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*Success, hope and value in the writing of  
Anzia Yeziarska*

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## **Abstract**

One of the authors who best describes the female experience in the New World is Anzia Yeziarska. At the turn of the century like men, also Jewish women migrated to America in order to escape from racial persecutions in the Russian Empire. She focuses on women and the protagonists of her works *Bread Givers* and *Hungry Hearts* embody her own personal experience as an immigrant woman, who from scratch starts a new life in a foreign country. Success is a word that is crucial in Yeziarska's writing career because it marks a turning point in her life: material success brings her spiritual decline, leading her to emptiness and discontent. Her relief can be found in the Jewish ghetto, the place which gave her the strength to face the troubles and adversities of the new country. Indeed it is possible to affirm that her value is the result of the combination between her roots and the new American precepts; she understands that her own "person" derives from the mediation between the "old" and the "new", the key that solves the tension between these two sides of the same coin is mediation. The third important key word of this thesis, hope, can be read as the shared belief among immigrants, both men and women, that in America life is different. In this case we underline the female experience and women believed in the so-called "American Dream": the possibility that in America everyone can start a new life, one can shape his/her own life according to his/her own personality and experiences. America is seen as the land of opportunity, in which everyone can display the best version of himself/herself, the land instills freedom and a life far from constrictions. When in America migrants realize that all these "American promises" have to be gained and the price is that of Americanization; only through consumption of American products one becomes a real American person. Americanization is a double-edged sword that helps to integrate in the American society but at the same time by focusing on materiality leads the foreigner to take the distances with his/her own roots; Yeziarska teaches how to control this struggle, only by maintaining the tie between the two sides: the old identity and the new one.



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## Introduction

What we know today as the United States of America is the outcome of the encounter of different cultures, people, languages, realities weaved all together in a new landscape. All those who arrived in America between the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century shared a common hope: they all wanted to start a new life and realize themselves in a place in which they could express themselves in the best way possible, far from the restrictions and fears that had been freezing them for a long time.

In general people coming to America hoped to find better life conditions. Focusing on Jews, they were escaping from pogroms, anti-Semitic persecutions, but once they saw the Statue of Liberty all their fears vanished, after examinations at Ellis Island migrants had to decide where to settle and start a new life. The majority of Jewish immigrants settled in a neighborhood in Manhattan, the Lower East Side. Here migrants organized themselves in neighborhoods in which they shared the same culture with other migrants coming from the same homeland, giving birth to the so-called melting pot.

Jews re-created the same environment they left in their homeland, they spoke Yiddish and in this way they maintained strong the connection with their roots. In this landscape of change, possibility and freedom, problems were still present; different from those they were used to face, problems of the modern, industrialized America. Women and children were mainly exploited in sweatshops. Women organized themselves in organizations, such as in the “International Ladies’ Garment Workers Union” in order to rebel against the dangerous working conditions and different walkouts took place, all led by women. Speaking about Jewish female figures who wrote their history and are still today remembered as important female authors in the American landscape, we find the Jewish immigrant female writer Anzia Yeziarska. She arrived as a teenager from Plotsk, a shtetl in Russian Poland. In all her writings, especially in *Bread Givers* and *Hungry Hearts* she focuses on women: how they lived in the Lower East Side, what were their fears, their hopes and all the adversities they went through. The author made her way in America only due to her strength and her desire of becoming an independent woman both economically and socially. She had to face the same problems of other migrants, such as integration, the difficulty of learning a new language and culture and how to deal with the tension between her old identity and her new American way of life. What she found to be the best solution was to break the chains that tied her with the Old World, in order to get rid of her own culture, which seemed to be too tight, only in this way she thought she

could become an Americanized and free woman in the “Golden Land”. Her works are the mirror of her own life, indeed they all are autobiographical: they depict with different protagonists the struggles that she, and all immigrant women, went through in their lives, everyone moved by a sensation of hunger that gave them the push to try to improve and to take part of the new reality in which they started living in. This hunger is not only related to the lack of food but it can be seen also as the hunger of Americanization: they all yearned for becoming Americans. They are hungry for new relationships, for love and the hunger that comes from the importance to work on you in order to be able to become the best “person” for yourself, that is mainly through education. Anzia Yezierska with her vivid imagery is able to render the feelings of her characters and the environments in which they live in in every single work. The author also mixes Yiddish, her native language, with English; it is a way to maintain vivid her own reality and to remember where she came from: this is a proof that even though in a different country, a person maintains his/her own ties with his/her own culture. It is impossible to completely get rid of one’s own roots. What Anzia Yezierska wants to tell us is that it is important to mediate between our inner soul and what the world around us wants us to be. It is wrong to repress our true self, we have to know it in order to shape it according to the environment in which we start living.



## **1. Jewish female migration to the US between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century**

### **1.1. Socio-Historical background of the Jewish experience in the Old World**

Between 1820 and 1924, an astonishing number of Jewish people left the Russian Empire to reach America, resulting in a sudden increase of immigrants at the beginning of the 20th century. Fueled by persecutions, poverty and the changes of the 19th century: industrialization, urbanization which lead cities to become overcrowded. According to this environment millions of Jews left their homes in order to start a new life in the Promised Land. Central Europe was the cradle of the immigrant Jews in the first half of 19th century.

The city in which the majority of emigrants settled was New York, especially after Manhattan was consolidated with Brooklyn (and the Bronx, Queens and Staten Island) in 1898. At the turn of the century, the population of the twenty-three square miles of Manhattan was over two million and the combined five boroughs had a population over four million, but while New York got most of the attention in this time period, and all time periods since, it was not alone in experiencing massive growth, for example Chicago, after basically burning to the ground in 1871, became the second largest city in America by the 1890s. There were also other cities which hosted foreigners, such as San Francisco, New Orleans, St. Louis, Minneapolis, Cleveland and several others. In this period America's population increased from 3,000 in 1820 to 300,000 in 1880.

Starting from 1881, the majority of emigrants came from Eastern Europe, Jews left their lands because of persecutions and poor economic opportunities. In America they settled in neighborhoods near downtowns, creating districts of people with whom they shared the culture, customs, the Yiddish language and in the majority of cases the same past. They all became laborers of the working class and in those districts they built social, cultural and spiritual organizations in order to keep their roots alive in the new American reality.

These flows of migrating people started to be restricted and ceased in 1921 and 1924 with restrictive laws.

This Eastern Europe Jewish emigration to US is considered the largest one, that has never occurred after 1920.

In the Russian Empire many people left, but especially Jews. After the assassination of tsar Alexander II in 1881 by political radicals, Russians launched more pogroms. The government had tried integrating their vast empire composed of more than a hundred

different ethnic groups by the Russification, but when it did not work, the government changed course toward negative integration, vilifying non-Russian ethnic and religious groups expelling or restricting several of them: Jews were foremost among those groups. One act of vilification really stands out, officials in the police department of the Ministry of the Interior produced a phony account called *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (see Singerman, 1981, 48): it documented a Jewish plot entirely concocted by these Russian officials for a Jewish takeover of the world and that forgery shows just how determined people were to demonize Jews, so they could be persecuted, expelled and even killed. In fact the protocols spread across Europe and the world, with increasingly disastrous results and even today it often fuels anti-Semitic conspiracy theories. Migration from the Russian empire had an ethnic, religious and class dimension that was fostered by governments and their agents. In Austria-Hungary some officials promoted migration but others were opposed to it and each group of opponents had their own reasons: military planners saw villages emptied of potential recruits, nationalists wanted people of their own ethnicity blocked from leaving their communities and large landowners often found that cheap local labor had fled to places where there were better jobs.

In the early 20th century the Lower East Side in New York was seen as an “ethnic map”: Russian and Italian people constituted the two big blocks of immigrants, but also there was that of Chinese people and other minorities.

Persecution, also called pogrom, is a Russian masculine word, which means “an organized, official violence against a group of people for racial or religious reasons” (Collins COBUILD Advanced Learner’s Dictionary. *Definition of pogrom*, HarperCollins Publishers), it is the massacre of a particular ethnic group, in particular that of Jewish people in Russia or Eastern Europe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It refers to a bloody riot organized by local populations against Jews, who were considered the responsible of the popular discontent in the Russian Empire. Jewish people of Eastern Europe was a civilization that existed for a thousand years in Eastern Europe and Russia, continually in a state of tremendous cultural dynamism. Pogroms’ participants were organized locally and supported by police and the government. They murdered and raped Jews after robbing all their belongings and possessions. Between 1918 and 1920 during the civil war that followed the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, Polish officials, Ukrainian nationalists and Red Army soldiers set up pogroms in western Belorussia and in the Polish province of Galicia, by killing tens of thousands of Jews.

After the Nazi party took the power in Germany, in 1933, Adolf Hitler who officially discouraged riots and violent actions, even if put in practice Jews were still raped in streets and Nazi leaders thought that violence was a tool that would have prepared them for the anti-Semitic legal and administrative measures put in place with the aim to restore the order. This street violence begun with riots in Vienna, after the Anschluss: known as the annexation of Austria into Germany. The Kristallnacht which took place between 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> of November 1938, considered the most destructive one, is the event which mostly represented the long period of sporadic street violence against Jewish people. This unforgettable event was followed by a worsening in anti-Jewish legislation between 1938 and 1939. During the first two months of the Nazi regime, were approved laws which excluded Jews and Communists from the possibility of taking part into the civil service. After the publication of the Nuremberg Race Laws, in September 1935, different episodes of violence took place against Jewish people in several cities in Germany; also houses, shops and synagogues were burnt down.

In this landscape women played an important role, even though female immigrants had been considered marginal figures for a long period in the past. The moment in which scholars understood that both men and women shape all the communities, immigrant women started to be studied. Although women represented the majority in different past populations, they are only one-third of the total of interviewed immigrants. The first essays about Italian, Mexican-American and Jewish women started to be written in the 1970s.

Scholars who focused on immigrant women, studied them related to their family: two concepts strictly sewed together. These first records did not consider female figures on their own, as individuals. This aspect changed with modern American scholars, who did not take into account women whose identity is defined according to family relations (see Gabaccia, 1991, 61-73).

Even though women and men had the same reasons for emigrating and had to face the same obstacles, their conditions and roles were very different during the migration. The majority of migrants were men, and 44% were women, reports the “Jewish Colonization Association” (see Gartner, 2005, 129).

In Eastern Europe women were considered inferior to men, they could not participate in the religious field nor in the power: patriarchy dominated Jews’ life in the Old World. Even though this relationship of inferiority, women had a central role in their family’s

economy, their work was considered “necessary” (see Foner, 1999, 97) and “respectable” (see Foner, 1999, 97), for this reason the wife of a scholar had to show respect, in terms of money, to his husband who was totally concerned in religious studies, the woman “acted as a legitimating symbol of the female breadwinner for the masses of east European Jews” (97).

Jewish women were involved in trade or business activities, some of them worked in their husband’s shop or they sold food and basic goods in shops ran on their own. Other women worked as peddlers, so they sold goods manufactured and prepared at home, going from house to house or in the market square. Jewish women, used to this type of life, easily became bargainers and developed a deep knowledge of how the marketplace worked, they worked not only in their community but also outside it. Women knew those languages spoken by peasants and some of them were compared to men for their aggressiveness and outspokenness. Jewish women were provided in their communities with jobs, such as baking matzos, Jewish unleavened bread, for Passover, a Jewish festival.

When industrialization broke out, many Jewish women started working in factories and others in artisans’ shops.

When women got married, they seldomly worked in factories and in general they tended to avoid jobs requiring eight to ten hours away from home, to face this issue they had the possibility to choose among different types of home-based production. The most well-known were the opportunities created by the introduction of the sewing machine, with this instrument, women could work at home and make dresses or other goods for those who would provide clothing to stores. Like Jewish women, also Italian women and wives organized the family’s economy. Jewish women emigrated to the New World in a period in which there was a social stigma referring to wives, according to which women’s wage was a “final defense against destitution” (see Foner, 1999, 108), only a subordinated source which had to be taken into account only when the family was facing a situation of crisis or emergency. Here women found themselves to be more secluded than in their home village. The fact that the majority of women whose income came from housework, resulted in crystallizing and highlighting gender inequalities (see Foner, 1999, 97-98).

Today things have changed, because as a Cuban sales worker stated “A woman needs to work”; “She feels better and more in control of herself. She doesn’t have to ask her husband for money. It seems to me that if a woman has a job, she is given more respect by her husband and children” (see Foner, 1999, 109). Today’s immigrant women have

achieved autonomy, respect and power due to their normal wages. Salary is the key that both subjugate and free immigrant women (see Foner, 1999, 95-101,108).

Men and women had different levels of education. In Russia Jewish women had very limited roles, they were mainly housewives and mothers. Once in America those women more ambitious started to take part in radical and labor movements that were emerging. This was an opportunity for women who saw the participation in the political life complicated if not impossible; they participated together with men to promote social ideologies of liberation that promised women freedom. There were also women who were not interested in politics and did not accomplish a role in the political life. They had to look after their children and humble house for which they usually did not have the money to pay the rent. The majority of Jewish married women were in markets and streets and in their houses.

All migrants travelled in the same steerage of a vessel, crossing the Atlantic Ocean. Mainly men moved to America, they travelled alone because tickets for the other members of the family were too expensive.

Usually men found a work in order to save money to send to the family who could purchase the tickets and join him. Also tickets were given from institutions, which rose in America, interested in foresting family reunion. While the family was waiting for the money they moved into the parental home.

The ticket for the ship that brought people from a European port, the most well-known was Hamburg, to New York costed \$35 and the rail travel to the port usually costed up \$10. We have to remember that mainly poor people travelled, so families had to wait months, even years to get money for the tickets in order to be ready to move. Russian passports were required for the travel and to avoid to pay for it and to avoid the long wait, people usually addressed border smuggler. In European ports were built compounds where Jewish emigrants could stay, while waiting for their ship to raise anchor. When it arrived to the port all the migrants were escorted by a brass band to the gangplank.

Marriage was used also among Jewish migrants, as an excuse to sell the dowry and wedding gifts to buy travel tickets. Jewish organizations could not be involved in migrations, because American laws forbid “assisted immigration” (see Gartner, 2005, 131).

In 1908 started a new wave of migration of people returning from America because of widespread unemployment that began in 1907. Many people during this period of depression bought tickets to go back to their family. Only one year later, in 1909 times got better and this migratory wave stopped.

Another type of emigration used by Jews was the emigration in stages. Poor families sent the father to Great Britain to find a work and consequently save the money for his family to join him. Once the family reunited in London, which was the common city of destination in this type of emigration, the father left his children and wife to reach America. Wives left alone by their husband had to take care of their children, those luckier who had friends in Great Britain were helped, but for those without any type of support, their husbands' departure put a massive encumbrance on them. In order to support their children, women worked in tailoring sweatshops. There were communities such as the Jewish Board of Guardians, the central Jewish charity in London and the Russo-Jewish Committee for Russian Refugees from Persecution and the provincial counterparts which took care of families during the migration but they always pointed out that they would not help "deserted wives" (see Gartner, 2005, 131) who decided to undertake, with their husbands, this path of "desertion" (see Gartner, 2005, 131); they did not provide any type of support to Jewish wives. To endure this situation several small immigrant charities intervened (see Gartner, 2005, 131).

In those families in which there was at least one son or daughter who was eighteen, he/she went first and brought his siblings with him/her and parents came after them.

Emigration in stages was not always successful. There were cases in which wives, after a very long period far from their families, refused to join their husband in America and so there were husbands who returned back to Russia to bring with them their wives to America or to divorce. In the situation in which the woman did not emigrate to his man, husbands addressed rabbis to marry another woman (see Gartner, 2005, 129-132).

### **1.2. The Jewish woman in the New World**

This type of woman in the United States saw an important change, immigration subordinated women and wives and when in New York they were compelled to live more constrained lives. It was like in the New World they had been subordinated to their men.

In New York Jewish women did not work outside their family unit, in this city in 1905 the census reported that only 1% of women worked outside their house. Usually between the age of 21 and 22 women got married and this event defined the end of the possibility

to earn a salary. There were some of them who were able to return to work when their children became adults, but the majority of foreign married women in New York City, once arrived there saw the possibility of working outside their home as something absurd.

In front of this situation the majority of Jewish women became able to make money by working at home. At the beginning of the immigration, between 1880s and 1890s, several Jewish women earned money for the piece of clothing they produced at home; this type of business started disappearing by the beginning of the 20th century. In this period a new occupation had been introduced: women in their houses started taking care of the boarders, this represented a new way to provide the income for the family. In 1911 the Immigration Commission reported 56% of Jewish families hosting boarders.

In general those men who had stores were helped by their wives and so they were considered the helpmates of their husbands, in the majority of cases the shop or store represented the main source of the family's income, so wives could work between their house and the shop.

Taking care of boarders was not a common practice among Italian female immigrants, they were more into housework. While they were looking after their children they worked in their home, for example by finishing garments or in the kitchen. Women knew that working in factories gave a better salary but there was the belief, common among immigrant families, that after the marriage women should live and work in the same place, which was their domestic unit. This sort of exclusion from the outside working life brought women positivity because they could raise their children, take care of their house and make money while staying at home. This was a kind of blessing for poor immigrant women who did not know how the mechanical work in a factory really run. The major problem women had to face in the New World was learning the language and customs of this new reality. Husbands learned English while working, their children learned it in factory work groups and women continued speaking Yiddish and did not know how to hold conversations outside their houses. For this reason they had to rely on their children in order to learn the American culture, or those who wanted to perfectly blend into the new American reality, attended night schools to learn the English language.

Immigrant women coming from villages or small towns, had to face another problem which started characterizing their lives in the New World: loneliness. In their hometown they used to doing chores such as the laundry with other women living near them, now they had to wash clothes on their own, inside their tenement apartment. As Donna

Gabaccia stated, immigration “limited immigrant women’s opportunities to interact with others” (see Foner, 1999,100), this new Americanized way of life limited women in every aspect of their everyday routine, taking them to live a more “inside” life and a consequent dissatisfaction.

In America people had to face new standards of cleanliness and order. Speaking about laundry, In the Old World women had to go washing in the river, once a month, here the laundry was done at least once a week.

Women in the United States saw a reduction of the importance of their role inside the family. The work they did inside the house, such as hosting boarders or industrial homework was not as profitable as that done in factories by the husband or children. Women were only seen as their husbands’ assistants, a branch of the tree (see Foner, 1999, 98-109).

In their houses wives had to follow Jewish rules and the “kashrut” (see Gartner, 1999, 136) was strictly observed while cooking. The term refers to the possibility for Jews to eat only certain kinds of food and some dishes have to be prepared following specific ways of cooking. Some diets and vitamins discovered at the turn of the century influenced Jewish cuisine, but also it was affected by the Yiddish press, the most well-known was the Forverts and also children brought home what they learned at school. In this period lots of new fruits and vegetables started to be purchased: pears, peaches and plums. According to a young teacher working in a school in the Lower East Side “most of the children receive daily several pennies, and always one each day. These they spend most often on fruit. It is amazing to see the large quantities consumed by the children...good fruit is very cheap on the Lower East Side, and the children are trained to regard it as necessary portion of their diet” (see Gartner, 2005, 136). The British government delivered a Board of Trade delegation in 1908 that collected information about the diet of Jews. It accounts the working class conditions in 28 cities between the Atlantic coast and the Mississippi River. This study found out that the diet of Jewish immigrants depended on the weekly income: there were those families whose income ranged from \$5 to \$10 and families ranging from \$40 to \$45 every week. The income tended to become higher when older children worked, because more children were present in a family unit more money it had. Researchers also discovered that Americans ate better than English people (see Gartner, 2005, 134-139).



Women who arrived in America had to face different problems and risks. A woman with her children, once arrived at Ellis Island, had to prove that in America there was someone who would have supported her, so women alone had to state that a brother-in-law would have taken care of them. This man, who did not know the woman's history, during the inquiry had to tell the examiners that the woman had a husband who was waiting for her. Those women who were discovered without a man in America were sent back to Russia. Many Jewish husbands, who married in Russia, had been captured by the American environment of freedom and the presence of unattached women and usually cheated on their far away wives. On the other side there are no reported instances of wives who had a second man while in Russia. The majority of husbands were loyal to their waiting wives and while they were saving money, they usually lived as boarders with an immigrant family.

