

Memories of Immigrant Life:
Marie Jastrow's *A Time to Remember: Growing Up in
New York before the Great War* (1979)

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Abstract

In her coming-of-age memoir, *A Time to Remember: Growing Up in New York before the Great War* (1979), Marie Jastrow, a Jewish-American immigrant woman, cleverly captures the daily life of her family in Yorkville, New York City, in the early decades of the twentieth century. Jastrow recalls the difficulties she and her parents had to face during their first years in the United States, between 1907 and 1918, and the ways in which they managed to adapt to the social, economic, political, and cultural circumstances of the new environment. Therefore, this essay sets out to explore how Jastrow's family members succeeded in negotiating the challenges of a gendered immigrant experience.

Keywords: Marie Jastrow, Jewish-American immigrant women, immigrant coming-of-age memoir, early twentieth century, gender roles, ethnic identity, acculturation.

The period between 1880 and 1920 represented the time when immigration from Eastern and Southern Europe to the United States was highest. It was also a time when many male – and a few female – immigrants left written, fiction or non-fiction, accounts of their immigrant experience. In her entry “Autobiography in the United States,” in *The Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women*,

Wendy Zierler explains the rapid development of autobiographical writing by Jewish-American women at the beginning of the twentieth century, suggesting that “as the status and role of women in American and Jewish life began to change, more and more American Jewish women turned to autobiographical writing as a means of documenting these changes and addressing questions of American, Jewish, and female identity.” Thus, they started “a kind of Jewish American woman’s autobiographical tradition, in which writers refer to and challenge the versions of Jewish, American, and female identity and life presented by their predecessors.” Since Mary Antin’s *The Promised Land* (1912), followed by Elizabeth Stern’s *My Mother and I* (1917), Rose Cohen’s *Out of the Shadow* (1918), and Elizabeth Hasanovitz’s *One of Them: Chapters from a Passionate Autobiography* (1918), to mention only a few, “American Jewish women have contributed copiously to such categories of autobiography as accounts of the immigrant experience, of feminist and/or activist involvement, of the changing role of women in Jewish and American life, as well as literary and political autobiographies, Holocaust survival narratives, and coming-of-age memoirs” (Zierler). Marie Jastrow (née Grunfeld), a Jewish-American immigrant who emigrated to the United States in 1907, is the author of two coming-of-age memoirs, *A Time to Remember: Growing Up in New York before the Great War* (1979) and *Looking Back: The American Dream through Immigrant Eyes (1907-1918)* (1986), in which she recalls her teenage years in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century. From a more distant vantage point in time, Jastrow’s memoirs look at roughly the same time period as Antin, Stern, Cohen, and Hasanovitz; however, one of the main differences is that Jastrow emigrated later, in the first decade of the twentieth century, and her parents emigrated from Serbia, not from the Pale of Settlement. Jastrow was born in Poland, but she moved with her parents to Serbia (where her parents came from), hence she considers Serbia her and her parents’ home country.

In *Jewish Girls Coming of Age in America, 1860-1920*, Melissa R. Klapper claims that Jastrow was an avid writer all her

life,¹ although she published her first memoir only in 1979, at age 82. Arguably, the two volumes of recollections, *A Time to Remember* and *Looking Back* can be considered memoirs, rather than autobiographies,² not only because they focus on a particular time period in Jastrow's life – her teenage years (between 1907 and 1918), but also because she looks back at those years from a more distant vantage point (at a distance of almost seventy years), which allows her to offer brief insights and comparisons between immigrant daily life and personal choices at the beginning of the twentieth century and life in the latter part of the century. Overall, both volumes describe the challenges faced by Jastrow and her parents in the United States during the first years after emigration, and the ways in which they adapted to the social, economic, political, and cultural circumstances of the new environment. This essay is going to focus on Jastrow's first memoir, *A Time to Remember: Growing Up in New York before the Great War*, with a view to exploring how Jastrow's family members managed to negotiate the challenges of a gendered immigrant experience.

In *The Jewish Metropolis: New York City from the 17th to the 21st Century*, immigration historian Daniel Soyer states that “a dramatic increase in migration took place from the turn of the century until the start of the First World War. In that brief span, 1.4 million Jews immigrated to the United States” (65).³ Furthermore, he points out that “In the five years at the crest of the wave (1904-1908), more than 600,000 Jews entered the country: 130,000 in 1905, 149,000 in 1907” (65). Jastrow's father, Julius Grunfeld, emigrated in 1905, followed by Jastrow's mother, Johanna Grunfeld (née Deutsch), and Marie Grunfeld in 1907. However, while the vast majority of the Jews who emigrated between 1900 and 1920 was from Eastern Europe and Russia, Jastrow's parents had German Jewish roots and emigrated from Serbia. For the most part, the push factors that prompted the departure of European Jews to the United States in such great numbers between 1890 and 1910 were “political and religious persecution [which] aggravated economic hardships. A combination of industrialization, the overcrowding of the cities, and rampant anti-Semitism, including

discriminatory laws, created a severe crisis in the already oppressive conditions of Jewish life” (Foner 20). On the other hand, as renowned sociologist Nancy Foner explains, the pull factors that drew Southern- and Eastern-European immigrants to the United States at the turn of the twentieth century, included America’s “expanding industrial economy, job opportunities, and higher wages and standard of living,” and, for Jewish immigrants, in particular, “the promise of a less hostile government, without official anti-Semitic restrictions — and the knowledge that earlier Jewish immigrants, largely from Germany, had found freedom and economic success” (21-22).⁴ Jastrow’s father, as she mentions at the beginning of *A Time to Remember*, emigrated because he had failed at several businesses in his home country, and, a rather adventurous spirit, he emigrated in search of “economic opportunities” (Alexander 22). In *Daily Life in Immigrant America, 1870-1920: How the Second Great Wave of Immigrants Made Their Way in America*, June Granatir Alexander suggests that “for most immigrants, coming to America was a voluntary choice. Whether they went alone or as part of a family, men and women were looking for a chance to better their lives” (31), which was also the main reason of emigration for Jastrow’s father. In his entry “German Jews in America,” in the *Encyclopedia of American Jewish History*, Stanley Nadel claims that the German Jewish immigration, which had reached a climax in the 1850s and continued up to about 1880, further continued up to 1914; however, between 1880 and 1914, only about “40,000–50,000 German Jews made their way to America” (35). Referring to this last wave of German Jewish immigrants, Nadel maintains that it “was overshadowed . . . by the much larger contemporary mass migration from Eastern Europe, and it is unclear what proportion was assimilated by the earlier German Jewish migrants and what was simply submerged among the Easterners. What is clear is that it had no special identity of its own” (35).

