

CHAPTER ONE

Jewish Immigrants to the United States, 1881 to 1905: The Decline of the Old Communities

It is right to draft the hard-working masses;
Shoemakers or tailors—they're only asses!
But the children of the idle rich
Must carry on without a hitch.

—Folksong

From 1881 to 1905, approximately three quarters of a million Jews emigrated from the Russian Empire to the United States.¹ They were part of large waves of immigrants responding to powerful economic and demographic developments in eastern and southern regions of Europe.² Jews emigrated in proportionately greater number than any other European group except the Irish. In absolute numbers, they ranked second after the Italians among the newcomers. During the peak years of their immigration, they constituted 10.5 percent of all new Americans.³

Why did Jews leave the old country at that point? What kind of society and culture did they come from? Who were the most likely to leave their homes and their communities? Responses to these questions indicate the social and cultural determinants that guided the newcomers in America. Spurred by economic necessity resulting from changes in world economic systems and the oppressive policies of Czar Alexander III, Jewish emigration also followed a long-term deterioration in social status and a curtailment of autonomy of their communities during the second half of the nineteenth century. A series of reforms initiated by the czarist government had a pro-

Folksong dating to the years of the oppressive conscription laws of 1827, quoted in Isaac Levitats, *The Jewish Community in Russia, 1772–1844* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943), p. 65.

found impact upon its Jewish subjects, particularly after the abolition of the autonomous Jewish community (*kahal*) in 1844. No longer bound and regulated by governmental authority, the community and its leadership also lacked the power and the authority that the state had previously conferred on it. These developments, reinforced by secular trends sweeping the Pale in the last half of the nineteenth century, undermined old hierarchies of authority and directed many Jews' political energies "outward" toward the wider society—and the new world.

Traditional historical narratives have emphasized increasing economic hardship and the discrimination practiced against Russian Jews as primary causes for their late-nineteenth-century migration. Accounts of the period do indeed confirm that those most exposed to the growing perils of impoverishment and proletarianization were more likely to emigrate. However, material objectives alone cannot account for the group's evolving identity and subsequent history in America. Rather, in order to understand the formation of this group's identity, we must view its total social experience as defined by its interaction with existing institutions, economic life, cultural practices, and strategies of political action. In the words of sociologist Margaret Somers, we must understand "the structural and cultural relationships in which they are embedded."⁴

THE EMIGRANTS

An examination of the Jewish emigrants' occupational structure indicates a marked preponderance of skilled workers and artisans, accounting for 64 percent of all Jewish immigrants between the years 1899 and 1914, while skilled workers represented only 37.7 percent of all gainfully employed Jews in Russia in 1897.⁵ Predominant among them were tailors and seamstresses, who together comprised 44 percent of all skilled newcomers.⁶ The next largest group, representing 21 percent of all Jewish immigrants during the 1899 to 1914 period, consisted of laborers and servants, classified by U.S. immigration as unskilled workers. They represented 18.5 percent of all gainfully employed Jews in Russia in 1897. In contrast to these two groups, the commercial and professional occupations, whose combined representation among all Jews in Russia amounted to 30 percent, accounted for only 6.8 percent of Jewish immigrants.⁷ The pronounced numerical presence of nonrural laboring occupations distinguished the Jewish immigrants from other national and ethnic groups. In contrast to the Jewish experience, "laborer," "farm laborer," and "servant" were much more frequently listed occupations among Italian, German, Polish, Slovak, and Greek immigrants in the years from 1899 to 1910.⁸ Also distinctive was the relatively high influx of Jewish immigrant women. Jews ranked second to the Irish with a rate of

fifty-four males to forty-six females, an almost equal distribution, in contrast to Italian, Croatians, Russians, and Greeks, among others.⁹

The high proportion of skilled workers among the immigrant men and women merits further analysis. What were the reasons for this pronounced tendency of craftsmen-artisans, especially of those engaged in the manufacture of clothing, to emigrate? The socioeconomic and cultural situation of the groups provides some explanation. Skilled Jewish workers emigrated in large numbers because of declining opportunities to earn a livelihood in Russia. The swelling class of artisans and their impoverishment were in part the result of the dramatic growth in Jewish population in Russia, from 1.6 million in 1825 to 3.98 million in 1880 and 5.175 million in 1900. Simultaneously, there was a noticeable reversal of the Jewish occupational structure, characterized by a marked increase in the numbers of those engaged in handicrafts and a decline of those engaged in trade. The data available for 1818 indicates that, in sixteen Russian provinces, those engaged in trade accounted for 86 percent of all Jewish occupations, while only 12 percent of Jews were artisans. By 1897, however, the category of trade occupations decreased considerably, so that they represented only 32 percent of all Jewish occupations, while the proportion of artisanal work increased to 37.7 percent.¹⁰ Even more telling are data available for the period between 1887 and 1898 which indicate that, in absolute and relative terms, Jewish artisans increased considerably in fifteen out of twenty provinces of the Russian Pale, while the other five provinces witnessed only a slight decline.¹¹ Within the swelling ranks of artisans, tailoring and related occupations were more numerous than other skills; they came to represent 38.7 percent of all Jewish artisans. In some provinces, especially in the south, their ratio was even higher. In the city of Ekaterinoslav for example, clothing workers comprised 46.4 percent of all artisans.¹²

