree."⁷⁹ Thus she turned to the radicalism and became an anarchist. She finally tried to kill John D. Rockefeller and failed. Ganz was arrested and put in prison.

After her imprisonment ended, she came to break away from anarchists. It was the cause that she lost some close comrades in an explosion. They prepared to blow up some wealthy capitalists but their plan went wrong. Ganz deeply grieved when she heard about the death of

her friends in the accident, but it seemed to her that their leaders, the anarchists, didn't mourn their deaths, but just tried to use them to criticize the police and capitalists. "A sudden hatred of him [a leader of anarchists] came over me," she writes, "I wanted to forget him and all his works."⁸⁰ Separated from the anarchists, she spent her days seeking for work and finally got a job in a wrapper shop. At that time she met a woman – perhaps a settlement worker – and began to study mainly about sociology with her help. While she was studying, an infantile paralysis epidemic swept through the tenements. She began to work as a volunteer in the tenements to bring relief to the afflicted. Through the work, she came to learn "what self-sacrifice really meant." She said to her dear male friend, she felt "as if I were coming out of the dark, with a new life opening before me."⁸¹

Ganz, who broke away from the anarchists, faced the rising in food price in the winter of 1917. Food prices in America began to rise rapidly in late 1915, after going up gradually since the 1890s. In February 1917 retail food costs in New York City leapt dramatically to new heights. Basic commodities increased 20 or 30 percent in price during a few days, and many individual foods reached prices two and three times those of the year before. The causes of this rising were complex. One of the causes was the increase in food exports to Europe during WWI. But Ganz didn't believe that the war was the main cause of the sharp rise in the price of food. "Oh, no, it wasn't the war," she insisted, "it was the profiteers."⁸² The situation was explosive, and finally the high cost of living drove the women to action. Marie Ganz reported:

One morning as I left home – it was the twentieth of February – the street had an unusual aspect. Women were standing about in groups talking and gesticulating excitedly. In the old days of hardship it had been the men who filled the streets, but now most of them were away working, for ... this was not a time of unemployment, and whatever the momentous question was that had arisen it was the women who were settling it.

In Orchard Street a woman began to quarrel with a peddler over the price of an onion. A crowd of women who were watching this quarrel grew excited and overturned his pushcart. "This was a signal for an attack upon all the peddlers in the street," writes Ganz. "Cart after cart was overturned, and pavements were covered with trampled goods. The women used their black shopping bags as clubs, striking savagely at the men whom they regarded as their sworn

enemies and oppressors.” In this struggle many women, most of them were long-enduring wives and mothers, resolved to bear the oppression of the profiteer no longer.⁸³ Ganz was involved in this disturbance and came to make a speech to wives and mothers at Rutgers Square, where once she had spoken to “the radicals and the reds.” Led by Ganz, the women went to the City Hall to complain about their plight and ask for assistance to make possible the purchase of food at prices within their means. Ganz was arrested on a charge of disorderly conduct. Many women with her fiercely made a protest against this arrest. “Get us back our Marie!”, they cried, “Why do you take from us our Marie!” She eventually received a suspended sentence. It was the women, wives and mothers, who welcomed Ganz from the court with cries of joy.⁸⁴ Thus Ganz, once an anarchist, came to feel a sense of solidarity with immigrant women who were running households in ghettos, not with the radicals engaged in political struggles.

Following separation from the radicals, Ganz was rapidly absorbed into the militant mood that existed in America during WWI. When she visited Washington with a friend, who was a journalist and trying to report the declaration of war by Congress, she was very impressed with the sight of the crowded capital. “And of a sudden the spirit of national pride awoke in me,” she excitedly stated. “The flag bore a new meaning. Oh, America, mighty and just, rallying to save the world! I was proud that I, I too, was an American. It was my flag, my cause. ... Good-bye, past! Good-bye, old hate! Good-bye, old doubts! Good-bye, old comrades of a cause that is dead! My country is calling, and I know the road that is right!”⁸⁵ Thus, Ganz entered into “a new life”. I couldn’t find a clear and definite reason for her change of mind, because there are few records about her. But it is certain that anarchism and radical friends couldn’t assuage the anger and loneliness which she had felt since childhood. Finally she returned to her people in the ghetto and ardently supported the war with them.

Conclusion

It appeared that Antin and Stern were willing to take America at its word and try to live by its ideals without doubting the system in the beginning. Their faith in American values and their knowledge gained through education and the reading of American books sometimes conflicted with the tradition of the old world and their parents. In this conflict they left homes and parents and chose the new life and friends. Cohen and Yeziarska also challenged the traditional values in the Jewish community that defined women according to familial responsibility and gender-specific roles. Cohen refused the marriage her parents arranged for her by break-

ing off her engagement. Yeziarska, too, left her only child with her husband in order to make a career in writing and thus deviated from a traditional gender role. They believed that in America women were able to live and make choices according to personal will. Thus they rejected normative Jewish female destinies and sought their own places beyond families and old communities. Choosing such a life meant crossing gender boundaries as well as ethnic ones. They didn't, however, want to disconnect themselves from the old communities and old people, and they couldn't abandon their ethnic heritage. They just wanted to integrate their model into the American one. In fact, however, it wasn't easy to achieve their desires. They, therefore, had to go through great pain and sorrow.