In the *Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women*, Harriet L. Parmet offers a brief overview of Jastrow’s life. As mentioned earlier, her maiden name was Grunfeld, and she was born “in the

Prussian city of Danzig, present-day Gdansk, Poland” (Parmet), in 1897.⁵ As Jastrow states in *A Time to Remember*, when she was about five, her parents moved in with her well-off maternal grandparents in Yamac, Serbia.⁶ As she explains in the first chapter of her memoir, “Papa Came Steerage,” Jastrow and her mother joined her father two years after he emigrated, when she was ten years old. According to the sociological categorization of different generations of immigrants in terms of their age upon emigration, Jastrow, age ten when she entered the United States, belongs to the “one-and-a-half” or ‘1.5’ generation,” a category which includes “those who immigrate as children,” different “from the ‘first’ generation of immigrants who migrate as adults and the ‘second’ generation of native-born persons of foreign parentage” (Rumbaut). This distinction is important because, unlike second-generation immigrants born in the United States, “1.5 generation”-immigrants have some recollection of their lives in their home countries, specifically of Yamac, in Serbia, in Jastrow’s case.

Jastrow starts her memoir with a short introduction in which she places her story in the larger context of immigration to America: “This is a story of an early America, . . . of an immigrant girl growing up in New York at the turn of the century” (11). “Our life was an ordinary life,” she continues, “I have no glorious, remarkable story to tell, beyond the glorious and remarkable story of the millions who migrated to a new land and settled there. Adventurers, dreamers, scholars, beggars – they came during a time when the gates of America were open to the world. . . . It was a unique moment in history” (11). She concludes her introduction with “in America a man could be anything he wished” (12), a statement expressing the hopes and dreams of the millions of immigrants who reached the American shores during the Progressive Era. Throughout the seventeen chapters of the memoir, each with an appropriate title, Jastrow dwells on different daily activities that shaped the acculturation process of the family, such as shopping, cooking, cleaning, looking for a job, going to work, going to school, socializing in the neighborhood, connecting with the ethnic community, etc., or special events, such as her father’s

naturalization (becoming an American citizen). One might argue that, for the most part, Jastrow strives to follow a somewhat chronological order of the events she records, but it appears that she was more interested in the activities and events themselves than in the specific dates, so she is sometimes inconsistent with the dates.⁷

The first part of the memoir ("Papa Came Steerage," "A Moment of Panic," "The Mop and Pail Brigade," "A Mitzvah," and "The Family Joins Papa") offers a brief account of her parents' life in Serbia before emigration, including the reason for her father's decision to go to America, his journey by ship (steerage – third class) to the United States, glimpses of his life in New York City in the two years before the family was reunited, and Jastrow and her mother's arrival in the United States. Jastrow starts with a description of her parents' life in Serbia: her father, born "in a small province of Austria" (13), later moved with his parents near Yarac, in Serbia, loved adventure, and, at an early age, left for Switzerland to work there for about ten years before he decided to settle down and get married. Her mother came from a well-off family in Serbia, and, although her father had been considered "a great match" (14) upon his return from Zurich, soon after they got married, lacking any business acumen, he failed at two businesses, in the process having spent his wife's generous dowry. In the meantime, news about America as a country of plenty and opportunity⁸ had reached the small town in Serbia as well, and, "to save his pride," as Jastrow puts it, her father, "always the adventurer," saw America as the solution to his problems: "In America lay his future. . . . People had been known to make their fortunes there. One only needed the courage to break away" (16). Yet, while her mother refused to leave her homeland, her father could not be persuaded to stay. Arrangements were made for Jastrow and her mother to stay with her maternal grandparents, waiting for "the outcome of Papa's American venture" (16). The chapter ends with Jastrow's recollections of the happy few years she spent with her grandparents, the congeniality, the food and the festive atmosphere during the holiday season, and with memories of her grandfather and grandmother, "a grand old pair" (20).

This happy, fulfilled atmosphere in Yarác is juxtaposed in the next chapter to her father's ocean voyage to America and his arrival at Ellis Island in October 1905, especially his complete desolation when he finds himself alone, on a bench in Battery Park, New York City, without any plan of what to do next. "It was a painful aloneness" (21), Jastrow recalls, as her father "often said that he never felt as abandoned as he did on that day, his first in America" (22). Luckily, a kind police officer gave him the address of a Jewish-American family on Hester Street, on the Lower East Side, where he found shelter and emotional support at the beginning of his life as an immigrant: "he had a home" (29). Her father's decision to settle in New York City might have been prompted, among others, by the fact that "New York was one of the American cities about which information was available to Jews in Eastern Europe, and they understood its inherent economic potential before they took their fateful decision to leave" (Soyer 65).

