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# Radical Trinity

## Anarchist, Jew, or New Yorker?

## Introduction

Before the First World War marked Europe's cultural suicide and cut many existing global ties, particularly transatlantic political ties, New York City was, as American historian Tony Michels remarks, the "unofficial capital"[1] of both Jewish radicalism and the Jewish labor movements in the United States and on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. For those familiar with the history of political radicalism, it is not surprising that "Jews played highly visible roles, over an extended period, in the leadership of leftist movements – including socialist, communist, and anarchist organizations – around the world,"[2] especially in New York organizations. As American political scientist Jack Jacobs highlights, "the presence of Jews and individuals of Jewish descent in the leadership of leftist movements was, at one point in time, considerable, and was regularly disproportionate to the percentage of Jews in the general populations of the countries in which these Jews were active."[3] This overrepresentation of Jews within radical political organizations led to the creation of a new Jewish image, i. e. "the Jew as radical," which "took shape in the 1890s. It was a stereotype that would gain wide currency during the Progressive Era, turn into a serious liability during World War I and the postwar Red Scare, and remain with Jews (often to their detriment) into the 1960s."[4] Because the city's history of political radicalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries pertains to Jewish immigration, this Jewish image is particularly strong and preserved in New York.

Between the 1880s and 1920s, around two million Jewish immigrants reached the shores of the United States from Eastern Europe; around a quarter

**1** Tony Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts: Yiddish Socialists in New York* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 6.

**2** Jack Jacobs, "Introduction," in *Jews and Leftist Politics: Judaism, Israel, Antisemitism, and Gender*, ed. Jack Jacobs (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 1.

**3** Ibid., 9.

**4** Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 2.

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of them stayed in New York.[5] Not all of them were active in radical political movements or even arrived as radicals in the United States, even if they later became radicals. The majority of this immigrant group "found employment in the hyper-exploitative sweatshops of the city's booming garment industry," which provided "ideal breading grounds for radicalism."[6] The working environments of the immigrants – not just the Jewish ones – stimulated a political radicalization that was unrelated to both the immigrants' Eastern European backgrounds and their religious traditions. It was a specific space-time continuum, i. e. New York City at the end of the nineteenth century, that provided an almost natural environment for political radicalization.[7] The sweatshops where the Jewish immigrants worked, as well as the tenement houses where they lived, helped forge a new variety of Jewish-American radicalism.

Contemporary political events, such as the Haymarket verdict[8], also radicalized several young Jewish immigrants.[9] To quote Tony Michels again, the Jewish labor movement "was arguably the largest, most creative upsurge in American Jewish history"[10] and might have drawn its human capital from the immigrant community, although it was forged on American soil. While the first Yiddish-speaking group of socialists was founded in New York in 1885, it took just a few years to fill socialist unions, political parties, and clubs with thousands of Jewish members.[11]

Eventually, the Jewish labor movement was one of the most successful ones on American soil, as "[n]o movement won more support or inspired greater enthusiasm among Jews during the four-decade era of mass immigration between the 1880s and 1920s."[12] Thousands of impoverished men and women hoping for a better future away from their birthplace and "who knew nothing of Karl Marx or his ideas before stepping foot on the island of Manhattan were soon marching

**5** Kenyon Zimmer, "Saul Yanovsky and Yiddish Anarchism on the Lower East Side," in *Radical Gotham: Anarchism in New York City from Schwab's Saloon to Occupy Wall Street*, ed. Tom Goyens (Urbana/Chicago/Springfield, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 33.

**6** Ibid.

**7** Some of the immigrants may have been radicalized in London before they went to the United States. See ibid., 34–35 and in more detail Constance Bantman, *The French Anarchists in London, 1880–1914: Exile and Transnationalism in the First Globalisation* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013).

**8** On the Haymarket Affair see, among others, Paul Avrich, *The Haymarket Tragedy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984).

**9** Zimmer, "Saul Yanovsky," 34–35.

**10** Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 2.

**11** Ibid., 2–3.

**12** Ibid., 4.

and striking and educating themselves in his name."[13] However, Jews were not the only ones who forged the American labor movement; unions and other socialist organizations were of "a multiethnic character,"[14] especially in New York. Nevertheless, as British sociologist Percy S. Cohen (1928 – 1999) correctly remarked, "Jews may have been prominent in the leadership of radical movements out of all proportion to their numbers in the population."[15] Leading socialists, anarchists, union leaders, and other labor activists in late nineteenth century New York were Jewish, which remained the case until the creation of the American New Left.[16] However, Jewish radicalism was not limited to socialism or anarchism; it was also expressed within the feminist movement, which is why "Jewish radicalism seen as a movement would have to embrace a wide range of radical thought and deed."[17]

There has long been a discussion to determine the importance of being simultaneously Jewish and radical in this historical context. In his work *Jews and the Left*,[18] Arthur Liebman claimed that a mix of religion, historical tradition, and the confrontation with antisemitism was responsible for radicalizing so many Jews. The role of religion in particular was critically discussed in the context of radicalization.[19] Considering that Jewish members of the US Socialist Labor Party, Socialist Party of America (SPA), and Communist Party accounted for twenty-five percent of all members and thereby formed "the backbone of each of these major radical organizations" – which were atheistic by nature – it is hard to believe that religion mattered at all. In addition, as Cohen highlighted, "most of the evidence for the connection between Jewishness and radicalism

**13** Ibid. Marx's position towards Jews was, however, rarely discussed. Dennis Fischman, "The Jewish Question About Marx," *Polity* 21, no. 4 (1989): 756, concludes that Marx was "shockingly anti-semitic" in his discussion of the "Jewish question." For further information on the discourse about Marx's anti-Semitism, see Jacobs, "Introduction," 6, and, more broadly, Julius Carlebach, *Karl Marx and the Radical Critique of Judaism* (London: Routledge, 1978).

**14** David P. Shuldiner, *Of Moses and Marx: Folk Ideology and Folk History in the Jewish Labor Movement* (Wesport, CT/London: Bergin and Garvey, 1999), 1.

**15** Percy S. Cohen, *Jewish Radicals and Radical Jews* (London/New York: Academic Press, 1980), 2.

**16** S. Robert Lichter and Stanley Rothman, "Jewish Ethnicity and Radical Culture: A Social Psychological Study of Political Activists," *Political Psychology* 3, no. 1/2 (1981/1982): 118.

**17** Robert Wolfe, *Remember to Dream: A History of Jewish Radicalism* (New York: Jewish Radical Education Project, 1994), 7.

**18** Arthur Liebman, *Jews and the Left* (New York: Wiley, 1979).

**19** For example: Jonathan Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics: Socialism, Nationalism, and the Russian Jews, 1862 – 1917* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) and Nora Levin, *Jewish Socialist Movements, 1871 – 1917: While Messiah Tarried* (London: Routledge, 1978).

is 'impressionistic', not statistical."[20] US historian Allen Guttmann has also criticized the belief in an interrelationship between the Jewish faith and Jewish radicalism:

> The role of the American Jew – as anarchist, as socialist, as Communist – has, however, been misunderstood by anti-Semites, by celebrators of Jewishness, even by scholars determined neither to praise nor to blame. It is an unrecognized fact that American Jews who rejected the political status quo have also rejected Jehovah and Torah and Talmud. Their radicalism has involved the abandonment rather than the intensification of their faith in Judaism as a religion.[21]

However, it is important to understand that "definitions of Jewish radicalism are one-sided and partial, reflecting the author's own political preferences and priorities,"[22] and therefore do not display a clear methodology in studying Jewish radicalism.

