Gender and Ethnicity:
Life Stories of Jewish-American Immigrant
Women in the First Half of the Twentieth Century

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Abstract

In the first half of the twentieth century, immigrants left oral and written testimonies of their experience in the United States, many of them housed in various ethnic-American archives or published by ethnic historical societies. In 1942, the Yiddish Scientific Institute in New York City encouraged Jewish-American immigrants to share their life stories as part of a written essay contest. In 2006, several of these autobiographical accounts were translated and published by Jocelyn Cohen and Daniel Soyer in a volume entitled *My Future Is in America*. Thus, this essay examines the autobiographies of two Jewish-American immigrant women, Minnie Goldstein and Rose Schoenfeld, with a view to comparing how their gendered identity (as women and as members of their families) has impacted their choices and lives in their home countries and in the United States in the first part of the twentieth century.

Keywords: life stories; Jewish-American immigrant women; countries of birth; gender roles; gender and family; contexts of immigration.

In recent years, immigration studies scholars have been involved in an assiduous process of recovering the life stories of ordinary immigrants at the turn of the twentieth century, contained in letters to their families in their countries of birth, in oral histories, or in brief autobiographical accounts left as testimonies to their descendants in the United States. Some of these testimonies have been published in volumes about the collective immigration experience of various ethnic groups, such as *In Their Own Words* (2000), translated and edited by Solveig Zempel, *Toward a Better Life: America's New Immigrants in their Own Words. From Ellis Island to the Present* (2011), collected by Peter Morton Coan, and *My Future Is in America: Autobiographies of Eastern European Jewish Immigrants* (2006), translated and edited by Jocelyn Cohen and Daniel Soyer. The last includes several life stories of Jewish immigrants in the early twentieth century, personal histories selected from a number of autobiographical accounts sent to the Yiddish Scientific Institute (YIVO) in New York City as part of a contest sponsored by the organization in 1942. The theme of the autobiography contest, "open to any adult Jew who had not been born in the United States or Canada," was "Why I left Europe and what I have accomplished in America" (Cohen and Soyer 5). In the introduction to the volume, the editors of the collection mention that the contest announcement underscored the organizers' "belief in the historical importance of the everyday lives of ordinary people" (5). Sixty years after the contest, Cohen and Soyer emphasize the fact that the accounts "capture the collective, many-textured experience of a generation that witnessed great upheaval in Eastern European Jewish life" (1) as "the autobiographers offer their own views on religion and political revolt; on the struggle for literacy and worldly knowledge beyond traditional Jewish learning; on masculinity and femininity; on family relationships and the domestic sphere; on upward social mobility and the price of success; and on the definition of success itself" (2). Thus, this essay focuses on the life stories of two immigrant women – Minnie Goldstein and Rose Schoenfeld,¹ who emigrated to the United States in 1894, and 1912, respectively, at the height of mass

migration of Jews from Eastern Europe and Russia – with a view to comparing how their gendered identity (as women and as members of their families – daughters, wives, and mothers) has impacted their choices and lives in their home countries and in the United States in the first part of the twentieth century.

Jewish Immigration at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

Based on census records at the turn of the twentieth century, historian Rodney Carlisle points out in *Multicultural America: The European Americans* that the 1900 census recorded “over 10 million immigrants” who entered the United States between 1890 and 1900, while more than “13 million new immigrants” arrived between 1900 and 1910, the vast majority from Europe (81). In this context, historian Hasia Diner explains that “Jews emigrated from eastern Europe in much greater number and intensity than did non-Jews. Jews constituted about 5 percent of the population of the vast Russian Empire but made up nearly half of its emigrants” (147). In terms of the push factors that prompted emigration, renowned sociologist Nancy Foner explains that “For eastern European Jews, political and religious persecution aggravated economic hardships. A combination of industrialization, the overcrowding of the cities, and rampant anti-Semitism, including discriminatory laws, created a severe crisis in the already oppressive conditions of Jewish life” (*From Ellis Island* 20). According to information in Cohen and Soyer’s volume, Goldstein was born in 1882, in Warsaw, Poland, and emigrated to the United States in 1894 at age twelve (18), while Schoenfeld was born in 1884, in Drohobych, Galicia,² and emigrated in 1912, aged twenty-eight (160). Regarding the situation of the Jews from Galicia, Diner argues that their life was much more difficult than that of the Jews in Russia: “while anti-Jewish sentiment existed in Galicia and acts of physical violence against Jews did occur, Galician Jews migrated out of the utter desperation of their poverty,” so that “the proportion of Jews leaving Galicia,

where no pogroms erupted, exceeded that of Russian Jews” (93). This was also the case of Schoenfeld’s husband, who emigrated from Galicia in the early 1900s for economic reasons. On the other hand, among the pull factors that drew Southern- and Eastern-European immigrants to the United States at the turn of the twentieth century, Foner enumerates America’s “expanding industrial economy, job opportunities, and higher wages and standard of living,” including, particularly for Jewish immigrants, “the promise of a less hostile government, without official anti-Semitic restrictions—and the knowledge that earlier Jewish immigrants, largely from Germany, had found freedom and economic success” (*From Ellis Island* 21-22).³

