

**Immigrant Lives Through Anarchist Eyes:
The Memories of Russian Jewish Immigrant Anarchists**

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INTRODUCTION

Anarchists were among the more than two million Russian Jews who left their homeland between 1881 and 1924. The majority immigrated to the United States. Unlike the migrations of other ethnic groups, this one was heavily dominated by women and family groups. For a variety of reasons, there are many more gaps in the history of these women than their male counterparts. I became aware of one such gap while researching in the University of Michigan's Special Collections Library. The library houses the Labadie Collection, a collection of papers from anarchists in the United States. Among the papers are those of Boris Yelensky and Judith Goodman. A memoir Yelensky wrote is over 400 pages. Goodman's is a mere four. This illustrates the great divide between the amount of written history available regarding men and women. Great strides have been made to increase documentation of women's history, but much work remains.

There is no indication that Yelensky and Goodman ever knew each other. However, similar social forces brought both of them to the anarchist movement. Both were active participants and escaped arrest by immigrating. Once in the United States, both Yelensky and Goodman started families. Each faced the difficulties common to most immigrants of the era. The fall of the Russian Tsar was welcome news to both, as well. Yelensky was soon traveling back to Russia to participate in the 1917 Revolution. Several years later he would return to the United States and would remain active among American anarchists for the rest of his life. Goodman remained in the States. Though she

continued to believe in the anarchists' utopian dream, she would never again enter the spotlight as she had in the pre-revolutionary days.

This paper will discuss the written and oral memories of Russian Jewish immigrant anarchists and the significance of these records within the context of Russian Jewish traditions and the development of collective memory. The focus will be on Boris Yelensky and Judith Goodman and the themes they both present that are representative of the movement as a whole. To add to the discussion, other works will be examined as well. Among these will be the autobiography of Marie Ganz and the work of historian Paul Avrich. Together, these four sources will demonstrate the intensity with which Russian Jewish immigrant anarchists lived their philosophy, as well as the charismatic aspects of the movement. Additionally, there will be an emphasis on gender and its effect on the recording of memory.

In order to understand the context in which these memories were formed and recorded I will first review literature regarding the history of Russian Jewish immigrants, both anarchists and otherwise. The work of Charlotte Baum, Paula Hyman, and Sonya Michel, Irving Howe, Ezra Mendelsohn, Naomi Shepherd, and Sydney S. Weinberg will be the basis for this review. I seek to understand the circumstances of the immigrants' lives in their homeland by analyzing what the factors were in their lives that brought these people to anarchism and to immigration. Baum, Hyman, and Michel focus on Jewish women in the United States, but also provide background of life for women in the Russian empire. Mendelsohn contributes toward the understanding of the role of Jews in the American union movement. Shepherd looks at Jewish women, both Russian and otherwise, as rebels, though not necessarily immigrants. Most helpful for the

understanding of immigrant lives in both the Old and New Worlds are the complimentary works of Howe and Weinberg.

Louise Tilly (1989) has argued that the “best women’s history...does not study women’s lives in isolation; it endeavors to relate those lives to other historical themes, such as the power of ideas or the forces of structural change” (p. 447). Therefore, certain aspects of this research will pertain to both men and women. Since it is the situation of women in which I am most interested, portions will be limited to the female perspective, particularly the issues in the life of a Russian Jewish woman.

Finally, I will review literature pertaining to the interplay of history and memory and the roles of individuals and groups in memory formation. I will concentrate on the writings of Maurice Halbwachs, Michael Kenny, Pierre Nora, and Lyn Spillman. Halbwachs (1992) work focuses on the collective memory of groups. Kenny (1999) discusses the development of collective memories from a group of individual memories. The focus of Nora’s writing (1989) is the way in which memory becomes history. The role of national identity over time is highlighted by Spillman (1998).