
Alexander Harkavy: Chapters From My Life*

*Alexander Harkavy, *Prakim Mechayai* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1935), pp. 34-62

(translated by Jonathan D. Sarna)

The years 1881-1882 were trying days for the Jews of Russia owing to the horrors which broke out against them in the southern districts. Many of our brethren in Russia left at that time for America. In Southern Russia, groups of enlightened Jews, products of the new generation, organized to go and settle in America as farmers. In the spring of 1882 such a movement of group organization also began among the enlightened Jewish youth of Vilna. When this news reached me I joined up. According to the regulations of my group every member was obligated to prepare seventy rubles for travel expenses. My relative having no opposition to my desire to travel to America, she agreed to give me the money out of the legacy left by my father, of blessed memory, over which she had control.

Farming was the ideal of intellectual Russian Jews in those days, but as to the means of carrying out this aim they were divided into two factions: one demanded that the immigration be to Palestine to settle the Land of Israel; the other insisted that the immigration be to America. Both sides loved their people dearly; they disagreed only over the site to be chosen. Each group was known by the name of the country which it chose: "Palestineans" and "Americans". The second group was larger than the first. All immigrants who left Russia with the object of taking up farming needed support. The "Palestineans" were helped by rich

Alexander Harkavy (1863-1939), the first great Yiddish lexicographer in America, is today best known for his pioneering Yiddish-English-Hebrew Dictionary (1925, rev. 1928), but early East European immigrants knew him for his immigrant-aid books: volumes which helped Yiddish-speaking newcomers learn to speak, read and correspond in English, and better understand their newly adopted land. Harkavy taught, lectured, edited several newspapers, and wrote voluminously in five languages (Yiddish, Hebrew, Russian, German, English). In his Hebrew autobiography (1935), Prakim Mechayai (Chapters From My Life), most of which was first published in the Hebrew journal Haleum (1903), he described his childhood in Byelorussia, his four years in Vilna, and his first trying days on American soil.¹ It appears here translated and annotated by Dr. Jonathan D. Sarna, of the Hebrew Union College faculty in Cincinnati.



Alexander Harkavy (1863-1939)
 distinguished Yiddish lexicographer
 and early American agricultural utopian

Jews in Russia: the "Americans" relied upon the Hebrew Emigrant Aid Society, the organization then established in New York to assist refugees.²

The group which I joined consisted of twenty intellectual young men, among them former students in the upper grades of the gymnasia who left their studies to devote themselves to working the land. Not one of us knew the nature of this work; we merely were dreamers, alert to every new cry. In Jewish circles the cry then was "work the land". We followed in its wake. We imagined to ourselves that we would easily be able to become farmers, especially on American soil which we presumed a Garden of Eden.

Our group was founded in February 1882. Its first act was to suggest to a larger group—the Am Olam already established in Kiev—to take us in under its flag. We found this desirable because the Kiev group had already exchanged letters with the Hebrew Emigrant Aid Society in New York,³ and had received its promise to help it achieve its aims once it arrived in America. The Kiev group willingly received our suggestion, and our two groups merged. The name Am Olam devolved also upon us.⁴ The two groups then discussed where they would join together, and decided to gather in the port city of Liverpool, England, from where a boat would transport all of us at once to our desired destination. Both groups selected leaders for themselves. The head of the Kiev group was Nicholas Aleinikoff,⁵ a university student (who later became a lawyer in New York). Our group's leader was M. Kaspe [Abraham Kaspe],⁶ a gymnasia student (and now a doctor in this city.)

Members of our groups used to gather together from time to time to consult with one another on how best to plan our departure. One of the conditions which we agreed upon was to fund our expenses collectively, without giving any advantage to one person or another. Our last gathering was held at the end of April (according to the non-Jewish calendar), outside Vilna on a hill near Zheleznaia Khatka⁷. There we set the day for our departure from Vilna. The day we selected was one of the first days in May. After this meeting, I prepared myself for the journey: I set aside clothes for myself, took leave of friends and relatives scattered around the city, bundled up my belongings which were my books, and began to study the English language.

The day set for our departure from Vilna arrived, and we were ready to go.⁸ At ten in the morning every member of our group was supposed to gather by the railway. When the moment came to separate from Vilna, love for my native land welled up within me, and I lamented to myself my decision to set out for America. But everything was set; there was no turning back. Brokenhearted, I parted from my relatives who owned the press and from the auditors in the office of accounting, and I made my way to the railway where members of the group had gathered. Our first destination was a small city in Lithuania near the Prussian border. We arrived there after noon, and turned in at a hotel outside the city. There we found a Jew engaged in border crossing [smuggling]. We contracted with him to cross us into Prussia at a price

of three rubles a head. Toward evening the man brought a large wagon which took us as far as the border district. There we got off the wagon, and the man left us alone. He went off to bargain on our behalf with one of the district's residents. No sooner did he leave than we began to fear for our lives. We were terrified that army borderguards would see and catch us. After an hour, our border crosser returned with a Christian man and both quietly ordered us to come along. Trembling mightily we followed them. They led us into Prussia. The border area was filled with wells of water and slime, and we grew impatient at our pace. Finally, after wandering about for half an hour, we came to the city of Eydtkuhnen in Prussia. The short time had seemed to us like an eternity. When told by the men that we were no longer in Russia, our joy knew no bounds.

