

## Introduction

Millions of women left their homes in Europe, Asia, and Latin America to immigrate to the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Many hoped that life in America would be better, not only for their families but also for themselves as women. Often their hopes were nourished by their initial encounter with America, as is evident in the following passage, written by Slovenian immigrant Marie Prisland:

A group of Slovenian immigrants, of which this writer was one, arrived in New York from that part of Austria which presently is the territory of Yugoslavia. It was a beautiful morning, in May 1906. After leaving the French ship *La Tourairle*, we were transported to Ellis Island for landing and inspection. There we were "sorted out" as to the country we came from. . . .

There were at least a hundred Slovenian immigrants. We separated ourselves, as was the custom at home—men on the right and women and children on the left. All of us were waiting to leave for all parts of the United States.

The day was warm and we were very thirsty. An English-speaking immigrant asked the near-by guard where we could get a drink of water. The guard withdrew and returned shortly with a pail of water, which he set before the group of women. Some men stepped forward quickly to have a drink, but the guard pushed them back saying: "Ladies first!" When the women learned what the guard had said, they were dumbfounded, for in Slovenia, as in all Europe, women always were second to men. Someone dramatically explained it this way: "First comes man, then a long time nothing, then comes the woman."

Happy at the sudden turn of events, one elderly lady stepped forward, holding a dipper of water, and proposed this toast:

"Zivijo Amerika, kjer so zenske prve!" (Long live America, where women are first!)<sup>1</sup>

For Prisland, who later founded the Slovenian Women's Union of America and created a woman's magazine, *The Dawn*, the American dream became a reality. Not all immigrant women were so fortunate. For many, life in

the United States was bitter and the slogan, "ladies first," cruelly ironic. "Ladies" were first to be underpaid, unemployed, and abused.

Bitterness is the lot of young Jewish immigrant Sara Smolinsky, the central figure in Anzia Yeziarska's semiautobiographical novel, *Bread Givers*. Sara lives in near starvation on the meager wages she earns doing "woman's work"—ironing in a commercial laundry. When she accidentally scorches a shirt, her employer deducts three dollars from her wage of five dollars, condemning her to a diet of bread and water for weeks to come.

A terrible hunger rose up in me. . . . The starvation of days and weeks began tearing and dragging down my last strength. Let me at least have one dinner with meat . . . for that last hour of work, I saw before my eyes meat, only meat, great big chunks of it. And I biting into the meat.

Like a wolf with hunger, I ran to the cafeteria. . . .

At last I reached the serving table.

"Stew with a lot of meat in it."

Breathlessly, I watched how far the spoon would go into the pot. A hot sweat broke over my face as I saw the mean hunks of potato and the skinny strings of meat floating in the starched gravy which she [the server] handed me.

"Please, won't you put in one real piece of meat?" and I pushed back the plate for more.

I might as well have talked to the wall. She did not see me or hear me. Her eyes were smiling back to the fat man behind me [in the food line] who grinned knowingly at her.

"Stew," was all he said.

She picked up my plate, pushed the spoon deep down into the pot and brought it up heaping with thick chunks of meat.

"Oh, thank you! Thank you! I'll take it now," I cried, reaching for it with both hands.

"No, you don't." And the man took the plate from the server and set it on his tray.

Speechless, bewildered, I stood there, unable to move. . . .

"But you didn't give me as much as you gave him. Isn't my money as good as his?"

"Don't you know they always give men more?" called a voice from the line. . . .

"But why did she give more to the man just because he was a man. I'm hungry."

All the reply I got was a cold glance. "Please move on or step out of line."

People began to titter and stare at me. . . .

I was too trampled to speak. With tight lips I walked out . . . boiling with hate for the whole world.

In my room, I found the tail end of a loaf of bread. Each bite I swallowed was wet with my tears.<sup>2</sup>

The immigrant woman's encounter with America, for better or for worse, was not the same as the immigrant man's. Like the men, the women faced poverty, loneliness, discrimination, and physical danger as they struggled to build new lives in a new land. But their identity as women shaped the roles, opportunities, and experiences available to them in the family, the workplace, the community, and the nation. Much of the voluminous literature on immigration has been male-centered, taking men's experience as the norm and assuming that women's experience was either identical to men's or not important enough to warrant separate and serious attention. Using documents written by immigrant women themselves, or by others who knew them intimately, *Immigrant Women* offers a different perspective, a woman-centered perspective on American immigration history.

