Renegotiating the American dream: Eastern European Jewish women and Kim Chernin's In my mother's house

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Renegotiating the American Dream: Eastern European Jewish women and Kim Chernin's *In My Mother's House*

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This paper uses Kim Chernin’s autobiography, *In My Mother’s House: A Daughter’s Story* to examine the attempts of Eastern European Jewish women immigrants to construct new versions of the American Dream when the traditional dream of individual financial prosperity is denied to them due to their race and gender. Kim Chernin’s mother, grandmother, and aunts—all immigrants—each chose to pursue a new version of the American Dream with varying degrees of success. In this paper, I argue that *In My Mother’s House* is a particularly valuable text because it includes the stories of a number of women, rather than just one woman with extraordinary experiences as so many immigrant memoirs do. The description of so many inter- and intra-generational relationships makes it possible to see the variety and limits of possibilities open to Eastern European Jewish women immigrants of the early twentieth century, and an examination of this specific group reinforces the argument that the lasting legacy of America is in its focus on individuality.
Renegotiating the American Dream: Eastern European Jewish women and
Kim Chernin's *In My Mother's House*

by

Terri Ann Burack

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has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Signatures have been redacted for privacy
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'Keep an eye on them,' my mother used to say, 'just when you least expect it a story will tell the truth.'" (In My Mother's House, ix)

For more than 300 years, historians, politicians, and writers have argued that America offers its citizens a unique promise of a better life.¹ By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the earlier religious focus on America as a literal Promised Land offering immigrants an escape from religious persecution had been replaced by the espousal of a universal “American Dream” of economic prosperity (or the possibility of it) for any American individual willing to work hard enough.

In reality, however, this story of American prosperity for all individuals established a standard that excluded many because of race, gender, or social class. It became clear to many that the American Dream was based on the norm of a white, male, Protestant population descended from northwestern European countries.² Immigrants to the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, were frequently unaware of the hidden class and race barriers that existed on this side of the Atlantic; they heard only tales of economic prosperity, but often arrived to find even greater poverty and discrimination than they left behind. Women immigrants faced a double bind as both their race and gender prevented them from achieving the freedom and prosperity they’d expected to find in America.

Kim Chernin’s book, In My Mother's House depicts the struggles three generations of women with Eastern European roots undergo to renegotiate the American Dream. Although In My Mother's House is subtitled "A Daughter's Story," much of the book reads as the first-person account of Kim’s mother, Rose, who immigrated to the United States from Russia in 1914. Through Rose, we also learn the story of her mother, Perle, and her sisters, Celia and
Gertrude. Of particular interest are the varied answers that these women arrived at to solve the discrimination they faced. As an adult immigrant to the United States, Perle never truly adapted to her new country and faced a lifetime of loneliness and isolation. Rose and her sisters came to America while still very young and so initially adjusted much more quickly by learning the language and many of the customs. But as they grow and begin to realize that the promise of an economic American Dream was beyond their grasp, each sister responded to the crisis in a different manner from the others. Rose became a leader in the American Communist Party; Celia searched for success through fame and wealth; and Gertrude, who seemed to settle easily into the traditional expectations of wife and motherhood, surprised everyone by joining the Peace Corps at the age of 53. Although these women's stories do not follow the most widely known version of the American Dream of financial success, their actions are a personal embodiment of the historical trend to renegotiate the American Dream based on individual and small community needs. In this way, I argue that In My Mother's House is a quintessentially American text despite its rejection of the traditionally capitalist American Dream.

The critical material on In My Mother's House that I have located does not address this issue of renegotiation of the American Dream nor does it deal in-depth with the intra-generational aspects of the book. In part, this may be because there has been surprisingly little substantive criticism of Kim Chernin's book; the majority of the information available consists of book reviews. The majority of those who have written on In My Mother's House, whether in reviews or the three substantive articles I have located, have tended to characterize the book in one of three ways: as a communist memoir,³ as a mother-daughter tale (Rose and Kim's) of separation and connectedness,⁴ or as an example of a uniquely
female style of autobiography. While these aspects are extremely valid areas of study, for me the most fascinating aspect of this book is that the story of the first generations of Chernin women (the mother and her three daughters who immigrated to America) puts a personal face on the realities of immigration and the failures of the American promise of prosperity. While several reviewers, especially those focusing on the mother-daughter relationship, acknowledge that this story encompasses four generations of Chernin women, most do no more than mention Perle and Larissa. Most ignore entirely Rose’s sisters, Celia and Gertrude. Only two reviews mention the intra-generational aspects of the story that I have chosen to focus on. Jeanne Barker-Nunn considers Rose’s mother and sisters to be merely cautionary tales for the important figures of Rose and Kim. E.M. Broner compares Chernin’s structure to that of Chaucer, “there is The Mother’s Tale, The Grandmother’s Tale, The Aunt’s Tale [presumably, Celia’s]—and last, The Daughter’s Tale.” Later Broner discusses the effects that Rose’s mother and sisters had on her own life: “[Rose] sobs out the stories of each family member. Those women who did not get to tell their own tale died with the choking of it in their mouths” (Broner, 4). Of all the reviews, Broner’s brief mention of the connection among Rose and her sisters and mother comes closest to what I discuss in this paper—the idea that the inclusion of Gertrude, Celia, and Perle makes this text a more complete portrayal of the possibilities for renegotiating the American Dream than a single story of one exceptional Eastern European Jewish woman immigrant would have been.

Historically, the experiences of the Chernin family are linked strongly to the unique experience of Eastern European Jewish women immigrants at the turn of the century. I place the experiences of the first two generations of the Chernin family alongside the histories that have been written on Eastern European Jewish immigrants to demonstrate the
extent to which the Chernin family is a representative example of the immigrant experience. For this reason, I begin by describing the Chernin family’s experiences and other historical accounts of Eastern European Jewish immigrants in America. I divide the bulk of this paper into four sections to discuss how Perle, Celia, Gertrude, and Rose each adapted to and tried to recreate the American Dream. I conclude with a brief discussion of Kim, Rose’s daughter, and Larissa, her granddaughter, and the roles they play(ed) in continuing to renegotiate the American Dream for themselves.

The Experience of Eastern European Jewish Women Immigrants

For here finally is the clear shape of the story my mother wants me to write down—this tale of four generations, immigrants who have come to take possession of a new world. It is a tale of transformation and development—the female reversal of that patriarchal story in which the power of the family’s founder is lost and dissipated as the inheriting generations decline and fall to ruin. A story of power. —In My Mother’s House

In My Mother’s House begins with the Chernin family’s life in the sector of the Russian empire known as the Pale of Settlement, “in the part that spread from the Baltic to the Black Sea, called the Pale of Settlement—an area made up of the twenty-five northern and western provinces” (Ewen, 37). In the late nineteenth century, half of the world’s Jewish population lived in the Pale, and a series of pogroms in 1880-1881 and Czar Alexander II’s May Laws, which prevented Jews from owning or renting land in the Pale, drove more and more of the Jewish population into the shtetls (market towns) and “ghetto-areas” of the cities. As a result of these pogroms, the Chernin children spent their early years in the shtetl, where they lived with their mother and grandfather, who was forced to leave the shtetl six days out of seven to peddle goods in the surrounding towns.
Rose and her sister, Celia, attended a school in the shtetl where they learned to read and write Yiddish and Russian. Their mother, Perle, also knew how to read and write Yiddish, a feat unusual for a woman living in a traditionally patriarchal Jewish society that did not value women. Boys were encouraged to receive an education, and the highest honor in most Jewish families was to have a son or father who was a scholar (such men often did not hold jobs). Girls, on the other hand, were usually barred from advanced schooling due to their family’s lack of resources or prejudices against educated women; therefore, it is unlikely that Rose and Celia would have continued their education beyond basic reading and writing. According to Rose, the teacher told the girls that they were lucky to be receiving any education at all.

Recognizing the limits placed on women, Rose tells her daughter years later, “You are a woman. Don’t you understand? Do you think you could have been a scholar in that world?” (28). And Rose was not the only Eastern European Jewish immigrant to recognize women’s constraints in the traditional Jewish society. In *Jewish Grandmothers*, Ida Richter recalls

> In Russia, a woman was nothing...A boy was a very important thing in Jewish life for a lot of things. When my father used to pray in the morning with his prayer shawl, I used to hear him say in Hebrew, “Thank god, I’m not a woman.” A girl wasn’t much. (Kramer and Masur, 77)

In the memoir of her life in Russia and America, Mary Antin, an Eastern European immigrant woman, compares the life of the horse who powered the treadmill at the baths to the women of the shtetl:

> I was used to seeing horses hard-worked and abused. This horse had no load to make him sweat, and I never saw him whipped. Yet I pitied this creature. Round and round his little circle he trod, with
head hanging and eyes void of expectation; round and round all day, unthrilled by any touch of rein or bridle, interpreters of a living will; ...round and round and round, a walking machine, with eyes that did not flash, with teeth that did not threaten, with hoofs that did not strike; round and round the dull day long. I knew what a horse's life should be, entangled with the life of a master: adventurous, troubled, thrilled; petted and opposed, loved and abused.... How empty the existence of the treadmill horse beside this! As empty and endless and dull as the life of almost any woman in Polotzk, had I had eyes to see the likeness. (78)

Women did, however, play important roles in the shtetl community. Although Perle did not work outside the home like many other women did, she used her learning to write letters for people who had relatives in America. In addition, she ran her father's home while he spent every day but the Sabbath traveling about the countryside. Such a situation was typical in traditional Jewish society, where within the home, women made most of the everyday decisions, including how the family income would be spent, where the sons would be apprenticed, and when and to whom daughters would be married (Ewen, 39).

