

The Jewish Other Half: Girlhood on the Lower East Side as Presented in Immigrant Narratives

“I was learning good English, I was reading and with the trait of my race for adaptability I was quickly learning the ways of this country” (Cohen 1995: 256). The words of Rahel/Ruth/Rose Gollup explain the cultural transition from a childhood in Tsarist Russia to an adulthood in America, abruptly thrust on the shoulders of a maturing girl. This paper traces the construction of a female Jewish American identity. With the use of Critical Discourse Analysis, it compares two works of first-generation immigrant women coming of age in New York’s Lower East Side: *Bread Givers* (1925) by Anzia Yeziarska and *Out of the Shadow* (1918) by Rose Cohen, an autobiographical novel and an autobiography, respectively.

To begin, it is worth considering the women writers’ cultural subjectivities. The beginnings of their life stories seem representative of countless nameless Jewish immigrant women populating the Lower East Side. Both were born in the western reaches of Russia in the early 1880s, immigrated to the USA in their young teenage years together with their large families, toiled in New York’s sweatshops and tried domestic service. They were highly sensitive about gender – and zealous about education. They mastered English, and their quaint, local color – Yiddish vernacular was appreciated by the mainstream audience. Cohen and Yeziarska reached the height of their careers in the turbulent 1920s. Cohen, however, never achieved the educational accomplishment or nationwide prominence that Yeziarska enjoyed. In mature adulthood the course of Yeziarska’s life sharply diverted from the ordinary experience of Jewish womanhood at that time, through her flirtation with Hollywood and the American artistic elite. Cohen’s life, in contrast, was cut short at the age of 45, possibly by suicide. In the late 20th century both Cohen’s and Yeziarska’s works were republished, yet only the latter became a bright star in the firmament of American ethnic writers. As put by Thomas Dublin (1995: xviii), Cohen “has come ‘Out of the Shadow,’ but it is clear that she has not fully entered into the light.”

Incidentally, the lives of the two Lower East side residents intersected on both factual and fictitious planes. As discovered by Dublin, Yeziarska in-

corporated into her 1927 short story, "Wild Winter Love," a 1922 *New York Times* report of a suicide attempt by "a Rose Cohen, 40," who plunged into the East River. The protagonist of the story, Ruth, wrestles with the responsibilities of immigrant family life and a desire to write her autobiography. Having authored *Out of the Ghetto*, she achieves success, which estranges her from her tailor husband. Then she falls into the arms of a Gentile lover, and eventually commits suicide. By now it is impossible to completely separate fact from fiction in this story to know to what degree it reflects Cohen's biography (Dublin 1995: xv-xvi).

Bread Givers and *Out of the Shadow* portray Sara Smolinsky and Rachel/Ruth Gollup, eldest daughters, in their rebellion against the Old-Country values and lifestyle. Sara struggles against the virtual tyranny and abuse of the children on the part of the Orthodox father. Ruth's attitude, however, has more complex twists. Upon arrival in the New World, she is determined not to lose any of her religious zeal and outward expressions of faith, and the swift Americanization of her once pious father shocks her. But as Ruth grows up, the American environment bears its stamp on her and she becomes the family's agent of modernity, persuading her mother to cast aside her wig, encouraging her to read fiction, and eventually disobeying her father on the matter of marriage. Both girls are mesmerized by what America offers. Yet, they have different ambitions. Sara is determined to live independently and become "a finished *teacherin*." Ruth's prospects are not as definite; it is only implied that she desired some kind of social advancement earned with her own effort, not just a comfortable position through marriage. More importantly, the heroines pursue a common dream: to find romantic love outside the confines of tradition. They are out for a spiritual union of soul mates, not a financial deal or a social contract. Ruth is not afraid of marrying a Christian convert, and Sara makes an even further departure from her culture by becoming Gentile's wife. Finally, having realized their romantic and professional pursuits, both young women reconcile with their heritage and with a new conscience embrace things Jewish. To cut the story short, they leave their homes, families, and people in order to love them in the end. Ruth describes her identity quest in the following words:

now that I had a glimpse of the New World, a revolution took place in my whole being. I was filled with a desire to get away from the whole old order of things. And I went groping about blindly, [. . .]. And then [. . .] a little light came to me and I was able to see that the Old World was not all dull and the new was not all glittering. And then I was able to stand between the two, with a hand in each. (Cohen 1995: 246)

