

The Jewish Settlement on St. Paul's Lower West Side

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St. Paul's Lower West Side was home to several ethnic groups before East European Jews began settling there in the 1880's. The neighborhood was located on a bend of the Mississippi River across from the main business district of the city, and because it was subject to periodic flooding it was always an area of low rentals attractive to new immigrants.

The East European Jews who came to St. Paul in the 1880's were not the first Jews to settle in the city, but they were the first to settle on the Lower West Side. The Jews who had emigrated to St. Paul in the 1850's, 1860's, and 1870's were largely from Germany and Austria. They were a part of the general Central European emigration of those decades, and they settled in other parts of St. Paul. The Jews who began to arrive on the Lower West Side from Russia, Lithuania, Poland (these latter two part of the Russian Empire at that time), and Roumania were fleeing from persecutions and pogroms in their homelands and usually arrived with little more than the clothes on their backs.

Anti-semitism had always been present in Russia and Eastern Europe, but the Jews living in the Russian empire had been comparatively better off during the reign of Czar Alexander II (1855-1881). Then with the reign of Czar Alexander III (1881-1894), the situation deteriorated for the Jews and pogroms and massacres of Jews were often deliberately incited by the government. The infamous May Laws of 1882 crippled Jewish economic activity, prohibited the free movement of Jews to and from the "Pale" (the area where Jews had been allowed to settle), and often expelled Jews from areas where they had previously been allowed to live. Thus, the Jews were in a desperate situation. After each

successive wave of terror, Jews left Russia (and other East European countries where the situation was just as oppressive) in ever-increasing numbers; the number of emigrants varied with the extent of that year's pogroms.

Friction Between Old And New

The first of these Russian Jews to come to St. Paul arrived early in 1882, and, as Rabbi W. Gunther Plaut states: "Suddenly, without much planning, thousands of families fled in fright and found their way to London and New York. Without provisions or funds they had been sent westward; and without previous warning 200 refugees came to St. Paul in early 1882."¹ In July, 1882, 235 more Jews arrived, also in desperate straits. They were without food, and many wore nothing but rags. The Jewish community in St. Paul did what they could for these new arrivals, but were unable all by themselves to cope with the situation. The members of Mount Zion Temple—German and Austrian Jews—went to the mayor and the city of St. Paul for help, and as a newspaper report put it: "This is the first time that the Hebrew people in the cause of charity have been compelled to issue a call for assistance. Let it be nobly responded to, and with the least delay possible."²

The refugees were first housed in the Railroad Immigrant House in the city, and after a few days were moved to a school. The city contributed \$500 in addition to the use of the school, the Mayor's Emergency Fund gave \$100, and the Chamber of Commerce gave \$500. While housed in the school, the refugees were given food, clothing, and medical care if necessary; even a barber was brought in "to cut the children's hair, much to the dismay of many parents whose religious scruples were offended by the procedure."³ It was not long before the immigrants were able to find work in St. Paul's expanding labor market, either as skilled or unskilled workers, and to move into their own living quarters.

Jewish refugees continued to arrive in St. Paul in large numbers throughout the 1880's, and most of them settled in the Lower West Side. Some of the Jews moving into the still quite sparsely

¹ W. Gunther Plaut, *Mount Zion 1856-1956* (St. Paul, 1956), p. 55.

² *Ibid.*, p. 56.

³ Plaut, *The Jews in Minnesota* (New York, 1959), p. 94.



Agudas Achim Synagogue in St. Paul,
Erected in 1909

settled area built their own small houses as soon as possible, while others moved into homes vacated by Germans leaving the quarter. On the whole, however, there was no mass movement out of the Lower West Side by the French, Irish, and Germans already there when the Jewish immigrants started moving in.

According to Rabbi W. Gunther Plaut, the historian of the Minnesota Jewish community: "The slow, steady growth of the Jewish community burst into uncontrollable expansion. The older immigrants and their American-born children suddenly found themselves in the minority. Now, as never before, there were desperate, widespread poverty and urgent want."⁴ While the older Jewish settlers did what they could to help the refugees, there was some friction between the two groups. "As in every large-scale immigration," writes Plaut, "the newcomers represented a psychological threat to the established order. They could not fail to influence the older Jewish settlers' sense of security. Consequently, the lines of 'German' and 'Russian-Polish' were drawn ever more sharply."⁵ Moreover, Mount Zion's members were Reform Jews and were taken aback by the customs and practices of the Orthodox refugees. On the other hand, these *Deutsche Yehudim* no doubt seemed equally strange to the Orthodox residents of the Lower West Side. There were cultural and social differences as well, and, as Plaut says, "the cultural, social and religious interests of the two groups were or appeared to be incompatible."⁶

