

# Paths to Success in Jewish-American Writing

**Roy Goldblatt**

University of Joensuu

All the Irish and Italian families were sure that, being Jews, they had money. Even the friendliest of them, those who had a warm affection for Rachel and her children, would joke, "How much money have you got hidden in the cellar?" and "What coal dealer do you sell your coal and wood to?" When Rachel protested they would say, "We know why you don't sell the coal and wood and turn something into your pocket in honest graft. We know why. It's your own coal and wood. You are the leasers of the house, and you are saving on a janitor's salary. It's all right. *That's how you Jews manage to send your boys to college to become doctors and lawyers and teachers instead of ditch diggers and become powerful in the world.*"<sup>1</sup> (Emphasis mine.)

This quite popularly held Gentile view of education as the principal Jewish means of escaping the horrors of ghetto poverty appears in *From the Kingdom of Necessity*, a 1935 proletarian novel by Isidor Schneider. The fiction, however, was not far from fact though the particular methods described and attributed by these poor Irish and Italians to their Jewish neighbors certainly were. The number of Jewish students, even those from Eastern Europe whose families had begun to arrive in the 1880s, at the free-tuition City College of New York in the early years of this century was extremely high and immigrant Jews later entered the professions cited in the above passage in large numbers. Jewish success, social mobility and advancement and, finally, power in America has traditionally been explained in terms of education and the importance the Jewish community placed on it. Whether the Jews embraced the American concept of self-improvement, were ambitious and made more rapid and vigorous use of their educational opportunities than other immigrant groups is a difficult question to answer and irrelevant to the

1 Isidor Schneider, *From the Kingdom of Necessity* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1935), p. 49.

subject of this thesis. It would be absurd to claim that the Jews were unique and to deny the fact that success was also achieved inside those groups (Irish, Italian) through educational self-improvement and that the same methods are being employed by present-day immigrant groups.

Education plays and always has played a central role in Jewish life. The study of the Talmud—including written commentaries and scholarly debate—is centuries old. Though Jews have always been involved in the study of worldly matters, the massive shift from religious to secular scholarship is relatively recent, dating from the period of the Jewish Enlightenment in Germany in the 18th century, a century later in Russia and Czarist-controlled areas (when Jews were permitted entry into *gymnasias* and universities). Education was undoubtedly the single most important way of escaping the ghetto but it was far from the only one. Many immigrants used much less honorable methods of making their fortunes, often criminal and/or exploitative. Corrupt politicians, lawyers, gangsters existed among the Jews as they did in every other group in America; perhaps they were just overlooked or hidden away in the light of Jewish educational success.

One of the central themes in Jewish-American fiction from the turn of the century through the 1930s was the depiction of life in the ghetto slum and the obsessive desire of poverty-stricken East European Jewish immigrants to escape from their environment. Having fled the oppression and anti-semitism of Czarist Russia they arrived in cities like New York with the usual immigrant dreams of a better life for themselves and their children. The medieval conditions of the *shtetls* were replaced by appalling American conditions. While they were not confined by autocratic ukase, they were imprisoned by their poverty, trapped spiritually.

They were in America to stay and had to make the best of the situation—metaphorically speaking, America was their exile and their time in the new land was spent awaiting the Messiah and the redemption promised in the Covenant. Having crossed the Atlantic to find that the streets were clearly not paved with gold, they began the Americanization process almost immediately after their arrival to remove the stigma of being labeled a greenhorn; this led to the inculcation of traditional Benjamin Franklin-type American values, his cardinal virtues of honesty, thrift, ambition, initiative, etc., and the pursuit of the American dream. As was the case with immigrants in general, getting an education, learning to speak proper English, to sound like an American,

was central to the notion of self-improvement and advancement. Education again served as the primary method, at least for intellectual types, of gaining redemption, i.e. escaping the ghetto.

