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**Tales of the Great Jewish Migration: Memory,
Assimilation, and Unsettled Matrimony**

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INTRODUCTION

*[A] mighty wave of the emigration movement swept over all parts of Russia, carrying with it a vast number of the Jewish population to the distant shores of the New World. [...] Its power was enormous. All over the land homes were broken up, families separated, lives completely altered.*¹

With these words, thirteen-year-old Mary Antin describes her emigration from the Belarusian city of Plotsk to Boston, Massachusetts. As Antin recognizes, it was an experience she shared with many. For between 1880 and 1910 over a million Russian Jews like Antin made the journey across the Atlantic from the “Pale of Settlement” (western territories including parts of present-day Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus and Poland to which Russia limited permanent Jewish settlement) to the United States.² Here, most found new homes in large east coast cities including New York, Boston, and Philadelphia. Although many of these immigrants came in hope of a more prosperous (or less impoverished) life, or in search of greater political freedom, many others fled to avoid the vicious pogroms that swept the region during this period or to escape other consequences of anti-Jewish policies (especially forced conscription into the Russian military).³

Russian Jewish immigrants came steeped in the cultural practices of small Jewish villages, or “shtetls,” and of the Jewish sectors of larger cities. Many were devout

¹ Mary Antin, *From Polotzk to Boston* (Boston: Clarke & Co., 1899), 11.

² In the discussion that follows, I include some immigrants from Eastern Europe who did not live strictly within the Pale at the time of their departure for the US. Similarities in background, together with the ever-shifting borders of this region, seem to warrant inclusion of these immigrants within the same general category.

³ Hasia Diner, *The Jews of the United States, 1654-2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 73-79; Gur Alroey, *Bread to Eat and Clothes to Wear: Letters from Jewish Migrants in the Early Twentieth Century* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2011), 78-79; For a more in-depth discussion of the pogroms see John Doyle Klier, *Russians, Jews, and the Pogroms of 1881-1882* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), Chs. 1 and 2; Benjamin Nathans, *Beyond the Pale: The Jewish Encounter with Late Imperial Russia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 165-200.

followers of Orthodox Judaism and carried its beliefs and practices with them. Others brought with them a deep commitment to Socialist political ideals. In the course of their journeys and the encounters that followed, though, these Russian Jews met with experiences, people, practices and ideas that affected everything from the food they ate, the education they received and the work they did, to the names to which they answered, the language they spoke, the political ideals they adopted, their understanding of their place in the family or community, and the way that they practiced or maintained their religion. As young Antin puts it, immigration was an experience that “completely altered” lives.

In what follows, I accept Antin’s claim. My question is *how* this wave of immigration changed the lives of the Russian Jewish immigrants who were part of it. I researched and assessed these changes by examining primary sources that range from immigrants’ personal recollections in memoirs, to their published requests for guidance in advice column letters, to public debates made available in newspaper interviews and institutional reports, to works of fiction by Russian Jews from the era. Paralleling this range of sources, the changes I consider include very personal ones, for instance in diet or name, and more general trends, concerning choice of a marital partner for example. I take on this analysis by considering three sub-questions: What kind of change did these Russian Jewish immigrants seek in choosing to emigrate in the first place and what attitude did they carry with them concerning their old lives in the Pale? How did immigrants’ immediate needs as newcomers to a strange land contribute to changes in their lifestyles, commitments and plans? How did immigration affect deeply settled traditions widely shared among those who made up Antin’s mighty wave?

My chapters take these questions roughly in order of time, considering the changes that aspiring immigrants hoped for first, those associated with “greenhorn” needs second, and those that cut deeply into settled traditions third. I argue that the Russian Jewish immigration story is one we cannot easily capture through broad generalizations even if these are multiple. I support this claim, in Chapter 1, by uncovering a new link between the character of a person’s experiences in the Pale and the positive or negative tone of later “old home memories.” Likewise drawing on the accounts that immigrants and their contemporaries offer, Chapter 2 further identifies a method of reconfiguring commitments to meet needs that has gone largely unnoticed in discussions of Russian Jewish immigrants’ assimilation to American ways. Finally, on the basis of similar evidence, Chapter 3 contends that marital traditions among such immigrants at the turn of the twentieth century were deeply unsettled, the result of an interaction between changing Russian Jewish practice and a comparably uncertain situation among American Jews. To fully and accurately capture the entire Russian Jewish immigration story, I argue in short, we must forego reliance on sweeping historical generalization and allow the voices of immigrants and other relevant actors to be heard.

Methodology ***Dowd and Clendinnen***

In investigating and answering these questions, I take the methodologies of Gregory Evans Dowd and Inga Clendinnen as guides. Dowd’s *Groundless* examines the role that rumors, legends and other sources whose truth we tend to think of as questionable play in making history and in our understanding of it. His focus is on American frontier history, not on turn-of-the-twentieth-century Russian Jewish immigration. His insights about the historical role of stories and narratives, as well as

glosses, partial truths and outright untruths, are nevertheless highly relevant to my research and analysis. Three of his insights are especially important. First, even those who witness historical events first hand are story-tellers, and this is true even if they are doing their best to give a fully accurate account of their experience. Moreover, these stories are often the product of many witnesses or narrators and not just one. As Dowd puts the point, characterizing the work of those he calls “historians of rumor,” “the rumor depends less on an initial perceptual flaw than on the rumoring group’s sense of ambiguity and its determination to establish a reliable understanding of a dangerous world.”⁴ What matters here for my purposes is not Dowd’s interest in rumors or legends specifically. It is his insight that human beings do and must interpret events in order to try to understand them and that this is especially true of events that one can interpret in more than a single way, events that are ambiguous. Further, interpreters are likely to share understandings with one another and to revise their stories as new interpretations come to light. The second Dowd point important for in my research is that the stories witnesses tell about events of the time provide insights into the way at least some people viewed and understood those events even if the stories also leave out or mischaracterize some features. A third take-away is that historians are also story-tellers, offering an interpretation or a gloss of the sources they use. More than this, they are interpreters of interpretations.

These insights are important in my investigation of the changes that were part and parcel with turn-of-the-twentieth-century Russian Jewish immigration to the US. With such insights in mind, in each chapter I have selected sources that represent a variety of

⁴ Gregory Evans Dowd, *Groundless Rumors, Legends, and Hoaxes on the Early American Frontier*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), 6.

viewpoints. Where individuals and their circumstances were so numerous, this would be important in any case. We could not hope to have a full picture without examining a diversity of examples. Variety is all the more important, though, if one takes Dowd's points seriously. If first hand participants are interpreters of events, offer a window on thinking that was current at the time, and collaborated with others to develop and revise their interpretations, then our understanding will be deeper as we gather more perspectives. Dowd's discussion also guides my selection of secondary sources and my attitude towards the ones I consider and towards my own contributions. Secondary sources that provide a range of interpretations are not best understood as competitors, one of which gives us a true picture of history. Although some views are more justifiable than others, in general there is likely to be valuable insight in each. This applies both to what occurred and to how people at the time understood such occurrences. Further, in offering a new interpretation one does not need to see it or present it as defeating earlier interpretations. It will often be an indication of what others have overlooked or underemphasized rather than proof that opposing views offer no insights into past events and the people who lived them.

Clendinnen's transparent methodology complements these insights from Dowd. Her commitment is to determining "from whatever sources we happen to have what the participants in past events thought they were up to."⁵ I take this comment to mean, first, that the voices of participants in the events we hope to understand really matter. Second, we should not assume that just because these sources are partial, or difficult to interpret, or unusual in form that we should ignore them. Third, we should be transparent about

⁵ Inga Clendinnen, *Ambivalent Conquests Maya and Spaniard in Yucatan, 1517-1570*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), xiii.

process. We should be clear about why we focus on some sources and not others, about the ambiguities in these sources, and about the circumstances under which authors produced them. That way we can appeal to whatever evidence is available without significant risk of attributing too much weight or clarity, or too little bias, to the materials we rely on. These considerations seem especially important once we agree with Dowd that not only every piece of historical fiction, but also every letter, memoir, newspaper article or institutional report, is itself an interpretation or story of the events in question.

So in addition to selecting a wide variety of sources and viewing them at most as providing a window into relevant aspects of the past, I try in what follows to be transparent. Where I am able, I provide context for the primary sources I use and detail my own process in selecting sources, analyzing them and drawing connections and distinctions among them. My hope is that, in this way, voices from the past and the interpretations they provide are clear and that we can give them the attention they deserve and gain insight into the lives and experiences they describe.

This two-part methodology contrasts with my initial approach to my topic. Expecting to find right answers in the form of clear patterns or neat boxes, I began my work by segregating sources. My hope was to discover similar trends among examples taken from memoirs, newspaper articles and institutional documents. My attempt to wedge the examples I found into preconceived slots showed me that I would have to use warped readings of primary texts to achieve my goal. So I revised my plan and started over. The results are the chapters that follow. My conclusions are that we gain a fuller appreciation of immigrants' attitudes toward their former homeland and their sense of connection to the past by focusing, in part, on the degree to which those lives seemed

stable and secure. These attitudes are relevant in understanding immigrants' later decisions about assimilation, about what to maintain from the past when old commitments and new needs commonly associated with immigration came into tension. The restless status of some questions of assimilation, however, requires another explanation. At least for marriage questions, which I consider in detail in Chapter 3, we find this explanation not in tensions between needs and commitments but in colliding forces of change.

Background on collections

Especially given the methodology I have chosen, two published primary source collections that I use throughout the following chapters are worth describing here at the start. One of these is a selection of essays from a contest that the Yiddish Scientific Institute (YIVO) hosted in 1942.⁶ The contest theme was “Why I left Europe and what I have accomplished in America.” YIVO’s announcement stressed the historical importance of the experiences of everyday individuals who had been part of the great migration that sponsors termed “a nearly unprecedented historical revolution in Jewish life.”⁷ The announcement also encouraged recollections concerning contestants’ working lives, the social mobility they had experienced and the aspirations they had for their children and stressed that essays should be detailed and sincere. Contestants had to be adult Jews born neither in the US nor Canada. YIVO promised monetary prizes for six

⁶ YIVO was founded in 1925 in Vilna, Poland. Its purpose was to document Jewish life and preserve Yiddish. It moved to New York City in 1940. See Jocelyn Cohen and Daniel Soyer, eds., *My Future is in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 2-4.

⁷ Cohen and Soyer, *My Future is in America*, 5, quoting YIVO contest announcement.

top winners and book prizes for the next nineteen. Of the more than two hundred submissions ninety percent were written in Yiddish.⁸

The collection I used contains English translations, and the editors (Jocelyn Cohen and Daniel Soyer) purposely chose just nine for inclusion. In selecting essays they looked for “good stories” that were historically significant because they concerned “changes in everyday life.” They also attempted a collection that represented the immigrant population as a whole in terms of “gender [...], political and religious orientation, class status, age, time of migration, region of origin, and place of settlement.”⁹ I relied only on essays by authors who came to the US from the Pale or nearby Galicia in the period between 1880 and 1910. In addition to understanding what prompted authors to write the YIVO memoirs I make use of, the selection details are ones to keep in mind. They remind us not only that authors saw themselves as writing on a particular theme and with the hope of satisfying judges. The essays in the collection were selected in part for their quality as stories. They are excellent examples of Dowd’s point about historical resources as tales, stories or glosses. They are also reminders, following Clendinnen, that even when we carefully pay attention to the voices of all those who participated in events we should also keep in mind the limitations of what we have and the surrounding context. We should be careful not to claim more (or less) than our limited evidence warrants.

The second of the collections I want to describe in detail here is a set of letters and responses from the *Jewish Daily Forward*’s “Bintel Brief” advice column. The *Forward* was a Socialist newspaper, published in Yiddish for a working class audience

⁸ Ibid., 4-9.

⁹ Ibid., 15.

and aimed significantly at encouraging trade unionism and the fight for better wages and working conditions.¹⁰ But Abraham Cahan, who served as its editor for most of the period from the paper's founding in 1897 until his death in 1951, believed the *Forward* should also address a broader range of interests and needs. He began the "Bintel Brief" column in 1906 because "[h]undreds of thousands of people, torn from their homes and their dear ones, were lonely souls who thirsted for expression, who wanted to hear an opinion, who wanted advice in solving their weighty problems."¹¹ In the early years, encompassing letters I cite (1906–1910), Cahan answered "Bintel Brief" requests himself. According to his autobiography (quoted in the collection), the *Forward's* editorial staff sometimes rewrote poorly written letters before publication. Individuals who could not write sometimes asked (or even paid) others to compose letters for them and occasionally arrived at the *Forward's* editorial office asking for help in composing a letter. Letters to the column were written in Yiddish and are translated into English in the published collection.¹²

Perhaps in keeping with the column's own practices, collection editor Isaac Metzker explains in his introduction that he also "shortened or condensed" some letters and answers or sometimes simply provided a synopsis of the answer.¹³ I did not rely on any of the letters with summarized answers but cannot be certain where Metzker altered a letter. In analyzing the letters and answers, then, I am following Clendinnen's lead by using the best evidence available to me of the worries and experiences of those who

¹⁰ Isaac Metzker, ed., *A Bintel Brief: Sixty Years of Letters from the Lower East Side to the Jewish Daily Forward* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), 11-13.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 13, quoting Cahan's autobiography.

¹² *Ibid.*, 13-14.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 16-17.

wrote them, or who asked or paid others to do so, and also the best evidence of Cahan's reply. I am further acknowledging, in keeping with Clendinnen's emphasis on transparency, that someone may have altered the evidence. Although I have no current reason to doubt that the letters I use match those published or submitted, here again it is worth remembering not to base dogmatic claims on these limited resources. Of course the details of the writing and editing of "Bintel Brief" letters and responses also engage Dowd's insights. The evidence historians analyze is not only someone's interpretation of what has happened, or what a person or group thought or cared about. It is often the result of many interpretations and many interpreters both at the time of first writing and over time.

The Role of Fiction

Before I turn from methodology to chapter summaries, I also want to say a word about the role fiction plays in my discussion. As I explain below and in somewhat more detail in the chapters themselves, my analysis of assimilation and unsettled tradition (Chapter 2 and Chapter 3) includes examples from well-known works of fiction. In Chapter 2, I use children's stories about Russian Jewish immigrant life on New York's Lower East Side to introduce the kinds of tensions between needs and commitments that new immigrants had to navigate and to illustrate strategies for doing so. In Chapter 3, Sholem Aleichem's tales of Tevye's daughters illustrate the many questions in play regarding Jewish marriage traditions in the Pale itself at the turn of the twentieth century. They also provide an introduction into a similar discussion underway in the US at the time. They are thus a partial basis for comparison between the two and for some conclusions about the role of immigration in this debate.

Part of the reason for introducing these stories concerns ease of explanation. For fictional examples often isolate and highlight features that are easy to miss in real world contexts. Part of the reason, though, concerns a position I am adopting about the nature of history and historical sources. It is a position that extends insights from both Dowd and Clendinnen. If both historical sources and historical analyses are glosses or interpretations, then they share something important with fiction and especially with historical fiction. As another gloss or interpretation of past events, this fiction is one more contribution to the collection of interpretations that are history and that help us to understand the events, attitudes and viewpoints of the past. Moreover, if the voices of those who participated in these events include works of fiction, then Clendinnen gives us a further reason to take them seriously as we attempt to understand what people in an earlier time “thought they were up to.”

Current Literature

The amount of secondary literature on Russian Jewish immigration to the United States is vast in both quantity and scope with much written about nearly every aspect of the story. In what follows I appeal, among others, to works that exemplify popular positions on the issues central to my three chapters. Regarding my work in Chapter 1, on motivations for emigration and memories of the Russian homeland, these include Neil and Ruth Schwartz Cowan’s *Our Parents’ Lives: Jewish Assimilation and Everyday Life*, Gur Alroey’s *Bread to Eat and Clothes to Wear: Letters from Jewish Migrants in the Early Twentieth Century* and Frank Wolff’s article “The Home that Never Was: Rethinking Space and Memory in Late Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Jewish

History.”¹⁴ I argue that these authors’ positions at most accurately portray only a portion of cases, though. We must look to immigrants themselves, and sometimes to their contemporaries, to fill out the story. When I turn to issues of assimilation (in Chapter 2) and shifting traditions (in Chapter 3), I argue that popular views again tell only part of the story. Here relevant works include Irving Howe’s *World of Our Fathers*, Jack Glazier’s *Dispersing the Ghetto: The Relocation of Jewish Immigrants across America* and Michael Weisser’s *A Brotherhood of Memory: Jewish Landsmanschaftn in the New World*.¹⁵ Although I believe that they leave important things unsaid, I nevertheless learned much from the scholarship in these works.

Also central to my discussion and argument in the chapters that follow are a trio of works by Hasia Diner, including *The Jews of the United States, 1654-2000*, *Lower East Side Memories* and *A New Promised Land: A History of Jews in America*.¹⁶ Similarly important for my work are Daniel Soyer’s *Jewish Immigrant Associations and American Identity in New York, 1880-1939* and Jonathan Sarna’s article “Intermarriage in America The Jewish Experience in Historical Context.”¹⁷ Unlike the histories above, which inform my thinking but also function as foils, these works (like those of Dowd and

¹⁴ Neil M. Cowan and Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *Our Parents’ Lives: Jewish Assimilation and Everyday Life* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989); Alroey, *Bread to Eat and Clothes to Wear*; ¹⁴ Frank Wolff, “The Home that Never Was: Rethinking Space and Memory in Late Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Jewish History,” *Historical Social Research* 38, no. 3 (2013).

¹⁵ Howe, *World of Our Fathers* (New York: New York University Press, 1976); Jack Glazier, *Dispersing the Ghetto: The Relocation of Jewish Immigrants across America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); Michael R. Weisser, *A Brotherhood of Memory: Jewish Landsmanschaftn in the New World* (New York: Basic Books, 1985).

¹⁶ Hasia Diner, *The Jews of the United States; Lower East Side Memories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); *A New Promised Land: A History of Jews in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

¹⁷ Daniel Soyer, *Jewish Immigrant Associations and American Identity in New York, 1880-1939* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); Jonathan Sarna, “Intermarriage in America The Jewish Experience in Historical Context,” (New York: *The Jewish Theological Seminary of America*, 2007).

Clendinnen) importantly shape my views. As will become apparent, they also allow me to propose conclusions that are new but that extend this earlier scholarship.

Chapter Summaries

My first chapter considers the reasons travelers themselves provide for emigrating and the attitudes (for example bitter or nostalgic) that they express toward their former homes. Mainly focusing on memoirs, with several “Bintel Brief” advice column letters also making a brief appearance, I ask what these resources tell us about such reasons and attitudes and the experiences that gave rise to them. I also ask how well this primary source evidence matches trends that historians identify and what these historical analyses seem to miss or overemphasize.

The memoirists I consider in this chapter include Rose Cohen, who followed her father to New York City from the Pale to help earn money to bring over her mother and siblings. I also draw on Mary Antin, who made a similar journey to join her father, in this case traveling with the remainder of her immediate family. Others I discuss include Benjamin Reisman and Aaron Domnitz, whose memoir essays were part of the 1942 YIVO contest. The lines of historical analysis I evaluate, and ultimately supplement, are three. The first claims that most Russian Jews who came to America at the turn of the twentieth century did so in fear of bigotry and violence at the hands of local Gentiles and the Russian government. Their post-immigration attitudes towards former homes in the Pale were ones of fear and bitterness. A second line of analysis counters this, arguing that those who left the Pale in this era did so for a wide variety of reasons, including anti-Jewish violence, economic instability and the desire for greater political freedom. Whatever the reason, though, most left illegally and were in no position to return. Their

attitudes for a world lost to them were ones of wistfulness and longing. A third, more complex, line of thought argues that, whatever the catalyst for emigration, the attitude a writer expressed in recording later memories of the former home was more a product of the time of writing than of past experiences themselves. This line of analysis astutely recognizes that the way in which Russian Jewish memoirists recall the past varies with time and depends, in part, on events occurring as they write.

While each of these accounts contributes to our understanding of emigration catalysts and related events and attitudes, I argue, each also overlooks an important thread running through these decisions, experiences and reactions. When we carefully attend to immigrants' own voices, we find that the sense of stability and safety that they experienced before emigration shapes later memories. Those who were, or at least felt, safe and secure in the Pale recall life there more positively than those who were, or believed themselves to be, at significant risk. This positive attitude, I suggest, can further serve as a link between an immigrants' past and present. As with the insights of other authors, this link may help explain immigrants' decisions about what changes to make and how to make them when the needs that came with taking up residence in a new land conflicted with commitments brought from the old.

Armed with this analysis, in Chapter Two I consider the changes that immigrants made in the face of conflicts between needs and commitments. How did need influence assimilation, and what did this process look like and why? Here, I again take three common lines of analysis as a backdrop, lines that immigrants' contemporaries as well as historians sometimes endorse. The first suggests that new immigrants readily abandoned

old ways, hoping to become Americans as quickly as possible.¹⁸ A second takes the opposite position, seeing immigrants as prone instead to cling to the past, almost at all costs.¹⁹ A third view, by far the most popular, understands immigrants as usually attempting to strike a balance between honoring what they deemed important commitments and fulfilling significant needs.²⁰ As before, I agree that there is something to each of these views. None gives us a full picture of assimilation though, and even taken together they provide a picture that is incomplete. A more satisfactory view demands attention to a variety of examples and, especially, to voices from the time. These include both the voices of immigrants navigating issues of change and those of the aid workers and others who sometimes attempted to help them.

