

UNIVERZITA PARDUBICE

FAKULTA FILOZOFICKÁ

BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

2023

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Poverty and Immigration in Michael Gold's *Jews Without Money*

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Bachelor thesis

2023

Univerzita Pardubice
Fakulta filozofická
Akademický rok: 2021/2022

ZADÁNÍ BAKALÁŘSKÉ PRÁCE

(projektu, uměleckého díla, uměleckého výkonu)

Jméno a příjmení: **Tomáš Mrázek**
Osobní číslo: **H19406**
Studijní program: **B0231A090018 Anglický jazyk**
Specializace: **Anglický jazyk pro odbornou praxi**
Téma práce: **Poverty and Immigration in Michael Gold's *Jews Without Money***
Zadávací katedra: **Katedra anglistiky a amerikanistiky**

Zásady pro vypracování

Závěrečná bakalářská práce se zaměří na dílo Michaela Golda *Jews Without Money*, autobiografický román, který vyšel na samém počátku Velké hospodářské krize. V úvodu práce student nejprve s použitím relevantní sekundární literatury stručně nastíní dobový historický a politický kontext a vysvětlí pojmy, s nimiž bude pracovat (autobiography, Jewish immigration to US, American proletariat literature, apod.). Zvolené dílo zařadí do literárního kontextu. Jádrem práce bude analýza románu z hlediska způsobu, jímž prezentuje sociální problematiku chudinských čtvrtí, židovské imigrace, politických důsledků chudoby apod. Své vývody bude student ilustrovat ukázkami z románu a opírat o kritické zdroje. Závěrem analýzy přehledně shrne a vysloví obecnější závěr o obrazu sociálních problémů v Goldově románu.

Rozsah pracovní zprávy:
Rozsah grafických prací:
Forma zpracování bakalářské práce: **tištěná/elektronická**
Jazyk zpracování: **Angličtina**

Seznam doporučené literatury:

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Datum zadání bakalářské práce: **1. května 2022**

Termín odevzdání bakalářské práce: **2. května 2023**

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V Pardubicích dne 30. listopadu 2022

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V Pardubicích dne 28. 3. 2023

Tomáš Mrázek, v. r.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to the supervisor of this bachelor thesis doc. Šárka Bubíková, Ph.D. for her guidance, counselling, and all the invaluable advice that she provided to me. I would also like to give many thanks to my family for their unending patience and support they gave me during the writing of this paper.

ANNOTATION

This bachelor thesis focuses on the depiction of poverty and immigration in Michael Gold's autobiographical novel *Jews Without Money*. It explains necessary historical and political background and defines the author and his work in the appropriate literary context. Main part of this thesis is the analytical section, which reflects on the poverty and immigration as it is depicted in Gold's book.

KEYWORDS

poverty, Jewish immigration, proletariat literature, The Great Depression, autobiography

NÁZEV

Chudoba a Imigrace v románu *Židé bez Peněz* od Michaela Golda

ANOTACE

Tato bakalářská práce se zaměřuje na zobrazení chudoby a imigrace v autobiografickém románu *Židé bez Peněz* od autora Michaela Golda. Práce vysvětluje potřebné historické a politické pozadí a definuje autora a jeho dílo v odpovídajícím literárním kontextu. Hlavní částí této práce je analytický segment, který reflektuje chudobu a imigraci, jak je zobrazená v Goldově díle.

KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA

chudoba, židovská imigrace, proletářská literatura, velká hospodářská krize, autobiografie

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Introduction

During 1920s in America, poverty went hand in hand with immigration, this was especially true for Jewish immigrants, who had to leave their homes due to various reasons spanning from the threat of pogroms to the search for the American dream in the New World, the search for a brighter future. Those who had travelled in search of the American dream usually did not succeed and fell deeper into depression and poverty, incapable of changing their living situation. Some of these immigrants fought hard and did their best to break through even though the whole capitalist system was against them and a small portion of them were even successful, but this thesis is not about these people.

This bachelor thesis, above all, deals with the portrayal of poverty and immigration in the autobiographical novel *Jews Without Money* by Michael Gold. What needs to be noted is the fact that this book is a fictional autobiography, Gold did not shy away from changing important and unimportant details to high-light segments or shift the story in a certain direction. He first started writing under his real name Irwin Granich, but later started using a pen name Michael Gold. He was a strong supporter of communism, which explains the last paragraph of the book, in which he praises the socialist revolution. He was writing *Jews Without Money* for the whole duration of the 1920s and in that book, he retells his childhood story, although fictional, on the Lower East Side, the adventures he had been on and the unfairness and difficulty of being a poor Jewish American.

This thesis is divided into theoretical and analytical parts. Theoretical part of this thesis consists of chapters, which explain relevant historical and political context concerning the history of Jewish immigration to the United States, different reasons, and political climate, which forced these Jews out of their countries and made them look for new homes, origins of antisemitism and its ties to Christianity and the animosity they, as a race, had to face throughout history. Another chapter looks at the history of antisemitism as it developed in the United States and The Great Depression, which, although not present in the book itself, very much shaped the future of America in the upcoming years after the publication of Gold's book. Analytical part of this thesis deals with the literary context of the book, Michael Gold's overall approach to his work and his stances on issues such as the honest depiction of poverty and living conditions of Jews on the Lower East Side and the issues with immigration. This chapter also includes critics' opinion on *Jews Without Money* as a literary piece, its authenticity and informative value of what some of them call communist propaganda and others passionate call for help. Next chapter takes a deeper look on proletarian literature, of

which Michael Gold was arguably its most prominent figure. How it was created and shaped in that crucial time and looked upon by critics. Some of them panned it for its heavy ties to the communist movement and some even criticized the proletarian novel for its gloominess and unoriginality. Others praise it for its impact on the working class culture and the movement it has given rise to. Lastly, the final chapter inspects the way Michael Gold chose to portray poverty and immigration in *Jews Without Money*, specific language, and instances, which best capture his ideology and deep desperation and misery when describing his young life in poverty and the struggles he and his family had to fight through to stay alive.

1. Historical and Political Context

1.1 Jewish Immigration to the United States

Jewish immigration to the United States began hundreds of years before we encounter it in the book. We can date Jews in the North America as far back as to the colonial times.

Bernard Weinryb starts his explanation of Jewish immigration in the 17th century. For example, Jews from Poland started emigrating to the west after the “Chmelnicki massacres” of 1648-1649, which forced them to leave the country. Although they did not go all the way to the New World, they settled in the western countries like Germany, Italy, Austria or Bohemia and couple decades later even France and England. Immigration is a continuous process and little by little more Polish-Jewish immigrants were getting closer to America.

It sometimes happened that eventually when these immigrants arrived in the New World, they would not call themselves Polish Jews, but rather German Jews or English Jews due to them staying in these countries for many years before traveling on westward. “The first Jews that came to America were from Spain and Portugal, some of them coming to this country directly, and others after wandering to several other lands on their weary search for a permanent home.”¹ Regardless of that, there is information confirming the presence of Jews of Polish origin living in the North America from the beginning of the 18th century. Pastor John Sharpe leaves a note mentioning the existence of Polish, German, and Hungarian Jews in New York in 1712.²

Generations later and the west seemed more and more favourable to the Jews. Things that factored into this were many, such as the impact of the partitions of Poland, the French Revolution or the Napoleonic Wars. Russians even expelled Jews from their villages. Military service introduced for Jews in Russia in 1827 created another reason to consider fleeing the country and moving elsewhere, in this case the New World.³

Lee Levinger describes the reasons for emigration as such:

They (the Jews) came for the same reason that our other immigrants have come since the very discovery of the New World. Some came, like the French or Spanish, for love of adventure or desire for colonization. Some came, like the Germans and Irish, because they were very poor in the Old World and wanted to establish homes where

¹ Lee Levinger, *A History of the Jews in the United States* (The Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1931), 10.

² Bernard D. Weinryb, “East European Immigration to the United States,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 45, no. 4 (April 1955): 497.

³ Weinryb, “East European Immigration,” 499.

they could provide a better livelihood for their families. Above all, the vast majority of them came like the Quakers and the Pilgrim Fathers as refugees from religious persecution, seeking a land where they might worship God in their own way.⁴

Weinryb claims that the Jews became interested in America and their interest had grown even more when Yiddish writers translated and published works of foreign writers such as Hayim Chaikel Hurwitz's *Zofnath Paaneach*, published in 1817, a story translated from a German book *Die Entdeckung von America*, about the discovery of America. A.B. Gotlober, a Hebrew writer, wrote in his memoirs that this book was so widespread among the Jews that every Yiddish man, woman, and child knew about Columbus.⁵

Until 1860s only about a hundred Jews per year immigrated into the United States but these numbers grew in large amounts in the upcoming years partly due to Alexander II's decision to lift some restrictions set upon the Jews. This had opened up many possibilities for the Jews to open businesses and prosper but also allowed them to travel abroad for a brighter future.⁶

Weinryb in his book writes that what followed was a difficult situation, which originated from various factors making the lives of the Jewish people harder, from forces they could not control, like unpredictable weather and bad harvest and subsequent famine, to pogroms, all creating an environment from which the Jews would rather emigrate than to stay bound to it.⁷ It is estimated that about one and a half million Russian Jews came into the United States, to escape the pogroms that were going on there, in the span of circa 30 years starting in 1881/82. This sent a signal to Jews from other countries to also get in line and emigrate, not just to escape pogroms like the Russians, but to seek better living conditions than the ones in the Old World. Over 300 000 Jews from Austro-Hungary came to the United States in the wake of the Russian emigration wave.