Examples of education as an escape mechanism also appear in the work of Anzia Yezierska, Sidney L. Nyburg, Abraham Cahan and Samuel Ornitz. Cahan and Ornitz, however, present us with protagonists who, while possessing clear intellectual talents, escape the ghetto through business and politics, pursuits totally in the spirit of the American doctrines of initiative, ingenuity and self-reliance. A second category of escape, the "not-so-kosher," includes characters like Cahan's garment mogul David Levinsky and Ornitz' Judge Meyer Hirsch, the businessmen and the politicians whose scruples and morality have been compromised in their movement upward.

There is, however, another figure in Jewish ghetto literature interested in making it, in succeeding, and through even less 'kosher' methods. This character may be a gangster, gambler, a pimp or an idea-man. They all believe in America, in the American business ethic, and know that the easiest way up and out of ghetto poverty is not always the most moral and upstanding. They have comprehended the fact that the foremost names in American business have risen to their exalted positions by using these same methods. Michael Gold in *Jews Without Money* notes the role models of his childhood to be the success stories of the ghetto, Harry the Pimp and Jake Wolf, the saloon owner. The best examples of the dishonest, the *ganavish* as he calls it, are found in the works of Daniel Fuchs, author of three novels published in the 1930s, and later re-issued under the collective title *The Williamsburg Trilogy*.

Fuchs succinctly expresses this concept of *ganavish* in *Homage to Blenholt*, where Mr Balkan, a former actor on the Yiddish stage now earning his living by carrying a sandwich-board sign through the streets of Williamsburg, relates the following to his son:

'[T]wo kinds of work there is, honest and not honest. Standing in a stationery store all day, pressing in a shop, cutting fur—that's honest work and it's no good.' Mr B ran from this, it made him sick and he became an actor. 'The other kind is *ganavish*... You know what *ganavish* means, Max? To make a living not honestly, by tricks, by schemes, not with the hands. Gamblers, actors, poets, artists. That is good. It is easy, you can have a good time playing, but you need luck. Luck and tricks. Sometimes' he said, 'the craziest tricksters and schemers are the biggest successes, I don't know what it is.'<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Fuchs, *Homage to Blenholt* (New York: Avon Books, 1972. First published 1936), pp. 231-2.

## The Honest

I would now like to touch briefly on these different escape mechanisms and begin with Anzia Yeziarska, probably the best example of the use of education. The poverty of the ghetto slum and the hardships she encountered and surmounted in making her way out could not be ignored or even minimized and are the basis for her fiction. The figure of the hard-working young woman (or man) striving to break free of the poverty of the Lower East Side of Manhattan through education, by becoming a schoolteacher as in her autobiographical fiction (or a doctor or lawyer in Nyburg, Ornitz or Meyer Levin), probably best exemplifies this strategy of escape. Teaching represents a type of honest work, though by Balkan's standard it is no good. Her 1925 novel *Bread Givers* and some of the stories in *Hungry Hearts*, a collection written prior to the novel, clearly illustrate the desire of young immigrant women not only to flee the ghetto but to become Americanized. In her dissertation, Pearl Laufer expresses this process in the following way: "The Jewish immigrant, determined to become integrated into the fabric of American society, often lost or gave up not only a Jewish identity but family or Old World values as well, as 'payment' for passage in the New World."<sup>3</sup> In the case of Sara Smolinsky, the heroine of *Bread Givers*, escaping the ghetto is not solely a question of its physical and economic conditions but also the need to break free of the constraints of Orthodox Judaism, to seemingly spurn the religion itself, to find herself as an individual, achieve a place in the world as a woman rather than simply being a piece of chattel. Education, and through it attaining a position as a schoolteacher, would serve to repudiate the view of patriarchal Orthodox society that a woman's place was in the home, the market stall or the sweatshop.

To elaborate Yeziarska contrasts the radical Sara with her older sisters, the miseries of their marriages and/or the havoc wreaked upon them by their Talmudic scholar father's rejection of their suitors. These lovers are unacceptable since they are not wealthy enough to provide for him—a man of God, he is only "physically" present in the world; the Lord, through some divine instrument will see to him—providing for his

<sup>3</sup> Pearl Laufer, "Between Two Worlds: The Fiction of Anzia Yeziarska" (*DAI* 42 (1982): 4827A, University of Maryland).

daughter is unimportant.

