in America has ever been. Its towers are still the loftiest towers of stone to be seen. (The towers of the larger suspension bridges built since are of steel.) It is still acclaimed by architectural critics and figures time and again in movies, advertisements, and television commercials. Photographers find it irresistible. It is photographed, without cease, from every angle in all seasons, in every kind of light.

It remains a reminder of other days, yet serves still as an indispensable main artery. Trucks and automobiles, as unimaginable to the builders as were skyscrapers, stream across in both directions twenty-four hours a day.

And on good days, the crowds still come to walk the promenade and experience the thrill of the view, the same lift of spirits felt by so many for more than a century. It remains what it was, the greatest of bridges, the Brooklyn Bridge, made in America, its appeal defying time, a symbol now no less than ever of brave work nobly done.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Of all of the great technological achievements of the late nineteenth century, what made the Brooklyn Bridge the symbol of American accomplishment? As McCullough observes, the awe-inspiring structure convinced those who first viewed it to believe that “there was no place like New York.”

2. In what sense was building the Brooklyn Bridge largely a product of a family’s devotion to each other? What were the separate roles played by John, Washington, and Emily Warren Roebling?

3. Describe the ethnic and racial backgrounds of the young labor force that built the Brooklyn Bridge. Why does McCullough conclude that the giant steel and granite structure represented America’s diversity?

4. Why was the Brooklyn Bridge “a grand-scale enhancement to city life”? How did average New Yorkers use it on Sundays and holidays to experience something they had never seen or felt before?

5. Reflecting on selection 5 on Andrew Carnegie, explain why the modern American city of the late nineteenth century could never have developed without the steel industry. Besides the Brooklyn Bridge, in what other ways did steel change the New York landscape?

6. Why does McCullough conclude that the Brooklyn Bridge is “a symbol now no less than ever of brave work nobly done”?

7

A Little Milk, a Little Honey

DAVID BOROFF

The Gilded Age witnessed an enormous surge of immigration from Europe, as the romantic lure of America seemed to draw more people than ever. For Europeans, as one historian has noted, “America was rich, America was good, America was hope, America was the future.” They came over by the millions, crowding into American cities and swelling the bottom ranks of American labor. Between 1850 and 1910, some 22,800,000 immigrants arrived in the United States, more than three-fourths of them after 1881. There was also a significant shift in the source of immigration. The “old” immigrants were from western and northern Europe—Britain, Ireland, Germany, and the Scandinavian countries. But in the 1890s, most immigrants were from eastern and southern Europe—Russia, Serbia, Austria-Hungary, and Italy—and most were Jewish or Catholic. When
these people arrived in America's northeastern cities, they invariably antagonized native-born Protestants, who unfairly blamed them for America's growing urban problems.

The major gateway of the new immigration was New York City, where the population swelled from 1.5 million in 1870 to a spectacular 5 million by 1915. The constant stream of new arrivals made New York the largest and most ethnically diverse city in America. In fact, by 1900, more than three-fourths of New York's citizenry was foreign born. Among them were several hundred thousand eastern European Jews, most of whom settled in the crowded and tumultuous Lower East Side, where they lived in conditions that contrasted sharply with the dream of America that had brought them here.

David Boroff provides a vivid picture of the Jewish immigrants, who first began arriving in New Amsterdam (later New York) in 1654. His focus, however, is on the period after 1880, when Jewish immigration was, as he puts it, “in flood tide.” Boroff's lively narrative not only captures the immigrant experience but points out the influence of the Jewish immigrants on the United States and America's influence on them.

In significant ways, the Jewish immigrant experience mirrored that of other ethnic groups newly arrived in America. Italians, Poles, Slovaks, Greeks, and Irish also congregated in “immigrant ghettos” in which they tended to recreate the features of the Old World societies they had left behind. While the ghetto had its bleak side, it nevertheless afforded ethnic groups “a sense of belonging,” of “cultural cohesiveness” that assuaged the pain of leaving their homelands and starting over in a strange, often overwhelming new land.

GLOSSARY

1USWANDERERHALLEN Emigrant buildings in Hamburg.

ANTOR In a synagogue's religious service, this officer performs the liturgy and sings or chants the prayers.

ASTLE GARDEN The huge building, situated at the foot of Manhattan, where immigrants were cleaned and interrogated after their arrival.

CHEDERS Hebrew schools.

COFFEE HOUSE The most popular cultural institution in the Jewish ghetto.

JENNNA Hell.

JENTILE People who are not Jewish.

GREENHORN, OR GREENER Pejorative term for newly arrived immigrants.

JEWISH DAILY FORWARD Socialist Yiddish newspaper, edited by Abraham Cahan.

LANDSLEIT Jewish term for fellow townspeople.

MAX HOCHSTIM ASSOCIATION Energetically recruited girls to work as prostitutes.

