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“Our Alien Neighbors”: Coping with the Depression on the Lower East Side

SUZANNE WASSERMAN

“Our Alien Neighbors” and Citizenship

By the mid-1990’s, following the fall of Communism, American politicians began to focus more and more on perceived internal threats to civil order. Immigrants have often been easy targets for fears of reformers. The battle cry of the most recent wave of welfare reform has been the conviction that to dismantle welfare will rid urban areas of poverty and to require citizenship will rid cities of their foreignness.

The persistence of poverty and foreignness in urban America has long plagued reformers. Half a century ago, as the welfare state was itself being constructed, the persistence of poverty and of immigrants’ ways took center stage for debates among policymakers and social welfare advocates. On the Lower East Side during the Depression immigrants themselves, mostly Jews and Italians, coped with the economic crisis by utilizing traditional strategies for survival. By the onset of the New Deal most of these strategies had proved insufficient. New Deal policymakers and social welfare advocates brought relief, but only to those deemed worthy. The deserving poor were those who agreed to relinquish certain behavior associated with slum living and forego an attachment to foreign ways. During the Depression immigrants faced difficult challenges and had to make difficult choices.

On the Lower East Side during the Depression the emerging official culture and the rooted local immigrant culture clashed. The relationship between official and ethnic culture is little understood. But John Bodnar has argued that it was during the New Deal era that the American nation-state succeeded in distorting many expressions of ethnic culture, and American culture became nationalized.1

During the 1930’s government power on the state and local level exploded. On New York’s Lower East Side that meant federal funds became available for the first time in history for public projects.

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Tenements were razed, highways built, and pushcarts removed. But along with the creation of the welfare state came a crackdown on aliens and “alien” culture. Monies would be available to clean up the slums if immigrants modified and sanitized their behavior as well.

A stark division does not always exist between official culture and ethnic culture. Certainly, East Siders wanted better living conditions but not necessarily at the expense of being told how to behave. Some, particularly older East Siders, resisted breaking ties of “descent” from ethnic culture.2

The large number of Jews who had already left the Lower East Side by the time of the Depression was more ambivalent. Even as they celebrated their assimilation into the American mainstream, many waxed nostalgic about the “good old days of poverty.” Now outsiders, their memories tempered the reality of the conflicts raging on the East Side; sometimes these memories may have caused ex-East Siders to play a more active role as they attempted to mediate the conflicts. They looked back to the East Side as a lieu de memoire, a site of memory, but also celebrated their ascent of the ladder from rags to riches. On pilgrimages back to the East Side members of the Grand Street Boys Association, for example, returned to celebrate their escape from the ghetto but looked back to an idealized past.3 Ethnic memory colored the debate then as it does now.

Yet despite reinventions and drastic change, the Lower East Side remained an immigrant neighborhood throughout the Depression. Historiographic literature of the Lower East Side underestimates the tenacity of an ethnic and working-class lifestyle throughout the 1930’s. Historians of the Lower East Side experience, like those of the immigrant experience in general, stress the relative rapidity of assimilation and the disappearance of the immigrant Lower East Side.4

Between 1920 and 1930 the Lower East Side lost 40 percent of its population.5 Yet despite this exodus, in 1930 the Lower East Side was still 39 percent Jewish. Italians comprised the other major ethnic group.

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2. See Werner Sollers, Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture (New York, 1986), 6-10.
3. Suzanne Wasserman, “‘The Good Old Days of Poverty’: The Battle Over the Fate of New York City’s Lower East Side During the Depression” (Ph.D. diss, New York University, 1990), 367.
5. Leo Grebler, Housing Market Behavior in a Declining Area (New York, 1952), 110.
Well into the 1930's many of these East Siders were still noncitizens, although most had been on the East Side at least two decades. Over half spoke a foreign language exclusively at home. Throughout the decade the Lower East Side was still one of the most heavily populated neighborhoods in New York City.

Contemporary social theorists were only too aware of the persistence of the immigrant Lower East Side; it disturbed and worried them. They began asking why all East Siders did not assimilate. Didn't they want to? They could not comprehend a deep attachment to a community they saw as a locus of broken dreams, delinquency, decline and personal failure.

To the contrary, many Lower East Siders, like one Mr. Raftberg, saw little use for the English language, rarely had contact with nonimmigrants, and saw no need for citizenship. He, his wife and two small children had emigrated to the United States at the beginning of the century. Mr. Raftberg, a cobbler, went to work helping his brother in a little shop on the East Side. His world revolved exclusively around home, shop, synagogue and landsmanshaft (mutual aid society). Settlement investigators concluded that Raftberg's attachment to his landsmanshaft, for example, represented a "continuous rejection of the American way of life . . . a conscious recreation of Old World activities, relationships and patterns." Although retired by the time of the Depression, Mr. Raftberg continued to live as he always had.

Raftberg did not even consider citizenship for many years after his arrival due to both the expense ($5 for first and second papers before 1929) and the fear of dealing with authorities of the state. Around the time of World War I he did take out first papers, but officials informed him that in order to get second papers he would have to wait two more years, pay additional fees, learn to read and write English and answer questions about the American government. Soon any thoughts of citizenship faded.