According to Diner, upon arrival in the United States, Jewish immigrants “settled in American cities, labored, and saved to send for siblings or wives as well as young children and sometimes parents, providing them with passage money. This then brought the cost of transportation within the reach of those with less means, making it possible for an elaborate process of family and community building in the United States to take place” (95). In the early 1890s, Goldstein’s father sold his most valuable possessions to gather the necessary sum for a ticket to America, and, after a few years, having saved enough money, he sent for his wife and daughter to join him there. Schoenfeld’s husband asked an aunt who had emigrated earlier to send him a ticket and money for emigration, but his wife emigrated alone, having paid for the fare herself, carrying only a letter from her husband to facilitate her entry in the United States, since she had traveled as an unaccompanied immigrant woman. Given the family and ethnic community settlement patterns at the time, “over 2 million” Jewish immigrants settled in and around New York City between 1890 and 1920, eventually establishing “one of the largest Jewish communities in the world” (Carlisle 81). According to Foner, “In 1910, Russian and Italian immigrants were almost a fifth of the city’s population; by 1920, with their children, Italian Americans numbered over 800,000 and the Jewish population had soared to over 1.6 million, or, together, about 43 percent of the city’s

population” (*In a New Land* 13). Goldstein emigrated with her mother to join her father who had settled in New York City and spent several years there before she got married and moved with her husband to Providence, Rhode Island, while Schoenfeld lived in New York City where her husband had settled upon arrival.

Individual Life Stories: Minnie Goldstein and Rose Schoenfeld

In an article on Jewish women’s autobiography, Tzvi Howard Adelman suggests that “autobiography constitutes an attempt to form a comprehensive, coherent picture of one’s self as a totality” in light of “an altering, dramatic, or defining experience” (117), in this case, the experience of leaving the country of birth, settling and trying to adapt to life in the United States. Steven Rubin defines autobiography as “an exploration of personal identity, ... an assertion of the power of the individual,” whose “purpose is to express subjective awareness,” but he also connects autobiography to a larger context, stating that it is also “inescapably historical, reflecting the concerns of society and culture in general” (178). Thereby, as he further states, “in retelling the story of their lives,” autobiographers “re-created the collective history of their people” (179). Similarly, in the introduction to the volume *In Our Own Voices: A Guide to Conducting Life History Interviews with American Jewish Women*, Joyce Antler points out that “The subjective, personal meanings of lived experience deepen historical knowledge, providing insights into how individuals interact with the historical forces that shape their lives” (8). Referring to oral histories, Antler further explains that “The narrator tells her story in her own terms, concentrating on those aspects of her life history that are the most important to her,” while during the process of telling the story, “she simultaneously *reinterprets* as well as *remembers* the past...” (8, emphasis added), statements that are also valid for Goldstein’s and Schoenfeld’s written autobiographical accounts.⁴

Goldstein and Schoenfeld wrote their accounts as Jewish-American immigrant women in their late fifties, but the fact that they had emigrated at different ages had a significant impact not only on their lives in the United States, but also on the way they chose to select and structure the personal information in their autobiographies. Professor Rubén Rumbaut, well-known sociologist, explains that “differences in nativity (of self and parents) and age at arrival ... are criteria used to distinguish between generational cohorts”; hence, “the term ‘one-and-a-half’ or ‘1.5’ generation distinguishes those who immigrate as children from the ‘first’ generation of immigrants who migrate as adults and the ‘second’ generation of native-born persons of foreign parentage” (982). According to this categorization, Schoenfeld is considered a first-generation Jewish-American immigrant because she was born in a different country and emigrated to the United States later in life, while Goldstein, who was twelve years old when she emigrated with her mother, belongs to “the 1.5 generation.”

Goldstein, who emigrated as a young teenager, started her autobiography with a brief presentation of her family environment (parents, grandparents, siblings) and her childhood; but, having spent a longer time in the United States, she concentrated on her life in the country of adoption, both in New York City, with her parents, and in Providence, Rhode Island, with her husband and children. On the other hand, in her narrative, Schoenfeld, who emigrated at age twenty-eight to join her husband, focused primarily on her family, social milieu, and early years of marriage in Galicia, and included fewer details about her life as an immigrant in the United States. Furthermore, the fact that the women chose to highlight particular family relationships and social events in their stories reflects the importance they granted to various layers of their individual identities. One might argue that, because Goldstein was marked by her unhappy childhood in Poland, she emphasized her resilience and determination to be a good wife, to raise three accomplished sons, and to become a successful businesswoman (a “landlady”). Schoenfeld, on the other hand, was marked not only by her relationship with her parents, but also by the relationship with

her husband's family (siblings) and by the resulting financial difficulties that influenced her husband's decision to emigrate; hence, she highlighted her individual strengths and literary accomplishments that helped her to overcome the challenges encountered both in Galicia and in the United States.

Daughters – Memories of Life in the Home Country

In her seminal study *Daughters of the Shtetl: Life and Labor in the Immigrant Generation*, historian Susan A. Glenn states that "Women occupied a paradoxical place in eastern European Jewish society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries," highlighting the fact that although women's "economic and domestic" work was considered a crucial element of "physical and cultural survival," "women as a sex were considered inferior to men" (8). Their main role was that of a homemaker, in charge of the domestic sphere and child-rearing. In keeping with these roles, as Antler suggests in the afore-mentioned introduction, women's stories tend to focus on their most meaningful relationships which "often take place within their families of origin and the families that they create. Families provide expectations, values and models which give shape to women's lives, yet family relationships and the complex roles of women within families also engender tensions and conflict" (8), as illustrated in Goldstein's and Schoenfeld's autobiographies. Thus, in the first part of their accounts, both Goldstein and Schoenfeld describe their experience as young girls and dutiful daughters in their home countries. At the beginning of her account, Goldstein offers detailed information about her parents and her grandparents,⁵ who "were all natives of Warsaw," respectable and well-off persons; her grandparents, she proudly remarks, owned a shoe store in "the biggest business district in Warsaw at the time" (Cohen and Soyer 18). By emphasizing the fact that although her maternal grandmother did not have any formal education, she had managed to become a businesswoman, Goldstein might have intended to create a link with her own business acumen mentioned later on in her narrative. Goldstein's father, her mother's second husband, was a Yeshiva⁶ student who