For many years, Perle's husband—who is identified throughout the book only as "my father," "her husband," or "Mr. Chernin"—lived in America without his family. He left when the children were too young to remember him. Although Rose never reveals what specifically led to her father's decision to leave for America, the Chernin family's situation was not uncommon. Rose recalls, "everybody in the shtetl had someone in America" (23).

In fact, immigration became increasingly popular amongst Eastern European Jews in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries due to the combination of oppression—both religious and economic—by the czar and skilled advertising by the American companies looking to attract young men and women of working age from southern and eastern Europe.
Eastern European Jews became enamored with the idea of American exceptionalism as they learned of the wealth and possibilities available in the United States. Because Mr. Chernin left for America several years before his family, as did many Jewish men, Perle was the acting head of her household. As I mentioned above, Perle’s father was traveling six out of seven days each week, so the children grew up in a home headed by a woman. This may have contributed to the strong reactions Rose, Celia, and Gertrude had later in America when their father usurped their mother’s place. Although Rose admits to having been embarrassed by her mother as a teenager in America, she also attributes her own activist lifestyle to her father’s poor treatment of her mother. Perhaps this feeling stemmed from her early years in Russia, where women ran many of the households.

In 1914, when Mr. Chernin sent for his family, Perle and her children enjoyed instant popularity within the shtetl before setting out, but it turned out that America was not all that they and their friends had dreamed. The family was settled in apartments in Staten Island and later Waterbury, Connecticut, but then faced many long years of near poverty. At age 14, Rose and her sister, Celia, were sent to work in the sweatshops. Their mother took in boarders who worked nights and slept in the family’s beds during the day. She also took in homework (piecework done by immigrants inside their homes, for which they were paid a set amount for each completed product) making suitcase handles.

The Chernin family was denied access to the traditional American Dream, as were many immigrant families from Eastern Europe. Statistically, many Eastern European families had an even lower standard of living in America (Baum, et al 119). As in America, women found themselves forced to take jobs outside the home because their husbands’ income was frequently not enough to support the family even in the tenements. But instead
of peddling or selling goods in a marketplace, most women and girls over the age of 14 (sometimes younger if the family was desperate and factory bosses were willing to turn a blind eye to child labor laws) worked in the sweatshops. Unable to speak English, these women were frequently hired because they could be paid “wages below the standard that Americans demanded, but above that to which the Europeans had been accustomed in their old homes” (Seidman, 33). And although wages were higher in America than they had been in Eastern Europe, there were frequent periods of unemployment for all immigrant workers—including Mr. Chernin who saw several businesses flourish but ultimately fail—due to recessions or seasonal layoffs. According to Baum, Hyman, and Michel,

The expectation [of American prosperity] quickly turned to disillusionment when the immigrants found themselves unable to escape the American tenements and poor factory conditions. While the idea of America had brought hope to the Jewish immigrants, the reality of America generated a sense of hopelessness for some. Although the immigrants found political freedom and safety from pogroms, threat of destruction, and discriminatory laws, in most instances working conditions and the level of poverty in America were similar to those the Jews thought they were leaving behind.” (119)

Recalling that the Jews in Eastern Europe were fleeing religious as well as financial persecution, it is important to stress that the struggles the Chernin family faced did not stem from any wide-spread form of anti-Semitism in America. While it is true that In My Mother’s House records one instance of American anti-Semitism when a cross was burned in their lawn after the Chernin’s moved to Canonsville, Connecticut, the majority of the family’s problems seemed to stem not from their Jewish beliefs but from their status as poor immigrants. There were, of course, instances of anti-Semitism. However, I do not believe that these problems were necessarily indicative of a systematic form of anti-Semitism like
that found in the Russian Empire. Instead, this reaction against Jews (and southern Italians) was typical of the anti-immigrant backlash that had earlier occurred with the Chinese, the Irish, and the German. Joel Seidman writes that during the early years of immigration, “the Jews, like other immigrant groups in their turn, incurred the dislike of older groups of workers, because they were held responsible for undermining standards in the trade” (Seidman, 35).

Despite the common experiences that Perle and her daughters, Rose, Celia, and Gertrude shared, they ultimately adapted to and recreated the American Dream in radically different ways. In relating her story to her daughter, Kim, Rose expresses her sense of astonishment that she and her sisters turned out so differently from their mother and one another: “That Celia turned out a different way, that Gertrude, with her heart of gold, became still another kind of person, this in all my life, I never understood. To me, to become what I became was inevitable. From that family, in those times, who could become some other kind of person?” (92). In My Mother's House begins to answer not only “who” could become another kind of person, but exactly what kinds of people they became. Therein lies the usefulness of this memoir to a study of Jewish immigrant women from Eastern Europe and the ways in which they renegotiated the American Dream.

Comparison to Similar Memoirs

In many ways, In My Mother’s House is not unique. There have been many (auto)biographies and fictionalized accounts of Eastern European immigrants published in the last 50–75 years, many by and about women. A few of those texts are briefly described below.
Mirroring in many ways the life of the Chernin family, Mary Antin’s autobiography, *The Promised Land*, traces her life from the shtetl to the United States, where her family struggled with poverty and eventually succeeded in sending their daughters to high school so they could have better lives than their parents. Unlike the Chernin memoir, however, Antin’s book is unabashedly pro-American at all times. Despite the financial struggles her family faced, Antin continues to embrace unquestioningly the traditional American Dream. In addition, Antin’s memoir tells only one story—hers. She makes some apologies to her older sister, who was forced to work in the sweatshops instead of attending school like her younger sister and eventually married a fellow immigrant, remaining in the tenements where she grew up. But we never really hear the sister’s story.

There are, however, a number of texts by or about German and Eastern European Jewish women that present a much less rosy picture of America. In *Rebel Girl*, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, the daughter of German Jewish immigrants depicts her life as an American communist fighting for a new, non-capitalist American Dream. In this respect, Flynn’s experiences closely reflect those of Rose Chernin, born 13 years later in Russia, and she demonstrates well the possibilities open to women through the communist/socialist parties of America. However, Gurley Flynn was not herself an immigrant and does not have a strong sense of the dream that America had been for immigrants or the subsequent disillusionment that occurred as a result. In addition, Rebel Girl offers only one possible choice—the capitalist American system is inadequate and must be replaced with communism. In accordance with this belief, Gurley Flynn spends most of her time describing her political life rather than her day-to-day experiences as a woman trying to renegotiate the American Dream.
Other texts do an excellent job of pointing out how families like the Chernin’s struggled to build a new American Dream despite the sweatshop and tenement lifestyle that they faced. Rose Cohen’s life, as described in her autobiography, *Out of Shadow*, mirrors that of the Chernin women in several ways. Like Rose and Celia, Rose Cohen was forced to forgo education in order to work in the sweatshops to support her family. Like Perle, Rose Cohen found little opportunity to adapt to America due to illness and because she knew so little English. Rose Cohen’s American Dream appears to be a blending of Old World tradition with the benefits of American education and health care. One aspect of Rose Cohen’s memoir that distinguishes her text from *In My Mother’s House* is that in many ways *Out of Shadow* affirms the traditional Eastern European Jewish lifestyle that many immigrants brought with them to America. Rose Cohen lived in America for nearly five years before she left the Lower East Side of New York (to go to a hospital in Manhattan) and began to question the cultural and religious customs that she had brought over from Russia. And following her period of questioning, she returns to her Jewish lifestyle (albeit in Americanized form) in the Lower East Side.

Anzia Yezierska also depicts the difficulties that Eastern European immigrants faced as they struggled to earn a living and build a new American Dream in her short stories in *Hungry Hearts*. These stories of life in New York City’s Lower East Side do not, for the most part, end with happiness or success, although some do end with the dream retained. In “Wings” and “Hunger,” Shenah Pessah rejects the love of a fellow immigrant to chase her dream of marrying an American college student whom she met while he was studying immigrants and education. In “The Lost Beautifulness,” Hannah Hayyeh saves money to paint her flat in celebration of her son’s return from the army. As soon as she has done so,
however, the landlord raises the rent and evicts her because her work has made the tenement more valuable. Although these stories do not follow the changes that occur over a person’s life as the Chernin memoir does, Yezierska does offer important glimpses of life for Eastern European immigrants with examples of how those immigrants tried — but frequently failed — to renegotiate the American Dream.

