

**Yeziarska, Anzia. *Hungry Hearts*. Introduction by Blanche H. Gelfant. New York: Penguin, 1997.**

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*Hungry Hearts* (1920) by Anzia Yeziarska (c. 1880-1970) is an anthology of historical fiction – ten short stories based on the personal experiences of the author – all of which revolve primarily around the Lower East Side during the first decades of the twentieth century. Indeed, one of the most memorable features of these stories is the palpable manner in which they capture the essence of this much written about district, replete with its teeming life, noise, and squalor of immigrants, namely, those of east European Jewish extraction. Tying these stories together are repetitive protagonists, such as Shenah Pessah and Hanneh Hayyeh; as well as common themes, such as emigrating from the old country to the proverbial “golden country,”<sup>1</sup> and the accompanying disappointment and disillusionment. Most tragic of all is these protagonists’ discovery that, ultimately, America was not exactly the land of plenty – at least, not for them.

One of the elements throughout these stories that helps to preserve the ethnic Jewish tone of authenticity of the Lower East Side of the early twentieth century is the routine use of Yiddish idiomatic expressions in English. The following excerpt from the story, “The Lost `Beautifulness,”” in which the protagonist, Hanneh Hayyeh’s husband reprimands her for bringing financial troubles upon their family by having had their kitchen painted, is just one of many examples: “‘Oi weh! Oi weh!’ he whined. ‘I was always telling you your bad end. Everybody is already pointing their fingers on me! And all because you, a *meshugeneh yideneh*, a starved beggerin, talked it into your head that you got to have for yourself a white-painted kitchen alike to Mrs. Preston.’”<sup>2</sup> Ironically, at least from today’s perspective, the use of Yiddishisms and Yiddish-inflected voices in Yeziarska’s stories were a source of outrage on the part of

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<sup>1</sup> The “golden land” (or golden country) is a direct translation from the Yiddish: “goldene medine.” America was often referred to in these idealistic terms by Jews in Eastern Europe, and frequently, with cynicism and irony, by Jewish immigrants of east European extraction, who were already living in the United States. This expression is used both idealistically and cynically in *Hungry Hearts*. See, for instance: “They strained and stretched to get the first glimpse of the `golden country,’ lifting their children on their shoulders that they might see beyond them” (Yeziarska, 211). See also: “Was it then only a dream ... this age-old faith in America—the beloved, the prayed-for “golden country” (Ibid., 220)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 74.

Jewishly-identifying Jews in the 1920s, who even went so far as to accuse her of “employing Yiddish to evoke cheap laughs.”<sup>3</sup>

To a certain degree, it was this unpolished, hybridized manner of speaking that caused a generational rift between the older immigrant generation and the younger immigrant, or native-born generation. This distinction is made most salient in the ironically entitled story, “The Fat of the Land.” In this tale, the reader encounters a family in which the children of the immigrant protagonist, Hanneh Breineh, have essentially “made it;” they have become financially successful in their respective careers and have moved up from their humble origins on the Lower East Side. However, in contradistinction, their mother, Hanneh Breineh, cannot seem to leave her Lower East Side patterns of speech and mannerisms behind, thereby acting as a frequent source of shame and embarrassment for her now upwardly mobile children.

This generational rift may be reflected in the following words, uttered by Hanneh Breineh: “My children ... but—but I can’t talk myself out in their language. They want to make me over for an American lady, and I’m different.”<sup>4</sup> In a similar vein, Hanneh Breineh’s daughter, Fanny, acknowledges the fact that her mother will never learn to speak and behave like a civilized woman. As a result, Fanny concedes that she risks suffering both professional and social ostracizement (as seen in the following words, uttered by Fanny to her brothers):

You know mother. She’ll spill the beans that we come from Delancey Street the minute we introduce her anywhere. Must I always have the black shadow of my past trailing after me? ... God knows how hard I tried to civilize her so as not to have to blush with shame when I take her anywhere ... Whenever she opens her mouth, I’m done for ... but I, with all my style and pep can’t get a man my equal because a girl is always judged by her mother.<sup>5</sup>

But, unlike the outcome in “The Fat of the Land,” in which the protagonist ends up being well-provided for, thanks to her successful children (yet still disillusioned and feeling out of place in both her former and her current living surroundings), the other stories conclude before reaching such a stage. Overall, these stories tend to end on a sobering, nebulous, or falsely positive note. One such example is that of “Where Lovers Dream.” The protagonist of this story, Sara, relates the doleful account of how she was once deeply in love with David Novak, the

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<sup>3</sup> Delia Caparoso Konzett, “Administered Identities and Linguistic Assimilation: The Politics of Immigrant English in Anzia Yezierska’s *Hungry Hearts*,” *American Literature* 69, 3 (September 1997): 596.

<sup>4</sup> Anzia Yezierska, *Hungry Hearts* (New York: Signet Classic, 1996), 163.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

doctor-to-be. The two were even planning to marry, until one day when David was visited by his Uncle Rosenberg, who was paying for David's medical school education and strongly disapproved of Sara and her impoverished "greenhorn" family.

