

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Mary Antin (1881-1949)

Initiation

The *Promised Land*, which was published in 1912, after being serialized in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1911, tells the story of Maryashe Antin's emigration from Polotzk, Russia, to Boston, where she became an outstanding student and a promising American writer. The early chapters describe in detail the privations and injustices of the Pale of "Pale of Settlement" in eastern Russia where Jews were required to live. Men were subject to conscription into the czar's army. Merchants paid protection money to avoid raids by the police. Gentiles and Jews never trusted one another. Education was all but closed to Jewish children, except for the Hebrew lessons and training in the Law given to boys. "A girl was "finished" when she could read her prayers in Hebrew, following the meaning by the aid of the Yiddish translation especially prepared for women. If she could sign her name in Russian, do a little figuring, and write a letter in Yiddish to the parents of her betrothed, she was called *wohl gelehrent*—well-educated" (111).

The middle part of the book describes her quiet but passionate rebellion against these restrictions and traditions, her family's emigration to America in her early teens, and her rapid and joyful casting off of her early identity as "Mashke" of Polotzk to become "Mary Antin" of Boston. "With our despised immigrant clothing we shed also our impossible Hebrew names," she says, speaking for her parents, brother, and two sisters (187), just before she started school. School, as this chapter explains, was the most welcome part of her conversion. She was such a good student that she went on to the prestigious Girls' Latin School, where she met the daughters of Boston's social and intellectual elite, and made plans to go to Radcliffe. Instead, she married a biologist she had met through the Natural History Club at the Hale Settlement House in Boston and went with him to New York, where she continued her education at Barnard.

The *Promised Land* is therefore a monument to the immigrant's successful assimilation, willing and welcomed, and it makes a fascinating comparison to other immigrant autobiographies. The story, some readers will think is too happy to be true. They may also object to her smugness. Yet she was not ashamed of her past, and she even attached a Yiddish-English glossary to the end of the book so that American readers could better understand Jewish customs. In 1941, with Hitler invading Russia, she published an essay expressing both her universalism and her solidarity with "my people." "I can no more return to the Jewish fold than I can return to my mother's womb: neither can I decency continue to enjoy my accidental personal immunity from the penalties of being a Jew in a time of virulent anti-Semitism."¹ She had become a kind of latter-day Transcendentalist, and saw the universalism of all great religions as having their political fulfillment in democracy.

The whole of "Initiation," Chapter 10 in the *Promised Land*, is given below. There is no biography of Mary Antin, but there is a brief biographical introduction by Oscar Handlin in a reprint of *The Promised Land* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969). *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 5 (1986): 29-53 has articles on Antin by Richard Tuerk, Steven J. Rubin, and Evelyn Avery.

"House of the One Father," *Common Ground* 1, no. 3 (Spring 1941):41.

Reading

The *Promised Land*

<http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/antin/land/land.html>