

From Scarcity to Abundance: The Immigrant as Consumer

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The chasm between a past of inveterate want and a future of potential comfort profoundly shaped the perspective of immigrants to the United States between the 1870s and 1914, when the First World War ended the great migration of over 20 million Europeans to America. Louis Borgenicht, a Galician Jew who came to New York City in 1888 and shortly afterward launched a successful career in the garment industry, expressed clearly the revolutionary change of condition that was inherent in immigration to the United States. "Even at his wealthiest, my father lived in very much the same fashion as his tenth-generation grandfather," Borgenicht observed—"I have shifted my mode of living more in fifty years than my ancestors [had] in a thousand."¹

No transition was more dramatic than the movement from a material life that was nearly medieval to one that thrived on modern mass production. The psychological adaptation of the immigrant to American society was defined largely by this enormous leap in material circumstances and possibilities. Because of an overriding desire to become established in the United States, eastern European Jews responded especially quickly to the condition of mass consumption. They recognized that, as consumers, they could begin to move toward the goal of fitting into American society.

In the sphere of consumption, virtually all newcomers to America discovered an opportunity for social advancement that often eluded them in the domain of production. By contrasting the status of urban immigrants as consumers to their position as laborers, a comprehensive study of industrial workers in the United States published by the British Board of Trade in 1911 emphasized this fact. In the workplace, the differences between newcomers and citizens were often accentuated, as immigrants typically were pushed into, and congregated in, the least tolerable kinds of labor. Through the marketplace, however, newcomers had the opportunity almost immediately to adopt

basic forms of American life. The report explained that "the industrial status" of most southern and eastern Europeans was "different from and lower than" that of most Americans. But, the position of immigrants "as measured by the command of material comforts" began "at once to be relatively 'American' in standard." Consequently, even among the poorest groups of urban workers the term "American" was found to have a meaning that was "definable and real."²

The significance of emulating the American consumer was highlighted by the impoverishment of those millions who had come from eastern and southern Europe between 1880 and 1914. The shifting source of immigration to the United States directly reflected economic changes across the Atlantic. As the German economy expanded in the last decades of the nineteenth century, the number of German immigrants to the United States, which neared one-and-a-half million between 1881 and 1890, dropped to one-half million, at the most, between 1891 and 1900. At the same time, the deterioration of economic opportunities in the largely agricultural societies of eastern and southern Europe stimulated a titanic increase of people from Italy, Austria-Hungary, Russia, and from Poland, which had been divided and annexed by Russia, Austria-Hungary, and Prussia in the late eighteenth century. Between 1881 and 1890, approximately 926,116 people arrived from these lands; between 1891 and 1900, the number jumped to about 1,846,610; between 1901 and 1910, roughly 5,788,449 flooded into the United States.³ In all, about ten million had left for the United States between 1880 and 1914. The one characteristic unifying these diverse peoples was poverty. Not only did they arrive, on the average, with virtually no capital, but they had known a meagerness of material existence that was fast becoming outmoded in the more industrial regions to the north and west of Europe.

The regions that supplied so many emigrants had an aspect that contrasted sharply with the setting of urban consumption in the United States. The people of southern Italy conceived of their society as having two major groups—those who ate white bread and those who ate black bread. This point of view clarified the deep division between the gentry and the peasantry, for whom white bread symbolized an unattainable style of life. The peasants of southern Italy lived in abysmal homes that were often no more than hovels made of interwoven sticks or straw and daub. Some inhabited caves. In the cities, particularly Naples, several families of impoverished workers typically cohoused in underground apartments that made the tenements of New York City seem luxurious. The average diet was as poor as the water supply, consisting mainly of corn meal, pasta, rice, beans, and bread. Meat was esteemed a "rich man's food."⁴

The impoverishment of eastern Europe was accentuated by the fact that, until 1863, masses of Russian peasants were serfs. Designed to turn peasants into urban factory workers, the abolition of serfdom actually provided little relief from the unrelenting pressure of poverty. Many laborers continued to be tied to land that they did not own, and factory operatives ended up with ex-

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tremely low wages. In Lithuania and Poland, the regions of northwestern Russia that provided a large proportion of immigrants to America, life on the land had become increasingly untenable after the breakdown of the traditional agricultural order. Descriptions of Lithuanian life prior to World War I were portraits of drabness and want. The average diet revolved around cottage cheese and sour cream, beet soup, onions, cabbage, potatoes, and rye or raisin bread. Rolls and pastries were unusual, as were most vegetables and fruits. Fresh milk was rarely enjoyed, and butter, considered a luxury, was made to sell rather than to eat. Tea and coffee were rare, the main drink thus being water. As forks were used only by the rich, peasants relied on handmade wooden spoons and other small utensils. Their clothing and interior furnishings were simple and nondescript.¹

Estranged from the land, the Jews of eastern Europe endured material conditions that differed somewhat from those of the surrounding peasantry. Working primarily as artisans and merchants, Jews had much greater familiarity with urban refinements, and their autonomous, communal institutions helped the poorest among them to enjoy the special foods of the Sabbath and holidays. Dispersed throughout the Russian Pale of Settlement—the stretch of land between the Baltic and Black Seas that confined most Jews—the eastern edges of Austria-Hungary, and Rumania, they varied in their customs and tastes. Yet, their culture was remarkably uniform, and their experience of material scarcity was quite consistent.

