

**Representations of Immigrant Life on New York's Lower East Side****in Leela Corman's *Unterzakhn***

**Keywords:** gender, sexuality, Jewish-American, immigration, graphic novel

**Abstract:** Leela Corman's graphic novel *Unterzakhn* illustrates the difficulty of life at the turn of the century in New York's Lower East Side as seen through the eyes of Jewish twins Fanya and Esther. Although the novel does not solely follow the story of the sisters, it is mainly focused on their fascinating passage from childhood to adulthood. The purpose of my paper is to analyze Corman's graphic novel in order to illustrate how New York's Lower East Side shaped the life of Jewish immigrants. On the one hand, I will examine the historical development of the Jewish migration and its causes. Consequently, I will explore whether Leela Corman follows the pattern of the factual past or not. On the other hand, I will focus on Corman's graphic depiction of the streets of the Lower East Side and on her portrayal of Jewish family life. The critical sources used include Hasia R. Diner's *The Jews of the United States, 1654 to 2000* and Joyce Antler's "'My Yiddishe Mama': The Multiple Faces of the Immigrant Jewish Mother." *You Never Call! You Never Write! A History of the Jewish Mother*.

Leela Corman's graphic novel *Unterzakhn* illustrates the difficulty of life at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century on New York's Lower East Side as seen through the eyes of Jewish twins Fanya and Esther Feynberg. Although the novel does not solely follow the story of the sisters, it is mainly

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focused on their fascinating passage from childhood to adulthood. The twins do not pursue the life already established for them by family and gender conventions: while Fanya ends up working for a doctor who performs illegal abortions for married women, Esther becomes a dancer and actress working in a vaudeville theater and brothel. The purpose of my paper is to analyze Corman's graphic novel in order to illustrate how it depicts the way New York's Lower East Side shaped the life of Jewish immigrants who came to the United States between the 1880s and the 1920s. To this end, I will first examine the historical development of the Jewish migration and its causes. Consequently, I will explore whether Leela Corman follows the pattern of the factual past or not. In the second part of my paper, I will focus on how Corman's narrative depicts, on the one hand, life on the streets of the Lower East Side and, on the other hand, Jewish family life.

### **Causes and Effects of the Jewish Migration**

Jewish studies scholars such as Hasia Diner, Jenna Weissman, and many others have pointed out at length how migration became a significant feature of East European Jews' existence from the beginning of the 1880s to the end of the 1920s. This movement of migration generally occurred from the east to the west, "from places of limited Jewish rights and restricted opportunities to places of expanded rights and greater opportunities" (Diner 74). During this century of mass migration, Jewish people significantly changed their way of life as they moved from small town communities into large, hectic cities,

Before the nineteenth century, most Jews had been small-town dwellers. The transformation of Jewish residence took place on a global scale. Jews left small communities of central and eastern Europe for larger cities [...]. As Jews made their way to England, France, Germany, Canada, and South America, as well as to the large cities of central and eastern Europe, they changed the ways they lived and made a living. This transition in turn informed deep changes in what Jewishness meant to them. (Diner 74)

The majority of Jews chose to live in the United States, considering America to be a refuge, a place of opportunities and freedom, “Three million European Jews had made this westward journey to a country where in principle church and state stood separate and where religious, ethnic, and racial diversity characterized social life” (Diner 75). A highly important aspect that needs to be taken into consideration when referring to Eastern European Jewish immigrants who came to the United States between the 1880s and the 1920s is represented by their lack of devotion to American values and norms of behavior. Accordingly, they were unwilling to abandon their distinctive, ethnic traits,

According to early-twentieth-century American opinion, the newest immigrants had little interest in embracing the values of their new home. Rather, these immigrants from southern and eastern Europe had come primarily to find a livelihood, their critics claimed. They would make no commitment to American ideals of freedom, and their low

level of cultural development would prevent them from grasping American ideas. They clung together in urban enclaves, learning little about America, its language, and its values. (Diner 78)

We may also observe the specifics of Eastern European Jewish immigrants in *Unterzakhn*. Apart from the story of the sisters, Corman tells the story of their father, Isaac. He is a Jewish man who grew up in Russia and ran to Poland and, due to the harsh conditions, moved to the United States in 1896 because he agreed to marry a woman who had a free passage to America. Like the majority of Jews who moved to America after 1880, Isaac and his family preserve the characteristic Jewish way of life. Moreover, New York's Lower East Side, their new home, also carries the distinctive traits of Jewish culture. The best proof is the language they speak which is full of Yiddish inflections, "No, you goose. She's just a *pritze* who like to mix in! She broke my head so much, I told her, OK, Fanya only, she's the smart one, so if a little bit of *goyish* she reads, why not?" (Corman 35).

