

# The Immigration Studies Collection of the University of Minnesota

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THE CANDIDACIES of Spiro Agnew and Edmund Muskie have reminded us forcefully in this election year that the United States is still a "nation of immigrants." Yet one cannot help but wonder whether Spiro Anagnostopoulos or Edmund Muszynski would have received so high a recognition. Aside from other considerations, are the voting machines capable of handling 15-letter names? Although their names are anglicized, the fact that they are both sons of immigrants is not completely unrelated to the choice of Mr. Agnew and Mr. Muskie as vice-presidential candidates. In politics, as in many other areas of American life, ethnicity based on a sense of a common racial, religious, or national origin remains a powerful force. Yet this dimension of social reality has not received the attention from historians and social scientists that it deserves. The ethnic complexity resulting from the mass immigrations of the past century certainly constitutes one of the basic influences in the development of modern America. But our knowledge of the processes whereby ethnic groups are formed, of the internal structure of such groups, of their impact upon such institutions as the church, politics, and labor unions, of their interactions in patterns of conflict and accommodation—our knowledge of these important matters is at best primitive. That this should be so is a cause for puzzlement.

Andrew Greeley, a perceptive student of ethnicity, recently observed that the historians of the 23d century would probably regard as one of the most extraordinary phenomena of our era "the formation of a new nation on the North American continent made up of wildly different nationality groups." "I further suspect," he went on to say, "that historians of the future will be astonished that American sociologists, the product of this gathering in of the nations, could stand in the midst of such an astonishing social phenomenon and take it so much for granted that they would not bother to study it."<sup>1</sup>

American historians by and large have also been strangely insensitive to the impact of the recurring tides of immigration upon the Nation. There have, of course, been able historians of immigration, but these

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<sup>1</sup>"Ethnicity as an Influence on Behavior," an unpublished paper presented before the National Consultation on Ethnic America, June 21, 1968.

pioneers have been relatively few in number. In a recent statement, a committee of historians affirmed the following as a fundamental principle for the preparation of textbooks:

The American people . . . have embodied in their national being a tremendous diversity of folk mores, national attitudes, racial origins, social classes, religious and political attitudes. This diversity is part of American life and must be faithfully portrayed. A major theme of American history lies in the adaptations which a diverse people of scores of national origins functioning in a highly diversified environment have made in three centuries.<sup>2</sup>

In the past, however, the portrayal of diversity has been an ideal to which we have paid lipservice rather than a task to which we have addressed ourselves. Only within the past decade, for example, has the history of black Americans become the subject of intensive and sustained scholarly investigation. Negroes, however, have not been the only "invisible men" in American historical writings. Traditionally, American historiography has been almost exclusively concerned with white Anglo-Americans; its unspoken assumption has been that important things have been said and done only by members of the dominant, white, English-speaking group. When immigrants as well as blacks have appeared in historical texts, it has usually been in the form of faceless crowds, mobs, herds, hordes, and masses. Their role has been depicted as one of passive or disruptive creatures, rather than as active participants in the making of American history.

It is a paradox that the history of multiracial, multilingual, and multicultural societies such as those of the United States and Canada should have been written for the most part from an Anglo-American perspective. I shall not attempt a full explanation of this paradox in this paper. Suffice it to say that historians are not immune to the biases and limitations of their own cultural backgrounds. It is not remarkable that around the turn of the century historians tended to share the racist assumptions of Anglo-Saxonism and that, although most historians in the 20th century repudiated racism, they continued to work within an Anglo-American perspective.<sup>3</sup> In common with most Americans, they believed that the "melting pot" was rapidly transforming the immigrants into standardized and homogenized citizens.<sup>4</sup> Since ethnic differences were transient characteristics (a fleeting stage in the process of Americanization), they were not to be dignified by study.

Unfortunately, the cultural myopia of the historians has been shared by those who were the custodians of the records of the past. It is a sorry

<sup>2</sup> "The Writing and Teaching of American History in Textbooks," in *AHA Newsletter*, 6:8-9 (Apr. 1968).

