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THE GOLDEN DOOR

Italian and Jewish Immigrant Mobility
in New York City 1880-1915

THOMAS KESSNER

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Mobility, they feared, "leads to change and therefore to loss of continuity"; it destroyed contacts with church, neighbors, and local institutions. In their opinion, "the total effects of forces like . . . mobility . . . seem to be subversive and disorganizing." Jacob Riis also feared the implications of constant movement, and declared that unless this constant flow out of established communities closed, "we perish."⁶⁷

Notwithstanding such theoretical reservations, New York's immigrants welcomed the opportunity to escape their neighborhoods, leaving others to express qualms and weigh the cosmic implications. Indeed, as mobility within the city increased and new areas opened to the immigrants, a greater percentage remained in the city. Flexibility added to rather than detracted from stability.

VII

The New York Experience

When we possess rather detailed knowledge about . . . Newburyport, Massachusetts, in the late nineteenth century but lack comparable observations about . . . New York City, it is risky to generalize. . . .

*Stephan Thernstrom,
"Reflections on the New
Urban History"*

Americans have long celebrated their nation as a land of unique opportunity for all men. Few other societies place such emphasis on the qualities of self-made men or the significance of social mobility. So important was this idea of a distinctive social fluidity that very early in American history it took an important place in the national ideology. Writing in 1782, the French immigrant Michel Guillaume St. Jean de Crèvecoeur explained his adopted country's uniqueness by pointing to the even-handed opportunity it offered to all comers, winning them away from the Old World and its ways.

What attachment can a poor European emigrant have for a country where he had nothing? The knowledge of the language, the love of a few kindred as poor as himself, were the only cords that tied him: his country is now the country which gives him land, bread, protection, and consequence: *Ubi panis ibi patria* is the motto of all immigrants. . . .

. . . Here the rewards of his industry follow with equal steps the progress of his labor, his labor is founded on the basis of nature, *self interest*; can it want a stronger allurements? Wives and children, who before in vain demanded a morsel of bread, now, fat and frolicsome, gladly help their father to clear those

fields whence exuberant crops are to arise and to feed and to clothe them all. . . . The American is a new man. . . . From involuntary idleness, servile dependence, penury, and useless labor he had passed to toils of a very different nature, rewarded by ample subsistence—This is an American. . . .

. . . After a foreigner from any part of Europe is arrived, and become a citizen; let him devoutly listen to the voice of our great parent, which says to him, "Welcome to my shores. . . . If thou wilt work I have bread for thee: If thou wilt be honest, sober, and industrious, I have greater reward to confer. . . . Go thou, and work and till; thou shalt prosper, provided thou be just, grateful and industrious."¹

Those who accepted this bright picture have been assailed as too complacent, too willing to accept abstractions instead of spending the time and effort to investigate the issue rigorously. Thus Robert Foerster complained that Americans dismissed gritty questions on mobility by reasoning simply that "it is Eldorado that lures and is found." Concluding his own brilliant survey of Italian settlement in America, Foerster put the question directly: "Have they profited by coming? Has the game for them been worth the candle?"²

His response was far less sanguine than Crèvecoeur's. He reported pessimistically in 1919 that Italians were scarcely better off than their predecessors had been twenty-five years earlier. Foerster dismissed such items as the \$85,000,000 in savings shipped back to Italy in a single year with this basic lesson in statistics: "Wherever Croesus lives, though the mass go naked, the average wealth, strictly speaking, is high." Others may point to the Delmonicos, Gianninis, and DiGiorgios who achieved enormous success, but for the average Italian immigrant, however, "the pictures that cut across the years are somber."³

Recently other scholars have reopened this question that touches the core of American ideology, and have attempted to measure immigrant progress in the United States. The first iconoclastic reports concluded that mobility was mostly a myth "more conspicuous in American history books than in American history."