Most of the new arrivals on the Lower West Side—single men or families—immediately began saving their money to bring over the relatives and friends who still remained in the Old Country. This was no easy task, since the immigrants had to work hard just for the bare necessities of life for themselves. It was not an easy life, but a lighter side can be found, as William Hoffman relates in his reminiscences:

Wives and families were brought over from the old country with \$300 loans for steamship tickets, sometimes payable in five years by weekly payments at an interest rate of six percent. Once having brought a family over, more loans were made to bring over immediate relatives, who, as the old familiar complaint went, never appreciated it anyway. And just as soon as

⁴ Plaut, *Mount Zion*, p. 56.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

⁶ Plaut, *Minnesota*, p. 110.

these relations who "didn't appreciate it" had a roof over their heads and a thin and precarious livelihood in sight, they in turn sent for other relatives who, of course, also "didn't appreciate." So, in time, the West Side was populated with nothing but "didn't appreciators."⁷

In a more serious vein, it should be noted that as an example of how these people saved to bring relatives over to join them, William Hoffman's own father survived literally on peanuts for months in order to save the money to bring his family to St. Paul.⁸

With Jewish immigrants continuing to flock to the Lower West Side throughout the 1880's and 1890's, it is no surprise that the area was predominantly Jewish by the mid-1890's. Many of the Jews earned their livelihood as workers in the garment and needlework industries in downtown St. Paul, and there were also quite a few peddlers, junk dealers, and small neighborhood store owners. In starting any little businesses of their own, the would-be peddler, junk dealer, store owner, or what-have-you usually found it necessary to borrow money from a loan association. Most of these loan associations were not out to make what they could off their clients, but were often, according to Hoffman, "the real heroes of many little Jewish communities struggling to maintain a precarious foothold."⁹ Hoffman describes the usual loan process involved, in this case to open a little store, as follows:

To open a little store, the husband would take out a maximum loan of \$300, and his wife would make another loan for the same amount. With this \$600 in cash, it was a relatively simple matter to secure an additional \$600 in credit. With \$1200, you could really open up a well-stocked store without fearing a run on case goods. After all, nobody bought more than a dollar's worth on any trip and since it would take 1200 customers at that rate to empty the shelves, and since at one time it seemed as though there were 1200 little grocery stores, there was little danger of selling out to the bare walls. The prevailing merchandising philosophy, of course, was, "So if we don't sell it, the family will eat it," and many did.¹⁰

In spite of the fact that the great majority of immigrants were working hard to get a start, criticism of them "was often harsh and praise frequently condescending." Plaut states that one Jewish

⁷ William Hoffman, *Tales of Hoffman* (Minneapolis, 1961), p. 63.

⁸ Oliver Towne, column in the *St. Paul Dispatch*, Dec. 5, 1957.

⁹ Hoffman, *Tales*, p. 65.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 64-65.

writer called the immigrants "pretty unmanageable, especially when advised to begin working and getting their \$10.00 a week, which is an easy thing in this growing city." This was, again in Plaut's words, a "gratuitous and especially misplaced barb—for if the immigrant knew one thing, it was hard, back-breaking work."¹¹

A Spokesman For The West Side

The residents of the Lower West Side were, of course, interested in more than employment, although that was necessarily of prime importance. Their Orthodox Jewish faith was of the utmost importance to them, and they wasted no time before organizing congregations. The different nationality groups formed separate congregations, and the two largest were Russian congregations. One of the Russian groups held its first services in Rutchik's Hay and Feed Store prior to their building a synagogue, B'nai Zion, for \$20,000 in 1901. The cornerstone was laid in July, 1902, and at the dedication on September 14, 1902, the steps broke under the large assembly.¹² By 1907 they had 1,350 members in 175 families (indicating that the average family size was between seven and eight). They operated two Hebrew schools with 175 pupils, teaching customs and ceremonies, the Talmud, and Hebrew sight-reading and translation. Their auxiliaries were the Daughters of Zion, the Hachnosis Orchim [sheltering home], the Young Men's Aid Society, and the Ladies' Aid Society.¹³ The other Russian group, the Russian Brotherhood, met in a building on Kentucky Street for several years, with daily services and several auxiliary societies.¹⁴ In 1909 they built a new synagogue, Agudas Achim. There was also the Texas Street *shul*—the original building was built in 1889, and when it was damaged by fire a new structure was built in 1923. This was the smallest synagogue in the area. Other congregations, which either leased quarters or built synagogues on the Lower West Side, were Congregation Beth Hamedrash Hagodol, Congre-

¹¹ Plaut, *Minnesota*, p. 111.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 116.