Despite the effort of Jews to punctuate the year with religious celebrations that included luxurious foods, gabardine, cashmere, or silk garments, and handcrafted silverware, the want of daily life in eastern Europe was ineluctable, often demanding that the holiday diet be hedged, the clothes be well-worn, and the tableware inherited. In fact, the Jewish perception of luxuries as an important part of regular celebrations made for a trying tension between expectation and reality. Echoing the impact of deprivation, some Jewish immigrants recalled in detail the most minute elements of the daily diet—a piece of bread, an apple, or a cookie that persisted in memory despite the passage of years.²

The cities of eastern Europe often lacked the most basic commodities and conveniences enjoyed by the poor in American cities. In the 1880s and 1890s, the women of Minsk chopped their own wood for the oven, walked distances to draw well water, and washed the family's clothes in the river with the aid of a wooden hammer and board. In the winter, washing had to be done through a hole in the ice.³ Lacking domestic appliances, the vast majority of urban families were also burdened by a limited selection of garments. Until 1912, residents of the Galician city of Shniatyn had neither shoe stores nor retailers of ready-made clothes.⁴ The confinement of the consumer in the largest cities of the Pale was conveyed by a description of a Jewish marketplace in Warsaw in 1898: "All kinds of old clothes, and some new ones of the worst quality are sold by auction in the wooden shanties . . . sometimes a pair of high-boots

constitutes the whole of their stock-in-trade, and a whole day is sometimes uselessly devoted to getting rid of them."⁹

The embrace of material scarcity on the consciousness of Jews extended to their attitude toward living space. Disproportionately urban, the Jews of eastern Europe suffered acutely from the miasma of overcrowded housing. In 1900, a traveling correspondent for the New York *Yiddishes Tageblatt*, America's first successful daily newspaper printed in Yiddish, described as indescribable "the want, the misery, the wretchedness" of the poor in Kazmierz, the Jewish suburb of Cracow, "where half-a-dozen families . . . live together in one cellar with bad food and scanty light."¹⁰

The journalist's impassioned chronicle was well corroborated by detailed reports of living conditions in the Jewish Pale of Settlement during the first decade of the twentieth century. The majority of artisans' homes was described by one investigator as being "small, crowded, and poverty-stricken."¹¹ This terse description was amplified by an inspector of the United States Immigration Service who visited the homes of urban Jews in the Pale during the summer of 1906. In one cellar room, twelve feet underground, three families totaling seventeen people were found living together. For several families to cohabit one room was "a common sight."¹² These city residents were so conditioned by the fact of material scarcity that they calculated joint "ownership" of a single room in terms of fractions as minute as one thirty-second. In one case, three families claimed twenty-eight thirty-seconds ownership of a room, one individual with a one thirty-second share had to live elsewhere, and the remaining parts were viewed by their "owner" as an investment.¹³

Even families that were comparatively comfortable lacked the stimulation provided by a variety of domestic furnishing and personal possessions. Marc Chagall, the most renowned of the Jewish artists to emerge from the Pale, recalled what to his eyes was a painful lack of adornment in his childhood home of Vitebsk, where "there wasn't a single painting, not a single engraving on the walls of the rooms." Until the age of nineteen, Chagall had "never seen drawings or paintings."¹⁴ The painter's recollection was significant partly because, by prevailing standards, his family was not poor. In the homes of comparatively comfortable Jewish families, the dearth of possessions was often relieved only by the presence of religious and ceremonial objects, such as pictures of great rabbis, Jewish shrines, and Jewish philanthropists, a *yortszyt*, or memorial tablet for relatives, a charity box, brass candlesticks, a finely wrought spice box, a wine beaker, a menorah, a silver-plated ornamental box to hold etrogs, the Mediterranean citrus fruit used for the celebration of Sukkot, and perhaps a set of silver goblets and a special snuff box for use on Sabbath and holidays.¹⁵ The lack of secular commodities in the homes of all but the affluent bred notoriety. "No dolls, no books, no games," recalled Mary Antin of her childhood in a moderately well-off family in Polotsk—"the days drew themselves out too long sometimes, so that I sat at the window thinking what should happen next."¹⁶

The desire to escape a world of deprivation figured prominently in the constellation of motives that moved people from Europe to America after 1880. In 1911, a report of the United States Immigration Commission stated that "the chief motive behind the movement" to the new world was "a laudable ambition for better things" than the emigrants possessed at home.¹⁷ As had been the case throughout the nineteenth century, letters brimming with optimism about American prosperity passed from the recently arrived to their relatives back in the old country, and this personal correspondence constituted one of the most powerful catalysts of immigration.¹⁸

In the era of exodus from eastern and southern Europe, however, the content and impact of letters home changed in a subtle way. During the middle of the nineteenth century, the rhetorical enthusiasm of land-hungry newcomers from central and northern Europe dwelled on the agricultural dimension of American prosperity—the abundance of inexpensive land, superfluous crops, and light taxation of the farmer.¹⁹ At the end of the century, the factory-bound arrivals from eastern and southern Europe focused more on the scale of wages and the urban refinements of the new society. Moreover, the formidable gap in material condition separating the impoverished newcomer from the American at this time made for many analogies between the status of the average worker in the United States and the nobleman in Poland or Italy. An American consular official reported in 1904 that "the greatest influence in promoting emigration" came from relatives and friends in the United States who wrote "glowing accounts of the enormous wages received, food such as the nobility [at] home, and houses grandly furnished."²⁰ Historians of the immigration of Italian and Slavic peasants have found these newcomers to have been motivated by a fierce commitment to the pragmatic goal of accumulating money and material possessions, both of which served as tangible signs that they had transcended the degradation of their material and social condition in Europe.²¹

The vision of America as a place of bounty had a unique significance for Jews because of the circumstances behind their immigration. Although the eastern European Jews responded to similar pressures of population growth, economic disruption, and political persecution that had motivated most immigrants to the United States, they contended as well with special, and potentially catastrophic, problems. Since the beginning of the nineteenth century, the dramatic growth of Europe's population had aggravated the economic frustration of multitudes of peasants who had lost the ability to make a living from farmlands that were quickly being consolidated by powerful landlords.