William Miller's 1949 study of Progressive Era business elites found rich native American Protestants atop the corporate structure. Their offspring, he contended, inherited the inside track on these high positions. The sons of immigrants did not glide into corporate chairs. Not more than 3 per cent of the business leaders were drawn from either immigrant or poor farm backgrounds.⁴

Stephan Thernstrom's pioneering 1964 study of *Poverty and Progress* in Newburyport, Massachusetts, focused on mobility from the bottom up and reported that the laboring class did not experience substantial occupational mobility between 1850 and 1880. Only one in ten laborers worked himself up the ladder to a skilled craft. Moreover, being foreign born handicapped Newburyport's Irish in the occupational competition. Based on his analysis, Thernstrom believed that "the barriers against moving more than one notch upwards were fairly high." America was better for them than Europe had been, and they did make slight progress, but this sober gradual mobility bore no relationship to the mesmerizing plots that spilled from Horatio Alger's confident imagination. "This was not the ladder to the stars that Horatio Alger portrayed and that later writers wistfully assumed to have been a reality in the days of Abraham Lincoln and Andrew Carnegie."⁵

Since 1964, a number of historians have quarrelled with Thernstrom's prematurely general dismissal of American mobility. They contend that the sluggish Newburyport economy was not the proper place to test the issue. Herbert Gutman's study of thirty-odd iron, locomotive, and machine manufacturers in Paterson, New Jersey, between 1830 and 1880 convinced him that the rags-to-riches theme was appropriate. "So many successful manufacturers who had begun as workers walked the streets . . . that it is not hard to believe that others . . . could be convinced by personal knowledge that 'hard work' resulted in spectacular material and social improvement."

Clyde Griffen studied "Craft and Ethnic Differences in Poughkeepsie," and also found that social fluidity in that city was suffi-

cient to confirm "the national faith that merit sooner or later was rewarded by success." Howard Chudacoff emphasized residential over occupational change as an indicator of social mobility in his study of Omaha, Nebraska. Nonetheless, he concluded similarly that "a large number of men improved their condition in a genuine, though limited, way."

Humbert Nelli's recent history of Chicago's Italians treats the issue of mobility in more conventional terms, eschewing the quantitative methodology employed by Griffin and Chudacoff, but he too argues that the idea of mobility was pronounced "myth" too hastily. "Whether through legitimate business activities, criminal actions or politics, Chicago's Italians made substantial headway [by 1920] in an effective economic adjustment to urban America."

Focusing on Southern cities, Richard Hopkins and Paul Worthman have detailed the same sort of steady progress. In Atlanta, Georgia, Hopkins discovered greater mobility than Thernstrom described in Newburyport and stated flatly that "the achievement of some degree of success or improvement in occupational status was fairly common [for native and immigrant] white Atlantans in the later nineteenth century." And the Worthman study of Birmingham, Alabama, which analyzed a sample of 1,500 individuals uncovered "significant rates of upward occupational mobility," and "extensive" movement from blue collar to white collar positions among whites.⁶

More recently Thernstrom has admitted that his "early work—on the laborers of Newburyport—was misleading in its emphasis on the barriers to working class occupational achievement. . . . In other communities . . . the occupational horizon was notably more open." His study of Boston produced a more conventional conclusion than his Newburyport analysis. "The American class system . . . allowed substantial privilege for the privileged and extensive opportunity for the underprivileged." Even the oft-maligned Horatio Alger, straw man for debunking mobility stud-

ies, is resurrected as a sober social commentator. "If Horatio Alger's novels were designed to illustrate the possibility, not of rags-to-riches but of rags-to-respectability, as I [now!] take them to have been, they do not offer widely misleading estimates of the prospects open to Americans."⁷

The present study of the two largest immigrant groups in the nation's most important and most populous metropolis provides additional evidence that mobility was not restricted to a select few well-born individuals. Social mobility was both rapid and widespread even for immigrants who came from the peasant towns of southern Italy and the Russian Pale. At first they qualified only for jobs as laborers, tailors, and peddlers, but with time and effort they found in New York ample opportunities for themselves and their children.