A similar occupational distribution existed among women in the Pale. Of Jewish women aged fourteen to fifty-nine, an estimated 27 to 28 percent were working. Women's employment in paid work reflected economic necessity. The traditionally high esteem that Jewish tradition assigned to lifelong religious learning for men meant that women played a central role as providers. Women, like men, were engaged in petty commerce or crafts such as shoemaking, weaving, lacemaking, and baking. Among the many occupations in which Jewish women were engaged, the sewing trades represented the largest group. Of all registered female artisans, 70 percent worked in some aspect of this craft.¹³ It was unusual for women to be employed as tanners, butchers, barbers, or engraving photographers but not unknown for men to be employed in women's occupations such as knitting, which was poorly paid, with earnings of as little as fifteen kopecks per day, practiced in villages for city markets.¹⁴ A minority of women ran small dress-making establishments with one or two employees or apprentices, earning

a bare subsistence minimum for themselves and their families.¹⁵ The preponderance of handicrafts, particularly sewing, among Russian Jews reflected a disadvantageously high ratio to local population, leading to cut-throat competition and pauperization.¹⁶

The declining living standards among Jewish artisans were also partly caused by legal restrictions on domicile imposed on Jews and by the low standard of living among the Russian population in general. Apart from professionals and merchants, the majority of Jews were forbidden to live outside the restricted areas of the Pale. Within the Pale they were excluded from the countryside and confined to the provincial towns and incorporated villages.¹⁷ Geographic restriction accompanied economic prohibitions; Jews were barred from owning land or real estate outside urban areas and also from liquor production. The latter restriction had a particularly severe impact on the Jewish economy.¹⁸

The Jewish community suffered from poverty as did the rest of the local Russian population. Even the emancipation of the serfs in 1861 did not generate a viable economic base which could revive local demand. The position of peasants was further aggravated by the worldwide fall in grain prices during the 1870s, which adversely affected the Pale's economy. A Russian government committee reported in the 1880s that 90 percent of Jews living in the Pale constituted "a proletariat living from hand to mouth in poverty and under the most trying and unhygienic conditions."¹⁹ The growing numbers of itinerant beggars and recipients of charity further reflected the vast scale of pauperization. In 1898, for example, the number of families requesting Passover assistance reached 132,855, representing nearly 19 percent of all Jewish families in Russia and as many as one in four in some regions.²⁰ Among the poor, artisans were the most numerous, followed closely by manual laborers and beggars.²¹ The largest single group of artisans, including tailors, seamstresses, and other occupations related to clothing, suffered most in the declining Jewish economy. Their growing numbers "could supply clothing for half the population of the Russian Empire," but their ability to provide for their families at the turn of the century declined precipitously.²² Thus, for instance, though the national average annual income of all tailors in 1897 was 250 to 400 rubles, "the average income is only a dream for most artisans-tailors, a dream which will never be fulfilled." Most tailors, as well as shoemakers, had to subsist on 80 to 120 rubles a year.²³

The declining economy had far-reaching effects on the Jews' occupational structure. Those engaged in skilled artisanal occupations increased at the expense of occupations related to commerce. Sources confirm that the economic decline undermined the living standards of religious professions such as *melamdîm* (teachers), rabbis, talmudic scholars, and ritual slaughterers. Many were forced to seek alternative ways of earning a living, and the acquisition of skills became a necessity dictated by their economic

circumstances.²⁴ From the economic point of view, an artisan's life appeared relatively attractive, primarily because little capital was required—a factor applying to all artisan work in the shtetl economy—and secondly because of the short apprenticeship. Jewish artisans, both men and women, worked mostly from home. Such occupations as tailoring or shoemaking were done mostly by hand and usually to order for local customers who supplied the necessary materials.

Manufacturing on a large scale was “relatively rare.”²⁵ Thus, the use of sewing machines did not spread among the Jewish tailors, and as late as the 1890s, the typical small-town tailor worked “with his own two hands; each had his workshop, or a workroom, or at least a work table.”²⁶ For some, the acquisition of a sewing machine seemed prohibitively expensive.²⁷ According to one account, some workers stubbornly refused to believe in the sewing machine's ability, which “will not and cannot tell between good and evil” and was incapable, therefore, of performing quality work. Declaring that no seam “sewn by machine could be stronger than a seam sewn by human hand,” the same old-fashioned tailor refused to buy a machine, despite the growing competition from the more mechanized tailoring shops.²⁸ Jewish artisans compensated for the absence of capital equipment by the intensive use of labor and particularly of cheap apprentices, but rarely waged workers. For instance, in Vilna and Kovno, two of Lithuania's provinces, fewer than half of the master-artisans in 1898 employed one worker, and more than half engaged the services of an apprentice, defined as a child aged ten to fifteen.²⁹

It was estimated that at the end of the nineteenth century, there were about 100,000 apprentices within the Pale, of whom about a fifth were girls.³⁰ In seven of the twenty provinces of the Pale (not counting Poland), tailoring bosses employed Jewish boys and girls as apprentices rather than qualified adults. In the remaining provinces, the average shop employed one to three wage earners. Larger shops were generally confined to the Pale's bigger cities.³¹ In reality, though largely independent, Jewish artisan-craftsmen were unable to employ workers or to compete with the consumer goods industry that served the general market. Those aspiring to achieve the status of master-artisan had to undergo a period of apprenticeship of three to four years. They spent their first year helping the masters' wives in household work and childcare. After three years, they earned low wages of 40 to 75 rubles annually. In reality, many apprentices left their masters before completing their training, to begin working as independent craftsmen, while others skipped their apprenticeship altogether.³² As a result, “one could encounter a self-taught artisan whose products will not be satisfactory outside the poor districts of the shtetl; in large cities these craftsmen could not survive.”³³

Impoverished Russian peasants, the main customers for Jewish artisans' products, were consumers of cheap, all-purpose goods, a situation



1478. — I. & P., Praha. — Ręcznie kolorowane.

