

Ådne Reidar Nes Kleppe

Anzia Yeziarska's USA

The Jewish experience explored through Hungry Hearts

Bachelor's project in English for teacher training students

Supervisor: Mitchell Domnhall

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Faculty of Humanities
Department of Teacher Education



Kunnskap for en bedre verden

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1. Introduction

In this thesis, I will look at how Anzia Yeziarska (1880-1970) depicts the lives of Jewish immigrants, and especially women, in the United States of America during the early 20th century.¹ Yeziarska was born in late 19th century Poland, at that time a part of the Russian empire, in a poor eastern European city named Plinsk. Yeziarska came to the United States as a teenager and grew up in a society very different from the one she left. She did not have the privilege of much formal education in Plinsk and contributed to supporting her family by taking several menial jobs, as a domestic worker, and in laundries and factories².

Yeziarska studied English at night and worked in a sweatshop by day. After some time, she managed to secure herself a scholarship for studying domestic science at the Columbia College for Teachers, only three years after she arrived in the United States. Her career as a teacher however did not last for a long time.³ In the year of 1910, she got married, and eventually got pregnant and became a mother. Yeziarska was not happy with staying at home spending her time doing house chores and the obligations that came along with being a mother difficult to endure. Therefore, she went away from her family, and spent the rest of her life working to achieve a career in writing. The publishing of «Free Vacation House» in 1915 became Yeziarska's literary debut.⁴

1.1 Bibliography

In what follows, I will discuss Yeziarska's short story collection *Hungry Hearts* (2020). Though I am not only interested in the accuracy of Yeziarska's writing, I will also be using Jacob A. Riis' (2018) study of the conditions under which immigrants lived in urban areas during the early 1900s, *How the other half lives – Studies among the tenements of New York*, as a frame of reference for her writing.⁵ Jacob A. Riis was an American photographer, newspaper reporter, and social reformer who, with the book I will be using managed to shock the conscience of those reading his book with the factual descriptions of conditions of slum in the city of New York.

¹ Bankston, 2010: p.1089–1090.

² Bankston, 2010: p.1089–1090.

³ Keresztesi, 2005: p. 69-70.

⁴ Keresztesi, 2005: p. 70.

⁵ Pihl, 2021: Jacob Riis.

Finally, I have used *The Promised Land*, by Mary Antin, to gain background knowledge on the period. *The Promised Land* was first published in 1912, and Antin was also from a Jewish immigrant family and came from a Russian area.⁶ But this thesis is first and foremost about Yeziarska, and especially her short story *Hungry Hearts*, where she writes about the lives of Jewish immigrants to the USA. I have narrowed my discussion down to four of the ten short stories for the purpose of trying to answer the thesis question. These being: “The Lost Beautifulness”, “Soap and Water”, “Hunger” and “the Fat of The Land”. I have also used the following books: *Salome of the Tenements* (1995) and *The Promised land* (2012); as a way of gaining a more general understanding of the times in focus, and to broaden my understanding of the setting in Yeziarska’s short stories, allowing me to see how the ordinary people of those times fared, and how they lived in relation to the new American society that they had become a part of. However, it should be noted that *Salome of the Tenements and The Promised land* has only been used for precisely the purpose of gaining a general understanding of the time and theme of the assignment and will not be used in the discussion.

Mary Antin was a Jewish immigrant from the Russian city of Polotsk, that emigrated to the United States of America in the last decade of the 19th century. Antin is most often remembered for writing *The Promised Land*, an autobiographical piece of literature, but also having written other books concerning the life of immigrants in the United States. There are many similarities between Antin and Yeziarska, most importantly their entrance to US public school.⁷

2. Hungry Hearts

Hungry Hearts is a short-story collection published in 1920, which was also adapted for the screen two years later, directed by E. Mason Hopper.⁸ Anzia Yeziarska wrote the collection of short stories in the time around and after the first world war, meaning that she would have experienced the effects of the world war on the economy and the American society. An interesting aspect of Yeziarska’s literature is the characteristic build-up of characters in using

⁶ Sheffer, 2010: p.141-142 & 145.

⁷ Antin, 2012: p.2.

