Struggles between Nationalism and Ethnicity in Eastern Europe and the United States, 1890s-1910s: The Life Writings of M.E. Ravage and Michael Gold

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Abstract

This article analyzes the life writings of Jewish American authors Marcus Eli Ravage and Michael Gold, both of Romanian parentage but representing two different literary generations and two different ideological commitments. I argue that both authors revisited the dominant form of early twentieth-century immigrant autobiographies by other fellow Jews. These much-celebrated stories primarily foregrounded the embrace of the American Dream by a variant of the rags-to-riches narrative, under the guise of upward mobility stories of successful Jewish immigrants who culturally assimilated to American norms. Ravage's An American in the Making *offers a twist to this dominant narrative by his emphasis on the embrace of American cultural citizenship over American legal citizenship as the Jewish immigrant's path to success. Gold rejects altogether the above rags-to-riches narrative and redefines Jewish identity in the Lower East Side as a working-class identity upholding a proletarian culture.*

Introduction

M.E. Ravage: Jewish Ethnicity and Polarized Nationalism in Eastern Europe and the US

Michael Gold: Exposing the Dark Side of American Nationalism via the Working-Class Lens

Conclusions

Introduction[1]

In the early twentieth century a dynamic struggle between nationalism and ethnicity was in full swing. During this period, the consolidation of many nation-states occurred. In the region of Eastern Europe, Romania had long been under foreign domination and only established itself as an independent national state in the second half of the nineteenth century.[2] Romania therefore continued to feel threatened by the possibility of foreign intervention and control, one of the causes of Romanians' growing xenophobia and distrust of foreigners at the turn of the twentieth century.[3] It was in the wake of Romania's formation as a nation-state, from 1866 until the declaration of independence in 1877, that the great wave of Eastern European Jewish emigration occurred, from the 1880s to the 1920s, when some 2.5 million Jews settled in the United States. The majority of them came from the Russian Empire (around 1.5 million, i.e. a third of the total number of Jews living there and around 40 percent of the number of people emigrating from Russia to the US at the time). Simultaneously, some 67,000[4] of the approximate 269,000 Jews of Romania[5] also emigrated to America at the time. Even if the numbers were significantly smaller than those from Russia, the impressive feature

[1] Research for this paper was supported by a grant of the Romanian National Authority for Scientific Research, UEFISCDI, for grant no. 38/2018, PN-III-P1-1.1-TE-2016-0697, *Witnessing Destruction: The Memory of War and Conflict in American Auto/biographical and Documentary Narratives*.

[2] Romania emerged and consolidated itself as an independent nation-state in the period 1859-1914. For a thorough historical analysis of the mechanisms of this process in connection to the making of Romanian citizenship in modern Romania; Constantin Iordachi, *Liberalism, Constitutional Nationalism, and Minorities: The Making of Romanian Citizenship, c. 1750-1918* (Leiden: Brill, 2019).

[3] Ghitta Sternberg, *Stefanesti: Portrait of a Romanian Shtetl* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1984), 3 and 27-28; Leon Volovici, *Nationalist Ideology and Antisemitism* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1991), 2.

[4] The exact number of Jews emigrating from Romania to America between 1881 and 1910 is 67,057, with the peak of emigration occurring from 1900 to 1904; Samuel Joseph, "Jewish Immigration in the U.S. from 1881 to 1910," (PhD diss, Columbia University, 1914), 93.

[5] The number of Jews living in Romania according to the 1899 census, before the start of the large out-migration of Jews, was 269,015; previously, the Moldova census of 1859 reported 118,922 Jews living in Moldova and the 1860 statistics from Walachia counted 9,234 Jews in its territories. See further details about the demographic evolution of the Jewish population in Romania at the time in Carol Iancu, *Evreii din România (1866-1919). De la excludere la emancipare* (Bucharest: Hasefer, 2006), 148-150.

of Romanian Jewish emigration consisted in the fact that Romanian Jews represented 89.8 percent of the total number of immigrants from the country to the US during the peak years of emigration from 1899 to 1910 and 80 percent for the whole period of mass migration.[6] Taking this historical reality as a departure point, my paper examines the effects of the consolidation of the national state in the early twentieth century on those Jews whose feeling of territorial belonging to a nation-state was missing, and was replaced by identification with a set of ethnic values. I will focus on the life stories of two Jewish American writers of the era, Marcus Eli Ravage and Michael Gold, both of Romanian parentage but representing two different literary generations and two different ideological commitments. The aim of my comparative endeavor is to pinpoint the main signposts of the national versus ethnic confrontation from the perspective of different generational and ideological stances, as represented by these two Jewish American writers.

My selection of these two writers was prompted by their being contemporaries, as they were born within a decade of one another (Ravage in 1884 and Gold in 1893). I also chose them because their books about their life stories were highly successful and widely read in the US, thereby with a high potential of impacting American readers' views. At least partially, both authors also shared a Romanian background as Ravage was born of Romanian Jewish parents and Michael Gold's father was a Romanian Jew, while his mother was of Jewish Hungarian descent. Nevertheless, one clear difference between the two authors follows from their birthplaces: Bârlad (Romania) for Ravage; New York (in the US) in the case of Gold. On the one hand, Ravage is the immigrant individual assessing the new host society by direct comparison to the country of birth. On the other hand, Michael Gold is the American-born Jewish son of Eastern European immigrants, indirectly linked to his parents' previous nations. The difference, then, amounts to American citizens belonging to distinct generations.

[6] Samuel Joseph, "Jewish Immigration in the U.S. from 1881 to 1910," 168; Joseph Kissman, "Immigration of Rumanian Jews up to 1914," *YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Science* 2, no. 3 (1947-1948): 161 and 176-177.

My choice of these two writers is also motivated by the fact that the fictionalized accounts of their life stories focused on approximately the same period, namely the first decade of the twentieth century. Ravage's *An American in the Making* (1917) foregrounds the author's life in Romania until his emigration and continues with his experiences in the United States from his arrival in 1900 until 1907.[7] Gold's *Jews without Money* (1930) focuses on the author's childhood memories from the age of five, broadly covering the period between 1898 and 1905.[8] Here I will investigate if there is a change in perspective on their part on the relation between Jewish ethnicity, Romanian nationalism and American nationalism, starting from the fact that one was an immigrant Jew to the US and the other an American-born Jew, and following the input of the authors' ideological beliefs.

M.E. Ravage: Jewish Ethnicity and Polarized Nationalism in Eastern Europe and the US

M.E. Ravage (né Marcus Eli Revici) was born in 1884, in Bârlad, Romania. He spent his childhood in the neighboring city of Vaslui and emigrated to the US in 1900, when he was 16. He initially lived on New York's Lower East Side where he Americanized his name to Max Ravage. He became a naturalized American citizen in November 1912. He settled in France in 1927 and died in 1964.[9] His autobiography *An American in the Making* was first published in 1917 by Harpers and Co. A new edition containing an added fifth part about his return to Romania after twenty years appeared in 1936. The book was then republished by Dover Publications in 1971 and by Rutgers University Press in 2009. The book's focus on

[7] Marcus Eli Ravage, *An American in the Making: The Life Story of an Immigrant*, ed. Steven G. Kellman (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2009).

[8] Michael Gold [alias of Irwin Granich], *Jews without Money* (New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 1996).

[9] Dana Mihăilescu, *Eastern European Jewish American Narratives, 1890-1930: Struggles for Recognition* (Lanham: Lexington, 2018), 29-31.

migration from Romania to New York as a variant of the rags-to-riches success story determined its adoption as a high-school text across the US.[10]

Ravage's initial publication of his life-story in 1917 followed in the footsteps of a few like-minded English-language autobiographies by Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe to the US at the turn of the twentieth century. These autobiographies highlighted the authors' success at becoming American through their hard work, changed attitudes and mastery of American English. They included: Simon Polack's *The Autobiography of Simon Polack* (1904), Mary Antin's *From Plotzk to Boston* (1899) and *The Promised Land* (1912), Edward A. Steiner's *From Alien to Citizen* (1914). Similar topics were developed at the same time in highly successful fictionalized accounts of fellow Eastern European Jewish immigrant authors, such as Elias Tobenkin's *Witte Arrives* (1916), Abraham Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917), or Anzia Yezierska's *Hungry Hearts* (1920). The most successful publication among all was Mary Antin's *The Promised Land* (1912), a best-selling paean to the United States, which had an immediate impact, and "became the immigrant's Horatio Alger story" of success.[11] Antin's memoir focused on her immigration from a shtetl in Polotzk (misspelled as Plotzk in her 1899 narrative, a Lithuanian province under the rule of the Russian Empire), and the discrimination she experienced there, to Boston in 1891. Therein, Antin celebrated the US as the melting-pot land of opportunity in which impoverished and obscure immigrants like herself could achieve literary or other types of renown.