There have even been texts written by the children of immigrants, much as Kim Chernin wrote the story of her mother’s life. Despite being filtered through the experiences of children who have grown up in America, these texts retain their focus on renegotiating the American Dream. James McBride’s _The Color of Water_ tells the story of his mother’s immigration from Poland to Virginia, where she married a black man in 1942, moved to Harlem, founded a church with her husband, and raised 12 children with him. While beautifully written, this story often focuses less on the connections between James’ mother and her Eastern European Jewish background than on her defiance of that past. Like the other stories, _The Color of Water_ addresses only one alternative American Dream, in this case, a highly unusual one that in many ways cannot be generalized to the experience of Eastern European Jewish immigrant women as a whole.

When examined together, the narratives and biographies I have discussed here illuminate a range of possibilities offered to Eastern European Jewish immigrant women for renegotiating the American Dream. Alone, however, each can only tell us one possible option open to women. For this reason, the most unique and important aspect of _In My Mother’s House_ is that it juxtaposes the stories of six women (including Rose’s daughter, Kim, and her granddaughter, Larissa) spanning four generations, who all chose different life paths in order to adapt to and recreate the American Dream. Upon hearing Perle’s story and
the difficulties she faced as an adult immigrant and in her abusive marriage, we can begin to understand Rose’s and Celia’s decisions to pursue radically different ways of life. Celia’s and Gertrude’s stories help us see the other paths that were open to Rose as an immigrant woman. This interweaving of life stories gives *In My Mother’s House* a depth that many other memoirs do not offer.

**The Elder Generation: Perle Chernin**

> All this that to us seemed a paradise, to her was a living hell. —In *My Mother’s House*

Perle’s life is, in many ways, an example of the ways in which the reality of America and the elusiveness of its promise could break the spirit of older immigrants who found it difficult to adjust to the new language and customs while unable to forget the family, friends, and lifestyle they had left behind in Europe.

In her stories, Rose recalls her mother experiencing extreme isolation from her neighbors, her husband,—who had arrived in America several years earlier—and even from her own children. Perle’s experience appears to be a common one for many immigrant women who came to America in adulthood. Elizabeth Ewen writes that “the abrupt separation from the immediate past was probably hardest on the older generation, whose lives had been shaped in other worlds and different cultures” and that immigration was especially difficult for mothers of young children because such a change “meant the loss of familiar social rituals that had given life meaning and value” (62). In *The Heart is the Teacher*, Leonard Covello recalls his own mother’s first encounter with America:

> And when finally we saw the towering buildings and rode the screeching elevated train and saw the long, unending streets of the
metropolis that could easily swallow a thousand Aviglianese towns, she accepted it with the mute resignation as *la volonta di Dio* [the will of God], while her heart longed for the familiar scenes and faces of loved ones and the security of a life she had forever left behind. (qtd. in Ewen, 60)

Perle’s experience was very similar to this. Rose recalls that Perle “missed her father and her life in Russia” (Chernin, 37). Perle’s husband had left for America several years before the rest of the family. Perle essentially took over as head of the family in the *shtetl*, a role traditionally reserved for men, but not uncommon in a society dependent on two-income families and travelling salesmen for economic survival. Perle and her children still officially lived in a man’s home and under his rule (Perle's father), but he worked in another town throughout the week and seemed willing to leave the running of the home to Perle. In addition, Perle held a respected role in her community as an educated woman. Because she was able to write, she would write letters for people who had relatives in America (23).

Once the family reached America, however, Perle lost her position of importance both because her husband took over the role of family head and because she could not speak English. Her skills from the Old World were of no use in America. Her husband's neglect increased her feelings of isolation. Although he participated in many social activities, he never took Perle with him.17 Most weeks, he donated nothing from his paycheck to support the family.18 On at least two occasions, he tried to abandon Perle, once when he left the whole family to live in another city and once by having her incarcerated in a home for the mentally ill. Baum, Hyman, and Michel have noted that this weakening of family units was common following the move to America both because family networks were less extensive and because men were much more likely to abandon their families (137).
The attitudes of Perle's children also increased her feelings of isolation. In Russia, Rose remembers viewing her mother as an intelligent, beautiful, and happy woman. At the beginning of the memoir, Rose relates the story of how she and her sisters and brother drove away their grandfather's new wife because she had usurped their mother's place as head of the household. Several years later in America, however, they rejected their mother's authority in favor of their more Americanized aunt's:

My father's sister, our Aunt Gita, who was a single woman, came to take care of us. When my mother came back from the hospital, we preferred Gita, our aunt. She knew how to do things. She could cook and she knew how to press. In America my mother seemed completely helpless...She came here and she was a nobody. Nobody cared about her and Papa hated her. We kids were mean to her, too. We couldn't sympathize with her; we preferred our aunt and our aunt encouraged us against our mother. From the time we came to this country it was unmitigated misery in our home. (Chernin, 37)

Perle tried to alleviate the pain of American life in several ways. She did make what could be considered a few half-hearted attempts to participate in the struggle for the American Dream that other immigrant families faced. She took in boarders, and when her husband abandoned her, she took in homework making suitcase handles. Twice, she reached such despair that she tried suicide—once soon after their arrival in America and once after being forced by her husband to move to a new town with no Eastern European Jewish immigrant community. But Perle's most successful attempts to find happiness in the New World were those times when she was able to recreate and recapture the life she had left in Russia. After her husband abandoned her in Waterbury, Connecticut, Perle began to make some connections with her neighbors, who were also from Eastern Europe. In this community, the skills that had been valued in the Old World and had been mocked in the New were once again respected. Rose recalls, "In Waterbury she had the other immigrant
women. She knew her neighbors, she could talk Yiddish. On our street she was admired for her stories, for the jam she made" (48). Near the end of her life, she once again found a community in Boyle Heights, California. There the people spoke Yiddish, and Perle was considered "a chochma,...a wise woman" because she could write letters for people with families back in Russia and read the Bible to the women.

It might seem strange to begin with the story of a woman who appears to have rejected the idea of America and an American Dream entirely in favor of the life she left behind in Europe. But there were several uniquely American aspects to Perle's dream. The first relates to her life in Boyle Heights, California where she was once again able to find a Yiddish community for herself. In this town, she not only read the Bible with other women, she also attended the synagogue, something that would not have been possible in Eastern Europe. Rose says:

Here, in America, my mother could join the synagogue...In the shtetl of course where would have been a place for such a thing? Where we came from the women stood in a gallery, looking down. But now the old ladies from the neighborhood would follow her to the synagogue. In Boyle Heights you could see a whole procession of old ladies going down the street, with their hats and their sweaters and their heavy coats. My mother with her big shape, walking in front of them, carrying the books. (178)

Therefore, America offered Perle a limited gender equality, of which she was quick to take advantage. The second uniquely American aspect to Perle's dreams was the possible success of her children. Twenty-six years after coming to America, Perle finally received her citizenship papers. When the judge questioned her inability to speak English or understand American civics, Perle replied (in Yiddish):

Your honor, the judge, I will tell you how it is. I have five children. We are very poor. My children are brilliant. I have a son. He is a
professor. I had to see to it all the children went to school. How else? I had to see to it they learned English. After all, they had to live in this world. As for me, what does it matter? (174)

This idea that America was for the young and that children's needs and wants were more important than the mothers' was common among immigrant mothers. Elizabeth Ewen writes that many immigrant mothers went without, so they could provide their children with new clothing, education, and sufficient food.

Perle’s story is important to this paper’s discussion for two reasons: 1) it demonstrates how older immigrants, when given the chance, frequently tried to recreate the societies they came from because they could not find a place for themselves in the traditional American Dream; and 2) Perle’s life became a sort of cautionary tale for her daughters. Determined to avoid their mother’s fate, each girl struggled to create an American Dream that could accept her as a woman, as an immigrant, and as a Jew.