Indeed, despite the contention by Peter Blau and Otis Duncan that "the opportunity to achieve occupational success in the course of one's career is not so good in the very large metropolis as in the city of less than one million inhabitants," New Yorkers outpaced all others in climbing the economic ladder. In fairness to these authors and their distinguished study of the *American Occupational Structure*, their conclusions are based on recent data and may well be valid for the modern period; it was not the case, however, between 1880 and 1915. The nation's major metropolis offered exceptional possibilities for progress out of the manual classes.⁸

The highest percentage of blue- to white-collar mobility in Atlanta, Omaha, or Boston for the decade between 1880 and 1890, was 22 per cent, and that was the average achievement for all citizens, natives and immigrants alike. Gotham's New Immigrants, who began the decade at the bottom of the Promised City's social order, rose out of the manual class at a rate of 37 per cent in the same decade. One might expect that New York's great flux would produce deeper valleys to match such higher peaks, but that was not the case. In Boston between 1880

and 1890, 12 per cent of the white-collar class slipped into blue-collar occupations; only 10 per cent of New York's New Immigrants suffered such a decline.⁹

For the following decade mobility statistics for Brooklyn are even more striking. Between 1892 and 1902, 57 per cent of those who could be traced graduated out of the manual division. Subsequently over the eight-year period, 1905-1913, 49 per cent made the same climb. Admittedly the directory for Brooklyn was less extensive than the one for Manhattan. But the fact that immigrant occupations (which unlike mobility were not determined from directory sources but directly from the census) were more attractive in Brooklyn suggests that the higher mobility in this borough was more than a mere artifact of the measuring device.

Manhattan data for 1905-1915 are based on stronger evidence, nonetheless the findings are not significantly different. In a comparison with other cities after 1900, New York's mobility percentage stands highest. Between 1900 and 1910, 23 per cent of Omaha's working population switched blue collars for white. The figures for such mobility in Boston, Norristown, and Los Angeles between 1910 and 1920 were 22 per cent, 16 per cent, and 8 per cent, respectively. Among Manhattan's New Immigrants, 32 per cent managed this ascent between 1905 and 1915.¹⁰

Mobility was not restricted to any one group, both natives and immigrants climbed the class ladder. The amplitude and frequency of such progress were, however, functions of ethnicity. Despite the fact that Italians and Jews shared important characteristics—they came to the United States in the same years, settled in the cities in about the same proportions, formed similar ethnic enclaves in downtown Manhattan, and shared the burdens of alien language and religion—Jews from eastern Europe entered the economy at a higher level than the Italians and sustained a higher rate of cross-class movement over the entire period 1880-1915.

From 1880 on, Italian immigration was drawn primarily from the peasant towns of southern Italy, dominated by single males

in their working years with few industrial skills. Almost half of these immigrants were illiterate and few brought with them significant sums of money. This made it difficult for them to qualify for anything but the lowest rung of the economy, and the transient character of the group as a whole helped keep them there.

Italians emigrated largely for short-term economic motives. As the unusually high repatriation rates demonstrate, few intended to sever ties with their mother country permanently. Even those who did not go back to Europe often failed to sink roots, flitting across the country behind the *padrone* and his promises. Consequently, ambitions were geared to the short range, foreclosing careers that were based on sustained effort and piecemeal development. Moreover, the large sums of money sent back over the ocean to Europe drained risk capital from investment and enterprise. Lacking the desperation of men without bridges behind them, Italians were often ready to return home if they gathered a sufficient bankroll or if the job market slackened.

Because the New York economy was expanding its housing, building new factories, extending its transit lines, and upgrading its port facilities, the Italian newcomer was not forced to learn a craft; he could trade on his muscles and his willingness to work hard. In short, the city did not force him to equip himself beyond his peasant origins. It stood ready to use his primitive skills as they were. Consequently three of four Italian household heads in 1880 did manual labor and more than half were unskilled.

Russian Jews took a different tack. They too included a large contingent of poor and illiterate males, but they came in family groups, brought urban skills, and settled in New York with the intention of remaining. With anti-Semitism on the rise in Europe, Jews who came to the United States did not look back so fondly at the mother country. Under such conditions they thought in terms of the long range and their settlement was more stable.

