

THE ADAPTABILITY OF TRADITIONAL INSTITUTIONS  
AS A FACTOR IN THE FORMATION  
OF IMMIGRANT VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATIONS:  
THE EXAMPLE OF THE LANDSMANSHAFTEN

Mark P. Curchack  
University of California, Berkeley

In the four decades after 1880, the City of New York became the home of well over a million Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe. Throughout the period of their adjustment to American urban life, these immigrants formed thousands of landsmanshaften<sup>1</sup>, voluntary associations organized on a principle of common former residence of the members. Generally named after the town, city, or province of origin of the members, these groups combined in their operations elements of mutual aid societies, immigrant relief organizations, and social clubs. Examples of immigrant associations with similar membership principles and activities are reported among widely divergent peoples, including Poles, Italians, Japanese, and Chinese in America (Park and Miller 1921), Peruvians (Mangin 1959) and West Africans (Little 1965). While differences in the nature of the several populations and the urban conditions they encountered and in the types of voluntary associations they formed, make controlled comparison most difficult, the widespread occurrence of such organizations leads one to suspect that they may play important roles in the processes of urbanization and immigrant adjustment. If this is the case, and most writers do suggest such functions for voluntary associations, an analysis of the formation and operation of these groups might provide useful information for those who would seek solutions to the problems of urbanization.

Discussions of voluntary associations often view the groups as responses to anomic situations: the immigrants are removed from their familiar social system and enter the mass, anonymous, heterogeneous urban setting; by forming small social groups of people with

similar backgrounds they attempt to recreate their old, smaller-scale environment and to provide familiar cultural reference points for their disoriented brethren (Park and Miller 1921:30-42; Wirth 1954:283-4). However, Kenneth Little, in noting recent studies which have indicated less-than-expected incidents of voluntary associations among relatively stable yet presumably anomic urban working classes, suggests that anomie may not be as causally related to voluntary association formation as is often assumed. Drawing upon his knowledge of West African urbanization, he states:

Further study is therefore needed of the two factors which seem to be largely instrumental in the growth of these African voluntary associations. . . . the existence of an urban population which is largely immigrant, unstable, and socially heterogeneous . . . [and] the adaptability of traditional institutions to urban conditions. (1964:215)

Landsmanshaften serve as examples of such associations and may be used to examine the utility of Little's two-factor approach to the study of voluntary associations. Space greatly limits the depth of this analysis; therefore, detailed attention will be given only to the second of Little's factors, the adaptability of traditional institutions to the new situation. The conditions of Little's first factor, an immigrant, unstable and socially heterogeneous population, are well filled in the case of the Eastern European Jews in New York (Rischin 1962: passim).

Institutions in the social organization of Eastern European Jewry have great bearing on the development of the landsmanshaften. The Jews of this region typically inhabited small rural towns known as shtetls. Sociological presentations of life in the shtetls of the last century are largely lacking, except for the ethnographic reconstruction by Zborowski and Herzog in Life Is With People (1952). Each shtetl possessed a rather elaborate organizational structure centered around the synagogue and its associated religious institutions, the cemetery, the ritual bathhouse, and the khevras (a series of societies for the performance of religiously prescribed but socially oriented functions) (Zborowski and Herzog 1952:63). Khevras, which were found in most

communities included:

- 1) a society to provide clothes for the needy
- 2) one to collect alms for the poor
- 3) one to provide dowries for needy girls or orphans
- 4) an orphanage
- 5) a school for poor children
- 6) a society to provide medical expenses for the poor
- 7) one to provide shelter for wanderers
- 8) a home for the aged
- 9) a burial society to maintain the cemetery and provide funeral expenses for the poor
- 10) a free loan society
- 11) a society to provide special Passover foods for the poor
- 12) women's auxiliaries to many of the above groups

Decisions were made and officials elected by vote of the adult males, though dissenters often declined to yield to majority sentiment. Funds were collected through individual donations, each member giving according to his means, and by special fund-raising campaigns (Zborowski and Herzog 1952:202-217).

Membership in the khevrass was voluntary, though highly encouraged by public opinion. This was true of private philanthropy as well. Zborowski and Herzog portray the shtetl as a community laced by networks of charity in which giving was second only to learning as a means of procuring earthly status and heavenly merit. Even the poor, whose right it was to expect charity, were enjoined to make token donations to the community funds (1952:193-201).