Yet this neglect (or decision) came back to haunt the Raftberg family. The aging Mr. Raftberg was retired by the time of the Depression. The Raftberg's daughter, Ruthie, supported her parents with money from her

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WPA job. But in June 1937 Congress passed the Federal Deficiency Appropriation Bill. This bill drastically cut WPA funds and carried with it an alien rider. The rider stated that aliens who had not taken out first papers would be ineligible for WPA jobs and gave suspected aliens 60 days to prove citizenship. After the grace period all those without first papers would be summarily dismissed. Less than a month later even aliens holding first papers lost their jobs. In New York City alone 20,000 joined the ranks of the unemployed by August 1937.9

When Ruthie Raftberg lost her job in the summer of 1937 the family had no choice but to accept home relief. Ruthie was more than willing to take out first papers, but where would the money come from? Mr. and Mrs. Raftberg attended English classes and starved themselves in order to save the $2.50 for first papers. Yet when Passover approached they made a decision to spend their meager savings on items for the seder that could not be bought on their home relief allowance. “If they want so bad that we become citizens,” asked Mrs. Raftberg poignantly, “why don’t they make it possible?”10

Clearly, in both conscious and unconscious ways, Lower East Siders made decisions about their lives that sometimes coincided with the demands of reformers and the state and at other times resisted those expectations. Individuals such as Mr. and Mrs. Raftberg decided quite consciously, knowing full well the consequences, to forego citizenship and chose instead to spend their savings on traditional needs. On the Lower East Side during the Depression these choices still made sense, and, even more importantly, they were viable choices that neighbors and friends (if not children) understood.

By the time of the Depression the Lower East Side had clearly become a locus of resistance to Americanization.11 In a community study conducted by Henry Street Settlement, researchers concluded that

the “port of entry” has apparently become a refuge for immigrants not susceptible to Americanization or lacking the data and literacy required for citizenship . . . these alien neighbors, living in a community with other foreigners like themselves, were almost totally isolated from American language and life. They lived as much as possible as they had back home . . . They acquired little understanding of their new country.12

11. Some older Jews remained on the East Side to stay close to religious institutions, but in fact the East Side was becoming less religious rather than more. See Baron, 106.
The East Side had a core of long-term residents, like Mr. Raftberg and his wife, who were predominantly older Jews and Italians and who had never become citizens. In 1934, according to one study, one-third of the adults in the neighborhood were still noncitizens. In sharp contrast, the United States Census of 1930 counted one in twenty nationwide as noncitizens and in New York City one in nine.\textsuperscript{13} Expense, bureaucracy, fear of the state and inability to see the necessity of citizenship made many of these East Siders reticent or unwilling to take the step towards naturalization and Americanization.

These noncitizens had firm roots in the community. Less than a quarter had ever lived any place other than the East Side, and their average length of residence on the East Side was 22 years; one-fourth had been in this country over 30 years.

Almost half of these noncitizens were over 50, most widows, widowers or elderly couples.\textsuperscript{14} Women were the most likely to be noncitizens. Noncitizenship broke down by gender rather than by ethnicity; both Italian and Jewish women were more likely to be non-citizens than Jewish or Italian men.\textsuperscript{15}

Reforming Immigrant Behavior

While some East Siders, like the Raftbergs, tried to weather the Depression by making traditional choices, reformers considered the source of East Side poverty to be East Siders’ attachment to what they considered pernicious slum living. Several decades later Oscar Lewis would coin the term “culture of poverty” in order to describe a similar persistence among Latinos.\textsuperscript{16}

Well before the “culture of poverty” debate this persistence of slum living made the social welfare community increasingly anxious, for it pointed out the potential failure of Americanization and assimilation in

\textsuperscript{13} “Alien Study,” 4.

\textsuperscript{14} “Alien Study,” 4.

\textsuperscript{15} “Alien Study,” 6. Italian women were the most likely to be noncitizens (52 percent), followed by Jewish women (47 ½ percent), Italian men (36 percent) and Jewish men (33 percent). At least half of the Italians arrived between 1919 and 1929. The fact that the Italians emigrated later than the Jews may explain why Jewish men were more likely to be citizens but not why Jewish women lagged behind Italian men. Of the total 426 families only 8 had emigrated between 1929 and 1933. The majority emigrated between 1909 and 1919.

communities like the Lower East Side. By the 1930’s slums in immigrant
neighborhoods like the Lower East Side were almost 100 years old. 
Social theorists such as Louis Wirth began to see the persistence of these
communities as indications of social and familial breakdown and
disintegration.17

Social workers and theorists found the Lower East Side during the
1930’s to be a perfect example of Wirth’s worst fears. Harry Manuel
Shulman, author of *Slums of New York*, for example, could not
understand why communities such as the Lower East Side continued to
exist, nor could he understand East Siders’ attachment to their commu-
nity. The Lower East Side was an “area of cultural lag,” and he called for
slum clearance as well as “cultural reeducation.” “Most of these families
have led a treadmill existence consisting mainly of work, sleep, feeding
and breeding,” he lamented. The questions Shulman posed to his
interviewees revealed his implicit assumptions:

Is the deteriorated slum a dreary waste of disorganized families, or are there
important differences in ability and initiative among them? Are slum homes
all dirty, slovenly and lacking in aesthetic standards? . . . Is there such a thing
as a family meal? . . . How many are still illiterate?18

Similarly, social work student Harold Baron labeled the neighbor-
hood “a slum area” where disintegration and disorganization reigned
and “traditional controls” were absent.19 While the “‘normal’ family
and the ‘normal’ community attempt to meet the crisis situation for its
members, this is not the case here. This cannot really be called a
community and the families here have lost much of their ability to
control.” So, too, have local groups and institutions “failed to function
as agencies of social control.”20

Shulman’s and Baron’s evidence, though, completely contradicted
their theories of breakdown and disorganization. Single parent homes
accounted for 25-30 percent of average American families; on the East
Side only 6-10 percent of homes were broken. Similarly, Baron found
that an “inter racial spirit” among children on the Lower East Side made
them more tolerant and less prejudiced towards others.21 Although he
stated that “community life is practically non-existent,” he described the

17. Louis Wirth, “Urbanism as a Way of Life,” *American Journal of Sociology* 44
East Side as vibrant and warm. He stressed the laxity of family life but found that children on the East Side attended more religious services and classes, did more homework and adhered to stricter bedtimes than children elsewhere.22 When he asked several boys and girls what they liked to do most in their spare time he found that many preferred staying home with their parents: “A large variety of activities were mentioned by the children as being shared with their parents.”23

Shulman and Baron mistook the slums themselves for a reflection of East Sider’s values rather than an indication of economic and physical stagnation and decay. If behavior could be altered slums would disappear they believed. Calls for reform of slum-living habits and behavior focused on the dynamics of home life, specifically on women and on children.

