

MAGDALENA MATŁOKA
(JAGIELLONIAN UNIVERSITY)

THE EVERYDAY LIFE OF LOWER EAST SIDE JEWS
ON THE TURN OF THE 19TH AND 20TH CENTURY –
SELECTED ASPECTS IN THE LIGHT OF AMERICAN DAILY PRESS

ABSTRACT

The main aim of the article is to analyze the everyday life of New York Lower East Side at the turn of the 19th and 20th century in American daily press of the time. The article's chronological framework begins with the 1880 when the mass migration era started and ends with the outbreak of the World War I. The author attempts to answer the following research questions: How the everyday life of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe looked like in the eyes of American tabloid journalists and social workers? With what kind of daily problems Lower East Side Jews needed to cope with? What were the living conditions of the early 20th century New York Jewish slums inhabitants? And how they manage to create the institutional completeness among the district?

The research methods are: historical, sociological analysis and interpretation of American daily press and magazines, among others "New York Times", "The Sun", "The Evening World", periodicals and reports of municipal and state commissions published those days like: *Report of the Tenement House Committee as Authorized by Chapter 479 of the Laws of 1894, Transmitted to the Legislature January 17, 1895* (Albany 1895); *Family desertion: report of the Committee on desertion (National Desertion Bureau)*, *National Conference of Jewish Charities* (New York 1912); *Tenement House Fires in New York* (New York 1900); and *Report of the Mayor's Push-Cart Commission* (New York 1906).

KEYWORDS

New York Jews, Lower East Side, ethnic enclave, Jewish immigration

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Magdalena Matłoka
Institute of American Studies and Polish Diaspora
Faculty of International and Political Studies
Jagiellonian University in Kraków
e-mail: m.m.matloka@gmail.com

The tenements grow taller, and the gaps in their ranks close up rapidly as we cross the Bowery and, leaving Chinatown and the Italians behind, invade the Hebrew quarter. [...] There is no mistaking: we are in Jewtown.¹

J. A. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives...*

At the beginning of the 20th century it was impossible to find a place which would converge more Jews than New York City those days did.² Between 1881 and 1911 almost 1.5 million Jews entered that East coast gateway to the United States. Vast majority of immigrants decided that in New York City they would finish their journey to the *American Promised Land*.³

At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries the most representative, populated, leading and institutionally complete immigrant district of the New York metropolitan area was Manhattan's Lower East Side. During the 19th century newly arrived Irish, Hungarians, Poles, Italians and German Jews found a shelter within its borders. During the 1880s, while the internal migration route of the latter group led to more prestigious districts of Upper East Side,⁴ lower part of Manhattan was being flooded by a massive wave of East European Jews. "Nearly every Jew that comes here seeks the East Side as his first domicile in

¹ J. A. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York*, Stilwell 2005, p. 82.

² M. Gilbert, *Atlas historii Żydów*, Liszki 1993, p. 81.

³ Almost 73 percent of immigrants who came to the United States between 1881 and 1911 stayed in New York. G. Sorin, *Tradition Transformed. The Jewish Experience in America*, London 1997, p. 57.

⁴ Majority of West European Jews (mainly German Jews) who immigrated at the beginning of the 19th century before the wave of new Immigration started, have already experienced social advancement. In the 1880s they have already become a part of New York middle class and moved to more exclusive Upper Manhattan.

the New World. Some move to other parts later, but migration is comparatively slow”⁵ – wrote about that phenomenon “The Sun” journalist in 1913.

The main purpose of the present article is to outline the selected aspects of Jewish immigrants’ everyday life in New York City at the turn of 19th and 20th centuries seen from the perspective of American daily press journalists and social workers of the time.

The material analyzed comprised of articles and press notes published in the daily journals, mainly “New York Tribune”, “New York Times”, “The Sun”, “The Evening World”, periodicals and reports of municipal and state commissions published those days like: *Report of the Tenement House Committee as Authorized by Chapter 479 of the Laws of 1894, Transmitted to the Legislature January 17, 1895* (Albany 1895); *Family desertion: report of the committee on desertion (National Desertion Bureau), National Conference of Jewish Charities* (New York 1912); *Tenement House Fires in New York* (New York 1900); and *Report of the Mayor’s Push-Cart Commission* (New York 1906).

The exact Jewish ethnic enclave was a certain part of New York downtown immigrant Lower East Side. In the end of the 19th century East European Jews became great majority in the Tenth, Thirteenth, Seventh, Eleventh Manhattan’s wards.⁶ Very nearly entirely Jewish was the Tenth,⁷ which because of its high density was popularly called the *Jewish Hongkong* years later. According to *The Report of the Tenement Committee*, New York below Harlem was one of the most populated spots on the earth. In 1881 there was only one place which density of population could be compared to New York’s and that was a part of Bombay.⁸

According to the report Jewish wards had the highest density in whole New York area. Manhattan’s Tenth ward with its 621 people per acre and in turn: Thirteenth with 407.26; Eleventh with 396.41; Seventh with 331.20 people per acre were the most populated parts of the city.⁹ Living in an unbelievable crowd wasn’t the only problem those days on the Lower East Side. It was one of numerous serious problems of everyday life which immigrants needed to cope with.