In exploring and analyzing primary sources in this chapter, I focus on needs common to most new immigrants, including those for economic stability, medical care and social inclusion. The commitments I consider are ones common among Russian Jewish immigrants of the era. They concern religion and identity, as well as basic standards of morality and self-respect. As already mentioned, I begin my discussion here with Sydney Taylor's well-known *All-of-a-Kind Family* children's book series. I do so, in part, to provide freestanding exemplars not only of needs and commitments, but also of the ways that immigrants dealt with tensions between these. As already noted, though, I also take these stories as historical sources that provide interpretations of the events I am considering.

¹⁸ Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, 115-117.

¹⁹ Cowan and Cowan, *Our Parents' Lives*, 13-14.

²⁰ Hasia Diner, *The Jews of the United States 1654-2000*, 78-81.

Set on New York's Lower East Side in the early 1900's and drawn from Taylor's own recollections of a Russian Jewish immigrant childhood, the All-of-a-Kind-Family stories suggest that immigrants' decisions around assimilation depended very much on personal features. Such decisions also made use of strategies beyond those that interpreters (including both historians and immigrants' contemporaries) typically identify. Sources, including the Cohen and Domnitz memoirs from Chapter 1, bear out this conclusion. I further enrich my discussion by drawing on primary source documents concerning immigrant aid efforts. Among these are an Educational Alliance report and charity-oriented opinion pieces from newspapers including the *Hebrew Leader* and *The Jewish Harold*. Together with Taylor's stories and immigrant memoirs, these sources offer insights into the ways that assistance leveraged or alleviated tensions between need and commitment and influenced immigrants' assimilation into their new environment. The assimilation tales that historians and others tell, I conclude, certainly identify broad responses that were common among new Russian Jewish arrivals. For a fuller understanding, though, we need a better appreciation of the complex circumstances that might lead to abandonment or determined retention of commitments. We must also grasp the difference between balancing needs and commitments and reconfiguring a commitment so that it becomes possible to retain it while also meeting a need.

In Chapter Three, I turn to yet another type of life-altering change that concerned Russian Jewish immigrants to America at the turn of the twentieth century. Distinct from my Chapter 2 discussion of assimilation in the face of need, my topic here is significant and widespread change, or contemplation of change, in settled traditions brought from the homeland. My focus is on marriage, more specifically on alterations in customs

surrounding the suitability of marital partners and the rituals of marrying. As noted, I take Sholem Aleichem's short stories, featuring Tevye the dairyman and his daughters (famously adapted as *Fiddler on the Roof*), as a starting point and a touchstone throughout. In these stories, set in the Pale and written in Yiddish by a famed Russian author, we find a clear account of the traditional Russian Jewish marriage paradigm: a Jewish man and woman of like social status whose fathers arrange an economically advantageous marriage with the assistance of a matchmaker. We also find indications of a set of changes, or attempted changes, apparently already afoot in the Pale of the late nineteenth century. These include tales of successful challenges to parental arrangements whose aims are economic, but also of significant and sometimes deadly resistance to alterations in norms regarding social status and inter-faith alliances.

Primary sources, including memoirs of Cohen and Antin, a lengthy newspaper debate on interfaith marriage among Rabbis and advice column letters from the *Jewish Daily Forward*, mark similar changes, or attempted changes, in America's Russian Jewish immigrant community. But as in the fictional Tevye's case, I argue, these changes are not settled or fixed. We find this community still in hot debate not only on the most vexed question of inter-faith marriage, but even on matters of arranged marriage, the relevance of economics, and the role of formal religion. Here we encounter an example of deep change that is in process across a wide swath of the immigrant community and beyond. We also discover grounds for seeing that debate as complicated, and as heightened by the fact that it takes place in a realm where potential Russian and American metamorphoses have collided. This is yet another consequence of Antin's mighty wave of immigration.

“I think it was the next day that a message came telling us that father had escaped from the constable in the next village. That was a joy indeed though limited, for father was still on Russian soil and could be recaptured at any minute.”²¹

Chapter 1 – REMEMBERING THE PALE

In re-examining popular narratives of the turn-of-the-twentieth-century Russian Jewish immigration experience, I begin at the roots. My focus in this chapter is on immigrants’ own descriptions of their reasons for leaving what many term the “old country” or the “old home” in the first place. I further examine the old home experiences they recall and the attitudes with which they view this past life. What can we learn from immigrants themselves about these catalysts, experiences and attitudes? How closely does what we find track the patterns or trends historians have identified? In what ways does it, at least sometimes or to some extent, diverge from these?

To explore immigrants’ own stories about past lives and immigration decisions, I focus on memoirs and letters. Memoirs of Rose Cohen (the source for my opening quotation) and Mary Antin, take the form of book-length autobiographies. Each was the work of a woman then in her thirties who had left the Russian Pale in her early teens. A pair of shorter autobiographical pieces further fill out the picture in Cohen’s case. I take two additional memoirs, one by Ben Reisman and another by Aaron Domnitz, from the 1942 YIVO contest essays mentioned in my introduction. Three letters that recent Russian Jewish immigrants submitted to *The Jewish Daily Forward’s* “Bintel Brief” advice column round out primary sources here. Each offers the author’s memories of life in the Pale and voices concerns either about changed circumstances in America or the

²¹ Rose Cohen, *Out of the Shadow: A Russian Jewish Girlhood on the Lower East Side* (New York: Doran, 1918), 20. For another autobiographical account of Cohen’s childhood see, “My Childhood Days in Russia,” *Bookman* Vol. 47 (August 1918): 591-608.

well-being of family and friends left behind. The letters provide another window into reasons for leaving the old home as well as into the life these immigrants led there and their attitudes towards it. They are a further means of understanding the place where narratives concerning this period of Russian Jewish immigration to America have their roots and of assessing, modifying or enriching the stories historians currently tell.

I have chosen this collection of memoirs and letters not only to capture immigrants' own voices, but also because these examples showcase variety. They capture the great diversity of reasons, experiences and attitudes that characterized emigration decisions and relationships between immigrants and their first home. To evaluate historical narratives that emphasize trends, categories and similarities, one must examine and confront this diversity. Although I provide some analysis of these sources taken together, I also group memoirs to highlight certain comparisons. When viewed side-by-side, I claim, these cases reveal important details that current historical narratives miss. In particular, I pay special attention to comparisons between Cohen and Reisman, on one hand, and between Antin and Domnitz on the other. My aim is to understand why pairs who shared good or ill fortune and higher or lower economic status differed significantly in their later attitudes towards the old home (with Cohen and Domnitz conveying relatively positive outlooks and Reisman and Antin negative ones). Because they differ from the memoirs in their brevity and advice-seeking character, I consider the "Bintel Brief" letters as a set, noting the way they seem to confirm my analysis of the memoirs.

As a backdrop for my discussion in this chapter, I have selected three contrasting historical narratives that focus on Russian Jewish decisions to depart the old home and immigrants' lasting attitudes towards it. The first represents the view of these decisions

and attitudes that is probably most familiar. Russian Jewish immigrants fled the Pale for America as the nineteenth century became the twentieth, on this account, because long-standing anti-Jewish feeling had come to a head, and lives were imperiled. Neil and Ruth Cowan offer a particularly clear example of this view. “Having been hated by their neighbors for centuries,” they argue, “the Jews of Eastern Europe responded by hating their oppressors, regarding the *goyim* [...] of Eastern Europe as little more than idol-worshipping barbarians, and stupid ones at that.”²² With growing social and economic stresses in the region and a spate of terrible pogroms that began as the nineteenth century wound down, Jews fled the territory. While “[s]uch a massive migration must have had many causes,” the Cowans write, “[...] the overriding cause was fear for their lives.”²³ The attitudes these immigrants later harbored towards the Russian homeland, they suggest, were predictably negative.

While the Cowans’ characterization surely captures the reasons, experiences and attitudes of many, though, a single portrayal (as they concede) is unlikely to account for all important catalysts for immigration or for the whole range of later attitudes towards the old home. This no doubt helps to explain the fact that other historians view this wave of immigration through very different lenses. Gur Alroey, for example, emphasizes that most immigrants from this era experienced a strong sense of loss and longing for the homeland in part because, once they had left, there was no real prospect of returning. The decision to emigrate, he writes “meant a life of uncertainty because the Jews, unlike other ethnic groups, had nowhere to return.”²⁴ Most having left illegally, going back would

²² Cowan and Cowan, *Our Parents’ Lives*, 13-14.

²³ *Ibid.*, 35.

²⁴ Gur Alroey, *Bread to Eat and Clothes to Wear*, 62.

mean peril for self and family and could not be risked. For many, says Alroey this was a source of poignant recollection and regret rather than bitterness, providing a reason to cling to memory and tradition.²⁵

In an unusually direct and thorough examination of attitudes concerning the Russian homeland, Frank Wolff argues that depictions of the Pale in memoirs by Russian Jews who were part of Antin's "mighty wave" tended to track current experiences and hopes rather than past realities and altered as these were transformed over time. Thus he contends, memoirs written in the early years of this period of Russian Jewish immigration typically cast the "old home" as one of repression that immigrants rejected and attempted to escape.²⁶ Those of the inter-war period described Russia as a place that gave birth to progressive thinking and fostered its development. Those that followed World War II, by contrast, depicted the European home, and especially the shtetl, as a lost civilization never to be re-gained.²⁷ Wolff's narrative accounts for more diversity in emigration catalysts and in attitudes towards the old home than do other views. Nevertheless I argue, like the Cowans and Alroey, he fails to take sufficient account of the role that a sense of relative stability and safety in the old home played in one's memories of it. These authors likewise miss the implications of this consideration for a sense of connection with the past and for a consequent unwillingness to make oneself over completely anew. In short this chapter contends that, while each of these narratives provides insight into the reasons for emigration and the attitudes towards the past that accompanied them, the voices of

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 80.

²⁶ Frank Wolff, "The Home that Never Was: Rethinking Space and Memory in Late Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Jewish History," 203-5.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 212.

those who made the decision to migrate offer detail and texture that we would miss by listening only to more current story-tellers.

Contrasting Memories
The Dreamer and the Orphan

As the above quotation from Rose Cohen's memoir *Out of the Shadow* already suggests, the impetus for her departure from the Russian Pale and journey to New York City (in 1892 while in her early teens) was her father's own hurried and perilous flight over the Prussian border to avoid forced military conscription.²⁸ Describing the weeks leading up to her father's ultimate escape, Cohen recalls that this required two attempts to steal into Prussia, with a hazardous and potentially deadly imprisonment in between. His successful evasion of the draft thirteen years earlier had caught up to him. Unable to get a passport, without which "no one may live in Russia even a week," he was immediately forced to attempt an escape.²⁹ In the hard times that followed this departure of the family's chief source of income, Cohen's grandparents aged, her mother became both caretaker and breadwinner, and the children too abandoned much of their play or study time for work.³⁰ Both the pain of separation and the fact that the family could hardly survive alone soon led to Cohen's own trans-Atlantic crossing. Using steamer tickets her father supplied, the family determined that she and her young aunt would join him in New York and work to help fund the journey for Cohen's mother and siblings. Yet the decision to follow this plan came with its own pain, a permanent separation from beloved and ailing grandparents, and as Cohen well knew by the time she wrote the memoir, a new life in the US filled with grinding poverty and hardship.

²⁸ Ibid., ix; 13-14.

²⁹ Ibid., 14.

³⁰ Ibid., 22-28.

As Cohen relates her memories of the “old home,” some thirty years after her departure and as World War I was coming to a close, though, she remembers her early childhood in the Pale with fondness. While she also recalls personal challenges, privations and frustrations, her vivid descriptions of evenings sitting by the fire with her father, of playing in the trees with her little sister and of festive and welcoming visits from strangers reveal a sense of belonging, comfort and security. “To see the sunshine, the blue sky, and the green fields,” she writes, “filled my soul with unspeakable happiness.”³¹ Although winter days could be dark and cold, she notes later, “our joy was boundless” when a beggar’s knock at the door brought the opportunity for conversation and a shared meal.³² True, her father sometimes spanked (actually strapped) her for small misbehaviors or stubbornness, but even then, she had the support of her mother and grandmother, who offered to hide her or teared up at the thought of her punishment.³³

“The Books I Knew as a Child” offers a further window into Cohen’s early memories, now with a focus on her early relationship to literature. She recalls first learning to read from the books her family owned. As in other Russian Jewish families these were only “a few volumes in Hebrew and Yiddish pertaining to religion.”³⁴ Reading the same passages over and over, taking the stories to heart, she eventually became the most pious member of her family, a child who religiously washed her hands, prayed fervently, and felt terror at the thought that she might commit a sin.³⁵ When she was about eleven, Cohen remembers, her father employed a tutor who “procured a Russian

³¹ Cohen, *Out of the Shadow*, 9.

³² *Ibid.*, 10.

³³ *Ibid.*, 12.

³⁴ Rose Cohen, “The Books I Knew as a Child,” *Bookman* 49 (March 1919): 15.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

book” in order to teach her to read that language as well. “We were all proud,” she recalls, for to learn this kind of literary Russian and not merely the local dialect “was an accomplishment, like music.”³⁶ It impressed her sufficiently that “the mantle of both religion and fear was lifted a little,” broadening her outlook and her sense of what was part of her world and important in her life.³⁷ In addition to being one of joy and familial support, then, the Russia of Cohen’s early memory was a place of religiosity and the concerns and fears associated with it, but also of beauty and of new possibilities.

Even when the idealistic tone characterizing Cohen’s account of early childhood falls away with her father’s arrest and ultimate escape, positive memories remain. For example, she recalls both the fear she experienced in crossing an elderly neighbor’s windowless entryway and the joy of sitting with her sister on the old woman’s bed while they watched her weave and completed tasks for their mother.³⁸ She likewise remembers her own tendency to daydream and play with an imaginary older brother while her sister, younger and smaller, hauled a great sack of potatoes for planting and dropped the spuds in neat rows.³⁹ At its most difficult and despite hardship, then, this remained a childhood of play and imagination.

On receiving the steamer tickets that would allow her (with youthful Aunt Masha) to join her father and speed relocation for the nuclear family, Cohen recalls the sad realization that permanent separation from her grandmother was imminent. But she also remembers being blessed with the fame of one who would travel far (the envy of friends and neighbors) and a vacation from chores (since her mother guessed the work abroad

³⁶ Ibid., 16.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 25.

³⁹ Ibid., 27.

that would spell the end of her childhood).⁴⁰ Even the hardships of travel to reach the steamer, sometimes hidden in the bottom of a wagon, have an air of mystery and excitement in Cohen's retelling. She writes of crying desperately for her mother, taking a last long look at a favorite uncle, and fearing a fellow traveler who had designs on her aunt. Yet, she says, she will never forget Aunt Masha's "joy" on finally learning that they would sail the next day after a long delay in Hamburg. Her recounting of a stranger's kind response to her desperate seasickness is likewise lighthearted. As she tells it, "He kneeled down in front of me, raised my chin, showed me how to open my mouth and squeezed a few drops of juice into it. A good-natured smile played about his lips as he watched me swallow."⁴¹ The same is true of her account of their New York arrival, where she failed to recognize the smiling, waving man onshore as her father. "'Why you little goose,'" her aunt cries in her retelling, "'don't you see. It's father.'"⁴² Even in the distress of hardship, long travel, uncertainty and loneliness, the story Cohen tells is of a child loved, protected and fortunate. Having examined Cohen's experience, I now put it into conversation with a memoirist whose motivations and memories differ greatly from hers.

Ben Reisman's YIVO essay "Why I Came to America" offers a particularly detailed picture not only of his experiences after immigration, but of the trials he faced in Eastern Europe. These ultimately propelled his decision to travel west, across the Atlantic and into the US. As Reisman describes them, though, these were not trials attributable to Gentile bigotry. Instead, they were the product of both the selfish unconcern of the extended family with whom he lived miserably after his parents' deaths and (as he sees

⁴⁰ Ibid., 34.

⁴¹ Ibid., 64.

⁴² Ibid., 64-5.

it) the absence of policies and institutions within his hometown's Jewish community to see to the welfare of orphaned children like himself. As Reisman remarks in reflecting on his departure for America, "No one bothered with a poor orphan. Many Jewish orphans wandered in the streets in tatters, half naked, and the respectable Jews did not even want to take notice."⁴³

Born Binyomin Reisman in Galicia, an area that passed for centuries between Austria-Hungary, Poland and Ukraine (then part of Russia), Reisman came from a Hasidic family and spent a particularly pious early youth immersed in the study of the *Gemara*.⁴⁴ Like Cohen, he recalls his earliest years with fondness. Though his father was a teacher who met an early death, his mother nevertheless made a good living as a shopkeeper and by lending money to local Gentiles. Until her own death several years later, this insured that Reisman could dedicate himself to the religious studies he loved.⁴⁵

With the untimely death of both of his parents, though, Reisman found himself at age nine living with his older sister's family. At first treatment was reasonable, and he continued avid study. But as he turned eleven, Reisman's brother-in-law ordered him to cease attending *heder*.⁴⁶ Insisting that young Reisman was "not going to make a living from studying," the older man commanded that he "learn the trade."⁴⁷ Now the family apprenticed the boy to a tinsmith and soon required him not only to contribute all earnings to the family, but to act as a servant in their home, cleaning, caring for younger cousins and family livestock, and receiving little by way of sustenance or care. While the

⁴³ Ben Reisman, "Why I Came to America," in *My Future is in America*, ed. and trans. Jocelyn Cohen and Daniel Soyer (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 65.

⁴⁴ *Gemara* are rabbinical commentaries.

⁴⁵ Reisman, "Why I Came to America," 37-8.

⁴⁶ *Heder* were religious schools for Jewish children, most commonly for boys. I discuss them at greater length in the next section.

⁴⁷ Reisman, "Why I Came to America," 41.

family's two sons (one his own age) played, attended school, and consumed the best food and comforts this modest family could afford, Reisman was chastised for small errors, whipped when he played, forbidden to attend school and required to labor long and hard.⁴⁸

There were happier moments as well. Reisman recalls an uncle and cousins with whom he stayed for some weeks and who pampered him and helped him improve his writing. As he puts it, “[t]hese were weeks of love and gentleness as I had not experienced since my mother, may she rest in peace, had died.”⁴⁹ With the knowledge he had already acquired, Reisman was also able to find quiet moments to read, to write and to study on his own and, on summer evenings when more of his time was free, even to work with a local Talmudist.⁵⁰ Though other relatives and family friends were seldom able to improve his situation, Reisman also took comfort from the concern they sometimes showed. He remembers a family friend who asked with worry why his cousins ate buttered bread while his was dry and a local tradesman who advised the family to send this intelligent boy to school as they did their own children.⁵¹ As to why he did not leave the family to seek his fortune elsewhere in the region, Reisman offers three reasons. Jobs were in short supply throughout the area; he could not be certain circumstances outside the family and community would allow him to follow the demands of Jewish law; and while he remained in Kalush (his hometown), he had some hope of an opportunity for religious study.⁵²

⁴⁸ Ibid., 42.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 44.

⁵⁰ That is, with a scholar of Jewish law.

⁵¹ Reisman, “Why I Came to America,” 43.

⁵² Ibid., 46-7.

Then at age twenty, with the help and advice of a relative concerned for the fate of an orphaned niece, Reisman was betrothed to this fellow orphan, a young woman he genuinely loved. It was this betrothal and some wise plotting and planning (again with this relative's help) that allowed him at last to depart for New York, just a day after his wedding. He aimed to stay with a cousin, find work in an environment where jobs were more plentiful and bring his bride Keyle after him, all plans that in fact came to pass.⁵³

Cohen and Reisman differed in age, gender, experience and the catalyst for travel, yet their youths were also similar in important ways. Both experienced great love in early childhood and significant hardship tempered by love in later years. Each developed a deep religious piety at an early age and a consequent love of learning. Each suffered the loss of a parent, though Reisman's was permanent while Cohen's was not, and each experienced both personal anguish and material want as a consequence. Partly as a further consequence, each also experienced an abrupt end to childhood pursuits, though for Reisman this occurred in the Pale and for Cohen, for the most part, once she reached American shores.