Jews in Europe had been marginal men. Precluded from owning land because of their religion and prevented from building power or prestige in the established ways, they were shunted into

less desirable jobs as innkeepers, peddlers, and dealers in second-hand clothing. But this experience, so *déclassé* in Europe, fit the dominant needs of their New York environment. "Jews, who were commercial *faute de mieux* in manorial Europe were as peripheral as the first mammals among the dinosaurs, but fortuitously advantaged later," Miriam K. Slater has written.¹¹

However much their significant concentration in tailoring may reflect previous experience, it was also directly related to the emergence of New York City as the world's center of clothing production. Their skills were very specific. Lacking American education and money, they could not compete at the white-collar level. They also would not compete for unskilled jobs. "The emigrants of other faiths coming here . . . are . . . able bodied laborers who are willing to live on almost any kind of food, and working on railroads, canals, and the like must endure considerable exposure and fatigue. To send our people to labor in that way," a representative of the Russian Relief Fund in New York explained to officials of the Alliance Israelite Universelle in 1881, "would be cruel and *futile*." For Russian Jews to succeed there had to be a clothing industry and the opportunity to peddle. Their unique good fortune in New York derived from the fact that the city provided both, permitting them to enter the economy at its middle rungs.¹²

By 1905, both groups upgraded their occupational patterns reflecting in part New York's own development, and in part their own expanded connections and control. Italians entered the needle trades and took work on the docks, displacing the Jews and the Irish. Gradually they cut their heavy reliance on unskilled labor, avoiding such stigmatized pursuits as rag picking and organ grinding. But they could not catch up to the Jews, who continued to move one step ahead. Close to 45 per cent of the Jewish immigrants claimed white-collar positions, including a good number of professionals, manufacturers, retailers, investors, and office workers.

Ethnic differences proved equally important for mobility. Both

Italians and Jews found the New York economy fluid and open, but Jews moved upwards more quickly and more often. This is apparent by comparing four separate cohorts, differentiated by length of residence in the United States. Italians and Jews showed enhanced occupation profiles as the number of years spent in the country increased. Taking the longest residing cohort of significant size, those who had lived in the country between 15 and 25 years, 24 per cent of the Italians achieved white-collar status, with only 2 per cent in the upper white-collar sector. Among the Jews, 54 per cent wore white collars and a significant 15 per cent reached the upper white-collar stratum. While Italian progress proceeded along one line, shopkeeping and self-employed artisanship, the Jews took more opportunities to move into both upper and lower white-collar positions.

In a second analysis of mobility, Italians and Jews were traced over three separate decades. When these data are aggregated they show that 32 per cent of all Italians who started in blue-collar categories crossed to the upper class within a decade. Considering the Italian reputation for sluggish mobility and Robert Foerster's gloomy conclusions about the rate of their advance, such growth is surprisingly impressive, indicating that almost one-third of a largely peasant group could leave manual labor behind within a decade.

The companion statistic, however, shows that fully 21 per cent of the Italian white-collar class dropped back into blue-collar categories, demonstrating how tentative their ascent was. This flux helps explain Foerster's dismal conclusions about the Italian experience in America. Looking out at the Italian-American community in 1919 he saw that they still inhabited poor houses and occupied low-paying jobs.

But he missed the interstitial changes within that community. Moreover, he was wrong to expect that a community which continued to absorb masses of incoming peasants would not show poverty. The proper question is, was there progress over time. And the answer is, yes. If an Italian immigrant remained in the

city one decade his chance of proceeding from a blue-collar job to a white-collar position was 32 per cent—not bleak by any standard.

Russian Jews left the manual class at a rate of 41 per cent, and once they achieved the upper class they did not slip down as easily as the Italians. Only 9 per cent of the white-collar class dropped back to manual labor. If we sum the two percentages as a crude index of mobility Italians register 10.4, the Jews 31.6.

* What accounted for these differences? Why did the Jewish group find it easier to navigate toward the economic mainstream? Interestingly, one important explanation of differential mobility, differential fertility, favored the Italians. According to Blau and Duncan men from smaller families achieve more, and more successful men have smaller families. They quote the *capillarité sociale* theory advanced by Arsene Dumont at the turn of the century: “Just as a column of liquid has to be thin in order to rise under the force of capillarity so a family must be small in order to rise on the social scale.” They further speculate that men who are more successful achieve satisfaction from their careers, while less accomplished individuals “must find other sources of social support and gratification”; hence larger families.¹³