The sociologist Jacob Lestschinsky, known with the pseudonym of Ben-Eliyahu, studied and discussed the topic of forgotten wives as "A Serious Question" (see Gartner, 2005, 132). The abandoned wife, called "agunah" (see Gartner, 2005, 132), performed a delicate role, because she did not know anything about her husband and with a divorce certificate, called "get piturin" (132) in Hebrew, they could get married another time.

Female immigrants did not emigrate only to join a man. A hospital in Gomel, in which many Jews went for eye treatment before the inspections at Ellis Island, stated 1312 patients, of those 182 were going to emigrate to join a husband and the remaining 302 aimed to join their father. After World War I the number of women predominated.

By showing the "ketubah" (133), a marriage certificate, women under the tsarist regime could present their request to join their husbands in America. They also had to present a letter of invitation from the husband who declared to be waiting for his wife, a passport fee, the police confirmation stating that the man emigrated legally and a certificate of correct behavior. If women helped by smugglers, who took them and their children to Hamburg, were caught, they were sent home in humiliating conditions.

Aboard vessels women could be abused by crewmen and after several days of inhumane travel they reached the port of Ellis Island or immigrant depots in Boston, Charleston, Philadelphia or Baltimore. And here they were ready to undergo examinations.

There are two different stories about 2 women who reached America on their own. Masche Ornowitz, arrived at Castle Garden, the military placement before Ellis Island, in 1890 with three young children. A brother-in-law came to see her, with two other siblings.

She thought one of them was her actual husband, but her husband, did not show up. Another man stated to be her husband, but with her family they all ejected him. Her actual husband did not appear because he did not want to waste a day's work. About the husband, the brother-in-law claimed that ""He ain't smart enough. He ain't a common sense man"; "At this juncture a stranger entered through a side door and approached the woman who kissed and embraced him in a hysterical manner"" (see Gartner, 2005, 134). The man was Simon Ornowitz, tailor on the Lowe East Side, who stated "Thank God, I can support her" (134). Masche was admitted by the Commission and the story had a happy ending.

The second story is different and the protagonist is Chane (Hannah) Lifscitz. She reached America widow and pregnant. The four brothers-in-law, waiting for her, stated that they would support the woman only after examining if her baby was the child of her actual man. The woman was banished as an emigrant who would become a public charge and the Commission told off two of the men "you two ought to be ashamed of yourselves" (134).

In 1917 the Congress established a literacy test at ports. This kind of test was said to enhance the immigrants' quality. Men and women differed in the comprehension of a text written in Yiddish, the percentage of male illiteracy was about 15% and the female one around 25%. The literacy of Jews registered at ports was accounted by the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) the years before the test became mandatory. In Eastern Europe Jewish female Illiteracy was decreasing. In 1917 Congress abolished the three presidential vetoes of a literacy requirement and it became law. Immigrants had to read a text of maximum forty words in a language that could be Yiddish. Few immigrants knew English, mainly those who, before arriving to America, settled for a period of time in Great Britain. For some jobs English was a requirement and women could not teach, work in offices or shops outside Jewish neighborhoods. Those young female immigrants who were twelve years old or more were forced to work in sweatshops or sell products in the neighborhood roads. There were some differences between those Jewish women who lived in America and those living in Great Britain, the main refers to religion, in city such as London and Manchester there was a religious conservatism, while in America religion was lived without constrictions.

Once arrived in the city, the majority of immigrants, in order to become part of the American environment, attended evening classes in public schools were they learned

English. For some parents it was difficult to study at school, so they quit and learned it while working and speaking with their children. For them learning a foreign language is much easier. Following the “kashrut” (136) meant to avoid pig’s meat, rye bread, poultry and eggs and it allowed to eat potatoes, suet, flour, lard and sausages. The studies carried out by the Board of Trade also showed that Jewish housewives were aware of protein foods and tried to reduce the consumption of animal fat. They always tried to buy healthy food. In the majority of cases the diet was much healthier and richer than that followed in the homeland (see Gartner, 2005, 134-139).

### **1.3. The arrival and the development of life in New York**

New York represented the front door for all those who decided to move abroad. In order to manage the mass affluence, in 1892 the federal government decided to centralize the migratory policy (which belonged to the single nations) and to build an appropriate building to welcome this multitude in New York bay. Since 1892, all migrants who arrived in the Big Apple had to pass all the medical inspections and a check of the necessary requirements to move into the New World at Ellis Island and not only anymore in Castle Garden. (see Bender, 1999, 5).

Migrants sailed from northern European ports, such as Bremen or Posen, here they were examined for the first time and ill or weak migrants could not depart. Inspectors fumigated their clothes and examined their bodies for possible signs of tuberculosis, trachoma and skin diseases. Those families whose members were quarantined were rejected the possibility to settle in the “goldene medinah (golden land)” (see Bender, 1999, 1, 4). On vessels their health was another time put to test: they approximately had to travel seventeen days in close contact with each other in the steerage. Israel Antonovsky described the people with whom he shared the travel as “exhausted, pale creatures, hardly able to drag their legs” (see Bender, 1999, 5).

Ellis Island, an islet in New York bay, was defined as “the final Day of Judgement” (see Bender, 1999, 5): here migrants were inspected in the big, noisy hall. They were stripped, examined and fumigated by a dozens of doctors, customs officials and nurses. Here they had to verify their “fitness to enter heaven” (see Bender, 1999, 5). Inspectors came from the Public Health Service and marked with chalk those immigrants considered ill or with a suspicion of being defected: they marked with X to indicate a mental illness, K used to define a hernia, Sc a scalp condition and H those with a heart problem. Many confused doctors for soldiers and were frightened by those men wearing a uniform. Few people

were not allowed to enter New York and two or three immigrants in five were quarantined at Ellis Island until they were cured (see Bender, 1999, 5).

The medical examination was the most feared, it aimed to detect possible disabilities, mental illnesses or contagious illnesses. It was called the “six seconds physical inspection” (see Dolmage, 2011, 32), that refers to the time the doctors took to carry out the whole process. First of all were controlled the eyes, the dreaded disease of the immigrant was the diagnosis of trachoma, which could lead to almost certain deportation. Those identified to be set aside for possible rejection represented a small percentage examined each day. This was an agony for families because there could have been members who were rejected and missed. Police separated men from women and the first took care of their wives and children. As long as some members of families were together, this experience was seen as something tolerable, even though someone was missed they still had a relationship of love that overwhelmed them even in moments of sadness and desolation. They still could converse, cry, laugh and hug with each other.

At Ellis Island women had to pass other examinations; inspectors had to track down possible prostitutes who aimed to enter the New World. America did not want the burden of an unhealthy immigrant, America wanted people who could make a living and were not bringing into the country an infection disease. After the eyes they looked at the passengers' back, with the lungs and heart. There were some rejected people who lied on beds in a big room because they showed signs of illness for example mental difficulties. Those people were brought to the ship that accompanied them here and then they would have sent back home.

They thought it was like a miracle, they now felt to be human beings, all the deprivation, abuses and restrictions they had in Europe were no more part of their life. The majority of those migrants who passed through Ellis Island, decided to start a new life in the immigration district par excellence: Manhattan. To be more precise Jewish immigrants settled in a neighborhood which is located in the south-east of Manhattan, known as the Lower East Side.

In the first half of 19th century the Lower East Side had mainly a residential purpose, populated by families belonging to the upper society. The development of the harbor activities brought the increase of factories, workshops and consequently the soaring of poor and working-class population, which brought a change in the socio-democratic geography of the territory. As a matter of fact upper classes moved north and the Lower

East Side became increasingly a popular and immigration district. During the 40s and 50s first arrived Irish people escaping from famine, German people escaping from revolutionary uprisings (1848), White Anglo-Saxon Protestant and few black people. Irish people were mainly poor peasants who lived here in extreme poor conditions and accepted any kind of work and German refugees worked as artisans, merchants and small freelances.

The neighborhood is now clearly defined: a popular area, highly populated if not to say overcrowded, where different communities were forced to live one close to the other, in a variegated socio-territorial context. Immigrants lived mainly in the so-called tenements, massive 6-8 floors buildings, longer than 10 meters; people got sick frequently due to the huge number of people living there, inadequate ventilation with common services and wash houses. Living conditions got worse if we think that the owners of the buildings did not care about how people were living inside and usually they did not even provide the security of the facility.

Women and children were mainly exploited in sweatshops. The Lower East Side was flooded by sweatshops, big rooms in which exploited migrants had to work in poor health conditions, paid by how many pieces they made in a day, from 8 to 12 hours per day. It was so frequent to get sick in the place of working, tuberculosis was the most frequent disease and also very habitual were accidents mainly due to working machines that the migrants did not know how to use properly. Usually the employer was an ex-laborer who started working as a freelance and organized the immigrants' work. The fact that New York had become the center of the clothing industry fueled this situation. Due to the constant immigration flux, manpower- mainly offered by women and children- was a lot sought-after and the Lower East Side was the perfect place where these craft workshops could arise: inside basements, storage rooms and attics. Here mass production dominated people's lives, characterized by piecework, intense working rhythms, grim and low wages to testify the exploitation, misery and shame of the living conditions in this American neighborhood.

The two different genders experienced the garment work in two different ways. Women were sexually harassed and exploited. A 1911 survey reported 10,108 female cloakmakers for a total of 45,199; few women were operators or cutters, which were the highly-paid places. The majority of women worked as basters, fishers and buttonhole makers. Moreover most female workers were single women and minors (Bender, 1999,

3). After marriage most women stopped working, as the Senate Immigration Committee stated in 1911, only 8% of married immigrant Jewish women continued working. Marriage was seen as a tool used to run away from the chaotic and draining sweatshop labor. In the house women's wage came from child care, housework, short stints in garment shop and sometimes garment piecework. As Clara Lemlich affirmed "Almost all women ... work under long hours and miserable conditions.... Their only way to leave the factory is marriage" (see Bender, 1999, 3-4).

America instead of a golden land, was seen as a "humiliating beginning" (see Bender, 1999, 2), because weakness became part of the immigrants' lives. The hint of weakness was also defined in the place of work: garment factories symbolized weakened states. There was a strong connection between garment work and tuberculosis. Which spread because of the poor sanitary conditions in factories. The conditions and the pressures under which migrants had to work were engraved on their skeletal chests and humps backs, this is the reason why garment work was considered a physical struggle. Work for Jewish people meant weakness and disease, it did not signify wealth and the freedom they had been looking for since they left their homeland. Work seen from this perspective helps to understand the different ways in which workers considered their occupation and it is possible to examine workplace conflicts more in details. Workers organized themselves in organizations which basic idea was to address proletarians concerned beyond wages and benefits such as health care and ways to cure workers' enfeeblements (see Bender, 1999, 3).

Stella Papiroff in her work defines how work and disease are strictly related in the immigrants' lives in the Lower East Side "Men and girls were coming home from the shops, thin and soaked out, with their faces yellow and green" (see Bender, 1999, 5). When she arrived in the United States she was aware of her health, indeed she affirmed that her "face... was shining with red cheeks" (see Bender, 1999, 5), but this positive image suddenly changed when she had to face the new American world of work. Her work was characterized by all the effects of the garment labor which were shared by all the sweatshops' workers. She decided to quit in front of this terrible and tough situation, but she needed money to pay the rent and to buy food so she returned to the factory. Like in her case, illness was a cause of work for all the immigrants' workers in the United States. While working they all could experience bodily changes and sickly health (see Bender, 1999, 5-6).

Yiddish press helped sharing the concept of tuberculosis and in a short while every worker learned its definition, as a disease caused by the environment and by the passing of time and doctors worked to provide cures to face it. In 1899 was founded the National Jewish Hospital (NJH) and years after the Jewish Consumptive Relief Society (JCRS), these two hospitals hosted over  $\frac{3}{4}$  of patients coming from the Lower East Side. With the studies of the anthropologist Maurice Fishberg tuberculosis started to be seen as a feature of the Jewish immigrant worker. The scholar stated that with their skeletal flat chest, not strong enough to hold up the rib cage and the spinal column, Jewish people were more prone to develop consumption. Tailors who worked in overcrowded facilities, in poor health and non-ventilated conditions, and did not exercise frequently, were more exposed to tuberculosis. For this reason the disease hit mainly tailors. To defeat consumption rose the Workmen's Circle's Liberty Sanitarium that aimed at correcting the physical damages which made Jewish people more vulnerable to tuberculosis (see Bender, 1999, 6-7).

The gymnasium of the Educational Alliance aimed at protecting Jewish sweatshops workers from the consequences of tuberculosis by reinforcing their bodies. The services provided by this association were divided in four categories: physical, moral, social and educational. Five evenings in a row it was open for men and one night for women and it also offered hot showers and hygiene classes. Educational Alliance provided Jewish people of the Lower East Side a "out-of-door, park and country exercise" (Bender, 1999, 8) during the hottest months. By 1913 the Alliance was attended by 6,000 young boys and girls, not adults, they instead used to use the association's library and its books. One of the main purposes of the Alliance was to improve people's bodies, so as its director David Blaustein reported "Let a young man develop his body, and he will neither shrink from... danger nor shrink manual work which falls his lot" (see Bender, 1999, 9), only with stronger bodies immigrants could intensify America's production and also could endure the dynamic and poor working conditions in garment factories. Every immigrant worker in sweatshops described his/her work by focusing on his/her consumptive body; an example is Rose Cohen. The young girl depicted her work as constantly related with disease. She tells that she could not cure her cough and this did not let her working, she went several times to the hospital and when her illness was cured she returned working in the same unhealthy conditions because she needed money (see Bender, 1999, 10).

In order to face the fatigue and diseases of work, the weak sweatshop workers associated into form of resistance to rebel against the strong ones: their bosses. Jewish workers used their sickly health to develop a collective movement which joined women and men, that

aimed at supervising workplaces and that displayed effective services to its components. As work and disease were strictly weaved the cure and health of the body became a political issue and after the massive 1909-1910 strikes, rose the labor movement of both men and women (see Bender, 1999, 12). During these strikes both sexes marched altogether, in 1910 after the cloakmakers' strike, there was the victory of the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union (ILGWU), it was like the turning point in the garment work in the Lower East Side, highlighting the strength and social stability of Jewish workers' organizations and political associations. The official magazine of the International Ladies' Garment Worker Union stated that "the girls' thin and poorly nourished bodies... testified at what cost to themselves...they were working" (see Bender1999, 13). For every single Jewish person health was above all, in their associations they wanted to provide health care, while in the past workers walked out for "shorter hours and higher wages" (see Bender, 1999, 14) now their strikes were organized for the improvement of their working conditions. In 1915 was founded the Workmen's Circle Medical Department in order to provide safe cures and people did not turn to charlatans who actually did not know how to recognize illness nor provide effective cures. The Circle defined tuberculosis as proletarian sickness: "ptoletarishe krankheit" (see Bender, 1999, 14), mainly tailors, operators and pressers developed it (see Bender, 1999, 13-14).

The cure of the body represented the main purpose of Jewish workers, the ILGWU was fundamental because it went at the roots of the working class' health problems: it was not useful to cure consumption and not improving the workplace. It led the most important strike in 1910 in the Lower East Side: 6,000 cloakmakers asked for better working conditions, 49 working hours per week instead of 53 and higher salaries. The *Protocol of Peace* signaled the end of the strike by stating that workers' voice was influential and powerful in the improvement of sweatshops. For the very first time a Jewish union pointed out the importance to define and supervise the standards of the workplace with bosses. These standards included: "regular chairs instead of sitting on boxes" (see Bender, 1999, 16), proper ventilation, shops "should be thoroughly aired before and after work hours, and during the lunch hour" (see Bender, 1999, 16) with big windows, it was also demanded to disinfect cuspidors to prevent possible infections, to install better fire escapes, clean toilets and separate lunchrooms. Even though the Protocol fell in 1916, some of its features remained still observed (see Bender, 1999, 15-16).



In 1913 the ideas of the sanitarium and that of the workplace merged through the ILGWU and the Altro Works opened by the Committee for the Care of the Jewish Tuberculosis. The latter opened a sanitarium in a garment factory, its purpose was to provide cures for its workers while producing clothes, the idea was that Works were “Where garments are well made ...and patients made well” (see Bender, 1999, 17). A big change was signaled by the ILGWU’s Union Health Center that provided X-ray machines, free pharmacy and electric cardiographs. In this way treatment did not start in the gymnasium, but in the workplace, Jewish workers started to be cured using medicines and few of them continued developing consumption in the place of work, after the measures introduced by the Protocol (see Bender, 1999, 17-18).

#### **1.4. Women try to help women in the process of Americanization**

Since immigrant women and children were the most vulnerable and delicate categories of people in the United States, in order to deal with the problems which affected the majority of them, such as rape, venereal diseases, violence and widespread ignorance, several organizations, known as the International Institutes for Young Women started rising. Till the first decades of the 20th century the institutions which dealt with the immigrants’ integration were accused of the assimilation of the latter, without considering those fundamentals which directed their social intervention inside those foreign communities. This type of work did not consider the differences within the groups and so the diversification of the approaches of Americanization were not taken into consideration.

In 1912 the Young Women Christian Association founded in New York the first International Institute for Young Women (YWCA). Its leading aim was to support young immigrant working women and to rectifying the conflict between parents and sons. Their modus operandi kept at a distance the idea of assimilation and forced Americanization, very common at the time. These Institutes acted like a mediator between the old culture and the American society. Children were taught to comply with their parents’ culture of origin, in this way the generation gap was healed and at the same time, with their Americanized children, parents were introduced into the huge, new American reality (see Tirabassi, 1982, 853-856). Second-generation daughters asked social workers’ help to make clear to their parents the new non-patriarchal way of life. For this purpose, International Institutes organized courses and working groups in order to display and teach the requirements needed to live in the New World. For example they introduced migrants to English courses, in order to find work and to acquire the citizenship. The

Mothers' Club in Massachusetts solicited a civil rights' course in which women also discussed the right to property for women and that of the custody of children. Institutes also set up clubs in which women studied dances and folk songs. Women attended cooking and sewing classes and they were also attracted by sports clubs in which they could play basketball or skating. Moreover young women were taught how to run the household, as Taylorism rationalized the industrial production, home science had to uncover the secrets of efficient housework, improving times, activities and techniques. Now also women had to achieve maximum output with minimum effort. While in the 800s mainly middle class women had to manage efficiently the house, now also proletarian were involved and at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century all women, including the foreigners had to know how to deal with domestic rationalization. Women coming from rural communities, did not know how to organize their new house as a leisure center for them and their children, also they were not aware of appropriate games for small groups of babies and this combined with financial difficulties brought mothers to develop a hostile attitude towards the fact that children had to play. To solve this problem International Institutes organized associations in which fairy-tales were told and simple games were taught, with the hope that they were also proposed in the immigrants' houses.

All these clubs' main purpose was to boost the capacity of women to improve their personal and familiar lives, by increasing the value of their culture to adapt it to the new reality and not to crash with it. Within this double process, women were brought to develop their personality and individuality, the model of patriarchy to which they had been used to since their birth was completely changed and women in America were no more seen only as guardians of family values, here they were learning how to be more independent.

All those leisure and socializing activities inspired the female immigrants to develop their own spirit of initiative, this work was made by social workers who wanted to encourage their self-consciousness and to internalize those familiar and community rules that have allowed them to carry a new life in line with the new American way of life (see Tirabassi, 1982, 857-858, 862-869).

International Institutes were headed by female secretaries who worked with voluntary interpreters who knew different languages, in order to understand the cultures of their people because they came from the same background of those people with whom they related. They aimed at connecting the complicated transition between the idea of rural

communitarianism to that of urban and industrial individualism which dominated the new emerging society. The general idea was that the immigrants' culture was the tool that would have helped them to gradually blend into the new reality. Women were directed to enhance their self-affirmation and autonomy, always maintaining the ties with their roots; International Institutes wanted to preserve newcomers' values and principles in a world subjected to materialism and individualism (see Tirabassi, 1982, 857,858). Social workers in the Institutes believed that culture created the bond between the person and the new society, only by respecting it the immigrant knew how to respect himself/herself and avoid the problems related to the integration in an unknown reality (see Tirabassi, 1982, 857).