We arrived in Eydtkuhnen after midnight and made straight for the hotel. There we feasted on bread and ale; we were happy and in high spirits. We were pleased both to have safely succeeded in crossing the border of our cruel native land, and to have placed the soles of our feet down on the soil of Germany — which excelled in higher education and in a legal system designed to benefit its citizens. After having eaten, we lay down to rest from the ardors of our journey. We slept very well indeed. Next morning we woke joyfully, and went out walking to see the city and its inhabitants. We found groups of people and spoke with them about the quality of Germany, and the relationship of its citizens to the government. The residents whom we asked praised both their leaders and their way of life. They told us that Germans were pleased that their government extended human rights to all citizens. I asked one about the relationship of Jews to the army: did some of them try to escape this obligation? The man replied that every one of them enters military service willingly, not only that, they yearn for it even if not admitted. To support his words he told me the story of how in Eydtkuhnen there was a Jew who was not admitted to military service on account of some deformity which was found in him. This man, according to the storyteller, spent a great deal of money in order to be admitted, but he didn't succeed and was terribly disappointed. This was astonishing to me. I told myself: "see how great the difference is between Germany and Russia."

We remained in Eydtkuhnen for twenty-four hours, and then travelled on to Hamburg. We remained in this port city for two days. At that time there was in Hamburg a Jewish committee to support Russian emigrants who came there by the thousands on their way to America. We turned to this committee with the request that it purchase for us tickets on an English boat at the special rate offered charitable societies. The committee filled our request, and in this way we saved the treasury of our group some money.

From Hamburg, we travelled over the North Sea to the city of Hartlepool in England, and from there via train to the port city of Liverpool. There we were to wait until the *Am Olam* from Kiev arrived

so that we might go down to the ship along with them. Four days later the group arrived. Great joy filled our hearts when we learned that our allied group had made it. In high spirits we rushed to greet them. After a meeting between the leaders of our two groups, the creation of a legal union was announced: henceforward, we were like brothers of a single society. The Kiev group with which we had joined had seventy members, men and women. Most were young intellectual men, dreamers just like we were. Among its members was the late poet, David Edelstadt,* then about eighteen years old. Our two groups met up with one another on the afternoon of May 15th. That very day, the ship "*British Prince*" stood at the harbor ready to accept passengers for America. It was destined to take us as well. Just an hour after our union we went down to the ship together. That evening the "*British Prince*" hoisted anchor, and began to transport us to our ultimate destination: the new world.

The boat "*British Prince*" was like a city floating on water, so great was the number of its passengers. All its passengers were Russian immigrants; all, save members of our group, were travelling to America as individuals, seeking to improve their position by their own brains and brawn: this one through handiwork, that one through peddling. Members of our group saw themselves as superior to this multitude. "The other passengers are not like us," said we to ourselves, "we are not merely going to America for simple comfort, we are idealists, eager to prove to the world that Jews can work the land!" In our imagination, we already saw ourselves as landowning farmers dwelling on our plots in the western part of the country. So certain were we that our aims in the new world would be achieved that even on the boat we began to debate which kind of community institutions we would build, which books we would introduce into our library, whether or not we would build a synagogue and so forth (with regard to the synagogue, most of the views were negative). We danced and sang overcome with joyous expectations of what America held in store for us. In spite of seasickness, storms, and tempests which visited us on our journey, we were happy and lighthearted. All the days of our Atlantic voyage were filled with joy.

On May 30th, fifteen days after our boat set sail from Liverpool, we arrived safely at the North American shoreline and disembarked onto dry land. Our boat stood at the port of Philadelphia in the state of Pennsylvania. Our destination, however, was New York where the Hebrew Emigrant Aid Society was centered, and the next day we were taken there by railroad. Upon our arrival we were brought to a place then known as Castle Garden* where we rested from the wearisome journey. Our leader, the head of the Kiev group, went to the administrative office of H.E.A.S. on State Street to inform them of our arrival, and to ask them what they planned to do for us.

Between the time that our group was founded and the time of our arrival large numbers of our brethren had emigrated from Russia and come to New York. So great were their numbers that the shore officers had found it necessary to erect large wooden shacks around Castle Garden to provide them with cover and a place to sleep. The Castle Garden Plaza was filled from one end to the other with immigrants. On the adjoining streets, State Street, Greenwich Street, and even at the top of Broadway women sat on the ground, babies in hand, for want of a home. Owing to the flood of Russian immigrants, the aid society was short of means and couldn't undertake great projects on their behalf. All it could do was arrange that the mass of people be provided with bread until such time as the incoming flood would diminish and they could do somewhat more for their benefit.

The officers of the Society received our leader politely, but informed him that in the existing circumstances they could do not a thing for our group. They continued to say, however, that since we had come to America trusting in the Society, they would agree to provide us at the first opportunity with food and lodging. After a short while our leader returned to our camp and told us everything that the Society's officers had said. Our spirits sank. "No more hope of working the land! Our dreams have come to naught! Alas that we have reached such a state!" After a time, however, we calmed down a bit and our spirits improved. When we saw what troubles faced the rest of our brethren wandering about outside, we made peace with our lot and were grateful for the Society's promise to feed us for the time being.

