

“A BINTEL BRIEF:” A JOURNEY TO AMERICA

Sarah Weiss

Introduction

The Eastern European Jews who migrated to the United States during the years 1880-1920 typically were nervous about starting a new life in a new country, but also were excited to set foot in America, the land of opportunity. The hardships they had experienced in Eastern Europe, including outbreaks of violence, called pogroms, directed against Jews, had strengthened them as a religion, an ethnic group, and a culture. The journey they would make wouldn't only be a journey across the ocean, but also a journey to the assimilation that would take place from the Eastern European Jewish culture to the American culture.

Like many other immigrant ethnic groups, the Jews turned to a variety of *American* activities so they might fit into their new home. They also continued activities from their old traditions to aid in remembering from where they had come. The traditional lifestyle of the Jews often blended with and had counterparts in the American lifestyle. The newspaper was one of the most important connections between these two cultures. The Yiddish newspapers in Chicago acted as a guide to the Eastern European Jewish immigrants searching for a new life.

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Eastern European Life

The Jews in Eastern Europe sustained a remarkable culture and tradition that revolved around the marketplace, the home, and the synagogue. In the larger cities, such as Warsaw, Poland¹ and Minsk, Russia,² Yiddish newspapers were published. But in the shtetls, the small, rural communities of Jews in Eastern Europe, newspapers weren't a major form of communication. A few men had learned to read the Yiddish language, as well as a few fortunate women. The spoken form of Yiddish was the most common form of communication. Stories were passed on orally from generation to generation.³

As a result of the pogroms of Czar Alexander III in 1881, many Jews began to contemplate leaving for America.⁴ They came to a crossroads in their lives: stay and suffer or move on. Many felt that they should remain in the Old World and fight against the pogroms that were becoming a part of daily life. They worried that the strong culture they had achieved would break apart if they left their homeland. Others felt it was time to leave in order to eliminate persecution from their lives. In the end, many decided to leave Eastern Europe and start out on the long journey to America.⁵ Would the Jews stay strong as a people? Would their ideas and culture be accepted in this new, foreign land? Most importantly, would this mass migration of Jews change their culture forever and would they become so Americanized that their culture would be forgotten, simply to adjust to their new world? These are questions that were running through the minds of many of the Eastern European Jews as they boarded the large ships and came across the Atlantic Ocean where they would approach a new country, a new culture, a new people, and a new life.⁶

The Jews Come to Chicago

Two million Jews left Eastern Europe between 1880 and 1925, most settling in American cities.⁷ Most arrived in America on

the East Coast and continued westward.⁸ During these forty-five years, approximately 50,000 Eastern European immigrant Jews settled into Chicago, 80% of all Jews in the city.⁹ Most congregated in the poorest section of the city, the Maxwell Street area of the West Side.¹⁰ In 1900, Chicago's Jewish population had reached almost 75,000. The Maxwell Street area was 90% Jewish.¹¹ The immigrant Jews created a community similar to the shtetls they inhabited in Eastern Europe. There were kosher meat markets and chicken stores, matzo bakeries and ritual bathhouses. There were also synagogues, Hebrew schools, bookstores, Hebrew-, Yiddish-, and English-speaking literary organizations, a number of Yiddish theatres, and a few Yiddish newspaper offices. Yiddish remained the predominant tongue of the immigrants.¹²

Once the Jews had settled in Chicago's Maxwell Street area, they experienced a significant culture shock. Many lacked the experience of living in large cities. The male East European Jews were artisans and cottage workers, working from door to door to sell what they had produced themselves.¹³ With their arrival in America came a realization of the industrial workplace. They were soon forced to find jobs in sweatshops where harsh conditions were a way of life.¹⁴ Thus, the struggle began between the traditional Jewish culture and the shocking reality of becoming true *Americans*.

