

## SESSION FOUR



## The Encounter with America: *Hester Street*

Feature film, 1974  
 Director/Screenwriter: Joan Micklin  
 Silver  
 Gitl: Carol Kane  
 Jake: Steven Keats  
 Mamie: Dorrie Kavanaugh  
 Mrs. Kavarsky: Doris Roberts  
 Bernstein: Mel Howard

Language: English and Yiddish  
 (subtitled)

Length: 89 minutes

For her portrayal of the young immigrant wife Gitl, Carol Kane received an Academy Award nomination. Her timid embrace of America is poignant.

*Hester Street* is based on *Yekl*, an English-language novella published in 1896 by Abraham Cahan, editor of the Yiddish-language newspaper, the *Forward*. Both the novella and the film adaptation portray the challenges that immigrants faced in leaving behind traditional, small-town life in Eastern Europe for the congested urban environment of New York's Lower East Side. Although their outward attempts at Americanization were most visible, they also had to change inwardly.

Set at the turn of the century, the story and film follow the romantic misadventures of Yekl, a young man who leaves his Russian hometown for America and settles in New York, where he works as a cloakmaker. Like many immigrants, Yekl comes to America ahead of his wife and young son, planning to earn enough money to send for them later. Seduced by the new life he finds in America, he puts off their arrival. Yekl (a Yiddish nickname for Yankev, i.e., Jacob) anglicizes his name to Jake; he is clean-shaven, avoids speaking Yiddish, and is a great enthusiast of such "Yankee" pastimes as boxing and social dancing. A handsome, charismatic figure, Jake has many female admirers. Only news from Russia of his father's death prompts him to remember his wife and son, Gitl and Yosele. Stricken with guilt, he sends money for their passage.

Upon their arrival, he is shocked at how much his wife is a creature of Old World habits. Gitl has difficulty speaking English and refuses to go about "in her own hair," that is, to be seen in public without a wig, according to the Eastern European Jewish tradition for married women.

Jake moves his family into an apartment, where they live with a boarder, and tries to adjust to being the head of the household. But he is drawn to Mamie, another garment worker, who is quite Americanized in dress, speech, and manner. She is likewise attracted to Jake and becomes furious at learning that he is a married man. With great difficulty, Gitl attempts to Americanize and eventually learns of Jake's infidelities. Torn between his attraction to Mamie and his sense of obligation to Gitl and their son, Jake is finally persuaded by Mamie to divorce Gitl and marry her. As the film ends, Gitl returns from the divorce proceedings to prepare to marry Bernstein, their boarder, who is also reluctant to abandon traditional ways. Meanwhile, as Jake heads for City Hall to marry Mamie, he worries that he will lose the freedom he has just won, while Gitl and Bernstein prepare to embark on a new life.

The novel *Yekl* was the first of Cahan's English-language works of fiction (his best-known and most accomplished effort is his novel *The Rise of David Levinsky*, 1917). First published in New York in 1896, *Yekl*, like Cahan's other writings in English, was intended not as much for immigrant readers as for non-Yiddish-speaking Americans, Jews and non-Jews.

Unlike the other films in this series that were made prior to World War II and were part of the very culture they depicted, and the documentary films that use authentic cultural artifacts, this film was made decades after Eastern European Jewish mass emigration to America had ended and the overflowing Jewish population of the Lower East Side had shifted to the suburbs and other places. Director and screenwriter Joan Micklin Silver looks backward and recreates the culture as she imagined it to be.

*Hester Street* is one of a number of films and television programs made in the 1970s that responded to a growing interest among Americans in their various ethnic heritages. Other such films include *The Emigrants* (1972), about Scandinavian immigrants settling in the Midwest; *The Godfather, Part II* (1975), which deals with Italian immigrants living on the Lower East Side; and *Roots* (1977), chronicling the heritage of Africans brought as slaves to the American South. This decade also saw such women as Micklin Silver enter the filmmaking industry as writers,

**Mamie:** *What is this, the old country? Is it Poland? Is it Russia?*

**Jake:** *She's 100 percent right, Joe. In America you marry for love.*

**Jake** (in Yiddish): *How do you like America?*

**Bernstein** (in Yiddish): *I'm trying to find my cousin Pincus Levinsky.*

**Jake** (in English): *. . . He'll soon find out that in America there's no such thing as relatives.*

**Sweatshop boss:** *I wasn't no boss in Lithuania. Give a guess what I was.*

**Bernstein:** *A peddler.*

**Boss:** *I told you already? Some country, America, huh? The peddler becomes the boss and the yeshivah student sits by the sewing machine. Some country, eh Jake?*

**Jake:** *You betcha!*

producers, and directors in unprecedented numbers. Women characters and women's issues consequently received increasing attention, as is the case in *Hester Street*, with the emergence of Gitl as the central character.