The Hebrew Emigrant Aid Society at that time owned a refugee station on Greenpoint, Long Island, near New York. There they gave immigrants food and lodging for a short time so that they might renew themselves after the ardors of their journey. We were taken to this house on the day we arrived in New York, and stayed there for about a week. We originally thought that we would be maintained there for several weeks, but after just one passed we were informed that the time had come for us to leave. This seemed wrong to us, and we said that we would stay on notwithstanding the demands of the society's lackeys. When the superintendants of the station saw that they could not force us, they set about deceiving us. On the eighth day of our stay, two men came in the name of the New York Society and gently asked us if we would be so kind as to accompany them to the bathhouse to clean ourselves off. Feeling grimey from the boat voyage, we went along gladly. The men brought us on the ferry to New York, and there, right in the middle of the river, told us that there was no more room for us on Greenpoint. As the saying goes, "they had taken us for a ride."

I cannot let pass in silence our own actions at the refugee station. In spite of our idealism we did not act honorably. The reason for this was that the house rules were very strict. The superintendent was a pious old German Jew whose devotion to every rule was absolute. Since we couldn't follow every detail of every rule there were always arguments

between us. Many in our group would arouse this man's anger in very strange ways: for example, at night when he was in bed one would begin to yell, another to dance, another to screech like a chicken, another to sing like a cantor, another to sermonize like a preacher, another to spin rhymes like a jester and so forth. When our behavior was brought to the attention of the Society's overseers in New York, they sent several honorable men out to reprove us. But this had no effect at all: the men did as they had earlier, renewing their pranks even more strongly than before.¹⁰

The superintendents of the immigrant aid society did not abandon us, however. They felt themselves obligated to extend a helping hand until such time as we could depend on ourselves. Once we were brought from Greenpoint to New York, they allocated enough money to support us for a month (which by their estimation was time enough for us to be able to find work), and they rented a large room for us on 4½ Division Street where we could live. They also bought us a stove for cooking, so we could fix ourselves meals. Responsibility for running our house lay with us and we chose among ourselves a cook and food procurer. Cooking was the only work we did in the house. We paid no attention to cleaning which we considered unnecessary. Our furniture consisted of an oven, pots and dishes, a long table, and long wooden benches. We bedded down on the packs which we had carried with us and which were spread over the floor. Since the room was too narrow to accommodate us all, the women and one or two of the men took beds for the night in one of the nearby hotels.

So long as we lived in our group lodging, we paid no attention to the fact that in a short time we would have to go out on our own. We didn't worry ourselves about tomorrow; we spent our time at home. Between meals somebody would pace up and down the width of the room with a book on the syntax of the Russian language reading great rapture examples of that language's classical poetry. Some other member was pacing the breadth of the room with a volume by the Polish poet Adam Mickiewicz¹¹ which he read moving his lips lustily. Another sat quietly in a corner writing a poem or an article. Near the stove stood a group of boys fighting with the cook over the small portions he gave them at mealtime. On the floor, on top of our scattered bundles, several people were lying on their backs, hands folded, looking upward and yawning. The same scenes could be seen in our Division Street room almost every day.

One day, while we were living in this apartment, a fine looking guest appeared before us: Abraham Cahan of Vilna who had arrived in America about six weeks¹² after we had. He would come by our home to spend his time, being as miserable as we members of Am Olam were. Who could have predicted that this man would have risen to the station which he commands today? It is worth mentioning here that one of the members of our group was the widow, Mrs. Anna Bronstein from Kiev who later [December 11, 1886] became his wife.

Several of the men among us became exceptions to the rule: they decided to seek their livelihood by their own sweat and blood, and set out in search of some sort of job. Two or three became independent peddlers, and several others, myself among them, decided to seek salaried employment. In those days it was easy to find work unloading ships, since the stevedores had called a strike. We at that time did not understand the meaning of "strikes" and "scabs", and sought jobs on the ships without knowing whether we would succeed in finding any or not. The supervisors of the loading dock accepted us willingly and put us to work. Our job consisted of wheeling wheelbarrows to the bridges of the ship, loading them up with boxes or sacks full of merchandise, and transporting them to the warehouse next to the harbor. It was very difficult work, and on our first day we returned home totally exhausted, not an ounce of strength left in us. By the second day we had grown accustomed to our work and we didn't strain so hard at it.

The boxes and sacks that we unloaded from the boat were filled with produce from various kinds of trees: almonds, nuts, figs, dates, raisins and others. While working with this merchandise we were overcome with the desire to enjoy some of it. Unable to contain ourselves, we treated the merchandise as one does his own goods: we opened sacks and crates and ate as much as we liked without being disturbed, as there was nobody watching over us. We earned \$1.70 a day, but the number of days we spent at the work was few. The original workers, striking for higher wages interfered. After our first week of work, on the day we were to get paid, we were told to be prepared for a settlement of the strike. When we left the supervisors' office there stood in our path groups of strikers lying in wait for "the scabs." They fell upon us. Loading dock supervisors were forced to call out the police to accompany us on our way. After that, we did not go back to work."

