

New York Jews and the Great Depression

Uncertain Promise

Beth S. Wenger

Yale University Press

New Haven and London

The organized Jewish community recognized that Jewish economic and employment needs required particular attention. Since many employment agencies refused to accept Jewish applicants, Jewish communal leaders initiated their own programs to help Jews find jobs. Even before the Depression, several Jewish employment agencies existed throughout the city, sponsored by organizations ranging from the Ninety-second Street YMHA to the Jewish Board of Guardians to the Brooklyn Jewish Federation.⁴¹ In the first decades of the twentieth century, such agencies assisted new immigrants looking for



Illustration

in

Original

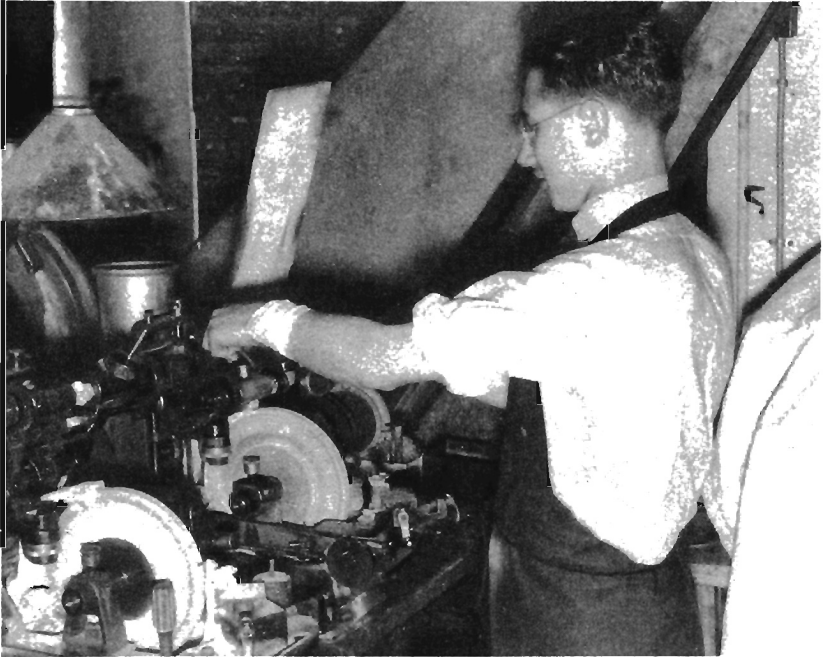
5. *At this employment bureau, as in many others in the city, job listings regularly specified that applicants be "Christians only."* Courtesy of the Richard A. Lyon Collection, Museum of the City of New York.

work and provided a range of vocational services for Jewish job-seekers. When the Depression came, Jewish employment offices suddenly faced an avalanche of clients. In 1933, four New York Jewish employment agencies reported a combined total of twenty thousand applicants registering for job placement; they were able to find work for only four thousand.⁴² With individual agencies taxed to capacity, Jewish social workers suggested that Jewish employment needs might be better served through a coordinated communal effort. In 1934, New York's Federation of Jewish Philanthropies created a central Jewish employment bureau. The Federation Employment Service was a joint venture supported by the then separate Brooklyn and New York Jewish Federations along with several of the city's other private

Jewish community provided a relatively solid economic base capable of providing work for at least a portion of its members. The ethnic economy was by no means self-sustaining; thousands of Jewish lawyers, engineers, and professionals remained unemployed or underemployed throughout the Depression. Nevertheless, as historian Henry Feingold has explained, "Despite its contraction, the Jewish ethnic economy still had comparatively greater depth than that of other groups and was able to absorb some of its own unemployed."⁴⁰

Once again, however, the relative security of the Jewish economy provided little reassurance to American Jews who faced the pressures of the economic depression at a time of rising anti-Semitism and employment discrimination. Troubled by the specter of young, well-educated Jews unable to earn a living, Jews worried particularly about the fate of the next generation. New York Jews watched as sons and daughters with high school, college, and professional degrees searched for part-time work or joined the ranks of the unemployed. The unemployment of youth was certainly not unique to the Jewish group; the Depression hit America's young people particularly hard. But the combination of bleak job opportunities, university quotas, and employment discrimination created a sense of foreboding among American Jews. The deteriorating prospects for Jewish employment, unfolding against an international climate of fascism and Nazism and the growing strength of American anti-Semitic movements, enhanced Jewish insecurity and informed Jewish responses to the daily challenges of economic survival. Jews began to wonder if the political power of anti-Semitism, the pervasiveness of employment discrimination, and the economic stringencies of depression might combine to reverse the progress achieved by a generation of immigrant Jews, creating a cadre of educated but unemployable Jewish youth and undermining the Jewish future in America. Unemployment and lack of job opportunity were national problems during the Great Depression, but the vicissitudes of the economic crisis had specific manifestations for American Jews who were negotiating a complex maze of economic, social, and cultural forces.

