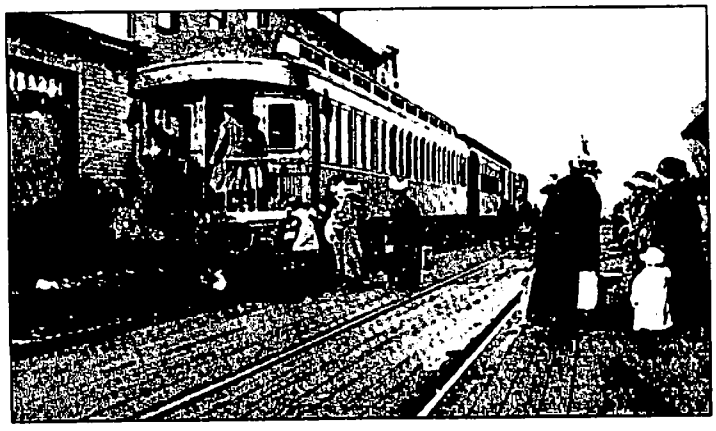
1909 Profile

The Ravage family, new to America from Romania, found help starting their lives in a new country from Jewish groups whose purpose was to follow the traditions of charity practiced in the old country.

Life at Home

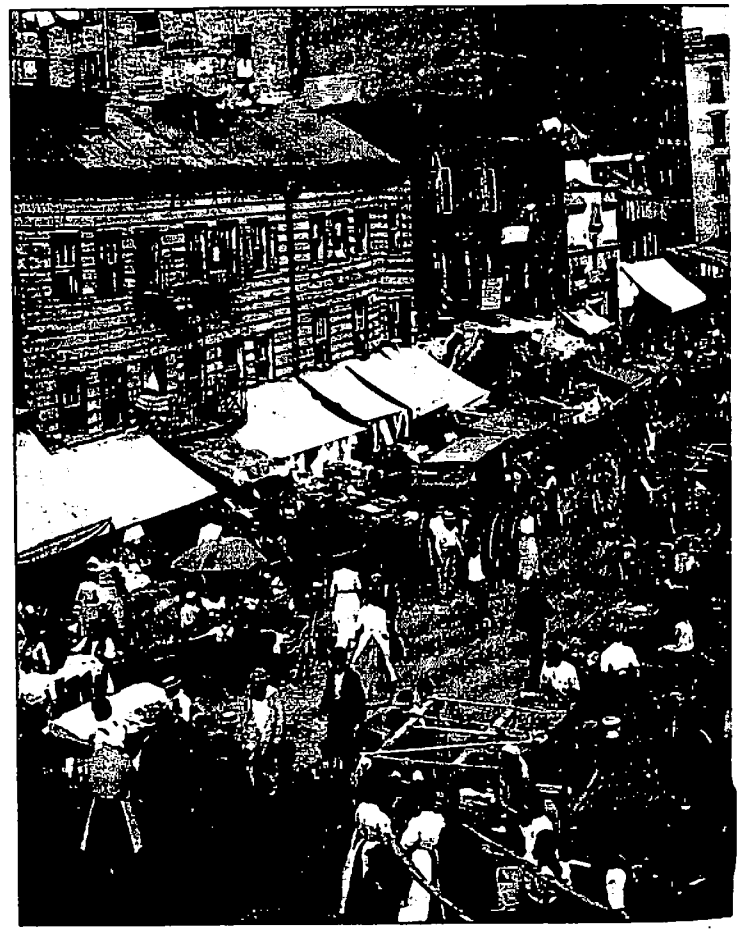
- Anzia Ravage's life was centered around three things: family, home and mother.
- These unifying bonds galvanized her and her entire family against the chaos and brutality of her surroundings.
- From childhood she had been taught by her rabbi that Jews were expected to look after their own in poverty and sickness, life and death, according to the ancient traditions.
- Thus, leaving for a better life in America was not only terrifying but a betrayal of her aging mother and father.
- The one constant for 31-year-old Anzia was family.
- But her husband Aaron, desperate to leave the crushing poverty and rising political persecution of Romania, was prepared to sell all their possessions to raise money for steamship fare.
- Their goal was "di goldeneh medina" or "the golden land" in America.
- Only after a Jewish peddler was beaten to death by a hooligan gang did her father give his consent, saying, "Take my grandchildren and find them a future."
- And then he began to weep, saying, "I will never see you again."
- When her children asked, "Where is this America?" she replied, "I only know it's far away and when you get there they undress you and look you in the eyes—only then can you be an American."
- Then began the business of saying goodbye to neighbors; as a family they went house to house, sometimes spending an entire day with friends talking about the past and whispering about the future.
- Anzia saw envy in their eyes.
- The journey to America began with a train ride—the children's first—to the ocean and a physical exam required to board the ship.
- They all passed, but their nervousness didn't abate, especially when the doctor declared that a fellow Romanian emigrant woman had trachomas in her eyes and would not be allowed on the ship.