⁵ *All Races Found in City’s Foreign Colonies*, “The Sun”, Vol. LXXX, No. 358 (August, 24, 1913), New York 1913, p. 87.

⁶ Tenth and Thirteenth were almost entirely Jewish, in Eleventh ward Jews composed about 80 percent of population likewise the Seventh in which 65 percent of all ward’s inhabitants were Jews. Ch. S. Bernheimer, *The Russian Jew in the United States: Studies of Social Conditions in New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago, with a Description of Rural Settlements*, Philadelphia 1905, p. 292.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 35.

⁸ *Report of the Tenement House Committee as Authorized by Chapter 479 of the Laws of 1894. Transmitted to the Legislature January 17, 1895*, Albany 1895, p. 28.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

The conditions in which the downtown Jews were constrained to live were dramatically bad. Over the years that tragic situation of the New York slums' inhabitants was systematically being presented in the leading newspaper titles. The daily press articles depicted Lower East Side as a dirty, airless, crowded, dangerous place full of poor immigrants wandering around grey tenements. In one of the "New York Tribune" numbers from April 1901 they were defined as *centers of disease, poverty, vice and crime*.¹⁰

The tragic situation of the Lower East Side *Jewtown* inhabitants was caused mainly by tough housing conditions of the Lower East Side buildings. At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries tenements were built one next to another because of the deficit of free city space. After years dumb-bell tenements¹¹ became a synonym of the worst evil to immigrants' masses. "New York Tribune" in 1903 writes that there were more than 200 000 rooms without daily light and ventilation on Manhattan, most of them concentrated in Jewish district.¹² Even if the room had a window in most cases neither sunlight nor fresh air would reach there. The authors of *Report of the Tenement House Committee* wrote that the space between some rare tenements was no bigger than 18 inches. In addition the ventilation of the buildings was limited by wet laundry hanging out to dry.¹³ As the tenement commissioners marked, the outside air had been already stench before it came to the apartments. The reason for that is because people threw their garbage by the windows.¹⁴ Leftovers laid between the tenements for weeks rotted and made the air unbearable.

Journalist and social workers constantly pointed out the problem of high cost of renting apartments on Lower East Side. Unfortunately for Lower East Side inhabitants, there was no correlation between tough housing conditions and the rental prices. Landlords were taking advantages on poor immigrants, especially on the so-called *greenhorns* – those who had just arrived in New York. A single family could not afford to pay 10\$ to 20\$ rent by their own, so subletting rooms in many cases was the only solution.¹⁵ Rooms were being

¹⁰ *Tenement Houses*, "New York Tribune", Vol. LXI, No. 19 887 (April 28, 1901), New York 1901, p. 7.

¹¹ They were called dumb-bell because of their dumb-bell shape.

¹² *Tenement House Life*, "New York Tribune", Vol. LXVIII, No. 20 650 (May 31, 1903), New York 1903, p. 7.

¹³ *Report of the Tenement House Committee...*, op. cit., p. 18.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵ For example Marcus T. Reynolds in 1893 wrote that average rent of small room with dark niche in New York is 10\$ per month. Room with two niches cost 12,50\$ and salon with kitchen and two bedrooms was 22\$ per month. M. T. Reynolds, *The Housing o the Poor in American Cities*, "Publications of the American Economic Association", Vol. 8, No. 2/3 (March–May, 1893), Baltimore 1893, p. 31. Howard Sachar wrote about three

sublet for whole families or for independent boarders. There were two separate categories of people who were forced to hire a piece of floor to sleep. People who besides staying in immigrants' apartment at night, also took the meals were called *boarders*. However, those who paid just for sleep and left the apartment or hall every morning were known as *lodgers*.¹⁶

The boarding problem was emphasized by the authors of *The Report of the Tenement House Committee*. Dr. Annie S. Daniel, who worked as an inspector for the Tenement Committee, testified that she visited a tenement where 151 families with 311 lodgers lived.¹⁷ According to her statements the biggest problem with high numbers of boarders and lodgers was during winter time, as we can suppose the reason for that being low temperature. The authors of the aforementioned report, just like typical Americans of those days, paid a lot of attention to the destructive influence of the influx of strangers on immigrants' morals, especially morals of young girls and wives sharing the same home space with accidental young men. "All ye who enter here, leave decency behind"¹⁸ – wrote about Lower East Side tenements Edward Marshall, the secretary of the Tenement House Committee, in his critical article published in "North American Review".

