

# THE JEWISH GHETTO MEETS ITS NEIGHBORS

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The Lower East Side has long been viewed as the quintessential ghetto, a term that came into American usage around the turn of the twentieth century in reference to precisely that section of New York City. With a Jewish population surpassing 540,000 at its peak, the Lower East Side was, to quote Moses Rischin, “the densest and most visibly volatile critical mass of immigrants in the nation’s history.” Poor, overcrowded and predominantly Jewish, appellations like “The New York Ghetto,” “The Great New York Ghetto,” and “The American Ghetto” seemed entirely appropriate.

The Lower East Side “ghetto” was depicted in two conflicting ways. One was that of a blighted “Jewtown,” as described in Jacob Riis’ classic, *How the Other Half Lives* (1890). The other was first made famous by Hutchins Hapgood’s *The Spirit of the Ghetto* (1902), which presented a culturally vibrant enclave, animated by educational striving and social idealism. Yet, as different as they were, both books presented an insular view of the Lower East Side. One would not know from reading them that many of the Lower East Side’s denizens, starting with its intellectuals, formed close and regular contact with others elsewhere in the city. Its sizeable intellectual community gave the Lower East Side a cosmopolitan atmosphere: European-orientated, freewheeling, radical. That atmosphere was what drew outsiders like Hapgood to the Lower East Side in the first place. The Lower East Side may have appeared to be a ghetto, but it was far from isolated. It provided meeting ground for intellectuals of diverse backgrounds, whose influence extended in any number of directions. This openness was evident even in that most seemingly insular of Jewish settings: the orthodox synagogue. The Eldridge Street Synagogue was open to Jews of various social backgrounds, without regard to



*The Eldridge Street Synagogue’s diverse congregation, 1891.*

geographic origin or class standing. In the words of an 1892 article in *Century* magazine, “E pluribus Unum receives a new meaning here.”

A distinct sub-community of Jewish intellectuals took shape on the Lower East Side in the early 1880s. Its members were young, rebellious students who immigrated to New York from Russia in the wake of the notorious pogroms of 1881–1882. Hundreds of them came to the United States with the intention of establishing agrarian communes somewhere in the far west. Their dream did not last long, but they would make a strong impact in New York and pave the way for an untold number of Russian Jewish intellectuals who would arrive in subsequent years. Those later arrivals came to the U.S. in order to escape arrest or because their entry into institutions of higher education had been blocked by

anti-Jewish restrictions or because they found life in Russia to have been generally intolerable. On the Lower East Side, they would establish themselves as leading writers, lecturers, and labor leaders.

The Lower East Side's Jewish intellectuals cultivated ties with their non-Jewish neighbors early on. They started, in the early 1880s, with German radicals. At that time, Germans (mostly non-Jews) comprised the majority of the Lower East Side's population, which was why the area was then known as *Kleindeutschland* (Little Germany). Radicals occupied a prominent position in the German immigrant community and were generally well disposed to the Jewish intellectuals who started to appear on the scene. Individuals such as Abraham Cahan, the future editor of the *Forverts*, attended German lectures, frequented German saloons, and read German newspapers. From the Germans, they acquired new ideologies (such as Marxism and anarchism) and models of organization (such as unions and political parties), which they would later introduce to the immigrant Jewish



Among the Anarchists of New York, showing Emma Goldman, John Wain and Justus Schwab, who all made a good living out of the gold they were not permitted. Emma was only thought devoted to her own beloved Russia, where her theories of government were being carried out. Her anarchical concepts all were put her to work on a small job as an expression of their admission and health (which) he was.

**German and Jewish immigrant leaders, such as John Most, Justus Schwab and Emma Goldman, mingled on the Lower East Side.**

community. Germans even donated money to help the Jews establish their own labor organizations and Yiddish publications. The crucial help provided by Germans led directly to the establishment of the Jewish labor movement, one of the most potent institutions in New York's immigrant Jewish life.

The Jewish labor movement achieved such large dimensions that it began to draw in radical Jewish intellectuals from cities as far afield as London, Minsk and San Francisco. Other cities had given birth to Jewish labor movements of

their own, but none was as large as New York's. This was due to the size of its Jewish population, the frequent outbreaks of large strikes, the possibilities of free expression, and the absence of traditional structures of Jewish authority. Nowhere else in the world had so many intellectuals adopted Yiddish as their primary medium of political communication and literary creativity, and nowhere else in the world did radical Jewish intellectuals enjoy so much authority within such a large Jewish population.