It was not just the pogroms that were encumbering the lives of the Jewish people but also the legal and legislative effort to make their lives harder. Jews could no longer live in villages with other people and were even being expelled from their homes.⁸ These efforts piled on top of each other and deepened the animosity between people.

Emigration became a hot and highly debated topic and measures had to be taken to ease the transition from Europe to the New World. Problems connected with emigration such as

⁴ Levinger, *A History*, 9.

⁵ Weinryb, "East European Immigration," 501.

⁶ Weinryb, "East European Immigration," 508-509.

⁷ Weinryb, "East European Immigration," 510.

⁸ Weinryb, "East European Immigration," 516.

housing, means of transport and the overall organization of this process were at the forefront of programs of different groups that were dedicated to help immigrants with these issues.⁹

Rapid waves of immigration started in 1881 when about 5-6000 Jews emigrated annually to the United States, this amount doubled in the upcoming years and grew exponentially to the point that from years 1904-1914 the number of immigrants entering the country annually passed the 100 000 mark.¹⁰ Lee Levinger compares this expansion to a series of steps, “each one immensely larger than the one before.”¹¹

Population of Jews living in New York in 1881 was estimated to be around 75 000 which then skyrocketed to 200 000 in 1890, 135 000 of those 200 000 were concentrated in ghettos on the East Side. These massive waves of immigrants pouring in caused troubles and distress to other Jewish immigrants who immigrated years earlier. Isidor Straus, a reporter in the *Daily Jewish Herald*, wrote: “They (meaning the Russian Jewish immigrants) will, by their superior numbers, in time bring so much harm to our children that I shudder to think of it.”¹²

The Jewish immigration got to the point that organizations had to step in and put in action regulations and restrictions to mitigate the ever-increasing numbers of people entering the county. The Union of American Hebrew Congregations for example, among other groups, permitted entry only to “strong and able-bodied individuals, willing to work and possessing a knowledge of some handicraft.”¹³

The beginning of the first World War however caused the slow end of mass immigration, Eastern Europe became a desolate place from which it was little to no chance of escaping. At the end of the War a literacy test for immigrants was implemented to again regulate the number of ingoing immigrants. Fear of Russian revolutionaries, unemployment and general unrest caused the creation of the Immigration Act of 1921 and 1924, the former limiting the number of immigrants, who could enter and the latter making the quotas even stricter, which finally put a stop to the massive waves of immigrants pouring in.¹⁴

⁹ Weinryb, “East European Immigration,” 517.

¹⁰ Weinryb, “East European Immigration,” 518-519.

¹¹ Levinger, *A History*, 11.

¹² Weinryb, “East European Immigration,” 520.

¹³ Weinryb, “East European Immigration,” 522.

¹⁴ Weinryb, “East European Immigration,” 524-525.

1.2 Origins of antisemitism

If we want to understand the circumstances of Michael Gold's life, we have to know what antisemitism is, its origin and how it influenced his writing and life in the United States.

Antisemitism is referring to hate, prejudice and discrimination against individuals or a group of people – the Jews. This hatred is based on stereotypes and beliefs that do not coincide with other religions and beliefs. People who hold these radical views are called antisemites. Back in its origin it was simply recognised as a conflict between two religions: Christianity and Judaism. This conflict slowly evolved into a system of political, economic and social isolation and in more radical views; exclusion, degradation and annihilation.

Initially when Christianity was created it was seen as another Jewish sect but it slowly began to push back against Judaism. In the year 70 C.E. after the Siege of Jerusalem where the Romans had won most Jews run away and scattered across the world. After that, Christianity became the main established religion of Roman Empire and was to be a successor to Judaism. The denial of Jewish people to accept Jesus as their Messiah was seen as a major threat to Christianity.

In the three hundred years that followed from 300-600 C.E. a new form of discrimination was put to practice. Jews could not get married, were banned from holding positions of power and even could not participate in a court as witnesses against Christians. These actions even led to a creation of bizarre rumours and fantasies regarding the Jewish people, such as that they have horns and tails and that they are “in league with the devil.”¹⁵

Pope Urban II in 1095 made perhaps the most influential speech of the Middle Ages, which gave rise to the Crusades. This combined effort of the Christian people to liberate the Holy Land was to that day the worst scenario that could have happened to the Jews. Christian people slaughtered Jews in never-before seen numbers. This method was later named the pogrom.

During the 14th century people had to fight the Bubonic Plague, which quickly spread throughout Europe and the death count is estimated to be a one-third of the population. This was also blamed on the Jews, saying that they were poisoning wells and purposely spreading the plague among the common people. Estimated 100 000 Jews were burned in Germany and Austria due to these accusations.

¹⁵ Leonard Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America* (Oxford University Press, 1995), xx.

Martin Luther in the 16th century wrote a pamphlet called *The Jews and Their Lies* where he claimed that Jews wanted to massacre Christians and that they are to be eradicated. This document was later reprinted and used by the Nazis as part of their antisemitic propaganda. Another thing that the Nazis reinvented from the past were the badges, which Jews were obligated to wear at all times to distinguish them from others.

Christian church prohibited Christians to loan money for profit and since the Jews were also prohibited from buying land, they had very limited options as to how to make money. Due to these circumstances the Jewish people had decided to become moneylenders. This gave rise to many more stereotypes surrounding the Jews such as the one that they “own all the banks”.¹⁶

¹⁶ “A Brief History of Antisemitism”, Anti-Defamation League, accessed February 25, 2023, <https://www.adl.org/sites/default/files/documents/assets/pdf/education-outreach/Brief-History-on-Anti-Semitism-A.pdf>

1.3 Modern Antisemitism in the United States

Leonard Dinnerstein writes in his book that antisemitism in the United States dates all the way back to the first settlers who brought with them the prejudices and stereotypes of the old world. The most hatred came mainly from Protestants and Catholics. Carl Wittke, a historian, wrote in 1932 about the situation of Jewish immigrants this: “it is one of persecution and discrimination, and of the long and eventually successful struggle for the removal of civil disabilities.” Jacob Marcus followed up on this saying that the very word Jew brought with it something negative, a notion of distrust and hatred.¹⁷

At the start of the 18th century, it was common for the Christian people to not really bother with the significance of the Jewish difference to the effect of what their religion actually was and how it stood in the landscape of that time. However, what was also common was the rejection of the Jewish people because they did not accept Jesus Christ as their saviour and the fact that they would go to hell for it. Many Christians took it upon themselves to turn these Jews from their wrongful ways and embrace Jesus as their Lord. It was their “duty” to do so.

Moving forward into the 20th century United States saw Jews immigrating into the country fully prepared to jump in among the elite Protestants in regard to schooling, housing and employment. This notion however met strong opposition from the members of the middle and upper class who wanted nothing more than to not associate with the Jewish people.

Lee Levinger claims that anti-semitism was used as a weapon of the reactionary parties used to battle any progressive idea or movement, mainly in Europe and later in the New World. “The Jews was always a scapegoat for political reaction from the Dreyfus in France to the pogroms in Russia, to the losing of the First World War in Germany and the rise of the communist party to power in Russia.” Liberal parties tended to side with Jews because they saw them as people deserving rights and decency.¹⁸

Antisemitic rhetoric existed in this country for centuries already as we have already established so to push through was seemingly impossible. The aftermath following the end of the First World War did not help the Jewish situation either. Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 in Russia set in stone this mindset even more because now the good people of the United States were scared that socialism and communism, just like the Jews, were there just to divide and replace the population of the New World.

¹⁷ Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America*, 4.

¹⁸ Levinger, *A History*, 357.

Protestants and Catholics were scared so much that they even gave rise to unsubstantiated rumours surrounding Jews such as that they are secretly leading the socialist revolution. These were not the only rumours surrounding the Jewish immigrants, another thing that created unrest and distrust between these groups was the idea that children of these immigrants were there to undermine already established businesses and institutions and install their own people.

Anti-Semites used every medium available to them to cause harm and deepen the hate and prejudice towards the Jewish race even further. First published in Russia in 1904 a document called the *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion* was supposedly written by seventy Jewish elders plotting to destroy and overthrow the Christian world. Later after the first World War this book emerged in the United States and wreaked havoc among the uneducated. Although this book was poorly written and was easily recognised as fake by scholars, many common people believed it. It was reprinted by Russian Czarists who tried to blame the Jewish people for the communist revolution in Russia. Many people of power were caught in these lies, like Henry Ford, who accepted these protocols as fact and took this book and again reprinted it as a long series in his own paper, the *Dearborn Independent*.¹⁹

Wave of antisemitism came again in connection with the Red Scare and the post war period. Many feared that people connected to the Bolshevik revolution would find their way to the west, to the New World, and would cause disruptions in the society. In 1919 Americans faced a series of labour strikes, which many people thought would give rise to another socialist revolution.

Dinnerstein comments that these labour strikes were later followed by many instances of letter bombing, which were used to target prominent figures of society. This was the last straw for Americans and a full Red Scare broke out. Initially, targets were simply outcasts and anarchists but that eventually shifted into accusations against Jews.²⁰ Jews were always an easy target for people to pin the blame on, often used as a scapegoat to have someone people could hold grudge and resentment against. *Literary Digest* published two articles, which basically supported the notion that “Jews” and “Bolsheviks” are synonymous, ever so slightly pushing the agenda that Jews are the enemy. In 1918, *World's Work* reprinted an article, which indicated that Jews were among the prominent Bolshevik leaders. Minister George A. Simons told a U.S. Senate that New York City's Lower East Side' “Yiddish agitators” were

¹⁹ Levinger, *A History*, 358.