Significantly, when Ravage's autobiography was published, a reviewer commended it in connection to none other than Antin's recently published work, which had evidently become the standard piece on how an immigrant should write

[10] Steven G. Kellman, introduction to *An American in the Making*, by Ravage, xix. It should also be noted that, apart from his successful autobiography, Ravage's name has also remained in circulation over time in connection to his articles "A Real Case against the Jews" and "The Jew: Commissary to the Gentiles," originally published in *Century* magazine in 1928, as satirical pieces decrying the hypocrisy of Christian Antisemitism. Nazis and far-right groups then appropriated and republished these articles illegally, with a distorted meaning, as promoting Antisemitism and hate speech.

[11] Ibid., xiv.

one's life story. Bernard Iddings Bell noted about Ravage's book that, "It has a vitality that most biography lacks. Its sociological sidelights upon the life of our newer population even Miss Antin never was able so vividly to give."[12] Indeed, Ravage's autobiography offered a twist to the genre of immigrant autobiography established by Mary Antin by his use of introspection, self-reflection and social critique to forge his identity as an American. As Ravage straightforwardly noted in the introduction, his autobiography provided to American readers a Jewish immigrant's gaze on nationalism and identity in Romania (or Eastern Europe, more broadly) and the US. To that end, Ravage structured it in five parts that together sketched the trajectory of a Jewish individual from an "alien" to an American citizen. This was apparent from the very titles he chose for each section. The five chapters of Part I, "The Alien at Home," spoke about the situation of Jews in Romania, the author's birth country. The six chapters of Part II, "The Alien Abroad," focused on the initial contours of the Jewish immigrants' encounter with America, after arrival in New York. The five chapters of Part III, "The Education of an American," highlight how the immigrant learned about American ways through his experiences in New York's job market and the US educational system. The four chapters of Part IV, "America of the Americans," suggest that he only learned of deep America on going to college in Missouri, and it is only at this moment that he acquired an American national identity. Finally, the two chapters from Part V, "Postscript—Twenty Years Later," include the details of the author's return trip to Romania; the poverty, discrimination, and prejudice he once again found there cemented his embrace of the American national identity he had acquired.

As indicated by the book's title and the topics of its five parts, Ravage's autobiography was an unconventional immigrant narrative that challenged the possibility of an immigrant's complete transformation into a "composite" American. Unlike the majority of the era's Jewish and non-Jewish immigrant autobiographies, in Ravage's memoir it is not just the act of immigration but primarily the "internal migration," once within the US, from New York's Jewish

[12] Bernard Iddings Bell, "An Immigrant's Biography: Review of *An American in the Making*," *The Public: A Journal of Democracy* 21, no. 1031 (May 4, 1918): 576-577.

neighborhoods to mid-western Missouri that is central to his acquiring an American national identity.[13] In this respect, Cristina Stanciu has astutely demonstrated how Ravage's autobiography "differs tellingly from other contemporaneous immigrant autobiographies in that his search for cultural citizenship takes primacy over legal citizenship."[14]

The introduction to *An American in the Making* announces the subsequent structuring of the book along the lines of the struggle between ethnicity and nationalism in which the immigrant figures as the better educator: "Only from the humble immigrant, it appears to me, can he [the free American] learn just what America stands for in the family of nations."[15] This stems from the initial explanation of the immigrant's background: "He, unlike the older inhabitant, does not come into its inheritance by the *accident of birth*. Before he can become an American he must first be an immigrant. More than that, *back of immigration lies emigration.*"[16] This passage positions the immigrant in a particular relation with nationalism, that in turn allows the author to become American on his own terms, as his book suggested. This stance may be read as a foray into the outcome of the struggle between ethnicity and nationalism in Romania and the United States.

Firstly, Ravage gives a number of reasons for the segregated identity the Jew is ascribed to after migration to America. They comprise different clothes, bad language practices, different food and manners: "in his incredible *garb*, as he walks off the gang-plank, he appears like some sort of an odd, moving bundle"; "[h]e sells nondescript merchandise in *fantastic vehicles*, does *violence to the American language*, and sits down on the curb to eat *fragrant cheese and unimaginable sausages.*"[17] Here Ravage paradoxically establishes his initial conformity to Jewish

[13] Cristina Stanciu, "Marcus E. Ravage's *An American in the Making*, Americanization, and New Immigrant Representation," *MELUS* 40, no. 2 (2015): 1-25.
[14] Cristina Stanciu, "The Makings and Unmakings of Americans: Indians and Immigrants in American Literature and Culture, 1880-1924" (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2011), 251.
[15] Ravage, *An American in the Making*, 7.
[16] Ibid., my emphases.
[17] Ibid., my emphases.

ethnic culture by suggesting the failure to correspond to the claims of the American gaze as to American identity. Such American identity markers involve meeting the requirements of specific costumes, social, literary, and media practices, the vernacular and food, aspects which are necessary for national invention.[18] Hence, he identifies that the basis for the American segregation of Jewish culture lies in the presence of the above "mediate connections." These are "imaginary forms of connectedness" rather than "immediate" forms of kinship (i.e. blood/descent) relations.[19] This is a case of civic vs. organic national identity.[20] Thus, Ravage's emphasis is that American nationalism functions on markers of cultural construction and not on the ties of blood, on aspects allowing variation and change having here a divisive function for Jewish immigrants in relation to the Gentile American community. Relevantly, in the passage above, Ravage adopts the average American's attitude at the sight of the Eastern European Jew. In this sense, all the implied claims make no reference to matters of descent but only concentrate on traits that represent a matter of agency and volition. By this emphasis, Ravage suggests that, in America, Jews are judged on the grounds of their consent to the country's articles of faith. On this cultural basis, the Jew initially qualifies as an "alien" *other*.

Before reaching the US, Jewish identity in Romania also amounted to the position of the *other* (as an "alien" lacking citizenship rights). In Romania, the Jew's otherness was predicated at the level of official state ideology and following an ethnic basis. Part I of *An American in the Making* highlights this. Ravage first inserts such claims indirectly, in patenting the birth of the American exceptionalist myth on the return of the author's cousin, significantly named Couza,[21] from the

[18] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised edition (London: Verso, 2006), 6-7 and 25-36; Werner Sollors, ed., *The Invention of Ethnicity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), xiii.

[19] Sollors, *The Invention of Ethnicity*, xii.

[20] Anthony D. Smith, *The Nation in History: Historiographical Debates about Ethnicity and Nationalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 24-31 and 38-53.

[21] The cousin's name is reminiscent of the name of prince Alexandru Ioan Cuza under whom the United Principalities of Moldova and Wallachia were established in January 1859, becoming in 1862 the Romanian United Principalities, the precursor of the Romanian nation-state. Cuza's election as prince inaugurated the democratic social, political, and legal transformation of the principalities,

US in 1899: "There was a country somewhere beyond seas where a man was a man in spite of his religion and his origin."[22] Here, in celebrating the American precept of human equality he implies that it was absent in Romania, where religious and ethnic discrimination were dominant in the post-1866 decades.

The book continues with a series of concrete examples supporting Ravage's critical stance towards Romania's descent/organic type of nationalism. They comprise "the discriminations of the Government against us."[23] Here, the Jewish community is placed as separate from the Romanian national community by means of the use of "us" as a separate group marker. Ravage then explains that the grounds for the Jewish *other* position in Romania are represented by legal discrimination as well as by educational, religious, and economic restrictions targeting Jews. For instance, in the passage below, Ravage carefully expresses how the force of law in fact nullified an apparently open position towards Jews as a matter of "justice":

> Supposing I wanted to study law, then "aliens" were not eligible to the bar. The ministry? Rumania forbade the establishment of rabbinical seminaries. Well, I could go in for medicine, if only the Government allowed him to earn the means of seeing me through. But justice had taken precious care that he should not. When he had engaged in storekeeping in the country and had, by hard toil, succeeded in making a comfortable living, a new law had legislated him and all his kind back into the towns. Later on, when he had entered the family occupation of candle-manufacturing, an import tax on the raw materials and a heavy export tax on the finished product suddenly rendered the trade unprofitable. Wine and tobacco still brought tolerable incomes, but he was no more permitted

implying an open attitude towards minorities, including Jews. Ousted from power in 1866, Cuza had initially established the adoption of the inclusive, assimilationist French legal model for Romanian citizenship (allowing also non-Christian Jews to become Romanian citizens) which was reversed in 1866 "by an ethno-national understanding of citizenship during the establishment of the constitutional monarchy under a foreign prince," see Iordachi, *Liberalism, Constitutional Nationalism, and Minorities*, 28-29 and 218-221.

[22] Ravage, *An American in the Making*, 25.

[23] Ibid., 38.

> to deal in these articles than I was to study and practice the profession of law.[24]

In fact, official anti-Jewish laws in Romania operated on different levels. These laws involved inconsistent policies towards the Jews that reflected the main actors' social position, ideological orientation, and regional affiliation. [25] First geographical and economic restrictions were enforced. Such were the decrees that forbade Jews to be lawyers (in 1864), pharmacists (in 1869), railway employees (in 1871), part of the administration in tobacco companies (in 1887), and a law from 1873 which forbade the Jews' right of settlement in villages and their right to open hotels or restaurants.[26] Yet, by far, the most important problem was that of political discrimination, given the absence of Jewish political representation and the Romanian leaders' obsession with defining Romanian spiritual life on the basis of the central elements of "*Romanianism, ethnicism, Orthodoxism.*"[27] Article 7 of the Romanian constitution adopted in 1866 stipulated that only Christian foreigners could become Romanian citizens, keeping Jews as "aliens" irrespective of how long they had lived in Romania.[28] The article was revised in 1879,[29] allowing for the possibility of unchristian foreigners to become Romanian citizens but only on the basis of individual naturalization, which resulted in an insignificant number of only 85 Jews receiving it between 1879 and 1900. Despite the international pressures at the Congress of Berlin from 1878 that the recognition of Romania's independence be conditioned upon its granting of full civil and political rights to all its citizens, irrespective of their religious affiliation, Romanian

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[24] Ibid., 38-39.