tried hard to support his family, but somehow his repeated business ventures did not work out. Hence, she remembers her childhood as a difficult period, from a financial point of view, with hard times when the family did not even have enough money to pay the rent. This desperate financial situation prompted her father to think about emigrating to America, in the hope of earning more money and offering his family a better life. However, her mother was against his emigration, declaring that only “those who run away from home because of some sort of crime, or those who are banished there by the government” go to America (Cohen and Soyer 21). And in spite of her father’s response: “I want to go to a country where I can work hard and make a living for my wife and children and be equal to everyone” (Cohen and Soyer 21), her mother felt ashamed, and perhaps disappointed, that her husband was incapable of supporting his family, and his only solution was to emigrate to America. Unfortunately, life after her father’s departure became even more difficult for Goldstein, as the remaining family had to rely completely on her grandmother’s financial support. “Now the bitter years of my childhood began,” Goldstein confesses, as she had to live with a mother who “was always nervous and angry ... very tired of staying home,” and who felt betrayed by all the family members: “she kept talking about how my father had gone away, about how she had trouble with my grandmother, about how her eldest son had betrayed her” (Cohen and Soyer 22). Goldstein remarks that she was only ten years old at the time, and although she tried to understand her mother’s predicament, she always felt hungry and neglected, mainly left to fend for herself, often getting in trouble because she used to socialize with older, rather mischievous children. “I wandered around like a lost soul” (Cohen and Soyer 23), Goldstein admits about that time period, emotionally plagued by an anxious and discontent mother.

Schoenfeld also devotes the first part of her autobiographical account to a minute description of her family background: her paternal and maternal grandparents descended from rich and respectable families, and her parents were also very righteous people. She recalls the difficult time when her father was drafted to the Austria-Hungary military, and her mother and

siblings had to live with her grandfather for three years in a small house in a village, as well as the time when, upon her father's return from the draft, he only found a low-paying job in another town, which was hardly enough to support the family. With her husband in a different town, forced to find ways to make ends meet financially, her mother took up sewing linens for the priest's wife, in addition to the demanding task of taking care of the household and raising the children. Out of the six daughters born to the family only three survived, but her mother felt "mortified that she did not have a boy" (a great blessing in Jewish families unlike having girls) (Cohen and Soyer 165). When the family was finally blessed with a boy, her mother decided to give up sewing to take care of the "delicate and pale" boy; as a result, at the tender age of twelve, Schoenfeld had to start working: "I was the oldest and the burden of work fell into my hands" (165). She also mentions that before her brother was born, she and her two sisters were sent to heder,⁷ studying "everything else that the boys studied" (Cohen and Soyer 165); so, during the fraught period of family difficulties, Schoenfeld's escape were the books. "I was a great lover of books," she admits, a pastime that led to her "writing little sketches and poems" (Cohen and Soyer 167), which, at first, she was too shy to share with anyone.

On the other hand, in her account, Goldstein expresses her regret that because of the challenging family situation after her father's emigration, her mother did not consider her education a priority, so she did not learn how to read or write. However, when her father wrote to them that he had managed to start a shoe business and set up a small shoe store, about four years after he had left and sent money for his wife and daughter to join him, Goldstein hoped to have a better life there, despite her mother's explicit reluctance to follow her husband to America.

Daughters: Comparative Approaches to Work and Marriage Choices

As mentioned previously, Goldstein had no say in the decision to emigrate. The difficult financial situation they were in had forced

her father to sell everything to be able to buy a ticket for America, and, as a result, he had left his wife and children in dire circumstances, hoping that they would be helped by his wife's family. Goldstein briefly describes her father's first years as an immigrant, living in extreme poverty in New York City, like his family in Poland. However, she also mentions his resilience in facing the difficulties of adapting to a new country, recounting how he arrived at Castle Garden with only a few dollars in his pocket, and how he was met by a representative of Hakhnoses Orkhim,⁸ who helped him out for a few days. Her father settled in New York City, on the Lower East Side,⁹ applied for citizenship and tried his hand at different trades for a few years before he managed to start a shoe business, bought a small store on Hester Street, and decided to send for his wife and daughter, possibly to help him with the business. Goldstein's mother was adamant at first, angry that she was forced to leave behind her old mother, her younger son, and her home in Poland for an uncertain future in America. Grudgingly, she eventually embarked on the journey with her daughter, but throughout the entire voyage, she kept reminding her daughter that "It's because of you and your father that I was driven out of my home. And it's because of you that I have to go to America" (Cohen and Soyer 28). Although Goldstein does not mention it explicitly, it seems that she looked up to her father, so, at first, she was happy to be together with both parents and enjoyed living in the rooms her father had rented across the street from their store on Hester Street.

Nevertheless, once in America, Goldstein was expected to do her part in supporting the family. In terms of the work patterns of immigrant women, Glenn states that "in 1910, more than three-quarters of unmarried Jewish immigrant daughters over sixteen worked for wages, the vast majority in the needle trades; even younger girls, those only fourteen and fifteen years of age, often worked outside the home" (80), which was probably Goldstein's case. She mentions having "worked as a baster on men's vests from six in the morning until seven at night with a heavy iron in my hand" (Cohen and Soyer 33) before she got married, but she does