It is suggestive to note the size of Jewish and Italian families in this sample study of 16,191 New Yorkers. Italians averaged 2.62 offspring per family between 1880 and 1905 while Jews averaged 3.21. Calvin Goldscheider has pointed out that the conventional picture of lower Jewish fertility was largely based on American-born Jews and that the foreign-born generation had larger families, but he assumed that as a consequence the immigrant generation was not economically mobile (“*In contrast* most second generation Jews were economically mobile”). The data indicate that the first generation not only had large families but were also quite mobile.¹⁴

This is not the place for a full discussion of the issue nor do the data, based only on those immigrant offspring still living at home, permit a full analysis. But within these restrictions certain

observations are in order. Russian Jews had larger families living with them than did Italian Catholics. Furthermore, since Jews were unusually mobile it does not seem that family size increased as a consequence of the need to compensate for stunted progress. In view of these findings, it may well be that the inverted birth rate (higher occupation-lower family size) that researchers have found is due less to the higher mobility of smaller-sized families than to the social-psychological disposition of families, once they achieved the upper level, to have fewer children.

Other matters proved more significant, with more direct effects. Obviously the fact that Italians came in at the very bottom of the occupational hierarchy while Jews entered at step three was important. Jews were able to move into the employer class while Italians were still trying to move into skilled and semiskilled employment. This helped Jews in the blue-collar class as well, as one Italian unionist pointed out with some bitterness:

In general, . . . , management was constituted of Jewish capitalists, who either because of the influence of the Rabbi of the synagogue, or because they were annoyed by the too-verbal insistence of their co-religionists, revealed themselves to be less cut-throat with the latter than they were with the Italian workers who besides not being able to express themselves in English, had a little disposition toward the niggardly characteristics of Jewish cloakmakers. And the salaries that the Italians received were very inferior to those that were realized by their fellow Jewish cloakmakers, for the latter if not inferior, at least were only equal in technical capacity to the Italians. From the wage earning viewpoint the Italian element remained several steps below the Jewish cloakmakers.¹⁵

Moreover, Russian Jews were driven by a demon, seeking the security that had constantly eluded them in Europe. If “ruthless underconsumption” could help one become a “sweater,” a contractor, or a shopkeeper, it seemed a small price to pay for self-employment. Because of their past they did not trust outsiders, whom they considered fickle and untrustworthy. They placed great emphasis on independence, on being a *balabos far sich*

(one's own boss). This ambition translated into an emphasis on professional positions, shopkeeping, and manufacturing. These had been their goals in Europe, and the fact that they were more easily achieved in New York made them no less attractive.

Persecution, marginality, and alienation from the outside Christian world in Europe made of the *shtetl* a close-knit community. Rather than the family allegiances of the Italian peasant community summed up in Edward Banfield's phrase "amoral familism," the Jews possessed an ethnic consciousness and interrelationship that provided jobs, built industries, and provided ghetto capitalists with handsome returns on investments. Isaac Rubinow long ago pointed out that "almost every newly arrived Russian Jewish laborer comes into contact with a Russian Jewish employer, almost every Russian Jewish tenement dweller must pay his exorbitant rent to a Russian Jewish landlord." Among Italians it took time to build an ethnic consciousness as an American minority group; they did not bring a wider ethnic self-image with them. As Max Ascoli noted, "They became Americans before they were ever Italians."¹⁶

Few southern Italians had the ambition to become big businessmen or professionals. Life in the peasant towns of the *mezzogiorno* squelched such dreams with an inescapable iron reality. No matter what one dreamed, one's lot was fixed to a life of peasant poverty. For the sake of his own equilibrium, as Herbert Gans has argued, the Italian peasant restricted his aspirations. Jews, even in the ghetto, had some mobility through commerce and education, and this kept ambitions flickering. Because Italians did not see such mobility at home, they brought to New York a truncated conception of their own possibilities; an outlook that placed self-imposed limits on ambition. "Their trip across the ocean took them from rural towns to urban villages." This peasant gestalt was kept alive in their narrowly drawn village neighborhoods. As late as 1962, Italians in Boston's West End looked upon white-collar people "as not really working."¹⁷