[25] Iordachi, *Liberalism, Constitutional Nationalism, and Minorities*, 265.

[26] "Les Israélites de Roumanie," *Bulletin de l'Alliance Israélite Universelle* 2, no. 25 (1900): 25; Moses Gaster, "The Jews in Roumania," *The North American Review* 175, no. 552 (1902): 664 and 666.

[27] Volovici, *Nationalist Ideology and Antisemitism*, 3.

[28] Article 7 of the 1866 Constitution read as follows: "doar străinii de rit creştin pot obţine calitatea de român." (Only Christian foreigners can become Romanian citizens). See C. Hamangiu, *Constituţiunea. Codul Civil* (Bucharest: Carol Müller, 1897), x, footnote 1.

[29] According to the 1879 revised article 7 of the Romanian Constitution, "3. Naturalizarea nu se poate acorda decât prin lege şi în mod individual. 5. Numai românii, sau cei naturalizaţi români pot dobândi imobile rurale în România." ("3. Naturalization can only be granted by law and on an individual basis. 5. Only Romanians, or naturalized Romanians, have the right to possess rural housing in Romania.") See Constantin Hamangiu, *Constituţiunea*, xi.

authorities responded with a subterfuge. They merely modified article 7 of the 1866 Constitution to permit (but not guarantee) the naturalization of Jews.[30]

The legal situation of Romanian Jews in the period between the Congress of Berlin until after World War I, when full civil rights were to be achieved, the situation decried by Ravage in his memoir, was therefore highly problematic. During this time, the Western countries' insistence that Romanian independence only be recognized after the authorities had granted Jewish emancipation led to the subsequent proliferation of restrictive legislative provisions. This was caused by Romanian officials' frustration at what they considered the international powers' illegal involvement in the domestic affairs of their newly created state.

In response to all this, the intellectual and political circles of Romania resurrected their antisemitic, xenophobic feelings. They not only blamed the Jews for invading the country, taking hold of its subsistence means and ruining its traditions, hence being the epitome of capitalism. They also held Jews accountable for their alleged refusal to assimilate and for plotting with Romania's foreign enemies, especially Hungary, to deter the country from reaching its highest ideal, an internationally recognized Greater Romania.[31] Historian Constantin Iordachi analyzes all this in detail and distinguishes three stages of Romanian authorities' policies towards the Jews between 1859 and 1914, with the third stage from 1878 to 1914 (applicable in Ravage's case) being the most radical period. It was during this third stage that Romanian officials abandoned their previous plans for the assimilation and integration of Jews, which could have led to their emancipation.[32] Instead, they supported an anti-assimilationist policy aimed at increasing the segregation of Jews in order to prompt their emigration from Romania. Only in 1919, in a newly

[30] Joshua Starr, "Jewish Citizenship in Rumania (1878-1940)," *Jewish Social Studies* 3, no. 1 (1941): 58-64.

[31] Raul Cârstocea, "The Path to the Holocaust: Fascism and Antisemitism in Interwar Romania," *S:I.M.O.N – Shoah: Intervention. Methods. Documentation* 1 (2014): 45; Volovici, *Nationalist Ideology and Antisemitism*, 7-20.

[32] Iordachi, *Liberalism, Constitutional Nationalism, and Minorities*, 266-67.

revised Article 7 of the Constitution,[33] Romania pledged to recognize Romanian citizenship to the Jewish inhabitants who did not possess any other nationality.

It is essentially this third period of discrimination from 1879 to 1914 which Ravage records in his book, since he focuses on the period from the 1890s until 1900, the year of his emigration. It was during this period of time that Romanian authorities transformed previous "strategic" economic rights into political rights available to Romanians only and eliminated the distinction they had previously made between indigenous and foreign Jews (in the 1864 Communal Law which had conferred on indigenous Jews some political rights at the local level). As a result, all Jews became "aliens" and a threat to the Romanian economy.[34] This political and lived reality explains Ravage's choice of the word "alien" in his memoir as a recurring term and structuring device meant to represent Romanians' escalating discriminatory anti-Jewish attitude.

Significantly, it was in 1900 that the economic depression from the previous year and the escalating anti-Jewish laws transformed the emigration of Romania's impoverished and desperate Jews in a real "exodus."[35] Jews decided to walk out of Romania and gave rise to the Fusgeyer movement, that took both the gentile and Jewish Western communities by surprise, as indicated in the 1900 issue of the Bulletin de l'Alliance Israélite Universelle.[36] The *fusgeyers* (Yiddish for wayfarers) were groups of Jews that began to migrate out of Romania after the economic depression of 1899 and after new discriminatory laws and educational restrictions that targeted the Jews of Romania and rekindled antisemitic feelings. These Jews

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[33] Article 7 from the 1919 Paris Treaty of Peace stipulated that "România se angajează să recunoască ca supuşi români, cu drepturi depline şi fără nici o formalitate, pe evreii locuitori ai tuturor teritoriilor României şi care nu pot să se prevaleze de nici o altă naţionalitate." (Romania engages to recognize full Romanian citizenship to the Jewish inhabitants of Romanian territories not belonging to any other nationality, [my translation]). It resulted in Romania's issuing the law-decree of May 22, 1919, on the emancipation of Romanian Jews. Carol Iancu, *Evreii din România (1866-1919)*, 290 and 343-344.

[34] Iordachi, *Liberalism, Constitutional Nationalism, and Minorities*, 352-399.

[35] Dana Mihăilescu, "The Jewish Fusgeyer Migration Movement from Early Twentieth-Century Romania as Transcultural Rhetorical Tool in US Memorial Literary Culture," *MELUS* 45, no. 1 (2020): 139-141.

[36] "Les Israélites de Roumanie," 28.

organized themselves in groups; because they lacked money to pay for a train ride, they started on foot primarily towards the port of Hamburg in order to get a passage across the ocean, especially to the US or Canada.[37] As described by the main historian of the movement, Israel Bar-Avi, these groups by and large walked out of Romania from April to July 1900.[38] The first such group was formed in Bârlad in May 1899 and left on April 20, 1900, printing the single issue, four-page newspaper *Daţi ajutor* (*Give help*) on April 22, 1900[39]; they sold it to amass money for the travel expenses ahead of them. In the chapter "To America on Foot," Ravage explains how he joined such a group of "emigrants on foot" that turned up in Vaslui in mid-May 1900 and was modelled on the first Fusgeyer group from Bârlad. His emigration to the US took place as part of this walking group.[40] Even if around 80% of emigrants were within the 15 to 30-year-old age range, as in the case of the early wayfarers of Bârlad and Vaslui, gradually older Jewish men, women and children also started to leave. These vulnerable newcomers, that could easily become social burdens, soon made the US and Canadian authorities establish criteria of admittance, according to which young pre-forty-year-old healthy, skilled young men were welcome, while women, children and old men were repatriated and asked to remain at home.[41]

Most likely because he was unaware of it at the time, Ravage's memoir does not touch on the contemporary efforts of the various Western Jewish agencies to halt the spontaneous, unorganized emigration of Romanian Jews from late 1899 and 1900. These agencies worked to establish an organized emigration of only those Jews that were young, well-built, were skilled workers and could work hard, so as to prevent the complete ban of Romanian Jewish emigration, especially on the part of the US.[42] In response to Canadian and US authorities, that in 1900

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[37] Wilhelm Filderman, *Memoirs and Diaries*: *Volume 1, 1900-1940* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2004), 88.

[38] Israel Bar-Avi, *O istorie a evreilor români. Volumul 1. Emigrările anului 1900* [A History of Romanian Jews. Volume 1. Emigrations from the Year 1900] (Jerusalem: Cenaclul Literar "Menora," 1961), 52.

[39] *Daţi ajutor*, Bârlad, April 22, 1900: 1.

[40] Mihăilescu, "The Jewish Fusgeyer Migration Movement," 139-141.

[41] Bar-Avi, *O istorie a evreilor români*, 68-69.

