

"TROMBENICKS" OR JEWISH HOBOES

BY RALPH ASTROFSKY

WHILE the Jew has earned the reputation of a wanderer through the centuries, he is generally not a vagrant, rather an explorer, seeking a place where he can peacefully settle down and establish his home. Albeit, among Jews, as among other human beings, you will find some restless souls with strange philosophies of life—homeless, driven here, there, and everywhere by the wheel of fortune and play of chance. It is difficult to estimate what proportion of hoboos are Jewish, but I should judge it to be relatively small. In one of the transient lodging houses on the notorious Bowery, commonly known as a "flop house" or "scratch house," you might find from five to ten Jewish lodgers out of a hundred occupants.

For all that, a steady stream of Jewish hoboos, jocularly known in their own circles as "trombenicks," knock at the doors of charity day in and day out, begging for food, clothing and shelter. Social agencies, welfare organizations, and large synagogues have had to resort to the employment of professional secretaries to attract the regular parade away from the "pet angels" and "easy marks," and study the individual applicants for the purpose of genuinely relieving and adjusting them. In such capacity I have interviewed two thousand men in some four years, listened to their hard luck stories, heard them tell their experience in their colorful language, and observed the reckless disregard of the accepted conventions and open contempt for the con-

tented and respectable wage-earners by the more misanthropic vagrants. As in every other walk of life, the Jew has fully contributed his peculiarly characteristic subtlety, native shrewdness, and quaint dry humor to the already baffling person of the hobo, like pungent oil poured over an inextinguishable flame.

IT WAS some years ago that the Bureau for Homeless Men was created at the Jewish Social Service Association of New York City (then known as the United Hebrew Charities) for the purpose of studying the problem and rendering as much constructive assistance to needy persons detached from a family group as may affect their adjustment in society, rather than encourage their pauperization by indiscriminate alms giving. Every available facility was employed to select the redeemable, separate the wheat from the tares by the use of medical examinations, expert psychiatric analyses and modern case work methods. Pioneering in this field of endeavor, months were spent in groping and angling for some understanding of this human material, and certain fundamental truths were reached in the first report of the Bureau for Homeless Men in 1924 which have neither been contradicted nor seriously extended by the later surveys made by the writer for the Bureau of Jewish Social Research, in Baltimore in the summer of 1927, and again in New York in the fall of the same year.

For the sake of convenience applicants have been divided into six

classes, namely: 1, the apparently healthy mendicant whether he be (a) an inveterate pauper, transient or stationary (commonly called "homeguard"), rationalizing his abnormal behavior, or (b) just a casual and migratory worker practicing beggary when occasion demands it; 2, the runaway lad; 3, the mentally inadequate individual; 4, the physically disabled person; 5, the religious itinerant; 6, the aged.

ASK the professional "trombenick," ostensibly in good health, to explain his habitual mendicancy and he will invariably chortle a deep, blue tale of his life's history, all depending upon his range of imagination, to arouse your quick sympathy. He was left an orphan at a tender age, alone in this cruel, bitter world, and cannot even recall the names of his parents; or he was innocently sent to jail and after his release took to drink; or maybe it was the fault of a faithless wife or sweetheart. Become a little intimate with him, slap him on the back, call him by his "Christian" name, and he may tell you his real story as he knows it, how he has genuinely attempted to settle down but in vain. Somehow, he naturally drifted into this precarious existence and in spite of all efforts to extricate himself from the shackles of the road, is only forced to relinquish in the end any hope for salvation.

"Nature won't let me break away," "Jerusalem Slim" told me. He was one of a large and poor family who had to leave his home at the age of fifteen to support himself, and he has been a hobo since. "In school, some

guys were naturally born math sharks, but nuts, say, in history. Well, I'm the nut in the course of life. But I should worry. Some guys can even beat life and play tricks on it, but I'm always the grand joke. Maybe, if I was a fink (professional strike-breaker) I could make enough money to settle down. But I got my principles. Oh, well, I guess I'm a bum and ain't got no excuse." He was sent to work as a hospital "stiff" (orderly or attendant) where he remained exactly five days and left for parts unknown.