### **The World of Our Fathers (and Mothers)**

Irving Howe's landmark and now classic work *World of Our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made*, published in 1976, is an exceptional portrait of a people and time. From street life to labor unions to Yiddish poets, Howe covers every aspect of immigrant life, illustrating how new Americans tried to keep their Yiddish culture while making their way in a new society. That story is the background and foreground of *Hester Street*.

Many other writers have also chronicled the period. The Lower East Side has been called the Jewish ghetto, portal to America, and promised city. Hutchins Hapgood, a non-Jewish journalist, was enthralled with the area during the early years of this century and noticed a vitality that he felt lacking in the Yankee culture he came from. Jacob Riis, a slum reformer of Danish descent, saw habits leading only to filth and disease. More recent books by Harry Golden present a more favorable view, but one that is steeped in sentiment. An excellent resource for learning about the period is the *Forward*, whose pages chronicled Yiddish life and culture while familiarizing its immigrant readers with the styles and manners of their adopted home.

The story of Yekl/Jake and Gitl exemplifies the experience of many immigrants. From 1881 through the beginning of World War I, tens of millions of immigrants, mostly from Southern and Eastern Europe, arrived in America. Among these were some three million Jews, most of them from the Russian and Austro-Hungarian Empires. Most were Yiddish-speaking and brought with them the language and culture of their Eastern European homelands. The majority settled in large cities of the Northeast and Midwest. It was not uncommon for one member of a family to arrive first, alone – as Yekl did – and then work to accumulate funds for the rest of the family's passage. (Domestic abandonments and romantic betrayals were also not uncommon. The *Forward* ran a feature, "Gallery

of Missing Husbands,” with photographs of men who had deserted their families and pleas for their return.)

By 1910 there were more than a million Jews living in New York, making it the world’s largest Jewish population center – which it remains to this day. There were Jewish poets, doctors, criminals, and lawyers along with rabbis, tradesmen, and vagabonds. They came from a variety of backgrounds; all had different reasons for coming, different expectations of America, and different personal goals. Some in fact chose to come while others fled persecution.

The largest concentration of Eastern European Jews in New York was found on the Lower East Side, which was also home to many other immigrant groups. At the turn of the century, the Lower East Side was the most densely populated neighborhood in the world, with block after block of crowded tenements and busy commercial streets, where storefronts competed with pushcart peddlers. It also contained many sweatshops, devoted mainly to garment manufacturing, which had become a major industry in New York. Many Eastern European Jews, like those depicted in *Hester Street*, as well as Italians, Russians, and other recent immigrants entered the so-called needle trades.

The Lower East Side was also culturally dense, with a rich popular Yiddish culture as well as a respected high culture. Transplanted from Eastern Europe and further developed with an immigrant sensibility, Yiddish theatre, literature, and cinema flourished, as did social and political movements, and sports leagues. Several Yiddish newspapers competed for the newcomers’ attention. Local cafes were filled with immigrants engaged in never-ending conversation and debate.

Although most immigrants came with little of material value, they brought with them spiritual possessions, yearnings, aspirations, and a dedication to ideals. Not all Jewish immigrants were intellectual and idealistic, but there was a strong literate and activist current. Although diverse, the community was also cohesive. There was a shared language – Yiddish – and common religion; even nonbelievers grew up learning Torah. Immigrants also maintained their sense of Old World community cohesiveness by establishing *landsmanschaftn* (mutual aid societies) and synagogues organized by immigrants from

the same towns in Europe. Meanwhile, many of their uptown cousins – Jews from Germany and others who had immigrated in a previous generation – looked down on the newest arrivals.

Most Jewish immigrants quickly established a new way of life in America that combined aspects of their Old World heritage with New World culture. While many set about mastering the English language – an essential part of Americanization – Yiddish remained a vital means of communication within the immigrant community, as well as a link to the Old World. But Yiddish-speaking immigrants also found much of American life to be totally at odds with their European past. Many were unable to attain the social position or professional status they had enjoyed in the Old World. While some found life in an American city wonderfully liberating, others saw it as a serious threat to their ability to lead a traditionally pious life. Not only did the industrial urban environment make it difficult to observe such traditional practices as keeping the Sabbath, but many Jews felt that the New World lacked the atmosphere of piety they associated with the Old World. America was sometimes referred to by these Jews as a *treyfene medine*, an “unkosher country.”