An interesting source to get to know every day housing problems bothering Lower East Side immigrants in the turn of the centuries are letters sent to committee bureau. The Tenement Committee inspectors got thousands of letters of complaint, asking for help each year. A few of them were published in a "New York Tribune" article from 1903. First of them says: "Why has the inspektor not come? Four weeks has a dead cat been under the staircase and odor is afull..."¹⁹

In other letters the habitants also complained about the bad conditions of the buildings. The second immigrant wrote: "Please come and look after the house of No. – Suffolk St. because the gas didn't burn and I fell down from the steps was broken."²⁰ Complaints about dark corridors also appeared in a third letter quoted by a "New York Tribune" journalist:

[...] there is no light in the Hall and on the stairs the oil/cloth is full of holes and It is a wonder that: / 'somebody has not broke their heads before this. / the landlord says he does not care a rap for / your commission because he says your inspectors

rooms flat on the sixth floor hired for 8,50 \$ per month. To compare: the price for apartment in the same building, placed on the first floor was 1\$ higher. H. Sachar, *A History of the Jews in America*, New York 1992, p. 149. It is obvious that the prices for the rent depended on factors like: particular years when the flat was hired, its location, size and conditions.

¹⁶ *Report of the Tenement House Committee...*, op. cit., p. 601.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 529–530.

¹⁸ E. Marshall, *New York Tenements*, "The North American Review", Vol. 157, No. 445 (December, 1893), New York 1893, p. 48.

¹⁹ Original spelling is kept in all quoted letters. *Tenement House Life...*, op. cit., p. 7.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

/ are reform inspectors and they – will only / be in a short time longer and they are
hungry / for money, / [...] I would sign my name. / only if I know he would make
me move and the/rent is cheap here. / ATENANT.²¹

Browsing the letters sent to The Tenement Committee, we can also read immigrants' individual characters between the lines. Not all correspondence was kept in a serious tone. There was a group of letters which were written in the form of short, more or less funny poems full of sarcasm and irony. The best example of the immigrant's black humor is a letter from 1903, the author of which complains about noise in the neighborhood. The desperate immigrant wrote: "Five cats and one dog: / Seven cats and fleas; / Man spits out of the window; / Chickens soaring over the house at midnight. / Dog with eight pups; / Noise from dogs and chicks;/Parrot in apartment."²²

As we could notice, most of them touched the urgent problems of tenement life like: permanent lack of light, bad sanitary conditions of the buildings, dirt, and fear of landlords. The last mentioned problem was deeply expressed by the fact that about 104 letters from 139 received by the commission during one week were written anonymously.²³ The sense of danger and fear caused not only by unfair landlords was a constant element of the immigrants' life. It was common truth that overcrowded tight tenements are deathtraps for their inhabitants. Lack of fire protections and running water, boarders sleeping on every piece of free space like halls, stairs and roofs and the fact that apartments, commonly used as a tailor's workshops, were full of inflammable material scraps which in case of fire caused a huge risk of life.

Lawrence Veiller²⁴ and Hugh Bonner²⁵ in the *Tenement house fires in New York* from 1900 reported that during 1898 and 1899 there were 6,324 tenement

²¹ Ibidem.

²² Ibidem.

²³ Ibidem.

²⁴ Lawrence Veiller (1872–1959) born in New Jersey, graduated from the New York City College. Since his adolescence he was involved in charity and social activities for improving living conditions of the poorest part of New Yorkers. First he was involved in The University Settlement and Charity Organization Society, next he became a New York City House Department commissioner (1902–1904). Over the years he was a chief and secretary of Tenement House Committee. Throughout his whole term in office he had been pushing the initiative of a radical house building legislation reform in New York. Thanks to his tenacity and determination the Tenement Law from 1901 could be forced. R. Lubove, *Lawrence Veiller and the New York State Tenement House Commission of 1900*, "The Mississippi Valley Historical Review", Vol. 47, No. 4 (March, 1961), Lincoln 1961, pp. 659–677.

²⁵ He was a commandant of the New York Fire Brigade between 1889–1889. P. Hahagen, *Fire Department, City of New York*, Paducah 2002, p. 237.

houses fires in the greater New York City.²⁶ About 52 percent of the whole city's fires, started during the eleven months period (1899), took place in the tenements.²⁷ As the statistics from June 1900 shows, all of 18 percent (which was 82 from 240 all fires which took place in that month) of tenement fires were caused by *careless use of matches*.²⁸ People living in those days Lower East Side often came back home from work by night. As we can deduce (even from immigrants' letters quoted above) the gas light installation on the staircase in many buildings did not work or did not work properly. Stroked matches were often the only light which could show immigrants the way to apartment and protected them from falling down from the stairs. It happened (not rarely) that tired and inattentive immigrants sometimes threw down a burning match and accidentally set up the fire.²⁹