NEW YORK INDEPENDENT BENEVOLENT ASSOCIATION An organization of pimps.

ORTHODOX JEW One who adheres faithfully to traditional Judaism, who is devoted to the study of the Torah, attends synagogue daily, and takes care to observe the Sabbath, Jewish holy days, dietary laws, and religious festivals.

“PIG MARKET” Functioned as the labor exchange on the Lower East Side.

POGROM Organized massacre of Jews.

SHTETL Typical small Jewish town in Europe.

WHITE PLAGUE Immigrants' term for tuberculosis.

YIDDISH The Hebrew-German dialect and the main vehicle for a Jewish cultural renaissance between 1890 and World War I.

ZHID Yiddish word for “leave.”
It started with a trickle and ended in a flood. The first to come were twenty-three Jews from Brazil who landed in New Amsterdam in 1654, in flight from a country no longer hospitable to them. They were, in origin, Spanish and Portuguese Jews (many with grandiloquent Iberian names) whose families had been wandering for a century and a half. New Amsterdam provided a chilly reception. Governor Peter Stuyvesant at first asked them to leave, but kinder hearts in the Dutch West India Company granted them the right to stay, “provided the poor among them . . . be supported by their own nation.” By the end of the century, there were perhaps one hundred Jews; by the middle of the eighteenth century, there were about three hundred in New York, and smaller communities in Newport, Philadelphia, and Charleston.

Because of their literacy, zeal, and overseas connections, colonial Jews prospered as merchants, though there were artisans and laborers among them. The Jewish community was tightly knit, but there was a serious shortage of trained religious functionaries. There wasn’t a single American rabbi, for example, until the nineteenth century. Jews were well regarded, particularly in New England. Puritan culture leaned heavily on the Old Testament, and Harvard students learned Hebrew; indeed, during the American Revolution, the suggestion was advanced that Hebrew replace English as the official language of the new country. The absence of an established national religion made it possible for Judaism to be regarded as merely another religion in a pluralistic society. The early days of the new republic were thus a happy time for Jews. Prosperous and productive, they were admitted to American communal life with few restrictions. It is little wonder that a Jewish spokesman asked rhetorically in 1820: “On what spot in this habitable Globe does an Israelite enjoy more blessings, more privileges?”

The second wave of immigration during the nineteenth century is often described as German, but that is misleading. Actually, there were many East European Jews among the immigrants who came in the half century before 1870. However, the German influence was strong, and there was a powerful undercurrent of Western enlightenment at work. These Jews came because economic depression and the Industrial Revolution had made their lot as artisans and small merchants intolerable. For some there was also the threatening backwash of the failure of the Revolution of 1848. Moreover, in Germany at this time Jews were largely disfranchised and discriminated against. During this period, between 200,000 and 400,000 Jews emigrated to this country, and the Jewish population had risen to about half a million by 1870.

This was the colorful era of the peddler and his pack. Peddling was an easy way to get started—it required little capital—and it often rewarded enterprise and daring. Jewish peddlers fanned out through the young country into farmland and mining camp, frontier and Indian territory. The more successful peddlers ultimately settled in one place as storekeepers. (Some proud businesses . . . made their start this way.) Feeling somewhat alienated from the older, settled Jews, who had a reputation for declining piety, the new immigrants organized their own synagogues and community facilities, such as cemeteries and hospitals. In general, these immigrants were amiably received by native Americans, who, unsophisticated about differences that were crucial to the immigrants themselves, regarded all Central Europeans as “Germans.”

Essentially, the emigration route was the same between 1820 and 1870 as it would be in the post-1880 exodus. The travellers stayed in emigration inns while awaiting their ship, and since they had all their resources with them, they were in danger of being robbed. The journey itself was hazardous and, in the days of the sailing vessels when a good wind was indispensable, almost interminable. Nor were the appointments very comfortable even for the relatively well to do. A German Jew who made the journey in
1856 reported that his cabin, little more than six feet by six feet, housed six passengers in triple-decker bunks. When a storm raged, the passengers had to retire to their cabins lest they be washed off the deck by waves. “Deprived of air,” he wrote, “it soon became unbearable in the cabins in which six sea-sick persons breathed.” On this particular journey, sea water began to trickle into the cabins, and the planks had to be retarred.

Still, the emigration experience was a good deal easier than it would be later. For one thing, the immigrants were better educated and better acquainted with modern political and social attitudes than the oppressed and bewildered East European multitudes who came after 1880. Fewer in number, they were treated courteously by ships’ captains. (On a journey in 1839, described by David Mayer, the ship’s captain turned over his own cabin to the Jewish passengers for their prayers and regularly visited those Jews who were ill.) Moreover, there was still the bloom of adventure about the overseas voyage. Ships left Europe amid the booming of cannon, while on shore ladies enthusiastically waved their handkerchiefs. On the way over, there was a holiday atmosphere despite the hazards, and there was great jubilation when land was sighted.