By the second half of the century, the Jews of eastern Europe were also unsettled by the joint pressure of overpopulation and economic dislocation. Around 1800, Russian Jews numbered approximately one million. Fifty years later, they were three and a quarter million. By 1900, nearly five and a half million Jews lived in the Russian Empire. As the Jewish population grew, economic opportunities dwindled. Since the abolition of serfdom in 1863, the customarily Jewish occupations of provisioning and administering the estates of

noblemen were subverted, and the role of Jews as small-scale moneylenders and merchants was further undercut after 1880 by the growth of large-scale industry, which relied on major banks for credit and on the railroads for the shipment of goods.²²

Throughout the nineteenth century, the burgeoning number of Russian Jews had migrated within the Empire in search of new opportunities, but this alternative had inherent limits that would eventually make emigration inevitable. Flowing out of the densely populated provinces of Lithuania and Poland into the areas of "New Russia" around the Black Sea, the migrants rapidly achieved roughly the same ratio to the Gentile population that existed in the older regions of settlement. Further expansion was precluded by the boundaries of the Pale of Settlement.²²

Physically cramped to the point of frustration, many Jews needed only an upsurge of anti-Semitism to convince them that the future in Russia would be increasingly dismal. The decline in the security of the eastern European Jews accompanied the decline in the eighteenth century of the Kingdom of Poland, most of which came into the possession of Russia. Under the Tsars, the insecurity of the Jews was accentuated by policies that both inadvertently and deliberately undermined their political autonomy and economic privileges. After the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881, the group's position turned from a state of insecurity to one of virtual siege. Led by high ranking, anti-Semitic officials and sustained by deeply rooted suspicions and animosities among the Russian folk, the government began systematically to bar Jews from customary occupations, to limit sharply their enrollment in universities, and to incite pogroms that destroyed millions of dollars worth of Jewish property as well as thousands of lives. Although other ethnic and religious minorities in the Empire, notably the Lithuanians and Poles, suffered persecution that helped produce waves of emigration, the plight of Russian Jews between 1881 and 1914 was unparalleled in scope and intensity.²³

The two million Jews who left eastern Europe for the United States in this period—nearly one-quarter of whom fled deteriorating conditions in Rumania and Austria-Hungary—held a deep desire for freedom that lent special importance to the vision of abundance inspiring the majority of impoverished newcomers. More than for other groups of immigrants, America represented for Jews a promised land, a mysterious place of redemption from the accumulated iniquities of the past. As a form of relief from the harrowing conditions of scarcity, the anticipation and experience of material abundance in the United States enriched the perception of the new world as a source of liberation and promise.

Since the publication in 1817 of a Yiddish edition of Joachim Heinrich Campe's *The Discovery of America*, which attained great popularity in eastern Europe, the United States had acquired a mystique among Jews.²⁴ As larger numbers of Polish Jews started to emigrate to America in the 1870s, the images of American prosperity conveyed through letters and return visits to

the homeland took on greater clarity, deepening the country's appeal. In the summer of 1880, a thirty-eight-year-old Polish Jew living on East Houston Street was interviewed by a reporter for the *New York Tribune* about the conditions and attitude of the small community of immigrants. In answer to the question of whether the Polish Jews sought to return to Jerusalem, the man stated, "we are satisfied here; indeed, among us America is known as 'the new Jerusalem.'" ²⁵

The vision of American abundance intertwined with the vision of America as a haven. Interpreting American life in intensely spiritual terms, Jewish newcomers tended to view their new material existence as an integral part of the New Jerusalem. While acknowledging that the life of the Jewish garment worker was difficult, Abraham Cahan, the socialist editor of the *New York Forward* and the conscience of the city's Yiddish-speaking community, recalled that most Jewish newcomers perceived their new living conditions as justification for the claim that "America was paradise." ²⁶

The cultural heritage of the newcomers had prepared the ground for such an attitude. Although Judaism had not systematically formulated a description of Paradise, a conception arose among eastern Europeans that the sublime world of redemption might be full of milk and honey, a splendid banquet for the sake of the righteous. The tradition of Hasidism that flourished in eastern Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries encouraged the idea of a mystical union of the act of eating and spiritual liberation. One older version of Paradise was contained in an Aramaic poem pertaining to the holiday of Shavuoth. In the time of the Messiah, the poem foretold, meat, fish, and wine would be enjoyed at a special banquet, and God would set forth jars of wine that were made during the six days of Creation and sealed until the occasion of redemption. ²⁷

The concept of the afterlife that prevailed among the Jewish folk of eastern Europe, and that influenced the vision of American abundance, was articulated by Isaac Loeb Peretz, the brilliant writer of Yiddish short stories whose simplicity of style managed to evoke the popular imagination of Polish and Russian Jewry. One of Peretz's best stories, first published in 1894 in the *New York Arbeiter Tsaytung*, was "Bontshe the Silent," the tale of a physically and spiritually downtrodden Jew who finds himself transported to the Other World.