#### *Women as Immigrants*

Between 1820 and the mid-1970s over 46 million immigrants entered the United States: 35 million from Europe, 8 million from Latin America, Canada, and the Caribbean, 2 million from Asia, and half a million from Africa, Australia, and elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> In the 1980s legal (documented) immigrants, illegal (undocumented) immigrants, and refugees numbered from half a million to a million each year, most of them from Latin America and Asia. Peak immigration periods for men have not always coincided with those for women, however. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, male immigrants outnumbered females by roughly three to two, while among Asian and some eastern European groups the preponderance of men was even greater. By 1920, however, women outnumbered men among West Indians, Bohemians, and Jews, and from World War II into the 1990s, the majority of immigrants were women.<sup>4</sup>

Women outnumbered men among the Irish who came to the United States in the nineteenth century to escape destitution. During the anti-Semitic massacres in the dying years of czarist Russia, almost as many women as men fled for their lives to the United States. On the other hand, in the early twentieth century southern Italian, Polish, and other Slavic male immigrants outnumbered their female counterparts five to one because of the attraction of "male" jobs in mining, construction, and heavy industry. By mid-century, however, many of these jobs had been automated out of existence, and a rising demand for service workers of all kinds created an American labor market more favorable to women. This mid-twentieth-century labor market was especially attractive to Third World women. Many of these

women were displaced from their traditional occupations as their countries modernized but were not provided the same job opportunities as men in the new economic order.<sup>5</sup>

Immigration policy, as well as economic development, sometimes affected women differently than men. Reflecting racist views on Asian sexuality, a special act of Congress in 1870 gave immigration officials in California the right to determine whether an incoming woman (but not an incoming man) was "a person of correct habits and good character," an indignity that helped discourage the immigration of Asian women. Discrimination against women was carried further by the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which restricted Chinese immigration to a very small number of students and merchants, effectively shutting women out altogether. In the 1900 Census there was only one Chinese female to every twenty-six Chinese males in the United States; the Chinese community remained heavily male until after World War II.<sup>6</sup> Folksongs express the frustration and sorrow of the many wives left behind:

I am still young, with a husband, yet a widow.  
The pillow is cold, so frightening.

O, don't every marry a daughter to a man from Gold Mountain,  
Lonely and sad, her only companion is her cooking pot.<sup>7</sup>

The National Origins Quota legislation of the mid-1920s barred all immigration from Asia, preventing Japanese as well as Chinese women from joining their countrymen. Favoring western Europeans over the supposedly inferior eastern Europeans, it also kept southern Italian and Slavic women from immigrating to join male relatives. By mid-century, however, immigration policy was more favorable to women. Special legislation admitted World War II "war brides," many of them Asian, and subsequent laws admitting displaced persons and refugees were gender neutral. New immigration laws passed in 1965 gave preference to relatives of persons already in the United States, regardless of gender or country of birth.

Women came to the United States to escape the economic, political, and religious oppression that all immigrants faced in their native lands. Many also came to escape forms of oppression unique to them as women. For example, some nineteenth-century Scandinavian servant girls fled sexual harassment, others unequal wages and working conditions that were more difficult than those endured by their male counterparts.<sup>8</sup> Marie Zakrzewska, who became a noted physician and medical educator, emigrated from Berlin in 1853 because women could not become physicians there.<sup>9</sup> Future trade-union organizer Rose Pesotta left Russia at seventeen because she could see "no future for myself except to marry some young man returned from his four years of military service and to be a housewife. That is not enough."<sup>10</sup>

A Korean "picture bride" married an unknown man in America to escape the social restrictions of her homeland: "Since I became ten, I've been forbidden to step outside our gates, just like all the rest of the girls of my day. . . . Becoming a picture bride, whatever that was, would be my answer and release."<sup>11</sup>