In their first decade, International Institutes mainly focused on young immigrated women. In the 20s the focus shifted to second generation women. Such expressions "second generation girls"; "first generation Americans" (see Tirabassi, 1982, 869) referred to immigrants' daughters or daughters of at least only one foreign parent. On the basis of the interest for these "second generation girls" (869) there was the idea that they worked like a bridge between the Old World and the New World and their successful integration into the American society depended on the hard work of the International Institutes. Taking into account second generations gave the possibility to intervene into family dynamics: social workers were concerned about generational contrasts, which characterized the majority of the dynamics of immigrant families. Parents and children's fights were mainly boosted by the different ideas that they had about the rural culture and that urban and industrialized of the United States. Parents were not able to deal with a reality strictly divided into age groups (adolescence was a concept introduced by middle classes) and the generational contrast soon became the main concern of immigrant families, adding the fact that children denied their culture in order to integrate and become Americanized. By taking into account these considerations social workers started operating in order to heal conflicts between parents and children: first of all they became interpreters of the immigrant cultures, they wanted to teach it to the youngest in order to teach them to respect it and consequently show respect to their parents. In this way the ties with their roots and with the first generation of immigrants were kept alive.

A study promoted by the International Institutes over the second generation girls highlighted that in those families whose standards are the opposite of those children see outside their house, it fueled a sense of "diversity". It had been studied that more the habits of foreign families were far from the American ones, more parents felt the new

society was tearing away their children. In this situation of imbalance parents used to reply with authoritative attitudes causing a separation of their children, who in the majority of cases, found a refuge into the worst behaviors of the American society. They relied on wrong amusements which were reflected in their way of dressing and attitudes. Parents and children fought because both lived in an uncomfortable condition, because both suffer from the lack of a proper acknowledgment. This was not the case with which every single family had to deal with when in the United States, there had been also parents who acknowledged the good in their culture of origin and how to use it in order to take part in the New World and also recognized the good in this new reality.

The most important conflicts including girls were related to marriage. When daughters reached the age of marriage, families had to face the new standards of liberty, very different from that of the Old World, suffice it to say that in America pay slips were not anymore given to the family, in particular to the father, but the girl had it. It is important to remember that while girls had to internalize new forms of adaptation to the sex, work and family, they were still living in the delicate condition of bridges between two cultures. Usually the disintegration of the family unit brought the youngest to perform acts of criminality, which the Young Women Christian Association and the International Institutes tried to curb. Their work was mainly done to fix all those habits in contrast with the positivist and scientist idea of progress and modernity of the new American reality (see Tirabassi, 1982, 857, 869-873).

In America family bonds were put to test: parents wanted their children to be faithful to their roots, but they knew that growing as Americans meant to cut these cultural bonds. Parents saw their background completely be for nothing and so they tried to prevent a sudden Americanization of their children, but in America, in the chaotic and complex life of big cities, it was not possible.

It was at school that rose first inferiority complexes, even though it represented a place of socialization outside the family, it also represented the main source of problems of adaptation for second generation children. All immigrants had problems in learning the English language and so it was hard to study different subjects in English. Also children had names stranger to the names of their American schoolmates, so teachers mispronounced or did not know how to write them properly (see Tirabassi, 1982, 873-874). International Institutes in 1941 produced a summary of the consequences deriving from the belonging to the second generation immigrants: what joined them was the feeling

of inferiority which was reflected over domestic conflicts, shame for the family including its habits and customs and consequent deny of them, precocious marriages to go away from home earlier and sudden escapes. According to Donna Gabaccia's words, the adaptation to the new life in America does not have to be seen as a form of "emancipation" (see Gabaccia and Ruiz, 2006, 15), but instead as "domestication" (15). Women were relegated into their houses and their all life was spent into the domestic walls (see Gabaccia and Ruiz, 2006, 14-15) (see Tirabassi, 1982, 875).

Social workers in International Institutes wanted women to be aware of their background, and to know how to use it in order to take part into the American society. They promoted a new ethnic revised culture in light of modernization. In this new reality they wanted their girls to become aware of their potential, their individuality and take it as their highest priority, replacing it to the family or the ethnic community. The focus on women, holders of traditions and familiar values, and their children, who symbolized the future, denounced a call for a change in America (see Tirabassi, 1982, 875-876). Modernization promoted by social workers in International Institutes did not appear as a forced and cast-iron process, instead it was a many-sided experience where women performed as active parts. Their background did not help them in providing the proper tools to use in this process, as a result the patriarchal structures worsened their conditions and represented a disadvantage in the process. Social workers were like a bridge between second generation immigrant daughters and their parents, they supported them to understand the new life and to take the distances from the severe patriarchal structures that ruled over the majority of immigrant families. Parents had also to deal with a reality made of department stores, movies and in general a new context made of a complexity of symbolic elements which were characteristic of the world of that period (see Tirabassi, 1992, 232-233).

## **2. Anzia Yeziarska's role and how she gave voice to the Jewish community.**

### **2.1. The spokeswoman of the Jewish immigrants: Anzia Yeziarska's fragmented autobiography**

The immigration wave from Eastern Europe, which lasted 40 years expanded the Jewish population in America to more than three million by 1920. Different periodicals had been fueled by this huge change, *The Independent* for example stated that "America is in truth becoming the New Jerusalem" and in 1928 the Jews in New York "our largest and so-called most American city" were 1,643,012. The *Literary Digest* divulged a map of the United States including each city containing a Jewish population over 1,000 (see Ebest, 2000, 120).

Many Jewish women gave voice to their experiences in the New World: from the struggles of the travel to the development of their life in this new reality, they all wanted to give a solid proof of their new beginning, in order to let the new generation know how their ancestors lived and integrated in a foreign country. It is important to quote the autobiographies of Mary Antin, Emma Goldman, Rose Schneiderman and the fictions of Fanny Hurst and Dorothy Canfield Fisher. They were Anzia Yeziarska's friends: the spokeswoman of the Jewish people in the United States (see Ebest, 2000, 123) (see Goodman, 1983, 237). The confusion which emerged from her standard biography is done on purpose from the writer herself. Her year of birth is uncertain, but scholars affirm she was born between 1880 and 1885 in Ploch, town on the Russian-Polish border.

Around 1890 she migrated with her family to the United States, more precisely to New York in the Lower East Side, Manhattan, where she settled the majority of her works. In a letter to her friend who was a poet, Amy Lowell, she stated "I live alone in a little room like a prison cell. I never meet anyone to talk out what's aching in my heart... I feel I could bring to you new life-the life of dumb, unvoiced worlds" (see Schoen, 1983, 236). She described the experiences of the struggles of those Jewish immigrants in expressing their necessities in a foreign land and by using a foreign language, different from their "mama loshen" (see Schoen, 1983, 236): Yiddish and the worries of the oldest ones seen as separated from the youngest. In all her works she gives voice to the pain of those "dumb, unvoiced worlds" (see Schoen, 1983, 236).

She moved to the United States with her parents, her father was a Talmudic scholar, and siblings while she was a teenager. Her oldest brothers pursued higher education while she and her sisters had to take care of them and of the family in general, and like all children

they had been put to work very soon. Like all poor immigrants she worked in sweatshops, places she frequently evokes in her stories which were in the heart of the Metropolis: the Lower East Side was where the majority of Jewish emigrants ended up (see Ebest, 2000, 123).

Unlike other immigrant children she attended night schools and at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century she attended the Teacher's College of Columbia University from which she held the degree in domestic science in 1904. For a few years she taught domestic science and as a housekeeper-manager of philanthropic institutions. She did not enjoy it but this resulted in a job that sustained her and would have given her important skills for her future. Also in 1907 on a scholarship she attended the American Academy of Dramatic Arts (see Ebest, 2000, 122) (see Schoen, 1980,4). After receiving the O. Henry Award for the Best Story of 1919 she highlighted all her struggles, the hard work in the sweatshop and factories and the tough classes in night schools. When Hollywood press started spreading publicity about her first book, it underlined these aspects of her existence, so everyone looked at her as the "Sweatshop Cinderella" (see Schoen, 1980, 4), a young, poor woman who found her economic and spiritual success in America.

Her desire was to become a professor, even though with a rich cultural experience her teaching credentials had been denied. In front of this situation she decided to not surrender and asked the help of the professor of philosophy of the University from which she graduated: John Dewey. She sought her possibility to achieve her goals and her dream job stolen in a system driven by a senseless bureaucracy. Dewey believed in her writing skills, spurred her to become a writer, at the same time she helped him in recognizing his emotions and try to put them on the paper. Both encouraged each other in their work, also because John Dewey employed Yeziarska in his sociological study of the ethnic isolation of the Polish in Philadelphia. They were not only colleagues, the career they shared flowed into a relationship that remained platonic because the philosopher was deep in love with his wife and he wanted to maintain his academic career (see Fishbein, 1998, 138).

A fact which has been omitted from her standard biography is that she was married twice: the first marriage with a lawyer lasted for a very short period and in the second one, lasted more time, she got married to a textbook writer and teacher: Arnold Levitas and they gave birth to their only daughter.

When she moved to California she decided to bring their child, Louis Levitas, with her, but when she understood she could achieve more success and wealth she decided to return Louis to her father. They got married according to the Jewish ritual ceremony.

When the last marriage failed she decided to live in Los Angeles with her sister and after she started working in San Francisco (see Schoen, 1980, 4). In her more long-lasting marriage she was 23 years-old, but in front of this first love, she still defined her passion for Dewey as an emotion which could erase his wife and family's bonds, she stated:

I knew him as neither his wife nor children could know him. They had his name, his money, his reputation, but I had something that fed his spirit. He never could share with his family the thoughts he shared with me. Our need for each other burned away the differences between Gentile and Jew, native and immigrant- the barriers of race, class, and education. In my dreams I felt myself more married to him than his wife, closer to him than his children  
(see Fishbein, 1998, 139).

One day he aimed at consummating their tie but she was not capable to do such a thing, because “God could become flesh” (see Fishbein, 1998, 139) and she hid in her bedroom. After regretting her decision she tried to reawaken his passion but this time he refused her. The relationship between Yeziarska and Dewey lasted a year, even though their relationship affected all her life and writings. The majority of his stories had been published after their meeting, indeed during an interview she intentionally omitted the publication of a story in 1915, stating that her first story was published in 1918, which is the year after she met Dewey. Some of his poems were written for her and about her and so she decided to include two of them in her fictions (see Schoen, 1980, 4-5).

At the beginning of the century Anzia Yeziarska had an interview with Frank Crane, the columnist of the newspaper Hearst. She presented herself as an immigrant autodidact, a woman who wrote with a strong honesty, who could dip “her pen into her heart” (see Ebest, 2000, 122). After interviewing the woman, Crane wrote a report of it that attracted the interest of Goldwyn studios. Samuel Goldwyn turned her short story collection *Hungry Hearts* into a silent film (1922), maintaining the same title, by offering her a three-year contract as a writer. In the early 1920s she suddenly became a woman of success and popularity also because her work “The Fat of the Land” was included in



Edward J. O' Brien's well-known *Best Short Stories*. Fame represented for her a double-edged sword: it released her from the constrained life in the tenements but at the same time it removed from the writer her immigrant identity, which "validated" (see Ebest, 2000, 116) all her writings and was a symbol with which she identified herself. At first she expresses this change as something positive, "healthy" and necessary, also admits that "who used to be the most violent rebel of an immigrant, now find myself the most ardent defender of America. . . . America has no place for the dawdling, soft-spined, make-believe artists that swarm the Paris cafes" (see Ebest, 2000, 116-117). It was reported in an essay for the issue of *Cosmopolitan*, Yeziarska's words "I was very poor"; "And when I was poor I hated the rich" (see Ebest, 2000, 117). She imagined throwing a bomb in the shops while admiring the rich shops in Fifth Avenue before Christmas 1920. She had these thoughts before signing the contract for the movie.

Success and wealth soon collapsed and Anzia Yeziarska started to be recognized as the "sweatshop Cinderella" (see Schoen, 1980, 4); this upward mobility starts to be seen by the author as a futile experience. She felt to be taken apart from her community, she felt that the roots from which she descended had been cut off.

She reported:

Now as I sit alone in my room, watching the wonder of the sunset, I look back and see how happy I ought to have been when I was starving poor, but one of my own people. Now I am cut off by my own for acquiring the few things I have. And those new people with whom I dine and to whom I talk, I do not belong to them. I am alone because I left my own world (see Ebest, 2000, 117).

Material success defeated her, by bringing her own spiritual decline. Her inspiration dried up.

Facing this moment of crisis she decided to go back on herself and to return to her place of origin: the ghetto in New York (see Ebest, 2000, 116-117). Her writing career started declining but in 1950 with *Red Ribbon on a White Horse* she hoped to manage her resurrection. After this fictional memoir she wrote occasionally short fictions and criticism for *The New York Times Book Review* (see Ebest, 2000, 124). But only with the

reprinting of *Bread Givers* by George Braziller in 1975, the biographical introduction for the volume by Alice Kessler-Harris, the publication of *The Open Cage* (1979) and the republication of her collection in 1985 *Hungry Hearts* her literary reputation lifted up (see Goodman, 1983, 236-237) (see Hefner, 2011, 188).

Even blind, with arthritis and relying on a scant income she continued writing, in 1969 was published one of her last stories for which she was paid 25\$. Her last story was published after her death but there had been several other manuscripts, written by Yeziarska that have never been published (see Ebest, 2000, 125) (see Schoen, 1980, 10).

The Jewish author died in 1970 in Ontario of a stroke.

## **2.2. The author's troubled writing career**

Anzia Yeziarska arrived in the United States by knowing only Yiddish. Here she learned the language and her fifty-five years writing career caught on. The author wrote five novels: *Salome of the Tenements* (1923), *Bread Givers* (1925), *Arrogant Beggar* (1926), *All I Could Never Be* (1932) and *Red Ribbon on a White Horse* (1950) *Hungry Hearts* (1920) and *Children of Loneliness* (1923) are her two collection of short stories which contributed establishing her consideration as a Jewish American writer. The professor Alice Kessler-Harris published posthumously *The Open Cage: An Anzia Yeziarska Collection* (see Schoen, 1983, 236).

This publication helped in the rediscovery of the author, who seemed to have disappeared. Even this latest collection captures the spirit and struggles of immigrant Jewish women in the New World (see Schoen, 1980, 3).

Yeziarska was an educated immigrant woman, conscious of her condition, who tried to do her best in order to depict her own life in her fictions, taking into account also the incidents of her friends and family members. She combined events of her life and of her own imagination in order to highlight those themes which mostly interested her. Also some of the characters she includes in her works are taken from her own experience, who she decided to combine with fictional events in order to display all those tensions and oppositions she aimed to dramatize. As the spokeswoman of the Jews she wanted to give voice to her people, who had been ignored for a long period of time, and to present their condition in the best way possible. She wanted to underline the conditions and lives of immigrant Jewish women whose integration into the American society confronted with their Eastern European roots. Although her production is mainly characterized by fiction, autobiographical elements are in any case present, ready to display her female

protagonists' striving for freedom and independence from the cultural constraints they brought with them in their travel to the New World (see Schoen, 1980, 3-4). As Thomas J. Ferraro stated, her works are rich in "autobiographical resonances" (see Ebest, 2000, 105); her autobiography had been displayed fragmented in different reviews through the 1920s and "provides a case study of the invention of ethnicity in American culture" (see Ebest, 2000, 105) as Mary V. Dearborn suggested.

Yeziarska's first stories had been published in the context of the First World War, during a period when periodicals were interested in the discussion over "The Jewish Question" (see Ebest, 2000, 106), that interested the mass immigration of Jewish people, such as Yeziarska, from Eastern Europe. The writer's mission was to mediate between her own culture and the American one and the tool used for this mediation was the periodical press.

Even though she started writing in 1912, she found it difficult to find a publisher for her works. In 1915 *The Forum* published her story "The Free Vacation House", but also in other periodicals like *The Century* and *Harper's* she depicted the "ghetto life" (see Ebest, 2000, 106). She decided to start writing essays for some journals; firstly she presents to the *Free Mankind*, during the meeting with its editor Mr. Alfred Nott, he admitted he decided to flee "like a frightened rabbit" (see Ebest, 2000, 107) because he was stuck by the woman's "zealotry" (see Ebest, 2000, 107). The editor of the second journal she met affirmed that her "chaotic mind would be useless to an intellectual journal" (107), finally the third editor who interviewed her decided to stop the meeting by suggesting her a book *Psychology of Madness* which could have helped her mind full of emotions and events ready to be given birth and listened to. In front of this situation she thought to abandon essays and to start writing fictions, to produce "a story of myself-myself lost in America" (107), so she introduces herself to the editor of the "most literary magazine of all those I looked over" (107) that could be *The Forum* or *The Century*, but what we know with certainty is that the editor of this journal accepted her short story *An Immigrant Among the Editors* and paid her \$200. In this story she dismisses the ghetto depictions contained in the periodicals, seen as "twisted pictures of the way higher-ups see us people" (107), she explores the significance of the immigrant point of view in the debate over Jewish people. Like her other stories, by defining the legitimacy of her immigrant identity she highlights the rhetorical validity of her style of writing.

She defined the intellectual journals "so dull, so dead"; "whose erudite and antiseptic prose reads to her heroine like a head without a body" (see Ebest, 2000, 108), the "dead

logic” (108) on which journals rely on give birth to a reader “deaf, dumb, and blind to the cry of hunger and want knocking at their doors” (108). As a matter of fact Anzia Yeziarska affirms that literal and metaphorical hunger are the highest agents of human imagination, rather than intellect. It is with hunger that people “paint pictures and write books and sing songs” (108).

Yeziarska wrote in a period in which in America periodicals spread the idea that Jewish people would have not be able to take part into the American society and they only were a ghettoized mass. Jews were simplified, their peculiarities and main positive features were summarized into meager descriptions. Many authors such as Burton J. Hendrick stated that Eastern Jews were “a type of Jew very different” (108) from Spanish and German immigrants because they were considered intellectually, racially and culturally inferior due to their past life as farmers. This inferiority brought to the break out of socialistic agitations fueled by the incapacity, according to Hendrick, to comprehend the American social and political system. Ralph Phillip Boas attacked the sweatshop system: he believed that the interaction of cruel employers and poor workers depicted a morally ruined system and this system (factory work) resembled the personalities and culture of the Jewish community.

In opposition to these descriptions of negative Jewish qualities, there had been authors who used the images of the ghetto to justify hidden nobility such as Mary Frank did and the journal *The Independent* used the ghetto to dramatize the targeting of the Jews. Mary shared a positive point of view, according to which America was “fast coming to new days of brotherhood” (see Ebest, 2000, 111), like her Yeziarska aimed at providing a faith that future would have brought better times: “The Americans of to-morrow, the America that is every day coming to be, will be too wise, too open- hearted, too friendly-handed, to let the least late comer to their gates knock in vain with gifts unwanted” (see Ebest, 2000, 111).

Jews were also seen as war profiteers, in his *Atlantic*, Boas depicted the Jews as possessors of the clothing and theatrical businesses, indeed they all had “a passion for wealth and a passion for power” (see Ebest, 2000, 114). The Jews were considered greedy people, many authors and editors feared them because they thought they would have ruled the country. Henry Ford shared this belief because in his *Dearborn Independent* he wrote that “most of big business, the trusts and banks, the natural resources and the chief agricultural products, are in the control of Jewish financiers” (see Ebest, 2000, 115). This

is clearly an anti-Semitic concept, to which Ford became closer after the circulation of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. This Document, shared by the tsarist secret police, aimed at sharing hate and disgust against American Jews because there was the belief that they wanted to take over the world and organize a society according to their own rules and dogma. There had also been writings like *The Outlook*, which even though supported and fomented hate against Jewish people, did not believe Ford's words because *The Protocols* were said not to be authentic.