While US author, rabbi, and peace activist Arthur I. Waskow tried to trace the Jewish radical tradition back to antiquity[23] and claimed that Shabbat was "the first general strike [and] a holy general strike,"[24] Robert Wolfe argued that socialism was considered a translation of "traditional radical ideals of the Jewish people into the language of secular thought."[25] To quote the American left-wing author David P. Shuldiner, the error of such approaches lies "in assuming that Judaism is unique in predisposing its adherents toward a particular ideology."[26] That socialism was a form of secularized Jewishness might have been the perception of radical Jews themselves.[27] I suggest following Liliana Riga's approach – which she used in the context of Jewish Bolsheviks – that "Jewishness was a social fact mediated by ethnopolitical context, and therefore a dimension of *varying significance* to their radicalism, even for those for whom Jewishness was not a claimed identity."[28] In other words, the

**20** Cohen, *Jewish Radicals*, 2.

**21** Allen Guttmann, "Jewish Radicals, Jewish Writers," *The American Scholar* 32, no. 4 (1963): 563.

**22** Wolfe, *Remember to Dream*, 11.

**23** Arthur I. Waskow, "Judaism and Revolution Today," in *Jewish Radicalism: A Selected Anthology,* ed. Jack Nusan Porter and Peter Dreier (New York: Grove Press, 1973), 11–12.

**24** Ibid., 28.

**25** Wolfe, *Remember to Dream*, 10.

**26** Shuldiner, *Of Moses and Marx*, 33.

**27** Ibid., 37.

**28** Liliana Riga, "Ethnonationalism, Assimilation, and the Social Worlds of the Jewish Bolsheviks in Fin deSiècle Tsarist Russia," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 48, no. 4 (2006): 763. My emphasis.

link between socialism and Judaism depended on personal perspectives, the role that Jewishness played in radicalism and vice versa, or – to reference Percy S. Cohen – whether someone was a Jewish radical or a radical Jew.[29] For the anarchists in New York, to name one example, organizing a Yom Kippur ball on the Lower East Side posed no problems, especially since the Jewish anarchist community tended to be "unapologetically Yiddish."[30]

Regardless of radicalization levels, religion was still discussed within political movements, even if discussions about Jewishness among the SPA were secondary to theological discourse about Christianity.[31] To discuss the impact of Jewishness as a sole factor in political radicalism would mean arguing that "Jews are more radical than others within the same social categories."[32] Nevertheless, socialism and other left-wing radicalism might have been particularly interesting for Jews; they demanded a new order of equality and often fought ideologically against antisemitism. Furthermore, Jewish radicalism was also an expression of generational struggles within Jewish communities that originated in Eastern Europe but found fulfillment in a geographically distant environment, i.e. the Lower East Side of New York. Regarding the intensity of religious ties, Percy S. Cohen provided three "principal ways" for Jewish radicalism to be expressed: "One such way is to ignore one's Jewishness or to treat it as an irrelevance; a second is to keep one's radicalism and one's Jewishness quite separate from each other; the third way is to fuse one's radical concerns with one's commitment to being a Jew."[33] It is safe to assume that all of those options applied in New York where Jewish radicalism neither imitated or imported ideas from Eastern Europe; instead, it came into existence because of the metropolitan environment of the late nineteenth century. It is important to accept that "to understand Jewish radicalism as a movement, it has to be understood as a movement in time"[34] and within its specific geographical context. Therefore, it makes sense to examine the Lower East Side of Manhattan where Jews not only "played an extraordinarily disproportionate role in socialism and other radical movements,"[35] but also had a

**29** Cohen, *Jewish Radicals*, 9.

**30** Zimmer, "Saul Yanovsky," 44.

**31** For a detailed analysis of these discussions, see Dan McKanan, "The Implicit Religion of Radicalism: Socialist Party Theology, 1900–1934," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78, no. 3 (2010): 750–789.

**32** Cohen, *Jewish Radicals*, 4.

**33** Ibid., 9.

**34** Wolfe, *Remember to Dream*, 13.

**35** Gerald Sorin, *The Prophetic Minority: American Jewish Immigrant Radicals, 1880–1920* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 1.

transnational impact on Jewish radicalism on the other side of the Atlantic. New York offers both a local and transnational perspective on Jewish radicalism.[36]

This chapter will present a general discussion of when and where Jewish radicalization occurred in late nineteenth and early twentieth century New York. In a second step, however, local perspectives will be considered by examining the life and radicalization process of Isidore Wisotsky (1895–1970), a Russian (Ukrainian) Jew who immigrated with his family to New York at age fourteen in 1910 and later became an anarchist. His story, i.e. a historical case study based on his autobiographical materials,[37] will highlight how political radicalization within the Jewish community of the Lower East Side could have looked like. I will thereby show that time and place played a more critical role in the radicalization process of the Jewish community than religion did, which is usually highlighted when discussing Jewish radicalism. If one is interested in the full story of Jewish-American radicalization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, one must understand Jewish radicalism beyond religiosity.

## New York's Lower East Side and Jewish Radicalism

New York's Lower East Side was the perfect ground for developing Jewish radicalism in the United States. American historian Hasia D. Diner described it perfectly, referring to it as

> a warren of crowded, dirty, and mean streets. In this slum, these impoverished Jews re-created the culture of Eastern Europe, thick with the smells, sounds, tastes, and noises of life in the 'Old World.' But through the miracle of the American dream of mobility, their sons and daughters emerged from the Lower East Side as teachers, lawyers, doctors, movie mak-

**36** For recent transnational approaches to American Jewish history, see Adam Mendelsohn, "Tongue Ties: The Emergence of the Anglophone Jewish Diaspora in the Mid-Nineteenth Century," *American Jewish History* 93, no. 2 (2007): 177–209; Daniel Soyer, "Transnationalism and Mutual Influence: American and East European Jewries in the 1920s and 1930s," in *Rethinking European Jewish History*, ed. Jeremy Cohen and Moshe Rosman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009): 201–220.

**37** Isidore Wisotsky Autobiographical Typescript (henceforth Wisotsky), TAM.071, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University. An interview with Wisotsky from October 26 1963, in which he reveals similar stories, is also available in YIVO Archives: Interviews in Amerikaner Yiddishe Geschichte Bel-Pe, Collection 6036/002, Box 1, Folder 18–20, Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.

> ers, musicians – aggressive and assertive about their rights as Americans but more ambivalent toward the nature of their Jewish legacy.[38]

As Diner continued to emphasize, it was the experience of having lived in that environment that "reflected in microcosm the broad outlines of the metanarrative of the Jewish past" with its "recurrent themes of oppression, constriction, and danger, on one hand, followed by the expansiveness of liberation, on the other."[39] It could thus be rightly described as a "transitional zone"[40] for Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe who were becoming not only Americans, but also Jewish-American radicals. Jack Jacobs already alluded to this, highlighting that

> the relationship of Jews to the left was historically contingent, specific to political, historic, and economic conditions that prevailed between the late-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries in Europe, and that impacted upon Jewish political opinion in the United States and other countries that received large numbers of Jewish immigrants from Europe.[41]

While Jewish identity determined emigration and immigration processes, the American environment's political and economic implications formed a radical community with a European Jewish heritage.

