

Irish
Jews
 year, 1851, a quarter of a million Irish came to America, and almost all of them settled in New York or Boston. By 1855, one-third of New York's population was Irish-born.⁶ As immigration from northern Europe eased in the third quarter of the century, the slack was taken up by eastern European Jews. Between 1880 and 1900 an estimated one-third of the Jewish population of Europe came to America, and again settled almost exclusively in New York.

N.Y.C.
 By the turn of the century, New York had become easily the most cosmopolitan city the world had ever seen. Eighty percent of its five million inhabitants were either foreign-born or the children of immigrants.⁸ It had more Italians than the combined populations of Florence, Genoa, and Venice, more Irish than anywhere but Dublin, more Russians than Kiev. As Herman Melville put it: "We are not so much a nation as a world." In 1908, a British Zionist named Israel Zangwill wrote a play about the immigration experience that gave Americans a term for the phenomenon. He called it *The Melting-Pot*.

The popular image, recreated in countless movies and books from *The Godfather* to *Kane and Able*, is of an immigrant arriving wide-eyed and bewildered at Ellis Island, being herded into a gloomy hall and subjected to an intimidating battery of medical tests and interviews, being issued a mysterious new name by a gruff and distracted immigration official, and finally stepping into the sunshine to realize that he has made it to the New World. Except possibly for the last part, it wasn't quite like that.

Ellis
 For one thing, until 1897 immigrants didn't pass through Ellis Island, but through Castle Garden, a former opera house on the Battery. Even after immigration facilities were transferred to Ellis Island, only steerage passengers were taken there. First- and second-class passengers were dealt with aboard their ships. Nor was Ellis Island (named for an eighteenth-century owner, Samuel Ellis) the drab, cheerless institution we might imagine. It was a beautiful, richly decorated complex with first-class health facilities, a roof garden with inspiring views of lower Manhattan and the Statue of Liberty, and good food for the relative few who were subjected to detention. Its Registration Hall with its brass chandeliers and vaulted ceiling containing 29,000 tiles handset by Italian craftsmen was possibly "the grandest single space in New York," according to *The New Yorker*.⁹ Although immigration officials were unquestionably hard-worked—they processed up to five thousand arrivals a day and just over one million, four times Ellis Island's supposed capacity, in a single peak year, 1907—they performed their duties with efficiency, dispatch, and not a little compassion.¹⁰ (Many were themselves immigrants.)

Though the list of those who could be denied admission was formidable—it included prostitutes, lunatics, polygamists, anarchists, those with "loathsome or contagious diseases," those deemed likely to become public charges, and some ninety other categories of undesirables—only about 2 percent of applicants were denied entrance, and so few were given names they didn't willingly accede to as to make the notion effectively mythical. Far from being a cold and insensitive introduction to the New World, it was a dazzling display of America's wealth, efficiency, and respect for the common person, one that made many truly believe that they had passed into an earthly paradise.

On landing in Manhattan the new immigrants would immediately find further manifestations of the wondrousness of America. Often they would be approached by fellow countrymen who spoke their language, but who were friendlier, easier in their manner, and far more nattily dressed than anyone they had seen at home. With astounding magnanimity, these instant friends, or *runners* as they were known, would offer to help the newly arrived immigrant find a job or lodgings and even insist on carrying their bags. Then at some point the immigrant would turn to discover that his new friend had vanished with his belongings, and that he had just learned his first important lesson about life in a new land. Few newly arrived travelers weren't fleeced in some way within their first days.

Most of the millions of lower-class immigrants settled in the four square miles that were the Lower East Side, often in conditions of appalling squalor, with as many as twenty-five people sharing a single windowless room. As early as the 1860s, three-fourths of New York City's population—more than 1.2 million people—were packed into just 37,000 tenements. By the end of the century the population density of the Lower East Side was greater than that in the slums of Bombay.¹¹ In an effort to improve conditions, a law was passed in 1869 requiring that every bedroom have a window. The result was the air shaft. Though a commendable notion in principle, air shafts turned out to be a natural receptacle for garbage and household slop, and thus became conduits of even greater filth and pestilence.

Crime, prostitution, begging, disease, and almost every other indicator of social deprivation existed at levels that are all but inconceivable now. (But not murder; the rate is ten times higher today.) A study of Irish immigrants to Boston around mid-century found that on average they survived for just fourteen years in America. In 1888, the infant death rate in the Italian quarter was 325 per 1,000. That is, one-third of all babies didn't survive their first year.¹²

Gangs with names like the Plug Uglies, Dead Rabbits, and Bowery

Gangs of NY

B'hoys roamed the streets, robbing and *mugging* (an Americanism dating from 1863; also sometimes called *yoking*) with something approaching impunity. Although New York had had a police force since 1845, by the second half of the century it was largely corrupt and ineffectual. Typical of the breed of nineteenth-century policeman was Chief Inspector Alexander "Clubber" Williams, who was brought up on charges no fewer than 358 times but was never dismissed or even apparently disciplined, and who was so magnificently talented at corruption that by the time of his retirement he had accumulated a yacht, a house in Connecticut, and savings of \$300,000.¹³

