

NEW AMERICANS: THE IMMIGRANTS

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

One day in August 1921, the artist Joseph Pennell was walking in the Lower East Side of New York City. He wandered into a street of houses that were trimmed with ornate carvings, mouldings, and ironwork, all products of old craft traditions. Pennell was at once taken with the beauty of the architecture and disturbed by the people in the neighborhood. He wrote to his friend Cass Gilbert, a renowned architect, that the beauty of the buildings was "destroyed by the tribe of mongrels, the spewings out of niggers, dagoes, Chinese, and Greeks who herd in them and make by millions the new Americans." Nonetheless, Pennell advised Gilbert to go there: "If you can stand the stink and sight of your fellow countrymen and women though they aren't mostly naturalized and can get a police permit to see the dens where they herd and breed, *you might get some marble pieces.*" An architect like Gilbert, in other words, could extract artwork from these people's homes and reuse it in buildings located in more respectable neighborhoods. Pennell added as an afterthought that there was no danger that anyone in the neighborhood might object; "as there are no Jews there, these people don't know the things have any value."

It was not uncommon for Americans in this era to think of those from other lands as "spewings," to comment on how they smelled, or to mention their "herding" and "breeding," terms usually reserved for animals. The inscription on the newly erected Statue of Liberty, after all, referred to immigrants as "wretched refuse," hardly a compliment to the parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents of so many of us. Nativism, racism, and xenophobia have been long and enduring in American culture. Pennell's letter merely tapped into resurgent prejudices.

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to see such attitudes as fixed and immutable. Ethnic stereotypes may range from tasteless jokes to vicious images that are used to justify violence. The intensity of prejudice varies with such circumstances as economic conditions, competition for jobs, the degree of closeness in which people of different groups live to each other, and the amount of contact over time they share with each other. By 1880, for example, few Americans had encountered Polish people, but nearly everyone was familiar with the racist stereotypes of African Americans that infused popular culture. Prejudice

may be enduring, but its pervasiveness, intensity, and consequences change dramatically across time and place.

To read Pennell's letter as part of an unvarying climate of hatred for strangers is to imply that there were no alternatives. The logic is circular: everyone harbored ugly prejudices because that was how everyone felt. Such a position absolves individuals from responsibility, for it makes them seem powerless before the ideas that control them. But to say "everybody thought that way back then" simply is not true; the history of ideas is never so clear or uniform. For example, Pennell's last remark derives from the age-old stereotype of Jews' alleged obsession with money, their stinginess, wealth, power, and so forth. In the stereotype, an entire people's history, traditions, and religion are reduced to a simple and pernicious cluster of prejudices.

Not everyone believed such nonsense. To cite an alternative (and history is the study of alternatives, of roads taken and not taken), Hutchins Hapgood, a man from an old American family, wrote an extraordinarily sensitive and complex book about the cultural life of the Jewish neighborhoods of New York City. Hapgood walked on the same streets as Pennell (though he had walked through them twenty years earlier) and saw something very different. "The Jewish quarter of New York," Hapgood wrote in the preface to his *Spirit of the Ghetto* (1902), "is generally supposed to be a place of poverty, dirt, ignorance, and immorality. . . . But the unpleasant aspect is not the subject of the following sketches." Philanthropists, sociologists, and reformers might enter ethnic neighborhoods to document the immigrants' debasement, but Hapgood was attracted by "the charm [he] felt in men and things there." By not reducing Jewish immigrant culture to poverty, depravity, or stereotypes, Hapgood could explore the rich cultural life that Jews created in America.

The history of America, of course, is the history of immigrants. But the half-century between the late 1870s and the late 1920s—by which date new legal restrictions and economic depression had ended the influx of foreign peoples—witnessed unprecedented immigration. Roughly 30 million newcomers entered the country in those years, sometimes at a rate of over 1 million per year. They came less from western and northern Europe than from southern and eastern Europe, and they came too from Asia, so that, taken together, Italians, Jews, Poles, Russians, and other Slavic and Mediterranean peoples, as well as Chinese, arrived in numbers far exceeding the legions of Irish, German, and Scandinavian immigrants who dominated earlier in the nineteenth century.

The newcomers tended to settle north of the Ohio and east of the Mississippi Rivers in burgeoning urban centers like Chicago, Cleveland, and New York. Industrialization and the expansion of the worldwide market economy caused massive shifts in the supply of goods and the demand for labor, so that millions found themselves in motion. The vagaries of weather or falling prices in international markets might leave Italian or Slavic farmworkers on the edge of starvation, but the demand for laborers to dig the subways of New York City or to man the steel mills of Pittsburgh offered them a chance to survive. Some people migrated within their native countries; others moved through Europe or Asia;

many went overseas to Latin America, Canada, or especially the United States; but immigration was an international phenomenon rooted in economic dislocations that left millions without the means to make a living.

The majority of the new immigrants were men; they came in search of jobs while their families stayed behind. (Jews, more than other ethnic groups, migrated as whole families because political persecution in eastern Europe gave them little hope of a decent life there; Chinese women, on the other hand, were forbidden to enter the United States, so Chinese men often settled in all-male work camps to mine gold or to build the railroads in the West.) Many intended to remain in America—or in whatever country they found work—only long enough to send money home to secure the survival of their families in the old country. In some years, half as many people returned to Europe as came to America. Moreover, immigrants tended to come in patterns that demographers call *chain migrations*. The decision to go was not made randomly by individuals; rather, extended families, neighbors, and even whole towns migrated within a few years of each other, sold their labor together, and settled into new communities together. The Chinatowns, Little Italys, and other ethnic neighborhoods were the result of people's need to help one another economically, to maintain their language and culture, and to defend themselves from prejudice.

Despite occasional recessions, America's economy boomed during this era, providing plenty of work to lure the newcomers. But immigrants were mostly unskilled, exploitable labor, easily replaced by others if they started to organize and make demands. In New York sweatshops, Jews sewed garments for the ready-to-wear industry; in Pittsburgh mills, Poles poured steel; on California ranches, Mexicans picked the crops; and in downtown Chicago, Greeks shined businessmen's shoes. Most worked brutally long hours to make a bit more or less than subsistence wages. All lived with the fear that new workers might undercut their wages, and they labored in horrid conditions that caused tens of thousands to die prematurely every year. Epidemics swept the crowded slums, mines caved in, explosions rocked the mills, construction workers fell from shoddy scaffoldings, and tenements burned to the ground. Prejudice and fear prevented many Americans from recognizing the human tragedy before their eyes. The relative powerlessness of immigrants—their difficulties communicating across ethnic boundaries, their need to keep jobs, and their sheer exhaustion from overwork—too often kept them from organizing effectively to resist oppression.

All of their hardships notwithstanding, the immigrants made a life for themselves and their children. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that, to survive the hardships, they knew that they must stick together and cling to their old ways. In ethnic communities, they sang the songs, played the games, and told the stories of the old country. Extended families reinforced distinctive gender roles, foodways, languages, and other cultural patterns. The new immigrants built churches, especially Catholic churches, since the majority of them were of that faith. They worshiped in their own unique ways; Polish Catholicism differed markedly from Italian Catholicism, as did the Greek Orthodox from the Russian

Orthodox church. Politics engaged many immigrants' attention, and community leaders helped to develop local resources, to accomplish goals for their people, and, in the process, to become powerful individuals. Many groups also came with well-developed traditions of economic protest, so socialist, communist, trade unionist, and anarchist organizations flourished.

But there were always tensions. The children of immigrants were divided in their loyalties between the ways of their parents and those of the American culture. Wealthier foreigners were embarrassed by their poor compatriots but often not too embarrassed to exploit them. Patriotic feelings toward the new country that fed them vied with hatred of America's prejudice and exploitation. The experiences of migrating to a strange land, settling, making a living, establishing communities, and deciding whether to stay and for how long were difficult challenges that individuals negotiated for themselves day by day.

