

Why I Left My Old Home and What I Have Accomplished in America

Aaron Domnitz (Aba Beitani)

b. 1884, Romanovo, Belarus

To U.S.: 1906; settled in Baltimore, Md.

The autobiography of Aaron Domnitz is the purest example of the maskil type in this collection. A deeply pious and zealous student of Gemara as a child and youth, he was drawn to the study of Hebrew literature and secular subjects as a yeshiva student. Influenced by the revolutionary fervor surrounding him, Domnitz romanticized workers and industrial labor but lasted only a brief time in the “shop” when he arrived in the United States. Domnitz describes his experiences as a member of the literary and intellectual circle known as “Di Yunge,” the Young Ones, while living in the Bronx in the first decades of the twentieth century. An ideal informant, the writer has a knack for keen observation, evoking his surroundings with a sharp eye and close detail, always placing the phenomena he describes vividly in their historical contexts.

Introduction

I want to make use of the autobiographical form, so I will skip many, many things that have occurred in my life. I will record only those details of my childhood that have in my consciousness some connection with my later urge to travel somewhere. Ruminating over my past has renewed in my memory several details that at one time made a strong impression on me, and I portray them here. These too would be interesting for a historian who might sometime ruminate over old documents and want to form

a complete picture of the people who took part in the great Jewish immigration at the beginning of the century.

I was born in the year 1884 in a little village called Shalovitsi, near the town of Romanovo in the District of Slutsk, Minsk Province, Russia. I was raised in Romanovo. My mother's parents in Shalovitsi were, like all their children, true country folk. My grandfather was a tailor and also had land, fields, and gardens. As a boy, I would come from town to help him sharpen plows, dig potatoes, and cut hay. My mother did all kinds of field-work and knew her way around livestock. My uncles also kept gardens and orchards. I used to help them harvest fruit, pick cherries, gather gooseberries, and guard the orchards at night.

My father's father lived in Starobin, on the other side of Slutsk where the Polesia region¹ begins. He was a peddler. (In our area this was called a "traveler.") He was a quiet man and a hard worker with no education. He would fall asleep during the recitation of the first chapter of the Psalms. My father's brother had a similar occupation. He traveled farther into the surrounding villages, however, where he bought grain from the peasants to sell to merchants in the city.

My father was a traditional teacher in Romanovo. He raised me and taught me from my earliest years. He himself had learned the entire Tanakh,* Gemara,* and Hebrew grammar. I recall that he read the *Ha-Melits* and *Ha-Tsfira* newspapers² in town, though he didn't subscribe. He would go to the grocer, who received the newspapers wrapped around his goods from Slutsk. After unpacking, the grocer smoothed out the papers and put them together more or less according to date, so people had reading material for several weeks. In synagogue after prayers or on the Sabbath, strolling in the orchards, my father would discuss with his friends events described in the paper that had happened long before, though Zalman the Storekeeper had just brought the news to town. Mostly people marveled at the language used in the newspapers.

I was a "good boy." I knew everything that people taught me. The teacher praised me. My father enjoyed that. The "neighbors" who stood next to my father in synagogue would ask me questions, smiling to my father and pinching my cheek with the back side of their middle fingers.

I had a little trouble with some boys in *heder*,* however. They hated me. On Fridays, when we had to read from the Khumesh* by ourselves, I always knew the lesson and they didn't. As was the teacher's custom, I had to slap them. Outside, they would return the slaps.

I quickly parted from my friends. I skipped a grade and went to a more advanced teacher. At eight years of age, I was already learning Gemara. The boys at that *heder* were older than me, and, once again, they made me suffer. They avoided me and didn't let me in on their games, so the result was that I spent time by myself, immersed in thought. I grew accustomed to spending a lot of time by the cabinet of religious books in the study house, looking at the title pages with their strange letters and counting the chapters of the Gemara. I quickly learned to read the pages of Gemara by myself. Soon I attended my father's *heder* but could not remain there for long. In small towns, parents were not happy when a teacher kept his own child in his *heder*. If the teacher's boy was good, then they had reason to complain that the teacher was focusing all his learning on his own child. So my father hired a scholarly Jew, not a teacher by profession, to study Gemara with me. Early before prayers and all day long, I studied by myself in the study house. Thus I was once again on my own, lonely and without friends.

The scholar, Reb* Ayzik, with his beard matted from constantly kneading it with his fingers, didn't charge much for his lessons. He said he enjoyed studying with a fluent and capable person. I recall that he would often immerse himself in a question without regard to me, but I followed along with him. Many times he would get confused at a difficult place. He would wrinkle his brow, knead his beard, and his face became serious and fretful. With childlike simplicity, I would then steer him toward a different question on a similar matter and help him extricate himself. Because of this, I received a reputation as a prodigy.

One winter, a small yeshiva* was established for the better Talmud* students in town. My father enrolled me. There we studied like adults. After the Talmud lesson from the head of the yeshiva, everyone would study at their own lectern. We also chanted like adults as we studied. Singing occupied an important place in our studies. Without it, we could not savor our studies properly. Little boys in *heder* didn't sing, but those who studied partly on their own in the study house had to sing. Common people didn't sing either when they studied the *Ein Ya'akov*.* They just read it. Neither did one sing while studying the legends in the Talmud; it was easy to rush through them. But when studying talmudic law, one had to sing if one wanted to go deeply and understand. We could often identify the student by his singing.

In the evenings, everyone studied by a candle on his lectern. We never bought the candles. We "stole" them. This was an old custom in the small

towns, sneaking candles from the sexton to study by after evening prayers. The sexton took good care, but the boys were very adept at swiping *yortsayt** candles from under his nose, and then using them up singing the Gemara.

That winter I became a zealot. I made an agreement with a friend to get up early before dawn to go study at the study house. We undertook to learn an entire tractate of the Talmud by ourselves, without the help of the head of the yeshiva. This was a secret. Our parents didn't need to know how early we got up and quietly shuffled out of the house in the dark. Since we had no watches, it often happened that one of us would arise in the middle of the night around two or three in the morning and quietly leave his house for the synagogue. I was ten years old at the time. My friend Zalman Itshe-Gite's (now Sam Parton, somewhere in Belfast, Maine) was twelve years old and lived quite a distance from synagogue. Still, we kept this up for two winters in a row.

To enter the study house, one had to walk by the cold synagogue, from which it was said that "the dead called out at night," and the shed in the cemetery, with its broken windows, where they prepared bodies for burial. The stretcher on which the dead were carried was kept there. We turned up our collars so as not to look "over there" and ran by quickly. Inside, we turned up the fire in the hanging lamp that always burned over the table next to the oven and sat down to study.

Studying at night had a completely different feel. Our thoughts were clear and fresh and undisturbed. The accompaniment to our learning, our singing, also had a different sound and a different effect. The house of study was empty and dark. The posts on the *bimah*, the platform from which the Torah was read during services, cast long shadows. The lecterns looked like thin men sleeping while standing up. Outside the wind howled in the windows. The hanging lamp swayed, and the shadows of the tall posts and outstretched lecterns swayed with it. It blended with the melody and filled our hearts with bittersweet feelings of zeal, persistence, and sacred calling.

I recall that sometimes it was difficult to get the right mood from the surroundings, especially when it turned out that one of us was alone because he had gotten there first. The shadows appeared fearful; the great clock on the western wall of the synagogue beat out its slow, ceaseless tick-tock, tick-tock. A gust of wind suddenly blew through the windows. Uneasy voices seemed to come from the women's section. I am lonely—a fear seizes me—but I must be strong! The melody begins: It rings louder and

more resounding. My learning grows stronger and surer. The words run faster, lines chase after each other, page after page. The melody charges forward, like a protector. My thoughts follow and—we are triumphant! My fear has disappeared and I’ve sung through another two or three pages of Gemara.

We weren’t alone every night. Once a month, Itshe the Preacher, an old ashen Jew, would come in from a nearby prayer house where he had his bed, to study and pray at midnight according to custom. By the glow of the candle melted to the bench along the far eastern wall, he would sit in a little chair on the ground and mourn the destruction of the Temple. On those nights, the synagogue looked different. The moan of the blizzard outside accompanied the quiet inner lament of the matriarch Rachel weeping for her children.³ The lament moistened the air and it grew stiller. The clock’s tick-tock became more reticent and muted. We would stop studying, as if the moment were too sacred for studying, but the words of the Gemara began to draw us in again, and again the lines spread themselves out before us. Our eyes were drawn to the eastern shadows. Only one thing quietly persisted—the melody. A light melody, without words, fluttered modestly over the Gemara, as if it did not want to sever entirely its connection to the surroundings. Those were our nights of midnight study and prayer.

When I had gone as far as I could go with my studies in my town, my father sent me away to Reb Nekhemie’s yeshiva in Slutsk. He immediately took me into the “big table,” the upper class. Nekhemie was known as a strict yeshiva head. He spoke little outside his lessons. He led the yeshiva with the look of his eye. Walking around the *bimah*, hands clasped behind him and a pinch of snuff between his fingers, he observed every boy at his place. If someone wasn’t behaving himself properly, Reb Nekhemie gave him a look. That was enough. We studied there enthusiastically and had great respect for the head of the yeshiva, his scholarship and strong discipline.