When our month of living on Division Street came to an end, our group split up and members went their independent ways. Prior to our separation, each of us received from our leader, a portion of the remaining general fund which he controlled. Everyone's part was equal—five dollars—and that small sum was supposed to provide for us on our new path in life. Then members split up, going off in all directions in search for food. Each man proceeded according to his own wisdom and inclinations.

I set my sights toward work in the fields. Landowners were at that time seeking hands from among the European immigrant peoples. During the week after our group separated, I went to the employment office for refugees then maintained on Castle Garden, and on that very day they found me an employer: an estateholder in the village of Pawling in Dutchess County, New York. The estateholder designated my salary as twelve dollars a month, plus food, and on that very day—July 6th, six weeks after my arrival—he brought me to his estate.

An amusing incident befell me between my departure from New York and my arrival in Pawling. Since the estateholder was Christian, I had decided not to eat meat, lest I be defiled by pig-meat. I had always been careful about this, not from devotion to the laws of permitted and forbidden food but simply from revulsion to pork. While at the railroad station, my employer took me to the cafeteria to eat with him. At the table, the waiter brought both of us a cut of meat looking to me like pork. I didn't eat it. Seeing that I didn't eat the meat, my employer took the menu and allowed me to choose whatever I wanted. I pointed out to the waiter a line which, as I understood it, designated some kind of food made with eggs. The item had two words in it, the first being egg. But I didn't know what the second word meant, my knowledge of English being very slight. The waiter filled my order and much to my astonishment brought me an expensive drink made from eggs. My employer realized my error and couldn't restrain his laughter.

We reached Pawling in the evening. In my employer's house the table was already set for dinner, to which the mistress of the house immediately summoned me. The table was filled with various foods including several sorts of meat, all of which looked to me like hateful pork products. I ate no meat, and when asked about it by my employer, I falsely told him that the only meat eaten by Russians is chicken! I said this because I couldn't well distinguish pork from other kinds of meat, and I feared that I might someday guess wrong and fall into eating that which I so despised. My employer was amazed that Russians were so finicky, and found the foreign ways very funny. Instead of meat, he ordered that I be given fried fish.

I was given no work to do on the day of my arrival. After dinner, the mistress of the house assigned me a bedroom, and I lay down to rest at once so that I would have the strength to work the next morning. At four o'clock the next morning, my employer awakened me and took me with him to teach me my work.

The first thing they taught me on the estate was how to milk a cow. I learned this in one lesson and was henceforward responsible for milking eight cows every morning and evening. During the first couple of days, I found this work very difficult. The cows grazing in the meadows used to run away from me, and I had to chase after each one in order to catch it. While chasing one, another sometimes came and kicked over the bucket of milk I had just taken from the previous cow.

During the rest of the day, I worked in the fields or in the meadows: ploughing land, trampling down dry grass in the carts, and cutting with a scythe hay that couldn't be cut by machine. (Hay was harvested by machine in this region, but in hilly areas it had to be cut by hand.) I used to work not less than sixteen hours a day.

My daily schedule on the farm was as follows. From four to seven in the morning I milked the cows. At seven I ate breakfast, and then immediately went out to work in the fields until lunch at noon. After lunch I went back to the fields until it was time to milk the cows a

second time at six. That labor accomplished, I ate dinner, generally at eight. At nine I went to sleep. Sunday was my day of rest, but I couldn't relax entirely: I still had to feed the housepets, help my employer harness up his horses and sharpen his pruning hooks and axes, and perform other small housechores. When during the day I had time for rest and relaxation, I used to study English from a youth, the grandson of the estateholder, or I used to read [Rabbi Joseph Albo's] *Sefer Ha'ikarim*,¹⁴ the only book I brought with me from New York.

During my first two weeks, I felt myself newly invigorated and was happy. The beautiful visions of farm life excited me and made my work a joy. As time went on, however, my strength ebbed, and the work became loathsome to me. I decided to return to New York, but to wait until the month ended so I could get my full month's salary. . . .

On the same plot, there was another Jewish youth working, a Russian immigrant whom my employer brought from New York a couple of days before or after me. I don't remember which. This youth didn't like the work from the beginning, but he too waited out his month.

On the morning of August 16th, a month after I arrived in Pawling, we—my friend and I—informed the estateholder of our decision to leave and demanded our wages—twelve dollars a person according to the contract made with us. Our words shocked him. It was a period when the work in the fields was great, and our labor was very much needed. He entreated us to stay with him, but our resolve being firm as a rock, we refused. Seeing that his request would remain unfulfilled, he decided to deprive us of some of our wages saying "just as you abandon me at a time when work is most necessary, causing me to lose time and money in finding others to replace you, so I shall give you only a portion of your salaries." But even this made no difference. We were stubborn, preferring to lose part of our salary than to remain on the estate. After some bitter words, our employer gave each of us four or six dollars and we left him.

We set out from the farm to the railway station to buy tickets for the journey to New York. On the way, however, we realized how little money we had: "if we spend it all on the railway trip we'll come to our destination almost empty handed." After discussing our situation for a while, we decided to travel to New York on foot. And so we did.