INTRODUCTION TO DOCUMENTS 1-6

The documents in this chapter give a sense of the complexity of the immigrant experience. There are interviews with three immigrants—one Italian, one Chinese, and one Jewish—that appeared in the reform magazine *The Independent* just after the beginning of the twentieth century. While we cannot know what questions were asked by the representative of the magazine or how the interviews were edited, these pieces give us the rare opportunity to hear the immigrants' own voices and to glimpse how they viewed themselves. Preceding each interview is a portion of Jacob Riis's famous book *How the Other Half Lives* (1890). Riis was a Danish immigrant who became a journalist and a social reformer. Before his success and fame in middle age, however, he had suffered severe poverty and alienation shortly after he migrated to America. During the economic depression of the 1870s, when he was in his twenties, Riis wandered the streets of New York unemployed, homeless, and suicidal. He was saved by a job as a police reporter for the *New York Tribune*. For the rest of the century, he wrote about the city's impoverished lower Manhattan wards.

Despite his own experience of immigration and poverty, Riis was by no means wholly sympathetic to the people he wrote about and photographed. He hated the dirt and the anarchy, the stink and the poverty of lower Manhattan, but he hated these things as a man running from something in himself. He saw mostly the immigrants' degradation, barely the people themselves, so he readily fastened onto ethnic stereotypes to describe them and focused on the material environment as a remedy to their problems. Compare Riis's characterization of the Chinese with what Lee Chew says about himself and his people. Are there similarities between Riis's description of Italians and the picture we get from Rocco Corresca? Can you square Riis's characterization of Jews as obsessed with money with Rose Schneiderman's commitment to labor organizing?

1. "LITTLE ITALY" (1890)

JACOB RIIS

Certainly a picturesque, if not very tidy, element has been added to the population in the "assisted" Italian immigrant who claims so large a share of public attention, partly because he keeps coming at such a tremendous rate, but chiefly because he elects to stay in New York, or near enough for it to serve as his base of operations, and here promptly reproduces conditions of destitution and disorder which, set in the frame-work of Mediterranean exuberance, are the delight of the artist, but in a matter-of-fact American community become its danger and reproach. The reproduction is made easier in New York because he finds the material ready to hand in the worst of the slum tenements; but even where it is not he soon reduces what he does find to his own level, if allowed to follow his natural bent. The Italian comes in at the bottom, and in the generation that came over the sea he stays there. In the slums he is welcomed as a tenant who "makes less trouble" than the contentious Irishman or the order-loving German, that is to say: is content to live in a pig-sty and submits to robbery at the hands of the rent-collector without murmur. Yet this very tractability makes of him in good hands, when firmly and intelligently managed, a really desirable tenant. . . .

Recent Congressional inquiries have shown the nature of the "assistance" he receives from greedy steamship agents and "bankers," who persuade him by false promises to mortgage his home, his few belongings, and his wages for months to come for a ticket to the land where plenty of work is to be had at princely wages. The padrone—the "banker" is nothing else—having made his ten per cent. out of him en route, receives him at the landing and turns him to double account as a wage-earner and a rent-payer. In each of these roles he is made to yield a profit to his unscrupulous countryman, whom he trusts implicitly with the instinct of utter helplessness. The man is so ignorant that, as one of the sharpers

who prey upon him put it once, it "would be downright sinful not to take him in." His ignorance and unconquerable suspicion of strangers dig the pit into which he falls. He not only knows no word of English, but he does not know enough to learn. Rarely only can he write his own language. Unlike the German, who begins learning English the day he lands as a matter of duty, or the Polish Jew, who takes it up as soon as he is able as an investment, the Italian learns slowly, if at all. Even his boy, born here, often speaks his native tongue indifferently. He is forced, therefore, to have constant recourse to the middle-man who makes him pay handsomely at every turn. He hires him out to the railroad contractor, receiving a commission from the employer as well as from the laborer, and repeats the performance monthly, or as often as he can have him dismissed. In the city he contracts for his lodging, subletting to him space in the vilest tenements at extortionate rents, and sets an example that does not lack imitators. The "princely wages" have vanished with his coming, and in their place hardships and a dollar a day, [along] with the padrone's merciless mortgage, confront him. Bred to even worse fare, he takes both as a matter of course, and, applying the maxim that it is not what one makes but what he saves that makes him rich, manages to turn the very dirt of the streets into a hoard of gold, with which he either returns to his Southern home, or brings over his family to join in his work and in his fortunes the next season. . . .

Like the Chinese, the Italian is a born gambler. His soul is in the game from the moment the cards are on the table, and very frequently his knife is in it too before the game is ended. No Sunday has passed in New York since "the Bend" became a suburb of Naples without one or more of these murderous affrays coming to the notice of the police. As a rule that happens only when the man the game went against is



Image 4.1 Jacob Riis, "In the Home of an Italian Ragpicker, Jersey Street" (c. 1890)

Source: Museum of the City of New York. 90.13.2.128.

either dead or so badly wounded as to require instant surgical help. As to the other, unless he be caught red-handed, the chances that the police will ever get him are slim indeed. The wounded man can seldom be persuaded to betray him. He wards off all inquiries with a wicked "I fix him myself," and there the matter rests until he either dies or recovers. If the latter, the community hears after a while of another Italian affray, a man stabbed in a quarrel, dead or dying, and the police know that "he" has been fixed, and the account squared.

With all his conspicuous faults, the swarthy Italian immigrant has his redeeming traits. He is as honest as he is hot-headed. There are no Italian burglars in the Rogues' Gallery; the ex-brigand toils peacefully with pickaxe and shovel on American ground. . . . The women are faithful wives and devoted mothers. Their vivid and picturesque costumes lend a tinge of color to the otherwise dull monotony of the slums they inhabit. The Italian is gay, light-hearted and, if his fur is not stroked the wrong way, inoffensive as a child. . . .¹

2. "THE BIOGRAPHY OF A BOOTBLACK" (1902)

ROCCO CORRESCA

[The story of Rocco Corresca is presented almost as he told it to a representative of *The Independent*. There are changes of language and some suppressions, but no change of meaning has been made. The ideas and statements of fact are all his, and, astonishing as it may seem to Americans, much of the experience is typical of thousands of Italians who come to this country penniless and make their fortunes, though beginning as low down in the scale as the narrator. Rocco is known to many people as "Joe." He claims that he has always been known as Rocco but that the name Corresca was given him when he went aboard the ship that brought him here. It was entered on the books. He has since kept it for official purposes and proposes to be known by it in the future. —Editor.]

When I was a very small boy I lived in Italy in a large house with many other small boys, who were all dressed alike and were taken care of by some nuns. It was a good place, situated on the side of the mountain, where grapes were growing and melons and oranges and plums.

They taught us our letters and how to pray and say the catechism, and we worked in the fields during the middle of the day. We always had enough to eat and good beds to sleep in at night, and sometimes there were feast days, when we marched about wearing flowers.

Those were good times and they lasted till I was nearly eight years of age. Then an old man came and said he was my grandfather. He showed some papers and cried over me and said that the money had come at last and now he could take me to his beautiful home. He seemed very glad to see me and after they looked at his papers he took me away and we went to the big city—Naples. He kept talking about his beautiful house, but when we got there it was a dark cellar that he lived in and I did not like it at all. Very rich people were on the first floor. They had

carriages and servants and music and plenty of good things to eat, but we were down below in the cellar and had nothing. There were four other boys in the cellar and the old man said they were all my brothers. All were larger than I and they beat me at first till one day Francisco said that they should not beat me any more, and then Paulo, who was the largest of all, fought him till Francisco drew a knife and gave him a cut. Then Paulo, too, got a knife and said that he would kill Francisco, but the old man knocked them both down with a stick and took their knives away and gave them beatings.