A further feature of shtetl life is relevant to the experiences of the Eastern European immigrants -- that of family life and kinship relations. As presented by Zborowski and Herzog, the life of the shtetl family was highly oriented toward the children (1952:308ff). Parents owed their children total support and children were expected to reciprocate by showing great respect for their elders. As such, it was a great blow to the pride of a father to have to accept aid from his son (1952:298). In a similar fashion, the obligations of the old to the young, the rich to the poor, and those with status to those without were to be returned by deference, and it was held to be shameful to receive assistance from

a social inferior (199). Brothers and sisters were expected to aid in the fulfillment of one another's obligations; correspondingly, one's uncles and aunts would discharge parental responsibilities if one's own parents were unable to do so. Obligations of assistance were also borne by one's extended kin and in-laws (304-306). "These mutual obligations act almost as a source of insurance in an economic system as unstable as that of the shtetl." (306) It is clear, however, that the various charitable societies in the shtetl provided similar insurance across kinship lines. Thus, "for the shtetl, the community is the extended family." (306)

In the larger centers of Jewish population in Europe there were systems of mutual aid similar to those of the shtetls. More centralized, such activities came under the province of the Kehillah (community). These organizations, covering large populations, controlled the synagogues, schools, cemeteries, and charities (Pilch 1943:112-115). But in the midst of these powerful structures there existed informal, small mutual aid societies -- *khevras* (Zibbel 1964:78).

When large numbers of Eastern European Jews began arriving in America, these immigrants encountered opposition to their efforts to join pre-existing Jewish organizations, controlled primarily by Jews of German extraction. Partly in response to this opposition, and partly as a result of recognized cultural differences between themselves and their Western European fellow Jews, the immigrants from Eastern Europe established their own synagogues aligned by place of origin. These early congregations had their full complement of *khevras*, but as the number of new arrivals increased without an accompanying increase in the number of necessary religious functionaries, mutual aid societies independent of synagogue ties were created -- the *landsmanshaften* (Hersch 1946:411).

The only detailed work about the *landsmanshaften* was compiled in 1938 (Yiddish Writers' Union), and its data are quite incomplete. Its major value is its partial enumeration of the groups extant at the time. Other data about the societies must be collected from the passing mentions

given to them in general works on Jewish social history. Of the 2,045 landsmanshaften listed in 1938, 209 were typed as small religious congregations which functioned also as mutual aid societies and 339 were landsmanshaft-branches of several Jewish fraternal or labor orders. The rest were independent organizations, among them many ladies' auxiliaries. Many of the groups formed as a result of factional disputes within earlier, parent organizations. Others were quite ephemeral, having arisen in times of crisis overseas when home communities were in danger (Yiddish Writers' Union 1938:245-370). A total of 256,924 members was reported, though estimates for the number of societies not reported brought the total to about 500,000 (one in four New York Jews). Group size varied from 25 members to as many as 3,000, with an average membership of nearly 140. About 30% of the members were classified as "not-landslite." This was largely explained by the practices of men inviting their sons-in-law to join their societies and workmen inviting fellow laborers to do the same. Only about 15% of the members were native-born Americans (Yiddish Writers' Union 1938:16-17). Eventually, many of the groups from neighboring areas in Europe formed provincially aligned federations. These organizations met with varying success, but even among the most solidary of the federations, considerable landsmanshaft autonomy was preserved (Friedman 1955:162).

Great variety existed among the landsmanshaften, but it is possible to describe their organization and activities in general. Meetings were held weekly or bi-weekly, usually in rented halls, though sometimes groups owned their own buildings (Teller 1968:39). The groups had written constitutions, and parliamentary rules were generally followed, sometimes with special rituals added (Levitats 1956:88). Officers included a president and secretary, elected annually or semi-annually. Both groups which restricted membership to one sex and mixed-sex groups were found, though men were usually the officers regardless of the group's sex composition (Yiddish Writers' Union 1938:18).