Jastrow might have chosen to dwell on the hardships endured by her father during the first months in New York City to illustrate the material difficulties and emotional turmoil most new immigrants had to face and cope with upon arrival. In the introduction to *Emerging Metropolis: New York Jews in the Age of Immigration, 1840–1920*, Deborah Dash Moore points out the rather "quotidian promises" offered by New York City to its Jewish immigrants: "a job, a place to live, food, and clothing" (17). Nevertheless, while New York City "kept" its promise of "a place to live" to Jastrow's father upon arrival, the first promise, that of finding a job was much more difficult to solve. He had arrived somewhat prepared, with a little money and several possessions (a quality wardrobe, a gold watch and chain, a silver snuffbox, and a gold ring), and, while he managed to pay the rent and eat with the Grossman family for about two months, as money ran out, several items had to be pawned to make ends meet. Life became harder, but her father was too proud to ask his family back home for money, so he suffered in silence; being "a firm optimist," he was convinced that he would find some work soon (33). One morning, hungry and

exhausted, he collapsed on the stairs of St. Marks Hospital, on Twelfth Street, and after he was taken in to be treated, he was hired as a porter, receiving “a small wage, and a place to sleep” (35). Indeed, the job “was a comedown from his former position in life,” but New York City “had managed” to fulfill the promise of a job. Her father was determined to make it work in the United States, eager to adapt to the “new land, with new standards, and new customs. It was time to forget the old life. This was America!” (35). The fourth chapter, “A Mitzvah,”⁹ is a reflection on the hard lives of immigrants on the Lower East Side, but Jastrow might have chosen to include the example of Sam Grossman’s family (where her father stayed during his first months), to show that sometimes immigrants managed to adapt and assimilate successfully into the American society after two generations. Once settled in New York City, her father was determined to send for his wife and daughter as soon as the financial possibilities would allow; therefore, he led a very thrifty life, saving every penny he could for the tickets: “He had extra jobs on his free afternoons to earn money. In the process, he learned English. And already he regarded himself as an American” (40). However, he needed to save much money because he was intent on buying them second-class tickets; travelling steerage, as he had done, was out of the question as it “was hardly fit for animals, much less human beings” (39). The good deed done by Grossman’s mother, who facilitated a better paid and steady job for Jastrow’s father, was of great help to save the money for the tickets, and, the following year, in 1907, Jastrow and her mother crossed the ocean in the comfort of a second-class cabin to join her father in New York City.

In the fifth chapter, Jastrow mentions the emotional departure from Yarac, Serbia, especially her mother’s reluctance to leave behind her parents, her younger sister, and the comfort of their home, as they had all expected that, at some point, her father would return, “come back ‘where he belonged’” (43). In the end, her mother had no choice, and, since traditionally “wives belonged with husbands,” Jastrow’s grandfather convinced her to join him in America (43). Throughout the memoir, Jastrow describes her

mother as an energetic, practical person, who, in the end, managed to do things her way, despite implicit or explicit opposition from her husband. So, Jastrow mentions that, faced with the challenge of emigration, her mother “wiped her eyes, squared her shoulders, and, spunky lady that she was, set her sights on America and the new life that awaited her across the ocean” (43). Having been fitted with stylish travel outfits by her grandparents, they “travelled well” (although Jastrow adds that “it was our last luxury for many years to come” 44), and she mentions that, once they arrived at Ellis Island, they “looked very classy” (44). What probably stayed with Jastrow for a long time was that first encounter with her father in New York City. Jastrow and her mother were completely shocked when they saw him because he had aged much in the two years since he had left, looking worn out and rather shabby. It was only when he embraced her heartily that Jastrow felt he was again the person she had known back home.

The second part of the memoir depicts the gender differences between Jastrow’s mother and father as far as the adaptation process was concerned. While her father’s role was to provide financially for the family, her mother’s role was to achieve New York’s second promise, providing “a place to live,” this time a decent place for the entire family. Coming from a rather well-off family, although she understood the limited financial resources they had in America, her energetic mother decided that the present accommodation was not adequate for the family, so she had to find a better home. “We lived in four homes that first year” (62), Jastrow reminisces at the beginning of the sixth chapter. Her mother’s attempts to find and move to a better home took them to a place on 9th Street (close to the Lower East Side) for a short time; then they moved up north, on 76th Street, then on 92nd Street, and finally settled on 81st Street, where they lived for many years. Her father “hated moving” (64), and, as the provider of the family, he used the cheap rent as a reason not to move. That is why, whenever her mother suggested moving because of unbearable circumstances (no private toilets, no large kitchens, awful smell from outside), he dodged the suggestions by returning to “his reading,” and “the

subject was closed” (64). Still, agreeing with his wife that they had to move out of the 92nd Street apartment, this time, he was the one who found the new one: “he had learned of a modern, steam-heated tenement on Eighty-First Street near the East River” (66), a place to her mother’s liking. It had “a white porcelain sink, hot water, a gas stove, and a white bathtub” (64), modern amenities which her mother was excited about. Thus, while her father liked “to mull things over” (in this case a higher rent for this apartment), her mother “never turned things in her mind longer than it took her to decide one way or another” (68), especially when it came to decisions regarding household matters, such as appropriate living quarters. At the same time, her mother was a very resourceful person, and, in the case of the 81st Street apartment, she managed to persuade her husband, in spite of his initial opposition, to agree to a common practice at the time, renting out one of the rooms to a boarder to help out with the rent.¹⁰

Indeed, her mother was very content with the apartment, proud of the modern amenities, particularly the gas stove, which made it easier and more pleasurable for her to fulfill her household chores, helping her, among others, with the cooking, as she was in charge of preparing delicious ethnic foods for her husband and daughter: “she cooked the most marvelous dishes, and baked her strussel kuchen and those apricot and nut tarts for which she was famous” (70). Throughout the chapters, Jastrow intersperses significant instances of her mother’s acculturation, two of them being getting used to place a quarter in a box near the stove to bring gas into it and learning about canned food from the grocer. Despite her initial reluctance to emigrate, perhaps due to her more pragmatic nature, Jastrow’s mother appears to have adapted quite fast to some of the American ways, especially if they made her life as a housewife much easier. This is also illustrated in the situation when her husband suggested speaking in lower voices in the flat so as not to be overheard by the neighbors, and she simply replied that they had to get used to the thin walls; they were in America and they had to adapt to the American ways (73-74). Jastrow’s thoughts about their initial process of acculturation is encapsulated in her

final thought of the chapter: “each step, successfully taken, added confidence. The children learned quickly, and the parents followed” (75).