Each morning we boys all went out to beg and we begged all day near the churches and at night near the theatres, running to the carriages and opening the doors and then getting in the way of the people so that they had to give us money or walk over us. The old man often watched us and at night he took all the money, except when we could hide something. . . .

Then the old man said to me: "If you don't want to be a thief you can be a cripple. That is an easy life and they make a great deal of money."

I was frightened then, and that night I heard him talking to one of the men that came to see him. He asked how much he would charge to make me a good cripple like those that crawl about the church. They had a dispute, but at last they agreed and the man said that I should be made so that people would shudder and give me plenty of money.

I was much frightened, but I did not make a sound and in the morning I went out to beg with Francisco. I said to him: "I am going to run away. I don't believe 'Tony is my grandfather . . . and I don't want to be a cripple, no matter how much money the people may give."

"Where will you go?" Francisco asked me.

"I don't know," I said; "somewhere."

He thought awhile and then he said: "I will go, too."

So we ran away out of the city and begged from the country people as we went along. We came to a village down by the sea and a long way from Naples and there we found some fishermen and they took us aboard their boat. We were with them five years, and tho it was a very hard life we liked it well because there was always plenty to eat. Fish do not keep long and those that we did not sell we ate.

The chief fisherman, whose name was Ciguciano, had a daughter, Teresa, who was very beautiful, and tho she was two years younger than I, she could cook and keep house quite well. She was a kind, good girl and he was a good man. When we told him about the old man who told us he was our grandfather, the fisherman said he was an old rascal who should be in prison for life. Teresa cried much when she heard that he was going to make me a cripple. Ciguciano said that all the old man had taught us was wrong—that it was bad to beg, to steal and to tell lies. He called in the priest and the priest said the same thing and was very angry at the old man in Naples, and he taught us to read and write in the evenings. He also taught us our duties to the church. . . .

We grew large and strong with the fisherman and he told us that we were getting too big for him, that he could not afford to pay us the money that we were worth. He was a fine, honest man—one in a thousand.

Now and then I had heard things about America—that it was a far off country where everybody was rich and that Italians went there and made plenty of money, so that they could return to Italy and live in pleasure ever after. One day I met a young man who pulled out a handful of gold and told me he had made that in America in a few days. . . .

The young man took us to a big ship and got us work away down where the fires are. We had to carry coal to the place where it could be thrown on the fires. Francisco and I were very sick from the great heat at first and lay on the coal for a long time, but they threw water on us and made us get up. We could not stand on our feet well, for everything was going around and we had no strength. We said that we wished we had stayed in Italy no matter how much gold there was in America. We could not eat for three

days and could not do much work. Then we got better and sometimes we went up above and looked about. There was no land anywhere and we were much surprised. How could the people tell where to go when there was no land to steer by? . . .

We were all landed on an island and the bosses there said that Francisco and I must go back because we had not enough money, but a man named Bartolo came up and told them that we were brothers and he was our uncle and would take care of us. He brought two other men who swore that they knew us in Italy and that Bartolo was our uncle. I had never seen any of them before, but even then Bartolo might be my uncle, so I did not say anything. The bosses of the island let us go out with Bartolo after he had made the oath.

We came to Brooklyn to a wooden house in Adams Street that was full of Italians from Naples. Bartolo had a room on the third floor and there were fifteen men in the room, all boarding with Bartolo. He did the cooking on a stove in the middle of the room and there were beds all around the sides, one bed above another. It was very hot in the room, but we were soon asleep, for we were very tired.

The next morning, early, Bartolo told us to go out and pick rags and get bottles. He gave us bags and hooks and showed us the ash barrels. On the streets where the fine houses are the people are very careless and put out good things, like mattresses and umbrellas, clothes, hats and boots. We brought all these to Bartolo and he made them new again and sold them on the sidewalk; but mostly we brought rags and bones. The rags we had to wash in the back yard and then we hung them to dry on lines under the ceiling in our room. The bones we kept under the beds till Bartolo could find a man to buy them.

Most of the men in our room worked at digging the sewer. Bartolo got them the work and they paid him about one quarter of their wages. Then he charged them for board and he bought the clothes for them, too. So they got little money after all.

Bartolo was always saying that the rent of the room was so high that he could not make anything, but he was really making plenty. He was what they call a padrone and is now a very rich man. The men

that were living with him had just come to the country and could not speak English. They had all been sent by the young man we met in Italy. Bartolo told us all that we must work for him and that if we did not the police would come and put us in prison.

He gave us very little money, and our clothes were some of those that were found on the street. Still we had enough to eat and we had meat quite often, which we never had in Italy. Bartolo got it from the butcher—the meat that he could not sell to the other people—but it was quite good meat. Bartolo cooked it in the pan while we all sat on our beds in the evening. Then he cut it into small bits and passed the pan around, saying:

"See what I do for you and yet you are not glad. I am too kind a man, that is why I am so poor."

We were with Bartolo nearly a year, but some of our countrymen who had been in the place a long time said that Bartolo had no right to us and we could get work for a dollar and a half a day, which, when you make it *lire* (the Italian currency) is very much. So we went away one day to Newark and got work on the street. Bartolo came after us and made a great noise, but the boss said that if he did not go away soon the police would have him. Then he went, saying that there was no justice in this country.

We paid a man five dollars each for getting us the work and we were with that boss for six months. He was Irish, but a good man and he gave us our money every Saturday night. We lived much better than with Bartolo, and when the work was done we each had nearly \$200 saved. Plenty of the men spoke English and they taught us, and we taught them to read and write. That was at night, for we had a lamp in our room, and there were only five other men who lived in that room with us. . . .

When the Newark boss told us that there was no more work Francisco and I talked about what we would do and we went back to Brooklyn to a saloon near Hamilton Ferry, where we got a job cleaning it out and slept in a little room upstairs. There was a bootblack named Michael on the corner and when I had time I helped him and learned the business. Francisco cooked the lunch in the saloon and he, too,

worked for the bootblack and we were soon able to make the best polish.

Then we thought we would go into business and we got a basement on Hamilton avenue, near the Ferry, and put four chairs in it. We paid \$75 for the chairs and all the other things. We had tables and looking glasses there and curtains. We took the papers that have the pictures in and made the place high toned. Outside we had a big sign that said: *The Best Shine for Ten Cents*. Men that did not want to pay ten cents could get a good shine for five cents, but it was not an oil shine. We had two boys helping us and paid each of them fifty cents a day. The rent of the place was \$20 a month, so the expenses were very great, but we made money from the beginning. We slept in the basement, but got our meals in the saloon till we could put a stove in our place, and then Francisco cooked for us all. That would not do, tho, because some of our customers said that they did not like to smell garlic and onions and red herrings. I thought that was strange, but we had to do what the customers said. So we got the woman who lived upstairs to give us our meals and paid her \$1.50 a week each. She gave the boys soup in the middle of the day—five cents for two plates. . . .

We had said that when we saved \$1,000 each we would go back to Italy and buy a farm, but now that the time is coming we are so busy and making so much money that we think we will stay. We have opened another parlor near South Ferry, in New York. We have to pay \$30 a month rent, but the business is very good. The boys in this place charge sixty cents a day because there is so much work.

There are plenty of rich Italians here, men who a few years ago had nothing and now have so much money that they could not count all their dollars in a week. The richest ones go away from the other Italians and live with the Americans. . . .

