POVERTY AND OPPRESSION

Poverty and oppression drove Jews to emigrate from Eastern Europe during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Jeffrey Katz and Esther Horowitz share their family stories.

Jeffrey Katz was born in Milwaukee in 1946 to a Russian father and Polish mother. Both came from small towns and large families. His mother's family saved for 15 years to have enough for passage to America and to make it work, they had to come at different times. Poverty motivated both his parents' families, and they chose Milwaukee because they had relatives here. Jeff describes the conditions in his parents' hometowns through this family story:

They'd have this argument telling us which family was poorer. My mother would tell the story when she was about 12 years old, and she was in Rasanav, her little town, and the mother had saved up money for her to buy shoes. And she gave my mother money and said, "Go into town, and buy yourself a pair of shoes, and you'll have it for...however long." So my mother took the money and walked into Warsaw, and when she got to the main street she was just amazed at the size of the city and all of the stores...She saw candy stores and grocery stores and then she was passing a clothing store and she looked in the window and she saw a hat, like a little bonnet. And she fell in love with it. So she walked inside the store and talked to the storekeeper...She looked at the money in her hand that she knew she was supposed to buy the shoes with, but she decided, "I'm gonna buy the hat." So, there was enough money; the storekeeper gave her the hat, and she took the hat and she ran all the way home. She went up to her mother [and said], "I know, mother, I was supposed to buy the shoes, but I saw this hat and I love it. Isn't it beautiful?" And her mother looked at the hat and said, "Yeah, it's very beautiful; now you just have to wear it on your feet."

Then my father after my mother told that story would say, "Goldie, that's not a very funny story; my family was even poorer than yours, and here's the story of mine." And he would say, "You know, when I was little," he would say, "our family was very poor; we had one cow and we used to milk that cow. You know, we'd send it out to pasture during the day, and it would come back at night and we'd milk the cow." There was a time in their life when they didn't have any money and they had to sell the cow, so they sold it to a wealthier family down the road. And every day the wealthier family put the cow in the pasture, but the cow was used to coming back to their house at night. So the cow would come back to their house; they'd milk the cow, and then my father would send it back.

Under these circumstances, Jeff's mother immigrated to America in 1924, and his father took the journey in 1920. Says Jeff:
They both went through Ellis Island and they saw the Statue of Liberty...They were so proud and so happy to be leaving a life of poverty and trouble coming to America. They were so happy, and that feeling is meaningful to me.

My father, when he first came [to Milwaukee], worked in the dairy business for about three or four years...Then he had an opportunity to go into the scrap business. So, he bought a shop here in Milwaukee with his brother [in]1932 and was in that business for, until he retired, for over 50 years.

Esther Horowitz’s family, the Safersteins, also arrived in America in multiple stages; passage to the United States was too expensive for everyone to travel at once, and it could take months or years to save up for the journey. They were the sole Jewish family living in the village of Sokolovocont, Poland, where they ran a grocery store business. Esther described incidents of Anti-Semitism:

“We paid a lot of taxes and we had a beautiful school...And we couldn’t go because we was Jewish. Our parents never could send us. Never. Never. But the teacher had so much pity on us...The teacher used to live right next door to the school, so he says, 'I’m going to take you in the kitchen.' I didn’t want to go. I never wanted to go. All the children went in the morning to school. And me they’re going to put in the kitchen...

“We was hated. But I never let my head down that I was a Jew.”

Esther’s family lost their business and property during World War I (1914–1918). Growing anxiety about conditions in Eastern Europe coupled with visions opportunity that America offered fueled the desire to emigrate. Esther and her sister Jenny secured passage to the United States in 1920. The two young women passed through Ellis Island:

The boat trip to the US was uneventful. It was when the boat got to New York that problems developed. Some of the boat’s passengers had come down with chicken pox and everyone—including Esther and Jenny, who didn’t become ill—was quarantined on the boat in New York for 12 days.

One day, Esther’s and Jenny’s uncle and cousin from Philadelphia came to the boat. They couldn’t board, but sent $10 and a box of fruit to the girls. “Oranges and apples and pears and bananas,” Esther recalled. “And we didn’t know what bananas was. We start to eat the bananas with the shell—we didn’t know. We were like monkeys. A fella that we met on the ship, he was from England and he kind of felt sorry. He couldn’t talk no Jewish or no German but English, so he said, ‘I’m going to show you how to eat,’ and he opened up the banana. It was a different taste. It tasted good. So we had a holiday there. We ate the whole fruit. Oy, it was such a big doing.” Can you imagine eating a banana with the peel on?

Esther’s brothers Max and Fred followed in 1921. After a few years of working in a wholesale tailor shop, Esther saved enough money to send for her mother and two of her sisters. Her brother Leo arrived in the U.S. in 1924, traveling through Argentina.

Like many families passing through Ellis Island, the Safersteins “Americanized” their names.