Religion – commitment to the tradition – was a realm of both continuity and change. Some immigrants remained steadfast in their observance, despite additional hardships. For others, religious traditions were something of the past only, and they were eager to shave their beards, wear their hair loose, and shake off what they saw as encumbrances to becoming “real Americans.” Some adapted their religious practices, keeping some of the traditions and abandoning others.

Family and generational conflicts were commonplace. As Howe points out, a common theme in immigrant memoirs is the way family life suffered disruption because everyone went to work at different times, making it difficult for families to have meals together. Sons and daughters frequently learned English more quickly than their parents, and their “Americanization” – and potential assimilation – was hastened, exacerbating discord between the Old and New Worlds.

Many immigrants unburdened their hearts in letters to

newspapers, like the *Forward's* Bintel Brief (“A Bundle of Letters”) column. People sent emotional letters dealing with such problems as religious conflicts, poverty, love, business dealings, and more. Those unable to write had others compose letters for them; signs in store windows read “We write Bintel Brief letters.” A young, well-educated woman from Poland working to support her family wrote that she didn’t know how to react to the “foreman’s vulgar advances,” pleading that she was “one of those unfortunate girls thrown by fate into a dark and dismal shop.” A man who mourns the fact that his unfaithful wife has taken the children and deserted him closes his letter: “I know, dear editor, that you cannot advise me now, but for me it’s enough that I can pour out my suffering on paper. . . . I hope that my wife will read my letter in the *Forward* and blush in shame.” Advice was generally optimistic and upbeat, delivered in the third person (i.e., “the young man should. . . .”), directed to the letter’s author as well as other readers.

The story of *Hester Street* is told largely in terms of the transformations that immigration brings to the lives of individuals, in particular one young married couple – Jake and Gitl. Much attention is paid to changes in daily life: clothing, hair style, recreation, eating, shopping, even talking. One of the most daunting challenges facing these immigrants (as well as one of the most revealing changes in character in the telling of their story) is the shift from Yiddish to English as the language of their daily life. These changes are all linked to the greater, more fundamental transformation of the immigrant community. Through their daily routines, the immigrants confront the challenge of leaving behind the world of their childhood – its language, customs, and values – and acquainting themselves with a different world – modern, cosmopolitan, industrial.

As *Hester Street* demonstrates, each immigrant found his or her own way of responding to this challenge: some tried to embrace American culture as fully as possible, some tried to maintain their commitment to Old World ways. As the film ends, Gitl seems on the way to striking her own balance between the Old and New Worlds. She’ll call her son Joey, in deference to America, but will marry a man also reluctant to abandon his traditional religion.

**Jake:** *Gitl, you're in America.  
In America they don't go with  
shaytls.*

As in the film *East and West*, the two worlds literally meet, but in this case on American soil. It was Cahan who coined the term “allrightnik,” which aptly describes Morris Brown. Jake isn’t yet as assimilated as Brown; Gitl is already a bit more modern than Brown’s shtetl relatives. But whereas Jake looks down contemptuously on his tradition-minded wife and is embarrassed and angry about her un-American looks, Brown’s attitude toward his relatives is sentimental as well as patronizing. It is also significant that he meets his relatives on their turf, in the shtetl; perhaps bringing them to his American home would make him as contemptuous as Jake. The relationship between Molly and Jacob and that of Gitl and Jake can also be contrasted. The *East and West* couple shift from being different – one traditional, one modern – to both being modern; in *Hester Street* the couple shifts from being the same – two traditionally minded people in the shtetl – to being very different – one still traditional, one rushing to be modern.

### **About Abraham Cahan**

Abraham Cahan, author of *Yekl*, was one of the founders and a long-time editor of the *Jewish Daily Forward* (called in Yiddish *Forverts*, established in 1897), a New York-based Yiddish newspaper with the largest circulation (over 200,000 during the 1920s) that is still publishing, now on a weekly basis.

Born into a religious family in Padberberezer, Lithuania, in 1860, Cahan was forced to leave his home because of involvement in revolutionary activities. In 1882, he arrived in America with forty rubles and “the world’s salvation in his soul,” as he has written in his five-volume autobiography.

He began work in a Lower East Side sweatshop, but went on to become a teacher, labor organizer, orator, editor, journalist, and novelist, and was probably the most influential voice of Eastern European Jewry on American soil. Cahan interpreted American life to immigrants, and interpreted the immigrant experience to the American people through his novels, stories, and autobiography.