I am nineteen years of age now and have \$700 saved. Francisco is twenty-one and has about \$900. We shall open some more parlors soon. I know an Italian who was a bootblack ten years ago and now bosses bootblacks all over the city, who has so much money that if it was turned into gold it would weight more than himself. . . .²

3. "CHINATOWN" (1890)

JACOB RIIS

... Whatever may be said about the Chinaman being a thousand years behind the age on his own shores, here he is distinctly abreast of it in his successful scheming to "make it pay." It is doubtful if there is anything he does not turn to a paying account, from his religion down, or up, as one prefers. At the risk of distressing some well-meaning, but, I fear, too trustful people, I state it in advance as my opinion, based on the steady observation of years, that all attempts

to make an effective Christian of John Chinaman will remain abortive in this generation; of the next I have, if anything, less hope. Ages of senseless idolatry, a mere grub-worship, have left him without the essential qualities for appreciating the gentle teachings of a faith whose motive and unselfish spirit are alike beyond his grasp. ... There is nothing strong about him, except his passions when aroused. I am convinced that he adopts Christianity, when he adopts it



Image 4.2 Jacob Riis, "The Official Organ of Chinatown" (c. 1890)

Source: Museum of the City of New York. 90.13.2.128

at all, as he puts on American clothes, with what the politicians would call an ulterior motive, some sort of gain in the near prospect—washing, a Christian wife perhaps, anything he happens to rate for the moment above his cherished pigtail.

Stealth and secretiveness are as much part of the Chinaman in New York as the cat-like tread of his felt shoes. His business, as his domestic life, shuns the light, less because there is anything to conceal than because that is the way of the man. Perhaps the attitude of American civilization toward the stranger, whom it invited in, has taught him that way. At any rate, the very doorways of his offices and shops are fenced off by queer, forbidding partitions suggestive of a continual state of siege. The stranger who enters through the crooked approach is received with sudden silence, a sullen stare, and an angry "Vat you vant?" that breathes annoyance and distrust.

... The average Chinaman, the police will tell you, would rather gamble than eat any day, and they have ample experience to back them. Only the fellow in the bunk smokes away, indifferent to all else but his pipe and his own enjoyment. . . . Not a Chinese home or burrow there but has its bunk, and its layout, where they can be enjoyed safe from police interference. The Chinaman smokes opium as Caucasians smoke tobacco, and apparently with little worse effect upon himself. But woe unto the white victim upon which his pitiless drug gets its grip! . . .

From the teeming tenements to the right and left of [Chinatown] come the white slaves of its dens of vice and their infernal drug, that have infused into the "Bloody Sixth" Ward a subtler poison than ever the stale-beer dives knew, or the "sudden death" of the Old Brewery. There are houses, dozens of them, in Mott and Pell Streets, that are literally jammed, from the "joint" in the cellar to the attic, with these hapless victims of a passion which, once acquired, demands the sacrifice of every instinct of decency to its insatiate desire. . . . I came across a company of them [young Caucasian prostitutes] "hitting the pipe" together, on a tour through their dens one night with the police captain of the precinct. The girls knew him, called him by name, offered him a pipe, and chatted with him about the incidents of their acquaintance, how many times he had "sent them up,"

and their chances of "lasting" much longer. There was no shade of regret in their voices, nothing but utter indifference and surrender.

One thing about them was conspicuous: their scrupulous neatness. It is the distinguishing mark of Chinatown, outwardly and physically. It is not altogether by chance the Chinaman has chosen the laundry as his distinctive field. He is by nature as clean as the cat, which he resembles in his traits of cruel cunning and savage fury when aroused. On this point of cleanliness he insists in his domestic circle, yielding in others with crafty submissiveness to the caprice of the girls, who "boss" him in a very independent manner, fretting vengefully under the yoke they loathe, but which they know right well they can never shake off, once they have put the pipe to their lips and given Mott Street a mortgage upon their souls for all time. . . .

The frequent assertions of the authorities that at least no girls under age are wrecked on this Chinese shoal, are disproved by the observation of those who go frequently among these dens, though the smallest girl will invariably, and usually without being asked, insist that she is sixteen, and so of age to choose the company she keeps. Such assertions are not to be taken seriously. Even while I am writing, the morning returns from one of the precincts that pass through my hands report the arrest of a Chinaman for "inveigling little girls into his laundry," one of the hundred outposts of Chinatown that are scattered all over the city, as the outer threads of the spider's web that holds its prey fast. . . .

Withal the police give the Chinese the name of being the "quietest people down there," meaning in the notoriously turbulent Sixth Ward; and they are. The one thing they desire above all is to be let alone, a very natural wish perhaps, considering all the circumstances. If it were a laudable or even an allowable ambition that prompts it, they might be humored with advantage, probably, to both sides. But the facts show too plainly that it is not, and that in their very exclusiveness and reserve they are a constant and terrible menace to society. . . . The severest official scrutiny, the harshest repressive measures are justifiable in Chinatown, orderly as it appears on the surface. . . .³

4. "THE BIOGRAPHY OF A CHINAMAN" (1903)

LEE CHEW

[Mr. Lee Chew is a representative Chinese business man who expresses with much force views that are generally held by his countrymen throughout America. The interview that follows is strictly as he gave it, except as to detail of arrangement and mere verbiage. Mr. Lee was assisted by the well-known Chinese interpreter, Mr. Joseph M. Singleton, of 24 Pell Street. —Editor.]

The village where I was born is situated in the province of Canton, on one of the banks of the Si-Kiang River. It is called a village, altho it is really as big as a city, for there are about 5,000 men in it over eighteen years of age—women and children and even youths are not counted in our villages.

All in the village belonged to the tribe of Lee. They did not intermarry with one another, but the men went to other villages for their wives and brought them home to their fathers' houses, and men from other villages—Wus and Wings and Sings and Fongs, etc.—chose wives from among our girls. . . .

My father's house is built of fine blue brick, better than the brick in the houses here in the United States. It is only one story high, roofed with red tiles and surrounded by a stone wall which also incloses the yard. There are four rooms in the house, one large living room which serves for a parlor and three private rooms, one occupied by my grandfather, who is very old and very honorable; another by my father and mother, and the third by my oldest brother and his wife and two little children. There are no windows, but the door is left open all day.

All the men of the village have farms, but they don't live on them as the farmers do here; they live in the village, but go out during the day time and work their farms, coming home before dark. My father has a farm of about ten acres, on which he grows a great abundance of things—sweet potatoes, rice, beans, peas, yams, sugar cane, pineapples, bananas, lychee nuts and palms. The palm leaves are useful and can be sold. Men make fans of the lower part of each leaf

near the stem, and water proof coats and hats, and awnings for boats, of the parts that are left when the fans are cut out. . . .

In spite of the fact that any man may correct them for a fault, Chinese boys have good times and plenty of play. We played games like tag, and other games like shinny and a sort of football called yin. . . . It was not all play for us boys, however. We had to go to school, where we learned to read and write and to recite the precepts of Kong-foo-tsze and the other Sages, and stories about the great Emperors of China, who ruled with the wisdom of gods and gave to the whole world the light of high civilization and the culture of our literature, which is the admiration of all nations.

I went to my parents' house for meals, approaching my grandfather with awe, my father and mother with veneration and my elder brother with respect. I never spoke unless spoken to, but I listened and heard much concerning the red haired, green eyed foreign devils with the hairy faces, who had lately come out of the sea and clustered on our shores. They were wild and fierce and wicked, and paid no regard to the moral precepts of Kong-foo-tsze and the Sages; neither did they worship their ancestors, but pretended to be wiser than their fathers and grandfathers. They loved to beat people and to rob and murder. In the streets of Hong Kong many of them could be seen reeling drunk. Their speech was a savage roar, like the voice of the tiger or the buffalo, and they wanted to take the land away from the Chinese. Their men and women lived together like animals, without any marriage or faithfulness, and even were shameless enough to walk the streets arm in arm in daylight. So the old men said.

All this was very shocking and disgusting, as our women seldom were on the street, except in the evenings, when they went with the water jars to the three wells that supplied all the people. Then if they met a man they stood still, with their faces turned to the

wall, while he looked the other way when he passed them. A man who spoke to a woman on the street in a Chinese village would be beaten, perhaps killed.