Regardless of these interrelations, Tony Michels warned against perceiving Jewish radicalism as too European because "New York's immigrant Jewish community was not a mere replica of eastern European Jewry."[42] The US metropolis offered far more than a place to live; it "served as a laboratory of political and cultural innovation that influenced eastern Europe in ways historians are just beginning to recognize."[43] It offered both socialism and anarchism as forms of radicalism with which to identify. To name just one example, a German American named Justus H. Schwab (1847–1900) had opened a saloon on 50 East 1st Street in 1875/76 that would become a hotspot for anarchist culture in Manhattan's Lower East Side.[44] Yet not only in anarchist saloons did radicalism spread among Jewish immigrants – a rich café culture also provided radical spatialities

**38** Hasia R. Diner, *Lower East Side Memories: A Jewish Place in America* (Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000), 20.
**39** Ibid.
**40** Ibid.
**41** Jacobs, "Introduction," 1.
**42** Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 5.
**43** Ibid.
**44** Tom Goyens, "Introduction," in *Radical Gotham: Anarchism in New York City from Schwab's Saloon to Occupy Wall Street*, ed. Tom Goyens (Urbana/Chicago/Springfield, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 1.

where Jewish radicals met to have discussions at Sachs', Schmuckler's, or Sholem's café.[45]

However, New York's radical potential was not limited to a national scope. Rather, it served as a transnational hub of Jewish radicalism in the late nineteenth century. Jewish socialists printed thousands of copies of radical print media in Yiddish – newspapers, pamphlets, and the like – that would then be shipped to Europe, especially to Tsarist Russia. Many Jews there would be recruited into revolutionary circles, and based on their experiences with print media, the Jewish labor movement of Eastern Europe produced and published on the other side of the Atlantic.[46] It is thus critical to understand that transatlantic ties impacted the United States and vice versa; "[b]y providing an ample supply of Yiddish publications, New Yorkers successfully exported socialism to Russian Jews."[47] The Eastern European Jewish labor movement was consequently impacted by radical communities abroad, and in further studies we must accept its transnationality instead of using an old-fashioned and Eurocentric center-periphery approach.[48] In Tony Michels' words, "The leading role of New York in exporting Yiddish socialist literature to Russia suggests the need to revise the standard view of American Jewry as an outpost of European Jewry."[49] The relationship between the radical Jewish communities in Europe and the United States saw things eye to eye; as such, Jewish radicalism should be researched as a global system.

As the language of the revolutionaries, Yiddish "moved from west to east,"[50] although it had reached the United States before as a cultural form of communication. The radicalization took place on the Lower East Side and would later spread around the globe, even finding its way back to Russia. Although Yiddish was important to the revolutionaries, it would not have had the same impact without the movement of the radicals themselves. They moved back and forth across the Atlantic, stayed in contact through correspondence, and exchanged journal and newspaper articles that helped spread the fire of the revolution around the Jewish and non-Jewish world alike. When thousands of Jewish immi-

**45** Wisotsky, 74; Zimmer, "Saul Yanovsky," 43. For a detailed discussion, see the recently published work Shachar M. Pinsker, *A Rich Brew: How Cafés Created Modern Jewish Culture* (New York: NYU Press, 2018).

**46** Tony Michels, "Exporting Yiddish Socialism: New York's Role in the Russian Jewish Workers' Movement," *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society* n.s. 16, no. 1 (2009): 1.

**47** Ibid., 2.

**48** Ibid., 3.

**49** Ibid., 2.

**50** Ibid.

grants flocked to the trade unions of New York City, helped vote left-wing politicians into office in the following decades, determined the city's radical milieu, and constituted the readership, entourage, and followers of famous socialists, anarchists, and communists, they created New York's radical culture. They established this milieu in the United States before exporting it to the "Old World," from where new followers and adherents to radical ideologies would arrive in later years, having already been radicalized by their experiences in the Eastern European Jewish labor movement.[51]

The core of the American Jewish labor movement

> consisted of three interlocking institutions: the United Hebrew Trades (an umbrella organization of Yiddish-speaking unions inspired by the United German Trades), the Arbeter Tsaytung Publishing Association (which published the weekly *Di arbeter tsaytung* and the daily *Dos abend blat*), and the Yiddish-speaking branches of the Socialist Labor Party (which sponsored the monthly *Di tsukunft*).[52]

These publications also laid the foundation for the export of Yiddish papers and journals, which were usually smuggled by "Russian Jewish émigrés, typically university students, residing in Austria-Hungary, Germany, and Switzerland."[53] The workers' movement in Russia consequently obtained many of its reading materials from US printing machines, and the formation of socialism among Jewish communities of Russia originated in New York. Yiddish was also chosen as the language of the revolutionary movements in the Tsarist Empire because it was available for distribution, since the Lower East Side radicals had used it for more than a decade for communicating their own radical ideas.[54]

Based on these transnational interrelations, it would be inappropriate to explain Jewish radicalism in the United States with the geographical, religious, and social marginalization of Eastern European Jewish immigrants.[55] From a geographical perspective, Jewish radicals in New York were everything but marginal. Religion was not required as a basis for radicalism, but it could be synthesized

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**51** For a more detailed discussion of Russian-Jewish immigration to the US, see Simon Kuznets, "Immigration of Russian Jews to the U.S.: Background and Structure," *Perspectives in American History* 9 (1975): 35–124.

**52** Michels, "Exporting Yiddish Socialism," 8.

**53** Ibid., 14. Tony Michels also describes the smuggling process in more detail: "School holidays and Jewish holidays, such as Passover, provided opportune times to transport materials back home. Smugglers would often strap contraband to their bodies or hide it under false bottoms inside their suitcases. In that way, an individual might carry as much as 20 pounds of literature inside a single bag." (Ibid.)

**54** Ibid., 18.

**55** On that idea and its debate, see Jacobs, "Introduction," 2–3.

into radical views. As Jack Jacobs highlighted, the Jewish faith was no obstacle for many radicals: "There were, and are, Jewish leftists who have found elements of the Jewish religion to be compatible with their political proclivities."[56] The only form of marginalization that could have impacted Jewish radicalization in New York was social, and further analyzing this point requires a closer study of the lives of the nineteenth century Jewish immigrant community in the Lower East Side.

## The Community

As mentioned before, around two million Jewish immigrants reached the United States between 1880 and 1924. Yet, it would be a decade and a half before the "poor *Yidn*" were considered something besides "greenhorns."[57] While the newly-arrived community began to adjust to the American way of life, it also added "important parts of their rich and long-evolving culture, by concentrating in neighborhoods in a number of large cities, particularly the lower East Side of New York."[58] In the 1900s, they added "a variety of radical ideologies"[59] to the American Jewish labor movement. As Jack Nusan Porter and Peter Dreier stated in their introduction to their selected anthology on Jewish radicalism, this is especially true because the early twentieth century "saw the simultaneous rise of two mass movements among Jews – a Jewish labor movement and a Jewish radical political movement."[60] The second wave of Jewish immigrants no longer solely arrived from Jewish *shtetls* in Eastern Europe,[61] but rather from a "revolutionary Yiddishland,"[62] as the French scholars Alain Brossat and Sylvia Klingsberg called it.

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**56** Ibid., 3.

**57** Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 1; Sorin, *The Prophetic Minority*, 1; Zimmer, "Saul Yanovsky," 33.

**58** Sorin, *The Prophetic Minority*, 1.

**59** Jack Nusan Porter and Peter Dreier, "Introduction," in *Jewish Radicalism: A Selected Anthology,* ed. Jack Nusan Porter and Peter Dreier (New York: Grove Press, 1973), xvii.

