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**From Eastern European Rooted Immigrant Circle
to the Mainstream of American Culture
– an Alfred Kazin’s Transition**

**Od zakorzenionych w Europie Wschodniej kręgów imigranckich
do głównego nurtu kultury amerykańskiej
– transformacja Alfreda Kazina**

Abstract

Tracing the process of immigrants’ transition, it appears that in the twentieth century children of Eastern European, mainly Jewish immigrants were trying to get rid of the European past of their parents as quickly as possible in order to take the full advantage of American culture. This attitude brought serious changes in family values, social ties, and religious traditions among immigrants’ children, which was vividly presented in Kazin’s works. Moving straight toward their American future often meant leaving the Old World heritage and language behind. Many of the immigrant children regarded this type of attitude as another logical step in their development. But although this incorporation into the mainstream of the American culture was fruitful, some of them experienced a deep sense of irreversible loss over their past.

Key words: *Alfred Kazin Old World, New World, immigrant identity, new language and culture, education, Jew, New York.*

Abstrakt

Śledząc proces transformacji imigrantów, wydaje się, że w dwudziestym wieku dzieci przybyszów z Europy Wschodniej, głównie żydowskich imigrantów, starały się jak najszybciej pozbyć europejskiej przeszłości swoich rodziców, aby w pełni wykorzystać możliwości jakie dawała im amerykańska kultura. Takie podejście przyniosło poważne zmiany wartości rodzinnych, więzi społecznych i tradycji religijnych wśród dzieci imigrantów, co zostało obrazowo przedstawione w pracach Kazina. Pożądanie prosto w kierunku swojej amerykańskiej przyszłości często oznaczało porzucenie dziedzictwa i języka Starego Świata. Wiele dzieci imigrantów uważało ten rodzaj postawy za kolejny logiczny krok w ich rozwoju. Ale chociaż włączenie do głównego nurtu amerykańskiej kultury było owocne, niektóre z nich doświadczyły głębokiego poczucia nieodwracalnej straty odnośnie dziedzictwa przeszłości.

Słowa kluczowe: *Alfred Kazin, Stary Świat, Nowy Świat, imigrant, nowy język i nowa kultura, edukacja, Żyd, Nowy Jork.*

Introduction

Evidently, the vital problem concerning the 20th century immigrants in the USA and their children was connected with the acquisition of the American language and culture. It is the problem of the relation between the American culture and assimilation, or the immigrants' potential isolation from the American culture and language. If culture existing in America is perceived as a threat to newcomers, then assimilation becomes a threat as well. But if the American culture is perceived as really desirable, then assimilation becomes desirable as well. The concept of assimilation appears to reflect the existing dangers of immigrants' unconscious or purposeful melting into the American society. The process of entering into an American *melting pot* might not be easy. But in the cases of some newcomers, they may not even wish to avoid such a situation. On the other hand, a process totally different from assimilation may occur, namely, an almost total isolation from the American society and the English language.

Most of the newcomers believed that America constituted a cultural monolith symbolized by lifestyle and traditions of inhabitants living in the East Coast. But during the second half of the twentieth century till the end of this century, a process of building a multicultural and multi-ethnic society was in progress. And actually, immigrants from the Old World were an im-

portant part of this process, even though, they were not always conscious of becoming a part of American *salad bowl* society.

When viewing the second generation of immigrants from the position of first and third generation, it seems that the second generation usually occupies the cultural space in America that is marked with the lack of most of the prejudices of their ancestors. But at the same time, the second generation appears not to be thoroughly rooted in the newly acquired culture, often occupying an “in between” position.

Apparently, for immigrant generations the vital problem was connected with making a decision whether to translate themselves to the language and culture of the New World or refrain from doing so. The choice between the rejection of old culture and customs and adjusting to new ones seemed to be more than painful. But all the efforts to adjust to a new situation were vital. Even though some of the immigrants spoke funny broken English, it was always better to speak this type of English than not to speak it at all. And, the price for being unable to adjust to the new reality, as observed by Thomas and Znaniecki (1984), was extremely high. These effects of emigration targeted both first and second generation immigrants but in a different way, and the causes were probably different.

“Some immigrants to America, uprooted from family, land, customs, expectations in the Old World, literally died from the uprooting, unable finally to stir from the stifling tenement in which they were set down. But the emotional suffering of the second generation, the American-born may have been as intense.”
(Wheeler, 1971, p. 9)

Wheeler (1971) believes that the importance of immigration to the USA was connected with bringing along fresh blood and a new spirit to the American society. This new spirit helped prevent the American society from numbness experienced in the Old World’s countries like the Austro-Hungarian Empire or Russia, the places from which many immigrants came from. The importance of immigrant experience for America puts the USA on the verge of true and difficult meeting of the old and the new.