Against such a background, it is hardly surprising that many immigrants fled back to Europe. At one point, for every one hundred Italians who arrived in New York each year, seventy-three left. Perhaps as many as a third of all immigrants eventually returned to their native soil.¹⁴

Nonetheless, the trend was relentlessly westward. The pattern for European immigrants was for one group to settle in an enclave and then disperse after a generation or so, with a new concentration of immigrants taking its place. Thus when the Irish abandoned their traditional stronghold of the Five Points area, their place was taken almost immediately by Italians. The old German neighborhoods were likewise taken over by Russian and Polish Jews. But there were finer gradations than this, particularly among the Italians. Natives of Genoa tended to accumulate along Baxter Street, while Elizabeth Street housed a large community of Sicilians. Calabrians congregated in the neighborhood known as Mulberry Bend. Alpine Italians—those from areas like Ticino in Switzerland and the Tyrol near Austria—were almost invariably to be found on 69th Street.

Immigrant groups had their own theaters, newspapers, libraries, schools, clubs, stores, taverns, and places of worship. Germans alone could choose from 133 German-language newspapers by 1850, some of them, like the *New York Staats-Zeitung* and *Cincinnati Volksblatt*, nearly as large and influential as their English-language counterparts.¹⁵ Yiddish-speaking New Yorkers by the 1930s had a choice of a dozen daily newspapers, one of which, the *Jewish Daily Forward*, had a circulation of 125,000. Nationally, even Norwegians had forty papers in their own tongue. It was possible—indeed, in some cases not unusual—to live an entire life in the United States and never use English.

Dutch, for instance, remained widely spoken in rural New York well into the nineteenth century, some two hundred years after the Netherlands had retreated from the continent. The celebrated abolitionist, feminist, and public speaker Sojourner Truth, for instance, was raised as a slave in a Dutch household in Albany and spoke only Dutch until she

reached adulthood.¹⁶ According to Raven I. McDavid, Jr., "a few native speakers [of Dutch] survived in the remoter parts of the Hudson Valley as late as 1941."¹⁷

Though the Dutch were only a passing political presence in America, their linguistic legacy is immense. From their earliest days of contact, Americans freely appropriated Dutch terms—*blunderbuss* (literally "thunder gun") as early as 1654, *scow* in 1660, *sleigh* in 1703. By the mid-eighteenth century, Dutch words flooded into American English: *stoop*, *span*, *coleslaw*, *boss*, *pit* in the sense of the stone of a fruit, *bedpan*, *bedspread* (previously known as a *counterpane*), *cookie*, *waffle*, *nitwit* (the Dutch for I don't know is *Ik niet wiet*), the distinctive American interrogative *how come?* (a literal translation of the Dutch *hoe kom*), *poppycock* (from *pappekak*, "soft dung"), *dunderhead*, and probably the *caboodle* in *kit and caboodle*. (*Boedel* in Dutch is a word for household effects, though J. L. Dillard, it is worth noting, mentions its resemblance to the Krio *kabudu* of West Africa.)¹⁸

Two particularly durable Americanisms that emanate from Dutch are *Santa Claus* (out of *Sinter Klaas*, a familiar form of *St. Nicholas*), first recorded in American English in 1773, and *Yankee* (probably from either *Janke*, a diminutive equivalent to the English *Johnny*, or *Jan Kees*, "John Cheese," intended originally as a mild insult).

Often Dutch words were given entirely new senses. *Snoepen*, meaning to slip candy into one's mouth when no one is watching, was transformed into the English *snoop*, meaning to spy or otherwise manifest nosiness.¹⁹ *Docke*, "doll," became *doxy*, a woman of easy virtue. *Hokester*, an innocuous tradesman, became our *huckster*, someone not to be entirely trusted. *Dooop* to the Dutch signified a type of sauce. In America, transliterated as *dope*, it began with that sense in 1807, but gradually took on many others, from a person of limited mental acuity (1851), to a kind of lubricant (1870s), to a form of opium (1889), to any kind of narcotic drug (1890s), to a preparation designed to affect a horse's performance (1900), to inside information (1910). Along the way it spawned several compounds, notably *dope fiend* (1896) and *dope addict* (1933).

Still other Dutch terms came to English by way of nautical contacts, reflecting the Netherlands' days of eminence on the seas, among them *hoist*, *bumpkin* (originally a short projecting spar; how it became transferred to a rustic character is unclear), *bulwark*, *caboose* (originally a ship's galley), *freebooter*, *hold*, *boom*, and *sloop*.

As Dutch demonstrates, a group's linguistic influence bears little relation to the numbers of people who spoke it. The Irish came in their millions, but gave us only a handful of words, notably *smithereens*, *lallapalooza*, *speakeasy*, *hooligan* (from Gaelic *uallachán*, a braggart),²⁰ and *slew*

(Gaelic *sluagh*), plus one or two semantic nuances, notably a more casual approach than in Britain to the distinctions between *shall* and *will* and the habit of attaching definite articles to conditions that previously lacked them, so that whereas a Briton might go into hospital with flu or measles, we go to *the* hospital and suffer from *the* flu and *the* measles.

