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THE NEW DEAL MURALS OF BEN SHAHN: THE INTERSECTION OF JEWISH
IDENTITY, SOCIAL REFORM, AND GOVERNMENT PATRONAGE

by

DIANA LOUISE LINDEN

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Art
History in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New
York

1997

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Art History in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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AbstractTHE NEW DEAL MURALS OF BEN SHAHN: THE INTERSECTION OF JEWISH
IDENTITY, SOCIAL REFORM, AND GOVERNMENT PATRONAGE

by

Diana Louise Linden

Adviser: Marlene Park

This dissertation discusses the eight murals that Ben Shahn (1898-1969) created under the auspices of the New Deal. It begins in 1933 when the federal projects were initiated and ends with Shahn's mural for the Social Security building in Washington, D.C., completed in 1942. This work examines Shahn's murals within the sociopolitical history of the New Deal, foregrounds the social events that Shahn depicted, and problematizes the issue of Jewish identity within the context of public murals. Shahn proposed eight mural projects, completing four; in addition to Social Security (1940-42), he painted a mural for the Jersey Homesteads, New Jersey on immigration and the labor movement (c.1936-38), Resources of America for the Bronx Central Post Office, New York (1938-39), and the Four Freedoms for the Woodhaven Station, New York post office (1939-41). Officials rejected Shahn's satirical Prohibition Era for the Central Park Casino, New York (c.1934), his The Great State of Wisconsin, for the planned community of Greendale, Wisconsin (c.1937), and his Four Freedoms, submitted to the St. Louis, Missouri post office competition (1939). Officials canceled his project for Riker's Island

Penitentiary, New York (c.1933-35) as Shahn began work on site.

Three questions motivate this study of Shahn's murals. These questions are about Jewish identity, social reform, and government patronage. How did Jewish identity relate to the subject matter of Shahn's murals, and the contemporary Jewish American experience? Which particular issues of social reform did Shahn present in his murals and how did these relate to New Deal initiatives? How did the procedures, opportunities, and policies of government art patronage intersect (encourage, censor, modify, or parallel) with Shahn's message of social reform and Jewish identity? What was the Jewish ethnic and sociopolitical content within Shahn's murals and how did he negotiate these messages within the New Deal art projects? This work locates these answers within the sociopolitical terrain of the 1930s and early 1940s to establish how Shahn's narratives express the particular situation of American Jews between the wars.

Acknowledgments

To write a dissertation is a privilege, all the more so in these days of increased tuition, cutbacks at public libraries, and shrinking support for the arts. This dissertation would never have been completed--nor even attempted--without the advice, support, and assistance of numerous individuals and the staffs of key institutions. I wish to thank them all.

My first thanks are due to my adviser Marlene Park who has guided this work since its inception and whose scholarship on New Deal art and 1930s culture has greatly inspired my thinking. I thank Sally Webster for her insights on American public murals and for her enthusiasm. I am thankful to Mona Hadler who likewise has helped me from the initial proposal, to grant applications, and to this final product. I would like to extend a special acknowledgement to Frances K. Pohl who generously shared her knowledge of Shahn's work and who encouraged me to establish my own position.

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My husband and friend Peter Wells Ross always paused from his own dissertation to fix my computer glitches, helped me to formulate my ideas, and showed unwavering support and faith in my intellectual capabilities. Writing was never a lonely process sharing a office with Peter and, best of all, he kept this sometimes weary writer laughing each and every day. With love and admiration, I dedicate this work to him.

"The highest, the most logical, the purest and strongest form of painting is the mural. In this form alone it is one with the other arts--with all the others. It is, too, the most disinterested form, for it cannot be made a matter of private gain; it cannot be hidden away for the benefit of a certain privileged few. It is for the people. It is for all." -- José Clemente Orozco (1929)

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Introduction

This dissertation discusses the eight murals that Ben Shahn (1898-1969) created under the auspices of the New Deal art projects. The first comprehensive study of Shahn's murals as well as the first indepth exploration of Shahn's work in relation to the question of Jewish identity, it begins in 1933 when the federal art projects were initiated and ends with Shahn's final mural for the Social Security building in Washington, D.C., completed in 1942. My aim is to examine Shahn's murals within the sociopolitical history of the New Deal, to foreground the social events that Shahn depicted, and to problematize the issue of Jewish identity within the context of public murals. Of the eight separate mural projects Shahn worked on during these nine years, he completed four; officials rejected three; and one--for Riker's Island Penitentiary--was canceled as the artist began to work on site. Therefore, the range of documentation remaining from each project varies. Those murals that were executed garnered press attention and sparked letters between government officials and Shahn, as well as occasional unsolicited letters from the public. One can write about these completed works by evoking the sense of magnitude and engagement with public space that the artist so desired. In contrast, for the rest, all that remains are scattered studies and notations, which soon entered private collections and archival repositories, not

the public sphere.