Much has been made of the different values regarding educa-

or also
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tion. The specific consequences of these differences are more apparent among the second generation, but they did not fail to help first-generation Jews who were more appropriately educated for industrial America than the southern Italians. Not only were their specific skills more apt but also their exposure to a labor ideology and the inclusion of a secular intelligentsia permitted them to build a labor movement. As early as 1885 a Jewish workingman's union was formed. By 1892 the United Hebrew Trades boasted 40 affiliates. Italians did not enter the labor movement in large numbers until much later.¹⁸

Education in the narrower sense, literacy plus specialized knowledge, became increasingly important in the age of business bureaucracy. The expansion of corporations and the wider use of the corporate form as well as the expansion of government and municipal services demanded a larger supply of lawyers, clerks, teachers, accountants, and other educated white-collar workers. Education became an economic tool rather than merely an esthetic one. Here the Jewish respect for education gave them an economic advantage. Italians, based on their experience, considered education an irrelevant prolonging of childhood. In a perverse way this argument became self-fulfilling. Without schooling, they took blue-collar jobs. For such jobs formal education *was* irrelevant . . . and costly, by postponing entry into the job market. Only when one aspired to white-collar status could the argument be drawn that education offered pragmatic benefits.

The persistence of the Italian attitude among the offspring is evident from a number of indications: The second generation's occupational similarity with their elders, especially in the concentration of Italian sons in unskilled jobs; the persistence of Italian offspring in first-generation neighborhoods; the fact that American-born Italian offspring did not differ much from their Italian-born brothers in occupational interest; and the fact that attendance in American schools made no noticeable difference in occupational outlook.

Jewish offspring did not follow their parents so closely. They were reared to exceed their parents' achievements, and although this created tremendous tensions, as psychologists and novelists have gone to great pains to illustrate, it kept the issue before them constantly. They must succeed. They must be ambitious. They must aspire to do well. Thus by 1905 Jewish offspring were moving into white-collar positions as professionals, salespeople, clerical workers, and shopkeepers. Unlike the Italians, place of birth did make a difference. Jewish offspring born in America, open to its training and schools, did better than their European-born brethren and subsequently moved up the ladder more quickly.

Aside from fertility, ethnic background, education, and cultural differences, differential mobility has also been ascribed to the influence of the ghetto as a mobility barrier. Both groups settled tightly packed ghettos, with the Jews clustering together even more than the Italians, so that it would be difficult to show how the ghetto hindered one group more than the other. But the entire issue of the ghetto's retarding effect should be questioned. The tremendous rates of out-mobility demonstrate that New York's neighborhoods were very porous barriers. Lower Manhattan's ethnic colonies bore no resemblance to the European "ghetto." In Europe the term stood for enforced residential segregation within a regulated area of settlement, but the downtown community in Manhattan held few immigrants back from seeking better fortune elsewhere. Between 1880 and 1890, 95 per cent of the semiskilled and unskilled Italian work force left their neighborhoods and indeed the city. The ghetto, per se, cannot be charged with restricting occupational progress.

A more compelling argument can be drawn for the ghetto as a mobility launcher. It offered the immigrant hospitality of place. It provided jobs, business, and political contacts as well as investment opportunities. The local schools and settlement houses further aided the immigrant to assimilate and to acquire essential skills. The downtown neighborhood often pro-

vided him the best base for accumulating sufficient experience and capital to move elsewhere, if he wished. Of course many moved away from the ghetto no better off than when they first settled. This was especially true of unskilled and semiskilled Italians, who often joined the "floating proletariat" to search for jobs around the country.

Persistence in the city related inversely to class. Those who did not move into higher occupational levels found it rather easy to move to other cities. Unlike the present, when geographic mobility is more common to white-collar workers, in the period 1880-1915 such movement typified the blue-collar class. At first Italians were very mobile geographically, but by 1905-1915 as they achieved better positions the number leaving the city dropped dramatically. Persistence within neighborhoods, however, was not so clearly related to class or occupation. For both job and ethnic reasons Italians tended to remain in their original neighborhoods longer.

Residential mobility, like its occupational counterpart, symbolized the broad options open before the New Immigrants. They opened new ethnic neighborhoods in Harlem, South Bronx, Williamsburgh, South Brooklyn, and Brownsville. Some of the immigrants chose to disperse among the natives, away from their own group, others moved out of the Lower East Side to fresher ghettos, but the movement itself indicated a freedom that the *paese* and *shtetl* lacked.