Sara, the youngest of his daughters, having seen the lives of her sisters and mother broken in the service of the(ir) Lord, is forced to make a clean break with her family and community, to reject both, in setting out on her chosen path towards Americanization. Noting that women in America do not need male bosses, that she will not let her life be charted by others and that she lives in modern times, Sara flees her father's wrath and home crying "My will is as strong as yours. I'm going to live my own life. Nobody can stop me. I'm not from the old country. I'm American!"<sup>4</sup>

And nothing can stop her. Dedicated to the proposition of making a "person" out of herself, the first steps in Sara's process of self-improvement and assimilation take the form of self-definition and location: renting and isolating herself in a small room which opens onto an airshaft and then hopelessly attempting to provide it with some personality. Though the room is on the Lower East Side it still serves as a haven and she gains a sense of privacy that has always been lacking. Having now situated herself, she must then begin the dual life as sweatshop worker and night school student, and laundry worker-college student, which will eventually culminate in her gaining her teacher's certificate.

What does it all cost? Yeziarska clearly believes that the sacrifices are worth making, that assimilation is the answer. Her heroine's isolation is not: simply limited to her filth-surrounded cell, it is accompanied by almost total self-denial. Since knowledge is the food she hungers for, food intake and quality suffer. Sara feels no need to concern herself with her physical appearance, believing that her only "hope was to get to the educated world, where only the thoughts you give out count, and not how you look,"<sup>5</sup> only to realize later on as a college student that "... it wasn't character or brains that counted. Only youth and beauty and clothes—things I never had and never could have."<sup>6</sup> Consider her immigrant's awe of the small, quiet, friendly, typically American college town and the promise it holds open and her rude awakening to the fact that she will always be shut out of that community. While the chapter depicting Sara's college years is the longest in the novel, little space is devoted to the actual study setting. There is little joy to be gained for the

4 Anzia Yeziarska, *Bread Givers* (New York: Persea Books, 1985. First published 1925), pp. 138-9.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 183.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 220.

serious student—discussion is consciously put aside; the college is no community of scholars but just an education factory, a means of achieving a further stage of life: a teaching job.

Education, the university in particular, has Americanized Sara. Hard work and financial luck, right out of Horatio Alger, have made a "person" out of her, given her a new way of life. Back in New York, degree in hand, she can exchange her airshaft room for one basking in sunlight, her few mousy gray and black "old maid's" clothes for fashionable, quality suits. She has become so practical and assimilated that she makes what seems to be a final break with the traditions of Orthodox Judaism: Sara balks at rending her garments (the traditional sign of mourning), at a waste of good clothing, and brings down the condemnation of the other mourners, who are appalled by her attitude and scorn her as "*the Americanerin!*"<sup>7</sup> All that Sara has ever dreamed of has been achieved, but total satisfaction does not come to her nor Yeziarska, Ralda Meyerson Sullivan writing of her that "creating a fictional world as a way of containing and ordering the disparate elements of her life meant isolating herself from the sources of her material, her communal past. Self-transformation into an American writer thus meant personal loss."<sup>8</sup>

## The Not-so-kosher

Abraham Cahan's 1917 classic of Jewish-American fiction, *The Rise of David Levinsky*, draws the portrait of a man who escapes the ghetto by rising in business to the top of the garment trade, that unique Jewish industry monopolized first by German and then Russian Jews in the early part of this century.

His reactions to his arrival and first moments in New York are marked by negative feelings; the immigration officials of republican America are no better than the Czar's Cossacks, their "unfriendly voices flavored all America with a spirit of icy hospitality that sent a chill through my very

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid* , p. 255.

