

# The Yiddish in Yankeeland

## Class 3: Jews and the Boston Machine, 1891–1914

Nov. 16, 2021

Excerpts from Antin's *the Promised Land*

“Anybody who knows Boston knows that the West and North Ends are the wrong ends of that city. They form the tenement district, or, in the newer phrase, the slums of Boston. Anybody who is acquainted with the slums of any American metropolis knows that that is the quarter where poor immigrants foregather, to live, for the most part, as unkempt, half-washed, toiling, unambitious foreigners; pitiful in the eyes of social missionaries, the despair of boards of health, the hope of ward politicians, the touchstone of American democracy. The well-versed metropolitan knows the slums as a sort of house of detention for poor aliens, where they live on probation till they can show a certificate of good citizenship.

He may know all this and yet not guess how Wall Street, in the West End, appears in the eyes of a little immigrant from Polotzk. What would the sophisticated sight-seer say about Union Place, off Wall Street, where my new home waited for me? He would say that it is no place at all, but a short box of an alley. Two rows of three-story tenements are its sides, a stingy strip of sky is its lid, a littered pavement is the floor, and a narrow mouth its exit.”

“In our days of affluence in Russia we had been accustomed to upholstered parlors, embroidered linen, silver spoons and candlesticks, goblets of gold, kitchen shelves shining with copper and brass. We had featherbeds heaped halfway to the ceiling; we had clothes presses dusky with velvet and silk and fine woolen. The three small rooms into which my father now ushered us, up one flight of stairs, contained only the necessary beds, with lean mattresses; a few wooden chairs; a table or two; a mysterious iron structure, which later turned out to be a stove; a couple of unornamental kerosene lamps; and a scanty array of cooking-utensils and crockery. And yet we were all impressed with our new home and its furniture. It was not only because we had just passed through our seven lean years, cooking in earthen vessels, eating black bread on holidays and wearing cotton; it was chiefly because these wooden chairs and tin pans were American chairs and pans that they shone glorious in our eyes. And if there was anything lacking for comfort or decoration we expected it to be presently supplied – at least, we children did. Perhaps my mother alone, of us newcomers, appreciated the shabbiness of the little apartment, and realized that for her there was as yet no laying down of the burden of poverty.”

Antin, Mary. *The Promised Land*. (Boston & New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1912).

Available online: <http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/antin/land/land.html>

Wyner Family Jewish Heritage Center also has several letters written by Antin to educator Alfred Seelye Roe in their digital archive: <https://digital.americanancestors.org/digital/collection/antin>



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Excerpts from Sarna and Smith's *The Jews of Boston*

“With their arrival in Boston, the new Russian immigrants faced the immediate necessity of making a living. The majority found such opportunities in Boston’s well-developed textile and shoe industries, a segment of the economy previously entered into by Central European Jewish immigrants. But success in the clothing business was not limited to ‘German’ Jews. Indeed it was the success of these first Jews in Boston that made it possible for Russian Jews to peddle, accumulate capital, and then open their own small stores. It was also the Russian Jews who carried out most of the skilled and unskilled labor upon which the larger clothing manufacturers depended.

Part of the Reason for the economic success of many Russian Jews was their ability to position themselves in sectors of clothing industry that others had either overlooked or consciously avoided because of the unpleasantness and low status of the work. Benjamin Feinberg and his sons, for example, cornered the market in the wool rag business. Feinberg was born in Pliskov, Russia, in 1840 and worked in the cattle business. ... With his old world skill of cattle dealing useless, Benjamin Feinberg worked as a rag picker with his son William. He received three dollars a week, barely enough to pay for rent and food for a family of eight. Other sons brought home additional funds by sorting woolen clippings for clothing manufacturers. When Benjamin had felt he had learned the rag business, he hired a shop in an old engine fire house and ‘started to prosper from the beginning.’ ... In the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century all of the brothers combined their businesses and formed B. Feinberg and Sons, which soon became New England’s premier rag business.” (pgs. 69 - 71)

Sarna, Jonathan D., and Ellen Smith. *The Jews of Boston: Essays on the Occasion of the Centenary (1895-1995) of the Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Greater Boston*. 1st ed. Boston: The Philanthropies, 1995.

*For a full bibliography see “Bibliography” on the course page.*