[42] "Les Israélites de Roumanie," 28-30; 33.

prohibited a number of Romanian Jews to enter their territories (namely women, old people, and money-less men who could not support themselves by work),[43] the above criteria for organizing Romanian Jews' emigration were already in place as 16-year-old Ravage migrated to America. The criteria resulted from the collaboration of various American Jewish agencies, most famously B'nai B'rith, the Alliance Israélite Universelle, the Anglo-Jewish Association of London, Jewish communities of Brussels and Vienna, various German communities, and the American and Canadian governments.[44] This new policy was caused by the fact that especially the American authorities were literally taken by surprise by the upsurge in Romanian Jewish migration on foot in 1900, since overall Jewish immigration rates had been decreasing throughout the 1890s.[45]

In contrast to the above-delineated complex situation of Romanian Jewish emigration to the US from the 1900s, Ravage's memoir offers a more simplistic image in which the US position towards Jews amounts to a welcoming open-door policy. It represents, as such, the exact opposite to the Romanian authorities' discriminatory stance. As a case in point, in Ravage's book the Jewish *other* position in the United States is related to reasons other than bloodline, namely to markers of cultural construction. As presented by Ravage in part 2, the reasons for the *other* position of the Jew in America are twofold: the American incorrect idea of the immigrant, who is not "the raw material Americans suppose him to be,"[46] but rather the bearer of a deep-rooted tradition that comes in conflict with the New World; and the Jewish habit of establishing relations based on the lines of descent that exist back home, which is incompatible with the American system.

Max, the narrator, is used as a case in point, following his gradual shift, in America, from descent-based connections to those based on consent. At first, blood connections are fundamental for Max's good start in life in the "Little Rumania" ghetto on the Lower East Side, given his expectations of receiving help from his

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[43] Ibid., 29; Lara Rabinovitch, " 'The Gravest Question': Romanian Jewish Migration to North America, 1900-1903" (PhD diss., New York University, 2012), 160-165.

[44] "Les Israélites de Roumanie," 28; Rabinovitch, " 'The Gravest Question'," 1-4, 188-202, 207-227 and 303-355.

[45] Rabinovitch, " 'The Gravest Question'," 185.

[46] Ravage, *An American in the Making*, 48.

cousin Couza: "my *kinsman* would do [something] for me", "set me to making money in one of his factories" or "use his great influence with the American Government."[47] The same idea persists in connection to the meaning ascribed to the notion of family in Romania: the family is based on cross-generational inheritance of professional secrets and on religious continuity. Thus, the pride of a family was in its "godliness and in its respected forebears" and what passed from generation to generation were "copper utensils" and "silver candelabra."[48] In America, the meaning of the family was related to the initial continuity of the descent-based society, as in the case of Max's first job in the barroom with employers that also served as his foster family. This shows that the immigrant's initial encounter with the US was with the America of his fellow-immigrants. As a result, the questions Max answered in order to get employment were "about my family, how long I had been in America, what I had done before."[49] In other words, one's past bloodline credentials rather than skills were the main criteria for job ascription within the confines of the congested Jewish Lower East Side ghetto in New York.

Subsequently, Max's first employers, Mr. and Mrs. Weiss, acted as parents for him in the new land. While Mrs. Weiss focused on educating Max on courtesy, outfit and appearance, Mr. Weiss initiated him to his professional secrets. Just like a Jewish father, Mr. Weiss would also keep Max's wages, since a child's responsibility to his parents, even if he was toiling for strangers, was "to hand over their earnings to the father."[50] However, Max soon sensed in Mr. Weiss's advice not just the disinterested sharing of experience, but the material self-interest of the employer hidden behind the three rules of bar-room work. Those were honesty (excluding the fear of being cheated); no drink (except when the customer pays, as it brings more money); and patience (as it is needed not to lose a customer).

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[47] Ibid., 50.

[48] Ibid., 60-61.

[49] Ibid., 86.

[50] Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted: The Epic Story of the Great Migrations That Made the American People* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1956), 215.

Discovering the primacy of economic profit under Mr. Weiss' mask of fatherly care, Max gradually became aware of the different realities of the American environment. At the outset, Couza's wife had taught Max the first lesson of self-reliance by telling him that "in America there were not such things as relatives, that money was a man's best friend, and that the wisest course to pursue was to depend on oneself."[51] Yet, it is only after his own personal experience in accord with the woman's words that Max really started to change his attitude and behavior.

In his search for work he had initially considered job offers as "advertised appeals for help," which he found to be in contradiction with "the arrogant indifference of the employing superintendent" at the office.[52] Such job offers were understood as help on the employee's side when in fact this was just a means of selection among many applicants in the name of efficiency and low wage costs. While competition among Jews existed also in Romania because of the restrictions that the authorities imposed upon the community, Max discovered that in America competition was primarily a matter of the employer's profit. Put differently, capitalism was the rule of thumb in the US.

Later on, after entering the market system, Max finally discovered that in America, unlike Romania, a person was not identified with a single stable occupation but with several that had no bearing with a person's worth. He exclaimed:

> Men were engaged in given lines of work and business. But their occupations were not permanent things. They did not chain them down to any definite place in the scheme of existence. What a man did in no way determined his worth or circumscribed his ambitions. Peddling and hawking and the sewing-machine were just so many rungs in the ladder. A dingy apartment in the tenement was merely a stage in the march toward a home in Brownsville or a shop in the Bronx. The earth was young and fresh from the hand of the Maker, and as yet undivided among His

[51] Ravage, *An American in the Making*, 50.
[52] Ibid., 66.

> children. That was another distinctive superiority of America over Romania.[53]

In light of this, Max's decision to leave the bar for better wages in the garment industry illustrated the shift undertaken from the position of the *other* to that of *another*, i.e. to a man that had the same rights as those guaranteed to any American citizen by the system of democratic justice. This implied successful upward mobility via cultural assimilation. On going to college at the University of Missouri in the heart of the US, he extended this view of America by noting that the anti-Jewish ideas he heard did not amount to the venomous Antisemitism he had encountered in Romania. Instead, he noted, "There was not a trace of venom in the yarns. Why, these chaps had not the remotest idea what a Jew was like! Their picture of him was the stage caricature of a rather mild individual with mobile hands who sold clothing and spoke broken English."[54] He concluded that Americans did not run on "race prejudice" or "class exclusiveness"; instead, he commended the American national spirit according to which "[t]he genuine American recognized but one distinction in human society—the vital distinction, between the strong, effectual, 'real' man and the soft, pleasure-loving, unreliant failure."[55] In Romania the *other* Jew could not become *another* because he did not have the position of a citizen by virtue of unchangeable official law. In America the Jewish position was seen by Max, Ravage's narrator, as simply a matter of distinct cultural-economic values and not of legislative descent-based restrictions.

Nevertheless, once the individual agrees to analyze the other's culture and its tenets, one realizes America is not a country where one gets anything for free. In Ravage's narrative, Max learns to believe only in potential gain following the quality of his own experience and contribution, beyond the descent-based regulations of the "Old World" that Couza tried to impose on him, in the imperative language typical of legislation: "I ought to be ashamed for even asking them to pay me after the return I was making them for their parental kindness. Was I aware that the very clothes I was wearing were theirs, and that they had tried

[53] Ibid., 90.
[54] Ibid., 142.
[55] Ibid.

to educate me into an American and a business man?"[56] In Max's own words: "now I had bettered Couza's own instruction. I had found the America he had seen in a dream."[57]

On returning to Vaslui after twenty years, Max is determined to tell his former friends what real America is like, "the America that lived and breathed, a land of imperfect men and human institutions, but with the blessing of heaven and the promise of salvation upon them."[58] Max's final ideas here amount to celebrations of the potential offered by the US, seen as a culture of hope as opposed to the certainty of loss he rediscovers in the Romanian culture of repression. Through these choices, Ravage uses a binary-type of construction in which Romanian nationalism stands for a destructive descent-type traumatic paradigm disseminating discrimination and prejudice, while American nationalism functions on hope. In his book, this latter aspect echoes Ann Rigney's definition of nationalism as "'civic virtue' and as a minimum condition of democracy," sustaining civic action and the struggle for a better life, because it conceives of attaining it as a possibility and not an inevitability.[59] In Romania, the prodigy child of Max's youth, Nicu Russu, had not been able to enter university because of practical problems: he had been wounded in World War I and later, having a family, he completely abandoned the prospect of university studies. After learning how the local prodigy's promising life has been annulled, Max embraces his national identity as an American by stating: "What in the world was I doing here anyway? I belonged somewhere else. I was an American. I had always been one."[60]

Yet, alongside the Romanian case, one cannot ignore that America too makes the Jewish immigrant aware of his difference from the others because of a separate background. Still, because of this emigrant's relocation into a society of consent, Ravage highlights the possibility of bridging the gap, in contrast with a descent-based society like Romania, where everything seems to be officially fixed in stable,

[56] Ravage, *An American in the Making*, 91.
[57] Ibid., 92.
[58] Ibid., 192.
[59] Ann Rigney, "Remembering Hope: Transnational Activism beyond the Traumatic," *Memory Studies* 11, no. 3 (2018): 370.
[60] Ravage, *An American in the Making*, 209.

unchanging patterns. In other words, like another already mentioned contemporary Jewish immigrant from the Russian Empire, Mary Antin, Ravage is aware of the complex response to Jewish immigration in the early twentieth-century American context. Nevertheless, he very clearly chooses to emphasize the American democratic model as an ideal of liberal society in contrast with the persecution of Eastern European repressive regimes. Hence, Ravage's entire sense of criticism is directed against European nationalism.