The relationship between occupational and residential mobility is not a direct one. As Howard Chudacoff found in Omaha, "place utility [is] multidimensional, including economic, social, psychological, ethnic and . . . other components. Residential mobility [involves] relocation of an individual to a place of higher utility. Perceptions of utility, however, are not usually optimal . . .," nor are they restricted to the ability to pay. Gradually, however, as immigrants could afford better, the old clearing house for New Immigrants on the Lower East Side was eclipsed by newer areas.¹⁹

Thus American society, at least so far as New York can bear witness for the nation, afforded immigrants and their children a comfortable margin of mobility. Immigrants who carried the burdens of European poverty and persecution and settled into slums and poor jobs as aliens, were nonetheless mobile. Clearly the statue standing in New York's harbor shined her symbolic torch for the poor as well as the rich and well born. To answer a question posed by an earlier investigator of immigrant mobility: Yes, the myth of an open American society with opportunity for the common man "squared with social reality."²⁰

Certain aspects of mobility are beyond the ken of studies such as this one. Daniel Bell and others have discussed the role of crime in ethnic mobility, but studies that are based on census and directory samples inevitably miss such occupations as bank robber, prostitute, or gangster. Suffice it to say that given the levels of mobility uncovered in New York, crime was not the only way up.²¹

Another point, anticlimactic as it may be, should be made. Occupational mobility helps us judge the American promise by materialist standards. In that respect Jews assimilated more quickly, and rapidly climbed the economic ladder. But this merely scratches the surface. We can move away from the issue of mobility—it existed. But did the American system provide a better quality of life? As David Levinsky asks for all who came and were successful, "Am I happy?"

There are moments when I am overwhelmed by a sense of my success and ease. I become aware that thousands of things which had formerly been forbidden fruit . . . are at my command now. . . . One day I paused in front of an old East Side restaurant that I had often passed in my days of need and despair. The feeling of desolation and envy with which I used

to peek in its windows came back to me. It gave me pangs of self pity for my past and a thrilling sense of my present power. . . .

I am lonely. . . .

No I am not happy. . . .

I can never forget the days of my misery. I cannot escape from my old self. My past and present do not comport well. David, the poor lad swinging over a Talmud volume at the Preacher's synagogue, seems to have more in common with my inner identity than David Levinsky, the well known cloak manufacturer.²²

As another immigrant son, Mario Puzo, has written,

There is a difference between having a good time in life and being happy. . . . We are all Americans now, we are all successes now. And yet the most successful Italian man I know admits that though the one human act he could never understand was suicide, he understood it when he became a[n American] success, . . . He went back to Italy and tried to live like a peasant again. But he can never again be unaware of more subtle traps than poverty and hunger.²³

But then Horatio Alger never promised happiness.

havior, 135-36, 249-53. See also Walter F. Laidlaw, *Statistical Sources for the Demographic Study of Greater New York: 1910* (2 vols., New York, 1912).