Figure 1.1 Jewish cobblers and apprentices, postcard, Eastern Europe, ca. 1900. The Jewish National and University Library, Jerusalem. Courtesy of Beth Hatefutsoth, Tel Aviv.

which discouraged any form of specialization. Thus, for example, the limited and simple needs of the local population dictated the presence of one all-purpose tailor, rather than a number of craftsmen specializing in different garments. According to the recollections of M. Alper, an immigrant who came to the United States aged forty in 1902 and whose father was a tailor, rough local peasants required the services of tailors capable of making a wide variety of garments: "a fur coat or an overcoat, or a pair of linen trousers or a linen dress for women."³⁴ Tailors providing more specialized services were generally confined to the larger towns. For example, in the town of Spola (Kiev district), with a population of twelve thousand, half of whom were Jewish, two categories of tailors existed: those who catered to the richer clients and those who made clothes for the poor. The former specialized in making superior quality coats in fur, sheepskin, or superior cloth, designated for the Sabbath. The latter made "trousers of cheap black shining material, short jackets of wool and cotton."³⁵ Sarah Reznikoff was a Jill of all trades in czarist Russia, capable of running up almost anything from men's underwear to ladies' dresses, but she took the initiative to improve her skills: "I sent for Glazhdinsky's *System of Cutting for Dressmakers and Tailors*. . . . I was soon able to make dresses that fit."³⁶

During the last decades of the nineteenth century, even independent or semi-independent gainfully employed Jewish artisans faced poverty and proletarianization. The wretchedness of their life was matched by their equally inferior social standing in the Jewish community, caused by both limited religious learning and low income. Jewish men's devotion to scholarly activity, which traditionally afforded them high social esteem, presupposed an existence free of economic worries, a luxury open to few; the majority were forced to seek more practical pursuits. Many fought "tooth and nail" against the possibility of social degradation and clung to old values of "clean work," fearing a loss of status. Abraham Solomon Melamed, who was born in 1862, remembered his grandmother's grief after she was widowed and forced to give her five-year-old son (Melamed's father) away, as an apprentice to a tailor. All her life she mourned over the great tragedy imposed on her by poverty which forced her to

give away her son to learn a trade. She was the daughter of Rabbi Solomon and the daughter-in-law of Rabbi Abraham Schechter, and among her relatives on her father's side there was not one artisan. And now her only son, one of thirteen sons she bore to her husband, of whom twelve had died before reaching the age of studies, her one child had to become an artisan.³⁷

Similarly, a widowed mother, one of M. Alper's ancestors, who couldn't afford a decent dowry to marry off her two daughters, refused to consider artisans as future sons-in-law. It

wasn't to her liking because in those days [1860s] an artisan was considered crude and boorish. And she insisted on the respectable lineage of her late husband as well as her own lineage, since she herself came from religious parents and was a learned woman well-versed in Yiddish and could translate the whole Bible [into Yiddish].³⁸

Others clung tenaciously to their precarious economic status by refusing to admit their poverty; doing a lot of "cheek pinching in order to get the color," in order to pass as respectable, well-off Jews, even though "poverty whistled in all corners," remembered A. Berlow, whose father sold leather to Russian peasants and shoemakers.³⁹

Tailors were considered disreputable in some sections of the Jewish community. An anonymous immigrant, who came to the United States so he would not have to "live on air any longer," could not contemplate learning a trade in Russia because

it would have shamed my family. My father-in-law used to say that if one finds a needle in the stomach of a chicken, the chicken is *treyf* [nonkosher]. What can one say then about a tailor who holds in his mouth so many needles? And that was also the rule for other trades.⁴⁰

Tailors were also accused of cheating their customers by retaining pieces of cloth provided by clients. One observer portrayed the tailors of the town of Spola as unreliable, especially in the days before the High Holidays. They apparently liked vodka and, like some of their English counterparts,

all took off some of the cloth given to them by their customers, claiming that it was "left over." Although some used to deny it vehemently in the name of all that was holy, some . . . would say in jest: "Get one yard more, because whether you provide it or not, I will have to take the equivalent of my vest." People used to say that this custom of remnants was the means for some tailors to become rich and respectable.⁴¹

In response to similar accusations, Abraham Solomon Melamed remembered a humble tailor who, on his death bed, asked the head of the town's burial society to

have his coffin made of the board of his work-table which he had used for thirty years. These boards will be the testimony on Judgment Day that "I have never stolen any of the cloth provided to me and that I did my work with honesty." [His wish was fulfilled]. . . . They carried his table which they broke into boards to the cemetery. The boards served as sides of the coffin and the legs of the table as tombstones.⁴²

The artisans' declining material circumstances in the late nineteenth century played a pivotal role in influencing social and cultural relationships and in forging the identities of distinct social groups. New social categories emerged under the impact of economic hardship, which were equally shaped and defined by their social and cultural position in contemporary Jewish society.