not specify how long she worked as a baster or at what age. What she wanted to stress in her autobiography, though, was the fact that, during the first years there, she had to help her mother with the housework and her father in the family store: “I worked from very early to late at night with my mother at home and with my father in the store” (Cohen and Soyer 28). Goldstein had already mentioned how much she regretted that she had not received any education in Poland, so, having hoped that the situation would be different in the United States, her disappointment was even greater when there was no “talk at all of sending me to school” as long as she had to work to support the family (Cohen and Soyer 28). As she grew older, she felt ashamed that she could not write her English name and asked her father to teach her some English; however, her mother completely opposed the idea, pointing out that education had not helped her in life: “Look at me with all of my knowledge of Yiddish, Polish, and German! I was driven from my home and now I’m in America where even the stones are not kosher!” (Cohen and Soyer 28). So, instead of her daughter wasting her time getting an education, she should have focused on helping her mother with the housework, “Come here, Manele, better go bring me a pound of sugar” (Cohen and Soyer 29) and striving to become a proper housewife. Still, her father understood her desire for education and allowed her to go to night school for a very short while, but because Goldstein started socializing with other young girls and boys, maybe slightly older than her, her parents perceived that as a threat to her reputation as a young girl and/or to her ethnic identity and stopped her from attending more classes.

As a daughter in Poland and in the United States, Goldstein acknowledges the qualities she inherited from her father, her resilient nature and more optimistic outlook on life: “My father was always a very quiet and happy person, while my mother was one of those people who had complaints against the world. It seems that I take after my father, one hundred percent. I have believed in working hard all my life, and I make the best of what comes my way” (Cohen and Soyer 29). At the same time, though, she admits that “I cannot remember a single day during my childhood when I

was taken care of as a child should be, or when I had enough to eat—even here in America. I just worked hard and heard my mother say that she was weak and unhappy” (Cohen and Soyer 29).

While Goldstein tried to help support her family the best she could in the United States, in Galicia, Schoenfeld’s life started to change as well when she turned sixteen. According to Glenn, in Jewish culture, “Women were supposed to aspire not to religious learning but to marriage. Consequently, women’s position in the social order depended less upon their occupation than upon whom they married” (23). In this context, Foner explains that “In eastern European Jewish communities,” the custom was that “matchmakers, or *shadkhens*, typically arranged marriages between a bride and groom, who were wed sight unseen” (*From Ellis Island* 113). Schoenfeld was sixteen when the first marriage proposal through a matchmaker was turned down by her father because it was not considered good enough in terms of social status. Glenn points to the significance of marriage in Jewish culture as a crucial element that “might lead to upward or downward mobility in the *shtetl*” (37). In general, “a family could improve in class position by marrying a daughter to a learned man or face humiliation if she ran off with an ordinary worker”; so, “the desire to maintain or acquire social status through marriage forced parents to protect their children from liaisons with people of a lower social station” (Glenn 37). After the failed marriage proposal, Schoenfeld moved to Borislav, the town where her father worked. She knew how to sew, so she “set up a tailor shop and started to earn money” (Cohen and Soyer 169), which allowed her to help her family financially, but also gave her a certain level of independence as a young woman. As mentioned by Glenn, sewing was considered a respectable occupation for a young girl or a wife: “To learn how to be a seamstress or a dressmaker provided a woman not only with skills she could use to earn a living for her parents but also the means to help support a husband and children later on” (22), as had also been the case of Schoenfeld’s mother when the children were little. In addition, “A girl might take pride in the seamstresses’ craft for it gave her a certain independence, a feeling of accomplishment,

and some security against hard times” (Glenn 21), as was Schoenfeld’s case.

Her next suitor, met through one of her friends, was a young Jewish man who had come from the United States to find a suitable bride in his home country. They seemed to get along well, and during the time spent together, he would tell her about life in America, hoping to convince her to join him there. The young women in Schoenfeld’s social circle envied her for the budding relationship with “the American,” but her parents outright dismissed any suggestion that she might emigrate to America as the young man’s wife; much like Goldstein’s mother, “they became frightened that I would be cast away into *treyfene*, impious, America”¹⁰ (Cohen and Soyer 170), a common belief about America in the European Jewish community at the time. This time, the Jewish-American suitor was rejected by Schoenfeld’s mother, who did not consider him a suitable match for her daughter; he may have been rich in America, but, according to her mother’s standards, he was not a young man “with the right pedigree fitting for the family” (Cohen and Soyer 171). So, after Schoenfeld’s mother went to a Hasidic rebbe¹¹ for advice, she returned satisfied with the result: “My mother came home from the rebbe on Sunday, and on Tuesday the engagement was concluded, without anyone asking me if I wanted the groom” (Cohen and Soyer 171). Schoenfeld was not so enthusiastic about the match, “but my mother said that it was a piece of good fortune” (Cohen and Soyer 171), even if her father sensed that there might be problems because she would have to live with her in-laws after the wedding. “This was how European parents could act, with only their own happiness in mind. As long as the pedigree seemed appropriate to them, everything was right” (Cohen and Soyer 171), Schoenfeld declares about her arranged marriage.

On the other hand, marriage patterns in the United States were different for young immigrant women. Foner points out that “the move to New York gave immigrant daughters greater freedom over marriage choice. Old World patterns of arranged marriages began to give way in the context of new ideas and norms in

America" (113), which seems to have been Goldstein's case. Although she does not offer explicit details about how or when she got married, she only remarks that, once she grew up, "many boys fell head over heels in love with me" (Cohen and Soyer 29). Perhaps by pointing out that "of all of them, I picked a poor worker boy, my own age. He was very much in love with me and very good to me" (Cohen and Soyer 29), she suggests that living in the United States, she had earned the right to choose her own husband. Moreover, Goldstein explains that she had chosen him because he loved her and had a kind nature, not in order to enhance her family's social status (like in Schoenfeld's case). Still, she does not mention how they met; she might have met him through friends, in their social circle, and maybe there had not been any explicit matchmaking involved, as was customary in the home country.¹²