Without a doubt, Wheeler’s remarks were true concerning quite many early twentieth century immigrants. So was the example of the parents of Alfred Kazin, a notable American intellectual and writer. So was the situation of many post war refugees such as the family of Eva Hoffmann, an important American writer and scholar. Their osmosis to the New World was connected with assimilation to the highly desired, somehow monolithic English culture

of the American East Coast. On the other hand, this desired culture was *terra incognita* both for the newcomers (such as Hoffmann) and for those who left their immigrant ghettos (like Kazin). Focused on their melting to the American culture and the English language, immigrants may have been unaware of changes occurring in the American society, even though the second half of the twentieth century (especially the eighties and the nineties) was a time when the concept of multicultural and multi-ethnic America was developing. This formed the basis for a contemporary American society being a mosaic of different cultural heritages and beliefs.

It is essential to examine particular experiences of people from immigrant communities. In this respect, Alfred Kazin's autobiographies *A Walker in the City* (1951), *Starting out in the Thirties* (1965), and *New York Jew* (1978) offer the example of a person who was born and brought up in an immigrant community in Brooklyn, New York, isolated from the mainstream of the American culture. But due to Kazin's strong efforts towards education, this isolation from the American culture was overcome.

It is significant that each chapter in Kazin's first memoir tells of some development in Kazin's life. The title of the first chapter "From the Subway to the Synagogue" shows the exact way, which is both on a real and a symbolic level. Hence, it is possible for Alfred Kazin to go back to Brownsville after having left this place years ago. It is the reverse of young Kazin's life journey.

The second chapter, "The Kitchen," shows the center of immigrant life, the solidarity of the family, and of the ethnic group. It portrays the relations within the immigrant family and the way they deal with problems facing Kazin's family.

Chapters three and four – "The Block Beyond," and "Summer: The Way to Highland Park" are a clear sign of Kazin's change. This change was connected with his absolute certainty that he wanted to cross to "the beyond." These chapters show Kazin's fascination with based on high-brow culture, the Whitmanesque America that lay "beyond" his Jewish shtetl – Brownsville. This Whitmanesque America which for Kazin, was Manhattan, on the other side of Brooklyn's Bridge, was his final long desired and not easy to be achieved aim. And, in testifying how difficult it was to achieve this aim and to describe it, the form of memoir seems to be the best one. The presented below extract is a clear illustration of the importance of such a writing:

For the first generation of Jewish writers to be born in this country, the American-Jewish experience was difficult to describe; the social, intellectual, political. And economic freedom that Jews had achieved by mid-century only served to complicate the story. For writers like Alfred Kazin, lost for a ti-

me between the old and the new, autobiography offered a means of re-creating the past, or telling how it was and why it was important (Fried, 1988).

Contrary to *A Walker in the City*, which was mainly an account of Kazin's personal struggle to break with his immigrant past, *Starting Out in the Thirties* is not a continuation of this struggle. It is a testimony of his gradual assimilationist success. The phrase "starting out" suggests gradual accession to the intellectual world of Manhattan. *Starting out in the Thirties* is less focused on describing Kazin's family and the surroundings they lived in, than on portraying the literary and artistic life of New York, with a special emphasis put on the people Kazin admired.

In *New York Jew* Kazin continued to portray New York's intellectual life but he also decided to move back in time to the days of his youth. The past since he had left this Jewish ghetto on Brooklyn caused that Kazin was able to write about "Brownsville revisited," and somehow immortalize his memories of the past definitely lost.

From an immigrant ghetto to the world of New York's culture

In his first autobiographical work *A Walker in the City*, Kazin sees New York as a foreign city which is brilliant and unreal to the children of immigrants, contrary to Brownsville, a poor Jewish *shtetl*-like district in Brooklyn where the author comes from.

We were the end of the line. We were the children of the immigrants who had camped at the city's back door, in New York's rawest, remotest, cheapest ghetto, enclosed on one side by the Canarsie flats and on the other by the hallowed middle-class districts that showed the way to New York. "New York" was what we put last on our address, but first in thinking of the others of us. *They* were New York, the Gentiles, America: we were Brownsville – *Brunzvil*, as the old folks said – the dust of the earth to all Jews with money, and notoriously a place that measured all success by our skill in getting away from it. (Kazin, 1951, p. 12)

To the children of immigrants, the English language was the ladder of advancement. Parents felt ashamed because they were Jews and spoke languages other than English at home. English was required at school, but the children from Brownsville did not speak it at home.