*In the New Land*

Women's adjustment to life in the United States, like their immigration, often differed from that of men. Most women were, or soon became, wives and mothers. Housework, pregnancy, childbirth, and childcare gave their lives dimensions of pleasure and pain not shared even by the men closest to them. Sometimes pregnancy was an intolerable burden, to be avoided or terminated regardless of the disapproval of husband, church, or state. More often, children were the welcomed antidote of the loneliness of immigration; "having my own baby, that was heaven," wrote a Bulgarian immigrant.<sup>12</sup> Children were also a link to the new world and an important factor in the Americanization of the immigrant homemaker.

In the workforce as in the family, women usually fared differently than men. Whether they arrived in the nineteenth or the twentieth centuries, from Europe, Asia, or Latin America, most women took jobs in areas related to traditional women's occupations: domestic service or needlework. Like their predecessors, many of the Hispanic and Asian women who immigrated after 1965 became "sewing women," but others moved into newer female occupations. In the late 1980s, 90 percent of the workers in California's Silicon Valley electronics industry were women, about half of them Filipinas, Vietnamese, Koreans, and South Asians.<sup>13</sup>

Though many women needed to earn a living, typically their job opportunities were fewer than men's; between 1845 and 1859 the Boston Society for the Prevention of Pauperism received applications for employment from 14,000 women "foreigners" (mainly Irish) as opposed to 5,034 men.<sup>14</sup> Typically, too, their wages were lower. In the famous 1913 "Protocol in the Dress and Waist Industry" (won largely through the efforts of militant women workers), labor and management reserved the highly skilled job of "cutter," at \$27.50 a week, for men only. The jobs of "finisher," "examiner," and "sample maker," at \$9.50, \$11.50, and \$13.00 respectively, were reserved for women.<sup>15</sup> Mostly nonunionized, contemporary Asian women workers in the electronics industry endure forced overtime, work speedups, and health hazards for minimum wages and with little chance for advancement.

The differences between women's and men's roles at home and in the workforce were reinforced by women's differential and inferior access to education. Early twentieth-century Americanization programs for men offered instruction in industrial skills, civics, and English. Parallel programs for

women, fewer in number, were usually limited to American-style domestic skills and “pots and pans” English. Robert Woods, an authority in settlement work, spoke for many educators when he suggested in 1903 that the education of immigrant girls in the public schools and settlement houses have a similar domestic focus because “the girls can discuss sewing and cooking with their mothers when they have no language to discuss trade winds and syntax.”<sup>16</sup> Time did not necessarily alleviate the problem. In the 1970s and 1980s women refugees from Southeast Asia faced discrimination in government-sponsored language and job training programs. The need to find and pay babysitters further restricted some women’s access to education, as did fear of venturing out at night in dangerous neighborhoods.

Even nativist prejudice affected women differently than men. Foreign-born men from many countries of origin have been characterized at different times as drunkards, brutes, criminals, and political radicals. Just as consistently—and with evidence just as scanty—immigrant women have been characterized in equivalent “female” terms: as loose women, poor housekeepers, and bad mothers. During the rapid urbanization of the early twentieth century, eastern European immigrant women were blamed for a real or imagined decline in family life as well as for the rise of juvenile delinquency because “they do not learn English; they do not keep up with other members of the family.”<sup>17</sup> Racism reinforced nativism to make prejudice against Third World women even more intense and more lasting. Hispanic and black immigrants, their daughters, and their granddaughters are still frequently relegated to the sidelines of American life, condemned as being sexually immoral, dirty, and maternally inadequate. Asian women have been, and are, stereotyped as exotic and erotic, or passive and docile, or both.

*Recovering the Story: The New Ethnicity  
and the Women’s Movement*

Before 1965 most traditional American historians viewed immigrants as “problems” to be solved by assimilation, while liberals emphasized discrimination, the ethnic American as victim. The distinctive experiences of immigrant women were usually subsumed under men’s history or given perfunctory or patronizing treatment. In the late 1960s and 1970s, however, the rise of the “new ethnicity” and the revival of the women’s movement changed the way many scholars approached the history of immigration in general and the history of immigrant women in particular. The new perspectives offered by these movements have had a major influence on the conceptualization of this book and on the selection and interpretation of the documents in it.