A major activity of all the groups was mutual aid. Members

were assessed monthly or quarterly in equal amounts, usually at fixed rates without regard to age or wealth (Rosenblatt 1918:733). This method of assessment often proved insufficient to cover the needs of the group, and many societies adopted actuarially based systems of finance or subscribed to group insurance policies (Basye 1919:190). Benefits were applied toward a variety of ends: maintenance of a society burial plot and provision of funeral costs for the members; unemployment funds and strike insurance; illness and disability benefits; the employment of a "society doctor" whose fee was subsidized by the group; funds to compensate for work missed during the ritual seven-day mourning period; benefits to widows and orphans, especially for the purpose of allowing the latter to attend religious schools; interest-free loans; special emergency funds (Teller 1968:15). The landsmanshaften aided newly arrived landslites by serving as clearinghouses for jobs (Asch 1918:22) and housing (Gay 1965:84).

A second major activity of the associations was sending of relief to the home towns. Much of this work took place during periods of crisis abroad, times of mass pogroms or wars. Though centralized relief agencies existed, most landsmanshaften preferred to aid their home towns individually and independently (Szajkowski 1967:56-84). Amounts of aid were particularly large during the Passover season as a result of the need for special foods (Friedman 1955:162). With the destruction of many Jewish communities during the Second World War, many groups turned to aiding refugee resettlement in America (White 1957:318) and to supporting newly established sister-landsmanshaften in Israel (Szajkowski 1967:289).

Social and cultural activities for members is a third aspect of the landsmanshaften. Business meetings were often followed by card games and informal conversations which allowed the members to discuss the old home and receive news from newly arrived landslites (Asch 1918: 33, 39). Meeting halls doubled as social centers (Yaffe 1968:200). The societies provided personnel to fill the ritual attendance requirements

of certain religious ceremonies. Each group had a "hospitaler" whose job it was to visit the sick (Teller 1968:15). Besides picnics, dances, and theater parties (often used as fund raising events), societies invited guest speakers to talk on topics from politics to religion to health (Friedman 1955:163). Many societies also provided English lessons (Rosenblatt 1918:732).

There is a strong tendency on the part of some authors to equate the landsmanshaften directly with the khevras of Europe. Indeed, a comparison of the two types of groups indicates that they have much in common, especially in the sphere of mutual aid activities. But it is likewise evident that there are differences, many of which may be seen as necessitated by the adaptation of khevra-like organizations to the new social setting.

Each landsmanshaft provided services for its members which were undertaken by several different khevras in the home town. The number of immigrants from each shtetl was often not large enough to support an independent congregation, let alone a multiplicity of khevras. Larger landsmanshaften employed a committee system to handle specific activities; committees were not independent khevras, but neither was the landsmanshaft operating in an isolated shtetl. Rather, the landsmanshaft operated in an extremely heterogeneous society where it was frequently the only small-scale, extra-familial social group to which its members belonged.

In the khevras, members were assessed according to their ability to pay, while the landsmanshaften usually levied equal assessments. This may be a reflection of the fact that the immigrants were generally equal in economic status. Typically, only the lower strata of shtetl society emigrated, and the costs of travel had severe leveling effects (Zborowski and Herzog 1952:261).

The ideological precedent for equal mutual aid and for other aspects of the landsmanshaften may be seen within the framework of shtetl life as a whole, not exclusively within the model of the khevras. The community-wide charity of the shtetl is thematically paralleled by the

mutual aid of the landsmanshaften. Men gave and received as equals, and were thus spared the embarrassment of receiving aid from their economically successful children or from large, impersonal philanthropies (Friedman 1955:164). The network of personal relations and obligations of the shtetl was in part maintained by the landsmanshaften. Former neighbors were brought together, and ties to the home town were fostered by the overseas relief work. Landsmanshaft federations, a phenomenon unparalleled in Europe, offered a more efficient means of maintaining ties abroad. The landsmanshaften allowed immigrants to retain many customs of shtetl life, among them visiting the sick, attendance at special rituals, and rights in a community burial plot.