The Second Generation: Celia, Gertrude, and Rose Chernin

"Ach, sisters," she sighs shaking her head. "Sisters, sisters." -In My Mother's House

The Chernin children's childhood was, in many ways, typical of those immigrants who came from Eastern Europe at a relatively young age. Faced with the same difficulties of over-crowded tenements, lack of money for food and clothing, and long hours of work as their parents, the children at first found ways to adapt to and celebrate life in America. Rose explicitly addresses the immigrants’ dream of America that she and her sisters and brothers shared by describing their frequent trips to the Statue of Liberty:

We discovered a way to make joy. Sometimes, on a Sunday, my mother or my aunt would pack a lunch for us. Five cents for the trolley brought us a transfer to the ferry that crossed into New York.
It went past the Statue of Liberty. No American, born in this
country, could know the impression seeing this beautiful woman for
the first time. We would crowd to the side of the boat, each time, to
see her again. We felt she had been put there for us, we thought she
was ours. There was a band on the boat and we could stay there the
whole day. We went back and forth, all Sunday, from nine o’clock
in the morning until three in the afternoon. (37)

During their earliest years in the United States, the promises of America seemed on
their way to being fulfilled. Arriving in America in 1914 at the age of 11, Rose, the oldest of
the five Chernin children, had high expectations for her new life in America, and in the
memoir, she recalls the feelings of excitement that she and her siblings experienced and their
sense that life in America was a great adventure. Despite poverty and the domestic abuse in
the family, the children quickly embraced all that America had to offer:

I was happy with America. No, it was something more. I was
enamored. In the apartment there was running water, a toilet inside.
My father bought us clothes. In America everything was new.
There were pavements on the street. It was just like [grandfather]
said: there were no old people in America. There was more sun in
America. Everything was painted in America. We were in love with
this shining world. (36)

Education was another of the benefits to life in America, especially for the girls. In
the shetel, Rose and Celia had gone to classes for girls where they learned to read and
Russian and Yiddish, but poverty and gender discrimination would have prevented them
from advancing beyond mere literacy (and even then, their education would have been much
more advanced than most of the women in their community). But in America, all children
had the opportunity to attend school, and for those children whose parents could spare the
income they would have made working, even girls could attend high school and even college.
Rose learned this for herself in 1917 when she visited the principal of a college preparatory
high school to discuss the possibility of attending. Once there, she lost her nerve, but the
principal told her that her intelligence would make it possible for her to succeed at the school and find a scholarship to college. In relating this story, Rose says, "I, Rose Chernin, go to college? Think who I was. An immigrant girl, fourteen years old, a factory worker, without a future. But now I stood there. In the office of an American high school I heard the possibility I might go to college" (40).^{19}

But achieving the American Dream came with a price, even in the beginning. In the case of the Chernin children, they were forced to shed their old lives and culture in the _shtetl_. Immediately after the family's arrival, their father changed the children's names so they would be more American: "Now we were Rose and Celia, Gertrude and Milton. We put away Rochele, Zipora, Gita, and Mikhail" (36).^{20} Also, the schooling of which Rose and her sisters were so proud further distanced them from their Eastern European past. Rose recalls that a teacher taught her English, and "after that, Russia vanished. Everything from before went out of my life" (36).

Eventually, the American Dream for prosperity would begin to exact an ever-increasing price from these immigrant girls, and each of Perle's daughters would react to their disappointments in different ways. The main focus of _In My Mother's House_ is the story of Rose's life and how she came to join and participate in the Communist Party. For this reason, the stories of her sisters, Celia and Gertrude, act as counterpoints to Rose's, showing the lives Rose might have had if she had not found her new American Dream of communism.^{21} In many ways, Celia's life reflects how difficult it is for immigrants, for Jews, and for women to achieve the traditional American Dream of wealth and fame. Gertrude, on the other hand, chose a role of self-sacrifice and service to family that, surprisingly, may have ultimately been a successful recreating of the American Dream. Since the stories of Celia and Gertrude
act as counterpoints to how Rose defines her life and her American Dream, I discuss each of them before Rose in the following sections.

**Celia Chernin**

In the eyes of many people, Celia Chernin's life was the one that most closely achieved the American Dream discussed in chapter one. But like her mother, Celia's life ends in isolation and suicide. What ramifications does this have for those who would define the American Dream as universal?

Celia, the second daughter, is described by Rose as being willful and somewhat selfish even before the family immigrated to America. She was able to attend school for some time upon her arrival in America before she and Rose were sent to work in the factories. Even while working in the factories, Celia began her pursuit of the traditional American Dream of affluence. Rose remembers that Celia would save a small bit of her salary and spend it on clothing:

> My sister was a beautiful girl. Elegant. From our little salary (and of course we were still sending money to Mama) she would always manage to save out a bit. This she spent, all of it, on clothes. How, you might ask, would this immigrant girl from a small town know about fashion? Somehow she knew. She'd come out of the factory and put on her gloves. She had a little round hat, tipped to the front of her head. Like a queen she went. (53)

Celia's desire for fashionable clothing was not unusual for immigrant girls her age, according to Elizabeth Ewen. Clothes from Eastern Europe were considered highly unfashionable—and even laughable—by American standards, and many immigrant girls were willing to spend all their money on cheap knock-offs of the latest styles. Companies encouraged this growing consumerism; in New York City's Lower East Side, for example, "billboards and
posters graced with women in the latest styles" (67). For an immigrant girl like Celia, consumerism was the first step toward achieving the American Dream.

Celia began her serious pursuit of the traditional American Dream after several years of juggling work and then teaching high school when she joined her sister, Rose, who was living in New York City. This move, according to Rose, was for Celia 'like a duck coming into water' (67). Celia was uninterested in joining the labor or socialist groups that so fascinated her sister. Instead, she actively worked to acquire the money and fame that went along with achieving the American Dream. And it was Celia's unabashed pursuit of the American Dream that worried her sister, Rose:

That was my sister. I would look at her and I would think: One day maybe she will become a very wealthy woman. That is what my sister wanted. She had a longing to live, to eat and drink, to travel, to buy, to devour. She seemed insatiable. I was sure she would burn herself out a young age, lose her beauty, accomplish nothing. I was always cautioning her: "Celia, be careful. You are not yet twenty years old. Save a little for your old age. Who knows, you might yet live to be twenty-five. (69)

To achieve her dream of prosperity, Celia married twice—once to Harry Horowitz, a successful businessman who owned several delicatessens, and then to Baron Hank Doeff, for whom she abandoned Harry and their daughter, Ethel. She ultimately became a very wealthy woman and was able to travel around the world, living in Holland, Indonesia, and Venezuela. Her sister, Rose, speaks of Celia's initial success, but, of course, for Rose, success in capitalism is not something to be admired; therefore she says

So, yes, of course, for a time she's happy. Her new husband is an engineer. They go abroad, they live in Venezuela, they live in Indonesia, wherever it's possible for Shell Oil to exploit the people and make money. You know the life of the wealthy colonial. Servants, beautiful clothes, parties. Why shouldn't she be happy? (77)
But the American Dream did not come without a price; Celia was forced to deny her own past in order to gain a life of wealth and fame. While living in New York City, she told lies, claiming that she was an actress or a descendant of the czar in order to meet men who were wealthy or famous. When she married Hank Doeff, she abandoned her daughter, Ethel, an act that Rose claims ultimately led to her mental breakdown and suicide.

Later, when she returned to Holland we began to hear that she would have a breakdown and go into a mental hospital. And somehow we knew it wasn’t Indonesia, it wasn’t the concentration camp, it wasn’t the war. It was Ethel, I tell you, the child she abandoned. Believe me, it was not what Celia suffered that broke her. She was a Chernin, a strong person, like all of us. No, I’m telling you, it was the suffering she caused others that tortured her. She couldn’t forgive herself. How else could it be? (77)

In addition to abandoning her daughter and first husband, Celia changed her name once again when she married Hank Doeff, this time to Sylvia, so that no one would know she was Jewish. Even her own sons never knew she was Jewish until they were grown men. According to Rose, "She was an American pure and simple, without a past. That is the way she wanted to think about herself" (66).

Celia’s pursuit of the American Dream ultimately led to disillusionment, because capitalist success demands a severing of family and community ties in order to achieve individual success. She left Horowitz for a man with more wealth and prestige, but in the process, she lost her only daughter. Almost as important, Celia lost her connection with her own past. For the women of her family, this loss of connection is the real tragedy because despite all her efforts to disengage herself, Celia was inextricably tied to her immigrant, cultural past. Gertrude and Kim believe that Celia would have been understood and loved by the community if she had stayed in Russia. Together, they argue:
In the shtetl...you see? There, in that world, they would have known what to make of Celia and her stories...If Celia had grown up in the shtetl, she would have known the way her own embellishments reached back, through an unbroken tradition, to the first tales of the Hebrew people...In our village Celia's green goats could have danced right up over the rooftops. And no one would have told her, It's impossible, things don't happen like that here. (78-79)

**Gertrude Chernin**

For Rose and Celia, Gertrude's life appears, in many ways, to be an unfinished, possibly even a wasted one. In describing the differences between herself and Celia, Rose implies that neither Gertrude's potential nor her dreams were ever realized:

About Gertrude of course we don't know. She never got a chance to come to New York. After Mama broke down, Gertrude took care of the family. She did the very thing Celia and I didn't want to do. Celia as you know, was never a fighter. But Gertrude was even less a fighter...Gertrude would do whatever my father wanted. She had the sweetest nature of us all. And that, if you want to know, was her downfall. That was the ruin of her. And, who knows? This maybe is why she wants me to tell you about Celia. From the time we came to America until Gertrude was fifty-three years old and went off into the Peace Corps, she never did anything for herself. Never anything. Her whole life was for pleasing others. (67)

But if we examine Gertrude's life, we can see that she was recreating the traditional American Dream for herself. Her dream may have been less obtrusive than Rose's communism or Celia's insatiable consumerism, but, she eventually succeeded in her dream to build and maintain a family community, a dream her mother had wanted but been unable to achieve until the end of her life.