I recall a few incidents from that time.

One day, we caught a thief in the courtyard. The yeshiva students had started to miss things, so they searched for a thief and caught him. He was a tall boy, not from that neighborhood. The students grabbed him by the arm, dragged him out into the yard and executed his sentence “Russian-style”: they beat him. I arrived in the middle of the action and saw how the thief bawled and the crowd pummeled him. I intervened and told

them to leave him alone. The thief got up from the ground. Our eyes met and we recognized each other. It was the smith's son from my town, a former friend from my earliest *heder* years. He was the one I had to punch every Friday for not knowing the Khumesh with Rashi's* commentaries. Our paths had parted long ago. Now we had coincidentally met away from home, I as a student at Nekhemie's big table and he as a thief of young men's wallets. I was embarrassed meeting him in such a state. He cast an angry look at me and quickly escaped. It turned out that I encountered him again, but under entirely different circumstances.

I Get Slapped for Studying Tanakh

The story goes like this. My father ordered me to write my letters in Hebrew, but where would I get Hebrew, having spent so little time in *heder* and having studied only Gemara in Aramaic? I wrote to him with mistakes, so he sent back my letters with corrections and ordered me, for God's sake, to take a look at the Tanakh for half an hour a day between afternoon and evening prayers. So one day, I sat down with a Tanakh and took a look. A respected Jew from Iserke's synagogue—that's where Reb Nekhemie's yeshiva was located—walked by and, seeing what I was looking at, slapped me in the face.

"That will lead to heresy. Here we study Gemara, not the twenty-four books of the Tanakh!"⁴

That slap immediately got good results. A little later the respected Jew's son came to me, a young man a few years older than me, and suggested that I study Tanakh and Hebrew with him. He brought me to his friend. In a room full of books, they gave me a book from which to read. I did not understand a single word. The short lines with punctuation seemed mysteriously drawn out to me, like the tall young man in the room who took me in so sympathetically. I started to study diligently for a few hours a week.

The Jew who slapped me for looking at the Tanakh was called Lipshits. His son, who led me to Hebrew, was called Faytel. At that time, he had already begun to send correspondence to *Ha-Melits*. Later he participated in *Ha-Dor* and *Ha-Shiloah*.⁵ In the latter, he wrote a series of articles about political economy in the years 1904–5. Later, he became a teacher in a Swiss institute.

After attending Nekhemie's yeshiva, I remained in Slutsk for a few

years, studying on my own in various study houses, “eating days,”* sleeping in the study house, and paying expenses from the usual occupations of an independent scholar such as myself: helping to make up a *minyán** to pray for the dead, writing letters for wives to their husbands in America, and the like. For a time, I helped the Slutsker Rov, the famous Ridbaz, copy the manuscript of his great interpretation of the Jerusalem Talmud.⁶

My parents were very poor at that time. That summer, a fire took place in Romanovo, and the fire consumed my father’s teaching post as well. They moved to Starobin, the town where my father was born. There were still five children at home, two older sisters and three younger brothers. My father wanted to put together a *heder*, but the other teachers in town prevented this. Teachers had a strict guild in that region, although without a written charter. The regulations were moral. A teacher was forbidden “to ask” parents for a boy; he had to wait until the father offered. It was not allowed to take a boy out of *heder* in the middle of the term. A boy had to study with a teacher for a certain time, about a year, to complete his entire course, along with the rest of the children who had started with him. In this way, whole classes passed from a lower teacher to a higher one. Because the whole educational system was organized by a group of teachers in town, it was difficult for a new person to get into the field. Sometimes an individual child would fall out of the system: the slow learners or the badly behaved who fell behind, or those students the teachers didn’t want to take on because they didn’t pay. These “damaged goods” were what was left for a new teacher. So we went hungry at home.

My sisters started to earn a bit, one with sewing, the other by helping out in a store. As a supplement to his teaching, my father also started to engage in a trade. He worked wiring pots. As he now tells me, my father had learned this in his youth when he was a teacher in a village.⁷ Besides teaching the villager’s children Hebrew, he had to help the villager out with his work. The craft consisted of putting together broken clay pots, tightening them with rings of thick wire on two sides, and then drawing thinner wire through in a box shape “cross-wise” to hold the pot together for a long time. Payment for the work was three to five kopeks, depending on the size of the pot. Peasant women paid with produce—eggs, potatoes, cereal. This helped a little, but really only a little.

When I finally went home for the holidays, my parents immediately started in with the question of what I would do now. When my father insisted on apprenticing me in a trade, my mother burst into tears. My mother, who was raised in the country almost like a peasant woman and

could barely crawl through a few short lines of prayer in a *siddur** or *tekhi-nah*,* wanted me to become a rabbi. For his part, my father, a scholar and Hebrew grammar expert, spoke constantly in praise of work. He cited every saying from the Gemara about the importance of the trades and the talmudic maxim of earning a living by one's own hand. He often mentioned the talmudic sages Yokhanan the Shoemaker and Yitskhok the Blacksmith.⁸

He later fulfilled this image of work with my younger brothers. Although they were also good students, he apprenticed one as a gaiter stitcher and set up the other as a smith. They have remained intellectual workers to this day. The gaiter stitcher is a leather goods maker here in America. He knows Hebrew well and has recently begun publishing poems in provincial newspapers and journals. The smith is now in labor circles in the Land of Israel and also publishes in the press there sometimes.

At that time, however, it was not my fate to become a worker. I had already gone too far with my studies. It was suggested that I "travel under a contract," in other words, become an instructor in a village.

Our town was at that time a major provider of teachers for a large number of villages in the region, all the way to Pinsk and Mozyr. Starobin was the center for the agents who would provide the peasants with all their needs from the city in exchange for their produce from the countryside. These same agents provided teachers for the Jewish families in far-off villages. Between school terms, Starobin was like a fair. Besides the significant number of local teachers, "goods" (teachers) were brought from yeshivas in Slutsk. Starobin hawkers sorted them according to which teachers were appropriate for which villages and led them away. The villagers from far away villages had no opportunity at all to inspect "the goods" beforehand. They depended on the brokers to follow their instructions. One village Jew wanted a younger teacher for a beginning student; someone else needed an older teacher who could also help out in the granary; yet another wanted a good-looking lad, perhaps to strike a match with an older daughter. Rarely did a village desire a Gemara teacher. The most important attributes were a nice handwriting, a little Russian, and arithmetic. That is how Jewish children in the villages of Polesia got their education: from hawkers who received brokers' fees from both sides.

Fate carried me away to a far-off village near Mozyr. I was then thirteen and a half years old, stuffed with Torah, with an inkling of Enlightenment, but utterly without common practical knowledge. Moreover, I was shy and

didn't know how to talk to a person, not to mention how to handle children. Two of the boys I was supposed to teach were my age; one girl was a bit older than me. I felt lost when she looked at me. How could I be their teacher?

It was a bad situation indeed. The coachman let me off in the village and left. The housewife, who was from the city, was an excellent judge of character and saw right away that I wasn't right for them. They still let me stay: It was too late to change and an agreement is an agreement. I got used to teaching the students Khumesh and Tanakh, but discipline was bad. I had no influence on them. The villager would need to come into the room, take off his belt, and restore order. My spiritual emptiness was indescribable. I thought of fleeing but I had no money. The villager apparently suspected my intentions and didn't trust me with any cash. I lived in that hell for six months.

I remember that I got more pious that winter. I prayed mournfully every morning. God was very close to me. I asked him personally to help me as one asks a powerful protector.

When winter was over, the same agent came and released me. To my great astonishment, the villager paid me the entire sum of forty rubles as we had agreed, and I was free. The joy at home was no smaller than my own. We drove away the poverty from the house for a little while. We got some clothes for ourselves, and celebrated Passover.

After the holiday, I went to Minsk. My father wanted me to go to yeshiva and study for rabbinic ordination. Now I wanted to "educate myself," as we called learning secular subjects, even though I had become very pious while in the country. But afterwards I liberated myself from the fear of God and continued on my way in a new direction.

In Minsk, I got into a little yeshiva on Romanover Street. I had information that there were fewer obstacles there if one wanted to read books on secular subjects. I had no sustenance besides the yeshiva. The head of the yeshiva supported the students with bread and some change. He got support for his yeshiva from two wealthy men in the city, Rappaport and Luria. By the second week, I had already found the way to Nofakh's library and threw myself at Hebrew literature like a thirsty man at water.⁹ I also encouraged the other fellows to read. I started to give them lessons in grammar. The Romanover synagogue became a place of knowledge and enlightenment.

The head of the yeshiva, Reb Menakhem, discovering that I was too involved with books instead of Gemara, feared that his yeshiva would get a

bad name again—as had happen a few years before I arrived—and forfeit the support of the wealthy class. So he had a little talk with us and asked us not to do anything improper in public. This shocked me. I saw the beginning of the breakdown of the old orthodoxy. He knew what we were doing, but looked the other way.