⁸ Konzett, 1998: p. 18-19.

the Yiddish language in her fiction. This shines throughout the whole short story collection, exemplified by the characters speaking English that's inflected in Yiddish, with sequences where Yiddish idioms are quite literally transcribed into English.⁹

2.1 “The Lost Beautifulness”

“The Lost Beautifulness” is written in the third person, and centres around Hanneh Hayyeh, a Jewish immigrant to the USA, having established herself in the new country with her husband and son. The dream of Hanneh Hayyeh in “The Lost Beautifulness” is the same American dream that so many American immigrants have had through time. Like Irish migrants escaping the Great Potato famine, where the majority were rural peasants, but also others such as artisans, with 2000 of them settling in the area of New York in the middle of the nineteenth century.¹⁰ And of course, the immigrants of the 21st century, coming from all around the world, with hopes of a better life in the land of opportunity. The short story also underlines how the lives of Jewish immigrants were marked by hard work, with many living from paycheck to paycheck.¹¹

However, an interesting aspect in the story is the symbolism of the “stars”, which could be a reference to the stars of the American flag. Hannah is in many ways still an immigrant, while her son is an integrated American, represented through his entrance to the US Army, and the Medal bestowed him by the United States Government. Aby is “marked” by stripes, which can be interpreted as him being marked by America. The Army becomes a symbol of USA as a melting pot:

On Private Safransky's left shoulder was the insignia of the Statue of Liberty. The three gold service stripes on his left on his left arm and the two wound stripes of his right were supplemented by the Distinguished Service Metal on his left breast bestowed by the United States Government.¹²

The story manages to say much about the society of the time, even though it is simply a short story. Both on the aspect of social mobility, symbolized by her son Aby, the brutality of capitalist tenement, represented by Hanneh's landlord, and the sense of goodwill in the district she lives in. In many ways the story is an interrogation of the idea that going to

⁹ Frieden, 2020: The 21st century.

¹⁰ Timothy, 2005: p.74.

¹¹ Yezierska, 2020: p.35.

¹² Yezierska, 2020: p. 47.

America is a step upwards. Yeziarska confronts, and goes into the discussion on “America’s promise” of hard work paying off and resulting in a good life. Versus the harsh reality for all those who would not make it past the post. This paragraph sums up Hanneh’s feeling about the capitalist society, as she is being evicted:

“Some one who got nothing but only money will come in here and get the pleasure from all this beautifulness that cost me the blood from my heart. Is this already America?... Was it then only a dream-all these millions people from all times, wishing and hoping and praying that America is? Did I wake myself from my dreaming to see myself in the black times of Russia under the czar?”¹³

An interesting aspect worth noting in the case of Hanneh and Jake, is how they only have one child, which is unusual. The family can also afford meat, and even luxuries such as going to the movies, and they have the money for buying paint. However, the couple is quite clearly in a vulnerable situation, where they are susceptible to quite a dramatic impact on their lives, by simply their everyday utilities becoming more expensive, or if one was to lose their income. Another interesting aspect in the life of Hanneh is that she has the opportunity to go to court, and the man she sues is also a Jew.

2.2 “Soap and Water”

The main character of “Soap and Water”, a young and hardworking, Jewish woman, attempts to complete a class journey. Along the way, she is judged by others for aspects that characterize her due to the conditions of her life. The aspects on one hand stop her from fitting into the demands of the clean society. On the other hand, the only reason for her being able to be judged by them at all is that she has her job at the laundry, but she would not afford to go to school without it.

What for some might not be anything special, going to school, was for the main character her way out of poverty and misery, but the only thing her teacher and those surrounding her see is that she is not clean enough. The great irony in this story is that the main character, the hard-working girl, works fittingly enough at a laundry, cleaning the clothes of those in the “clean society”, who are critiquing her for her looks and cleanliness.

¹³ Yeziarska, 2020: p.46-47.

I was considered unfit to get decent pay for my work because of my appearance, and it was to the advantage of those who used me that my appearance should damn me, so as to get me to work for the low wages I was forced to accept. It seemed to me the whole vicious circle of society's injustices was thrust like a noose around my neck to strangle me.¹⁴

2.3 “The Fat of the Land”

The Fat of the Land is all in all a story of class journey, with lots of troubles on the way to the top. However, as the main character, Hanneh Breineh, is quite a special woman, even described as crazy by her neighbour at one point. Breineh only looks upon the daily situations in her life from her perspective: looking no further than the tip of her own nose. Some do not have any food to put on their table, while she struggles because her children do not approve of her behaviour. Nevertheless, there is a point to be made from her sorrow as her five grown-up children look upon themselves as better than her, even though it was her struggle to feed and care for them that made their success possible in the first place.