Admittedly, Gertrude's life does not appear to be conventionally successful on the surface. The third daughter, Gertrude, lived with her father and mother (when Perle was not in the mental institution or living with Rose and her husband) until her marriage to a doctor in California. Gertrude's husband was a doctor, not well liked by her family, and whom Kim
remembers as a selfish man who frightened his wife. Her description of Gertrude and her husband is remarkably similar to Rose's description of her mother and father's relationship. In an early chapter of *In My Mother's House*, Rose recalls the following memory:

My father would tell her to make breakfast and she would make breakfast for him. If he didn't like the way the coffee tasted he'd throw all the dishes off the table. She would never sit down and eat with him. She ate afterwards. (38)

Later, Kim recalls a similar scene that she witnessed in her aunt's home:

Once, when I was visiting at Gertrude's home, I saw her husband eating and drinking alone at the table, lifting a huge bottle of distilled water to his lips and guzzling audibly, while my aunt stood in the doorway, her hands clasped nervously, waiting to bring him his next course. (112)

In fact, Rose Chernin blames much of what she views as Gertrude's failed life on these similarities between mother and daughter. At various points in her stories, Rose blames her father for having broken the spirits of both Perle and Gertrude. According to Rose, their father established control over Gertrude on the first night the family arrived in America when Gertrude threw a tantrum to be allowed to sleep with her mother as she had done in the *shtetl*.

But that time my father took one look at her, gave her a beating, and threw her into our room. She went to sleep sobbing in my bed. I felt very sorry for her, but what could I do? She fell asleep. I am witness to this: she has never lost her temper again. He broke her spirit. Never again in childhood, never again in adulthood. She never stood up to anything or anybody. And I tell you this, you my children, I date her character back to this first night. After that, she was a good girl, self-denying, always giving to others. (36)

Rose further characterizes her as being willing always to do as her father asked, just as Perle returned to him time after time, in spite of the beatings and numerous rejections. The youngest sister, Lillian, remembers that Gertrude was the mother figure in the house on whom she, Milton, and even their father relied for support and stability (112).
In keeping with the self-sacrificing nature described by her sisters, Gertrude was a nurse. At the age of 53, she joined the Peace Corps and spent several years as a nurse in Ethiopia. Ultimately, it is in her role as nurse that Gertrude's dream and the extent to which it was a success becomes clear to her family and readers of *In My Mother's House*. In recalling her aunt's work as a nurse, Kim lends an air of nobility to the description:

But it is her hands that betray the greatest eloquence. They are, unmistakably, the hands of a nurse and they carry the story of her life's long sacrifice. In them, I see the history of beds turned, heads lifted, pillows straightened, bedpans emptied, all the patient heroisms of her compassion. (50)

And although Kim refers only briefly to Gertrude's life in the Peace Corps, she describes it in language that renders Gertrude an almost heroic figure:

I have heard that one day she rode a donkey over the mountains, taking supplies to villages of the interior. The image of her has lived on with me, an aging woman with gaunt face and brilliant eyes, her white hair beginning to yellow, the habitual smoker's cough, the clop of the animal's hooves as she rides, talking, smoking, gesturing, over the bad roads of the mountains of Ethiopia. (10)

And so, we can begin to understand the dream that Gertrude was trying to build. Her childhood had been a series of disappointments and disillusionment: her father repeatedly abandoned and abused her mother, and American law where everyone was to be treated equally did nothing to prevent it; her older sisters moved away and maintained extremely limited contact with the family; the financial success promised by the American Dream did not come to pass for her family either in the early years on the East Coast or in California during the Depression. Gertrude responded to these trials by trying to build for herself a new dream that focused on family and community connections. Gertrude's decision may not have been an unusual one. Baum, Hyman, and Michel have noted that because family units
weakened in the move to America (family networks were less extensive, men were much more likely to abandon their families), "Jewish women displayed a sense of connection with the working-class community in general rather than solely with their families or ethnic group" (137). In many ways, therefore, her dream was not unlike her sister, Rose's, dream for a community of workers. But throughout the story, Rose remains unable to recognize the similarities because her dream was a theoretical, universal ideal for equality, while Gertrude's was a very localized attempt to build community.

In light of Gertrude's dreams, the real tragedy of her life is not her failure to become a social activist or a wealthy socialite, but the loss of her only child, Vida. Gertrude, who put her dreams into the ideas of family and community, was unable to raise her daughter to feel the same. Lillian reports that Vida, an inveterate gambler, emptied her mother's bank account while she was sick with cancer. Fortunately, however, Gertrude's dreams of family community did not end with her daughter; she was still able to establish the connection she longed for with her sisters, her niece, and grandniece. In one particularly moving scene, Rose symbolically hands over Kim to Gertrude, and so Kim becomes her aunt's "daughter" (52). And at the end of Gertrude's life, the women of her family—Rose, Kim, and Larissa—are there to support her:

And now we have surrounded her with love; the glass of water is at her lips, a hand is clasped in a hand, a head supported, eyes meet and hold, the head that is dying is brought into a living circle of care. Comforted, she lies back upon the pillow again and her eyes move from one face to the next. (51)

Throughout her life, Gertrude turned her back on the traditional American Dream of capitalism and individual success in favor of self-sacrifice that allowed her to build a community of which she could be an integral part. Gertrude and her niece, Kim, believe that
her life was more rewarding than Celia's because Gertrude chose the better dream. In the last few weeks of her life, Gertrude and Kim discuss this idea:

"You're wondering whether it is possible that you, who always seemed to be sacrificing yourself, really led the richer life than Celia?"

Her eyes release me. A delicate pink color comes into her cheeks and for a moment her whole being is suffused with light, as if the life force were visibly passing through her body.

That's possible," she says, clearly and simply, with that old twinkle in her eyes...

She squeezes my hand. "There," she says, "you understand."

**Rose Chemin**

Of the three sisters, Rose's version of the American Dream was the most radical. Her decision to join the American communist movement demonstrated a deliberate attempt to build a new American Dream that included a place for her as an immigrant and as a woman. Judging from the communist movement's persecution and eventual decline in America, Rose's life, like that of her sisters and mother, would not be traditionally considered a success. And yet, in Rose's life, she did build a place for herself as an American that allowed her to fulfill many of her dreams. Because Rose's life is so tied to the American Communist movement, it is necessary to give a brief history of the communist party in America, and the part Rose played in that history.

The Communist Party was founded in 1919, following a break between left and right-wing members of the Socialist Party (founded in 1901). Originally begun as two organizations—the Communist Party and the Communist Labor Party—the two groups were blended into one group, The Communist Party of the United States, following the persecution of communists and socialists during the first Red Scare in January 1920.25 The Communist Party had a relatively small membership during the prosperous 1920s, but following the stock
market crash in 1929, party membership grew rapidly. The 1930s have generally been considered the heyday of American Communists, when many people openly joined the party. The Communists were influential in the labor and rent strikes of the Depression years and made many of the demands that would later appear as part of Roosevelt’s New Deal (Browder, 15). World War II led to increased nationalism and prosperity for America, and as a result, the universalistic Communist Party, which opposed participation in the war, began losing members rapidly. Following the onset of the Cold War, the Communist Party’s power shrunk even further. During the 1950s, a new phase of conservative pro-capitalism began, and under Senator Joe McCarthy, Communists faced a new Red Scare, more severe than any persecution they had yet undergone in America. Almost anyone could be suspected of being a Communist, and by that definition, advocating the overthrow of the government. The cumulative effects of America’s nationalism and prosperity, the Cold War, and American suspicion of Communists on their own soil, resulted in a decline from which the Party never recovered.

In the Communist Party, a large percentage of the members were Jewish. This may be due in part to the radicalism they brought with them from Eastern Europe. At the turn of the century, Jews in Eastern Europe, both men and women, had become increasingly frustrated with life under the czarist regime. Following in the footsteps of the Haskalah socialist movement that swept through the Pale in the end of the nineteenth century, many Jewish men and women had joined the Bund, “the Jewish affiliate of the Russian Social-Democratic movement” (Seidman, 87).