There were, however, rude shocks when the voyagers arrived in this country. The anguish of Castle Garden and Ellis Island was well in the future when immigration first began to swell. But New York seemed inhospitable, its pace frantic, the outlook not entirely hopeful. Isaac M. Wise, a distinguished rabbi who made the journey in 1846, was appalled. “The whole city appeared to me like a large shop,” he wrote, “where everyone buys or sells, cheats or is cheated. I had never before seen a city so bare of all art and of every trace of good taste; likewise I had never witnessed anywhere such rushing, hurrying, hasting, running... Everything seemed so pitifully small and paltry; and I had had so exalted an idea of the land of freedom.” Moreover, he no sooner landed in New York than he was abused by a German drayman whose services he had declined. “Aha! bought I,” he later wrote, “you have left home and kindred in order to get away from the disgusting Judaeo-phobia and here the first German greeting that sounds in your ears is hep! hep!” (The expletive was a Central European equivalent of “Kike.”)

Another German Jew who worked as a clothing salesman was affronted by the way customers were to be “lured” into buying (“I did not think this occupation corresponded in any way to my views of a merchant’s dignity”).

After 1880, Jewish immigration into the United States was in flood tide. And the source was principally East Europe, where by 1880 three-quarters of the world’s 7.7 million Jews were living. In all, over two million Jews came to these shores in little more than three decades—about one-third of Europe’s Jewry. Some of them came, as their predecessors had come, because of shrinking economic opportunities. In Russia and in the Austro-Hungarian empire, the growth of large-scale agriculture squeezed out Jewish middlemen as it destroyed the independent peasantry, while in the cities the development of manufacturing reduced the need for Jewish artisans. Vast numbers of Jews became petty tradesmen or even lufemenschen (men without visible means of support who drifted from one thing to another). In Galicia, around 1900, there was a Jewish trader for every ten peasants, and the average value of his stock came to only twenty dollars.

Savage discrimination and pogroms also incited Jews to emigrate. The Barefoot Brigades—bands of marauding Russian peasants—brought devastation and bloodshed to Jewish towns and cities. On a higher social level, there was the “cold pogrom,” a government policy calculated to destroy Jewish life. The official hope was that one third of Russia’s Jews would die out, one third would emigrate, and one third would be converted to the Orthodox Church. Crushing restrictions were imposed. Jews were required to live within the Pale of Settlement in western Russia, they could not Russify their names, and they were subjected to rigorous quotas for schooling and professional training. Nor could general studies be included in the curriculum of Jewish religious schools. It was a life of poverty and fear.
Nevertheless, the shtetl, the typical small Jewish town, was a triumph of endurance and spiritual integrity. It was a place where degradation and squalor could not wipe out dignity, where learning flourished in the face of hopelessness, and where a tough, sardonic humor provided catharsis for the tribulations of an existence that was barely endurable. The abrasions and humiliations of everyday life were healed by a rich heritage of custom and ceremony. And there was always Sabbath—"The Bride of the Sabbath," as the Jews called the day of rest—to bring repose and exaltation to a life always sorely tried.

To be sure, even this world showed signs of disintegration. Secular learning, long resisted by East European Jews and officially denied to them, began to make inroads. Piety gave way to revolutionary fervor, and Jews began to play a heroic role in Czarist Russia's bloody history of insurrection and suppression.

This was the bleak, airless milieu from which the emigrants came. A typical expression of the Jewish attitude towards emigration from Russia—both its hopefulness and the absence of remorse—was provided by Dr. George Price, who had come to this country in one of the waves of East European emigration:

Should this Jewish emigrant regret his leave-taking of his native land which fails to appreciate him? No! A thousand times no! He must not regret fleeing the clutches of the blood-thirsty crocodile. Sympathy for this country? How ironical it sounds! Am I not despised? Am I not urged to leave? Do I not hear the word Zhid constantly? . . . Be thou cursed forever my wicked homeland, because you remind me of the Inquisition. . . . May you rue the day when you exiled the people who worked for your welfare.

After 1880, going to America—no other country really lured—became the great drama of redemption for the masses of East European Jews. (For some, of course, Palestine had that role even in the late nineteenth century, but these were an undaunted Zionist cadre prepared to endure the severest hardships.) The assassination of Czar Alexander II in 1881, and the subsequent pogrom, marked the beginning of the new influx. By the end of the century, 700,000 Jews had arrived, about one quarter of them totally illiterate, almost all of them impoverished. Throughout East Europe, Jews talked longingly about America as the "goldene medinah" (the golden province), and biblical imagery—"the land of milk and honey"—came easily to their lips. Those who could write were kept busy composing letters to distant kin—or even to husbands—in America. (Much of the time, the husband went first, and by abstemious living saved enough to fetch wife and children from the old country.) Children played at "emigrating games," and for the entire shtetl it was an exciting moment when the mail-carrier announced how many letters had arrived from America.

