

Assimilation

*Mary Antin and her family fled Russia during the pogroms. When she was 13-years old, she and her mother and brothers and sisters reunited with her father - who had emigrated three years earlier - in Boston. Antin attended public school and went on to be a distinguished student at Boston Latin School and Barnard College. In 1912 she wrote an autobiography, *The Promised Land*, in which she exuberantly celebrated America as the land of opportunity.*

In the following passage she described her Americanization process, which she compared to a "second infancy," in which, she, as a "newborn," learned the ways of a new world. As she explains, "greenhorns" (newly arrived immigrants) often received aid from more experienced immigrants in their adjustment to American life.

Now I was not exactly an infant when I was set down, on a May day some fifteen years ago, in this pleasant nursery of America... America was bewilderingly strange, unimaginably complex, delightfully unexplored. I rushed impetuously out of the cage of my provincialism and looked eagerly about the brilliant universe... Plenty of maiden aunts were present during my second infancy in the guise of immigrant officials, school-teachers, settlement workers, and sundry other unprejudiced and critical observers...

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 a "banana," but had to give it up from the time being. After the meal, he had better luck with a curious piece of furniture on runners, which he called a "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...

We had to visit the stores and be dressed from head to foot in American clothing; we had to learn the mysteries of the iron stove, the washboard, and the speaking tube; we had to learn to trade with the fruit peddler through the window and not to be afraid of the policemen; and above all, we had to learn English.

The kind people who assisted us in these important matters form a group by themselves in the gallery of my friends... When I enumerate the long list of my American teachers, I must begin with those who came to us on Wall Street and taught us our first steps. To my mother, in her perplexity over the cookstove, the woman who showed her how to make the fire was an angel of deliverance. 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 homemade 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. My mother, possessing a name that was not easily translatable, was punished with the undignified nickname of Annie. Ftechke, Joseph and Deborah became Frieda, Joseph and Dora respectively. As for poor me, I was simply cheated. The name they gave me was hardly new. My Hebrew name being Maryashe in full, Russianized into Marya (Mar-ya), my friends said that it would be 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, which I have had no occasion to mention until now. I found on my arrival that my father was "Mr. Antin" on the slightest provocation, and not as at home 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 weekdays.