Social reformers’ fears about East Siders’ inability or choice not to assimilate often focused on older women in the community. Despite the fact that Lillian Wald considered Henry Street Settlement a “neutral place,” her prescriptions for the behavior of East Siders’ were often explicit.24 Although Wald appreciated Old World customs, she was more tolerant of those customs which did not physically distinguish people. She considered the traditional wig worn by married Jewish women “disfiguring.”25

We place importance on the elimination of those superficial qualities which are often more divisive than deeper and more fundamental characteristics. Habits consistent with the conventions of other countries . . . often mark as “alien” or “queer” people who might otherwise prove to be sympathetic, and sometimes limit the possibilities of real companionship.26

One method settlements had always found useful for instilling Americanization and middle-class values amongst mothers was the creation of mothers’ clubs. The United Neighborhood Houses stated that they created the League of Mothers’ Clubs expressly to “make the mother a real force in her own home . . . she was persuaded to cast aside her old-world ways and to adapt herself to American conditions.”27

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25. Windows, 16.
27. League of Mothers Clubs, 1926, box 97, United Neighborhood Houses, Wald Collection.
Stuyvesant Neighborhood House stated explicitly that Americanization was their main goal. In the 1930s the head settlement worker there, Lydia Banning, coaxed mothers’ club members into attending birthday celebrations for Lincoln and Washington as a part of the settlement’s Americanization effort. Banning rewarded reluctant mothers who attended with tickets to a show.

From their inception, though, mothers of the East Side helped to shape the course of the clubs. They were not simply passive recipients of settlement house goals and aims. On the contrary, East Side mothers were a real force in their clubs; they both learned new skills and at the same time infused the clubs with traditional neighborhood values of mutual aid and comaraderie. East Side mothers used the clubs to shore up Yidishkayt; even when settlement workers discouraged it, these mothers spoke Yiddish, danced old dances, sang old songs and went to the Yiddish theater together.

By the mid-1930s many of the original mothers’ clubs, begun some 30 years earlier, were still vital organizations. Original or early members—now much older women—not only continued to participate in them but carved out their own space steeped in Old World traditions. In 1941, on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Seward Park Library’s Mothers’ Club, it was celebrated as “one of the remaining bulwarks of the old East Side:”

It has weathered all these years and remained practically the same in spirit and form as in the beginning of its existence. It is surprising that the club did survive at a time when many institutions and organizations vanished or followed the general trend and moved to other sections . . . The appearance of the women has undergone a change. Instead of the worn immigrant dresses, the members wear silk dresses and up-to-date coats . . . Many of them have small groceries, restaurants and paper stands . . . the English language is still unfamiliar to many of them.

When it folded in 1948 it was still a Yiddish-speaking club with some of its original members.

28. Stuyvesant Neighborhood House Minutes, November 27, 1928 and December 18, 1928, box 206, file 3002, Stuyvesant Neighborhood House Papers (SNH), YIVO.
29. Stuyvesant Neighborhood House Minutes, February 25, 1930, box 206, file 3002, SNH Papers, YIVO.
30. Progressive Mothers’ Club Minutes, March 14, 1933, box 210, file 3384, SNH Papers, YIVO.
32. “Story of the Mothers’ Club.”
Settlement workers directed attempts to reform lingering “immigrant” behavior during these years at these older women who still found little use for the English language. Some mothers consistently refused to learn English and would not allow their children to speak it in the house. “This is a Yiddish house and no gentile languages are going to be spoken here,” explained one mother.33

The mothers of the Stuyvesant Neighborhood Mothers’ Club opposed joining English classes despite warnings about the consequences of not becoming citizens. One member told the leader that she felt too old to learn a new language, another that she had too many other troubles, and a third assured the settlement worker that she would be permitted to enter heaven even though she could only speak Yiddish.

The mothers’ exhibited no interest in current events, fitness or citizenship. They loved to sing but only old songs.34 At one meeting, the minutes noted, the talk on Palestine was “very interesting . . . Now to get down to real business . . . May 22nd was the date set for the Barn Dance.”35

More commonly, mothers’ club members regularly engaged in traditional activities together, such as going to shvitz at the Turkish baths or play cards. When members of one club planned a dinner at a certain East Side restaurant they discovered that the restaurant prohibited card playing. The mothers therefore changed restaurants, “sat around one big table and had a real good time.”36

At Henry Street as well older women participated in clubs only if the clubs retained long-held traditions. In one instance a dance that had been well attended the week before was empty. Settlement workers realized that members would attend for an East Side band but spurned the more Americanized orchestra the settlement engaged for the second dance.37 Hanukkah, Purim and Sukkoth parties continued to be popular, especially when it gave seniors a chance to listen to their favorite bands and dance Sher or Patch Tanz.38