For Kazin like for many second generation immigrants at Brownsville, English was not a mother tongue. His first language was Yiddish, spoken by

Kazin's parents. His mother never managed to learn English and his father spoke only some basic English. So, for Kazin learning English and then mastering it was the most important aim clearing the way towards assimilation. This aim was extremely difficult to achieve, and required endless hours of practice. The problem was that at the beginning of his assimilation Kazin, as a nonnative speaker of English, could not articulate clearly his thoughts in the language of the New World, and had problems with the choice of appropriate words or phrases.

The word was my agony. The word that for others was so effortless and so neutral, so unburdened, so simple, so exact, I had to meditate in advance, to see if I could make it, like a plumber fitting together odd lengths and shapes of pipe. (Kazin, 1951, p. 23)

Kazin remembers preparing words that he could speak, storing them away, choosing between them. And quite often when a word or phrase came out of his mouth he felt ashamed of the results. By struggling to acquire English, Kazin, like most second generation immigrants, wanted to forget everything which linked him with his past. Without doubts, for Kazin living at Brownsville, the English language meant his future success in America. But on a broader scale, learning English was the beginning of Kazin's journey from an immigrant ghetto to the American high-brow culture, the journey that was supposed to cause a total change in Kazin's identity.

Growing up in Brownsville suggested that Kazin would become a typical Jewish inhabitant of this area, a poor worker like Kazin's painter father, his dressmaker mother and his dressmaker uncles and cousins. Kazin remarks sarcastically that although he read in books that Jews were people given to banking or commerce, all the Jews he knew seemed to be an exception to that rule. The happiness among such people was measured by the length of their job as they often worked only seasonally. This situation of constant job shortages caused a huge frustration among the Jewish community, which resulted in rejecting tradition and religion and gave reason for turning towards socialist and Marxist doctrines. Brownsville inhabitants saw their boss in terms of class struggle as a person doing nothing himself but getting rich on the bitter toil of others. A "Boss" was mean, unspeakable, and hateful but kept many people alive.

Young people living in Brownsville were well apart from the Jewish tradition and religion. They were heading for quick assimilation, sometimes seeing elders as outsiders, pointing to the fact that people from Warsaw pronounce words in a funny pedantic way, articulating every sound, or de-

nouncing Galicians for having no taste in taking cream with herring. Kazin describes the Brownsville synagogue in such a way that it may be regarded as a metaphor of a dying past:

The synagogue was old, very old; it must once have been a farmhouse; it was one of the oldest things in Brownsville and in the world; it was old in every inch of the rotting wooden porch, in the crevices deep in the doors over the Ark, in the little company of aged and bearded men smelling of snuff who were to be seen there every day at twilight, wrapped in their black-striped prayer shawls, their eyes turning to Jerusalem, mumbling and singing in their threadbare voices. (Kazin, 1955, p. 42)

The continuation of Alfred Kazin's life journey could be observed in the second part of his autobiographical work: *Starting Out in the Thirties*, which shows Kazin's break from his immigrant ghetto in Brooklyn, which resulted in his overcoming, his isolation from the American culture and language. Abandoning an immigrant community comes along with his fascination with high-brow culture. This attitude was different from fulfilling only basic needs and caring mainly for financial matters, which was common among immigrants undergoing assimilation. A great number of passages in this book is devoted to New York's intellectual life as well as to the city itself. Kazin shows the reader his intellectual life journey which appears to be far more intricate than being literally "a walker in the city".

But beyond Kazin's ghetto there was "the city" with its Brooklyn Museum, Central Park, Wall Street, China town, universities, schools and libraries. These were places so interesting and so tempting that it had been obvious to Kazin's parents and neighbors that a young gifted kid from Brownsville had to use all his might to cross to "the beyond."

Gradual but finite transition into the world beyond Brownsville

Apart from Kazin's intellectual passions, and apart from his fascinations with a certain type of people and the influence of the witty women he met, it seems clear that Kazin is a young New Yorker who is completely fascinated by the city he lives in. He gives a detailed description of different places within the city. When reading about various streets, districts, museums, libraries, parks, shops, bridges or subway, one has the impression of an inner circle in which the author, and perhaps only the author, operates. He tends to be preoccupied both with the present and the past of New York:

I would walk down the grand staircase on my way out to the Automat across Fifth Avenue with gratitude that I was still in the period I had been excitedly absorbing all day. I had fallen in love with the Eighties and Nineties, with the dark seedtime of modern writers and modern art. Just as I found the traces of forgotten time in the beautiful wooden paneling, the high ceilings and the portraits of bearded old New York founders in the halls of the great library itself, so getting off the subway at Borough Hall to walk home I would feel in the dusky downtown Brooklyn streets jammed with traffic for Brooklyn Bridge and lined with old brownstones, old churches, old antiquary societies, old insurance offices and courthouses and street clocks, that I had providentially made my way to my favorite corner of the past. (Kazin, 1989, p. 134)

Alfred Kazin, a son of the emigrants from the rural areas of Russia, seems to be totally soaked with the American culture present in the urban areas of New York.