Jewish Newspapers in Chicago

For the Eastern European Jews in Chicago, one of the most important aids in Americanization was the Yiddish language newspapers. In these newspapers, almost every political and cultural persuasion and controversy among the Chicago Jews was represented.¹⁵ By 1920, two major Yiddish daily newspapers served the immigrants: *The Daily Jewish Courier* and *The Jewish Daily Forward*.¹⁶

Everyone read the Yiddish paper, the Yiddish paper came in every day. After dinner our family would leaf through it—sometimes my father would read items aloud. Not to take a paper was to confess you were

[a] barbarian. The Yiddish paper was their main tie, perhaps their only tie, with the outside world."¹⁷

The Forward, *Forverts* in Yiddish, was one of the most popular Yiddish newspapers among immigrant Jews. Originally founded in New York City in 1887, it began its Chicago edition in 1920, which ran continuously until 1953. Before 1920, the New York edition was sent by train to Chicago and contained a few pages of Chicago news. The New York edition's "Bintel Brief" column was printed until 1970, and the newspaper itself is still in existence.

For the first half of the 20th century, the New York edition of *The Forward* was edited by Abraham Cahan, a Lithuanian Jew. Its Chicago office was located on the West Side. *The Forward* spoke for the labor-involved, socialist-inclined immigrants and supported the labor unions, the Workmen's Circle members, and the secular Jews of Chicago. In the mother tongue, Yiddish, it explained the importance of being organized, fighting against poor working wages, long work hours and unfair treatment from bosses.¹⁸ Primarily a workmen's paper, *The Forward* was considered the most vibrant, the most vocal, and the best adapted Jewish newspaper in the new land.¹⁹ By 1902, the newspaper had already become "the bridge which hundreds of thousands of Eastern European Jewish immigrants crossed to become Americans."²⁰ It had a peak of circulation in Chicago of 15,000 in 1930.²¹

The pages of *The Forward* were a compilation of the stories of the immigration of Jews from Eastern Europe to Chicago and their struggle for a better life in America. Their achievements and contributions were recorded in the newspaper, as well as day-to-day news, articles, sketches, and special features. It included sober observations, and sometimes vivid descriptions, of tenement houses and sweatshops. *The Forward* reflected, "as no other institution in the immigrant world," the experiences of these immigrant Jews.²² The newspaper became a large part of the Jewish immigrant family's home and a large part of their Americanization.²³

“A Bintel Brief”

The most popular feature in *The Forward* was a question and answer column entitled, “A Bintel Brief,” literally meaning “a bundle of letters.” Abraham Cahan felt that *The Forward* should not devote itself completely to trade unionism and political problems.²⁴ The feature began in New York’s 1906 edition. Cahan wrote in his memoirs about “A Bintel Brief:”

People often need the opportunity to be able to pour out their heavy-laden hearts. Among our immigrant masses this need was very marked. Thousands of people, torn from their homes and their dear ones, were lonely souls who thirsted for expression, who wanted to hear an opinion, who wanted advice in solving their weighty problems. The ‘Bintel Brief’ created just this opportunity.²⁵

A new cottage industry arose among the literate of the immigrant Jews with the coming of “A Bintel Brief” to Chicago. The typical immigrant wrote poorly. Literate immigrants were soon sought out by the ever inventive, illiterate immigrants. Twenty-five cents was the fee one paid for the writing of a letter. The “Bintel Briefwriters” often added their own expressions in the letters, the paying immigrants completely unaware.²⁶ The letters voiced a variety of problems and complaints that Eastern European Jews had about America and its culture. Decisions that the immigrants had to make were some of the most popular kinds of letters. Problems that arose between mothers and daughters, mothers and sons, and especially mothers and daughters-in-law were common. Other complaints dealt with love, jealousy, education for women, lost relatives, kosher and unkosher issues, poverty, unemployment, illness, and religion. Letters poured into *The Forward*.

Many Jews wanted to return to Eastern Europe because they felt they could no longer adapt to the culture of America. One person wrote of this very situation in 1906. “I opened a grocery store here, but soon lost all my money. In Europe we made business; we had people working for us and paid them well. In short, there we made a good living but here we are badly off.”²⁷

Another man was also worried about returning to Russia or staying in America. His mother and sister were living in poverty in America, and his brothers refused to leave Russia, wishing the family would return. "I can't make up my mind whether to fulfill my duty to my parents and sister and send them to Russia, or to go back to Russia and help my brothers. Now I feel like a coward."²⁸ The following quote from a letter written in 1912 illustrates the dilemma the Jews faced. "I've struggled because I never made a living. I know English, I am not lazy, I've tried everything and never succeeded. In America, it went badly and I haven't been able to adjust to the country. I must go away from the free America in order to better my condition."²⁹ "A Bintel Brief" responded to these letters with truly American messages. The general suggestion of the replies was to join an American movement and to occupy their time with American activities. *The Forward* also strongly suggested not to return to their homeland because it was different from when they had left and they would be "strangers to their own neighbors."³⁰