The Jewish hobo who, in spite of himself, drifts into vagabondage, becomes more enthralled to the road after each futile effort to free himself, but unlike his Christian companion, still expects at some future date liberation and a home through marriage. Your Gentile hobo loses hope, fills his stomach with rotten liquor at every opportunity, and shoots needles into his arms to relieve his aching heart. The Jewish tramp will take refuge in metaphysics or "riddles," as he calls it, break up a game of dice to which he is not adapted, and start a poker game instead.

Not only are the "trombenicks" more optimistic, but they are also more practical minded than their Gentile associates. They generally outline their route in advance, prepare their little speeches and "work" each customer patiently and persistently. Rarely do they take great risks. Some have been on the road for years and have yet never clung to the "rods" (brake beams underneath the box cars), or balanced themselves on the buffers of moving freight trains. Similarly, they avoid the South, a hostile section of the

country for hoboes. The Jewish vagrant is also more resourceful. He faces arrests with legal excuses and alibis. On the road he will always have something to sell to a fellow tramp. Often he will invest his few dollars in a second-hand suit and resell it to his Gentile companion at a neat profit only "as a favor."

The confirmed itinerant mendicant, generally a young man, is utterly mercenary in his methods to secure a satisfactory existence. He will lie, cheat at dice and card games, whine, weep copious tears, browbeat or jolly you for a few pennies, and rob his buddy at night for the price of a smoke. Unlike the Gentile hobo, the "trombenick" does not allow himself as readily to become the victim of an older and unscrupulous tramp of homo-sexual tendencies, commonly known among them as a "wolf." Sex perversion is generally frowned upon by Jewish hoboes, although they freely indulge their normal desires in the cheapest brothels where they never once fail to admonish an inhabitant of their own faith for her disgraceful profession.

THE group of casual and migratory workers is composed largely of those in the lower grades on the labor market who are the first to be laid off when work becomes slack. The vagrancy of some of the men on the road today as well as the descent of others to casual labor has often been due to an industrial cause. A man may have been employed as an unskilled laborer in a city or country. His job gone, he hunts for another wherever he can find it, in a factory or mill, or at heavy labor in distant railroad camps as a "gandy

dancer" (taking the name from the manner in which he bobs up and down at work, like a gander, with his "duck billy," or long spike with a handle shaped like a swan's neck).

The West offers a golden opportunity to the migratory worker in the summer. The fields must be cultivated, the crops harvested, berries picked—and hands are scarce. To recruit help the box cars of freight trains are left wide open and practically invite transients in. "Skid-rows," known in the East as "slave markets" (employment agencies), operating in the large cities, ship hundreds of men for a small fee, usually two dollars, to the Hoosier "plough jackies" (middle western farmers).

Perhaps ten per cent of the men shipped actually go to work. The others, habitual vagrants of the hardier type, make the most of the seasonal hospitality of the inhabitants and railroads, abandon the practice of swaying horizontally on the "rods" and ride inside the "high balls" (the moderately fast freights) and even the "manifests" (the very fast freights), without fear of being molested. As many as a hundred vagrants are sometimes herded together in a box car, yodeling and whistling, indulging in all forms of ribaldry, solving the problems of the universe and exchanging colorful reminiscences, oft-times highly imaginary.

When favorable towns are reached, they will sweep down in bunches, select a "jungle" (headquarters, a convenient location along the railroad, preferably near a water tank) and then saunter on the "stem" (the main street) to observe and ferret out the prospects

of the place. Enterprising "trombenicks" not interested in work, will search telephone books for a "noch" (*hachnosas orchim*), a Jewish shelter for transients, or a "pay station" (a social agency or central almsgiving society). If there is no established "pay station" in town, he feels at liberty to work "factories" (synagogues where collections might be made), store keepers whose names end in "stein," "baum" or "berg," and, of course, junk dealers of any nationality, a never failing source. I have heard it said among hoboes that many junk dealers, in the West at least, began their business careers as tramps, picking up discarded material and putting it to good use.