Hanneh Breineh does however symbolize the longing for simpler times. Even though her longing might not be very sincere, considering the state of her previous living conditions. A nostalgic view upon the times that were, and the fact that her previous hardships are no longer present, makes it possible for her to reminisce of the fellowship in the tenements.

Even though Hanneh has become a lady with a nice house and even servants to do her bidding, she's still much the same person as she was back in Delancey Street. The woman that complains even though she might not have a reason to, and likes to haggle the prices for foodstuffs on the market:

“Oi weh! What grand times we had in that old house when we were neighbors!” sighed Hanneh Breineh, looking at her old friend with misty eyes... “Haven't you more high-class neighbors uptown here?” “A good neighbor is not to be found every day,” deplored Hanneh Breineh. “Uptown here, where each lives in his own house, nobody cares if the person next door is dying or going crazy from loneliness. It ain't anything like we used to have it in Delancey street, when we could walk into each another's rooms without knocking and borrow a pinch salt or a pot to cook in”¹⁵

¹⁴ Yeziarska, 2018: p.80.

¹⁵ Yeziarska, 2020: p.91.

This next paragraph really shows the “American mentality” of being the architect of your own fortune but also reflects upon the reality of there being those immigrants who had modest, middle class lives in their home countries, and actually, so to speak, downgraded when going to America:

“Some people work themselves up in the world,” sighed Hanneh Breineh. “For them is America flowing with milk and honey. In Savel Mrs. Melker used to get shriveled up for hungar. She and her children used to live on potato-peelings and dry bread picked out from the barrels; and in America she lives to eat chicken, and apple shtrudels soaking in fat.” ... “Who will believe me here in America that in Poland I was a cook in a banker’s house?”¹⁶

2.4 “Wings”

The main character of Wings is Shenah Pessah, a young Russian who emigrated to the USA to help her old uncle after his wife died. She works as a janitress, but she dreams of there some day being something more to her life than simply working and just having enough to feed herself. The short story shows the aspirations of a young woman, who wished to be seen by someone, in order to start believing in herself, and then sought to aim for the stars. The first step on the way to success is by believing in yourself.¹⁷ Even though the professor in the story seems to converse with Shenah simply out of self-interest, Shenah still gets to feel seen and begins to regard herself as a person.

“My heart chokes in me like a prison! I’m dying for a little love and I got nobody-nobody!” wailed Shenah Pessah, as she looked out of the dismal basement window. It was a bright Sunday afternoon in May, and into the gray, cheerless, janitor’s basement a timid ray of sunlight announced the dawn of spring.”¹⁸

Yeziarska uses a figurative and metaphorical language, and the word “prison” can be interpreted as the emotions of Shenah as having an unutilised power. The same figurative language is used in showing that the young woman is poor, represented through “the dismal basement window” out of which she gazes. Materially Shenah might be poor, but she has an unrealized power that could be utilized one day. “Sunlight announced the dawn of spring”,

¹⁶ Yeziarska, 2020: p.83-84.

¹⁷ Middleton, 2013: p.41.

¹⁸ Yeziarska, 2020: p.6.

spring indicating a possible beginning for a new life, and the sunlight shining on her metaphorically, as she will not be held back by the circumstances of her birth.

Yeziarska continues criticise the conditions which radical market capitalism does to society, and in many ways depicts the society of free trade and free business as an emotionless society, where every man and woman is left to herself.

“In America a person can’t live on hopes for the next world. In America everybody got to look out for himself. I’d have to give up the janitor’s work to let her go, and then where would I be?” “You lived already your life. Give her also a chance to lift up her head in the world. Couldn’t you get yourself in an old man’s home?” “These times you got to have the money even in an old man’s home. You know how they say if you oil the wheels you can ride. With dry hands you can’t get nothing in America.”¹⁹

In “Wings” Shenah’s uncle says that “everybody got to look out for himself”, and in “The Lost Beautifulness Hanneh says “Some one who got nothing but only money will come in here and get the pleasure from all this beautifulness that cost me the blood from my heart. Is this already America?” These two quotes really emphasize the general message from the short stories of Anzia Yeziarska: of American society placing the emphasis on individual initiative rather than collective.