In the same context of adapting to the new ways, Jastrow includes a chapter on her mother’s “secret job,” in which she describes the tensions in her family, “after the depression of 1907,” when her father lost his “delicatessen job” (76), and her mother was offered a job outside the home, in a bakery nearby. “My father, like many other immigrants, never lost some of his European ideas, especially where the role of women in the family was concerned” (76).¹¹ Suzanne M. Sinke states in “Gender and Immigration” that “for East European Jews,” and, I would argue, for German Jews, as well, “two very significant shifts in gender roles took place on the group level, if not always for individuals, around the turn of the century” (297). The first one, more important in this case, referred to the diminishing “emphasis on religious education for men” as “idealized masculinity became more associated with money-making endeavors” (Sinke 297). “As a result,” Sinke further remarks, “women’s roles as money earners even after marriage became less acceptable, and the idea of a woman supporting her husband became a source of ridicule not only for the surrounding society, but also within the ethnic group” (297). Jastrow’s father was adamant that her mother should not take the job under any circumstances: “It is for me to provide the money. . . . Your job is the home” (76), pointing to a clear separation of the two spheres traditionally inhabited by husbands (the public one) and wives (the private one). Just like many times before, her father ended the discussion and closed the subject by returning to his book. Her mother’s silence in response to her father’s decision, though, was not something Jastrow was used to. Soon after, Jastrow understood that her mother had taken the job, but she did not want to tell anything to her husband. From her mother’s point of view, “she had exchanged her culinary talents for money” (78). Her father’s perspective on it, however, was different: when he found out about the job a few months later, he was not only angry, but his male pride was also deeply hurt. “It was not the job itself,” he admitted

to Jastrow, “outside work was completely out of bounds for a lady, and he was surprised that Mama had so soon forgotten who she was” (78), and little impressed by his wife’s explanations, he declared: “Do as you wish . . . but understand that when you hire yourself out, I am shamed” (79). Perhaps, as expected, that was the argument that persuaded her mother to give up the job as she did not want to shame her husband in the community. In her memory, Jastrow connected this situation with how the extremely difficult time of the economic depression had affected their daily lives, including the scarce food available for the family: “bean soup and garlic bread” (79), instead of the nourishing meals her mother used to cook when more money was available as a result of her father’s steady jobs. Still, like many chapters in her memoir, this chapter also ends on a positive and optimistic note, with her father finding a steady job in a German-American import export company, thus putting an end to their financial worries for a while.

After having described various daily activities and aspects of her parents’ adaptation process, Jastrow concentrates in the eighth chapter, “The German School,” on her own life in the new country, specifically on her education. While her parents were both concerned with providing a decent life for the family, Jastrow’s life gravitated around school and socializing with other children in the ethnic neighborhood. When they moved to the apartment on 81st Street, in Yorkville, on the Upper East Side, Jastrow started attending a nearby school, P. S. 96. During her first days there, she felt “alone and miserable” (80), perhaps similar to how her father had felt during his first day in New York City. Jastrow explains that she had no friends at the time because she only knew a few words of English; that is why, she “had no choice but to learn the new language, quickly and without fuss” (80).¹² Reminiscing about school prompts her to think about how teachers and doctors were held in high regard by the immigrant parents, perhaps because of their social status and higher level of education. As far as the languages spoken at school and at home were concerned, Jastrow felt torn: “For some time, I was obliged to lead a double life. In school I had to speak English; with my parents I could only speak

German,” and only with her friends she spoke “whatever language came into my head” (82). Moreover, “at home there was a tug between the old and the new” (82), as, after finishing her homework in English, her father insisted that she keep up her German, motivating that “it is part of education to speak two languages” (82). Therefore, her father enrolled her in a private German class offered by the Turnverein in their area, “the lodge for German-Americans”¹³ (82). At that time, Jastrow did not like going to the German class three times a week for two hours, but, in hindsight, she appreciated the fact that her father insisted she should take the class. “In those days the education of most immigrant girls ended in grammar school. The career of a girl was marriage. No other career was acceptable” (82-84), she explains. Moreover, she was a good student, and, as her father “never conformed entirely to the conventional wisdom, the higher education offered by the German school seemed an acceptable compromise for me. Mr. Winter, the teacher and principal, drilled into me more Latin, composition, literature, history and mathematics that I could have acquired in any other way, considering that my formal education ended in the eighth grade” (84).¹⁴

In the same chapter, Jastrow mentions how she discovered reading and the world of books at the public library on 78th Street, an activity which became a favorite pastime for a while. Yet, because of this new passion she lost her friends who resented her habit and considered her “a freak” (85). In the midst of this emotional turmoil, she befriended another German Jewish girl, whom she had met during a May Day celebration organized by her teachers in Central Park. Her friend joined Jastrow at the German school, and, after that, having a friend to share the experience with, classes there were not so dreary anymore. Still, after four years of German school, her father, “with his European ideas,” decided that she had had enough education for a girl, “to last [her] a lifetime” (88); he also considered that it was time for her to start working and found her a job at his firm. Jastrow did not like that job but found one in a dry goods store in the neighborhood, where she kept the

books and “helped with the selling” (89). Still, one of her main regrets at the time (and probably throughout her life) was that she was not allowed to go to college: “A college education always seemed to me to be the ultimate in achievement. . . . I always felt that I was deprived of something special in life. I’ve never lost a feeling of awe for those venerable halls of learning; a corner of my life felt unfulfilled,” even if she tries to accept it years later: “But no regrets. I lived in a different era” (89). Her concluding statement might echo the regret of many young Jewish immigrant girls, R. Cohen being one of them, of not having had the possibility to take advantage of the opportunity of free education for boys *and* girls in America, often because of the traditional expectations regarding their gender or the difficult financial situation of their families.