<sup>8</sup> Ralda Meyerson Sullivan, "Anzia Yeziarska: An American Writer," (*DAI* 40 (1979): 260A. University of California, Berkeley)

soul."<sup>9</sup> This lack of hospitableness haunts him through the course of the entire novel, the home he yearns for constantly eluding him. While dulling his initial feelings of the 'golden land' it is nowhere as horrifying an image as that in Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*, where the bright rays of light emitted from the crown of the Statue of Liberty, the quintessential American symbol of freedom and safety, are terrifyingly described as spikes upon which 'the huddled masses' will be impaled.<sup>10</sup> Nor can he find any comfort in being tricked, cast off and abandoned or being informed by an Orthodox Jew (who cannot offer him a place to sleep) in a synagogue that "Alas! America has turned me into a mound of ashes" and that America holds no place for a religious man. But David is also advised that "America is not Russia ... a man must make a living here."<sup>11</sup> This is truly the crux of the matter; making a living, i.e. money, reigns supreme and in the spirit of American true grit, "if a fellow isn't lazy nor a fool he has no right to be sorry he came to America."<sup>12</sup>

A Talmudic scholar who arrived in New York in 1885 with four cents in his pocket but worth two million at the time the story is told, he notes in the opening paragraph of this first-person novel that "my present station, power, the amount of worldly happiness at my command, and the rest of it, seem to be devoid of significance."<sup>13</sup> A constant regret is that while having succeeded in business he has failed to fulfill his dream of getting a degree from the City College of New York. At the conclusion of the novel Levinsky states that he is proud of being one of the largest clothing manufacturers in America, of building an industry, but feels that he has gained little else from his endeavors.

We need first to examine the course of Levinsky's intellectual aspirations to understand the reason for his remorse. After his arrival he took up peddling but failed because he was too concerned with reading, too religiously devoted to the prospect of his evening course, to bother with his work. Bender, his teacher, had inculcated the dream of City College into the peddler's active questioning mind along with the following advice: "Get these three words engraved on your mind, Levinsky. Dili-

9 Abraham Cahan, *The Rise of David Levinsky* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960. First published 1917), p. 89.

10 Henry Roth, *Call It Sleep* (New York: Avon Books, 1964. First published 1934), p. 14.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 97.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 91.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

gence, perseverance, tenacity."<sup>14</sup>

Now a cloakmaker, Levinsky sets his mind on a single goal, saving the money necessary to pay his expenses as a City College student. Like Yeziarska's characters, he is resigned to long hours over a sewing machine to earn as much as possible in the shortest possible time. The accumulated wages "lent reality to [his] vision of college. Cloak-making was now nothing but a temporary round of dreary toil, an unavoidable stepping-stone to loftier occupations."<sup>15</sup> We note the image used in referring to the college's red, church-like structure: "It was the synagogue of my new life. Nor is this merely a figure of speech: the building really appealed to me as a temple, as a House of Sanctity, as we call the ancient Temple of Jerusalem."<sup>16</sup> Cahan entitles the two books of the novel centering on Levinsky's educational dreams "My Temple" and "Destruction of My Temple." Following this symbolic destruction Levinsky declares the building to be "the sepulcher of my dearest ambitions, a monument to my noblest enthusiasm in America."<sup>17</sup>

How could this have happened to Levinsky? Another of those strokes of fate that swing the pendulum from poverty to wealth in America: an unimportant accident, the spilling of a bottle of milk on some garments which the boss charges against David's wages. The result is not tears, but a sudden partnership based on his realization that the brains behind this entire garment operation, those of the designer he teams with, are being exploited by the management. This realization and the total monopolization of his waking hours, the need to transfer his educational acumen to learning the skills of the business world, bring his academic pursuits to an immediate halt.