Anzia Ravage was 31-years-old when she arrived in America from Romania.



The journey to America began with a train ride to the ship.

- Her wailing hurt Anzia's ears and heart.
- Then Anzia's heart began to pound excitedly when the passengers were allowed aboard the ship and ordered downstairs to the little cages in steerage.
- There the family stayed in darkness for most of the trip
- They were not even allowed topside to see the famous Statue of Liberty welcome them to America until the boat had docked.
- Upon arrival in New Bedford, Massachusetts, in September 1908, Anzia, Aaron and children Zalman, 9 and Rosie, 7, were shoehorned into a 435-square-foot apartment.
- To meet expenses they were forced to take in boarders often single men who had also recently emigrated to America.
- There was always a steady stream of unmarried young men coming out of the ships.
- That meant little privacy, sleeping three or four to a room, sometimes in a single bed.
- Anzia drew up a budget that permitted her to feed and clothe the family for $0.96 a day.
- Quickly, Anzia became known in her all-immigrant neighborhood as a woman of mitzvas, of good deeds, who was also capable of making all her family's clothing and was willing to walk blocks to find the cheapest bread or meat being sold for a penny less per pound.
- To save money that first winter, she shunned coal, which was very expensive, and instead gathered old wood from crates and pallets left in the street to burn for heat.



Anzia and her family lived in a crowded apartment in a crowded city

Life at Work

- Even while the family waited at Ellis Island for admittance to America, Aaron Ravage began asking about available work.
- Supporting his new American family was his single-minded focus.
- Aaron quickly found his landsman Marcus Cohen, a friend from the same village in Romania, who agreed to help.
- Marcus had arrived in New Bedford two years earlier and knew his way around.
- Marcus knew of another landsman who had recently contracted tuberculosis so badly he was being forced to sell his Hokey Pokey cart because he could no longer work the streets.
- Like a typical greenhorn, Aaron asked, "What is this Hokey Pokey Man?"
- His new friend replied, "A Hokey Pokey Man is a peddler of ice cream and candy," to which Aaron replied, "What is ice cream?"
- When the pair met with the Hokey Pokey Man, he was so ill he could barely speak above a whisper, but still drove a hard bargain.

- Reluctantly, he agreed to sell Aaron his cart and connections for $20.00—an immense sum for Aaron.
- "I have worked hard to establish my business and now must give it away," the Hokey Pokey Man said. "I was doing well after 15 years in that spot; only because of your landsman do I give you what I slaved for."
- But Aaron could not concentrate on the man's concerns while he pondered where he was going to find $20.00.
- As they walked away, Marcus said, "Don't worry; we are men who live off the air."
- That's when he introduced Aaron to the Gemilath Chassodim, or Hebrew Free Loan Society, which made no-interest loans to immigrants and was content with small weekly repayments.

Aaron Ravage purchased a "Hokey Pokey" cart and began peddling ice-cream and candy.

