

Homeland and America in the Work of Anzia Yeziarska

By

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Abstract

Jewish migration is a monument of remembrance of pogrom and discrimination of human beings in the modern world. Migration is a radical and complex process that causes political, social, economic difficulties to countries and people faced with it. The struggle and fight of all those women and men to find survive, to live their lives or to find their identity which they had lost, or which was forcibly taken from them; clashes with cultures and identities, trying to resist, survive and not vanish. It shall be a lesson that discrimination shall never be used as a tool for humiliation. This paper will look at the literary representation of Jewish migration to the USA in the early twentieth century. These literary representations are the experience brought by Anzia Yeziarska, and reflected in her two short stories about America. This paper will be concerned with the hopes, illusions, disappointments and pain experienced through a recurring cycle of pogroms and flight. This paper will portray the sufferings of a nation, which are quite similar as well as quite contrast to the representation of two worlds, the home land, and “America, the promised land”. These representations are also treated as part of the genre of travel writings; left as evidence for generations to come.

Key words: Jewish migration, travel writing, America, dreams, homeland

Introduction

We live in a rapidly changing world, one of countless perceived problems, of which one of the most long-standing is the challenge of migration. Of course human migration has been a constant factor of human history and may be viewed in the most general terms as a form of individual or group adaptation to changes in the economic and political environment (Chapman, 1980). Nevertheless it always involves far more than the simple movement of people from one place to another. It raises complex social and cultural issues as they are encountered by both the receiving countries and by those who migrate. Sometimes it is difficult to define whether a book is a novel of travels or simply a documentary work describing journeys, places, people and traditions. The purpose of travel may include a fulfillment of early wishes to escape from family. Mews haw says that “travel may be viewed as a rebellious, even a subversive act, part of self-actualization” (Mewshaw, 2005) Travelers bring to the readers their personal stories experienced through their journeys. Deborah Apple man and Margaret Reed, in their introduction to Braided Lives: An anthology of multicultural

American writing ([Appleman, 1991](#)), suggest that “People become avid readers when they find their personal meaning in literature. We read with conviction, commitment, and motivation those works that reflect our own experiences or histories or speak to us in ways that are real and true” (p.9)

‘America and I’ and ‘How I Found America’ are two stories by Anzia Yeziarska, in which she invokes her origins in Tsarist Russia ([Yeziarska, 1923, 2021](#)). In both stories she describes the struggles that Jewish immigrants, particularly women, have in coming to terms with their lives in the new world while continuing to preserve aspects of their cultural traditions and identity.

America: Dream and Reality

In ‘America and I’ Yeziarska focuses on her individual experience. She is as any other traveller that brings to the readers their personal stories experienced through their journeys. In this spirit, for example, [Morris \(2007\)](#) suggests that women travel writers are typically more concerned with the “inner landscape”, and “the writer’s own inner workings”, than their male counterparts. Not only she was forced to migrate, but did she, as many of her compatriots went as aliens to this new country, where they also had to endure treacherous living quarters, rise above religious and ethnic prejudice, adapt to unfair social conditions, and customize and take advantage of economic opportunities that make the Jewish race a strong one in today's society. These troubles and sacrifices they faced while settling in the new country are full of pain and devastation. Writings of Anzia Yeziarska, who herself was a migrant; portray and share the pain the migrants have gone through.

In order to earn a living and achieve some kind of independence she begins to work for an American family, though they never tell her how much she is to be paid. While she is grateful for the opportunity she also recognizes the way in which she is being exploited. She has no opportunity to make friends, simply: ‘There had been no end to my day – working for the ‘American’ family’. (2002: p.1731) Thus America seems to be no better than the world from which she has escaped. She begins to wonder ‘What am I? Who am I? Why am I here?’ and finally ‘Where is America?’ (Ibid, 1731) She needs then to find a better job that will not only enable her to make a living but also give her some free time. Moving to a factory she is free ‘from the worry of bread and rent’ but she is not happy: ‘I want to do something with my head, my feelings. All day long, only with my hands I work.’ ([The Century Magazine, 1920, p.73](#))

Following the advice of a teacher at the factory that she must first learn English, she starts to learn the new language. After mastering the language she returns to the teacher who suggests she join a social club run by American women who want to help immigrant girls. We shall see how in both stories her ambivalence towards America and its opportunities remains.