Large cities throughout the country maintain free shelters or inns. New York has its Municipal Lodging House with double-decker beds, providing shelter to a homeless city resident five nights a month and to a stranger one night in a year. Each applicant is required to submit to a physical examination, take a cold shower, and check his clothes for the night, to be steamed and thoroughly fumigated and returned the following morning, crumpled and creased, but at least purged of vermin. No wonder the Jewish hobo prefers the "noch" with its simple precept not to make oneself too well known to the janitor or caretaker. Wise old beggars have sometimes manipulated a two- and even three-month extension of time at a *hachnosas orchim*, a feat quite impossible at a publicly maintained lodging house. "You know how it is," explained one experienced *schnorrer*, "with Yiddin you can always come to terms." Another young

hobo, an habitue of the Bowery, lacking "two bits" (25c) for a "flop," refused to associate with the "goyim" and bums at the city shelter and requested permission to stay at the *hachnosas orchim*, pronouncing that difficult name flawlessly, though unable to utter another Hebrew word. There are "nochs" famous throughout Jewish hoboemia for their abundant fare on the High Holidays, particularly on Passover.

If there is no "noch" in town, the "trombenick" will return to the "jungle" in the evening with information and victuals of all kinds collected by hook or crook, and prepare a "Mulligan stew" (the prime dish made by boiling all the edibles in a mass). For an appetizer the contents of a sterno can will be strained through a handkerchief and diluted with lemon pop, and a strong smelling drink of wood alcohol would be passed around to the crowd. As a rule, the Jewish hobo will refrain from this bad booze and pass it on to his Gentile associates.

A "jungle" may be made up of two or three "stiffs" (hoboes), although I have seen at one rendezvous, both in the East and far West, a collection of fifty vagabonds or more, most of them obviously Irish, some "Bohunks" (Poles) and Swedes and a few unmistakably "trombenicks." At one such party I caught notice of a "trombenick" clandestinely tugging carrots from his pockets, unwilling to participate in the prize dish because it was not *kosher*, as he declared to me later.

When hands are laid off, or, in the case of the professional beggars, when the town's visible resources

have been exhausted, the gullible Ladies' Aid Societies, synagogues and individual donors worked to death, or if a serious theft has been committed with an ambitious prosecutor ready to place the blame on the shoulders of the first friendless vagrant, a hasty departure is effected. They begin scattering for their favorite winter stations, the Bowery in New York, West Madison Street in Chicago, the Embarcadero in San Francisco, the river front of East Baltimore, or Occidental Street in Seattle. The labor of the hoboes no longer in demand, the attitude of the surrounding populace toward them changes to one of hostility, and the "harnessed bulls" (uniformed police) and "yard dicks" (railroad detectives) are on the alert to arrest stray vagabonds on sight.

The highway barred by unsympathetic constables and apprehensive automobile drivers, any outgoing train must do. A false move in "jumping a freight" means instant death. I have known hoboes caloused by years on the road, with as much as \$100 in savings sewn in between the lining and the cloth of the jacket, unable to resist the temptation of stealing even a short ride, only to be maimed or killed, or frisked out of their roll by other hoboes and not infrequently by railroad detectives. Stealing a ride on a "blind" (passenger train, generally in the car between the baggage coach and the locomotive) is also fraught with grave danger, as it may bring a bullet from the "rod" (gun) of a marine stationed in the mail car, or a long jail sentence, if arrested.

In the city, friends lead the novice to the cheap transient hotels to pass

away time, exchange stories and wait leisurely for the next spring season. Strange views of life are revealed to him, fascinating, alluring, disturbing his dull, heavy mind and upsetting his hitherto normal conception of things. Long periods of physical inactivity tend to absorb him farther into the flotsam and jetsam of society. His money earned from the hot summer's toil is soon exhausted and he must get a job at once. Except during the short snow period, work for laborers is not plentiful during the winter months and it becomes more and more scarce as the season advances.