²⁰ Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America*, 79.

behind the abrupt chaos in the Soviet Union. Next year, in 1919, rumours spread around that Jewish peddlers used their profession to put into circulation among other things also Bolshevik literature.²¹

Levinger mentions in his book that the Jews had to, among other threats, also deal with the KKK, the Ku Klux Klan. Although their primary target were black people, Jews would often be targeted as well. Just between the years 1920 and 1925 as many as a million people would join this group. This got to the point where states had to pass laws forbidding masked organizations, which was ultimately the beginning of the Klan's decline. On top of that, in 1920, nine national Jewish organizations got together and sent out a letter entitled "An Address to Their Fellow-Citizens by American Jewish Organizations." This paper ended with these words:

Let not hatred and misunderstanding arise where peace and harmony, unity and brotherliness are required in order to perpetuate all that America represents, and to enable all men to know that within her wide boundaries there is no room for injustice and intolerance."²²

This notion was quickly followed by America's leading Christians, former president Howard Taft and current president Woodrow Wilson at the front. The National Conference of Christians and Jews was created to spread peace and understanding among the two groups. Since then, every president have spoken out to support this notion and expressed strong opposition to any form of discrimination of any race.²³

This has hopefully given us a clear understanding of what antisemitism is, how it evolved and how it affected the life of American Jewish immigrants trying to live in the United States.

²¹ Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America*, 80.

²² Levinger, *A History*, 361.

²³ Levinger, *A History*, 361.

1.4 The Great Depression

Although the events of the book are set before the Great Depression era, it is still important for us to understand which setting and environment Michael Gold lived in when he wrote his book. The Great Depression started in the United States in 1929 but over the next few years spread across the whole world and ended in 1939. It was the most severe depression the Western world had ever experienced until then. People lost money, their homes and many of them even their savings. Christina Romer claims that the fundamental reason the Great Depression occurred in the United States was a decline in spending by people, which consequently led to slower production. The USA were profiting from the first World War and people even among the working class finally had money to buy things they wanted or even to invest. Banks happily gave out loans and soon even banks were borrowing money as well. One area of money spending became hugely popular at that time and that was the stock market. It was so popular in fact that stock prices had risen fourfold between the years 1921 and 1929 when it reached its peak. At that time the Federal Reserve had to step in and raise interest in hopes of reducing the amount of investing, this affected areas such as construction and car purchases, which then reduced production.²⁴

Edwin Gay describes this mania of buying and investing like this:

The war fervor, aided and inflamed by energetic organization, placed government bonds in the hands of millions of people who never before had possessed such instruments of credit. They were not thereby educated in the use of credit; they simply received a new vision of its possibilities. The basis was thus laid for the vast and credulous post-war market for credit which culminated in the portentous speculation of 1928 and 1929. Great enterprises learned that they could distribute their shares and bonds by direct sale to the public, and smaller enterprises were recapitalized by busy investment houses to float new securities in a national market canvassed by high-pressure bond salesmen.²⁵

What ultimately led to the crash of the stock market was the ever-increasing stock prices, which reached a point where nobody reasonable would think they would have turned a profit. Investors lost confidence in the market and started rapidly selling everything they had to obtain even a little profit. This huge difference between prices rising and declining has led to the Great Crash of 1929.²⁶

²⁴ “Great Depression,” Forthcoming in the Encyclopaedia Britannica, Now and Future, last modified December 20, 2003, https://www.nowandfutures.com/d2/great_depression_romer.pdf

²⁵ Edwin F. Gay, “The Great Depression,” *Foreign Affairs* 10, no. 4 (July 1932): 534.

²⁶ Now and Future, “Great Depression.”

Robert J Samuelson claims in the journal *The Wilson Quarterly* that the Great Depression does not have an exact definition, in his words it is “a term of art.” But tries give a broader definition: “it’s a broad economic collapse that produces high unemployment from which there is no easy and obvious escape.” He even argues that the Great Depression directly led to Adolf Hitler seizing power in Germany.²⁷

²⁷ Robert J. Samuelson, “Revisiting the Great Depression,” *The Wilson Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (Winter 2012): 36.

2. *Jews Without Money* as a Literary Work of Art

In this section I would like to outline Michael Gold's approach to his book. Taking into consideration that the book is not a real representation of his childhood but a fictional autobiography which he uses to depict the life of Jews in New York, and especially living in Manhattan on the Lower East Side.

In his book, Michael Gold critiques works of others set to portray the poor living standards and the overall look on the world from the eyes of the people. He claims it is not accurate. In his tribute to Upton Sinclair, he says he dislikes pictures of cheerful and virtuous poverty because it paints a completely different picture from reality, and so he sets out his goal.²⁸ To show the accurate depiction, although in fictional autobiography, of the living conditions of that time, the gloom and dirt of everyday life, the desperate need for some escapism and reason to look elsewhere when people are dying on the streets left and right. He stands in complete opposition to other writers of his generation, who, unlike him, would like nothing more than to forget their impoverished past. He is equipped with strong and raw language, using "nurtured angry memories" and "lonely radicalism" which all helped as a foundation for *Jews Without Money*.²⁹

I will also use this passage to explain and illustrate the terminology I will be using throughout my analysis of this piece of work. Autobiography is often incorrectly mistaken for a novel. The general conception of autobiography is that it has a bases in reality, it depicts the author's life to some extent. Encyclopaedia Britannica defines autobiography as "biography of oneself narrated by oneself."³⁰ J. A. Cuddon in his dictionary of literary terms explains that an autobiography is "a person's own account of his or her life."³¹ It was understood by both its writers and readers that autobiography was meant to be read by an audience, unlike journals or diaries, which were strictly personal and private.³² On the other hand, novel can be based on fantasy or imagination, its goal is not necessarily to depict the real and true view of the author's life. Again, we have to bear in mind that this particular book is a fictional autobiography, meaning, that although it functions as a recollection of Gold's childhood, it did not happen the way he wrote it in the book.

²⁸ Morris Dickstein, "Hallucinating the Past: "Jews without Money" Revisited," *Grand Street* 9, no. 2 (Winter 1990): 155-168.

²⁹ Dickstein, "Hallucinating," 163.

³⁰ "Autobiography," Encyclopaedia Britannica, last modified November 10, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/art/autobiography-literature>.

³¹ J. A. Cuddon, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (John Wiley & Sons, 2012), 60.

³² Cuddon, *A Dictionary*, 60-61.

According to Folsom the book is about 85% autobiography, but what is important is the fact that it is a “pseudonymous autobiography”.³³ From that, we can safely assume that Michael Gold does not shy away from changing details or even whole stories to better suit his overarching story. For example, in *Jews without Money*, his father falls down from a scaffolding and breaks his leg whereas in *Poverty is a Trap* nobody falls from a scaffolding, but the mother and father get sick. “Poverty is a trap, my father would say, the harder you struggle, the faster you are caught.”³⁴

Harrington says that *Jews Without Money* should be taken as a series of memoirs more than a novel. Some praise it for staying faithful to the real experiences of Michael Gold’s childhood life.³⁵

Critics’ opinion varies on the purposes of the book, some, like Michael Folsom say it is a pure communist propaganda, speaking mainly about the last paragraph of the book, which contains lines that point towards Gold’s conversion to communism:³⁶ O Workers’ Revolution, you brought hope to me, a lonely, suicidal boy. You are the true Messiah. You will destroy the East Side when you come and build there a garden for the human spirit.³⁷

In their eyes, because Gold’s work is more of a piece of fiction rather than autobiography, the book is constructed to fit in the narrative of this ideology, to highlight the suffering of the poor majority and to show the wealth of the rich minority ruling above them. According to Folsom, the ending is the whole point of the book and paramount to the whole idea.³⁸

Others, like Sinclair Lewis, call it “passionate” and “authentic”. Allen Guttman claims it is “the first important document of proletarian literature”.³⁹ Above all, it is Gold’s portrayal of a man on his road to American dream. A young boy living in the worst of environments, poverty, and dirt, constantly encountering obstacles and problems to at the end hopefully getting some resolution.

It can be a mixture of both. On one hand, one could interpret the story with its dividing ending as a direct support for communism and a strong stand against capitalism, but on the

³³ Richard Tuerk, *Studies in American Jewish Literature* (Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 1988), 68.

³⁴ Tuerk, *Studies in American Jewish Literature*, 69.

³⁵ Tuerk, *Studies in American Jewish Literature*, 67.

³⁶ Tuerk, *Studies in American Jewish Literature*, 67.

³⁷ Michael Gold, *Jews Without Money* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2004), 309.

³⁸ Tuerk, *Studies in American Jewish Literature*, 67.

³⁹ Tuerk, *Studies in American Jewish Literature*, 68.

other hand, there is also a strong sense of individuality, a sense that one can accomplish anything even against all odds, and the need to survive in the most desperate of times.

We can see this duality perfectly in Mickey's father. Every night he and his friends: housepainters, peddlers and clothing workers gather around and play poker, share gossip, sing, and share stories. Telling stories is Mickey's father's speciality, he is a somewhat of a master of his craft. They lament their situation, their social status, their past and their future and yet are unwilling or unable to do anything about it or try to change anything, perhaps they are afraid to stand up for themselves. Showcasing the fragile state of the poor working-class people in need of a revolution, in need of a change.