The distance from Pawling to New York is about eighty miles. The railroad traverses this distance in two to three hours; it took us two and half days. We could have made the journey in less time, but we didn't rush. There was no need to; nothing was waiting for us in New York. When we passed a lake or a pond, we would stop and bathe our bodies in the water. When we came to a village or a town we lingered to see the place and the people. In addition, we sometimes were delayed watching out for trains on our path (we walked along the railroad track), especially when we crossed narrow railway bridges. At night we went to the side of the track, in a place of grass or trees, and rested using

our packs as pillows, until the morning light. These nights were torture. We were dressed in light summer clothes which were soaked by the cold dew. On one of the two nights, we turned into the thicket where in addition to the plague of dew we were hit with the second plague of the [Passover] *hagadah*: lying on the earth exhausted from several hours of nonstop walking, we were jumped upon by frogs! ...

On our way from Pawling to New York, we came upon a company of men laying water pipes. As we passed, their supervisor approached us and offered us work at the rate of \$1.50 a day. We turned him down.

On August 18th, in the afternoon, we arrived at the outskirts of New York. There we got on the subway and came down into the city until Bowery Street. I lingered there a while, and then turned toward the immigrant house on Castle Garden.

When I came to Castle Garden, I found a vast throng of people there, one larger than before my trip from New York to the estate. My month away from the city seemed to me like a long time, and I had hoped to find the number of our brethren on Castle Garden dwindling. But I was most mistaken. The square was even more full of people than it had been a month before, for on top of the old immigrants there now were new ones. I found many of my friends from Vilna and Kiev straying aimlessly among this throng. They were amazed that I left the estate at a time when so many of our brethren were circling the streets of New York wrapped in hunger, and they reproved me for my recklessness. The reproof was like a sword piercing my soul. My heart filled with remorse at having left the place where my needs were abundantly provided for.

"What do I do now?" was the question facing me. My friends advised me to return to my employer in Pawling. But that I didn't have the courage to do. After a good deal of soul searching, it occurred to me to go and seek work on the water pipes that I had passed on my way from Pawling to New York. I made the same suggestion to my friends, and three of them accepted it. Three days after returning to New York, my three friends and I set out on foot for the road leading up to the pipes.

The water system on which we sought to work was near the city of White Plains, New York. We left in the morning and walked all day long. At night we rested by the railway station near our destination. Beside the track stood empty cars and with the permission of the stationmasters, who took pity on us, we lay down for the night in one of them. Word of the Jewish immigration from Russia to America had become universally known; the unfortunate refugees roused the compassion of everyone in this country.

The next morning we moved forward on our way and reached the area of the pipes. We found the supervisory men and told them what we wanted. They received us cheerfully, but to our utter disappointment, told us that they hadn't need of any new workers.

Broken in spirit we returned to New York and became part of the



Maxwell Street Chicago
 East European Jewish life in the middle of America
 (Woodcut by Todros Geller)

vast throng on Castle Garden. The plight of immigrants then was horribly bitter. Like sucklings at their mother's breast, the immigrants were entirely dependent on help from the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society. It couldn't help them much: the best it could do was provide a portion of food to prevent their starving to death. For this purpose, the society set up free kitchens on Greenwich Street where people came in groups, one after another. The meals they received, at the Society's expense were poor and skimpy. The operators of the kitchens were eager to make money, and oppressed the unfortunate diners. At breakfast, for which the Society paid ten cents a head, they provided a cup of coffee

looking like muddy water, and a loaf of bread worth less than a penny. Whenever mealtime came there was tumult and excitement, since everyone was hungry and eager to be among the first. Those who came to eat had to bring certification tickets from the Society. One of its officers distributed them, signed by him, to the throngs outside. This distribution demanded a great deal of time, and everyone waited his turn impatiently. Many used to forge tickets to fill their empty bellies quicker.

At times, the unfortunate immigrants on Castle Garden wearied of bearing their bitter fate. Stirred by inner passion they would begin to riot. Honorable gentlemen from the Society used then to come, appeal to them, and quiet them down.

The scenes that took place among the despairing immigrants broke the hearts of all onlookers. One, which I shall describe, affected the entire square. A young man, enveloped in hunger, who had not worn a clean shirt for many days, burst into the offices of the directors of the Society on State Street, tore off his contaminated shirt, and cried out loudly "See what has become of me!" Professor Michael Heilprin, of blessed memory, was then sitting in the directors' offices. At the sight of this horrible spectacle he burst into tears and wept like a baby.

Immigrants faced these troubles because they knew so little about the practical world. The year 1882 was a prosperous one in the United States, and work was available for thousands of people. But our brother immigrants didn't understand how ripe the times were. Several among them became wise to it and did improve their positions, but only a few. Intellectuals suffered particularly acutely, for they had come to work the land, which proved impossible. Their hopes dashed, they thought that theirs was no way to live, and therefore did nothing at all. But the practical spirit pervading this country eventually made an impact upon them. Toward the end of the summer, they began to rouse from their slumber.

