

Identity Crisis: Immigrant teenagers torn between two worlds.

Introduction

Ever think that your parents don't understand you? Or that it's hard to fit in with kids at school? That's the situation that millions of children confronted when their families settled in America.

Whether they were from Italy, Greece, Poland, or Russia, the children of European immigrants shared many of the same problems. Because their families were often poor, many had to live in overcrowded apartment buildings (tenements), sharing bedrooms not only with brothers and sisters but also with parents. They had to work, selling newspapers, washing dishes, or toiling in factories. They had to learn to speak a new language. And they had to deal with the prejudice of other Americans who thought that they had strange customs, cloths, and religions.

Immigrants going through the inspection process at Ellis Island.

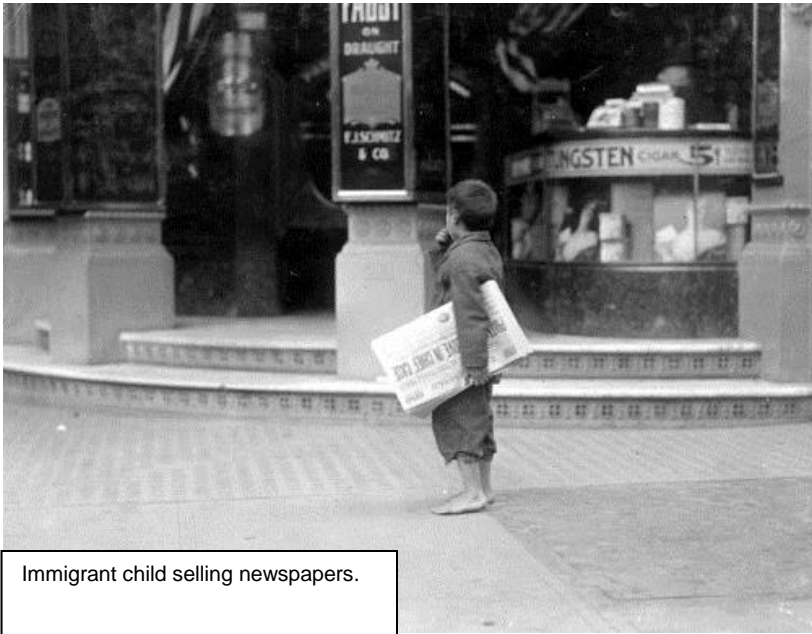


Italian Immigrants coming to America.



Kids worked hard to learn English, and they were drawn to such American attractions as baseball and the nickelodeon, an early form of the movies. But in trying to fit in with Americans, kids found themselves caught between two worlds. Immigrant parents didn't want their sons and daughters to lose touch with the Old World. They often demanded their children play only European games, spend time with kids from their own ethnic group, and speak only their native language. To many teenagers, old family traditions were just that – old.

On the following pages, you will find excerpts from letters and memoirs written by people who were children in immigrant families around the end of the 19th century. As you read, pay attention to the problems they experienced and the ways in which their attitudes about American life contrasted (were different) with those of their parents.



Immigrant child selling newspapers.

Article #1

A Jewish newspaper in New York called The Dailey Forward published an advice column, in which immigrants requested help adjusting to American life. In this letter, five sons discuss their parents' use of Yiddish, a language used by Eastern European Jews.

Worthy Editor:

I am sure that the problem I'm writing about affects many Jewish homes. My parents, who have been readers of your paper for years, came from Europe. They have five sons.

We, the five brothers always speak English to each other. Our parents know English too, but they only speak Yiddish, not just among themselves but to us too, and even to our American friends who come to visit us. We beg them not to speak Yiddish in the presence of our friends, but they don't want to.

Imagine, even when we go with our father to buy something in a store on Fifth Avenue, New York, he insists on speaking Yiddish. We are not ashamed of our parents, God forbid, but they ought to know where it's proper and where it's not. If they talk Yiddish among themselves at home, or at us, it's bad enough, but among strangers? Is that nice? They want to keep only their old ways and don't want to take up our new ways.

We beg you to express our opinion, and if possible send us your answer in English, because we can't read Yiddish.

I, and the Four Brothers

Dear Brothers:

We see no crime in the parents speaking Yiddish to their sons. The Yiddish language is dear to them. It may also be that they are ashamed to speak their imperfect English among strangers so they prefer to use their mother tongue.

- *The Editors*

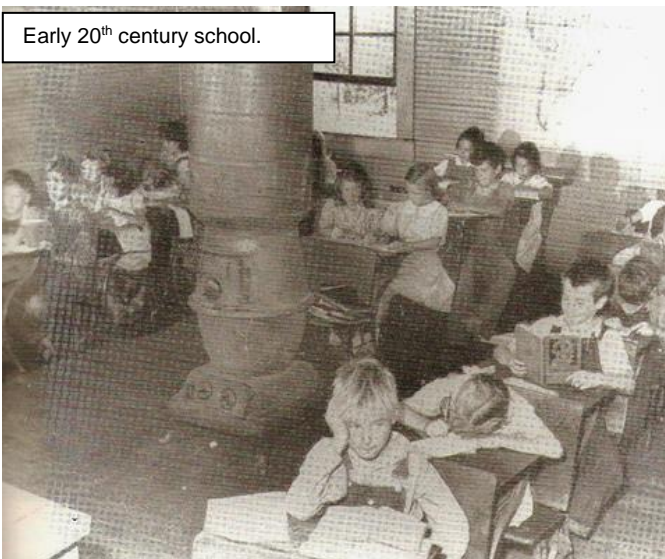
Article #2

Writing in 1933, novelist John Fante recalls his Italian-American mother using cruel nicknames – such as Dago and Wop – to put down other Italians. And he remembers absorbing their prejudices and feeling embarrassed of his own Italian roots.