34. Immigrant Women.
35. Progressive Mothers Club Minutes, May 14, 1935, box 210, file 3382, SNH, YIVO.
36. Clara Buttenweiser Mothers Club Minutes, May 13, 1931, box 210, file 3398 and Progressive Mothers Club Minutes, January 24, 1933, box 210, file 3384, SNH, YIVO.
38. Henry Street News, May 1924, 14 and December 1932, box 60, Wald.
When settlement leaders tried to dictate policy or impose innovations, members of the mothers’ clubs refused to cooperate. “To a newcomer,” reported a new settlement worker in 1930, “the Stuyvesant Mothers’ Club was a nightmare . . . they themselves held the leader very firmly to their limitations by ‘we know how to do it.’” Several mothers’ clubs planned a boat outing in the summer of 1937. The boat developed engine trouble, so 300 mothers and children had to wait for three and a half hours. On the docks club member Rose Porper led her fellow members in the singing of Jewish and Russian folk songs. This in turn led to spontaneous folk dancing.

When Miss Eleff, a settlement worker, could not regain the attention of the group she complained that the only language these mothers understood was “Orchard Street.” “Orchard Street” behavior, it seemed, consisted of singing, dancing and playing cards in public. Once on the boat settlement staff forbid mothers from playing cards for small stakes. The result of the trip was “an antagonism which became open warfare.” Mothers registered their dissatisfaction by refusing to participate in future outings.

Similarly, at a discussion concerning the spread of antisemitism at a mothers’ club meeting at Stuyvesant Neighborhood House, a mother noted in the Yiddish and English minutes that “Mrs. Sands, our lieder [sic] advised that it would aid our caus [sic] if we would conduct ourselfs [sic] in a forward but quiet and [illegible] manner as a Jew.” Settlement workers implied that Jewish behavior attracted antisemitism.

Members of mothers’ clubs over the years resisted Americanization efforts and retained old ways of doing things, but they also learned new skills and lessons from their clubs. They used the clubs to their own ends and at the same time did not escape entirely efforts to change their behavior. Many women expressed feelings of being transformed by their association with a club. Their main interest in the clubs was social, but many also claimed that the mothers’ clubs had educated and enriched their lives. As one mother put it, “They have taken me out of the kitchen and shown me the world.”

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39. Stuyvesant Mothers Club, Leaders Report, August 21, 1930, box 312, file 3344, SNH, YIVO.
40. Report on Mothers’ Outing, Summer, 1935, box 210, file 3395, SNH, YIVO.
41. Stuyvesant Mothers’ Club Minutes (in Yiddish and English), February 21, 1938, box 210, file 3392, SNH, YIVO.
Clubs sometimes challenged traditional gender roles, and efforts to participate in the clubs were sometimes opposed by husbands. When a librarian asked Mrs. Plotkin to help recruit members for a mothers’ club, neighborhood husbands asked her husband to forbid his wife from attending the club; he refused. They accused Mrs. Plotkin of “demoralizing their wives [who] leave them and ‘run’ to the library meetings.” One recalcitrant husband eventually accepted his wife’s genuine interest in her club and even offered to wash the dishes on her meeting day.

Women gained other skills as well. At Stuyvesant House members of a mothers’ club formed the Mothers’ Rhythm Band. Over the years they played at the World’s Fair, performed for the Board of Education Evening School, and won first prize on a radio station’s amateur hour.

Transforming Traditional Strategies for Survival

During the Depression many East Siders tried to sustain values and life choices rooted in tradition and custom, but the extent of the economic collapse, as well as coercion on the part of the official culture, sorely tested their ability to do so. In addition to a determination to preserve a foreign language within the household, sustain immigrant leisure-time activities and resist citizenship, East Siders tried to weather the Depression by relying on traditional strategies for survival.

For East Siders themselves the critical question was whether they could survive the crisis of the Depression by employing traditional strategies, and, if not, what compromises would have to be made. Well before East Siders were faced with the citizenship crisis of 1937 they were forced to make difficult decisions in their attempts to survive the Depression.

New York City as a whole was hard hit by the Depression. “Nowhere had America’s great Depression struck harder than in America’s greatest city,” writes Robert Caro. At least one in three New Yorkers was unemployed, somewhere between 300,000 and 600,000. One chari-

44. Stuyvesant Neighborhood House Minutes, November 19, 1940, box 206, File 3002; box 312, file 3329, and Progressive Mothers Club Minutes, April 25, 1939, box 210, file 3387, SNH, YIVO.
table agency reported that relief giving rose by 100 percent between September and October 1929 alone. In 1930 the number of men using the municipal shelter jumped by 153 percent over the previous year; for women the figure rose by 270 percent and for children by an unbelievable 1,933 percent.46

Observers of the effects of the Depression in New York City noted the plight of the newly poor—those who had just made it into the middle-class before the Depression struck:

There was a great deal of moving last winter and frequent moving by many families: to smaller apartments, to poorer neighborhoods; to old-law tenements without heat or hot water or private toilets; to basements . . . from Queens back to run-down districts . . . to homes of relatives and friends. “Doubling-up,” of families was common, and instances were found of three families living together.47

In New York City’s poorest neighborhoods poverty and hardship were hardly new. But on the Lower East Side the advent of the Depression, coupled with the effects of depopulation and rapidly deteriorating living conditions, rendered the community vulnerable to devastation. Lillian Wald, founder and head settlement house worker at Henry Street Settlement on the East Side, noted that in 1929 there was “no sudden avalanche, but a creeping, daily change . . . it permeates a neighborhood like a thickening fog of anxiety and fear . . . months before the stock-market crash, we were made aware of the foreboding among our neighbors.”48 Similarly Helen Hall, then a settlement worker in Philadelphia, recalled that “by 1928 [we] were aware of the rising tide of worklessness among neighbors and the dire effects this was having on family life . . . although this was generally considered a prosperous time.”49 In 1930 the Lower East Side’s average yearly income was the lowest in Manhattan.50

