A Forgotten American Tale: Mary Antin's The Promised Land

By Ronit Mazovskiy

In the early twentieth century, when Jews escaped the poverty and inequality of the Russian Empire to the United States, slaving away for eighteen hours a day in a garment factory was probably not the freedom that had been dreamed of. Long hours, low wages and unsafe working conditions were the realities that many Jewish immigrants faced in New York City, Chicago, Philadelphia and Boston. And yet, these realities still represented better opportunities to make money and educate their children than anything they could have hoped for back in Europe.

As more and more Jewish immigrants arrived in the US, these subpar working conditions became less than acceptable and workers drifted to labor organizers who promised to help them improve their circumstances. Jewish labor leaders such as Samuel Gompers, Abraham Cahan, and Daniel DeLeon started organizing Jewish laborers and creating the first Jewish unions.

These early labor advocates demanded better pay, better conditions and better treatment but they had a significant blind spot: women. Though their focus was on laborers in the garment industry—an industry that half of the new Jewish immigrants ended up in—they refused to admit women into their unions. This at a time when 80% of garment workers were in fact women! Enter Mary Antin, author of *The Promised Land*, whose work for labor rights attracted the attention of Theodore Roosevelt's Bull Moose Party.

Antin's story begins in Polotzk. Her earliest memories are vintage shtetl fare: endemic poverty, mandatory service in the Tsar's army and a strong adherence to Jewish law and tradition. For little Mary, the worst of these oppressions was the prohibition of girls to study, even to learn how to read and write: "A girl's real schoolroom was her mother's kitchen […] her mother instructed her in the laws regulating a pious Jewish household and in the conduct proper for a Jewish wife [for] a girl was born for no other purpose". Precocious and curious, Mary bucked at this prohibition and learnt how to read from a male cousin. Her father emigrated to Botson and after a couple of years, at the age of 13, she, her mother and siblings follow.

She is immediately enamored with American life, celebrating its ability to integrate new immigrants and give them opportunities they would never have had in the Old Country: "Think, every time you pass the greasy alien on the street, that he was born thousands of years before the oldest native American; and he may have something to communicate to you, when you two shall have learned a common language". In her earliest impressions of life as an American, Antin infuses her story with the themes that would come to dominate her political activism in later years—the plight of women and the importance of welcoming and integrating new immigrants.

When writing her autobiography in the 1910s, there was a growing tension within the Jewish labor movement. It pinned new immigrant laborers against their wealthy Jewish bosses; male laborers against their female coworkers; Yiddish-speaking workers against their Americanized associates and Socialist Zionists against Jewish communists.

These tensions grew in intensity in the 1900s and 1910s. Observing them, Jewish writer Irving Howe commented that there was nothing in the Jewish immigrant experience to match the ugliness of the civil war within the Jewish left. Antin took a strong position in these struggles, firmly on the side of women and new immigrants. These *linke* (left) positions clashed with the *rekhte* (right) wing, each staking out their claims in the Jewish press and in their street protests. Incorporating women and advocating for more free immigration were fringe positions in the Jewish labor movement at the time of the publication of *The Promised Land*, perhaps explaining why the book did so well nationally but Antin never gaining real popularity among the Jewish intelligentsia.

Though she may not have gotten the attention of the leadership of Jewish labor, she became a part of the Bull Moose party's national tour for Theodore Roosevelt's 1912 presidential campaign. This was the height of Antin's career, and indeed the height of non-progressive wing of Jewish labor. The internecine struggles eventually settled in the early 1930s, when Jewish labor came under the umbrella of FDR's New Deal and joined the mainstream Democratic agenda. Antin's vision of the role of women and the importance of immigrants for the American left slowly came into focus and we can see today how her ideas were prescient for this moment in American Progressivism.

The Promised Land has been largely forgotten today, overshadowed by other Jewish immigrant literature of the time. Its unabashed celebration of the American Dream and advocacy for women's voices in the public sphere add an important element to the discourse that was taking place specifically within the Jewish labor moment and help shed light onto how Jewish women in particular came to hold positions of prominence in the American labor movement.