

The background of the cover is a light yellow-green color. It is decorated with several stylized, light green leaf motifs that appear to be floating or falling from the top left towards the bottom right. These motifs are scattered across the entire cover, with some appearing near the top and others near the bottom.

WOMEN OF COURAGE

**Jewish and Italian Immigrant
Women in New York**

**Rose Laub Coser, Laura S. Anker,
Andrew J. Perrin**

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Women of Courage

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and Andrew J. Perrin

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List of Interviewees

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—Laura Anker and Andrew Perrin

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—Laura Anker

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—Andrew Perrin

Chapter One

Introduction

I think it is great that we get this information [about women] because I'm Italian, too, and it is my heritage. They always say the men did this and the men did that. The men my eye! It was the women who did all the work. Oh Lord, yes!

Rosa Fatino¹

What did I have there? No relatives. . . . It was a hard life and I was glad. . . . I felt that no one dies in this country. That was the big thing . . . being killed and dying . . . we're going to a country where no one dies. . . . I was coming from a life of running and running and running away, and worrying about being killed and being hunted!

Fanny Greenberg

I wasn't afraid of anything, I had my mother and I had my relatives and I had my people . . . from the same country, the same town that I came from, so I really wasn't worried.

Nina Benuto

In the wake of World War I, an extraordinary group of women emigrated from Europe to the United States under austere conditions. The ways they chose to assimilate and differentiate themselves from mainstream American culture, and the experiences they had interacting with cultural, political, and economic institutions, offer rich insight into the process of cultural change and women's special role within it. This book considers the stories of 100 Italian and Jewish immigrant women who built lives and families in New York.

¹The names of all respondents have been changed to protect their anonymity. Original transcripts may be located in the archives by referring to the interview number published in the Appendix.

During the early 1920s around 293,287 Jews and some 467,000 Italians migrated to the United States, many of them settling in the New York City area (Table 1.1). This wave of immigration represented a significant contribution to the population and cultural diversity of the region.

Table 1.1
Selected Immigration Statistics to the United States, 1915–1924

	1919	1920	1921	1922	1923	1924	Total
Total ¹	141,132	430,001	805,228	309,556	522,919	706,896	3,026,350
All Europe ¹	24,627	246,295	652,364	216,385	307,920	364,339	1,842,993
Italy ¹	1,884	95,145	222,260	40,319	46,674	56,246	467,778
Eastern Europe	1,454	10,477	138,075	60,789	63,771	62,897	341,798
Poland ^{1,3}		4,813	95,089	28,635	26,538	28,806	183,881
USSR etc. ¹	1,403	1,751	10,193	19,910	21,151	20,918	79,568
Other ¹	51	3,913	32,793	12,244	16,082	13,173	78,349
All Jewish ²	3,055	14,292	119,036	53,524	49,719	49,989	293,287
Men	1,566	6,595	52,710	22,216	23,826	25,258	133,685
Women	1,489	7,697	66,326	31,308	25,893	24,731	159,602
Ratio	95%	117%	126%	141%	109%	98%	119%
South Italian ²	2,137	84,882	195,037	35,056	39,226	47,633	409,205
Men	1,174	44,112	126,528	19,726	26,646	34,018	254,083
Women	963	40,770	68,509	15,330	12,580	13,615	155,122
Ratio	82%	92%	54%	78%	47%	40%	61%

¹Source: *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1970*.

²Source: Willcox (1929)

³Pre-1920 Polish data are included in other countries including the USSR, etc., category.

Our data provide important insights into the lives of two groups of women who arrived in the United States at around the same time, but under different circumstances, for different reasons, and with different family and cultural backgrounds. The southern Italian immigrants were, of course, all Catholic, although they experienced their Catholicism in different ways. Those from eastern Europe shared a Jewish ethnic and religious identity, but not always even the common language or national culture enjoyed by Italian immigrants.

On the other hand, as immigrants to the New York area in the same time period, these two groups shared some important traits. Southern Italians and eastern European Jews were both active in the labor movement and in other social justice causes. The dual nature of these women's experiences—the striking opportunity of American life combined with the stunning drudgery of the working environment—suggests a common understanding of the immigrant experience. Indeed, it is in the family strategies for survival they employed, their juggling of paid labor outside and inside the home with domestic and child care responsibilities and their union involvement that the interviews reveal strong common elements of identity formation and political engagement.