As summer waned, the throng at Castle Garden began to decrease. Immigrants slowly spread out over the city seeking work or setting up in business. My friends and I also set out to find means of support. Our first concern was to find somewhere to live. Several among us succeeded in locating residences where advance payment was not required; the rest of us were left with nothing. I was among the unfortunates who couldn't find a place to live. For several nights I slept on the floor of a house on Ludlow Street in which some of my friends resided. I considered it my right to dwell in the vestibule of a house where my brethren were living. How I fed myself, I no longer even recall.

During this period of trouble, I sought work through the want ad section of the German language paper that was published in this city: *The New York Staats-Zeitung*. One day I found an ad in this journal seeking a dishwasher for a cafeteria. It being still morning, I raced to the appointed place as soon as I read the ad, and to my great joy was accepted. I assumed that my work would only be to clean bowls, spoons, and knives, but after I was accepted the owner gave me a large pot

to clean, encrusted on its bottom and sides with a dry layer of day-old cooking. The owner instructed me to take the pot outside and set it up near the waterpump so that I might have enough water to rinse it. I started to do my work most eagerly, but the crust of food in the pot was very hard and I couldn't remove it. I realized at once that there was no use in my staying on in the cafeteria and I decided to leave. But I was too embarrassed to tell my boss, and sought a way to get out without his knowing. I looked about here and there, found an opening in the corner of the yard, and quickly escaped through it. I felt most sorry for the honest owner who on account of me undoubtedly was late serving his guests lunch on that day.

At this time, I became acquainted with a young man from Vilna who worked in a factory which made copper utensils. He advised me to apply for work in his place. Though I knew nothing about the art of copper-smithing, I nevertheless took his advice and applied to the boss for some sort of employment. The overseer accepted me readily, and immediately put me to work. First they taught me how to use a file. Several days later they taught me how to finish copper instruments on a lathe. I became skilled in all facets of the work. My salary at the factory began at two dollars a week and after several weeks it was raised to four. The work lasted ten hours a day: from seven in the morning until six at night (with an hour off for lunch). I spent my spare time studying English and writing articles. One of the pieces which I wrote was the story of Johann Gutenberg, inventor of the printing press.

I considered myself a successful man. But lo, my success didn't last long. After three months, work at the factory declined and I was fired.

After being fired from the factory, I found work as a dishwasher in a restaurant then owned by an immigrant downtown at the corner of Ludlow and Canal streets. The work was hard, and my salary was very low. After two weeks I left the place to find better and more respectable work.

I left the restaurant with just one dollar in my pocket. That was all the money which my boss gave me for two weeks of work. Half of this sum I spent on a week's rent; the rest I set aside to subsist on until I could find a job. I had hoped that I would succeed in finding the means to earn a living in just a few days, but my hopes went unrealized, and I was in trouble. After five days, I had emptied my pocket of its last penny; after a week, I was left without a place to sleep. The man with whom I boarded refused to keep me in his house unless I paid him for a week in advance. I was left without shelter.

So as not to die of starvation or freeze from the cold — which had by then already arrived — I returned to the portals of my poor friends who had succeeded better than I. I joined in their paltry meals and meager accommodations. But even in this I faced obstacles: the owners of those dwellings where my good friends resided refused to permit unregistered guests to stay there, particularly not after dark. On account of these evil men I once had to spend a whole night under the stars.

I'll never forget that night. The cold was fierce and my clothes were torn and tattered. Afraid to sleep in the hall of a house, or in one of the carts that stood outside, I was forced to spend the whole night circling the streets. I strayed hither and yon, going past Bowery and Canal Streets many times. Whenever I reached the elevated subway stop on Canal and Allen I would look at the clock on top of the station to see how many hours were left until sunrise. Time passed exceedingly slowly. When I discovered, after a long hike, that the clock's hour hand had passed five, my spirits brightened. I still couldn't go to anyone's house, but at least I could take joy in the hope that the light of day would soon dawn, and then I could knock at somebody's door. . . .

In the end I succeeded in finding quarters at the home of some good-hearted people who agreed to take me in on condition that I pay them their rent when I earned it.

Meanwhile, it came time to begin baking Passover matzah in the Jewish area of New York. Seeing that I couldn't find a job in a factory, I decided to apply for work in a matzah bakery. This came easily: the first bakery I applied to accepted me at once. Matzah bakeries in those days paid their workers a very low wage, and people used to leave after just a few days on the job — so it was very simple to find work there. All the workers in the matzah bakery were newly arrived immigrants who could easily be cheated and sucked dry by the bakers. In accepting someone for work, they didn't tell him his salary in advance, but allowed him to labor a whole week to see how much his work was worth. After a week was over, they fired the poor "greener" with a pittance. The hours of work in the bakery were from two in the morning until nine or ten at night.

My job at the bakery was to turn the wheel of the machine that kneaded and pressed the dough. It was very hard work, and exceeded my power which had been weakened by hunger and tension. Still I gathered the last of my strength and performed the work satisfactorily. Lacking the money to buy food, I fed myself on the bakery's matzahs which workers were permitted to eat to their heart's content. But I grew to loathe this "bread of affliction" and I awaited the week's end with anticipation to discover what wages my toil would bring. I expected that my pay would be not less than five dollars, but when payday came I discovered that I was greatly mistaken. The amount which the baker gave me for my week of work was \$2.50. Seeing this, I became embittered, and left this terrible job.