My grandfather told how the English foreign devils had made wicked war on the Emperor, and by means of their enchantments and spells had defeated his armies and forced him to admit their opium, so that the Chinese might smoke and become weakened and the foreign devils might rob them of their land.

My grandfather said that it was well known that the Chinese were always the greatest and wisest among men. They had invented and discovered everything that was good. Therefore the things which the foreign devils had and the Chinese had not must be evil. Some of these things were very wonderful, enabling the red haired savages to talk with one another, tho they might be thousands of miles apart. They had suns that made darkness like day, their ships carried earthquakes and volcanoes to fight for them, and thousands of demons that lived in iron and steel houses spun their cotton and silk, pushed their boats, pulled their cars, printed their newspapers and did other work for them. They were constantly showing disrespect for their ancestors by getting new things to take the place of the old.

I heard about the American foreign devils, that they were false, having made a treaty by which it was agreed that they could freely come to China, and the Chinese as freely go to their country. After this treaty was made China opened its doors to them and then they broke the treaty that they had asked for by shutting the Chinese out of their country. . . .

I worked on my father's farm till I was about sixteen years of age, when a man of our tribe came back from America and took ground as large as four city blocks and made a paradise of it. He put a large stone wall around and led some streams through and built a palace and summer house and about twenty other structures, with beautiful bridges over the streams and walks and roads. Trees and flowers, singing birds, water fowl and curious animals were within the walls.

The man had gone away from our village a poor boy. Now he returned with unlimited wealth, which he had obtained in the country of the American wizards. After many amazing adventures he had become a merchant in a city called Mott Street, so it was said.

When his palace and grounds were completed he gave a dinner to all the people who assembled to be his guests. One hundred pigs roasted whole were served on the tables, with chickens, ducks, geese and such an abundance of dainties that our villagers even now lick their fingers when they think of it. He had the best actors from Hong Kong performing, and every musician for miles around was playing and singing. At night the blaze of the lanterns could be seen for many miles.

Having made his wealth among the barbarians this man had faithfully returned to pour it out among his tribesmen, and he is living in our village now very happy, and a pillar of strength to the poor.

The wealth of this man filled my mind with the idea that I, too, would like to go to the country of the wizards and gain some of their wealth, and after a long time my father consented, and gave me his blessing, and my mother took leave of me with tears, while my grandfather laid his hand upon my head and told me to remember and live up to the admonitions of the Sages, to avoid gambling, bad women and men of evil minds, and so to govern my conduct that when I died my ancestors might rejoice to welcome me as a guest on high.

My father gave me \$100, and I went to Hong Kong with five other boys from our place and we got steerage passage on a steamer, paying \$50 each. . . . Of the great power of these people I saw many signs. The engines that moved the ship were wonderful monsters, strong enough to lift mountains. When I got to San Francisco, which was before the passage of the Exclusion act [1882], I was half starved, because I was afraid to eat the provisions of the barbarians, but a few days' living in the Chinese quarter made me happy again. A man got me work as a house servant in an American family, and my start was the same as that of almost all the Chinese in this country.

The Chinese laundryman does not learn his trade in China; there are no laundries in China. The women there do the washing in tubs and have no washboards or flat irons. All the Chinese laundrymen here were taught in the first place by American women just as I was taught.

When I went to work for that American family I could not speak a word of English, and I did not know anything about housework. The family consisted of

husband, wife and two children. They were very good to me and paid me \$3.50 a week, of which I could save \$3.

I did not know how to do anything, and I did not understand what the lady said to me, but she showed me how to cook, wash, iron, sweep, dust, make beds, wash dishes, clean windows, paint, and brass, polish the knives and forks, etc., by doing the things herself and then overseeing my efforts to imitate her. She would take my hands and show them how to do things. She and her husband and children laughed at me a great deal, but it was all good natured. I was not confined to the house in the way servants are confined here, but when my work was done in the morning I was allowed to go out till lunch time. People in California are more generous than they are here.

In six months I had learned how to do the work of our house quite well, and I was getting \$5 a week and board, and putting away about \$4.25 a week. I had also learned some English, and by going to a Sunday school I learned more English and something about Jesus, who was a great Sage, and whose precepts are like those of Kong-foo-tsze.

It was twenty years ago when I came to this country, and I worked for two years as a servant, getting at the last \$35 a month. I sent money home to comfort my parents, but tho I dressed well and lived well and had pleasure, going quite often to the Chinese theater and to dinner parties in Chinatown, I saved \$50 in the first six months, \$90 in the second, \$120 in the third and \$150 in the fourth. So I had \$410 at the end of two years, and I was now ready to start in business.

When I first opened a laundry it was in company with a partner, who had been in the business for some years. We went to a town about 500 miles inland, where a railroad was building. We got a board shanty and worked for the men employed by the railroads. Our rent cost us \$10 a month and food nearly \$5 a week each, for all food was dear and we wanted the best of everything—we lived principally on rice, chickens, ducks and pork, and did our own cooking. The Chinese take naturally to cooking. It cost us about \$50 for our furniture and apparatus, and we made close upon \$60 a week, which we divided between us. We had to put up with many insults and some frauds, as men would come in and

claim parcels that did not belong to them, saying they had lost their tickets, and would fight if they did not get what they asked for. Sometimes we were taken before Magistrates and fined for losing shirts that we had never seen. On the other hand, we were making money, and even after sending home \$3 a week I was able to save about \$15. When the railroad construction gang moved on we went with them. The men were rough and prejudiced against us, but not more so than in the big Eastern cities. It is only lately in New York that the Chinese have been able to discontinue putting wire screens in front of their windows, and at the present time the street boys are still breaking the windows of Chinese laundries all over the city, while the police seem to think it a joke.

We were three years with the railroad, and then went to the mines, where we made plenty of money in gold dust, but had a hard time, for many of the miners were wild men who carried revolvers and after drinking would come into our place to shoot and steal shirts, for which we had to pay. One of these men hit his head hard against a flat iron and all the miners came and broke up our laundry, chasing us out of town. They were going to hang us. We lost all our property and \$365 in money, which members of the mob must have found.

Luckily most of our money was in the hands of Chinese bankers in San Francisco. I drew \$500 and went East to Chicago, where I had a laundry for three years, during which I increased my capital to \$2,500. After that I was four years in Detroit. I went home to China in 1897, but returned in 1898, and began a laundry business in Buffalo. But Chinese laundry business now is not as good as it was ten years ago. American cheap labor in the steam laundries had hurt it. So I determined to become a general merchant, and with this idea I came to New York and opened a shop in the Chinese quarter. . . .

The ordinary laundry shop is generally divided into three rooms. In front is the room where the customers are received, behind that a bedroom and in the back the work shop, which is also the dining room and kitchen. The stove and cooking utensils are the same as those of the Americans.

Work in a laundry begins early on Monday morning—about seven o'clock. There are generally

two men, one of whom washes while the other does the ironing. The man who irons does not start in till Tuesday, as the clothes are not ready for him to begin till that time. So he has Sundays and Mondays as holidays. The man who does the washing finishes up on Friday night, and so he has Saturday and Sunday. Each works only five days a week, but those are long days—from seven o'clock in the morning till midnight.

During his holidays the Chinaman gets a good deal of fun out of life. There's a good deal of gambling and some opium smoking, but not so much as Americans imagine. Only a few of New York's Chinamen smoke opium. The habit is very general among rich men and the officials in China, but not so much among poor men. I don't think it does as much harm as the liquor that the Americans drink. There's nothing so bad as a drunken man. Opium doesn't make people crazy. . . .