The story of Bontshe played on the profound tension between the impoverishment of the Jews and their grand vision of redemption. Having endured in apparently noble silence a life of constant abuse and poverty, Bontshe arrives in the divine kingdom to receive his final Judgment. Surrounded by little angels with gold-filigreed wings and silver slippers, the subdued "hero" is received with a gold easychair and a gold crown with inlaid gems, and he is escorted into the Court of Virtue, the floor of which (Bontshe is too awestruck to lift up his head) is composed of alabaster and diamonds. A review by the divine court ends so favorably that Bontshe is offered everything he desires from the glori-

ous realm of the Afterlife. In Peretz's satirical conclusion, the hero turns out to be an anti-hero, his lifelong silence having reflected not noble forbearance but an utter lack of spirit. Bontshe answers the court meekly that he would like every morning to have a hot baked roll with fresh butter! ²⁸

Although written as a commentary on the degrading aspects of Jewish life in eastern Europe, "Bontshe the Silent" gave form to the evocative sense of Paradise harbored by impoverished Jewish immigrants. Unlike Bontshe, these people had not been beaten down into passivity by deprivation—they were able not only to envision the splendor of redemption but also to imagine and pursue the prospect of a satisfying standard of material existence. A more realistic, poignant expression of the yearning for a worldly paradise was given by Kate Simon, in her recollection of immigration to New York from Warsaw just after World War I. "My life was filled with images of raisins and chocolate, cookies and dolls, white slippers and pink hair bows, all waiting for me in a big box called America," she wrote of her last days in Poland. Her rich mental image of a promised land had been formed from the stories of comfort and luxury told by adults expecting to emigrate. ²⁹

If the new potential for consumption completed the Jews' notion of America as a promised land, it served also as a starting point toward a goal that was more immediate for them than for other newcomers—the goal of fitting into American society. There was a strong desire among the peasants of eastern and southern Europe to make money quickly in the United States in order to buy land and raise their social position in the old country. Consequently, most groups of immigrants included a greatly disproportionate number of young males who originally viewed America as a means to an end rather than as an end in itself. Of the most populous groups of newcomers, the Italians exemplified the tendency to return home. More than two million Italians arrived in the United States between 1899 and 1910, over three-fourths of them males, largely "birds of passage" aiming to return home with American wages. During the period 1897-1906, more than one-half of the immigrants repatriated, and, from 1907-1911, almost three-fourths returned to Italy. ³⁰

By contrast, few Jews returned to Russia, Poland, Galicia, or Rumania. Statistics for the period 1908-1914 showed only 7 percent re-emigrating, compared to 31 percent of immigrants in general. Furthermore, Jewish immigration consisted of families rather than single men, including almost twice as many women as the groups from southern and eastern Europe contained. The reason for these striking differences was clear: Jews intended to stay. ³¹

The unique attitude of Jews toward America motivated them to view items of consumption as foundation stones of American identity. A study of the cultural adjustment of American immigrants conducted by sociologists Robert Park and Herbert Miller in 1921 described six personality "types" that characterized the majority of immigrants. Of the six, two were formulated by immigrants themselves and thus arose directly from the milieu of urban communities rather than from the observation of social scientists. These two

stereotypes were the "allrightnik" and the "cafone," deriving from the Jewish and the Italian immigrants respectively. In the contrast between the "allrightnik" and the "cafone," the significance of being a consumer in the American way emerged most clearly.

Reflecting the old-world orientation of many non-Jewish immigrants, the "cafone" represented the Italian who sought only to make money in America in order to gain a higher position in the native community in Italy. As a result of his singleminded focus on a future in the old world, the "cafone" cared neither about adopting American ways nor about fitting into the settled group of Italians in the United States. Standing in diametrical opposition to the "cafone," the "allrightnik" reflected the deep tendency of Jewish immigrants to view themselves in the light of potential roles and social position in America, rather than in the European birth-place. The "allrightnik" stood for the successful Jewish immigrant who adopted American habits, particularly habits of consumption, so thoroughly as to blend into the group of cosmopolitan Jews who had attained a high degree of cultural assimilation.³²

The cultural flexibility and cosmopolitan outlook of Jewish newcomers made it easier to understand and adopt American habits of consumption. Unlike the majority of immigrants, who had been raised within the narrow confines of village life, Jews had an almost proverbial versatility stemming from a history of migration within and beyond national borders. Mendele Moykher-Sforim, the "grandfather" of modern Yiddish literature, evinced the breadth, as he satirized the depth, of perspective of the most ignorant shtetl Jews of the mid-nineteenth century, whose conversation behind the old stove of the synagogue ranged beyond domestic secrets to "the politics of Istanbul, the Sultan, the Austrian Kaiser, high finance, Rothschild's fortune compared with the wealth of the great aristocrats and the other magnates . . . and so on and so forth."³³ The cultural flexibility of the Jews was characterized by a traveler who had spent enough time in Russia to recognize that the Russian had "great facility in language" but that the Russian Jew was "the most versatile man in the empire."³⁴

In the American setting, viewed overwhelmingly as the best available to Jews, the cultural adaptability of Jewish newcomers made for the rapid adoption of American ways. Perhaps the surest sign of quick cultural change was the commitment to learning English. David Blaustein, a Russian immigrant who gained a reputation as a social worker on the Lower East Side, where he served as a director of the Educational Alliance, noted that, in Russia, the vast majority of Jews made no effort to learn the dominant language, whereas in America "they feel they are welcome, and with high hopes" they set at once to learning English with the aim of lessening "as far as possible the gulf between them and native-born Americans."³⁵

The intensity of Jewish motivation to fit into American society by learning English underlay the success of Alexander Harkavy's "briefenshteller," handbooks written by the Yiddish lexicographer to instruct newcomers in the forms of American correspondence. The popularity of the first two "letter writers" in

the 1890s prompted the issue of an expanded third edition in 1902. Although the English model in the handbook was at times rigid and melodramatic, the volume guided the newcomer through virtually every social situation that would warrant a verbal exchange, from complaints to a wholesaler about defective merchandise, to apologies for late payment of rent, from greetings and invitations relating to holidays, rites of passage, concerts, meetings, and telegrams to letters containing passionate expressions of love as well as delicate phrases of distaste. Harkavy's letter-writer also included extensive lessons on English pronunciation—with a special section of words most likely to be mispronounced by the speaker of Yiddish—as well as exercises in spelling, punctuation, diction, and penmanship.³⁶

As a result of such efforts to master the language, many eastern Europeans gained access to the thoroughfare of urban American society. A survey of readers of the Yiddish press in New York City, which was undertaken after 1914 but probably reflected tendencies among Jews in earlier years as well, found that almost two-thirds of the randomly sampled readers could and did read English-language newspapers. They patronized the Yiddish press out of desire, rather than from necessity.³⁷

The English language was an essential avenue into American culture, but it was time-consuming and often difficult to adopt. In contrast, habits of consumption constituted the most easily accessible element of the new society. New clothes, foods, and furnishings were as tangible as syntax was abstract and as obtainable as idioms were elusive.