He spent fifty years as editor of the *Forward*, leaving for one five-year period to work as an English-language

investigative reporter. At the *Forward*, he wrote every kind of journalism – editorials, comic pieces, literary critiques – signing his name Ab. Cahan. Under his stewardship, the *Forward* ran articles whose tone ranged from sensationalism to high culture. “It is as important to teach the reader to carry a handkerchief as to teach him to carry a union card,” he said. As Howe has written, the *Forward* was both university and kindergarten, and Cahan saw himself as a guide for the masses.

Author William Dean Howells, the dean of American letters in the early part of this century, launched Cahan’s career as a novelist. After reading one of Cahan’s short stories in an obscure magazine, Howells sought out the author and urged him to write a novel. Cahan submitted the manuscript for *Yekl* to Howells, who kept sending it to publishers until it was accepted. Howells praised Cahan as “a new star of realism.” In an 1898 review of Cahan’s *The Imported Bridegroom and Other Stories of the New York Ghetto*, Howells wrote, “No American fiction of the year merits recognition more than this Russian’s stories of Yiddish life, which are so entirely of our time and place, and so foreign to our race and civilization.”

**Jake:** *This son of mine going to be president of the United States.*

### **From the Book to the Screen**

In adapting the novella three quarters of a century after it was published, Micklin Silver made a number of changes, deleting some sections and adding material that did not appear in *Yekl*. These changes reflect differences not only between Cahan and Micklin Silver but also between the historical and cultural contexts in which each worked.

*Yekl* was the first immigrant novel in English – written by an immigrant writer who observed American life through the eyes of his people. Silver’s different perspective is evident in the changed emphasis of her title. While *Yekl* focuses on the novella’s central character, Yekl/Jake, Hester Street refers to a place that is emblematic of a whole cultural phenomenon. Although it was one of the Lower East Side’s main shopping districts at the time, it is mentioned only in passing in the novella, when Jake teases a fellow immigrant that he is “afraid to budge out of Hester Street.” Yiddish-speaking immigrants often referred to Hester Street ironically as khazer-mark – literally, “pig

**Gitl:** *Good-bye. Go in good health* (yiddish).

**Bernstein:** *Say good-bye to the boy.*

**Gitl:** *May you have a boy of your own one day.*

**Bernstein:** *From your mouth to God's ears* (yiddish). *To have a son, you must have a wife.*

**Gitl:** *A wife you can get.*

**Bernstein:** *The one that I would ask, what if she would say no?*

**Gitl:** *What if she would say yes?*

**Bernstein:** *Mrs., what are you doing?*

**Gitl:** *I'm saying yes.*

**Bernstein:** *Thank you.*

**Gitl:** *You're welcome.*

market” – because it was so crowded, noisy, and dirty. But Micklin Silver uses the title *Hester Street* to link the film to a place that, for her generation, has both exotic and nostalgic connotations. She adds new details or whole scenes that depict the daily life of immigrants on the Lower East Side. Most notable are the street scenes, with their elaborate portrayals of vendors and pushcarts.

The change in title also coincides with a shift in protagonist. Whereas the dynamics of Jake's inner life are the center of Cahan's narrative, Gitl's transformation emerges as the dramatic focus in *Hester Street*. While information about Jake's personal history and psychological development from the novella are omitted, *Hester Street* features scenes involving Gitl that are considerably expanded from the original or are altogether new.

This shift reflects a growing attention to women and women's issues in film in the 1970s. For example, in the divorce scene in the novella, Gitl's appearance is described as “bewildered and as if terror-stricken.” When the rabbi questions Gitl, her answers must be prompted by her friend and neighbor, Mrs. Kavarsky, who has accompanied her to the rabbi's home. While Gitl responds “with an air of dazed resignation,” Jake gives his answers “with bravado.” At the conclusion of the ceremony, when Jake hands over the get (divorce decree) to Gitl and pronounces her divorced from him, Cahan writes that: “Her arms shook so that they had to be supported by Mrs. Kavarsky and by one of the witnesses. . . . Gitl closed her hands upon the paper as she had been instructed; but at the same moment she gave a violent tremble, and with a heartrending groan fell on the witness in a fainting swoon.”

*Hester Street* presents quite a different portrait of the couple as they formally end their marriage. Throughout the divorce proceedings, Gitl remains poised, even when asked to remove her wedding ring and to accept the get from Jake. Her dignified composure is contrasted both with Jake's furtive glances and fidgeting as well as with Mrs. Kavarsky's weepiness and chatter. Unlike Cahan's Gitl, the film's heroine is not afraid to look at her husband, she requires no prompting from others, nor does she faint at the end of the ceremony.