JEWISH CITIZENSHIP IN ACTION

Social divisions were part of the traditional Jewish community despite its sense of unity when facing danger from the outside world. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, solidarity had been severely tested by what one historian calls the "conscription debacle."⁴³ The ensuing social antagonisms and mass discontent generated a process that would erode the social and cultural leadership's power.⁴⁴

Until about 1850, Jewish communities in Russia and Poland were self-governing political entities, a status which allowed the leaders considerable executive power in internal communal affairs. The kahal was "the guarantor of civil order of the Jewish society and the effective fiscal administrator on the state's behalf," noted one historian.⁴⁵ Throughout the history of the independent Jewish communities, artisans were excluded from public offices, which, along with the right to vote, were granted in exchange for financial contributions.⁴⁶ Between 1827 and 1844, the kahal's power to exert social control was further augmented by its responsibility for supplying recruits to the Russian army.⁴⁷ Central government required a certain quota of conscripts from every community. The draft law's administration and execution were handed to community leaders who, in turn, apportioned the number of recruits to be supplied by individual families. Given the exemption of rabbinical students and tradespeople's sons from military service, a disproportionate burden of the draft fell on the poor. During the early years of the draft laws, the length of army service was twenty-five years, and boys as young as eight were recruited. Traditionally, the recruitment laws have been viewed as expressions of state-motivated anti-Semitism, which aimed effectively to remove young recruits from their religious and cultural continuity. Ultimately, however, decisions about who was recruited were the responsibility of the kahal rather than of czarist institutions in choosing to draft youngsters under the marrying age of eighteen.⁴⁸

The unfairness of the draft process remained etched in popular memory. Abraham Solomon Melamed remembered, "It came the turn of my father's family to send a son to serve in the army. And because my father was the only artisan [a tailor] among them, the whole family decided to send him to the army as a scapegoat. And because he was an orphan nobody ob-

jected.”⁴⁹ To meet the demands of the Russian government, Jewish communal authorities had the right to draft idlers or vagrants who paid taxes irregularly or were guilty of other offenses.⁵⁰ Thus, short of self-inflicted mutilation, there was no escape for the poor, artisans, laborers, and other socially marginal Jews. Moreover, those who attempted to circumvent the law or to escape were thwarted by the communal authorities, who often resorted to the services of kidnappers or informers. Although the new recruitment law of 1874 decreased the community burden of supplying an annual quota of recruits, it did not erase the memory of the injustice and the feeling of resentment expressed in popular lore.⁵¹

Those opposed to the kahal’s claim to power and control defied the community council’s absolute power by a variety of means. The most extreme was that of informing on enemies to outside authorities or resorting to Gentile courts, a known recourse for settling grievances, as in the case of Hasidim informing against the Vilna kahal in 1799. In another case, Jewish artisans demanded representation on the town’s council independently of the recognized Jewish authorities.⁵²

Discontent was expressed more commonly through the longstanding practice of participatory associations such as the autonomous voluntary associations known as *hevrot*, guilds, and breakaway synagogues. In these traditional formations, subordinate groups fought for inclusion and exercised their rights as full citizens of the Jewish community. An integral part of Jewish communities, the *hevrot* fulfilled the functions of social welfare agencies, offered mutual aid, and dealt with the religious needs of the Jewish population. The most important was the *hevra kadisha* (burial society), which was in charge of burials and the cemeteries. Other religious societies devoted their activities to recitation of psalms for sick or deceased members, visited the sick and provided religious instruction. There were societies that assisted the poor, including the provision of food, clothing, shelter, and dowries to destitute brides.⁵³

The proliferation of autonomous associations and congregations was integral to the culture of religious dissent in an unequal setting where ordinary people had no recognized voice. Secession from established synagogues constituted a means of cultural and social self-expression at all levels of social conflict. The kahal had historically exercised control over artisans through its power to grant or revoke artisanal guild charters and to supervise their affairs.⁵⁴ Moreover, the kahal was eager to centralize all places of worship for tax-collecting purposes.⁵⁵ Jewish guilds sought a greater share in religious ceremonies and rituals and, ultimately, religious autonomy by holding services in their own places of worship. Guild-based synagogues also established their own *hevrot* for the fulfillment of religious and social duties. Membership dues financed the acquisition of the basic Torah scroll, ceremonial objects, and the hiring of preachers. Usually, when

a guild's constitution was drafted, all its members signed it, irrespective of their status.⁵⁶ However, despite the commonality of universally accepted ceremonial symbols, these synagogues differed from established ones. For example, some of their members were illiterate, and, as in the case of the Bialystok tailors' guild, there were far fewer Talmudic tracts in the guild's library, an absence which symbolized the more humble origins of its members and the rejection of domination by a learned elite.⁵⁷ Sometimes journeymen vented their grievances against artisans by seceding from artisanal synagogues to establish their own places of worship, as well as forming their own guilds and hevrot.⁵⁸ Journeymen tailors of women's garments in the town of Moghilev, for example, split from the parent guild in 1850 and formed their own organization, which remained active into the 1900s. Following the split, the journeymen established not only their own synagogue but also their own free loan (interest-free) association, and cared for their sick. The breakaway from the parent organization offered them freedom to develop their own traditions and culture. In subsequent years, for example, the seceding journeymen took great pride in an annual celebration commemorating the release of their leaders who had been imprisoned at the instigation of the master-tailors.⁵⁹