Each also largely avoided the terrible pogroms that brought many similar travelers to the US. True, her father's decision to flee forced conscription with its special hardships and dangers for Jews prompted Cohen's journey, while Reisman left to escape poverty exacerbated by his plight as an orphan. True too that Cohen was forced to journey in secret, while Reisman was able to travel to nearby Western Europe without these precautions. Nevertheless, both avoided the deep sense of peril due to ethnic and religious bigotry that plagued so many others. As Jennie Grossman recalls in an interview

⁵³ Ibid., 62-5.

documented by the Cowans, for example, “the soldiers would come into the house and just commandeer the entire house. They slept in our house, and my mother had to cook for them. Maybe I’m some soldier’s child, God forbid!”⁵⁴ As noted earlier, the Cowans themselves observe that many “must have departed from their homelands in Eastern Europe with a mixture of fear and hatred in their hearts: fear of what lay ahead, hatred of what lay behind; hatred not so much for the place in which they had been born, as for the people who had lived there; a hatred born of harassment, oppression, and terror.”⁵⁵

Yet even if their experiences did not include this special terror, both Cohen and Reisman had reason to look back on their time in the homeland with some bitterness. Cohen, as we have seen, hardly does so. Written as World War I came to an end, her memoir does not neatly fit Wolff’s scheme predicting positive sentiments towards Russia in works written between the wars. Another explanation for her positive outlook, of course, might be the longing Alroey describes for a home to which she could never return. There is good reason to think, though, that a large part of the explanation lies in the relatively stable and loving family, and consequent sense of security, that Cohen enjoyed. The fact that her memories are largely fond ones also seems likely to be due, in part, to the fact that she did not understand until much later why her father was forced to flee.⁵⁶ Thus she did not feel at risk from laws and penalties that were biased against and burdensome for the Pale’s Jewish residents. Reisman, by contrast, sees the town of his birth as having given him nothing of value, not even fond “youthful memories.”⁵⁷ His bitterness was not tied to a sense that the Jewish people were under attack, though.

⁵⁴ Cowan and Cowan, *Our Parents’ Lives*, 34.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁵⁶ Cohen, *Out of the Shadow*, 19.

⁵⁷ Reisman, “Why I Came to America,” 65

Moreover, the timing of his memoir removes it from categories where Wolff would predict a negative take on Russian experiences. What seems most likely, as before, is that Reisman's bitter attitude stems from his conviction that a child left without parents could expect little from the Jewish community itself, much less from the Gentile one. Once he had become an orphan, Reisman was a child always at risk and with no one whose support or protection he could count on with certainty. In this, his story and Cohen's starkly diverge.

The Oppressed Child and the Labor Zionist

Although there are positive moments, the vast majority of Mary Antin's memories of her childhood in the Belarusian city of Polotsk, described in her 1911 memoir *The Promised Land*, are ones of bigotry and related hardships that recall the injustices that local Jews suffered in especially great detail. It was this climate that first drove her father's departure for Boston, Massachusetts in 1891 and ultimately led Antin, her mother and her siblings to emigrate as well.⁵⁸ One story that brings home Jewish disadvantage particularly well recalls the workings of the Belarusian education system. Decades earlier, the Russian government had instituted a policy dictating that no more than ten percent of those in schools within the Russian empire could be Jewish. This meant that, even in predominantly Jewish settlements, Gentiles occupied most available spaces.⁵⁹ To be awarded a spot, Antin recalls, one had to pass an exam. Often, Jewish children were expected to have mastered material four years above what was typically required for their age-level. While they regularly did so, and completed the entrance exams with

⁵⁸ Mary Antin, *The Promised Land* (Boston: The Riverside Press, 1911), 137-163; Pamela S. Nadell, "Mary Antin," Jewish Women's Archive, <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/antin-mary> (accessed March 2, 2019).

⁵⁹ Antin, *The Promised Land*, 26.

confidence after much studying, the quota system frequently prevented aspiring and qualified Jewish students from enrolling in school.⁶⁰ For young boys, *heder* was an alternative route to education. Families, says Antin, treated *heder* students like royalty since proving oneself to be a boy of intellect was one of the few ways of moving up in the social class system. Though there were also some educational alternatives for girls, she notes, they were far less widely available, a fact whose implications I will explore more below.⁶¹

Beyond the kind of disadvantage that Russian policies like these imposed, Antin also addresses the sheltered and isolated nature of her community in light of rigid restrictions on residency. Her perceptions as a young child that “the world was divided into two parts; namely, Polotzk, the place where I lived, and a strange land called Russia”⁶² are especially compelling testimony to this. This isolation from the larger Russian population and lands, she emphasizes, was enforced by fear of risks that were real and dire. Russia “was the place where one’s father went on business. [...] So many bad things happened there, that one’s mother and grandmother and grown-up aunts cried at the rail station”⁶³ when fathers, husbands and sons boarded trains to visit these forbidding areas. Nevertheless, many men regularly left the Pale to do business in other parts of Russia, since there they could better supplement limited incomes. As Antin also recalls, such isolation further created a youthful confusion, one only revealed at age ten during her first lengthy rail journey to visit family in Vitebsk. While she had been aware that other towns in the Pale existed, Antin writes, she had difficulty comprehending that

⁶⁰ Ibid., 26-28.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., 1.

⁶³ Ibid.

the river in Polotsk, the Divna, could continue outside of town. Yet finally “[i]t became clear to me that the Dvina went on and on, like a railroad track, whereas I had always supposed that it stopped where Polotzk stopped.”⁶⁴

Further elements of Antin’s account are memories of more immediately damaging injustices against Jews in the Pale. Her recollections of young men’s desperate attempts to avoid forced military conscription (as Cohen’s father did) are particularly moving. Hoping to escape the threats of poverty (for men who gave the best years of their working lives to unpaid military service), physical harm and religious persecution that accompanied conscription, Jewish men resorted to extreme measures. Often they attempted to fail the medical exams through self-inflicted wounds. Even when attempts succeeded, though, wounds intended to be temporary frequently proved unalterable. Someone who wanted to lose his hearing for a few months wound up permanently deaf. Someone who had intentionally inflicted a leg wound would limp for the rest of his life.⁶⁵ In the same vein, Antin relates the story of David the substitute. A poor man who did military service for another in exchange for money, David the Substitute had thus accepted forced violations of his religious convictions (including dietary and prayer requirements) for the sake of income. Overwhelmed by remorse when his military service ended, and despite costs to his health due to a grueling work schedule, this man committed himself to calling the community to prayer every morning as a form of repentance.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Ibid., 2.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 12-16.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 16-17.

Antin herself feared the possibility of pogroms, a danger requiring constant watchfulness and caution.⁶⁷ But the persecution whose prospect terrified her most was forced baptism:

There was one thing the Gentiles might do to me worse than burning or rending. It was what was done to unprotected Jewish children who fell into the hands of priests or nuns. They might baptize me. That would be worse than death or torture. Rather would I drown in the Dvina than a drop of the baptismal water should touch my forehead.[...] Sooner would I rush out to the mob that was passing, and let them tear my vitals out.⁶⁸

By the time Antin published *The Promised Land*, she had long ago abandoned her Orthodox roots, though not her Jewish faith, and married a Christian German.⁶⁹ Yet her intense recollections of the fear surrounding forced baptism suggest that, for all her rejection of antiquated ways and her acceptance of a Gentile spouse, she had not forgotten intense childhood fears of unwilling conversion. Neither had she come to take the cruelty of the conditions of bigotry and religious zeal that created them less seriously.

Antin's fellow Belarusian Aaron Domnitz paints a picture of life in the Pale that almost could not be more different from hers. As a young boy, Domnitz's family was not well-to-do, but they made enough to get by and to promote his education when he proved a prodigy in Talmudic study and dedicated his childhood to the *Gemara*.⁷⁰ The opening pages of his YIVO contest memoir likewise detail late nights at the *heder* studying without permission. Stealthily leaving the house, ten-year-old Domnitz and his best friend would race through the darkness, past the cemetery and into the school because

studying at night had a completely different feel. Our thoughts were fresh and undisturbed. [...] The house of study was empty and dark. [...] [T]he

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 8-11.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, xxi-xxii.

⁷⁰ Aaron Domnitz, "Why I Left My Old Home and What I Have Accomplished in America," in *My Future is in America*, ed. and trans. Jocelyn Cohen and Daniel Soyer (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 125-126.

hanging lamp swayed. [...] It blended with the melody and filled our hearts with bittersweet feelings of zeal, persistence, and sacred calling.⁷¹

This almost enchanted tale of childhood markedly contrasts with Antin's description of bigotry and fear. In fact, Domnitz hardly mentions Gentiles. As a young child his only problems seem to have been with fellow students, in particular those he surpassed in *heder*.⁷² According to custom, the superior student who out-performed his fellows was also required to slap them, slaps that were consistently re-paid outside of school.⁷³

By comparison with his earlier years, Domnitz's later childhood was not so easy. While he was away at school, his parents' home burned, forcing them to return to the village where his father had grown up.⁷⁴ While his father had been a successful teacher in the old shtetl, the only students available to new teachers in this town were ones who nobody else wanted to work with or who could not afford lessons. As a result, Domnitz's father made very little money, and his mother and younger sisters had to supplement the family income by doing paid seamstress work from their home.⁷⁵ Still, despite these financial difficulties, Domnitz's family never failed to feed him well, and upon his return home after several years studying in another city, his mother's caring nature helped to remind him "what a mother's gentleness" was.⁷⁶ Hardships notwithstanding, then, his memories appear overwhelmingly positive.

What ultimately moved Domnitz to leave the Pale was not some dramatic change in circumstance rendering his condition more like that of Antin, Reisman, or even Cohen. As he describes it, it was instead that fellow Jewish intellectuals in nearby towns and

⁷¹ Ibid., 127.

⁷² Ibid., 125.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 130.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 134.

small cities accepted popular Russian critiques of both Judaism and Socialism.⁷⁷

Domnitz, a self-described Labor Zionist organizer committed to what he calls the “spirit of progressive Judaism,” rejected these critiques and could not live in his home region in accord with his commitments.⁷⁸ Since there was no larger urban center where it was safe to live, work and study, no easy route to escape this stifling social environment was available. Domnitz did not have a significant economic issue or religious or cultural strife to contend with, but he lacked a satisfying outlet for discussion and activism. As he remarks;

The small town felt narrow to me, and I wanted to go somewhere else. I was drawn to a large urban center. There could be no discussion of going to a big city in Russia. It was 1905, the year of revolution and unrest. Even my parents asked me to go abroad.⁷⁹

Given Antin’s own description of her experiences, she nicely fits the accounts of Russian Jewish reasons for leaving the Pale, and of immigrants’ accompanying attitudes, that the Cowans and Wolff provide. Though she maintains a positive connection with Judaism despite her critiques of the outdated and sometimes oppressive practices of Russian Jews in the Pale, Antin’s characterization of life amidst Russian Gentiles is deeply negative. She expresses precisely the fear and bitterness born of Russian bigotry and violence that the Cowans tell us to expect. Her memoir, written in the years before World War I, also fits Wolff’s characterization of memoirists’ shifting attitudes. In fact, *The Promised Land* is Wolff’s paradigm example of a memoir from this period, one that looks entirely toward a bright future in America and rejects the Russian past.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 134-135.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 135.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

Domnitz's far more positive characterization of the value of his roots in the Orthodox Jewish community in Russia and his experiences with Russian Gentiles fits the alternate characterizations I described at the outset far less well. He hardly mentions interactions outside the Jewish community except to say that Russia was a dangerous place at the time of his emigration, apparently in his perception for anyone. So he is certainly an exception to the Cowans' analysis. Despite his positive take on the past, though, Domnitz hardly expresses a tendency to cling to old ways or any deep nostalgia that would be a fit for the one Alroey offers. On Domnitz's account, though he had maintained many religious ties, by the time of his emigration he had also become a committed Socialist who had modified his orthodoxy and a restless young man ready to pursue his political convictions elsewhere. Moreover, the man who writes the memoir in 1942 expresses no discontent with that decision and describes no attempt to return to the past.

Written in the midst of World War II, Domnitz's memoir does fit Wolff's analysis to a degree. He has many fond memories of his early childhood and even of his later years in the Belarusian homeland, as Wolff tells us to expect. As noted, though, Domnitz's recollections are also tinged with some negativity regarding Jewish practice. Further, though he describes himself as a committed Socialist throughout, his fondness for the old home does not focus on the fact that it provided a model for Socialism in the US. In fact, Domnitz makes it quite clear that he left Russia in large part because he could pursue neither political nor intellectual projects in the confined conditions it provided.

A closer comparison between Domnitz's autobiographical rendition and Antin's, though, offers the possibility that an alternative analysis (mirroring the one I offered for Cohen and Reisman) may prove enlightening. Differences between Antin's Russian experiences and Domnitz's do not stem from their having lived in different parts of the Pale, since both spent their childhood years in Belarus. Likewise, their families, while not wealthy, seem to have been comparably well off economically. In light of earlier discussion, it does seem reasonable to think that Domnitz's vastly more positive perspective stems, in part, from the fact that he was a male child who went to *heder*. As noted, this factor in the life of Jewish boys in the Pale is one Antin mentions in discussing the effects of Russian bias on Jewish children's education. On her more detailed description:

After a boy entered *heder*, he was the hero of the family. He was served before the other children at table and nothing was too good for him. If the family were very poor, all the girls might go barefoot, but the *heder* boy must have shoes; he must have a plate of hot soup though the others ate dry bread. When the rebbe came on Sabbath afternoon, to examine the boy in the hearing of the family, everybody sat around the table and nodded with satisfaction, if he read his portion well; and he was praised, and blessed, and made much of.⁸⁰

This seems a fairly accurate match not only for Domnitz's family life as he describes it, but for his life within his village as a whole. As he recalls, due to his talents and his father's high standing within the community, "The teacher praised me. [...] The 'neighbors' who stood next to my father in synagogue would ask me questions, smiling to my father."⁸¹ It was these talents and social advantages that led Domnitz to travel to towns all around the Pale for study and eventually to become a teacher.⁸²

⁸⁰ Antin, *The Promised Land*, 32-33.

⁸¹ Domnitz, "Why I Left My Old Home and What I Have Accomplished in America," 125.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 128-132.

Whatever help it may offer in understanding the differences between Antin's experiences and Domnitz's, it is also worth noting further commentary on the role of the traditional Eastern European *heder* in Jewish culture and memory. While Russian Jews in general, including those who attended as children, frequently describe the *heder* with fondness, and as "bulwarks in a now fragmented Jewish culture,"⁸³ many experts of the time instead characterized them as classrooms "filled with death."⁸⁴ In fact, after a visit to what was considered the worst offender in Russia, one investigator reported that she "left this *heder* shattered physically and spiritually."⁸⁵ These seemingly contradictory recollections of religious educational spaces, ones that Domnitz and Antin (despite her misgivings) hold in high esteem, are telling. They suggest both the importance of tradition and faith in the Pale, two things that immigrants often feared would be lost on their immigration journey, and the power of memory to preserve symbolic aspects of the past as more positive than they actually were. As Antin's recollections suggest, this kind of positive memory does not require continued devotion to orthodoxy even if it suggests continued attachment to religious and cultural heritage. This look at the negative aspects of Jewish schooling also serves as a reminder that, despite his own positive experience, Domnitz was hardly uncritical of either his early or later education. He expresses no fondness for either the practice of slapping (described earlier) or for shaming practices imposed on older students in later years of religious education. Although he does not directly state that these fueled his devotion to Socialism or his departure from strict orthodoxy, it is reasonable to infer that this may well have been the case.

⁸³ Steven J. Zipperstein, *Imagining Russian Jewry: Memory, History, Identity* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999), 47.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

Another important difference between the two concerns their family situations. Domnitz's father made his living as a teacher within the Pale. Antin's father, we know, was instead a businessman whose trade took him away from Polotsk, and even into Russia, with frequency.⁸⁶ For Domnitz, then, the risks of Russian anti-Semitism were at least somewhat more distant than they were for Antin, and it seems reasonable to conclude that it was partly for this reason too that his memories of the old home were more positive.

The connecting thread that emerges from this comparison with Antin, is one of relative stability and safety. As a male child who successfully attended *heder* and was able to continue his education, Domnitz enjoyed care, praise and opportunities that many Jewish young people in the Pale (notably including many Jewish girls) did not. As the child of an intact family whose father had a safe and respected, if not very lucrative, profession, he enjoyed relative economic stability without undue concern for his safety or well-being or for that of his loved ones. In all of this, Domnitz childhood resembles Cohen's, whose memories and attitudes towards the old home are likewise positive. He contrasts not only with Antin, but also with Reisman. As with our comparison of Cohen and Reisman, a sense of safety and stability within the family and community seems to explain much, accounting for Domnitz's sense of his past and feelings of connection with it better than other historical analyses we have considered. Although the reasons Domnitz could feel safe and assured differ from those that supported Cohen, they nevertheless shared a sense of security that affected their later attitudes towards the old home and linked them to their past lives in the Pale.

⁸⁶ Antin, *The Promised Land*, 3.

Letters to the *Jewish Daily Forward*

To gain further insight into this line of reasoning and appreciate further support for it, now consider several “Bintel Brief” letters from the *Jewish Daily Forward*’s well-known advice column. Although these short letters offer only a snapshot of immigrant experiences, memories and attitudes, taken in combination they provide us with further perspective on memories of the Pale and additional evidence on which to base conclusions.

“In Europe we were in business; we had people working for us and paid them well. In short, there we made a good living but here we are badly off,”⁸⁷ one 1906 “Bintel Brief” advice-seeker recalls, with evident fondness for a life led in Europe. As she continues, the writer further laments that in America her husband, now a peddler, is often recognized as a Jewish immigrant and assaulted because he wishes to continue wearing his beard. These troubles, she intimates, began upon immigration, not during their time in the Pale (an attitude expressed by more than one “Bintel Brief” author).⁸⁸

On an initial reading, one might ask why someone with a successful business emigrated in the first place, since the writer does not address the troubling times in Russia. Given the memoirs we considered above, though, we can appreciate that reasons might have ranged from concern to avoid pogroms, to worries over other forms of Russian oppression (e.g., military conscription), to desires to avoid trends towards financial instability or to secure a freer and more stable environment for minor children.

⁸⁷ F.L. to Editor, 1906, in *A Bintel Brief*, 42.

⁸⁸ F.L. to Editor, 1906, in *A Bintel Brief*, 42-43. Also see, Unhappy to Editor, 1907, in *A Bintel Brief*, 62-63; Heartbroken to Editor, 1907, in *A Bintel Brief*, 65-67; A Shopgirl to Editor, 1907, in *A Bintel Brief*, 72; Skeptic from Philadelphia to Editor, 1908, in *A Bintel Brief*, 81-83; Z.B. to Editor, 1909, in *A Bintel Brief*, 95-96.

We can also conclude that motivations like these were consistent with a life in the old home that had many positive features, including opportunities to enjoy deep connections with extended family and friends, to live and work in reasonably good conditions and to pursue intellectual, religious and political aims and commitments.

Whatever the motives for emigrating, this letter certainly does not square with Wolff's argument that those writing prior to the World War I remember the Pale negatively, nor does it express the kind of fear and bitterness that historians like the Cowans, who focus on Russian repression as a principal reason for migration, tend to emphasize. Further, while the letter expresses a sense that times were better in the old home, it does not suggest any tendency in the writer or her family to cling to old ways and customs in general as others, like Alroey, tell us to expect. Regarding her husband's decision to maintain his beard despite abuse, this writer simply agrees that "it is not fitting for such a man" to shave (presumably, as the editor's answer suggests, because tenets of Jewish faith will not allow it).⁸⁹ As with Cohen and Domnitz's memoirs, though, what the letter does suggest is a life in the Pale that was, at least for some substantial period, stable and reasonably secure. As before, we can reasonably conclude, positive memories of the Pale and attitudes towards it are likely to rest, at least in part, on a foundation of stability and a consequent sense of security.

Still other "Bintel Brief" authors at the turn of the twentieth century, reflecting back on times in Russia, express wistfulness for the Socialist activities that were their primary engagement in the old home despite enjoying business success in America.⁹⁰ In

⁸⁹ F.L. to Editor, in *A Bintel Brief*, 42-43.

⁹⁰ See, for example, H.P. to Editor, 1906, in *A Bintel Brief*, 38-40; M.G. to Editor, 1906, in *A Bintel Brief*, 51-52; J.B. to Editor, 1906, in *A Bintel Brief*, 53; The Debating Group to Editor, 1908, in *A Bintel Brief*, 74-75; S.R. to Editor, 1909, in *A Bintel Brief*, 101-102.

one of these (also written in 1906), a new immigrant is plagued by concern that perhaps he should return to Russia to check on his family's safety after a recent wave of pogroms. Remarking longingly on his former Socialist activities, he also expresses fear, given the dangers of returning to Russia in its current climate.⁹¹

Yet another writer, a young woman, recalls that “[a]long with my sisters and brothers, I came from Russian Poland where I had been well educated. But because of the terrible things going on in Russia we were forced to emigrate to America.”⁹² Her 1907 letter then describes the new horrors of her American working life in a “shop” where the foreman “is an exploiter” who keeps wages “very low” and “allows himself to ‘have fun’ with some of the working girls,” though he is a married man with children.⁹³ Despite an intimate sense of the terrible dangers and tragedies for Jews in Russia, this writer too expresses a wistfulness for her homeland, where she enjoyed the benefits of a good education and the community standing that came with it.

These writers express both a fondness for the good things they enjoyed in their former home and, at least in the latter two letters, a clear-eyed appreciation of the dangers left behind. The letters also indicate a deep appreciation for the lives writers lived in the Pale and a sense of continuing connection with the people these writers were before emigration (owners of a successful business; a committed member of the Socialist community; an educated and respected woman). Writers' memories are a mixture of the positive and the negative (against both Wolff's expectations for memories recorded in this period and those like the Cowans who emphasize only fear and bitterness). Alroey's

⁹¹ M.G to Editor, 1906, in *A Bintel Brief*, 51-52.