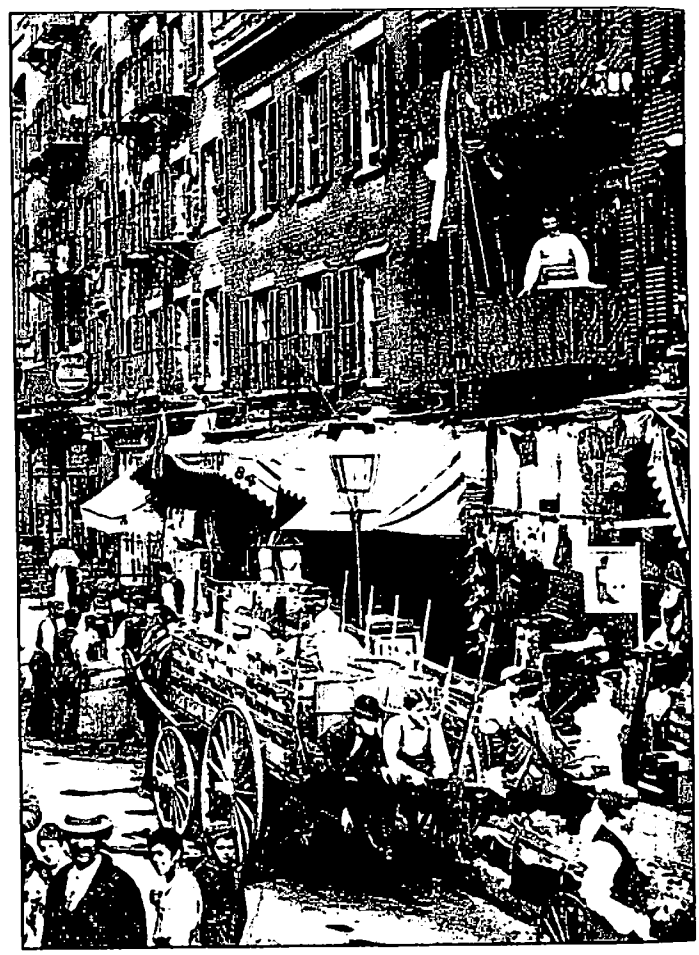
- The religious affiliation of Gemilath Chassodim helped assure proper repayments by members.
- Just as Marcus had promised, a loan for $50.00 was approved, enough to buy the Hokey Pokey cart, supplies, rent money and a small cash reserve against the possible fate of Aaron's business.
- Within a week of coming to America, Aaron had become a Hokey Pokey Man.
- Of all the unusual habits of Americans, Aaron believed that baseball was the wildest and silliest of them all.
- It made sense to teach a child dominoes or chess, but what was the point of a crazy game like baseball?
- Children could get crippled and lose their chance to be a success; maybe the newspapers were right, he thought: Irish boys wanted to be boxers and Jews wanted to be debaters.
- In matters of faith, Aaron and Anzia adopted a middle ground between strict observance and socialism, and sought to balance orthodoxy and secular humanism.
- Whenever possible they attended the synagogue, which had been dedicated only a few years before.
- Anzia was also a member of the Hebrew Ladies' Helping Hand Society, which had been organized the previous year.

Anzia was reluctant to leave her children when she worked, but the family had no choice.

- Within six months of arriving, the family realized that the income from the Hokey Pokey cart was not enough feed a family of four.
- Anzia was offered a job as a domestic in an uptown man's home, but Aaron said no; factory work offered more dignity to his wife.
- Their biggest concern was keeping the two children in school; under no circumstances would they be allowed to work and denied an education.
- Anzia had tears in her eyes when she went to work the first day as a seamstress in a small coat factory operated by a friend.
- The hours were long and Anzia's hands often bled from the work; but the pay was steady—something critical to a new immigrant family in America.

Life in the Community: New Bedford, Massachusetts

- To follow the traditions of charity practiced in the old country, immigrant Jews formed many institutions: credit unions, fraternal societies, synagogues, trade unions, political parties and educational groups.
- Most resisted any attempts to centralize or organize all Jews into a single group, preferring to adhere to a diversity of opinions.
- The Ravage family quickly found upon arrival that these organizations were critical to their ability to survive.
- As immigrants sought to balance the Old World culture with the new one in America, often their strongest advocates were people from the same neighborhood, village, or community in Europe.
- As part of that tradition, Aaron and his landsmen would gather periodically to institute a fundraiser for the sick or hungry, tell stories of the old country, play dominoes or talk about business.
- This network also allowed the establishment of a cemetery so traditional Jewish rites for burial could be practiced.
- The Hebrew Free Loan Society played a critical role in the economic life of the community, boasting thousands of customers, most of whom were born abroad.
- For greenhorn and established immigrant alike, the Gemilath Chassodim provided access to capital—often based solely on the recommendations of their landsmen.
- This would allow the owner of an established cigar store, for example, to buy supplies in larger quantities and for lower prices, thus improving profits and inventory.
- For the newly arrived, the Hebrew Free Loan Society made entrepreneurship possible through no-interest loans and flexible repayment plans that suited the cash flow of new immigrants.
- New Bedford was flooded with Romanian immigrants seeking a prosperous future.
- Since the turn of the century, this community, known for its whaling culture and participation in the Underground Railroad, was sometimes overwhelmed by the flow of new immigrants.



New Bedford was flooded with Romanian immigrants seeking a prosperous future.