The new ethnicity was an outgrowth of the post-World War II black civil rights movement. In the social ferment of the 1960s, Mexican-

Americans, Asian-Americans, native Americans, and descendants of many European immigrant groups followed the lead of black Americans by organizing to pursue political and economic justice for their communities and by taking increased pride in their ethnic heritages. Ethnic activism increased the number of ethnic officeholders, helped introduce bilingual education and ethnic studies programs, and prompted the removal of some of the most blatantly insulting stereotypes from the media.

The new ethnicity as an organized movement faded away. Immigration continued, however, stimulating new debates about immigration policy and new research about the expanding Asian and Hispanic communities. As the 1990s began, ethnic minorities continued to be an active political force, and pluralism continued to challenge the melting pot as the ideal for American society.

Scholars responded to the new ethnicity by placing new emphasis on the struggle of immigrants to resist oppression and, within the limits imposed upon them, to adjust to America on their own terms. Oscar Handlin's Pulitzer Prize-winning study, *The Uprooted*, published in 1951, focused on the emotional and social disruption caused by immigration. More recent studies by Rudolph Vecoli, Virginia Yans McLaughlin, Donna Gabaccia, and others have stressed the resourcefulness of immigrants in using their ethnic traditions to help adapt successfully to their new life. Similarly, the "Chicago school" of sociologists of the 1920s and 1930s had emphasized assimilation, whereas Nathan Glazer, Rudolph Vecoli, Andrew Greeley, and other scholars of the 1960s and after have stressed the continuing survival of these communities as political and economic interest groups, as focal points for alternative value systems, and as touchstones for social and personal identity.<sup>18</sup>

*Immigrant Women* does not neglect the traditional concerns of immigration historians. It documents the disorientation and pain that accompanied immigration, and the racism and ethnic and class prejudice that scarred many lives. But its main concerns are those of the newer scholarship. This book sees immigrant women as subjects rather than as objects and ethnic life as an enduring (and valuable), though constantly evolving, feature of the American social landscape. Readings such as Corinne Azen Krause's study of the successful Americanization of Italian, Slavic, and Jewish women in Pittsburgh and Emma Gee's description of Japanese "picture brides" coping with "culture shock" present immigrant women as problem solvers rather than as problems. In similar fashion the selections in Part 7, "Social and Political Activists," illustrate the impact of immigrant women, from nuns to labor leaders, on many areas of American life. The concluding part, "Daughters and Granddaughters," documents not only Americanization, but also the continued survival, often in altered form, of ethnic life-styles, interests, and values. It also documents the complex and evolving meaning of ethnic identity.

While the insights of the new ethnicity apply to all immigrants, those of the women's movement pertain specifically to women. Like the new ethnicity, the revived women's movement grew out of the reform movements of the 1960s, when many women became aware that as women they suffered discrimination similar in some ways to that of ethnic minorities. In a best-selling book, *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan described the malaise of homemakers for whom the lonely routines of suburban housewifery did not provide the fulfillment promised by psychologists and the advertising media. Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millett, Elizabeth Janeway, Juliet Mitchell, and other scholars and theorists investigated the oppression of women by social and political institutions, asking hard questions about the origins of men's power over women, about the use of sex, like race, to perpetuate economic inequality, and about mechanisms for positive change in women's lives.

Like the new ethnicity, the women's movement affected the world of scholarship. By the mid-1970s gender was beginning to take its place alongside ethnicity and class as a category for historical analysis. Alice Kessler-Harris pioneered in the history of the working women. Carl Degler cautioned against the identification of prescriptive sources (what women ought to do) with descriptive sources (what women actually did). Working at the intersection between ethnic and women's history, Virginia Yans McLaughlin, Betty Boyd Caroli, Norma Fain Pratt, Hasia Diner, Sarah Deutch, Judy Yung, and others turned their attention to the recovery of the story of immigrant women.<sup>19</sup> Donna Gabaccia called attention to the fact that research on immigrant women, especially more recent immigrants, was being done by sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, and literary scholars as well as historians and scholars in women's studies. By the 1980s women's studies (and, to a lesser extent, other disciplines) was beginning to explore the interaction of gender, class, and ethnicity in the lives of their subjects.