In a more general sense, it may be asserted that, in a society of strangers, the landsmanshaften recreated the close social relationships of shtetl life. Such a statement may appear to be obvious, and there is no lack of reference to the fraternal roles of the associations (Gay 1965:83; Lifschutz 1962:136; Asch 1918:31; Pilch 1943:164); but the role of the landsmanshaften in providing a sense of social identity, though seemingly great, is hard to substantiate rigorously at an historical distance. Assuming this role to be of importance, one might look to the much-discussed phenomenon of immigrant anomie as a major causative factor, but measurement of its effect would have to be speculative. Most of the landsmanshaften have failed to recruit large numbers of native-born members and are experiencing a rapid decline as the immigrant generation dies out. Many of the groups, however, have persisted, even without recruitment, for as long as fifty or more years after their formation. This may indicate either that an immigrant generation never fully adjusts to the new environment, or that non-anomic factors are highly instrumental in the development of these groups.

From this limited view of the landsmanshaften, it may be concluded that they represent a form of a traditional institution adapted to newly encountered, specific conditions, conditions which caused these groups to take on more roles than did their institutional predecessors,



the khevras. The institutions which in the shtetl created the feeling that the entire community was equivalent to an extended kin group also seem to have been well adapted to the conditions of immigration in which families were often separated. Thus, the landsmanshaften may be shown to comply with Little's second factor. The role of anomie cannot be dismissed summarily, though, as Little suggests, it alone may not be causative. Further exploration of the question of why regionally aligned voluntary associations are so common (and why they do not exist in some places) is needed for a better understanding of the balance of factors at work in their formation, understanding which would shed more light on the nature of urbanization.

#### NOTE

- <sup>1</sup>Yiddish = fellow-countryman associations  
landsman = fellow-countryman, plural=landslite  
shaften = associations, societies

#### REFERENCES

- Asch, Sholom  
1918 America. James Fuchs, trans. New York: Alpha Omega Press
- Basye, Walter  
1919 History and Operation of Fraternal Insurance. Rochester:  
The Fraternal Monitor.
- Friedman, Philip  
1955 Political and social movements and organizations. In Jewish  
People, Past and Present. New York: Jewish Encyclopedic  
Handbooks.
- Gay, Ruth  
1965 Jews in America. New York: Basic Books.
- Hersch, L.  
1946 Jewish migrations during the last hundred years. In Jewish  
People, Past and Present. New York: Jewish Encyclopedic  
Handbooks.

- Levitats, Isaac  
 1956 The organization and management of Jewish schools, YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Science. New York: Yiddish Scientific Institute.
- Lifschutz, Ezekial  
 1962 Discussion of "Jewish labor in America: Jewish and non-Jewish influences" by J.B.S. Hardman. American Jewish Historical Quarterly 52 (2).
- Little, Kenneth  
 1964 The role of voluntary associations in West African Urbanization. In Cultural and Social Anthropology, Peter Hammond, ed. New York: The Macmillan Company.  
 1965 West African Urbanization. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mangin, William P.  
 1959 The role of regional associations in the adaptation of rural populations in Peru. Sociologus 9 (Berlin).
- Park, Robert E. and Herbert A. Miller  
 1921 Old World Traits Transplanted. New York: Harper & Brothers.
- Pilch, Judah  
 1943 Jewish Life in Our Times. New York: Behrman's Jewish Book House.
- Rischin, Moses  
 1962 The Promised City. New York: Corinth House.
- Rosenblatt, Frank F.  
 1918 Mutual aid organizations. In Jewish Communal Register of New York City. New York: Kehillah of New York City.
- Szajkowski, Zosa  
 1967 Private and organized American Jewish overseas relief. American Jewish Historical Quarterly 57:1, 2, 3.
- Teller, Judd L.  
 1968 Strangers and Natives. New York: Delacourt Press.
- White, Lyman C.  
 1957 300,000 New Americans. New York: Harper and Brothers.
- Wirth, Louis  
 1956 The Ghetto. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Yaffe, James  
 1968 The American Jews. New York: Random House.
- Yiddish Writers' Union  
 1938 Die Yiddishe Landsmanshaften Fun Neu York. (Yiddish) New York: Works Progress Administration.

Zborowski, Mark and Elizabeth Herzog

1952 Life Is With People. New York: Schocken Books.

Zibbel, Charles

1964 The Jewish communal agency - an historical perspective.  
Journal of Jewish Communal Service 41:1.