The early affect of these cumulative factors on the East Side was
great—registered not only by homelessness, unemployment and poverty
but in smaller ways as well. Local residents such as Sol C. Denker of 244
Delancey Street appealed for help to Henry Street Settlement on behalf of
his religious mother, explaining that the family could not afford the
“holy bread, new dishes and utensils” required for Passover:

Unless you volunteer to assist us we’re up against it. Do you realize what that
means? Please ease my mother’s worries by promising to help. Do you realize
how sacred these holidays are and the feelings one gets when one realizes one
cannot prepare for it.51

Appealing for outside help, though, was a last resort for many East
Siders. Neighborhoods like the Lower East Side had always been poor,
and during the Depression Lower East Siders tried to rely on shared
values rooted in tradition to cope with the circumstances in which they
found themselves. Initially they depended upon traditional forms of relief
and self-help which had sustained them through earlier hard times, such
as mutual aid, doubling up, taking in boarders and homework. Mutual
aid had always played an important role on the East Side in the form of
loan societies, landsmanshaften and mothers’ and fathers’ clubs.

East Siders utilized many of these traditional methods of support
during the early years of the crisis. Lillian Wald noted many “instances
occurring in the past few years to show the extreme neighborliness of
people in their difficulties.” Neighbors passed the tin cup to raise rent
money and picketed at eviction proceedings.52 She added that “if all the
relief that has been given the poor by the poor in small amounts of food,
clothing and cash relief could be totaled, I do not doubt that it would
surpass many times the amount raised for organized charity relief.”53

Mothers’ and fathers’ clubs continued the tradition of giving small
loans or other forms of relief to members in need.54 For example, by the
fall of 1929 many tenants at Lavanburg House were in arrears up to one
month; the fathers’ club set up a loan fund to aid these families. In
general, though, the clubs were not equipped to deal with the magnitude
of the economic collapse. On June 5, 1929, for instance, they could not

51. Sol C. Denker to Henry Street Settlement, April 11, 1929, box 43, “Cases,” Wald
Collection.
52. Lillian Wald to Eleanor Linton, June 9, 1933, box 32, Unemployment 1932-35,
Wald Collection.
53. Linton Letter.
54. Lillian Wald to Sam Goldsmith, December 15, 1926, box 24, Jewish Matters, Wald
Collection.
prevent a family from breaking up. While the mother was in the hospital social workers placed the children in a home.\textsuperscript{55}

In order to meet expenses some Lower East Side women chose to rely upon earlier forms of work rather than look for work outside the home. Traditional means of work for women such as taking in boarders or doing home- and piecework allowed women to remain in the home.\textsuperscript{56} This practice resurfaced during these years, although some reformers attempted to repress its revival.\textsuperscript{57}

The decision to work at home represented a choice which differed markedly from choices made by non-East Siders. In 1930 the United States census revealed that 46 percent of married, widowed or divorced women worked; the percentage had been a mere 9 percent in 1920. By 1930 one out of every five American workers was a woman.\textsuperscript{58} Contrary to popular trends, East Side women made other decisions. For example, within a short time of the onset of the Depression almost all of the tenants of one housing project were doing piecework, cutting lace in their apartments.\textsuperscript{59}

Like the city government, some settlement workers and social theorists, housing reformers believed that if East Siders wanted better housing they had to alter their behavior. At least one privately funded project, Lavanburg Homes, provided immeasurably better living conditions for some East Siders. But those who moved in paid a price, for rules governing the project attempted to reform their behavior and made it almost impossible to weather the Depression by the preferred traditional means of self-help and mutual aid. Like the mothers’ clubs, East Siders both benefitted from and resisted the influence of reformers. Yet the fundamental conflict remained, for while East Siders saw themselves as making choices that fit into a traditional context, reformers saw these choices as indications of the persistence of slum living.

\textsuperscript{55} Abe Goldfeld, \textit{Diary of a Housing Manager} (Chicago, 1938), 72-95 (May 3, 1929 to June 25, 1930)


\textsuperscript{57} Impressionistic View, 9.


\textsuperscript{59} Diary, 105. See also \textit{World of Our Mothers}, 227: “Homework made a comeback during the Depression.”
In 1928 the philanthropic Lavanburg Foundation welcomed 108 families out of 1,600 applicants into the newly constructed Lavanburg Homes at 124-42 Goerck Street. The apartments offered greatly improved conditions and included steam heat, hot water, electricity and dumbwaiters. Rents ranged from $8.40 to $10 per room per month. Average rent on the Lower East Side during these years was $6 per room per month; these apartments were not meant for the neediest East Siders. Still, all but four families accepted were East Siders (the other four hailed from Brooklyn.) They included cloak operators, peddlers, taxi drivers, barbers, plumbers, laborers, ragpickers and waiters.

Although the building manager, Abe Goldfeld, was concerned about Lavanburg appearing paternalistic or institutional, he and the foundation set down certain rules that made that characterization unavoidable. One condition of rental was that the supervisor or his representative had the right to enter an apartment at any time to ascertain its condition. The management worried about maintaining the buildings since “tenants came from a neighborhood known for its unsanitary conditions.”