Not long after that, I was no longer completely dependent on the yeshiva. I took a job giving private lessons and got by, as it were. It was a strange time, when material life held little interest for me and my friends. For us, there were more important matters. We were nearing a transitional period, as boys and as people. New influences and aspirations emerged: a thirst for knowledge, the desire to get to the truth about God and the world, about people and society. This came together with a period of *Sturm und Drang* in Jewish social life. Minsk was at that time the cradle of many movements in Jewish society—Zionism,* Bundism,* Labor Zionism, religious Zionism, Socialism of all shades. Even the unsuccessful “independent” movement had its root in Minsk.¹⁰ We young people—formerly in yeshiva, now pretending to study for *gymnasium**—lived intensely with the times, read, discussed, joined one political “tendency” or another, flocked to secret gatherings, carried illegal literature around with us, destroyed worlds and built new ones in our imaginations—all the while neglecting ourselves entirely.

Our circle stuck together, sharing bread and tea. We had left our homes in the small towns, forgetting the severity of our fathers and the devotion of our mothers. Without brothers and sisters, without cousins, we lived in a world of abstract ideas like shabby ascetics, emaciated and ragged. We forbade ourselves to think of practical ends. That would have meant weakening! Sometimes someone from home mentioned them in a letter, but we—modern, enlightened—ignored it with a smile. We experienced uplifted emotions from one book, derived honest aesthetic enjoyment from another, and became intellectual paupers—although we didn’t see this in ourselves.

This sort of life began to affect the health of several of us. Someone started to spit blood. Another became melancholy and later ended up going mad. One of us then revolted and went back to the study house, started studying Talmud again, and later became a rabbi. It was then I thought for the first time of leaving Russia.

At that time, I had coincidentally come into contact with the problem of Jewish emigration. I worked for an agent who helped lead emigrants over the border. His partners lived in border towns, and he delivered

customers from the Minsk region. Because he didn't want the correspondence in his handwriting, I wrote his letters and someone else wrote the addresses. The language was also disguised: instead of men, women, and children, he talked of oxen, cows, and calves. It was often very painful to read the telegrams from his partners saying that they had taken so many "cows and calves over the pasture," or similar things. Most of the emigrants didn't need to cross the border illegally at all. They could easily have gotten legal passes and traveled like human beings, but they were ignorant and there wasn't anybody to enlighten them. Though it was discussed in the press, it never reached the masses. No committee existed among the people to enlighten them. There was absolutely no one around who would take up that task. The intelligentsia was busy with "rebuilding" the world. Common work with the people was considered almost dishonorable.¹¹

I started to feel discontent with Russia and its customs and alienated from its movements and activities. Together with their revolutionary high-mindedness, I found among my Jewish Socialist acquaintances the inferiority complex of the assimilated. As soon as one of them started to read Russian books, he derived great sadistic enjoyment tearing asunder everything that was Jewish. I felt spiritually constricted in a voracious Russian culture that tore away and devoured more and more parts of my Socialist nationalist circle. My desire to leave and go "somewhere" grew quite strong. It wasn't clear where I would go. My first thought was Germany or the Land of Israel.

Meanwhile, I went home. I had been in Minsk for four full years. I was very gaunt. My mother tried to make me healthy by feeding me milk and fresh eggs. I had already forgotten what a mother's gentleness is. I was revived and decided to stay at home for a time.

My father had settled into teaching a bit but made a very poor living. He still repaired pots. My brother, who had been with me for a year in Minsk, was now working as a gaiter stitcher. And what should I do?

The town leadership gave me an answer only after I had conceived of it myself. My long Hebrew letters that I occasionally wrote to my father had probably been passed from hand to hand, and I had become famous as a person of knowledge. So they invited me to open a modern *heder* for the more advanced children who had nothing more to study with their previous teachers.

I took on the project and remained in town for two years. The work was pleasant. My students, not much younger than me, studied Hebrew

literature diligently. They practiced expressing themselves in writing in a fluid and appropriate way. I helped to educate them in the spirit of progressive Jewishness. I was also active in other cultural areas. I opened a library. Together with my younger brother, we organized the children who worked for tailors and shoemakers. I founded a Labor Zionist association and worked to enlighten young and old.

At the end of two years, I was again overcome by restlessness. 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. The mood in town in general was to emigrate, although no one was forced to do so by the economic situation. No one was idle. Starobin had gradually developed as an important commercial center for its size. The town had a canal to the Berezina River, which flowed into the Dniepr. People transported railroad ties, pig bristles, skins, grain—all gathered from the villages—to Pinsk, Kiev, and Königsberg.¹² Jews kept watermills and windmills, resin works, gardens and orchards, and maintained livestock and estates. In short, Jews were a necessary economic element. Capable young people had the same opportunities as young people in other normal countries. There was no friction with non-Jews in our town. It remained peaceful there, even in the later years of great unrest, and yet the youth continued to make their own way. The general mood, the new social ideas, created a feeling of discontent with their parents' livelihoods and a desire for change through emigration.

I was apparently also overcome by the same "psychosis." I began to prepare to go abroad. I spent the last few months before my departure in Slutsk, which had changed much in five or six years. The formerly quiet, pious Slutsk buzzed with political parties and sub-parties, *birzhes** and gatherings, as in the larger cities. I noticed a new trait, or phenomenon: the use of force. Too often, party members used their fists, not against the enemies of the working class, but against their own people from another political tendency.

Groups organized for self-defense. There were rumors about Black Hundreds agitators from Bobruysk, and it was before the fair.¹³ Two parties took the lead, the Bund and S.S., the Socialist-Territorialists.¹⁴ As a Labor Zionist I opposed the Bund, but I had even less love for the S.S., so I joined the Bundist self-defense group. At our nightly meetings, people said nothing about our own problems or about Socialism. All they did was

throw dirt on others, particularly Zionists, making false assertions, ascribing to Zionist leaders claims that they never made. Protesting against these falsifications did not help. One only got cursed out, but good.

One night, we had one meeting in the large study house. As was the custom, we appropriated the place. The head sexton of the synagogue knew about the meeting, however, and also came in the middle of the night to see what was taking place. We detained him inside and forced him to be quiet until the meeting was over. The frightened sexton sat gaping under the watch of a revolutionary. He couldn't believe his eyes: Here were the children of the town leaders who had always been outwardly dignified.

Then something happened. One speaker took off his hat as he went up onto the small platform next to the Ark. The old, respected sexton could no longer restrain himself. He jumped up and shouted, "Kill me, shoot me, but this I will not allow!" Those around him endeavored to quiet him down. Someone pushed through the crowded mass of people and took aim at the sexton with a club. I grabbed the guy by the arm to stop him. Meanwhile, the chair of the meeting restored order and convinced people not to use force this time. The disappointed guy turned to see who had held him back. Our eyes met and we recognized each other once again. Yes, it was my one-time friend from *heder*, the smith's son, who I had to slap every Friday for not knowing Khumesh, and who I later encountered in the schoolyard as a thief. Again we met, for the third time, under completely different circumstances. He was a rank-and-file Bundist, a guy with a vulgar face and robust muscles. He served the movement by fulfilling "certain functions," when they needed to have a strong arm with a club. And I—the former prodigy, the zealot for study, who later suffered through Socialist theory and who had dreamed up a Socialist worldview—stood there before him, that same moralist holding back the club.

He threw a contemptuous sidelong glance at me and sauntered off arrogantly in another direction.

I think sometimes that it was a good thing that I didn't happen to encounter him for a fourth—and final—time a few years later, wearing a leather jacket and high boots and strolling through the chambers of the Secret Police, guarding the purity of the Bolshevik Revolution, while I, an arrested "intellectual" and counterrevolutionary, sat below in the cellar.

Before departing, I wanted to cross the threshold of Iserke's synagogue, where I spent a few years of my childhood in Nekhemie's yeshiva. From the outside, everything appeared as it had been. Boys rocked over their

lecterns. The familiar scholar's melody resounded over the Gemara. Reb Nekhemie walked around as before, his hands behind him, snuff between his two fingers, with one eye on the students. When I entered, I remained standing, removed to the side. He noticed me, walked by me and stopped. He had a reputation as an acute observer, and he recognized me, calling me "the Romanover," by name.

He asked, "So, where do you stand? Have you received rabbinic ordination already?"

I was embarrassed. When he heard my candid reply that I had given up my studies, he looked at me quietly, turned his eyes to the window and slowly and silently left. I was left standing there in the gloom. I knew what he felt in his heart at that time. He didn't say anything, but the poet sang for Nekhemie, *Kulam nasa ha-ruah, kulam sahaf ha-or*. "The wind carried them all away, the light swept them all away."¹⁵

I left Russia at the beginning of 1906. I went through Virbalis. The German border officials wanted to take me out of second-class where I belonged, as my ticket stated, and put me in the special car for emigrants traveling through Germany that would take them first to the baths and then straight to Hamburg. But I outwitted them. I insisted that I was going only to Germany. Where? To whom? I gave them the address of a Dr. Simon Bernfeld in Berlin.¹⁶ At that time, one could still make the Germans believe something. That is how I managed to travel in a railroad car like a human being.