The next two chapters, “The Yorkville Melting Pot” and “Paprika Weiss,” offer Jastrow’s perspective regarding the ethnic community in Yorkville, a section of Manhattan between 83rd and 89th Street. In *Little Germany: Ethnicity, Religion, and Class in New York City, 1845-1880*, Nadel points out that in the 1870s and 1880s, “Yorkville became the center of a new and expanding German neighborhood, which increasingly became the area of settlement for the third wave of German immigrants, who began arriving in the 1880s. . . . By 1910, Yorkville had grown into a new ‘little Germany’” (161-162). In the same context, Steven E. B. Lechner states in “Recalling Ethnic Yorkville: The Histories, Heritage Practices, Imaginaries, and Identities of Two Ethnic Communities in One Urban Neighborhood” that “communities such as Yorkville offered upwardly mobile ethnics enhanced economic opportunities, better accommodations with increased living space, as well as the ability to maintain ethnic connectedness” (46). He further argues that “During the first decade of the twentieth century Yorkville emerged as the cultural and social center of German New York,” pointing out that, as a result of the Lower East Side becoming overcrowded, “German Americans spread to all corners of Greater New York at an accelerated rate after 1900, creating a series of residential enclaves. Spatial diversity thus joined religious identity, Old World regional allegiance, Turn Verein [sic]

membership, political party designation, and socio-economic class distinction as another layer of ethnic heterogeneity within the city's German milieu" (51). Jastrow's nostalgia for the neighborhood where she spent most of her teenage years can be felt in the touching way in which she describes daily life and ethnic encounters in "The Yorkville Melting Pot." She cleverly juxtaposes the Christmas pushcarts and the festive Christmas atmosphere – with the small gifts that brought children much joy back then – with the greater expectations of material gifts (Christmas gifts, weekly allowances, etc.) of the children in the late twentieth century. This memory also makes her think about the importance of parental authority, and how, when she was a teenager, young people did not dare to question their parents' judgement: "the children understood the harsh conditions, and it never occurred to them to question the way their parents lived. Life was too difficult" (92).

Homesickness for the old country was a familiar feeling throughout the neighborhood: "all had memories of loved ones left behind and waiting. It was not easy to endure the homesickness. But endured it had to be. Life had to be lived" (92). Thinking back, what stayed with Jastrow over the years was indeed "a genuine feeling of acceptance, a real value placed on friendship" (92), for instance, the enduring friendships her parents formed, which lasted a lifetime. "It was an era when leisure time was for visiting with friends and neighbors, when good talk was valued over a congenial cup of coffee" (93), she recalls, thinking of the times when people shared their "joys and sorrows" (93) with their friends and neighbors. Guests were always welcome in their house, and the activities, as well as the spaces where they took place, were also gendered: while the men played cards in the kitchen (traditionally a woman's space), women sat in "the front room with a bit of gossip of the day, viewing the America they lived in, through their European eyes, comparing, sometimes crying a little when they talked about those left behind" (93). Jastrow must have cherished the fond memories of those happy days, as she remarks that "It was the time of great ideas and aspirations. . . . of great plans and

dreams, of great opportunities and fulfillments. It was the mystery and magic of America” (94).

“Paprika Weiss,” the next chapter, adds to the nostalgic picture of Yorkville at the beginning of the twentieth century. After explaining the importance of ethnic communities for immigrants as safe places, where they could eat their ethnic food, maintain their cultural traditions, and speak their own languages, Jastrow describes Yorkville as a multiethnic community, “a cluster of German, Jewish, Irish, Czech, and Italian immigrants” (110), where the immigrants tried to create an emotional space of belonging, similar to the one they had had in the villages in their home countries. Jastrow’s perception of Yorkville at the beginning of the twentieth century may be supported by Amanda Seligman’s statement in “Neighborhoods, Immigrants, and Ethnic Americans” that “living in proximity to members of different [ethnic] groups . . . familiarized immigrant Americans and their children with ethnic strangers, fostering amicable relations, including friendships and intermarriage made possible in multiethnic contexts” (286). As Jastrow remembers, the immigrants fostered emotional connections not only with their neighbors, but also with the owners (of different ethnic backgrounds) of the small family stores which catered to the needs of the community, such as the bakery, the grocery, the kosher butcher store, the candy store, the ice and coal cellar, the shoe repair shop, and a second-hand furniture store, among many others. In *Emerging Metropolis: New York Jews in the Age of Immigration, 1840–1920*, Annie Polland and D. Soyfer suggest that “Women played a particularly active role in the identity-building function of the neighborhood streets. . . . As consumers, Jewish women, like other housewives in New York, dominated street commerce” (62). Discussing gender roles at the turn into the twentieth century, Riv-Ellen Prell maintains in *Fighting to Become Americans: Assimilation and the Trouble between Jewish Women and Men* that “Immigrant women, with middle-class aspirations, learned to Americanize by learning to consume, financed by a husband who embraced the American work ethic” (93). Immigrant women, like Jastrow’s mother, learned how to become deft consumers, trying to

make the most of their husbands' wages in order to offer a semblance of decent life to their families. Jastrow recalls one of the stores where her mother would often buy food and clothes for her family, Rosenberg's dry goods and department store: they "sold everything at bargain prices. . . . Mama rarely left the store empty-handed. . . . Always the practical one, she never let a bargain slip through her hands" (113). Jastrow herself remembers one of her favorite stores, Fleishmann's Vienna Bakery, where they used to buy bread, fresh rolls, "sweet butter-tasting buns," and her favorite, a "huge, round pinwheel kind of bun that my mother called 'Schnecken,' which means 'snails,' because that is what they looked like" (114). Jastrow also has fond memories of the Hungarian grocery, Paprika Weiss, not only because of the great variety of spices sold there, "that found their way into Mama's soups, stews, and, of course, the apricot cakes and strudels," or the "very strong, very red paprika" (114) that could not be found in other stores, but especially because of the corn sugar, raisins, or even "a juicy pickle" (115) the owner gave her as a treat whenever she went to the store: "for you, for being a good girl for your mama" (114-115). In the end, however, as time passed by, things changed in Yorkville, too, and only fading memories of those happy days remained.