German steamship companies assiduously advertised the glories of the new land and provided a one-price rate from shtetl to New York. Emigration inns were established in Brody (in the Ukraine) and in the port cities of Bremen and Hamburg, where emigrants would gather for the trip. There were rumors that groups of prosperous German Jews would underwrite their migration to America; and in fact such people often did help their co-religionists when they were stranded without funds in the port cities of Germany. Within Russia itself, the government after 1880 more or less acquiesced in the emigration of Jews, and connived in the vast business of "stealing the border" (smuggling emigrants across). After 1892, emigration was legal—except for those of draft age—but large numbers left with forged papers, because that proved to be far easier than getting tangled in the red tape of the Tzarist bureaucracy. Forged documents, to be sure, were expensive—they cost twenty-five rubles, for many Jews the equivalent of five weeks' wages. Nor was the departure from home entirely a happy event. There were the uncertainties of the new life, the fear that in America "one became a gentile." Given the Jewish aptitude for lugubriousness, a family's departure was often like a funeral, lachrymose and anguished, with the neighbors carting off the furniture that would no longer be needed.

For people who had rarely ventured beyond the boundaries of their own village, going to America
was an epic adventure. They travelled with pitifully little money; the average immigrant arrived in New York with only about twenty dollars. With their domestic impediments—bedding, brass candlesticks, samovars—they would proceed to the port cities by rail, cart, and even on foot. At the emigration inns, they had to wait their turn. Thousands milled around, entreatling officials for departure cards. There were scenes of near chaos—mothers shrieking, children crying; battered wicker trunks, bedding, utensils in wild disarray. At Hamburg, arriving emigrants were put in the “unclean” section of the Aushawerthallen until examined by physicians who decided whether their clothing and baggage had to be disinfected. After examination, Jews could not leave the center; other emigrants could.

The ocean voyage provided little respite. (Some elected to sail by way of Liverpool at a reduction of nine dollars from the usual rate of thirty-four dollars.) Immigrants long remembered the “smell of ship,” a distillation of many putrescences. Those who went in steerage slept on mattresses filled with straw and kept their clothes on to keep warm. The berth itself was generally six feet long, two feet wide, and two and a half feet high, and it had to accommodate the passenger’s luggage. Food was another problem. Many Orthodox Jews subsisted on herring, black bread, and tea which they brought because they did not trust the dietary purity of the ship’s food. Some ships actually maintained a separate galley for kosher food, which was coveted by non-Jewish passengers because it was allegedly better.

Unsophisticated about travel and faced by genuine dangers, Jewish emigrants found the overseas trip a long and terrifying experience. But when land was finally sighted, the passengers often began to cheer and shout. “I looked up at the sky,” an immigrant wrote years later. “It seemed much bluer and the sun much brighter than in the old country. It reminded me on [sic] the Garden of Eden.”

Unhappily, the friendly reception that most immigrants envisioned in the new land rarely materialized. Castle Garden in the Battery, at the foot of Manhattan—and later Ellis Island in New York Harbor—proved to be almost as traumatic as the journey itself. “Castle Garden,” an immigrant wrote, “is a large building, a Gehenna, through which all Jewish arrivals must pass to be cleansed before they are considered worthy of breathing freely the air of the land of the almighty dollar. . . . If in Brody, thousands crowded about, here tens of thousands thronged about; if there they were starving, here they were dying; if there they were crushed, here they were simply beaten.”

One must make allowances for the impassioned hyperbole of the suffering immigrant, but there is little doubt that the immigration officials were harassed, overworked, and often unsympathetic. Authorized to pass on the admissibility of the newcomers, immigration officers struck terror into their hearts by asking questions designed to reveal their literacy and social attitudes. “How much is six times six?” an inspector asked a woman in the grip of nervousness, then casually asked the next man, “Have you ever been in jail?”

There were, of course, representatives of Jewish defense groups present, especially from the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society. But by this time, the immigrants, out of patience and exhausted, tended to view them somewhat balefully. The Jewish officials tended to be highhanded, and the temporary barracks which they administered on Ward’s Island for those not yet settled soon became notorious. Discontent culminated in a riot over food; one day the director—called The Father—had to swim ashore for his life, and the police were hastily summoned.

Most immigrants went directly from Castle Garden or Ellis Island to the teeming streets of Manhattan, where they sought relatives or landsleit (fellow towns- men) who had gone before them. Easy marks for hucksters and swindlers, they were overcharged by draymen for carrying their paltry possessions, engaged as strikebreakers, or hired at shamelessly low wages.