Quite early in the morning, I arrived at Friedrichstrasse Station in Berlin. A Jew came over to me, introduced himself as a representative of the aid society, and asked me the same question the border officials had asked me, whether I was going to America. I wanted to get rid of him as well, but he explained to me that there were new laws in Prussia about Russian immigrants, and he would prefer that I not have to deal with the police. Rather, I should go straight to the aid society. So I went with him.

At the aid society, they advised me not to remain in Germany, as I had planned. They gave me precise information about the situation in America, about the circumstances of working and studying there, and I complied.

Being in the office for a day, I made myself useful by translating Hebrew letters of inquiry from Russia for the officials. My impression was that the aid society did useful work. Besides providing information, they really helped those who were traveling through, as well as the many who

decided to stay in Germany. If only there had been such a committee in Russia to help with emigration expenses, it would have saved the Jewish wanderers much money. I also found an aid society in Hamburg that was concerned with those in the immigrant dormitories and helped out. After a month of tossing and turning over the Atlantic, we arrived in the land for which we had yearned.

My First Impressions of America

My first contact with my new country was the brief conversation between me and the immigration officials. We were put into short lines as we entered the large buildings at Ellis Island* (fig. 8). Each line had to go by a small table next to which officials sat who questioned each immigrant in his language. The new immigrant felt right at home. My line spoke Yiddish. Hence, a big, strange country recognized my language that I had brought here with me from abroad as an official language. In Russia and Germany, I did not receive any such privilege.

One official asked me what I would do in America. I told him that until then I had been a Hebrew teacher. He smiled, “A rebbe*?”

“No,” I said, “A teacher!”



Fig. 8. Ellis Island, the busiest immigration station in the United States from its opening in 1892. Courtesy of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research



Fig. 9. Headquarters of the Hebrew Immigrant Sheltering and Aid Society (HIAS) on East Broadway, the Lower East Side of New York, c. 1920. Courtesy of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research

A second official called out, “What’s the difference?” I explained that a “rebbe” is Hasidic.* They laughed at me. “Go, go,” they said, “you’ll be a great rebbe in America,” and pushed me aside.¹⁷ I looked around. Here I am on the other side of the railing, among those who have been let in. But why did they laugh at me? It’s nothing. People are good-natured here and they were joking. I liked the reception.

I was to go to a cousin. He was late arriving to meet me, but they trusted me and let me leave without him. A representative of the Hakhnoses Orkhim* (now the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society*; fig. 9) took me to my cousin’s house in Brownsville. He offered me his help. I wanted to reward him for the trouble, but he wouldn’t take it. I had only been here for an hour and I saw only politeness around me. When I later came into contact with everyday reality, I found other kinds of relationships too, but it was pleasant for someone who had just arrived in a new world.

My cousin, I.L. from Shalovitsi, was almost the first person from our family on either side who had gone to America. I say “almost” because when I got here, I.L. surprised me with a story about how he met here, right in Brownsville, an old uncle, a younger brother of my grandfather Yermiyahu from Shalovitsi. Back home nobody had ever spoken of it. They only said that in the 1880s, a boy disappeared somewhere. What drove a boy from Kopyl to emigrate to far-off places in those years I never could figure out. I only saw him once. His wife was very unfriendly. She considered every greenhorn* an animal. I soon lost track of them.

I.L. was the first to come here during my time. He left the village quite young. In Russia he had lived in larger cities, and he knew languages. He had married and gone to America to accomplish something. For a while, his wife and child remained in Staryye Dorogi, a town near Mir. I.L. was a Hebrew teacher and very discontent in America. He discouraged me considerably in my first days here.

The people in the house where I.L. lived were simple workers. They lived better here than in the Old Country. They were content and assured me that “it will be ‘alright’ if I work.” They emphasized the point about work a little too often. I heard no other discussion among them or their many acquaintances who came to the house. Nearly everyone had a greenhorn guest or expected to get one soon. They were always occupied with looking for work for new arrivals, and the conversation among them was only about work.

I remember, however, that everyone felt a joy with the arrival of every greenhorn. Everyone felt that it was his duty to teach and instruct the greenhorn about how to stand and how to sit and what to say. One of my first teachers in the laws of immigration was a young man from Vilna, also a teacher in a Brownsville talmud torah,* whom I got to know on the second day. He was also discontent with America, meaning Brownsville America. The teacher, by the name of Shteynbok, suffered from a mania of exaggerated Americanization. He felt very unhappy because he would never be a genuine American. He had learned English, but he knew that he would never lose his greenhorn accent. He actually cursed Vilna one time, because he was born there and so would never pronounce the English “th” properly.

I immediately struck up a debate with him about national autonomy and the like. I argued that even we have a right to live with our own pronunciation. He was unmoved. He was very embittered about his past,

against Jews and Jewishness. He saw the greatest happiness in completely removing his “greenness” from himself and becoming American.

He had another ideal along with Americanization: practicality. He preached fire and brimstone against idealism. He considered it a great misfortune that people—mostly greenhorns—talked about idealism. It was against Americanism. “You have to be practical here!” I found an echo of such opinions in many circles at that time. Greenhorns took to the American dollar and to the easy life here and made a religion out of them, a cult of practicality. For Shteynbok, this had taken on the form of a fixation. Years later, there was a sensation about him in the Yiddish press when this very Shteynbok hurled away his *siddur* and his talmud torah and converted to Christianity. He became a missionary and I think he still has his mission house somewhere in Brooklyn.

On the third day after my arrival in America, I got my first job. My cousin had an acquaintance, a plumber, who took me on as an apprentice. My plan was to learn a trade, work and be independent, to learn English over time, and leave the rest for later. If I liked the work, I would remain a worker. This was in keeping with my idealization of work and workers.

I was then over twenty-one years old. In Russia, at that time, it would have been impossible to become an apprentice in a workshop. Here it was a common phenomenon that older people would begin learning a trade, so I became a plumber. I was even a little happy for the opportunity to learn that trade, and not tailoring like everyone else—as if we were all a nation of tailors.

The shop was on Centre Street near Canal, in a cellar. There was another worker, a Romanian Jew. He showed me what to do and I helped him out. This was the first time in my life that I had held a tool in my hand, a metal tool working on metal. 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.

And America was another thing: noise. Sounds from outside always drifted into the shop. Centre Street, an industrial street with all kinds of factories and shops, was at that time paved with rough, uneven stones, so the constant clopping of horse hooves and the hard wheels of freight wagons drifted overhead. It hummed, whistled, and clamored. Boss and workers spoke little, and what they did say I didn’t understand. So I was, for the most part, by myself with my own thoughts once again. I did what people told me to do and wondered, is this America?

I didn't get to enjoy the work or my thoughts for very long. At the end of the week, I was fired. Weeks later, I found out the reason from my cousin. The last few days, when my silence got tedious, I struck up a conversation with the Romanian. He asked me about Russia. I told him what was going on there with the working class, and so on. He immediately passed the word to the boss that I was a Socialist. So I was no longer a plumber.

I tried to get a job with another plumber but without success. The trade was completely closed to outsiders who wanted to get in. An opportunity presented itself very rarely.

I started to look for work in other metal factories that advertised in the newspapers that they were looking for hands. I quickly lost my greenness and knew how and where to look. Within a period of about three months, I underwent various experiences in large metal factories. People turned over every other day. At one place, where they polished brass beds, the work was tremendously difficult. I saw several people fainting as they worked. They paid six dollars a week, but it was hard to endure more than a few weeks. At another place, it was easy but very uninteresting. One stood all day next to a machine that spewed out ready-made articles like nails, screws, parts of locks, and the like. One had to move up the bin, and when it filled up, move it away and move up the next. The machine did the work and the greenhorn stood there like an idiot and helped it along. The machine "thought" much more than the greenhorn worker. The machine wasn't berated and humiliated all the while and it wasn't paid three dollars a week.

I started to look for work in other trades—as long as it wasn't tailoring—but it didn't work. One time, I went into a bakery where a sign hung—"Worker needed; no experience necessary"—and offered myself. The woman sized me up with a condescending look and casually rejected me: "You, a worker? You're a rabbi, not a worker!" What an insult!

I got tired of constantly changing jobs and looking for work. I felt the need to have stable employment with a more or less secure income. My relatives and *landslayt** lectured me that it was now time to settle down and do what everyone else did—become a tailor.

I became a tailor.

Over time several more of my relatives arrived here. Cousins joined their husbands who were already here. They were all tailors. I made my home with one of them. This cousin was a women's tailor back home and worked here as a cloak maker. People considered him a good earner. In

season, he made about fifteen dollars a week, a more than sufficient sum for that time. Most worker families ended up with ten dollars a week. He lived in an apartment of three rooms and a kitchen on Cherry Street. The family—husband, wife, and two small children—slept in one room. In a second room, two boarders slept in one bed. At night, the kitchen was also transformed into a bedroom for a third boarder. One room, the parlor, was not used. Large pieces of furniture were set up in that room, a big round table with chairs and a cabinet with a mirror. In the cabinet stood a platter with a set of six large glasses with colored edges that they never used. On the table was a large lamp that they never turned on. One could barely push one's way through all the furniture set up in there. That was the fashion in those days in immigrant homes.