¹³ "History of the Jews of Minneapolis and St. Paul," in *Reform Advocate* (Chicago, 1907), p. 45.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

gation Sharey Hessed Woemet, and Congregation B'nai Israel. The above description of the different congregations has some gaps in it, and one of the reasons for this is described by Hoffman: "Each of the *schuls* has a colorful history, but . . . for the most part their records have disappeared and at least in several instances it is common knowledge that a defeated secretary was unhappy with his newly-elected successor and threw his books away either out of spite or because he joined another congregation."¹⁵

Most of these congregations joined in forming an Orthodox congregational union and engaged a chief rabbi. The first chief rabbi was Abraham E. Alperstein, who served for only a short time. Rabbi Herman Simon became rabbi of the West Side Congregations in 1888, and "in the years following established himself firmly as the spokesman for the West Side."¹⁶ His most significant contribution to the Jewish community was his leadership in the drive for a Hebrew Institute on the West Side. The St. Paul Hebrew Institute and Sheltering Home became a reality in 1911—the cornerstone was laid in May, 1911, and the building was formally dedicated on November 6, 1911, with Rabbi Isaac L. Rypins of Mount Zion Temple as the major speaker. The new edifice was, as Plaut states, "what could then be rightly considered a splendid building."¹⁷ The Institute was the Lower West Side's Talmud Torah, and its major function was the education of children, which up to this time had been offered in Mr. Bromberg's Cheddar.¹⁸ The Institute also became the social center of Jewish community life—prior to this, weddings and other celebrations had been held in the Royal Arcaneum Hall in downtown St. Paul.¹⁹ The Sheltering Home housed and fed many of the new immigrants when they first arrived on the Lower West Side and served in this way until the flow of Jewish immigrants stopped in the 1920's.

Perhaps the single most important institution in the life of the Lower West Side was Neighborhood House. Neighborhood House had its beginnings in 1893, when the Mount Zion Temple Ladies

¹⁵ Hoffman, "A Proud Era Is Gone," in the *American Jewish World*, September 28, 1962, p. 16.

¹⁶ Plaut, *Minnesota*, p. 203.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 226.

¹⁸ Hoffman, *Those Were the Days* (Minneapolis, 1957), pp. 22-23.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

Hebrew Benevolent Society's Jewish Relief Society, led by Mrs. Sophie Wirth, started sewing classes for the children of the new Jewish immigrants on the Lower West Side. Two years later they had expanded the program, and Mrs. Wirth had requested and gotten the use of Mount Zion's vestry rooms for the classes. In 1897 they rented rooms on the Lower West Side, and at this time there were seventy-three girls enrolled.²⁰ Rabbi Emanuel Hess and later Rabbi Rypins (who came to Mount Zion in 1899) as well as members of Mount Zion also helped with the classes—Rabbi Rypins taught English in the evening school—but the guiding force was Sophie Wirth. Mrs. Wirth, who had been born in Germany and had come to the United States at an early age, was, according to Rabbi Plaut, "St. Paul's outstanding symbol of the Jewish volunteer social worker" and served as vice-president of the National Conference of Jewish Charities.²¹ Mrs. Wirth also helped found a Jewish Day Nursery on the Lower West Side, but since "it was found that Jewish mothers would not readily consent to leave their children in someone else's care," the nursery was later taken over by Neighborhood House on a nonsectarian basis.²²

On July 5, 1900, efforts toward special quarters on the Lower West Side were rewarded when Neighborhood House opened its doors at 153 Robertson Street in a rented building. In its first few years of operation, Neighborhood House's program focused on the teaching of the English language, "explaining the customs and ideals of their adopted country to children and adults, and teaching sewing to the young girls of the community."²³ It soon became obvious, however, that the needs of the community required a broader program. There were fears and frictions among the different ethnic groups residing in the area—the Jews had little in common with the older immigrant groups, and often even with fellow Jews who had come from different parts of Eastern Europe.