<sup>3</sup> On the historiography of American immigration, see Edward N. Saveth, *American Historians and European Immigrants, 1875-1925* (New York, 1948).

<sup>4</sup> Recent events and recent scholarship have brought this assumption into serious question; see, for example, Nathan Glazer and D. P. Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot; the Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963).

fact that those American institutions charged with the preservation of historical documentation have with few exceptions restricted themselves to the records of the English-speaking culture. A scrutiny of Philip Hamer, *A Guide to Archives and Manuscripts in the United States*,<sup>5</sup> for example, reveals very few references to ethnic collections. The same can be said for Walter Muir Whitehill's survey of independent historical societies.<sup>6</sup> Similarly there are only a handful of entries relating to immigration in the recently published *Union List of Manuscripts in Canadian Repositories*.<sup>7</sup>

The research experience of students of immigration supports the contention that the holdings, particularly the manuscript holdings, of ethnic materials by university and public libraries, by public and private historical societies, tend to be very slim or nonexistent. Because of this neglect by the established historical agencies, many ethnic groups have established societies devoted to the study of their particular role in American history.<sup>8</sup> These ethnic historical societies have varied greatly in their level of scholarship, but the best of them have established splendid research libraries and archives. One need mention only the collections of the American Jewish Historical Society at Brandeis University and those of the Norwegian-American Historical Association at St. Olaf's College. But for most of the groups of recent European origin, the basic task of collecting and preserving their records remains to be accomplished.

Thus even the scholar highly motivated to undertake ethnic research has encountered major obstacles in the lack of readily accessible source materials. Allow me to relate an experience of mine to illustrate the point. In the course of my work on another topic, I became aware that Paterson, N.J., of all places, was the center of the Italian anarchist movement in the 1890's. Exiled anarchist leaders, including Errico Malatesta, had gathered in Paterson, where they formed groups, issued manifestos, published newspapers, and organized strikes in the silk mills. It was a Paterson silkworker, Gaetano Bresci, who assassinated King Umberto I in 1900. I scoured the libraries in the New York area for materials relating to the Paterson anarchists, but to no avail. A visit to the Paterson public library revealed that it did not have a single scrap of paper relating to the Italians, although they were the largest immigrant group in the city. When I called at the Passaic County Historical Society, I was told that the only foreign-language publication in its collections was a Dutch newspaper of the 1830's. I do not mean to disparage the city of Paterson by this story, but to describe a situation

<sup>5</sup> (New Haven, 1961).

<sup>6</sup> *Independent Historical Societies* (Boston Athenæum, 1962).

<sup>7</sup> (Ottawa, 1968).

<sup>8</sup> Rudolph J. Vecoli, "Ethnic Historical Societies; From Filiopietty To Scholarship," an unpublished paper read at a joint session of the American Historical Association and the American Jewish Historical Society, Toronto, Dec. 28, 1967.

that I believe, is rather typical. I might add that an article recently appeared in an Italian historical journal on the Paterson anarchists, based almost entirely on sources in Italy.<sup>9</sup>

There is a myth with regard to non-English speaking groups that ought to be scotched now and forever. It has been said even by historians who should know better that since the immigrants, particularly those from eastern and southern Europe, were for the most part illiterate peasants, they left no written records to speak of. As a matter of fact a vast amount of documentation does exist for all these ethnic groups.<sup>10</sup> If many were illiterate upon arrival, they soon learned to read the tens of thousands of newspapers that were published in the United States and Canada in their languages; they also organized thousands of churches and schools and established an untold number of political, labor, dramatic, literary, professional, welfare, business, and religious associations.<sup>11</sup> All these societies kept their records in some language other than English. Each ethnic group had its hundreds of clergymen, journalists, politicians, labor leaders, and poets, who wrote their sermons, speeches, novels, poems, and diaries in their native tongues. The student, undeterred by the empty shelves in the library, who has dug into the attics and basements of ethnic communities has often discovered a wealth of materials. Much of this valuable documentation, however, has been lost through neglect, and much more is in imminent danger of being lost.