The main room was the kitchen. We spent our time and received guests there. The only sink was in the kitchen, where everyone washed and the landlady washed the family's and boarders' laundry. The toilet was in the hall, one for four families who lived on the same floor. The landlady also cooked meals for the all the boarders. I remember that, at that time, I earned around four dollars a week, enough for all my needs, including extraneous expenses.

The main meal in the evening always consisted of the same courses, namely a piece of herring or chopped liver, pea or barley soup, cooked meat, and cooked plums, always accompanied by a pickle and a glass of beer. This sort of menu became so standard in Lithuanian and Belarussian Jewish workers' homes that many called this a "Jewish" meal.

The friends and *landslayt* who would come and fill up the kitchen almost every night were all from the towns and villages around Slutsk: Timkovichi, Nesvizh, Kapyl, Romanovo. A person from a completely different region was considered a foreigner. It was as if a Jew from Poland or Galicia was from a different people.

The themes of the conversations were news from the Old Country, greenhorns, and work. When a letter arrived for one person, everyone read it. Letters were received at the address of Max Kobre's bank on Canal Street. Kobre was like an older brother to all the Slutsker *landslayt*. As with the man of wealth in a town back home, every one deposited their money with him. We also paid Kobre weekly installments for the ship's tickets with which we ourselves had come and which we sent to relatives and family. Kobre's was the "clearing house" where we exchanged news from the entire region.¹⁸

Work was always on the agenda of conversation. We discussed the

situation in every shop, prices, grade of material, and the like—not at the union, but in Elie Abramovitsh’s kitchen. We knew which *landsmán** was looking for a new place and who could take someone in to work. To take someone into your shop was considered the greatest good deed, almost the only good deed, that the greenhorns performed in their new country.

We mainly devoted ourselves to greenhorns. Before bringing one here, we bought a ship’s ticket from Kobre on the installment plan. When the greenhorn got here, he made payments on it himself. After his arrival, we clothed him: *Landslayt* would go with the greenhorn to Canal Street to purchase a suit, a hat, and shoes. Everything had to be American. Clothes from home were defective, even if they were of good quality and well sewn. Going to the stores with the greenhorn on Canal Street was a joyful procedure, like a Jew back home picking out an *esrog*.¹⁹

The friendship toward *landslayt* often extended to Gentiles, to the Russians from our villages who began to emigrate to America. They clung like mad to their Jewish acquaintances and were under their protection. The Jews helped them out with the language and with getting jobs. The Russians went into the needle trades in the smaller Jewish shops and worked as pressers.

With respect to befriending our peasant *landslayt*, who felt so lonely and lost without the Jews, my cousin Peysakh Mayztl distinguished himself. He had made friends only with Gentiles in his home village of Shalovitsi. Here he was a presser, worked hard, headed the entire department in his area of the shop, and employed the *landslayt* from his village as errand boys. He treated them like brothers, and his name was respected in his village back home.

Here is a scene from that time: One day there appeared in Hester Street Park a Russian just off the boat. Standing amid a circle of Jews and looking lost, he wondered aloud in Russian: “Where does Peysakh Falkova live?” So several Russian Jews were found who enquired of him: Who and where? But the Gentile knew only one thing, that Peysakh Falkova lived “in New York.” When they found out that the greenhorn came from Slutsk, they brought him to Max Kobre at the bank. There, people quickly found out who Peysakh was and brought the *landsmán* to him. Here is not the place to describe the joy of those two when they met each other. They embraced and kissed. The newcomer delivered greetings from all the Gentiles in the village: “How’s the young pony?” “Do you remember the calf with the red stripe over the eyes? She is now a full-fledged cow and has already had grandchildren.” Peysakh showed him around for a day, got

him settled in, and took him to work. I related this scene at that time to Y. D. Berkowitz²⁰ to use as a scene in a skit. He later expanded it for other purposes in his drama *Landslayt*.

For the first year and a half, I lived with relatives. I took their advice and became a tailor. For twenty dollars, I learned to sew with a machine. When I could stitch a piece of material on a sewing machine in a straight line, not stretched-out and not wrinkled, I went looking for a job and found one. Even a greenhorn feels at home in a tailor shop. I felt a bit surer of the work and that people would treat me like a human being. I had various experiences in the shops where I worked sewing men's clothes. The trade was just starting to organize. It had started to migrate to new buildings uptown from the small, neglected little shops on Cherry, Forsythe, and Lispenard Streets. The migration brought with it small social transformations. In the old shops, people worked on Sundays. In the new ones, where the building had to be closed on Sundays, people started to work on the Sabbath. This caused something of a stir among workers and bosses alike. Both were "Jewish" Jews and lived in a Jewish way. (I'm speaking here about the men's clothing trade.) The new shops started to employ foremen. They also installed electric sewing machines. The old-fashioned operators were afraid of the machines and clung to the old, smaller shops.

After wandering about in various shops, a week here and a week there, I got a place in a shop on Cherry Street that I will describe a bit, because it was characteristic of the others.

It was a small shop, old-fashioned and not very clean. It had eight machines for the operators, three or four presses, and a few finishers (who pulled out the basting). We sewed men's jackets. The operators had the prestige in the shop, but not everyone at the same level. It depended on what sort of operation he performed. The first in line was the one who sewed the collar and the sleeve. The rest did various parts and had to see to it that they passed their work to the head operator. The last and least important was the sleeve maker. He had to stitch both edges of the sleeve, the inner and outer lining. This had to be done fast. One had to make at least three hundred a day. (We worked for ten hours a day.) The first step in making a jacket, they set a greenhorn to this task. That was my work.

The two bosses also worked. One cut the linings. (A specialist cut the cloth for the outer lining.) The bosses were not bad people. They came from a small town around Slutsk—*landslayt*. They had not been at this undertaking for long and were just learning to be bosses. They sometimes

shouted at a worker. But their shouts lacked the true authority of an employer, and the worker often shouted back. This was not the protest of the union man but the sound of a worker back home arguing with his boss. At lunchtime, one could see both boss and worker sitting at the high table, chewing their wrapped-up bits, drinking beer from the same dipper, only each wiped his mouth with his own sleeve.

There were curious types among the operators. One had been a prayer leader back home. He serenaded us with melodies from the High Holidays,* the most melancholy ones. The chief operator, the collar sewer, was an older, depressed family man. He spoke little, feared the union and the new shops “with electra.” Another was a tall fellow, Pinye. Not Sam, Benny, Hymie, but Pinye, although he had been in the country for a long time. He often mentioned the fact that he had worked with Kaspe at one time, “the very Doctor Kaspe, of the *Forward*,” and with Morris Rosenfeld, when they were still sewing shirts.²¹ Pinye was very sensitive if someone hinted indirectly that he was old and past his prime. When the boss got angry during the season when the work was urgent and he thought that we were working too slowly and not passing it along quickly enough, Pinye would stand up, spit artistically toward the ceiling, make a “Russian blessing,*” sit down, and drive his “Katerinka,” his machine, so hard that those behind him had to catch up in order to pass the work on to him. Then he would say: “Yep, Pinye is still Pinye!”

I caught Pinye’s fancy from the beginning of the season. He wanted to know why I was always so quiet and who I really was back home. “A rabbi or a horse thief, something must be wrong with that greenhorn.” At lunch, I ate in a corner and looked at an English book while eating. One time, he grabbed me by the arm. “Aha! Now I see,” he cried out, and sunk into thought. “You can’t fool me,” he confided quietly to his colleagues. “I recognize this. I once worked with Kaspe and Morris at the same time. That one”—pointing at me—“doesn’t belong to us.”

From then on, Pinye became very polite to me, stopped ordering me around as was the custom with greenhorn sleeve makers. Once he even suggested that I come in early Saturday morning and he would teach me how to sew in a pocket. This was a high-level task for an operator, and the bosses, “damn them,” would give me a raise next season.

Through the season, we all became close to each other. In the fall, work slowed down. We went into the shop—we had to come in if we wanted to keep our jobs—but there was nothing to do. The bosses didn’t need to

make concessions to the workers now, so they became arrogant and put on airs. A boss is a boss, and the season was now over.

One day, the head worker arrived a little late. Although there was no work that day, the bosses grumbled, "Aha, you went somewhere to look for another job?"

The disheartened workman justified himself. No, he had had a party the previous night. His daughter had gotten engaged.

"So congratulations," the boss-cutter grumbled, straining an expression of a benevolent manager.

When the group of workers heard of the party, they immediately suggested that someone should bring in some liquor. Said and done. Apparently the bosses had argued between themselves and were not in a good mood, so they forbade us to celebrate in the shop. The workers felt insulted. They recognized that they were now extraneous; the friendship was over after the season. So they left with their bottle of liquor to the house of the guest of honor. He didn't live far, on Scammel Street, near Monroe. There, everyone partook slowly, made toasts and amused themselves. Several sang songs. The cantor sang the entire High Holiday prayer, *Unsaneh toykef*.²² I honored them with a few Russian revolutionary songs. Here on Scammel Street, they sounded foreign. The workers, although all Russian, knew little of what was taking place there, but the Russian words reminded everyone of the Old Country, and we grew more intimate. The words removed the barrier between edge-stitcher and sleeve maker. Gradually, we all forgot about the autumn, the approaching "slack,"* and the bosses.