The leading newspapers informed about a new burnt building almost every day. People were worried not only about their lives but also about property. That fact was used by insurance agents whose main slogan was *remember that you're living in the tenement*.³⁰ However, those businesses used to be perverse – the cases of planned arsons were also known on 19th and 20th centuries' Lower East Side. Some immigrants set the fire themselves or hired some district's gang to do it, because they wanted to get money from insurance company.³¹

Because of the increasing social problems (arising mainly from tragic conditions of New York downtown), growing social consciousness and activity, municipal government was forced to change its passive housing policy and make some steps to improve slums' conditions. Under the pressure of critical voices coming from various organizations, independent social leaders and public opinion, a compilation of new architectonic standards was introduced. Those laws, which were supposed to novelize the old, inadequate housing regulations, came into force in 1901.³²

New criteria were supposed to put an end to dumb-bell tenements and replace them with new, architecturally better tenement models. According to the new regulations, every tenement should have fulfilled all security norms. Every building should have had fire protections, running water and toilets in each of its apartments, the minimal bedroom space could not have been smaller than

²⁶ H. Bonner, L. Hugh, *Tenement House Fires in New York*, New York 1900, p. 7.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 12.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 10; J. A. Riis, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

²⁹ H. Bonner, L. Hugh, *op. cit.*, p.11.

³⁰ M. Rischin, *The Promised City. New York's Jews, 1870–1914*, Cambridge–Massachusetts 1967, p. 83.

³¹ J. A. Riis, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

³² I. Howe, *The World of Our Fathers The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made*, New York 1976, p. 153.

70 square feet and salon should have more than 120 square feet.³³ However the biggest problem was that at the beginning of the 20th century Lower East Side, especially its Tenth ward, was considered to be almost entirely built up, so the new law did not help all immigrant inhabitants. It was a very hard and expensive venture to rebuild or improve already existing dumb-bell tenements.

Despite the fact that it turned out that new regulations were in some cases only a dead letter of the law, it is definitely worth to mention that the whole public discussion which arose over dramatic life conditions of the immigrants, influenced also their self-consciousness. The collective sense of social injustice caused a common mobilization to fight for poor masses' rights. Thousands of letters which I already mentioned before, received every week by Tenement Committee bureau, are considered to be the best evidence of that activation of the New York downtowners.

Great number and multifaceted character of problems, which the inhabitants of *Jewish Hongkong* needed to cope with, were too much for the Tenement House Committee abilities. It was really hard for the commissioners to decide which problem of everyday life in Lower East Side is the most urgent or important one, because there were plenty of problems which touched totally different spheres of human life. Lawrence Veiller and Hugh Bonner wrote about the officials' painful helplessness and necessity to make a choice. The authors of the *Tenement house fires in New York* ended their report with following words:

If the choice must be made it seems to us preferable that a few people should be burned to death each year than thousands should be killed slowly by tuberculosis and other diseases caused by lack of proper light and air.³⁴

“Only the rent and the death rate are high here”³⁵ – writes Edward Marshall about Lower East Side tenements in 1893. That was actually true. Living in unsanitary conditions, in darkness and filth, with poor diet and extremely long working hours placed the Lower Manhattan on the top of city's mortality statistics.³⁶

As we can paradoxically observe, people who lived in the most overcrowded Seventh, Tenth, Eleventh and Thirteenth wards had definitely lower death rate than other nationalities living in the same or even better area.³⁷ Analyses of the

³³ *Tenement Houses...*, pp. 7–8.

³⁴ H. Bonner, L. Hugh, op. cit., p.15.

³⁵ E. Marshall, op. cit., p. 45.

³⁶ From 10,000 deaths registered in New York (only during the year 1890) about 25 percent took place in Lower East Side area. Ibidem, p. 48.

³⁷ The statistics provide that the death rate for the Tenth – the most Jewish ward of Manhattan were 17, 14; 23, 59 for the Thirteenth, 22, 84 for Eleventh and 22, 36 for Seventh. In comparison the Fourteenth had the death rate 35,12; Fourth – 33,78 and First

data of the following *Vital statistics of New York and Brooklyn* lead us to interesting conclusions. As we can see by example of statistic data for the most representative Tenth ward, Russian and Polish Jews had even four times lower mortality than the death rate which the American part of population had.³⁸

Jewish immigrants were healthier than other immigrant nationalities mainly because they were faithfully respecting strict religious rules of Judaism. Due to the fact that in the Orthodox Judaism alcohol is in most cases forbidden, Jews rarely suffered from alcoholism and liver diseases in opposition to the Irish group.³⁹ The religious Jews paid a lot of attention to keep ritual cleanness and they led incomparably more hygienic lifestyle than other immigrant nationalities. They obeyed an obligation to clean the apartment every week, so, according to statistic data and inspectors' opinions, the Jewish houses were the cleanest houses in Lower East Side area.⁴⁰ Even so prosaic activity as every week nails' cutting for religious Jews was a matter of Judaism duties. The obligation to keep ritual cleanness requires from Hebrews to clean hands and mouth before and after every meal. Charles S. Bernheimer wrote that truly religious Jew "does not walk four steps from his bed in the morning without careful ablution of his face and hands".⁴¹