Truth as well as courtesy compels me to say that we historians have been most blameworthy for this neglect. Librarians and archivists, it has been my observation, are reasonably responsive to the research interest of scholars. A burgeoning of interest in the study of ethnicity among historians and social scientists, therefore, leads me to hope that this will result in a more active and systematic collection of ethnic materials.<sup>12</sup> Our experience at the University of Minnesota suggests that one leads to the other.

Some 5 years ago several historians at the University who were studying educational developments in the Minnesota iron mining region were stymied by the lack of documents on the immigrants who had settled in the mining towns. As they sought to gather ethnic materials for their own study, the idea of establishing a national depository of immigration records crystalized. With the blessings of the university administration and a grant from the Hill Family Foundation, an Immigrant Archives was created in the university library to house and service

<sup>9</sup> Luigi Vittorio Ferraris, "L'assassinio di Umberto I e gli Anarchici di Paterson," in *Rassegna storica del Risorgimento*, 50:47-64 (Mar. 1968).

<sup>10</sup> For example, the recently published *Polish American Serial Publications 1842-1966, An Annotated Bibliography*, by Jan Wepsiec (Chicago, 1968), lists 1,201 separate serials.

<sup>11</sup> For a study of efforts by ethnic groups to perpetuate their mother tongues and cultures see Joshua A. Fishman, *et al.*, *Language Loyalty in the United States* (The Hague, 1966).

<sup>12</sup> There is now an active organization of scholars in this field known as the Immigration History Group. Prof. Hyman Berman of the University of Minnesota history department is secretary.

this collection. A curator was appointed to administer the archives; we are fortunate in having as our curator, Roman Kochan, who is well suited by experience and training to meet the manifold demands upon him. Somewhat later the Center for Immigration Studies was erected in the College of Liberal Arts to direct the collecting of materials for the Immigrant Archives and to develop teaching and research programs in the field.

It soon became apparent that we had stumbled on a virgin field, which indeed at times appeared to be quicksand threatening to engulf us by our very success. Since no other institution was gathering ethnic materials on a national basis, opportunity was unlimited. The scope of the Archives has been defined to include all peoples who immigrated to the United States and Canada from southern and eastern Europe and the Middle East (roughly east of the Oder River and south of the Alps). Upon hearing of an Immigrant Archives at the University of Minnesota, most persons conclude that it must be concerned with Scandinavians. As a matter of fact, Swedish and Norwegian materials fall outside our sphere of collecting, as do German and British. Our rationale is that much more has been done to preserve the records of this older immigration, than of the so-called new immigration. We bring a certain sense of urgency to this undertaking since the last survivors of the heroic age of immigration, which ended half a century ago, are rapidly passing from the scene. Too often it happens that with their death, manuscripts, letters, books, and publications that had been treasured for decades are destroyed.

The collecting of ethnic materials requires its own peculiar expertise. In the first place, we must seek out the potential donor; he will not ordinarily come to us. The reason is that, on the basis of past experience, the leaders of ethnic groups had no reason to believe that academic institutions had the slightest interest in their records. Once they understand the nature of the project, however, their response generally has been enthusiastic and generous. They are gratified by the interest manifested in their history by a major State university, and the deposit of their documents in the Immigrant Archives appeals to their group pride. Our success thus is largely due to the ready cooperation given by ethnic leaders and organizations. I should mention that one of the occupational hazards of this work is the high-caloric hospitality with which one is received. Each ethnic group, moreover, is a social world with its own complicated structure of institutions and organizations, a world in which only the initiated can find his way around with facility. Fortunately the center has had the assistance of faculty members, at Minnesota and elsewhere, who have ethnic connections and who have carried on the indispensable field work. Three basic institutions common to most ethnic groups have proved to be the most fruitful sources of records: the church, the newspaper, and the fraternal organization.