The lives of immigrants are important both for their own sake and for their perspectives on the society into which they moved. Since they are not yet fully assimilated into mainstream culture, their paths tell us about the social and cultural resources they bring with them and the demands they encounter in their new homes. The decisions immigrants make, their particular situations, and the conditions they encounter determine in large part the success or failure of their ambitions, and the ways their children become part of American society.

Listening specifically to the stories of women immigrants provides its own richness by delving into the relationships among family, work, religion, and culture. The women interviewed for this project experienced immigrant family life twice: first as the children of immigrant families and again as parents. They participated in paid work, both by managing the household economy and by themselves performing garment and service industry jobs. And they forged relationships with religious and voluntary organizations that, this book suggests, played a pivotal role in families' assimilation strategies.

Families moved from Europe to the United States for a variety of reasons, political, cultural, and economic. Jewish families were likely to have migrated to escape the pogroms and other violence of their previous homes; since they had fewer cultural ties to their lands, they were less likely to expect to return in the future. Italians, on the other hand, maintained strong ties to Italy, in many cases expecting to return there after making enough money in the United States to hold on to their small plots of land, pay taxes, and buy the additional acreage necessary to family survival. Some Italians, mainly men, actually made the cross-Atlantic journey several times, constructing connections between work, family, and community on both continents.

Economic considerations were important for both groups, but since the level of specific and direct violence toward Italians was lower than that toward Jews, Italian immigrants were more likely to have come to the United States for reasons of economic opportunity. Life in southern Italy in the 1920s was difficult; both artisans and peasants found it difficult to make ends meet, and wartime rations meant further hardship. For both the Jewish and Italian respondents, a combination of economic and social misery in World War I Europe provided the spur for moving their families to what was seen as a beacon of opportunity: New York City. While life for Jews was hardly prosperous in Europe, Jewish immigrants, fleeing religious and political persecution, were more likely to come to the United States with some resources: money, skills, or both (Kessner 1977: 42; Cohen 1982: 447).

These similar stories produced different experiences as Jews and Italians worked to fit into American culture and to interact with previous groups of immigrants from their homelands. Earlier Jewish immigrants from Germany had established a network of aid societies in the United States, although class and national differences between the Jewish immigrant groups caused some friction. Similarly, Italians arriving in the 1920s connected with the Catholic church and with existing Italian organizations in their new homes.

Nevertheless, both groups felt somewhat alienated by their new culture and isolated from mainstream life. Respondents report problems getting used to culture, dress, language, and social relations. The two groups, though, adapted differently to these adjustment problems. Jews, this book suggests, maintained “centripetal” family structures: they adapted to new surroundings by orienting out of the family, aiming to assimilate to mainstream culture. The combination of this family structure and their inability to return to their previous homes meant Jews were more interested in involvement in American society, while Italian families’ “centrifugal” structure led them to form more insular groups, striving to maintain a more thoroughly Italian culture in the new world.²

These differences in assimilation strategy and ties to commercial and professional positions had far-reaching consequences. In the short term, Jews’ outward orientation gave them more social capital than their Italian counterparts, giving them an edge in the worlds of work and business. Further down the road, these differences in kinship structure became important in determining fertility rates and involvement in work and labor unions for the two groups.

Jewish immigrants, from the sample in this study, had fewer children than their counterparts in other immigrant groups. Thus, the book suggests, Jewish families experienced an earlier drop in fertility than did Italians—an important indicator of the cultural values these families imported from their previous homes. Indeed, when the interviewees were asked how they would spend an unexpected fortune, far more Italians than Jews said they would spend it on family alone—another sign of the difference between centrifugal and centripetal family structures and values.

Although the two groups of respondents differed significantly on family orientation, values, and assimilation strategies, in some important ways their experiences were similar. Many of the women reported similar stories of home life and relationships with their husbands, and much of their work lives and involvement in labor unions followed similar paths. As Chapter six states, much of the daily routine for women, whether Jewish or Italian, was drudgery. They prepared husbands and children for the next day, did the wash, cleaned the home, and provided emotional support work for tired and often unresponsive husbands. Both Jewish and Italian women valued quiet time when they could talk with their husbands, but both also cited important strife between husband and wife over issues both cultural and financial.