As the Tenement House Committee investigation says, Polish and Russian Jews used the public bath at least twice or once a week. In the first decade of the 20th century Jews were owners of almost half of the all city's baths.⁴²

– 33,18. *Report of the Tenement House Committee...*, op. cit., p. 28.

³⁸ For example the Death Rate per 1,000 persons whose mothers were born in: Russia and Poland according to *Vital Statistics of New York and Brooklyn* for the district A (a part of Tenth ward) was: 31,94 for persons *under 15 years* and 6, 18 for *15 years and over*. For those whose mothers were born in United States (white part of population) the same statistics were: 136,73 (*under 15 years*) and 43,57 (*15 years and over*). *Vital Statistics of New York City and Brooklyn Converted a Period of Six Years Ending May 31, 1890*, Washington, D. C. 1894, p. 100.

³⁹ Among the Jewish group seltzer and tea were the most popular drinks. It happened that they drink some low-alcohol wine yet only during the Hebrew holidays. Usually for those occasions wine were bought in *Schapiro's House of Kosher and Sacramental Wines* – the most well-known Jewish wine house located on Rivington Street. G. Sorin, op. cit., p. 68; L. J. Epstein, *At the Edge of a Dream: the Story of Jewish Immigrants on New York's Lower East Side*, San Francisco 2007, p. 54.

⁴⁰ The Tenement House Committee Investigator testified in the report that: In the group of Jewish Tenth ward's inhabitants personal cleanness is at times strictly compelled, and at least one day in the week the habitation must be thoroughly cleaned. *Report of the Tenement House Committee...*, op. cit., p. 22.

⁴¹ According to the rabbinic studies the dirt under the nails is the bad spirit's nest. Ch. S. Bernheimer, op. cit., p. 292.

⁴² M. Rischin, op. cit., p. 87.

Charles S. Bernheimer wrote that also free East River baths organized by city's government in summer were really popular among Jewish part of Lower East Side inhabitants.⁴³ However, on the other hand, a "New York Tribune" article devoted to the phenomenon of those free summer city baths, published in 1897, brings us to completely opposite conclusions. The author wrote there were only few Hebrews among East Side summer baths users.⁴⁴ What is even more interesting, he also says that Jewish participants were not well-thought-of by the rest of bathers and very often they fell victims of many unpleasant jokes.

The Jews in the slang of city baths were facetiously called *geese*.⁴⁵ When a *goose* appeared on the bath, he or she was inevitably, without any notice, shoved to the water. One of the favorite entertainments for non-Jewish part of city's bath society, was to smash a melon on the *goose's* head. Moreover, it often happened that during the baths someone's (not only those which belonged to the Jewish bathers) clothes disappeared. As the author emphasized, *The East Side knows the East Side*, so robberies were not a surprise for anyone.⁴⁶ The Jewish absence in those described baths could be caused not only by already mentioned bad treatment of Hebrew bathers but also by really low quality of water used during those social events. As the author of the article wrote:

The water is somewhat turgid and at times even opaque, in spite of the frequency with which it is changed. Various foreign substances, such as musk-melons that have outlived their usefulness find their way in to tank.⁴⁷

Also the Jewish dietary habits were strictly submitted to the religious rules of Judaism. Religious Jew does not eat treif meals. Positive influence of kosher kitchen on immigrants' health was spotted by Dr. Annie Daniel, who emphasized the benefits of kosher kitchen. Commenting the Hebrew housekeepers' habits and rules investigator testified: "The food must be cooked properly, and hence the avenues through which the germs of disease may enter are destroyed. The meat must be kosher, and this means it must be perfectly healthy."⁴⁸ Interesting reflection of the Jewish dietary habits on the Lower East Side is the

⁴³ Ch. S. Bernheimer, op. cit., p. 287.

⁴⁴ The same situation concerned the female Jewish bathers. On three days per week, exactly on Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays, the Lower East Side baths were open only for women. According to "New York Tribune" article, on those days the Jewish absence was also easily noticed. *The East Side in Bathing*, "New-York Tribune" Vol. LVII, No. 18, 501 (July 11, 1897), New York 1897, pp. 10–11.

⁴⁵ As the author claimed, the reason for that was unknown. Ibidem, p.11.

⁴⁶ Ibidem.

⁴⁷ Ibidem.