⁹² A Shopgirl to Editor, 1907, in *A Bintel Brief*, 72.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

analysis better accounts for the sentiments and attitudes captured here, and we might well read each of these letters to express the longing he describes for a home to which one can never return. (This applies especially to the letter from the Socialist worried for his family's safety.) The helpfulness of Alroey's analysis notwithstanding, though, the sense of relative stability that characterizes Cohen and Domnitz's memories of the Pale is also present here. It offers a further explanation for positive memories and connection to the past, one consistent with Alroey's account that also adds something his storyline does not highlight.

Conclusion

Although about one third of the Russian Jewish population became immigrants at the turn of the twentieth century, there are commonalities that connect their stories. Some of these lie in their reasons for deciding to emigrate, in the circumstances surrounding that decision and in their later attitudes towards their old home. There is no doubt that popular lines of historical analysis, the tales many historians tell, capture something true and important about these reasons, experiences and attitudes. Fear of bigotry and violence were often significant factors in these decisions; a sense of longing spurred by the impossibility of return was frequently another; current circumstances and the passage of time were bound to affect the character of the memories and attitudes immigrants described in later memoirs and letters.

No one narrative, or even a collection, will capture everything required to appreciate this era of mass Russian Jewish immigration and the individual lives that it encompassed. Yet when we pay close attention to the voices of those who lived those lives and carefully compare the stories they tell, I have argued in this chapter, we

discover a new and important connecting thread. Those whose lives in the Pale were reasonably protected and stable (or who believed this was true) tended to recall these lives more positively and to feel a closer connection to the people they had been before departing the old home. The new storyline I suggest is no more complete than the others I have considered, but it is significant as we move forward to ask how immigration in this era changed those who made the journey from the Russian Pale to America. True, some saw themselves as abandoning an old existence for a new one, and some may have clung to practice and tradition generally as they longed for a past life they could not regain. My new storyline reminds us, though, that still others surely thought of themselves as the people they always had been. They were, of course, now bound for a new phase of life, but not a phase completely separate or sharply divided from the old. Those who took these varying viewpoints on the connection between past, present and future were likely to approach the changes that come with immigration differently. They may also have been likely to make different choices or to conceive of the choices they did make in distinctive ways. In the discussion of need, commitment and assimilation that follows in the next chapter, this is an important point to keep in mind.

[Passover], the oldest and greatest of Jewish festivals was about to begin [...], and in Mama's house four sick little girls wept because they could not take full part in it. Papa put on his kittel just as in ancient times when the festival clothing of the Jews had been white. He stood for a moment in the open doorway of the bedroom so that the little ones might see him in all his splendor. "Don't cry," he told them. "We shall keep the door open throughout the services. I shall read loudly so you will be able to hear me. [...] The sick ones dried their eyes, determining to listen carefully so that they might hear everything even if they couldn't see."⁹⁴

Chapter 2 – RECONFIGURING PASSOVER: COMMITMENT AND NEED IN CONFLICT

I take the quotation above from a piece of children's fiction by author Sydney Taylor. I choose it because it exemplifies one of this chapter's central themes. The Mama and Papa of Taylor's stories are recent Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe. The setting is a tenement apartment on New York's Lower East Side in about 1910, and the Passover holiday is just beginning. As we will see in what follows, the family faces a type of dilemma familiar to new Russian Jewish immigrant families of the time. Sick children cannot both recuperate as their health requires and join in the all-important Passover Seder.⁹⁵ Parents must determine how to navigate this conflict between health and religious commitment.⁹⁶ The way they find to do this, opening doors so that the children may hear the traditional prayers although they cannot see the rituals performed, may initially seem unremarkable. In fact, I will argue below, this and similar examples that draw on immigrant voices offer insight into the paths open to these newcomers as they determined in what ways they would alter their lives as a consequence of immigration.

⁹⁴ Sydney Taylor, *All-of-a-kind Family* (Chicago: Follett Publishing Company, 1951), 125-126.

⁹⁵ A Seder is a ritual dinner held on the first two nights of the eight-day Passover celebration.

⁹⁶ For more information on the unique health issues facing those living in the tenements, see Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: With 100 Photos from the Riis Collection* (New York: Dover Publications, 1971); Robert W. de Forest and Lawrence Veiller, "The Tenement House Problem," in *The Tenement House Problem*, ed. de Forest and Veiller, Vol. I, pp. 1-68.

Cohen, Reisman, Antin and Domnitz, as well as this fictional family celebrating Passover, left the Pale for varying reasons and in the midst of very different conditions. As we have seen, this diversity of experience affected memories and later attitudes towards the home left behind. It likely also helped shape immigrants' experiences as newcomers in a foreign land and the ways that they altered their actions, their practices and themselves in hopes of building new lives free of whatever adversity or difficulty led them to leave their old homes in the first place. Among the steps new immigrants took towards this goal, of course, were attempts to address basic needs while surrounded by unfamiliar social and cultural conditions and by people who were, for the most part, strangers.

My question in this chapter concerns the changes immigrants made in order to meet these needs, or to put it in more familiar terms, the ways that need led to assimilation. Because they were common among new immigrants, I will focus here on economic needs, on needs for medical care during illness and on needs for social inclusion. Because I am interested in changes that "completely altered lives," as Antin puts it, the examples I consider involve changes that occurred when immigrants' important needs came into conflict with what they saw as central commitments. While not every person would identify the same commitments as central, those that often played this role for Russian Jewish immigrants at the turn of the twentieth century include religious commitments, commitments tied to identifying features like one's name, and commitments regarding basic moral behavior, for instance to honesty, or regarding basic standards of self-respect, for instance to refusing charity.

Historians and others (including immigrants' contemporaries) have tended to characterize assimilation among turn-of-the-twentieth-century Russian Jewish immigrants in one of three ways. Some have characterized at least one group of new immigrants as rapidly abandoning old practices, anxious to distance themselves from a place and culture they associated with hardship, or worse, and enthusiastic about fully integrating into a new society.⁹⁷ Some instead have suggested that these immigrants clung to old customs, anxious to preserve what was familiar in an alien world.⁹⁸ For others analyzing this era of Russian Jewish immigration, we best think of most of these immigrants as attempting to balance the old and the new, hoping to become Americans without sacrificing all connection to their origins.⁹⁹ My focus on tensions between needs associated with immigration and existing commitments already sharpens the picture most describe. It suggests that we cannot satisfactorily understand the changes immigration brought with it unless we limit consideration to alterations with significant connections

⁹⁷ On assimilation see, e.g., Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, 115-117. Howe characterizes some new immigrants of the era as bent on assimilating as quickly as possible and others as taking the opposite attitude. As I discuss in this chapter's conclusion, tales of rapid assimilation were popular among at least some who remained in the Pale. These Russian Jews perhaps received word that those who left for America soon abandoned religious duties in particular.

⁹⁸ For a description of this view and of some reasons for holding it see Jack Glazier, *Dispersing the Ghetto*, 27-34; Michael R. Weissner, *A Brotherhood of Memory*, 3-9. Glazier's focus is on established German Jewish attitudes towards Russian newcomers, and his characterization is as much about these attitudes as it is about the real tendencies of Russian Jewish immigrants. As we will see in what follows, more established American Jews who were their contemporaries often described newcomers, especially older immigrants, as tightly bound to familiar practices and commitments. See e.g., "About Men and Things," *The Hebrew Leader*, January 21, 1881, Dorot Jewish Division, *Newspaper Collection*, New York Public Library; "Our Immigrants," *The Hebrew Leader*, February 6, 1881, Dorot Jewish Division, *Newspaper Collection*, New York Public Library; "Development in the Charities," *The Hebrew Leader*, April 3, 1881, Dorot Jewish Division, *Newspaper Collection*, New York Public Library; John Foster to Irving Lipsitch, January 26, 1916. *Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society Records*, YIVO Institute, New York. This was sometimes also true of the way that younger Russian Jewish immigrants described their elders. See, e.g., Rose Cohen's description of her impressions on returning to the Lower East Side after a hospital stay "uptown." Cohen, *Out of the Shadows*, 246;

⁹⁹ See, e.g., Cowan and Cowan, *Our Parents' Lives*, 249-254; Daniel Soyer, *Jewish Immigrant Associations and American Identity in New York, 1880-1939* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 3-6; Hasia Diner, *The Jews of the United States 1654-2000*, 78-81. More historians fit this category than others though, again, most are not as precise as they might be about what precisely balancing involved.

both to individuals' status as immigrants and to commitments they took especially seriously.

In order to clarify this insight and identify other considerations likely to enrich our understanding, I begin just below with further examples taken from the books that Sydney Taylor (herself the daughter of Eastern European Jewish immigrants) wrote about her own early-twentieth-century childhood on New York's Lower East Side. I then turn to some real-life examples that are the cousins of these fictional ones. I conclude that cases of precipitous abandonment or determined maintenance of old ways across the board tend to bear important connections to immigrants' old home experiences. Instances of balancing, moreover, are far more complicated than most studies suggest and often involve what we might call reconfiguration rather than an attempt to achieve equal weight on each side of an imaginary scale. What this chapter claims is not that the stories historians and others tell about assimilation are straightforwardly false, but that they do not fully capture the diverse voices and layered interpretations that characterize the experiences of Russian Jewish immigrants in this era. Thus to gain new insight, though nothing like the whole truth, we must carefully analyze the contributions of those who were there at the time. This includes those of memoirists, letter writers, Educational Alliance Superintendents and authors of children's fiction, just to name a few. The aim of such an analysis is to find connecting threads that have been lost or hidden, thereby developing a fuller picture of the past.

The Insights of Fiction

Sydney Taylor's *All-of-Kind Family* series stands out as one of the first pieces of children's literature to focus on American Jewish immigrants.¹⁰⁰ The books trace Taylor's childhood memories, with the earliest stories set (as mentioned) on the Lower East Side in the years between about 1910 and the start of World War I in Europe. Although Taylor herself was born in New York, her parents and oldest sister immigrated to the US in 1900.¹⁰¹ Her mother was originally from Russia, though she was raised in a middle-class Orthodox Jewish home in Bremen, Germany. Her father was a far poorer Jew from an area that Russia and Poland alternately controlled.¹⁰² The books themselves focus on Sydney (formerly Sarah) and her four sisters, Ella, Henny, Charlotte and Gertie, as they grow up in the tenement district. They tell stories of Jewish holidays that range from Hanukkah to Sukkot, weekly Friday afternoon trips to the library, a bout of scarlet fever (partially described above) that strikes just as Passover begins, and a warm relationship with the neighborhood's Settlement house. They also recount the economic challenges the family faces and suggest the cramped quarters in which they lived, though with a cheer and nostalgia that sugar-coats the real deprivations of poverty the family endured and their harsh tenement living conditions.

Three of these stories are especially useful for our purposes. The first concerns the scarlet fever experience just mentioned. Another involves an encounter with a Christmastime church charity, and the third a kindness from the children's beloved

¹⁰⁰ Hasia Diner, *Lower East Side Memories*, 60.

¹⁰¹ Cynthia Miller Coffel, "Sydney Taylor: Bringing All-of-a-Kind Family into the World," Bloom, <https://bloom-site.com/2018/10/30/sydney-taylor-bringing-all-of-a-kind-family-into-the-world/> (accessed March 3, 2019).

¹⁰² Ibid.

“library lady,” a Gentile woman named Miss Allen. Each tale presents a complicating aspect of assimilation for us to examine and paves the way for the similar analyses of primary source memoirs, reports and newspaper articles that follow. Taylor’s rendition of Passover illness makes for one of her most vivid chapters. Sarah, the middle child of the five and always most prone to illness, is first to succumb. Her oldest sister Ella, with whom she shares a bed, soon joins her as do the youngest two. Since all five children in this poor immigrant family share one room and just three beds, rapid spread of the illness is no surprise. Only Henny, next-to-oldest and most hearty, is spared, and Mama must clean leaven from the house and prepare the special dishes and foods for Passover while caring for four very sick children.¹⁰³

And it is Mama, of course, who realizes and must navigate the tension that results when the needs for care and medicine that accompany serious childhood illness come into conflict with the religious rites this Orthodox family holds dear. “Mama’s heart sank,” Taylor writes. For scarlet fever “meant quarantine and isolation. It meant special diets, probably leavened foods, and they were coming into the Passover holidays. How would she manage it?”¹⁰⁴ Despite the conflict, and Mama’s uncertainty about whether she can handle both nursing and the honoring of Passover traditions, there is never a doubt in her mind that both must be done. There is no moment when she considers, for example, imposing religious dietary restrictions on ailing children or forgoing religious requirements during Passover.¹⁰⁵ All preparations are made for the healthy family members while special diets with their leavened foods go to the sick. When it comes time

¹⁰³ Taylor, *All-of-a-Kind Family*, 112-131.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 115.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

for the traditional Seder meal with its Exodus story and the famous four questions, Mama opens the doors between the sick room and kitchen so that Gertie, the youngest, can ask them as tradition demands.¹⁰⁶ She preserves religious rites wherever she can consistent with strictly following the doctor's orders, morphing commitment so that she can maintain some semblance of it in the face of need.

A second story revealing for our inquiry involves the hearty and headstrong Henny, who discovers through a poor Irish schoolmate that a nearby church is offering toys for tenement children in the Christmas season. Determined to obtain a gift for her younger sisters (a doll with real hair like the one in her schoolmate's arms), Henny intentionally rips her stockings so she can appear even poorer than she is and garner more sympathy.¹⁰⁷ Arriving at the church, though, she is suddenly uncertain. "Would God be angry with her," she asks herself, and "[c]ould she dare go inside a church? Or, even worse, ask for a present?"¹⁰⁸ Ever determined, though, she overcomes doubt and receives not only the last doll available, but wishes of "Merry Christmas" from the church lady charged with handing out toys. "Happy Hanukkah!" the child responds. At this "[t]he lady's eyes opened wide. Her face broke into a broad smile. 'Happy Hanukkah!' she repeated."¹⁰⁹

As Henny's later thoughts and actions reveal, this experience troubles her on several levels. Though from a poor family with genuine needs, she has been dishonest, trying to make herself look truly indigent when she is only poor. She also reflects that she

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 126-127.

¹⁰⁷ Sydney Taylor, *All-of-a-kind Family Downtown* (New York: Taylor Productions, 1972), 33-35.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 36.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 38.

“took charity, even though I know how Papa and Mama feel about that.”¹¹⁰ Her parents may be poor, but they are self-supporting and have made it a point to teach their children to manage with what they have. Finally, she has gone to an event at a Christian church (though in the end she did not have to enter) and perhaps angered God. Henny does not reveal why she believes God might be angry. It seems she has been taught, though, that if a Jewish child enters a Christian house of worship she violates God’s will. These worries may seem trivial to an adult, but they are in fact a ten-year-old girl’s way of confronting tensions between need and commitment. For Henny, need has come into conflict with three commitments central to her upbringing in the Russian Jewish immigrant community of the Lower East Side: a commitment to honesty; a commitment to support oneself rather than relying on charity; and a commitment to honor God’s commands. Although Henny has not actually changed the commitments, she has violated them. Moreover, and important for my purposes, the church with its alluring gifts has played a role in this. Those handing out Christmas charity surely did not intend to encourage dishonesty, likely did not consider families’ sense of pride and may not have hoped to begin to win converts to their faith among the Jewish community. The availability of such tantalizing gifts to fulfill children’s needs for comfort and stimulation, though, has provided an extra pull towards fulfilling needs in ways that violate commitments. Henny’s story thus offers a straightforward example of the way that outsiders, however good their intentions, could leverage immigrants’ needs in the direction of change.

A last example from Taylor’s books for children exemplifies another case of need, commitment and outside influence, but this one is almost precisely the opposite of

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 38-39

the one just described. In the story that opens the series, we meet the five sisters and their Mama with Sarah in despair. It is Friday afternoon and the group is preparing for the weekly trip to the public library, excited to exchange old books for new before the sabbath begins at sundown.¹¹¹ Sarah cannot find her book. She lent it to a friend who apparently failed to give it back. Now she will have no book to return, no possibility of checking out another to entertain and sustain her in the coming week, and she will surely have to pay for the lost book besides.¹¹² As Mama says, this is a real concern both for the girls and for the family. “I’m afraid they won’t let you take out any more books until we pay for this one,” she worriedly tells the girls, “And a book costs a lot of money.”¹¹³ Moreover, it is Sarah who will have to contribute the money. Though Mama wishes she could help, the simple truth is that “there’s no money for such things.”¹¹⁴

The book, it turns out, costs a dollar, a large sum for a poor immigrant family and an enormous one for a child whose allowance is a penny a day.¹¹⁵ When she realizes the full scale of the problem, Miss Allen (the library lady) is struck by Sarah’s sincerity, “how anxious [she is] to do the right thing”¹¹⁶ even though she has been saving what little money she receives to buy a doll (again the kind with real hair). As much as Miss Allen wants to offer to pay the money herself, moreover, “she could not risk hurting either the children or their parents by making the offer,”¹¹⁷ for she understands that, in addition to honesty, the family may well have a commitment to self-support. They would not only reject her offer but see it as a sign of disrespect.

¹¹¹ Taylor, *All-of-a-kind Family*, 11-12.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 14-15.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

Having taken these matters into account, Miss Allen conceives a plan that will help Sarah maintain her commitments and meet the very real childhood needs of toys and books so closely connected to imagination, comfort and learning. Sarah will immediately contribute the seventeen cents in her savings. Then there will be a “special arrangement” for her to pay just a penny a week, also checking out books all along the way. “I know it will take a very long time to pay the whole amount,” Miss Allen tells the child, “but you can save for your doll at the same time.”¹¹⁸ Taking both the child’s needs and her commitments into account, Miss Allen (not unlike Mama herself) finds a way to address both. Unlike Mama, who must find a creative way to maintain religious tradition, and different from Henny, who violates her commitments though she does not abandon them, Miss Allen allows Sarah to meet needs with only slight burden while remaining honest and self-supporting.

Of course, Taylor’s chapters are memories of events re-described to appeal to children who, in the process, perhaps learn something about immigration history, Orthodox Jewish religious practice, and commitments like honesty, religious commitment and self-sufficiency. The last of these may have gotten emphasis as much because of their appeal to 1950’s Protestant America as because of the role they played in Taylor’s own Russian Jewish immigrant childhood. What is important about these stories for my discussion, though, is not the particular commitments and challenges that Taylor emphasizes (though we will find good reason in what follows to think they were relatively common). Instead, I am interested, first, in the way in which Taylor’s characters respond to tensions between commitments with roots in tradition, family and

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

community. As with their real-world counterparts, they have a strong connection to old home practices and values and also experience the needs that put these commitments at risk. Second, I want to examine ways in which those who give aid to alleviate immigrants' needs may do so in ways that either increase or alleviate these tensions. For this allows us to take into account a further important factor explaining and influencing the changes that accompanied this wave of immigration and helped to alter immigrants' lives.

Memoirists Return

With these examples in hand, then, I first return to the now familiar cases of Rose Cohen and Aaron Domnitz and consider some of the accounts of need, tension with deeply held commitments and assimilation that we find in their memoirs. As with the example of Mama and the "scarlet fever" Passover, here I am concerned with the perspective immigrant's themselves took on such tensions and the ways in which they resolved them. Other examples from Taylor's stories will be relevant later in this chapter and will put us in conversation with other primary sources.

As she describes it in *Out of the Shadow*, Cohen's experience with assimilation began almost as soon as she disembarked the ocean steamer in New York. Riding in a market wagon from the immigration station at Castle Garden, with time to survey what was around her, she realized that her father was unbelievably changed. This man who was once "the most pious Jew in our neighborhood" now wore his beard "closely cut" and with "no sign of earlocks."¹¹⁹ Her shock was even greater on the first Saturday of her time in the US. On father's only shortened workday, the Jewish sabbath, he took her to

¹¹⁹ Cohen, *Out of the Shadow*, 69.

the market for a treat (a piece of melon), paying with a coin because the Russian Jewish practice of Saturday credit did not operate in America. That her own father would touch money on the sabbath, a terrible sin, was such a shock that Cohen ran away, dropping the fruit on the pavement and nearly toppling passersby.¹²⁰ Soon, though, Cohen herself was violating religious tenets she once held dear. By the time the family in America had earned enough to bring her mother and siblings by steamer from Russia, the long sweatshop hours followed by cooking and cleaning at home, together with an environment where old world piety was generally less prevalent, had taken their toll. As Cohen puts it,

I too was not so pious now. I still performed some of the little religious rites assigned to a girl, but mechanically, not with the ever-present consciousness of God. There were moments of deep devotion, but they were rare.¹²¹

As Cohen explains, some of these moves towards assimilation were necessary to avoid economic disaster, to obtain bare necessities or to avoid violence. Without them one would lose one's place in the shop, be unable to obtain goods on one's day off or perhaps be recognized as a Jew and beaten in the street.¹²² Others were matters of convenience or comfort, making a hard life a bit easier by forgoing time-consuming rituals. Yet others were decisions to Americanize to gain a sense of social belonging, leaving behind Russian Jewish ways, even ones required by religion, in order to fit in and feel a part of this new society. Though her father's decision to trim his beard and cut his ear-locks likely fell partly in this category, Cohen provides an excellent and clear example in the advice she herself offered soon after her mother's arrival. Finding herself

¹²⁰ Ibid., 78.

¹²¹ Ibid., 143.