Three questions initiated my study of Shahn's mural oeuvre. As the title of this dissertation indicates, these questions are about Jewish identity, social reform, and government patronage. First, how did Jewish identity relate to the subject matter of Shahn's mural work, the relationship between artist and audience, and the contemporary Jewish American experience? Second, which particular issues of social reform did Shahn present in his murals and how did these relate to New Deal initiatives? And third, how did the procedures, opportunities, and policies of government art patronage intersect (encourage, censor, modify, or parallel) with Shahn's message of social reform and Jewish identity? In other words, what was the Jewish ethnic and sociopolitical content within Shahn's murals and how did he negotiate these messages within the New Deal art project guidelines?

That Ben Shahn was a Jew and an artist are known facts, but this double identity has not been explored within the context of current theories on ethnic identity, or applied to his artistic production. Shahn's Jewish identity and early schooling in Judaism have been credited with inspiring the artist, but such essentialist statements have not always illuminated his work. For example, art historians have identified Shahn's Jewishness as a factor in his art, but the literature is not sufficiently sophisticated when

addressing this question. For example, when Francis V. O'Connor claimed that Shahn's desire to humanize political issues, coupled with his "Jewish heritage," constituted his ideology, what does he see as the relationship between humanism and Judaism? As for Jewish heritage, does O'Connor mean Shahn's youthful Talmudic training?¹ Shahn's socialist father? The artist's own involvement with the Left and organized labor? I do not wish to focus too sharply on a few words within O'Connor's rich, informative discussion of Diego Rivera, Ben Shahn, and other muralists of the New Deal. Rather, I wish to introduce the types of generalized, often romanticized statements that have given me pause and, ultimately led me to produce this work.

In their book Jewish Identity, David Theo Goldberg and Michael Krausz write that "to be Jewish simply by way of descent [differs] from assuming a Jewish identity, from affirming one's Jewishness as a matter of choice." They continue:

[C]entral to Judaism, but not to Jewishness, then, is a set of law-defined practices; while central to Jewishness, but only at most in part and by extension to the religion of Judaism, is the question of group history. This distinction raises in an accurate way the question of the place Judaism as a religion occupies, in Jewish cultural identity, for the Old Testament. . . . serves also as the basic historical document of

1 Francis V. O'Connor, "The Influence of Diego Rivera on the Art of the United States during the 1930s and After," in Diego Rivera: A Retrospective, exh. cat. (Detroit: The Detroit Institute of Arts, 1986), 167.

the Jews.²

Let me clarify: I am not concerned with Shahn's involvement with Judaism, but with Jewishness--as cultural identity and as ethnic identity within the sociohistorical framework of the 1930s.

Laurence J. Silberstein reminds us that the issue of identity continues to be a central concern in both Jewish public and academic discourse. He notes that in the past several years, theorists have questioned the notion of ethnicity as a fixed, stable identity. For example, Stuart Hall discusses cultural identity as a social construct, which is always in the process of becoming and changing.³ Ethnicity, therefore, is something reinvented and reinterpreted in each generation; it is dynamic.⁴ Silberstein sees post-modern theory, which rejects essentialist notions of identity, as particularly pertinent to Jews because they themselves reject such essentialist theories while remaining committed to the perpetuation of a

² David Theo Goldberg and Michael Krausz, eds., Jewish Identity (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 5-6.

³ Laurence J. Silberstein, "Others Within and Others Without: Rethinking Jewish Identity and Culture," in The Other in Jewish Thought and History: Constructions of Jewish Culture and Identity, ed. Silberstein and Robert L. Cohn (New York and London: New York University Press, 1994), 3-5.