**60** Ibid.

**61** On the shtetl see Sorin, *The Prophetic Minority*, 11–18. For a more detailed analysis of *shtetl* culture see Steven T. Katz, ed. *The Shtetl: New Evaluations* (New York: NYU Press, 2009).

**62** Alain Brossat and Sylvia Klingsberg, *Revolutionary Yiddishland: A History of Jewish Radicalism*, trans. David Fernbach (London/New York: Verso, 2016), xi. This "revolutionary Yiddishland" only survived in the memories and its people, or abroad, as the two scholars rightly remarked: "Having failed to achieve its hopes, its utopias, its political programmes and strategies, broken on the rocks of twentieth-century European history, Yiddishland survives,

Throughout Eastern Europe,

> the mass of Jews lived, thought, suffered and acted, a whole world, a complete society, with the requisite variety of elements – workers and intellectuals, scholars and financiers, managers and labourers, etc. At the top of the pyramid a financial bourgeoisie as in the West, but without any influence; below them a middling bourgeoisie, intellectual and commercial; and finally an immense Jewish proletariat.[63]

However, said proletariat first had to form either in the Tsarist Empire or in the United States. Determining factors during these developmental processes on both sides of the Atlantic were the same: "their family; and the social and cultural environment in which they grew up. The[n] ... the originality and unity of the world in which their consciousness was formed reveals itself: Yiddishland."[64] This radical Yiddishland is a world without borders; it includes the vast territories of Eastern Europe as it does New York's Lower East Side. Nevertheless, it has religious and cultural roots in the *shtetls*.

Most Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe who came to the US had memories of their *shtetl*, where they were poor, hunted, and often ostracized. While their class consciousness was not as strong as in industrialized cities, the *shtetls* also had their social hierarchies. Within them, "the Jews, by their act of refusal to give up their religion and culture, denied the ruling elite complete domination; this rebellion was obvious to other oppressed groups."[65] Memories of the *shtetls* were stuck to Jewish emigrants, who had no realistic worldviews living in a place that would perish as a consequence of a radical antisemitism. This was already felt in pogroms during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by those who became victims of anti-Jewish violence.[66] Alongside rampant antisemitism, the *shtetl* did not offer many prospects for poor people: "Though scholarship was a pillar of status, so clearly was wealth and family background."[67] In this Jewish world, a third factor began to change hierarchical dynamics: a generational conflict consisting of young Jews who "were rebelling against their parents and parts

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in the account of the past, as a culture, a lost treasure entrusted to antiquarian remembrance." (Ibid.)

**63** Ibid., 1.

**64** Ibid., 29.

**65** Aviva Cantor Zuckoff, "The Oppression of America's Jews," in *Jewish Radicalism: A Selected Anthology,* ed. Jack Nusan Porter and Peter Dreier (New York: Grove Press, 1973), 31.

**66** On the history of the anti-Jewish pogroms in Russia see John D. Klier and Shlomo Lambroza, eds. *Pogroms: Anti-Jewish Violence in Modern Russian History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

**67** Sorin, *The Prophetic Minority*, 16.

of their parents' culture."[68] Eventually, the "family was a microcosm in which the tensions and conflicts that beset the world of Yiddishland were focused,"[69] and for many young Jews, radical ideas allowed them to dream of a better world. It is thus no surprise that many young Jews who left Eastern Europe did so hoping for a brighter future.[70] Many of them must have been disappointed by the poverty that awaited them on the other side of the Atlantic, which is another reason why they were receptive to radical ideas. The Jewish immigrants were, as American historian Gerald Sorin put it, "energetically seeking outlets for deeply felt aspirations."[71] Breaking from their own parents and culture, particularly in different political environments in the US, caused "a break with the rigidity of the traditional Jewish life that invaded every sphere of existence,"[72] as it had been dominated by rituals and obligations. The young immigrants did not want to remain *Luftmenschen* but eventually became workers, organized and unionized among the ideals of socialism. As many other immigrants in the United States before and after them, they were under steady pressure to define and redefine their own identities – not only as new US citizens but also as radicals and as Jews.[73]

During this identity-defining process, the newly-arriving Eastern European Jews dealt not only with the non-Jewish New Yorker community. They also faced an older generation of German Jewish immigrants who had reached the metropolis a few decades before them. Those arriving between 1880 and 1914 were under constant and "powerful assimilative pressures from the already established Jewish community of New York."[74] Since German Jewish businessmen had established their own wealth in the metropolis, they feared that the large number of poor Jews arriving from Eastern Europe would damage their standing in New York's society; "[a]mong the reasons behind their desire for the quick and total Americanization of the new immigrants, anti-Semitism heads the list."[75] However, the arrival of new immigrants from Eastern Europe altered the Jewish community in the United States – in 1880, there were only a quarter of a million

**68** Ibid., 42.
**69** Brossat and Klingsberg, *Revolutionary Yiddishland*, 37.
**70** Ibid., 36–38.
**71** Sorin, *The Prophetic Minority*, 43.
**72** Brossat and Klingsberg, *Revolutionary Yiddishland*, 39.
**73** Melissa R. Klapper, "'Those by Whose Side We Have Labored': American Jewish Women and the Peace Movement between the Wars," *The Journal of American History* 97, no. 3 (2010): 638.
**74** Selma C. Berrol, "In Their Image: German Jews and the Americanization of the Ost Juden in New York City," *New York History* 63, no. 4 (1982): 418.
**75** Ibid., 419.

Jews in America – once the pogroms in Tsarist Russia set in motion a new age of Jewish migration.[76] As American historian Selma C. Berrol describes it from an economic perspective, the two groups were adversaries:

> Russian Jews were tenants and German Jews their landlords. Even more important, German Jews were the employers of the eastern Europeans. The garment industry offers the best example. In 1885, 97 percent of the garment factories in New York City were owned by German Jews, and it was in these factories that the greatest number of Russian and Polish Jews worked. This relationship was also true in the hat, cap, fur, jewelry, textile or trimming trades. Since most of the tenements that housed these workers were also in the hands of German Jews, conflict was inevitable.[77]

Considering this economic situation, new American life did not offer much more than poor life in Eastern Europe's *shtetls*.[78] The exploitation of the Jewish workforce by rich factory owners therefore continued to stimulate radicalization within the Jewish-American community.

## Its Radicalization

While radicalization happened on both sides of the Atlantic, the early arrivals were usually radicalized in the United States. Those who arrived after 1900 had the chance of being radicalized before their emigration from Eastern Europe, so they integrated with an already radical Jewish community on the Lower East Side of New York. In Eastern Europe, many Jews were members of the "three major currents of red Yiddishland: the communists, the Bund and Poale Zion."[79] For many radical Jews in Eastern Europe, "it was perfectly natural [...] [to] conceive[ the] Bund and revolution as one and the same thing."[80] Eastern European radicalism was based on the experience of Jewishness in this region of the world, which, to quote Alain Brossat and Sylvia Klingsberg again,

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**76** Ibid., 421.

**77** Ibid., 422.

**78** On poverty and exploitation in the *shtetl* see Ben-Cion Pinchuk, "The Shtetl: An Ethnic Town in the Russian Empire," *Cahiers du Monde russe* 41, no. 4 (2000): *Aperçus sur le monde juif:* 495–504.