“Greenhorn” or “greener” was their common name. A term of vilification, the source of a thousand cruel jokes, it was their shame and their destiny. On top of everything else, the immigrants had to abide
Dated 1900, this photograph shows Hester Street in New York’s Lower East Side at the peak of Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe. The Jewish neighborhoods were characterized by an integration of domestic life and commercial activity. One avenue of economic activity for these immigrants was the pushcart, which could be rented at low rates. Crowded and impoverished as it was, the Lower East Side teemed with cultural vitality. It was, as author David Boroff puts it, “a vibrant community, full of color and gusto, in which the Jewish immigrant felt marvelously at home.” (Seaver Center for Western History Research, Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History)

the contempt of their co-religionists who had preceded them to America by forty or fifty years. By the time the heavy East European immigration set in, German Jews had achieved high mercantile status and an uneasy integration into American society. They did not want to be reminded of their kinship with these uncouth and impoverished Jews who were regarded vaguely as a kind of Oriental influx. There was a good deal of sentiment against “aiding such paupers to emigrate to these shores.” One charitable organization declared: “Organized immigration from Russia, Roumania, and other semi-barbarous countries is a mistake and has proved to be a failure. It is no relief to the Jews of Russia, Poland, etc., and it jeopardizes the well-being of the American Jews.”

A genuine uptown-downtown split soon developed, with condescension on one side and resentment on the other. The German Jews objected as bitterly to the rigid, old-world Orthodoxy of the immigrants as they did to their new involvement in trade unions. They were fearful, too, of the competition they would offer in the needle trades. (Indeed, the East
Europeans ultimately forced the uptown Jews out of the industry.) On the other side of the barricades, Russian Jews complained that at the hands of their uptown brethren, "every man is questioned like a criminal, is looked down upon . . . just as if he were standing before a Russian official." Nevertheless, many German Jews responded to the call of conscience by providing funds for needy immigrants and setting up preparatory schools for immigrant children for whom no room was yet available in the hopelessly overcrowded public schools.

Many comfortably settled German Jews saw dispersion as the answer to the problem. Efforts were made to divert immigrants to small towns in other parts of the country, but these were largely ineffective. There were also some gallant adventures with farming in such remote places as South Dakota, Oregon, and Louisiana. Though the Jewish pioneers were brave and idealistic, drought, disease, and ineptitude conspired against them. (In Oregon, for example, they tried to raise corn in cattle country, while in Louisiana they found themselves in malarial terrain.) Only chicken farming in New Jersey proved to be successful to any great degree. Farm jobs for Jews were available, but as one immigrant said: "I have no desire to be a farm hand to an ignorant Yankee at the end of the world. I would rather work here at half the price in a factory; for then I would at least be able to spend my free evenings with my friends."

It was in New York, then, that the bulk of the immigrants settled—in the swarming, tumultuous Lower East Side—with smaller concentrations in Boston, Philadelphia, and Chicago. Far less adaptable than the German Jews who were now lording it over them, disoriented and frightened, the East European immigrants constituted a vast and exploited proletariat. According to a survey in 1890, sixty percent of all immigrant Jews worked in the needle trades. This industry had gone through a process of decentralization in which contractors carried out the bulk of production, receiving merely the cut goods from the manufacturer. Contracting establishments were everywhere in the Lower East Side, including the contractors' homes, where pressers warmed their irons on the very stove on which the boss's wife was preparing supper. The contractors also gave out "section" work to families and landsleit who would struggle to meet the quotas at home. The bondage of the sewing machine was therefore extended into the tenements, with entire families enslaved by the machine's voracious demands. The Hester Street "pig market," where one could buy anything, became the labor exchange; there tailors, operators, finishers, basters, and pressers would congregate on Saturday in the hope of being hired by contractors.

Life in the sweatshops of the Lower East Side was hard, but it made immigrants employable from the start, and a weekly wage of five dollars—the equivalent of ten rubles—looked good in immigrant eyes. Moreover they were among their own kin and kind, and the sweatshops, noisome as they were, were still the scene of lively political and even literary discussions. (In some cigar-making shops, in fact, the bosses hired "readers" to keep the minds of the workers occupied with classic and Yiddish literature as they performed their repetitive chores.) East European Jews, near the end of the century, made up a large part of the skilled labor force in New York, ranking first in twenty-six out of forty-seven trades, and serving, for example, as bakers, building-trade workers, painters, furriers, jewellers, and tinsmiths.

Almost one quarter of all the immigrants tried their hands as tradesmen—largely as peddlers or as pushcart vendors in the madhouse bazaar of the Lower East Side. For some it was an apprenticeship in low-toned commerce that would lead to more elegant careers. For others it was merely a martyrdom that enabled them to subsist. It was a modest enough investment—five dollars for a license, one dollar for a basket, and four dollars for wares. They stocked up on pins and needles, shoe laces, polish, and handkerchiefs, learned some basic expressions ("You wanna buy somethin'?") and were on their hapless way.