But some chapters show exact opposite, the American dream. We find out that Mickey's father Herman and his cousin owned a suspender shop together when they moved to America, their way to make profit and break out in the New world. Due to at the time unforeseen circumstances this did not work out for Herman, and he was forced to find his living elsewhere.

His struggle to be his own boss did not end there, however. Throughout the book Mickey's father is always trying to move up the ladder, to show the world what he's made of. To make a good living for himself and look after his family. A true American dream come true. His dream was for the Mickey to become a doctor and he would make the money to afford it. To make a greater future for his children.

2.1 Proletariat Literature

Michael Gold was regarded as one of the prominent figures of proletarian literature in the United States, at this stage it is fitting that we define what it was.

As Ray Johnson states in his book *The Proletarian Novel*, the term suggests a class-conscious medium, which has the word “struggle” engraved inside. It cannot be counted as an ordinary middle-class category of literature because it usually generates the notion of working-class struggle. It is, after all, from working-class writers for working-class readers. Especially writers on the Left felt that there was an opening on the market of opportunities for the working-class people, who could not find themselves in bourgeois novel and sought something closer to their real lives.⁴⁰

The one thing that had sprouted from this new literary movement was undoubtedly its focus on political and social struggles, these things became inseparable from fiction and could not be judged on its own without taking into consideration the other.

Proletarian literature reflected, just like any other literary creation, certain interests, needs and positions, where it branched from other types was its strong connection to a political party through which it spoke to its subjects. This political party was of course the Communist political party, which out of all the labour parties expressed any interest in this movement. This attention was by many authors, like Michael Gold, whole-heartedly reciprocated.

In Philip Rahv’s opinion, it is impossible to nit-pick proletarian literature without acknowledging its ties to the Communist Party. Rahv admits that there are other factors that play their part here but all of them have been “modified” by this fundamental cornerstone. This relation between proletarian writers and the Communist Party signalizes the rise and fall, the beginning, and an end of proletarian literature.⁴¹

The *Molly Maguires* and *The Wobblies* were the first sources of what could be counted as proletarian literature, using many of their newspapers as a way to communicate the hardships and struggles of their readers to the masses. Above all else to give voice to the voiceless many, such as the *New Solidarity*, the *Wire-City Weekly*, the *Industrial Worker* and the *Can-Opener* all had the proletarian motto in mind, some more than others.

⁴⁰ Roy Johnson, *The Proletarian Novel* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1975), 84.

⁴¹ Philip Rahv, “Proletarian Literature: A political Autopsy.” *The Southern Review*; *Baton Rouge* 4 (January 1938): 616.

Steadman claims that these papers were proletarian in origin and their intent, but they failed to capture the essence of proletarian writing in America. He says they were “sporadic” and “ephemeral”.

The *Comrade* of 1901 and *The Masses* however took a different path and might have been the very first fully developed proletarian medium but they, like the papers before them, lacked in some aspects. The *Comrade* was said to be too political at times, too heavy-handed and blunt, the latter too educated and cruel, condescending even, to its readers, which it tried so hard to connect with. *The Masses* later became *The New Masses*, but they too did not know what to do at first, it took them almost two years to find their footing. That is when Michael Gold became an editor there and started publishing his stories called “workers”. His *Jews Without Money*, published in 1928, is considered to be the very first piece of proletarian writing to break out into the world. Granville Hicks called Gold “the movement’s great amateur” but he admits that without him, who knows what would have become of proletarian literature.⁴²

In 1921, Michael Gold, at that time still writing under his real name Irwin Granich, published an essay “*Towards Proletarian Art*”. Homberger proclaims that, as far as he is concerned, this essay has been described as “the first significant call in this country for the creation of a distinctly and militantly working-class culture.”⁴³

Steadman goes as far as to claim that out of poems, short stories, and novels, the last are “clearly” the weakest. He says that the radical proletarian novelists lack any writing talent and have one thing in common and that is their unanimous consensus that “misery has no dreams,” later clarifying what he means by dreams is not so much dreams in a sense of hoping for better future but simple enjoyment out of simple things, comparing these writers to the likes of Beethoven, who, at the end of his life completely deaf, could still find enjoyment and write the “joyous Sixth Symphony.”⁴⁴

In the same sense it is possible for proletarian writers to feel joy and happiness even though they are unemployed and poor. Human beings, Steadman says, cannot go on with their lives fuelled only with despair and misery, there will always be short or longer segments of joy no matter how deep the well of despair is. Works that leave out these parts are in his opinion dishonest and untruthful to the human experience and should not be regarded as anything else.

⁴² R. W. Steadman, “A Critique of Proletarian Literature,” *The North American Review* 247, no. 1 (Spring 1939): 143.

⁴³ Eric Homberger, “Proletarian Literature and the John Reed Clubs 1929-1935,” *Journal of American Studies* 13, no. 2 (August 1979): 221.

⁴⁴ Steadman, “A Critique,” 152.

Good literature, not only proletarian but overall, requires balancing of many factors. Putting things on paper is a process of transforming ideas and experiences, which must be not only accurate and truthful but also honest in its emotional message.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Steadman, "A Critique," 152.

3. Depiction of Poverty and Immigration

The book focuses on Gold's upbringing and the life of his family, his friends and his neighbours in the tenements and streets on the Lower East Side, in Manhattan. Each chapter contributes to painting the picture for us, the readers, to have better idea about what it was like to be a Jew and live in this hostile environment.

The story is written from the perspective of Michael Gold's younger self Mickey. It uses first-person narrative, which makes the story and the narration all the more personal even though the story and characters may be fictional.

In the author's note Michael Gold tells the story of a friend who in the 1930s helped him translate his book into German. The situation happened about a week after Hitler rose to power and Nazis were sweeping the houses. When they came into her house, and she was expecting them, they went through her manuscripts and saw one with the name "*Jews Without Money*". One of the men from the Nazi party allegedly laughed when he saw the title of the book. For them, there were no Jews without money.⁴⁶

This was big part of the Nazi propaganda against the Jewish population. According to them the Jews owned the banks and therefore had all the money and they needed to be stopped. This piece of antisemitism, as we have already discussed, have been used as an excuse for further hate and prejudice against the Jewish population and is of course a complete lie. It being a lie however did not stop people from using it as a weapon against Jews and through it instigate more violence and hatred, one of these people was Adolf Hitler, who used this lie as part of his program of ridding the world of the Jewish race. One Jewish family stands in the front of this hateful rhetoric and that family is the Rothschilds, this name is also later mentioned in the book when the father praises Michael, saying that one day he will be as wealthy as them.

Each and every chapter in the book is in some way representative of his life on the Lower East Side. Some chapters, for example *Fifty Cents a Night*, *How Babies Are Made* or *A Gang of Little Yids* are mainly focusing on the friends and friendships little Michael has made when he was young on the street. In the first chapter he writes about how he had a group of friends who were also Jewish, and they would go about their day and harass beggars and prostitutes who were roaming the streets in Summer and Spring.

⁴⁶ Gold, *Jews Without Money*, 9.

“I had joined, as on other mornings, my gang of little Yids gathered on the sidewalk. There were six or seven of us.” And they would play with anything and however they possibly could. “We spun tops on the sidewalks. We chased street cars and truck and stole dangerous rides. We threw a dead cat into the store of the Chinese laundryman.”⁴⁷ Needless to say, the circumstances and the desperation of their situation had twisted their views on “harmless” fun into something that hardly resembles it. When even that began to bore them, they would turn their eyes to the prostitutes roaming the streets, of which there were many to choose from. They began teasing one called Rosie. “We screamed at her, making obscene gestures: “Fifty cents a night! That’s what you charge; fifty cents a night! Yah, yah, yah!”⁴⁸

In the second chapter *How Babies Are Made*, Michael and the leader of their group, a much bigger older boy, nicknamed “Nigger” for his darker skin, are following one of the prostitutes Susie to her apartment with a truck driver she had managed to hail. This chapter signals the breakdown of Michael’s childhood naivete when his friend Nigger tells him that the same thing, they had seen happening in the room has had also happened to his mom.

Chapters like *Did God Make Bedbugs*, *A House Painter’s Tears* or *Mushrooms in Bronx Park* tells us much more about Michael’s family. He is the oldest out of 3 children, he has a sister and a brother. His father and mother are first-generation immigrants, meaning they were born in foreign countries, in this case the father is from Romania and mother from Hungary, and for various reasons they had to emigrate to America. This means that Michael Gold is second-generation immigrant and also Jewish-American.

As it was mentioned above, Michael had a group of friends who would spend time together, play together and even fight together. In the first couple of chapters like *Fifty Cents a Night*, *How Babies Are Made* and *a Gang of Little Yids*, Michael Gold depicts his early childhood and adventures he and his friends went on.

Michael Gold calls the East Side a red-light district of New York due to the oversaturation of prostitutes that were roaming the streets all day, every day. Hundreds upon hundreds occupying vacant stores and apartments. For young Michael this sight became very common and uninteresting. The pious adult Jews tried to not see them, isolate themselves from this

⁴⁷ Gold, *Jews Without Money*, 16.