From the beginning, I hear my mother use the words Wop and Dago with such vigor (force) as to denote violent disrepute (disgrace/disrespect). She spits them out. They leap from her lips. To her they contain the essence of poverty and filth. Thus I begin to loathe (hate) my heritage.

I avoid Italian boys and girls who try to be friendly. I thank God for my light skin and hair, and I choose companions by their American names. If a boy's name is Whitney, Brown, or Smith, then he's my pal; but I'm always a little nervous when I am with him; he may find me out. At the lunch hour I huddle over my lunch pail, for my mother doesn't wrap my sandwiches in wax paper, and she makes them too large, and the lettuce leaves stick out. Worse, the bread is homemade; not bakery bread, not "American" bread. I make a great fuss because I can't have mayonnaise and other "American" things.

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Early 20th century school.

I am nervous when I bring friends to my house; the place looks so Italian. I begin to think that my grandmother is hopelessly a Wop. She's a small, stocky peasant who walks with her wrists criss-crossed across her belly, a simple old lady. She comes into the room and tries to talk to my friends. She speaks English with a bad accent, her vowels rolling out like hoops. My heart roars. I'm disgraced.

One day I look at my father with amazement. Is this man my father? Why, look at him! Listen to him! He reads with an Italian tone of voice! He's wearing an Italian mustache. I have never realized it until this moment, but he looks exactly like a Wop. His suit hangs in careless wrinkles up him. Why the deuce doesn't he buy a new one? And look at his tie! It's crooked. And his shoes: they need a shine. Say, mister, are you really my father? You there, why, you're such an old-looking fellow! You look exactly like one of those immigrants carrying a blanket. You can't be my father!

Article #3

Pauline Newman came to the United States from Lithuania in 1901, when she was about eight years old. She recalls how difficult it was for poor immigrants to get an education, one of the most important ways of fitting into American society.

A cousin of mine worked for the Triangle Shirtwaist Company and she got me a job there in October of 1901. We started work at seven-thirty in the morning, and during the busy season we worked until nine in the evening.

What I had to do was not really very difficult. It was just monotonous (repetitive). When the shirtwaists (women's blouses) were finished at the machine there were some threads that were left, and all the youngsters were given scissors to cut the threads off.

Of course there were child labor laws on the books, but no one enforced them. The employers were always tipped off if there was going to be an inspection. "Quick," they'd say, "into the boxes!" And we children would climb into the big boxes the finished shirts were stored in. Then some shirts were piled on top of us, and when the inspector came – no children.

My pay was \$1.50 a week, no matter how many hours I worked. You were expected to work every day if they needed you, and the pay was the same whether you worked extra or not.



Children working in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, NYC.



NYC police & firefighters identify victims of the Triangle Shirtwaist fire.

At first I tried to get somebody who could teach me English in the evening, but that didn't work out because I don't think he was a good teacher, and anyhow, the overtime interfered with private lessons. But I mingled with people; I joined the Socialist Literary Society. There was a Dr. Newman, no relation of mine, who would come down to Literary Society twice a week and teach us literature, English literature. He gave me a list of books to read, and, as I said, if there is a will you can learn. I regretted that I couldn't go even to evening school, let alone going to day school, but it didn't prevent me from trying to learn and it doesn't have to prevent anybody who wants to. I was then and still am an avid reader. Even if I didn't go to school I think I can hold my own with anyone.

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Article # 4

Immigrants sometimes changed their names to make them sound more American. This could be an emotional issue, as described by Italian-American Leonard Covello, who immigrated from Italy in 1896, at the age of 9.

One day I came home from school with a report card for my father to sign. My friend Vito Salvatore happened to be there, and Mary Accurso had stopped in for a moment to see my mother. My father glanced over the marks on the report card and was about to sign it. However, he paused with the pen in his hand.

“What is this? Leonard Covello! What happened to the *i* in Caviello?”

“Maybe the teacher just forgot to put in,” Mary suggested.

“Mrs. Cutter took it out,” I explained. “Every time she pronounced *Coviello* it came out *Covello*. So she took out the *i*. What difference does it make?” I said. “It’s more American.” At that age, I felt that anything that made a name less foreign was an improvement.

For a moment my father sat there. Then with a shrug of disgust, he signed the report card. My mother now entered the argument. “How is it possible to do this to a name? You will have to tell your teacher that a name cannot be changed just like that.”

“Mamma, you don’t understand.”

“What is there to understand? A person’s honor is in his name. He never changes it. A name is not a shirt or a piece of underwear.”

“You just don’t understand!”

“Will you stop saying that!” my mother insisted. “Now that you have become Americanized you understand everything and I understand nothing.”



Immigrant neighborhood in NYC.

I called to Vito and we walked downstairs into the street. Somehow the joy of childhood seeped out of our lives. A sadness that we could not explain pressed down upon us. Mary came and joined us.

“They don’t understand!” I repeated.

Mary smiled. “Maybe someday, you will realize that you are the one who does not understand.”