But it was apparently our fate that our intimate friendship would be disrupted again. The door opened and the operator's daughter, the bride, entered. Instead of greeting us, she twisted her nose and hurled a reproach at her father in English, why did he bring drunks in the house? The father, who always looked depressed, looked even more debased and submissive here in his own house. He wanted to say something but couldn't find the words, so he smiled stupidly and helplessly. We saw that his American daughter respected her greenhorn father precious little, and that he felt completely foreign among his grown children.

Our "drunkenness" quickly wore off and we left the house in embarrassment. There wasn't anywhere to go. Our spirits fell. We felt even more lonely and homeless, so, keeping ourselves together, we went to Jackson Park nearby, leaned against the fence and looked at the East River. The

water, like the sky, was dreary, autumnal. A ship whistled from afar. Through the mist, we saw the silhouette of the Statue of Liberty. Behind her, the ocean spread out far and wide, and across the ocean somewhere were the shores of the Old Country. We were silent.

Soon afterward, I left that shop and became a Hebrew teacher. A friend of mine from Mefitsei Sefat Ever, “The Promoters of the Hebrew Language,” begged me to accept a position at a newly founded talmud torah in a new neighborhood in the Bronx.²³

I had studied a little English for about a year and a half. At the beginning, I went to evening school at the Educational Alliance,²⁴ for the first summer. After that, I studied in the small preparatory school of Khaym Faynman and A. S. Valdshteyn, then two Columbia students.²⁵ I recall that they did not want to accept any tuition from me. I could swear that they were not wealthy men and it seems they never became wealthy men, and yet . . . practical Americans!

I remember the Educational Alliance well. Without that institution, it would have been impossible to exist in crowded and noisy downtown. There wasn’t even space in the narrow dwellings to write a letter, not to mention to read, study, think, or do what one’s heart desired. In the large reading room, one leafed through the Hebrew and Yiddish newspapers from Russia, read a book, rested, heard a lecture, drank fresh milk for a penny a glass, and learned English. It was refreshing.

Gatherings of various societies were held in the same building in clean, illuminated rooms in a civilized environment. They did not charge rent. Every Sunday evening, the followers of Hebrew held meetings of the historic society, Mefitsei Sefat Ever. The members were students, teachers, workers, merchants, professionals, peddlers. Devoted, friendly relations prevailed among them in those years. Many remained friends for their entire lives. For people like me, who were slaves all week in factories, the Sunday meetings of Mefitsei Sefat Ever were truly refreshing.

I want to mention one more detail about the Educational Alliance. At the end of the summer English course for beginners, the manager—a Blaustein I think—offered to help us take out our citizenship papers.²⁶ In connection with that, he also advised us to polish off our Russian names. He sat down, called out each person, analyzed his name philologically and translated it into English. In other cases, he made due with only cutting and shortening. Although the idea itself was not a bad one, the procedure of entirely converting names scandalized me. When he got to me, I explained firmly that my name was dear to me the way it was, and that

I would not change it. The manager did not like this. He immediately, however, found a rationale: "America is a free country." I had a right. He immediately stopped the name operation and a substantial number of greenhorns were left with their "ski's" and "off's" on their names because of my impertinence, poor things.

In the Bronx

In 1907–08, the neighborhood in the Bronx where my talmud torah was located was a new territory for Jews. This was the neighborhood between Wendover Avenue (now Claremont Parkway) and Tremont Avenue and between Crotona Park and Claremont Park. Settled Americans lived there. The streets of Bathgate and Washington still had small private houses situated on the tall green hills. One by one, as Jews started to open stores and Gentiles started to move to West Tremont, more Jews moved into their empty houses and the neighborhood became Jewish. As the Gentiles left, the grass on the hills, the bushes, plants, and flowers gradually disappeared. More stores and tenement houses grew up in their place.

At the beginning, one didn't yet see any "kosher*" signs in the store windows. Pious Jews brought kosher meat and Jewish food from Harlem. We, however, young immigrants in the Bronx, knew that in two restaurants owned by Jews, you could get a piece of herring, borsht* like from home, and Jewish bread, if you asked. Gradually, Jewishness was revealed in the windows of the butcher stores, on the shelves of the bakery stores. Here and there, a candy store now sold a Yiddish newspaper. Only a talmud torah was missing. But there were two stubborn Jews by the names of Becker and Meltzer, and they founded—and with great effort maintained—the Bronx Tremont Hebrew School, then on a beautiful high hill among the trees on the corner of 173rd Street and Washington Avenue. There had once been a private school in that house, before the public school system had expanded to all corners of the city. When the Gentiles fled, the Jews took it over.

Bronx was then quiet and peaceful. One still found places between the houses where a human foot had not tread since the first days of creation. On the hill in Claremont Park, snakes still crept amicably. And how quiet and peaceful and clean it was in the small branch of the city library on Tremont Avenue! The books were complete in their beautiful bindings; there was no one to tear them. Later, when our people started to arrive,

the library also took on a new appearance. The old librarian no longer napped; he had to enlist another girl to help. Instead of peaceful stories of colonial times, translations of European literature appeared on the shelves, mainly Ibsen and de Maupassant.²⁷ Books with social content arrived. The Bronx was now a city.

During the time that I worked at the school, various teachers passed through who later took part in various Jewish activities, and I want to draft a few sketches of their physiognomy from when they first started to sprout forth. The first two teachers were a pair of young boys, one from Plotsk, Shmuel Fuks, and another from around Kovno, Tuvye-Zisl Miller.²⁸ For a long time, Fuks's parents sent him financial support from Poland, so he wouldn't have to work here. His coming here was connected with a little history. A member of a secret organization, Poalei Zion,²⁹ he had made an agreement with two of his friends to flee to the Land of Israel. They "withdrew" money from their parents and fled. Fuks's parents were people of influence. They sent a courier who caught up with them in Berlin and tried to trick them into coming home. Because of his mother, Fuks found a compromise by going to America, rather than the Land of Israel. His friends continued on their journey. One is now the manager of the experimental agricultural station in Rechovot, as well as an essayist and novelist. The other is the current David Ben-Gurion.³⁰ Fuks is now Dr. S. Fox, a dentist on Charlotte Avenue in the Bronx and active in Jewish cultural circles.

At a very young age, Miller left his home and strict father and went to South Africa, where he worked with "Kaffirs" in the mines. After a few years, he came to America with the few hundred pounds he had saved and a deep familiarity with classic English literature. He had also maintained his connection to Hebrew and wanted to study for the rabbinate. He was, however, a dreamer and philosopher and couldn't easily concentrate on the elementary studies. We used to go for walks and talk a lot, discussing the problem of the Jewish future. Then we founded a pioneering³¹ society, in fact the first of its kind in America. No great emigration began because of that society, but three people left for the Land of Israel. Miller was one of them. He settled in Rechovot and became a big orange planter. He is an important moral force in the Yishuv, the Jewish community in Palestine, beloved and respected among all classes, laborers and employers. He also co-edited *Bustanai* with Moshe Smilansky.³²

After Miller's departure, I advised the school committee on the hiring of new teachers. At various times, Dr. Valdshteyn, the writer and leader of

Poalei Zion, worked there. Other teachers included Meyer Waxman, now at an institution of higher learning in Chicago, author of a great work in English about the history of Jewish literature; Bloch, now the librarian at the Semitics Department at the New York Central Library; and Dr. Fefer, now a medical doctor and activist in Hebrew cultural circles in the mid-western states.³³

I also wish to include my friend I. J. Schwartz.³⁴ He lived in Brownsville. He wanted to liberate himself from the suffocating atmosphere there and was drawn to the Bronx. A man of many moods, in the classroom as well—often seriously sad and sometimes humorously mischievous—he used to love sending funny little notes to the teachers written in Hebrew, Yiddish, Aramaic, and his own made-up words. In the evenings in the park, he would recite entire chapters of the prophets Isaiah and Amos or the poems of Judah Ha-Levi by heart.³⁵ Apparently, the stones of Crotona Park and the brown-haired Jewish women understood him well. That was the beginning of his great work of translating into Yiddish parts of the old Hebrew literature. The Bronx indeed got more Jewish at that time. Schwartz's presence drew the young literati and friends of the Yiddish word to the Bronx. Circles started to form. People would go for walks and sit in the park in the evenings dreaming and scheming about how to build a new Yiddish literature. The Literature Society was created from those circles that began to publish anthologies under its name.³⁶ New talents could be found in the Bronx. We looked up to each other and put out for each other, creating an atmosphere of creativity.

In the house where I lived, in the room one story directly above mine, lived a fellow from Mława, Poland, Yoysef Opatovski. The year before, we had studied English together in Faynman and Valdshteyn's School. When I came to the Bronx as a teacher, he earned his livelihood delivering newspapers. He worked for a man, Dillon, the father of the poet A. M. Dillon. Opatovski was then a student of engineering at Cooper Union. He was an industrious student and very rarely "tramped about" with the teachers and idlers in the parks. But one time, he confided to me the secret that he too wrote. Quite early in the morning, when he would get ready for his newspaper work, he would often come into my room through the fire escape, bringing with him a bottle of milk and fresh rolls—God knows where he got them—and leave something of his that he had scribbled.