⁴⁸ *Report of the Tenement House Committee...*, op. cit., p. 22.

following summary of the grocery products sold on the street pushcarts. This data was published in the report prepared by The Mayor's Push-Cart Commission in the 1906.⁴⁹

Tab. Summary of the grocery products sold on New York pushcarts.
Number of pushcarts offered particular stuff

WARD	Fish	Fruits	Vegetables	Other foods	Dry Goods	Clothing	Miscellaneous	Mixed	TOTAL
7	–	85	22	15	38	9	19	3	191
10	–	36	23	5	–	–	6	4	74
11	8	68	52	10	22	6	13	2	181
13	170	168	72	31	57	62	82	21	663
TOTAL (for Jewton)	178	357	169	61	117	77	110	30	1109
TOTAL (for 33 wards)	193	1442	567	457	376	315	405	89	3844

Own presentation based on: *Report of the Mayor's Push-Cart Commission*, New York, p. 168.

As we can see, according to the statistic data, the city's almost all fish pushcarts, one quarter of the vegetable and fruit vendors were concentrated in the four Jewish wards. It's also worth to mention the sociological significance of those ethnic markets, especially the most famous of them so called *Pig Market* (*Chazermark* in Yiddish).⁵⁰ Its social phenomenon was noticed and emphasized not only by the Jewish part of New York society. One of the "New York Tribune" journalists in his article from 1901 described it using following words:

⁴⁹ *Report of the Mayor's Push-Cart Commission*, New York 1906, p. 168.

⁵⁰ It was called *Pig Market* because, paradoxically, man could buy everything there beside the pork. In an article about the phenomenon of the *Chazermark* from 1888, "The Sun" journalist called it *the most peculiar market on the continent*. *The Queer Corner of Town*, "The Sun", Vol. LV, No. 179 (February 26, 1888), New York 1888, p. 3; R. F. Shepard, V. G. Levi, *Live & Be Well: a Celebration of Yiddish Culture in America from the First Immigrants to the Second World War*, New Brunswick 2000, p. 81.

Placed in Hester Street every Thursday became very special place. In Hester-st. [...], Thursday afternoon and night and Friday until the Sabbath sets in the odor of fish, the clamor of the venders and the shrill bargaining of the housewives fill the air. At night this scene is lighted by great torches attached to the carts. It is not an American city any longer. The idea of its being New-York is unbelievable to an uptown visitor who sees it for the first time. The ascendancy of fish on these two days is accounted for by the fact that fish is the regular Sabbath dish of the Jews of the neighborhood. The recent order forbidding the sale of fish from carts will rob the city of one of its most picturesque sights, but he also suggest that the Sabbath odor of Hester-st. will be considerably more conducive to spirituality.⁵¹

However, the kosher kitchen, clean house, and using public baths didn't protect them from every civilization diseases. The huge plague among Jewish immigrants on the Lower East Side were tuberculosis popularly called *the Jewish disease*⁵² or eyes diseases which were the results of tenement lifestyle conducive to spread the germs, especially in overcrowded Lower East Side sweatshops. Problems with mental health and nervous breakdowns also occurred more often in the group of Jewish immigrants than in any other. Bad psychical condition of Jews had been frequently pointed out by leading press. Those days headlines were informed about increasing numbers of suicides especially among young Jewish men. Young fathers and husbands could not handle the responsibility of maintaining family and taking care about its spiritual development. One of the "New York Tribune" numbers from 1897 tells the tragic story of a Jewish student who killed himself because he failed in a race for scholarship on the College of the City of New York.⁵³

Bad condition, specifically of the male part of the families, and long separation, when a husband was already in United States but the rest of the family was waiting for the tickets to the *Promised Land* was the reason of a very high percentage of the Jewish husbands family desertion. How serious and urgent the family desertion problem was, can tell us the fact that in 1911 the National Desertion Bureau was called into existence. The main target of that organ, which was formed in interests of those left by husbands and fathers, was to hunt the running-away men and then to call them to financial liability of bringing up their offspring and supporting their wives. Within the competence of National Desertion Bureau was also taking care of abandoned women. This

⁵¹ *New York Pedlars*, "New York Tribune", Vol. LXI, No. 19 992 (August 11, 1901), New York 1901, p. 8.

⁵² It was also called a *white plague* or the *tailors' disease*.

⁵³ *Little East Side Pessimists*, "New York Tribune Illustrated Supplement", [in:] "New York Tribune",

Vol. LVII, No. 18 522 (August 1, 1897), New York 1897, p. illegible.

aspect was a very important one, because deserted wives, facing their personal drama and lacking sufficient financial funds, were forced to come to the way of prostitution. Of course depression and nervous breakdowns were only some of plenty reasons of the increasing number of family desertions. Among the immigrant society of those days, general disintegration of family ties and degradation of classical multigenerational model of Jewish family deserve a special attention. The fact that in some cases a lot of time passed between the family father immigration and the immigration of the rest of family members was not the only reason of divorces or defections. Also the Lower East Side housing reality with its subletting every free space of the apartment for huge amount of strangers conducted new romances.