¹²² Ibid., 100-107.

embarrassed by her parent's kerchief, a hair covering that satisfied Orthodox Jewish demands on married women, Cohen coaxed her to abandon the scarf so that she would look more up-to-date and American. Soon she succeeded and heard her mother respond to her astonished father, "As you see [...] I am not staying far behind."¹²³

Although there are many others, a last pair of examples related to Cohen's later hospital stay give an especially good sense of the complex relationship that Taylor's stories already suggest between need, commitment and assimilation. When, in her late teens, she found herself at the Presbyterian Hospital, terribly ill from overwork and anemia and fortunate to have come under the wing of settlement house worker Lillian Wald, Cohen knew that one feature of her stay was that she would be served meat that was "trafe," not kosher.¹²⁴ Only her mother's visit convinced her to break a vow she had kept until that moment. "You are not here for pleasure," her mother told her, "take it as you would medicine."¹²⁵ Here both Cohen and her mother sought a way to conceive of the meat that would allow the young woman to break her religious vow without giving up her sense of commitment, at once an attempt to resist assimilation and to accede to new ways at least for a time. Later Cohen again faced a similar decision. Several missionaries regularly visited the hospital, a number of her friends, both staff and patients, were Christian, and a Christian Bible lay on a shelf at the head of her bed.¹²⁶ She felt a deep curiosity about this religion, many of whose followers seemed warm, good people. But she also knew that neither her family nor her community would approve of her curiosity, much less of her acting on it. Ultimately, though, she did so. She learned to read the Bible

¹²³ Ibid., 154.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 234-236.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 236.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 244-245.

and, even once she had left the hospital, sought greater knowledge and accepted Christians as friends and advisors, angering her father in particular. Yet as she explained to others from the beginning, she did not want to “become a Christian,” but only to understand these people and their views.¹²⁷ Again, Cohen sought at once to maintain her culture and religion and to broaden her possibilities beyond what these strictly allowed.

What Cohen seems to have accomplished in these last two cases is not retention, abandonment or balancing, but instead (like Mama at Passover) a kind of reshaping of her convictions to suit the new conditions and environment in which she found herself. This kind of reconfiguration seems especially well suited to an immigrant like Cohen. For as Chapter 1 argues, a positive attitude towards the past that is born of a sense of safety and stability, as Cohen’s seems to have been, would seem to support both a continuing sense of connection with the past and a personal expectation for future development. Reconfiguration, as opposed not only to abandonment or rigid maintenance but also to a balancing involving trade-offs, is a kind of development. It adjusts the way in which one satisfies convictions without forgoing important needs that accompany a new life.

In some ways of course, Cohen and YIVO essayist Aaron Domnitz could not be more different. As the son of an economically more comfortable family whose father was a teacher, Domnitz was steeped in all manner of religious study and had traveled outside his hometown for further education. By the time he emigrated in 1906 at age twenty-two, we know, he was anxious to explore new places and engage with new people and ideas.¹²⁸ Despite his years, means, education and more modern outlook, though, Domnitz too found it necessary to develop new ways of navigating in the US. Unsurprisingly,

¹²⁷ Ibid., 245.

¹²⁸ Domnitz, “Why I Left My Old Home and What I Have Accomplished in America,” 124-38.

these were more broadly cultural than religious. For example, he determined for the first time in his life to take a job as a laborer, starting out as a plumber's apprentice.¹²⁹ About this first attempt at manual labor Domnitz proclaims in the memoir, "I felt proud. I felt reborn, no more the abstract thinker and dreamer. I made screws and sawed iron, I poured molten lead – I created! This was America: work."¹³⁰ This job lasted only until Domnitz's Socialist views were discovered though. Attempts at other such employment were unsuccessful because he looked like "a rabbi, not a worker," and in the end only family connections landed him a place as a tailor, a type of position he had determined to avoid because it was the typical default for immigrant Russian Jews.¹³¹

In all of this, it never occurred to Domnitz to alter his manner, or dress, or his political convictions. He had the means, in the form of some money and many friends, to live in adequate comfort despite unreliable work. Already a man who had shed many old ways while still in Russia, he could preserve much of his old self without much risk and without a sense that he did not belong in his new home. Among the features he was determined to preserve, however, was his name, something he and others were urged to alter for the purpose of filling out citizenship papers.¹³² When his turn came to receive a shortened version from a fellow Russian Jew, a manager at the Educational Alliance where he studied English, Domnitz explained that "my name was dear to me the way it was, and that I would not change it."¹³³ Unmoved by the manager's evident irritation, Domnitz unapologetically maintained his name.¹³⁴ Still later, he tired of the Jewish

¹²⁹ Ibid., 141.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid., 142.

¹³² Ibid., 148-149.

¹³³ Ibid., 149.

¹³⁴ Abraham Cahan describes his somewhat similar refusal to abandon Yiddish. While Cahan also spoke Russian and Hebrew and was highly motivated to learn English, he fiercely maintained the

quarter and the tailoring trade, moved to the Bronx to work as a teacher and joined fellow members of the young Jewish intellectual group Di Yunge (the Young Ones).¹³⁵ In this way, he recommenced activities similar to those that had drawn him in Russia, though in a new place, with new colleagues, and with background activities that included learning English. Still later, he studied to be a dentist, a career he stuck with. Though he had wanted to be a physician, Domnitz remarks, a financial setback necessitated new plans. Again following a common path among Russian Jewish immigrants of the time, he studied dentistry since after all “a dentist is *also* a doctor.”¹³⁶ This last experience makes it especially clear that, while Domnitz enjoyed more ability to make his own choices than many of his fellow immigrants, notably Cohen, he too found ways to reshape his plans and commitments, in this case his choice of an American profession, to fit the situation at hand.

While Cohen and Domnitz came from very different backgrounds and experienced immigration from very different perspectives, then, in some ways they nevertheless had much in common where issues of assimilation are concerned. Each held to some commitments, for Cohen certain aspects of religious commitment and for Domnitz matters including his Socialism and his name. In other regards, both of these Russian Jewish immigrants accepted or even embraced change to commitments in the face of need. For Cohen this was sometimes a consequence of necessity, as with

importance of keeping Yiddish alive as a language of the people. Like Domnitz’s name, this language was a commitment Cahan would not abandon. See, Abraham Cahan, *The Education of Abraham Cahan*, tr. Leon Stein, Abraham P. Conan and Lynn Davison (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1969), 233-241; For an example of English language self-help, see Azniv Beshgeturian, *Making Americans: Foreigners Guide to English* (New York: Immigrant Publication Society), *Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society Records*, YIVO Institute, New York (microfilm). This guide seems consistent with commitments to maintain Yiddish and other old home traditions.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 149-53.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 153.

decisions to work on the sabbath or to forego rituals that required more time and energy than her overtaxed body and mind could withstand. Other times it was a matter of fitting in or feeling more American, as when she cajoled her mother into abandoning her kerchief or changed her own name to Ruth and later to Rose, both more familiar to American ears than Rahel, her name in the Pale. For Domnitz such occasions concerned, for example, his eagerness to learn and continually improve his English.

What is also evident in each case is the way in which reasons for immigration and conditions that had prevailed for each in the old home shaped commitments, needs and change in the new. The misfortune, bigotry and poverty, that drove Cohen and her family from the Pale, together with their desire to maintain their close-knit family, made for more profound needs in America and fewer options when it came to simply maintaining commitments unaltered. Domnitz's happier circumstances in the Pale, and immigration reasons that concerned the ability to act on social commitments rather than prospects for living with family, made for greater freedom to maintain commitments.

In yet other cases, Domnitz, like Cohen, resembles the Mama of Taylor's stories in responding to tensions between commitments and needs. Here, as with Cohen, what might at first seem to be outright assimilation or an attempt to balance acquisition of new ways with maintenance of old seems better characterized as a reshaping of the old to accommodate the new. We have already seen this in Cohen's decision to eat trafe meat with the commitment that it was a kind of medicine or restorative and to learn about (but not adopt) Christianity so that she could better understand and engage with Christian friends. In Domnitz, this appears in the decision to work as a tailor despite his determination to shape his American employment, a central aspect of his assimilation, in

ways that avoided types of work considered appropriate for a Russian Jew. Accepting that tailoring would be his lot, he maintained his commitment to trying the shop even though it meant compromising his accompanying commitment to forge his own path. The same, of course, was true of Domnitz's decision to become a dentist. He did not abandon the commitment to American professionalization as a physician, but reshaped it in light of circumstances. As we know from Chapter 1, Domnitz also seems to have shared with Cohen a positive attitude towards the old home that was born of a strong sense of safety and security while he lived there. As in her case, this may well explain his tendency at least sometimes to reconfigure commitments rather than simply maintaining or abandoning them.

Certainly some of these actions, on each side, fit standard analyses of assimilation issues quite well. Cohen resisted change to some religious practices, thus rejecting assimilation, and urged the abandonment of others, thus embracing it. The same is true of Domnitz, though his decisions concerned broad culture and not religion. Because these immigrants engaged in each of these assimilation-related responses, we can also think of them as seeking to balance old and new identities, as some authors tell us we should expect. But other choices do not fit anywhere in this neat trio. They are ones that do not select one side or the other where assimilation is concerned and do not merely balance interests in maintaining and transforming old ways. They are actions that seek at once to maintain and transform and are not captured in more usual analyses.

When we ask about Russian Jewish immigrants' own perspectives on assimilation in the face of need, then, we find a nuance and complexity we miss when viewing the changes that came with immigration through common historical lenses, lenses in fact also

popular during immigrants' own era. This does not mean that familiar lenses have nothing to tell us, of course. By listening closely to those who lived the experience and attempting to filter out popular storylines, though, we become aware of factors related to change that we might otherwise have overlooked. These factors include the relationship of change to immigration catalysts and the relatively hospitable or intolerant conditions in which immigrants lived in the old home. They also include the kind of transformation for which the "scarlet fever" Passover is the paradigm. Next I want to take Henny's church charity experience as a model and ask about the ways in which certain offers of aid influenced change among new Russian Jewish immigrants. Although we see the attitudes and aims of the church charity through Henny's eyes, my non-fiction example comes in the form of an 1898 report to the President and Board of Directors for New York's Educational Alliance by its then Superintendent, David Blaustein.¹³⁷

The Superintendent and the Church Charity

Although Blaustein was born in Russia, he was educated in Prussia and had come to the US in 1886 at the age of twenty. Before taking over as Superintendent for the Educational Alliance in New York, he had worked extensively as an educator and in the field of immigrant aid and spent time both studying at Harvard University and lecturing at Brown.¹³⁸ Reading his report, there can be no doubt that Blaustein embraced the Alliance's mission of educating recent Jewish immigrants with an eye towards both

¹³⁷ The Educational Alliance was a coalition of a number of resources for newly arrived Russian immigrants consisting of matters such as a place to take courses, a library (which served over 1000 people per day), and other resources with the expressed goal of Americanizing these new immigrants. It was founded in 1889 by German Jews in order to aid their newly arriving Russian counterparts as a number of separate endeavors. These merged to become the Educational Alliance in 1893. See, Matthew Silver, *Louis Marshall and the Rise of Jewish Ethnicity in America* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2013), 33-37.

¹³⁸ *Jewish Encyclopedia*, 1906, s.v. "Blaustein, David," JewishEncyclopedia, <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/3358-blaustein-david> (accessed 14 April 2019).

assimilation and what many more educated Jewish community members deemed a deeper and more philosophical form of Judaism.¹³⁹ For my purposes, two elements of the report are especially significant. The first is Blaustein's description of the many requests he received for wide-ranging types of aid that the Alliance did not offer:

A number of people have come to me with the request, that I collect their wages for them. Others, again, wished me to lend them money to pay interest on mortgages. During the summer months the office was crowded with women who came for free ice tickets. One woman wanted me to cure her hand, which was burned. A man, whose wife had deserted him, asked me to undertake the care of his children for two months, while he searched for his wife. Mothers came with babies on their arms, asking us to care for their children while they, themselves, were at work. From morning till evening people come for addresses of persons who are in no way connected with the Alliance. A number ask to have money exchanged and checks cashed, while considerable time is wasted at the office in selling postage stamps.¹⁴⁰

The English courses and broad educational opportunities for adults and children that the Alliance offered were ones many appreciated (as not only the Superintendent's report but Cohen and Domnitz's memoirs attest). Yet new Russian Jewish immigrants' needs were many, and available means of help were limited, poorly understood by those in need, or both. The Alliance, housed in a prominent building on East Broadway, was accessible, and knowledgeable people could be found there. Where needs were many and substantial, it seems, immigrants believed this was a better place than many to seek help.

The second element of the report that is telling for this discussion of need, commitment and assimilation concerns the method Blaustein recommends for achieving

¹³⁹ Silver, *Louis Marshall and the Rise of Jewish Ethnicity in America*, 33-42.

¹⁴⁰ David Blaustein, Superintendent, *Report to the President and Board of Directors of the Educational Alliance*, October 11, 1898, *Educational Alliance Papers* (New York: YIVO Institute, Permanent Collection), 6.

the Alliance's aims. The Americanization and moral improvement of new Jewish immigrants, he writes, must come from within:

Therefore, if the Jew, especially the Russian Jew, is to be elevated – if, for instance, he is to be impressed with American ideas, it must be presented to him from a Jewish, and even a religious point of view. It must be proven to him, by the Bible, the Talmud and other rabbinical writings, that it is not a sin to learn the language of the country; that it is not a sin to dress like the rest of the citizens; that it is a sin to disregard the law of the country, and that it is a sin to violate sanitary law; that it is one's duty to identify himself with all movements for the public weal, and aid the Government in maintaining law and order.¹⁴¹

Blaustein's idea here seems to be twofold. First, he believes that appeals to religion are likely to be more effective than others for attracting new immigrants and convincing them to embrace changes in language, dress, and adherence to a new legal system and unfamiliar legal standards. Second, if these Russian Jewish immigrants accept these changes as requirements of Jewish religious doctrine, they will be more likely to internalize them and follow them regularly.

In offering education and information to encourage immigrants to make changes in their practices and lifestyles, it seems, Blaustein and the Alliance find themselves in a situation where immigrants often perceive their real needs to be different from, and perhaps even in conflict with, what the Alliance has to offer. How can I spend time learning English, a poor Russian Jewish immigrant might say, when I need to work in the shop from dawn until night to feed my family? Blaustein's aims, and those of the Alliance, are also at odds with many immigrants' commitments. In asking that people change their language, and as we saw in Domnitz's experience with the Alliance their names, the organization asks them to abandon what many deem a part of their identities, a kind of commitment. The same will

¹⁴¹ Blaustein, *Report*, 10-11.

be true with changes in dress and perhaps in matters of food preparation. Blaustein's method, then, is to change thinking about both needs and commitments by portraying various matters of assimilation as crucial to a successful life in America and then cementing new practices and attitudes in place by demonstrating that they should be seen as demands of the religion to which these immigrants are devoted.

Although it would be unfair to say that Blaustein does not care about immigrants' very real needs for medical attention, childcare, access to wages and so on, he certainly does not think that need ends there. Moreover, alleviating these needs is not his mission. As the church attracts Henny with the promise of a toy and all of the positive contributions it will make to her life (or that of her little sisters), so Blaustein seeks to attract immigrants with a new characterization of their needs. While Henny feels the ways in which the church's aid strains her religious and personal commitments, though, Blaustein hopes to soften the perception of this tension in those who visit the Alliance by appealing to religious commitments themselves. He encourages assimilation, or hopes to, by inculcating a new understanding of need and a new account of what religious commitment demands.

The Orthodox Synagogue and the Library Lady

Finally, consider an approach to immigrants' needs that is much closer to the one Miss Allen embodies in her interaction with Sarah at the library. Here, I want to consider two relevant examples. The first is an 1881 opinion piece from the *Hebrew Leader*, a conservative Jewish weekly newspaper published in New York City between 1850 and 1882. It concerns the possibility of building a new Orthodox synagogue:

There is need of an Orthodox free synagogue up town. [...] There are a great many poor Jewish people among us. They come to us ground down by centuries of oppression in Europe, uneducated, save in their religious duties, not trained for any specific trade, speaking some unknown tongue. [...]

They have to make their way as best they can despite all of these disadvantages. The consequence is that the old generation has to disappear before it has made much headway. [...] They are left behind in the race for wealth and honor. [...] [The synagogue] should be honored and commemorated by the rich Israelites of New York.¹⁴²

Here, the needs at issue are social and economic, and they pull against religious commitments. Even if new immigrants could raise sufficient funds to build such a synagogue, using them for that purpose would be in tension with deep economic need and the threats to health, comfort and education that come with it. Although the younger people among these new immigrants may one day have the stability and wealth needed to fund such a synagogue without undue economic strain, the older generation will never live to see that day. So currently they compromise commitment as a consequence of need, changing but not abandoning religious practices. The opinion piece proposes that New York's wealthy Jewish families, many of whom do not share these Orthodox commitments, nevertheless support them by building the synagogue their Russian Jewish counterparts cannot afford. Like Miss Allen's, it is a relative outsider's move to thwart assimilation not to encourage it.¹⁴³

We find a similar example in this vein in another opinion piece by Rabbi Henry Cohen of the newly founded Immigrant Publication Society.¹⁴⁴ In what appears almost a

¹⁴² "A Free Jewish Temple," *The Hebrew Leader*, April 1, 1881, *Dorot Jewish Division, Newspaper Collection*, New York Public Library (microfilm).

¹⁴³ For other examples of this attitude toward aid see Mrs. Jonathan Rice, "In the World of Charity," *The American Jewess* 1, no. 4 (July 1895): 204-210; "Development in the Charities," *The Hebrew Leader*, April 3, 1881, *Dorot Jewish Division, Newspaper Collection*, New York Public Library; "The Association of Jewish Immigrants: Annual Meeting – Important Details of the Work," *The Hebrew Leader*, January 9, 1880, *Dorot Jewish Division, Newspaper Collection*, New York Public Library (microfilm).

¹⁴⁴ Rabbi Cohen was a reform Rabbi, born in England, who served the Congregation B'Nai Israel in Galveston, Texas at the time he wrote this piece. Cohen was long involved immigrant issues, including efforts to move new immigrants South to Galveston to settle. For discussion see, Ronald A. Axelrod, "Rabbi Henry Cohen and the Galveston Immigration Movement," *East Texas Historical Journal* 15, No.1 (1977), <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/72736329.pdf> (accessed April 7, 2019).

direct response to Blaustein, Cohen advocates for a change to leafletting practices common among aid societies:

[m]uch of the information offered to the immigrant is ill-suited to his use and taste; usually it is sectarianly religious. The religious helps are, it is true, exceedingly important, because the immigrant, among strangers in a strange land, often loses the religious and ethical, as well as the social, restraints of his old home, gets a distorted idea of American freedom, and throws overboard his religion, discarding indiscriminately things good and bad. But these religious leaflets would have had much greater effect were they accompanied by advice and information of practical use to the bewildered new-comer in the exigencies of everyday life among us.¹⁴⁵

Here Rabbi Cohen acknowledges the importance of assistance that supports immigrants' religious commitments, ones that may be at risk when the new arrival encounters new places and people and more freedom to make personal choices. But he also recognizes that religious commitment is not separate from practical matters useful in everyday life. While the Rabbi offers no examples of such a connection, one can readily imagine that they include, for instance, Rose Cohen's decision to forgo religious ritual to save time and effort amid taxing working circumstances. Presumably they would also include her father's decision to shave his beard and ear-locks in order to fit in and avoid hostility. Unlike the Superintendent, who hopes to use the pull of religious commitment to encourage and cement assimilation, Rabbi Cohen seeks to encourage immigrants in the religious commitments they carry in part by meeting other needs.

Conclusion

Although Antin's mighty wave of immigration altered lives in many and profound ways, how best to understand the nature and extent of such change is far from clear. The starkest positions on assimilation, those that tell us to expect ready eagerness to assimilate

¹⁴⁵ Rabbi Henry Cohen, "The Immigrant Publication Society," *The Jewish Harold*, August 1915, *Dorot Jewish Division, Newspaper Collection*, New York Public Library (microfilm).

on the one hand or unyielding resistance on the other, do not fully capture things as they were at the turn of the twentieth century. Such accounts are also relatively uncommon among contemporary historians. In fact, as I suggested earlier, it was often immigrants' contemporaries who voiced these stark views. What comes to mind, for instance, is Cohen's report of a friend back in Russia who argued, in advance of the girl's departure, that in America "everyone becomes a libertine."¹⁴⁶ Similarly, periodic threats, for instance to strike individuals from the roles of immigrant benevolent societies for marrying a Gentile, might well have led to exaggerated rumors about immigrants' unwillingness to change.¹⁴⁷

Although I will consider (and largely reject) each of these more extreme positions in the next chapter, more subtle ones emphasizing immigrants' inclination to balance old and new are much more common. Sometimes these are statements that immigrants *were* balancers of this kind without indication of what more precisely they did balance, how various matters weighed in their decisions and so on.¹⁴⁸ Others present more nuanced views. In considering the original founders of Orthodox Jewish schools in the US during this immigration era, for example, Hasia Diner offers what she sees as a case of such balancing or compromise:

[t]he founders tried to create in the United States traditional institutions like those of eastern Europe-but this was not possible. Even the most committed traditional institutions had to add secular American studies, and the young men who studied in them soon adopted American ways.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁶ Cohen, *Out of the Shadow*, 69.