Many letters addressed the intimidation of the clash of Old World traditions with the traditions of a *true American*. "A Bintel Brief" was the answer to many of their problems. One of the most common issues among the immigrant Jews was intermarriage. Many first generation parents were worried their children would marry a non-Jew. Parents were upset at the thought of their children becoming too Americanized and forgetting their traditional lifestyle from the homeland. They were often faced with this difficulty and poured their hearts out in "A Bintel Brief." The following is from a letter written in 1906: "I worked with a Gentile girl, and fell in love. We agreed that I would remain a Jew and she a Christian. I realized that it would not work. When she sees me reading a Jewish newspaper her face changes color. I can see she has changed. I could never convert, and there's no hope for me to keep her from going to church."³¹ Another reader said he was confused about marrying a Gentile girl. The Gentile girl said to him "'The fact that I am a Gentile and you a Jew should not bother us. We are both human beings and we will live as such.' She believed that all men were equal."³² In 1928, a woman wrote to *The*

Forward explaining a situation with her daughter. “I consider myself a progressive woman who thinks there is no difference between Jews and Christians. I believe that a Christian is as good as a Jew. Now, however, when my daughter has fallen in love with a Gentile, I interfere because I am against this match. His parents are American Yankees, never miss a Sunday at church and speak with reverence of President Coolidge. When I think that they might become my in-laws and their son my daughter’s husband, I tremble.”³³ *The Forward* responded to such letters with a variety of messages. Some replies suggested the readers intermarry because this may help in their becoming more Americanized. But other replies warned that if they intermarried, they would be disrespecting their parents as well as the first-generation Jews.³⁴

The role of women was also one of the most important and drastic transitions from the old country to America. In the United States, most urban women worked in factories and sweatshops. In 1907, a seventeen-year-old woman working in a sweatshop was constantly harassed by her foreman. “There is a foreman who is an exploiter—he sets prices on the work—it was my bad luck—he tried to make advances to me—he started to pick on me, said my work was no good—he was wrong, he started to shout at me in the vilest language. The girls in the shop were very upset over the foreman’s vulgarity—they are afraid to be witnesses against him. The men that work in the shop are not treated in this way.”³⁵ The immigrants of this time were often faced with the issue of how women fit politically into American society. In 1909, a reader wrote, “I am one of the group that is in favor of giving women full rights. The opposed say it would destroy their family life. They say the woman would then no longer be the housewife, the mother to her children, the wife to her husband—to be dependent on man, obey him, love him, supply his comforts. Must the woman then be considered a slave, and the man the master? These same people who recently celebrated the hundredth birthday of Abraham Lincoln, for having freed the Negro slaves, now talk with a satirical grin about women’s freedom!”³⁶

Upon arriving in America, men and women differed in their ideas of the American woman. On one hand, women realized

that American women were literate and employed. On the other hand, male immigrants felt they should keep with the traditional lifestyle of Eastern Europe. Many women wished to educate themselves. This letter, written in 1910, was from a woman who wished to attend school, against her husband's wishes. "Since I do not want my conscience to bother me, I ask you to decide whether a married woman has the right to go to school two evenings a week. My husband thinks I have no right to do this. I cannot be satisfied to be just a wife and mother. My children and my house are not neglected, but I go to evening high school twice a week. He is in favor of the emancipation of women, yet in real life he acts contrary to his beliefs."³⁷ "A Bintel Brief" was a place for women and men to express their opinions about the role of women in the American culture and how it clashed with their own traditional lifestyle. *The Forward* answered these questions with strong support for the emancipation of women. Women in America were independent to educate themselves and have a voice in the community. This message, enforced in *The Forward*, answered the immigrants' questions for those who were confused about the proper treatment of women in their new home.