The way the author of *Starting Out in the Thirties* describes the whole city of New York is extremely poetic, full of color and sounds. It reminds the reader of a detailed description of Brownsville, a small Jewish emigrant *shtetl*-like district in Brooklyn where Kazin was born, which he pictures in his first autobiographical work *A Walker in the City*. The difference between the first part of Kazin's autobiography and *Starting Out in the Thirties* is that he used to portray Brownsville alone, and now he portrays the city as a whole:

The downtown Brooklyn streets were a dark grid of El lines, ancient office buildings fit for the heroes of Olivier Optic, courthouses built to the taste of Boss Tweed; there was a constant baying from freighters tied up at the foot of Columbia Heights; and on Sunday mornings, when Natasha and I walked down Remsen Street, to the lookout over the harbor, making our way there past the old Japanese bridge that arched Montague Street, past a line of solid mansions with golden oak doors with glass inserts where fruits falling from a cornucopia were pictured on the glass as if engraved there in fine needlepoint, our intensely scholarly and decorous life found its natural home in the Sunday peace of old Brooklyn city. (Kazin, 1989, p. 135)

Kazin's fascination with the city of New York may reflect or symbolize his interest in the American high-brow culture, politics, and social matters. A city,

especially New York, is the center of all sorts of cultural and social activities. In opposition to the general trends in the late 1930s connected with the overcoming of the Great Depression, slow but steady economic growth, causing people from poor immigrant neighborhoods to enter the mainstream of the American society, there were people like Kazin who were interested in and influenced by the non-commercial and universal American high-brow culture.

Kazin's third autobiography *New York Jew*, starting in the year 1942, could be regarded as a solid proof of how his intellectual independence improved his social status. From the very first passages of *New York Jew* it can be seen that Kazin's "long journey" from Brownsville's immigrant slums to the heart of New York's intellectual life – Manhattan, has been completed:

One dreamlike week in 1942 I published my first book, *On Native Grounds*, became an editor of *The New Republic*, and with my wife Natasha moved into a little apartment on Twenty-fourth Street and Lexington. I had never lived in Manhattan before. In those first few weeks of my "arrival" in the big city I went between my home, my publishers at Lexington and Twenty-eight and *The New Republic* at Forty-ninth and Madison in a dizzy exaltation mixed with the direst suspicion of what might happen next. (...) I could feel, when the taxi skidded around the circular passageway under the ramp of Grand Central into Fourth Avenue, sensations of personal deliverance that came and went like the light between the arches. (Kazin, 1979, p. 3-4)

So, a new chapter in Kazin's life started in the center of New York in Manhattan. The substantial change that Kazin underwent regarding his entering the center of the American intellectual life left some traits of nostalgia towards his previous life in Brooklyn. Although he was utterly fascinated with the new and much better opportunities facing him, Kazin still remembered his miserable days at Brownsville and the days spent in the library in Brooklyn Heights. The library in Brooklyn had a special place in Kazin's memory. For many years it used to be the place where he sought refuge from the miserable reality surrounding him. At the same time this was the place in which he was able to get full access, through the books he read, to highly sophisticated knowledge on different subjects. After having published his first book, Kazin entered New York's intellectual circle which to him, at the beginning, was like a dream come true. On the other hand, he was an extremely careful observer of the current situation in the USA in the midst of the Great Depression, and just before the American involvement in World War II.

Bearing in mind Kazin's remarks concerning his fascination with the vividness of New York, we should also acknowledge that after having left Brownsville, he needed peace and a quiet place to have an opportunity to broaden his knowledge. In this respect the only safe haven for Kazin seemed to be the Brooklyn library. The library, however, could not constitute an everlasting refuge, which was able to separate Kazin from the rest of the world. Except for being Kazin's refuge, the library also reminded him of the simple fact that being educated was the only chance to get away from poverty. Spending endless hours in the library Kazin realized that education should be regarded as the fundamentals of freedom.