Of Wives and Mothers: Galicia and the United States

As a wife in the United States, Goldstein's main complaint about her husband was that "the money immediately slipped through his fingers" (Cohen and Soyer 29), so she took charge, and, in the early days of their marriage they bought a candy-store on Fifty-Third Street, which she tended. "Many immigrant wives helped their husbands in mom-and-pop stores, and some ran the shops on their own" as "'minding' the store was considered an extension of a woman's proper role as her husband's helpmate," Foner explains (*From Ellis Island* 119). Glenn remarks that this kind of work was considered a much more respectful occupation than "wage work," because it gave women "more independence and greater flexibility regarding child rearing and domestic tasks" (76). In this context, Foner points out that "often the family lived above or in the back of the store so that wives could run back and forth between the shop counter and the kitchen" (*From Ellis Island* 119), which was Goldstein's case, who mentions that she did the housework (cooking and cleaning) in their rooms when there were no customers in the store. Having missed out on education growing up, she tried to combine her duties as a wife with her desire to develop

a distinct identity as a woman by becoming literate, so she started learning how to read the information in the “Bintl brif” published in the Yiddish newspaper *Forward*.¹³ In time, she gave birth to three children, but in spite of all the housework and child-rearing duties, Goldstein was intent on doing something for herself as a person, as well, by trying to keep up her literacy practices: “in all of my years of marriage, I never let a single day go by without sitting down and learning something” (Cohen and Soyer 29-30). Understanding the significance of education, once her sons started going to school, she expressed her pride that they did very well in school (learning English) and in heder, thus managing to reconcile their American and Jewish identities. At that time, they had moved to Providence, Rhode Island, where her husband had found a better job. Goldstein wanted to add English literacy to her Yiddish one, but her life as a mother became more challenging because of her youngest son’s health problem. Determined to do everything in her power to make him healthy, particularly as the doctors had not found a cure for him, she suggested buying a farm in Connecticut, where she lived with the children for four years, until her son’s health started improving. Then, she sold the farm and moved back to Providence, Rhode Island, to be with her husband. With the money from the sale of the farm, they bought a house, and then another one, which they rented. Goldstein remarks how proud she was of her financial and business acumen and of the status she enjoyed as a respected landlady: “My husband did not deal with the houses at all. ... All of the workers who do jobs for me—the plumbers, painters, carpenters—like to work for me, because I do not take up too much of their time, and I pay them right when they finish the job. I can honestly say that I do not owe anyone a dime, and this makes me feel very good” (Cohen and Soyer 31).

Schoenfeld spent the first twelve years of her marriage in Borislav, Galicia. That time period was marked by the relationship with her husband’s family, the financial problems they encountered because of changing economic conditions in the area and because of her own family and her husband’s siblings who wanted to be helped when it appeared that she and her husband would become

rich. Unfortunately, the oil drilling activity in the area stopped, and many people, including Schoenfeld and her husband, lost their money. Upon returning to Drogobych to live with her parents, and with their financial help, Schoenfeld's husband leased a tavern, but again, it did not work out. Finding themselves deeply in debt, after looking again for work in the area, her husband's only solution was to go to America. He asked an aunt who lived in America to send him a ticket. Schoenfeld was not happy about his plan to stay there until he had made enough money to pay their debts and then to return because she kept wondering how she would make ends meet while he was away, having to care for five young children with no income or money. Like in the case of Goldstein's family after her father's departure, Schoenfeld's husband suggested that she and the children should go on living with her parents, but after he left, she "became sick from the hardship" (Cohen and Soyer 178), emotionally worn out from the constant worrying about their debts and precarious financial situation. Schoenfeld's doctor recommended that she should start reading and writing again as she used to when she was younger in order to keep her mind off their problems. As her mother agreed reluctantly, at first, to take care of the children, Schoenfeld became an avid reader. She read books from the doctor's library, from the municipal library, and from the Zionist library, and, eventually, "for the sake of the books, I became a member of the Zionists" (Cohen and Soyer 179).¹⁴ At the same time, in 1910, she started publishing some of her sketches in the *Lemberger Togblat*.¹⁵ Writing became very important to Schoenfeld as it opened up "a new world, a new life" for her, and she started thinking about America, as a place where she could pursue her writing career and perhaps achieve more success: "I thought that there was limited room in Galicia for Yiddish literature, but that America would be the right field for me. I started to dream of America" (Cohen and Soyer 179). However, she felt torn because she was not sure how to reconcile her growing desire to go to America with her husband's intention to return to Galicia once he had made enough money to pay off their debts. In the end, it was her involvement in the Zionist movement that prompted her

to take a radical decision regarding emigration. The detailed description she offers in her account of her involvement in the parliamentary elections in 1911 (between a Zionist candidate and a Polish one) and of the violent incident that occurred afterwards¹⁶ demonstrate the significance it had in her life. This incident made her understand the tenuous social and political situation of the Jews in Galicia, so she decided not only to flee the town, but to leave for America on her own, against her husband's or her parents' wishes. Her husband had been in America for five years when she decided to join him, and although he considered returning to Galicia, he earned well there, so he kept postponing his return. Schoenfeld's mother, however, was completely opposed to the idea, basing her "fears," like Goldstein's mother, on hearsay about America and the voyage across the ocean. "My mother cried that I would die on the ship and would be thrown into the sea. Where she got that idea, I do not know. She must have heard something that stuck in her mind and made her afraid" (Cohen and Soyer 181), Schoenfeld describes her mother's reaction upon hearing that she wanted to go to America by herself. Like a respectful daughter, Schoenfeld tried to persuade her father to allow her to go, promising that she would leave her children with her parents as proof that she would return, but, although initially he had agreed to help her with the travel expenses, he changed his mind, hoping that his refusal to give her the money would prevent her from leaving. Determined to leave for America despite her parents' disapproval and staunch opposition, Schoenfeld paid for the travel expenses herself; nevertheless, besides her heartache at leaving her children behind, her departure was made even more difficult by her parents' refusal to say goodbye to her. At the last minute, though, her father and brother went to the train station to say goodbye to her; however, her mother remained adamant.