In responding to the environment of consumption in urban America, Jewish newcomers shared with other immigrants a general sense of wonder and enthusiasm. The simplest changes in lifestyle, such as increasing the size of meals, were accepted with little hesitation by virtually all newcomers. The prevalence of high-protein foods, like meat, milk, and eggs, and the abundance of food in general made for a sharp and immediate change in daily life, not only for newcomers from the poverty-stricken regions of eastern and southern Europe but even for western Europeans like the Germans.³⁸ In good part, the craving for old world dishes reflected the fact that these foods could suddenly be afforded in America.³⁹

First impressions of mass-marketed products like clothes and furniture were also universal. Many newcomers must have experienced the amazement of David Levinsky, the protagonist of Abraham Cahan's novel *The Rise of David Levinsky*, which first appeared in 1917. Newly arrived in New York City from a Lithuanian shtetl, Levinsky sees an evicted family sitting on the sidewalk with its belongings. He is shocked to discover that the furniture of these poor people would have properly belonged to a prosperous family in Russia. "But then," Levinsky reminded himself, "anything was to be expected of a country where the poorest devil wore a hat and a starched collar."⁴⁰

Although the prospect of consumption in America attracted people of various origins, Jews adopted the ways of the American consumer more quickly,

largely because of their dedication to the new society. One of the surest signs of the comparative sophistication of Jewish consumption was the flourishing retail business established in the neighborhoods of these eastern Europeans. The Jewish districts of the American city prior to 1914 offered immigrants a range of products that would have been inconceivable in the ramshackle shetels and urban ghettos of the eastern European Jews. The streets of the Lower East Side of New York inspired Henry James to speak of the "new style of poverty" in the American city, a social phenomenon of the first order that eluded most observers who were preoccupied with the environmental problems of the Lower East Side. As the great novelist walked through the area in 1904, after a twenty-two-year sojourn in Europe, he was surprised and impressed by "the blaze of the shops addressed to the New Jerusalem wants and the splendor with which these were taken for granted." Not oblivious to the sordid aspects of the crowded Jewish neighborhoods, James nonetheless considered the massive striving of the people for a more refined existence to be "the larger harmony" that united the energies of immigrants who had become urban consumers in America.⁴¹

The development of the Lower East Side as an emporium for immigrants betrayed the mythic image of the area as a monument to poverty. The dense Jewish section of lower Manhattan has been perceived as a prototype of urban poverty in the United States, and the Jewish population that lived there continues to be broadly described as impoverished.⁴² Notorious for its crowded housing, the Lower East Side did have residents who lived in a deplorable condition. Nonetheless, the rapid flowering of retail commerce in the district would have been impossible without a population that upheld standards of consumption.

The ability to cultivate such standards had everything to do with the bustling activity of eastern European Jews. By the late 1880s, when the number of Jewish newcomers in the area approached 100,000, the influence of the Jews' traditional familiarity with commerce began to be felt. The saloons and rundown shops that had marked the Lower East Side as a slum gave way steadily to groceries, cafés, and restaurants, and to clothing, jewelry, and furniture stores.⁴³ Particularly after the depression of 1893-1897 had ended, the signs of material sophistication came clearly to the surface of the community. Reviewing the retail boom of 1901, the *Yiddishes Tageblatt* concluded that the flourishing of business provided "the best proof of the great buying power of the people."⁴⁴ Visitors to the Lower East Side frequently commented on the quality of the food sold on the streets as well as in groceries and butcher stores, on the fine appearance of Jewish children, and on Jewish standards of domestic furnishing.⁴⁵ In 1902, the *Tageblatt* justifiably boasted about the regenerative power of Jewish consumers and merchants on the downtown community.

In clothing the East Side beats all other worker neighborhoods and it does not stand behind the most beautiful business areas. The Jewish quarter is the best cus-

tomers for silk and velvet, and also for gold and diamonds. . . . Furniture stores have multiplied and grown big and beautiful. The most beautiful furniture is sold on the East Side, and pianos have become a fashion in Jewish homes.⁴⁶

The newspaper went further, suggesting that Jews were becoming more definitively American by raising their material standards. This point was made by linking the popular concept of "greening oneself out" ("oygrinen zich"), which meant becoming more like an American, to sophistication in the area of consumption. Purporting to give "Clear Evidence How Jews Green Themselves Out Very Quickly in this Land," the paper dwelled on the change in attitudes toward housing that had occurred over the previous decade. In the early 1890s, many Jewish newcomers lived in small "room and bed-room" apartments rented for eight or ten dollars a month. A three-room place in a modern building was a distinct luxury. But, within a few years, many of the old tenements had been demolished, and the newcomers became accustomed to four- and five-room apartments with more conveniences. As the pace of modernization quickened, rents rose, but the supply was met by demand as newcomers entered the cycle of heightening tastes. By 1902, there had been a burst of construction of buildings with five- and six-room apartments and the latest conveniences. Bathrooms had become a commonplace, and electricity and elevators were not unusual. "The same people who had earlier been proud of living in three rooms," the *Tageblatt* stated, "began to be ashamed of their living situation and they opted for the new houses."⁴⁷