Education as the most significant ghetto escape mechanism is further exemplified in the character of Dora, the second of the three women who reject Levinsky. Unlike the mothers in *Call It Sleep* and *Jews Without Money* who accept confinement to the ghetto and the woman in the Yeziarska story who is patronized by her allrightnik children, Dora learns to speak and read English from her schoolage daughter, often forcing the unwilling child to teach her rather than play with her friends. She creates a one-sided educational rivalry, hopelessly refusing to allow

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 167.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 169.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 216.



herself to fall behind her daughter's progress. Her greatest fear, which she relates to Levinsky in the following is that:

'She'll grow up and be an educated American lady and she'll be ashamed to walk in the street with me.' ... People will beggar themselves to send their children to college, only to be treated like fools and greenhorns by them. I call that terrible.... Well, I'm not going to let my child treat me like that. Not I. I should commit suicide first.... If she reads a book she is to bear in mind that her mother is no ignorant slouch of a greenhorn, either.<sup>18</sup>

She also suffers the pangs of envy at her daughter's American birth and her fondest dream is that her daughter achieve those aspects of life that she was denied. Lucy's birth and education in the United States will permit her to become the "educated American lady" (when years later Levinsky meets the child, she is a student at Hunter College, the women's division of City College) and allow her to marry a man of her own choosing, a selection denied her mother.

Despite Cahan's emphasis on education, I would classify *The Rise of David Levinsky* as a work epitomizing the "not-so-kosher" mechanism of escape. The business methods Levinsky has employed are devoid of morality, or clearly amoral if we accept the view that there can be no place for scruples if the sole purpose of a business is to make as much profit as possible. Levinsky undercuts the wage scale by operating a non-union shop whenever conditions allow and a paternalistic company shop, hiring landsleit, greenhorns from his hometown, often paying their trans-Atlantic passage in return for their services, when conditions are not conducive. By "observing the sabbath," keeping his shop closed on Saturday, he can employ pious workers at lower wages. Levinsky dotes on the fact that Russian-Jewish 'cockroach' shops operate on a lower profit margin than the larger German-Jewish operations. He is not opposed to paying kickbacks to material suppliers and bribes to union infiltrators. He has an almost blind hatred of socialism and trade unions though he himself is a product of the sweatshops. Nor is he adverse to stealing designs from other manufacturers or ridding himself of the unnecessary partner upon whose designs the company was originally founded. There is nothing particularly Jewish in his methods; Levinsky has gone through the "College of Americanization Studies" and graduated with Phi Beta Kappa honors. He may not have earned a Bachelor's

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 243.

degree from City College, but he has a doctorate where it really matters in America, in "Industrial Captaincy." Despite his name, immigrant origins, speech faults, he is impeccably American; Levinsky is part of the great American business order. David Levinsky has truly discovered his rightful place in America. In doing so, however, it has been at the cost of his humanity. As he closes his memoirs, approximately fifty years old, he lives alone in an apartment in a very fashionable hotel. The home he has sought for thirty years in America has eluded him and there is no one to whom he may pass his two million dollars. Levinsky is dead according to Orthodox Jewish traditions, since a man with no children has no line to follow him. Life on "Allrightnik's Row", the alternative title of Samuel Ornit's 1923 novel *Haunch, Paunch and Jowl*, is cold, isolated and sterile to Levinsky.

Levinsky's disillusionment with Allrightnik's Row is also suffered by Meyer Hirsch, the protagonist of Ornit's novel. Hirsch is somewhat of a parody of a Horatio Alger hero—he has the same characteristics of ambition, brains, ingenuity, industry, but he connives and consciously puts these traits to a less than honest and noble use. But this is how to make it, by cutting corners and seizing the day, making contacts with the right people, knowing who to buy and how to do it; in essence this is the way of rising in America: dishonestly.

Having set out, he must steel himself, reject sentimentality, idealism, the "dream-stupefaction" befalling the "nobility" of the Lower East Side: the reformers; utopian socialists and IWW-type syndicalists traversing the nation in support of the dream of one big union; the doctors who give ceaselessly to improve the conditions of mothers and children in the ghetto. These are characters who have broken free of the slum through self-improvement, through a university education, the traditional means of escaping the ghetto, succeeded in the Horatio Alger sense to become credits to their community. They have worked their way through college, spent long hours sewing knee-pants in a sweatshop or as singing waiters in a downtown dancehall, and demonstrated that idealism and education go hand in hand. Others, like Al Wolff and Sid Raleigh (born Sam Rakowsky), fictional counterparts to Irving Berlin, Al Jolson and Eddie Cantor, used their talents to reach the vaudeville stage and Tin Pan Alley, to build the American entertainment industry. Wolff's remark about success is telling: "There's only one

thing goes in this game,—give the gang what it wants, and if you want to get by, you gotta be better than the next guy.”<sup>19</sup> They did and they were.

