

Mary Antin, The Promised Land.

May Antin came to the United States from Russia in the 1890s when she was a young girl. Later on, she became a famous author. The extract below is from her book *The Promised Land*. I chose this article because May's story of her arrival in Boston is through a young girl's eyes and contains excitement and promise of a new life. The following excerpt covers her first impressions of America after her arrival in Boston.

“Our initiation into American ways began with the first step on the new soil. My father corrected 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. So we paid 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 cans that had printing all over them. He tried to introduce us to a queer, slippery kind of fruit, which he called a banana. But he had to give it up for 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 of it. We laughed over various experiments with the novelty, which was a wholesome way of letting off steam after the unusual excitement of the day.

In our flat there was no bathtub. So in the evening of the first day my father conducted us to the public baths. As we moved along in a little procession, I was delighted with the lighting of the streets. So many lamps, and they burned until morning, my father said, and so people did not need to carry lanterns. In America, then, everything was free; the streets were as bright as a synagogue on a holy day. Music was free; we had been serenaded, to our delight, by a brass band of many pieces soon after our installation on Union Place.

Education was free. That subject my father had written about repeatedly as comprising his chief hope for us children, the essence of American opportunity, the treasure that no thief could touch, not even misfortune or poverty. On our second day I was thrilled with the realization of what this freedom of education meant.

A little girl from across the alley came and offered to conduct us to school. My father was out, but we five between us had a few words of English by this time. We knew the word school. We understood. This child, who had never seen us till yesterday, who could not pronounce our names, who was able to offer us the freedom of the schools of Boston! No application made, no questions asked, no examinations, rulings, exclusions; no fees. The doors stood open for every one of us. The smallest child could show us the way. This incident impressed me more than anything I had heard in advance of the freedom of education in America.

Even the interval on Union Place was crowded with lessons and experiences. 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 policeman. And, above all, we had to learn English.

When I make a long list of my American teachers, I must begin with those who 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 ferments, and issued forth glorified in each other's eyes.

With our 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 made up American names for us all. My mother, possessing a name that was not easily translated, was punished with the undignified nickname of Annie. Fetchke, Joseph, and Deborah issues a 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, Mashka for short, Russianized into Marya, my friends said that it would hold good in English as Mary, which was very disappointing, as I longed to possess a strange-sounding American name like the others.

As a family we were so diligent under instruction, so adaptable, and so clever in hiding our deficiencies that when we made the journey to Crescent Beach in the wake of our small wagonload of household goods, my father had very little occasion to admonish us on the way. I am sure he was not ashamed of us. So much we had achieved toward our Americanization during the two weeks since our landing”.

Adapted from Mary Antin, *The Promised Land* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1912)

Based on the above reading, answer the following questions on a separate sheet of paper.

1. What aspect of American life did Mary Antin consider most valuable?
2. What problem, treated lightly by Mary, could make adjustments to the New World difficult for many immigrants.
3. What attitudes held by the Antin family probably helped them success in the United States?