⁴⁸ Gold, *Jews Without Money*, 17.

aspect of living but the children did not. “‘This is America.’ They tried to live. Tried to shut their eyes. We children did not shut our eyes. We saw and knew.”⁴⁹

It is apparent from their actions that they were not the nicest group. They did everything to make the best out of the gloomiest and grimmest of situations, from harassing prostitutes on the streets to killing cats for fun because there were too much of them. In these chapters there is a strong sense of naivete in young Mickey, his young eyes blind to the atrocities happening around him, making fun of others and their grim circumstances, unable to see the reality or process properly what is good and what is wrong behaviour like an adult person would.

The fact that kids knew how to create fun out of every dire situation does not take away from the fact that living on the Lower East Side was in no way safe for young children. Not only did the children have to see prostitutes roaming the streets of Manhattan and dead animals at every step but also try to avoid dangerous people standing around. One such man scared Michael and his friend Joe so much they nicknamed him “Jack the Ripper”.⁵⁰

Summers were tough on the Lower East side, almost as tough as the winters but whereas in the winter people had to do everything to survive, in summer people had to do everything to not die of boredom.

Joe was Michael’s childhood friend with whom he spent a lot of time. Roaming the streets bare foot to fight the heat and completely shaved heads to fight the summer lice, wondering what their next adventure would be.

We do not know much about Joey from Gold’s book but what we do know is that he was a good friend, probably the best friend of Michael’s at that age. Gold recalls him fondly saying: “You are precocious in the Jewish way, full of strange kindness and understanding.” Joey, however, did not survive very long as he was “sacrificed” under the wheels of a horse car.⁵¹

Herman, Michael’s father, is a very complex and conflicted person. On one hand he can lament all day about his life, about his desperate working situation, about all the injustices happening all over the Lower East Side and on the other hand boast to others about his smart and beautiful children and the bright future that is surely awaiting them. “I am certain to be

⁴⁹ Gold, *Jews Without Money*, 14-15.

⁵⁰ Gold, *Jews Without Money*, 60.

⁵¹ Gold, *Jews Without Money*, 50.

rich! I will make a schoolteacher out of you Esther! And you, Mickey, will be a doctor!” he exclaims as he laments about his cousin Sam who stole his suspender shop from him.⁵²

“Why must I work at this accursed trade?” Herman wept, complaining about the horrible working conditions.

To fall off a scaffold someday, maybe, and break my legs, and then come at the lunch hour every day to other painters, to beg them for a little money? Every day there comes one of them, the sick painters.⁵³

In the chapter A House Painter’s Tears Herman has been working as a painter on a scaffolding around buildings and as it is usual with this profession, they suffer illnesses connected with these aforementioned working conditions. Herman often suffered lead poisoning sickness which resulted in him going home devastated and ill, in need of a bucket to vomit into. Scared that he might die:

It will happen (an injury from work), my father wept. I am always the unfortunate one. And if that doesn’t happen, I will die of this paint sickness, I am sure of it. And once I owned a suspender shop of my own! Once I worked for myself and laughed and lived! But now I must die! It is all useless. A curse on Columbus! A curse on America, the thief! It is a land where the lice make fortunes, and the good men starve!⁵⁴

Michael’s mother always soothing him to feel better. “Nu, nu, it will pass, Herman,” she says, and it gets better.⁵⁵

In a company of friends and family Herman is always content. He grows “talkative” and “witty”.

Talk does not exhaust Jews as it does other people, nor give them brain-fag; it refreshes them. Talk is the baseball, the golf, the poker, the love and the war of the Jewish race. The whole tenement was talking and eating its supper. The broken talk came through the airshaft window. The profound bass of the East Side traffic lay under this talk. Talk. Talk.⁵⁶

During these times Herman contemplates his living situation and recalls his beginnings when he desperately tried to convince his parents in Romania to give him money for the trip to America when he saw all the postcards sent by his cousin Sam.⁵⁷ During the time Herman was looking after his family, Sam had already travelled to America and had built a business of manufacturing and selling suspenders. Herman was amazed by this and wanted to come to

⁵² Gold, *Jews Without Money*, 110.

⁵³ Gold, *Jews Without Money*, 112.

⁵⁴ Gold, *Jews Without Money*, 112.

⁵⁵ Gold, *Jews Without Money*, 111-112.

⁵⁶ Gold, *Jews Without Money*, 112-113.

⁵⁷ Gold, *Jews Without Money*, 100.

help him. He wants to be his own boss and is looking for ways to make a better living and more money. When he suffers an accident and is bedridden for quite some time his mental state suffers the most. The then cheerful and outspoken Jew is now quiet and sad. Mickey has to step up for his father and peddle newspapers to make some money when his father is unable to.

Herman has a dream, and that dream is being his own boss. “I don’t want a Boss! I must be my own Boss or go crazy!” He says to Katie. However due to his situation and relationship with his cousin he is unable to achieve it and is forced to do something that is slowly killing him. He, instead, shifts his focus on his children, placing his dream onto them. Hoping for them to have brighter and happier future, here, in the Promised Land.⁵⁸

Michael Gold himself said about the “father” that he “is an immigrant who came here expecting to get rich quick, like so many other immigrants who have dreamed of the Promised Land. But he sinks lower into poverty; he discovers that for the working class there can be no promised land where capitalism functions, but only hunger, unemployment, bitterness, degradation.”⁵⁹ At the end of the book Herman contemplates on his life in America saying: “Twenty years in America, and poorer than when I came. A suspender shop I had, and it was stolen from me by a villain. A house painter foreman I became, and I fell off a scaffold. Now bananas I sell, and even at that I am a failure. It is all luck.”⁶⁰

Gold called her mother in his book the heroine of this story and she indeed to some extent is. In a story full of men, she is the strong matriarchal side that balances it all out. Until a tragedy that befalls the Gold family later in the book she is the most generous, courageous, active and open woman in the whole tenement. Prostitutes, among others, were especially fond of her, often seeking her out for support or advice:

There’s no privacy in a tenement. So, there was always some girl or other in our kitchen, pouring out a tale of wretchedness to my mother, drinking tea and warming herself at my mother’s wonderful heart.⁶¹

Everyone in the tenement knew that she was the one to ease their struggles, their voice of reason in a time when reason was the last thing on people’s minds.

⁵⁸ Gold, *Jews Without Money*, 207.

⁵⁹ Tuerk, *Studies in American Jewish Literature*, 70.

⁶⁰ Gold, *Jews Without Money*, 301.

⁶¹ Gold, *Jews Without Money*, 30.

One prostitute in particular, Susie, worshiped Michael's mother. She was the prettiest and the most hated girl on the street, very often dissatisfied with her life. She would jump in her arms and cry:

"Momma, momma, please be kind to me!" she wept. "Tell me what to do, tell me how to save myself!" "Leave this business," my mother said patiently. "Get a job in a factory, and be a good girl." "Yes, yes, yes," the girl wept. "I'll do it to-morrow morning, momma." But she never did.⁶²

But it was not just the people in the tenement who looked up to her. She was a strong leader wherever she went. She was a strong figure who could be always relied upon. There came a time where even she had to find a job because Herman had been injured and thus incapable of providing for his family. She started working at a posh restaurant who also hired Christians. She was reluctant about the job at first but had to do it otherwise they would be moneyless. She was met with the same warm approach as she did in the tenement.

They liked her, and soon called her "Momma," which made her vain. "You should hear how a big black dishwasher named Joes, how he comes to me to-day, and says, 'Momma, I'm going to quit. Every one is against me here because I am back,' he says. 'The whole world is against us black people.' "So I said to him, 'Joe, I am not against you. Don't be foolish, don't go out to be a bum again. The trouble with you here is you are lazy. If you would work harder the others would like you, too.' So he said, 'Momma, all right I'll stay.' So that's how it is in the restaurant. They call me Momma, even the black ones."⁶³

She was the mother figure for all people, no matter your colour of skin, or your religion. She would see you as a person and tell you straight to the face what she thought about you. But she was not so generous and nice like this all the time. She also knew how to step up for herself. To have stiff upper lip. To show courage in the face of adversity. Michael Gold describes their tenement like this:

Our tenement was nothing but a junk-heap of rotten lumber and brick. It was an old ship on its last voyage; in the battering winter storms, all its seams opened and wind and snow came through. The plaster was always falling down, the stairs were broken and dirty. Five times that winter the pipes froze and floods spurted from the plumbing and dripped from the ceilings.⁶⁴

But their landlord still demanded payment for it. What could people do? Had they not paid the landlord would throw them and their furniture on the street, in the snow, in Winter. That was an almost certain death sentence. Without home and without money, there was almost nothing

⁶² Gold, *Jews Without Money*, 31.

⁶³ Gold, *Jews Without Money*, 245-246.

⁶⁴ Gold, *Jews Without Money*, 248.

these poor people could do. When confronted with these demands he would just tell them he would do it next week.

