

The Educational Alliance: Beacon Of Light For An Immigrant Community

Immigrant improvement, one of the great American stories, is a social saga of large ambition, breathtaking audacity and, alas, petty snobbery and condescension. It is history both raw and cooked, a roiling mix of human ingredients that makes for a compelling historical repast.

This was so in particular when the Lower East Side served as a place of refuge for countless Russian Jewish immigrants and their families fleeing tsarist pogroms. Into this milieu in 1889 a remarkable institution came into being -- the Educational Alliance, located at 197 East Broadway, New York City. Founded and funded by German Jews with the aim of Americanizing Yiddish-speaking Jews and their families, the Alliance ran morning classes for children, night classes for immigrants, classes in cooking and sewing, music and art, two summer camps, and much, much more.

The Educational Alliance took over the work of the Hebrew Free Schools Association but broadened it considerably. Under the leadership of Vilna-born David Blaustein, an educator and communal worker, it became the most important social-educational institution for the Americanization of immigrants. Indeed, during Blaustein's tenure, the standard of social work rose considerably as the long history of its professionalization began.

Few alumni associations in the nation can boast as stellar and far-reaching a constellation of graduates as that of the Educational Alliance. Its roster, reading like a "Who's Who of American culture," includes Felix Frankfurter, Morris Raphael Cohen, Sir Jacob Epstein, Ben Shahn, Eddie Cantor, David Sarnoff, Chaim Gross, Moses and Raphael Soyer, Geiorge and Ira Gershwin, and Zero Mostel.

The Educational Alliance archives at YIVO contain boxes upon boxes of pictures, studies, and reports, both printed and hand-written, in which uptown/downtown conflicts are often the order of the day. Take for example the following quote from an exasperated uptown counselor, which appeared in a 1902 summer camp report:

"It is a discouraging fact, but nonetheless true, that the East Side boy despises manual labor of whatever sort. He has not learned Emerson's "nobility of labor" nor Ruskin's "duty and love for work." Aside from intellectual exertion, all work seems menial to him. Boys had to be literally driven to make their beds, to sweep their rooms.

"The Lower East Side boy loathes vegetables largely because he does not know them as food. Lettuce is called "grass" and not eaten, cauliflower is meant for cattle, beans for people with nothing better to eat. Table manners, not to mention the usual conventions of decency and good breeding, are absent."

A far more sympathetic note is struck in the reminiscences of Sam Franko, a distinguished violinist in his day who gave freely of his time training an Alliance children's orchestra, which included young Jacob Gershowitz who later changed his name to George Gershwin:

"This class was composed of about thirty-five members, ranging from ten to fifteen years of age, and distinguished more by ambition than by talent. The parents, however, most of them immigrant Russian Jews, thought their offspring to be geniuses and became most indignant, almost insulting, when I was obliged to refuse to accept the one or the other. ... The young students never missed an opportunity to accompany me to the subway station, each armed with a violin case. After class I often took the whole group into a restaurant and let them choose what they would from the menu, and I was often surprised by their modesty and good behavior."

Zero Mostel, who left an overcrowded apartment for art classes at the Alliance, "had never seen such big rooms before." Joseph Rolnick, a Yiddish poet who was also a garment worker, found the peace and quiet he needed in the Alliance's Aguilar library on a Sunday morning to finish a poem. Russian-born writer Maurice Hindus liked nothing better than taking an armful of books from the Aguilar library's bountiful shelves, sitting at a table and turning the pages. In a myriad of ways the Alliance was and is a trailblazing institution for generations of Americans in the making.

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