Since important resources for the study of American immigration are



to be found in various European archives and libraries, the Minnesota center has sought to acquire such materials either in the original when possible or on microfilm. A large quantity of records pertaining to emigration in the Hungarian National Archives and the Archives of the Hungarian Reformed Church, for example, has been filmed for the Immigrant Archives. It is noteworthy that there has recently been a remarkable upsurge of interest among European scholars in the study of emigration. The center has entered into cooperative relations with research institutes in Hungary, Italy, and Yugoslavia. Arrangements have been made for the exchange of duplicates and microfilms and other forms of mutual assistance.

The Immigrant Archives collection includes a wide variety of materials: files of newspapers and periodicals, books, brochures, pamphlets, jubilee albums, and printed records of organizations, as well as manuscripts and microfilms. To add that these materials are in more than 20 languages indicates something of the complexity of the collection. A listing of some of the manuscript collections in the Archives will provide some idea of the range and variety of these resources: the Archives of the Yugoslav Socialist Federation of America, the Finnish Work Peoples College of Duluth, the Union and League of Romanian Societies of America, and the First Catholic Slovak Union; the files of the Chicago Chapter of the American Committee for Italian Migration; the papers of Rev. Nicolo C. Odone, an Italian-American priest, Wasyl Halich, historian of the Ukrainians in America, James Donnaruma, editor and publisher of *La Gazzetta del Massachusetts*, and Rev. Paul J. Fox, Polish-American minister and social worker; and a collection of manuscript plays of Lajos Egri, Hungarian-American dramatist.

The ethnic historical and sociological studies that are so badly needed must be based on sources such as those in the Immigrant Archives. Among the kinds of research projects to which the materials will lend themselves are the following: the immigrant's role in politics, in the church, and in the labor and radical movements; the origin and evolution of ethnic organizations; and the ethnic contributions to music, drama, and poetry. Cultural anthropologist, folklorist, sociologist, geographer, and historian alike can find grist for their mills in the collections of the Archives. Faculty members and graduate students both from Minnesota and elsewhere are making increasing use of these resources. A few of the topics that have been recently studied in the Archives are: the educational adjustment of Greek immigrants; the relationship of the Italian immigrants to the Catholic Church; and Hungarian-American proletarian literature. Students of ethnicity have another major resource at the University of Minnesota in the Social Welfare History Archives Center. Under the able direction of my colleague Prof. Clarke Chambers, that center has become a national repository of social welfare records. Much of the material such as the files of the American Immigra-

tion and Citizenship Conference and the International Social Service is relevant to the study of immigrant adjustment and ethnic groups.

We at the University of Minnesota take some satisfaction in that the Immigrant Archives already constitutes one of the most extensive collections of materials pertaining to ethnic groups of southern and eastern European origin. When we consider what remains to be done, however, we tend to feel overwhelmed. We have therefore welcomed the recent entry of several other institutions into the field of ethnic collecting. The subject is so vast and the need so pressing that there is more than enough for all of us to do. We hope to avoid wasteful competition and duplication of effort by devising appropriate forms of cooperation in our common task. Joint efforts in the microfilming of records or in the compilation of bibliographies and union lists, for example, would more efficiently serve the ends of scholarship.

Among the harried archivists in danger of being buried by the avalanche of records generated by modern society this appeal and admonition for more attention to ethnic materials may be as welcome as a gunshot in an Alpine valley. Yet I chance it because of my conviction that a scholarship of ethnicity is urgently needed at this juncture of our history. Only a realistic appraisal of our cultural diversity deriving from racial, religious, and national origins will enable us to deal effectively with the American social order and disorder. But I also like to think that ethnic studies serve a humanistic as well as a pragmatic purpose: to recover the fullbodied humanity of the immigrants and to transform the anonymous hordes and masses of the history textbooks into individual human beings with thoughts, feelings, and aspirations. The immigration studies collection at the University of Minnesota exists to serve these objectives.

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