Ornitz is not particularly interested in these noble characters, but plays them off against Meyer and his uncle Philip, Talmudic scholar cum capitalist. The former is one of those professional Jews of the title, who makes their living, line their pockets and feather their political nests by demagogically stirring up rumpuses,

alarms, furors over every fancied grievance, insult and reflection. They focus a spotlight upon the Jews. Their self-righteous rantings in the circulation-seeking press, in pulpits, on the political stump, in mass meetings and legislative halls, do more to raise up a spectre of the Jewish question in America than all the sneers, insinuations and charges of the rabid Anti-Semites.<sup>20</sup>

He is a master manipulator, an opportunist par excellence serving only a credo of expediency. A free-thinker, Meyer is advised by his uncle to attend Yom Kippur services at the synagogue, to build a base of legal clients. The advice is well taken and the non-practicing Jew becomes the soul of the community, the great provider and protector of the ghetto downtrodden. It is all done with the utmost cynicism, the greatest profit and an eye toward a final goal: a judgeship.

In all his expediency and overt opportunism, Hirsch is completely aware of his actions. There is not the slightest hint of delusion. He understands the validity of the diatribe on the professional Jew, that he himself has long ridden on the issue. He must, however, discount the criticism, not allow it to move him from his chosen path; he must avoid even the slightest wavering, of becoming dream-stupefied. Meyer has consciously sold his soul to politics, to the devil, where “the order of the day was—PLAY THE GAME AS YOU SEE IT PLAYED.”<sup>21</sup>

19 Samuel Ornitz, *Allrightnik's Row, "Haunch, Paunch and Jowl": The Making of a Professional Jew* (New York: Markus Wiener Publishing, 1986. First published 1923), p. 125.

20 *Ibid.*, pp. 198-9.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 227.

## The Ganavish

Probably the most pessimistic viewpoint on escaping the ghetto was held by Daniel Fuchs. Williamsburg is undeniably a trap, a prison, a hell on earth that one must be liberated from. Gabriel Miller describes Fuchs' insight as one concerned with environment, the theme of entrapment and "the contradiction between what is given and what is desired and the discrepancy between what a man has and what he strives for, and his final wasteland vision [is] of a world where everyone and everything has turned to *dreck*."<sup>22</sup> What then are the available alternatives in this novel? Honest work is certainly no possibility and Fuchs keeps harping on this in the trilogy. There is the possibility of education, self-improvement, which provides or should provide a means of escape. There is also gangsterism, obviously dishonest. Dreaming, in the form of Hollywood films and movie magazines or English romantic novels, particularly for women, are a third. But this only provides temporary relief, like going to Coney Island or spending a few weeks in the Catskills. There is, however, a fourth: suicide, obviously the last resort is not recommended, but is significant in the fact that it is a recurrent event in the novel.

Fuchs presents the *ganavish* form of escape as by far the most successful. It is embodied in the character of the gangster Papravel, who rejects the notion that he is a criminal, saying "I come from a good family in the old country and there is no one in Williamsburg more honest than me. It is true people call me a crook, but I work hard for a living and no one can ever say I cheated a customer."<sup>23</sup> Papravel is certain that he is an honest businessman—in America, he believes, people have to make a living and he performs certain services and is strictly paid for them. He draws the line at murder. Papravel is no ordinary run-of-the-gutter cut-throat and is appalled by the thought that his organization might be "tarnished, its reputation damaged in the community ... associated with the signs of common thuggery and gangsterism."<sup>24</sup>

Papravel is a product of the Americanization process. He may be seen in terms of a number of trite American homilies: "he saw his chance and he took it," "he struck while the iron was hot." This is America, and

22 Gabriel Miller, "A Butterfly in the Subway" (*DAI* 37 (1976): 312A-313A, Brown University).

23 Daniel Fuchs, *Summer in Williamsburg* (New York: Avon Books, 1972. First published 1934), p. 126.

24 *Ibid.*, pp. 237-8.