The phenomenon of continually rising expectations was officially documented by the New York City Tenement House Department, which reported that, by 1914, the city housed around 1,500,000 tenants in over 22,000 buildings constructed since the passage of the New York Tenement House Law in 1901, which required much better lighting and ventilation, and a bathroom inside each apartment. As the pressing demand of consumers for better housing suggested, the standards of 1900 were well outmoded by the end of the decade.⁴⁸ A changing sense of desirable housing inevitably spurred desires for newer furnishings as well. Recalling her childhood in New York City around the turn of the century, a Jewish immigrant from Serbia explained that belongings that had been "perfectly acceptable" in one apartment became "impossible" in a different dwelling.⁴⁹

Adjusting to the idea that luxuries could regularly be converted into necessities, newcomers found themselves involved in what appeared to be an endless cycle of acquisition. A Jewish version of the American notion of "keeping up with the Joneses" gave expression to the new view of material standards. "If the Browns next door hang up expensive lace curtains," a social commentator declared, replacing "Jones" with a name more common to American Jews, "we are discontented until lace curtains have gone up to our windows, no matter how much smaller our income may be than that of the Browns."⁵⁰ In eastern Europe, the concept of a continually rising standard of

material life would have had little foundation. In urban America, however, it found sustenance.

With subtle yet irresistible force, new habits of consumption triggered a profound change in perspective among the majority of newcomers. Acquiring the American perspective of abundance, Jews learned that aspirations need not be tailored to means. By the start of the twentieth century, the Yiddish press could focus on the topic of "Families That Live Better than They Earn." Although many Jews saved money fastidiously, an equal number apparently lived well beyond their means as a result of credit, particularly the installment plan. Exemplifying this phenomenon was a family that had a combined income of twenty-three dollars a week from three wage-earning members, but that spent twice that amount in order to have a new suit "every two months" and diamonds "as big as icicles."⁵¹ Although most Jews were not spendthrifts, they had to balance the pressure to save money against the imperative of increasing their standard of living.

The installment plan relieved the potential conflict between saving and spending. Despite the desire to identify with urban Americans through consumption, Jews shouldered a double burden of saving. They needed to accumulate money for the sake of relatives in Europe, most of whom required financial aid, and many of whom also wanted to emigrate to the United States. In addition, they needed savings for investment in business and real estate, two important avenues of economic success, and for education, a prerequisite for the social advance of the young in America. The economic and educational success of the newcomers and their children demonstrated the ability to save money in the hope of achieving long-term goals.⁵² Saving money for investment in the future, however, did not preclude American habits of consumption.

The practice of installment buying initiated newcomers into the possibilities of immediate acquisition and familiarized them with the impatient optimism that characterized the American consumer. One immigrant suggested the impact of installment buying upon Jews by entitling a chapter of her memoirs "Buy Now, Pay Later—Mama Discovers an American Custom."⁵³ On the Lower East Side, items as various as children's treats, wedding dresses, and cemetery plots were available on the installment plan in the 1880s and 1890s.⁵⁴ Musician Samuel Chotzinoff remembered how luxuries bought on credit relieved the tense existence of his mother, who had to run a large household with small earnings. A percentage of the family's income was regularly devoted to "the never-ending succession" of domestic furnishings and personal possessions that his mother "could not resist buying" on installment.⁵⁵

Encouraged by the activity of installment peddlers, young couples and families were particularly impressed by the possibility of instantly furnishing a new apartment with elegant-looking parlor sets and with dining room and bedroom pieces that contained the promise of a comfortable life. Abraham Cahan recalled that, when he married in 1885, he and his wife moved into an

apartment furnished on the installment plan. The "three new rooms with brand-new furniture" passed even the stern scrutiny of the Russian intellectuals who composed Cahan's circle of friends. They gave the home high approval, judging the furniture to be "just fine."⁵⁶

The availability of consumer credit was viewed not only in pragmatic terms, as a means of expediting consumption, but also as the outward sign of the dynamic state of demand that seemed to animate American society. Thomas Eyges, a Russian Jewish anarchist who immigrated from England to America in 1902, was prompted by his first law class—on the topic of contracts—to comprehend intellectually the general sense of wonder about American abundance which he had held for over a decade in the new society. Once his law professor made the opening comment that the underlying principle of American economic life was the assumption that everybody is honest, Eyges felt that he suddenly understood how such a young nation could become the richest in the world. "The extension of credit to everybody," he reflected, on the practice of selling luxuries on installment, was "the key to success," enabling virtually everyone to imagine material abundance and to realize that spending could be a legitimate way to confront the future.⁵⁷

In 1914, as Europe verged on a war that would both assure the economic superiority of the United States in the world and herald the end of free immigration for Jews, an editorial in the *Yiddishes Tageblatt* made it clear that Jewish immigrants had developed the American perception of material abundance as a precious legacy. "Who can deny that [America] is more fruitful," began the argument under the title "A Great America—the Land of Tomorrow," which continued, "that her inhabitants eat better, dress more beautifully and live more comfortably than does the average population of other lands?"⁵⁸ Capping a generation of feverish immigration, this patriotic message reflected the psychological adaptation of eastern European Jews to the phenomenon of American abundance.

Though critical to the adaptation of immigrants, acceptance of the ever-rising American standard of living conflicted with traditional Jewish culture. In the old world, Jewish identity depended upon a venerable distinction between the holy and the mundane spheres of existence. To augment that distinction, Jews had cultivated a unique concept of material luxury, one that would be undermined by American abundance.

Notes

1. Louis Borgenicht, *The Happiest Man: The Life of Louis Borgenicht* (New York, 1942), p. 368.
2. British Board of Trade, *Report on the Cost of Living in American Towns* (London, 1911), pp. xxxix–xl.
3. Leonard Dinnerstein and David M. Reimers, *Ethnic Americans: A History of Immigration and Assimilation* (New York, 1975), pp. 164–165.