As far as their chosen place in American society is concerned, Sara Smolinsky has a far more definite outlook and priorities than Ruth Gollup. Perhaps it is connected with the genres containing different kinds of the autobiographical gaze. Cohen, writing directly about herself, seems to find it difficult to characterize herself as decisively. We learn that she looks beyond the sweatshop, saying, "Surely this would not end there. Would this be all I would see of that other world outside of Cherry Street? And she waited from day to day" (Cohen 1995: 247). Ruth's ambiguous identity is also manifested in her names, which is not the case of Sara. Born Rahel, she still went by that name at home, in America. In her "greenhorn" days, she was involuntarily named Ruth by her boss's Americanized wife, who advised that she should take a less clichéd Jewish name, and it became the name of her autobiographical persona in public dealings, also in the Anglo context. This dichotomous identity underscores the distinction between the private and the public, and the Old, and New World as well. Rose, a name yet further removed from the Jewish tradition, is the one that is used by the author herself. Thus Cohen's identity is clearly split.

For Sara and Ruth, "America" stands for a promise of a more affluent and happier existence, in contrast to the dreary experience of Hester Street. Both novels employ the notion of "America" as a banner-word, which is flashed to the readers on numerous occasions and has the function of a cognitive trigger with highly compressed meaning. Another such rhetorical device is the word *Americanerin* sneeringly used by Reb Smolinsky when speaking of his disobedient daughter. When used by Sara, the statement "I am American" (Yeziarska 1975: 138) compresses a totally different set of ideas and explains her whole rebellion in the briefest way. Cohen ends her autobiography by quoting her now accomplished father: "After all this is America" (1995: 313), where she consciously uses the figurative construct promoting the American Dream. Banner-words are also used in Sara's text: "He was the Old World. I was the New" (Yeziarska 1975: 207). This conflict is further suggested by the use of a simile, which also carries a compressed meaning: the father is called "a tyrant more terrible than the Tsar from Russia" (Yeziarska 1975: 65), while Sara, setting off to college, compares herself to Columbus "starting out for the end of the earth" (Yeziarska 1975: 209). Here the spatial and temporal divide emphasizes emotional distance.

The two writers also use the rhetorical reversal of the American Dream in order to underscore the split in their families. The Americanized daughters eventually experience comfort and social recognition, while their parents live the lives of want and destitution. Yeziarska eventually sends the rabbi father

onto the street peddling for pennies. Ruth's family goes through years of hardship, always on the verge of unemployment, homelessness and starvation. In the end, they achieve a relative success, with father opening a small but prosperous family-run grocery and the eldest son, a would-be-rabbi, graduating from Columbia University as a teacher. Mrs. Gollup and Mrs. Smolinsky definitely do not share the American Dream as both are worn out by physical exhaustion and worry. Sara's mother experienced only loss upon her arrival. Ironically, she claims to have been much better off back in Russia, "Who'd believe me, here in America, where I have to bargain by the pushcarts over a penny that I once had it so plenty in my father's house?" (Yeziarska 1975: 30). She concludes on the sentimental note, "There ain't in America such beautiful things like we had at home" (Yeziarska 1975: 33). Upon arrival in America, the Gollups became deprived of whatever modest traces of affluence they had possessed back in Russia; now, instead of a fine brass Sabbath candlestick, they have to use a brick to hold candles, not to mention the broken and incomplete furniture, or the succession of shabbier and shabbier lodgings.

In this way, Yeziarska and Cohen rhetorically undermine the long-standing myth of America as a Promised Land, a paradise offering all virtues and wealth to *all* its inhabitants, in opposition to Europe and its allegedly corrupt environment. Both authors nostalgically remember the open, sunny fields and fresh air of their European childhoods, the abundance of simple, nutritious food, and good health. In America, teenage Ruth develops anemia, which drains all her strength and repeatedly confines her to bed for months. Sara, who works and studies tirelessly, living virtually on nothing, displays no major health condition probably only thanks to her innate stamina. Yet, there is a different America, and both Cohen and Yeziarska reveal its rewards to the readers. Sara recounts her college entry as the passing of the gates of Eden, "But know I came to a town of quiet streets, shaded with green trees. No crowds, no tenements. No hurrying noise to beat the race of the hours. Only a leisured quietness whispered in the air: Peace. Be still. Eternal time is all before you" (Yeziarska 1975: 210). Ruth finds a similar paradisiacal refuge in a Connecticut retreat established for immigrant children, where she worked and recuperated during successive summers. Cohen writes, "I walked among the tress. [. . .]. The leaves touched my face and I stood still. The quiet seemed to surround me and every now and then there was a twit, a rustle, and overhead the sky shone blue. [. . .]. In the house too it seemed as if I were living in a fairy tale" (Cohen 1995: 262). A clear-cut distinction between the immigrant and Anglo settings is evident here, and only those privileged to enter the inner circle can drink from America's fountain of youth.