Paprael takes pride in the quality of the work he provides as well as his being an American. He believes that everyone who makes money always hurts people, "that's the way the world is, and who am I to change it?"<sup>25</sup> In American business it is the law of the jungle that is applied (cf. the Darwinian and Spencerian doctrines followed by David Levinsky). This is what America has made of its immigrants; the ethics of the Old World had to go in the face of the success ethic preached to them: to make it one can spare no costs.

In the second part of the trilogy, *Homage to Blenholt*, Fuchs goes right to the heart of the falsity of the American dream, its absurdity, in the creation of his protagonist Max Balkan. Balkan is the dream incarnate, a wholehearted believer in the success ethic. He exudes America's cardinal virtues: honesty, ambition, industry, intelligence, thrift and sacrifice (innate rather than learned through a life of ghetto poverty). Max is an idea man; he is searching for that one illusive thought, a brainstorm, some star he can hitch his wagon to and through which he can be carried rapidly and triumphantly out of Williamsburg and escape into America. He is a man of vision, aware of the way America has permitted the man using a little simple ingenuity—Whitney, Edison, Ford, her greatest inventors—to parlay it into fame and fortune. Max is also a man of understanding, conscious of the ways of greatness in America. He is able to see beyond the rough, possibly slightly tarnished facade of the captains of industry, into the recesses of their minds, the vehicles that provided them the power and esteem to tower over their inferiors. In his dreams, he wonders if he, too, could not rise like his hero and idol Tamburlaine, to be magnificent and heroic?

Why not? Because Max Balkan is a *luftmensch*, he lives in the air, in his dreams; there is no reality to them. Fuchs spares nothing in exposing Max's absurdity: his ideas—soft-drink stands selling chicken soup, self-sustaining parachutes (to make everyone a *luftmensch*?) and bottled onion juice. Unfortunately Max is always a step behind, a moment too late—a constant *also-ran*. His modern-day incarnation of Tamburlaine also leaves something to be desired: Blenholt, the City Commissioner of Sewers, the post clearly emblematic of the respect that should normally be given him as a corrupt petty crook and racketeer. But in America things are often inverted (cf. the case of Paprael in *Summer* in

25 *Ibid.*, pp. 252-3.

*Williamsburg*). It is a country where everything, practically all human values, is measured in dollars and cents; where it is insanity to try to get on without money. Despite being the child of immigrants, Max has learned his lessons well: might makes right, money makes might.

Max rejects rising from the ghetto through honest labor. Only the *ganavish* has any value, as evidenced from his reverence of Blenholt and his belief that the bright idea is the short-cut to success in America. Education, too, though never really considered, is cast aside and ridiculed in the form of Max's friend Munves, a philologist whose days are spent pouring over maps and scholarly works. Undoubtedly, there would have been great excitement in linguistic circles over Munves' discovery of the true location of Sealwudu in Somerset rather than in Essex, but Fuchs can hardly get worked up while there is a more monumental upheaval in progress for the residents of Williamsburg. If Max's ideas bring him no millions, whose stomach will be filled by Munves' earth-shattering revelation?

What Fuchs seems to embrace is the notion of getting ahead outside the system. Rather than the corruption of Papravel, the "honest American businessman," Fuchs opts for the vice of gambling. Success in the novel is exemplified by a third young man, Coblenz, who lives off his racing winnings. Unlike the idea man and the academic, Coblenz has a clear aversion to physical work and his intellectual powers extend to the analysis of the racing form.