Establishing breakaway synagogues was a traditional expression of religious and social discontent. At one level, it claimed commonly accepted and familiar religious rights of honorific and ceremonial participation previously enjoyed by better-off Jews. When seceding groups used such established symbols as Torah scrolls and other expressions of liturgy and ritual, they indicated their acceptance of established religious models. On occasion, religious rituals and customs were a terrain for openly expressing social and cultural antagonisms. They provided opportunities for open clashes between artisans and well-to-do communal officials, as in the case of the town of Keidany, where a worker entered a synagogue on Rosh Ha'shana (New Year's Day) wearing a silk skullcap, a privilege reserved for the wealthy and the powerful. That evening, he was summoned before the communal elders of the community, who imposed a fine and ordered him to surrender his silk cap. In response, local artisans defied the edict by coming to the synagogue wearing silk caps, velvet gabardines, and fur caps. Thereupon, community officials denounced the undisciplined artisans to the local Polish nobleman, who imposed a sentence of flogging. Ultimately, a settlement was reached between the two warring factions that allowed artisans to wear silk and velvet. The agreement also coopted an artisans' representative onto the kahal's board and provided the opportunity to choose their own representative rabbi in all legal disputes.⁶⁰

The proliferation of voluntary associations of journeymen and artisans shows the cracks appearing in the oft-assumed loyalty and cohesion of the community.⁶¹ Secession from established synagogues and the found-

ing of new hevrot effectively acted as a counterweight to the rule of an oligarchy and helped to provide democratic outlets in Jewish political life. The silk skullcap incident provides a poignant illustration of both class conflict and an expression of political culture. The incident symbolized oppositional practice that went beyond the immediate sources of tension, such as army recruitment. The background of the declining rural economy served to bring into sharper relief the unequal distribution of cultural and religious space, and this became the arena of social conflict. The skull cap incident provides a microcosmic example of how contestation over cultural symbols, apparently insignificant customs within the Jewish community, sometimes became lightning conductors in struggles for greater democratic rights. On this occasion, the leadership of the Jewish community colluded with the state in order to preserve ethnic hierarchy. The journeymen of Keidany claimed the formal religious dress code as a universal right, held in common, in contrast to the elite's exclusive claim to a symbol of its power.

The hevrot, guilds, and synagogues were institutions of participatory democracy. They were a mobilizing force organized around common concerns and claims for a more equitable share of religious honors. Ultimately, these claims contested the accepted practices and defied the Jewish elite's cultural and social status.

Many years after the incidents mentioned above, Abraham Ain conveyed a similar structure of social relations at the turn of the century in Swislocz, a shtetl with a population of about 3,000, of whom 2,000 were Jews. He described the Community Council as a self-perpetuating elite which ran community affairs, made decisions about religious and charitable matters, administered the bathhouse and poorhouse, and collected the tax on kosher meat—the *korobke*. The council members were the “choosers and the chosen,” or the Jewish equivalent of an oligarchy.⁶² These memories of grievances constituted a force that resonated powerfully in a new and dynamic world view.

The culture that inspired the expression of such tensions transformed itself on American soil to confront new issues in innovative ways. The platform for the enactment of social practices was no longer confined to the shtetl or local synagogues, but encompassed neighborhoods and streets.

THE DECLINE OF TRADITIONAL COMMUNITIES

With the abolition of the autonomous Jewish communities in 1844 and the changes in the laws regulating taxation and draft that followed in 1863 and 1874, the power of the official leadership significantly decreased.⁶³ The tax reform of 1863 abolished mutual responsibility for tax payments, which

were thereafter paid directly to the Russian authorities on income and property. The military reform of 1874 decreed that all twenty-one-year-old men had to come before a draft board where recruits were picked by lot for a four-year service. Officially, the reforms, particularly the new draft law, liberated ordinary people from their leaders' unlimited power. However, although the reforms effectively deprived community representatives of the means of disciplining unruly members, in reality the community retained much of its power. In some cases the kahal continued to exist secretly, or even with the knowledge of the Russian authorities, and to regulate internal life, supervise residency laws, and grant exemption from army service by special authorization to those who wanted to study in secular schools. At times it became a kind of clearing house for recruitment, as when the community raised money to pay those who volunteered for the army while exempting others from service. In reality, the administration of the draft remained discriminatory, providing loopholes for the wealthy and the well connected.⁶⁴

In the long run, these events, coupled with economic and cultural changes in the Pale, unleashed powerful forces that resulted in the secularization and modernization of Jewish life. Contemporary commentators noted, for example, the new spirit of rebellion around the institution of the "crown rabbi." These rabbis, whose official appointment dated back to the regulations imposed by Alexander I in the early nineteenth century, were vested with increased powers after the abolition of the kahal. The qualifications for the job included a secular education and the ability to speak and write a language other than Hebrew or Yiddish. This lent the institution the support of secular Jewish circles in Russia. Moreover, unlike traditional rabbis who were elected by Talmudic scholars and community notables, the authorized rabbis were, at least in theory, democratically elected. Not surprisingly, the balloting, especially in the larger communities, mirrored the social and political tensions in the Jewish community. In many cases, these rabbis were symbolically embraced by the "riff-raff," according to one contemporary observer's complaint.⁶⁵ Popular support for the crown rabbis reflected the common people's mistrust of the traditional leadership, which was known for its discriminatory practices and its use of the korobke, a meat tax that financed traditional rabbis' salaries.⁶⁶ At times, the clashes between the traditional rabbis and the crown opponents mirrored the conflict between the poor and the traditional hierarchy. For example, in Ekaterinoslav, in 1888, supporters of Rabbi Nahum Zeev Shahor, who were described as "the lowest social element," allegedly terrorized his antagonists.⁶⁷ Conversely, those candidates who derived their support from "shoemakers and tailors" or from the Russian authorities, did not gain any support from the communal elites.⁶⁸ Some contemporary observers bemoaned the passing of an era and longed for the years when "the people saw and feared the awesome

whip" of the official kahal. "Today's lowly people signed a covenant to oppose all that leadership holds holy," complained one writer in 1888, lamenting communal elections as a "victory of the sheep over their worthy leaders."⁶⁹