The Scandinavians imparted even less. With the exception of a very few food words like *gravlaks* and *smorgasbord*, and a few regional terms like *lutfisk* (a fish dish) and *lefse* (a pancake) that are generally unknown outside the upper Midwest and the books of Garrison Keillor, their linguistic presence in America escaped emulation.

(Italian) was slightly more productive, though again only with food words—*spaghetti*, *pasta*, *macaroni*, *ravioli*, *pizza*, and the like. The few nonfood Italian terms that have found a home in English, like *ciao* and *paparazzo*, came much later and not through the medium of immigration.

(German) by contrast, prospered on American soil. Germans had been present in America from early colonial times—by 1683 they had formed their own community, Germantown, near Philadelphia—but the bulk of their immigration came in two relatively short later bursts. The first, numbering some ninety thousand, happened mostly in the five years from 1749 to 1754 and was largely completed by the time of the American Revolution.²¹ From 1830 to 1850 there was a second, larger influx focused mostly on urban areas like St. Louis, Cincinnati, Chicago, Milwaukee, Cleveland, Buffalo, and New York, in several of which the German cultural impact was not just enormous but dominant. An editorial writer for the *Houston Post* noted at the outbreak of World War I, "Germany seems to have lost all of her foreign possessions with the exception of Milwaukee, St. Louis, and Cincinnati."²²

Only a few German words naturalized into English date from the earlier period of immigration, notably *sauerkraut* (1776), *pretzel* (1824), and *dumb* in the sense of stupid (1825). Most Americanized German terms arose during or soon after the second wave: *to loaf* and *loafer* (1835); *ouch*, *bub*, and *pumpernickel* (1839); *fresh* in the sense of being forward (1848); *kindergarten* (1852); *nix* (1855); *shyster*, probably from *Scheisse*, "shit" (1856); *check* in the sense of a restaurant bill (1868); and possibly *hoodlum* from the Bavarian dialect word *hodalump* (1872). Rather slower to assimilate were *delicatessen* (1889); *kaput* (1895); *sink*, from *Shmierfink*, a base character, literally "a greasy bird" (1892); *kaffeeklatsch* and *hockshop* (1903); and *scram* (1920). From German speakers, too, came our habit of saying *gesundheit* ("health!") after a sneeze and so long upon departing, of using *how* as an intensifier ("And how!"), and of putting *fest* on the ends of words (*songfest*, *foodfest*, *slugfest*, *talkfest*).

Many German terms underwent minor modifications of spelling to

make them accord with English practice, so that *autsch* became *ouch*, *krank* (to be ill) became *cranky*, *zweiback* became *zwieback*, *Schmierkäse* became *smearcase*, and *Leberwurst* became *liverwurst*.

Equally productive, if somewhat less diffused through society, was Yiddish (from Middle High German *jüdisch diutsch*, "Jewish German"), brought to America by eastern European Jews beginning in about 1880. Though based on German, Yiddish uses Hebrew characters and is written from right to left like Hebrew. It originated in the early twelfth century in the Jewish ghettos of central Europe. As Jews dispersed through Europe, they took Yiddish with them, enlivening it along the way with borrowings from Aramaic, Hebrew, various Slavic and Romance languages, and finally English. By the late nineteenth century it was the mother tongue of some eleven million people, a quarter of whom ended up in the United States.

As with the Germans, Jews came to America in well-defined but far more culturally distinct waves—first a small block of Sephardic Jews from Spain and Portugal (*Sephardic* means Spaniard in Hebrew) in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, then, from the 1820s through the 1880s, a much larger group of Ashkenazi Jews (named for the scriptural figure Ashchenaz) from elsewhere in western Europe, particularly Germany, and finally, from about 1880 to 1924, a tidal wave of eastern European Jews, most especially from Poland and Russia.

Members of the first two groups, generally educated and comfortably off, moved smoothly into American life. Many of the great names of American business and philanthropy—Guggenheim, Kuhn, Loeb, Seligman, Schiff, Lewisohn, Morgenthau, Speyer—trace their origins to the first and more particularly second waves. Those in the final diaspora were by contrast almost universally ragged and poor. At least one-quarter could not read or write. To the "uptown Jews," these new arrivals were something of an embarrassment. They referred to them as "barbarians" or "Asiatics," and regarded speaking Yiddish as a mark of poverty and ignorance.²³

But it was these poor eastern Europeans who would more than any other group reshape America's concept of itself. They would help to create Hollywood and give us many of our most cherished creative talents, from the Marx Brothers to the composers George Gershwin and Irving Berlin. Both of the latter would get their start in the New York music district known as Tin Pan Alley (so called because of the cacophony to be heard there), Gershwin with "Swanee" and Berlin with the 1908 hit "Yidl with Your Fiddle, Play Some Ragtime," a song that, in the words of the writer Marvin Gelfind, "speaks volumes on the process called assimilation."²⁴