During the 1890s, then, New York was the leading center of radical Jewish politics. This meant, in part, that Russian revolutionaries—both Jewish and not—looked to New York for financial and material support. This signaled a second important connection, one between the Lower East Side “ghetto” and the revolutionary movement in Russia. New Yorkers shipped thousands of copies of Yiddish newspapers, pamphlets, and journals overseas to be smuggled into Russia, then distributed by a variety of surreptitious means. This aid was crucial because the Russian Jewish labor movement, at its outset in 1893, did not possess the means to produce its own reading materials. It did not own a hectograph until July 1894 or a printing press until May 1897. Furthermore, state censorship made it impossible to publish materials freely, so that almost everything had to be imported from abroad. Russian Jewish activists were well aware of their dependence on New York. According to Julius Martov, a founder of the Jewish labor movement in Vilna, he and his comrades decided to begin organizing Jewish workers on the example provided by the preexisting Jewish labor movement in New York and on the understanding that New York would provide the needed material support needed. In other words, New York helped give rise to the Russian Jewish labor movement and enabled it to function to the extent that it could as an underground movement.

The relationship between New York and Russia expanded into the 1900s. Publications from New York continued to flow eastward, possibly in larger numbers than before. All major branches of the Bund and its political prisoners in Siberia, for instance, received copies of the monthly journal, *Di Tsukunft*, on a regular basis between 1907 and 1914. However, after the 1905 revolution, Russia no longer needed to rely on New York for publications because the government had loosened censorship restrictions. Even so, it became dependent on New York for money. In and around 1905, all the major political parties sent emissaries to New York to

raise funds. Even non-Jewish parties sent representatives because they understood that the city's Jewish population provided a large reservoir of support. The East Side's Jewish intellectuals founded aid organizations to raise funds and organize rallies on behalf of one party or another, thereby exposing Russian parties to a wide American public.

The Socialist Revolutionaries, for instance, sent Katherine Breshkovskaia, known as the "Grandmother of the Russian Revolution," to New York in 1904 to raise funds for the party. The party sent Chaim Zhitlovsky to accompany her precisely because Zhitlovsky, a Yiddish-speaking Jew, could provide entrée into New York's Jewish immigrant population. The two emissaries raised about \$10,000 in several months, which they used to purchase weapons in San Francisco. Other Socialist Revolutionaries came to New York over the next two years and raised tens of thousands of dollars. When the SR leader, Nikolai Tshaikovsky, expressed gratitude to Mark Twain for the American people's generosity, Twain corrected him, pointing out that the bulk of funds came from immigrant Jews. Christians, Twain reportedly said, "have lost [their] ancient sympathy with oppressed people struggling for life and liberty..." The Bund also conducted extensive fund raising activities. In the last two months of 1905, emissaries collected \$25,000 and in the spring of 1906, the Bundist leader, Gregory Maxim, raised about \$10,000, some of which he used to purchase weapons from a manufacturer in Cleveland. A report to the Bund's annual convention estimated that American donors provided up to half of the budgets of local party organizations. The Jews, Maxim Gorky stated during a tour of the U.S., are "the most influential bearers and representatives of the new religion, socialism."

The connection between immigrant Jews and the Russian revolutionary movement made them especially interesting in the eyes of native-born intellectuals, who had coalesced in Greenwich Village by the turn of the century. Writers such as Hapgood, William Dean Howells, and Lincoln Steffens had been visiting the Lower East Side since the 1890s. Hapgood developed a friendship with Cahan, who showed him around the East Side in encounters that would result in the publication of *The Spirit of Ghetto*. Such interactions would play a pivotal role in the development of the American intelligentsia, as the historian David Hollinger argued more than three decades ago. According to Hollinger, "They [non-Jewish intellectuals] looked to a new intelligentsia to manifest a more diverse, more broadly based emotional and intellectual



*In 1902 Hutchins Hapgood devoted months to studying Jewish life on the Lower East Side. He had his artist, Jacob Epstein, capture the bustling café life.*

existence, and they were eager for this cause to be advanced by persons of any ethnic origin." Thus alienated children from respectable, gentile homes started visiting the Lower East Side's cafes and bookstores, where they mingled and observed, and walked away deeply impressed. They saw in front of them a remarkably vibrant cultural life: lectures, debates, street corner speakers, voracious readers. Jews gave hope to them that immigrants were not only fit for democracy, but could help lead the way toward a more democratic, inclusive, broadminded country.