Another important aspect of immigrant life mentioned by Jastrow is health. In "House Calls a Dollar, Office Visits Fifty Cents," she recalls a store where they found remedies for many of their ailments, Goodman's Drug Store. It was imperative, though, to see a doctor, in case of a more serious health problem that could not be solved with various ointments. Jastrow remembers one of those times when she ran away from a doctor's office in their neighborhood because she was scared of the doctor, and how, in the end, her mother's remedy, salt-water gargle, was instrumental in curing her tonsilitis. A more serious situation arose when her father suffered a bout of arthritis, which did not recede after her mother's alternative remedies, thus prompting his wife to take decided action to bring the doctor to their home, in spite of her husband's protests

that it was nothing serious, thus making sure that he was properly cared for so as to be able to resume work.

“An Old-World Superstition Pursues Us to New York” is about the lasting impact of the ethnic culture, in this case, the superstitions that stayed with immigrants in the new country, possibly for many years after emigration. This memory refers to an occurrence about five years after they emigrated, in 1912.¹⁵ Jastrow begins the chapter with a short summary of how they had acculturated during those years, especially regarding the acquisition of the English language: “I was very proud of the way I had mastered the English language, which I could speak without a trace of an accent. At least I thought I could. Anyway, Papa thought I spoke like a native. . . . He himself managed quite well in English” (134). In “Immigration and Language,” Nancy C. Carnevale suggests that “many first-generation immigrants were not able to make a complete transition from one language to another. Immigrants past and present have instead relied on their own distinctive idioms that reflected and articulated the immigrants’ new lives in America” (474). This seems to have been the case of Jastrow’s mother, who “had a language all her own. . . . She would Germanize her English in many ways, in accordance with her own feelings. ‘Liebchen,’ she would say to me, ‘Papa is coming schon heim.’ . . . Or, she would say to a visitor, ‘Ach, es ist nice sie zu sehen’” (134). “Certainly,” Jastrow goes on, “America and my mother needed more time for each other” because “she could still feel weighed down by the burden of homesickness” (134). One might argue that, for her mother, holding on to the German language was one of the ways of alleviating the feeling that plagued most first-generation immigrants, even if, for the most part, it was the women who expressed their emotions when thinking about their parents and siblings left behind. That is why, in Jastrow’s family (and possibly in many other immigrant families), letters bringing news from the home country were eagerly awaited and cherished, especially by her mother, despite the fact that, when they were read, they brought tears of homesickness to her eyes. The old-country superstition Jastrow mentions is related to her young aunt’s (her

mother's sister) death in Serbia, which her mother believed was foreshadowed by some glasses that cracked in their New York flat one night without any logical explanation. Jastrow might have included this memory to show how her mother, who was an extremely practical woman, was also extremely superstitious, "a fatalist," who believed that there was "a master plan for everyone, preordained at birth" (135), even if, in Jastrow's perception, she was "more religious" (136) than her husband.

Yet another aspect worth remembering was politics, which Jastrow described in the chapter "When You Were Poor, You Were a Democrat." That same year, in October 1912, her father became a naturalized citizen, a very important occasion in the life of an immigrant family. "For us it was a day to remember," Jastrow declares proudly; "our immigrant days were over. Suddenly, we were part and parcel of the American scene. We had been thinking about it for years, imagining how wonderful it had to be when one no longer felt a stranger in a strange land" (143). In "Naturalization and Nationality," Irene Bloemraad and Reed Ueda state that "The Naturalization Act of 1906 . . . initiated procedures for stricter verification of the five-year residency requirement," as "it also raised the qualifications for naturalization by demanding a rudimentary knowledge of American history and civics, a basic ability to speak and understand English, and proof of moral worth. An alien seeking naturalization had to appear before a judge with two witnesses who would vouchsafe his character for American citizenship" (40). As far as the members of immigrant families were concerned, "Act of February 10, 1855," granted "citizenship to alien women who marry a US citizen or whose husbands naturalize, regardless of place of residence" (Jasso and Rosenzweig 331), hence the pride of the Jastrow family on the occasion of the father's naturalization. As her father was a staunch supporter of President Woodrow Wilson at the time, he "immediately became a Democrat," much to the satisfaction of their landlord on 81st Street, who was also a Democrat, and who "had a great interest in fostering democratic principles in the people who lived in his building" (143). In this chapter, Jastrow also recalls Election Day,

her father's pride at being allowed to vote, and the convivial atmosphere of the ensuing block party, with plenty of food, drink, and music, sponsored by their landlord and enjoyed by all their friends and neighbors.

As time passed, Jastrow's mother constantly thought about ways of improving their lives and status, so she decided it was time to move again, not far away, but to a larger flat in the same building on 81st Street. This made her aware of another American custom she embraced wholeheartedly, "making purchases 'without the money to pay right away'" (147). Mrs. Wagner, one of her mother's good friends, with whom she spoke German "when they were together" (149), told her about a peddler¹⁶ from whom she could buy everything she needed to redecorate the new flat (furniture, curtains, etc.), and pay for the items in installments, a practice much appreciated by her mother. "Only in America," she told her husband, excited by the discovery of the new custom, "Where else can a poor man have a life?" (152), and, although her husband was rather reticent to the changes brought about by moving again, Jastrow believes that he must have been "quite impressed with this new way of acquiring things. Probably because bank accounts remained intact. Without a bank account, the uncertainties of life remained too unbearable" (155).