A Letter from America

Central to Yeziarska’s account of the Jewish experience of America is the letter sent by Gedalayah Mindel to his wife after a gap of many years. This letter reaches the whole village of Sukolovy, whose inhabitants suffer from the persistent persecution of the Cossacks, the recurring pogroms against the Jews. The letter is both revelation and shock and it disturbs the community. They are as doubtful as they are excited: ‘A savage envy bit us’. (Ibid, 74)

‘I am telling you that my sun is beginning to shine in America’. (Ibid, 74) It is this prospect of light that is so tempting.

‘First I am come to tell you that I am well and in good health’ Thus he appears as a physical presence among the villagers, sharing his joy with them as though he had never left. At the same time he reveals a new kind of identity, a new sense of self: ‘I am becoming a person- a business man’. (Ibid, 74)

Equally there are the simple facts of a new diet: ‘white bread and meat I eat every day just like the millionaires’. (Ibid, 74) Beyond that is the contrast, not only with Cossack oppression of the village, but a new sense of space:

‘I have for myself a separate room with closed door and before anyone can come to me, I can give a say, ‘Come in’ ,or ‘Stay out’ , like a king in a palace.’ (Ibid, 75)

In the village people cook, sleep, learn and eat all in one place. They are subject to the sudden appearance of soldiers in their houses telling them what they can and cannot do. Perhaps the most suggestive part of the whole letter is: ‘Lastly, my darling family and people of the village of Sukolovy, there is no tsar in America.’ (Ibid, 75)

Thus the letter offers the prospect of both prosperity and justice, and may even have motivated some of the villagers to sell up and emigrate. Yeziarska says she ‘could dance myself over the waves of the ocean to America...empty hands, empty pockets; yet it dreams itself in you – America’. (Ibid, 75)

Memories of Home

Yeziarska herself emigrated at the age of fifteen and retains a clear memory of her early years. The ‘ukase’ of the Czar was felt by the young to frustrate at every turn their hopes of a better future. ‘How I Found America’ begins with her father trying to teach little boys from the village. Some of the details remind me of my experiences in Kosovo at the end of the last century. Expelled from our schools we attempted to continue our education in private houses and mosques and were chased out by the Serbian police and military. Yeziarska’s father was teaching the boys Hebrew in the only room of the small house. Cossacks would appear, shouting:

‘No chadir (Hebrew school) shall be held in a room used for cooking and sleeping...a thousand rubble fine, or a year in prison, if you are ever found again teaching children where you’re eating and sleeping’ (Ibid, 73)

Clearly this was senseless as the poor had only one room for the whole family and yet they are being denied to learn their own language in the country of their birth.

Yet in ‘America and I’ Yeziarska shows how assimilation to the new culture is difficult. Landlords ‘look her up and down’ in evident disapproval. Although away from the pogroms of the homeland there seems to be no spiritual peace: ‘I had become free from the worry of bread and rent, but I was not happy’. (Ibid, 78) Freedom from the demands of the stomach made more intense the hunger of the soul.

Light and Dark in America

Yeziarska deploys images of light and dark, warmth and cold to express the difficulties of her encounter with America. Her hope is 'sunlight burning through my darkness', however: 'In America were rooms without sunlight; rooms to sleep in, to eat in, to cook in, but without sunshine, and Gedlayah Mindel was happy.' (Ibid, 76)

In 'America and I' she notices 'four cold eyes turned on me' after she has asked to be paid for the work she does for the family. 'They looked at me with sudden coldness...what have I said to draw away from me their warmth?' Later she reflects how she 'was driven to cold and hunger....I could no longer pay for my mattress on the floor'. (2002, p.1729)

In 'How I found America' she feels:

'A longing for the fragrant silence of the woods that lay beyond our mud hut welled up in my heart, a longing for the soft, responsive earth of our village streets. All about me was the hardness of brick and stone, the smells of crowded poverty.' (1920, p.76)

But quite soon she tells us that she 'looked up, and met the steady gaze of eyes shining with light' and 'in a moment all my anger fled'. (Ibid, 79)

After cold and darkness come warmth and light, and so she manages to keep faith with America. She recognises that America is not only the horrible hag in charge of the sweat-shop. Nor is it her 'Americanised' countryman who cheated her of her wages.

'Fired up by this revealing light, I began to build a bridge of understanding between the American-born and myself. Since their life was shut out from such as me, I began to open up my life and the lives of my people to them.' (2002: p.1729)

Thus she seems to arrive at some compromise between the new life of America and her memory of the Russian village. In both worlds she realises there are prejudice and disappointment. She sets out a personal journey of both loss and difficulties overcome. It is though in each story there are two characters, the writer and the country of America, and in spite of the vicissitudes and struggles of her experience she is finally able to make her peace with the latter.

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