In contrast with them, Ganz rebelled against the American social and economic system at first. It appeared that her identity rested in the class consciousness first of all, and was beyond gender and ethnicity. Compared with Antin and Yeziarska, we get the impression that her attachment for Judaism was weak in her childhood. As she grew up, however, and went through the passion of adolescence, she went back to her Jewish community and found a sense of solidarity with Jewish mothers and wives. Moreover she broke with radicalism and suddenly came to feel that she was a part of America. It is impressive that near the end of her book she proudly saw young Jewish men, who went to camp in order to serve in WWI, alongside Jews in ghetto. Seeing that many Jews in her community enthusiastically support WWI, she said, "We learned then what it meant to have a country to be proud of."⁸⁶

The five Jewish women in my paper all struggled to find their place to belong in America. One once found it in the American middle class society outside her traditional ethnic community and another found a place in radicalism focusing on improving American society. Their processes of adapting to America varied, but it was common to be unable to abandon Judaism. They couldn't forget the past, although "the Wandering Jew" in them wanted to do that. They had to endure keeping two worlds as American Jewish women.

Notes

- 1 Alice Kessler-Harris, Introduction for Anzia Yeziarska's *Bread Givers* (New York: Persea Books, 1999), xxv.
- 2 Mary Antin, *The Promised Land* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 1912; repr. Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1946), xiv.
- 3 *ibid.*, 141-142, 147-149.

- 4 Joyce Antler, *The Journey Home: Jewish Women and the American Century* (New York: The Free Press, 1997), xi.
- 5 Antin, *op. cit.*, 227.
- 6 *ibid.*, 8.
- 7 Paula E. Hyman, *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History* (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1995), 93-94.
- 8 *ibid.*, xiv-xv.
- 9 Antler, *op. cit.*, 18.
- 10 Antin, *op. cit.*, 5.
- 11 *ibid.*, 148.
- 12 *ibid.*, 148.
- 13 *ibid.*, 32-33.
- 14 *ibid.*, 34.
- 15 *ibid.*, 246.
- 16 *ibid.*, 198, 222-225.
- 17 Sydney Stahl Weinberg, *The World of Our Mothers* (Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1988; New York: Schocken Books, 1990), 169, 172-3.
- 18 Hyman, *op. cit.*, 105.
- 19 Weinberg, *op. cit.*, 171.
- 20 Class limited Jewish women's education in America, while gender and ethnicity had thwarted their hope for education in Eastern Europe. Leaders of Jewish female workers, such as Rose Schneiderman and Pauline Newman, weren't allowed to attend school and had to work from childhood. See, Annelise Orleck, *Common Sense and the Little Fire* (N. C: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1995), 23-25.
- 21 Thomas Kessner and Betty Boyd Caroli, "New Immigrant Women at Work: Italians and Jews in New York City, 1880-1905," *Journal of Ethnic Studies*, vol.5, no.4, 1978, 23-24.
- 22 Weinberg, *op. cit.*, 172.
- 23 *ibid.*, 173.
- 24 Antin. *op. cit.*, 186.
- 25 It is wrong to say that Jewish mothers were always more eager to educate daughters than fathers. Fannie Shapiro's mother, for example, opposed her daughter's desire for more education and made the girl help her mother at home, while the daughter wanted a full educa-

- tion when they lived in Russia. On the other hand, her father wanted his daughter to have a better education. Thus Fannie decided to come to America. See Sydelle Kramer and Jenny Masur, eds., *Jewish Grandmothers* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976), 2-8. Marie Ganz's mother also had a poor opinion of public schools which she thought were crowded with undesirable children. She hoped to teach her daughter herself though Marie wanted to go to school as other children did. But she soon overcame her prejudice against the other children. See Marie Ganz, *Rebels: Into Anarchy and Out Again* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1920), 14-15.
- 26 Isaac Metzker, ed., *A Bintel Brief: Sixty Years of Letters from the Lower East Side to the Jewish Daily Forward* (New York: Doubleday, 1971; repr. Schocken Books, 1990), 70-71. The answer to this question was that "she should obey her parents and further her education, because in that way she will be able to give them greater satisfaction than if she went out to work."; Hyman, *op. cit.*, 102-103.
- 27 Weinberg points out that age was a more important consideration than gender in determining the amount of education a child could expect. See Weinberg, *op. cit.*, 173-174.
- 28 In New York before 1903, only four years of schooling were required before a child could legally go to work. Since 1903, stricter compulsory education laws went into effect, and children were supposed to remain in school until the age of fourteen. But little effort was made to enforce "Progressive" education laws, and so children routinely obtained false working papers. See, Susan A. Glenn, *Daughters of the Shtetl: Life and Labor in the Immigrant Generation* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1991), 86-87.
- 29 Antin, *op. cit.*, 199-202.
- 30 Antler, *op. cit.*, 20-21.
- 31 Weinburg, *op. cit.*, 172.
- 32 Ganz, *op. cit.*, 155-157.
- 33 Barbara Sicherman points out that *My Mother and I* is a problematic book. Some reviewed it as autobiographical fiction, but others saw it as autobiography. Stern's origin as Jew, however, sometimes was doubted. But Sicherman and Ellen M. Umansky show some evidences and insist that "Stern's literary self representations reflected her own experiences." See, Barbara Sicherman, "Reading *Little Women*: The Many Lives of a Text," in *U. S. History as Women's History*, eds. L. Kerber, A. Kessler-Harris and K. K. Sklar (N. C: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1995), note 86, 423.

