

from
THE DAYS OF OUR YEARS
1880s

----- *Israel Kasovich* -----

From the 1880s until the outbreak of World War I, a massive wave of Jewish immigrants arrived in the United States from Eastern and Central Europe, most fleeing poverty and political and religious persecution. Israel Kasovich was one of the many immigrants who left their homeland in search of a better life in America. This excerpt describes the conditions he faced upon arrival in New York.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Drawing Conclusions

How does the way Kasovich tells his story (particularly where he ends it) change or complicate our understanding of the experience of immigrants who came to America in the late 19th century?

...I set out for the office of the Immigrant Aid Committee in order to ask for advice. When I came near the place I saw a line of people, men and women, with tickets in their hands. At the door stood a policeman, who behaved anything but gently. Near him stood a Russian Jew employed by the committee, and he behaved even worse than the policeman. It was impossible to get inside. If one needed help, he had first to procure a ticket, and then stand in line and wait for his turn. I knew, however, that the chairman of the committee was Michael Halperin, of whom I had read that he was a great man and had a fine command of the Hebrew language.... Halperin told me that the committee had as yet no funds to establish agricultural colonies, and that even if it had the money, it would not do so, because the colony established the year before for the refugees from Yelizavetgrad had proven a failure. The latter has deserted the colony and were now back in New York. He therefore advised me to find some kind of occupation, and for my two young brothers-in-law he gave me his personal cards addressed to two manufacturers, who were sure to give them employment.

After this interview, I proceeded to Essex Street and rented a flat consisting of a tiny kitchen and two small rooms. Here I installed the women and the children, purchased all that was necessary for the house, and rented out one room to two lodgers. And now commenced a terrible battle with the bedbugs, which did not let us sleep a wink all night.

My brothers-in-law found work with the aid of Halperin's cards. The younger one stripped tobacco leaves for three dollars a week; he would come home from work all wan and waxen, and keep on vomiting. The older one was employed at turning a heavy wheel; he would return home all dirty like a chimney sweep, and

too weak to eat. My mother-in-law would meet them with bitter laments, and I had a guilty feeling. On Saturday, when the children had to go to work, the house would be filled with wailing; so I used to rise before the rest and go away in order to avoid the scene. Nobody said anything to me, but I was ashamed to look them in the face.

I myself scanned the newspapers to find out where "hands" were wanted; I ran all over the city, but could find no work, employers rejecting me on account of my delicate hands. My neighbors, who had long been in this country, advised me to become a peddler. A fine occupation, forsooth! I had come to America to be a tiller of the soil, and now I was to become a peddler! Another couple of weeks passed, and I was still idle. I softened somewhat and agreed to become a peddler; in America, it was said, such an occupation was not looked upon as degrading, but as good as any other business. A neighbor kindly took me to a wholesaler of his acquaintance, and asked him to treat me well. The wholesaler told me that he, too, had once been a peddler, and that all the Jewish millionaires here had started out as peddlers, that being the best way to become Americanized and to work one's self up. He ordered a clerk to fetch a basket and they began to fill it with all kinds of notions: stockings, socks, combs, buttons, handkerchiefs, towels, scissors, pocket knives, etc. The proprietor himself made out my bill. And how cheap everything was! Whoever heard in Russia of a pair of scissors selling for ten cents, or of a pair of women's stockings, ditto? I paid twelve dollars for the goods, and received by way of premium a strap for the basket. The wholesaler himself adjusted the strap on my shoulder, and showed me how to hold the basket; he told me not to be shy but to knock at every door, and wished me success, whereupon I set out to try my fortune as a peddler.

My portable shop was pulling me down to the ground, and it seemed as if my shoulder blade would break any minute. Rivers of perspiration were streaming down my face and body, my feet were staggering under the heavy weight, and I was ashamed to look people in the face. I had now been walking for a long time, yet had not knocked at a single door. How could I get myself to knock at a door and to intrude uninvited? Presently a gang of Gentile street urchins began to pelt me with stones and lumps of coal. I ran into a house more dead than alive, climbed to the sixth floor, and made a sale amounting to ten cents.

I returned home with shooting pains in my side and a swollen shoulder. My wife sat by my side and wept softly, while my mother-in-law wailed and complained bitterly, "A fine pass we have come to, woe is me!"

The next day I made up my mind to knock at every door. I went and knocked, but many refused to open the door, shouting that they did not need anything. Some did buy a couple of cents' worth of goods, but with the air of one giving alms, as though they took pity on a poor immigrant. My face burned with shame, but I dragged myself along and, as I did so, thought of our sweet dreams about a well-ordered agricultural colony and the nice and quiet life we were going to live as farmers. Thus lost in reverie, I noticed an open door, forgot that here one must

knock first, and walked right in. The house wife, who happened to be cleaning the stove, seized one of the stove lids and hurled it at me, at the same time shouting: "Get out of here!" Fortunately, the lid missed me. I at once bounded out of the flat, closed the door behind me, and began to run wildly, nearly breaking my neck. I proceeded straight home, where I threw down my peddler's basket and declared I would not go peddling any more.

My father-in-law, who had not yet found employment, decided to try his hand at peddling. He shouldered my basket and began to walk toward the door. We attempted to dissuade him, but he laughed and said to me: "If you have tried, I may try as well." A couple of hours later he returned and told us that all he had taken in was blows, and plenty of them. He had been assailed by loafers, who ran after him, pulled his beard, kicked him, and showered him with refuse from the garbage cans.

The upshot of the matter was that we sold the basket with the contents thereof to a peddler for six dollars. And now I was idle again. Our little capital was steadily diminishing, and our disappointment was great indeed. We had uprooted our home and traveled to a distant land overseas in order to lead a quiet, honest, independent life as tillers of the soil, as Jews and as free citizens, and instead of this we had to live amid noise and dirt, and to eke out a livelihood by engaging in a contemptible business that smacked of begging, or else by hiring ourselves out as wage slaves and toiling like horses for our daily bread. For the class struggle was more bitter here than in Russia. Nor was there any evidence of a particular love for us here; we were stoned in the streets, and many refused to rent their houses to Jews. Again, it was impossible to observe the Jewish religion here, many being compelled to work on the Jewish Sabbath and holidays. Where, then, was the freedom, where the human equality? And so we were filled with longing for our old home and our old life.

Meanwhile letters arrived from friends in Russia, who already knew the whole truth from my letters, and they wrote me that there was a new Minister of the Interior in Russia, one who was a liberal man, and that better times were expected. Accordingly, they advised me to return home.

My father-in-law pleaded that we go back to Russia. My mother-in-law wailed and begged to be taken back to the old country; here, she said, we would lose both this world and the next. And my wife argued that since we failed to realize the main object of our voyage to America—namely, to engage in farming—we ought to return to Russia.

Source: Excerpt from *The Days of Our Years* by Israel Kasovich, translated by Maximillian Hurwitz. Copyright © Hebrew Publishing Company. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission of the Publishers, Hebrew Publishing Co., P.O. Box 222, Spencertown, NY 12165.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY : ANSWER

Students may answer that Kasovich's story presents a pessimistic view of the experiences of immigrants who came to America in the late 19th century. Some students may answer that Kasovich's desire to establish an agricultural community contradicts the traditional perception of immigrants wanting to work in cities. Students may also cite Kasovich's description of the industrial work that left his relatives sick, dirty, and weak as evidence that complicates ideas about immigrants working their way up the economic ladder. Students may argue that by ending his story with the suggestion that the family will return to Russia, Kasovich complicates the widely held idea that all late 19th century immigrants were able to make better lives for themselves through hard work.