Although the atmosphere of intolerance toward the Jewish community, Yeziarska remained strong and continued to speak about the problems and difficulties her people had to deal with in their everyday life. In 1919 the publication of her story "The Fat of the Land" in the *Best Short Stories* rewarded her with a prize as the best story of the year by Edward J. O'Brien. "The Fat of the Land" speaks about the alienation of a Jewish mother, Hannah Breineh, who has been brought to her Americanized children into a modern but empty uptown apartment. The story explores the loneliness she feels when she left her ghetto. Yeziarska's success grew with her collection of stories *Hungry Hearts*, for which she was paid \$10,000 by the Goldwyn studios for its movie rights and offered her a contract to write screenplays in Hollywood. This occasion opened her the doors to a new life, she discovered success and wealth. In California she started to be known as the "sweatshop Cinderella" (see Schoen, 1980, 4), but it was in this moment that her inspiration dried up, she found herself looted from her true identity, based on the poverty of the tenements and factory work. The frivolousness of her new life brought her to feel that this new life did not belong to her true self, this did not represent the real Anzia Yeziarska, so she went back to New York in the half of the 20s. There she found the bravery and vitality that animated again her writings which she saw had been stolen her by the materialistic and frenetic life in Hollywood (see Ebest, 2000, 114-118).

The East Side called her and then she returned to her place. In 1923 she wrote *Salome of the Tenements*, this novel's main character is based on her friend: Rose Pastor, she is the daughter of poor Jewish immigrants, who falls in love with the scion Graham Stokes, who headed a campaign against the Jewish neighborhood to which Rose belonged. This novel exposes a scheme, used frequently by the author, in which the female protagonist is taken by the American society to fight for sterile and useless beliefs which lead her to tough decisions and situations from which she defends herself through the strong relationship she kept with her tradition. It is here that the protagonist's ability to combine the old culture with the new defines her inclusion into the new society (see Schoen, 1980, 6-8).

The short stories which appeared in *Children of Loneliness*, in the novels *Arrogant Beggar* and *All I Could Never Be* underline the difficulties of the immigrants to integrate into a new society. The author emphasizes over the tensions between the Old World and the New World; the last one is the place in which the immigrants' desires appear achievable but the moment in which they seem to be achieved they are ripped up by the society with its rules and values, unknown to the immigrants (see Schoen, 1980, 8).

In 1925 she wrote the autobiographical novel *Bread Givers*. This work connects the Jewish tradition with American doctrine and values. It explores the rebelliousness of a Jewish young girl who feels that the patriarchal system of her tradition is too tight to her and cannot go on anymore in America. She frequently confronts with her father, she strongly believes that women can be educated and that they can work in order to develop their capacities and to become someone. These two figures symbolize the opposition between the Old World with its traditions, beliefs and close-minded structure and the vitality and dynamism of the New World.

Till the 1932 she was a recognized writer and many American Jews felt to be represented by her, indeed she was considered "the recognized mouthpiece of New York's Jewish East Side" (see Ebest, 2000, 124) by 1924, *The Literary Digest* defined Anzia as the "Balzac of the Ghetto" (see Ebest, 2000, 124) and *Vanity Fair's* editor Jim Tully spread the idea that she was "the biggest person developed among the young generation of American Jews" (124). Many others were the authors who recognized Anzia Yeziarska as the writer who was capable to work as a bridge between the big American public and the small community of people with which she shared the same roots. Her success started declining in a period in which it had occurred a change in people's literary taste and also the Economic Depression brought her financial difficulties. Even though by facing these problems she continued her writing career, after the first years of 1930 she saw a reduction in the publication of her works. Many periodicals in this period in order to avoid bankruptcy tried to join with others, for example *The Century* in front of the fall of its works to 20,000 was merged with *The Forum*. Also periodicals which cured the Jewish Question, to which Yeziarska gave her contribute, faced a moment of decline.

With the publication of *Red Ribbon on a White Horse* in 1950 she knew how to revive her declining career. This autobiographical novel can be considered her finest achievement, after that she wrote only short stories and book reviews. In *Red Ribbon* she depicts the contrast between her life under the Russian Empire and her new existence,

she emphasizes her life in Hollywood and the telegram between Samuel Goldwyn and the Goldwyn office reported "Davis says Yeziarska not accustomed to luxuries therefore only furnished her with lower berth. Arranged her return transportation accordingly" (see Ebest, 2000, 124) (see Fishbein, 1998, 138). The author devoted her novel to her daughter Louis Levitas, "To my daughter LOUISE LEVITAS" (see Fishbein, 1998, 137), who was living with Arnold while Yeziarska was working in order to reach wealth and success in Hollywood.

The relationship that tied the writer and John Dewey, according to which it could be seen as a very close relationship, results in the appearance in her stories of an Anglo-Saxon man, who can be identified with John Morrow in *Red Ribbon on a White Horse* and with Professor Scott in *All I Could Never Be*. Dewey embraced a theory of ethnic pluralism that resembles the endings of her novels. The most well-known statement of the philosopher "the hyphen in the hyphenated American must connect, not separate" (see Schoen, 1980, 5) relates to the conclusions of the novels *Salome of the Tenements*, *Bread Givers* and *Arrogant Beggar* in which the American values and knowledge merge with those considered part of the traditional Jewish community. This man fueled her intellectual sphere and for this reason it is frequent to notice in her novels her own intellectual attainments. For example in *Salome of the Tenements* there are references in the title but also throughout the story to Oscar Wilde's play and to the *New Testament* legend. There are also references to her knowledge of literary naturalism and psychological determinism. Emerson's philosophy and doctrine of self-reliance was known by the author for her connection with Dewey, his emphasis on the needs of every single person who breaks the tradition in order to satisfy them is repeatedly expressed in Anzia Yeziarska's fictions (see Schoen, 1980, 5).

### **2.3. Anzia Yeziarska in between vernacular modernism and realism**

Mary V. Dearborn stated that Yeziarska's "fiction is welcomed, in short, because it provides valuable documentary evidence that ethnic women existed" (see Hefner, 2011, 188). Anzia Yeziarska's voice became central in the understanding of how the immigrants' labor really run in the United States, focusing on women, considered marginal figures during the immigration period by many authors. In 1923 Yeziarska met Gertrude Stein. They both were Jewish Americans but they embodied two very different movements of the American literature: the first one was interested in and took the side of the ethnic women's trend and the second one represented the modernist trend.

Some scholars define Yeziarska as an ethnic modernist author. Her rediscovery in the 1970s and 1980s brought several feminist academics to read and after study her writings. She examined the issues of ethnicity, class and gender, also recent studies highlight her works as important for the study of the Yiddish literature. It is in this period that ethnic studies emerged and several authors such as Anzia Yeziarska, who had been forgotten for a long time, started to be taught in schools, because they represented an important part of the history of the United States. Usually ethnic writers shared the same background, such as themes and general ideas.

Ethnic authors remained for a long time set aside because the world they represented was ignored, not considered valid. Their works for this reason were not involved in the big literary movements and they were also excluded from the standard narratives (Hefner, 2011, 187-188).

Yeziarska kept at a distance from the realism of her contemporaries Jewish American authors Mary Antin and Abraham Cahan because she belonged to the field of “vernacular modernism”. The roots of her works can be found in the popular writings of Ring Lardner that are characterized by comic representations and an emphasis over a deep subjectivity; under this light Yeziarska’s writings can be seen as belonging to the sphere of “ethnic modernism” and are the product of the dynamic and variegated vernacular American language. She moves from the oral tradition and folk tools of the storyteller of her ghetto, it can be seen in the titles of *Hungry Hearts* and *Bread Givers* (see Stone, 1999, 1-2). Her production is the result of a new way of perceiving language and its representation, the main concepts are the importance of making the language concrete: make it as close as possible to the reality in which her characters live and establish a variegated language, with references to the Yiddish language, although not one of her works is written in Yiddish. She confronts the realism and assimilation concepts shared by Antin and Cahan’s works because instead she focuses over the process of linguistic Americanization of her protagonists. Jewish American authors used realism in their works for specific social and political reasons, they included traditional stereotypes of the realism of the nineteenth century. The majority of realist authors expressed cultural differences in texts as linguistic differences and immigrant authors tried to break these fixed constructions, by weaving the canons of the realist movement with dialect in order to display the different hierarchies which their characters belonged to. Yeziarska represented a turning point because she denied the rules of the realist literature and her writing analyzes the social and political issues of her predecessors. While realism was employed to glorify the



American language, Jewish American writers used realism in a different way. They wanted to give voice to the poorest, their life and the rude language they spoke. They wanted to display to the general public that read their books, that they were closer to those poor characters than they thought. Anzia Yeziarska criticized the genteel language exposed by Antin and Cahan, these authors wanted to point out that the language spoken by the middle class was along the lines of their narrators. Unlike them Yeziarska aimed at highlighting the gap between American people and those who were trying to become Americans, by using the vernacular language. Sally Ann Drucker affirmed that Yeziarska took the distance from Cahan and Antin because she “used [dialect] to show that her characters came from the culture of the ghetto, but without that culture denigrating or debasing them” (see Hefner, 2011, 191). In this way the experiences told by the Jewish author can be the same of those expressed by Cahan and Antin but the main difference is that Yeziarska’s immigrant characters expose their experiences using the constructions and specific words of the vernacular language (see Hefner, 2011, 189-191).

“Yeziarska’s technique and subject grew out of the literary realism which was then made” (see Stone, 1999, 2), with this expression Alice Kessler-Harris affirms that Yeziarska displays in her writings some features of the literary realism but at the same time she takes the distances. Like realists she provides the description of the life in tenements in Manhattan in the 1900s and the general life conditions in the Jewish ghetto. But at the same time Yeziarska provides little plot structures because her focus lies on the vivid and vibrant language used by the characters to communicate with the most naturalness their habits and the life they lead. This language is the result of two opposite components: the Old World and the New World, she mixes her thoughts, memories expressed with Yiddish and the language of the new reality in which she lives in that is English (see Stone, 1999, 2).

While realistic authors frequently used the first-person narrator who remains at the same level of the reader, Yeziarska broke with this concept by aiming to present a language her readers should understand, but in reality they feel far and to promote a linguistic mixture and complicated syntax like modernist authors such as Gertrude Stein taught. Indeed Delia Caparoso Konzett defines Yeziarska’s works “ethnic modernism” (see Hefner, 2011, 192) which “raises the combined question of dislocation and ethnicity as a key feature of modernism, one that is still too-often dealt with in discreet separation” (see Hefner, 2011, 192). Yeziarska as modernist writer deals with the topics of ethnicity and gender which she merges with the typical language of the ghetto. For this reason she is

defined as belonging to the “vernacular modernism” (see Hefner, 2011, 191), because she combines modernist issues with a linguistic transformation: she integrates words from the dialect in the standard speech (see Hefner, 2011, 191-192).

Anzia Yeziarska vernacular modernism can also be seen in her deep knowledge about how the language spoken by her characters really works. The language spoken by every single character, English or Yiddish, defines the character himself/herself. Yeziarska refuses realism because she is opened to express subjectivity, how the process of assimilation really worked and she also pointed out the role of the language in this course. No matter if Americans and/or Americanized, her characters are always brought again to their place of origin: the Jewish ghetto, represented by the Lower East Side. Jewish roots are not only remembered visually but also in the constructions of their own mother tongue. More vivid and genuine expressions replace with modernist Jewish authors, especially with Anzia Yeziarska, the fixed and well-known sayings of the early 1920s. An example can be found in the story “To the Stars” integrated in the collection *Children of Loneliness* of 1923, in which the protagonist Sophie Sapinsky, such as Yeziarska, dreams to become a writer. The dean of the college does not believe in her writing skills, above all because she is an immigrant girl: she does not speak perfect English and she does not know the American culture. Sophie was so decisive “Show them what’s in you! If you can’t write it in college English, write it ““immigrant English!”” (see Hefner, 2011, 193), that she brought her piece to the writing class. With his speech the president, who encouraged her to do so, congratulated her by saying “There are things in life bigger than rules of grammar [...]. Unfortunately, education robs many of us of the power to give spontaneously, as mother earth gives, as the child gives. You have poured out not a part, but the whole of yourself. That’s why it can’t be measured by any of the prescribed standards. It’s uniquely you” (see Hefner, 2011, 193). Here new modernist concepts are introduced by Yeziarska: plainness and spontaneity. Like all modernists, also the Jewish female writer, emphasizes subjectivity and interiority over the constraints and rules imposed by culture. Her whole production highlights the importance that immigrants had in shaping the society from the linguistic point of view and the variegated American population which brought to the American melting-pot. She refuses traditional grammatical rules, unlike realist authors. Due to the interactions with foreigners, the incessant novelties and changes, H.L. Mencken stated in *The American Language* that “[...] No other tongue of modern times admits foreign words and phrases more readily; none is more careless of precedents; none shows a greater fecundity and originality of

fancy” (see Hefner, 2011, 194-195). According to Yeziarska immigration brought in America linguistic transformations that allow Americans and those who are in the middle of the process of Americanization “to express more vitally the rush of new experience, the fire of changing personality” (see Hefner, 2011, 195). We can assume that for modernists in order to express thoughts, feelings and more in general words with sincerity and naturalness, it is crucial to experiment with language, adding words, ways of saying and constructions that do not belong to the standard language spoken in a specific area. For this reason Yeziarska speaks about a “creative spirit” which “has arisen ... in the form of a protest and a rebellion” (see Hefner, 2011, 195). In order to express himself/herself at the best the author “has the right to use words of his own fashioning and to disregard existing grammatical and syntactical laws” (195) states Eugene Jolas in 1929 *Proclamation*. It is only due to “foreign minds” (195) that according to Yeziarska, the American language, could revise itself and be more inclusive and opened toward new expressions. Anzia wanted to change the language: she wanted it to become more “real”, for this reason she took the distance from realism and hoped for the linguistic reinvention. In “To the Stars” the work of the protagonist elevates itself from the fixed rules and criterions of the language, indeed Carlos Williams spoke about “not ‘realism’, but reality itself” (see Hefner, 2011, 195) in *Spring and All*, published in the same year of *Children of Loneliness* in 1923.

Anzia Yeziarska by creating the Yiddish-American speech gives voice to the poorest, those people who were subject to the process of Americanization and whose life was every single day a challenge. Yeziarska as Drucker points out “uses the emotional verbal style of Yiddish-speaking or dialect speaking ghetto women in constructing her stories. The stories too, are expressive, tearful, joyous, and voluble. They have extremes and quick mood changes” (see Stone, 1999, 1), the author moves from Jewish ghetto storytellers, in particular the “shetl” women’s storytelling known as “bobe-mayses” (see Stone, 1999, 1) or “grandmother’s tales” (see Stone, 1999, 1). The Jewish author transmits in her production the fear, the faith, the hunger and the dreams of her Jewish female protagonists through first-person narration. The narrator speaks dialect that gives a sense of spontaneity and a strong attachment to her roots.

Characters while speaking dialect express themselves also by cursing, as Sally Ann Ducker states “No previous characters in Jewish-American literature surpass Yeziarska’s women when it comes to swearing and cursing- another example of Yeziarska’s ear for language” (see Stone, 1999, 3). An example can be found in “The Fat of the Land”, in

which Hannah Breineh yells at the greengrocer “A black year on you, robber, swindler” (see Stone, 1999, 3). In general Yeziarska uses Yiddish expressions such as the frequent “Ach” (3). Yeziarska depicts moments of everyday life, an example is Hannah Breineh who curses her children, defining them blood suckers, she is always lamenting her life especially because she has many children to feed and her economic opportunities were not so major, she says “Woe to me”; “To my bitter life there ain’t no end” (see Stone, 1999, 5). There are cases in which Yiddish expressions are translated: the word “mensch” that conveys the meaning “of being a real person” (see Stone, 1999, 4), is translated with the word “person”.

The Jewish female author has been criticized for her passionate and emotional tone, but this was her tool to express in the best way possible to her audience the real life of ordinary women who struggled in their everyday life in order to take part to the big project that was the American reality.

Yeziarska gave voice to women’s thoughts, beliefs and fears, as they are, in a genuine and spontaneous way. Yeziarska’s production has its fundamentals in “shtetl” narrations and for this reason she takes the distance from realism because her Eastern European voice waved with an intimate tone mixes with non-linear structures. In her first works she uses first-person narrators, such as in *Hungry Hearts*, especially to accomplish her search for the “real”, but her narrator is more complex than that used by realist authors such as Antin and Cahan. She started using also third-person narrator like in *Arrogant Beggar* and both first and third-person narrators appear in her works around the end of her writing career (see Hefner, 2011, 196) (see Stone, 1999, 4-5).

Anzia Yeziarska displays her protagonists’ struggles in a poor environment that seems to undermine them, instead of giving them tools to use in order to find relief. She depicts women whose poverty bring them in some cases to hate everything around them, even their children such as for the case of Hannah Breineh. Yeziarska does not criticize her protagonists, she gets herself in their shoes, because she was one of them. She empathizes with them, she recognizes their everyday challenges as hers: the obstacles in learning a foreign language, the tensions between their own culture and that of the hosting country, prejudices and hunger. Hunger takes many facets in Yeziarska’s production, it can be seen for example as hunger for love, education: satisfying hunger means to satisfy all the needs that emerge in the new American society, all those empty spaces that one needs to fill in a new society (see Stone, 1999, 6).

In all her writings there is the possibility to build a bridge between two worlds: the first one characterized by those who are hungry and that of the well-fed. In America immigrants are hungry, consumption is the only tool they can use to become and to live like real American people. Food and clothing are the central cultural marker that Yeziarska takes in her writings. In *Salome of the Tenements*, the female protagonist, Sonia, is ready to integrate in America and to become the successful woman by eating American food, the author describes her ordering a toast and an omelette. Clothes for women at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century emphasized a new access to freedom. They could show their ankles, they were also free to cut their hair. For Yeziarska and her contemporaries clothing brought an ethnic-national mark. Historically Russian Jewish immigrants were both producers and consumers of clothes. During the 2<sup>nd</sup> Industrial Revolution mass production spread through Europe and America from the half of the XIX century till the first twenty years of the XX century. It brought mass production, introduced by Henry Ford with his car manufacturer, the type of production was called just in case: industries produced regardless the demand of products. In this way stores were filled with standardized products and the production line introduced in industries increased the production by reducing times. It was the period of ready-made clothes, also known as prêt-à-porter, they were the opposite of those clothes made-to-measure that characterized the previous years. In this type of industry the laborer was a simple worker who purchased the clothes he himself produced, he worked from 10 to 12 hours per day, there was unqualified manpower and he had to adapt to the machine he had to work with. Historically Russian Jewish immigrants were both producers and consumers of ready-made clothes, which had a conflicting meaning: they were source of pleasure because they helped in the process of Americanization but also symbol of an intense exploitation, because people wore the clothes they produced. The author Anzia Yeziarska in her stories presents her characters who slowly grow alienated from clothing because clothes are associated to the exploitative American economic system. In *Red Ribbon* Yeziarska remembers that when she was a child “I felt like the village idiot in my immigrant clothes so different from the clothes of the other children” (see Stubbs, 1998, 158) that were very different to that of her schoolmates. The process of alienation forms the subject of *America and I* because the protagonist imagines all the transformations she would undergo with her first American clothes. Desire and pleasure are associated with frustration and alienation that stand behind those ready-made products. The waists she produces started signifying oppression. In “How I found America” the protagonist when

she sees American clothes immediately thinks about all the difficulties of production: she takes the readers to wonder about the conditions of those who produce clothes. It is only by consuming American products that one becomes an American person and this is the answer to the principal question that covers every single writing of Yeziarska “What made the Americans so far apart from me?” (see Yeziarska, 1923, 9).