The fights among the Chinese and the operations of the hatchet men are all due to gambling. Newspapers often say that there are feuds between the six companies, but that is a mistake. The six companies are purely benevolent societies, which look after the Chinaman when he first lands here. They represent the six southern provinces of China, where most of our people are from, and they are like the German, Swedish, English, Irish and Italian societies which assist emigrants. When the Chinese keep clear of gambling and opium they are not blackmailed, and they have no trouble with hatchet men or any others.

About 500 of New York's Chinese are Christians, the others are Buddhists, Taoists, etc., all mixed up. These haven't any Sunday of their own, but keep New Year's Day and the first and fifteenth days of each month, when they go to the temple in Mott Street.

In all New York there are only thirty-four Chinese women, and it is impossible to get a Chinese woman out here unless one goes to China and marries her there, and then he must collect affidavits to prove that she really is his wife. That is in case of a merchant. A laundryman can't bring his wife here under any circumstances, and even the women of the Chinese Ambassador's family had trouble getting in lately.

Is it any wonder, therefore, or any proof of the demoralization of our people if some of the white women in Chinatown are not of good character?

What other set of men so isolated and so surrounded by alien and prejudiced people are more moral? Men, wherever they may be, need the society of women, and among the white women of Chinatown are many excellent and faithful wives and mothers. . . .

I have found out, during my residence in this country, that much of the Chinese prejudice against Americans is unfounded, and I no longer put faith in the wild tales that were told about them in our village, tho some of the Chinese, who have been here twenty years and who are learned men, still believe that there is no marriage in this country, that the land is infested with demons and that all the people are given over to general wickedness.

I know better. Americans are not all bad, nor are they wicked wizards. Still, they have their faults, and their treatment of us is outrageous.

The reason why so many Chinese go into the laundry business in this country is because it requires little capital and is one of the few opportunities that are open. Men of other nationalities who are jealous of the Chinese, because he is a more faithful worker than one of their people, have raised such a great outcry about Chinese cheap labor that they have shut him out of working on farms or in factories or building railroads or making streets or digging sewers. He cannot practice any trade, and his opportunities to do business are limited to his own countrymen. So he opens a laundry when he quits domestic service.

The treatment of the Chinese in this country is all wrong and mean. It is persisted in merely because China is not a fighting nation. The Americans would not dare to treat Germans, English, Italians or even Japanese as they treat the Chinese, because if they did there would be a war.

There is no reason for the prejudice against the Chinese. The cheap labor cry was always a falsehood. Their labor was never cheap, and is not cheap now. It has always commanded the highest market price. But the trouble is that the Chinese are such excellent and faithful workers that bosses will have no others when they can get them. If you look at men working on the street you will find an overseer for every four or five of them. That watching is not necessary for Chinese. They work as well when left to themselves as they do when some one is looking at them.

It was the jealousy of laboring men of other nationalities—especially the Irish—that raised all the outcry against the Chinese. No one would hire an Irishman, German, Englishman or Italian when he could get a Chinese, because our countrymen are so much more honest, industrious, steady, sober and painstaking. Chinese were persecuted, not for their vices, but for their virtues. There never was any honesty in the pretended fear of leprosy or in the cheap labor scare, and the persecution continues still, because Americans make a mere practice of loving justice. They are all for money making, and they want to be on the strongest side always. They treat you as a friend while you are prosperous, but if you have a misfortune they don't know you. There is nothing substantial in their friendship. . . .

Irish fill the almshouses and prisons and orphan asylums, Italians are among the most dangerous of men, Jews are unclean and ignorant. Yet they are all

let in, while Chinese, who are sober, or duly law abiding, clean, educated and industrious, are shut out. There are few Chinamen in jails and none in the poor houses. There are no Chinese tramps or drunkards. Many Chinese here have become sincere Christians, in spite of the persecution which they have to endure from their heathen countrymen. More than half the Chinese in this country would become citizens if allowed to do so, and would be patriotic Americans. But how can they make this country their home as matters now are! They are not allowed to bring wives here from China, and if they marry American women there is a great outcry.

All Congressmen acknowledge the injustice of the treatment of my people, yet they continue it. They have no backbone.

Under the circumstances, how can I call this my home, and how can any one blame me if I take my money and go back to my village in China?⁴

5. "JEWTOWN" (1890)

JACOB RIIS

Thrift is the watchword of Jewtown, as of its people the world over. It is at once its strength and its fatal weakness, its cardinal virtue and its foul disgrace. Become an overmastering passion with these people who come here in droves from Eastern Europe to escape persecution, from which freedom could be bought only with gold, it has enslaved them in bondage worse than that from which they fled. Money is their God. Life itself is of little value compared with even the leanest bank account. In no other spot does life wear so intensely bald and materialistic an aspect as in Ludlow Street. Over and over again I have met with instances of these Polish or Russian Jews deliberately starving themselves to the point of physical exhaustion, while working night and day at a tremendous pressure to save a little money. An avenging Nemesis pursues this headlong hunt for wealth; there is no worse paid class anywhere. . . .

Penury and poverty are wedded everywhere to dirt and disease, and Jewtown is no exception. It

could not well be otherwise in such crowds, considering especially their low intellectual status. The managers of the Eastern Dispensary, which is in the very heart of their district, told the whole story when they said: "The diseases these people suffer from are not due to intemperance or immorality, but to ignorance, want of suitable food, and the foul air in which they live and work." The homes of the Hebrew quarter are its workshops also. Reference will be made to the economic conditions under which they work in a succeeding chapter. Here we are concerned simply with the fact. You are made fully aware of it before you have travelled the length of a single block in any of these East Side streets, by the whir of a thousand sewing-machines, worked at high pressure from earliest dawn till mind and muscle give out together. Every member of the family, from the youngest to the oldest, bears a hand, shut in the qualmy rooms, where meals are cooked and clothing washed and dried besides, the live-long day. It is not unusual to

find a dozen persons—men, women, and children—
at work in a single small room. . . .

Oppression, persecution, have not shorn the Jew
of his native combativeness one whit. He is as ready
to fight for his rights, or what he considers his rights,
in a business transaction—synonymous generally
with his advantage—as if he had not been robbed of
them for eighteen hundred years. One strong impres-
sion survives with him from his days of bondage:
the power of the law. On the slightest provocation he
rushes off to invoke it for his protection. . . .

In all matters pertaining to their religious life that
tinges all their customs, they stand, these East Side
Jews, where the new day that dawned on Calvary left

them standing, stubbornly refusing to see the light.
A visit to a Jewish house of mourning is like bridging
the gap of two thousand years. The inexpressibly sad
and sorrowful wail for the dead, as it swells and rises
in the hush of all sounds of life, comes back from
the ages like a mournful echo of the voice of Rachel
“weeping for her children and refusing to be com-
forted, because they are not.”