Unlike Goldstein's account about her experience in the United States, as mentioned previously, Schoenfeld's story about her immigrant experience as a wife and mother, is much shorter than that about her childhood and early youth in Galicia. Like Goldstein, her story of emigration starts with her departure from

home, on her own, to be with her husband in the United States. However, while Goldstein's 1894 voyage across the ocean was rather unpleasant, almost twenty years later, in 1912, Schoenfeld describes hers as an enjoyable experience: "On board, the *Augusta Victoria* was gorgeous, almost luxurious. Everything in the dining hall sparkled with cleanliness and tidiness," and she is happy to share her meals and time with other Jewish fellow travelers, thus feeling a part of a community of immigrants looking forward to a new, hopefully better life: "And so I made the entire trip in eight days and arrived in America, healthy and fresh" (Cohen and Soyer 183). She had a letter from her husband, so she could leave as soon as the ship arrived, and she hired a "horse and buggy" to take her to her husband's address, on Allen Street in New York City. As her husband had not expected her so soon, he and his niece were completely taken aback at her courage to travel alone and find her way in such a big and foreign city. Moreover, her husband seemed rather annoyed at her sudden arrival: "My husband considered it scandalous of me to come so unexpectedly without letting him know" (Cohen and Soyer 184). "Why did you come running?" he kept asking her, questioning her maternal instincts: "But how can a mother go away and leave behind five children?," to which she responded that "A mother can do it when she sees no future for her children in poor, dark Galicia" (Cohen and Soyer 184), hinting not only at the poor economic conditions back home, but also at the serious political turmoil foreshadowing the massive pogroms. Her husband's attitude towards her unexpected arrival was similar to that of the Jewish community he frequented, when they implied, even jokingly, that she had come "uninvited" because "she was the only one who did not trust her husband" (Cohen and Soyer 185). This substantiates Professor Suzanne Sinke's claim that "A woman who either migrated or returned on her own often illustrated a degree of independence people interpreted as lack of deference to patriarchy, which in many settings could challenge existing gender roles" (297). Furthermore, shortly after her arrival, Schoenfeld took charge of the household; they rented a small apartment, and, as she put it, "with luck, I became an American housewife" (Cohen and

Soyer 185), although she does not offer any details as to what she might have meant by “American housewife.” Determined to have her children with her, she finally managed to persuade her husband to send for them, and they arrived accompanied by one of her female cousins, five months after she had emigrated.

As Schoenfeld had wished in Galicia, she continued writing in the United States and soon managed to publish “sketches and short stories” “about the life of the poor and oppressed in Europe and America” in various Yiddish newspapers in America, among which the *Freiheit*, *Yidishes tageblat*, *Froyen zhurnal*, *Yidisher Amerikaner*, and *Naye varhayt* (Cohen and Soyer 185).¹⁷ She also proudly mentions in her account that she published her “first book of stories” in 1925 and her “second book, a novel,” in 1930,¹⁸ while the staging of one of her plays in 1935 gave her the necessary means to support her family in Europe (Cohen and Soyer 186). Unlike Goldstein, who does not mention anything about her relationship with her parents after she got married, Schoenfeld kept in touch with her family in Europe. As a respectful daughter and caring sister, she sent plenty of “money, clothing, [and] food” (Cohen and Soyer 186) to her parents and siblings back home, especially after the First World War, when her family described their desperate situation in letters and asked for her help, praising her for her foresight to emigrate and take her children to America to save them from a life of poverty and constant want. In this context, Schoenfeld describes her experience of visiting her home country in 1932, one of the reasons being to see her mother again, to whom she had not said goodbye before emigrating. However, it turned out to be a completely disheartening trip, as she only found “poverty and desolation there” (Cohen and Soyer 186), except perhaps her visit to the offices of the newspapers she had contributed to before emigration, the *Lemberger tageblat* and other Yiddish newspapers in Warsaw.

The visit functioned as an eye-opener for her as she congratulated herself on having been courageous enough to emigrate to “the free country where I could make decent people of my children” (Cohen and Soyer 186). As a mother, she was content

because her children were “educated professionals and conduct themselves in a Jewish and humane manner. They devote themselves to various charitable works and are ardent supporters of Hadassah.¹⁹ ... [Her son] is a pious Jewish young man, a fine cantor by trade” (Cohen and Soyer 186-187). Glenn points out that Jewish women played a vital role in the economic life of the family, highlighting the fact that since “the ideal Jewish man was a full-time scholar who withdrew from the mundane world, ... it was no shame for men to lack interest in business and no embarrassment for women to earn a living for her family” (80), which seems to have been the situation in Schoenfeld’s family. Glenn further points out that “Jews considered it something of a religious obligation for the wife of a Torah scholar to work while her husband devoted most of his time to study and prayer” (10), and Schoenfeld was content with her financial contribution to the family household through her writing because it had allowed her husband to be “what he wanted to be. He is a pious Jew who sits and studies with other Jews. And that is his whole life—to be a Jew” (Cohen and Soyer 187). Schoenfeld’s activities inside and outside her home made up the different layers of her identity as a Jewish-American immigrant woman: “I give a little time to the charities to which I belong. And the rest of the time, I work for my family and for my writing, which I publish in various newspapers in the city and out of town, wherever I can” (Cohen and Soyer 187). Bearing in mind that her autobiographical account was written in 1942, in the middle of the horrors of the Second World War, she concludes it with a short prayer for the entire Jewish community: “God should grant the true salvation of real peace, to redeem us from our dark exile” (Cohen and Soyer 187).