Letters written to "A Bintel Brief" were answered by the department editor, S. Kornbluth, and on occasion by Abraham Cahan himself. Whoever answered the letters took the place of the *rebbe*. A *rebbe* is the wisest rabbi, the one who gives advice. The letters and the answers were often paraphrased and slightly changed when translated into English. Therefore, most letters lost their "Yiddish humor" and answers were summarized. Not only was "A Bintel Brief" an advice column for immigrants new to America, but also a glimpse into the impoverished lives of the immigrant Jews.³⁸ "A Bintel Brief" guided Jewish immigrants for decades by answering their most common questions about becoming the *better American*.³⁹ As the immigrants became more American, so did their questions and complaints.⁴⁰ They became less confused about the culture of America. As the 1950s approached, the complaints became less directed at unfair working conditions, and more directed at problems among relatives or children. The assimilation of the Jews into America's and Chicago's culture was reflected over time in *The Forward*.

Impact

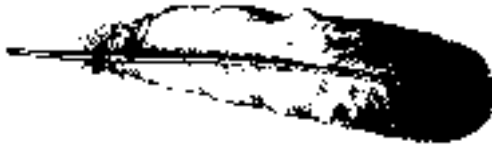
The Forward's advice column "A Bintel Brief" served the immigrant Jews until 1970. The Jews left a torn life in Eastern Europe, where their culture was seemingly doomed. They made a long journey to the "Land of Opportunity." Once they arrived in Chicago, the Jews led impoverished lives. But they were determined to become part of America and its remarkable culture. The newspaper became a significant part of daily life. Each day, the children were sent out to the newsstand to buy *The Forward*, and each day the parents read the paper out loud, in Yiddish in the earlier years, and eventually in English.

My grandfather sent me to get the *Forverts* every morning. When it came to "A Bintel Brief," I remember my grandmother and sister reading it out loud. A lot of things helped the Americanization. It was there to keep people tied to their roots and help them adjust—it helped them stay in this world and stay in their Old World.⁴¹

Not only did "A Bintel Brief" have an impact on the culture of the immigrant Jews in America, but it also had an effect on English language newspapers. "A Bintel Brief" is considered by many historians to be the precursor to the nationally syndicated Ann Landers column published in *The Chicago Tribune*.⁴² But Ms. Marcy Sugar, Ann Landers' personal assistant, states that "A Bintel Brief" did not inspire Ann Landers to write her column, but rather they aid immigrants in the same way. Ms. Sugar says, "Bintel Brief spoke to the average person, and so does Ann Landers, [because she] provides practical, simple, straightforward and no-nonsense advice."⁴³ Ann Landers states, "Readers have let me know that they learned appropriate social behavior and American values through my column, since the letters often bring up such subjects. My advice is very American."⁴⁴ The Ann Landers column is an advice column about some of the same issues that were discussed in *The Forward* at the turn of the century.⁴⁵

Many of the traditions of the Old World clashed with those of America. Each Jew that journeyed across the Atlantic Ocean to Ellis Island and then to Chicago had fears about their new life, and

once they had settled in Chicago had important questions about their adjustment. Although the transition from the Old World to America was immense and difficult, the Jewish people survived as a culture in the heart of America. Most Jews were determined to adjust, yet they would not forget their traditions. Not only did the American culture greatly affect the Jews, the Jewish people have also made an enormous contribution to America's culture. The Jews have successfully made their mark in American arts, medicine, and business. This mass migration of Jews had a profound impact on their culture, as Americanization became one of the most momentous elements of their lives. Aided by *The Forward* and "A Bintel Brief," Jews not only held on to their historic ideas and culture, but also grasped the ideas and culture around them in their new home, America.



Endnotes

¹ Irving Cutler, interview by author, 7 January 1998, Chicago, tape recording, telephone interview, Chicago
 Dr. Irving Cutler is a professor emeritus of geography at the Chicago State University. He has written several articles on the Jews of Chicago and several books on Chicago itself. Dr. Cutler is also on the board of directors and one of the founders of the Chicago Historical Society. His interview provided information on the history of *The Forward* in Chicago and the importance of “A Bintel Brief.”

² Aviva Silberman, interview by author, 13 January 1998, Highland Park, tape recording, Highland Park, Illinois
 Ms. Silberman read *The Forward* and its column, “A Bintel Brief” as a child and was able to remember the issues discussed in the column and the importance of it as an Americanization guide to the Eastern European immigrants.