After she achieved fame she rejected the importance of clothes and it is in the moment in which she achieved material success, that she felt a deep sadness: a spiritual lack, that could be cured only by revitalizing her own identity, the physical and spiritual hunger for Americanization can arrive only by going back to the ghetto. It is common to notice in her writings that when the desire is achieved, the dream is over and despair prevails. One of the most important messages that Yeziarska wants to convey is that in order to integrate into a new reality we do not have to neutralize ourselves, but we have to accept what is foreign and enrich it with our knowledge and culture. This concept can be linked to that of exceptionalism: this is not an idea of conquest, it is an ideal of remaking ourselves, we are exceptional because we can remake ourselves, we can merge our true identity altogether with what is new and needs to be discovered. For this reason Yeziarska wants her protagonists to build an identity which mixes their old version of themselves with the new one, an American-Jewish identity. Although the first difficulties her women want to become independent, they want to break the chain of their close-minded tradition, as America is seen as the land of freedom they want to be free and to authentically express themselves and do the best for themselves.

In *Bread Givers* the protagonist Sara Smolinsky is hungry. Her hunger comes from the desire for success, to become an independent woman, not repressed or marginalized in the society. Yeziarska herself was an independent woman, who believed that she was the only one who really could decide in her life, she had a revolutionary thought. Furthermore she was independent, she believed in her potential and always rejected tyranny. She affirmed “I’m living in America not in Russia. I’m not hanging on anybody’s neck to support me. In America if a girl earns her living she can be fifty years old and without a man, and nobody pities her” (see Yeziarska, 2005, xxx-xxxii), she strongly believed to “make herself for a person” (see Yeziarska, 2005, xxxii), her purpose was to make money on her own and satisfy her needs with it.

### 3. Inside Anzia Yezierska's *Bread Givers* and *Hungry Hearts*

#### 3.1. *Bread Givers*

The original title was in Yiddish “broit gibbers”, expression which refers to those women who brought home “bread” (see Wilentz, 1991-1992, 34). *Bread Givers* is a semi-autobiographical novel written by the Jewish-immigrant author Anzia Yezierska, regarded as her most autobiographical work (see Ahern, 2015, 27) (see Bingham and Gabriel, 2001, 3). It is a novel divided in three volumes, the first book is titled Hester Street and it consists of nine chapters, the second one Between Two Worlds is composed of seven chapters and the third, named The New World, has five chapters. The story is settled in the Lower East Side in New York city.

The first book opens with the Smolinsky family gathered around the dinner table. The family is composed of the father Reb Smolinsky, his wife Shenah and mother of their four daughters: Bessie, Fania, Mashah and Sara, the youngest, who is the protagonist. The family has just arrived in America from the Russian Empire, hoping to find better life conditions. They start living in a tenement flat in Hester Street. The father does not work, he studies and preaches the Torah. The family lives in dire economic conditions, no one of the oldest daughters work and Mashah spends the little money she has only for herself. One day, given this situation, Sara, who was preparing dinner for the family, decides to take the control and goes outside on the street and starts selling herrings. When she returns home she brings with her the little money she has made. Later, her sisters find a job. Shenah comes up with the idea of clearing the room occupied by Reb's religious books and rent it to boarders. The financial situation improves.

Bessie falls in love with a man, Berel Berenstein who she invites for dinner and for whom she wears her favorite dress. All the family members support Bessie, except for her father. His first thought when he hears the news that they want to get married is that he cannot live without his daughters' money, so he tells the man that if he wants to marry Bessie he has to pay for the wedding. In front of these words the man suggests Bessie to leave her father and to get married at the City Hall, but Bessie does not listen to him. Berel meets another woman and breaks up with Bessie who is distraught. Mashah brings home a pianist: Jacob Novak, who comes from a rich family. Reb does not approve of this relationship, for the same reasons for which he rejected Bessie's suitor, blackmailing him. After some days Jacob returns to the Smolinsky's house but he is rejected another time. Finally Fania falls in love with a poet: Morris Lipkin who is shamed away by Reb Smolinsky. Sara looks at what is happening around her but she cannot intervene. The

father decides to arrange his daughters' future marriages, according to his necessities, not even taking into account their thoughts and desires. Reb decides that Bessie is destined to marry Zalmon, a fish peddler, even though she does not like him. Zalmon pays the father \$500 for Bessie's hand, with this money he decides to buy a supermarket in New Jersey. This is actually a fraud because the owner left fake goods in it. The family members start fighting, Sara cannot stand this environment of poverty, abjection and submission to the paternal figure, and decides to leave, going back to New York. She hopes to find a shelter in Bessie and Mashah's houses but their husbands refuse her.

In the second book Sara hopes to get an education and to become a teacher. Rejected by her older sisters she thinks about living alone. She rents a small room, only for herself; the money she needs comes from a laundry job. After the first day of work she is so tired that she forces herself to eat dinner. She then enrolled in night school: her plan is to start attending classes to be able to study in college in order to become a teacher.

One day her mother comes to see her by bringing her a feather bed and food. Sara tells her that even though she is exhausted of this life she will not go back home. Also Mashah, Bessie and Fania go visit their youngest sister and although they recognize their unhappy marriages, they remark that Sara should get married. In front of these words she states that she does not want to marry a man with whom she knows she would not be happy.

At work people look at her as a stranger, because at that time there were not so many single women living on their own. She feels discriminated both in the laundry and at school. In this moment of deep sadness, sorrow and loneliness a man visits her. His name is Max Goldstein, he is a business man who comes from Los Angeles. They start going out several times and Sara at first feels weird because she was not used to such things, but soon she realizes she is happy and has strong feelings for him. Her love starts decreasing when she realizes that for him she would be a mere "piece of property". For this reason she decides to reject his proposal to get married. When her father finds out about her daughter's refusal, he disowns her.

After two years of night school Sara starts attending college, while studying she continues working. Even in a condition of loneliness and poverty, her desire is to become like those neat and learned people around her. The days in college are tough but she manages to do it also because she finds support in her teachers. In the fourth year she graduates and becomes the winner of the best essay on "What the College Has Done for Me", the contest organized by the most important newspaper owner in town and she receives \$1,000.



The third and last book of the novel, as the title suggests, focuses on the protagonist's new life. Sara decides to use the money she won to buy a teaching suit. When she finds out her mother is dying she decides to go visit her. For the first time, after six years, she returns to Hester Street, the place in which she once lived. Also her sisters come to see Shenah; her last wish that she reveals Sara who is standing at her deathbed, is to take care of her father. At the funeral Sara refuses to wear the traditional Jewish clothes people wear in this occasion and she is derided by the community.

While Sara starts working as a teacher in a local school, Reb, her father, marries a widow, Mrs. Feinstein who lives near them. Her sisters are disgusted by their father for finding another woman thus disrespecting his recently deceased wife, and for this reason they refuse several times to help them by giving them any money and they stop speaking to their father. In her workplace Sara feels a deep connection with the head of the school, Hugo Seeling, and they start to see each other also outside the school. She invites him for a tea and while speaking they discover that they have the same origins.

One day Sara, while crossing a road, bumps into an old man, who is selling chewing gum, and helps him taking the packets from the ground. He thanks her and by his voice Sara recognizes her father Reb Smolinsky. She is touched by his sickly appearance and blue lips and decides to bring him to her place. Her dad is scared by his new wife because he thinks she wants to take advantage of his death and she is only interested in material things.

Sara decides to introduce Hugo Seeling to her father. When he sees the man, he asks him if the school pays him adequately, but Hugo expresses a sincere interest in Reb and asks him to teach him Hebrew. Reb is relieved to receive this question because he thought that in America there was no more interest in the Jewish culture.

With Hugo in her life, Sara does not feel to be alone anymore and feels happiness. She asks him to live with her and she proposes also her father to start living with them, because she understands that he could not live anymore with Mrs. Feinstein. Sara is aware of the fact that with her father's presence she will not be free and for this reason she compares him to a problem, that is "still unsolved" (see Yeziarska, 2005, 296) and she feels that "the weight of all generations is still upon her" (see Yeziarska, 2005, 297).

Sara Smolinsky is the narrator and protagonist of the novel. She is the youngest of four daughters and when she arrives in America she is ten years old. Since when she was little she has had a strong dream of independence and this can be achieved only by breaking

from her family's path. She wants to escape from the world her father has been preaching, she represents the New World; opposite to the Old World ruled by the study of the Torah. Her desire of independence and self-awareness can be defined with the expression "make for myself a person" (see Ahern, 2015, 28) and she is aware that she can reach this achievement only with an education. She lives with her family in a slum in New York City, the living conditions were terrible because the family was poor. Sara due to her gender and age looks at the unhappy and forced marriages her father arranges for her sisters and does not intervene but when her father tries to do the same with her she decides to leave the house: she does not want to become another victim. Her first attempt to achieve independence can be seen as the moment in which she goes to sell herrings on the street in order to help with the money her family. She will return home as a teacher, only to visit her mother when she will be at bedside. Sara's self-realization and independence are challenged at the end of the novel because of the presence of her father: she cannot completely get away with her traditions, as she dreamt (see Ahern, 2015, 33-34). With Seeling she rediscovers emotions that are positive and deep, with him in her life she does not feel alone anymore, "I'm no longer alone, I'm no longer alone!" (see Yeziarska, 2005, 279).

Reb Smolinsky is Sara's father. He is a man who studies and preaches the Torah. He is the point of reference of the Jewish community in America. He strictly follows the Jewish religious calendar and the kosher diet and wants his family to do the same. He is the man who embodies the Old World, and for this reason antagonist to Sara. He does not accept his daughters' lovers, he wants to find himself the best suitor for them, the ones who can provide a financial help to them and the family itself. Reb does not work, he is completely concerned with Talmudic studies, for this reason his innocence and little knowledge of the world of work leads him to be cheated, causing the sorrow and anger of his daughters and wife. He is the head of the family and for this reason he is given the biggest room of the tenement apartment: full of his holy books, in which he can study and pray in tranquility. His death at the end of the novel can be seen as the decline of the Jewish culture in the modern America and the sudden interest of Goldstein in learning Hebrew revitalizes him. After his wife's death he marries a widow but he does not trust her and starts living with his daughter Sara and his husband-to-be (see Ahern, 2015, 28-31).

Shenah Smolinsky is Reb Smolinsky's wife and mother of their four daughters. She is the prototype of the Jewish wife: she helped Reb to live his life according to the principles of the Torah; free from domestic worries and a strict observance of Jewish rituals. She can

be considered as the bridge between Sara and her father. On the one hand she is understanding toward her husband and she knows that for holy men it is difficult to adapt to the “real” world, although she complains for the family’s poverty. When she is at dying she shows her concern for Reb and asks Sara to take care of him, because a man like him would not be able to survive in America. As her husband, she wants her daughters to get married. On the other hand she understands Sara and even though her dream of independence and self-realization is not in line with the family’s tradition, she supports her as every good mother should do.

Bessie Smolinsky is the oldest daughter and the one whose income is the main support for the family. Her lover is rejected by her father who forces her to marry Zalmon, the fish peddler. She does not love him and the only thing that gives her the strength to marry him is his child Benny. She feels a strong connection with him, she knows he needs her because Zalmon insults him, he yells at his children “Devils! Stop this, or I’ll break the bones in your bodies and kick you out in the street” (see Yeziarska, 2005, 143).

Mashah Smolinsky is the middle among the daughters in the family. She loves beauty and for this reason she is called in the family “empty-head” (see Yeziarska, 2005, 4), she likes to listen to the music in the park, she also likes to be well-dressed. Mashah falls in love with Jacob Novak for his music but her father rejects him. Reb instead wants her to marry Zalmon, the fish peddler, only for his interest in his money. She says she does not want another “Americanerim” in her apartment, she rejects everything Zalmon gives her to win her love. When her parents force her to wear the cot Zalmon gives her she refuses and cries all night long (see Yeziarska, 2005, 144).

Fania Smolinsky is one of the oldest sisters. She felt in love with a poet, Morris Lipkin, but she is not luckier than her sisters and she is forced to marry a man, Abe Schmukler, who does not care for her, only buys her diamonds to show them off to his friends. She is unsatisfied with her marriage, as all her sisters are, and she thinks wealth is only appearance. It is Fania who sends a letter to Sara, telling her that there is a man, Max Goldstein who is interested in her and wants her to become his wife.

Max Goldstein is Sara’s suitor. He is the prototype of Jewish man only concerned with business. He says “I like you the way you are better than if you fixed yourself up in the grandest style” (see Ahern, 2015, 32), he admires her for her dream of independence. But in front of his arrogance, his disdain of knowledge and his only interest in business and

material things Sara realizes she will be a mere object to him and she decides not to marry him.

Berel Berenstein is the young man with whom Bessie falls in love. He wants her to become his wife because she is a brilliant girl who will be able to flank him in his business. He suggests her to rebel against her father because he thinks that he is too much into old traditions.

Hugo Seeling is the head of the school in which Sara works as a teacher. One day he tells her “I have a compliment for you. Rosy is a changed girl since she had been in your class” (see Yeziarska, 2005, 275) and this news gave her the strength to continue her work as a teacher. They share same roots: they come from Poland “from villages only few miles apart” (see Yeziarska, 2005, 277). She likes him because unlike her father, who is deeply concerned with his culture and past he is oriented toward the future, he is a dreamer. While talking in front of a cup of tea at Mashah’s, he takes her hands while saying “You hard! You’ve got the fibre of a strong, live spruce tree that grows in strength the more it’s knocked about by the wind” (see Yeziarska, 2005, 279). He provides a strong comparison because he understands the type of father Sara has been enduring. He invites her to other dates and they will get married. Sara takes Hugo home and he gets to know her father, he is interested in knowing Hebrew and the couple will live with him.

Morris Lipkin is the pale young man with whom Fania falls in love. He writes for newspapers and he likes going to the library. Reb Smolinsky rejects him as a possible husband-to-be for his daughter and when Fania goes to visit him he breaks her heart.

Jacob Novak is Masha’s beloved. He is the son of wealthy parents and loves playing the piano. He does not have inherited his parents’ prejudice toward poor people and although he is strongly connected with her he sacrifices his love for his music.

Moe Mirsky is the diamond dealer who Reb forces his daughter to marry. Their marriage will cause sorrow to Mashah because he treats her like an object, “you’re nothing but a worn-out rag” (see Yeziarska, 2005, 150), also before he arrives home Mashah has to take out the dry clothes, prepare dinner and take the children to bed. He is the type of an authoritative man. He only thinks to go out for dinner and to wear fancy clothes, unable to keep a regular job.

Zalmon is the fish peddler who Reb wants to get married to his daughter Bessie. He is a widower looking for a wife to look after his children, he states that his wife “must be good-looking”; “and she mustn’t be lazy and she mustn’t curse [...] I could make for a

lady with nothing to do but stay home and cook for me and clean the house and look after the children” (see Yeziarska, 2005, 93). He shares Reb Smolinsky’s ideas and also will give him money if he finds him a wife. He promises her a good life, he gives her presents such as his old wife’s fur coat but she does not want him and his presents. Mashah is forced to wear her new dress for Zalmon, he fills her with compliments but she does not want anything to do with him. Zalmon is the first factor that disrupts the original order of the Smolinsky’s family.

Abe Schmukler is the suitor Reb Smolinsky decided for his daughter Fania. He is a cloaks and suits dealer, they will get married but this marriage, like all the others planned by Reb, will be unhappy. He gives his wife material presents as tools used to replace attention and love. He uses diamonds to display his wealth. They will move to Los Angeles.

Mrs. Feinstein is the widow Reb Smolinsky marries after his wife’s death. She accuses Sara to visit her father only when he is sick “when he has only a few hours to live, now you come, dear, kind, good-hearted, dutiful daughter”, and not “when weeks and months passed and we were starving” (see Yeziarska, 2005, 286-287). Reb does not want to take medicine from her because “she might do something” (see Yeziarska, 2005, 288), she is only interested in “pleasures and luxuries of the flash” (see Yeziarska, 2005, 290), she reveals herself to be a woman only interested in her husband’s affluence. Soon Sara realizes that if they tried “to be a little kind to her, maybe she would be more faithful to Father” (see Yeziarska, 2005, 291), she thinks that Reb needs her and finally Sara gives her ten dollars per week. At the end of the novel she behaves good toward Father, when Sara “brought her a box of fruit for New Year holiday” she prepared “her apple strudel” (see Yeziarska, 2005, 292).

*Bread Givers* focuses on the difficulties that the protagonist, a Jewish woman, had to face in New York city in the 20th century. Sara Smolinsky, the protagonist, is a mirror of Anzia Yeziarska: she uses her character in the novel in order to give voice to her own life experiences. Sara struggles to become independent. The desire of independence is the theme which pervades the entire novel. Sara’s desire is to escape from her father’s tyranny that seems to threaten her independence. At the time for women “Jewish expectations pointed in a single direction-marriage and motherhood” (see Ahern, 2015, 28). In front of her mother’s conditions of poverty and dependence on her strict father, and her sisters’ unhappy marriages, Sara wants to elevate herself and the only way to take the distances from this prearranged path is to leave home and work on herself, through education. She

decides to fight in order to build a new life, based on America's ideals, where if "they (women) don't get a husband, they don't think the world is over, they turn their mind to something else" (see Yeziarska, 2005, xxv) while in Jewish villages as Rose Pesotta states, she decided to leave because she "could see no future for herself except to marry some young man and be a housewife" (see Yeziarska, 2005, xxiii). The only way to follow the American path was through education. While in the Russian Empire daughters went to school only to know the basis of Hebrew and Yiddish and their main concern was to sustain economically the family and support their brothers' religious studies, in America they could get a complete education. America opened new perspectives to its citizens: in America women could decide who to love, they could achieve success and both social and economic independence. Self-determination and the search for personhood for women were seen as acts of violation because women were seen as mere branches of the tree, they could not have their freedom and independence, they depended to their husbands. This is a revolutionary theme brought by the author Anzia Yeziarska, who was herself a revolutionary woman, seeking for autonomy and independence. Another interesting aspect to examine is the use the protagonist does of the spaces related to poverty; this struggle to find the perfect accommodation reflects her struggle of independence and upward mobility. When Sara moves with her parents to Hester Street they all live in a dirty shared tenement flat in which she is forced to move her stuff from the dining table to the floor in order to eat "It was now time for dinner. I was throwing the rags and things from the table to the window, on the bed, over the chairs, or any place where there was room for them" (see Yeziarska, 2005, 8), Shenah, the mother, inhabits the kitchen, Fania is allowed to arrange her clothes by hanging them on the bedroom wall and her father, the head of the family, rules the remaining poor space. Then when Sara leaves home she moves in a cold and dump basement flat for which she pays the rent by working in a laundry, while in college she starts living in a better lodging until she moves in a clean and private home at the end of the novel. Interesting is the relationship between private and public spaces. The tenement apartment does not provide any kind of privacy, the only privacy belongs to Reb Smolinsky for his religious studies and prayers: no one can bother him, even when the landlady asks for the rent and puts his books on the floor he takes her to court, because women were forbidden to enter. When Sara decides to leave her family she moves into a basement room: her bed has broken feet, with ripped sheets and an old mattress. Even though she is still living in dirty and poor conditions she is happy because all the space in the basement is hers, it was like her safe place, she says

“I looked at the room. A separate door to myself- a door to shut out all the noises of the world” (see Yeziarska, 2005, 159). The door is the tool with which she can lock the outside world and focus on herself and feel safe. This accommodation was hard to find because not everyone rents rooms to alone and unmarried women.

When she becomes a teacher and returns to her family’s apartment she finds a new home, with “a sunny, airy room” (see Ahern, 2015, 29), she appreciates it because “In the morning, in the evening, when I sat down to meals, I enjoyed myself as with the grandest company. I loved the bright dishes from which I ate. I loved the shining pots and pans. I loved the broom with which I swept the floor. The routine with which I kept clean my precious privacy, my beautiful aloneness, was all sacred to me” (see Yeziarska, 2005, 241). She likes living alone and doing domestic things to take care of her house, she reports that she has “fought [her] way up to into the sunshine of plenty” (see Ahern, 2015, 29-30), she will live a life of cleanliness and light, and poverty and dirt will be no more part of her life. Her self-realization is mirrored by the steps she makes into the different urban environments. Moreover it is outside her family walls that she finds the push for independence, her first attempt to achieve it happens when she goes into the street and starts selling herrings to support financially her family “On the corner of the most crowded part of Hester Street I stood myself with my pail of herring” (see Yeziarska, 2005, 21); it seems like it is in the streets that America opens its doors and leads her to her Americanization. Outside Sara Smolinsky is able to be the real version of herself, she achieves her goals of independence, autonomy and self-realization.