**79** Brossat and Klingsberg, *Revolutionary Yiddishland*, 6. On the Bund, see Henry J. Tobias, *The Jewish Bund in Russia from its Origin to 1905* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1972). On the Poale Zion, see Mario Keßler, "Die Komintern und die Poale Zion 1919 bis 1922: Eine gescheiterte Synthese von Kommunismus und Zionismus," *Arbeit – Bewegung – Geschichte* 2 (2017): 15–30.

**80** Hersh Mendel, *Memoirs of a Jewish Revolutionary* (London: Pluto Press, 1989), 35.

> was in the early twentieth century a turbulent volcano, a social and political powder keg, a world that was constantly rumbling and moving. On top of this, in this zone of instability, the situation of the Jewish communities and populations from which they came was in most cases particularly unstable – from the pogrom at Kishinev in 1903 to the state anti-Semitism of interwar Poland. This double instability, the danger in simply being Jewish in Eastern Europe, this misery that was everyday experience of the great majority of these communities, clearly formed the roots of the availability for revolutionary commitment of a large fraction of Jewish youth in the early decades of the century.[81]

All Jewish radical organizations in Eastern Europe searched for an answer to address the basic misery of the Jews, who were not only economically suppressed and exploited, but sometimes victims of violence and perpetration. In the course of such an agenda, the organizations, its members, and the circulated radical ideas spread the word about "secular, emancipatory, rationalist values that went diametrically against the social and religious traditions of the *shtetl*."[82] The members of the Jewish Bund communities questioned and opposed "a world that was cracked and overthrown by the rise of modern capitalism to the live forces that arose from the young Jewish proletariat, open to the universal culture of the modern world,"[83] while those who followed the ideals of the Poale Zion "connected the universalism of its struggle with the rather mystical vision of an Eretz Israel that would be red and socialist."[84] Both of these organizations were particularly strong in the first two decades of the twentieth century. On one hand, Bund members demanded "political and civic equality for Jews" in the beginning, and "national and cultural autonomy for the Jews of the tsarist empire"[85] in later years. On the other hand, the Poale Zion established "a proletarian movement that sought to combine Zionism and socialism,"[86] but its influence already began to decrease after the failed revolution of 1905. For those who left Eastern Europe after 1900, it is no surprise that most of them were active in radical organizations in Eastern Europe previously.[87] Gerald Sorin assumed that a "significant majority" of those who reached the United States consequently "brought a developing radicalism with them."[88] This might be true, and since seventy percent of the Jewish immigrants who stayed in New York lived on the

**81** Brossat and Klingsberg, *Revolutionary Yiddishland*, 7.
**82** Ibid., 16.
**83** Ibid.
**84** Ibid., 18.
**85** Ibid., 24.
**86** Ibid., 26.
**87** Sorin, *The Prophetic Minority*, 46.
**88** Ibid.

Lower East Side, it must be considered specifically radical spatiality. David P. Shuldiner described the transformative forces the new arriving members of New York's radical society were impacted by:

> For Jewish immigrant radicals in the United States, the transformation and journey to a strange country were more than metaphorical equivalents; they were the defining features of personal and political odysseys. Caught up in a storm of revolution, war, migration, and resettlement, Yiddish radicals sought to chart a steady course through turbulent political waters.[89]

The radical Jewish identity in the United States might have been based on class and ethnicity, but the first generation of immigrants, i.e. those who arrived before having underwent a radicalization process in Europe, were probably rather radicalized due to a strong class consciousness and the exploitation in New York's sweat shops. Since the "Jewish tradition did not offer an intrinsically revolutionary outlook; nor did traditional Jewish community life provide objective conditions for the emergence of Jewish-identified Left politics,"[90] the US-based radicalization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was not built on religion. Rather, radicalization occurred in abstraction or opposition to religious traditions, since "the traditional religious community, as represented by rabbinical and civic authority, was historically conservative, and revolutionaries were often disowned – and sometimes banished – by the religiously observant, who felt besieged by modernity, and who saw radicals of any stripe as threats to their ever-tenuous position."[91]

Regardless of immigrants' ethnic or religious backgrounds, becoming politically active was essential for all immigrant workers to secure their economic outcome, which meant improving their income and/or working conditions.[92] Many who reached the United States to work were teenagers who had just begun developing political ideas. The garment industry became the midwife of political radicalism in New York City. It paid poorly or not at all during initial weeks of training, and the fact that "[g]arment workers also often paid for needles and electricity to run their machines, were overcharged for mistakes, and were fined for lateness"[93] helped forge radical ideas in young workers' heads. That many people with Jewish backgrounds worked in the sweatshops created a sense of community, a community that was based on the same ethnic back-

**89** Shuldiner, *Of Moses and Marx*, 13.
**90** Ibid., 21.
**91** Ibid., 28.
**92** Ibid., 1.
**93** Sorin, *The Prophetic Minority*, 57.

ground, the same class consciousness and, more important, the feeling of being exploited.[94] As a consequence of these preconditions, the unionization and radicalization of garment industry workers happened almost naturally. This phenomenon must be understood in the context of its space-time-continuum; that is, the Jewish community living and working in the sweatshops of New York's Lower East Side. Gerald Sorin emphasized this when he stated that

> The biographical materials on Jewish radicalism in America suggest that the roots of Jewish radical collective action lay not in irrational responses by uprooted, atomized individuals to the strain and hardship brought by extensive social change. In their radicalism these Jews were making claims on society as a cohesive group. They were organized around articulated interests that were shaped by social change, hardship, class-consciousness, and cultural background.[95]

The garment industry's exploitative nature demanded the proletarization of the Jewish immigrant community, whose members consequently became American radicals. This led to a radical community that absorbed further radical elements from abroad after 1900. Since these elements were of Jewish origin – and therefore easy to integrate into the Lower East Side's Yiddish society – they became an important part of the US Jewish labor movement.

The new arrivals, mostly poor families who had fled from economic hardship or violence, arrived in New York and found a Jewish community that was "partially rewoven with new threads, and highly girded by social formations"[96] and provided a radical tune for the future music of Jewish unionization and political radicalization alike. The song, so to speak, was not to be performed solo:

> Residential concentration, the family, the synagogues, *landsmanschaftn*, educational alliances, theater groups, mutual aid societies, reading clubs, the workplace, the union were all important social formations – places wherein one could sustain status and identity by being part of something larger than the atomized self.[97]

From the 1890s onward, immigrants did not simply arrive to the United States. They entered a world with existing Jewish communities where people spoke Yiddish and shared their pasts in the *shtetl*. In this world, workers had established the first radical structures into which new immigrants were drawn,

**94** Ibid., 96 – 97.
**95** Ibid., 8.
**96** Ibid., 5.
**97** Ibid. Landsmanshaftn were "social, fraternal, health, and mutual aid societies whose membership was generally based on common residential origin in a shtetl or region." Ibid., 67.

since they often became a gear in the exploitative system of various US industries. This familiar milieu allowed for faster radicalization; being exposed to German radicals and their socialist traditions was once essential in this process, but many Jewish communities in New York naturally incorporated new arrivals into their existing radicalism.

While "working-class Jews and German-Americans were the twin pillars of American socialism"[98] in 1900, Jewish immigrants had learned a lot from their German role models prior to the turn of the century. They established their own radicalism alongside socialist ideas, and the German radicals in earlier years "provided financial assistance, publicity, organizations models, and ideological guidance"[99] to their Jewish comrades from Eastern Europe, who "did not become so much Americanized as German-Americanized."[100] Considering these interactions, Tony Michels' evaluation is appropriate: "Jews created their labor movement in a German image."[101] This fact is particularly important because it highlights that at the end of the nineteenth century, the Lower East Side provided a radical breeding ground for Eastern European Jewish immigrants. Their radicalization initially took place in the United States, and from there it spread back to Tsarist Russia, providing a safe haven for later radicals. Said radicals traveled to the United States from there to become part of New York's radical Jewish community.