Jewish-Romanian Immigration Timeline

A gradual immigration of Romanians commenced in 1880 and increased at the turn of the twentieth century, totaling 100,000 by the beginning of World War I. The majority of immigrants came from Transylvania, Banat, and Bucovina, territories under Austro-Hungarian rule, where political ethnic and religious persecution, combined with precarious social and economic conditions, forced Romanians to leave their homes in search of relief in the New World. Spread throughout the continent, the highest concentrations were in New York, New Jersey, and the cities of the Midwest, where the immigrants found employment in the factories, the mines and on the railroads.

1871
The first Yiddish and Hebrew newspaper in America was published.

1875
Isaac Mayer Wise founded Hebrew Union College, the rabbinical seminary for the reform movement in Cincinnati.

1880
The Romanian immigration movement began in earnest as immigrants sought employment in American factories, mines and railroads.

1882
A Yiddish theater production was staged in New York.

The Pittsburgh platform articulated the tenets of American Reform Judaism.

1886
A Jewish theological seminary was founded in New York.

Four hundred thirteen prominent Americans petitioned President Benjamin Harrison to support the resettlement of Russian Jews in Palestine.

1891
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1893
The National Council of Jewish women was founded in Chicago.

1897
The *Jewish Daily Forward* was founded in New York.

1900
The International Ladies' Garment Workers Union was founded.

1903
Oscar Strauss was appointed Secretary of Labor and Commerce, the first Jew to hold a Cabinet position.

1906
The American Newspaper, the official organ of the Union and League of Romanian Societies of America, was founded.

The American Jewish Committee was founded to safeguard Jewish rights internationally.

1907
Physicist Albert Michelson was the first American Jew to win the Nobel prize.

By the beginning of WW I, Romanian immigrants in America totaled 100,000.

"New Bedford's Jubilee," *The New York Times*, September 6, 1897:

Elaborate preparations are being made in this city for the coming celebration of the 50th anniversary of the city's incorporation which is to take place October 10-14, although as a matter of fact the active incorporation was accepted March 9, 1847.

The site of the city of New Bedford was purchased in 1752 from the chiefs Wasamequen and Wamsutta, father and son, the Indian name of the place being Acushnet. It was part of Dartmouth until February 1787 when it was set off and incorporated as a town. It was first named "Bedford" in honor of the Russels, early settlers to the place, and related to the Duke of Bedford. It being found that there was already a Bedford in the state, the prefix "New" was adopted.

Few cities in the United States are more cosmopolitan than is New Bedford and hence a large attendance is expected. Of the population of 55,251 as given by the census of 1895, 22,174 people were born outside the United States. There are two reasons for the settling of foreigners in New Bedford. During the period of the whale industry, many sailors, shipped in foreign ports on New Bedford whalers, were discharged here and therefore made this port their home. This is particularly true of the former subjects of Portugal, who were shipped many of them from the Western Islands. When the cotton mills were established and began to grow in number, they furnished work for skilled cotton operatives, a fact which was taken advantage of by many English men and women, particularly from the Lancashire District.

French Canadians, too, found that working New Bedford cotton mills paid better than work in the sterile farms of the provinces and flocked to New Bedford in large numbers. This accounts for three large elements of New Bedford's foreign population. Represented in the 22,174 foreigners in New Bedford are 7,340 Canadians, 5,315 from England, 3,861 from Portugal and the islands under Portuguese control, 3,314 from Ireland and 550 from Scotland, 598 from Germany, 322 from Russia, 204 from Sweden and 238 from Austria. . . .

The Duke of Bedford, in congratulating the city on its coming celebration, wrote:

"The Bedford from which you take your name has of late prospered and increased, and is now one of the most beautiful and healthy centers of education in England.

It is difficult to express its leading characteristics or to suggest a sentiment drawn from purely local considerations, but perhaps the spirit of the Midlands of England may be summed up in the word moderation, and I cannot do better than suggest to you the thought that the quiet prosperity of Bedford is due to its Midlands habit of avoiding extremes."

Jewish Daily Forward, January 17, 1906:

Do you want to meet a landsman from Lemberg, a freshly baked greenhorn who can give you the latest news about your city; or an Americanized landsman who knows how to transfer from one streetcar to the next, or whistle at the ticket copper on the elevated? Go to the northeast corner of Clinton and Rivington streets, where you can find out about a job, family scandals, landsleit parties and anything else that interests you.