The topic of romantic relationships is developed in *Bread Givers* and it is strictly related with the issue of independence. Sara Smolinsky is firstly courted by Max Goldstein, a wealthy business man who comes from Los Angeles. The protagonist likes him at first sight, but the fact that he was looking for a wife did not convince her. He tells her about his career, why he changed different jobs and when he proposes her to go out on a date she agrees. Sara feels happy with him and she says that when he took her home she looked at herself in the mirror and “I was amazed at my shining face. I was laughing in myself like one bewitched with happiness” (see Yeziarska, 2005, 194). She also reports that when he touches her she feels emotions and “I had become a changed person” (see Yeziarska, 2005, 194). She also receives attentions from him: he appreciates her “because you’re independent” (see Yeziarska, 2005, 197), also he suggests that a woman like her should not iron, her hands are perfect to play the piano. One day she decides to read him a story and even though he seems interested soon he starts talking about his business. When she

hears that word “business” (see Yeziarska, 2005, 198) she cannot believe to be tied to a man like him, who is “such a stranger to me” (see Yeziarska, 2005, 199). He is deeply concerned with business that she realizes that “a wife would only be another piece of property” (see Yeziarska, 2005, 199). He symbolizes the materiality of the New World, a world in which economic success seems to matter more than one’s personality. “I can hire them and fire them. And they, with all their education, are under my feet, just because I got the money” (see Yeziarska, 2005, 199): his words are full of arrogance and little respect for knowledge; this, together with his obsession to find a wife, make Sara change her mind. His materialism hurts her to the point that she dismisses him as a mere selfish and materialistic man. She takes this decision also because he would affect her desire of independence, to become “a real person” and she could not become such a woman, near a man like him.

When Sara starts teaching she works in a school in which “not one of the teachers around me had kept the glamour. There was one in this school who was what I had dreamed a teacher to be- the principal, Mr. Hugo Seeling” (see Yeziarska, 2005, 270). She goes to his office because he has received a letter from her dad in which he insults her and she thinks to be “a ruined thing without purpose-without hope. I was no more” (see Yeziarska, 2005, 274). In front of her tears he understands her tough background and day by day they tell each other their story and they discover to come from the same place: Poland, for this reason Sara claims “You and I, we are of one blood” (see Yeziarska, 2005, 278). With him Sara discovers new emotions, she likes him because he appears as an inspiring and sophisticated figure. He symbolizes “reason and civilization” (see Yeziarska, 2005, xxxii); he can be identified, after her mother’s death, as the bridge between the protagonist and her father. The opposition between Sara who represents the dynamism, modernity and opportunities of the New World, and her father symbolizing the strict and close-minded Jewish traditions of the Old World, is disrupted by Hugo Seeling, who is captivated by Sara Smolinsky’s energy and vitality. In her essence lie the roots of the Old World she has been trying to get rid of and her beloved admires and wants to discover. They are the perfect opposites who complete each other, indeed it will be Hugo who will reconcile Sara with her father, pushed by the interest to come into contact with the Hebrew culture and language. Reb Smolinsky at the end of the novel will move into Sara and Hugo’s house, they will live together, as Alice Kessler-Harris reported, Sara “is saved by making her peace with her immigrant childhood and her father” (see Ahern, 2005, 33).



### 3.2. *Hungry Hearts*

*Hungry Hearts* is a collection of ten short stories, each of them based on the problems, struggles and aspirations which joined Jewish immigrant women in New York at the turn of the 20th century. Like *Bread Givers* it is based on Anzia Yeziarska own life experiences.

The first story is entitled Wings. It speaks about a young girl coming from the Russian Empire, Shenah Pessah, who has been living in New York city for two years. She is leading a humble and poor life in a basement with her uncle; one day, John Barnes, a young man, comes to see the room that her janitor is renting. He decides to go living there and the two fall in love. Next to him she starts living as an American woman, and she discovers the joy of learning. One day she waits for him but he does not show up. Three days pass and then he arrives and with a suitcase he is ready to leave. She did not expect it and at first she misses him a lot but she realizes that he gave her the “wings” to start a new life. She has “ruddy cheeks, the film of innocence shining out of eyes that knew no guile” (see Yeziarska, 2012, 42) and when she starts working in the shirtwaist factory she immediately understands how to work and she surpasses her old and envious colleagues and soon becomes Sam Arkin’s assistant.

Shenah Pessah is a 22 year old orphan who tells that she “never had a home since I was eight years old. I was living by strangers even in Russia” (see Yeziarska, 2012, 5). She lives in America with her uncle, who sent her the money to reach him in America after his wife’s death and he is old and sick and needs her. She is a good cook and housekeeper and when the matchmaker tells him that Motkeh, the fish-peddler is looking for a wife, her uncle does not leave her. She never went to a night school because she has to look after her uncle and the house. When she falls in love with John Barnes she is filled with new light and hope, he gives her the “wings” to blend in America. She feels ashamed in front of him for her “calloused and rough” (see Yeziarska, 2012, 27) hands with “dirty finger-nails” (see Yeziarska, 2012, 27), for him she wants to become a new person, an American, she “can’t no more wear my “greenhorn” shawl going out with an American” (see Yeziarska, 2012, 17), for this reason she pawns her feather bed in order to have the money to buy a new hat and a new dress. She feels at ease with him and she states “How only the sound from his voice opens the sky in my heart!” (see Yeziarska, 2012, 23), she feels that “her soul swoon in ecstasy as he drew her toward him” (see Yeziarska, 2012, 30). For three days she does not see him, she feels sad, during the night she is not able to fall asleep because every sound she hears she thinks that it could be him. When he shows

up she feels that something in him has changed, she starts crying as she watches him going out with his suitcases. This sadness is suddenly changed into strength and she realizes that he gave her the “wings” (see Yeziarska, 2012, 34) to build her own path in the New World. In *Hunger* she is described as a woman with “ruddy cheeks, the film of innocence shining out of eyes that knew no guile” (see Yeziarska, 2012, 42).

John Barnes is the man with whom Shenah falls in love. He is “the youngest instructor of sociology in his university” (see Yeziarska, 2012, 5) and he is writing his thesis on the “Educational Problems of the Russian Jews”. He is interested in the protagonist as the figure of the scholar who is interested in the subjects of his studies, for this reason he decides to go living in the Lower East Side. He wants to help Shenah in her Americanization, in order to “place her feet firmly on earth” (see Yeziarska, 2012, 8), he takes her to the library, place in which she has never been before and he suggests her a book to read. He has pity on her because he understands how lonely and poor she is and for this reason he takes her under his wing. John abandons her in the end and by doing so “He opened the wings of your soul” (see Yeziarska, 2012, 34) in order to “fly” in America. Even though she has misunderstood him and she ends brokenhearted, all this suffering results to be worth it: in Shenah Pessah sprouts up the seed of lecture and study, the fundamentals of the intellectual interest.

Her uncle, Moisheh Rifkin and the matchmaker Mrs. Melker represent the prototype of Jewish people, who follow the Talmud and share the belief that a woman is needed in a house only to take care of the children and the house itself.

Sadie Krank is a worker in the shirtwaist factory and Shenah is placed by her side to learn the job. She is described as “a big-bosomed girl, the most skillful worker in the place” (see Yeziarska, 2012, 43). When the bell rang in the factory to invite the poor workers to go rest at home, Shenah reveals her she does not have a home and Sadie takes pity on her and invites her to her accommodation, a “dingy hall-room” which resembled her poor uncle’s basement and she also offers her dinner (see Yeziarska, 2012, 45). Sadie suggests her “You got to look out for yourself in this world” (see Yeziarska, 2012, 46) and adds that as a fast learner she will make money in order to mitigate her hunger for Americanization: she will be able to buy clothes and do things that will help her in her process of Americanization.

“*Hunger*” is the next story, which is a sequel of *Wings*. The protagonist, Shenah Pessah, cannot stand her uncle anymore, they fight and then she decides to leave. While walking

on the street she sees a shirtwaist's factory sign "Hands Wanted"; she is hired, since she has no money and the factory needed more hands. Among her envious colleagues, she becomes Sam Arkin's assistant; he likes immediately her since the first time he saw her and his feelings are so strong that he decides to write her name over his bankbook. She does not return the feelings and instead gives him deep advice to his improvement and self-realization.

Sam Arkin is a worker in a shirtwaist factory, he has "neglected teeth, thick, red lips" (see Yeziarska, 2012, 58). He is curious to understand something more about Shenah, since her first entrance in the factory he has fallen for her. He describes himself as "a feller that knows himself on a person first off" (see Yeziarska, 2012, 43). He is gentle and kind to her, because he wishes her good luck to her before she talks to the foreman and when he fixes the belt she broke. He shows interest in Shenah because he asks her different questions about her life and also he protects her when her colleagues, envious for her closeness to Sam, describe her as a "'greenh yenteh" just landed from the ship" (see Yeziarska, 2012, 52) and he adds "Gottuniu! If only the doves from the sky were so beautiful!" (see Yeziarska, 2012, 52). Sam tells her his story, he worked in different places in order to raise money to buy the ship ticket to America, he came as "a ragged nothing" (see Yeziarska, 2012, 57) and was captivated by a man who took advantage of the immigrants' ignorance there and exploited them in his factory. In America he learned how to sign and step by step he managed to raise money to open "a tailor-shop" (see Yeziarska, 2012, 59), his dream, and to get married. He suggests he wants to marry a girl like Shenah, not "those crazy chickens" (see Yeziarska, 2012, 60). In the end, driven by his strong feelings toward Shenah he reveals her that he wants to put her name on his bank-book.

As the title of the second short story suggests, the topic which comes over the whole story is that of "hunger" that can be translated as the longing for the American dream. Shenah restates different times her desire to become someone, only by working on herself, she does not want to rely on anyone or anything. She sees the fight with her uncle as the first possibility to "the awakening of her dreams of America!" (see Yeziarska, 2012, 39), because she realized that her uncle did not send her the money for the ship ticket because he really wanted her, in order "to give her a chance for happiness, for life and love" (see Yeziarska, 2012, 39); he needed her only to replace her aunt and the "janitor's drudgery" (see Yeziarska, 2012, 39). After she has been hired in the shirtwaist factory her first thought is that by working she will raise money with which she will feed her hunger, to

dress up “like a person and men will fall on their knees to make love to you-even him-himself!” (see Yeziarska, 2012, 41), she still thinks about John Barnes and he is her first love, the man who opened her eyes in the New World. Yeziarska used to put the stress on the importance to buy American products in order to become Americanized and perfectly blended into the society. Shenah Pessah while speaking with one of her colleagues states “it burns in every girl to get herself married-that’s how it burns in me to work myself up for a person” (see Yeziarska, 2012, 46), she wants to become someone in America only by working on herself. She states that she wants John Barnes, but it is important to underline that she does not want him as a person, she wants him to drive her in the path for Americanization, she wants to go to school, she wants new books to read, she wants to go again to the library, buy American clothes and all those activities and things that support her in her “making myself for a person” (see Yeziarska, 2012, 46). She does not want to be bound in a marriage, as she flew away from her strict and tyrannical uncle, she wants to breathe free and independent in America. Even though she compares Sam Arkin to “the self-made man” (see Yeziarska, 2012, 58), who made his own money in America and arrived as a poor foreigner, she suggests him to “Give yourself your own strength!” (see Yeziarska, 2012, 64), to not need someone to rely on, that makes you feel loved and cared; the message is that yourself in first person has to be the engine that makes loving yourself and gives you the power to do the best for yourself. Moreover Shenah concludes by saying “This, is only the beginning of the hunger that will make from you a person who’ll yet ring in America” (see Yeziarska, 2012, 64).

“The lost “beautifulness”” is the third short story in the collection. It speaks about a Jewish woman, Hanneh Hayyeh who lives in America with her husband; their son Aby is overseas working for the United States Army. The protagonist has been saving her money in order to realize her dream: to paint the walls of her house in white like those of Mrs. Preston, the rich woman for whom she works as a laundress. She has done this also because she wants that when her son returns back home he will not be ashamed anymore for his humble and dirty house. She is very proud of it and asks the butcher and her neighbors to see her beautiful apartment. Hanneh is so happy that when the landlord arrives for the rent she shows her white walls also to him, in front of this “beautifulness” the landlord decides to raise the rent. Hanneh goes to court “to answer her dispossession summons” (see Yeziarska, 2012, 90) but she returns home defeated and hopeless because the landlord stated that if she was not able to pay the rent someone else would have done it. Filled of anger she breaks the walls with a “chopping-axe” and the story ends with her

son who returns home from France and under the rain sees his mother on the street with all her belongings.

The protagonist, Hanneh Hayyeh is a Jewish woman who is described as a good person, humble, “plain from the heart” (76), who “makes the lowest nobody feel he’s somebody” (76). As every poor immigrant her hands were “gnarled, roughened ones” (76). Her husband accuses her of showing no interest in his concerns, “it only dreams itself in you how to make yourself for an American and lay in every penny you got on fixing out the house like the rich” (68). As every single immigrant in America, Hanneh wants to improve herself, in this specific case she wants to do it by starting from the renewal of her tenement apartment. She is so proud of it that she calls everyone to look at it but after the landlord’s dirty trick she decides to destroy her creation, but the more she hits the plaster, the more she becomes angry and frustrated, “for every inch of the broken plaster there was a scar on her heart. She had destroyed that which had taken her so many years of prayer and longing to build up” (95). In this state of deep anger Mrs. Preston did not recognize Hanneh, “for the first time she noticed the ravages of worry and hunger” (86).

Mrs. Preston is a rich woman, whose hands are the opposite of Hanneh’s hands, hers are “fine, white” (76). She is the woman for whom Hanneh works as a laundress, they are close because they support each other, she describes the protagonist as a humble person and affirms that “When I go away from you I could just sit down and cry” (76), she also appreciates her because she loves what is “beautiful” (76) and she “expresses it in your washing just as a painter paints it in a picture” (76). Like Hanneh also her son is working in the United States Army.

Jake Safransky is her husband, “a stoop-shouldered, care-crushed man” (66) who does not appreciate his wife’s work and in front of the landlord’s decision does not defend her, but suggests she should not have painted the walls of their apartment.

In this short story Anzia Yeziarska focuses over the impossibility to achieve the American dream. The protagonist, Hanneh Hayyeh is an immigrant who finds in painting the walls of her house a way to become American. She wants to produce a change of her living conditions: the dirty, old and grey tenement apartment that symbolizes her poverty is transformed into a bright house, that resembles those of American people. She saved her money from “the extra washings” (66) for it, it is the product of her hard work, she dreamt about that and now this dream has become reality. The apartment “lights up my eyes like sunshine in the room” (67) and also “my new-painted kitchen will light up your heart with

joy” (71), she does it for herself because it is a way to take the distances from her roots, to abandon the poverty which has been characterizing her and her family since they were in Russia, it clearly is a way to redeem herself. This was the belief people had when they settled in America, also they thought, like the protagonist, that “the lowest nobody got something to give to America” (89) and for this reason foreigners were spurred to come here, sharing the belief that they had the possibility to be heard. This was not the reality because Americans when facing them usually took advantage of their inferiority and ignorance, like in this specific case. Indeed Hanneh goes to court because she thinks the judge will listen to her and her needs “And that’s what I got to give to America-the last breath in my body for justice” (89), but she is forced to return home defeated, suffering and compelled to leave “all this beautifulness that cost me the blood from my heart” (93) and to beg on the street.

“The Free Vacation House” is the fourth short story that Anzia Yeziarska presents. It speaks about a Jewish immigrant woman who settled in America and has five children: Masha, Mendel, Frieda, Sonya and Aby. She is on the threshold of “a nervous breakdown” (97) and she receives the visit of a nurse from the “Social Betterment Society” because she does not “get the children ready for school in time” (97) and suggests her to take a break and to rest in a vacation house in the country. After being questioned about her life and living conditions and the doctor’s examination she is ready to go to the house. Here the “fat lady all in white, with a teacher’s look on her face” (108) lists all the rules that women had to follow, there are so many rules that she starts thinking that it is better to stay home and in the end she returns happy to her house.

The protagonist’s name is not given, she is a mother who arrived in America with her five children. She has to take care of her children and the house but she is not able to manage everything all on her own. She is on the threshold of a nervous breakdown and when her children’s teacher, Miss Holcomb, visits her to understand why her children are never on time for school, she suggests her to go to a free vacation house in the country. When the doctor examines her and the nurse poses her the teacher’s same questions she feels ashamed because other women, like her are listening to all her affairs. All the women were with their children and they all followed the nurse “like stupid cows” (104) heading to the train. On the train to the country the protagonist was breathing “the fresh-smelling country air” (105) which “made me feel so fine!” (105), “I soon forgot all my troubles” (108). She feels a new person, this clean country air gives her new strength. When she sat at the dining table her first thought is “I sat down to the table like a somebody” (108), for

the first time in her life someone cooked for her and she was not serving the others. This condition changes rapidly when she is given a “tag with our name written on it” (107); “like tagged horses” (107) and listens to all the strict rules she has to follow in order to live there, she feels distressed and hopes to go back home. When she returns back home she is so happy that “I could cry from thankfulness” (113); she is cheerful to “move around my own house” (113) and to live without grievous rules.

It is interesting how the author uses the space. Like Hanneh Hayyeh and Shenah Pessah, also the protagonist of this short story dreams to escape from her poor and humble condition, as a migrant the idea of a free vacation house entices her. On the train she feels happy and she states “Ah, how grand I felt, just on the sky to look! Ah, how grand I felt just to see the green grass-and the free space-and no houses!” (105), instead of looking at the grey and dirty “fire-escapes with garbage-cans” from her flat (105). When she arrives and looks at the dining room which is beautiful, decorated with colored flowers and clean napkins she can feel the tranquility, peace and cleanliness she has been dreaming of for the past ten years. This environment, which can be compared to a “locus amoenus” gives her positive feelings but this atmosphere is demolished when the “fat lady” (108) tells her the rules to which obey in the house, she perceives this life worse than her life in poverty. It is like the space starts oppressing her and the only escape is her real home. When she returns she looked “out from my window on the fire-escapes, full with bedding and garbage-cans, and on the wash lines full with clothes. All these ugly things was grand in my eyes” (113): now she feels at home, in the space she organizes by herself and no one can say anything about her decisions. In the ends she states “Even the high brick walls all around made me feel like a bird what just jumped out from a cage” (113).

The following short story is entitled “The Miracle”. The protagonist, Sara Reisel lives with her Jewish family in Poland. She is not satisfied of her life, she wants love. She receives a letter from a friend of hers, Hanneh Hayyeh, who tells her that in America, for a girl it is easy to find love and here men run after women. Sara pushed by her friend’s letter is determined to go in the golden land. But there is only one problem, she does not have the money to buy the ship ticket, her brother suggests her to pawn her father’s Holy Torah and her mum’s silver candlesticks. She manages to arrive to America, she starts working in a factory but all her dreams vanished, during the day she only sees machines and her colleagues, not a single man. Upset she goes to the matchmaker but it is difficult for him to find a man who wants a woman without a dowry, unexpectedly she moves every time closer to her teacher during classes in a night school and they fall in love.