It was the professions, of course, that exerted the keenest attraction to Jews, with their reverence for learning. For most of them it was too late; they had to reconcile themselves to more humble callings. But
it was not too late for their children, and between 1897 and 1907, the number of Jewish physicians in Manhattan rose from 450 to 1,000. Of all the professions it was medicine that excited the greatest veneration. (Some of this veneration spilled over into pharmacy, and “druggists” were highly respected figures who were called upon to prescribe for minor—and even major—ills, and to serve as scribes for the letters that the immigrants were unable to read and write themselves.) There were Jewish lawyers on the Lower East Side and by 1901 over 140 Jewish policemen, recruited in part by Theodore Roosevelt, who, as police commissioner, had issued a call for “the Maccabee or fighting Jewish type.”

The Lower East Side was the American counterpart of the ghetto for Jewish immigrants, as well as their glittering capital. At its peak, around 1910, it packed over 350,000 people into a comparatively small area—roughly from Canal Street to Fourteenth Street—with as many as 523 people per acre, so that Arnold Bennett was moved to remark that “the architecture seemed to sweat humanity at every window and door.” The most densely populated part of the city, it held one sixth of Manhattan’s population and most of New York’s office buildings and factories. “Uptowners” used to delight in visiting it (as a later generation would visit Harlem) to taste its exotic flavor. But the great mass of Jews lived there because the living was cheap, and there was a vital Jewish community that gave solace to the lonely and comfort to the pious.

A single man could find lodgings of a sort, including coffee morning and night, for three dollars a month. For a family, rent was about ten dollars a month, milk was four cents a quart, kosher meat twelve cents a pound, herring a penny or two. A kitchen table could be bought for a dollar, chairs at thirty-five cents each. One managed, but the life was oppressive. Most families lived in the notorious “dumbbell” flats of old-law tenements (built prior to 1901). Congested, often dirty and unsanitary, these tenements were six or seven stories high and had four apartments on each floor. Only one room in each three or four room apartment received direct air and sunlight, and the families on each floor shared a toilet in the hall.

Many families not only used their flats as workshops but also took in boarders to make ends meet. [Journalist and reformer] Jacob Riis tells of a two-room apartment on Allen Street which housed parents, six children, and six boarders. “Two daughters sewed clothes at home. The elevated railway passed by the window. The cantor rehearses, a train passes, the shoe-maker bangs, ten brats run around like goats, the wife putters. . . . At night we all try to get some sleep in the stifling, roach-infested two rooms.” In the summer, the tenants spilled out into fire escapes and rooftops, which were converted into bedrooms.

Nevertheless, life on the Lower East Side had surprising vitality. Despite the highest population density in the city, the Tenth Ward had one of the lowest death rates. In part, this was because of the strenuous personal cleanliness of Jews, dictated by their religion. Though only eight per cent of the East European Jews had baths, bathhouses and steam rooms on the Lower East Side did a booming business. There was, of course, a heavy incidence of tuberculosis—“the white plague.” Those who were afflicted could be heard crying out, “Luf! Glib mir luf!” (“Air! Give me air!”). It was, in fact, this terror of “consumption” that impelled some East Side Jews to become farmers in the Catskills at the turn of the century, thus forerunning the gaudy career of the Catskill Borscht Belt resort hotels. The same fear impelled Jews on the Lower East Side to move to Washington Heights and the Bronx, where the altitude was higher, the air presumably purer.

Alcoholism, a prime affliction of most immigrant groups, was almost unknown among Jews. They drank ritualistically on holidays but almost never to excess. They were, instead, addicted to seltzer or soda water . . . which they viewed as “the worker’s champagne.” The suicide rate was relatively low, though higher than in the shtetl, and there was always a shudder of sympathy when the Yiddish press announced that someone had gessen men digne (taken gas).

The Lower East Side was from the start the scene of considerable crime. But its inhabitants became concerned when the crime rate among the young
people seemed to rise steeply around 1910. There was a good deal of prostitution. The dancing academies, which achieved popularity early in this century, became recruiting centers for prostitutes. In 1908–9, of 581 foreign women arrested for prostitution, 225 were Jewish. There was the notorious Max Hochstim Association, which actively recruited girls, while the New York Independent Benevolent Association—an organization of pimps—provided sick benefits, burial privileges, bail, and protection money for prostitutes. The membership was even summoned to funerals with a two-dollar fine imposed on those who did not attend. Prostitution was so taken for granted that Canal Street had stores on one side featuring sacerdotal articles, while brothels were housed on the other.