The worlds of work and unions were central to the lives of both Jewish and Italian immigrant women, and these immigrants, in turn, played significant roles in the formation of the modern American labor movement. Chapter seven argues that work was a primary motivation for many of the women to come to the

²Miriam Cohen (1993) has argued convincingly that these behaviors are not simply tendencies carried over from ancestors’ practices, but rather practices generated out of a combination of cultural patterns and material conditions. This is in line with Swidler’s (1986) argument that culture is not simply ingrained “values,” but a dynamic set of practices and “tools” with which groups of people approach varying needs and conditions.

United States, but that its place in their lives was complex. Women found both independence and drudgery, liberation and oppression, in their work, which included both home-based piecework and factory work.

Women usually found these jobs through community connections: churches, synagogues, families, kinship networks, and organizations. Work rarely paid well, even for male workers, which led to the formation of communal housing arrangements and other coping mechanisms that served to bring workers and communities closer together. Where women's participation in paid labor in Europe tended to reinforce their primary roles as caretakers, women in the American workplace experienced more of a disconnection, and jobs that were taken out of necessity often became the sources of further ambitions in the public sphere.

As women grew older and their children moved out of the home, many began to work as much for this sense of independence as for the economic needs the jobs met. Since workplaces were both modernized and sex-segregated, women met and talked with one another at work, providing the basis for social solidarity that grew into support for the emerging textile union movement. As in the case of family life, immigrant women's experiences at work reinforced the multiplicity of roles, producing both the long hours of drudgery characteristic of the textile industry, and the independence that came from participating in paid labor.

Jewish and Italian immigrants have often been compared to each other, in popular texts and in academic studies, frequently in ways disparaging both groups. Spadoni (1912) claimed both were motivated essentially by greed—the Jews' greed checked by a sense of community spirit, but southern Italians' greed unchecked. This difference, she writes, led to clashes over labor organizing; Italian women were unwilling to sacrifice their wages for "abstract ideas of unionism, community spirit, welfare of the whole—ideas that would have supported a body of Jewish girls through months of suffering" and had to be paid off to facilitate the success of Jewish textile unions.

As strange as these ideas may be (particularly in light of Italian involvement in the Lawrence, Massachusetts, "Bread and Roses" strike and in the socialist and anarchist movements of the early twentieth century; see Avrich 1991) the prevalence of such explanations highlights the connections between Jewish and Italian immigrants in the early 1900s. Jews and Italians had yet to become "white" in the American imagination. Their images, while contrasting with one another, suggested much about mainstream American xenophobia and hysteria about immigrants then-president Theodore Roosevelt did not consider "the right sort." Immigrant women were caught in these images, squeezed between the dual ideals of domesticity and labor, forced at once to defend their womanhood and to provide for families.

When this book was first conceived, work on Jewish and Italian immigration consisted of "classics" such as Glazer (1958) and Howe (1976) for Jews; Foerster (1919) for Italians; and Handlin (1951) and Bodnar (1985) for comparative per-

spectives. Now, nearly twenty years later, there has been a blossoming of “new history” and feminist works addressing many of the issues this book addresses.

In the 1970s, advocates of the “new history” (Thernstrom and Sennett 1969; see also Peiss 1986: 14) argued that traditional histories—including those of immigration—ignored the lives of everyday people in favor of narratives of leaders and large-scale changes.³ This generation of immigrant historians sought to understand the patterns and meanings of ordinary immigrants. Kessner and Thernstrom are good examples of such work, examining the lives of Jewish and Italian immigrants in New York City (Kessner 1977), and the working class of Boston (Thernstrom 1973).

Kessner’s book, *The Golden Door*, was among the first to compare Italian and Jewish immigrants in New York City, and it is here that several key themes appear. For example, Kessner notes that the different reasons for emigration from Europe—economic opportunity for Italians, social and economic persecution for Jews—had significant effects on the ways the two groups would eventually adapt to life in New York. Kessner also points to Italians’ tendency to make several trips to and from the United States before settling (29) and to the class differences between the two groups upon arrival (42).