3. Discussion

3.1 Where did they come from and where did they settle?

The characters in Yeziarska’s short stories are from Poland, to be precise Czar-Russia, as all of them underline strongly. Some of them were from rural areas, having lived on a farm, while others, such as Hanneh Breineh, used to work as a cook. If one regards immigrants from Poland as one group, they were the most numerous of Slavic immigrants coming to the USA in the end of the 19th century. The Upper Midwest and Northeast were the main regions for Polish settlement in the USA, with peak immigration being in the 1920’s and 1990’s.²⁰

“The decade 1870-1880 added nearly 35 000 natives of Poland to the population of the United States; the decade ending 1880 adding nearly 99 000; and the last decade, 1890-1900, nearly 236 000. In 1900 there were 383 407 natives of Poland in the United States.”²¹

¹⁹ Yeziarska, 2020: p.11.

²⁰ Bankston, 2010: p.845.

²¹ Lucille, 1951: p.85-91.

The mass wave of immigrants to the USA settled in New York, in the “ghetto”, the slums of New York. Many different groups of immigrants settled here, with Riis mentioning Germans, Italians, Irish, Chinese, Bohemian and Russian-Polish Jews. Jacob Riis worked as a journalist and photographer documenting social issues and went around the ghetto of New York and tried to document for the general public the living conditions of the immigrant masses. In his book, “How the other half lives”, he starts off with a most interesting quote, quite fitting for the theme of this BA:

“Long ago it was said that “one half of the world does not know how the other half lives”. That was true then. It did not know because it did not care. The half that was on top cared little for the struggles, and less for the fate of those who were underneath, so long as it was able to hold them there and keep its own seat”²²

When reading the observations of Riis about the cradle of the New York slums, the genesis of tenements, some similarities comes to mind. “Soap and Water”, with the poor Russian shopgirl, Hanneh Breineh in her early squalor life in Delancey street, and of course the life of poor Shenah Pessah, living in the basement, only sometimes experiencing sunrays falling upon her, both figuratively and literally.

“As business increased, and the city grew with rapid strides, the necessities of the poor became the opportunity of their wealthier neighbors, and the stamp was set upon the old houses, suddenly become valuable, which the best thought and effort of a later age has vainly struggled to efface. “Their large rooms were partitioned into several smaller ones without regard to light or ventilation, the rate of rent being lower in proportion to space or height from the street; and they soon became filled from cellar to garret with a class of tenantry living from hand to mouth, loose in morals, improvident in habits, degraded, and squalid as beggary itself.”²³

In the short story “The Lost Beautifulnes”, where Hanneh and Jake are evicted from their home, due to the fact that they can’t afford the rise of the rent that the landlord demanded from them. This is an interesting aspect to look into, as in the year of 1920, when *Hungry Hearts* was published, many people were indeed being evicted.²⁴ In fact, the situation got so

²² Riis, 2018: p.11.

²³ Riis, 2018: p.16.

²⁴ Willis, 1950: p.70-71.

bad that New York and the District of Columbia passed legislation aiming to get to the root of the cause of all the evictions:

While it has been said that there was no absolute housing shortage in New York but only a relative shortage of particular types of housing, it is clear that there was insufficient housing; rents skyrocketed, complaints of profiteering multiplied, tenants were evicted wholesale...A series of emergency rent laws for New York City were passed, to become effective in April, 1920, but they were inadequate.²⁵

The Jewish immigrants settled themselves in bulk in the district between Rivington and Division streets, east of the Bowery. Riis singles the area out in regard to population density, even comparing it to that of old London, with New York surpassing the population density by a great margin.

There is no mistaking it: we are in Jewtown. It is said that nowhere in the world are so many people crowded together on a square mile as here. The average five-story tenement adds a story or two to its stature in Ludlow Street and an extra building on the rear lot, and yet the sign "To Let" is the rarest of all here.²⁶

3.2 What are the typical trades?

The typical trades of the women in the stories are some kind of manual labour, from working at a laundry, a factory or as a janitress. The main trade of the Jewish immigrants in the district that Riis describes, is, according to him, working in manufacturing cloth. The way Riis describes the Jews in the book make the Jewish population in New York seem quite industrious. However, in the manner that Riis does so, makes it seem all quite negative. The Jews are written off as only being encapsulated by only the goal of saving up money, and even starving themselves wilfully in order to achieve that goal.