Thus, in 1903, Neighborhood House was reorganized on a nonsectarian basis. Catholics, Protestants, and others joined the Jews of Mount Zion in the effort to improve the common lot of, and to "Americanize," the residents of the Lower West Side. However,

²⁰ Plaut, *Minnesota*, p. 153.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, p. 225.

²³ *Neighborhood House 1897-1947* (St. Paul, 1947), p. 4.

Mount Zion's rabbis always served on Neighborhood House's Board, emphasizing the Temple's original relationship to the institution. The first regular staff members of Neighborhood House were hired in 1903 and consisted of two full-time paid workers and seven volunteers; they operated Neighborhood House that first year on a budget of \$959.89.²⁴

Only One Telephone

The English classes slowly but surely began to overcome the language barriers which separated neighbors from one another, and the classes in "Americanization" and citizenship especially helped the most recent immigrants to learn the customs, practises, and traditions of their new homeland, a way of life perplexingly different from the one they had left behind. The values of the different cultural contributions of each ethnic group to American life were emphasized, and there were also recreational programs for the children. Neighborhood House expanded rapidly in its first decade and soon became an integral and vital part of life on the Lower West Side. In 1905 the first night school was opened with students from MacAlester College serving as volunteer teachers, and in 1907 a paid teacher from the St. Paul Institute of Letters and Science opened additional classes in English and citizenship. Also around this time a branch of the St. Paul Public Library was established in Neighborhood House, making reading material available in both English and foreign languages. In 1908, a visit by Jane Addams of Chicago's Hull House was quite an occasion for the staff and members of Neighborhood House.

With rapid expansion it became necessary to find new and larger quarters, and in 1910 Neighborhood House rented and occupied the building at 157 Robertson Street where it was to stay for many years. By 1910 there were industrial arts classes for boys as well as sewing classes for girls, and many clubs with both educational and social purposes were organized for women, boys, and girls. The Katherine Pitts' Mother's Club, for Jewish mothers, was concerned with the mother's "duty toward her child," as well as with the more practical aspects of child-raising.²⁵ This club was

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Neighborhood House, *Annual Report for 1909-1910*, p. 6.

also much concerned with the problems of law enforcement and their effect on youth in the Lower West Side. For boys there were many social and educational clubs. The Young Boys Aurora Club, whose standard of conduct forbade "gambling, smoking, and entering saloons," held an annual show in 1910 and took in \$29.45 for their efforts.²⁶ There were other clubs as well, such as the Herzl Club, which was interested in Zionism, and several gymnastic groups. Girls participated in the Thimble Bee Club (a sewing group), the Girls' Glee Club, dancing classes, and sewing classes.

In 1913 a kindergarten was opened by Neighborhood House, which continued to expand in other areas as well. The annual report for the period September, 1914, to September, 1915, shows many varied activities—night classes in English instruction with forty-five pupils, a class for twelve-to-fourteen-year-old girls who were taught to care for their little brothers and sisters, and in most clubs a concern for other people and for improving their neighborhood. The report states that "much money has also been sent by these loyal boys and girls to their suffering countrymen in Europe" in that first year of World War I.²⁷

In 1915 Neighborhood House undertook a survey or census of the population of the Lower West Side. The total population of the Lower West Side at that time was found to be 3,763 in 644 families—an average of almost six to a family. Ninety percent, or 582, of the families had foreign-born parents, with only 10 percent, or sixty-two families, having native-born parents.²⁸ Commenting on the census the next year, the annual report said that only thirty families could "in any sense call themselves American," and continued: "surely here we have an example of what Israel Zangwill calls the 'great melting pot of America.'"²⁹ The census showed the following breakdown in ethnic groups (Neighborhood House referred to "nationality" groups) by families:

From this census it can be concluded that the Lower West Side was overcrowded, especially in view of the fact that most of the houses there were not particularly large and spacious—most of them, indeed, were small frame dwellings. Also, many of the houses

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

²⁸ Neighborhood House, *Annual Report for 1914-1915*, p. 15.

²⁹ Neighborhood House, *Annual Report for 1915-1916*, p. 6.