New York City at the turn of 19th and 20th century was the largest metropolis in the US, and its Jewish population made a huge cultural impact. A guidebook from the period, *The Sidewalks of New York*, described the Lower East Side in the following way, “the enormous area east of the Bowery and south of 10th Street, which [. . .] is almost exclusively Jewish.” One could encounter there “Yiddish signs, Yiddish newspapers Yiddish beards and wigs” (Rose Cohen 2003). The Jewish enclave was also probably the world’s most densely populated urban neighborhood at that time. In the words of Abraham Cahan, the district “covers a comparatively small area, something less than half a square mile, wherein is crowded a little city of its own, the ghetto, with a population of 500,000 souls. Half a million men, women, and children, almost exclusively Polish and Russian Hebrews” (qtd. in Rose Cohen 2003). Jacob Riis writes in his *How the Other Half Lives*,

The homes of the Hebrew quarter are its workshops also. [. . .] You are made fully aware of it before you have travelled the length of a single block in any of these East End streets, by the whirr of a thousand sewing-machines, worked at high pressure from earliest dawn until mind and muscle give out together. Every member of the family, from the youngest to the oldest, bears a hand, shut in the qualmy rooms, where meals are cooked and clothing washed and dried besides, the livelong day. It is not unusual to find a dozen persons – men, women and children – at work in a single room. (1971: 88)

In numerous first-hand accounts of the immigrant “other half,” New York is hardly the Promised Land. It is neither Yeziarska’s nor Cohen’s autobiographies that became the paradigm of the genre. Unlike Mary Antin, they experience initial repulsion to New York City and its citizens (Muir 2000: 7). According to Lisa Muir, Yeziarska and Cohen strive to “‘expose’ their ethnicity to a dominant group that was blind to its own clannishness. They hold up their own ethnic group status as one for contemplation rather than revulsion” (Muir 2000: 8). The strategy of differentiation is used by Yeziarska to emphasize the distance between America’s newcomers and her native citizens. On election day, Sara’s sister says, “They say work can’t start till they got a new president” (Yeziarska 1975: 2), and repeatedly uses the pronoun to refer to “the other half.” Interestingly, Cohen also remembers an election night, but her account is ridden with terror. It is used to underscore her and her people’s status as outcasts of the second degree, their existence as outlaws, and their exclusion and marginalization even within the ethnic ghetto. When “Americans” are celebrating their democratic ways, the immigrant girl is numb with fear caused

by the assaults of the Irish claiming a privileged status. The worst nightmares of persecution come alive again, now in the shade of the Statue of Liberty. Ruth explains, "I had grown used to seeing strange Jews mistreated whenever they happened to come to our village in Russia. But after election night I felt differently" (Cohen 1995: 104).

Ruth and Sara face not only a social gap between their fellow countrymen and Anglo-Saxons, with their quiet ways and elegant appearance, but also experience a chasm between the generations of the Jewish Americans. This can be observed through the use of the strategy of differentiation into "us" and "them." This potent rhetorical tool, just as banner-words, is symbolically irrefutable because it rests on the relationship of familiarity, it is indeterminate, and it limits the audience's perception of choices (Paine 1981: 17). Sara differentiates herself not only from her parents but also from her less willful sisters. She cries, "Thank God I'm living in America! You made the lives of the other children! I'm going to make my own life!" (Yeziarska 1975: 138). Also by the juxtaposition of social actors, Yeziarska achieves the effect of differentiation. She writes, "I began to feel I was different from my sisters" (1975: 65), and throughout the story she builds a virtual wall separating the experiences and personalities of the girls. In the end, Sara reflects, "Sitting side by side with **them** [. . .] I felt stranger to **them** than if I had passed **them** in Hester Street" (Yeziarska 1975: 214, emphasis mine). Ruth, the daughter of a tailor, in turn, writes unabashedly about her "blinding dislike for the whole class of tailors" (Cohen 1995: 247). She distances herself further from her people by stating, "I could never quite be a part of the filth I had absorbed" (Cohen 1995: 275). It is through her exposure to mainstream America at the Settlement, a hospital – which led her to reading the New Testament, struggling through Shakespeare, and attending night classes – that she develops rebellious attitudes: "walking through the street it seemed to me that now I did not belong here. I did not feel a part of it all as I did formerly" (Cohen 1995: 250).

