

Section IV

JEWISH MIGRATION TO AMERICA

Members of the Shanberg family were undoubtedly caught up in the cultural awareness taking place in eastern Europe in the late 19th century, as were all Jews. The Jewish consciousness of eastern Europe found expression in the socialist Bund movement, Zionism, Yiddish literature, and a range of political and religious movements. This self-awareness had previously kindled activity and hope in a stagnant and closed world of the Jew and many stayed in the Pale¹ who would otherwise have fled after the chaos, pogroms and Kishinev massacre following the assassination of Alexander II, Czar of Russia, on March 1, 1881. As succinctly put forth in his work, World Of Our Fathers,² Irving Howe states in his opening paragraph:

. . . The question had now to be asked: should the east European Jews continue to regard themselves as permanent residents of the Russian empire or should they seriously consider the possibility of a new exodus?

The following are relevant quotations on the subject of Jewish migration expolated from Howe's book, *supra*, pages 5 through 16, given without further citations.

There had already been a trickle of Jewish emigration to America—7,500 in the years between 1820 and 1870 and somewhat more than 40,000 in the 1870's. But the idea of America as a possible locale for collective renewal had not yet sunk deeply in the consciousness of the east European Jews. By the 1880's their hope of winning rights as a citizen was badly shaken, perhaps destroyed.

At no time could the life of the Jews in Russia have been described as comfortable. With the caprice of absolutism, the monarchs had alternated between prolonged repression and intervals of relaxation. At intervals these policies would be eased a little, and the Jews would be allowed, as part of a tendency toward Westernization, to settle in outlying southern and western districts. . . .

Once the Holy Alliance sealed the defeat of Napoleon in June of 1815 and stabilized Europe as a concert of reaction, the conditions of the Russian Jews, as indeed of almost all Russians, sadly deteriorated. The reign of Nicholas I, from 1825 to 1855, proved to be a nightmare. Over six hundred anti-Jewish decrees were enacted, ranging from expulsions from villages in which Jews had traditionally resided to a heavy censorship of Yiddish and Hebrew books; from meddling with the curriculums of Jewish schools to a

¹"The Pale of Settlement comprised that area of czarist Russia in which the Jews were legally authorized to settle. The Pale covered an area of about 386,000 square miles from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea. By 1897, slightly less than 4,900,000 Jews lived there, forming 94 percent of the total Jewish population of Russia and about 12 percent of the population of the area." (Howe, *infra*, at page 5n)

²World of Our Fathers, Irving Howe, published by Simon and Schuster, 1976, page 5.

conscription that tore Jewish children away from parents, often at ages between twelve and eighteen, for periods of up to twenty-five years. . . .

No wonder that Alexander II, whom Disraeli called 'the kindest prince who has ever ruled Russia', aroused enthusiasm among the Jews. Alexander II reduced the period of military service to five years; . . . and freed the forty million serfs of Russia. But once this weak effort at official liberalism collapsed and the pogroms of 1881 left the Jews stunned and bleeding, it was no longer possible . . . to hold out much hope Though not as bestial as Nicholas, Alexander III pursued a steady anti-Jewish policy. Neither stability nor peace, well-being nor equality, was possible for the Jews of Russia.

The life of the east European Jews was anything but an idyl. Given the pressures from without and a slow stagnation within, this world was bound to contain large portions of the ignorant, provincial, and even corrupt. One of the motivating forces behind the communal and political movements that sprang up during the last two decades of the nineteenth centuries, as well as of the Yiddish poetry and fiction written at the same time, was a desire to stir the blood of a society that had long gone sluggish, to cleanse the life of a people that had suffered too long from isolation, poverty, and violence.

(Their world was) colored throughout by religious emotion, yet it was not a theocracy: by no means were the rabbis undisputed rulers. It was a world dominated by an uneasy alliance between a coterie of the learned and the somewhat wealthier merchants . . . (uneasy because) often enough there smoldered a subterranean rivalry between learning and wealth that could suddenly flare into the open. . . .

Socially, this world had not yet split into sharply defined and antagonistic classes. By the 1880's . . . (T)he beginnings of a Jewish proletariat started to appear in the cities, though in the main it consisted not of factory workers but of artisans employed in small shops. . . . But in the shtetl . . . (there were no classes because Jews did not own the means of production). Often the relations between the social strata of the shtetl came to little more than a difference between the poor and the hopelessly poor. . . . As it was, the shtetl nestled in the crevices of a backward agricultural economy where Jews were often prohibited from ownership of land, had to live by trading, artisanship, and their wits. . . . Distinctions of caste were urgently maintained through learning, economic position, and the concept of yikhes, which pertains to family status and pride.