In fact, in 1923, Ravage published a non-fictional book entitled *The Malady of Europe*, in which he offered a comparative outlook on European and American nationalism in the shadow of the recently finished World War I. Therein, the author explicitly criticizes the European national system, in contrast to the American, for its "provincial separatism,"[61] which he sees as an outgrowth of grounding nationhood on ideas of blood kinship and community of origin coupled with the primacy of Christianity. Ravage notes that nationalism in itself is not a negative notion. On the contrary, he interprets it as "the instinct for fellowship written large," "an intensification of the social impulse, a broadening of the family group."[62] Based on this, according to Ravage, nationalism is in itself "a stage in the progress toward internationalism,"[63] which he sees as the European equivalent of the democratic model of Americanism. Yet, the problem that he identifies in Europe is that of arresting this positive growth toward internationalism through the evil inheritance of the past. He especially decries Europe's wars, waged in the name of economic imperialism by regimes that keep many hinterland peoples oppressed, subordinate and in the condition of inferior subjects under the "foreign domination" of an imperial power,[64] resulting in a society of suspicion and exclusive self-interest. Or, as he further explains: "The spirit of discord [...] has inflected the instinct of fellowship and made nationalism a sickly craving for revenge and self-sufficiency. It has made every little people in Europe see in its neighbor across the frontier an enemy, a potential master and despoiler, a demon who will not let other people live their own life as they

[61] Marcus Eli Ravage, *The Malady of Europe* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1923), 18.
[62] Ibid., 39.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Ibid., 43.

choose."[65] With a keen eye, Ravage records here the disastrous effects that the fear fostered by great European powers had on small countries like his native Romania. This materialized in many Romanians' attitude of suspicion and a tendency to distrust any other nation as a potential despoiler. As a result, Romanian authorities multiplied privileges for the mainstream descent group and discriminatory practices towards the other ethnicities on their territory.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, Ravage poses American nationalism, defined as a "breakaway from the European system of nationalistic exclusiveness and dissension." He goes on to celebrate America in idealistic terms, as the land where the notion of the foreigner or "alien" no longer applies for European immigrants:

> [America] was the continent of Refuge where the race of Europe made a new start, where men and women shed the swaddles of nationality, ceased to be the pawns of states, and became simply people. She had left behind the class idea of descent; she had got rid as well of the racial notion of blood. She had contrived by a beneficial therapy of fresh air and freedom to cure the inherited malady of Europe—to abolish the foreigner; [...] it was a voluntary adherence to an association of men of all origins on a new and rational principle.[66]

Ravage's vocabulary here reverberates with Sollors' notions of "descent" and "consent." Ravage presents descent as a negative constricting norm of the negative European power field, while he celebrates consent to cultural markers as America's superior model of democracy which he totally embraces.[67] Unlike Antin, who also directs her criticism to the unfairer aspects of America's justice system, Ravage chooses to almost exclusively use America as a positive model while virulently criticizing the repressive European systems he left behind. The reason behind this is his primary concern with the need to change European conditions and norms of

[65] Ibid., 45.
[66] Ibid., 74-75.
[67] Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

life, hence his critical stance primarily targets Europe and uses the positive aspects of American democracy as a model to follow.

Overall, in his writings, Ravage uses the criteria of political representation, legal dispositions, and cultural confrontation as categories of assessment, and he conceives Romanian and American nationalism as entertaining an opposite relation with Jewish ethnicity. The former implies negative connotations of subordinated existence, lack of citizenship and the negative power of normative restrictions and prohibitions. The latter is associated with the positive undertones of self-assertion, open access to knowledge and inquiry.

Michael Gold: Exposing the Dark Side of American Nationalism via the Working-Class Lens

Born Itzok Granich on New York's Lower East Side in 1893, Michael Gold was the son of Jewish immigrant parents. He first changed his name to a more Anglo-American version, Irwin Granich and, in the 1920s, he began to use the pen name of Michael Gold. His Jewish Romanian father, Charles Granich, had immigrated from Iaşi in 1885, while his Jewish Hungarian mother, Kate Schwartz, had immigrated from Budapest in 1886. Given his place of birth, Michael Gold is in another category than M.E. Ravage, since his perspective on poverty and oppression does not come from the vantage point of a direct comparative outlook on both Europe and the US. His standpoint comes from the society in which he was born and lived, a tenement neighborhood in the Lower East Side. The author was a popular Communist speaker and debater who edited the party journal, *The New Masses*, from 1928 to 1930. He also wrote for other leftist journals like *The Liberator* (from 1921) or *The Daily Worker* (from 1933). However, he was not a member of the party committee but the symbol of the committed writer, to whose name is associated the birth of proletarian literature in the United States in the 1920s.[68] The source of this affinity towards the poor was Gold's individual

[68] Morris Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark: A Cultural History of the Great Depression* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2009), 21.

experience of tenement life. This made the author envision a proletarian revolution as the only possible therapy and way to remain true to the mother who fought boss and landlord and pawnbroker to protect her brood."[69]

Gold's autobiographical works echoed those of other fellow Jewish American authors who grew up in poverty and chose to write about their immigrant parents' difficult lives in the early twentieth century, as the Depression hit the US. Most famously, such were also Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep* (1934) and Tillie Olsen's autobiographical pieces published in 1934 in the *Partisan Review.* These left-wing writers' works drew attention to people's suffering, dehumanization and exploitation, "portraying poverty as a social pathology" in the context of the 1930s Depression-era fascination with the lives of people that had been made "invisible" by mainstream US society's "almost religious faith in American prosperity, equality, and social mobility."[70] They did that by using the style of ethnic modernism, which treated both "the fragmentation of the urban experience and the exploitation of immigrant labor, establishing a middle-ground between art and politics" in "a desperate attempt to keep together both the self and the community as (fragmented) wholes."[71]

Michael Gold published his fictionalized memoir, *Jews without Money*, in March 1930, just as the Great Depression was showing its first signs in the US. Since its focus was on the miserable life of Jewish immigrants on New York's Lower East Side, its topical subject-matter resulted in its huge popularity, including eleven printings by October 1930, and its translation in eleven languages. It then fell into oblivion primarily because of the author's political commitment to Communism and his staunch criticism of capitalism in articles that he published in leftist papers until his death in 1967.[72] The book actually brings together the exploitation of immigrant labor force with the fragmentation of urban experience that modernist authors were putting forth at the time.[73] As such, his book cannot simply be

[69] Ibid., 22.
[70] Ibid., 18.
[71] Sostene Massimo Zangari, "Between Political Commitment and Literary Modernism: Michael Gold's *Jews without Money*," *Polish Journal for American Studies* 4 (2010): 34.
[72] Ibid., 33.
[73] Ibid., 34.

discarded as merely a propaganda piece for Communism, like his later writings. The book actually consisted of "brutal snapshots of street and tenement life," Gold's outright ethical commitment to Communist ideology only appearing on the last page.[74] It is also relevant as the author's attempt at developing a modernist artistic principle and a counter-piece to both the staunch Antisemitism circulating in the US at the time and fascism that was on the rise as he was writing the book. Gold himself acknowledged this fact in the Author's Note he wrote in April 1935 for a new edition of the book, stating: "The defense of the Jewish race against these fascist liars and butchers has become one of the most necessary tasks for every liberal and radical."[75]

Sostene Massimo Zangari shows the modernist character of *Jews without Money* by comparing the changes Gold made to its beginning with the explicitly proletarian preliminary sketch he published in *The Masses* in 1917, entitled "Birth. A Prologue to a Tentative East-Side Novel."[76] In that preliminary piece that Gold published under his birth name, he started by correlating his birth with the poor, decrepit neighborhood of the Lower East Side, with its streets "dark with grey, wet gloom," everything looking like "a prison."[77] Zangari points out how the author made some changes to "the prison metaphor and the use of dark colors [in 'Birth']" that formed the initial coordinates of his life in which "the East Side [w]as a wretched neighborhood." In *Jews without Money*, the focus shifted "onto the sounds and the physical presence of people," on the street culture and its tenements, conveying a sense of bohemia and not just radicalism and proletarian concerns.[78] Corinna Lee echoes Zangari's point by highlighting how the 1966 paperback reissue of *Jews without Money* omitted the last dozen lines of the original version that provided a revolutionary Communist message announcing the author's conversion to the "worker's Revolution" following his futile job

[74] Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark*, 22-23; Zangari, "Between Political Commitment and Literary Modernism," 42.
[75] Gold, Author's Note, *Jews without Money*, 11.
[76] Irwin Granich, "Birth: A Prologue to a Tentative East Side Novel," *The Masses* (1917): 27-28.
[77] Ibid., 27.
[78] Zangari, "Between Political Commitment and Literary Modernism," 35 and 41.

search, thus doing away with Gold's "political signature."[79] Lee explains how this followed the 1960s interest of the publisher, Avon, to "capitalize on the book's East Side setting" and use the neighborhood not as the site of revolutionary identity that Gold had envisioned in 1930, but as "the site of the ethnic and popular cultural memory in the invention of immigrant America" that the place had become by the 1960s.[80] For Lee, the book is not simply a nostalgic recovery of immigrant or ethnic roots (Jewishness as a shared ancestry of immigrant poverty and experience of assimilation). It is also "a literary-political effort to root socialist Jewish identity—an alternative to American assimilation—in the culture of the East Side ghetto."[81] To that end, the ghetto appears as "a symbol of immanent economic injustice" created by a capitalist society.[82]