Finally, after months of idleness and dissipation, his overcoat, watch and valuables pawned, and unequal to any sort of continuous hard labor, the casual worker makes his call to the social agency. Odd jobs are the forms of employment he now seeks until the spring. If he does not get any at that critical moment, he resorts to any form of begging that brings results. A continuous state of mendicancy and personal neglect tend to promote his pauperization and eventually make him utterly indifferent to steady employment. He might find stray jobs in restaurants as dishwasher ("pearl diver") or busboy, if the social worker proves too cold to his appeal. Healthy floaters are regular blood donors in hospitals, receiving fifty dollars for each blood transfusion. "Panhandling," or begging on the streets, is employed only by the lowest kind of tramp, and the Jewish vagrant generally prefers any hard labor to that. A proud hobo is a "sweet-back," that is one who succeeds in having a woman support him.

OF PRIME interest to the transient worker is the lad who, because of a quarrel at home or moved by a spirit of adventure, suddenly departs without warning for places unknown. Such youngsters are generally bright, impressionable, impudent, incorrigible, and in some cases sufficiently daring and delinquent to make them potential criminals.

It is really astonishing how quickly a runaway lad will discover the Bowery, that Alsatian den of misery and despair. Only recently a boy of fifteen who had refused to "*leigen t'filin*," told me how he had lived on the Bowery during his entire absence from home and associated with the human riff-raff who make that street their winter headquarters. At first he refused to return home, but finally relented when his vision and mind were directed to the lingering collection of bedraggled creatures in the office and his imagination pricked to draw his own future as a hobo. The boy returned home to find his name advertised in the missing column of the local newspapers.

CLOSE observation of the homeless, their examination by competent psychiatrists, have indicated that a large number of them are either mentally unbalanced or of defective intelligence. It is a nice question, indeed, to determine whether they are vagrants because of insanity or insane because of their vagrancy. Some men can become mad from the effects of worry and inconsistent habits of living. They are allowed to wander from place to place, either because their

legal residence cannot be established and commitment effected, or because their condition is merely of a border-line nature. An erstwhile dentist diagnosed as a "dementia praecox," known to at least twenty social agencies in as many cities over a period of seven years, has not escaped jail sentences for vagrancy, but commitment for his mental aberration has never been possible. Many a young fellow has been hounded out of home for his laziness or queerness. There may be a marriageable daughter at home, or a son about to enter an honorable profession, when it becomes essential to sacrifice the pariah to the road rather than jeopardize the social ambitions of the other members of the family. Not for a moment do the latter suspect the possible insanity of the outcast, who is allowed to drift from place to place for the means of subsistence.

Then there are the starved and crazy-eyed hoboes claiming the invention of scientific products or the discovery of modern philosophic theories, pursued and persecuted by the secret agents of Marconi, Edison, Einstein and others. Every now and then some restless soul will insist that he is the genuine inventor of the abbreviated system of writing copied by the "pretender" Gregg or Pitman. Recently, a slimy little figure, whose feet have touched the soil of every state in the Union, showed me his voluminous manuscripts refuting Einstein's claim to the theory of relativity. One pitiful old vagabond called himself the "Defender of the Jewish Faith," and so offensive were his letters to public men that he was finally held for

observation and sent to a state institution.

Society has developed a machinery more or less ponderous and creaking, but nevertheless based upon fairly concrete formulations, for handling the positively insane and criminal. However, it has been unable to understand and has therefore neglected humans whose mental traits and habits are not so sharply defined. It is this individual who makes one of our greatest problems, both as to number and difficulty of adjustment. His marked defect in volition prevents him from holding to one course long enough to succeed and his poor inhibition makes him particularly prone to the commission of crimes of passion and the perpetration of sensual excesses of all kinds. Yet he will not admit that his inadequacies are the cause of his failure and will only project them upon his environment. His emotional instability and impulsiveness bring him into continual conflicts with his family, employers and associates, resulting in bitterness, neuroses and psychoses.

In the course of the seven-week survey and intensive work with the homeless in Baltimore, sixteen men out of sixty-seven were found by a psychiatrist to be mentally unequipped to compete in the industrial world for a respectable livelihood. For the entire year of 1926 forty-one mental cases were definitely diagnosed at the Jewish Social Service Association of New York out of a case load of 488 homeless men, and fifty-seven were suspected of mental disorders. Fifteen were committed to state institutions for the insane.