Intra-Jewish social and political divisions intensified and the new individualism was particularly manifest in the changing character of charity distribution. The traditional charitable services provided by the kahal and the hevrot in the past declined during the decades of general impoverishment.⁷⁰ Although benevolent voluntary associations continued to exist, they were often dependent on the financial assistance of individuals who were not synagogue members. Departing from tradition, new rules concerning charity distribution stated that the needy could no longer ask for alms unless they could prove need.⁷¹ The new philanthropists found it necessary to discourage a culture of dependency. To reeducate and discipline the poor, they embarked on new efforts to centralize all charitable funds, especially in the larger communities, thereby hoping to put an end to the proliferation of beggars. Thus, for example, the poor of Bialystok received booklets in which each weekly stipend was duly marked, while the out-of-town poor were allowed to appeal directly to the prosperous Jews of the town on three designated days and were entitled to food from local charities. They also got a three-stop railway ticket, possibly to encourage them to leave town.⁷²

Contemporary sources reacted with alarm to the new spirit of "each one for himself and each little *minyán* [quorum of ten men for worship] for itself," which replaced what some concerned contemporaries perceived as old communal cohesiveness and solidarity.⁷³ Lamenting the demise of the old unity, and alarmed by the frequent collusion of communal leaders with the Russian government, one critic noted a damning incident from the town of Berditchev. According to a newspaper report, the town's Jewish leaders requested that a local official coerce an elderly Jew to pay a poll tax for himself and for his long-deceased son. The town clerk ordered the elderly Jew to do so, but his inability to pay landed him in jail. Although two well-to-do community members eventually paid the debt, the author of the article marvelled "how a respectful and large community as this would miscarry justice."⁷⁴ The article concluded with the remark, "The emigration to America from our town has not abated, and three to four families leave every day. Most of them are artisans, along with few adventurers and young men who have to flee the military draft board this year."⁷⁵

THE IMPETUS TO EMIGRATE

Economic dislocation and pauperization underscored the growing divide between rich and poor and the latter's increasing dependence on the for-

mer. Artisans and their families suffered the hardships of poverty as well as low esteem. Their marginality was reflected not only in the distribution of charity, but also in the way they were treated socially, in schools and in the synagogues. The recollections of B. M. Laikin, born in 1896, testify to the power of privilege. "I always felt that my two teacher-rabbis never hit me because my father was a respectable, well-to-do Jew and not just an artisan, as were the fathers of the other children." The only artisan who attained respectability, according to this account, was a shoemaker who employed other workers and had some education. But even he was excluded from the "respectable" group that met at the rabbi's house on the Sabbath.⁷⁶ In view of the low esteem in which artisans were held, the prospect of joining their ranks signified a social degradation "worse and more sinful than converting to Christianity," according to S. J. Levy, who came to the United States in 1902 at age nineteen and subsequently became a dentist. According to him, "the whole town lived on charity."⁷⁷ With poverty growing throughout the Pale during the 1880s and 1890s, many teachers, rabbinical students, and slaughterers, as well as petty merchants, faced the prospect of joining the ranks of the poorest proletariat. A weakened allegiance to the community led many individuals to a critical view of Jewish leadership. Ben Reisman, who came to the United States in 1896 from the Ukraine, brought "no sweet memories of youth" from his hometown, only his mother's cynical view of the town's Jewish notables, who

study Talmud day and night . . . [and] provide for the cost of the synagogue and the religious school, but charge high interest rates when the poor come to borrow a few pennies. They squeeze out his soul, but to others they appear as great scholars and so they fulfill the command of "righteous life."⁷⁸

Growing secularization within the Jewish community further sowed the seeds of economic and social discontent. The cultural transformation began under the rule of Czar Alexander II, who granted privileges of domicile and occupation to students and to professionals, thus increasing the number of Jews entering government-sponsored Jewish schools as well as Russian schools and universities.⁷⁹ Russification and the new secular ethos released hitherto unknown aspirations among Jews and promoted new challenges to the established order. The foremost expression of the secular mentality was a new emphasis on the future, as opposed to the traditional "timelessness" of Jewish historical experience. While religious beliefs held out the promise of future redemption, social changes undermined the traditional Jewish quietism and the belief in a divinely ordained history.⁸⁰

The challenge to the old order was universal. Growing numbers of Jews experienced exposure to Russian culture and Russian society through the Russian "crown school" or university, while many others, who grew up

in traditionally Jewish homes, also gravitated, mostly in secret because of parental opposition, toward Russian culture.⁸¹ The resulting russification and secularization of the Pale assumed a variety of political expressions. While some considered cultural assimilation as the solution to the Jewish problem and rejected the notion of Jews as a people apart, others aspired to reconcile the Jewish tradition with modern secular culture. Still others, who aspired to liberation from the confines of Jewish tradition, linked their struggle to the revolutionary movements for emancipation from the oppressive czarist regime. The dominant political trends of the day, especially populism, called for politically engaged Jews and Russians to agitate among workers and the newly emancipated peasantry to support a revolution against the regime. "Going to the people" was the principle underlying a populist credo. The Jewish revolutionary intelligentsia took up the mission to educate the people and help them shake off the yoke of oppression. They hoped that revolutionary agitation would bring nearer a free society based on a philosophy of solidarity and emancipation. Many Jewish intellectuals believed that secularization and radicalization of the masses would ultimately solve the so-called Jewish question, in other words, stop anti-Semitic persecution.