Another significant instance of their family's acculturation process is captured in chapter sixteen, aptly entitled "How Papa Learned about Women's Rights." At a distance of seventy years, Jastrow considers that her early years in the United States were happy ones, perhaps because the daily familiar routine had given them a sense of stability – her father going to work every day, Jastrow going to school, and, upon her return always finding her mother at home to greet her with home cooked food, the weekend visits with friends, etc. During that time, "life was simple and uncomplicated," Jastrow reminisces, and wistfully adds, "I suppose we just managed to be happy with what we had" (156). Still, there were unhappy memories, as well, and, for her, one of them was when her father lost the steady job he had had for eight years. Therefore, in 1915, to avoid allowing his wife to get a day job, as

many immigrant women in their building did, he decided to start his own business, a French laundry business, “at home, here in the kitchen” (157). “My French laundry will launder only fine, delicately embroidered wearables of the rich” (157), he proudly announced his wife and daughter, mentioning that he had already placed advertisements in “three American papers and the *Staats-Zeitung*”¹⁷ (157). In *America’s Jewish Women: A History from Colonial Times to Today*, Pamela Nadell points out that “immigrants understood that, in America, married men did not let their wives go out to work. But as long as the husband and wife were working together in their own business, they could work day and night. . . . ‘Helping out’ was what wives did. Of course, no one helping out – not wives, not sons, not daughters – was paid for their work” (120). “It was becoming a flourishing business,” Jastrow recalls, and, while her mother started getting used to it, and, at first, somewhat enjoyed “helping out,” her father became obsessed with it. Given his earlier business failures in Europe before emigration, he was determined to make the American business endeavor a successful one. “Success in business is an important factor which bolsters the Jewish entrepreneur’s assimilation and acculturation,” according to Brygida Gasztold in “Old World Dreams and Promised Land Nightmares in Early 20th Century Jewish-American Immigrant Narratives” (97). It grants “ethnic-minority men . . . a sense of authority” she further claims, “which comes with the power derived from the cultural significance of possession and decision making. . . . At the same time, this type of relationship reinforces white, male dominance in American society, leaving women outside the sphere of social management: men enjoy the hegemonic position of producers, whereas women are confined to the subordinate role of consumers” (97). Therefore, “during their acculturation, immigrant men internalized and reiterated the gender divisions emblematic of early twentieth-century American society” (Gasztold 97).

Nevertheless, despite boosting the pride and business success of Jastrow’s father, the thriving business had rather negative effects on their family life and relationships. “For the first time, he could

not separate himself from his business. He had eyes and ears only for his new venture. Books were laid aside. The card games ceased. We no longer visited museums on Sunday afternoons. . . . Slowly, Papa's fine, considerate character changed. He became tense, irritable, unnatural. The trick of giving orders now came easily" (159), Jastrow explains, perhaps in an attempt to motivate the fact that she considered this an unhappy memory. One day her mother simply snapped, bluntly refusing to help her father any longer; this led to a loud row, and, later on, to strained moments between her parents for a while, affecting the family dynamics. Her mother said that instead of helping her ungrateful husband, she could find work outside the home: "For this I get paid at least, and a thank you once in a while. From you, what do I get? Nothing" (160). As a result, her husband moved his business to the basement of their building, hiring the janitress to help him with the ironing. Her mother "kept her distance" from him for some time and found some embroidery work on her own, work she could do at home and which she later contracted among her friends, while still holding a grudge against her husband: "his autocratic ways still rankled" (161). After eight months of successful business, her father seems to have realized that, although the business had helped them financially, it had deteriorated their family relationships, and as he might also have missed the stability of an outside job, he put an end to the business and started looking for another job.

Jastrow's memoir ends with a short chapter about the "great changes" and the impact of the First World War on the lives of immigrants in the United States. Jastrow equates the beginning of the war with the end of their simple, yet stable and somewhat happy, existence in the protective and friendly multiethnic community of Yorkville. Circling back to the beginning of her memoir, where she referred to the aspirations and dreams of "the immigrant" upon arrival, she remarks: "an end came to the warm friendliness he had known. The ferment of his dreams was gone, the great American romance was gone; something within himself had gone with it. It would never be again – the fullness and richness and stirring adventure that had brought him to this land when it was

young” (164). Those early years had been a time with ups and downs: “No, it had not been easy, it had not been a great life always. But difficult and demanding as life was, in retrospect there emerges a grandeur from it all” (165). In her final chapter, Jastrow chooses to focus on the happy memories brought about by the “street entertainments” (166) she had enjoyed in Yorkville: the street singers, the organ grinder and his monkey, and the dances to the music of the German music bands. As the United States entered the First World War in 1917, Jastrow claims that “our immigrant days were over. Papa did not buy the *StaatsZeitung* anymore” (168). However, her hopeful statement “our immigrant days were over” – when her father became an American citizen, expressing her joy at their family being finally considered “American” not strangers or immigrants – is very different from the same statement in this chapter. This time, “our immigrant days were over” expresses Jastrow’s sad realization and regret that the somewhat happy times in the multiethnic community had come to an end. She briefly mentions how things had changed after the war, how the immigration laws of the early 1920s had restricted the immigration flow, and how, afterwards, the incoming immigrants were looked upon “as a danger and a threat” to America. “An era had ended” (168), she declares, possibly with a heavy heart, maybe full of nostalgia. At a distance of seventy years, Jastrow concludes her memoir by explaining her purpose in writing it, as well as her choice to present a more “romantic” picture of the immigration experience at the dawn of the twentieth century: “And if I see this era with romantic eyes, it is because it *was* a romantic era. Who can deny the romance of a world flocking by the millions to the lure of the phenomenon called America?” (169). Moreover, “now, as I write this, an aging lady looking back down the years, it is my hope that I have touched, at least in part, the essence of that remarkable time when the shores of America were open to the world. It was then, and it will never be again,” is Jastrow’s final thought, perhaps accompanied by a sigh for the end of the carefree and happy days of her youth.