. . . The shtetl was a town, usually a small one; it sometimes had cobbled streets; it occasionally had imposing structures; and it was rarely picturesque. . . . (It was) a jumble of wooden houses clustered higgledy-piggledy around a market-place . . . as crowded as a slum The streets were. . . as tortuous as a Talmudic argument. . . .

. . . Once the shtetl began to crumble under alien pressures, the sense of history, suddenly rising to acute consciousness, became an obsession; . . . so that certain of the political movements among the east European Jews, notably Zionism and socialism, received nutriment from the very faith they had begun to displace.

At the peak of its development the shtetl was a highly formalized society. It had to be. . . . (There was no need or room for individuality in this lost world.)

Life was static, but not without its upheavals. For centuries they existed, and then Sabbatai Zevi, the false messiah, shook them in the seventeenth century.

. . . In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Hasidism . . . swept across Europe to brighten its spiritual life. And in the nineteenth century the Haskala, or Enlightenment, brought modern thought to at least the middle-class segments of the Jewish population. The greatest ferment came, however, in the last third of the nineteenth century. A phalanx of new political and cultural movements, . . . (a social awareness) that Jewish culture in both the shtetl and the city had again come alive . . . (but this time), (T)urned, one might say, with religious intensity to the idea of secular expression.

As early as 1882 a conference was held in Saint Petersburg to discuss the question of emigration as a communal policy. What now uniquely characterized the east European Jews was the explosive mixture of mounting wretchedness and increasing hope, physical suffering and spiritual exultation. They perceived a whole new hope—that there was somewhere else to go—and whether for the fulfillment of personal relief or of collective aspirations, the masses spontaneously made their decision beginning slowly in the summer of 1881 and then reaching their peak between 1905 and 1914 when 700,000 east European Jews emigrated. It was at the beginning of this peak period that the relatives still remaining in The Pale, who would ever leave their homeland, immigrated to America.

The following are excerpts, given without page citations, from studies of social conditions in Chicago in the early 1900's when our relatives were still arriving in the United States and striving to establish a new home.³

The Russian Jew brings with him the quaint customs of a religion full of poetry and of the sources of good citizenship. The orthodox synagogue is not merely a house of prayer; it is an intellectual centre, a mutual aid society, a fountain of self-denying altruism, and a literary club, no less than a place of worship. The study-rooms of the hundreds of synagogues, where the good old people of the Ghetto come to read and discuss "words of law" as well as the events of the day, are crowded every evening in the week with poor street peddlers, and with those gray-haired, misunderstood sweat-shop hands of whom the public hears ever time a tailor strike is declared. So few are the joys which this world has to spare for those overworked, enfeebled victims of 'the inferno of modern times' that their religion is to many of them the only thing which makes life worth living. In the fervor of prayer or the abandon of religious study they forget the grinding poverty of their homes. Between the walls of the synagogue, on the top floor of some ramshackled tenement house, they sing beautiful melodies, some of them composed in the caves and forests of Spain, where the wandering people worshiped the God of their fathers at the risk of their lives; and these and the sighs and sobs of the Days of Awe, the thrill that passes through the heartbroken talith-covered congregation

³Bernheimer, The Russian Jew in the United States, The John C. Winston Co. Philadelphia, 1905.

when the shofar blows, the mirth which fills the house of God and the tenement homes upon the Rejoicing of the Law, the tearful greetings and humbled peace-makings on Atonement Eve, the mysterious light of the Chanuccah (a festival in memory of the restoration of the Temple in the time of the Maccabeans) candles, the gifts and charities of Purim (a festival commemorating the events in the time of Esther), the joys and kingly solemnities of Passover,—all these pervade the atmosphere of the Ghetto with a beauty and a charm without which the life of its older residents would often be one of unrelieved misery.

The Russian immigrant in America tells a somewhat different tale from writers who describe a great Inferno of the Europe from which he had escaped.

. . . We must, however, remember that his native love of home and fatherland lends a rosy coloring to all his memories of far-away Russland. He really loves his country and hates only the government restrictions against him. He will tell you that the microbeholding, smell-emitting air-shaft of our modern tenement is unknown in Russia. The tenements are rarely over three stores high, and each is provided with a court-yard where the children may play free from the dangers and temptations of the streets.

The present size of Chicago Jewry, including all elements, Portuguese, German, Russian and Roumanian, is variously estimated. The best judges, however, agree on 60,000 as being the fairest approximation. These are distributed over the whole city area forming colonies at each of the four corners—a fact worthy of note in a consideration of the Chicago Ghetto, which to the minds of some people still suggests an iron-barred fence encircling a limited area wherein all Jews dwell.

Chicago Jewry is scattered all over the South Side as far as Sixty-third Street, on the East and North-East Side up to the Lake, the North-West Side, where it numbers nearly 15,000, and finally the West Side where there are at least 30,000 Jews, mostly Russian and Polish. . . .