Also one of the leading Jewish daily newspapers – “The Jewish Daily Forward” took part in an initiative to lend a hand to the abandoned women. In cooperation with the National Desertion Bureau, “Forward” devoted a separate column to publish information about runaway husbands sent to the Bureau by their families. That special column was called *Gallery of Missing Husbands*.⁵⁴ It would usually contain more or less detailed description of the fugitive, sometimes also a summarized story of the miserable relationship and tough living conditions in which the abandoned families have found themselves in, as well as, addressed directly to the missing person, appeals for a quick homecoming expressed in an imploring tone. Next to the correspondence, pictures or images of the wayward husbands and fathers would also be published. Interesting information are presented in *Family Desertion: Report of the Committee on Desertion* published in New York in 1912 by National Desertion Bureau. The document contains one of this kind of letters sent to the Bureau already prepared to be published in *Gallery of Missing Husbands*.

INFORMATION IS WANTED OF: SAMUEL R... who resided with his wife Rose and their three minor children in New York City and from whom nothing has been heard of or seen since March 26, 1912. The family was left in a totally destitute condition and they are at present dependent upon the hospitality of charitable relatives for their support. It is believed he left in company of another woman. DESCRIPTION: — He is 27 years of age, was born at Bialostock, Grodna Guberma, Russia, and arrived in this country in 1907. He is a skirt operator (union) by trade, five feet, seven inches in height, weighs about 140 lbs., has gray eyes, brown hair, is clean shaven, full faced, stockily built and speaks English.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Or *Gallery of Runway Husbands*.

⁵⁵ *Family Desertion: Report of the Committee on Desertion (National Desertion Bureau)*, National Conference of Jewish Charities, New York 1912, p. 12.

What is interesting is that the editor of the paper was very skeptical to the whole action. Abraham (Abe) Cahan felt sorry for the abandoned families, but despite that, he also thought that no one has the right to force a man to stay with his wife, if he does not want it.⁵⁶ The evidence how huge and serious problem it was not only for victims of desertion but also for city budget, is the fact that social help for abandoned women cost New York about 400,000 \$ per year.⁵⁷

Image of the Jewish quarter presented on the pages of the American daily press shows the Lower East Side as an overpopulated place with humiliating sanitary conditions, where social problems like nervous breakdowns or family desertion were part of the daily agenda. This kind of tabloid narrative was characteristic of the era of progressivism during which the yellow journalism played an important role. It was intended to draw the higher classes' and government's attention on previously ignored situation of the inhabitants of New York slums. From the daily press emerges the traumatic situation of Lower East Side immigrants, however, what is also visible is a reporters' fascination of the inner, *exotic* world of immigrant ethnic enclave. The best example is the way how they wrote about the socializing role of every week meetings on *the Pig Market*, where there was floating familiar melody of Yiddish and smells from the Old World in the air. The essence of those homeliness and phenomenon of the institutional completeness of the New Yorks Jewish district were emphasized by the words of "Dakota Country Herald" journalist who wrote about Lower East Side:

Here the immigrants come and locate immediately they have landed, for in this Ghetto they find a life in outward semblance similar to the life of the Ghettos they have left in Europe, Every one speaks Yiddish and consequently ignorance of English is no drawback. Jewish customs prevail. The prevailing atmosphere is Jewish. Here they are at home.⁵⁸

Lower East Side, often called the *American Jerusalem* or the *Jewish Ghetto*, has played a huge part in research on not only New York Jews but also – in a wider perspective – general studies on the whole American Jewish History. Analyses of those days Milwaukee or Chicago religious and ethnic immigrant enclaves without reference to that particular New York district would definitely

⁵⁶ A. R. Igra, *Wives without Husbands: Marriage, Desertion, & Welfare in New York, 1900–1935*, Chapel Hill 2006, pp. 25.

⁵⁷ *Family Desertion: Report...*, op. cit., p. 4.