The intellectuals among the immigrants dove into the Lower East Side's rich culture of radicalism, becoming socialists or anarchists who provided a new "eclectic stew of European ideas"[102] that itself had already been cooked with ingredients from the New World. Yet the language of their radicalism was Yiddish, which, as David P. Shuldiner correctly remarked, "is not simply a linguistic, but also a cultural code of communication."[103] Many immigrant workers spoke Yiddish, leading to the creation of a labor movement that was Yiddish at its core.[104] Radical Yiddish papers were quickly established to provide the new Jewish working class with its radical ideas for the future. However, the "radical rhetoric of … [the] labor leaders and socialists caused great alarm in the bourgeois German Jewish community."[105] This was not only because of their antagonistic demands

**98** Ibid., 2.
**99** Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 4.
**100** Ibid., 5.
**101** Ibid., 4.
**102** Sorin, *The Prophetic Minority*, 73.
**103** Shuldiner, *Of Moses and Marx*, 43.
**104** Porter and Dreier, "Introduction," xvii.
**105** Berrol, "In Their Image," 423.

of society, but because of their use of Yiddish, which was considered "a 'piggish jargon' and a reminder of the ghetto."[106] However, even Russian intellectuals could not forego learning Yiddish if they wanted their political messages to reach the masses. Many of them had to learn or relearn a language that was once considered unintellectual and backward.[107] Tony Michels highlighted the pragmatic considerations that forced radical intellectuals to embrace their Jewish, i. e. Yiddish, heritage:

> To organize Jewish workers, Russian-speaking intellectuals needed to employ Yiddish, the spoken language of nearly all eastern European Jewish immigrants. But many of the intellectuals either did not know Yiddish or had rejected it years earlier as a marker of cultural backwardness. They had to learn or relearn the zhargon, or Jewish vernacular, thousands of miles from Europe's Yiddish-speaking heartland. This return to Yiddish was initially justified as a short-term concession necessary only until immigrants learned English.[108]

Due to political demands and needs, Yiddish endured a cultural renaissance in New York's Lower East Side. From there, it spread its radical potential across the globe.

It was not long before the first Jewish workers' unions were established. In 1888, they assembled under the umbrella of the United Hebrew Trades (*Vereinigte Yiddishe Gewerkschaften*).[109] Jewish unionization was a fast process because the "horrendously oppressive conditions of the sweat-shop industry impelled workers to think about escaping"[110] their economic exploitation. By 1890, there were already twenty-seven Jewish unions with around fourteen thousand members. Delegates of the United Hebrew Trades were sent to participate in the congresses of the Second International in Paris (1890) and Brussels (1891).[111] Early on, socialism played a critical role in the worldviews of Jewish workers, since the living conditions of their communities in the United States led to socialist ideas and their discussion among workers. In 1886, the Jewish Workingmen's Verein initiated its affiliation with the Socialist Labor Party and "joined a coalition of liberals and socialists to support the New York mayoral candidacy of Henry George."[112] In contrast to Eastern Europe's past, American

**106** Ibid., 429.
**107** Zimmer, "Saul Yanovsky," 36.
**108** Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 5.
**109** On the United Hebrew Trades see United Hebrew Trades, ed. *Seventy Years: United Hebrew Trades* (1958).
**110** Sorin, *The Prophetic Minority*, 78.
**111** Ibid., 79.
**112** Ibid.

society not only offered possibilities for emancipation, but also a real chance for political change. When socialism reached the climax of its influence in the 1910s, "Jewish socialists [that] felt that they were part of a movement that in the not too distant future could emerge victorious."[113] While Jewish membership increased over the years, the SPA's militancy was not Jewish in nature. Rather, it was represented by men like William Haywood (1869 – 1928), Jack London (1876 – 1916), and Frank Bohn (1878 – 1975).

Within their socialist activities, many Jews maintained their Jewish identities and found ways to deal with both their religious heritage and their status as radicals. Most of those who arrived after 1900 were already radicalized Jews, so it was unnecessary for them to redefine their identities; they could easily integrate into the American Jewish radical community as it existed in contemporary New York. There, they would read the Yiddish socialist daily newspaper *Forward*, which had reached a circulation of 200,000 copies in 1917 and was rightfully named the "largest pro-socialist newspaper in the United States."[114] The Russian radicals had found a new home where both Jewish identities and radical identities coexisted in a globally-connected hub of international radicalism.[115] Until the early 1920s, the poor Jewish migrants and intellectual elites of Eastern Europe alike entered this hub to explore new possibilities for radical action in hopes of creating a better society.[116] However, in New York, it was not only the unions and socialist organizations that gained from this steady influx of (radical) immigrants; their anarchist counterparts also benefited. As US historian Kenyon Zimmer confirmed, "Although anarchists played the second fiddle to the more numerous social democrats in the organization, their role as organizers and rank-and-file militants should not be underestimated."[117] One of these rank-and-file militants was Isidore Wisotsky, whose radicalization in the US shall be analyzed in more detail in the remaining part of this chapter. His story offers greater insight into the above-mentioned processes that took place in New York City, the capital of Jewish radicalism. I will focus on Wisotsky's early life rather than discuss his radical acts in his adulthood, since his developmental years were instrumental in his radicalization.

**113** Ibid., 86. Socialist party membership numbers had increased from 15,975 in 1903 to 118,045 in 1912. While this increase is not solely related to immigration, the growing Jewish community was well-represented among the party members.

**114** Ibid., 2.

**115** Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts,* 26 – 68.

**116** Brian Horowitz, *Russian Idea – Jewish Presence: Essays on Russian-Jewish Intellectual Life* (Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2013), 124.

**117** Zimmer, "Saul Yanovsky," 40.

## The Account of Isidore Wisotsky

Isidore Wisotsky reached the United States at the age of fourteen in 1909. He was part of no radical organization in Eastern Europe before his immigration, so he can be considered a "truly" Jewish-American radical. By discussing the autobiographical materials Wisotsky wrote in 1965, I will demonstrate how and why he became a Jewish anarchist – one of the numerous Jewish radicals of New York's Lower East Side.[118] Like many other Jewish immigrants, Wisotsky was born in a *shtetl*, namely Lipovets in the Kiev district of Ukraine. It "was the birthplace of several generations of our family, who were born, who lived and who died there. It was sunk in mud and poverty. There were no streets, no layouts. The houses were built of mud and straw" (3). Wisotsky described the environment in more detail:

> You seldom saw a brick house. If you did it belonged to a rich man. A thorough-dare paved with cobblestone was the main and only street of the town, and boards nailed together for about half a mile served as a sidewalk. When the mud rose you could not find it. There were also a few kerosene lamps that lit the street at night. That was your night life, hanging around those lamps. (4)

In school, the young boy encountered a violent teacher who only spoke Russian and punished students for any form of disobedience: "He had three kinds of punishments for pupils, according to the crime. Being in the corner, was for turning around or talking to someone; for coming late, he would let the pupil go to his seat and then have him go back to the door, and back, twice... If your Homework was not done, he used his cane" (24). When his father's small business could no longer secure his family's survival and pay their debts, the "have-nots" of the *shtetl* "came together in our house for a consultation, to help out Father. The only way out was to run away to America in the darkness of the night, so he could get rid of the money lenders. In America he will make a living. In a couple of years he will take the family out" (34). Eventually, the family borrowed money from relatives and parents to leave Eastern Europe together with four children. In Latvia, they spent four weeks at an immigrant house before they were able to go on a boat to America. After having missed one ship there, they boarded the Estonia, "a small, stinky steamer, that was overcrowded with emigrants, had poor service, and food you could not eat" (2). Stocked like sardines in a can, the "few hundred passengers were stuck together – with no air

**118** In the following part of the present chapter, page numbers in parenthesis will be used to refer to Wisotsky's manuscript.

or light" (3). They would survive on a diet of herring and potatoes, but the mother got sick and stayed below deck until she left the ship again. After a long time at sea, the family eventually reached the New World and moved to the Lower East Side of New York.