TABLE 1
POPULATION OF THE LOWER WEST SIDE BY NATIONALITY GROUPS IN 1915

<i>Nationality Group</i>	<i># of Families</i>	<i>% of Total</i>
Jewish	463	71.9
Syrian	34	5.3
Irish	32	5.0
French	31	4.8
Eleven Others	84	13.0 ³⁰

were below river level and over a period of years the streets and land around the houses filled in with sand from the river so that the streets rose gradually above the houses. This necessitated the building of steps from the streets down to the front doors of the houses, sometimes fifteen feet or more.³¹

In addition to overcrowding there were other conditions which caused concern to Lower West Side residents. The St. Paul city dump was located in the area and contributed to unsanitary conditions; there was only one paved street in the area, which meant that most of the streets were virtually impassable whenever it rained; there was only one street having sewers and running water; and there was only one telephone which served the entire area and was used only in dire emergencies.³² There was no playground area for the many children, and the only public school in the area, Lafayette, was not adequate for the needs of the community. As Hoffman describes it: "From the outside it presented a formidable appearance; grim and determined, like a fastness and fortress designed and built by craftsmen to withstand the onslaughts of time and weather and the daily never-ending siege of incorrigible students."³³ In addition to the physical condition of Lafayette, there was also severe overcrowding. In 1917, 667 pupils attended the twelve-room school—an average of between fifty-five and fifty-six pupils in each room.³⁴ In spite of this severe overcrowding,

³⁰ Neighborhood House, *Annual Report for 1914-1915*, p. 15.

³¹ Hoffman, *Those Were the Days*, p. 20.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

³⁴ Report to the Commissioner of Education by the Superintendent of Schools, St. Paul Public Schools, *Survey and Building Conditions and Requirements* (1922).

Lafayette continued to be used until a new building was finally erected in 1923.

In response to the many needs of the neighborhood, a civic league was formed under Neighborhood House auspices. The league's two major concerns were the lack of a public playground and the need for a new Lafayette School. The league also studied the problems of juvenile delinquency and of the transient laborers who were beginning to enter the area.

My Father The Rag-Picker

Immigrants (still primarily Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe) had continued to pour into the Lower West Side in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Some of the Jewish residents, primarily those who had been among the first to settle on the Lower West Side in the 1880's and 1890's, were beginning to move to other parts of the West Side, so the majority of Lower West Side residents continued to be the most recently arrived immigrants. Many Neighborhood House activities continued to be centered around helping the new arrivals adjust to their new environment and working to improve that environment. According to the 1917-1918 Neighborhood House annual report, one of the Jewish girls' clubs produced a play which "depicted in a touching manner the problems of readjustment which come to the Jewish immigrant as he faces life in this country."³⁵ A very graphic illustration of these problems of adjustment and assimilation is described as follows in the report of 1918-1919:

We were trying to emphasize the duties of good Americans on a tiny boy of four, but he indignantly denied any such obligation, saying "My father is not an American, he is a rag-picker. I am going to be a rag-picker too." We felt that the subject of Americanization had to be dealt with more fully before our little friend understood that a man could be both a rag-picker and a good American.³⁶

Some of the other activities at Neighborhood House in 1918-1919 were "parent parties" at which the children themselves baked the

³⁵ Neighborhood House, *Annual Report for 1917-1918*, p. 8.

³⁶ Neighborhood House, *Annual Report for 1918-1919*, p. 7.

cakes, insisting that strictly kosher methods and materials be used; the music program with sixteen piano and six violin pupils; and preparations that summer for a pageant called "America in the Making."

In June, 1919, the Minnetonka Playground was opened on the Lower West Side, and the Lake Rest Vacation Home Camp at White Bear Lake was established "for the benefit of overtired mothers and their children." The camp was established by Mount Zion's Jewish Relief Society despite opposition by some members who felt that "providing such vacations was far exceeding the boundaries of traditional 'relief.'" ³⁷ The camp was later taken over by Neighborhood House and renamed Sophie Wirth Camp. In reading about the various clubs at Neighborhood House, it is readily apparent that, with few exceptions, there were no mixed nationality memberships. For example, in 1918-1919 the Gentile Girls Club had twenty-three members, and the Golden Red Club had twenty-five Jewish girls as members.

Such ethnic or nationality divisions would indicate that the "melting pot" was not melting away some of the barriers dividing groups from one another; perhaps the term "melting pot" was not applicable to what was happening in the Lower West Side and in other immigrant neighborhoods at that time. Neighborhood House's aim to make good American citizens who respected their own and other people's traditions at the same time was perhaps a more realistic way to view "Americanization," and Neighborhood House's English language and citizenship classes, overflowing into the Lafayette School, were most important in this effort.