However, the promise of emancipation through participation in the revolutionary movements was shattered by the pogroms of 1881. The effect of the pogroms was deeply and widely felt. Irrespective of the degree of assimilation within the Russian revolutionary movements, "virtually every major figure in the Russian Jewish intelligentsia was drawn to some sense of solidarity with the Jewish people," observed one historian.⁸² Some became Palestinophiles; others, forced to seek new answers to Jewish survival and freedom from oppression after the trauma of the pogroms, sought refuge in America. Here, russified revolutionaries Abraham Cahan, Morris Winchevsky, Philip Krantz, Morris Hilkowitz (later Hillquit), Louis Miller, and Emma Goldman would become prominent in new political struggles, which linked most of them inexorably to the Yiddish-speaking masses.⁸³

While some Jews were exposed to secular learning and to Russia's radical political movements, others on the socioeconomic margins remained untouched by contemporary politics, although secularism affected their world view. This was particularly the case in the days before the founding of the Bund in 1897, a movement mostly confined to industrial workers in large cities. Many others were also influenced by the prevailing secular currents. As immigrant accounts testify, a new orientation toward future possibilities and the new belief in the ability to shape one's life characterized their perceptions of social and economic reality. Unlike the older generation of parents who experienced economic decline but determinedly clung to their familiar way of life, the shtetl youth rebelled. "To go on and suffer so much will never satisfy us, the young," declared A. Berlow, who decided at thirteen

to stop his studies because "Talmud will not provide a livelihood," and at age fifteen made his way to the United States.⁸⁴ Similarly, Joseph Esrick, who emigrated to the United States in 1888 at the age of fourteen, while still a student in a religious school, began to think about possible options open to him. He rejected the career of a rabbi or a *shohet* (ritual slaughterer), who could not earn enough to pay for water "to prepare kasha."⁸⁵ Although he expressed a preference for the tailoring and shoemaking trade, he did not take up these plans until emigrating because his parents considered themselves "respectable people."⁸⁶ Another immigrant, who moved to Ekaterinoslav and then emigrated to America in 1902, rejected his parents' plan for a good match with a sizeable dowry, which would finance a peddling stand: "Though I was young . . . I understood that this is no practical solution for me."⁸⁷

Young people's rejection of traditional livelihoods, coupled with practical considerations for their own future as well as that of their children, lay behind many decisions to emigrate. They did for Philip Bernhardt, who came at age eighteen. His father, who was a religious teacher, had said that he "didn't see great hopes for his children in the old country" and decided to emigrate.⁸⁸ Another immigrant was torn between the desire to return to his native Russia where he had left his wife and children and concern for their future there. He observed:

In Russia, there was no possibility for Jewish children to achieve a goal, not in commerce and not in learning a profession . . . people had to leave home and look for luck abroad. But my children were still small, one was five and the other was three. Do I have to worry already about their future?⁸⁹

This was also a generation which was prepared to defy the dictates of religious authorities. In fact, their very decisions to emigrate constituted a defiant act in view of the rabbinical authorities' widespread image of America as a "treyf land." The image was intensified through Russian Jews' contacts with emigrants who became a living confirmation that Jews forsook their religion in the new land and that their children "don't know the difference between the middle of the week and the Sabbath."⁹⁰

In the changing climate within the Pale, news about America found a receptive audience. At times, such stories assumed a mythical character analogous to the apocryphal tradition reserved customarily for the Holy Land. Folk imagery in Hasidic tales focused on the symbol of the coming of the Messiah, who would lead the exiled to the Holy Land through subterranean tunnels. Sam Langer, who emigrated in 1902 as child, remembered how he loved to hear the story that America "is located under our feet and we are walking on the heads of the Americans and if one were to dig a tunnel into the ground one could reach America."⁹¹ Personal accounts and apocryphal

stories described America as a magical country, a land that epitomized freedom and opportunity. America was seen not only as the land where “everybody is free to move around and do what he pleases” or as the land of plenty where “one can pick up money lying around in the streets,” but also as a place providing a potential for personal renewal.⁹² “I heard that it was a new land and I was young—twenty-two years of age—I wanted to see the world, to see what the world looks like and to see whether I could take part in the direction life takes,” recalled Bernard Fenster, who had been a tailor’s apprentice before coming to the United States in 1891.⁹³ America also carried the promise of freedom from religious oppression for nonconformists who had found it impossible to escape the watchful and intolerant community of the old world. S. Ginsburg, once a Talmud student in Ukraine who was supported by his wife in petty commerce, compared his struggle for religious freedom in the old country to that of Baruch Spinoza, the seventeenth-century Jewish philosopher who had been excommunicated in Amsterdam. He dreamed of a “free land” where he would be able to follow his convictions.⁹⁴ Another immigrant searching for a “free republic” traveled to Austria and Germany and finally set his heart on Switzerland, which he thought was a land of freedom, but because of that country’s stringent immigration laws, he eventually decided to emigrate to America.⁹⁵

America, a land free of limiting social conventions, was associated in the minds of future emigrants with a promise of new beginnings. As one immigrant recollected, when he was thirty, the head of a family, and forced to look for new sources of livelihood, he found himself “in a frame of mind which led me to think that I had to do something drastic. I felt I had to smelt over my old personality into something new, to knead out a new being out of the old components. To learn a trade and to become an apprentice and so to become a new ‘being’ that could not happen, not in my old home.”⁹⁶ Similarly, Ephraim M. Wagner, who had been a teacher in Russia, decided to emigrate in 1888 because “I often used to consider the matter of changing my occupation, and the happy idea of emigrating to America occurred to me.”⁹⁷ Above all, America came to symbolize a land not only unfettered by the confines of political and religious intolerance, but free of the traditional social stigmas perpetuated within the Jewish community. The same immigrant who sought to become a new being set out for a country “where it is no shame to work; on the contrary, it is even an honor, and this country is America. So, I am going to America.”⁹⁸