Suffolk Street, where the family lived, was "full of sounds and shrieks, an assortment of men, women and children, shouting, yelling screaming... a symphony of discordant noises. Everyone bent on selling his wares – from pushcart, his hand or from pieces and scraps that lay on the crowded sidewalk" (1). Like many other Jewish immigrant families, the Wisotskys would live in a tenement house, "with dark hallways, small gaslights on every floor, wooden stairs, no electricity and no steam, toilets, assigned to the living room, were strategically shared by two tenants. A big black iron stove in the kitchen used coal for cooking, for boiling the wash, and in winter, served as a heater for all the rooms" (Ibid.). As described above, the family arrived at a time when Jewish communities had already been established for more than two decades. Although they were far from Eastern Europe, the *shtetl* culture was close. Wisotsky describes one evening when *landsleit* from Lipovets visited the family (3). During this evening, people would discuss history and politics and enjoy one another's company. Wisotsky describes the friendly atmosphere within this community:

> Yes, the *landsleit* all came to greet us and brought with them gifts for the "greenhorns." Refreshments consisted of beer, salted pretzels, herring. Everyone was in a festive mood. Everyone was joyous, asking about their relatives, their wives and children whom they intended to bring over soon. (6)

His father's half-brother left a particularly strong impression upon the young boy, which is why his description of this relative shall be quoted at length:

> Suddenly half-uncle Moishe, without knocking, made his appearance. He was my father's half-brother. Round-shouldered, hoarse-voiced and glassy-eyed, a wandering drunk, Moishe had left his wife and children. He earned his living by going to [S]lavic neighborhoods throughout the country, miners' towns, and steel factories where Polish, Russians and Ukrainians worked. He spoke their language fluently and sold them portraits of their grandfathers, grandmothers, grandchildren, fathers, mothers. He would carry a large painted portrait which he would show his prospective customers as his sample. Then he would ask for a small picture of whom they would want, and make an enlarged copy. This cost them one dollar. When he brought the picture back, he would say, "You don't want this beautiful picture without a frame?" Then he charged whatever he could get. This was how Moishe earned his living, roaming from town to town. This was how he avoided the sweat shop. No bosses for him! (Ibid.)

After their initial celebrations, the Wisotskys' daily lives were determined by the need to earn an income. The father became a skirt operator after learning the trade from a cousin who owned a shop on Stanton Street. He earned four dollars for sixty to seventy hours of work every week and slept in the shop. At home, the family provided rooms for four boarders who paid one dollar each per month for rent. In addition, Wisotsky's mother would sell them supper at twenty-five cents per meal (8 – 9). The boarders were all *landsleit* and would often discuss politics or the newest gossip in the evening. Such were moments in which Isidore encountered stories about the harsh realities of New York's working class for the first time. They talked about union meetings and, of course, "strikes in the needle trade" (10). On one day, his father and the boarders showed up in the middle of the day and announced that they were on strike as well. Rivele, one of the boarders, made it clear: "The dogs, our bosses, must give in to the union all the demands" (12). In the evenings, the striking workers would discuss their strategies, and Gussie, "a finisher at Branfman and Sheinberg's shop where my father and our boarders were striking," visited the family. When she, "a middle-aged, well-built woman, with dark hair and black burning eyes," heard that one of the women who worked as an "underfinisher" in the shop "went up to scab," she became angry and screamed: "I would rather see her in the hospital!" (13). The next morning, Gussie went to confront the other woman. When the latter appeared, "[a] fight began, with screams. Police came. One of the scabs was running away, blood all over his clothes. When Gussie hit [the other woman] with her pocketbook, she fell to the sidewalk" (14). Gussie had put "half a brick" in her pocketbook and fulfilled her promise that she would rather see the traitor go to the hospital.

At this time, many of the struggles between workers and their employers were violent. Wisotsky witnessed many of these incidents. Strikers had to fight against the police forces of hired mobsters, since bosses sometimes tried to crush strikes instead of paying workers more (15). Families usually suffered during strikes, since even the unions did not pay the workers enough. As such, most of those on strike had to borrow money within the community. That the workers' situations were miserable was often showcased by personal miseries and tragic events, like regular suicides within the tenement houses and by events like the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in 1911. During the fire, "146 girls were burned because of locked doors. On a dreary, foggy, rainy day, thousands of workers cried and marched to bring them to their last resting place" (22).

School bored Wisotsky; he preferred spending time with Rivele, attending lectures by Jewish radicals such as Saul Yanofsky (26). A lecture on "revolutionary trade unionism" (Ibid.) made sense for the young attendant, who had seen the misery of the Jewish working class at home every day. The atmosphere

there and the reliability to secure a part of the family income, as Wisotsky remarked, eventually

> started to choke me… to prey on my mind… the congestion, the nagging, the misunderstanding, between me and my parents. My inability to get a half-decent job to help out the family chased me out into the street. On a hot summer evening, I left and moved into 7th Street Park, a three by three square block affair, an improvement on Hester Park. It had a couple of trees, spots of grass and a shanty where they sold a schooner of milk for one cent, and for one more penny, you could buy a salt pretzel. That made a good meal for the day. (38)

His first night after leaving home, Wisotsky slept at the docks (39) and on the next day, he began to look for a job. He would clean tables at a cafeteria during lunch hour for seventy-five cents, for which he could buy two meals and lodging for a night (40). He could also stay at his friends' places from time to time. When the winter came, it was bitterly cold:

> It took considerable stamina to contend with those icy wintery days with no overcoat, no warm underwear. The only place to shield oneself from the frost was the public library. Hence, the library on East Broadway became my shelter, my home. However, not much reading can be done on an empty stomach. Besides, the library also closed at night, and that was bad. (42)

Eventually, he became a member of a commune. With nine more of his homeless companions, Wisotsky rented a "a two-room apartment on 5th Street on the top floor. There was no heat, no toilet, no water. Everything in the hall. Of course, there was no bath and no hot water. One room was completely dark and without windows. The cost? Six dollars a month rent" (44). The "Don't Worry Group," as they called themselves (44), lived in this apartment for quite a while and debated and discussed "all kinds of subjects – socialism, anarchism, individualism, philosophy, literature, vegetarianism, and men like Nietzsche, Bakunin, Kropotkin, Marx, Zola, Maxim Gorki [sic!], Jack London, Sholom Asch, Tolstoy, Peretz, Ibsen, Raisin, Strindberg and others. The main subject was the social revolution and how to make it and these debates last till dawn, until we were all breathless and hoarse" (45).