The organized Jewish community recognized that Jewish economic and employment needs required particular attention. Since many employment agencies refused to accept Jewish applicants, Jewish communal leaders initiated their own programs to help Jews find jobs. Even before the Depression, several Jewish employment agencies existed throughout the city, sponsored by organizations ranging from the Ninety-second Street YMHA to the Jewish Board of Guardians to the Brooklyn Jewish Federation.⁴¹ In the first decades of the twentieth century, such agencies assisted new immigrants looking for



6. *The New York Jewish Federation provided training for Jewish job-seekers. The caption accompanying this photograph in the Federation's magazine declared, "A real break—apprenticed to a good trade, lens-grinding. Jobs are scarce, but Federation agencies have been resourceful in searching out opportunities in industry." From Federation Illustrated (July 1936).*

of vocational preparation. He instituted classes in bookkeeping, accounting, and stenography and implemented psychological testing to determine the suitability of applicants for particular occupations.⁴⁸ Despite his best efforts, Rosen operated the bureau at a time when job prospects were increasingly bleak. By the winter of 1932, enrollment in the Ninety-second Street Y's vocational training programs had ballooned to more than two hundred students per class. During the worst year of the economic crisis, overcrowding and the poor job market forced Rosen to close registration temporarily. At that time, he estimated that the odds of finding a job had become one in twenty and conceded the unlikelihood of placing the flood of Jewish applicants.⁴⁹

Rosen could not manufacture jobs for Jews, but his meticulous statistical calculations of the FES clientele did help to identify the central problems of Jewish employment, particularly those of Jewish youth. (The appendix offers a thorough analysis of the FES survey.) In one eight-month period from



7. *The Federation Employment Service trained men and women for different careers. The caption under this photograph reported, "Through Federation agencies many girls find places as clerical workers, and in stores and industry. But their number is but a fraction of those who still await their chances." From Federation Illustrated (July 1936).*

September 1934 to May 1935, almost eight thousand Jews came to the Federation Employment Service hoping to find a job. Eighty-five percent of the applicants ranged from eighteen to thirty-five years old. Most were the American-born children of immigrants and came from working- and middle-class Jewish families. The unemployed Jewish population that registered with the FES had generally not grown up in poverty: only one-sixth lived in the five lowest-income neighborhoods of the city and one-third made their homes in the five highest rent districts. Jewish applicants to the FES had obtained a relatively high level of education. More than 99 percent had completed at least eight years of schooling, and 68 percent had pursued academic, commercial, or technical training beyond the high school level.⁵⁰ Their parents worked in skilled labor or small business, but they came to the

bureau seeking white-collar jobs.⁵¹ This was precisely the group that the relief and employment statistics declared were faring best economically, but they had arrived at the FES unable to find work. "A superior type of applicant seeks employment through our agency," Rosen explained, "and is met with the dilemma that positions become increasingly inferior."⁵²

The collective client profile of the FES revealed the problems that most concerned Jewish communal leaders during the Depression. Despite the economic crisis, young Jews continued to aspire to professional and white-collar careers, but such positions were in short supply and almost half of all Jewish youth looking for work failed to find jobs.⁵³ The Depression prompted a communal discussion about the possibility that American Jews were becoming a maladjusted and "abnormal" economic group. The editors of *Fortune* magazine had argued precisely that point when they claimed that Jews displayed "a curious industrial distribution, [a] tendency to crowd together in particular squares of the checkerboard."⁵⁴ Several years before the article appeared, Jewish leaders had already contemplated the issue and worried that Jewish occupational preferences might prove detrimental in an age of economic contraction. "Unlike Americans as a whole, the Jewish group does not possess that balanced economic distribution which will enable economic gains and losses, strains and tensions to be spread evenly throughout their number," declared one Jewish social service worker, pointing out the infinitesimal number of Jews in agriculture and the shrinking Jewish presence in manual trades.⁵⁵ Jewish communal leaders who studied occupational patterns noted with dismay that young Jews were gravitating toward a single, already overcrowded, sector of the economy. As it turned out, Jews of the post-World War II era benefited greatly from their occupational preferences, but in the midst of the Depression, some Jews began to doubt the economic path they had chosen.

In the turmoil of the Depression, many social workers and community leaders attempted to guide young Jews away from overcrowded white-collar fields. "Sound vocational guidance should be effective in redirecting Jewish workers into new occupations and into those jobs where less competition . . . exists," declared one Jewish social worker.⁵⁶ In 1935, the vocational guidance department of the Jewish Social Service Association proudly reported that "many of the hundreds of boys eager to become doctors and lawyers, and many of the hundreds of girls wanting to be teachers or private secretaries have been diverted from overcrowded fields to training for occupations which offer them a chance of a better future."⁵⁷ Jewish agencies often believed that they provided sound advice to young Jews by encouraging them to avoid professional pursuits and highly coveted white-collar

jobs. "Rising generations of Jews will find it increasingly difficult . . . to climb freely as their fathers did by means of the urban businesses, trades and professions," warned one Jewish social worker. "We ought, therefore, to provide for them new places and escapes through a more balanced distribution."⁵⁸