4. George E. Pozzeta, "The Italians of New York City, 1890-1914" (Ph.D. thesis, University of North Carolina, 1971), pp. 17-19, 177-179.
5. For a detailed description of conditions in Lithuania, see Peter Paul Junitis, *The Acculturation of the Lithuanians of Chester, Pennsylvania* (New York, 1985), pp. 4-65. This book is a reprint of the author's Ph.D. thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 1951.
6. Carole Malkin, *The Journeys of David Toback* (New York, n.d.), pp. 213-214. The book was first published in 1981.
7. Morris R. Cohen, *A Dreamer's Journey* (Boston, 1949), pp. 17-19; Marcus E. Ravage, *An American in the Making* (New York, 1917), p. 82.
8. Joachim Schoenfeld, *Shetl Memoirs: Jewish Life in Galicia Under the Austro-Hungarian Empire and in the Reborn Poland, 1898-1939* (Hoboken, N.J., 1985), p. 33.
9. New York *Jewish Daily News*, August 2, 1898. The *Jewish Daily News* was the English page of the *Yiddishes Tageblatt*. It appeared for about a decade after 1897 and was instituted in 1914. As an aid to the reader, this source will be identified by its English title throughout the book.
10. *Ibid.*, April 28, 1900.
11. Isaac M. Rubinow, *Economic Conditions of the Jews in Russia* (New York, 1975), p. 526. The book was first published in 1907.
12. Philip Cowen, *Memoirs of an American Jew* (New York, 1932), p. 231.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Quoted from Sidney Alexander, *Chagall* (New York, 1978), p. 42.
15. Benjamin L. Gordon, *Between Two Worlds: The Memoirs of a Physician* (New York, 1952), p. 12, for a specific recollection of the home of a petty grain merchant in Lithuania during the 1880s.
16. Mary Antin, *The Promised Land* (Boston, 1969), p. 100. This well-written account of the immigration of a Jewish family from Russia to America first appeared in 1912.
17. United States Immigration Commission, *Reports* (Washington, D.C., 1911), vol. 4, *Emigration Conditions in Europe*, p. 56.
18. Marcus Lee Hansen, *The Atlantic Migration 1607-1860* (New York, 1961), pp. 157-158. The book was first published in 1940; Maldwyn Allen Jones, *American Immigration* (Chicago, 1960), p. 100.
19. Hansen, *Atlantic Migration*, pp. 157-158.
20. United States Immigration Commission, *Emigration Conditions in Europe*, p. 57.
21. Ewa Morawska, "For Bread with Butter": Life-Worlds of Peasant Immigrants from East Central Europe, 1880-1914," *Journal of Social History* (Spring 1984), 17:388-389, 392. For an expanded version of this work, see Ewa Morawska, "For Bread with Butter": Life-Worlds of East Central Europeans in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, 1890-1940 (New York, 1985). Robert Anthony Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950* (New Haven, 1985), pp. 156-162.
22. Salo W. Baron, *The Russian Jew Under Tsars and Soviets* (New York, 1976), pp. 68-69; Howard Morley Sachar, *The Course of Modern Jewish History* (New York, 1982), p. 188. The first editions of these standard texts of Jewish history in the modern era appeared in 1964 and 1958 respectively.
23. Hans Rogger, *Russia in the Age of Modernization and Revolution, 1881-1917* (New York, 1983), p. 199; Baron, *Russian Jew Under Tsars and Soviets*, pp. 43-62.
24. Bernard Weinryb, "Eastern European Immigration to the United States," *Jewish Quarterly Review* (April 1955), 45:501.
25. New York *Tribune*, July 11, 1880.
26. Leon Stein, Abraham P. Conan, and Lynn Davison, eds., *The Education of Abraham Caban* (Philadelphia, 1969), p. 400.
27. *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem, 1972), 2:337-339; 13:78-86; L. Jacobs, "Eating as an Act of Worship in Hasidic Thought," in Siegfried Stein and Raphael Loewe, *Studies in Jewish Religions and Intellectual History* (Tuscaloosa, Ala., 1979), 157-161. The verses

evoking the aura of the divine banquet are from "Akdamuf," a mystical poem composed in Aramaic by a European rabbi of the eleventh century. This version of the poem was described by a reporter for the *New York Tribune*, whose story on the celebration of Sha'wroth by Jewish newcomers appeared on May 31, 1903.