In view of the fact that there was no gymnasium or other place for young people to gather and that the local or downtown pool halls and taverns provided the only nightly entertainment offered, it was certainly not surprising that some measure of juvenile delinquency was present on the Lower West Side. What is surprising is that there was not much more of it. When one speculates on the reasons for the relative absence of delinquency, it immediately comes to mind that the traditionally strong family structure and emphasis on education in Jewish culture were probably important factors. Also, even though the physical environment (overcrowding, poor housing, etc.) usually associated with high delinquency

³⁷ Plaut, *Minnesota*, p. 220.

was very much in evidence, it appears that most of the area's residents at this time felt that their residence on the Lower West Side was not a permanent condition. That is, they were convinced that hard work, saving their money, and educating their children would get them out of the Lower West Side, and they transmitted this philosophy to their children. As Hoffman puts it:

... the West Side and all the other places like it were really stopping places [and] the old neighborhoods of immigrants here and all over—first and second generations—never constituted, either spiritually or culturally, a slum. They were often physically and materially poor but always rich in a wonderful culture and fine ethical values.³⁸

Despite the many very real accomplishments of the Lower West Side's Jewish residents, evidence of anti-semitism was perceptible in the larger community. For instance, the report of an investigator sent to the West Side by the Association of Commerce said: "Many of the Jews who live here are junk dealers. This aggravates an apparent national tendency to have their ground covered with dirt, rubbish, and other unsightly things."³⁹

Many of the descriptions of life on the Lower West Side during this era suggest parallels with New York's Lower East Side. The two neighborhoods were quite similar, as Samuel Popper points out in his introduction to Hoffman's memoir:

Some readers may be surprised to discover the similarity of Jewish immigrant life in the Upper Mid-West with that of New York's East Side. They needn't be. The Jewish immigrant stock at the turn of the century... stemmed from the same general East European sources. Whether they settled in New York City or the city of St. Paul, their world view was much the same. They drew spiritual and moral values from a common fountainhead. Even their historical and sociological experiences were more alike than not. It mattered little whether the shipping tag on their cultural baggage read New York City or St. Paul; its contents reacted much the same once exposed to the environment of the New World. The Jewish immigrants who settled in St. Paul apparently fashioned cultural patterns very similar to those of the Jewish immigrants who settled in New York City. The first generation Americans which they sired were accordingly influenced, I suspect, by a social and cultural climate which prevailed in any American

³⁸ Hoffman, *Tales*, Introduction.

³⁹ Plaut, *Minnesota*, p. 269.

community where large numbers of these Jewish immigrants settled early in the twentieth century.⁴⁰

The Lower West Side was, then, primarily a Jewish neighborhood from the latter part of the nineteenth century into the first two decades of the twentieth century. The language most likely to be heard was Yiddish, and the newspapers read on the Lower West Side were *Der Forvitz*, *Der Tog* and *Der Morgen Zhournal*, all of them New York papers published in Yiddish. The major holidays observed in the area were Passover, Rosh Hashanah (New Year), Yom Kippur (Atonement Day)—not Christmas, Good Friday and Easter. As Plaut says: “St. Paul’s West Side was the hub of traditional life. Here lived the first generation of immigrant settlers and those of their children who had not yet started to move away in appreciable numbers.”⁴¹ And it was, Hoffman remembers, “a great era—a happy one—a melancholy one—a rich one and a poor one.”⁴²

New People Need It More

By the 1920’s relatively few Jewish immigrants were settling on the Lower West Side, while increasing numbers of those who had settled there previously were moving to other neighborhoods. The major reason for the lack of new immigrants was the passage of restrictive Federal immigration laws. The “quota” laws of 1921 and 1924 greatly limited emigration from Eastern and Southern Europe, and thus the flow of East European Jews to the Lower West Side was reduced to a trickle. That decade of the 1920’s also witnessed the first great exodus of Jews from the Lower West Side, primarily to other parts of the West Side. Some, however, were able to move to St. Paul’s Highland Park area where they could build their own homes instead of moving into an older neighborhood. It took years of saving to be able to afford to build a home in Highland Park, but many succeeded. As Oliver Towne says, these people “skimped and slaved and pushed through the invisible barrier on Robert Street and have gone across the river to the end of the rainbow, whose symbol is Highland Park.”⁴³ And the move

⁴⁰ Hoffman, *Those Were the Days*, p. 11.

⁴¹ Plaut, *Minnesota*, p. 291.

⁴² Hoffman, “A Proud Era,” p. 27.