I used to help him out with the rolls and milk, but we did not completely agree on his scribbles. I demanded content from him, themes addressing painful Jewish questions, just like Brenner, for example.³⁷ He

would get angry at me and not show me anything for a time. Until early another morning, he would come in once again through the fire escape with fresh rolls and new scribbles. He threatened to scribble something that I would have to acknowledge. He followed through with his threat.

I later helped him become a teacher and took him into the talmud torah. His class was for beginners, the alphabet and basic Hebrew. He did not take his work lightly. His artistic eye did not abandon him in the classroom either. Every boy in his class had a nickname, for his nose or for the way a boy shrieked and shouted “ouch!” when he got something over his fingers from the rebbe.

In our first anthology, *Literatur*, we accepted his first story “Sharmanchikes,” Organ Grinders. He changed his name a bit to Opatoshu, and it has remained so in literature.³⁸ The literary set hung around the teachers of the Bronx Tremont Hebrew School. I want to recall some of them. Avrom-Moyshe Dillon, the poet who died before his time, who had just begun to write his difficult, tortured lines about sadness and terror, contributed much to the literary mood.³⁹ No man of means himself, he endowed others with the power of creativity, and he inspired and demanded. He possessed much inner beauty which unfortunately found no expression in his own poems. His enthusiasm, however, infected others. When a new volume by Shneur or an article by some thinker arrived, one immediately saw Avrom-Moyshe running from one person to the next expressing his enthusiasm.⁴⁰ He was a bohemian in a certain sense. He had no ground under his feet, but neither did he have the proper bohemian atmosphere around him. This explains perhaps the limited extent of his creativity.

As in a theater ensemble, every character plays his role, and so the beginner Yitskhok Bloom played a peculiar role among us. He had a tailor shop in that neighborhood. He would come into the same small restaurant, Lederman’s, where we would have our fill, a tomato herring with a piece of black bread and butter for seven cents. (If you let yourself splurge, you spent another two cents for a glass of coffee.) Bloom was a true worker, a tailor from the Old Country. He was a little lonely and had “moods.” Listening to us while he ate, he once pressed himself close and revealed to us that he was also interested in such things. Such as? He’d show us. So he invited us to his cleaning and pressing store. On the thick yellow wrapping paper there were little rhyming lines.

Bloom was then very raw and primitive in the so-called creative process. Besides Shomer* and Dineson,* he hadn’t read any literature, not to mention history and the like. Because of his moods, he strove to express

himself, but the poetic form fettered him. He had ambition and was something of a stubborn man, familiar qualities of a person with promise. When we showed him that his lines didn't harmonize, he grabbed a pair of scissors and read the lines himself, banging on his tailor's table with the big scissors and stamping with his feet in time. To him it fit together. He rarely allowed anyone to correct anything besides his conclusions, and for our trouble we got our pants pressed for free.

We considered it a joke, but one day Bloom felt as if he were in seventh heaven. In *Di fraye arbeter shtime* the editor had answered a letter of his.⁴¹ That was his first victory. From then on, he redoubled his efforts. Wherever he found a piece of paper in the store, he wrote on it, until he achieved his end: He started to get published. Today, he has a few volumes of prose and poetry. In this way, a folk-writer saw the light of day right before our eyes.

I want to return to my story. You probably want to know what became of the greenhorn who began with plumbing, changed to tailoring and then to teaching.

At the age of around twenty-eight years old, married, and the father of a one-year-old daughter, I still wanted to study. I sensed that I lacked much knowledge. I did not even begin to know anything. I needed to go through an entire course from A to Z. In Russia, this would have been impossible for me. Here in America, it was a simple matter. I enrolled in a good preparatory school and began to study the lessons systematically in the evenings and on my own in the early morning hours. The hours of work at the talmud torah were from four to eight. I got back my former zeal for learning and went through the entire high school course in a year and a half, and passed the New York state exam with distinction. One winter, I spent the evenings at Cooper Union studying chemistry. I was ready to go to university.

I wanted to study medicine. At the last minute, however, financial difficulties occurred, and I had to change my plan and go to dental college. That's how I became a dentist. Here, as with tailoring, I was forced by the circumstances to do what all people do and follow the well-trodden path. There is more than one man among Jewish dentists whose true calling was to be a geologist or a shoemaker, but became a dentist because—a dentist is *also* a doctor!

What happened next? The usual thing. I studied in New York and Baltimore, practiced in Baltimore among Jews and Gentiles, made a living, was

active in communal affairs among my own people, got involved in real estate nonsense and lost every cent, traveled to the Land of Israel and came back.

And so I will soon conclude.

I educated my daughter more or less in my own spirit. This was not easy; here it means going against the mainstream and against the laws of physics. The young generation is everywhere demonically rebellious against the old. That is the way of the world. It is a fact that a Jewish education draws the youth backwards. Youth however are drawn forward, so one needs to rack one's brains constantly to outwit the laws of nature. One needs to create around the child the kind of Jewish atmosphere where the past and future, the new and the old blend together harmoniously. A crown of exaltation and esthetics—things that attract Jewish youth like a magnet—must hover over Jewishness. Then the American child will be fascinated by the beauty of Jewish life and strive to rescue it. The Land of Israel is very helpful in this process. The pioneering movement is a refreshing spring for our weakening children. It has until now guarded my child from the dangers of assimilation.

My daughter knows Hebrew and Yiddish, and graduated from college in languages and social science. She is married to one of her equals in education, someone not born in the area, who works for the government in Washington as an economist. Both belong to the Zionist-Socialist movement. They have a set of friends with varying degrees of education and from different social classes, but who are all in the same movement. When I find myself among them—when they sit at dusk in a circle and sing the sad, gentle song with the enchanting melody, “V’ulai,” by Rachel, when they sit by the Potomac and sing of “Kineret sheli,” my Kinneret—I know the tunes themselves will do for them what the Gemara tunes once did for me on those wintry nights mourning the destruction of the Temple, and I feel more secure.⁴²

I want to relate an incident my daughter told to me because it is instructive. An acquaintance of hers in Washington, a Communist-leaning woman who lives in a non-Jewish neighborhood, noticed that her twelve-year-old boy avoids the company of the neighborhood children and feels lonely in his leisure time. Upon questioning him, the mother found out that he is overwhelmed by fear because he is a Jew. He feels inferior to the others, the “aryans” in the street. His mother came to the decision that her boy needs to learn some Jewishness to prevent the further development of feelings of inferiority. My daughter, who has taught high school, has

undertaken to teach him Yiddish and Jewish history. They're making a beginning. He already reads short paragraphs—in the *Forward!*

I will end with a few lines about the rest of the members of our family from Starobin of long ago.

One of my sisters and two brothers came here before the First World War. My sister came to join her husband whom she had married in Starobin. He was a smith there, a presser here. He still remembers what he once learned in *heder*. Besides work, he occupies himself with quite important communal work among his *landslayt* in Brownsville. He organizes and leads his society. He helps, and makes others help, every *landsmann* who needs a job or a loan. In Starobin, he was from the “edge of town.” Like his father, also a smith, he was not connected to the town elite. Here, under different circumstances, the powers of virtuous communal activism were revealed in him, which is admirable.

One of my brothers, a leatherworker, is active in unions and in cultural circles. The other brother, the youngest, who was a clerk back home and a worker during his first years here, is now in business in San Diego, California. He is active in the Workmen's Circle and in Zionist work through the branch in his city. (That's how it is in San Diego. The Workmen's Circle is active in raising money for the Gewerkschaften Campaign for the Jewish National Fund.⁴³)

Another brother, who apprenticed as a smith back home, is in the Land of Israel, and another sister remains in Russia. Where she is today, we do not know.

We brought our parents here after the First World War. Our mother is no longer alive. Our father lives with our sister in Brownsville. She is very pious, and her house is strictly kosher. She and her husband fulfill the commandment to honor thy father in the most beautiful way.

My father no longer wires pots, but he still studies, by himself and with others, to fulfill the commandment. His grandchildren, my sister's children and mine, are beloved to him. It gives me great joy to see such love from grandchildren to a grandfather. They love his cheerfulness and erudition. At the age of eighty-five, he still sits by a table every day in synagogue, his “boys”—sixty- and seventy-year-old Jews—around him, and gives them a Gemara lesson. He doesn't hear very well, but he recites and they repeat.

When he speaks of money and livelihood, my father still likes to throw in the old-time saying that the most important thing is not wealth, but living an honest life by one's own hand. We children and grandchildren sit

around him and understand each other, although our language varies a little. For my father, a good life means living “by one’s own hand.” In our time, we called it “proletarianization,” and the grandchildren call it “*dat ha-avodah*,” the “religion of labor,” or “pioneering.” On the inside, they are the same. From grandfather to grandchildren there is continuity, the links of one chain.

May the chain not be broken.