The book's topic immediately caught people's attention as it appeared in 1930, at the beginning of the Great Depression, which set the framework for an audience sympathetic to those living in poverty and receptive towards anti-capitalist messages. Lee proposes reading Gold's depiction of the impoverished Jewish masses in the context of the contemporary nativist resurgence (see the 1921 and 1924 American quota laws that directly hit impoverished Eastern European immigrants) and Hitler's rise to power. To support her claim, she uses the author's note to the 1935 new edition of the book, in which Gold invokes the life of his mother, "a brave and beautiful proletarian woman," as "the best answer to the fascist liars I know."[83] His insistence on "Jewish identity *as* a revolutionary working-class identity"[84] functions as a counterpoint to "pervasive racial stereotypes of Jews as wealthy, greedy, and conniving people" at a time when "anti-

[79] Corinna K. Lee, "Never Forgetting the East Side: Michael Gold's *Jews without Money*," *MELUS* 40, no. 2 (2015): 30-52.
[80] Ibid., 31-32.
[81] Ibid., 32.
[82] Ibid., 37.
[83] Gold, Author's Note, *Jews without Money*, 12; Lee, "Never Forgetting the East Side," 44. Alan M. Wald further shows how Michael Gold continued to develop this nexus of left-wing attachments with anti-fascism in the press articles he wrote in 1944-1945: see Alan M. Wald, *Trinity of Passion: The Literary Left and the Antifascist Crusade* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 75.
[84] Lee, "Never Forgetting the East Side," 48.

Semitism had reached unprecedented heights in Europe and the United States."[85] Gold therefore wrote this book to draw people's attention to a class minority among the Jews of America, the poor and working-class that had been rendered invisible by the prevalent image of upwardly-mobile Jews that Eastern European Jewish immigrant authors like Antin, Ravage, Cahan, Yezierska had so successfully presented. Lee, however, only focuses on the role of Gold's mother as a catalyst of her son's redefining and embracing "Jewish identity *as* proletarian identity."[86] She just passingly notes that Gold's father was a progressive-minded immigrant (of the type presented by Ravage, Antin, Yezierska, etc. at the time) who failed to change his fortunes.[87] I will actually pinpoint the father's fundamental role in Gold's perspective and what it entails for how he saw the relation between ethnicity and nationalism.

Gold openly rejected the early twentieth-century Jewish immigrant authors' embrace of the American Dream and the rags-to-riches narrative, which their autobiographical and fictionalized works presented under the guise of upward mobility stories of successful individuals. He did that in a 1918 review article published in *The Liberator* in which he discussed Abraham Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky* and Elias Tobenkin's *The House of Conrad*. Published under his real name, Irwin Granich, the review made ample references to Mary Antin, the time's most successful Jewish author, who patented the positive embrace of the American cultural model to be adopted by Jewish immigrants. Gold/Granich discarded Antin as "the bright slum parvenu who wrote that exuberant book of gratitude called 'The Promised Land'"; he challenged Antin to join him in one "particular allotment of her 'Promised Land'," a Lower East Side tenement which he thought was "exactly like the one my parents came from in Europe, only it is larger and viler," keeping the Jew, as in Eastern Europe, "a drudge and a slave"

[85] Ibid., 38. The spread of Antisemitism both in Europe and the United States found a response in the rise of a transnational Jewish anti-fascism supported by leftist, pro-Soviet individuals in the 1930s and 1940s, with anti-fascism becoming an important component of Jewishness. See especially Max Kaiser, " 'A new and modern golden age of Jewish culture': Shaping the cultural politics of transnational Jewish antifascism," *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 1, no. 3 (2018): 287-290.

[86] Lee, "Never Forgetting the East Side," 44-48.

[87] Ibid., 42.

living "in poverty and pain."[88] With ironic references to America as the Promised Land, Granich/Gold took to task the immigrant autobiographical narratives of the likes of Antin and Ravage because they generalized the pattern of just a few "[individuals that] rise from the mass," while "there are always the tenements remaining after them, and the deep, silent hordes toiling on in darkness, even in America." [89] Through these claims, Granich/Gold discarded the Jewish immigrant proponents of America such as Antin, Ravage, Cahan, Tobenkin, Yezierska, etc. as unfair justifiers of the American democratic national image because they contributed to the perpetuation of the illusion of the American nation as "an open society by showcasing spectacular cases of individual rise."[90]

In fact, Granich/Gold himself only gives a partial account, that ignored the fact that the same immigrants' narratives included depictions of struggles and tension. For instance, he fails to mention that in 1914 Mary Antin followed with an amendment to her initial "pledge of allegiance" to the American national culture from *The Promised Land*; and even in this initial work some nuances about the hard lot of vulnerable immigrants, like Antin's sister, Fetchke, had already been included. [91] In fact, in 1914 Antin published a non-fictional work about immigrants, *They Who Knock at Our Gates*, in which she changed her celebration of American individualism and upward mobility via cultural assimilation into an ethical reckoning about the US, criticizing America's anti-immigration feelings and the Dillingham Commission's report from 1911 which established immigrant inferiority.[92] As I have already shown, Ravage's 1917 autobiography itself was unconventional as an immigrant narrative, in that it challenged the possibility of an immigrant's complete transformation into a "composite" American and focused on cultural citizenship over legal citizenship. However, since such works emphasized Jewish individuals' success at upward mobility as the outcome of their

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[88] Irwin Granich, "Surveys of the Promised Land," *The Liberator* (July 1918): 32.

[89] Ibid.

[90] Lee, "Never Forgetting the East Side," 41.

[91] For further details, see the sub-chapter "Fetchke's Missed Encounter with America: Towards an Ethics of the Vulnerable," in Mihăilescu, *Eastern European Jewish American Narratives*, 101-108.

[92] Mary Antin, *They Who Knock at Our Gates* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1914). For a detailed analysis of Antin's 1914 account, see Mihăilescu, *Eastern European Jewish American Narratives*, 108-116.

cultural adoption of the American national values of education, thrift, hard work, competitive spirit and determination, Granich/Gold understood them as epitomes of the "usual bourgeois answer," upholding a discriminatory US capitalist society.[93]

In response, Gold's *Jews without Money* radically revises the dominant immigrant narrative genre as defined by Antin, Ravage, etc., that supported the American national progressive agenda. Gold does this by making his central concern that of representing not some few individuals that have become successful in the US, as Antin and Ravage did. Instead, Gold focused on the large numbers of those who were left behind and trapped in poverty, using as the main example his own father. In this respect, Gold's narrative aims to prove his claim from his 1918 review that "America smites its idealists as bitterly as any nation of the old world. The immigrant who comes here with a vision had better give it up, or be crushed."[94]

In my analysis, I understand Gold's leftist commitment in keeping with Alan M. Wald's perspective. I interpret it as a result of Gold's negotiations between a negative personal experience and the force field of the institutions in which he lived. In this sense, I believe that the turning point in Michael Gold's life was represented by the death of his father Charles in 1911. The self-employed salesman Charles had proved to be incompetent in economic matters and illness finally destroyed him. For the author, his father's death came to represent a life-long belief that "the prevailing social system was at fault for never giving his father a chance to reach his full powers."[95] As a result, in *Jews without Money* (1930), his father comes to epitomize the dreamy victim of a capitalist society who remained unaware of the forces destroying him. After his father's death, Gold tried to soothe his personal pain by channeling his anger against an inegalitarian social order. In other words, it was not simply the Communist ideology that forged Gold's credo, witnessing his father's downfall and experience of poverty also contributed to

[93] Granich, "Surveys of the Promised Land," 32.

[94] Ibid., 33.

[95] Alan M. Wald, "Inventing Michael Gold," in *Exiles from a Future Time. The Forging of the Mid-Twentieth-Century Literary Left* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 46.

cementing his leftist world outlook, that in turn could provide an explanation for his father's fate, as well as that of oppressed people. He found that solution in Communism, through which he strongly advocated that, if they existed, Jewish identity configurations should be based on class alliances.[96]

Like Ravage, Gold also begins with a description of the Lower East Side as the setting of Eastern European Jews fleeing discrimination: "The Jews had fled from the European pogroms; with prayer, thanksgiving and solemn faith from a new Egypt into a New Promised Land. They found awaiting them the sweatshops, the bawdy houses and Tammany Hall."[97] Here, unlike Ravage's focus on a positive paradigm of improvement that seems to be possible in America's democratic regime, Gold foregrounds a traumatic paradigm of deprivation and disempowerment that marginalized poor Jews in the US too. For Gold, Jews' struggle in America results from the dire economic conditions they faced at work, from the profusion of prostitution in poor neighborhoods, and from the political corruption in which the manipulation of people in need was a key device.