The question of how or whether to attempt to change Jewish occupational patterns elicited a multitude of communal responses. Most Jewish social workers advocated offering Jews instruction to broaden their career opportunities, not suggesting factory work, but recommending more modest positions in accounting, stenography, and other small-scale trades. The Depression crisis did evoke more radical proposals, however. Some voices within the community called for a redistribution of Jews into manual labor or agricultural work. The Jewish Agricultural Society, which had sponsored farming projects since the late nineteenth century, accelerated its campaign during the Great Depression, touting agriculture as one answer to Jewish unemployment. "It is perhaps time to reopen the question of agriculture as an opportunity . . . for the young people who are casting around for a career."⁵⁹ Although some Jewish poultry and dairy farms did function successfully through the Depression, most American Jews never seriously considered turning to farming. Other suggestions about reviving the "dignity of labor" included the recommendation that young Jews reenter the manual occupations that had employed many of their parents, an idea that also failed to elicit any sustained interest. The dearth of white-collar positions kept many young Jews out of work, but most preferred to continue searching for employment rather than embrace such drastic solutions to their economic problems.⁶⁰

In fact, the majority of Jewish communal workers argued that it was both futile and foolish to attempt any radical reconstruction of the Jewish economic profile. "I am not entirely sympathetic with the present vogue for decrying Jewish 'middle-class and professional leanings,'" insisted social worker Ben Selekman, "for it seems to me that the idealization of physical work as such belongs to a passing era. . . . Before training too many of our Jewish youth for unwanted manual occupation[s], let us make sure . . . that they offer the only or even the most promising way out in America."⁶¹ Irwin Rosen harshly criticized plans for redirecting Jews to manual trades, emphasizing that by persisting in white-collar occupations, Jews had "allied themselves with what must be considered the relatively good employment possibilities." Since industrial laborers fared much worse than white-collar workers during the Depression, he argued, "there could hardly be any logic in recommending redistribution of Jews" into factory and industrial work.⁶²

"Any achievement of such distribution would materially lower the present economic level of the Jewish people and would certainly direct many of them into occupations below their employment level."⁶³ Some Jewish leaders had suggested that eliminating Jewish overcrowding in white-collar positions might reduce anti-Semitism, but most members of the Jewish community disagreed. Morris Waldman, secretary of the American Jewish Committee, maintained that Jewish occupations were the targets not the causes of anti-Semitism, adding that "we cannot at all be certain that anti-Semitism resulting from economic competition will be materially modified by shifting the competition from one occupation or profession to another."⁶⁴

The best response to Depression-era employment problems, according to most social workers, involved combating anti-Semitism and job discrimination whenever possible while trying to help Jews withstand the economic crisis. Irwin Rosen acknowledged that young Jews were not likely to find work, and he joined the chorus of experts encouraging youth to remain in school. In 1932, he advised job applicants "to return to or continue with school since the opportunities for profitable employment in business are largely non-existent at the present time."⁶⁵ Rosen and others who defended the Jewish white-collar profile and urged Jews to stay in school witnessed the wisdom of their claims in the postwar era. But in the turmoil of the Depression, as Jewish leaders struggled to determine the most prudent path for Jews to follow, they could not have envisioned the successes of the next decade. In truth, the ongoing debate among social workers and communal leaders had little impact at all on Jewish occupational choices. While the experts argued about the best prospects for young Jews, the next generation continued an unabated pursuit of higher education and white-collar careers.

The heated discussion about employment patterns revealed, above all else, Jewish fears about the future. Communal leaders worried not only about Jewish economic fortunes but, more broadly, about Jewish security and acceptance in America. On the most basic level, the setbacks of the Depression raised serious doubts about the fate of the next Jewish generation. Joblessness and economic adversity unsettled New York Jews, but the climate of discrimination and prejudice informed Jewish responses to Depression-era unemployment. Defending the need for Jews to maintain their own employment agencies, one social worker insisted that the effort would be necessary "so long as the Jewish community feels and understands that Jews throughout the world are going through a period of grave economic insecurity."⁶⁶ Jews interpreted their own economic challenges as distinct from those of other groups, for they encountered the Great Depression

against the backdrop of national and international developments that lent particular meaning to their search for employment and financial stability. Even as a host of Depression-era surveys revealed the comparative good fortune of American Jews, Jews did not feel economically, socially, or politically secure.

The economic profile of New York Jews, their less frequent appearances on the relief rolls, and their relatively lower levels of destitution offer some perspective on Jewish experience in the Depression years. The daily challenges facing Jews looking for work and the responses of the organized Jewish community to their employment problems testify to a more complex Jewish economic reality, not always apparent in numerical calculations and occupational status. The particular character of the ethnic economy, the battle against discrimination, and the broader framework informing Jewish economic circumstances complicate the collective portrait of Depression-era Jewry. Against the canvas of these larger economic and cultural forces, Jewish families and households navigated their course through the rough waters of the Great Depression.