28. Isaac Loeb Peretz, *Alle Verk* (Buenos Aires, 1944), 6:98-106.
29. Kate Simon, *Bronx Primitive* (New York, 1982), p. 18.
30. Humbert S. Nelli, *The Italians in Chicago* (New York, 1970), pp. 42-47.
31. C. Bezael Sherman, *The Jew Within American Society* (Detroit, 1965), pp. 60-61.
32. Robert E. Park and Herbert A. Miller, *Old World Traits Transplanted* (New York, 1921), p. 101.
33. Mendele Moykher-Sforim, "The Travels of Benjamin the Third," in Joachim Neugroschel, ed., *The Shetl* (New York, 1979), p. 182.
34. New York *Tribune*, March 29, 1903.
35. Miriam Blaustein, ed., *Memoirs of David Blaustein* (New York, 1913), p. 60.
36. *Harkavy's American Letter Writer and Speller, English and Yiddish* (New York, 1902).
37. Mordecai Soltes, *The Yiddish Press: An Americanizing Agency* (New York, 1925), p. 44.
38. Dorothee Schneider, "For Whom Are All the Good Things in Life?: German-American Housewives Discuss Their Budgets," in Hartmut Keil and John B. Jentz, eds., *German Workers in Industrial Chicago, 1850-1910* (DeKalb, Ill., 1983), p. 152.
39. Nelli, *Italians in Chicago*, p. 119.
40. Abraham Cahán, *The Rise of David Lewinsky* (New York, 1960), p. 95. The book was first published in 1917.
41. Henry James, *The American Scene* (London, 1907), pp. 135-136.
42. The Lower East Side as a prototype of urban poverty appears in Anthony Sutcliffe, ed., *Metropolis, 1890-1940* (Cambridge, 1984), p. 24, which draws on the depiction of Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers* (New York, 1976), p. 88. The almost chronic tendency to preface the phrase "Jewish immigrants" with the adjective "poor" can be observed in the symposium "A Reexamination of a Classic Work in American Jewish History: Moses Rischin's *The Promised City*, Twenty Years Later," *American Jewish History* (December 1983), 73:141. Moses Rischin, however, originally noticed the marked improvement in standards of consumption on the Lower East Side, *The Promised City, New York's Jews, 1870-1914* (Cambridge, Mass. 1977), p. 92. The book was first published in 1962.
43. For a chronicle of change on the Lower East Side since the 1880s, see New York *Yiddishes Tageblatt*, March 20, 1910.
44. *Tageblatt*, December 31, 1901.
45. Two vivid accounts of food on the Lower East Side are found in the *New York Tribune*, August 20, 1899, and *Jewish Daily News*, February 11, 1900. A visit of college students to the Lower East Side in 1904 is recalled by Philip Cowen, founder and publisher of the *American Hebrew*, in *Memoirs of an American Jew* (New York, 1932), p. 298. For the high opinion held by social workers of Jewish tastes, see Charles Bernheimer, *Russian Jew in the United States* (Philadelphia, 1905), p. 35, and Mary Sminkovitch, *The City Worker's World in America* (New York, 1917), pp. 12-13.
46. *Tageblatt*, July 4, 1902.
47. *Ibid.*
48. New York City Tenement House Department, *Seventh Report of the Tenement House Department of the City of New York* (New York, 1915), pp. 8-9.
49. Marie Jastrow, *A Time to Remember: Growing Up in New York Before the Great War* (New York, 1979), p. 149.
50. *Jewish Daily News*, April 23, 1900.
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52. On Jewish economic advancement, see Thomas Kessner, *The Golden Door: Italian*

Consuming Brotherhood: Men's Culture, Style and Recreation as Consumer Culture, 1880-1930

Mark A. Swienicki

In her exploration of the historical relationship between American men and cosmetics, Kathy Peiss outlines how the late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century discourse of heterosexual masculinity denied and covered up men's cosmetics use by defining men's numerous grooming products as toiletries rather than cosmetics or beauty products. This denial of the feminine "other" lurking within men was so sustained and successful that it became a "self-evident statement" of twentieth-century culture that "real men" do not use cosmetics.¹

A parallel, self-evident statement of American culture and research would be that pre-Depression, American men were not major consumers since most buying and shopping were done by women. While such an idea is nearly ubiquitous in American popular culture, sociology, and women's history, my examination of the leisure activities of white American men between 1890 and 1930 suggests that such men were indeed a very large and important consuming constituency. Moreover, the advertisements in numerous men's and general interest magazines of the period show that such men were highly courted by early twentieth-century advertisers. However, most of this consumption and consumerism has been shielded from view since the terms "consumer" and "consumer goods" have been constructed in such a profoundly gendered fashion. Thus after documenting the degree to which pre-Depression men were: 1) engaged in consumption and consumer activity, and 2) explicitly courted by magazine advertising, I will examine how and why such information has been overlooked by most scholars of gendered consumption and advertising.

The Elision of the Male Consumer

Over the past decade, a rich literature on the relationship between gender, shopping, and consumer culture has emerged within U.S. cultural history,

¹Consuming Brotherhood: Men's Culture, Style and Recreation as Consumer Culture, 1880-1930" by Mark A. Swienicki from *Journal of Social History* 31 (Summer 1998). Reprinted by permission of the *Journal of Social History*.

and *Jewish Immigrant Mobility in New York City, 1880-1915* (New York, 1977); see Moses Rischin, *The Promised City: New York's Jews, 1870-1914* (Cambridge, Mass. 1977), pp. 51-75, 92-93, 199-200 for discussions of activity in business, real estate, and education; the theme of education as a means of advancement is addressed by Leonard Dinnerstein, "Education and the Advancement of American Jews," in Bernard J. Weiss, *American Education and the European Immigrant, 1840-1940* (Urbana, Ill., 1982), pp. 44-60; good primary references to Jewish investment in real estate are Isaac Markens, *The Hebrews in America* (New York, 1975), p. 157, first published in 1888; Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*, p. 94; Charles S. Bernheimer, ed., *Russian Jew in the United States* (Philadelphia, 1905), pp. 46, 354-55; *New York Tribune*, June 25, 1905; *Jewish Daily News*, January 1, 1906.

53. Jastrow, *A Time to Remember*, p. 147.

54. *Yiddishes Tageblatt*, January 1, 1889, for advertisement of H. Silberman and Son, January 18, 1892, for advertisement of Mt. Nebob Cemetery; and January 15, 1892 for advertisement of B. Zeller; Stein, et al., *Education of Abraham Caham*, pp. 219, 261; Samuel Chorzynoff, *A Lost Paradise* (New York, 1955), p. 75.

55. Chorzynoff, *Lost Paradise*, p. 122, also pp. 113, 124.

56. Stein et al., *Education of Abraham Caham*, p. 306.

57. Thomas B. Eyges, *Beyond the Horizon: The Story of a Radical Emigrant* (Boston, 1944), p. 140.

58. *Tageblatt*, July 3, 1914.