Consider the following quotations, starting with this by the social reformer Ida Van Etten. "The Russian Jews are naturally radicals on all social questions..." Van Etten wrote in 1893. "Thousands of disciples of Karl Marx may be found among the organized Jewish workingmen. Their intense desire to study and discuss social questions I have never seen equaled." Six years later, James Reynolds of the University Settlement identified in Jews "an extremist idealism, with an utter disregard for the restraining power of circumstances and conditions." "Any Jew," the *New York Times* reported in 1910, "has to struggle hard to keep from being a philosopher, and for a Russian Jew the effort is impossible." And, finally, there is this observation from James Huneker's

1915 book, *New Cosmopolis*, “The East Side is an omnivorous reader. Stupendous is the amount of books studied and digested; the books of solid worth, not ‘best sellers’ or other flimflam...We need the Jewish blood as spiritual leaven; the race is art-loving and will prove a barrier to the rapidly growing wave of fanatical puritanism.” Jews, Huneker and his contemporaries hoped, would serve as a kind of catalyst, a “spiritual leaven” for a new America.

A young intellectual who developed an intimate relationship with the Lower East Side was William English Walling. The son of a wealthy and politically prominent Kentucky physician, Walling moved to New York in 1902 after graduating from the University of Chicago. He took up residence as a writer and social worker at the University Settlement, an important meeting ground for native-born reformers and immigrant Jews. As the historian Leon Fink has shown, the Lower East Side’s Jews had a profound effect on Walling. Through contacts with them, Walling moved toward socialism and cultivated an interest in Russian literature and politics. “[M]ake friends with these settlement people and listen, listen all the time,” Walling counseled a newcomer to the University Settlement. “They’ve got a lot to teach us boys, so for the love [of] Jesus Christ don’t let’s be uplifters here.” Through the University Settlement Walling met Anna Strunsky. A Russian Jewish immigrant raised in a prosperous San Francisco family, Strunsky moved to New York at the turn of the century already a committed socialist. She married Walling, the two would travel to Russia to report on the 1905 revolution, and they would later become founders of the NAACP. Walling had indeed traveled a long road from Kentucky, and his stop through the East Side had a deep and lasting effect.

It is possible to trace the contacts Walling made through Strunsky. Walling surely would have come to know William Edlin, for instance, a close friend of Strunsky’s from San Francisco. Edlin had moved to New York in the late 1890s specifically to participate in the Jewish labor movement, which he had read about on the West Coast. Edlin had become a highly regarded theater and opera critic, a leader of the Workmen’s Circle, and editor of the Yiddish newspaper, *Der tog*, one of the most culturally sophisticated of the Yiddish dailies. A second person Walling would have come to know was Edlin’s brother-in-law, Louis Boudin, a recognized legal scholar in the English-speaking world and perhaps the country’s foremost authority on Marxist

thought. Boudin and Walling were both contributors to *The New International Review*, a theoretical journal associated with the Socialist Party’s left-wing. Strunsky would have also introduced Walling to one of her dearest friends, Dr. Katherine Maryson, a Yiddish writer and prominent anarchist, which would have led to her husband, the Yiddish writer, Dr. Jacob Maryson. He was a close friend and political associate of Dr. Chaim Zhitlovsky, the Socialist Revolutionary leader, theoretician of Yiddish cultural nationalism, and towering figure in immigrant Jewish life. It says something about the inter-mixing of the time that *The Nation* ran a substantial and favorable review of Zhitlovsky’s journal *Dos naye lebn* (The New Life)—the first high-brow theoretical journal in Yiddish—despite the fact that few of *The Nation*’s readers could read Yiddish. *The Nation* evidently believed its readers should know about Zhitlovsky and his magazine.

Walling’s marriage to Strunsky provides an example (and examples within examples) of the multiple interactions between immigrant Jews and non-Jews. Those interactions as the historian, Christine Stansell, has observed, were important in that they moved native-born intellectuals “from the staid realms of reform into a bohemia open to different sorts of radicalism.” They show how immigrants were not only influenced by the surrounding society, but helped shape it. Individuals from disparate backgrounds, belonging to distinct communities, nonetheless spoke to and affected one another. Jews met Germans, who encouraged them to establish a Jewish workers’ movement using the Yiddish language; New Yorkers came to the aid of revolutionaries in Russia and helped to create a Jewish labor movement; and denizens of Greenwich Village came to realize that the grimy Lower East Side might actually provide the basis for an expansive American national identity. *Kleindeutschland*, the Jewish ghetto, Greenwich Village fertilized one another and helped to foster the dynamism of modern New York.

## WORKS ON WHICH THIS COMMENT DRAWS

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Moses Rischin, *The Promised City*, 1962.

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