In 1975 Gerda Lerner reviewed the various levels on which women's history was being written: first "compensatory history," the recovery of "lost" women; then "contributions" history, women's roles in man-centered historical movements and events; and, finally, woman-centered history and the search for new woman-centered syntheses and conceptual frameworks.<sup>20</sup> *Immigrant Women* addresses its subject at all three levels. It includes "compensatory history," documents by or about "lost" women such as black nationalist Amy Jacques Garvey and labor leader Mother Jones. It also includes "contributions" history, readings describing women's participation in man-centered movements such as trade unionism and the campaign against child labor.

*Immigrant Women* does not propose new woman-centered syntheses or conceptual frameworks. Rather, it presents woman-centered materials from which such syntheses and frameworks can eventually be built. It documents

women's work, their participation in their own institutions such as "mothers' clubs" in settlement houses and ethnic women's organizations, and their struggles to gain control over their political and personal lives through movements for women's suffrage and birth control. It explores women's relationships not only with their husbands and their communities but also with one another as mothers, sisters, daughters, lovers, colleagues, and friends. It examines the impact of immigration in women-centered areas of life: women's work in the factory and the home, childbirth on the frontier, women's roles within the family, women giving and receiving help, old age, widowhood, the death of a child.

The selection of materials for a documentary collection on so broad a topic as immigrant women in the United States is highly subjective. Nevertheless, I have used a number of criteria. I have selected materials that address both the classic concerns of immigration history and the issues raised by the new ethnicity and the women's movement. Literary merit has been taken into account. My primary consideration in including a document, however, is its authenticity and effectiveness in conveying the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of immigrant women. Therefore, most of the documents are first-person accounts or materials by relatives or others who knew them well, sympathetic social workers, or researchers in direct contact with their subjects.

The collection focuses on the impact of change—immigration—and how women have coped with that change. It includes women who came to the United States from Europe, Asia, Latin America, and elsewhere from the 1820s to the early 1990s. The 1820s have been taken as a beginning point because the Anglo-Saxon Protestant baseline for American identity had been established by that time, and the government had begun to collect data on immigrants. Indentured servants and slaves who arrived before 1820, therefore, are not included, nor are native American women, whose experience was that of being displaced and colonized in their native land rather than that of immigration. Women from Puerto Rico who came to the mainland are included, although they were citizens of the United States in both locations, because their experience in moving from Hispanic to Anglo-American culture paralleled that of women emigrating from foreign countries.

Immigrant women differed from one another in ethnic background, religion, social class, age, political and sexual orientation, education, personality, and character, as well as in their motivation for coming to the United States. Their life-styles embraced a broad spectrum, from the most traditional to the most unconventional. Although it would be impossible to include materials representing all immigrant women, the readings reflect the diversity of this population.

The readings also reflect the diversity of the available historical materials. Many are drawn from traditional historical sources: the speeches and

memoirs of public figures, such as Polish-born suffragist Rose Winslow and Golda Meir, who became prime minister of Israel, and government reports, such as the life stories of industrial workers from a bulletin of the Department of Labor Women's Bureau. Readings from less traditional and less "official" sources include oral histories, poems, short stories, and excerpts from novels by or about immigrant women. Quantitative academic studies have been excluded as inappropriate in tone, but many of these studies are cited in the bibliographic essay.

The opening part of the book documents the reasons women left their homelands. Succeeding parts deal with the immediate problems of survival in the United States, then with work, family, community life, education, and the impact of immigrant women upon "mainstream" American social and political life. The last section documents continuity and change, the relationship between immigrant women and their daughters and granddaughters. An introductory essay opens each part, providing a historical context for the selections that follow. Brief headnotes introduce the individual selections. The book concludes with a bibliographic essay that directs the reader to a wide range of published materials about immigrant women in the United States.