This time, only a few days passed before I found work. One of my friends then worked in a factory where they made cakes of soap and they needed a man for the work. My friend informed me of this, I applied to the factory, and they accepted me. My job was to pound a kind of pitch, melt it into a pot, and dip into it the cakes of soap (they used to dip them in pitch to protect them from the air.) My pay at this work was five dollars a week, and I was very pleased with my lot. But lo, after several weeks I had to leave because the dust and

smell of the pitch greatly damaged my health. The work was so bad that I fell ill.

When my health returned, I decided not to go back to any sort of "dirty" work, but instead to seek my livelihood in a job that was clean and pleasing to me. It was not long before this work found me of itself.

On East Broadway in New York there was, in those days, an old book-seller named Jerucham S. Kantrowitz. Thanks to his business ties with the firm of "The Widow and the Brothers Romm"¹⁶ in Vilna, I became connected with him, and I made his business my address for letters. On this account I used frequently to visit him, and in this way he learned about me and became interested in my plight. Once when I came to him, he offered me a job as his assistant in the business. I accepted willingly, for not only did I consider the job to be physically easy, but I found it pleasant to be surrounded by books. My salary was exceedingly low — not more than two dollars a week — but my boss often invited me to dine with him and I became like a member of his household. Here I renewed my strength and forgot my poverty. The work was light and easy; I had time to fulfill my old lust for spiritual matters. In my spare time I learned the language of the country, and I increased my knowledge of those subjects which I had studied in the old world.

Kantrowitz's business was in an excellent spot in New York. In those days there were in this city only three [Jewish] booksellers,¹⁷ and Mr. Kantrowitz was the largest of them. He not only stocked prayerbooks and books needed by the Orthodox, but also English and German language prayerbooks, scholarly works, and sermons in German by German rabbis like Jellinek ¹⁸ used by American Reform Rabbis. Thanks to this, his business became a meeting place for great minds. Among those who visited his house were Russian intellectuals, famous German Reform rabbis, and Orthodox rabbis and preachers from Russia and Poland who interested me greatly. One of his visitors was the lawyer J.P. Solomon, founder of the English weekly the *Hebrew Standard*.

While I was comfortable in the bookstore, I did not find any real purpose to my work. I spent my time thinking out how I might attain the life that I had aspired to from my youth. I concluded that the first step in that direction should be teaching. So after about two years, I left the bookstore and became a private language teacher. Teaching in those days did not command a large salary from among our European immigrant brethren. But the hope that it would lead me to my goal of becoming a writer was compensation enough.

I cannot close this chapter without describing my boss, the bookseller, who was one of New York's exceptional people in the eighties of the last century. Mr. Kantrowitz was an excellent character in every way. Though old and Orthodox, when I knew him, he always wore a top hat and the latest fashion clothes. Every day, after morning prayers and before breakfast, he used to learn a chapter of Mishnah or Gemara with a group of Jews from his homeland in the small synagogue above

his business. Among our brethren in New York City and State he was very important – a giant to whom all would turn in matters of Jewish concern. He was the treasurer of the Rabbi Meir Ba'al Hanes charity [for the poor of Eretz Israel], and a *mohel* [ritual circumcizer] who took no money for his efforts, save asking affluent coreligionists to donate to his charity. But this was not the only reason why he was loved; he was also clever and witty. . . . Once, before Rosh Hashanah a small congregation in New York state asked him to send them a young cantor for the holy days. He knew an old cantor, over seventy, and sent him to the place just a day before the holiday, so that the congregation wouldn't have time to return him. Immediately after Rosh Hashanah he received a letter from the congregation reproving him for his action. He replied "I know that the cantor I sent you had just been married. I didn't ask how old he was." (The cantor had just entered the bonds of matrimony for the third time!)

I said above that there were three booksellers in New York. The second largest was Hyman Sakolski who deserves to be mentioned here. His business was limited to prayerbooks (*sidurim* and *machzorim*) in English and German editions that he printed from plates bought from the printer, [Henry] Frank the founder of a Hebrew press in New York in the forties of the nineteenth century.²⁰ Sakolski came to America in the sixties of that century and it is said that he began his activities in a unique way. Knowing that there were many cities in the state where small Jewish settlements existed far removed from Jewish life, unable to found communities or synagogues, he made a business of bringing to places like this a wagon with a Torah, a *talit* [prayer shawl] and *tefilin* [phylacteries]. Wherever he went, he suggested to isolated Jews that they put on the *talit* and *tefilin* while he read to them a portion from the Torah (even on days of the week when no Torah portion is read). Jews received him eagerly and paid him well. In this way he accumulated capital and established his bookdealership. He was a handsome, well-dressed man, and in his day was one of the most honored Jews in New York.

The period which I am recounting was an ideal one for Jews immigrating to America!