Much like Schoenfeld, as a mother, Goldstein, for whom the pursuit of education had been a lifelong goal, was particularly proud of her sons’ educational accomplishments, as they graduated with honors from their universities: her oldest son became a lawyer (with a degree from Boston University), her middle son became a chemist (having studied at Brown University), and her youngest son also studied chemistry, although she does not mention the

university he attended.²⁰ Like Schoenfeld, Goldstein emphasizes her role as an important provider for the family, particularly when it came to her sons' education: "I felt very fortunate to know that with my help I was able to succeed in giving our children such a good education. I knew that it would not have been possible without my assistance" (Cohen and Soyer 31), a situation that makes her fulfilled not only as a wife, but also as a woman with a keen sense of business. Still, one of the things that disappointed her as a mother was the fact that her oldest son, who lived and worked as a lawyer in New York City, did not ask his parents' permission when he got married to a young lady who was not Jewish. Goldstein's statement upon hearing the news: "This hit me very hard" (Cohen and Soyer 32) might imply that by marrying outside his ethnic community, her son had lost or given up a part of his ethnic identity, a great disappointment for immigrant parents who had raised their children hoping that they would be as dedicated to the preservation of their ethnic heritage as their parents had been.

After mentioning her achievements as a mother, Goldstein enumerates her individual accomplishments as an immigrant woman. She emphasizes how, as an adult, she learned to read and write in Yiddish by herself, despite her demanding work as a wife, mother, and landlady. In the 1930s, she took advantage of classes offered through the WPA,²¹ and although it was not easy to go to school later in life, she was committed to further her education as much as she could. At the time, participating in a school essay contest and receiving an honorable mention for her essay meant for her the official confirmation that she had also become literate in English. This probably gave her the impulse to keep up her literacy practices in Yiddish and English, by reading the Yiddish newspaper *Forward* every day, monthly articles in *Reader's Digest* and the *Ladies Home Journal*, as well as a few books in English, in addition to attending classes whenever she could. On the one hand, these instances demonstrate her staunch belief in the importance of education at any age, even for women, and, on the other hand, her satisfaction as an immigrant woman at having been able to adapt to the American environment by learning how to read and write in

English. Towards the end of her account, Goldstein mentions her involvement in various social organizations, such as the women's club of the Workmen's Circle, the women's society, and the Consumptive's Home,²² and declares that had it not been for the war (and the fact that two of her sons had enlisted), she would be happy with her life up to that point. Interestingly, she ends her narrative with some thoughts about immigrant parents and children, wondering whether their children "know how hard and bitter their parents' lives were? We love our children very much, and they also love us very deeply and show us respect. But I often ask myself whether it is right that poor parents work so hard to make chemists and lawyers of their children" (Cohen and Soyer 33). Therefore, as a mother, she also asks herself whether she "would do the same" for her children "as before," only to reach the conclusion that "instead of putting every penny into their children," devoted mothers should also think about their identities as women, making "things a little easier for themselves" (Cohen and Soyer 33). In the last sentence, added later to her account, Goldstein asks her readers, whether after telling her story, they consider her a success or a failure, implying that she believes she had done her best to become a successful immigrant woman with a respectable family, similar to Schoenfeld.

Conclusion

Although immigration stories have numerous elements in common, such as the home country, the time period, the reasons for emigration, or the places of settlement in the United States, as demonstrated by Goldstein's and Schoenfeld's life stories, each narrative is unique not only regarding the people, relationships, and events in their lives, but also in the ways in which the women have chosen to structure their stories so as to create a meaningful account of their lives. The key question posed by the organizers of the 1942 essay contest, "Why I left Europe and what I have accomplished in America" (Cohen and Soyer 5) allowed the participants to remember and rethink their lives. "Success or Failure?" is the title

of Goldstein's account, and, as she examines her life in the home country and in the United States, she tries to understand the factors that helped her to negotiate her roles in the family and as an immigrant woman. Schoenfeld, on the other hand, slightly reverses the key question in her title "What Drove Me to America and My Experiences in Europe and America" as she looks at how the social, economic and political milieu in her home country defined her identity as a member of her family and later as an immigrant woman. Whether they emigrated with a parent, having no say in the decision, as was Goldstein's case, or as a result of a conscious choice, like Schoenfeld, both women concluded after their long stay in the United States that the experience had been marked by ups and downs, like any life, but, for the most part, it had been a satisfying one, an experience that had allowed them, in addition to the pursuit of the happiness of their families, as daughters, sisters, wives, and mothers, to also carve a smaller or larger individual space for themselves as accomplished and self-determined women. One might conclude by remarking that the title of Cohen and Soyer's collection, *My Future Is in America*, which is actually the title of Rose Silverman's life story in the volume, might apply to Goldstein's and Schoenfeld's experience, as their personal stories have added another gendered layer to the collective history of Jewish immigration to the United States in the first part of the twentieth century.

Notes:

¹ Minnie (Mashe) Goldstein: "Success or Failure?" in Cohen and Soyer, 18-34. Rose Schoenfeld: "What Drove Me to America and My Experiences in Europe and in America" in Cohen and Soyer, 160-188.

² According to information from the Jewish Virtual Library, Galicia was "a geographical-political region of E. Europe, in S.E. Poland and N.W. Ukraine, extending northward from the Carpathians into the Vistula Valley to the San River" ("Galicia"). (<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/galicia-ukraine>)

³ For more on Jewish immigrants in the United States, see Portes and Rumbaut (2014).