⁵⁸ *New York Greatest Jewish City*, "Dakota County Herald", Vol. XXII, No.4 (September 25, 1913), Dakota City 1913, p. 8.

be incomplete.⁵⁹ In retrospect one can easily notice that just as it is in case of East European shtetls, two different narratives of the New York Jewish ethnic enclave – the Lower East Side can be distinguished. The terms and the ideas of both East European *shtetls* and *Lower East Side* in common consciousness and collective memory are, on the one hand, used as synonyms of poverty, dirt, backwardness, and suffering of the masses, and on the other – as magical, mythic places full of familiar smells, tastes, and sounds. Present day's process of idealizing the unique introverted world of Jewish towns and thinking about the past times with nostalgia concerns also today's perception of the gone 1890s or 1900s Jewish Lower East Side. For immigrants, especially those who thought about the *New York Jerusalem* and tried to remember it after a dozen or so years, it was a mythical, special place, their own place in *di goldeneh medina*.⁶⁰ It cannot be forgotten that above all those mythical, sacral visions, Lower East Side life conditions were far from those from biblical Eden. At the turn of the centuries it seemed to be a really uncomfortable, tough, and unfriendly place to live.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

SOURCE MATERIALS

1. *Family Desertion: Report of the Committee on Desertion (National Desertion Bureau)*, National Conference of Jewish Charities, New York 1912.
2. *Report of the Mayor's Push-Cart Commission*, New York 1906.
3. *Report of the Tenement House Committee as Authorized by Chapter 479 of the Laws of 1894. Transmitted to the Legislature January 17, 1895*, Albany 1895.
4. *Tenement House Fires in New York*, New York 1900.
5. *Vital Statistics of New York City and Brooklyn Converted a Period of Six Years Ending May 31, 1890*, Washington, D. C. 1894.

⁵⁹ Hasia Dinner writes about this special role that Lower East Side played in Jewish immigrants' collective memory and identity in her monograph: *Lower East Side Memories. A Jewish Place in America* (Princeton 2003). The author draws our attention to a very important issue – contemporary trend to use the Lower East Side concept as a universal and general term with reference not only to particular New York ethnic enclave, but also to Jewish ghettos in other American cities. In the researchers' and historians' discourse terms like for example *Chicago's Lower East Side* are used and they do not stir any controversy. It could mean that the concept of Lower East Side became a separated term, detached from its previous topographical meaning. It became a kind of pattern and a universal category which describes Jewish ethnic enclaves around the United States. H. Diner, *Lower East Side Memories. A Jewish Place in America*, Princeton 2003, p. 35–37.

⁶⁰ *The Promised Land* in Yiddish.

ARTICLES AND PRESS NOTES

1. *All Races Found in City's Foreign Colonies*, "The Sun", Vol. LXXX, No. 358 (August, 24, 1913), New York 1913, p. 87.
2. *Little East Side Pessimists*, "New York Tribune Illustrated Supplement", [in:] "New York Tribune", Vol. LVII, No. 18 522, (August 1, 1897), New York 1897, p. illegible.
3. Lubove R., *Lawrence Veiller and the New York State Tenement House Commission of 1900*, "The Mississippi Valley Historical Review", Vol. 47, No. 4 (March, 1961), Lincoln 1961, pp. 659–677.
4. Marshall E., *New York Tenements*, "The North American Review", Vol. 157, No. 445 (December, 1893), New York 1893, pp. 753–756.
5. *New York Greatest Jewish City*, "Dakota County Herald", Vol. XXII, No. 4 (September 25, 1913), Dakota City 1913, p. 8.
6. *New York Pedlars*, "New York Tribune", Vol. LXI, No. 19 992 (August 11, 1901), New York 1901, p. 8.
7. Reynolds M. T., *The Housing of the Poor in American Cities*, "Publications of the American Economic Association", Vol. 8, No. 2/3 (March–May, 1893), Baltimore 1893, pp. 9–132.
8. *Tenement Houses*, "New York Tribune", Vol. LXI, No. 19 887, (April 28, 1901), New York 1901, p. 7.
9. *The East Side in Bathing*, "New-York Tribune", Vol. LVII, No. 18, 501 (July 11, 1897), New York 1897, pp. 10–11.
10. *The Queer Corner of Town*, "The Sun", Vol. LV, No. 179 (February 26, 1888), New York 1888, p. 3.

MONOGRAPHS

1. Bernheimer Ch. S., *The Russian Jew in the United States: Studies of Social Conditions in New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago, with a Description of Rural Settlements*, Philadelphia 1905.
2. Diner H., *Lower East Side Memories. A Jewish Place in America*, Princeton 2003.
3. Epstein L. J., *At the Edge of a Dream: the Story of Jewish Immigrants on New York's Lower East Side*, San Francisco 2007.
4. Gilbert M., *Atlas historii Żydów*, Liszki 1993.
5. Howe I., *The World of Our Fathers The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made*, New York 1976.
6. Igra A. R., *Wives Without Husbands: Marriage, Desertion, & Welfare in New York, 1900–1935*, Chapel Hill 2006.
7. Riis J. A., *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York*, Stilwell 2005.
8. Rischin M., *The Promised City. New York's Jews, 1870–1914*, Cambridge–Massachusetts 1967.
9. Shepard R. F., Levi V. G., *Live & Be Well: a Celebration of Yiddish Culture in America from the First Immigrants to the Second World War*, New Brunswick 2000.
10. Sorin G., *Tradition Transformed. The Jewish Experience in America*, London 1997.