A large number of the Communist Party members—Jewish or otherwise—were women. One reason for this high participation by women was the combination of poor
working conditions and institutionalized gender inequality, which increased the difficulties for working class women. And Jewish women were frequently at the forefront of women’s participation in communist and socialist movements. Even before leaving Russia, Jewish women had begun to hope for more equality due to the spread of the Russian Haskalah, a secular movement that promoted gender and class equality. Approximately one-third of the members of such groups as the Bund were young, unmarried women (87). The socialist and communist movements of early twentieth century America seemed to embody the social, economic, and gender equality women had longed for when they left Eastern Europe.

But what made the communist party so appealing to Rose that she devoted the majority of her life to its service? Rose realized early in life that America’s promise was not all they had been led to believe in the shtetl. Although highly appreciative of being able to attend high school, Rose’s first rebellion was against what she considered the enforced groupthink that the schools fostered, her first real experience with the invisible wall of prejudice that existed in the United States. Interestingly, this early instance of prejudice was not linked to race or class, but political ideology. In one chapter, she relates how they took a secret straw vote in class, and the teacher reported the results as follows, “Seventy students are Republicans... Thirteen are Democrats and Rose Chernin is a socialist” (45). In another incident, the principal called her father into the school to tell him that he had suspended Rose for attending the lecture of a socialist speaker. Rose’s father became enraged, and he told his daughter, “That’s the kind of country it is. They talk about their free speech. And if you went to a Ku Klux Klan meeting would you be suspended then?” (45).
Rose noted that this same desire for enforced groupthink spilled over into other areas of life as well. As she describes a peaceful communist rally that was broken up by police officers, she tells, her daughter, Kim:

Then I looked up and I could see those horses coming. It was a nightmare. And we were paralyzed. They were riding straight toward us, riding us down. Suddenly someone screamed. It was, how can I tell you? Never in my life, before or since, have I heard anything like that shriek. I heard, in that cry...to me it seemed we were standing in a village and the Cossacks were riding down. You could go so far back in Jewish history and always you would find that cry. Always, in the history of every people. And then people were running all around me, racing for the subway, screaming, crowding together. And I ran with them, and I was thinking, this, this is the answer they give to the demands of the people. I will never forget it. (91)

For Rose, the police officers’ actions reinforced her growing belief that freedom of thought and expression was another of the American myths that was not valued under the capitalist system. She concludes that story with the words, “That was the day I joined the Communist Party” (91).  

Rose’s story provides specific clues why she and other women were drawn to radical socialist and communist movements; some of which mirror historical factors that writers like Baum, Hyman, and Michel have catalogued. The most obvious of these is that family units were weakened in the move to America (family networks were less extensive, men were much more likely to abandon their families), and, as a result, "Jewish women displayed a sense of connection with the working-class community in general rather than solely with their families or ethnic group” (137). I believe that this social need for women could easily transmit itself into participation in the community intensive actions of the communist and socialist parties, and this seems to have been the case with Rose. Her father’s continual
attempts at abandonment (by moving to Canonsville or having Rose’s mother committed) led Rose to seek out a new community within the communist party. Throughout the text, she refers to the party’s ability to offer her what her father had never given her or her mother.

Through Rose’s stories, it becomes clear that the Communist Party appealed to her not only because it offered class equality but that it promised gender equality as well. This does not mean that Rose does not recognize the greater opportunities available to women in American than to those in the traditional Jewish society of Eastern Europe. When her daughter, Kim, imagines herself carrying schoolbooks in the shtetl, her mother says to her, “You are a woman. Don’t you understand?” In that world do you think you would have become a scholar?” (28). But she was not blind to the fact that gender equality – while an improvement over life in the Pale – was another of the false myths of America. At one point, she tells her daughter stories of the way in which male bosses would sexually harass the female workers in the factories and the difficulties her sister had teaching at a school where many of the male students were older (and larger) than she was. At the end of the story, she tells Kim, “You think maybe you invented the struggle for women. But this struggle we knew, believe me, already in our time” (59). The issue of gender equality as a sham comes up again as she describes both her own relationships with men and her mother’s marriage to her father. As she describes, the live-in relationship she’d had with a wealthy screenwriter, she says, “I would not say I had any ideas at the time about a woman’s development. The women I knew lived as I was living. They stayed at home, they took care of a man. Even when they were working women the responsibilities of home life fell on their shoulders” (63). In a later chapter, she describes the time her father committed her mother to a poorly-run mental institution because he did not want to care for her. Despite Rose’s efforts, she is
unable to get her mother released because she is not the guardian; only her father would be allowed to have her mother released. Rose tells her daughter, “What could I do? What could anyone do? Even in America my father had the law on his side. This bothered me. We had expected so much from America” (87).

In the pre-feminist years of the twentieth century, participation in radical movements “promised women equality and offered them opportunities for leadership denied them by the traditional Jewish community” (Baum, Hyman, and Michel 77). And Rose appears to buy into this promise and believe that communism contains the answer to the gender inequality which exists under capitalism. When she has decided to remain in America fighting against the illegal imprisonment of socialist agitators in California rather than returning to the Soviet Union with her husband, he protests that he will miss her too much. She responds, “Paul, did you marry just a woman or did you marry also a Communist?” (154). Her husband then agrees to support her decision. The implication is that Rose is a Communist above all else, and in communism, gender is no longer an issue. The truth of this statement, in both American and Soviet communism is debatable, although gender equality was a much touted feature of the communist movement. What is important, however, is that Rose continues to believe in that equality, and her experience in the party seems to bear testament to that belief.35

But for Rose, the issues of discrimination against women could never be separated from the other forms of discrimination that a capitalist America practiced. Rose deplored the poor treatment that America offered to its workers, immigrants, and blacks. Following the rescue of her mother from the mental institution, Rose offers her most scathing characterization of American society:
Already in the shtetl we were thinking about this country. There we will get an education, when Papa sends for us we will go to America, there we won’t be poor anymore. But now I was hearing about things; I was learning about the exploitation of the workers and we heard about the way Negroes were living in the South. If a Negro man looked at a white woman he would be lynched. We heard stories about the Ku Klux Klan and these bothered me, they really bothered me. All this reminded me of the pogrom; this we were used to for the Jews in Russia. But here in America? (88)

It is important to stress that throughout her life, Rose Chernin never rejects America, but rather the particular myth of capitalism which she believes is destroying her nation. Thus, Rose chooses a new exceptionalism for America: communism. Possibly the clearest indication that Rose continues to believe in the possibility of America comes when she chooses to return to America in 1934 after two (happy) years in the Soviet Union. Although she loves her life and work in the USSR, she feels guilty that people in the United States are still suffering. Rose describes her visit to California, when she decided to remain in the U.S. while her husband returned to finish his job as an architect on the Moscow subway system:

When I heard about [the agricultural strikes], what could I do? Sit enjoying my vacation? I went out into the fields. I wanted to see for myself. A year before we were traveling down the Volga River. And now who could believe here in America the life for workers could be so difficult? They were like serfs, close to starvation. Who can live with something like that? I heard that children were dying from malnutrition. Could I sleep at night?…So I ask you, would someone who has worked for the revolution, who has lived for the revolution and who sees now that it is coming, turn her back? How could that be? I felt ready to risk everything. (151)

For Rose, “everything” would include her husband who spent more than a year away from her, finishing his job in the Soviet Union; her family who remained in California while she traveled around the country and spent time in jail; and her health as imprisonment, poor
eating habits, and deplorable living conditions took their toll. She was willing to make these sacrifices in order to build the new America she believed in.

Why does Rose Chernin continue to believe in the exceptional power of the United States despite the disillusionment she so often suffered? Rose believes that the true strength of America lies in its people. On a walk with her daughter in June 1978, Rose discovers a garden with a plaque that reads, "CONSTRUCTED BY THE WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION, 1937" (170). As she continues walking, she says, "Ach, the people...What greatness, what love of beauty is in the people" (170).

Continuing Evolution of the American Dream: Kim and Larissa Chernin

In addition to the stories of the women I have discussed in this paper, In My Mother’s House includes the stories (with their similarities and differences) of two more generations of Chernin women, Kim and Larissa. Although Kim and Larissa were American citizens by birth, the case can still be made for calling them Eastern European women because ethnic background influenced even these later generations of women. In the introduction to the 1994 edition of In My Mother’s House, Kim Chernin wrote:

I came into the world as my mother’s listener, saturated in the broodings, misunderstandings, visions of a life that had begun in the first year of the twentieth century... Both [the] wars, the revolutions that followed them, the sufferings that gave rise to them, had made their way into my mother’s stories, along with the lost world of European Jewish life. (xi)

Larissa is linked to her own ethnic history by passages that describe her as having traits similar to those of her grandmother and her great-grandmother. During a conversation with her daughter, Kim comments that Larissa has "that deep look in her eyes, which at such times are so like the eyes of my mother [Rose]" (30). Only a few minutes later as Larissa
demonstrates her artistic skill through the folding of paper, Kim comments that she and Rose had never had "skillful" hands. This paper-folding, says Kim, "is a skill her great-grandmother might have taught her, sitting next to the tiled stove in that vanished house in the little village, telling her how the windows must be left open at night so that the restless evil spirits can escape. These old stories, which she has never heard, live in her eyes" (31).