The new history, however, still gave short shrift to the roles and special experiences of women in immigrant families and communities.⁴ Only beginning in the mid-1980s did many authors begin to treat immigrant women’s experiences as important and unique. This period saw the beginning of a trend toward thorough investigations of immigrant women’s lives, including di Leonardo (1984), Gabaccia (1984), Ewen (1985), Smith (1985), and Peiss (1986). They began addressing the special positions of women immigrants—and working-class women in general—and their links with considerations of immigrant culture.

These works, while mostly not focused on women, did consider gender as a central force influencing immigrant life. For example, di Leonardo (1984), studying Italian kinship networks in San Francisco, noted that the “work of kinship” (199ff.) is women’s work; Italian women were responsible for developing and maintaining the kinship networks at the base of immigrant communities. Similarly, Smith’s approach to Italian and Jewish immigrant women in Providence found that ethnicity and class worked through families—and, therefore, through women’s central role in them—to reconstruct immigrants’ ideas of their communities between 1900 and 1940.

Sydney Stahl Weinberg’s influential 1992 call for research into immigrant women’s lives marks the beginning of a recent wave of work on the subject, much of which came out too late for Coser to have considered it in the early

³For references to the “new history” see Peiss (1986); Kessner (1977); Thernstrom & Sennett (1969); Bernstein (1967); and Hareven (1971).

⁴An important exception from this period is Virginia Yans-McLaughlin’s *Family and Community* (1971), a history of Italian immigrants in Buffalo, New York, that explicitly considers the experiences of women.

sections of this work. Since then, numerous books and articles on immigrant women have appeared, providing a rich scholarly field of research.⁵

Miriam Cohen's (1993) work on two generations of Italian women is a theoretically sophisticated examination of popular conceptions of the cultural predilections of Italian immigrants. Following these families through time, she notes generational differences in educational and social behavior that dispute the traditional idea that Italian immigrants were unconcerned with education. Rather, she notes, differences in educational practice were as much the product of access to education and the material needs of families as they were of cultural differences.

Watkins and Danzi's work on Italian and Jewish women's use of fertility control exemplifies this new breed of women's immigrant history. Their finding that women bypassed religious and legal organizations to gather and spread information through informal "gossip" networks coincides with our own data; in chapter five, we present data that both Italian and Jewish immigrant women knew of and used fertility control. Furthermore, women were proactive in pursuing birth control—as Mary Pappa said:

If it was up to him, I would have a couple of dozen children. He loves children. But I'm the one who had to do the work and try everything. I was worried all the time!

Women spread news of abortion and birth control techniques through informal networks as well as medical channels (see Watkins and Danzi 1995; Litt 1996). Their patterns were different, but both groups actively sought to control their fertility. Both groups also knew of and had abortions, suggesting that women were looking specifically for methods of fertility control that would leave the decision in their own hands and not those of their husbands.

Kathie Friedman-Kasaba's recent work, *Memories of Migration* (1996), addresses some of the same issues as this book, but in a very different way. Drawing on memoirs and other published sources, Friedman-Kasaba traces the history of women like those in this study. In many ways, Friedman-Kasaba's study complements this one. She calls for a reexamination of immigrant women's history, rejecting both traditional male-centered narratives and some feminist approaches that glorify the liberating nature of immigration, but she presents relatively few actual women's voices.

In the last two decades, immigration research has shifted from what Friedman-Kasaba terms the "ahistoric individualism" and "psychoculturalism" of the

⁵During the last two decades a flowering of research on immigrant women has challenged the earlier "world of our fathers" perspective, stressing the crucial role of kinship networks, gender, class, and race/ethnicity in the migration and settlement process. For a synthesis of this research see Gabaccia (1994). For works that focus specifically on Jewish and Italian women, see Ewen (1985), Smith (1985), Cowan and Cowan (1989), Glenn (1990), Weinberg (1988), Caroli et al. (1979), Cohen (1993), di Leonardo (1984), Gabaccia (1984), and Yans-McLaughlin (1971).