The process of secularization had far-reaching effects on the traditionally circumscribed lives of women. As the providers in families where men devoted their lives to learning, East European Jewish women were more in touch with the secular world. The exalted ideal of Torah study for Jewish men also meant that Jewish learning for women was neglected. Free of cultural or educational expectations, girls in Russia were more likely to

avail themselves of public secular education, unlike their brothers who were still confined to traditional *cheder* schooling. Girls represented only 5 percent of those attending cheder, but 40 percent of those filling the few primary school places available.⁹⁹ According to historian Paula Hyman, exposure to the secular world meant that a new generation of women were able to detach themselves more easily from the traditional way of life and readily embrace the radical movements of the day.¹⁰⁰

Women were also more likely to acquire a knowledge of Russian and Ukrainian, enabling them to act as intermediaries in business affairs on behalf of their families.¹⁰¹ Sarah Rothman described her mother as "modern" because of her ability to read Russian and her secular independence. She was the only watchmaker in her town in the 1900s, meeting all kinds of people through her shop, some of them socialists. She eventually became a Zionist and refused her father's suggestion of marrying a religious man.¹⁰² Emigration was an attractive option for such women, who not only defied tradition by seeking secular education but also sought better prospects overseas. Those who emigrated were largely young unmarried women, but there were also some who followed their husbands. Other women, like men, wanted to leave behind the poverty and social degradation they had experienced in the Pale. By emigrating, they rejected the traditional roles assigned to them. Rose Pesotta, the future labor activist and anarchist, decided to go to America, "where a decent middle-class girl can work without disgrace."¹⁰³ As A. Berlow recalled, his sister decided to leave home because she knew that the lack of an adequate dowry meant she had "no future."¹⁰⁴ Fannie Shapiro, a young woman who left in 1906, begged her father to allow her to go to America and even threatened suicide: "I want to go to America, I want to learn. I want to see life." Her father agreed and paid \$30 for her ticket.¹⁰⁵ Ella Wolf (Misolovsky), who arrived in 1891 from Vilna, savored her freedom:

Of course, the conveniences were downstairs, the water was in the hall, but I was young and I was free here . . . the freedom that I had here in comparison with the school in Vilna was so great that America was my life. The only place we didn't have freedom was the home because my father was so deeply religious.¹⁰⁶

The image and promise of America, as well as the new country's economic prospects, influenced the decision to emigrate. Different aspects of the American experience were related in contemporary Hebrew and Yiddish newspapers. Most recommended emigration but disagreed on the desirability of various destinations. For example, the *Yudishes Volksblatt*, which was influenced by the budding Zionist ideology of the 1880s, favored Jewish exodus and settlement in the historical homeland, while *Ha-melitz*, one of

the two major Hebrew newspapers of the period, tended to favor the United States as the future homeland. It portrayed America as the land of toleration and of plenty where, under the Homestead Act, Jews received free land. In contrast, Palestine was presented as an undeveloped and uncivilized country where new settlers did not have much opportunity to find an adequate reward for their toil.¹⁰⁷ Newspaper accounts of the pros and cons of emigration were less important than personal impressions communicated by friends' and relatives' letters.¹⁰⁸ Reports from those already in America were an invaluable source of information. As one contemporary said, "no one can tell the relative difference of conditions between this country and the old as well as those who have tried them both."¹⁰⁹ The dissemination of these letters to shtetl inhabitants was of major importance. References to and from other emigrants provide proof that the information was fully shared. Firsthand experience, related by a friend or a relative well-acquainted with the needs and the expectations of the future immigrant, carried much more weight than images propagated by governmental or communal agencies. For example, one man, who feared America's corrupting influence upon his religious son, refused to allow him to go there. His fears were alleviated only after a visiting emigrant, who brought regards from his sister in America, assured him that in America "one can be as religious as in Baltermanz (the name of his village)."¹¹⁰

In the letters Jews in the Pale received from friends and relatives in America, the correspondents' use of images and idioms familiar to their readers served as a convenient shorthand by which to convey impressions and make comparisons.¹¹¹ One immigrant informed the recipient of his letter that "I live here a much better life than many Polish noblemen." Another, a cloakmaker, though unemployed at the time, expressed regret at not having emigrated earlier and enthusiastically compared the plentiful diet in America to the basic fare and the hunger he experienced in his old home. In a much less enticing letter, one new American informed his reader that "we are suffering here more than soldiers in the Czar's army. We work hard from morning till late at night to earn a few dollars to guarantee our livelihood." In general, the new experience of work in America determined the tone of other letters. "Here in America it's not so good . . . here as you know, if one doesn't work, one doesn't have anything. And now, my husband doesn't work, but hopefully he will start working again soon," one daughter informed her parents.¹¹² It was generally agreed that one had to work hard in America. Irregular employment, long slack seasons, and the desperate need to accumulate the means to survive in difficult times were problems expressed in many letters.¹¹³ Yet, despite the hardships and disillusionment often implied in the letters, in only one of the sixty letters did the writer inform his wife of his intention to return home. He wanted to do so as soon as he married off his son and explained, "It is difficult for an old