OF THE men handled by the Bureau for Homeless Men of the Jewish Social Service Association, 56.3% were regarded as mentally and physically incapacitated for regular and steady employment. Eliminating the diagnosed mental cases, equivalent to 8.4% of the total group, there remained 47.9% representing the men who suffered from serious physical handicaps requiring periodic service from welfare organizations. There were the crippled and those who suffered from tuberculosis, asthma, heart disease, lues, blindness, epilepsy and other chronic illnesses. This proportion of disabilities is, however, not to be taken as indicative of what might be expected from a cross section of the entire group of the homeless, since the Bureau gave precedence in service to those of its applicants who presented the more obvious physical handicaps.

Even among these transients there are, quite frequently, impostors. When an applicant alleged a physical handicap not obvious to the eye, he was sent to a clinic for a medical diagnosis and an opinion as to his limitations for self-support. Whether the original cause of the man's physical disability is social, individual, or purely accidental, his adjustment to the changed condition and his ultimate position in the industrial world depends in some part upon his own spirit and temperament and his general attitude toward life.

CITIES with old orthodox constituencies like Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington, Richmond, attract religious itinerant mendicants in the practice of making regu-

lar week-end visits. They attend the synagogues to pray for departed souls at so much a prayer, deliver lectures (*drosches*) and pass judgment on differences concerning various religious customs and observances. In return they are invited by the members of the synagogue to their homes for the Friday evening meal or to dinner following the Saturday morning services. Some of the religious travelers possess vast knowledge in their specific field and an excellent oratorical delivery, but many of them are rabbis who are ignorant of the Law, *melamdin* (teachers) who know nothing about pedagogy, and *chazanim* (cantors) who cannot sing. They consider themselves entitled to reduced transportation rates and an unqualified welcome by the local *hachnosas orchim*, and usually do receive special attention. They generally shun the offices of case working agencies and prefer contributions from private individuals, benevolent aid societies made up of members from their home towns, and friendly orthodox synagogues in the poor sections of the city. In their journeys to small communities they occasionally do strike desirable jobs and settle down, but such examples are rare, indeed.

To meet the above situation Dr. Bogen has suggested¹ that "a better organization of our synagogues, an absolute refusal to permit the traveler the use of the pulpit unless by previous engagement through a central agency, are possible ways to reduce the number who are dependent upon charity. Then the situation will be easily controlled and the traveling *chazan* will be considered just as legitimate a proposition

as the visiting theatrical troupe, or the debut of the renowned Sirota."

APATHETIC and hopeless case is presented by the aged homeless. The tendency of modern industry is to weed out the unfit, regardless of sentiment. Many are still strong and well, and will not accept the verdict that they are too old to be of further industrial value without a bitter struggle to prove the contrary. They have to choose between living in a home for the aged and the freedom of vagrancy. At least five cases now under the care of the J. S. S. A. are exploiting their advanced years for begging purposes on the streets, in synagogues, and at *hachnosas orchims* in New York and elsewhere.

IT MAY be well in closing to give a few figures on the ages, marital status and nativity of the "trombenicks." From one-third to one-half of Jewish hoboies are under thirty years of age. The Jewish Social Service Association had 32.3% of its homeless men under that age (out of 482 cases handled during a period of one year). In the New York Hias Shelter (608 men during nine months) those under thirty made up 49.2% of the total. In Baltimore, of the sixty-seven men who came to the Hebrew Friendly Inn in seven weeks, 53.8% were under thirty.

Because of the comparative youth of the homeless, most of them are single, about twice as many as reported by the United States census for the population at large.¹ The

¹The proportion of men who reported themselves single are: 61.3% in the J. S. S. A., 70.3% in the Hias Shelter, and 71.5% in Baltimore. The total figures and the periods covered are the same as those given in the preceding paragraph.

¹In his "Jewish Philanthropy."

others represent individuals separated from their spouses by mutual consent, men whose wives deserted them, or persons who left in search for work and in time became vagrants, ashamed to return to their families in their penniless and degraded condition. They had continued to wander until even vague intentions of going back home some day have been abandoned.