¹⁴⁷ See, e.g., First American Benevolent Association, *Constitution of the First American Benevolent Association*, May 12, 1916, *Benevolent Society Papers* (New York: YIVO Institute, Permanent Collection), 18.

¹⁴⁸ Cowan and Cowan, *Our Parents' Lives*, 34-35.

¹⁴⁹ Hasia Diner, *A New Promised Land*, 49.

Those who attempted to institute a religious authority in the United States similar to the one that had been present at home in Eastern Europe likewise had to reshape their efforts, she says. For “American society—with its separation of church and state and its emphasis on liberty and individuality—made it impossible for the idea of a ‘chief rabbi’ to flourish.”¹⁵⁰ Summarizing his own conclusions from a study of the era’s *Landmanschaftn*, Daniel Soyer reaches similar conclusions.¹⁵¹ “Adaptation to life in America,” he writes, “consists of a complex and ongoing series of adjustments, by which [...] immigrants and their children strive to reconcile the ‘duality of [...] foreignness and [...] Americanness’ which they experience.”¹⁵²

As suggested at the outset, I differ from those who emphasize this kind of balance as characteristic of the changes that came with the move to America for turn-of-the-twentieth-century Russian Jewish immigrants. The difference is in focus and detail, though, and not in general direction. Here as in other chapters, my aim is to try to characterize the Russian Jewish immigration experience, and especially the life changes that accompanied it for those who made the trans-Atlantic journey, by attending to the voices and characterizations of immigrants’ themselves. Both here and in Chapter 3, I also carefully listen to the words of contemporaries who sometimes played a special role in such change.

When we pay attention to these voices, I have argued, important details come to light, details other characterizations with somewhat different focuses might cause us to

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹⁵¹ *Landmanschaftn* were mutual aid societies founded by immigrants who came from the same village or region and modeled on those common in Europe. For a brief overview of their role in the lives of immigrants see Hannah Kliger, *Jewish Hometown Associations and Family Circles in New York: The WPA Yiddish Writers’ Group Study* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 47-55.

¹⁵² Soyer, *Jewish Immigrant Associations and American Identity in New York, 1880-1939*, 3; A similar conclusion is reached in Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 207-208.

miss. With regard to change that accompanies initial adjustment to a new home, I claim, we should be especially attentive to important needs common among new immigrants and to religious, moral and personal commitments that are often in tension with those needs. When we do this, we find that choices about what to hold firmly and what to abandon often track the reasons for and conditions surrounding immigration, with those whose old home circumstances were less dire and more fortunate having more freedom to make choices on their own terms. No matter their earlier conditions, though, in many cases immigrants could not meet important needs without impacting commitments too firm to abandon without undue cost. Here, the response seems often to have been not to balance but to reconfigure, maintaining religious holiday traditions with doors open wide so that ailing children could “hear everything even if they could not see,” transforming “trafe” meat into medicine, reconceiving what counts as being a doctor. Here, moreover, past stability and sense of continuity with one’s pre-immigration life seems to be an important part of the mix. In addition, whether immigrants maintained, abandoned or transformed settled commitments from an earlier time in the face of need, those offering aid could and often did play an important role. Whether that role sped assimilation or slowed it often depended on whether those providing aid sought to leverage tensions with immigrants’ needs or to calm them.

Together these insights, the product of close attention to participants’ voices, provide a clearer picture of how the great wave of immigration by Russian Jews at the close of the nineteenth century and the start of the twentieth altered lives. Such attention reveals more clearly the circumstances that produced change, the conditions that help explain immigrants’ varying decisions, the nature of that change and the role of outsiders (here those offering aid) in advancing or retarding it. Importantly, the process of uncovering

hidden threads and insights has also involved recognizing the nature and roles of relevant story-tellers. Those who provide currently popular lenses are often immigrants' contemporaries and not simply, or even mainly, professional historians. Meanwhile, the voices to which we need to attend to uncover hidden connections and insights are not those only of memoirists and letter writers. They may also be those of Superintendents and fiction writers, whose stories are as much a part of the evidence of what people thought they were up to as any more standard resource.

“And where do I come in? [...] I asked him bluntly, “Do I still have a right to say something about my daughter, or doesn’t anyone have to ask a father any more?”¹⁵³

Chapter 3 – “WHERE DO I COME IN?”: UNSETTLED TRADITIONS COLLIDE

With this query, Sholem Aleichem’s famed character Tevye the dairyman raises the question of a Jewish father’s role when young daughters grow old enough to marry. It is a piece of the larger question of shifting traditions that occupies both Tevye (still driving his horse cart through the Pale’s country tracks and village lanes as the twentieth century begins) and the Russian Jewish immigrants who are my focus. For each it is a question with many facets. Are marriages acceptable if entered for love and “arranged” by partners themselves, instead of by parents (especially fathers) with the help of a matchmaker? Are they preferable to marriages designed to maintain or improve economic prospects? What about marriages outside one’s social class, or between devout Jews and those of Jewish birth who have rejected traditional religious tenets? What about marriages between a Jew and a Gentile?

Although Tevye does not raise it, many contemplating permanent moves from the Pale to America also asked another closely related question. How would new spaces, cultures, and people impact traditional practices like marriage?¹⁵⁴ The answer to this question is central to my project. It offers a further window into the extent to which and ways in which immigration transformed travelers’ lives even beyond the pressures of economic, social and health-related needs considered in Chapter 2. Below, I use the marriage debate as a way of answering this broad question about the further effects of

¹⁵³ Sholem Aleichem (pen name for Shalom Rabinovitz), *Tevye’s Daughters* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1949), 33.

¹⁵⁴ As Rose Cohen reports, her favorite uncle’s parting words to her as she prepared to emigrate were “Don’t forget God.” Cohen, *Out of the Shadow*, 48.

immigration on practice and tradition. My discussion will assist in identifying relevant trends where marriage was concerned or in establishing that such regularities are not to be found. Along the way, it will also provide some insight into the relationship between immigration and tradition more generally. To foreshadow, I argue that, at the turn of the twentieth century, no settled attitude characterized views on questions of marriage within the Russian Jewish immigrant community. The distinguishing feature of such questions was a restless uncertainty about how to answer them.

I will begin this investigation by examining a number of sources, first using the Tevye stories to identify central issues and viewpoints and to provide an interpretation of these from the perspective of Jews living in the Pale. Turning next to a detailed set of clergy interviews on the question of Jewish intermarriage (published in New York City's *The Sun* in 1910), I will emphasize how widely marriage issues were debated in the United States and how the American debate both resembled and diverged from Tevye's own. Further primary sources, in the form of "Bintel Brief" letters and responses as well as selections from the memoirs and letters of Rose Cohen and Mary Antin, offer additional insights from the perspective of everyday Russian Jewish immigrants. Once we have thoroughly examined sources from the period, I argue, what we find is a case of deeply unsettled terrain. That terrain was unsettled, in part, as a consequence of what immigrants brought with them from the old home, in part as a consequence of new influences and, significantly, due to the interaction between these. In their approach to traditional marriage practices and roles, my examination suggests, turn-of-the-twentieth-century Russian Jewish immigrants showed no clear path or general trend. They were an undecided community in a restless era.

Tevye's Five Daughters in the Pale

The first three marriage questions Sholem Aleichem raises are familiar to many from *Fiddler on the Roof*, the well-known theater and movie adaptation of his stories. Two further tales, ones I will also take up, further strengthen the connection with conversations of the time. As with Sydney Taylor's fictional tales of the Lower East Side, here I take the Tevye stories not only to provide us with clear examples of the marriage issues I want to consider. They also offer one interpretation, among many, of the marriage debate occurring in the Russian Jewish community as the nineteenth century ended and the twentieth began. The dairyman's eldest daughter Tzeitl, as many know, is a young woman who catches the town butcher's eye. Although much wealthier than Tevye, Lazer-Wolf is still a tradesman and therefore of the same social class. In asking her father for a marriage agreement, then, the butcher proposes what usually would be considered both a good and a socially appropriate match.¹⁵⁵ From the beginning of their discussions, though, there are suggestions that tradition is not all that will be important in this match. Although Tevye ruminates to himself, "What a lucky thing for her. She'll have everything she wants,"¹⁵⁶ he also notes that the butcher is not handsome and has children as old as Tzeitl. Despite Lazer-Wolf's objection that the decision is for the father and not the bride, Tevye also insists not only that he must speak with his wife Golde before the agreement is final, but also that "there's Tzeitl herself to be asked."¹⁵⁷ When he later meets Tzeitl on the road, despondent and in tears at the news that has already reached her, Tevye keeps to his word. "If you say *no* it's *no*. Nobody is going to force

¹⁵⁵ Sholem Aleichem, *Tevye's Daughters*, 23.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.

you,” he tells her. “We meant it for the best, we did it for your own sake. But if it doesn’t appeal to you, what are we going to do? Apparently it was not ordained.”¹⁵⁸

Of course when Tzeitl’s true love, the young tailor Motl, asks for her hand while also reporting that they have already pledged to marry, Tevye is disgruntled. Not only have they violated tradition by pledging first and asking the father second, thus making Motl “[t]he matchmaker, the bridegroom, the ushers all rolled into one.”¹⁵⁹ Motl is nothing but a poor “stitcher” with less money than Tevye. Even if they are of the same social class, the match is hardly a good one. Yet even so, the dairyman soon relents, recalling that his own “pedigree” is nothing to brag about and that he is in no position to provide Tzeitl much in terms of a dowry or wedding clothes.¹⁶⁰ What decides Tevye in the end is not the tradition of a matchmaker, a contract with the father and the best economic match one can make. It is that even though “Motl Kamzoil is only a tailor,” he is also “a good man, a worker; he’ll be able to make a living. And besides, he’s honest too.”¹⁶¹ It seems Motl’s good qualities together with Tzeitl’s love for him outweigh traditional practices and goals and that Tevye is prepared for at least some aspects of his decision even before the youth present their case.

With the second daughter, Hodel, there is also the prospect of a good match through Ephraim the matchmaker, who reports that his client is learned, rich and from a fine family.¹⁶² Yet even as he drives home after arranging for Hodel and this mysterious suitor to meet, Tevye encounters young Pertschik on the road, walking and whispering

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 28.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 32.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 35.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 34.

¹⁶² Ibid., 59-61.

with this very daughter.¹⁶³ The dairyman has taken the teacher and socialist under his wing, feeding him and giving him a place to sleep in exchange for some free lessons for the children. In the process, he has also become quite fond of the young revolutionary, viewing him almost as a son. Now, surprised and flustered at meeting Tevye, the pair asks for congratulations, announcing at his puzzlement that they are “engaged” and also planned to marry with neither his consent nor his knowledge.¹⁶⁴

Tevye’s first reaction is hurt and anger, for “[b]ecoming engaged without my knowledge—that was bad enough, but I could stand it. He loves her; she loves him—that I’m glad to hear. But getting married? That was too much for me....”¹⁶⁵ As before, though, he comes around after much coaxing from the young couple. Tevye would rather have seen a proper marriage and not “[a] quiet little wedding—no fun at all.”¹⁶⁶ He is concerned too when Pertschik immediately departs on some secret project, when weeks pass without news of him, and when the first news is that he is “serving time” (presumably for revolutionary activities) and that Hodel will soon join him in a place that is “terribly, terribly far away.”¹⁶⁷

Still, Tevye’s love and respect for both Hodel and her Pertschik never falters. He tells young Hodel a fable about a hen who hatches a brood of ducklings that soon leave her clucking on the river bank as they swim away. When she observes, “I am sorry for the poor hen; but just because she stood there clucking, should the ducklings have stopped swimming,” his response is both loving and proud. “There is an answer for you,”

¹⁶³ Ibid., 60-61.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 61.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 62.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 66.

he says. “She’s not stupid, that daughter of mine.”¹⁶⁸ When he later bids her good-bye, perhaps forever, the thoughts are similar: “Forgive me, Mr. Sholem Aleichem, for acting like an old woman. If you only knew what a daughter she is. If you could only see what letters she writes. Oh what a daughter.”¹⁶⁹ For all that she forsook tradition, becoming engaged and married without his consent to a man whose political views and acts have landed him in prison, Hodel is still Tevye’s pride and joy. At least where there is love, respect and a sense of connection towards both the daughter and her partner, tradition apparently again takes second place at best for this Jewish father in the Pale.

Not so, as *Fiddler* fans know, for Tevye’s third daughter Chava, who has the misfortune to fall in love with a Gentile. Fyedka the clerk may be a second Gorky, “a writer” who is “fine and honest and true,” as Chava tells her father.¹⁷⁰ Unfortunately for Chava, he is not a Jew but instead Russian Orthodox. It is from the local priest that Tevye discovers that Chava has left the family to marry Fyedka and is now “under the protection” of the Church.¹⁷¹ Unable to win her return, Tevye declares Chava dead to the family shedding tears first at the “disgrace” and then at having lost “[a] child so precious to us, so deeply embedded in our hearts.”¹⁷² When she approaches him later on the road, he resists the temptation to relent, whipping his horse to avoid her pleas to “listen.”¹⁷³ It is only later that he asks, without acting on his strong desire to return and speak with Chava, “What is the meaning of Jew and non-Jew? Why did God create Jews and non-Jews? And since God did create Jews and non-Jews why should they be segregated from

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 67.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 68.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 96.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 99.

¹⁷² Ibid., 103.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 106.

each other and hate each other, as though one were created by God and the other were not.”¹⁷⁴ Tevye reaches no conclusion, though, just as he takes no action to regain the relationship. “I regretted that I wasn’t as learned as some men,” he reflects, “so that I could arrive at an answer to this riddle.”¹⁷⁵ Although he cannot determine why a sharp division should exist between Gentile and Jew, Tevye holds to it despite love and the pain of loss as he does not hold to other marriage traditions, relegating Chava to a living death.

For Sprintze, the fourth daughter, death is real and not living. It comes in the form of suicide when her beloved’s wealthy family rejects her, refusing to approve his marriage to the daughter of “Tevye the Dairyman, who brings us cheese and butter.”¹⁷⁶ This time it is not Tevye who rejects the prospect of marriage to a Jewish man outside his class. Though he does not see the prospect as likely to be a happy one, he is willing. When the boy’s uncle accuses him of trying to enrich himself at the family’s expense and offers to buy him off, though, Tevye departs the scene in disgust, but also in humiliation, and with a heavy heart for his child. Now he wonders, “Why should people be so cruel to each other, when they could be so kind? Why should human beings bring suffering to one another as well as to themselves, when they could all live together in peace and good will? Could it be that God created man on this earth just to make him suffer? What satisfaction would He get out of that?”¹⁷⁷ The only answer Tevye receives is the news of his daughter’s drowning, as he is left to wonder not at his own refusal to abandon a tradition he cannot fathom but at another’s similar adamance.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 107.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 158.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 160.

Where Tevye's elder daughters demanded to marry for love, it is money that Beilke (the youngest) desires, and she is happy to forego the love. Beilke does not marry outside her class. Her husband Padhatzur comes from a poor Jewish family and made his money cheating the government during the Russo-Japanese War.¹⁷⁸ He wants a pretty wife, and given the kind of social divisions that killed Sprintze, he is unlikely to find a rich family willing to have him as a son-in-law. So he gladly takes Beilke and then proposes to pay Tevye to retire and move to Palestine, so that no one will know that his pretty wife is the dairyman's child.¹⁷⁹ Having acted within all the traditions, Beilke becomes the one daughter who abandons love for her family, entering an unloving marriage at the very same time.

These stories of Tevye's daughters suggest, first, that the marriage traditions among Jews in the Russian Pale were already straining and changing even as immigrants made their way across the Atlantic. That daughters should have a say in their marital fate was far from surprising even if some, like Lazer-Wolf rejected it. Choosing one's own marital partner for love rather than economic gain and without a parent's prior approval, or perhaps any approval at all, was likely to meet more resistance, but was not wholly unheard of or unacceptable. Marriages outside of the faith or social class, however, were beyond acceptance and attempts could be deadly, even if sound arguments for these rigid views were elusive at best. Meanwhile the starkest version of old traditions, marriages arranged for economic benefit, were perhaps those most likely to result in a truly heartless rejection of all other bonds. What is also noteworthy in the Tevye stories is the way in which all of these changes and strains are portrayed, albeit in fiction, as swirling

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 164.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 170.

through the life of one family, and through the mind of one rather average Jewish dairyman. The stories suggest not only that, for Russian Jewish immigrants, change began in the old home, but that all of its elements were ones the average person might experience without ever settling on a single coherent view about the right or appropriate set of values and practices. The story of Tevye and his daughters suggests not separate views held by competing factions within the Jewish community, but a flock of unsettled possibilities to which the same person might be drawn in turn.

Three New York Rabbis

With this picture of the possible situation in the Pale itself in place, I move next to the other side of the Atlantic and consider views that mainly belonged to Jewish clergy who were neither new immigrants nor Russian Jews. In a set of interviews published in January 1910, *The Sun*, a relatively conservative and anti-immigration New York City newspaper aimed at a general audience, printed responses by Jewish and Christian clergy to a query regarding inter-marriage. Titled “Are Jew and Gentile Nearer,” the article addresses both the general question of relationships and attitudes between Jews and Christians and the question of inter-marriage in particular. Because our concern is principally with Jewish views on intermarriage, I will focus only on the interviews with Rabbis and in particular on three central ones. Of these, one accepts intermarriage as a last resort when love prevails and no alternative will do. Another accepts it only in cases of conversion, and a third rejects it outright. As before, though, my aim is to note the details and complexities of these Rabbis’ views and not simply the positive or negative view of intermarriage.

First consider the views of Rabbi Isaac S. Moses, who was a member of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, an association of reform rabbis, and who served New York City's Ahawath Chesed Shaar Hashomayim congregation, which attracted primarily German Jews.¹⁸⁰ Faced with the general matter of relations between Jews and Christian Gentiles, Rabbi Moses considers questions regarding division by race or religion that are reminiscent of those Tevye asks in contemplating Chava's marriage. Unlike Tevye, though, the Rabbi believes he has some answer. As he sees it, "[t]he lines of race, nation, and religion are natural demarcations." Although some "exceptional characters" may be able to rise above them, the best most can do is to "strive to tone down the sharp lines of separation by appreciating the good in every other race and religion."¹⁸¹ Here one can imagine Tevye adding social class to the list and urging efforts to be kind rather than cruel as he did in ruminating on Sprintze's fate. When it comes to intermarriage, Rabbi Moses again takes what he deems a realistic perspective and advocates damage control. Although he disapproves of such marriages "in principle" (presumably because he believes religious divides are real even if they do not separate the good from the bad), he also recognizes that determined young men and women "will marry with or without a Rabbi's blessing."¹⁸² The best the rabbi can do in this situation is to save "what can be saved of Jewish affiliation" by encouraging the non-Jewish party to convert. If this fails, though, the rabbi should perform the ceremony in order "not to stand

¹⁸⁰ Cyrus Adler, ed. *The American Jewish Yearbook 5664, Biographical Sketches of Rabbis and Cantors*, s.v. "Moses, Isaac S." (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1903), 83.

¹⁸¹ "Are Jew and Gentile Nearer? Effects of Americanization in New York as to Mixed Marriages: Views of Christian Ministers and Jewish Rabbis," Interview with Rabbi Isaac S. Moses, *The Sun*, January 9, 1910, *Dorot Jewish Division, Newspaper Collection*, New York Public Library (microfilm). The Rabbi's words are a close paraphrase of the 1885 "Pittsburgh Platform," setting forth the tenets of Reform Judaism. See, Central Conference of American Rabbis, Pittsburgh Conference, *Declaration of Principles*, 1885, <https://www.ccarnet.org/rabbinic-voice/platforms/article-declaration-principles/> (accessed April 14, 2019).

¹⁸² "Are Jew and Gentile Nearer?" Interview with Rabbi Moses, *The Sun*.

against the union of two young hearts where love reigned supreme or mar that sacred tie of kinship.”¹⁸³

Rabbi Moses does not make it clear precisely why he would adopt this approach to mixed marriage, but it appears that his concern is to preserve Jewish faith, if not Jewish ancestry, as much as possible through conversion. This suggests that he suspects mixed marriages to be unstable and perhaps also believes that Jews in this situation will tend to convert to Christianity. Conversion to Judaism would thus both strengthen the marriage and save the Jewish community a loss of one of its own. Perhaps because he is a well-established German Jewish immigrant now firmly settled in New York, as well as a self-described centrist reformer, mixed marriage may seem slightly less threatening and alienating than it did to Tevye on his farm in the Pale. Perhaps also, again unlike Tevye, Rabbi Moses’s main focus is not on preserving his own sense of self as a Jew or the dignity of his family. Instead, the Rabbi’s concern must be with preserving his congregation and with the broader Jewish community, though like Tevye with Tzeitl (though not with Chava) he also gives final say to love as the true basis for marriage and also, it seems, as one neither he nor others can fully control. Where Tevye asked why Jew and Gentile could not be nearer, but accepted this a painful if incomprehensible fact, on the other side of the Atlantic a Rabbi steeped in a more accepting Judaism and well-established in his second country reluctantly suggests otherwise. In cases like Chava’s, it seems, he would accept intermarriage in honor of love and continued attachment to family and faith.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

Rabbi Samuel Schulman of Temple Beth-El, a reform temple that served some of the wealthiest Jewish families in New York City, was born in Russia, educated in Berlin and immigrated to the US in 1865.¹⁸⁴ Unlike Rabbi Moses, he makes conversion to Judaism a prerequisite for a Jewish wedding. In Schulman's view, the denial of a Jewish ceremony before a Rabbi has been a central part of Jewish law for 2,000 years.¹⁸⁵ At the same time, immediate acceptance of converts to Judaism is likewise a longstanding tenet. It is one that means "there is no absolute purity in the Jewish race today" and also that there is an easy remedy for those who wish to marry a person who is not Jewish and to have a Jewish wedding.¹⁸⁶ Judaism is about religion and not race, a distinction Tevye likely does not endorse. But because it *is* about religion, and because civil ceremonies are available for those who insist on maintaining two faiths, the synagogue will not be in the business of supporting such marriages. For Schulman, then, one can avoid debates about who is a true Jew and what marriage choices might remove one from the community by clarifying the role of the synagogue and the criteria for membership. So far from suggesting that these standards are newly developed for evolving conditions though, Schulman holds that they are among Judaism's oldest and most firmly established tenets. Unlike Rabbi Moses, his answer to Tevye's queries regarding marriage between those of different religions is not that such divisions are natural, expected and as much about biology as religion. It is that this is the way the faith has chosen to position itself but that

¹⁸⁴*American Jewish Yearbook, Biographical Sketches of Rabbis and Cantors*, s.v. "Schulman, Samuel," 97.