Both Ruth and Sara feel a sense of empowerment and pride at now being able to read in English and participate in the larger cultural exchange by entering "the rival cultural discourse," to use William Boelhower's term (1987: 50). Reading becomes a tool of enculturation as well as a manifestation of rebellious attitudes for both Jewish women. Their ancient tradition has made them well-acquainted with the narrative form through Biblical stories. Now they move beyond the confines of tradition, which becomes a liberating experience. As noted by Muir,

Taking up the pen not only separated women from the Jewish community, but as immigrants, Jews, and women with working-class backgrounds, they could be “quadruply marginal” to American society as well. Frequently forced to live outside of society at large, and without a command of the English language, the women wrestled with their own silence. (2000: 8)

For Ruth and Sara, reading takes center stage in their lives, and they experience the dire reality around them through the textual lens. Ruth is also overpowered by narration; she confesses to “making up stories for herself,” seemingly devoid of any meaning, but in fact, helpful in explaining the world around her (Cohen 1995: 197). She is also captivated by the autobiographical “I” as she mentions, “the simplicity of the intimate tone of the first person” (Cohen 1995: 190). Ruth builds her new identity around the written word and cannot accept the situation when her suitor does not share her enthusiasm for education. Writing letters later becomes a form of passionate romance with an educated Americanized Jew as well as a manifestation of her rebellion against the father, who “commanded [her] to drop writing the letters” (Cohen 1995: 320). Similarly, Sara’s romance and marriage to her principal from work also starts around the word: the accomplished teacher instructing his young adept how to pronounce English words.

The women characters in Yeziarska’s and Cohen’s writings are typically passivized and impersonalized by their fathers, to use CDA terminology again. Suffice it to say that Reb Smolinsky boasts of marrying off two of his daughters in one day, of course in the traditional way, without taking their opinion into account. And this is what Sara rebels against. She resolves, “to marry myself to a man that’s a person, I must first make myself for a person” (Yeziarska 1975: 172). To personalize the heroine, and thus differentiate her from her sisters, Yeziarska consistently uses the active voice as well as the words *make* and *person* when referring to Sara. Ruth’s father is nearly successful in his attempts to strike a match between Ruth and a financially secure grocer, thereby conforming to Jewish customs. Interestingly, the traditional and formalized courtship ceremonies, which can be seen as a rite of passage, become an occasion for Ruth to assert her separate identity for the first time. After her family have chosen her future husband, Ruth remembers that during the preparations, “The choice was left entirely to me for the first time. [. . .] I chose a pretty pair of shoes and saw they were the right size” (Cohen 1995: 212). In Ruth’s case, her shoes are a simile of her social role. Prior to that, her father always made her grow into her shoes. She writes about her first pair of American shoes that took her

through her first immigrant years of struggle, “My shoes [...] – already worn out and still too large for me” (Cohen 1995: 125). Now, socially recognized as an adult, she has enough willpower to say no to her father. In contrast, her brother, who hates his old-country shoes and demands “American shoes,” is less hesitant about his own position and chooses to “fling them from a strange roof” (Cohen 1995: 191) so he would never be able to find them again, even if his father makes him. Importantly, in the final chapters of her *Out of the Shadow*, Cohen throws herself back into twilight, casting the spotlight on her accomplished brother and father, thus giving way to men.

In the end, strikingly, the heroines arrive at the same understanding of their position in the family. After lonely pursuits of their dreams, they finally become reconciled with their fathers. They seem to be able to finally enjoy the best of both worlds, living as hyphenated Americans. Both *Out of the Shadow* and *Bread Givers* have somewhat clichéd endings (see Zaborowska 1995: 129–31): marriage. Although these unions are of their own choice and against the Jewish tradition, ironically, they are not entirely in discord with it. As we are reminded by Yeziarska in the words of Sara’s father, “It says in the Torah: *A woman without a man is less than nothing*” (1975: 270). Eventually, both Ruth and Sara conform halfway to this rule. Cohen, however, proposes a more complicated relationship to men and America than Yeziarska. In this way, the daughter-of-the-tenements turned autobiographer stays closer to the social reality of the era by unabashedly exposing her own weaknesses and psychological tantrums. Yeziarska, in turn, “the Cinderella of the Ghetto,” as a novelist offers a nearly utopian role-model to follow for her “hungry-hearted” female readers looking for bearings in the cultural maize of their new world reality.

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