⁴³ Towne, column in the *St. Paul Dispatch*, May 29, 1956.

from the Lower West Side flats to Highland Park with its hills and room for expansion was perhaps, as Hoffman says, "a denial in an unconscious way of a painful past."⁴⁴ At any rate, by the 1920's the Jews were moving away from the Lower West Side, and this trend would continue for the next several decades.

Relocation to other parts of the West Side and finally to Highland Park was not the only or the most important evidence of the accomplishments of Lower West Side Jewish residents. There was more than one case of "a peddler's son becoming a physician [or] a junkman's boy scaling heights as a lawyer."⁴⁵ As Towne expressed it:

I wonder if there ever was a neighborhood like the West Side for Horatio Alger stories . . . - a census of the houses along those blocks 25, 30, 40 years ago would read of families and names which are emblazoned by success stories now.

They settled the Flats because it was all that was left for them. Who cared if the city by its very geography seemed to look down on them? They married and turned their nothings into somethings for their children. Junk peddlers and rag pickers, house to house vegetable salesmen. Salvagers of barrels and scrap . . . so the junk peddlers became proprietors of salvage firms, the vegetable salesmen became operators of big shiny grocery stores, supermarket chains.

And their children benefited from the obsessions of their elders about the value of an education. And hard work. It may seem odd, but naturally every West Side Flats boy cut his teeth selling newspapers on the street corners . . . Mothers scrubbed floors, took in washing so their boys could go to college. And off the Flats came an evolution that produced doctors and lawyers, business executives.⁴⁶

Mexican-Americans had begun to move into the Lower West Side after World War I, and thus the ethnic makeup of the neighborhood gradually began changing. Neighborhood House, of course, continued to serve Lower West Siders whatever their race, creed, or color. The House moved into a large new building in 1923, opened a dental clinic for children in 1927, and provided a gymnasium in 1928. The change in the population served by Neighborhood House can be seen in a survey taken by the settlement house in 1930; the survey indicated that only 36.6 percent

⁴⁴ Hoffman, *Those Were the Days*, p. 57.

⁴⁵ Towne, column in the *St. Paul Dispatch*, December 5, 1957.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, May 15, 1957.

of the population was Jewish.⁴⁷ The exodus of Jews from the area was slowed down in the 1930's, however, by the effects of the Great Depression. It was in the 1930's more a matter of struggling to "stay even" than to "get ahead," and staying even was more often than not a losing battle. As Hoffman puts it: "These were the proud and stubborn people of the West Side who labored valiantly to hide their despair and fear of unemployment from their neighbors and from their children. Real money was scarce, but when had there been plenty?"⁴⁸

Neighborhood House did what it could to counteract the effects of the Depression on the Lower West Side. The House continued holding classes in Americanization and citizenship education, cooking and sewing, health education, and recreation; it also opened two new day camps, Camp Owendigo at Carver's Lake in 1935, and St. John's Landing Camp in 1938. In 1937 the site next to the main building was purchased for a nursery school. A hot lunch program was operated and the gymnasium stayed open sixteen hours a day for the unemployed—all this in addition to the House's effort to offer employment counselling and to cooperate with industry in finding jobs for area residents.

As might have been expected, some friction developed between old and new residents of the Lower West Side during this time of transition and economic difficulty. The Mexican-Americans who had been moving into the neighborhood since World War I had, by the 1930's, increased their numbers significantly. They were the only easily recognizable and distinct ethnic group to move into the Lower West Side during those years and were often resented by the older and better established ethnic groups of the community. As the 1938 Neighborhood House annual report stated: "Their customs, their manner of living, and their outlook on life has stood out in direct contrast to the established customs and traditions of the area, and they have been a misunderstood people."⁴⁹ It was very difficult for both the Mexican-Americans and the older nationality groups in the neighborhood even to attempt to understand one another, and at times it was most discouraging to those working for harmony in the area. Tolerance for one another's

⁴⁷ Neighborhood House, *Annual Report for 1931*.

⁴⁸ Hoffman, *Tales*, p. 46.

⁴⁹ Neighborhood House, *Annual Report for 1938*, p. 16.

customs and traditions was the first necessity, with understanding and appreciation perhaps coming later.