I stood in a corner last week and met an old friend. He was surprised that I hadn't heard the latest. "Red—you know who I mean—has become a boss. Whenever he has to pass his corner, he stops a block before and buys a fat cigar, and watches us to make sure we see him. Once he came into our saloon and told us that we should establish a society and synagogue called Anshi Lemberg #1. To hell with him. What are we—provincials? So we got together and were going to make a Verein, a union and to spite Red we'll call it First Lemberg Ladies and Gentleman's Charity, Sick and Burial Society under the patronage of the late Australian Queen Elizabeth. A big portrait of the empress will hang over the president and we're going to give a ball and a performance. One of our members wrote a play in seven acts, with three comedians and lots of songs, in high German. You'll see Lemberger landsleit are not small-town landsleit.

Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to be free.

—"The New Colossus" by Emma Lazarus, composed as part of a fundraising campaign to erect the Statue of Liberty, 1883

To express loyalty with every / fiber of one's being, Land of Freedom, is the / sacred duty of every Jew.

—Opening words of Yiddish song "Land of the Free"

Every day that passes I became more and more overwhelmed at the degeneration of my fellow countrymen in this new home of theirs. Even their names had become emasculated and devoid of either character or meaning. . . . It did not seem to matter at all what one had been called at home. The first step toward Americanization was to fall into one or the other of the two great tribes of Rosies and Annies.

Cut adrift suddenly from their ancient moorings, they were floundering in a sort of moral void. Good manners and good conduct, reverence and religion, had all gone by the board, and the reason was that these things were not American. . . . The ancient racial respect for elders had completely disappeared. . . . American old-age had forfeited its claim of deference because it had thrown away its dignity. Tottering grandfathers had snipped off their white beards, laid aside their skullcaps and their snuff boxes, and paraded around the streets of a Saturday afternoon with cigarettes in their mouths, when they should've been lamenting the loss of the holy city in the study room adjoining the synagogue.

—Marcus Ravage

"The Origin for the Ice Cream," *The New York Times*, March 11, 1894:

The man who invented ice cream was a Negro by the name of Jackson, in the early part of the present century, and kept a small confectionery store. Cold custards, which were cooled after being made by setting them on a cake of ice, were very fashionable, and Jackson conceived the idea of freezing them, which he did by placing the ingredients in a tin bucket completely covered with ice. Each bucket contained a quart, and was sold for one dollar. It immediately became popular, and the inventor soon enlarged his store, and when he died left a considerable fortune. A good many tried to follow his example, and ice cream was hawked in the streets, being wheeled along very much as the hokey-pokey carts are now, but none of them succeeded in obtaining the flavor Jackson had in his product.

Jewish Daily Forward, February 7, 1903:

The signs on the dark, gloomy walls of the dispensary announce that patients are received at 12:30 to 2:00 p.m. It is now after 3:00 and not a single doctor is to be seen. Nobody has the courage to ask when they will come. The employees of the free dispensary all have the same cold, contemptuous stare; every gesture shouts: "You are a charity patient, so sit and wait."

The benches are filled; men, women and children hold their numbered cards. It is a sea of troubles, pain, and tragedy. You forget your own suffering.

A 40-year-old woman sits next to me. She says her husband is the sick one, not she. He works at boys' pants and earns about $7.00 a week. They have five children. "He started to cough, got pains in his back and chest. We didn't have $0.50 for the doctor, and we can't afford medicine. If he sits in the dispensaries, he will lose pay. So I go, while he works. I make believe I am the sick one, they give me the medicine, and he takes it. He feels a little better now."

The doctors began to arrive. The woman stopped talking and gave me a farewell smile.

"The Greenhouse Cousin," Yiddish theatrical song:

Once a cousin came to me
Pretty as gold was she, the greenhorn,
Her cheeks like red oranges,
Her tiny feet begging to dance.

She didn't walk, she skipped along,
She didn't talk, she sang,
Her manner was cheerful,
That's how my cousin used to be.

I found a place with my neighbor,
The one who has a millinery store,
I got a job for my cousin,
Blessed be the golden land.

Since then many years have passed.
My cousin became a wreck
For many years of collecting wages
Till nothing was left of her.

Underneath her pretty blue eyes
Black lines now are drawn,
Her cheeks once like red oranges,
Have now turned entirely green.

Today, when I meet my cousin
And I ask her: "How are you, greenhorn?"
She answers with a grimace,
"To the devil with Columbus's land."