³ Irving Howe and Kenneth Libo, How We Lived: A Documentary History of Immigrant Jews in America (New York: Richard Marek Publishers, 1979) p. 12

A history focusing on the journey of the Eastern European Jews physically and culturally to the United States. Includes pertinent quotes.

⁴ Irving Howe, World of Our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made (New York: Schocken Books, 1989) p. 59 Focuses on the second wave of immigration to America. Includes descriptions of the sweatshop and tenement house.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 59

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 34

⁷ Charles Jaret, Residential Mobility and Local Jewish Community Organization in Chicago (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977) p. 55 Reference about patterns of Jewish migration in Chicago; inclusive of tables and graphs of migration patterns.

⁸ Irving Cutler, The Jews of Chicago: From Shtetl to Suburb (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996) p. 56

One of Dr. Cutler’s many books, this book contains a great amount of information on the migration of Jews from Western and Eastern Europe and the life they created in Chicago. Includes important facts about *The Forward* and “A Bintel Brief” and how the Eastern European Jews were affected by it.

⁹ Jaret, p. 55

- ¹⁰ Howard Sachar, A History of the Jews in America (New York: Vintage Books, 1992) p. 142
- ¹¹ Richard Lindberg, Ethnic Chicago (Lincolnwood, Illinois: Passport Books, 1992) p. 122
Essential facts about the migration of Eastern European Jews to Chicago and the life they created.
- ¹² Ibid., p. 122
- ¹³ Sachar, p. 116
- ¹⁴ Ibid., p. 143
- ¹⁵ Cutler, p. 139
- ¹⁶ Ibid., p. 139
- ¹⁷ Howe, p. 518
- ¹⁸ Cutler, p. 139
- ¹⁹ Isaac Metzger, A Bintel Brief: Sixty Years of Letters from the Lower East Side to the Jewish Daily Forward (New York: Schocken Books, 1971) p. 11 Includes an extensive analysis of the migration of Eastern European Jews to the United States; containing direct translations from "A Bintel Brief."
- ²⁰ Seth Lipsky, "Abraham Cahan, the 'Forward,' and Me," Commentary Magazine (June 1997) p. 42
A friend and associate of Abraham Cahan, the editor of *The Forward* during the first half of the 20th century, writes of Cahan and *The Forward*.
- ²¹ Cutler, p. 140
- ²² Howe and Libo, p. 31
- ²³ Ibid., p. 31
- ²⁴ Richard Shepard and Vicki Gold Levi, Live and Be Well: A Celebration of Yiddish Culture in America: From the First Immigrants to the Second World War (New York: Ballantine Books, 1982) p. 58
- ²⁵ Metzger, p. 13
- ²⁶ Ibid., p. 12
- ²⁷ Jewish Daily Forward (New York, Chicago) 1906
- ²⁸ Jewish Daily Forward (New York, Chicago) 1906
- ²⁹ Jewish Daily Forward (New York, Chicago) 1912
- ³⁰ Cutler, interview
- ³¹ Jewish Daily Forward (New York, Chicago) 1906
- ³² Jewish Daily Forward (New York, Chicago) 1908
- ³³ Jewish Daily Forward (New York, Chicago) 1928
- ³⁴ Metzger, p.13
- ³⁵ Jewish Daily Forward (New York, Chicago) 1907
- ³⁶ Jewish Daily Forward (New York, Chicago) 1909

³⁷ Jewish Daily Forward (New York, Chicago) 1910

³⁸ Sachar, p. 149

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 10

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 10

⁴¹ Aviva Silberman, interview by author, 13 January 1998, Highland Park, tape recording, Highland Park, Illinois

⁴² Metzger, p. 11

⁴³ Marcy Sugar, interview by author, 13 April 1998, Chicago, Illinois

This secondary source interview was vital to the writing of this essay. Ms. Marcy Sugar is the current personal assistant of Ms. Ann Landers. Ms. Landers is the author of the popular “Ann Landers Column” in the Tempo section of The Chicago Tribune. Ms. Sugar’s and Ms. Landers’s comments gave the author a clear view on the similarities between “A Bintel Brief” and the “Ann Landers Column.” For two questions in the interview, Ms. Sugar gave her comments, and for the other two questions, Ms. Landers gave her comments to Ms. Sugar, who then repeated them to the interviewer. Ms. Landers’ and Ms. Sugar’s observations were an interesting addition to the research.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

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