Family life on the Lower East Side was cohesive and warm, though there was an edge of shrillness and hysteria to it. Marriages were not always happy, but if wives were viewed as an affliction, children were regarded as a blessing. The kitchen was the center of the household, and food was almost always being served to either family or visitors. No matter how poor they were, Jewish families ate well—even to excess—and mothers considered their children woefully underweight unless they were well cushioned with fat.

It was a life with few conventional graces. Handkerchiefs were barely known, and the Yiddish newspapers had to propagate for their use. Old men smelled of snuff, and in spite of bathing, children often had lice in their hair and were sent home from school by the visiting nurse for a kerosene bath. Bedbugs were considered an inevitability, and pajamas were viewed as an upper-class affectation. Parents quarrelled bitterly—with passionate and resourceful invective—in the presence of their children. Telephones were virtually unknown, and a telegram merely meant disaster from afar.

The zeal of the immigrants on behalf of their children was no less than awe-inspiring. Parents yearned or lofty careers for their offspring, with medicine at the pinnacle. In better-off homes, there was always a piano ("solid mahogany"), and parents often spent their precious reserves to arrange a "concert" for their precocious youngsters, often followed by a ball in one of the Lower East Side’s many halls.

To be sure, the children inspired a full measure of anxiety in their parents. "Amerikane kinder" was the rueful plaint of the elders, who could not fathom the baffling new ways of the young. Parents were nervous about their daughters’ chastity, and younger brothers—often six or seven years old—would be dispatched as chaperones when the girls met their boy friends. There was uneasiness about Jewish street gangs and the growing problem of delinquency. The old folks were vexed by the new tides of secularism and political radicalism that were weaning their children from traditional pieties. But most of all, they feared that their sons would not achieve the success that would redeem their own efforts, humiliations, and failures in the harsh new land. Pressure on their children was relentless. But on the whole the children did well, astonishingly well. "The ease and rapidity with which they learn," Jacob Riis wrote, "is equalled only by their good behavior and close attention while in school. There is no whispering and no rioting at these desks." Samuel Chotzinoff, the music critic, tells a story which reveals the attitude of the Jewish schoolboy. When an altercation threatened between Chotzinoff and a classmate, his antagonist’s reaction was to challenge him to spell "combustible."

The Lower East Side was a striking demonstration that financial want does not necessarily mean cultural poverty. The immigrant Jews were nearly always poor and often illiterate, but they were not culturally deprived. In fact, between 1890 and World War I, the Jewish community provides a remarkable chapter in American cultural history. Liberated from the constrictions of European captivity, immigrant Jews experienced a great surge of intellectual vitality. Yiddish, the Hebrew-German dialect which some people had casually dismissed as a barbarous "jargon," became the vehicle of this cultural renascence. Between 1885 and 1914, over 150 publications of all kinds made their appearance. But the new Yiddish journalism reached its apogee with the Jewish Daily
Yiddish sheet music from 1912. The song celebrates Ellis Island, which had replaced Castle Garden in 1892 as the point of entry for immigrants. A culture within a culture, Jewish New York had its own schools, newspapers, publishing houses, literary and musical circles, and a thriving Yiddish theater. (Sheet Music Collection, The John Hay Library, Brown University)

Forward under the long editorial reign of Abraham Cahan. The Forward was humanitarian, pro-labor, and socialistic. But it was also an instrument for acclimatizing immigrants in the new environment. It provided practical hints on how to deal with the new world, letters from the troubled (Binet Brief), and even, at one time, a primer on baseball (“explained to non-sports”). The Forward also published and fostered an enormous amount of literature in Yiddish—both original works by writers of considerable talent, and translations of classic writers.

In this cultural ferment, immigrants studied English in dozens of night schools and ransacked the resources of the Aguilar Free Library on East Broadway. “When I had [a] book in my hand,” an immigrant wrote, “I pressed it to my heart and wanted to kiss it.” The Educational Alliance, also on East Broadway, had a rich program designed to make immigrant Jews more American and their sons more Jewish. And there were scores of settlement houses, debating clubs, ethical societies, and literary circles which attracted the young. In fact, courtships were carried on in a rarefied atmosphere full of lofty talk about art, politics, and philosophy. And though there was much venturesome palaver about sexual freedom, actual behavior tended to be quite strait-laced.