Several days after moving in Goldfeld found that house regulations and rules stirred up much anxiety among the new tenants. “Gossip and exaggeration are rampant,” he wrote in his diary, “and many of the tenants are hesitant about signing leases, fearing their freedom will be curtailed.” He added that their “misgivings are, of course, due to their unfamiliarity with sanitary living conditions.” Rumors outside the Home abounded as well. A local taxi driver insisted that tenants had to be in bed by eleven o’clock.61

Throughout his diary Goldfeld worried about the habits of his tenants, referring constantly to items appearing on the fire escapes, noisy children and littered hallways. Goldfeld created a force of boy and girl commissioners who patrolled the hallways and courtyards and reported infractions to his office. Goldfeld kept notes and files on offenders. He constantly tried to train parents to bring in their rent money only at accepted hours. He scolded children for eating in the courtyard. On the latter point he wrote, “Training children to eat at the table might be a suitable topic for discussion of the Mother’s Club someday.”62 He complained that mothers continued to hang their laundry outside even though the project provided dryers. After a short absence Goldfeld was disappointed to see “backsliding” in tenants’ behavior:

61. Diary, 16 and 43.
62. Diary, 62.
I have learned that several tenants took advantage of my absence by doing things they would not otherwise have done, such as putting articles on the fire escapes, keeping baby carriages in the courts, giving children food in the halls and generally disobeying the rules.\footnote{Diary, 75.}

During the Depression many tenants attempted to employ traditional means of self-help and survival strategies. Many wanted to take in boarders as soon as they fell behind in rent, but Goldfeld forbade this practice.\footnote{Abe Goldfeld, \textit{Practices and Experiences of the Lavanburg Home} (New York, 1934), 10, pamphlet, East Side Files, Apartments, Lavanburg Homes, Seward Park Library.} He was so adamant that he allowed one tenant to clean his apartment rather than take in a boarder.\footnote{Diary, 72-95.} Families who disobeyed the ban were threatened with eviction and fined.\footnote{Diary, 72-95.}

Goldfeld also intervened when tenants began to take in piecework in order to pay rent. He asked the Department of Labor to revoke licenses unless tenants abided by the state child labor laws and disallowed children under 14 years of age from working. In all, Goldfeld was deeply upset that the Depression brought an air of “irresponsibility and disorganization” to the building and a reversion to traditional means of self-help.\footnote{Diary, 105-8.}

East Side families tried desperately to cope with the hardships of the Depression. They felt that traditional means of mutual support and supplementary work would see them through. But by the mid-1930’s traditional means of self-help could not relieve the hardships of the Depression on the East Side. For example, many \textit{landsmanshaften}, or mutual aid societies, traditionally responsible for seeing their members through hard times, went bankrupt.\footnote{\textit{A Brotherhood of Memory}, 221.}

Traditional forms of help such as mutual aid, taking in boarders or homework allowed Lower East Side families to reject their only other alternative—charity. Many Lower East Side families considered accepting charity unthinkable. Time and time again local settlement and social workers’ reports noted East Siders’ abhorrence of charity. In a neighborhood survey Henry Street Settlement worker Karl Hesley asked families how the economic crisis had affected them. One reply he heard many times was this lament: “will be forced to accept charity, although I’d
rather do anything else first.”69 Louis Starabinsky was just one East Sider of many who wrote settlements pleading for work: “I am not asking for charity, but for work which I absolutely must have.”70

Dramatic stories showed the extent to which families resisted resorting to charity. In 1931 Mr. Selowitz lost his job as a chauffeur. His wife refused to apply to a social service agency and proclaimed that she would prefer to starve. Unable to find work, Selowitz held up a shop at gunpoint so desperate was he to feed his wife and two small children. Even after her husband’s arrest Mrs. Selowitz refused to seek relief from a social service agency. Instead she insisted that she would “turn on the gas.”71

When East Siders agreed to accept charity they did so at great expense. Mr. Prince, an unemployed factory worker who accepted charity, was “discouraged, ashamed and humiliated.”72 Similarly, the Berman family—a widowed mother and three children—ultimately gave in to accepting charity. Soon the family was willing to accept any kind of charity and a settlement worker noted a “hopeless feeling in the family. They are not ashamed to ask for relief anymore. They feel it is useless for a person to make an effort to raise standards . . . they are trying to live from day to day, and at the present time care very little about the future.”73

Some settlement workers understood East Siders’ reluctance to accept charity, but other welfare workers were disturbed by recalcitrant East Siders. In fact, one of the primary goals of organizations such as the Jewish Social Service Association during these years was to convince families such as those on the Lower East Side to accept charity and to try to help them adjust to it.74

The proliferation of breadlines and soup kitchens on the East Side suggests the increased poverty and hardship, especially in light of East

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70. Louis Starabinsky to Karl Hesley, May 18, 1932, box 43, Wald Collection.
72. “Family Studies, Prince Family” The Selowitz Family and Prince Family reports were two of many submitted to the National Federation of Settlements for a planned study of the effects of the Depression on families between 1930 and 1932.
73. Berman Family Report.
74. Viola Paradise, “Not By Bread Alone,” radio dramalogue in celebration of the Sixtieth anniversary of the Jewish Social Service Association, November 6, 1934, Jewish Division, New York Public Library.
Siders’ reluctance to accept charity. By February 1930 there were 82 different breadlines in the city serving 82,000 meals daily. Nine months later the Lower East Side Community Council counted 40 on the Lower East Side alone serving 25,000 meals a day. One month later 50 local breadlines served twice as many meals. 75

Relief was haphazard. Local politicians and hacks often sponsored breadlines and soup kitchens. For example, two Jews and two Italians from a local Tammany club set up a breadline at the corner of Grand and Chrystie Streets that served 4,000 daily. Annoyed welfare workers felt that relief should be provided for and distributed by established welfare agencies. 76