Many of the Jewish residents of the Lower West Side in particular could be expected to view the Mexican-American influx into the neighborhood with apprehension, if not hostility, both because the two groups differed so in background and culture and because the Mexican-Americans seemed to threaten the already waning Jewish predominance in many areas of neighborhood life. That some progress toward understanding was being made, however, is attested to by these words of an elderly Jewish scrap iron dealer who had raised his family on the Lower West Side and still lived there: "New people come to neighborhood. Seems sometimes as though there are not so many things for our people. Maybe new people need it more."⁵⁰

Windows Facing The West Side

Jewish families continued to leave the Lower West Side in the 1940's, primarily for Highland Park. Only 12 percent of St. Paul's Jewish population lived on the entire West Side of the city in 1947, whereas it had been three times that twenty years earlier.⁵¹ With the economic recovery of the World War II and post-war years, many more Jewish families found it possible to move directly from the Lower West Side to Highland Park, and those who had moved to other parts of the West Side in the 1920's and 1930's were also leaving for Highland Park in the 1940's.

The early 1950's saw most of the remaining Jewish families leave the Lower West Side. The number of Jewish students in schools on the West Side had been reduced to a handful by this time, indicating that most of the Jews with school-age children had moved. Those who remained on the Lower West Side were, for the most part, elderly people who wanted to live out their days in familiar surroundings. This was often a sore point between the generations—the children who had moved to nice homes in Highland Park were at a loss to understand why their parents would choose to stay in little old houses in a neighborhood that seemed

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁵¹ Jack B. Mackay, "Fifty Years of St. Paul Jewry," in *American Jewish World*, September 28, 1962, p. 13.

to be falling apart before their very eyes. Why would they resist moving in with or being near their children in Highland Park, which by this time was much more of a Jewish neighborhood than the Lower West Side? Even those who had been persuaded to move to Highland Park or elsewhere, however, seemed to be irresistibly drawn back to the Lower West Side. As Towne put it:

. . . . Because in their common bond of trying to scale the wall, the atmosphere seeps into the blood and there's a lonesomeness for the "good old days" that few other neighborhoods knew—a camaraderie born of suffering.⁵²

The West Side is a place which rouses feelings of nostalgia in the breasts of hundreds who used to live there, were born and reared on the flats You haven't caught the feeling a man can have about his old neighborhood until you meet a businessman who has an office high in the First National Bank, windows facing the West Side, by request. "I was born over there," he says, pointing with pride and wistfulness to the site. And like the Mohammedans who face Mecca, he presses his nose against the window at least once a day to see the homeland.⁵³

There were still some Jewish businesses on the Lower West Side in the 1950's, stores like Kessel's Bakery and Goldberg's Butcher Shop, and "on Sundays in the Jewish area there is a busy hubbub in the shops where old friends who have moved away come back to talk and buy."⁵⁴ Throughout the 1950's (until 1961) the synagogues or *shuls* were kept open for the High Holidays, "drawing upon the children and grandchildren of the original members, who came down to worship from all parts of the city—drawn by tradition and because a 'zadah' [grandfather] or 'bawbeh' [grandmother] still lived in the neighborhood."⁵⁵ The last services in Agudas Achim were held in October, 1962, and attended by those few Jewish families still on the Lower West Side as well as many who had left years before.

Thus an era ended. Driving through the Industrial Park built on the site of the Lower West Side in the late 1960's, one finds it hard to believe that the neighborhood ever really existed—now the

⁵² Towne, column, in the *St. Paul Dispatch*, May 29, 1956.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, May 15, 1957.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Hoffman, "A Proud Era Is Gone," *American Jewish World*, September 28, 1962, p. 26.

streets are obliterated; the houses, synagogues, stores, and the Neighborhood House—even the trees—are demolished; the people who called the old Lower West Side home are long gone and settled elsewhere. In fact, there is nothing to remind one of what had once flourished there, no one will remember from personal experience that once there was indeed a Jewish neighborhood on St. Paul's Lower West Side.

ARCHIVES POSTERS

The American Jewish Archives has issued a number of multi-colored posters dealing with the American Jewish experience:

- Jewish participation in the Civil War (6)
- Immigrants from Eastern Europe (3)
- Episodes in eighteenth-century American Jewish Life (3)
- Abba Hillel Silver at the United Nations (1)
- Jews and the American Revolution (6)
- Distinguished American Jewish women (8)

These posters are available without charge for display by all schools, libraries, congregations, and organizations interested in American Jewish history.

When properly matted and mounted on heavy cardboard, these posters make an attractive exhibit.

Inquiries should be addressed to the Director of the American Jewish Archives, Clifton Avenue, Cincinnati, Ohio 45220.