Sara Reisel is a Jewish girl from Savel, in Poland. She lives there with her parents and her brother, Yosef. The family is a poor one, she states at the very beginning “Like all people who have nothing, I lived on dreams” (114), they do not even have 50 rubles to buy the ship ticket to go to America. From the beginning she claims she wants to go there because “like the hunger for bread was my hunger for love”; “I want love! I want love! I can’t live-I can’t breathe without love!” (115). Her friend’s letter convinces her to go to America, her words “America is a lover’s land”; “In America millionaires fall in love with poorest girls. Matchmakers are out of style, and a girl can get herself married to a man without the worries for a dowry” (115). She describes her house “Everything was old and poor, and not a thing to get money on- nothing except father’s Saifer Torah- the Holy Scrolls- and mother’s silver candlesticks, her wedding present from our grandmother” (119-120), she decides to pawn those things and manages to arrive in the New World. There she feels alone because “All that my face saw all day long was girls and machines- and nothing else” (127). She feels lonely also at home and decides to go the matchmaker as people were used to in Poland. She is disgusted by the matchmaker’s attitude because he is only interested in money and tells her that it is hard to find a man who wants a woman without money like her. Her sadness vanishes when she starts to think to “Make a person of yourself” (132), she wants to be her own change and in order to do so she starts attending night classes to learn English “It was such great happiness to learn to read and write the English words” (133). She falls in love with her teacher, who she compares to God, “My teacher was so much above me that he wasn’t a man to me at all. He was God” (135). They start a relationship but when school closes for vacation she returns sad and alone, she cannot see him anymore and she feels so empty inside that she thinks “Why don’t I kill myself? Why don’t something happen to me? No consumption, no fever, no plague or death ever comes to save me from this terrible world” (138). Also her teacher feels that something is missing in his life and decides to go visit her, he wants her as she is, he falls in love with her true nature.

Her parents are the prototype of the Jewish parents who strictly follow the Torah and whose values are rooted in their traditional culture. When Sara proposes to pawn the candlesticks and the Holy Torah her parents do not agree, these things are sacred and handed down from generation to generation. They do not want to do such a thing. Her father gasped at her: “Should I sell my life, my soul from generation and generation? Sell my Saifer Torah? Not if the world goes under!” (120). After pawning, her dad’s only hope is to have his daughter married as soon as possible to get back the Holy book.



Sara's teacher is the man she was looking for in America. Even though the semester has already begun he proposes himself to help her make up the lessons she missed, also he helps her to express herself in English without making her feel that it is a burden. He notices Sara's hunger for learning and her need to "make a person of myself" (134), her desire of becoming a new American person attracts him. "He was God" (135) states Sara. At the end they fall in love and also he affirms that he needs Sara by stating that "You can save me" (141), "I am bond by formal education and conventional traditions" (136).

This short story explores the theme of the American dream, but unlike the previous short stories, here Yeziarska clearly displays the negative aspects hidden in it. People were driven to America to escape poverty and subordination, hoping that they would have had a better life, but in reality the modern America concealed other traps. First of all she discovers the materialism and how much people are attached to money: the matchmaker can be seen as an example, he claims "five dollars for the stepping in" (129) and he reveals her that in America is hard for a girl to get married without a dowry: she is stunned in front of his "thick-skinness" (130). She is moved by hunger to the New World, her hunger is the need for love, education and better life conditions that she finds in her teacher "The miracle!" cried my heart; the miracle of America come true!" (141). She fortunately finds her path to Americanization, to become a realized person, helped by a man, even though she reminds herself that if women "don't get a husband they don't think the world is over; they turn their mind to something else" (132). He gives her the possibility to achieve her dream. The teacher on the other side is the prototype of the man who lives in a modern and industrialized society "I am a prisoner of convention" (136), which bounds people "by formal education and conventional traditions" (136). He is attracted by her inner spirit, that is not tainted by the rules and prescriptions of modern society, she represents spontaneity, naturalness and the touch of color that is missing in his grey city life; for this reason he needs her to give him those aspects which have been weakened in him. The relationship between the two is not unilateral, such as in "Wings", here both Sara and the man need each other; it is common in Yeziarska's writings to read about the love story of a poor immigrant woman with a learned man: these are the stories which resemble the author's love story with John Dewey.

"Where Lovers Dream" is the sixth short story. Sara the protagonist, is invited to her friend's wedding. Here she sees David, the man who she loved in her youth. Their love is pure and intense, they talk to each other about everything and they want to get married, but after David's graduation something changes. His uncle does not agree with their

marriage because he thinks the girl is attracted to him only for his wealth. Sara and her parents hear their conversation, because they live close, and she feels rejected and despised. The next day as usual, she thinks they would meet at six in the corner of the shirt-waist factory in which she works, but he is not there, then she goes home but also here no one has news about him. David after receiving her letter goes to her house, but her father gets angry and disgusted at this man, sends him away. The protagonist marries another man, Sam, and David does the same; in the end she states that she has never felt the same emotions and love she once felt toward David in her youth “It ain’t that I still love him, but nothing don’t seem real to me no more” (162).

Sara, the protagonist, is a Jewish girl who, with her family, settled in America from the Russian Empire. She works in a shirt-waist factory and tells about the deep love she felt in her youth with a rich man, David Novak. He teaches her how to speak English “And then he would fix my tongue and teeth together and make me say after him:”th-think, th-thank-th-thought; this, that, there” (147), she reads the journals he buys her and she always wants “to look neat and be up-to-date like the American girls” (146). They share every single thought to each other, she states “People began to look happy just looking on us” (145). Hoping to impress positively David’s uncle she fixes her humble and poor house, she wants her father to “dress up in an American white shirt and starched collar” (149), her “mother in a new white waist and a blue checked apron” (149). This excitement mixed with fear changes into sorrow and “only the crying and nothing else happening made my heart give a shiver, like bad luck was in the air” (151) when she hears the conversation between David and his uncle. Even though she marries another man she remains still deeply tied to David and she states in the last three lines of the story “For the little while when we was lovers breathed the air from the high places where love comes from, and I can’t no more come down” (161).

David Novak spends his days at school and during the night he works in a drudgery. He is studying medicine to become a doctor and his plan is to get married with Sara and open his office with his uncle’s financial support. He buys Sara the “Ladies’ Home Journal” (145) and other stuff to help her in her path to Americanization. Their love is pure but his uncle’s words kill it and bring a consistent change in David’s behavior. It is like he depended on his uncle opinions and cannot decide by using his own mind.

Uncle Rosemberg embodies the rich man who represents the materiality of the society, he does not believe in the true love of the couple, he only thinks that Sara wants to take

economic advantage of the future marriage. He does not accept this relationship “Marry! Marry yourself into that beggar house! Are you crazy?” (152). With his words he makes his nephew change his mind.

In this short story the focus is on the love story between Sara and David. This story has been defeated by the character of uncle Rosenberg, he represents the materiality, superficiality and attachment to money that characterize the majority of those affluent men at the turn of the century in America. Like in “The Miracle” it is interesting to look at the relationship between a poor and humble woman to a learned man, she needs him to find her way in the American society and also he for his part needs her pureness and “wild” nature, but in this case the society embodied by the uncle oppresses him and he feels he must obey him.

“Soap and Water” is the following short story in *Hungry Hearts*. It speaks about a young girl coming from Russia, who hopes to realize herself in America. Her dream is to become a teacher and in order to do so she starts attending a preparatory school, “There I shall learn to express myself, to voice my thoughts” (168). During college she works and she neglects herself: for this reason the dean of her college, Miss Whiteside, denies her diploma to work as a teacher. She feels that nobody listens to her and so she criticizes the American society. One day while walking on the street she meets her teacher of chemistry, Miss Van Ness who tells her about her life now, they speak and for the first time in America, the protagonist feels to be heard and understood.

The narrator does not provide the protagonist’s name, we only know that she is a girl who arrived in America, moved by the hunger for independence, self-realization and freedom that she was missing in her country. Before going to college she goes to a preparatory school in which she learns to speak English, while she is studying in college she works in a laundry from 1 to 8 am and after college from 6 to 11 pm. She does not manage to take care of her physical appearance “But I, after college hours, had only time to bolt a soggy meal, and rush back to the grind of the laundry till eleven at night” (166). She believed that “college was a place where I should find self-expression, and vague, pent-up feelings could live as thoughts and grow as ideas” (168). The American society that she has for a long time been dreaming of as something positive that helps one to make the best out of himself/herself, starts to be seen by the protagonist as something that inspects you from head to feet, only interested in your appearance. She finds in her

chemistry teacher the way to escape from this superficiality and materiality, “America! I found America” (177).

Miss Whiteside is the dean of the college who denies the protagonist her possibility to work as a teacher. She is compared to the “big, fat, policeman” (170) who scolded her at Central Park because she lied on the grass without knowing it was forbidden. She withholds the protagonist’s diploma because of “my skin looked oily, my hair unkempt, and my finger-nails sadly neglected” (163) and she suggests her “Soap and water are cheap. Any one can be clean” (163).

The chemistry instructor represents the protagonist’s keystone. She listens to what she has to say, she states “I wanted from her love, understanding, or nothing” (176), she finds in her “a friend” (177) who “unbound and freed me and suffused me with light” (177).

In this short story Anzia Yeziarska, by using the protagonist as her tool, achieves a greater awareness: “clothes form the basis of class distinctions, that after graduation the opportunities for the best positions are passed out to those who are best-dressed, and the students too poor to put up a front are pigeon-holed and marked unfit and abandoned to the mercy of the wind” (172). In America it was tough for immigrants to immediately find a good job and to be considered equal to those who were born in America, it was a process that required time. The dean of the college and the policeman represent the superficiality of the society; those people who ground their opinion on the physical appearance, on the packaging of something, they are not interest in what that packaging is hiding, they are indifferent to the story, the life, the struggles of the contents. The protagonist claims “The hate which I felt for Miss Whiteside spread like poison inside my soul, into hate for all clean society” (172), she felt society was “against me. Whenever I met a well-dressed person, I felt the secret stab of a hidden enemy” (172). This wrath and sorrow is changed into vitality and happiness when the instructor Miss Van Ness goes beyond her physical appearance and starts to ask her questions about her life, she is interested in her contents. Eventually the protagonist finds a person who really cares for her, “I felt that even if I had not said a word she would have understood all I had to say as if I had spoken” (177), with her “My past was the forgotten night. Sunrise was all around me” (177). The teacher becomes her “friend” (177), the person who will head her through the right path to independence and self-realization in the New World. She represents with different traits and features John Barnes in “Wings”, Sam Arkin in “Hunger”, Sara’s teacher in “The miracle” and David Novak in “Where lovers dream”.

The eight short story “The Fat of the land” speaks about Hanneh Breineh, a woman coming from Poland, who settled in the New York ghetto. She has six children and always complains about how many mouths she has to feed every single day and the few money she has to do so. She exposes all her concerns and sufferings to her neighbor Mrs. Pelz who tries to comfort her. Years pass and Mrs. Pelz go visit Hanneh in her new house, now she is a rich woman because she inherited money from her husband’s death and all her children climbed the corporate ladder. Even though her wealth she feels to be a lonely person, her children are ashamed of her, she decides to escape and finds protection at Mr. and Mrs. Pelz’s house. She confronts with them and pours out her thoughts and worries. The day after she returns home with a higher awareness and strength.

Hanneh Breineh is the protagonist, she arrived in America to run away from the “black life” (219) she had in Poland. She has six children: Fanny, Benny, Sammy, the youngest, Abe, Jake and the sixth children’s name is not given. Hanneh unloads with Mrs. Pelz about the difficulties she has in taking care of her babies, she states they threaten her life “They are here already, the savages! They are here already to shorten my life! They heard you all over the hall, in all the houses around! she also calls them “Murderers!” (191). The youngest is the source of the main pain, she confesses to her neighbor “The earth should only take it before it grows up!” (186). Mrs. Pelz always comforts her by telling her to stay strong because when they will grow and enter the world of work they will become a resource and not an obstacle anymore. She is the type of immigrant whose culture and habits are always part of her every-day life “No matter how hard she tried to learn polite table manners, she always found people staring at her, and her daughter rebuking her for eating with the wrong fork or guzzling the soup or staining the cloth” (211), she also quotes the Talmud “some children give their mothers dry bread and water and go to heaven for it, and some give their mother roast duck and go to Gehenna because it’s not given with love (216-217). When she becomes rich due to the five hundred dollars she received from her husband’s death and her children’s brilliant careers, she moves from her apartment in Delancey Street to Eighty-Fourth Street. One day Mrs. Pelz goes to visit her and although her wealth she confesses she feels deep loneliness and can’t stand her children who always criticize her, for this reason she decides to go away from home and she spends a night at Mr. and Mrs. Pelz’s house. Mrs. Pelz listens to her confessions and surges but underlines how lucky she is and the only problem is that she does not recognize it. During the morning of the following day Hanneh goes back home, aware of “the fat of the land” (223) on which she can rely on.

Mrs. Pelz is Hanneh Breineh's neighbor, she lives with her husband. Before arriving in America she cooked in "a banker's house" (180). She personifies the rationality, which Hanneh does not display in the story. When the protagonist complains and shows her anger with strong words, especially toward her children, she always tries to make her reflect over her thoughts. Her character is crucial in the end, because she helps Hanneh to think over her privileged position in the American society and finally gives her the strength to move forward.

The key words of this story are essentially three: hunger, money and loneliness. Hanneh Breineh as every single immigrant woman in America found it difficult to sustain herself and even worse was the situation of women with children. She arrives in America to start a new and better life "Some people work themselves up in the new world"; "For them is America flowing with milk and honey" (180), there was the belief that in the New World there was a return to the Golden Age, period in which people were rich, happy and could improve themselves. America symbolized new opportunities for everyone, here people started a new life from scratch and their happiness depended on money; as Hanneh states "In America money is everything"; "Without money I'm a living dead one" (181), indeed at the very beginning she laments the lack of money due to her numerous family. The protagonist confesses Mrs. Pelz that "Nobody has pity on me"; "nobody believes me until I'll fall down like a horse in the middle of the street" (186): she is alone, even the landlord is only interested in the money, he only comes to her when he needs the rent and when something is broken he is not interested to fix it. Mrs. Pelz comforts her by assuring her that she will have money when her children will be grown and able to work. She is tired and disheartened of her life, she is so exhausted that she thinks about her children's possible death "but no death takes mine away" (186).

With her husband and children's money she manages to move in a better house. She has a servant, a luxurious home with curtains, "shades on all windows" (196): Mrs. Pelz states "Twenty years ago she used to eat from the pot to the hand, and now she lives in such a palace" (197). Despite the affluence she is not as satisfied as she dreamt. She admits "When I was poor, I was free, and could holler and do what I like in my own house. Here I got to lie still like a mouse under a broom" (203). She is unsatisfied because she understands that money is not enough: in order to become happy in America the path is different. Her children are ashamed of her, Fanny states "I can't appear with mother in a box at the theater" (208), she also refutes the hall-boy to take her basket to her apartment, causing Fanny's shame who yells at her mother "Mother, you are the ruination of my life!

You have driven away Mrs. Van Suyden, as you have driven away all my best friends” (216). Hanneh’s children become American citizens, they integrate in the society, but their mother did not blend like them. She can’t get rid of her roots, even when she tries to hide them, they emerge; she cannot conceal her true nature, and for this reason she is alone, she does not have American friends, even her Americanized children distance themselves from her. Benny affirms “God knows how hard I tried to civilize her so as not to have to blush with shame when I take her anywhere” (209) and also “She’ll spill the beans that we come from Delancey Street the minute we introduce her anywhere” (208). She reveals Mrs. Pelz that she does not understand why her children are so mad at her when she was the person who helped them to make it through in America. The only person who listens to her is Mrs. Pelz who hosts her when she feels rejected by her children; she cannot stand the materiality which pervades the country, indeed she states “I’m starving, but I can’t swallow down their American eating” (218), she also criticizes the luxurious and rich restaurants in which “it looks so fancy on the plate, but it’s nothing but straw in the mouth” (218). Mrs. Pelz opened the protagonist’s eyes by stating “You have everything. You are living on the fat of the land. You go right back home and thank God that you don’t have my bitter lot” (220). Hanneh in the end decides to go home, thanks to her neighbor’s help she realizes that she has to accept her inner self and try to merge it with the features of the American society.

The second to last short story of the collection is entitled “My Own People”. It tells the story of Sophie Sapinsky, a young girl who manages to escape from the ghetto and finds a cheap room in New York. One day, while she was trying to write her essay, Hanneh Breineh, her landlady, knocks on her door and interrupts her by telling her the troubles of her immigrant life; suddenly her daughter Fannie arrives and tells the women that at work the inspector of the Children Society discovered she is too young to work and that Hanneh would be put in jail. Hanneh starts crying and cursing her children, because Fannie’s wages were a source of income for the entire family. Their neighbor, Shmendrick, hearing the laments shows up at the apartment’s door and invites everyone to have a taste of the cake and wine his friends gave him for the holidays. Soon the atmosphere of happiness and lightheartedness is demolished by the visit of the inspector of the Betterment Society who accuses Shmendrick to be a liar because he stated he was poor and in America he did not have friends who could support him. Fortunately the story ends happily and Sophie finds the inspiration to keep on writing her essay.

Sophie Sapinsky works in a sweatshop and while working she attends a night school. She likes writing and before leaving her family she started writing an essay "Believe in yourself", but when she moves to New York her inspiration dries out, "There's nothing here that's alive not a word yet says what's in me..." (229). Even though Hanneh Breineh interrupts her she finds in her an interesting person "She saw her own life in Hanneh Breineh's life. Her efforts to write were like Hanneh Breineh's efforts to feed her children" (235-236). She defends Schmendrick in front of the "superintendent of the Social Betterment Society" (248), without any fear she yells at him "You bosses of the poor! This man Shmendrik, whose house you broke into, whom you made to shame like a beggar-he is the one Jew from whom the Jews can be proud! He gives all he is-all he has-as God gives." (248). The interactions with Hanneh Breineh and her neighbor Shmendrik give the protagonist a new and higher inspiration for her writing.

Hanneh Breineh is Sophie's landlady. She is from Poland and has three children: Fannie, a young girl who works in a factory, Yosef who is not able to keep on working because "One week he works and nine weeks he lays sick" (231) and the third one is not introduced. She describes her children as savages "Gluttons-wolves-thieves!" (237). Hanneh finds in Sophie a friend, a means of release, the figure to whom she tells her struggles and her worries without any filters. When Fannie was discovered working in the factory she does not know how to go on without her wages and she desperately cries "What's my life-nothing but one terrible, never-stopping fight with the grocer and the butcher and the landlord..." (235). Like Sophie she came to America hoping for a better life but she asks herself "If America is so interested in poor people's children, then why don't they give them to eat till they should go to work?" (236), it is here in America that all her hopes fall to pieces. She only finds relief when Schmendrick gives her and her children to eat.

Schmendrick is Sophie's neighbor, who lives in front of her. He is an old man, described by Hanneh as a shoemaker, who "ain't no real shoemaker. He never yet made a pair of whole shoes in his life. He's a learner of the old country" (226), he is a generous man "every time he sees in the street a child with torn feet, he calls them in and patches them up. His own eating, the last bite from his mouth, he divides up with them" (227). He displays his generosity at the end when he shares his "precious cake" (240) with "nuts and raisins and even a bottle of wine" (238) with Hanneh Breineh, her children and the protagonist. When the inspector of the "Social Betterment Society" (246) shows up and accuses him of being a liar "You told us that you had no friends when you applied to us



for assistance” (246) he turns to religion to find a relief: he “groped blindly for the Bible” (248) and “he began the chant of the oppressed-the wail of the downtrodden” (248).

In this short story the protagonist, Sophie Sapinsky, moved by a sense of independence leaves the ghetto to find a room in New York where she has “her room, securely hers” (227). Here she loses her inspiration and asks herself “Was it worth while to give up the peace of home, the security of a regular job-suffer hunger, loneliness, and want-for what? Would she ever become articulate enough to express beautifully what she saw and felt?” (228). “The intensity of experience, the surge of emotion that had been hers when she wrote” (229) have vanished, she could not find them anymore. She is not able to understand how it happened, the only thing she is able to say is “But it is in me!” “It must be in me! I believe in it! I got to get it out” (229). Sophie Sapinsky and Hanneh Breineh are two halves who complement each other: Hanneh needs Sophie because she is the only person she can speak to, she feels to be listened to and in a sense Sophie calms her down, she drives her vibrant and dynamic nature in a more rational way. On the other side Sophie needs Hannah because she finds in her the true nature of the ghetto, that gives her the push to find the inspiration to write her essay, that loneliness and city life shred from her. At the end Hanneh Breineh and Shmendrik’s stories takes her back to her origins: the ghetto life, the place that provides her energy and spiritual wealth, she states “Hanneh Breineh, Shmendrik, they will not be stilled in me, till all America stops to listen” (249). In particular this short story mirrors Anzia Yezierska’s own writing career: when she achieved wealth and fame she could not find inspiration anymore for her writings, she felt that something was missing, and the only cure to this ailment was to go back to the ghetto; the place in which she could breathe the real essence of life and the place in which she could be herself.