According to this uncle, as seen in the following words addressed to David, Sara and her family would be little more than a financial impediment to his future professional success as a doctor:

"... What has she got to bring you in for your future? An empty pocketbook? A starving family to hang over your neck?" ... "Ach! You make me a disgust with your calf talk! Poverty winking from every corner of the house! Hunger hollering from all their starved faces! I got too much sense to waste my love on beggars. And all the time I was planning for you an American family, people which are somebodies in this world, which could help you work up a practice! For why did I waste my good dollars on you?" ... "Gazlen, you want to sink your life in a family of beggars?"<sup>6</sup>

Not long following that visit, David's behavior toward Sara changed, until one day he simply left her. Some time thereafter, Sara learned that David had opened up a medical practice uptown. As time went on, Sara reveals, she married Sam, not because she loved him, but simply because "he came along and wanted me, and I didn't care about nothing more."<sup>7</sup> Sadly, this type of matter-of-fact attitude – even toward love and marriage – was typical of the harsh day-to-day realities and means of survival of the Lower East Side, as exemplified throughout the stories of *Hungry Hearts*.

One of the subjects highlighted in a number of these stories is that of charitable agencies and the individuals who dole out these various forms of charity to the needy immigrants of the airless tenement houses. More specifically, Yeziarska, who, like many of her east European Jewish *landsmen*, "resented the Americanization programs sponsored by reform-minded Americans of the Progressive Era, particularly the affluent and established Americanized German Jews,"<sup>8</sup> demonstrates in "The Free Vacation House" and "My Own People" the true motives behind, as well as the innate hypocrisy of many of these so-called "do-gooders."

For example, in "My Own People," there is a scene in which Shmendrick the shoemaker generously shares his few holiday food items – charitable gifts from a friend – on a non-holiday,

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 124-25.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>8</sup> Konzett, "Administered Identities," 596.

with Hanneh Breineh's ravenous children and other household members. As luck would have it, Mr. Bernstein of the charities happens to barge in unannounced around this time, only to turn an accusatory finger at Mr. Shmendrick, whom he declares, lied and deceived in order to obtain financial aid. In retaliation, Sophie Sapinsky, a border, launches into the following visceral reaction, prompted by the sheer false piety of the situation:

“Kossacks! Pogromshiks! You call yourselves Americans? You dare call yourselves Jews? You bosses of the poor! This man Shmendrik, whose house you broke into, whom you made to shame like a beggar – he is the one Jew from whom the Jews can be proud! He gives all he is – all he has – as God gives. He is charity. “But you – you are the greed – the shame of the Jews! All-right-niks – fat bellies in fur coats! What do you give from yourselves?”<sup>9</sup>

Sophie Sapinsky, Yeziarska's alter ego in this story, succeeds in capturing the self-righteousness, artifice, and double standards of the philanthropic and liberal betterment societies. In theory, these agencies were supposed to aid impoverished immigrants, yet in actuality, they were more concerned with “preserving established social and cultural hierarchies.”<sup>10</sup>

In all of these vignettes, the protagonists hunger in their hearts for something that will sustain them, be it the literal hunger that was so prevalent among the east European Jewish newcomers of the Lower East Side, as demonstrated in the aforementioned account; the hunger for life in the new world, a sentiment uttered by Shenah Pessah in “Hunger;” hunger for (true American) friendship, as desired by the narrator of “How I Found America;” the hunger for love that proved so elusive and had no rightful place amidst the ugly squalor of tenement houses, as seen in “Where Lowers Dream;” and the ultimate existential hunger to make something of oneself – something beyond mere physical subsistence – usually, through the channel of education. Indeed, this latter sentiment, which may be further understood in light of the following excerpt from “The Miracle,” is perhaps the most prevalent of the hunger drives running through these stories (as uttered by the protagonist, Sara Reisel, following a rather disheartening session with a matchmaker):

Suddenly, I sprang up from bed. “What can come from pitying yourself?” I cried. “If the world kicks you down and makes nothing of you, you bounce yourself up and make something of yourself.” A fire blazed up in me to rise over the world because I was

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<sup>9</sup> Yeziarska, *Hungry Hearts*, 199.

<sup>10</sup> Konzett, “Administered Identities,” 596.

downed by the world. “Make a person of yourself,” I said. “Begin to learn English. Make yourself for an American if you want to live in America...”<sup>11</sup>

In general, Yeziarska’s vivid imagery and use of idiomatic language enabled this reader to be transported back to the early part of the twentieth century, amidst the poverty and noise of Delancey Street and its environs. Thus, even though these stories are theoretically fiction (although they are steeped mostly in the author’s own past), they appear thoroughly factual and provide historically relevant insights into the hardships that immigrant Jews faced in the United States during the first decades of the former century. At the same time, even while trying to empathize with the protagonists and other accompanying characters, this reader could not help but find a certain degree of repetitiveness in the themes and remarks found throughout *Hungry Hearts*.<sup>12</sup> From this reader’s perspective, this tended to lessen the overall impact of some of these stories.

It would be interesting to further compare this collection of stories with other works by Anzia Yeziarska, of which the most noteworthy is *Bread Givers: A Struggle between a Father of the Old World and a Daughter of the New* (1925). Additionally, it would be worthwhile to read Yeziarska alongside other works that likewise capture the sound and flavor of the Jewish immigrant experience in early-twentieth century America. This includes such works as Mary Antin’s *The Promised Land* (1912) and Abraham Cahan’s *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917).

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<sup>11</sup> Yeziarska, *Hungry Hearts*, 106.

<sup>12</sup> Wendy Zierler echoes this sentiment regarding the repetitive nature of Yeziarska’s stories and its necessarily negative impact on the quality of Yeziarska’s work. According to Zierler, Yeziarska herself admitted to having a single story to tell – one about “hunger driven by loneliness” – and that she would relate that story a number of different ways. See: Wendy Zierler, “The Rebirth of Anzia Yeziarska,” *Judaism* 42, 4 (Fall 1993): 420.