But the most popular cultural institution was the café or coffee house, which served as the Jewish saloon. There were about 250 of them, each with its own following. Here the literates sat for hours over steaming glasses of tea; revolutionaries and Bohemians gathered to make their pronouncements or raise money for causes; actors and playwrights came to hold court. For immigrant Jews, talk was the breath of life itself. The passion for music and theater knew no bounds. When Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony was performed one summer night in 1915, mounted police had to be summoned to keep order outside Lewishohn Stadium, so heavy was the press of crowds eager for the twenty-five-cent stone seats. Theater (in Yiddish) was to the Jewish immigrants what Shakespeare and Marlowe had been to the groundlings in Elizabethan England. Tickets were cheap—twenty-five cents to one dollar—and theatergoing was universal. It was a raucous, robust, and communal experience. Mothers brought their babies (except in some of the “swellest” theaters, which forbade it), and peddlers hawked their wares between the acts. There were theater parties for trade unions and landsmanschaften (societies of fellow townsmen), and the audience milled around and renewed old friendships or argued the merits of the play. The stage curtain had bold advertisements of stores or blown-up portraits of stars.

There was an intense cult of personality in the Yiddish theater and a system of claques not unlike that which exists in grand opera today. The undisputed monarch was Boris Thomashefsky, and a theater program of his day offered this panegyric:
Tomashefsky! Artist great!
No praise is good enough for you!
Of all the stars you remain the king
You seek no tricks, no false quibbles;
One sees truth itself playing.
Your appearance is godly to us
Every movement is full of grace
Pleasing is your every gesture
Sugar sweet your every turn
You remain the king of the stage
Everything falls to your feet.

Related to the Jewish love of theater was the immigrant’s adoration of the cantor, a profession which evoked as much flamboyance and egotistical preening as acting did. (In fact, actors would sometimes grow beards before the high holydays and find jobs as cantors.) Synagogues vied with each other for celebrated cantors, sometimes as a way of getting out of debt, since tickets were sold for the high-holyday services.

The Lower East Side was a vibrant community, full of color and gusto, in which the Jewish immigrant felt marvelously at home, safe from the terrors of the alien city. But it was a setting too for fierce conflict and enervating strain. There were three major influences at work, each pulling in a separate direction: Jewish Orthodoxy, assimilationism, and the new socialist gospel. The immigrants were Orthodox, but their children tended to break away. Cheders (Hebrew schools) were everywhere, in basements and stores and tenements, and the old custom of giving a child a taste of honey when he was beginning to learn to read—as symbolic of the sweetness of study—persisted. But the young, eager to be accepted into American society, despised the old ways and their “greenhorn” teachers. Fathers began to view their sons as “free-thinkers,” a term that was anathema to them. Observance of the Law declined, and the Saturday Sabbath was ignored by many Jews. A virulent antireligious tendency developed among many “enlightened” Jews, who would hold profane balls on the most sacred evening of the year—Yom Kippur—at which they would dance and eat no kosher food. (Yom Kippur is a fast day.) And the trade-union movement also generated uneasiness among the pious elders of the Lower East Side. “Do you want us to bow down to your archaic God?” a radical newspaper asked. “Each era has its new Torah. Ours is one of freedom and justice.”

But for many immigrants the basic discontent was with their American experience itself. The golden province turned out to be a place of tenements and sweatshops. A familiar cry was “a klag of Columbus!” (“a curse on Columbus”) or, “Who ever asked him, Columbus, to discover America?” Ellis Island was called Trenindzl (Island of Tears), and Abraham Cahan, in his initial reaction to the horrors of immigration,
thundered: “Be cursed, immigration! Cursed by those conditions which have brought you into being. How many souls have you broken, how many courageous and mighty souls have you shattered.” The fact remains that most Jewish immigrants, in the long run, made a happy adjustment to their new land.

After 1910, the Lower East Side went into a decline. Its strange glory was over. New areas of Jewish settlement opened up in Brooklyn, the Bronx, and in upper Manhattan. By the mid-twenties, less than ten per cent of New York’s Jews lived on the Lower East Side, although it still remained the heartland to which one returned to shop, to see Yiddish theater, and to renew old ties. By 1924 Jewish immigration into the United States was severely reduced by new immigration laws, and the saga of mass immigration was done. But the intensities of the Jewish immigrant experience had already made an indelible mark on American culture and history that would endure for many years.

**QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER**

1. Compare the migration experience of Jewish immigrants to America in the periods before and after 1880. In what ways did the experience become easier or more difficult? How did the immigrants themselves change?

2. For some Jewish immigrants, America was “the land of milk and honey,” whereas others cursed Columbus and called Ellis Island the “Island of Tears.” Discuss the reality of the Jewish immigrant experience hidden behind both images of America.

3. Analyze the reasons for the ambivalent feelings and divisions that developed between newer eastern European Jewish immigrants and those Jews, usually of German origin, who had been settled in the United States for several generations.

4. The lure of land in the “New World brought generations of Europeans to America. Why did the bulk of eastern European Jewish immigrants choose to remain in urban industrial centers such as New York City? Was there anything about their **shtetl** experience that made Jews more adaptable to city life?

5. Boroff says, “The immigrant Jews were nearly always poor and often illiterate, but they were not culturally deprived.” What evidence is there to support this statement?