Lacking Ravage's advantage of a direct contact with both Romanian and American national practices, for Michael Gold Romanian nationalism resides only in the observation of his father's attitudes in comparison with the larger American culture. In fact, like Ravage, Gold maintains the image of Jewish discrimination in relation to Romanian official policies. Yet, unlike Ravage, he does not locate American nationalism in opposition to the Romanian case but in continuity, stressing that its guiding principle of material profit (also identified by Ravage) is equally harmful for Jewish ethnic assertion. Thereby Gold also fights bourgeois nationalism. His viewpoint can be explained by what lies in the background of the Communist political ideology that Gold embraced. This background consisted of his personal and cultural experiences, which informed his allegiance to the ideology of an anti-national, anti-assimilationist Jewish leftist politics that was "firmly situated at this time in an international context of Jewish antifascism."[98]

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[96] For a detailed biography of Michael Gold's life, see Wald, "Inventing Michael Gold," 40-65.

[97] Gold, *Jews without Money*, 15.

[98] Kaiser, " 'A new and modern golden age of Jewish culture'," 299.

To understand Gold's deep-seated commitment to the Communist ideology, of particular importance is Gold's traumatic experience of his father's death in 1911, when he was 18 years old. Gold's real-life father Charles was a self-employed suspender maker and salesman, owner of a manufacturing shop with several employees. In that, he differs from Herman, the narrator's father in *Jews without Money*, who is a working-class house painter. Yet, like Herman, Charles Granich was economically incompetent but a great storyteller and theater connoisseur (fond of telling his fascinated son Old World tales and dramatizations of Yiddish and European plays). Unfortunately, Charles soon fell ill and died in 1911, after several unsuccessful suicide attempts during the previous year. In fact, this personal traumatic experience led Michael Gold to his radical leftist position as a way to "assuage his personal pain by channeling anger in the direction of an inegalitarian social order."[99] More precisely, Wald notes how "Charles Granich's death was [...] decisive in his son's leftward turn, for Gold formed the belief that the prevailing social system was at fault for never giving his father a chance to reach his full powers."[100] Put differently, the emotional turmoil of Gold's youth made him embrace a new world outlook which could provide an explanation for his father's fate, for Gold's own situation and that of other oppressed people; he found a solution in radical socialism. I suggest that his solution grew out of his inhabiting a different vantage point than that of M.E. Ravage. If Ravage used the lens of a comparative outlook between European and American societies that he had both known firsthand, Michael Gold judged the European-transplanted problems of national identity from the vantage point of the society he knew and in which he was born, the tenement society of the United States. Given this, he saw his family's poverty, oppression, and unemployment not as an individual problem but as an outgrowth of America's economic pragmatism, which denied recognition to the human face in the name of employers' profit and the employees' blind struggle for upward movement.

One episode from the early 1917 sketch from *The Masses*, entitled "Birth," includes the father as a combination of a progressive-minded, idealist Jewish immigrant and

[99] Ibid., 48.
[100] Ibid., 46.

a downtrodden working-class man due to East Side poverty. Gold therein introduces his father as follows:

> My father was a slim, clear-shaven, unusual kind of Jew, who had been the gay blacksheep of his family in Rumania, loving joy and laughter as only young thoughtless people can love them. He had capped a career of escapades by running away to America and freedom at the age of nineteen, and had struggled unhappily since then. [...] The poverty of the golden, promised land had eaten his joy, however, and mostly I knew him as a sad, irritable, weakly sort of father, who drank in the troubled times when the family needed him, and who loved us all to maudlinity.[101]

Gold's father's idealism concerning the US—presented here as the English variant of the "goldene medina," "the golden promised land"—is smothered by Gold's over-emphasis on "poverty" in the entire piece. At the same time, Gold connects the image of his father to an innocent idealism by mentioning how he never grew up: "My father was never anything but a child, and hunger and pain and toil and meanness he never grew accustomed to, as grown men must. He hated them without understanding them, as a child hates the rod."[102]

At the beginning of *Jews without Money*, Gold also paints a picture of his father as a progressive-minded individual in search of a bourgeois lifestyle, describing how he organized the celebration of his son's fifth birthday: "My father was young then. He loved good times. He took the day off from work and insisted that I be given a birthday party. He bought me a velvet suit with lace collar and cuffs, and patent leather shoes. In the morning he insisted that we all go to be photographed. He made me dress my sister in the Scotch plaid. Himself he arrayed in his black suit that made him look like a lawyer."[103]

Throughout the rest of the book, the image of Herman, the narrator's father, is associated with a pattern that revealed his propensity to relate his life with that of

[101] Granich, "Birth," 27.
[102] Ibid.
[103] Gold, *Jewish without Money*, 19.

other immigrants from Romania, each time resulting in his being tricked by friends sharing a common ancestry as Romanian Jews. There are three such instances in the book, related to a boarder sharing the family's abode, a business associate, and a physician.

Firstly, following a custom typical of the Jewish ghetto in early twentieth-century America, Mike's family takes boarders from among the new immigrants. These newcomers would usually be housed for a little period of time until they could begin a life on their own. Such is the case of Fyfka the Miser, the immigrant boarder who is introduced as "the friend of a cousin of a boyhood friend of my father's."[104] Yet, instead of staying for a couple of weeks, Fyfka remains for seven months. A week after arrival, he gets a job at a pants factory, being paid eight dollars a week out of which he only contributes the money to buy his breakfast. In the evening, his strategy is to sit in a chair and longingly watch the others eat until he is invited to join them; he pays no rent and goes nowhere, as "he needed nothing."[105] Consequently, in the seven months spent in the Golds' abode Fyfka saves two hundred dollars and begins to set out a plan to start a business. What Fyfka's situation shows is that Herman's humane intentions of helping a fellow-native start a new life in the new host society are not answered by the same sense of humane treatment. Instead, the response he gets is an extreme sense of self-interest in which the previous shared experience of persecution in Romania, so cherished as a source of mutual understanding, has lost its relevance.

Further on, one reads of Herman's decision to escape his underpaid job of house painter and become his own boss by asking for help from his old acquaintance in Romania, Baruch Goldfarb. This was a successful man from the East Side as well as a Tammany Hall politician, Zionist leader, and owner of a dry-goods store. Gold's words below clarify the logic behind Herman's idea of friendship, namely his expectations of being understood by those who had left behind the same oppressive land as him: [Goldfarb] "had been a poor boy in the same Romanian town as my father, and they had emigrated about the same time. For this reason

[104] Ibid., 75.
[105] Ibid., 76.

my father felt Baruch was his friend."[106] Yet, Goldfarb, like Fyfka, proves to be an economically costly choice: instead of providing the loan Herman came for, he convinces his old "friend" to join his lodge, "Baruch Goldfarb Benevolent, Sickness, Social and Burial Society."[107] Herman ends up paying the ten-dollar annual dues in exchange for promises of help in case of sickness and death. It is also during his time at the lodge that Herman chooses his new job, that of assistant for another house painter, but his new career soon ends after he falls off a scaffold and breaks his leg. So, instead of money and safe employment, the association with an acquaintance from Romania only brings more disappointment and disease.

Finally, it is in relation to Herman's health problems that the failure of sharing a Romanian national experience is sealed. Of the two physicians on the Lower East Side, it is Axelrod that represents the authoritative doctor, called upon by the Golds to help Herman as long as they can afford to pay him. The other equally important reason for choosing him is further proof that Herman has not learned his lesson: "It was because my father [Herman] and Dr. Axelrod had gone to school together in Romania."[108] This episode mirrors his father's previous trust of Goldfarb, who promised help in the name of youthful adventures in Romania, such as stealing apples and plums and swimming in the Danube, as "Such things one never forgets. I will help you, my friend."[109] Likewise, Axelrod remembers Herman's folly in school which finally prevented him from becoming a doctor: "We boys had to walk before him [the priest] and kiss his hand. It was the law; everyone had to do it, even the Jews."[110] Herman was the only boy who dared to rebel against religious Christian impositions in Romanian schools and, as a result, he was thrown out of school. Axelrod remembers here the absence of sympathy for Herman's act of courage against a flagrant case of religious discrimination (that of forcing Jews to submit to the practices of Christian Orthodoxy). The doctor does not appreciate the pangs of persecution Jews used to be subjected to in Romania but interprets it pragmatically as a foolish act that cost Herman a medical

[106] Ibid., 207.
[107] Ibid., 209.
[108] Ibid., 228.
[109] Ibid., 209.
[110] Ibid., 228.

degree. What ensues is Gold's changed relation to the slums in comparison to the immigrant generation on the basis of their identification with the world of urban tenements. Meanwhile, his father's shtetl piety is judged as a mere instance of social passivity and failure to engage with America fully.