In 1931 the city government tried unsuccessfully to relieve some of the pressure of the economic collapse when the Parks Department created 17,500 jobs under the aegis of the City Commission Work Bureau. But these jobs depended largely on patronage and Tammany connections. In 1932 the Tammany years came abruptly to a close after the famous Seabury Investigation revealed the extent of the city’s corruption, graft and incompetence between 1918 and 1932. During those years the city ran up a debt of $100,000 per day. In 1932 this debt totaled $2 billion and equaled the debt of all the states combined. As Mayor James Walker resigned the city faced bankruptcy and had to turn to its private citizens for help. 77

In 1931 Seward J. Prosser, chairman of Bankers’ Trust, headed a committee to raise money to continue the work relief programs of the Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor and the Charity Organization Society. Called the Emergency Work Bureau (EWB), it raised more than $40 million by the end of 1932 and employed thousands, yet these private and local efforts did little to alleviate the crisis. 78


78. Mrs. August Belmont raised money exclusively for single women in 1931, and a second Gibson Committee, organized in 1932, raised money to employ single women and white-collar workers. See John D. Millert, The Works Progress Administration in New York City (Chicago, 1938).
Work relief was more acceptable to East Siders than other forms of charity. In 1931 a young man named Louis Delinsky of 297 Henry Street wrote to Hesley at Henry Street Settlement asking for help in finding work with the EWB:

My mother has asked me to get in touch with you as she says that you could possibly help our family. I’ve been looking for work for months now without finding any. I registered for the 3 day job after standing all night in line. I am 21 years of age and a natural citizen. I hate to take any charity. What I would like you to try and get me some work. I am the sole support of the house and we have three other children in the house of school age.

Unfortunately for young Delinsky, the EWB had some 60,000 applications to review.79 Despite local and private efforts, the crisis deepened. By 1933, 7,000 people slept in municipal lodging nightly. One of the largest Hoovervilles in the city existed on Tenth Street and the East River.80 Lillian Wald wrote in 1934 that “no depression has touched in magnitude the situation of today, which must be described not as critical but as desperate.”81 A study of single and homeless men in the winter of 1933-4 revealed that “the conditions of a number of these men were among the worst ever seen.”82

Private charities realized they could not relieve the hardship on the East Side.83 Agencies such as the JSSA began transferring families to tax-supported agencies.84 By the fall of 1934 one-quarter of all American Jews received some type of aid from a public agency. As one JSSA pamphlet proclaimed, “that proud proverb, ‘The Jews take care of their own,’ could not withstand the stress of the times.”85

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79. Louis Delinsky to Karl Hesley, November 16, 1931, box 43, “Cases,” Wald Collection.
81. Windows, 231.
84. Council of Jewish Federation and Welfare Funds—Relief Cases, 1931, 6, Jewish Division, New York Public Library.
85. Inside Information, JSSA, May 1934, 2, Jewish Division, NYPL.
Making New Deals

Unable to dig their own way out of the Depression, like much of the rest of the country, East Siders came to depend on government aid. But the 1937 citizenship crisis made clear that there would be a price to pay for the “Deal.” By the time Mayor Fiorello H. LaGuardia entered office in 1934 the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, fashioned after New York State’s Temporary Emergency Relief Administration, had come into existence with a budget of $500 million. New York State had been the first to aid localities; now the federal government followed suit. The New Deal poured monies into cities such as New York City for the first time ever. It marked a major turning point in modern American history. By 1936 New York City became known as the “49th state” because the city received one-seventh of all federal money under WPA.

The numbers on relief in the city exceeded those in every other state or city except Pennsylvania. New Dealer Lenora Hickok reported that assisting New York City represented the “biggest community relief job on earth—the biggest job of its kind ever undertaken by any city since the world began . . . the magnitude of the relief job in New York City and its complexities are breath-taking. One city block will contain almost two hundred families on the relief rolls.”

The dazed city was hardly up to the difficult task of administering relief. “There is no question in my mind,” wrote Hickok, “that we are doing terrible things to people on relief in New York City. For instance, we have let families be evicted three times in six months!” The city instituted “foodless holidays” whereby thousands of families were summarily removed from the relief rolls at the end of each month once money had dried up. Helen Hall, now at Henry Street Settlement, also reported similar “cruel devices” such as “Skip the Feed,” in which the Home Relief Bureau of the Department of Public Welfare arbitrarily skipped every tenth family in order to make money go farther.

Despite the advent of the New Deal after 1933, hard times were still much in evidence on the Lower East Side at the end of the decade. In 1939 relief was still a mess and conditions had not been ameliorated. Folklorist Nathan Ausubel reported in his 1939 study of the Jews on the

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87. Richard Lowitt and Maurine Beasley, *One Third of a Nation* (Chicago, 1983), 45-6. Lorena Hickok was hired by Harry Hopkins, head of FERA, to travel around the country in 1933-4 and report to him on conditions she found.
88. *One Third*, 51.
89. *One Third*, 45.
90. *Unfinished Business*, 12.
Lower East Side, *Hold up the Sun!*, that two-thirds of the Jewish population on the East Side still received some form of relief and that half of those were on home relief.91

Home relief continued to be a last, humiliating alternative. Ausubel described the old men of the East Side—the peddlers, tailors, bakers—who finally had to resort to accepting home relief. “Some are deeply humiliated because of the Government assistance they receive. They cannot help but regard it as ‘charity.’” As one told him, “Relief is bad enough, but without relief it is impossible to live.”92

Even as East Siders agreed to accept the humiliation of relief they had trouble surviving. For example, in 1938 one investigator received about $150 for clothing allowances for 62 families.93 Other insufficiencies led to malnutrition and illness. As one investigator proclaimed, “Almost everyone on relief on the East Side belongs in the clinic or the hospital.”94