Thrift is the watchword of Jewtown, as of its people the world over. It is at once its strength and its fatal weakness, its cardinal virtue and its foul disgrace. Become an over-mastering passion with these people who come here in droves from Eastern Europe to escape persecution, from which freedom could be bought only with gold, it has enslaved them in bondage worse than that which they fled. Money is their God. Life itself is of little value compared with even the leanest bank account. In no other spot does life wear so intensely bald and materialistic an aspect as in Ludlow Street.²⁷

²⁵ Willis, 1950: p.70.

²⁶ Riis, 2018: p.87.

²⁷ Riis, 2018: p.89.

There were many different Jewish immigrants in the district that Riis depicts who worked in the industry of manufacturing cloth. Riis mentions this subject and uses an example from a friend that boasted on New York being at the very top in the world when it came to cheap clothing. As to why this situation had arisen, he attributed the success to “The cutter’s long knife and the Polish Jew.”²⁸ Riis goes on to describe the Sweaters’ district as an area with shops where both women and men were working on their machines or doing the ironing for their clothes, and the Jews themselves not having much clothing.²⁹ In observing how one family of Jews are conducting the business of manufacturing cloth, Riis explains how this family will use their income to buy themselves a tenement, and follow the example set by their landlord in collecting rent from those looking for a place to live. “It is the way the savings of Jewtown are universally invested, and with the natural talent of its people for commercial speculation the investment is enormously profitable.”³⁰

3.3 Educational opportunities?

Even though the United States of America was looked upon as the land of opportunity, and that those who worked hard would be rewarded, many did not have the time needed to have a day job, as they had to look after their children, at least in their young age. Those that had the time and capacity for a job, were often on a continuous search for employment.

The most important point when it comes to educational opportunities, is the fact that education was available to females as well as males, and it was free. Both Mary Antin, as previously mentioned, and Anzia Yezierska both prospered in result of education. Antin managed to become a most successful writer, and impart the immigrant experience to a wide audience.

Throughout *The Promised Land*, Antin posits herself as “unusual, but by no means unique”—an exemplary case who is representative of millions of new Americans (2). This tension between individual and collective experience expresses itself through Antin’s struggle to make her story conform to generic expectations of progress, acculturation, and upward mobility. The autobiography’s most

²⁸ Riis, 2018: p.98.

²⁹ Riis, 2018: p.101.

³⁰ Riis, 2018: p.102.

important contribution lies in the intersection of these narratives, when Antin is torn between acting the good citizen and faithfully chronicling a traumatic ordeal.³¹

In the 20th century, education was viewed just as much, if not more so, as a medium in climbing the socioeconomic ladder. The problem was for those who could not afford to spend their time in going to school, as they had to work. Therefore, never being able to do a socio-economic journey and a rejected opportunity of bettering their lives.

4. Conclusion

Yeziarska was, through *Hungry Hearts*, able to portray the different sides of immigrant life in America. Though this is fiction, many of the stories, or at least elements in them, are taken from Yeziarska's own life. The lives of immigrants, and especially Jews, is depicted as harsh, but that there were indeed those that managed to go upwards on the socio-economic ladder and gain themselves a much better life in the "new world", compared to the old one back in Europe.

Many Jewish immigrants in the USA had to endure different hardships. Some succeeded in business or got an education and thence a good job. However, the harsh reality for most was a poverty-stricken life. They stayed in the squalor tenements of New York and worked long hours in order to be able to pay their bills. When the rents went up, many were not able to pay and ended up being evicted. Many struggled with such basic needs as having enough food for their families, and thereby relying upon Hebrew charities in order not to starve. The tenements were often small and had many living in them, as Riis illustrates in his book. The fact that many lived together, and often did neither have the time or opportunity of keeping a good hygiene, made it easy for diseases such as smallpox to spread and take lives.

In answering the thesis question for this BA, I strongly believe it is fair to say that the lives of the majority of immigrants to the United States of America, and especially Jews, was hard. The slums of New York, the setting for so many stories of Jewish immigrants, was in every aspect a melting pot of different people from around the world. They all had the same goal of achieving the American dream.

³¹ Sheffer, 2010: p.143.

Having analysed the short stories written by a Jewish immigrant, Anzia Yezierska, and looking into the numbers and statistics by Jacob Riis afterwards, this has been an in-depth study to the Jewish experience in the USA through *Hungry Hearts*.

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