Another crucial aspect regarding the historical account of Jewish migration is connected to pogroms. It is a well-known fact that the pogrom was first created after the assassination of Alexander II, in 1881, when anti-Semitism developed. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* the term "pogrom" designates an organized bloodshed with the purpose of eradicating a body of people. In his article, "*Pogrom*" in the *Anglo- American Imagination, 1881- 1919*, Sam Johnson, has stated that "pogrom" is "a special Russian term that expressed the extraordinary actions perpetrated by the tsarist regime and its subjects against Jews" (Johnson 161). Likewise, it is important to notice that scholars have put a great emphasis on the idea that

pogroms were orchestrated by the authorities, “The role of the authorities—whether as soldiers, local officials, or government ministers, as perpetrators and, sometimes, complicit and passive bystanders—lies at the heart of the most widely accepted understanding of the term *pogrom*” (Johnson 149). Consequently, pogroms profoundly affected the situation of Jews in the Eastern Europe and forced them to move to safer places to live,

The pogroms confirmed for many Jews the utter impossibility of integration and the nearly total cultural and social chasm between Jews and non-Jews in the czarist country. [...] The story of eastern European immigration to the United States by and large has been told in terms of the pogroms and the Jewish reaction to them. The pogroms, as historical thinking has it, essentially sparked the exodus to America. (Diner 92)

Corman’s *Unterzakhn* takes into account the historical report regarding pogroms. By telling the story of Isaac, Corman thoroughly deals with this issue. Corman uses explicit images to reveal Isaac’s drama, “Was there some bad men. My house they took. Was never good for a Jew, Russia” (Corman 41). A pogrom left him without house and family. Corman’s depiction of this traumatic experience is particularly interesting because there are no words attached to the images describing the incident. The lack of textual representation is important as it shows the depth of his trauma. A more detailed analysis of this incident should be done in connection to the Kishinev pogrom of 1903. The Kishinev pogrom is a reference point for scholars dealing with the Jewish experience, as it is the first pogrom to enter “the world’s consciousness in visual

terms” (Johnson 159). The photos of the Kishinev pogrom were widely published in the Anglo-American press. The brutality of this event intensely shocked Anglo- American audience: the photos revealed smashed furniture, streets filled with scattered feathers (the symbol of the social distinction and wealth of a Jewish family), burnt houses, raped women, and mutilated bodies. Furthermore, the press interpreted pogroms as being a “national institution”. The Anglo-American mass media tried to understand the gruesome acts and explained that pogroms followed a well-established pattern,

First there is the propaganda; secondly, some squabble that provides the pretext; thirdly, little boys go forth and see if the authorities are willing, and if they are not punished for smashing the windows, then the fourth act begins and the mob breaks the furniture and scatters the feathers of the bedding. Finally, at the fifth act, the lowest passions finding themselves unrestrained, rape and murder terminate the drama. (Johnson 161)

To return to Corman’s graphic novel, we may observe that the after-pogrom images foreground the same ravages exposed in the photos of Kishinev pogrom: Isaac’s house is burnt down, the furniture is destroyed, there are feathers scattered on the floor and his mother and sister are raped and murdered. Likewise, Corman’s narrative indicates that pogroms were organized and tolerated by the authorities, as Isaac feared and constantly avoided police officers. Thus, we may observe that the pogrom episode corresponds to how pogroms usually occurred in

actual fact. Moreover, Corman comprehensively follows the historical account of Jewish migration throughout her narrative.

### **The Lower East Side and its Impact upon Jewish Life**

Another aspect that I will analyze in my essay focuses on how the narrative depicts, on the one hand, life on the streets of the Lower East Side and, on the other hand, Jewish family life. Historians have shown that the Lower East Side became the most congested neighborhood in America, where immigrant Jews and their American-born children lived from the late 1880s until well into the 1940s, “Close to 85 percent of them came to New York City, and approximately 75 percent of those settled initially on the Lower East Side, which by 1890 ‘bristled with Jews’” (Polland and Soyer 111). The neighborhood promoted establishments and organizations that supported the Jewish way of life, such as synagogues and kosher food shops. Moreover, it was described as “dense, throbbing with street activity, teeming with life, and crowded with people. Apartments often served as both home and workplace for large families, as well as unrelated boarders” (Diner 106). In *Unterzakhn*, Corman’s drawings of the neighborhood perfectly render the chaotic and overcrowded Jewish streets of the Lower East Side. We may also notice that Fanya and Esther’s home is both the place in which they live and their mother’s sewing studio, Zilber Corset & Foundation. Thus, we deduce that the business of the Feinberg family depends on the garment industry. Concerning the garment industry, we may observe that Corman’s story follows the historical records in this respect too,

New York emerged as the center of the garment industry, although Chicago, Boston, Baltimore, Rochester, Cleveland, and a number of other interior cities also produced clothing at a dizzying pace. In 1910 New York produced 70 percent of the nation's clothing for women and 40 percent for men.[...] Much of that garment manufacturing, done either in apartment workshops, known as sweatshops, or in the more modern factories that came into being by the second decade of the twentieth century, lay in Jewish hands. Jews constituted most of the workers in the field as well. (Diner 108)