“How I found America” is the last short story of *Hungry Hearts* and it is divided into three parts. The I part speaks about a family that lives in the Russian Empire. The father of the family is the main point of reference of the whole Jewish community; one day a woman brings him a letter to read that her husband sent her from America. In this letter he displays the advantages of living there, the prosperity and opportunities that the land provides. In front of this positive description everyone in the community hopes to move there.

The protagonist of the story is a young girl whose father is “the only man in the village who could read” (254). Her name is not given and the story is told from her point of view.

She dreams to move to America because “In the schools of America I’d lift up my head and laugh and dance- a child with other children” (262).

Her father is the head of the Village of Sukovoly, the only learned man, who teaches “the neighbor’s children” (250) “the ancient poetry of the Hebrew race” (250). He has a long red beard described as “falling over the Book of Isaiah” (250) while reading it. Even despite the Cossack’s warnings he goes on teaching his pupils the Talmud. In the end after reading Masheh Mindel’s letter he hopes to move to America, like everyone who listened to him.

Masheh Mindel is known in the village as the “water-carrier’s wife” (253). She is the woman who brings to the head of the village the letter her husband, Gedalyeh Mindel, sent her from the New World. Satisfaction grows in her while listening to the letter because she understands that her life in America would change “The dead, sunken eyes became alive with light” (255) and she becomes happier when she hears her husband’s words “Fifty rubles I am sending you for your ship-ticket to America” (257).

Gedalyeh Mindel is the Jewish man who moves to America. With his letter he opens his people’s minds to the American Dream. His words are filled with positivity: “my sun is beginning to shine in America. I am becoming a person- a business man”; “I have for myself a stand in the most crowded part of America”; “The day begins with my pushcart full of fruit, and the day never ends before I count up at least \$2.00 profit- that means four rubles” (254). In America he becomes a new person “Mister Mindel they call me in America”; it is the land of freedom of speech and choice, indeed he states “there is no Czar in America” and “In America they ask everybody who should be the President” (256).

In the I Part of the last short story is explored the topic of the American dream, America is depicted as the “golden country” (262), the land of freedom and self-expression: “Everybody can do what he wants with his life in America”; “There are no high or low in America”; “Learning flows free like milk and honey” (261). The New World represents the locus amoenus to which everyone aims to go to, it represents the freedom from constraints and strict ties and it is for this reason that every single person of the Village of Sukovoly thinks about how to get the money in order to buy the ship ticket.

The II Part of “How I found America” continues the story of the family introduced in the I Part. It narrates the travel of the family to “the swarming streets of the ghetto” (263) and focuses on the character of the protagonist in the New World. Her happiness is soon

destroyed by the new American way of life: she finds factory work oppressive and realizes the selfishness and the materiality which pervade the golden country. She tries to find relief in the “School for Immigrant Girls” (278) but also there she is not able to express herself.

From the beginning, when the protagonist lands in America, she starts to be oppressed by many doubts. The first doubt emerges when she is reaching her new house and sees all the “ash-cans and garbage-cans cluttering the side-walks” (263), she does not see “the green fields and open spaces” (263) she has been dreaming of since her departure. The second doubt emerges from the darkness that dominates the “palace” (264) which is her new house that her mother compares to a “grave” (264). Other doubts arise when she starts working in the sweatshop that she compares to a “prison” (265); working there brings her a sense of oppression. She realizes that it is not the America she hoped to find, indeed several times she asks herself “Where is America?” (265). She cannot find happiness neither in her colleagues’ faces, forced to work as animals under the control of a strict boss who is only interested in his profit; for this reason this character is compared for his features to the “Cossack” (268). The protagonist is disgusted by her colleagues’ self-interest because nobody helps her when the boss fires her for complaining on behalf of every worker for the meager salary they all received “fifty cents a dozen shirts instead of seventy-five” (268). She introduces the concept of the melting pot, indeed she believes in the strength that comes from people helping each other “I was full of the joy of togetherness” (276) that vanished at the right time she set foot in America. Before opening her eyes in hospital after the car crash she dreamt of a “heaven of the new world” (275), a place in which “Learning flows free like milk and honey” (275), “I was in my heaven- in the schools of America- in open, sunny fields- a child with other children” (275). She came to America “to make from myself a person” (267), and she realizes she needs education to achieve this goal. The protagonist starts attending the “School for Immigrant Girls”, here she finds a woman whose “Symphy and understanding seemed to breathe from her serene presence” (280) but this idyllic aura soon is demolished because the protagonist soon realizes that she was not there to help her to find a way to express herself in the New World and “to think out thoughts that makes people” (282), she was there to help her learning a trade, in order “to earn a good living” (282). She believes in the American dream, and the possibility for immigrants to “be people-not ‘hands’- not ‘slaves’ of the belly!” (282) but this general attachment to money disgusts her. In the end of the short story she reveals that she came to America to “open up my heart and fly free

in the air- to sing- to dance-to live-to love... Here I got all those grand things in me, and America won't let me give nothing" (282). The protagonist's beliefs, hopes and dreams vanished and sorrow takes their place, she is disheartened because she did not find her way through which to express her nature, vitality and colors in the New World.

In the III part of "How I found America" is introduced another character, Bessie's teacher: Miss Latham. She is described by Bessie as "a real person", a "friend" (291). When the protagonist goes to her office she presents her as a woman who "did not look so tired like the other teachers. She was correcting papers and was absorbed in her task" (293). She is the person, the protagonist was looking for since her arrival in New York, she listens to her needs, thoughts and problems. She is "The soul- the spirit- of America!" (298).

It is in this part of "How I found America" that the protagonist realizes the need for a friend: a person who can understand her. She is walking home from the Immigrant School and while nearing her house she sees her mother with her siblings on the sidewalk with all their stuff. She understands that the eviction has been caused by the unpaid rent due to her permanence in the hospital. A neighbor invites them for a soup and she is interested by the poem her sister's teacher gave her to read. In this poem are summarized all her thoughts and beliefs, which for her are hard to find in America. One day she decides to visit the teacher in her office, she finds in her the friend she has been dreaming of, she feels free to express her thoughts and emotions and at last she feels to be understood.

The last part of the last short story of the collection *Hungry Hearts* reveals the needs and thoughts of every single immigrant in the New World. The protagonist's voice can be seen as the voice of the whole immigrant community in America at the turn of the century. The protagonist understands the "barriers of materialism" (298) and selfishness that pervade America, but she does not want to homologate, she states "Only my body I must sell into slavery-not my heart- not my soul" (287); also she wants someone who gladly listens to her story and does not only need her for her hands: she needs a person who can gather her real essence. While speaking with Miss Latham she claims "Always something comes between the immigrant and the American"; "They see only his skin, his outside- not what's in his heart. They don't care if he has a heart... I wanted to find some one that would look on me- myself" (294). For this incongruity between her needs and that of America she states "I'm an immigrant many years already here, but I'm still seeking America" (293), her and America are like two parallel lines that cannot find a

common point; it will be only in the moment in which she will be herself at hundred percent that she will start living in the America she has for a long been dreaming of. Like every single character in *Hungry Hearts*, also the protagonist of “How I found America” is hungry, her hunger comes from the need to find someone that can understand her. The hunger will be appeased only when she will find a person ready to embrace her true essence, the person she is, without the constraints and rules made by the society. She wants to voice who she really is, her hope is to “dig my way up to the light!” (287) and “to do something with my life” (295). She finds in Miss Lathman her person, as Sara Reisel in “The miracle” found in her teacher: these bonds such as friendship or love are used as tools, in these short stories, to give the possibility to the immigrant woman to find the so yearned “America”. These bonds with which the woman protagonist both expresses her true nature and finds her path in the American society find resonance in Miss Lathman words “We go forth all to seek America. And in the seeking we create her. In the quality of our search shall be the nature of America that we create” (297), America is not the result of individuality; it is the product of collectivity: it is in the plurality that its essence can be found (melting pot), everyone gives his/her own contribute in the making of the American society we are still speaking about today.

### **3.3. The struggle between nature and culture**

Anzia Yeziarska is the author who best depicts the struggle of the Jewish woman who, while looking for independence, on the one hand tried to live “her life as an Americanerim” (see Wilentz, 1991-1992, 33) and on the other tried to maintain the tie with her roots, the Jewish community from which she hoped to escape. Jewish immigrant women who arrived in the New World hoped to find better life conditions and to get rid of all the strict principles of their Jewish culture. The key word to understand Yeziarska’s works is: “mediation” (see Wilentz, 1991-1992, 33), it is through this concept that we can understand the relationship between the immigrants’ desires and their attempts to take part into the America society of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The protagonist of *Bread Givers* mirrors the author’s own experience, she displays us the “double bind” (see Wilentz, 1991-1992, 34) of the Jewish immigrant who aims to blend into the American society and in order to do so she has to get rid of her culture of origin but when she realizes it she becomes rootless and consequently hungry. Through the character of Sara Smolinsky is explored the troubled relationship between nature and culture, between Old World and New World, between Russia and America. Sara leaves her family because she cannot stand her father anymore, the character who represents the Old World with its strict and close-minded

rules, he was always saying that “a woman without a man is less than nothing” (see Yeziarska, 2005, 294). This stormy relationship resembles that of Anzia Yeziarska herself, when she came back from Hollywood and her father told her “He who separates himself from people buries himself in death. A woman alone, not a wife and not a mother, has no existence” (see Wilentz, 1991-1992, 37). Like her, all her female protagonists think that the only way to become American is to distance themselves from their families and consequently from their roots. In *Bread Givers* Sara thinks to have found her path in America: she becomes a “teacherin” (see Wilentz, 1991-1992, 35), she marries an Americanized Jewish man and she moves from the dirt, poor and gray ghetto of the Lower East Side. But everything changes when her mother dies: in front of a father who is not able to live on his own in the New World, she feels that she cannot abandon him, he is part of her, he is blood of her blood, Sara states “Can I hate my arm, my hand that is part of me? Can a tree hate the roots from which it sprang? Deeper than love, deeper than pity, is that oneness of the flesh that’s in him and in me. Who gave me the fire, the passion, to push myself up from the dirt?” (see Yeziarska, 2005, 286). Sara realizes she cannot leave her father alone, in need, she is the only person who can help him. In the end of the novel Sara and her husband host her father in their house; when she was young she thought that escaping was the only way to make a change, but now, that she is adult and more rational she understands the importance of mediating between her new American way of life and her father, who symbolizes her past “I suddenly realized that I had come back to where I had started twenty years ago when I began my fight for freedom. But in my rebellious youth, I thought I could escape by running away. And now I realized that the shadow of the burden was always following me, and here I stood face to face with it again” (see Yeziarska, 2005, 295). This is the only way with which she is loyal both to her culture and to that of America (see Wilentz, 1991-1992,35).

Even though with different stories and characters, Anzia Yeziarska displays the same theme also in her collection of short stories *Hungry Hearts*. It collects ten different situations in which the protagonists follow the same path, a Jewish immigrant woman arrives in America moved by the American Dream: here she hopes to escape from the poverty and cruelties which pervade the Russian Empire. What moves the migrants to achieve the American Dream is the hunger for the principles it displays: it is the wealth, independence, equality, self-fulfillment, autonomy and love associated to both friendship and love with a partner that give the foreigners the push to achieve it.

Hunger is the main trope used by Anzia Yeziarska in both *Bread Givers* and *Hungry Hearts*. According to the author hunger is “at the root of economics, sociology, literature, and all art” (see Pascual, 2003, 148). Hunger is part of her own identity: she experienced it in the Jewish ghetto in the Old World and it continues to be part of her life in the New World; the fact of embracing hunger instead of the products of industrialization is a way to refuse the assimilation into a society which she feels is not in line with her needs and principles. The novel *Bread Givers* opens with Sara who is peeling the potatoes in the kitchen: the place in which the family gathers for dinner. The Smolinsky’s family such as the protagonists in *Hungry Hearts* want to escape from the persecutions, poverty and dirt of the ghetto, in order to find peace, abundance and light that only America could provide at the time. Hunger is used as a tool that both tied the immigrant to her culture but also to the possibility of becoming American: only by consuming American products one becomes American, as Yeziarska states in her writings. Only consumption can work as a bridge between the two worlds, every single American product: the house, clothes, food, ... is a cultural and social marker. Every female character is pushed to America by the American dream: self-fulfillment, upward mobility, independence, truth and the desire, as Yeziarska stated “to make herself for a person” (see Pascual, 2003, 151). Sara Smolinsky’s hunger seemed to be mollified when she becomes a teacher, event which mirrors Yeziarska’s real life when she starts teaching home economics and meets her future husband, who for Yeziarska represents John Dewey, but soon disappointments in both cases start following. Both the author and her alter ego Sara, fall into a crisis: the death of Sara’s mother and Yeziarska’s own failed relationship with the philosopher and her new empty life in Hollywood bring the characters down. The saddest moments in her writings take place when material success is achieved and the dream is over: this is the price of Americanization. When her protagonists discover that the American way of life is not what they were looking for because it displays individualism, selfishness, materiality, class distinctions based on clothes and attachment to money they realize that this life does not fit with their real needs. In *Hungry Hearts* it is clearly depicted in “America and I”: the protagonist hopes to find a job with which she can convey her true essence but living in America only means “losing all that richness of the soul”; in “The Lost Beautifulness” the protagonist thinks that her “white-painted kitchen” will be a way to integrate and be accepted in America as a foreigner, but it reveals only her eviction. Another example can be found in “The fat of the land” in which Hanneh Breineh has the luck to move outside from the ghetto but wealth, the luxurious table linens and polite

table manners do not fit with her true self and the American materiality another time means a lack of substance and superficiality.

It is in this gloomy atmosphere that the protagonists in *Hungry Hearts* suddenly find a person who opens their arms ready to embrace their stories. This character can be seen as the alter ego of John Dewey, the person who is an inspiring and learned character who is ready to receive the wilderness and the vitality of the immigrant woman, because he needs it, it is a trait that the “clean society” (see Yeziarska, 2012, 172) tore up from him. The friend opens the protagonists’ eyes and helps her to start building her own path in America. Yeziarska’s protagonists realize that their self is not defined by consuming American products, neither the American dream is achieved. What is crucial is the importance to accept one’s own roots and story and embrace it with the American dream, indeed Yeziarska states in “Not a woman-not a writer”: “I had to break away from my mother’s cursing and my father’s preaching to live my life but without them I had no life. When you deny your parents, you deny the ground under your feet, the sky over your head. You become an outlaw, a pariah” (see Pascual, 2003, 149-153). In this way mediation is Anzia Yeziarska’s solution to the struggle between the two words and the hunger she speaks about cannot be translated with a specific word or expression, it is something more than material, as Pascual sates her “eyes, face, heart, soul, and stomach ravenously starve for more than bread”.





## Conclusion

Anzia Yeziarska is the woman who presents her experience as the example of all immigrant women who, in the past, emigrated to a foreign country and of all those women who are still struggling nowadays to integrate in an environment they feel far and not to be their own. The fears, struggles, hopes and thoughts both positive and negative that the author shares with the readers do not have to be seen as stagnant and clung to her past experience, these feelings are still alive and vibrant in any person who needs to find a new suitable place to call home. It is interesting how the author places herself in between past and present: she maintains strong the ties with her past, that is related to both her personal experience as a woman and her style as a writer, these are two different but complementary sides of Yeziarska, in which one gives the bases to the other. At first she feels the need to get rid of her former identity, in order to perfectly blend into the new American society but finally she understands that her past is part of her and denying it is like denying a part of herself.

The women she speaks about are daughters, mothers and wives who are living in a situation of poverty and also have been humiliated by those charity organizations they thought would have helped them, but in reality are only interested in making a considerable profit. Even though they are living in humble and very poor conditions they are strong women who leave the door open to their hope also in the worst moments, especially when it seemed to be hard, if not to say impossible to find a way out. The inner strength, sacrifice and loyalty to themselves are the fundamentals of their creed, no one forgets her origins which are the point of departure for their redemption. Even in those cases in which the American dream cannot be achieved, their fire remains alive and will never be quenched, the important is to fight in order to reach a personal liberation and inner growth.

Anzia Yeziarska launches a clear message that can be embraced also today: to become the best version of ourselves we have to be the protagonists of our own personal growth. It is important to fight for what we believe in every single aspect of our life; even in the moments of weakness we have to find something in what to believe to find the strength to keep going and Anzia Yeziarska is an example. Her stream of consciousness direct and simple leads her audience to investigate conflicts about parents and children, old and new, the culture of the Jewish “greenhorn” and that of the Americanized person and expectation versus reality: all themes that are still contemporary and will also affect future generations. The different stories depicted in *Bread Givers* and *Hungry Hearts* which

symbolize the narrations of her own life experiences help us to understand every single side of her past and can be related to every single human being. The author lay bares herself in her writings, hoping to be an example and to help those who find themselves in her situation.

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## Italian Summary

Anzia Yeziarska è l'autrice che meglio delinea l'esperienza delle donne ebraiche nel Nuovo Mondo. Nel momento di passaggio tra IX e XX secolo sia uomini che donne emigrano in America per fuggire all'antisemitismo che dilagava nell'impero russo. L'autrice si focalizza sulla figura della donna e le protagoniste di *Bread Givers* e *Hungry Hearts* ci rivelano l'esperienza stessa che Yeziarska ha dovuto affrontare in quanto donna ebrea immigrata, la quale ha dovuto iniziare da zero una nuova vita in un luogo a lei sconosciuto. Il concetto di successo è cruciale perché segna un punto di svolta nella carriera dell'autrice: il successo materiale che lei ottiene dopo aver firmato il contratto con Hollywood, le porta una perdita dal punto di vista spirituale che si traduce in insoddisfazione e sconforto. Ciò che le dà le forze per sollevarsi da questa situazione è il ghetto ebraico, che con la sua cultura e principi, nei quali lei si rispecchia, riesce a darle la forza per affrontare le difficoltà ed incertezze del nuovo mondo. Il valore dell'autrice è il risultato della combinazione tra le sue radici e i nuovi principi americani, Yeziarska comprende che la sua persona non è nient'altro che la combinazione tra vecchio e nuovo e la mediazione è la chiave che permette la risoluzione della tensione tra queste due facce che appartengono alla stessa medaglia. Il terzo concetto fondamentale che verrà analizzato nella tesi è quello di speranza, che si può definire come la speranza che tutti i migranti, uomini e donne riponevano in America, paese che attirava coloro che aspiravano ad una vita diversa.

Ci soffermeremo ad analizzare la figura della donna, e ciò che univa coloro che emigravano era la speranza nel cosiddetto sogno americano, che diffondeva l'idea della possibilità per chiunque di iniziare una nuova vita che ognuno può modellare a seconda delle proprie caratteristiche e del bagaglio di esperienze personali. Il nuovo mondo era visto come il luogo delle opportunità, in cui ognuno poteva mostrare la versione migliore di sé, il luogo in cui essere libero/a e in cui condurre una vita lontana dalle costrizioni. Queste speranze non sono immediate, ciò significa che una volta arrivati/e in territorio americano, queste speranze non sono automaticamente di tutti, ma sono ottenute ad un prezzo, che è quello dell'americanizzazione: una persona può definirsi americana solo quando consuma prodotti americani. Il processo di americanizzazione è un'arma a doppio taglio poiché da un lato permette la perfetta integrazione nella società americana ma allo stesso tempo però questo focus sulla materialità porta la persona emigrata ad allontanarsi dalle proprie radici, da ciò che lei/lui è veramente. Ciò che Anzia Yeziarska vuole comunicarci è l'importanza di saper controllare questa tensione, e lo si può fare solo



attraverso un processo di mediazione tra le due identità: quella originaria e quella nuova americana.