“Next week!” my mother sneered, after he had gone. “A dozen times he has told us that, the yellow murderer! May the lice eat him next week! May his false teeth choke him to death next week!”⁶⁵

Katie offered as a solution to protest and go on a rent strike, which was a very popular thing to do at the time because every other tenement had these issues. Everyone agreed to this but when the day came everyone paid but Michael’s mother. The landlord threatened Katie with the possibility of him kicking them out of the tenement:

“I will show you. To-morrow I’ll call the sheriff and throw your furniture on the street!” [...] “I can do anything in this district. I have a pull with Tammany Hall!” My mother put her hands on her hips and asked him quietly: “But with God have you a pull, Mr. Zunzer?” Mr. Zunzer was startled by this sally. He tried to meet it with haughtiness. “Don’t talk to me of God,” he said. “I am more often in the synagogue than you and your husband together. I give a dozen times more money there.” “Every one knows you have money,” said my mother quietly, “even the Angel of Death. Some day he will come for *all* your money, Mr. Zunzer.”⁶⁶

What also sets Michael Gold apart from other writers is his use of language. He does not shy away from stronger and rougher language, usage of adjectives, verbs or even vast figure of speeches to help him portray the horrible conditions of the Jewish life. We can see that right away from the very first page where he describes the streets where he lived as a young boy:

It never slept. It roared like a sea. It exploded lie fireworks. People pushed and wrangled in the street. There were armies of howling pushcart peddlers. Women screamed, dogs barked and copulated. Babies cried. A parrot cursed. Ragged kids played under truck-horses. Fat housewives fought from stoop to stoop. A beggar sang. At the livery stable coach drivers lounged on a bench. They hee-hawed with laughter, they guzzled cans of beer. [...] East Side mothers with heroic bosoms pushed their baby carriages, gossiping. Horse cars jingled by. A tinker hammered at brass. Junkbells clanged. [...] Kids were dancing around the hurdy-gurdy. Two bums slugged each other. Excitement, dirt, fighting, chaos!⁶⁷

That is how Michael Gold describes the vibrant life of the New York’s East Side. Truly a diverse slice of life covering all sides from crying babies and “ragged” kids to housewives and homeless people there is everything from every corner of misery. In this short segment Gold is perfectly able to portray the environment and life of these poor people, it is miserable and sad, and they all know it.

⁶⁵ Gold, *Jews Without Money*, 248.

⁶⁶ Gold, *Jews Without Money*, 253.

⁶⁷ Gold, *Jews Without Money*, 13-14.

Catherine Rottenberg also adds on top of this information the fact that Michael Gold uses “Jewishness” as a descriptor, unlike other writers such as Anzia Yezierska and her works *Arrogant Beggar* and *Salome of the Tenements* where she emphasizes the dirt, poverty and the overall horrid living conditions of the Lower East Side but in no way the “Jewishness” of the place. In addition to that, the characters in her books are looking at their world using criteria and metrics connected more with the class struggle and class differences whereas Michael Gold is using “ethnically inflected language.”⁶⁸ The issue Michael Gold is trying to focus on is more concerning the American Jewish identity on top of the class differences of other races. He presents a more sophisticated look on Jewishness and Americanness and what it means to the main character of his story.⁶⁹

Rottenberg follows this by claiming that Gold’s descriptions of Lower East Side’s people, buildings and streets are often sort of a mix between a positive view and a negative view. These views alternate “between vivid, animated portrayals,”⁷⁰ which are more connected with the problems and struggles with the everyday life of working-class people and the descriptions of the horrid living conditions, the filth and stench and poverty. According to Rottenberg it is quite hard to pinpoint the way Gold describes things as good or bad, as pleasant or unpleasant, or fair and unfair.⁷¹ He does it both ways. The example Rottenberg lists in her article is that of a hot summer day:

This was Summer. An old melancholy Jew limped by, with six derby hats stacked one over the other on his head, and a burlap sack on his shoulder. “I cash clothes!” He wailed, gazing with weary eyes up and down the tenement walls. “I cash clothes!” and it made one’s heart ache strangely, like the synagogue prayers at Yom Kippur. In my ears still ring the lamentations of the lonely old Jews without money: “I cash clothes, I cash clothes, my God why hast Thou forsaken me?”⁷²

On one hand there is the sense of poverty and to the certain point even a mean spirited fun and mockery of a man which existence has been reduced to his race and job but on the other hand Rottenberg puts it like this: “And yet, not only is the sordidness of the scene portrayed with compassion, but the picture Mickey paints here of the Jew also registers empathy and identification mixed with repulsion, as if there were something grotesque about a limping, old Jew.”⁷³ Another example Catherine Rottenberg uses in her article of Jewishness and Jewish

⁶⁸ Catherine Rottenberg, “Writing from the Margins of the Margins: Michael Gold’s Jews Without Money and Claude McKay’s Home to Harlem,” *MELUS* 35, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 128.

⁶⁹ Rottenberg, “Writing,” 128.

⁷⁰ Rottenberg, “Writing,” 129.

⁷¹ Rottenberg, “Writing,” 129.

⁷² Gold, *Jews Without Money*, 56.

⁷³ Rottenberg, “Writing,” 129.

identity being a prominent part of Gold's descriptive technique is Mickey's description of a family who have been evicted from their home in Winter: "snow fell, too, on a *little Jew* and his wife and three children. They huddled in a mournful group by their possessions."⁷⁴ In Rottenberg's opinion there is again the mixture of positive and negative approaches here, there is both "identification" and "repulsion" in relation to the Jewish family, just like the limping old Jew, and thus she concludes that although the main problem with Lower East Side in *Jews Without Money* is still poverty, the way Gold uses ethnicity as a weapon creates another kind of internal and external conflict for the characters.⁷⁵

Gold's skill to portray everyday life on the Lower East Side is unlike any other writer, he paints the portrait so vivid and vibrant that it is easy to picture it instantly. Good example of this is when he follows the previous paragraph with more description of summer:

Summer. Everywhere the garbage. Plop, bung, and another fat, spreading bundle dropped from a tenement window. Many of the East Side women had this horrible custom. To save walking downstairs, they wrapped their garbage in newspapers and flung it in the street. In summer the East Side heavens rained with potato peelings, coffee grounds, herring heads and dangerous soup bones. [...] Summer heat. The asphalt bubbled underfoot. The horses pulled their hoofs with a loud sucking noise out of boiling tar streets. One's own bare feet sank in the tar, and left a deep print.⁷⁶

We have already mentioned summer couple of times, but winter was usually even more deadly and vivid in Gold's stories because there was no food and even when there were some people could not afford it. People so poor they could not even afford whole pieces of food but just parts, slices or pinches. Poverty was the ultimate enemy on the Lower East Side. Gold retells such story like this:

On the East Side people buy their groceries a pinch at a time; three cents' worth of sugar, five cents' worth of butter, everything in penny fractions. The good Jewish black bread that smells of harvest-time, is sliced into a dozen parts and sold for pennies. But that winter even pennies were scarce. There was a panic on Wall Street. Multitudes were without work; there were strikes, suicides, and food riots.⁷⁷

There was so much going in on this small ecosystem of a world and yet nothing at all at the same time. "Life froze. The sun vanished from the deathly grey sky. The streets reeked with snow and slush."⁷⁸ Gold is able to mix good and bad together so well, one might not always know what to think at first. Instances of them playing as kids, innocence clashing with this

⁷⁴ Rottenberg, "Writing," 129.

⁷⁵ Rottenberg, "Writing," 129.

⁷⁶ Gold, *Jews Without Money*, 57.

⁷⁷ Gold, *Jews Without Money*, 241.

⁷⁸ Gold, *Jews Without Money*, 241.

horrible world they live in. Naïve young eyes blind to the seriousness of the situation. “Winter. Building a snow fort one morning, we boys dug out a litter of frozen kittens and their mother. The little ones were still blind. They had been born into it, but had never seen our world.”⁷⁹ What at first seems like a positive and good memory always turns into horrible experience, maybe not right in that moment for a young child, but later, when one have the capacity to contemplate on it. They have seen in all already, they did not mind the smell, the dirt and noise of the street, it was part of their life just like everything else there, it was their home.

A saviour came in the form of Mrs. Rosenbaum who owned a grocery store and could not turn a starving child down even though her situation was the same. “She slaved from dawn until midnight,” she was the one kind enough to offer them any food even though they did not have any money to spend. “Every one was very poor, and she was too good not to give them groceries on credit. She was kind. Kindness is a form of suicide in a world based on the law of competition.”⁸⁰ She kept giving food away for free, knowing well she could not pay the bills. Then, finally her kindness caught up to her. Sheriff and his people came and tore her place down, destroyed her shelves and her furniture, threw her and her four children on the street with nothing but red swollen eyes. What could she have done when starving children came begging? In this world bad people are rewarded and good people are brought to their knees. Gold called poverty a sin, the worst possible sin there is because there was no escaping it and the punishment was constant. Although she did her best to help people around her the generosity came at a hight price. “O golden dyspeptic God of America, you were in a bad mood that winter. We were poor, and you punished us harshly for this worst of sins.”⁸¹ Herman goes as far as to say that “It’s better to be dead in this country than not to have money.”⁸²

Poverty and immigration went hand in hand on Lower East Side and Mickey has seen a lot of it up close. Mickey’s waking up and finding a new family of poor immigrants in his bed was almost a daily occurrence to him. “Around the room was scattered their wealth, all their striped calico seabags, and monumental bundles of featherbeds, pots, pans, fine peasant linen, embroidered towels, and queer coats thick as blankets.”⁸³ The Gold family would of course

⁷⁹ Gold, *Jews Without Money*, 242.

⁸⁰ Gold, *Jews Without Money*, 243.

⁸¹ Gold, *Jews Without Money*, 244.

⁸² Gold, *Jews Without Money*, 301.