Moreover, the place in which the Feinbergs live also respects the model of the typical tenement apartments of the 1870s, "Tall tenements, with five or six floors of apartments, offered each family its own space and kitchen. [...]. But the aggregate growth of these tenements over a block severely restricted light and air" (Polland and Soyer 113). These new tenements offered a better solution to the overcrowded and unsanitary two-storey houses specific for the years before the 1860s. Corman skillfully illustrates this way of living of the Jewish immigrants and we may observe that very often when she depicts the family at home, she uses darker contours in order to render the lack of light specific to the tenement apartments.

At the same time, we may argue that Corman's portrayal of Jewish family life does not respect entirely the prototypical ideas regarding family members. During the 1910s and 1930s the image of Jewish mothers was controversial. Some claimed that "immigrant mothers stood guard over backward, dysfunctional households and blocked their families' successful




assimilation” (Antler 19), while others regarded them as “prototypes of the warm-hearted, self-sacrificing immigrant mothers” (Antler 15). However, we may observe that Fanya and Esther’s mother, Minna, does not perfectly fit any description. Corman portrays her as a highly authoritative person who runs the family’s business successfully. Additionally, she lacks the boundless love and nurturing self-sacrifice characteristic of Jewish mothers, as she often scolds the girls, not showing any sign of affection towards them, “You girls just wait. One day, it’ll be you up here slaving away for your own army of little ingrates!” (Corman 36). Hence, Minna does not fit the pattern of the suffocating, overly-protective Jewish mother who wants to get involved in every aspect of her children’s life. She does not feel obligated to justify the social behavior of the adults to her girls and throughout the narrative we may see how Fanya and Esther struggle to understand the adults around them, “An’ I had to go get a doctor, ‘cept she wasn’t a real one, she was for ladies” (Corman 17). An important situation when Esther is just too innocent to realize the danger to which she exposes herself, is when she enters a girl’s room in the brothel in order to bring her whiskey and an old man abuses her, “You little idiot! What the hell were you thinking, going in there alone?” (Corman 61). Not only does Minna fail to explain important aspects of life to her girls, as I have shown above, but she also disregards the importance of education: “Aaah, for what she needs this? Esther’ll marry, too. They don’t need to read the goyim’s books. They’ll have families to provide for” (Corman 32). Another important characteristic of Minna is the fact that she is not loyal to her husband, Isaac, “Aw, c’mon, Fanya- everyone knows yer ma’s all loose like a farmhouse goose” (Corman 57). Despite her lack of loyalty, she is not a “Red-Hot ‘Yiddishe Mama”” (Antler 3) who rejects the role of being a mother and exposes her bold sensuality. On the other hand, Corman’s depiction of the Jewish mother does not fall into the category of the mothers who “seem frozen in time, trapped in a

nostalgic Old World habitat where they will forever be weeping and sentimentalized” (Antler 11). On the contrary, she is depicted as an authoritative and strong woman who mainly pursues her own interests.

The father also plays an important role in Corman’s depiction of family life. According to Antler, patriarchy in American Jewish families on the Lower East Side was replaced by matriarchy, “Defeated patriarchs, unable to meet their families’ expectations, they, too, seem between the world of the past and future. The destruction of the father’s role and status in the face of New World upheavals was overwhelming” (Antler 11). In Corman’s narrative, Isaac, the father of the twins, fits into Antler’s description of Jewish fathers of that time. Throughout the book, he is calm and mostly quiet. He loves his daughters dearly, “But in Russia I never saw this kind of flower. So pretty, like my girls” (Corman 41) and always tells them stories, “... and because the sailors was so rude to the mistress of the island, she turned them all into animals... sheep, pigs...” (Corman 48). In one episode, when Esther asks Minna for money to play the nickelodeon, his authority is undermined by his wife who does not allow the girl to do what she wants despite Isaac’s approval, “Oh, so you know all about it, Mister Big Shot? They got movies in your café now? Who’s bringing the money into this house?” (Corman 29). Hence, we may observe how the Jewish mother becomes “a domineering matriarch who replaces the father” (Antler 2).

To conclude, I have shown that Corman’s graphic novel *Unterzakhn* thoroughly follows the historical pattern of Jewish migration in order to depict the immigrant life on New York’s Lower East Side. Her drawings of the crowded and filthy streets reflect the chaotic and difficult life that Jewish immigrants had to endure at the time. Focusing on issues regarding family life,



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Corman traces Fanya and Esther's journey from childhood to adulthood. Facing the emasculation of their father and the authority and indifference of their mother, the twins embark on different paths which further illustrate how the historical context influenced the life of the immigrants on New York's Lower East Side.

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