LEO: “Why did they all do it? Our name was Saferstein. Then we changed it. Why? They all changed it before me. I was against it when I came.”
MAX: I didn’t like it neither.
ESTHER: Benny [Esther’s brother] did. The uncle [from Philadelphia] said Saferstein was too much to spell. It’s too long. So he said chop it off, make it Stein. But that is not our real name.
MAX: Saferstein is a real nice name. In Hebrew it means sapphire stone.
LEO: My grandson wants to change his name back to Saferstein. In Hebrew it is ‘evan safir’ and every time he writes me a letter, he signs it ‘Evansafir’ or ‘Saferstein.”

Once in America, the siblings set off trying to make a living. Why Milwaukee? Esther’s older brother Benny and his friend Charlie Segall left Europe to avoid the draft in 1914, and settled in Milwaukee near Charlie’s brother. Following in the footsteps of their brother, Max, Fred, and Leo became peddlers. Leo related his experience:

“I start the first day peddling. By us, we didn’t know you had to knock before you go in the house. [In Poland] we used to go in...I’ll never forget, the first house had an outside stairway, quite high up. So I go up with my two satchels to make my first stop. And I don’t knock, I open up and come in. The lady got scared. Here comes in a young man with two big satchels; he’s a gangster or something. She starts hollering. She scares the life out of me...So I quick run out of the house and I slid down all the steps—thought I’d break my neck—my satchels first and I after it. I figured to myself, ‘My God, this is America? This is what I came for here?’”

Max and Fred took over Benny’s peddling route:

“We came in [Milwaukee] in 1921, in February. And when we came, Benny used to peddle on the road to farmers, selling overalls, clothing, underwear, socks, you know. Benny gave up the route and divided the route between us two. He gave Fred a bigger route because he was older...I knew a little territory on which I saw the same customers maybe three, four times a year or five times a year, that’s about all...Monday we always used to go as far as Menomonee Falls and then we would divide up. I went one way and he went the other.”

Tragedy struck the family when Fred became ill and died. Max relates his grief:

“I couldn’t [go back to peddling], because we had the same voices, and when I said, ‘Hello, John,’ they would answer, ‘Hello, Fred.’ They thought it was Fred. I couldn’t take it no more. Then I opened up a little store on 8th and Clybourn.”

Like her brother, Esther and her husband, Adolph Horowitz, opened up a grocery store of their own. Esther says:

“Then all of a sudden there was on 5th and Vliet a beautiful little store. But dirty—the windows was all rusted. You didn’t know if there was glass... Cockroaches from God’s Earth was in there. And we painted the place...We took all these rusted windows and we put in new glass...

“So how do you go and make a store without money? We didn’t have no car but we weren’t far...
from the commission.” Adolph went to a **commission man**, who asked what he wanted.

He said, ‘I don’t know. I want to make a store’...So the commission man says, ‘How much can I trust you?’ [Adolph says] ‘I don’t know, I’ll take a case of each.’ [The commission man] says, ‘All right. You look already honest, that you don’t want too much.”

The location of the store turned out to be a good one. There was a big green market nearby, a butcher shop next door. A tailor was on the other side and the bakery just a block away. The Jewish women would get up early in the morning to do their shopping, and they took to the new store immediately.

“They seen we had such beautiful fruit and vegetables—we had plums, we had cherries, we had pears, we had everything that they gave us, oranges...and we sold them cheap. We had two, three, five pennies (profit) on the dozen. The first day, we sold it out; 10 o’clock in the morning and we have nothing. But we have money.” Within 14 months, the young couple had $8,000 in the bank.

The couple opened a series of stores in Milwaukee until Adolph’s death in 1967. When looking back on her life and the hardships she endured in Poland, Esther says, "It’s impossible. It’s impossible to believe those things.” Despite the challenges, Esther remained strong: “I have to take it with a little soul. I have a sweet soul on top.”

**VOCABULARY**

**Commission Man** (noun): peddlers and shopkeepers worked on commission—they would sell goods and then pay for them based on their sales. The commission man organized this and provided them with goods. There was a risk that the peddler may not be able to sell everything or that the goods would be stolen or taken that the commission man took in agreeing to a partnership.

**Satchel** (noun): a type of bag, often with a shoulder strap and a flap for closing.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES**

1) What factors drove Jeff’s and Esther’s families to leave for America? How did they make a living once they got there?

2) What similarities do you see between Esther’s family’s stories and the experience of other Jewish immigrants?

3) Create a short play that shows different aspects of these immigration stories. Pick a challenge that one of the families faces and in your play show how the family overcame this challenge.

4) Both Jeff and Esther’s stories are told in dialect—spoken language, which sometimes reflects that the speaker’s problems with grammar—how does this impact your understanding of the story?

(Personal history accounts and photographs obtained from the Jewish Museum Milwaukee archives.)