The above depiction of Herman's exploits bears resemblance to Ravage's representation of the "Little Rumania" enclave in the Lower East Side ghetto as a space of confinement, so much so that the narrator exclaims, just as Gold did, that "the truth remains that the immigrant is almost invariably disappointed in America."[111] For Ravage, this place was problematic because it kept the individual subjugated to the oppressive demands of the "Old World" bloodline kinship system imposed upon Max by the Weiss spouses. Ravage sets against it an American national system that does not run on "race prejudice" or "class exclusiveness," a system he witnessed by moving to deep America in Missouri, and in which the values of education, hard work, competition, thrift, and determination were the paths to unhindered success. While Gold draws a similar image of his progressive, idealist Romanian Jewish immigrant father, he uses the East Side differently. On the one hand, like Ravage, Gold too depicts the "Old World"-style Jewish identity and affiliation as a hypocritical form of solidarity based on the precepts of a shared linguistic, religious, and national heritage. This follows from the way Herman's Romanian Jewish immigrant friends and peers mistreat him. In Gold's narrative, these people are not bearers of an internalized oppressive system due to their previous life in the restrictive atmosphere of Romania, as in Ravage's account. Instead, they are shown as corrupted, compromised, and morally degraded individuals as a result of the US system of capitalist greed and exploitation. Meanwhile, his father is represented as the idealist bourgeois-aspiring Jewish immigrant, just like Ravage's narrator. Nevertheless, while Ravage's persona succeeds by following American national values in the deep US, Gold's father gets crushed by others' debased means because of his naive faith in a phony American dream. Gold therefore uses his father's downfall and death as the means to show the potentially devastating effects of

[111] Ravage, *An American in the Making*, 59-60.

credulous belief in the American Dream on many Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe.

Gold's narrative is structured around the topics of family, employment, and health, and it depicts New York's Lower East Side tenements as a terrible and "inescapable poverty trap of US capitalist society."[112] For Gold, in America, Romanian-based Jewish ethnicity stands for the loss of any community support, as shown by the fact that Herman's friends fully embrace the logic of American capitalism. Negative ethnic affiliation is what results by contrast with Ravage's emphasis on the potentialities of ethnic revitalization in the United States. In other words, in *Jews without Money*, rather than coming together, the myths of American society (school, business, family) show the destruction of the American dream. This is sustained by correlating the image of the father with dichotomies of utopian and dystopian ideas, as when the father tells a Romanian tale, "The Golden Bear," "the eternal fable of the man to whom the good things of life come by magic."[113] Instead, American realities relegated Herman to a position of failure, as underlined by his characteristic trope, "I have always been too late."[114] Following this trajectory of Herman's experience and his repeated emphases on failure and the death of hope, the past Romanian experience of the Romanian Jew embodied by Herman becomes a sense of persecution where the dominant tendency is that of victimizing oneself rather than doing anything about it. Passivity is what finally defines Herman: there has been no evolution from Romania to America and the image of the helpless victim is what prevails in him.

In other words, for Gold, the suppression of Romanian nationalism by American nationalism in relation to Jewish ethnicity has the same negative effects as in Eastern Europe, primarily because of America's logic of economic injustice. The solution of the ethnic versus national struggle given by Gold is the son's attainment of "a class consciousness that surpasses the false consciousness of

[112] Lee, "Never Forgetting the East Side," 37.
[113] Gold, *Jews without Money*, 86.
[114] Ibid., 88.

religion, American liberalism, and racial identity that permeates the culture of the East Side."[115]

Conclusions

Ravage's and Gold's books concentrate on struggles between ethnicity and nationalism in Eastern Europe and the United States from the vantage point of different generations of immigrants and different ideological convictions. Both authors revisit the dominant early twentieth-century immigrant autobiographies by other fellow Jews. These much-celebrated works primarily foregrounded the embrace of the American Dream by a variant of the rags-to-riches narrative, under the guise of individual upward mobility stories of successful Jewish immigrants that had culturally assimilated to American norms. Ravage's *An American in the Making* offers a twist to this dominant narrative by his emphasis on the embrace of American cultural citizenship over American legal citizenship as the Jewish immigrant's path to success. Gold rejects altogether the above rags-to-riches narratives and redefines Jewish identity from the Lower East Side as a working-class identity that supported a proletarian culture.

In brief, in the case of M.E. Ravage a sense of ethical agency uses the American system as a model to be implemented in place of discriminatory systems he was well acquainted with, following the vantage point of a permanent comparison between Old World and New World conditions, and explainable by his future choice to return to Europe. Following his sense of responsibility for the more vulnerable position of those who had remained in Europe, for Ravage, the American democratic system was primarily a model to implement in other places. In the case of Michael Gold, ethical agency results from his disappointment with American economic norms that exploited the vulnerable immigrants and destroyed their moral ties to one another in the name of profit; his decision to pinpoint the downfalls of such an economic mindset upheld the interests of revolutionary working-class identities.

[115] Lee, "Never Forgetting the East Side," 39.

These aspects show a difference of interest and stance between the two authors which was, at least in part, a result of their belonging to different generations of immigrants. Ravage's interest for social change did not focus on America, the new land he had moved to, but on Europe, the continent he had left behind. Even after emigration, Ravage remained primarily concerned with amending the discriminatory ways of Europe rather than perfecting American norms, so much so that the author eventually left the US and settled in Europe. In fact, Ravage resided in the US only from 1900 to 1920 and from 1923 to 1927. After an initial sojourn in Paris between 1920 and 1923, including a brief return to Romania in 1921, in 1927 he decided to settle in France for good and lived there until the end of his life (in 1964).[116] The early sojourn in France was due partly to Ravage's having married French-born Jeanne Martin, who had emigrated to Canada when she was 20, and partly to Ravage's being in the process of writing "a book on the sad political and economic state of postwar Europe," for which he traveled around the European continent.[117] The next return to France in 1927 came after Ravage no longer received hefty royalties for writing fairly successful historical books and magazine articles on political and social topics. He could therefore barely support his wife and two daughters. This triggered his decision to move with his family to France, where they "could live on far less funds." "The 'American' father" continued writing but slowly grew estranged from his family and got a divorce in 1933 after an affair with a woman whom he later married.[118]

According to his grandson Christopher Clausen, Ravage epitomized "the model immigrant" thanks to his gift for languages, "the ability to pass at will for a native—the perennial dream for an immigrant." The same ability, however, equally exacted a "bitter price from the possessor and those closest to him": loneliness and life-long pain. Ravage explained this to his grandson by unconvincingly telling him that "a family is always a burden for a writer," making Clausen wonder if nationality did not equally function as a similar burden. When Clausen visited his grandfather in Paris in 1957, Ravage not only treated his

[116] For further details about M.E. Ravage's life trajectory see the memoir of one of his daughters, Suzanne Ravage Clausen, *Growing Up Rootless* (Santa Barbara: Fithian Press, 1995), 11-21.
[117] Ibid., 11.
[118] Ibid., 13.

grandson with utmost kindness but also assured him that he had not become a French citizen, but he was an American, sounding like "a middle-class New Yorker with no trace of foreignness in his speech or attitudes."[119] Ravage's lifelong pride to be an American, even if living most of his life in France, undoubtedly resulted from his experience of the American democratic regime after his emigration from Romania and from his embrace of the promises of American cultural citizenship over American legal citizenship, which he had supported in writing his autobiography in 1917.[120]

Ravage's non-fictional books published in the United States are further illustration of his tireless efforts to determine a shift to decent conditions for both Jews and other ethnic or vulnerable groups in Europe. In this respect, in 1919 he published *The Jew Pays*; the book pleaded American Jews to raise charity funds and help those Jews who had remained in Europe and who were a target of discrimination during World War I.[121] In 1923 he published *The Malady of Europe*, which I have already discussed, and which emphasized the prejudicial nature of European nationalism in contrast with the openness of America's democratic model. Given this vantage point, always centered around European realities, and not at all unaware of America's own limitations, Ravage chose to emphasize the superiority of the American democratic environment as a model for changing European mono-ethnic nationalism and to engage the American mainstream in this change beyond its borders. For Ravage, his primary sense of responsibility resided with what he considered to be the more vulnerable situation of the people who had remained in Europe, and he dedicated his efforts to getting American support for helping remedy this situation.

As a second-generation American, born and raised in the United States in a low-class Jewish immigrant family, Gold opts for a thorough criticism of the American system in the name of the endemic poverty destroying the lives of the majority of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, like his parents, in New York's East Side ghetto. For Gold, the responsibility of this situation seems to lie in the American

[119] Christopher Clausen, "Grandfathers. A Memoir," *Commentary* 95, no. 4 (1993): 47.
[120] Stanciu, *The Makings and Unmakings of Americans*, 252-253.
[121] Marcus Eli Ravage, *The Jew Pays* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1919).

principle of material profit, which he views as the dominant American capitalist norm that Herman's three Romanian Jewish friends have internalized. As a result, on meeting Herman, rather than emphasize ethnic community support because of the shared experience of persecution, they use the American class norm of financial interest in which "the cult of the self"[122] and the "break-up of solidarity"[123] come before all the rest. Therefore, Gold suggests, the economic injustice of American nationalism via the primacy of material profit—which has been internalized by most Romanian Jews—only results in his father's sense of persecution, passivity, and his persistent victim mentality. Gold's solution is the revolutionary agency of working-class Jews, namely the celebration of the mother's humane realism as opposed to the father's utopian stance, via political radicalism and hard work.

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Keywords: Jewish Identity, Ethnicity, Nationalism, Romania, US

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[122] Ibid., 64.
[123] Ibid., 65.

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