Attached to many of the synagogues, which
among the poorest Jews frequently consist of a scant-
ily furnished room in a rear tenement, with a few
wooden stools or benches for the congregation, are
Talmudic schools that absorb a share of the growing
youth. The school-master is not rarely a man of some

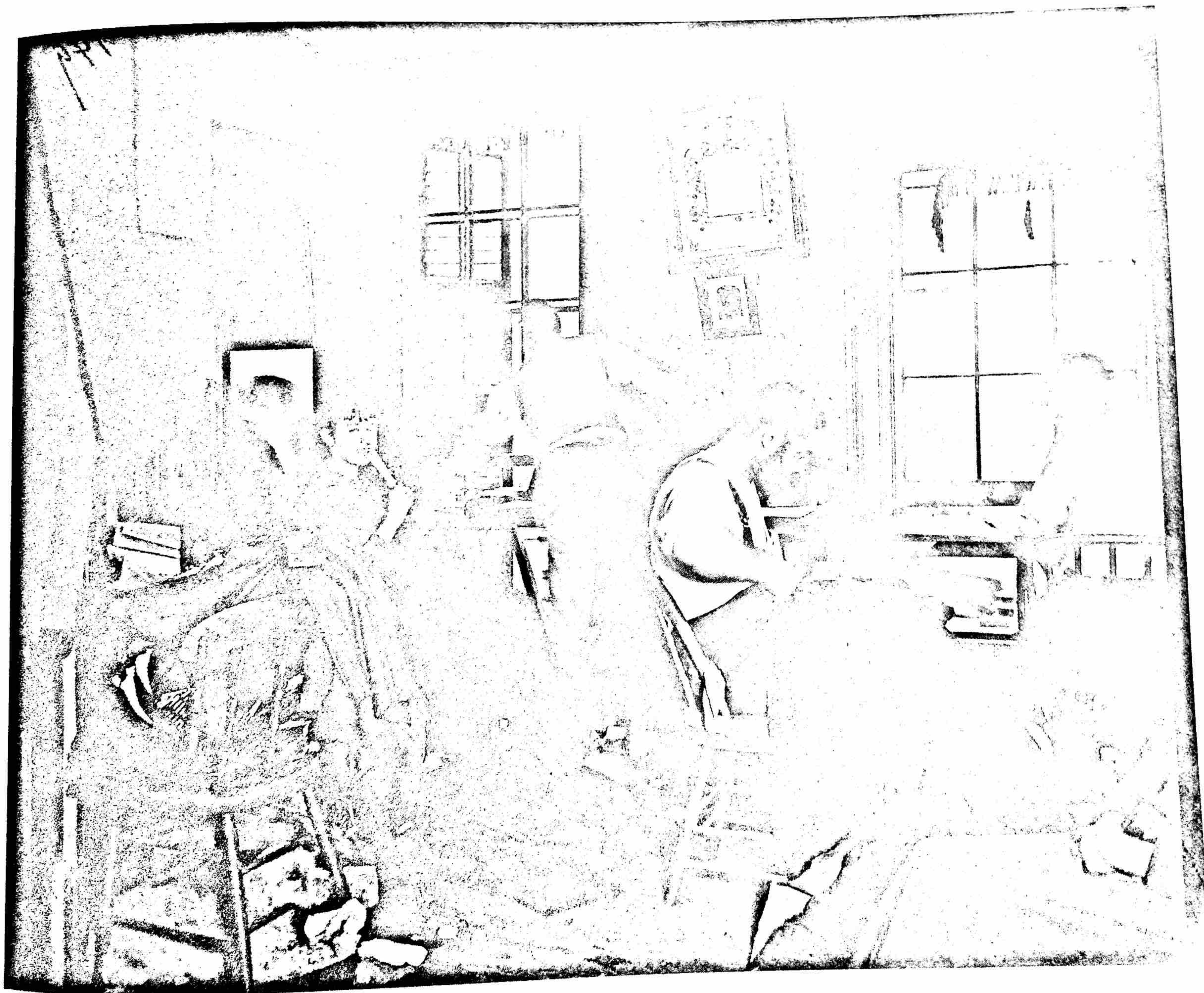


Image 4.3 Jacob Riis, “Knee Pants” at forty five cents a dozen—A Ludlow Street Sweater’s Shop

Source: Museum of the City of New York. 90.13.4.151.

attainments who has been stranded there, his native instinct for money-making having been smothered in the process that has made of him a learned man. . . . But the majority of the children seek the public schools, where they are received sometimes with some misgivings on the part of the teachers, who find it necessary to inculcate lessons of cleanliness in the worst cases by practical demonstration with wash-bowl and soap. "He took hold of the soap as if it were some animal," said one of these teachers

to me after such an experiment upon a new pupil, "and wiped three fingers across his face. He called that washing." . . .

As scholars, the children of the most ignorant Polish Jew keep fairly abreast of their more favored playmates, until it comes to mental arithmetic, when they leave them behind with a bound. It is surprising to see how strong the instinct of dollars and cents is in them. They can count, and correctly, almost before they can talk.⁵

6. "A CAP MAKER'S STORY" (1905)

ROSE SCHNEIDERMAN

[Miss Schneiderman led the women capmakers in their recent successful strike for the union shop. She is a small, quiet, serious, good looking young woman of twenty years, already a member of the National Board, and fast rising in the labor world. —*Editor.*]

My name is Rose Schneiderman, and I was born in some small city of Russian Poland. I don't know the name of the city, and have no memory of that part of my childhood. When I was about five years of age my parents brought me to this country and we settled in New York.

So my earliest recollections are of living in a crowded street among the East Side Jews, for we also are Jews.

My father got work as a tailor, and we lived in two rooms on Eldridge Street, and did very well, though not so well as in Russia, because mother and father both earned money, and here father alone earned the money, while mother attended to the house. There were then two other children besides me, a boy of three and one of five.

I went to school until I was nine years old, enjoying it thoroughly and making great progress, but then my father died of brain fever and mother was left with three children and another one coming. So I had to stay at home to help her and she went out to look for work.

A month later the baby was born, and mother got work in a fur house, earning about \$6 a week and afterward \$8 a week, for she was clever and steady.

I was the house worker, preparing the meals and looking after the other children—the baby, a little girl of six years, and a boy of nine. I managed very well, tho the meals were not very elaborate. I could cook simple things like porridge, coffee and eggs, and mother used to prepare the meat before she went away in the morning, so that all I had to do was to put it in the pan at night. . . .

When the other children were sent away mother was able to send me back to school, and I stayed in this school (Houston Street Grammar) till I had reached the Sixth Grammar Grade.

Then I had to leave in order to help support the family. I got a place in Hearn's as a cash girl, and after working there three weeks changed to Ridley's, where I remained for two and a half years. I finally left because the pay was so very poor and there did not seem to be any chance of advancement, and a friend told me that I could do better making caps.

So I got a place in the factory of Hein & Fox. The hours were from 8 A.M. to 6 P.M., and we made all sorts of linings—or, rather, we stitched in the linings—golf caps, yachting caps, etc. It was piece work, and we received from 3 1/2 cents to 10 cents a dozen, according to the different grades. By working hard we could make an average of about \$5 a week. We would have made more but had to provide our own machines, which cost us \$45, we paying for them on the installment plan. We paid \$5 down and \$1 a month after that.

I learned the business in about two months, and then made as much as the others, and was consequently doing quite well when the factory burned down, destroying all our machines—150 of them. This was very hard on the girls who had paid for their machines. It was not so bad for me, as I had only paid a little of what I owed.

The bosses got \$500,000 insurance, so I heard, but they never gave the girls a cent to help them bear their losses. I think they might have given them \$10, anyway.

Soon work went on again in four lofts, and a little later I became assistant sample maker. This is a position which, tho coveted by many, pays better in glory than in cash. It was still piece work, and tho the pay per dozen was better the work demanded was of a higher quality, and one could not rush through samples as through the other caps. So I still could average only about \$5 per week.

After I had been working as a cap maker for three years it began to dawn on me that we girls needed an organization. The men had organized already, and had gained some advantages, but the bosses had lost nothing, as they took it out of us.

We were helpless; no one girl dare stand up for anything alone. Matters kept getting worse. The bosses kept making reductions in our pay, half a cent a dozen at a time. It did not sound important, but at the end of the week we found a difference.

We didn't complain to the bosses; we didn't say anything except to each other. There was no use. The bosses would not pay any attention unless we were like the men and could make them attend. . . .

A new girl from another shop got in among us. She was Miss Bessie Brout, and she talked organization as a remedy for our ills. She was radical and progressive, and she stimulated thoughts which were already in our minds before she came.

Finally Miss Brout and I and another girl went to the National Board of United Cloth Hat and Cap Makers when it was in session, and asked them to organize the girls. . . .

We were told to come to the next meeting of the National Board, which we did, and then received a favorable answer, and were asked to bring all the girls who were willing to be organized to the next

meeting, and at the next meeting, accordingly, we were there twelve strong and were organized.