Only 6.2% of the heads of the families under the care of the J. S. S. A. and 11.2% of those under the care of the Hebrew Benevolent Society of Baltimore, were born in this country. In contrast to that we have 24.8% of the homeless applicants of the J. S. S. A. and 43.8% of the homeless who applied to the Baltimore agency last summer, who claimed American nativity. The higher figure for the native-born homeless in Baltimore may be accounted by the fact that the New York homeless are apparently older and more often regular residents of the city. Only 200 or 40.9% of the 488 cases of the homeless under the care of the J. S. S. A. confessed to non-residence, while over 90% of the applicants of the Hebrew Friendly Inn of Baltimore during the seven-week period of study were transients.

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IF ANYTHING has been revealed in this paper and previous studies made of the homeless, it is the existence of a fairly large neglected class of society, roving and searching the best way it knows for the very means of subsistence. Two thou-

sand at least find their way to New York each year, and if they leave the city, it is only to grace other agencies and *hachnosas orchims*. The problem is country-wide, yet it has been sidetracked or ignored at the recent national conferences of Jewish social work. Some structure might be devised to check and control vagrancy through a better recognition of their real needs. I daresay, from experience, that many vagabonds are more familiar with the characteristics of social workers than the converse of the proposition, for at least they have plentiful conferences in the shelters at night analyzing their prospects. Constructive work done in one community may be completely undone in another. During the first week of the study made in Baltimore, an average of seven men applied each day to the Hebrew Friendly Inn there, and every other person was recognized by this investigator through previous contacts in New York. Word was quickly passed around and not a single vagrant applied in the seventh or last week. They evidently preferred communities where they would not have to submit to any examination, however much abuse they might receive elsewhere.

The writer fervently hopes that his interest in this human debris will be retained at least until the time when opportunity will enable him to make a national comprehensive study to disclose more fully their character and needs, shedding light on the possible diminution of their number.

MISCELLANEA

SHOULD SOCIAL LENDING AGENCIES AFFILIATE WITH FEDERATIONS?

(EDITOR'S NOTE: The following represents an exchange of correspondence between William Hirsch, Managing Director of the Federated Loan Association of Philadelphia, and Dr. John Slawson, Research Director of the Jewish Welfare Federation of Cleveland, on a subject that is of interest to social workers generally. The Editor acknowledges the courtesy of Dr. Slawson and Mr. Hirsch for their kind permission to have these letters published.)

I.

My Dear Dr. Slawson:

We have a Hebrew Free Loan Association in this city which, until 1921, was a constituent of the Federation of Jewish Charities. The Federated Loan Association was organized in 1920 and the Federation found it unnecessary to further subsidize the Hebrew Free Loan. That organization, conducted on the general lines of Hebrew Free Loan Associations throughout the country, functioned on the very unsatisfactory basis of "he who asks should get." The result was an outstanding uncollectable sum of money, larger than their remaining immediate capital. The Jewish Welfare Society found very little use for the Hebrew Free Loan, and therefore there was very little co-operation between the two organizations.

The Federated Loan Association is the only social service lending organization in the city. Our charge is 6 per cent per annum on the full amount. The loan is repayable on a weekly payment plan at the rate of \$2.00 per \$100, which includes principal and interest. The Jewish

Welfare Society and the Federated Loan Association enjoy the closest possible co-operation. The business cases of the J. W. S. are discussed at this office. The Managing Director of this office is on the business committee of the J. W. S. The supervisor of the business department of the J. W. S. and the Director of the Federated Loan Association jointly take up and interview the Jewish Welfare Society's difficult rehabilitation cases. The J. W. S. guarantees the loans made by us to their clients and the collections on the loans are made at our office, which is separate and apart from the J. W. S. The Director of the Federated Loan Association is called into consultation by the supervisors of the J. W. S. in matters of business for their clients.

THERE is a definite place for a social lending agency in the community structure. The lending agency operates not only for the social service agencies, but more extensively for the men and women in the community who at no time would permit themselves to become clients of a social service agency. Nevertheless, they are always on the border line and manage, through their own efforts, to struggle away from it. Were we, for instance, to operate as a family case working agency, 95 per cent of our clients could not and would not take advantage of our offices. At the same time we are in a position to handle all the Jew-