NOTES

1. Polesia is a lowland region encompassing southern Belarus, northern Ukraine, and eastern Poland.

2. *Ha-Melits* (Hebrew, “The Advocate”) was the first Hebrew newspaper in Russia. Founded in Odessa in 1860, it was later moved to St. Petersburg. It appeared first as a weekly, then as a semiweekly, and, finally, as a daily. An important mouthpiece for the Haskalah, *Ha-Melits* advocated Zionism in its later years. *Ha-Tsfira* (Hebrew, “The Dawn”) was a Hebrew newspaper founded in Warsaw in 1862. At first dedicated primarily to scientific articles, it later focused more on current events and eventually became an organ for Zionism. It appeared, with a number of interruptions, until 1931. These newspapers pioneered the use of Hebrew as a modern journalistic and literary language.

3. See Jeremiah 31:15.

4. In many traditional circles, an active knowledge of Hebrew grammar was considered dangerous since it might enable a person to formulate independent thoughts and modern ideas in conflict with accepted interpretations of the sacred texts.

5. *Ha-Dor* was a short-lived Hebrew intellectual weekly in the first years of the twentieth century. *Ha-Shiloah* was a Hebrew monthly published in Berlin, Cracow, Odessa, and Jerusalem from 1896 to 1926.

6. Rabbi Jacob David ben Ze’ev Willowsky (known by the Hebrew acronym of his name, Ridbaz, 1845–1913) was the founder of famous yeshivas in Slutsk and, later, in Safed, Palestine. His commentaries on the Jerusalem Talmud appeared between 1898 and 1900.

7. Jews who lived in rural villages were isolated from Jewish life in the towns. They often hired young yeshiva students, and sometimes even students in advanced *heders*, to teach their children the rudiments of Jewish literacy.

8. Yokhanan was a *tanna*, a Palestinian sage of the first two centuries of the Common Era whose views appear in the Mishna. Yitskhok was an *amora*, a sage of the third to fifth centuries, who contributed to the Gemara.

9. Yehudah Ze’ev Nofakh (1848–1921) was a Russian teacher and Socialist who

converted to Zionism after the pogroms of 1881 and 1882. He founded a trade school in Minsk and was very influential among the city's youth.

10. The Jewish Independent Workers' Party (1901–3) sought to counter the growing influence of the Bund and to defend workers' economic interests without getting involved in political questions. It operated legally with police support and disbanded when that support ended.

11. Most people could leave Russia legally, but acquiring a passport entailed much expense and trouble. Young men of draft age, however, were forbidden to leave. Many Jewish emigrants therefore crossed the border illegally, and smuggling was a big business.

12. Koenigsberg was later renamed Kaliningrad by the Soviets.

13. "Black Hundreds" was the general term for various virulently anti-Semitic groups that often perpetrated pogroms. On market days, many strangers came to town, and the excited atmosphere was conducive to the outbreak of violence.

14. The Zionist Socialist Workers' Party (called S.S. after its Russian initials), founded in 1905 in Odessa, was "territorialist," arguing that the Jews needed their own territory, but that this territory did not necessarily have to be in the Jews' ancient homeland. Strongly Yiddishist, the S.S. joined with other groups in 1917 to form the United Jewish Socialist Workers Party.

15. The first line of a poem "Levadi" (Alone), by Chayim Nakhman Bialik (1873–1934), the great pioneer of modern Hebrew poetry. The poem refers to the Divine Presence, abandoned in the House of Study by young scholars drawn to the ideals of the Enlightenment.

16. Dr. Simon Bernfeld (1860–1940) was a rabbi who wrote in Hebrew and German on Jewish history and philosophy.

17. The leader of a Hasidic sect is called a *rebbe*, but so is an old-fashioned teacher in a traditional *heder*. By using the word "teacher" Domnitz is emphasizing that he is a modern secular teacher of Hebrew. The officials either do not understand the distinction at all or believe that he will end up teaching traditional subjects anyway in order to make a living.

18. Kobre's bank was one of a number of immigrant Jewish banks. On the eve of World War I, a catastrophic run on these banks led to the collapse of several, including that of Kobre. Kobre pledged to make good on his debts to depositors, but he committed suicide in 1916.

19. For the holiday of Sukkot Jews buy an *esrog*, a citron, to keep for the week and say a blessing over. The *esrog* should be as perfect as possible, without blemishes, so carefully inspecting each *esrog* is an important part of the process of buying one.

20. Yitskhok Dov Berkowitz (1885–1967) was a novelist and editor of Hebrew- and Yiddish-language publications. He was the son-in-law of Sholem Aleichem, whose Yiddish works he translated into Hebrew.

21. Avraham Kaspé (1861–1929) was a Socialist, doctor, educator, and writer of popular books on science. Morris Rosenfeld (1862–1923) was a pioneer of modern Yiddish poetry known for his poems on the plight of the sweatshop workers.

22. The *Unsanah toykef* prayer, so called for the first words of its opening line, “Let us tell how utterly holy this day is,” is one of the most solemn prayers of the High Holiday services.

23. Mefitsei Sefat Ever Vesifrutah (Promoters of the Hebrew Language and its Literature) was a Hebraist organization, founded 1902.

24. Community center in Manhattan’s Lower East Side. Founded as the Hebrew Institute in 1889, it became the Educational Alliance in 1893. It promoted Americanization and provided athletic facilities, a library, meeting rooms, lectures and classes, and other services to local residents.

25. Avrom Shloyme Valdshteyn (1874–1932) was a scholar and Labor Zionist leader. He earned a doctorate from Columbia University.

26. David Blaustein (1866–1912) was director of the Educational Alliance from 1898 to 1908. An immigrant himself, he became a widely acknowledged expert on issues concerning immigration and Americanization.

27. The works of the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen (1828–1906) and the French short-story writer Guy de Maupassant (1850–1889) were very popular in Yiddish translation.

28. Tuvye Ziskind Miller (1888–1962) was editor of *Bustanai* (Gardener), the organ of the Farmers’ Union in Palestine. He lived in New York from 1904 to 1909.

29. Poalei Zion was a Socialist Zionist party whose name means “Workers of Zion.” Local Poalei Zion groups sprang up in Russia in the first years of the twentieth century, and a unified party was formed in 1906. Poalei Zion was active in the United States beginning in 1903.

30. David Ben-Gurion (born Dovid Grin, 1886–1973) was a Labor Zionist leader and the first prime minister of the State of Israel (1948–1953, 1955–1963). In 1942 he was chair of the executive committee of the Jewish Agency.

31. Those who settled on the land in Palestine, especially Labor Zionist activists who joined collective farms, were known in the movement as “pioneers” (*halutsim* in Hebrew).

32. Moshe Smilansky (1874–1953) was a Hebrew writer and leader of the agricultural movement in Palestine. He edited *Bustanai* from 1929 to 1939.

33. Meyer Waxman (1887–1969), a rabbi and historian of Jewish literature, joined the faculty of the Hebrew Theological College in Chicago in 1924. Dr. Joshua Bloch (1890–1957) became head librarian of the New York Public Library’s Jewish Division in 1923.

34. Israel Jacob Schwartz (1885–1971) was a Yiddish poet and translator known for combining Jewish and nature themes. His most famous work, *Kentucky*, is an epic poem describing Jewish pioneer life in that state.

35. Judah Ha-Levi (d. 1141) was a medieval Spanish Hebrew poet and philosopher.

36. A reference to the immigrant literary movement known as *Di yunge*, or The Young Ones. *Di yunge* was made up of young immigrant writers whose literary expression centered first around the periodical *Jugend* (Youth) and then the anthologies *Literatur* (1910) and *Shriftn* (1912–26).

37. Joseph Chayim Brenner (1881–1921) was a key figure of the modern Hebrew literary movement and an adherent of the “psychological” approach to literature.

38. Joseph Opatoshu (born Yoysef-Mayer Opatovski, 1886–1954) was a Yiddish novelist and short-story writer. He trained as an engineer at Cooper Union. Domnitz is slightly mistaken. Opatoshu’s first published work was “Oyf yener zayt brik” (On the Other Side of the Bridge). It appeared in *Literatur* 2 (1910).

39. A. M. Dillon (born Avrom Moyshe Zhuravitski, 1883–1934) was a Yiddish poet who made his debut in *Literatur* in 1910.

40. Zalman Shneur (1887–1959) was an important Yiddish and Hebrew poet.

41. *Di fraye arbeter shtime* (The Free Voice of Labor, 1890–1892, 1899–1977) was the leading Yiddish anarchist newspaper in the United States, known for its high literary standards.

42. Rachel (Rachel Blaustein, 1890–1931) was a Hebrew poet, translator, and agricultural colonist in Palestine. Many of her poems, including the well-known “V’ulai” (And Perhaps) and “Kineret,” were put to music and sung in the Zionist movement.

43. The *Gewerkschaften* Campaign was founded 1924 to raise money from the affiliates and members of the United Hebrew Trades, or *Gewerkschaften* (more properly: *Geverkshaftn*), a federation of predominantly Jewish trade unions in the United States, for the Histadrut, the central labor organization in Palestine and, later, the state of Israel. Founded in 1901, the Jewish National Fund was the fundraising arm of the Zionist movement.