¹⁸⁵ "Are Jew and Gentile Nearer?" Interview with Rabbi Samuel Schulman, *The Sun*, January 9, 1910.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

this positioning does, and always has, left room for those who find love outside the temple.

Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, was a famed reform rabbi who arrived in New York City from Portland, Oregon in 1906 to serve as rabbi for the Free Synagogue on the Lower East Side among a congregation of poorer Russian Jews. Born in Hungary in 1874, as a child Wise had immigrated to New York with his family.¹⁸⁷ By the time of this 1910 article, he is described as the “most radical of all rabbis in the reform movement.”¹⁸⁸ For him traditional practices, like celebrating the sabbath on Saturday, and traditional views, for example that the Jews are God’s chosen people, were ones the religion should abandon.¹⁸⁹ If there is a central tenet of Jewish faith, says Wise, it is the commitment to freedom and the long struggle of the Jewish people to realize that commitment. For Wise, “[t]he greatest service of the Jew is that he survives to tell the story of the struggle for freedom.”¹⁹⁰ Yet with all his abandonment of other central Jewish traditions, Wise is against intermarriage. Conversion, he notes, almost always favors Christianity so that the more common it becomes the fewer Jews there will be.¹⁹¹ Moreover, unlike Rabbi Schulman, Wise sees Jews not merely as a religious group but as a race. Intermarriage raises the distinct possibility that both the Jewish race and religion will cease to exist, and this is to be avoided not because these have a value above all others but because they have a value that one cannot replace. Rabbi Wise thus offers yet a different answer to

¹⁸⁷ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Stephen S. Wise, 1874-1949,” *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/stephen-s-wise-18741949> (accessed April 4, 2019).

¹⁸⁸ “Are Jew and Gentile Nearer?” Interview with Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, *The Sun*, January 9, 1910.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

Tevye. Sharing his puzzlement at sharp divisions, exclusivity and related cruelty, Rabbi Wise sides with interaction and the loosening of tradition but not with what he sees as the destruction of Judaism. Like Tevye, he draws the line at intermarriage. His reasons, however, are clearly enunciated and quite practical.

Our consideration of Tevye suggested the interplay of a range of marriage questions and approaches in the lives of individuals and their families. Our discussion of rabbinic positions suggests a similar span of views, now on various questions related to intermarriage. While we might think of these rabbinic positions as a set of competing camps, the fine distinctions among the views just discussed seem better described as a range of attempts, experiments or ruminations. At least for those who attended services, they provided the possibility of sampling this approach or that without settling on any particular one. In fact *The Sun* article suggests that at least some parishioners took precisely this approach. For it reports, regarding Rabbi Wise, that at least one person was heard to say “I get up in the morning and walk across the Park to hear Dr. Wise. He is the only one I’ve found who teaches me to be a good American without wholly forgetting I am a Jew.”¹⁹² While not every Jewish parishioner likely sought the same combination, the point for our purposes is that some, perhaps many, were making the rounds to sample these views, whether through movement from synagogue to synagogue or by reading publications like *The Sun*. Far from settled, this suggests, when it came to marriage many were in a state of uncertainty and disarray.

¹⁹² Ibid.

Everyday Immigrants
“Bintel Brief” Letters

With fiction from the Pale and rabbinic reflections in hand, it is now time to consider individuals who are neither fictional characters nor the relatively powerful makers and enforcers of practice and tradition. I take examples first from the “Bintel Brief” letters that came to the *Jewish Daily Forward* (as we know) from Russian Jewish immigrants in search of advice. Then, for further investigation and support, I again take up the memoirs of Rose Cohen and Mary Antin. In each case, I argue, primary sources based in the lives of everyday immigrants add weight to the claim that Russian Jewish immigrants to America at the start of the twentieth century did not take a particular approach to marriage questions or even choose among several well-established views in competition with each other. They found themselves adrift among unsettled questions and, at most, adopted one approach or another for the moment, trying it on for size before experimenting with something further in this age of uncertainty and flux.

First consider a 1906 “Bintel Brief” letter from a young Jewish man who is married to a Christian woman. Laying out his concern and hoping for wise advice, he laments that his wife “used to be quite liberal,” happy for him to remain Jewish while she continued as a Christian. Now though “she is being drawn back into the Christian religion. She gets up Sunday mornings, runs to the Church and comes home with eyes swollen from crying.”¹⁹³ She becomes upset when he brings home a Jewish friend or reads a Jewish newspaper. Still, while he loves her and can see that she is miserable, he would never consider converting to Christianity himself.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹³ A Reader to Editor, 1906, in *A Bintel Brief*, 43-44.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

Like Tevye's daughter Chava and the many couples who visited the Rabbis interviewed in *The Sun*, the letter-writer has abandoned the usual practice of marriage within the faith and is treading the treacherous path of inter-faith marriage and finding it difficult. How can this young man maintain his sense of self as a Jew while supporting the wife he loves and working to maintain marital stability? Like Rabbis Moses, Schulman and Wise, and indeed like Tevye the dairyman, the advice column's response, presumably from editor Abraham Cahan, seems to push back against this tendency to depart from marital homogeneity. "We often hear of such tragedies," the editor writes, "which stem from marriages between people of different worlds. It's possible that if this couple were to move to a Jewish neighborhood, the young man might have more influence on his wife."¹⁹⁵

As is evident below, Cahan typically responds to marriage-related questions by addressing a variety of important considerations. These include the letter-writer's own interest, the feelings of loved ones and the very real impacts of tradition, and his ultimate recommendations are not always the same even when questions themselves seem very similar. In this case, he emphasizes that mixed marriages frequently are unstable. They pull each party away from religious and other traditions important to themselves and others and put them in the company of strangers who share the spouse's unfamiliar practices. The best thing from the editor's perspective in this case would seem to have been what most others we have considered might advise. Avoid the marriage despite the love. Since it is too late for that course of action, presumably what makes this case a tragedy, the plan must be to immerse the family in a Jewish part of town and hope for the

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 44.

best. While this does not suggest worries about conversion by the husband, it certainly raises that possibility. It also assumes that the husband appropriately controls the relationship. As such, it is a response designed for the maintenance of tradition written to a young man who has tried another course and found himself unhappy. Whether the answer will suit the letter-writer, though, is difficult to say. For if he loves his wife, and she desires her religion and culture and is uncomfortable with his, forced control or manipulation is unlikely to solve the problem.¹⁹⁶

A second “Bintel Brief” letter, this one from 1909, deals with inter-marriage in a different sense. In this case, a young shop-worker has fallen in love with an educated young man in preparatory school who hopes to become a doctor. They have declared their love for each other, but the young woman’s parents have recently arranged a match with an American relative who is a businessman. The writer wishes to know whether she should try to forget her beloved, aspiring doctor and move on with her life since she would have to wait seven years for him to be finished with school in any case.¹⁹⁷ The editor responds:

After years of study many such young students often fall out of love and leave the girls who have helped them. A graduate doctor doesn’t want to marry a toilworn old maid. She has worked her fingers to the bone and exhausted herself to help him become “Sir Doctor.” All that can be said when he leaves her is “You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Sir Doctor.” But one cannot generalize and say that all young men who complete their education act this way. It may be possible that the letter writer’s friend is different. However, it is hard to judge, and therefore difficult to advise the writer how to act. She must make her own decision.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁶ Interestingly, nowhere in these discussions does any writer mention matrilineal descent as an issue at play in these debates.

¹⁹⁷ A.B to Jewish Daily Forward, 1909, in *A Bintel Brief*, 91.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 91-92.

This letter concerns a marriage that resembles the cross-class one that Sprintze attempted. It is also a marriage that raises questions of love versus money and a choice endorsed by the potential bride rather than merely arranged by a matchmaker. So this letter raises a set of issues quite different from the first and also distinct from the rabbinic discussions above. Despite these departures from tradition, the editor's response is far more tentative and far less judgmental than in the case of the earlier letter. It warns the writer that a marriage between someone as highly educated and economically well off as a doctor is less likely to work out than one with a person of her own social and economic background. It also seems to suggest that those of higher social status are especially likely to disdain the working class. Yet it also indicates that this outcome is not set in stone. Moreover in telling the writer, unprompted, that it is she who should decide with whom she will spend her life, the editor seems to embrace both Tevye's position with most of his daughters and at least one aspect of Rabbi Moses's position with respect to the couples who visit him. Like Tevye, the editor seems to feel a growing comfort with women making their own decisions and with marriages for love and without aid of a matchmaker. At the same time, he sees the need for some guidance since such situations of economic and educational inequality often do not work out. An important difference between this case and the Tevye stories lies first in the fact that, while he sees it as risky, Cahan does not see a marriage that violates social class structures as inevitably a failure. Moreover, neither he nor the letter-writer identify the fact that parents have arranged a different match as itself a reason to abandon love. At least for some in America, it appears, these questions assumed less importance than back in the Russian Pale.

A further “Bintel Brief” letter on the marriage question, again from 1906, documents the qualms of a “freethinker” and “revolutionist,” a man, who plans to marry a like-minded woman with Orthodox Jewish parents. The parents, however, are threatening to break off all connection with the couple unless they have an Orthodox wedding, and this violates the young people’s convictions. Obviously concerned about breaking the family bond, the young man writes, “I don’t know what to do.”¹⁹⁹ The editor’s response is that “there are times when it pays to give in to old parents and not grieve them. It depends on the circumstances. When one can get along with kindness, it is better not to break off relations with the parents.”²⁰⁰

This case in many ways parallels that of Hodel and Pertschik. These young people have made their own decisions and wish to marry on their own religious and political terms. While the parents seem to accept that their daughter and her fiancé will not follow in their footsteps after the marriage, they want to insure what they presumably believe is minimal deference to religion. They may also feel that the Orthodox ceremony is required to show minimal respect for family, not only honoring parents’ religious views but allowing them to avoid feeling ashamed before other members of their Jewish community. The editor, it seems, advises the couple to follow the lead of Hodel and Pertschik, unless some circumstance he is unaware of would make the burden of doing so especially great. The reasons for this are unclear. They could have an economic basis. They could recognize the importance of maintaining loving and supportive relationships. They could display some concern to maintain traditions of respect. What seems most likely is that the grounds are some combination of these. In this example, unlike either of

¹⁹⁹ A Reader to Editor, 1906, in *A Bintel Brief*, 53.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

the two previous, we do see that some of parents' feelings and desires, if not their permission, still matter both to the young couple-to-be and to Cahan. Thus here at least, departure from Tevye's concerns in the Pale seems vanishingly small.

Finally, consider a 1908 letter that brings both the desires of Orthodox parents and concerns over inter-faith marriage into view. Back in Russia this letter-writer, a young man, was studying to become a rabbi. On arrival in America without his parents and at the age of twenty, though, he shed many of his more pious ways and gradually fell in love with his night school teacher, a Gentile woman, and she for him.²⁰¹ In response to his concerns, his lover insists that "[t]he fact that I am a Gentile and you a Jew should not bother us. We are both, first of all, human beings and we will live as such."²⁰² While the young man agrees, he is also waiting with little hope for a reaction from his Orthodox parents in Russia. "But I am in despair when I think of my parents," he laments. "What heartaches they will have when they learn of this!"²⁰³ Like the couple who mirror Hodel and Pertschik, this young man is torn. On the one hand, he loves this girl and also believes that it is not so important that he obey traditional marriage customs. On the other, he loves and respects his parents and their wish that he hold tight to his religion and the traditions that go along with it. Like Tevye, he fears, these parents still in Russia likely will respond that marriage between a Jew and a Gentile is under no circumstances acceptable.

²⁰¹ A Reader to Editor, 1906, in *A Bintel Brief*, 82.

²⁰² *Ibid.*

²⁰³ *Ibid.*

To this situation, which puts the young American immigrant and the Russian parents still immersed in the old home in direct conversation and conflict, the editor replies:

We can only say that some mixed marriages are happy, others unhappy. But then many marriages between Jew and Jew, Christian and Christian, are not successful either. It is true, however, that in some mixed marriages the differences between man and wife create unhappiness. Therefore we cannot take it upon ourselves to advise the young man regarding this marriage. This he must decide for himself.²⁰⁴

Unlike his response to the first letter regarding inter-faith marriage, here Cahan shows ambivalence regarding mixed marriage rather than seeming disapproval. Unlike his response to the free-thinking couple, he does not mention the concern to be kind to parents even though parental disapproval seems to be the young man's chief worry. Perhaps Cahan sees this case as different from the first because there the kind of discontent that can befall a mixed marriage had in fact occurred. Here, by contrast, a wise decision could still be made either way. Perhaps he does not mention the Orthodox parents because the sacrifice here is not a mere matter of a church wedding occurring on one day. It is a decision that clearly would affect the young man's whole life. What is clear is that Cahan here seems to share the view that mixed marriage is not out of the question. More, he seems especially to agree with Rabbi Moses that, however risky such a marriage might be, a couple in love and knowledgeable about the risks must be allowed to make their own decisions and deserve respect in doing so. While many considerations remain the same as for Tevye and his daughters, Cahan's response again suggests that, in America, the pendulum has swung in the direction of greater autonomy in marital decision even where the marriage proposed is between a Jew and a Gentile.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 83.

This suggestion about American trends regarding inter-faith marriage, though, does not mean that either Cahan or the recent immigrants to whom he responds see marriage questions as settled matters or answers as obvious. The editor and those seeking advice clearly agree that all of the worries Tevye's daughters raise in the old home are also worries in the new one. Issues of class, politics, degree of religious conviction and parental preference remain along with doubts about the wisdom or acceptability of intermarriage. Each concern appears to be somewhat more muted in the letters Cahan receives and the responses he writes than in the Tevye stories. At the least, both Cahan and the letter-writers seem more ready to see the fact of a couple's love, as well as their autonomy to decide, as having greater weight than other concerns. Neither the advice-seekers nor the editor express certainty about alternative courses of action though, and Cahan's mention of the importance of the circumstances when responding to the free-thinkers seems really to color all of his answers. One can offer advice to those making these difficult decisions. Little if anything, though, is firmly settled.

Memoirists Again

For another pair of lenses through which to examine marriage issues, finally consider Cohen and Antin. Through their stories too, we see the complicated and multifaceted nature of issues concerning marriage and links both to fellow Russian Jewish immigrants and to Tevye's daughters back in the Pale. While Cohen's autobiography provides no details concerning the man she ultimately married, it does relay the story of her relationships with several others. Among these are Israel, a grocer to whom she was briefly engaged, and L.V., a Christian convert from Judaism whom her father despised. Examination of Cohen's relationships with these two men, and of her fathers' reactions to

their presence, paint a complex picture, one riddled with questions of religious conviction and changing cultural practices.

Cohen first encounters Israel after hurrying to his store on news from a neighbor (who intended they should meet) that sugar could be bought there at a good price. After a somewhat awkward interaction regarding packaging, she makes her way home thinking to herself that this young man was charming. A few days later, news comes that he would like to pay a house visit on Saturday, a prospect pleasing to her father since, in his opinion, “the smallest business man is worth ten working men.”²⁰⁵ After the initial visit, a matchmaker reports that Israel’s family is pleased and would like to form an “alliance.” Despite her parents’ great enthusiasm for the idea and her good impression of him, though, Rose is overwhelmed by the prospect of deciding at age eighteen with whom to spend the rest of her life. Before this, she reflects, she “had never been allowed to decide the smallest thing – the shape of my shoes, the length of my dress.”²⁰⁶

After an initial “yes,” due to her family’s financial situation and eagerness that she be in the hands of someone who would be able to provide well for her, Cohen quickly regrets this engagement. She finds herself miserable and awkward.²⁰⁷ She accompanies Israel to purchase an engagement ring only to find that wearing it makes her feel trapped rather than pleased.²⁰⁸ Invited to spend a day and night with Israel and his blind mother, she becomes further distressed. They will be living, she learns, with his mother, in her small apartment, and with her furniture.²⁰⁹ On asking whether he likes to read, one of her

²⁰⁵ Cohen. *Out of the Shadow*, 205.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 206-207.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 213-214.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 218.

favorite pastimes, she learns that Israel does so only when he “[has] nothing better to do.” Noticing two books, one of them familiar like “an old friend,” she feels momentary hope. Yet soon Israel’s one-word responses to her every question further distance her from him despite his increasingly intimate treatment.²¹⁰

A theater excursion after which she resists his kiss is the final straw. Arriving home, she weeps to her sympathetic mother. Though she expects her father to be furious when she reveals her desire to break the engagement, he too is understanding, even agreeing to relay this decision to Israel.²¹¹ Fearing that her father may not follow through, though, Cohen confronts Israel herself, informing him that she cannot marry him because she does not love him. His telling response, “you will love me after we are married”²¹² shows that, though he is a young man who has been in America for five years, he still embodies the views of many “old-fashioned” Russian Jews.

Far more than the brief possibility that the fictional Tzeitl may have to marry the fatherly Lazer-Wolf so ill-suited to her ways and desires, Cohen’s experience with Israel vividly reveals the potential ills of the marriage arranged for financial stability. She is to be the assistant in his store, the caretaker for his mother, the person who cooks his meals and bears his children. That she might have her own interests, talents and wishes beyond a warm place to live and sleep and food on the table is neither here nor there for Israel. He bears her no ill will, but also has no interest in discovering who she is. Happily for Cohen, her story resembles Tzeitl’s in another way. Her parents agree with Tevye that the woman must have a say, and in fact the decisive one. Indeed, Cohen and her family

²¹⁰ Ibid., 219.

²¹¹ Ibid., 225-227.

²¹² Ibid., 227.

display many of the responses familiar from the Tevye stories, ones our other examinations suggest were nourished in America though likely rooted in changes already occurring in the Pale before their departure.

Cohen's second love, met while out walking one night, is the nephew of a neighbor. Quickly she finds herself quite taken with the worldly L.V, feeling that they have a special connection. For both are familiar with a world beyond the Lower East Side. He is visiting from Chicago, and with the aid of the Settlement house, she has ventured to White Birch Farm in the countryside during many summers.²¹³ Much to her family's dismay, though, L.V.'s aunt soon reveals to Cohen's mother that, though once a good boy, he has been taken in by Christian missionaries and will soon be heading to theological school out west. This upturns her parents' lives since, for them,

A Jew who forsook his own religion, his own people, was worse than a Gentile, worse than a heathen. He was an 'apostate.' He was a disgrace! Supposing the neighbors learned who the young man was; that their daughter went about with an outcast. For he who forsook Judaism for another religion belonged nowhere.²¹⁴

Cohen herself, however, sees no difference between L.V. and any other man of Jewish heritage, even when her mother highlights his ignorance of traditional Sabbath practices. To the mother's "Now you see the difference," Cohen's reply is a decisive no, "I cannot see any difference."²¹⁵

When L.V. departs, Cohen's parents are deeply relieved. Though she writes to him, they assume this will subside with time, as will her desire to wait out the two years until he returns.²¹⁶ They couldn't have been more wrong, however, as she eagerly looks

²¹³ Ibid., 292-293.

²¹⁴ Ibid., 294.

²¹⁵ Ibid., 295.

²¹⁶ Ibid., 298.

forward to each letter and takes enormous joy in writing lengthy ones herself.²¹⁷ When her father discovers this, he forbids further communication with L.V. and consults with a matchmaker who brings many suitors to visit, some promising pianos and nice homes. While her parents see many perfect matches among them, though, Cohen's love for L.V. remains strong, and she simply cannot break her promise or marry someone she does not love.²¹⁸

Despite now living on opposite sides of the ocean and despite the family's decade in America, then, Cohen's father resembles Tevye in more ways than were first apparent. While he can appreciate the fact that his daughter wants to marry for love and accepts that she doesn't love the businessman with whom she has been matched, he simply cannot accept that she would marry a Gentile, especially an apostate. With feelings that her time in the country and at the hospital have already undermined her piety, he perhaps believes all the more strongly that she must cling to some part of her Jewish heritage and culture and not bring shame on the family. Cohen, in short, seems to be Chava as well as Tzeitl, with parental concerns about this complex case of inter-faith marriage apparently enhanced by tradition-challenging experiences in the new home. Meanwhile for her own part, Cohen seems even more ready than Chava to abandon old ways. She has seen first-hand what life is like outside her Russian Jewish neighborhood on the Lower East Side, has modified her religious practice to fight illness, and has befriended and been befriended by Gentiles and even read their holy texts. As immigration has, at least in the

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ Cohen remained apprised of L.V.'s activities through his friend, D.C. However, two years turned into three, and she ceased hearing news.

moment she describes, increased her father's grip on marriage traditions, it has loosened her own.²¹⁹ Frustration and even anger on both sides as the result.