67. Chudacoff, *Mobile Americans*, 5-6.

CHAPTER VII—The New York Experience

1. Michel Guillaume St. Jean de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer*, in Merle Curti et al., eds., *American Issues: The Social Record* (2 vols., 1971), I, 103-10.
2. Robert Foerster, *Italian Emigration of Our Times*, 374-77.
3. *Ibid.*
4. William Miller, "American Historians and the Business Elite" in William Miller, ed., *Men in Business: Essays on the Historical Role of the Entrepreneur* (New York, 1962), 309-28. See also Frances W. Gregory and Irene D. Neu, "The American Industrial Elite in the 1870's: Their Social Origins," in *ibid.*, 193-212. The less rigorously built sample of businessmen studied by C. Wright Mills and Richard Bendix with Frank Howton is discussed by Herbert G. Gutman, "The Reality of the Rags-to-Riches 'Myth': The Case of the Patterson, New Jersey Locomotive, Iron, and Machinery Manufacturers, 1830-1880," in Stephan Thernstrom and Richard Sennett, eds., *Nineteenth Century Cities*, 98-101.
5. Stephan Thernstrom, *Poverty and Progress*, 112-13, 162-65, 223.
6. Herbert Gutman, "The Reality of the Rags-to-Riches 'Myth,'" 98-124; Clyde Griffin, "Workers Divided; The Effect of Craft and Ethnic Differences in Poughkeepsie, New York, 1850-1880" in Thernstrom and Sennett, eds., *Nineteenth Century Cities*, 93; Howard Chudacoff, *Mobile Americans*, 109; Humbert Nelli, *The Italians in Chicago*, 109; Richard Hopkins, "Status, Mobility and the Dimensions of Change in a Southern City: Atlanta, 1870-1890," in Kenneth Jackson and Stanley Schultz, eds., *Cities in American History* (New York, 1972), 223; Paul B. Worthman, "Working Class Mobility in Birmingham, Alabama, 1880-1914," in Tamara Hareven, ed., *Anonymous Americans: Explorations in Nineteenth Century Social History* (Englewood Cliffs, 1971), 193.
7. Stephan Thernstrom, "Reflections on the New Urban History," in Felix Gilbert and Stephen R. Graubard, eds., *Historical Studies Today* (New York, 1972), 329; Stephan Thernstrom, *The Other Bostonians: Poverty and Progress in the American Metropolis, 1880-1970* (Cambridge, 1973), 257-58.
8. Peter M. Blau and Otis D. Duncan, *The American Occupational Structure* (New York, 1967), 249.
9. An extremely useful summary of mobility findings is presented in Thernstrom, *Other Bostonians*, 234. The figures for upward mobility into the

white-collar class between 1880 and 1890 are: Atlanta, 22 per cent; Omaha, 21 per cent; Boston 12 per cent. Corresponding downward mobility figures are: 7 per cent; 2 per cent; 12 per cent. It is true that these figures must be understood within the perspective of the methodology that produced them. Thus they may be somewhat skewed because the better situated are more easily traced, but this problem is common to all these mobility studies and therefore the figures are valid in a comparative context.

10. *Ibid.*
11. Miriam K. Slater, "My Son the Doctor," 369.
12. "Letter of the Russian Emigrant Relief Fund to the Alliance Israelite Universelle, 1881," Appendix B to Zosa Szajkowski, "The Attitude of American Jews to East European Jewish Immigration (1881-1883)," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society*, XL (Sept. 1950), 265-66. Emphasis added.
13. Blau and Duncan, *American Occupational Structure*, 295-98, 361-99, quotes are on 367 and 428.
14. Sidney Goldstein and Calvin Goldscheider, *Jewish Americans: Three Generations in a Jewish Community* (Englewood Cliffs, 1968), 116, 121, 124. Emphasis added.
15. Salvatore LaGumina and Frank J. Cavaoli, eds., *The Ethnic Dimension in American Society* (Boston, 1974), 186-87.
16. Isaac M. Rubinow, "Economic and Industrial Condition in New York," in Charles Bernheimer, ed., *The Russian Jew in the United States*, 103-4; Ascoli quoted in Eugene P. Ericksen, Richard N. Juliani, and William Yancey, "Emergent Ethnicity: A Review and Reformulation," prepared by the authors at Temple University (1974), 33.
17. Herbert Gans, *Urban Villagers*, 123-212.
18. Moses Rischin, *Promised City*, 176; Joel Seidman, *The Needle Trades*, 43, 228.
19. Chudacoff, *Mobile Americans*, 157.
20. Thernstrom, *Poverty and Progress*, 1.
21. Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology* (New York, 1960), 115-36; Humbert Nelli, *Italians in Chicago*, places heavy emphasis on the role of crime in mobility and analyzes it functionally, 125-55. Professor Nelli is now at work on a full-scale study of Italian crime entitled *The Business of Crime* to be published in the fall of 1976. Arthur Goren, *New York Jews and the Quest for Community: The Kehillah Experiment, 1908-1922* (New York, 1970), includes a chapter on crime in the Jewish quarter, 134-58, and Professor Goren is at work on a full study of that topic.
22. Abraham Cahan, *The Rise of David Levinsky* (New York, 1917), 525-30.
23. Mario Puzo, "Choosing a Dream," in T. C. Wheeler, ed., *The Immigrant Experience* (New York, 1971), 49.