NOTES

1. (Jacob Shatzky), *Harkavy's Bio-Bibliography* (New York, 1933); A.R. Malachi, *Masot Ur'shumot* (New York, 1937), pp. 173-77 (in Hebrew); Bernard G. Richards, "Alexander Harkavy," *American Jewish Year Book* 42 (1940), pp. 153-64; Yudel Mark, "Alexander Harkavy," *Jewish Book Annual* 26 (1966), pp. 100-108 (in Yiddish).
2. See Joel S. Geffen, "Whither: To Palestine or to America in the Pages of the Russian Hebrew Press, *Ha-Melitz* and *Ha-Yom* (1880-1890)," *American Jewish Historical Quarterly*, 59 (1969), pp. 179-200.
3. See Gilbert Osofsky, "The Hebrew Emigrant Aid Society of the United States (1881-1883)," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* (= *PAJHS*), 49 (1960), pp. 173-85.
4. Abraham Menes, "The Am Oylom Movement," *Yivo Annual of Jewish Social Studies*, IV (1949), pp. 9-33.

5. The memoirs of Nicholas Aleinikoff (1861-1921) dating to this period may be found in H. Burgin, *Geshichte fun der Idisher Arbeiter Bavegung in Amerika* (New York, 1915), pp. 76-77, partly translated in Melech Epstein, *Jewish Labor in U.S.A.* (rev. ed. New York, 1969), I, pp. 22-23.
6. On Abraham Kaspé (1860-1920) see *Universal Jewish Encyclopedia*, VI (1942), p. 331.
7. For what follows, compare the memoirs of Harkavy's fellow passenger, Gregory Weinstein in his *The Ardent Eighties and After* (New York, 1947), esp. pp. 6-10. Burgin, *Idisher Arbeiter Bavegung*, pp. 74-75 lists other notable members of this Am Olam unit.
8. David Edelstadt (1866-1892) was an early Jewish socialist poet. His untimely death, of tuberculosis, transformed him into a folk hero of the labor movement. *Encyclopedia Judaica*, VI (1972), col. 364-65.
9. Philip Taylor, *The Distant Magnet* (New York, 1971), pp. 126-7; George J. Svejda, *Castle Garden as an Immigrant Depot, 1855-1890* (Washington, National Parks Service, 1968).
10. Compare Leo Shpall (ed.) "The Memoir of Doctor George Price," *PAJHS*, 47 (1957), pp. 102-106.
11. Adam Mickiewicz (1798-1855) was a Polish nationalist poet who expressed sympathy for Jews (his mother descended from a converted Frankist family), and has some influence on Hebrew literature. *Encyclopedia Judaica*, XI, col. 1500-1501; A. Duker in Waclaw Lednicki, *Adam Mickiewicz in World Literature* (Berkeley, 1956), pp. 561-68.
12. Cahan actually arrived on June 6th, only seven days after Harkavy. See Abraham Cahan, *The Education of Abraham Cahan*, translated by Leon Stein, Abraham P. Conan, and Lynn Davison (Philadelphia, 1969), pp. 217, 222; and Moses Rischin in *Dictionary of American Biography*, supplement V (1977), pp. 95-97.
13. For other, somewhat different accounts of this pivotal incident, see Weinstein, *Ardent Eighties*, p. 15; George Price, "The Russian Jews in America," translated by Leo Shpall, *PAJHS* 48 (1958), p. 40; Cahan, *Education*, p. 234; I. Kopeloff, *Amol in Amerika* (Warsaw, 1928), pp. 53-56; and Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers* (New York, 1976), pp. 102-103.
14. *Sefer Ha-Ikarim* (1425), *The Book of Principles*, is a famous treatise on Jewish articles of faith composed to counter declining Jewish morale and increased wavering of belief. See Alexander Altmann in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, II, col. 535-37.
15. Michael Heilprin (1828-1888) was born in Poland and immigrated to America in 1856. He attained fame as a writer and encyclopedist. Toward the end of his life he became active in Jewish relief work, winning unstinting praise even from otherwise hostile immigrants. See *Dictionary of American Biography*, 8 (1932), p. 502; and Gustav Pollak, *Michael Heilprin and His Sons* (New York, 1912).
16. The Romm Press (1789-1940) in Vilna was the most prestigious and probably the wealthiest Jewish press in Europe toward the end of the nineteenth century. Harkavy had served in its bookkeeping department before immigrating to America.
17. For a list of New York bookstores in 1890, see J.D. Eisenstein *Autobiography and Memoirs* (New York, 1929), p. 66 (in Hebrew).
18. Adolf Jellinek (1820/21-1893) was a Viennese rabbi and scholar, who ranked among the greatest preachers of his day. See Moses Rosenmann, *Dr. Adolf Jellinek, sein Leben und Schaffen* (Vienna, 1931).
19. Jacob P. Solomon (1838-1909) was an immigrant from England, a noted lawyer, and the editor of the Orthodox weekly, the New York *Hebrew Standard* (1881-1920). *American Jewish Year Book*, 6 (1904-5), p. 190; Eisenstein, *Autobiography*, p. 117.
20. Henry Frank (1804-1868) immigrated to America from Germany in 1848, and at his death was New York's foremost Hebrew printer and publisher. Madeleine B. Stern, "Henry Frank: Pioneer American Hebrew Publisher," *American Jewish Archives*, 20 (November 1968), pp. 163-168.