Once Wisotsky was old enough to get his legal working papers, he started looking for a job. In Eastern Europe, he began working at the age of twelve by "turning the wheel in a printing shop" (88). There, he received no salary and nothing to eat: "For six months I worked without a salary… no money and no food, only because the boss… promised my mother to teach me a trade. There was no electric power, or steam power. Human power was the cheapest. It cost nothing, only a promise" (Ibid.). Being in the United States and legally

old enough to work, Wisotsky hoped for better conditions. He checked job advertisements in the *Jewish Morning* and sought employment where he could learn a trade. However, nobody was willing to offer him such an opportunity, and would usually come home "tired, heartbroken and disappointed" (89). Selling newspapers, which he had done earlier, secured him a small income. He usually earned seventy-five cents on weekdays and a dollar on Saturday and Sunday, which was not bad compared to jobs offering $3.50 for sixty hours per week. He eventually got a job packing linings for straw hats, where Wisotsky was paid three dollars for a sixty-hour work week (Ibid.). Once hat-making season ended, he was fired and had to survive by taking almost any job:

> errand boy, bus boy, dish washer, apprentice operator on caps... I was a painter, I sold large picture paintings ... I was a waiter... I worked in a printing shop... All these jobs lasted from one day to several months and all these jobs wound up in a fight between me and the boss. I could not live in peace, with my bosses. I was a pocketbook maker, a printing salesman, too, and a labor investigator in the cloak and suit industry. (90)

Wisotsky was probably too radicalized to keep a job. Discussions at home, lectures at union and anarchist meetings, and early strike experiences made him an obstacle for every boss who wanted to exploit workers without incident. For years he drifted about, sleeping at the docks or at the headquarters of the Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W.), and "many times ... [he] sponged on those who had jobs, sometimes a meal, sometimes a night's lodging" (91). After an accident at an ice cream shop with an open electric wire, he won a lawsuit against his employer:

> I won the case. I got enough money with which to pay some of my debts, and three months' rent. I also bought myself a new suit, new shoes, a few shirts and underwear, and I still had some money left over to live on for a few weeks. My Wobbly friends also had a good time on that money. They kibbitzed [sic] and now called me a bourgeois (94).

The exact time of his political radicalization cannot be determined, since Wisotsky had many contacts with union members, radical workers, anarchist lecturers, and the like. However, one key moment seems to have impacted the seventeen-year-old boy. In 1912, he attended a debate between the famous anarchist Emma Goldman (1869 – 1940) and Sol Friedman, which was chaired by William "Big Bill" Haywood. This event was like a "champion prize fight" (55) and Wisotsky eventually became a member of Goldman's entourage and an activist in the I.W.W. This opened his young mind to new ideological territory:

> I stepped into a new world of thoughts and ideas that I frankly did not understand clearly. Strange to me were the conversations, debates, discussion and words like "sabotage," "the social revolution," "Socialism," "Anarchism," "Syndicalism," "Marx," "Engels," "Prud[h]on," "Commonwealth," "Bakunin," "Kropotkin," "Direct Action," "Political Action," "Craft Unions," "Industrial Unions," "Bureaucracy," "Capitalism," etc. In order to become conversant, I began to read such I.W.W. papers as "The Industrial Worker," and "Solidarity", issued weekly. "The Call" – a Socialist daily, and "Mother Earth", an Anarchist monthly. I also read pamphlets, brochures, books in Yiddish and English on social and economic problems, and became acquainted with the world of literature, fine arts, great authors and painters. I attended debates, meetings, lectures, that were held in many East Side halls. The lecturers were people of all shades and colors. Emma Goldman became my favorite. I did not miss her lectures or debates for many years. I even volunteered to help her manager, Dr. Ben Reitman, sell the booklets she had written and her magazine "Mother Earth." On many Friday evenings, I was at the door, taking the 15-cent tickets that people bought to hear her. (57)

Unemployment became a significant issue in New York during World War I, and many I.W.W. members endured daily struggles. During the war, many protesters who spoke out against unemployment – and later against the war itself, especially during the Palmer Raids[119] – were imprisoned, and "New York was the mirror of all conflicts and struggles that went throughout the country. We reacted immediately with financial and moral help. Defense committees were organized for each individual case. Money was raised, protest mass meetings were called, demonstrations on Union Square were held" (86). Wisotsky himself participated in I.W.W. actions against the government and actions in which workers occupied churches, demanding to spend the night there and receive food (104 – 105). These events were also used to arouse public attention, and "in both our speeches in the churches and in our declarations in the press, we charged the city politicians as well as all politicians and social and welfare leaders with neglecting their responsibility toward the unemployed. We demanded they take positive action to help all those in the need of food and shelter" (105). Wisotsky was eventually arrested by the police and sentenced to two months in prison. There, he learned "a rich vocabulary in the English language that the criminal world uses, full of profanity, double-meaning double-talk. What a lingo!" (107). He also received letters from anarchist Alexander Berkman (1870 – 1936) and the I.W.W. leader William Haywood; the former wrote to Wisostky saying "that he was ready to send [him] anything [he] could use, or needed" (115). Whatever the young man needed to strengthen his position as an anarchist and I.W.W. activist, Berkman's letters offered it. Wisotsky's mind was set, and he would remain active in these circles

**119** Wisotsky refers to the anti-communist raids at the end of the First World War, due to which, among others, Emma Goldman was sentenced to prison and later eviction.

for decades. What made him a radical, however, was the harsh living conditions in New York City at the turn of the century and in the two decades after 1900. Like many others, Wisotsky arrived from Eastern Europe seeking good fortune across the Atlantic, but the New World offered little less than the poverty he thought his family had left behind. As such, radicalization in New York was not based on Jewish heritage, but on the exploitation of workers by a cruel capitalist system that enslaved them.

## Conclusion

The radicalization of the Jewish community in the New York metropolis at the end of the nineteenth and during the early twentieth century was not a mere replica of Eastern European radicalism, as it would lead to the establishment of the Bund or the Poale Zion in the early 1900s. It was more so a process stimulated by the contemporary space-time-continuum. New York's Lower East Side provided an ideal breeding ground for radicalism. The Jewish immigrants who arrived there at the end of the nineteenth century oriented themselves around the strong German workers' movement and created a Jewish community that was radicalized in the United States. This community spread its specific variety of Jewish-American radicalism around the globe, particularly in Tsarist Russia, using Yiddish to express themselves.

The second generation of Jewish immigrants, some of whom were already radicalized in Europe, arrived in a culturally Yiddish and politically radical community. The radicalization process itself was stimulated by the harsh working conditions in the New World, especially within the garment industry, in which many Jewish immigrants tried to work for a living. However, low pay and long working hours radicalized many workers, stimulated strikes, and furthered political radicalization. Isidore Wisotsky arrived in New York in 1909 and would be radicalized like so many before him; poverty, hunger, and the hope for a better life made him easy prey for the radical ideas of the I.W.W. members and famous anarchists on the Lower East Side. Wisotsky's case is particularly interesting; it shows that beyond his ethnic and religious background as an Eastern European Jew, his specific experiences in New York trying to navigate an exploitative labor market would cause him to become radical. As such, he was more so a radical that happened to be Jewish, but not a Jewish radical. He was a radical created by the space-time-continuum he lived in, not by his religious tradition. This is why he stands as an example for so many others who came from traditional Jewish families and ended up as radicals – not only because they wanted to break with tradition, but because they struggled with the world they lived in.

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