⁸³ Gold, *Jews Without Money*, 73.

take care of them, “the hospitality was taken for granted until the new family rented its own flat.” These immigrants had to relearn everything, discover everything, that is how much the New World differed from the Old World. “They would walk up and down our East Side street, peering at policemen and saloons in amazement at America.” Most of them would find home and work elsewhere pretty quickly, leave after a few days and never come back but there were people who were not so lucky, people who stayed and enjoyed the endless generosity of the Gold family. “Don’t think my mother liked this. We were too poor to be generous.”⁸⁴

Jews, as we have also already discussed, were notorious for their immigrational habits. Their reasons for immigration varied just like the nations from whence they came. Some ran away from pogroms and lynching, some like Mickey’s father Herman came to America for the idea of the American Dream. The notion that America was a land of opportunity and that anyone could be rich was paramount in Herman’s decision to leave Romania. Immigration is a slow and continuous process and Herman was no exception to this. He would often tell stories of the old world, how “he had wandered along the Danube and through the Balkans. He had lived in the slums of Constantinople and had been with a band of young Jews who smuggled tobacco from Turkey into Romania.”⁸⁵ Then to finally decide and answer his calling in America. Even though this calling came at a high price for Herman. Before he left for America he was to be married to Miriam in an arranged marriage in Romania, which he refused and broke his father’s heart. “Father, I am not a child any longer. For this I am going to leave you. I am going to America to make my fortune.”⁸⁶ He said this to him, and his father disowned him for it. “When I left for America every one repeated my father’s words: he will eat the bread of sorrow and shame in America. He will never make his fortune.”⁸⁷ And in a way this prevision came true, Herman did not make his fortune and on top of that he is crippled and broken.

Mickey’s mother Katie did not have it easy either. She was working from a very young age and due to her father passing when she was ten, she had to step up and be the head of the family. Finally, when she was eighteen her family got together and sent her to America as a last effort to save them. She was tasked to work in America and sent money for her relatives

⁸⁴ Gold, *Jews Without Money*, 73-74.

⁸⁵ Gold, *Jews Without Money*, 81.

⁸⁶ Gold, *Jews Without Money*, 98.

⁸⁷ Gold, *Jews Without Money*, 99.

to also come. Gold describes her transition between the old world and the New World like this:

She spent seventeen agonized days in the filthy steerage, eating nothing but herrings and potatoes, because there was no *kosher* food. Her first night in America was spent amid groans and confusion on the floor of a crowded cellar for immigrants. It was called the Nigger House.⁸⁸

Her first job in America was in a restaurant getting paid five dollars a month, she slept on a floor in the kitchen and was working from five in the morning till midnight. It took her a whole year to save enough money so her oldest brother could afford a ship ticket. Katie notes of her life in America that “it is a good land, but not for the poor.”⁸⁹

With his mother crippled by her daughter’s death and Herman’s injury only allowing him to peddle bananas for little money, it was Mickey’s decision to leave the studies behind and ultimately bury his dream to be a doctor and even through his parents’ disagreements go and look for a job. He was fighting with himself for a long time after that, he loved books and he wanted to go to college, he even promised his elementary teacher who gifted him a book as a parting gift that he would study at night to keep up but this determination soon left him. “I thanked her for the book, and threw it under the bed when I got home. I never read a page in it, or in any book for the next five years. I hated books; they were lies, they had nothing to do with life and work.”⁹⁰ He despised books and he hated himself for it. Why was a child who was destined for bigger things deprived of his bright future? How is that fair in this world? He hunted for work for months and met with antisemitism at every step.

I found a job as errand boy in a silk house. But it was temporary. The very first morning the shipping clerk, a refined Nordic, suddenly realized I was a Jew. He politely fired me. They Wanted no Jews. In this city of a million Jews, there was much anti-Semitism among business firms. [...] How often was I made to remember I belonged to the accursed race, the race whose chief misfortune it is to have produced a Christ.⁹¹

Finally, after months of searching he found a job in a factory and it was the place that ultimate broke Mickey and destroyed his dreams and ambitions. It was hell. His supervisor “Monkey Face” bullied him, he could not see and breath in the fumes. It was a terrifying place for him.

⁸⁸ Gold, *Jews Without Money*, 159.

⁸⁹ Gold, *Jews Without Money*, 159.

⁹⁰ Gold, *Jews Without Money*, 305.

⁹¹ Gold, *Jews Without Money*, 306.

There was no time for anything but work in that evil hell-hole. I sweated there for six months. Monkey Face tortured me. I lost fifteen pounds in weight. I raged in nightmares in my sleep. I forgot my college dreams; I forgot everything, but the gas mantles.⁹²

After six months he left this work and alternated between various jobs in the upcoming years to no end, to finding no satisfaction or happiness. “Jobs, jobs. I drifted from one to the other, without plan, without hope. I was one of the many. I was caught like my father in poverty’s trap. I was nothing, bound for nowhere.”⁹³

Michael Harrington saw Gold’s pessimistic view a little bit differently in his book *The Other America*. Where Gold tried to portray a life of misery and despair, Harrington saw “an imaginative social document, which communicates the sights and sounds of that distinctive American experience, immigrant poverty.”⁹⁴ Corrina Lee critiques Harrington’s view, saying he is “strategically understating Gold’s radical and dissident perspective.”⁹⁵ In Lee’s opinion Harrington is purposely likening *Jews Without Money* to a “sociological fact” instead of reading it honestly and seeing the fictional side inside. Harrington treats the book as an immigrant document and takes the people of the book and shifts their life experiences into a narrative which depicts them as that of stereotypical American immigrants who have successfully assimilated into American society and put their Jewishness to the side. This view in Lee’s opinion critically clashes with the whole purpose and point of the book, cleverly omitting all the instances of characters going against this presupposition. Lee mentions Harrington’s claim that Jews of the Lower East Side were able to prevail exactly because of their ability to assimilate into society due to their shared language, religion and history. He later comments on this, adding that Gold purposely chose to “undermine and understate”⁹⁶ the collective effort and strength of these Jews to show the worse side of human nature instead of focusing on the things that make people happy in life. Harrington ends his thought saying that even though there was misery and dirt all around them there was also the ever-rising economy and environment full of opportunities, which made it possible for these people to break out from their social norms and achieve the American dream.⁹⁷

⁹² Gold, *Jews Without Money*, 308.

⁹³ Gold, *Jews Without Money*, 308.

⁹⁴ Corrina K. Lee, “Never Forgetting the East Side: Michael Gold’s “Jews Without Money,” *MELUS* 40, no. 2 (Summer 2015): 36.

⁹⁵ Lee, “Never,” 36.

⁹⁶ Lee, “Never,” 36.

⁹⁷ Lee, “Never,” 36.

Where is Harrington mistaken is in Lee's opinion the approach and the amount of good will he is willing to give to Gold in his book. He is adamant on the idea that these Jewish immigrants had successfully assimilated into American capitalist society when it is this exact American capitalist society, which holds these people back from escaping from poverty. Characters like Herman or Rabbi Schmarya are both prisoners of this social setting, hypocritical to their situation and unable to do anything about it. "Within the parameters of Gold's narrative, characters do not prevail over the environment as a result of an expanding economy or Old World solidarity,"⁹⁸ Corrina Lee says. Harrington treats Gold's East Side people as a group who had escaped the ghetto rather than a group who is stuck there and unable to move past it. Harrington "distorts" Gold's story into an "immigrant success," whereas Gold depicts it as a "inescapable poverty trap of US capitalist society."⁹⁹

⁹⁸ Lee, "Never," 37.

⁹⁹ Lee, "Never," 37.

Conclusion

This thesis looked closer on the depiction of poverty and immigration as it was described in Michael Gold's fictional autobiographical novel *Jews Without Money* and also on the historical, political and literary context relevant to Gold's work. In this book Michael Gold transforms into his fictional younger self Mickey and retells his childhood story on the Lower East Side. The stories he tells are very raw and gruesome, not holding back with the details of dead animals, which were used as toys for bored children or dying prostitutes in winter, unable to seek shelter for the night. The overall living conditions of these Jewish immigrants were nothing to be proud of, from low salaries and hard work to devastated tenements they had to live in. Tenements where the plumbing would freeze in winter, or the roof would leak, and their landlord would turn a blind eye to all of this. As long as these people were scared of being thrown out for not paying rent, he would have the upper hand. Mickey's parents are in a way the protagonists of this book, they are the ones who shaped Mickey's upbringing and they are the ones Mickey looked up to the most. Mickey's father Herman is the ultimate prisoner of America's capitalist society, he is the textbook example of a Jewish immigrant who travelled to America to get rich and failed miserably. He became an ill and broken man, which whole life purpose was to lament and curse his own life. His American dream failed, his dream life did not happen and the only thing he could do was to drown in poverty, sorrow and misery. Mickey's mother Katie was more optimistic than Herman, she was the matriarch of the family, she always knew what to do even in the most desperate times. They both wanted Mickey to be a doctor, to be the one who escapes out of this ghetto and works his way up and achieves the American dream but sadly, just like his father, he is also not successful in achieving it.

Regarding the political and historical context, we have looked at the history of the Jewish immigration to the United States. That started in the colonial period and lasted to the first World War when it became almost impossible for people to emigrate out of their countries due to the scale of the conflict. What ultimately stopped mass immigration were the Immigration acts of 1921 and 1924, which limited the amount of people admitted into the country. Sadly, the fact that people could travel and emigrate to more favourable countries did not stop the wave of hate following them. What shaped the lives of these Jews was the constant hostility and antisemitism coming from the people around them. These circumstances forced these Jewish people not only out of their countries in order to save themselves but also rooted in the New World. Young Michael had felt this especially when he

was looking for a job. Employees declined him, even though they needed men, just on the bases that he was a Jew, from the “cursed” race. Christians were even bold enough to use the Russian revolution of 1917 to spread hate and animosity between people and weaponized it to better target the Jews living among them.