Even more disturbing than the inadequacies of aid was the manner in which caseworkers supervised and distributed aid:

Clients cannot pick their own clothes; they have to take without complaint whatever is given them . . . the procedure of getting clothes is a very humiliating one. The client is given a clothing ticket by his investigator. He has to stand in line, often a block long, before he can retrieve his treasure.95

Investigators were under pressure to lighten their case loads and received economic incentives for quickly removing as many as possible from the relief rolls. To this end relief administrators admonished investigators to “be like hawks in watchfulness over their clients.”96 Investigators invaded welfare recipients’ privacy without warning or recourse: “soon they’ll look into my teeth or pump my stomach to find out what foods I’ve been eating,” one outraged East Side mother complained bitterly.97

92. Ausubel, “Hold up the Sun!” “God is in the Basement,” 138.
96. “Jews on Home Relief,” 75.
Such ill treatment led to protest and resistance on the part of some East Siders. The Workers' Alliance was one organization that fought against these injustices. Members would take on cases of families who had either been unjustly dropped from the relief rolls or could not obtain relief even though they desperately needed it. On one occasion, for example, a welfare worker at the Henry Street office denied relief to a couple with two small children. The Workers' Alliance took up a collection to buy bread and milk for the family and then proceeded to gather together 100 members for a demonstration at the relief headquarters. They waited patiently for three hours chanting “Open up emergency cases!” and finally, when admitted, a delegation argued with officials at the bureau for the next two hours. In the end the family received food and rent vouchers.98

On other occasions, though, the alliance was powerless to prevent tragedy. Suicides, attempted suicides and desertion occurred when welfare workers rescinded or denied families relief. Abandonment of women by men in the city rose 134 percent during the first few years of the Depression. Abandonment of babies rose as well.99

Some of the ill treatment was due to disorganization and the sheer magnitude of distributing relief. But other instances clearly had to due with persistent attitudes towards the poor. Episodes of interference on the part of relief workers and resistance to it were commonplace. A Polish Jewish family of six lived in an unheated basement apartment on Rutgers Street. The father was a WPA laborer and the mother worked as a janitress in exchange for rent. When she became pregnant again caseworkers arranged for maternity hospitalization. At the same time they sent two of the children to a convalescent home. The mother outraged social workers when she returned home with the newborn and immediately brought her other two children home. Then she refused to accept supplementary relief, explaining that she was not a shnorrer.100

In addition to patronizing attitudes by federal workers, the federal government expected certain conformities in exchange for welfare. This was most clear in the government's effort to make legal immigrants become citizens. By the late 1930's many Lower East Siders relied on some form of welfare. Many now depended exclusively on the salaries they made from federally funded jobs. Then in June 1937 Congress

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passed the Federal Deficiency Appropriation Bill. This bill drastically cut WPA funds and had an alien rider—the bill that had so drastically affected the Raftberg family. Thus, once East Siders became dependent on welfare for survival the law required them to comply with its demand for them to become citizens and to conform to its standards of Americanization. Yet conformity was almost impossible even when desired.

A study found that the immediate affect of the new law was devastating: “in every house a family crisis had come. In all too many, bitterness, shame and anger had separated parents and children.”101 One father cried that his daughter “tells me all the time it’s a dirty shame I no citizen . . . I got no time. I work all time . . . I shame to death.”102

Never before had East Siders been discriminated against on so large a scale because they were not citizens. In many cases individuals did not even realize that they were aliens. “If I be so many years here,” said one Mr. Dwores, “you don’t mean to say I’m a foreigner!” The average length of residence in the United States among those interviewed was over 20 years.103

One fired WPA worker, Ed Foley, had worked on a land reclamation project in the swamps of Staten Island. It took him an hour and a half to get to work; once there he worked an eight-hour day up to his knees in mud and water. On days when he was not at his WPA job (he worked every other week for WPA) Foley went down to the docks to look for extra work as a longshoreman. Satisfied that his family was not on home relief and did not have to be subjected to a relief investigator looking “into your pots while you’re cooking,” he was shocked when he received his pink slip.104

The consequences of the alien rider forced families like Foley’s to resort to home relief. When Henry Street interviewers visited families like the Foleys some had already waited a month to be put on the rolls. Many families had no money left for food or rent but worried more about when and if the government would decide that they, as noncitizens, no longer qualified for home relief either.105
But the worst of it by far was that these families were now stuck in an untenable catch-22 situation, for even those who agreed to conform to new standards set by the government were unable to comply. They needed to become citizens in order to qualify for government jobs but could not possibly afford to on their home relief allotments. Prior to 1929 the fee for first and second papers amounted to $5. In 1929 the fees for first papers was raised to $5 and for second papers $10. In addition, a “certificate of arrival,” a new requirement, cost $5. By the late 1930’s the fee was reduced by half—to $2.50 for first papers, $5 for second and $2.50 for the certificate of arrival. The loss of work relief jobs was sudden and unexpected. In addition, a bill pending before Congress proposed wholesale deportation of noncitizens. Almost a year later investigators found that frustration and hopelessness had replaced feelings of fear and bewilderment.

The realities of past East Side behavior confused and concerned officials. They had believed that if aliens were forced to become citizens they would Americanize and if slums were razed then slum living should wither as well. Clearly this was not the case. So-called slum living was a more complicated affair. East Siders viewed their difficulties as economic, and because of difficult economic conditions they made decisions in specific cultural contexts that were sometimes at odds with what was expected of them, as is still the case today.