Through the story of Kim's life, we learn that the process of renegotiating the American Dream continues for each generation as they become disillusioned by the dreams of the previous generation. In the same way that Rose decided that her life would be radically different from her mother, Perle's, Kim rejected her mother's faith in communism and instead turned to the feminist movement as a new American Dream. Several stories in the memoir are devoted to Kim's struggles to reconcile her mother's strong communist beliefs (and frequent arrests during the late 1940s and 1950s) with her growing disillusionment as a result of the infamous Khrushchev report and Kim's own visit to a less-than prosperous and politically oppressive Russia in 1957. After years of rebellion as a teenager and during a period of infrequent contact with her family, Kim developed a new interest in "matriarchy." As an author, Kim Chernin has published books on issues of eating disorders, sex, and the evolving relationships between mothers and daughters. And yet, her new dream for gender equality in America was still influenced by her parent's communist beliefs. In 1974, she told her mother,

Mama, listen to me, in doing this work I am breaking taboos as great as those you broke when you became a Communist... Believe me, where women are concerned, there are still ideas it is as difficult to think as it was once difficult for Marx to understand the fact that bourgeois society was built upon the exploitation of the workers. (7)
There are several stories about Kim's attempts to adapt to and then reject her mother's communist dream for America, but, interestingly, we hear little of Larissa's attempts to create a new Dream for herself, although we do learn from the prologue that Larissa became an artist while attending Harvard. In the memoir, Larissa appears to be at the beginning of her journey, unlike the adult women around her. In order to recreate her American dream, she must first understand what came before. For this reason, Larissa appears mostly in the role of listener, taking in the stories of her mother, her grandmother, great-aunts, and great-grandmother.

In the end, it is the very rejection of the narrow-focused American Dream of economic prosperity that makes *In My Mother's House* quintessentially American. Throughout history, different groups of people have perceived America in varied ways, and this continuation of the memoir over four generations (and six women) highlights the extent to which the American Dream is constantly renegotiated. Coming from a society where there was little room for women to assert a new way of life for themselves, the Chernin women use America's belief in the power of individuality to re-conceptualize the possibilities for their lives within small (predominately female) family communities. *In My Mother's House* stresses just how different dreams can be (even within the same generation) by demonstrating how women from similar backgrounds and sharing many experiences in common can still come to radically different visions of America's dream. For each woman, she may not find the dream that was advertised, but the dreams she does build are uniquely hers.
NOTES

1 The concept of American exceptionalism, defined by Byron Shafer as "the notion that the United States was created differently, developed differently, and thus has to be understood differently—essentially on its own terms and within its own context" (v), has been well documented in the twentieth century. A variety of authors have anthologized the changing definition of what makes America unique. In *The Puritan Origins of The American Self*, for example, Sacvan Bercovitch attempts to explain exceptionalism as the process by which a country of migrants produces "American" citizens who believe themselves to be part of a united nation with its own distinctive mythology and characteristics. The concept of American exceptionalism was born out of the Puritan concept that the New England colonists had been sent by God to create a New World. For examples of this viewpoint see Jonathan Edwards, "The Latter-Day Glory is Probably to Begin in America", John Winthrop, "A Modell of Christian Charity," and Michael Wigglesworth, "God's Controversy with New England." The concept of America as spiritually superior to Europe was employed during the Revolutionary War, when the rhetoric of exceptionalism offered the colonists a way to justify their separation from the British. This adjustment of American exceptionalism led to still further changes, and over the next two centuries, the earlier sacred nature of American exceptionalism blended with more secular goals as the "early New England rhetoric provided a ready framework for inverting later secular values—human perfectibility, technological process, democracy, Christian socialism, or simply (and comprehensively) the American Way—into the mold of sacred teleology" (Bercovitch, 136). By the twentieth century, the idea of American exceptionalism effectively transformed into what has traditionally been known as the American Dream, the idea that America offers economic prosperity unattainable in other countries.

2 The capitalist system relied on the exploitation of cheap, immigrant labor in order to offer prosperity for those Americans farther up the ladder of success. Harry Ward Beecher, a leading proponent of the link between capitalism and spirituality, expounded on the importance to American society of always having a low-paid class of immigrant workers in his speech, "The Tendencies of American Progress." To expand the labor pool, American companies advertised heavily in countries, such as Italy and Russia, highlighting, of course, the potential for individual success rather than their own need for cheap, unskilled labor. Such a system created a unique (and disheartening) experience for immigrants who came to America believing in the prosperity that they had been told of while still in Europe.

3 In *The Village Voice*, Mark Naison argues that, unlike many American communist biographers who believe the personal is not relevant, *In My Mother's House* puts a human face on communist party membership. While acknowledging that much of this memoir is about the relationship between Kim and Rose, Diane McWhortier claims that the book's real importance lies in its "ideological aspect" and focus on American communism.

4 For several of these reviewers (Grossman, Ward, *The Progressive*), this discussion of relationship has two parts: (1) the daughter's struggle to carve out an independent place for herself in the world, and (2) both women's ultimate recognition of their continued connectedness. In Sally Hayman's review of *In My Mother's House*, she describes the book as the coming together of mothers and daughters and old worlds and new. Interestingly, two
of the writers, Jeanne Barker-Nunn and E.M. Broner compare Chernin’s book to Maxine Hong Kingston’s. Barker-Nunn discusses how both Chernin and Hong Kingston interweave their lives with those of their mothers as they write autobiography, and Broner argues that in telling their mothers’ stories, both women stir up ghosts of their own.

5 Barker-Nunn focuses on the unique aspects of female storytelling in her text. Reginia Gagnier compares the connectedness between women found in *In My Mother’s House* and other feminist autobiographies of the 1980s to the traditional (white, male, middle class) biography focused on establishing autonomy at the expense of family connection.

6 Eastern European Jews were actively recruited in the late 1800s and early 1900s. In many ways, this group was similar to other immigrants coming from Southern Europe during the same time period, but the Jews had several unique characteristics that make them an interesting group to study for the ways in which they tried to adapt to and renegotiate the American Dream. The most obvious difference, of course, is that the Jews of Eastern Europe were fleeing religious persecution, just as the Puritans had in the 1600s.

7 The experience of Rose’s grandfather was not uncommon. Because so many people were forced to live in one place and because Jews were barred from many occupations, poverty increased dramatically. The *shtetls* were muddy cities with few resources. The people of the shtetl were obliged to conduct their businesses from within the settlement or obtain special permits to leave. The majority of artisans— butchers, cobblers, blacksmiths, watchmakers, etc.— were Jewish, and because the Jewish population was concentrated in small areas, many Jews found their skills redundant, even in the *shtetls* around the large cities of Kiev and Lublin. As a result, many Jews became traveling salespeople.

8 Because their husbands either did not earn enough money or were studying rather than working, many women worked outside the home as shopkeepers, peddlers, or traders— some even travelling alone to other villages or cities to sell goods. In the marketplace, “Women had a better command of the local languages spoken by the peasants— Russian, Hungarian, and Polish— than did the more learned men” (Ewen 39). Assuming much of the family’s economic burden did not relieve the women of their household or child-raising duties. Because mothers worked outside of the home, it was necessary to pass on household tasks to the older daughters in the family, so female children learned at an early age to care for the home and younger children. The double role of women as wage earners and caretakers of the home prepared them (unknowingly) in some way for the lives they would lead in America, but such a demanding lifestyle combined with the rampant, and frequently dangerous, anti-Semitism of Eastern Europe, created fertile soil to plant the seeds of America’s Dream for prosperity in the hearts of women.

9 Between 1881-1914, more than one-third of the population of Jews left Eastern Europe (Ewen 55). During that same period, 23 million immigrants from Eastern Europe and southern Italy arrived in America (21).

10 Of course, most of the information Eastern Europeans had about America was based on hearsay and myth. According to Rose Chernin, “If somebody heard about California, you can be sure it was a place where it never rained, where children never got sick” (Chernin 23). Irving Howe writes of whole towns discussing and planning immigration, but all the while “scarcely anyone knew one true fact about this magic land” (Howe 26).
Unlike the patterns of immigration from other countries, Eastern European Jews tended to immigrate in families; the ratio of males (58%) to females (42%) was nearly equal. In addition, because most Jews came to America for more than just economic reasons, repatriation was very low; the migration was intended to be permanent.

By 1910, women made up 70% of the workers in the garment industry. 56% of these workers were Jewish, and 50% were under twenty years old (Oldencrantz 38).