The views of Yiddish are also different in *Yekl* and

**Mrs. Kavarsky:** *Look at you.*

*Like a bubba with a patch on her head. Why should he love you?*

*Fix yourself. Look like a woman what lives in America.*

**Gitl** (in Yiddish): *I don't want to be a gentile, even for Jake.*

**Mrs. Kavarsky:** *What's the use.*

*I'm talking to the wall. . . . I'm as pious as you and I go with my own hair.*

*Hester Street*. Cahan's is satiric and derogatory; Micklin Silver's is reverential and nostalgic. In *Yekl*, language is emblematic of the immigrants themselves, whom Cahan describes as "a human hodgepodge with its component parts changed but not yet fused into one homogeneous whole." Although Cahan translates his characters' Yiddish speech into English, he imitates the sound and syntax of their dialect, indicating in italics the oft-mangled English words that they incorporate into their language. The immigrants' Yiddish is described as "jargon," and is presented as an exotic, coarse mixture of elements.

In *Hester Street*, characters speak both Yiddish and English. Here, it is their English that sounds awkward and ill-formed; Yiddish is presented as a legitimate foreign language (requiring subtitles) in which the characters appear fluent and expressive. For those viewers who know no Yiddish, the language's textures and cadences are offered as an authentic artifact of the past, much like the film's period costumes and furnishings.

*Hester Street*, Micklin Silver's directorial debut, was critically acclaimed. Made on a low budget of \$370,000, the film earned \$7 million at the box office. In a recent interview, Micklin Silver spoke about her attraction to the Cahan story: "I thought if I was to have only one chance to direct a movie, I would make it count for my family. While some immigrants don't like to talk about their roots, my parents were exactly the opposite, and I grew up hearing all these wonderful stories." Her 1988 film *Crossing Delancey* is also set on the Jewish Lower East Side – eighty years later.

**While you watch, consider:**

- ◆ What is the role of Yiddish in the film? When do the characters switch from one language to another?
  
- ◆ How is the contrast between Jewish life in the Old World and in the New World represented in the film?
  
- ◆ What are Jake's aspirations?
  
- ◆ How does each character deal with the challenges of immigrant life?

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

- ◆ How does this film compare to *East and West*?
- ◆ How does the conflict between Gitl and Jake relate to the conflict between Tevye and Khave?
- ◆ What do you think will happen to Jake and Gitl after the story of *Hester Street* ends?
- ◆ What does becoming a “real American” mean to newcomers? What is lost and what is gained?
- ◆ Did the immigrants view the shedding of their old ways as loss or liberation? How do you view it?
- ◆ Family members brought each other over from Europe, lived together, and for the most part helped one another. Is that spirit still part of our tradition?
- ◆ Today the Lower East Side is still an immigrant neighborhood, home to many new arrivals to the United States, most of them Asians and Latinos. What do you know about today’s American immigrant cultures that reminds you of the experience of East European Jews coming to New York at the turn of the century? In what ways are these cultures distinctive? In what ways are they a product of the time in which they have come to America and of the place from which they have come?
- ◆ Did the sheer density of the Jewish population on the Lower East Side promote cultural identity? Is a large number of participants necessary for a culture to flourish?
- ◆ What aspects of the vibrant Jewish life of the Lower

East Side are appealing? Have those things been sustained, or is it possible to recreate them? Is there anything unappealing?

- ◆ For the Yiddish-speaking Jews of the Lower East Side, newspapers, particularly the *Forward*, were part of their cultural lives. Do contemporary Jews have the same connection to Jewish newspapers? To The New York Times?

**SUGGESTIONS FOR READING AND VIEWING****Books and stories**

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- ◆ Cahan, Abraham. *The Rise of David Levinsky*. New York: Harper, 1960.
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- ◆ Howe, Irving. *World of Our Fathers*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1976.
- ◆ Howe, Irving and Kenneth Libo. *How We Lived*. New York: Marek, 1979.
- ◆ Metzger, Isaac, editor. *A Bintel Brief: Sixty Years of Letters from the Lower East Side to the Jewish Daily Forward*. New York: Schocken, 1971.
- ◆ Riis, Jacob. *How the Other Half Lives*. New York: Dover Press, 1971.
- ◆ Rischin, Moses. *The Promised City*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962
- ◆ Schoener, Allon. *Portal to America: The Lower East Side 1870-1925*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1967.
- ◆ Schreier, Barbara. *Becoming American Women*. Chicago: Chicago Historical Society, 1994.

**Films**

*Crossing Delancey*

*The Imported Bridegroom*

*The Forward: From Immigrants to Americans*