It is the West Side of Chicago that is commonly called the Chicago Ghetto. In fact the city is supposed to have two Ghettos, a lesser and a greater. The lesser 'is found in the Seventh Ward bounded by Twelfth, Halsted, Fifteenth Streets and Steward Avenue, while ninety per cent of the population are Jews. The Greater Ghetto, including an area of about a square mile, comprises parts of the Nineteenth, Seventh and Eights Wards, and is bounded by Polk Street on the North, Blue Island Avenue on the west, Fifteenth Street on the south, and Steward Avenue on the east.' Roughly speaking, this is almost co-extensive with the 'slum district' as defined in the Seventh Special Report of the Commissioner of Labor on the Slums of Great Cities. It is this Ghetto, then, in the slum of a great city, which is the home of the great majority of Chicago Jews. How it looks to the 'outsider' may best be judged from the following description of Prof. Zueblin:

The physical characteristics of the Ghetto do not differ materially from the surrounding districts. The streets may be a trifle narrower; the alleys are no filthier. There is only one saloon to ten in the other districts, but the screens, side doors, and loafers are of the ubiquitous type; the theater bills a higher grade of performance than other cheap theaters, but checks are

given between the acts, whose users find their way to the bar beneath. The dry goods stores have the same 'cheap and nasty' goods within which may be found elsewhere. The race differences are subtle; they are not too apparent to the casual observer. It is the religious distinction which every one notices, the synagogues, the Talmud schools, the 'kosher' signs on the meat markets. Among the dwelling-houses of the Ghetto are found the three types which curse the Chicago workingman,—the small low, one or two story, 'pioneer' wooden shanty, erected probably before the street was graded, and hence several feet below the street level; the brick tenement of three or four stories, with insufficient light, bad drainage, no bath, built to obtain the highest possible rent for the smallest possible cubic space; and the third type, the deadly rear tenement with no light in front, and with the frightful odors of the dirty alley in the rear, too often the workshop of the 'sweater' as well as the home of an excessive population. On the narrow pavement of the narrow street in front is found the omnipresent garbage-box, with full measure, pressed down and running over. In all but the severest weather, the streets swarm with children day and night. On bright days, groups of adults join the multitude, especially on Saturday and Sunday, or on Jewish holidays. A morning walk impresses one with the density of the population, but an evening visit reveals a hive.

One thing which excites the wonder of the investigator is the vitality of the Jew in spite of his living under the double curse of slum and Ghetto. The Seventh contains the largest Jewish population and the lowest death rate. The same remarkable vitality as is shown by the low death rate in the ward containing a large Jewish population is observed in other Jewish centres, and this vitality, let it be remembered is not only 'purely physical.' Hand in hand with the energy of the body goes an energy of mind which is equally challenging,—as a description of the various forms of industrial and social activities plainly shows.

. . . The true explanation of this vitality may now be suggested: Is it not likely that the Jew possesses qualities which are too fine for the slum and Ghetto soil in which they are planted, the result being a redoubling of energy to overcome a particularly nasty environment? That he has not succumbed to the distressing environment is still a cause for wonder.

Probably among no nationality does the economic condition change more rapidly than among the Russian Jewish people in the United States. The transition period from the junk peddler to the iron yard owner, from the dry goods peddler to the retail or wholesale dry goods merchant, from the cloak maker to the cloak manufacturer, is comparatively short. True, the same causes which influence trade and industry in the economic world about them also influence this population, yet they seem able to develop business methods of their own, which, in many instances, successfully defy or modify well established economic laws. They can do business with little money, or practically no money, right next door to a large house, ignoring the economic rule that the latter, through competition, drives the smaller house out of business. They continue to hold their own in the trades in which they engage, growing in strength as the years go on.

'A Jew would rather earn five dollars a week doing business for himself than ten dollars a week working for some one else,' was the observation of an Irishman who worked in the same factory with me.

We have no doubt that the new day about to break will show the Russian American Jew as a man of power, with mind well stocked and judgment well trained, with sympathies well refined for all that is good, true, and noble, with loyalty most intense for the best that America calls its own; a citizen well worthy of the prerogative, of the sovereignty which American citizenship confers; a Jew deeply conscious of the beauty, the reasonableness of his faith, the historic beauty that birth from Jewish parents imposes.

So this is why and from where our Jewish immigrant ancestors came, along with so many thousands of others. The older family members were seeking the freedom to be Jews without oppression, and desired to stay with their families, while the younger members had experienced an economic and intellectual hope which inspired the second exodus to a new land. This exodus, which began for our family with the arrival of CHANA BAILE SHANBERG, wife of Area Labe Goltz, in the United States between 1886 and 1888, culminated in the summer of 1906, with the immigration of the author's father as a child, his parents and his grandfather, NISSEN SHANBERG, hereafter often referred to as "the Ancestor".