Now briefly consider Mary Antin's experience with inter-marriage. As a young woman of eighteen, Antin became involved with a Columbia professor of geology eleven years her senior.²²⁰ Amadeus Grabau was also a Christian of German heritage. Antin's autobiographical works hardly mention her married life. Yet she recorded both her feelings as she speedily moved toward matrimony and her understanding of others' reactions to her choice in letters to her friend, confidant and supporter, the Jewish author Israel Zangwill.²²¹ As a child, Antin had attracted attention early for her intellect and writing skill. By the time her first work was published, she already had many supporters who were wealthy, recognized in the literary world or both. They included many established German and Sephardic Jews as well as Gentiles, among them sisters Emma and Josephine Lazarus.²²² It was through these connections that she met Zangwill, who not only engaged in a long correspondence with her as advisor and confidante but wrote the introduction to her first book (*From Polotsk to Boston*, published when she was eighteen).

These unusual associations for a Russian Jewish immigrant from a poor family also brought Antin into contact with her future husband, for whom she briefly worked as

²¹⁹ Some of Cohen's shorter published pieces provide further insights into her adult views on marriage. For two short stories suggesting that she saw issues of marital choice as extending beyond the Jewish community see her "Sifted Earth: A Story," *The Touchstone* 7 (July 1920): 255-60 and her "Natalka's Portion," *Current Opinion*, Vol. 72 (May 1922): 620-628. For reflections on her own later marriage see her "To the Friends of 'Out of the Shadow,'" *Bookman*, 55 (March 1922), 36-40.

²²⁰ Mary Antin to Israel Zangwill, October 8, 1901, in *Selected Letters of Mary Antin*, ed. Evelyn Salz (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 36-37.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 38.

²²² Mary Antin to Israel Zangwill, March 16, 1902, in *Selected Letters of Mary Antin*, 37.

a private secretary before they decided to marry.²²³ They may well also have provided her with both a sense of self-confidence and a weakening of the devotion to Orthodox traditions that her early work describes. Whatever was true, it is clear that Antin herself believed that her friends and family viewed her choice to marry a Gentile with disfavor. This is something she emphasizes even as she admits that some of this disfavor also concerned the fact that her decision was sudden and that she was young and had not yet finished with the private high school education supporters had insured she could have.²²⁴ In describing her feelings and upcoming marriage plans and her sense of others' disapproval, Antin writes to Zangwill:

I have a great and noble man constantly by my side now, but I am still grateful for the friendship and help of those who have been kind to me, before I knew him and since, and hope that none of my old friends will think that I can spare them now. I want them as much as ever, particularly since I have lost many to whom my marriage was displeasing on religious grounds. They might find these reasons unfounded if they could realize that I have not changed my faith.²²⁵

In later letters, she also references Zangwill's suggestion that she has married "prematurely" and often asks why he does not simply break off their friendship.²²⁶

Despite these concerns, though, Grabau and Antin remained married for 17 years. These were years in which she produced her most well-known literary works (including *The Promised Land*) and enjoyed renewed friendship both from Zangwill and from many other former friends, both Jewish and Gentile. The unhappy end to the marriage, and the divorce that apparently precipitated Antin's decline into mental illness, was not the result of religious differences or of abandonment by friends and family related to these. Rather,

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ Ibid., 38.

²²⁶ Ibid.

it was Grabau's support for Germany as the US entered World War I that led first to his dismissal from Columbia, then to terrific political arguments with Antin, and finally to their divorce.²²⁷

Given the length of their marriage and the fact that Grabau suffered significant rejection in other quarters, though, it seems that Antin's marriage is no symbol of the instability of which the Rabbis and Cahan warn, or of the rejection that Tevye imposes on Chava and that Cohen's father threatened. Oddly, it may be just the opposite. It was a successful inter-faith marriage in an unsettled period, one simply subject to all of the stresses that can beset couples who find themselves divided by politics, patriotism or other strong personal commitments. Her early worries, though, suggest Antin's awareness of the era's inability to settle where such questions were concerned. This was something that affected the views of Jews and Gentiles and of established, reform-minded Jews as well as their newly arrived Russian Jewish counterparts. It thus also stands as some testament both to the similarity between discussions in the Pale and those across the Atlantic and to the ultimately more accepting attitude common in the US. This attitude was one strong pull on those in the process of shifting from a Russian Jewish identity to that of a member of a new community.

Scholars Weigh In

How does this picture of restless variety on the question of intermarriage compare, though, with what historians of turn-of-the-twentieth-century Russian Jewish immigration suggest that we ought to expect? Although these scholars do not often take up marriage questions in detail, general issues of assimilation are an especially common

²²⁷ Ibid., 42

focus of historical work addressing these immigrants. Some specialists, as we saw in Chapter 2, emphasize forces that stood in the way of assimilation. Jack Glazier, for example, examines the perceived Russian Jewish tendency to reproduce the isolated community of the Jewish shtetl within US cities and the established German Jewish community's concern that this would slow or prevent assimilation.²²⁸ He suggests, in doing so, that German Jewish contemporaries had some reason to see these new Russian immigrants as resistant to change. Thus by extension, on his view, we might expect these new immigrants, at least initially, to have rejected moves away from traditional marriages. That is, we might expect them to have continued embracing marriages arranged by a matchmaker and approved by parents, with a Jewish partner of like social class or that promised economic stability. Certainly some central elements of the established Jewish community of the time would have expected this continuity. Given changes already afoot in the Pale, of course, we should instead anticipate that at least some immigrants might arrive in the US already open to a divergence from this standard picture of marriage traditions. They would be ready to dispense with matchmakers, to give special weight to love and to question rigid social class distinctions. Others, to whom change had not come, might arrive with attitudes more like those Glazier mentions, though if Tevye is any indication, even here we should expect some movement away from the practices just described.

Again as noted in Chapter 2, other specialists, among them Irving Howe, carefully detail both forces staunchly opposed to Russian Jewish assimilation (see previous

²²⁸ Glazier, *Dispersing the Ghetto*, Chs 1 and 3. Glazier does not claim that Russian Jews remained resistant but recognizes that, at least initially, established American Jews had some grounds for concern. Howe makes a similar point about some elements of the Russian Jewish community and the opposite point about others. See Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, 71-115.

footnote) and those that strongly encouraged it. They conclude that each set of forces affected some substantial part of the new immigrant population.²²⁹ Still others, including Daniel Soyer and Neil and Ruth Cowan, argue that Russian Jewish immigrants were well aware of both the value of assimilation and its less desirable features.²³⁰ As we have seen, these authors argue that most such immigrants attempted to strike a careful balance between becoming “Americans” and maintaining cultural and religious ties to their heritage in the Pale. On these accounts, it seems, we should expect greater initial variety than Glazier suggests, with some new immigrants embracing or at least accepting some alteration to the traditions they brought with them and others holding fast to some elements or even most. These views (as well as Howe’s) might accommodate differences between older immigrants and younger ones, or between those who held more tightly to marital traditions for personal reasons and those who did not, or between those exposed to new ideas in the Pale and those who were, for whatever reason, more isolated. Although these scholars could thus support a more varied picture, none could account for the almost chaotic truth that is evident from our examination above. This reality seems more likely to be the consequence when two groups already in flux on a central life issue encounter one another in a situation itself saturated with change. Such changes include, among others, the encounters with new people, places and circumstances that characterized life not only for new Russian Jewish immigrants themselves but also for those who now became their neighbors and compatriots.

²²⁹ Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, 171-177.

²³⁰ Cowan and Cowan, *Our Parents’ Lives*, 250-251; Daniel Soyer, *Jewish Immigrant Associations and American Identity in New York, 1880-1939*, 3-6.

One study that offers insight, though no full exploration of our turn-of-the-century question, is Jonathan Sarna's "Intermarriage in America: The Jewish Experience in Historical Context." While not unquestioningly accepted, Sarna argues, inter-faith marriages among American Jews and Christians were not uncommon in the years leading up to the great wave of Russian Jewish immigration.²³¹ Influences encouraging intermarriage included a small American Jewish population that provided an insufficient number of prospective marital partners, a lack of significant negative sanctions for "marrying out" by either Jews or Gentiles, and the social and economic benefits that Jews might enjoy by marrying Gentiles. The arrival of German Jewish rabbis in the mid-nineteenth century did not significantly change these conditions. Their frequent disapproval did trigger a debate, though, presumably the very debate we see still going on in the 1910 *Sun* article. Although Sarna does not make this point, his analysis suggests that the frenetic movement around marriage questions in Jewish America at the turn of the twentieth century was sparked by interactions among three factors. These were internal debate in the US, the changes in marriage practices that were stirring in the old home, and the arrival of millions of new immigrants bringing seeds of change from one land and encountering a related debate, and a still looser set of practices, in another.

Sarna's insights aside, the historians I have described represent the range of views on the general issue of turn-of-the-twentieth-century Russian Jewish assimilation. Some see this immigrant community as largely committed to maintaining its practices and roles; some see it as divided into various versions of assimilationist and traditionalist camps; some see Jewish immigrants as devoted to maintaining certain central traditions

²³¹ Jonathan Sarna, "Intermarriage in America The Jewish Experience in Historical Context," 127-130.

and abandoning others in order to achieve a balance between old Jewish heritage and a new American identity. As we also saw in Chapter 2, the stories these historians tell further match those of immigrants' contemporaries. What extensive primary source analysis suggests and Sarna helps to explain, though, is that where marriage was concerned no settled story can be told in these years surrounding 1900. The intermarriage debate, at least, became far less active as the 1920s dawned, resurfacing as Sarna and Hasia Diner both point out only in the 1960s.²³² Nevertheless, the years just preceding were turbulent ones for questions of marriage in the American Jewish community and especially among new immigrants. Not only the question of marrying out of Judaism, but also those involving marriage for love, marriage without religious observance and marriage outside one's social class were topics of hot debate on which individuals themselves shifted and the community in general was in no way in agreement.

²³² Diner, *A New Promised Land*, 130; Sarna, "Intermarriage in America," 131.

CONCLUSION

Argument

Rose Cohen arrived in New York City from the Russian Pale in 1892, a deeply pious young girl who had sacrificed what remained of her childhood to help her father bring the rest of their family to America. Over time, Cohen shed many of her pious ways and customs, battling illness, learning to read and write in English, discovering a world outside New York's Lower East Side with the help of aid workers, forming close bonds with Gentiles and developing a literary voice of her own in memoir and short story. There is no doubt that immigration altered her life in just the way her contemporary and fellow author Mary Antin describes. My question has been why, how and to what extent immigration proved life altering, not only for Cohen but for thousands of others. I have also asked whether an altered life like Cohen's could nevertheless remain connected to its roots (in this case to origins in the Russian Pale)

My answers are, first, that those whose lives in the Pale were reasonably safe and stable tended to maintain a positive attitude towards the past and to see themselves as individuals on a journey of development. They did not make a clear break with the past in order to remake themselves in the US, nor did they cling to former selves with no ability to embrace development or change. Second, when Russian Jewish immigrants met with conflicts between typical needs (economic, medical or social) and personal commitments (to religion, basic morals or identity), they did not automatically abandon commitment, cling to it or even weigh it in a balancing. Decisions about what to keep and what to save often depended on the depth of the need or the strength of the commitment. Moreover, such decisions often included more or less successful attempts to restructure commitments (for instance Cohen's rejection of "trafe" meat) to make them at least

temporarily compatible with satisfying needs. As for tensions involving traditions that practitioners themselves were scrutinizing (for example marriage practices, requirements and prohibitions), the forces of change at work were more global. In this case, individuals like Cohen were not caught in a dilemma involving personal needs and commitments. They were instead participants in a debate that encompassed the community. In the case of the marriage questions I considered, this debate involved both the Jewish community in the Pale and that in the US. As a consequence, not only community members, but their friends, neighbors and acquaintances remained in an unsettled state of indecision (and in Cohen's case in a series of relationships ranging from the forbidden one with LV to the undesirable one with Israel).

Likeminded Scholars

In reaching these conclusions, I have accepted, first, that both primary and secondary sources are interpretations of events. Second, we will come to a fuller appreciation of the past if we search out and listen to a variety of voices, especially among those with first-hand experience of the events in question. As I noted in my introduction, the first of these insights is Dowd's and the second Clendinnen's. Other scholars whose work likewise acknowledges these insights include Diner, Soyler, and Sarna. Each is committed to carefully examining what seem to be settled facts and demonstrating that, in some cases, these widely accepted views are closer to fiction. This is evident, for example, in Diner's careful, evidence-based critique of the popular claim that Jews who emigrated from Germany in the mid-nineteenth century were well off and assimilated by comparison with later immigrants from the Pale.²³³ Both in his work on

²³³ Diner, *The Jews of the United States*, 73-79.

Landsmanschaft and as an editor of the YIVO memoirs, Soyfer focuses on taking a wide variety of voices into account before drawing large conclusions (for example the determination that despite these societies' expressed emphasis on assimilation members tended to seek a balance between preserving old ways and adopting new ones). Sarna carefully examines myths about intermarriage between American Jews and Christians in the years before 1900. He discovers a range of examples and provides an explanation that can also account both for the unsettled flux that my sources suggest and a less turbulent situation on the horizon. I have suggested in some places that these scholars do not take the understanding of history as a narrative or the demand for many voices as far as they might. Nevertheless, this insightful work has made it possible for me to reach my conclusions

Model Resources

If there is one resource I have relied on that is a model for the kind of historical work I have in mind, though, it is *My Future is in America*, the collection of YIVO contest essays that Soyfer and Cohen edited. As detailed in my introduction, the editors very intentionally sifted through the two hundred plus contest essays to identify voices that varied across a large number of dimensions (including gender, class, place of origin, and political outlook). They also explicitly recognized that memoirs are stories and that participants wrote these particular stories under significant constraints (e.g., a designated theme and the prospect of prizes). In doing this, Soyfer and Cohen encouraged readers to hear the wide range of voices that made up the "great Jewish migration," but also to recognize these memoirs as narratives and understand them with that in mind.

The other collection that I described in detail in my introduction, Metzker's edition of the "Bintel Brief," is likewise a good example of an archival work that acknowledges a wide range of voices and presents them as the narratives they are. In fact, since he emphasizes that those asking for advice sometimes employed letter-writers and that *Jewish Daily Forward* staff sometimes edited letters they received, Metzker expressly recognizes that the letters are narratives that began life with many authors. There is a telling difference between the YIVO volume and Metzker's "Bintel Brief" collection, though. While Metzker notes that he too sometimes condensed letters and shortened responses, the volume gives us no sense of where this occurred. This makes it almost impossible to know whether some important element of the voice under consideration is missing. So while the content of the collection is a model for its attention to many voices, and it is further valuable for its emphasis on historical sources as narratives, it is not always a model of transparency.

Chapter Summaries

Addressing immigrant memories of old home adversity and the circumstances surrounding immigration decisions, my first chapter focused on memoirs by Cohen, Reisman, Antin and Domnitz, as well as on "Bintel Brief" letters requesting advice. We can attempt to understand immigration memories and surrounding conditions through any of several well-developed historical lenses. Those I considered alternately portray turn-of-the-twentieth-century Russian Jewish immigrants as refugees happy to escape persecution, as reluctant transplants steeped in yearning for a lost past, or as accurately understood only through a far more complex analysis that takes the time at which immigrants recorded their memories into account. Yet none of these historical analyses

tells us a story that fully fits the facts. The tale we uncover in the renderings of immigrant memoirists and letter-writers is one of remarkable variety. Amid a “mighty wave” of migration, some individuals, families and smaller groupings left the old home to avoid Gentile persecution experienced or anticipated. Some instead emigrated to escape poverty, or poor employment prospects, or to shake off the oppressive or exclusive customs of their own Jewish community. Others did so to find the opportunity to explore a newfound outlook (Socialism or a less restrictive Judaism) in a more accepting environment. The character of surrounding memories, fearful, bitter, fond or some combination of these, is equally varied. No one lens, perspective or gloss will do the whole job. This diversity notwithstanding, there are good reasons to accept popular historical narratives as partial explanations. In this chapter I argued, in addition, that we should recognize the role that security in the old home played in shaping later attitudes towards it. As I noted above in summarizing my argument, these attitudes in turn likely influenced both immigrants’ self-conceptions and their responses to assimilative pressures in the new American home.

My second chapter explored not the reasons that propelled immigration and the attitudes immigrants adopted towards the old home, but the needs that confronted these immigrants once they arrived on American soil. Set against the backdrop of Taylor’s children’s stories, my analysis considered not only the nature of those needs – economic, medical and social. It also took up the challenges and pressures that met those whose commitments came into conflict with these needs and the ways in which those offering aid often exacerbated or alleviated those conflicts. In addressing these considerations, I emphasized the many reasons that can support and shape decisions about assimilation. I

also identified a distinctive approach, different from balancing, through which immigrants both met needs and preserved commitments. Beyond Taylor's stories, primary sources included the Cohen and Domnitz memoirs considered in Chapter 1, a lengthy Superintendent's Report from New York City's Educational Alliance and newspaper articles from the *Hebrew Leader* and *The Jewish Harold*.

Whether found in children's fiction, memoir, institutional report, or newspapers, these examples tell a story of what immigrants shared. They also reveal how peculiarly individual and subject to accident or chance assimilation decisions sometimes were. They further suggest, though, that in other cases responses were carefully and wisely developed with an eye towards reconfiguring the commitment in order to preserve it, while also satisfying the need. This kind of response was perhaps most likely for those whose sense of security and safety in the old home allowed them to maintain a sense of connection with the past. Reconfiguration is the sophisticated response of a person (like Cohen or Domnitz) who sees it as a kind of growth or development that springs from strong but not suffocating roots in the old home.

My third and final chapter does not ask what needs new arrivals experienced and what changes in practice, religion and self-conception these required. It instead considers what pressures immigration itself placed on the traditions immigrants brought with them. This question of shifting roles and traditions occupied both Tevye, still driving his horse cart laden with milk, butter and cheese through the countryside of Russia's Pale of Settlement as the twentieth century began, and a wide swath of real life Russian Jewish immigrants. I did not focus on tradition generally though. Instead I considered how far is too far when it comes to changing marital customs and further concentrated on factors at

work in the widespread debate over intermarriage in the decades that marked the transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. Besides Sholem Aleichem's stories, my sources included lengthy interviews with New York rabbis in *The Sun*, "Bintel Brief" letters and replies and the Cohen and Antin memoirs.

I concluded that attempts to impose order on these issues misrepresent the era. Though firm decisions and trends were in the offing, the turn of the century marked a time of indecision, possibility and shift for issues of tradition in the community of Russian Jewish immigrants to America. This unsettled moment occurred, I argued, when two marriage debates, one Russian and the other American, collided. The American debate fed and fueled the old world one that Russian Jewish immigrants brought with them and vice versa. Although they later abated, indecision and inconstancy were the result of the super-charged environment around marriage questions to which immigration gave life.

Last Thoughts on Altered Lives

What most obviously connects the discussions in these three chapters is a question about the dramatic changes in immigrants' lives that accompanied Russian Jewish immigration to America at the turn of the twentieth century. I considered some of the many facets of this question by examining the changes immigrants sought in leaving the old home and related attitudes towards it; the assimilation that resulted when the needs that accompanied immigration came into tension with immigrants' firm commitments; and the cultural debates over marriage traditions that were independent of immigration but that it nevertheless shaped and inflamed. Although they are not the whole story, together these aspects of change enhance our understanding of the ways in which this

wave of Russian Jewish immigration altered lives. In some cases, for example where attitudes towards the old home likely affected approaches to assimilation, one of these discussions also informs another.

What further connects these chapters is an approach to studying history. As I have emphasized, Dowd's focus on narrative, and Clendinnen's insistence on hearing all voices through the evidence we have and being transparent about what we are doing, shaped my research and thinking. Taking each of these authors seriously also made me think differently about what counts as an historical source and especially what counts as doing history. In integrating fiction (the stories of Sydney Taylor and Sholem Aleichem) into my discussions, I have partly aimed to use the focused nature of story-telling to help clarify examples and to draw on fiction popular at the time as a way of determining the questions that interested real people out in the world. But I have also accepted these works of fiction as historical works. Like memoirs, letters, institutional reports, newspaper articles and scholarly studies, historical fiction (if not all fiction) offers an interpretation of events, responses and attitudes. It provides one window among many into the past and can enhance our understanding of it. Like my conclusions about the ways in which immigration altered the lives of Russian Jews at the turn of the twentieth century, this perspective on the value of fictional works is one of the fruits of my research.

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