In "The Ghetto and Beyond: First-Generation American-Jewish Autobiography and Cultural History," Steven J. Rubin states that "although every autobiography is unique, revealing the idiosyncrasies of individual personality, it is also general, reflecting patterns of cultural and historical development" (178-179). Discussing Jewish immigrant writers, he further claims that, for them, "the autobiographical form offered a means of defining an uncertain identity within a new and often alien culture. . . . it provided a vehicle for linking personal history with that of the group with an entire social process. In retelling the story of their lives, they re-created the collective history of their people" (179). Writing any personal story implies a process of selection, of including particular events or people and leaving others out. In Jastrow's case, it might be surprising that she does not dwell on hers or her parents' Jewish identity, choosing instead to focus on their life in the Yorkville community, a space that fostered her parents' German roots. One might speculate that she considered that their identity as immigrants was much more important, and by embedding her family in the larger story of immigration to the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century, she perhaps wanted to illustrate how resilience and determination helped immigrants to overcome the difficulties they had to face, thus trying to create a better world for their descendants.

At the same time, her memoir adds another layer to the gendered experience of immigration, as she describes how the members of her family managed to acculturate to the American society. Jastrow's father appears to have been a man of few words, an adventurous spirit and perhaps a dreamer (as Jastrow points out several times in her memoir), who, despite hating "change" (64), had had the courage to emigrate to a new country; he became an American citizen, and, although he was never rich (as Jastrow states in the introduction to her memoir), he did his best to provide a decent life for his family in rather challenging circumstances. Jastrow's mother, on the other hand, was a more pragmatic person, more outgoing on the outside, though rather homesick in her heart (at least during the first years in America). Nevertheless, while

pinning for her home country, she learned how to preserve important aspects of her ethnic identity – her language – and of her gender – her cooking habits and the ethnic recipes – as she found comfort and emotional support in the sheltering ethnic community. On the other hand, she eagerly embraced the new ways of doing things in America, as well as, perhaps, the possibility of challenging traditional gender roles and expectations. Jastrow describes her parents as ordinary first-generation immigrants who had been lucky enough to find a multiethnic community which helped them to transition from the life in the old country to another, more demanding life, but where friendship, hospitality, kindness, and generosity were key moral values. One might further speculate that those early years of acculturation in Yorkville shaped Jastrow's future personality as a woman, and later as a wife and a mother. Her story represents a small, but important, part of the history of Yorkville, and, implicitly, of New York City, in the early twentieth century.

Notes:

¹ “Marie wrote all her life” (Klapper 248, note 9).

² According to writer Annette Gendler, on the Washington Independent Review of Books website, “autobiography is a chronological account of that life, from birth to a later stage in life. . . concerned with recounting what happened, with setting the record straight, with giving a behind-the-scenes glimpse into the life of a usually famous person. Autobiography is not concerned, as memoir is, with introspection. A good memoir is not an accumulation of anecdotes, however entertaining they may be, but rather an inquiry into what those stories mean to the narrator. A memoir does not comprise a whole life; rather, it examines a particular phase in a life.”

³ According to historian Rodney Carlisle, “13 million new immigrants” entered the United States between 1900 and 1910, mostly from Europe (81).

⁴ For more on Jewish immigrants in the United States, see Diner (2004) and Portes and Rumbaut (2014).

⁵ Jastrow is not necessarily consistent with years and dates – in *A Time to Remember*, she writes that her parents married in 1898 (14); however, in *Looking Back*, she explains that her parents had been married at least two

years before she was born, and actually includes a photocopy of her birth certificate, which clearly shows that she was born on June 10, 1897 (25). Parmet and Klapper also claim that Jastrow was born on June 10, 1898, perhaps based on the information in *A Time to Remember*.

⁶ Today Jarak, a village in southwestern Serbia.

⁷ Some of the inconsistencies refer to her date of birth and that of the marriage of her parents.

⁸ Soyer explains that “another stimulus for the Jewish migration was the abundant information that began flowing back from the United States to Eastern Europe about the economic possibilities available in the New World. . . . The newcomers wrote back to their relatives about the job opportunities, wages, housing, and the cost of living . . .” (64). In a similar context, Brygida Gasztold suggests that “For Eastern European Jews the American Dream started at home with the stories, letters and photographs of those who had already left. . . . The newly arrived immigrants perpetuated the myth through epistolary narratives, which had little basis in reality but lured others with their sense of wonder” (95).

⁹ In this context, “a mitzvah” probably refers to “a good deed” (Sam Grossman’s mother helped Jastrow’s father to find a better paid job).

¹⁰ For more on the practice of keeping boarders to help pay the rent, see Nadell (2019).

¹¹ For more on traditional gender roles and expectations in the Jewish-American community, see Kamp (2000) and Nadell (2019).

¹² According to Polland and Soyer, “With the influx of immigrant children at the turn of the twentieth century, the public schools redoubled their efforts at Americanization, stressing instruction in the English language, hygiene, etiquette, citizenship, and vocational training. The children’s home language of Yiddish was denigrated” (264).

¹³ For more on various mutual aid organizations and Turnverein lodges, see Polland and Soyer (2012).

¹⁴ For more on gender and education, see Fass (2006) and Nadell (2019).

¹⁵ Again, Jastrow is rather inconsistent with the years – if she emigrated at age ten, five years after, she must have been about fifteen, not twelve as she suggests in the chapter.

¹⁶ For more on peddling, see Diner (2004).

¹⁷ *Staats-Zeitung* is the newspaper her father used to read regularly, according to Nadel it was the German New York’s leading daily” (*Little Germany* 122).

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