When Fox found out what had happened he discharged Miss Brout, and probably would have discharged me but that I was a sample maker and not so easy to replace. In a few weeks we had all the girls in the organization, because the men told the girls that they must enter the union or they would not be allowed to work in the shop.

Then came a big strike. Price lists for the coming season were given in to the bosses, to which they did not agree. After some wrangling a strike was declared in five of the biggest factories. There are 30 factories in the city. About 100 girls went out.

The result was a victory, which netted us—I mean the girls—\$2 increase in our wages on the average.

All the time our union was progressing very nicely. There were lectures to make us understand what trades unionism is and our real position in the labor movement. I read upon the subject and grew more and more interested, and after a time I became a member of the National Board, and had duties and responsibilities that kept me busy after my day's work was done.

But all was not lovely by any means, for the bosses were not at all pleased with their beating and had determined to fight us again.

They agreed among themselves that after the 26th of December, 1904, they would run their shops on the "open" system.

This agreement was reached last fall, and soon notices, reading as follows, were hung in the various shops:

Notice

After the 26th of December, 1904, this shop will be run on the open shop system, the bosses having the right to engage and discharge employees as they see fit, whether the latter are union or nonunion.

Of course, we knew that this meant an attack on the union. The bosses intended gradually to get rid of us, employing in our place child labor and raw immigrant girls who would work for next to nothing.

On December 22d the above notice appeared, and the National Board, which had known about it all along, went into session prepared for action.

Our people were very restive, saying that they could not sit under that notice, and that if the National Board did not call them out soon they would go out of themselves.

At last word was sent out, and at 2:30 o'clock all the workers stopped, and, laying down their scissors and other tools, marched out, some of them singing the "Marseillaise."

We were out for thirteen weeks, and the girls established their reputation. They were on picket duty from seven o'clock in the morning till six o'clock in the evening, and gained over many of the nonunion workers by appeals to them to quit working against us.

Our theory was that if properly approached and talked to few would be found who would resist our offer to take them into our organization. No right thinking person desires to injure another. We did not believe in violence and never employed it.

During this strike period we girls each received \$3 a week; single men \$3 a week, and married men \$5 a week. This was paid us by the National Board.

We were greatly helped by the other unions, because the open shop issue was a tremendous one, and this was the second fight which the bosses had conducted for it.

Their first was with the tailors, whom they beat. If they now could beat us the outlook for unionism would be bad.

Some were aided and we stuck out, and won a glorious victory all along the line. That was only last week. The shops are open now for all union hands and for them only. . . .

The bosses try to represent this open shop issue as tho they were fighting a battle for the public, but really it is nothing of the sort. The open shop is a weapon to break the unions and set men once more cutting each other's throats by individual competition.

Why, there was a time in the cap trade when men worked fourteen hours a day, and then took the heads of their machines home in bags and setting them up on stands, put mattresses underneath to deaden the sound and worked away till far into the morning.

We don't want such slavery as that to come back. The shops are open now for all union people, and all nonunion people can join the union. In order to

take in newcomer foreigners we have for them cut the initiation fees down to one-half what we Americans have to pay, and we trust them till they get work and their wages.

In order to give the newcomers a chance we have stopped night work, which doesn't suit the bosses, because it causes them to pay more rent when they can't use their buildings night and day. It costs them the price of another loft instead of costing the workers their health and lives as in the old days.

Our trade is well organized, we have won two victories and are not going backward.

But there is much to be done in other directions. The shop girls certainly need organization, and I think that they ought to be easy to organize, as their duties are simple and regular and they have a regular scale of wages.

Many saleswomen on Grand and Division streets, and, in fact, all over the East Side, work from 8 A.M. till 9 P.M. week days, and one-half a day on Sundays for \$5 and \$6 a week; so they certainly need organization.

The waitresses also could easily be organized, and perhaps the domestic servants. I don't know about stenographers. I have not come in contact with them.

Women have proved in the late strike that they can be faithful to an organization and to each other. The men give us the credit of winning the strike.

Certainly our organization constantly grows stronger, and the Woman's Trade Union League makes progress.

The girls and women by their meetings and discussions come to understand and sympathize with each other, and more and more easily they act together.

It is the only way in which they can hope to hold what they now have or better present conditions.

Certainly there is no hope from the mercy of the bosses.

Each boss does the best he can for himself with no thought of the other bosses, and that compels each to gouge and squeeze his hands to the last penny in order to make a profit.

So we must stand together to resist, for we will get what we can take—just that and no more.⁶

POSTSCRIPT

In 1921, 1924, and 1927, Congress passed a series of laws to restrict the flow of immigrants. The legislation targeted southern and eastern Europeans as well as Asians. These laws were woven out of several ideological strands: Resurgent fundamentalist Protestantism perceived Catholics as a major threat; immigrants were viewed (with some justification) as major participants in the strikes and radical movements of the post-World War I period and so were accused of being un-American; and citizens from old families grew increasingly concerned about the so-called dilution of American stock, upholding their Anglo-Saxon ancestry as the key to national greatness. This last was a particularly insidious form of racism and was uppermost in Joseph Pennell's thinking as he wandered the streets of Lower Manhattan in 1921. Whereas Jacob Riis would reform the immigrants into Americans, the new trend was toward exclusion. By the late 1920s, total immigration was capped at about 250,000 per year, with western and northern Europe receiving much higher quotas than countries from the east or the south. Immigration did not reemerge as a vital factor in American life until the last decades of the twentieth century, when new laws made it possible for migrants, especially from Latin America and Asia, to come to the United States in numbers comparable to those of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Then in the early twenty-first century came a resurgence of nativism.

QUESTIONS

1. Compare Riis's narrative and visual depictions of immigrant groups with the interviews.
2. How do you think these three immigrants would have defined success? Had they achieved it by their own standards? By the standards of the larger society?
3. To what extent did these immigrants consider themselves American? To what extent Chinese, Italian, or Jewish? Do you think it is possible to combine an American identity with some other affiliation?
4. How were the three immigrants whose life stories you read typical or atypical?
5. How did Corresca, Lee, and Schneiderman differ in their memories of their homelands? In their attitudes toward America? In their descriptions of work? What do you think accounted for the differences? How did they feel about other immigrants?
6. How are today's conflicts over immigration similar or different from those a century ago?

ADDITIONAL READING

The classic work on nativism is John Higham's *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860–1925* (1955). Oscar Handlin's *The Uprooted: The Epic Story of the Great Migration That Made the American People* (1951) remains a moving study of the pressures immigrants felt to abandon their native cultures, but also see John Bodnar's *The Transplanted* (1987). Other studies have emphasized ethnic groups' success in community building. For examples, see Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers* (1976), and Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (1989). For a marvelous immigrant autobiography, see Marie Hall Ets, ed., *Rosa: The Life of an Italian Immigrant* (1970). For a survey of diverse immigrant experiences, see Stephan Thernstrom, ed., *The Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups* (1980). For a fine anthology of women's writings, see Ellen Dubois and Vicki Ruiz, eds., *Unequal Sisters* (1990). More recent studies emphasize the connections between ethnicity and race, such as Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color* (1999); Thomas Guglielmo, *White on Arrival: Italians, Race, Color, and*

Power in Chicago, 1890-1945 (2004); and David Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White* (2006). On recent immigration, see David Reimers, *Still the Golden Door: the Third World Comes to America* (1992), and especially Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (2005).

ENDNOTES

1. Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives; Studies among the Tenements of New York* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1890), pp. 48-53.
2. *The Independent*, v.54 (December 4, 1902).
3. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*, pp. 93-102.
4. *The Independent*, v.55 (February 19, 1903).
5. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*, pp. 106-114.
6. *The Independent*, v.58 (April 27, 1905).