In *The Needle Trades*, Joel Seidman quotes one manufacturer as saying, “I want no experienced girls, they know the pay to get... but these greenhorns... cannot speak English and they don’t know where to go, and they just come from the old country, and I let them work hard, like the devil, for less wages” (37)

According to Elizabeth Ewen, there were several other causes for immigrants’ continued poverty despite higher wages. Even in times of recession or layoff, rent prices remained high for tenement apartments. For example, on the Lower East Side of New York City, where the tenements had “few windows, no inside bathrooms or bathtubs, and poor ventilation,” the rents were higher than anywhere else in the city, or even the country (Ewen 27). While the average rent for a three-room apartment was $13.50 per month, the average yearly income for an immigrant family (including income of both parents and children, from boarders living in one or more of the rooms, inheritances, etc) was only $600. And unlike the life they had left in Eastern Europe, immigrants did not have access to nature as a supplement to their livelihood. In the cities where most immigrants settled, it was impossible to grow a vegetable garden, raise sheep for clothing or cattle for dairy products or to gather firewood.

This statement is based on my own reading and is in some ways arguable. In *Out of the Shadow*, Rose Cohen describes watching her father clip his beard, a symbol of piety in Eastern European Jewish society, because “they do not like Jews on Cherry St. And one with a long beard has to take his life in his own hands” (106). The press often depicted Jews and Italians as misers, so interested in money that they were willing to accept “low standards of living in order to send money back home” (Ewen 113), a viewpoint, which, of course, ignores that many of these immigrants had relatives in Eastern Europe and Italy who relied on money sent from America for survival. In *The Almost Promised Land*, Hasia R. Diner asserts that the Jews did view the problems of blacks as a situation reflecting the anti-Semitism in Europe. In one instance, he argues that “alarmed at rising anti-Semitism in both Europe and America in the decades between the two world wars... Yiddish-speaking labor leaders found the issue of black discrimination and the plight of Negro Americans a useful forum in which to work out certain pressures of Jewish acculturation to America” (199). While I won’t disagree that many Jews were concerned with growing anti-Semitism during the 30s and 40s, I believe that the history of Jewish activism in the labor unions and Leftist movements of the communist and socialist parties demonstrates instead displeasure with a system that they deem economically, rather than religiously, oppressive.

Anzia Yezierska includes anecdotal evidence of this in her short story, “Hungry Hearts,” in which the women in a sewing factory resent the “greenhorns” because they “tear the bread from our mouths by begging to work so cheap” (44).

Elizabeth Ewen claims that most immigrant women, especially mothers "had almost no recreation at all" (104).
For Rose and Celia, however, the situation was different. Rose turned over her entire paycheck to her mother each week (Chernin, 41). This common occurrence was noted by Elizabeth Ewen who claimed that a girl's first responsibility was to her family and that many young girls were expected to bring their pay envelopes home unopened (page #).

Despite her later disillusionment with America's failed promises, Rose maintained a high regard for American education throughout her life and later told her daughter that her biggest regret is that she did not stay in college (58).

According to Elizabeth Ewen, Mr. Chernin's decision to change his children's names was somewhat unusual. She writes that for many older generation Eastern European immigrants, "the changing of names was thought of as demeaning...robbing the family of its history and honor" (72). Perhaps Mr. Chernin's action can be explained by his own desire to become completely Americanized. Throughout the story, Rose recalls that her father was embarrassed by her mother's inability to look, speak, and act American, and that he had even rejected Judaism in favor of atheism.

Perle Chernin and her husband had five children; however, I have chosen to discuss only three of them here. In My Mother's House does little to tell the stories of Milton, the only son, and Lillian, the youngest daughter who is born after the family immigrates to America. We do know that Milton became a university professor and then dean at Berkeley and was later an administrator for the California state government. Lillian became a nurse, married an electrician, and with her husband, joined Rose in the communist movement.

The fact that Rose and Celia Chernin lived on their own in high school and later in New York City may have been rather unusual. Elizabeth Ewen writes "Only in rare cases did young women move out to live and manage their own [money]. This option was open only to the few who were engaged in either political or artistic work" (108).

One of the several ironies of Celia Chernin's life was that in order to achieve her dream of wealth and fame, the seeds of which had been planted in America, she was forced to return to Europe for much of her life.

Ironically, Celia Chernin was imprisoned in the concentration camps in Indonesia during World War II, not because she was Jewish, but because she was a member of the Dutch ruling class by marriage.

The Palmer Raids, were named after Attorney-General Palmer and occurred as "simultaneous 'raids' all over the country, timed at a common hour of the night, arresting thousands of known or suspected Communists who were torn from their families and thrown into immigrant detention stations for indefinite periods" (Browder, 9). It was during these raids that Emma Goldman, a well-known anarchist, was deported to Russia.

The assertion that Jews imported radicalism from Eastern Europe is an arguable position. Joel Seidman, who admits the increase in radicalism from Jews who immigrated to America in the first years of the twentieth century, argues that in the 1880s and 1890s, Eastern European Jewish immigrants rejected the unions and socialist movements, for the most part, because they still fervently believed in the American dream and because the radical intellectuals heading the unions did not follow orthodox Judaism (83). However, at another point in the book, he states, "the Italians, as a group, were less union-conscious than the Jews" (43). I would argue that while there were Jews who believed that participation in radical movements conflicted with their religious beliefs and/or dreams for individual
success, as a group, the Jews were more likely to be involved with such groups than other immigrants from the same time period.

The Russian government also recognized the high participation of Jews in radical movements. Following the failure of the 1905 revolution, pogroms against the Jews increased.

For example, although women made up 70% of the workers in the garment industry, men made more than women for doing the same jobs. Even the labor unions established to protect workers exhibited a strong gender bias, which hindered women's equality. According to Baum, Hyman, and Michel, “the famous 1913 ‘Protocol in the Dress and Waist Industry,’ the first agreement between labor and management arbitrated by outside parties, institutionalized sexual discrimination against women and formalized sexual division of labor in the garment industry” (147). Although a high percentage of women (probably a majority) were among the strikers, men conducted the labor negotiations. The wages agreed to by the Dress and Waist Manufacturers’ Association and the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union established a pay scale whereby the highest paid women made less than the lowest paid male. Despite the gender discrimination even within the labor unions, many women stayed with them and worked to bring about better working conditions. Others, however, turned to more radical movements, such as the communist and socialist parties springing up at around the same time period. I believe this is because the labor unions continued to fail women in the search for an exceptional America where gender equality could be a reality.

According to Baum, Hyman, and Michel, “Those involved in the Bund and various other revolutionary movements in Eastern Europe were models for those who emigrated to the United States. The ‘new Jewish woman’ originated in Eastern Europe, not America. Jewish women’s political and union activism had already been established in Eastern Europe and it was carried steerage class to America.”

Although Rose had already been introduced to the socialist and communist movements through her future husband by the time she entered high school, it wasn’t until she began experiencing and witnessing prejudice first-hand that she felt compelled to become an active part of the communist party.

Obviously, this text is from an earlier time, and this argument would carry less weight now. My reading indicates that the bitterness of Mr. Chernin’s speech stems from the popularity of the Ku Klux Klan in the north, a group which actively discriminated against Jews as well as blacks.

This riot took place in 1931 or 1932, in the middle of the Great Depression. Although most people associate anti-Communist sentiment with the McCarthy years of the 1950s, there were actually several waves of tolerance of communist and socialist ideals followed by a panic against those same ideals. This cyclical process stretches back to at least the 1880s.

Rose Chernin’s radicalism is, in many ways, difficult to pin down because her disillusionment and reasons for turning to a new form of American exceptionalism are circular. Her interest in socialist/communist movements led her to recognize the discrimination such groups faced, which led to her joining those same groups as an alternative to what she believed to be a repressive capitalist system.

Rose Cohen records several incidences of what would now be termed sexual harassment in her memoir. She was fired from one sweatshop at the age of 12-13 for refusing to sit on the
boss' lap. In other instances, she and other female workers were forced to listen to sexual stories and jokes, which the men frequently told to embarrass the girls.

35 Although I have come across only minimal mention of Rose Chernin in my readings of American Communist histories, she appears to have held several positions of local leadership within the party, both in New York and California. In 1951, she was the first citizen the government attempted to denaturalize under the Smith Act, which stated that people found guilty of forming a conspiracy and advocating the overthrow of the government could be stripped of citizenship and deported. She formed friendships with other well-known communists, such as Lillian Hellman and Norman Mailer. In 1974, she was awarded a lifetime achievement prize for her 25 years of leadership in the party.

36 All four generations of women carried the surname “Chernin.” Upon her marriage to Paul Kusnitz, Rose Chernin kept her own last name. After her divorce, Kim took her mother’s last name instead of returning to her father’s. In junior high school, Larissa decided that she would go by her mother’s last name.
WORKS CITED


