

AP U.S. HW

~~Read by Tu 11/2 + (R) +~~
~~Mon. 1/30 (A)~~

"The First Step on New Soil"

A Russian Immigrant Comes to America

Mary Antin

The industrialization of the United States caused profound changes in American society. As U.S. industry grew, so did America's cities. In 1860, less than 20 percent of Americans lived in cities. By 1920, more than half were city dwellers.

America's expanding industry also created a demand for more labor. Immigrants flooded into the United States from 1880 to 1910 to meet this demand. For those like Mary Antin, America offered new hope and new freedom.



Settlement workers tried to help immigrants adapt to American customs.

Our initiation into American ways began with the first step on the new soil. My father found occasion to instruct or correct us even on the way from the pier to Wall Street, which journey we made crowded together in a rickety cab. He told us not to lean out of the windows, not to point, and explained the word greenhorn. We did not want to be greenhorns and gave the strictest attention to my father's instructions. . . .

The first meal was an object lesson of much variety. My father produced several kinds of food, ready to eat without any cooking, from little tin cans that had printing all over them. He attempted to introduce us to a queer, slippery kind of fruit which he called banana, but had to give it up for the time being. After the meal he had better luck with a curious piece of furniture on runners which he called rocking

chair. There were five of us newcomers, and we found five different ways of getting into the American machine of perpetual motion and as many ways of getting out of it. . . .

In our flat we did not think of such a thing as storing the coal in the bathtub. There was no bathtub. So in the evening of the first day, my father conducted us to the public baths. As we moved along in a little procession, I was delighted with the illumination of the streets. So many lamps, and they burned until morning, my father said, and so people did not need to carry lanterns. In America, then, everything was

Ordinary Americans

free, as we had heard in Russia. Light was free; the streets were as bright as a synagogue on a holy day. Music was free; we had been serenaded, to our gaping delight, by a brass band of many pieces, soon after our installation on Union Place.

Education was free. That subject my father had written about repeatedly, as comprising his chief hope for us children, the essence of American opportunity, the treasure that no thief could touch, not even misfortune or poverty. It was the one thing that he was able to promise us when he sent for us; surer, safer than bread or shelter.

On our second day I was thrilled with the realization of what this freedom of education meant. A little girl from across the alley came and offered to conduct us to school. My father was out, but we five between us had a few words of English by this time. We knew the word school. We understood. The child, who had never seen us till yesterday, who could not pronounce our names, who was not much better dressed than we, was able to offer us the freedom of the schools of Boston! No application made, no questions asked, no examinations, rulings, exclusions, no machinations, no fees. The doors stood open for every one of us. The smallest child could show us the way. . . .

. . . A fairy godmother to us children was she who led us to a wonderful country called uptown, where, in a dazzlingly

beautiful palace called a department store, we exchanged our hateful home-made European costumes, which pointed us out as greenhorns to the children on the street, for real American machine-made garments, and issued forth glorified in each other's eyes.

With our despised immigrant clothing we shed also our impossible Hebrew names. A committee of our friends, several years ahead of us in American experience, put their heads together and concocted American names for us all. Those of our real names that had no pleasing American equivalents they ruthlessly discarded, content if they retained the initials. . . . The name they gave me was hardly new. My Hebrew name being Maryashe in full, Mashke for short, Russianized into Marya (Mar-ya), my friends said that it would hold good in English as Mary, which was very disappointing, as I longed to possess a strange-sounding American name like the others.

I am forgetting the consolation I had in this matter of names from the use of my surname. . . . I found on my arrival that my father was Mr. Antin on the slightest provocation, and not, as in [Russia], on state occasions alone. And so I was Mary Antin and I felt very important to answer to such a dignified title. It was just like America that even plain people should wear their surnames on week days.