- 34 Stern, *op. cit.*, 70-71.
- 35 Antin enjoyed Alcott's stories and also longed to become a writer as the Alcott. She wrote: "Of these I remember with the greatest delight Louisa Alcott's stories. ... I could not resist the temptation to study out the exact place in the encyclopedia where my name would belong. I saw that it would come not far from 'Alcott, Louisa M.:' and I covered my face with my hands, to hide the silly, baseless joy in it." Antin, *op. cit.*, 256-259.
- 36 Ganz, *op. cit.*, 206, 213, 240-241.
- 37 Sicherman, *op. cit.*, 260-264.
- 38 Rose Cohen, *Out of the Shadow* (New York: Doran, 1918; repr. Cornell Univ. Press, 1995), 252-253.
- 39 Sicherman, *op. cit.*, 245-266 ; Stern, *op. cit.*, pp. 68-69.
- 40 Ganz, *op. cit.*, 190-191.
- 41 Ganz, *op. cit.*, 246-282.
- 42 Antin, *op. cit.*, 188. Changing names after arrival in America was usual for Jewish immigrants. The Yeziarskas—the family of Anzia Yeziarska—also changed their surname to Meyer as soon as they arrived America. See, Antler, *op. cit.*, 27.
- 43 Antin, *op. cit.*, 197.
- 44 *ibid.*, 224-225.
- 45 *ibid.*, 225-226.
- 46 *ibid.*, 228.
- 47 Stern, *op. cit.*, 76, 79-80.
- 48 Antler, *op. cit.*, 35.
- 49 Cohen, *op. cit.*, xii-xiv.
- 50 Antler, *op. cit.*, 36 ; Cohen, *op. cit.*, 233-245.
- 51 *ibid.*, 246.
- 52 *ibid.*, 267; Antler, *op. cit.*, 36.
- 53 Cohen, *op. cit.*, 273. According to the New York Times, Cohen committed suicide by jumping from a bridge in 1922. See, Cohen, *op. cit.*, XV.
- 54 Antin, *op. cit.*, xi-xii.
- 55 *ibid.*, 358.
- 56 Antler, *op. cit.*, 21.
- 57 Antin, *op. cit.*, 128-130, 244-247.

- 58 Antler, *op. cit.*, 21-22
- 59 *ibid.*, 22.
- 60 *ibid.*, 24.
- 61 *ibid.*, 24-26.
- 62 Stern, *op. cit.*, 76-77.
- 63 *ibid.*, 82-87.
- 64 *ibid.*, 139-142.
- 65 *ibid.*, 86-87.
- 66 *ibid.*, 110.
- 67 *ibid.*, 134-136.
- 68 Ellen M. Umansky, Introduction for Leah Morton's *I Am a Woman—And a Jew* (New York: Marcus Wiener Publishing, 1986), xiv. This book was a novel written by E. G. Stern in 1926. "Leah Morton" was the pen name of Stern.
- 69 *ibid.*, 362.
- 70 Anzia Yeziarska, *Hungry Hearts*, Penguin Books, 1997(1920), vii-viii.
- 71 Antler, *op. cit.*, 27.
- 72 The exact date of her birth went unrecorded, and it is guessed that Yeziarska was born between 1880 and 1883.
- 73 Antler, *op. cit.*, 27.
- 74 Yeziarska, *Bread Givers*, xx.
- 75 Antler, *op. cit.*, 30.
- 76 *ibid.*, 32.
- 77 Yeziarska, *Bread Givers*, xxi.
- 78 *ibid.*, xiii; Antler, *op. cit.*, 32.
- 79 *ibid.*, 123, 156.
- 80 *ibid.*, 228-240.
- 81 *ibid.*, 241-245.
- 82 Ganz, *op. cit.*, 247.
- 83 *ibid.*, 249-251.
- 84 *ibid.*, 253-258.
- 85 *ibid.*, 268-270.
- 86 *ibid.*, 277-281.