### *The Revised Edition*

This second, revised edition of *Immigrant Women* explores the same themes and uses the same organizational structure as the first edition and the same criteria for the selection of readings. However, in editing the revised edition I have included proportionately more material on the Latina and Asian immigration of the late twentieth century immigration, adding new readings about Korean, Cambodian, Vietnamese, Chinese, Japanese, Pakistani, Mexican, Chilean and Cuban women in the United States. There are also new readings about immigrant women in theater and art and about immigrant lesbians. Finally, the revised edition includes poetry as well prose and has an expanded, updated bibliographical essay. To provide space for these new materials I have eliminated—with great reluctance—a number of the readings that appeared in the original edition.

In conclusion, I would like to thank the generous authors and publishers who gave me permission to use their work. I would also like to thank the editors of the State University of New York Press who made this new edition possible.

### *Notes*

1. Marie Prislend, *From Slovenia to America: Recollections and Collections* (Chicago: Slovenian Women's Union of America, 1968), p. 19.

2. Anzia Yeziarska, *Bread Givers* (1925; reprint, New York: George Braziller, 1975), pp. 166–69.
3. United States Immigration and Naturalization Service, Annual Report, 1973.
4. Walter Wilcox, *International Migration Statistics* (New York: Gordon Breach Science Publishers, 1969), pp. 401–43.
5. For the impact of “development” on Third World women, see Helen Safa and June Nash, *Sex and Class in Latin America* (New York: Praeger, 1976); Ester Boserup, *Woman’s Role in Economic Development* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1970); and Louise Lamphere and Michele Rosaldo, *Women, Culture, and Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974).
6. Mary Coolidge, *Chinese Immigration* (1909; reprint, Tapei: Ch’eng Wen 1968), p. 19.
7. Marlon Kau Hom, “Some Cantonese Folksongs on the American Experience,” in *Western Folklore* (1983), p. 130, as cited in Asian Women United of California, ed., *Making Waves: An Anthology of Writings by and about Asian American Women* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), p. 5.
8. Edith Janson, *The Background of Swedish Immigration, 1840–1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1931), pp. 112–13.
9. Marie Zakrzewska, *A Woman’s Quest: The Life of Marie Zakrzewska, M.D.*, ed. Agnes C. Vietor (New York: D. Appleton, 1924), p. 67.
10. Rose Pesotta, *Bread upon the Waters*, ed. John Nicholas Biffel (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1944), p. 9.
11. Harold H. Sunoo and Sonia S. Sunoo, “The Heritage of the First Korean Women Immigrants in the United States, 1903–1929,” in *Koreans in America* (1976): 149.
12. Corinne Azen Krause, “Urbanization Without Breakdown: Italian, Jewish and Slavic Immigrant Women in Pittsburgh, 1900–1945,” *Journal of Urban History* 3 (May 1978): 302.
13. Asian Women United of California, ed., *Making Waves*, p. 19.
14. Maxine Seller, *To Seek America* (Englewood Cliff, N.J.: Jerome S. Ozer, 1977), p. 77.
15. Charlotte Baum, Paula Hyman, and Sonya Michel, *The Jewish Woman in America* (New York: Dial Press, 1976), p. 147.
16. Robert A. Woods, *Americans in Process: A Settlement Study of Residents and Associations of the South End House* (New York: Riverside Press, 1903), pp. 303–4.
17. *Second Annual Report of the Commission of Immigration and Housing of California* (Sacramento: California State Printing Office, 1916), p. 139.

18. See, for example, Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1963); Andrew Greeley, *Why Can't They Be Like Us: America's White Ethnic Groups* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1971); and idem, *Ethnicity in the United States: A Preliminary Reconnaissance* (New York: Wiley, 1974).

19. Examples of work by these and other historians of immigrant women are cited in the bibliographic essay.

20. Gerda Lerner, "Placing Women in History: A 1975 Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 3, nos. 1-2 (1975): 5-15.