Regarding literary context, this thesis analysed *Jews Without Money* from the critics’ perspective, how they viewed Gold’s work in terms of its authenticity, informative value and its degree of honesty when taking into consideration Gold’s ties to the socialist movement and the Communist party. Some did not attribute much value to Gold’s work, but others praised it for its boldness and passionate message. Gold took it upon himself to remain true to himself and to the Jewish idea even though the story itself may vary from reality. What these critics had to agree on was the fact that Michael Gold was arguably the most prominent writer of proletariat literature. Proletariat literature was unrecognized as a legitimate genre by some critics, proletarian novel especially took some heavy criticism for its supposed unoriginality and bottomless misery, in their eyes Michael Gold focused only on the bad inside the human nature and the world around him. Situations where people did not have enough money to buy whole items of food but just parts of it, such as the loaf of bread or five cents worth of butter or the constant fights with their landlord who refused to repair the cankering tenement or all the dying people and animals lying on the street, frozen. Immigration played a crucial role in setting the lives of these Jewish people. Their ability to assimilate into American society, their seemingly impossible fight with the capitalist system and the chances of breaking out of the ghetto are some of the most significant themes in Gold’s pessimistic and antagonistic view on the world and the idea of a successful Jewish immigrant. In Gold’s opinion the whole world was against these Jews and the struggles were so tough that it was impossible to overcome them.

This thesis concluded that, for Michael Gold, to be a Jewish American immigrant meant to be poor to the point of starvation and simultaneously unable to change anything or do anything that would in any way help his situation. No matter what these people did or how hard they tried, the circumstances of their lives would just not let go of them. Poverty was a trap that could not be escaped from.

Resumé

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá zobrazením chudoby a imigrace v americkém autobiografickém románu *Židé bez Peněz*, vydaným ve Spojených státech amerických v roce 1930 na samém počátku Velké hospodářské krize. Autorem této knihy je židovský novinář a spisovatel Michael Gold. Ačkoliv jde o autobiografický román, je nutné dodat, že kritici nejsou jednotní v názoru, do jaké míry román odpovídá skutečnému životu Michaela Golda a kde se liší, jisté je, že jde o fiktivní autobiografii, a proto je nutné brát události knihy s mírným nadhledem. Kritiky je Michael Gold považován za předního spisovatele proletářské literatury, ta byla významná svým vztahem k chudé dělnické třídě. Šlo totiž o literaturu psanou dělnickou třídou pro dělnickou třídu. Tato společenská vrsta nebyla jedinou skupinou spojovanou s proletářskou literaturou, další takovou skupinou byla Komunistická strana a socialistické hnutí, které se snažilo o lepší práva pro chudé obyvatele. Michael Gold byl už od mladého věku a po celou dobu svého života velkým podporovatelem komunismu a zastáncem Ruské revoluce, která proběhla roku 1917. To je jeden z důvodů, proč je kritický názor na jeho dílo tak smíšený. Někteří kritici nepřipisují Goldově knize velké zásluhy, pro ně jde o pouhou komunistickou propagandu s nulovou informační hodnotou, která by měla být spíše zapomenuta, než opěvována. Pro jiné kritiky jde o srdceryvné dílo plné vášnivých ukázek tvrdého a nelítostného života chudého židovského imigranta z New Yorku.

Bakalářská práce je rozdělená na teoretickou část a analytickou část. Teoretická část se zaměřuje na historický a politický kontext, který je relevantní s okolnostmi, které hrály roli při Goldově psaní. První kapitola pojednává o historii židovské imigrace do Spojených států, vysvětluje důvody, které byly kritické pro rozhodování židovského obyvatelstva k přesunu z jejich rodných zemí na západ do Nového světa. Zmiňuje pojmy jako je pogrom, což bylo krvavé pronásledování Židů a potažmo jejich vyvražďování nebo vidina amerického snu, který lákal chudé lidi k emigraci. Americký sen je jeden z hlavních motivů Goldovy knihy. Víra v to, že obyčejný, chudý člověk je schopen se vypracovat a zbohatnout čistou prací je zakořeněná v Goldově knižním otci Hermanovi, který pro americký sen cestuje až z Rumunska, aby se stal vlastním pánem a zbohatl. První velká imigrační vlna přišla kolem roku 1880 a počet imigrantů, který přicházel do USA, od toho roku neklesl a pokračoval až do začátku první světové války, kdy tento světový konflikt prakticky zamezil jakoukoliv možnost vycestovat ze země. Další kapitola zmiňuje historii antisemitismu, jak vznikl a jak se postupem času vyvíjel. Důležité je zmínit, že antisemitismus jako střet judaismu a křesťanství existuje prakticky od samého vzniku těchto dvou náboženství. Židé se po celé generace

setkávali s nepřátelstvím, ať už šlo o Křížové výpravy nebo výše zmíněné pogromy. Nebyla doba, kdy by židé měli klid. Antisemitismus se dostal i do Ameriky a o tomto tématu pojednává další kapitola. Nenávist vůči Židům existovala v Novém světě od dob kolonizace, kdy si první osadníci přivezli z Evropy mimo jiné i předsudky a nenávist vůči rase, která jim nic neudělala. Antisemitismus byl mnohými používán jako vhodná zbraň, když bylo potřeba na někoho svést vinu. Už tehdy kolem židů kolovaly různé zvěsti, například že se schází s ďáblem a mají rohy nebo kopyta. Lidé se tedy nebáli na ně ukázat, ani když Bolševici provedli úspěšnou revoluci v roce 1917, nebo že způsobili porážku Německa v první světové válce. Za dob Rudé paniky v USA někteří Američané poukazovali na židovské obyvatelstvo jako na strůjce nepokojů a podporovatelů komunistického hnutí a tím způsobili vznícení dalších nepokojů. Poslední kapitola této teoretické části popisuje problém Velké hospodářské krize, která vypukla v Americe v roce 1929 z důvodu krachu a propadu akcií na burze a rychle ochromila celý zbytek světa.

Druhá polovina této bakalářské práce zahrnuje analytickou část. Ta se zaměřuje na literární kontext a samotný obsah *Židé bez Peněz*. Jak už bylo zmíněno výše, Gold byl předním představitelem proletářské literatury. Vznikla jako reakce na okolní historické dění, které neúnavně utiskovalo dělnickou třídu. Tento žánr měl pro své společné ideologické smýšlení blízko ke komunismu, a proto mu mnoho amerických kritiků nepřipisovalo moc velkou hodnotu. Michael Gold se nechal slyšet, že opovrhuje zkrášlováním a romantizováním děje pro dosažení větší literární hodnoty. Podle něj jsou tyto snahy nepravdivé a neuctivé vůči utrpení chudého židovského obyvatelstva. Z toho důvodu se rozhodl psát úplný opak, ukázat pravdivou tvář židovské chudoby, tak jak ji skutečně zažívaly miliony lidí každý den. A jak se rozhodl, tak i udělal. To mu ovšem vysloužilo nejen chválu pro jeho nebojácnost a odhodlanost pro zobrazení reálného života, ale také kritiku z řad těch, kteří věřili, že i v těch nejtemnějších chvílích je místo pro světlo. Jedno je ale jasné. Nebýt tohoto autora nestala by se proletářská literatura tak populární a rozšířenou, jakou byla v dané době. Michael Gold je často kritizován pro jeho drsné zobrazení světa, ve kterém údajně žil. Mnozí mu vytýkají, že opomíjí lidskou schopnost najít si i v tom nejhorším něco dobrého, a tudíž i on píše nepravdivě a neuctivě k lidské povaze. Tato tvrzení lze vyvrátit poukázáním na Hermana, Michaelova otce, který se do poslední chvíle snažil zbohatnout. Hledal způsoby, jak se vyprostit ze zoufalé situace, kterou chudoba představovala. S hlavou plnou amerického snu se nevzdává, i přesto, že často upadá do depresí a rychle ztrácí motivaci pokračovat. Avšak tak rychle jak motivaci ztrácí, tak ji i nabírá. Až do úplného konce věří, že peklo, které

představuje chudinská čtvrť, kde žijí, je jen dočasnou překážkou, jež lze s dostatečným odhodláním a tvrdou prací překonat.

Co se však dozvídáme postupně v knize a co je také tématem poslední kapitoly mé práce je fakt, že tato překážka je větší, než si kdokoli z nich mohl představit. I přes největší úsilí a snahy není možné se z pasti s názvem chudoba vymanit. Když navíc vedle chudoby figuruje faktor, jakým je imigrace, vzniká tak neproniknutelná bariéra. Nejenže tito lidé byli chudí, tam odkud přišli, navíc museli začít od úplného začátku v Americe, která k těmto lidem nebyla nijak vlídná. Co se na první pohled může zdát jako kniha s dobrým koncem a jasným motivem vítězství židovského imigranta nad tvrdým americkým kapitalismem a chudobou, se mění na příběh, který podle Goldových slov není nijak výjimečný. Takových jako on jsou miliony, chudých imigrantů, nemohoucích se vymanit ze zoufalé situace. Tento příběh není o americkém snu, ale o americké pasti.

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