For almost five years I had lived in a state of scholarly innocence, of unexpected intellectual assurance that floated my book home on the radical confidence of the 1930s. (...) There it was as soon as you walked up the great marble steps off Fifth Avenue. "ON THE DIFFUSION OF EDUCATION AMONG THE PEOPLE REST THE PRESERVATION AND PERPETUATION OF OUR FREE INSTITUTIONS." (Kazin, 1979, p. 5)

As mentioned above, Kazin's *New York Jew* picks up from the turning point in his life which for him was the year 1942. This year seemed to be the splendid year of success for Kazin. This was the year when Alfred Kazin had a chance to enter the inner circle of the American high-brow culture not as a silent spectator, just a library reader, but as an independent writer, reviewer and editor:

I was my own staff researcher, a totally unaffiliated free lance and occasional evening college instructor who was educating himself in the mind of modern America by writing, in the middle of the Great Depression, a wildly ambitious literary and intellectual history. (...) My privacy was complete. No one behind the information desk ever asked me *why* I needed to look at the yellowing, crumbling, fast-fading material about insurgent young Chicago and San Francisco publishing houses in 1897. (Kazin, 1979, 7)

But apart from Kazin's intellectual choices and issues occupying his mind, there was a special place of his origin he could not forget. This was Brownsville, the place where Kazin had been born, and lived for twenty years before he moved to "real" New York. Kazin visited his old *shtetl* – Brownsville twenty years after he had left it. This visit aroused in him a strange mixture of nostalgia for the years of his youth spent in Brownsville, and disgust for

the substantial deterioration of what was once a promising Jewish-American neighborhood:

I went down to Brownsville to write about a native's return, or "The Great Depression Revisited," but soon lost heart. The place looks worse than the East End of London after the blitz. Apparently the roofs are regularly set on fire; the tops of old tenements, built of New York's usual cheap apartment-house brown brick, are charred, blackened, fire-streaked. When I walked down Sutter Avenue for the first time in twenty years, I was horrified by the look of rusted blood down so many windows, the mounds of garbage heaped in a continuing line down the *middle* of the avenue, the long line of empty boarded-up storefronts, and the dead angry silence in front of the stoops in the street where I spent so much of my boyhood playing catch-ball off the steps – on a street still named Herzl. (Kazin, 1979, pp. 448-449)

But at the same time as he was walking through Brownsville revisiting places of his youth, Kazin remembered that there was also another New York. The real capital of the USA, the city of choice for many American intellectuals, New York was full of splendor, elegance and chic. This was the place which Kazin was always dreaming of entering. And finally, being in the heart of New York meant overwhelming success.

Conclusion

Tracing the process of immigrants' transition, it appears that in the twentieth century children of Eastern European, mainly Jewish immigrants were trying to get rid of the European past of their parents as quickly as possible in order to take the full advantage of the American culture. This attitude brought serious changes in family values, social ties, and religious traditions among immigrants' children, which was vividly presented in Kazin's works. Moving straight toward their American future often meant leaving the Old World heritage and language behind. Many of the immigrant children regarded this type of attitude as another logical step in their development. But although this incorporation into the mainstream of the American culture was fruitful, some of them experienced a deep sense of irreversible loss over their past.

This sense of loss of the Old World's cultural heritage has been present in memories of many second generation immigrants living in urban neighborhoods of big American cities. Such was the case of many children of Jewish

immigrants leaving their *shtetls* of New York, Philadelphia, or Chicago, heading for *the city*.

Some of the children of immigrants like Alfred Kazin decided to make accounts of their painful way towards assimilation. In this respect *A Walker in the City* (1951), *Starting Out in the Thirties* (1962), and *The New York Jew* (1979) should be regarded as a recollection of all the ambiguities and problems connected with Kazin's assimilation. Evidently, Kazin was lucky enough to be one of those who reached success in the intellectual world of America. For a person born in the Brownsville *shtetl* in Brooklyn to become an editor, critic, writer, and teacher, was an overwhelming success.

It is not a coincidence that, as Allen Guttman (1971) observes, the frontispiece of *A Walker in the City* shows Alfred Stieglitz's photograph of European, mostly Jewish, immigrants on the board a ship, heading for the Promised Land of America, and that the title page of Kazin's autobiography contains lines from Walt Whitman's poem "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" – "The glories stung like beads on my smallest sights and hearings – on the walk in the street, and the passage over the river" (cited in Guttman, 1971: 89). In this way Kazin presents the two main themes of his life: Kazin's book is both about those millions of often anonymous Jewish emigrants to America, and about his leaving of the immigrant Brownsville ghetto for the real America which was beyond it. So perhaps, it is right to say that on the one hand, there is Kazin's immigrant past with the richness and power of the Jewish culture and everyday life, and on the other hand, all this that matters is "beyond Brownsville," – the culture, literature, and political life of America.

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