In the same way that Fuchs introduced the movies and romantic novels in his previous book as a fleeting mechanism for escape he continues and elaborates on this in *Homage*. Probably due to the job shortage of the depression and traditional attitudes that they need only marry and stay at home, his Williamsburg women have no refuges open to them on a daily basis, no sanctuaries to go to other than the movies and the beauty parlor. Both locations permit the fantasy necessary for female characters to rid themselves of the painful drudgery and dreariness of the ghetto and imagine a better America. These locales take them away from the everyday routine of worrying about whether their men will ever achieve the modicum of success needed for a marriage proposal and setting up house. The beauty parlor with its walls filled with advertising, its movie and romance magazines, permeate their imaginations with the Garbos, Dietrichs, Crawfords and Harlows they wish they could be as they doze off during their manicures. Though Fuchs accepts the value of

the movies (the dream factory he himself later fled to) as an escape, he rejects the Hollywood-packaged dream as a sham.

In the trilogy's last volume, *Low Company*, Fuchs rejects the gamblers and gangsters and goes a long way towards closing off all avenues of escape. Moe Karty, once a successful accountant reduced by the depression to searching for his one big four-horse parlay, and Shubunka, a ghetto Gatsby running a slew of whorehouses, are forced to flee for their lives; Karty from his violent brothers-in-law whose books he has been skimming, and Shubunka, who is being pushed aside by a faceless gangster combine. Shubunka, sharing the same attitude towards his business as Papravel, has worked hard to build his kingdom and truly believes in the morality of his toil, incredulously asking the thugs sent to lean on him, "How can you take what I have done and kick me out? It is not the way for one human being to treat another!"<sup>26</sup> Evidently, America no longer has a place for this type of 'respectable' merchant. Fuchs' personal solution seems to be in using something related to a traditional ghetto mode, education, but modifying it to some degree—as talent—and then adapting it to artistic, though ganavish Hollywood, purposes.

Of the three methods of escape I have discussed, the most important and widespread is clearly the honest, based almost entirely on the concept of education, self-improvement and assimilation; the other two rely quite heavily on education and making use of the individual's mental abilities and talents. Furthermore, those characters employing the "not-so-kosher" and the ganavish are either American-born or almost fully-assimilated, or Americanized.

Other than Mary Antin, it is difficult to find a satisfied "escapee." Of course, Montague Glass' two dry goods merchants, Potash and Perlmutter, are happy, but they are caricatures of semi-literate Russian Jewish allrightniks drawn by a "superior" Anglo-Jew. In Yeziarska and Cahan's David *Levinsky* there seems to be a certain guilt which is a by-product of success. Possibly this is an unpoliticized version of the communist view of the intellectual remaining with his class rather than rising above it, as expressed in Schneider.

Why is there so much kvetching going on in this fiction? Probably because the writers themselves were intellectuals. Many of the non

26 Daniel Fuchs, *Low Company* (New York: Avon Books, 1972. First published 1937), p. 150.

native-born, like Cahan and Yeziarska, had themselves struggled to break out of the ghetto and were troubled by the sacrifices they had made: once they had achieved success they found it impossible to return to their roots. Furthermore, poverty rather than success was extolled in the culture of the Pale, where, to paraphrase Jules Chametzky, "chief among the values of the tribe is [a] contempt for wealth and the rewards of this ephemeral world."<sup>27</sup> They may have achieved some degree of material success but little spiritual satisfaction; they witnessed the further breakdown of Jewish traditions and family life, which had already begun in Europe, as described by Sholom Aleichem. The native-born writers were educated in American schools—and Americanized from the outset—and despite their ghetto backgrounds had clear ideas of how their lives would change. When the change did not occur, or progress fell short of what had been anticipated, or the costs were just too great, social criticism was added to their texts. In the real world of the ghetto and for the most part in the fictional as well, there was little more that the immigrants could do but put their faith in a better tomorrow and hope that their children would succeed where they had "failed." And considering present-day Jewish success, they did!

<sup>27</sup> Jules Chametzky, "Focus on Abraham Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky*: Boats Against the Current," in David Madden, ed., *American Dreams, American Nightmares* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972), pp. 90-1.