⁴ For more information on specific aspects of Jewish women's autobiographies, see Adelman (2004).

⁵ Goldstein does not specify, but, from her story, it appears that she refers to her maternal grandparents.

⁶ In Hebrew, Yeshiva is "an academy of higher talmudic learning" (Cohen and Soyer 317).

⁷ As explained by Cohen and Soyer in the glossary at the end of the volume, "heder" is "the traditional Jewish elementary school in Eastern Europe, usually a very small private school attended by boys. Girls sometimes attended separate *heders*" (313).

⁸ According to Cohen and Soyer, Hakhnoses Orkhim was "the Hebrew name for the Hebrew Sheltering House Association, founded in New York in 1889. The group took its name from the term for the traditional precept of inviting guests into one's home. In 1909, it joined with the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (founded 1902) to form the Hebrew Sheltering and Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS)" (312). For more on HIAS, see Diner (2004), and for more information on mutual aid societies, see Soyer (2006).

⁹ For more on life on the Lower East Side of New York City at the time of the mass migration from Eastern Europe, see Sternlicht (2004).

¹⁰ "Treyfene" or "treyf" means "not kosher; ritually unfit to eat or use" (Cohen and Soyer 317).

¹¹ "Rebbe (Hebrew, Yiddish; 'teacher') refers to "the charismatic leader of a Hasidic sect" (Cohen and Soyer 315).

¹² For more on Jewish immigrant women, see Friedman-Kasaba (1996).

¹³ According to Melissa Klapper, the Yiddish *Forverts* (*Forward*) was "the Jewish newspaper with the widest reach of all. ... A socialist, politically progressive daily, *Forverts* was read by tens of thousands and exerted considerable influence over working-class and immigrant Jews" (60). In the notes at the end of Goldstein's account, Cohen and Soyer explain that "Beginning in 1906, the "Bintl brif" (Bundle of Letters) was an extremely popular advice column in the *Forward*" (34).

¹⁴ For more on the Zionist movement and women's role in it, see Antler (1997).

¹⁵ *Lemberger Togblat* was the first Yiddish daily newspaper, established in 1904 in Lemberg (Lvov) (Cohen and Soyer 188).

¹⁶ "Drogobych was indeed the scene of serious disturbances during the 1911 elections. Troops were called in and a number of civilians were

killed, though other sources put the death toll at twenty-six” (Cohen and Soyer 188).

¹⁷ “The American Communist Party’s Yiddish daily organ, the *Freiheit* (*Freedom*, founded 1922) was known in its early years for publishing high-quality Yiddish literature” (Cohen and Soyer 188). Cohen and Soyer also offer the following explanations about the other newspapers: “*Yidishes tageblat*, a New York daily founded in 1885, was one of the first successful Yiddish newspapers in the United States. Representing Orthodox opinion, it merged with the *Morgn zhurnal* in 1928. The *Amerikaner* (founded in 1905) was a very popular Yiddish weekly magazine” (188). For more on Yiddish newspapers, see Sternlicht (2004), Klapper (2013), and Polland and Soyer (2012).

¹⁸ The two published books mentioned by Schoenfeld are *Bilder fun lebn* (*Scenes from Life*) (1925) and *Blut farvandshaft* (*Blood Relations*) (1930). A brief mention of Rose Schoenfeld’s life and literary activity can be found in the *Yiddish Leksikon*

(<http://yleksikon.blogspot.com/2019/11/roze-shehnfeld-rose-schoenfeld.html>), based on information from “Pinkes galitsye” (Records of Galicia), Buenos Aires, 1945. 257. (“Roze Shehnfeld”)

¹⁹ Hadassah is “the Women’s Zionist Organization of America. Founded in 1912 as the Daughters of Zion, the organization adopted the name Hadassah in 1916. It was known especially for its sponsorship of medical facilities in Palestine and later Israel” (Cohen and Soyer 312).

²⁰ Kenneth Scherzer explains that although the “Jews who came to America had less religious commitment than those who remained in Europe, they still valued education and this translated into a high ‘general status of learning and jobs based on it’” (385). Thus, “Jewish students were more likely to enter high school, to pursue more rigorous classical and college preparatory tracks, and, in particular, to graduate” (385), which was reflected in the fact that “the second generation pursued college education and had attendance rates that were twice those of other groups” (Scherzer 385). In the same context, Paula Fass points out that “in Providence, Rhode Island in 1925, almost 70 percent of all children of Russian Jews had entered high school; ... The Jews did best in graduating (66 percent) ...” (500). For more on the higher education of immigrant (Jewish-American) children, see Fass (2006).

²¹ “Part of President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) was primarily a jobs program, so the

classes that Goldstein attended were most likely intended mainly to provide work for unemployed teachers” (Cohen and Soyer 34).

²² Daniel Soyer suggests that “Immigrants banded together in societies to help one another find a place for themselves in their new home even as they continued to remember the old” (544), which might also have been Goldstein’s case. Diner explains that together with “the Yiddish press and the Yiddish theater, the Workmen’s Circle helped the immigrants become American at the same time that it mounted a critique of capitalism” (148). For more on the Workmen’s Circle in general, and on women’s role in it, see Diner (2004), Hyman and Moore (1997), and Klapper (2013). As far as the information in Goldstein’s account is concerned, “In late 1928, in an effort to draw more women into the work of the order, the Workmen’s Circle decided to encourage the formation of women’s clubs. Goldstein also belonged to an independent local women’s society and to an association that supported one of several Jewish-sponsored homes for tuberculosis patients (“consumptives”) (Cohen and Soyer 34).

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