⁴ Michael M. J. Fischer, "Ethnicity and the Post-Modern Arts of Memory," in Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography, ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), 195.

distinct community.⁵

Perhaps, therefore, it is useful to establish the parameters of what is considered Jewish art, in addition to what constitutes Jewish identity. In 1966 Harold Rosenberg pointedly asked, What is Jewish art?⁶ He then proceeded to provide, and then dismiss as inadequate, a series of responses--art produced by Jews; ceremonial or ritual art; art that expresses Jewish metaphysics; or art depicting Jewish subject matter. Rosenberg privileges those artists--among them Mark Rothko, Adolph Gottlieb, Louise Nevelson, Philip Guston, and Larry Rivers--who had surpassed the Jewish theme of identity, which would be relevant to both community and autobiography--in deference to the twentieth-century theme of identity on the greater, existential plane. In so doing, by virtue of their engagement with aesthetics, these artists liberated themselves from self and from Jewishness.⁷ To Rosenberg, the answer to his question was located on the canvas and in aesthetics.

In contrast, this work will locate answers within the sociopolitical terrain of the 1930s and early 1940s. I wish to establish how Shahn's narratives express the particular situation of American Jews between the world wars. These

⁵ Silberstein, "Others Within," 11.

⁶ Harold Rosenberg, "Is There a Jewish Art?" Commentary (July 1966), 57-60.

⁷ Ibid.

narratives are rooted in such sociopolitical facts of Jewish experience in a particular generation as Jews' allegiance to Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, their immigrant origins and subsequent rise to middle-class status, Yiddish culture, and their involvement with the Left and with labor unions. Shahn's narratives, when resituated within their historical context, express reservations about the rise of Father Charles Coughlin and other American-bred fascists, the power of Adolph Hitler and the Nazis in Germany, America's tightening of immigration controls in the midst of the refugee crisis, and a concern with maintaining America's freedoms and liberties.

My second question concerns Shahn's interest in messages of social reform. In comparison to other New Deal artists, who in their public murals celebrated constitutional activities, the economic origins of towns, conservative community values, or postal history, Shahn's murals forcefully confronted the events and issues of the 1930s. Shahn provided us with well-thought-out blueprints for prison reform, the basic human need for meaningful work and decent housing, and the importance of citizens' rights and benefits. Shahn never approached these issues with idealized or generalized treatments. Rather, he devoted much time to study, reading, and preparation and gathered quantities of information to enable him to dramatize these issues in particular scenes. Shahn's messages are specific

and detailed; they illustrate his political acumen and savvy, as well as his humor and humanism.

And finally, it is important to state that Shahn expressed Jewish identity and support for particular social-reform acts within the framework of federally sponsored murals. This required him to address the patron's thematic and stylistic concerns, as well as anticipate public reaction. What I do not attempt in this dissertation is to chart the policies and histories of the federal art patronage programs, since a rich bibliography on this material already exists.⁸

Although the scope and method of my study are neither monographic nor biographic in the most orthodox sense, it is important to establish key biographical facts from Shahn's

⁸ Important studies on the New Deal art projects include Greta Berman, The Lost Years: Mural Painting in New York City Under the W.P.A./F.A.P., 1935-1943 (New York: Garland Publishers, 1978); Belisario R. Contreras, Tradition and Innovation in New Deal Art (Cranbury, N.J.: Associated University Press, 1983); Jonathan Harris, Federal Art and National Culture: The Politics of Identity in New Deal America (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Karal Ann Marling, Wall-to-Wall America (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982); Richard McKinzie, The New Deal for Artists (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1973); Marlene Park and Gerald Markowitz, Democratic Vistas: Post Offices and Public Art in the New Deal (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984); Barbara Melosh, Engendering Culture: Manhood and Womanhood in New Deal Public Art and Theater (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991); Francis V. O'Connor, Federal Support for the Visual Arts: The New Deal and Now (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, Ltd., 1968); and his edited anthologies, Art for the Millions (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, Ltd., 1973); and The New Deal Art Projects: An Anthology of Memoirs (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1972).

early life and career because they influenced his murals.⁹ Further, these facts establish Shahn as part of the greater American Jewish cultural experience and environment. In particular, I believe that Shahn's background as a child in Eastern Europe, his immigration to America, and his formative years and work as a tradesman in New York City, are factors that influenced the themes and content of his art. These events shaped his political sympathies, which, in turn, inspired the contemporary subjects of his murals. His lifelong affiliation with the social underclass and his liberal politics are consistent with his training in ethics, the experiences of his family, and events of his early life.

Ben Shahn was born in 1898 in Kovno, Lithuania, a large Jewish community and theological center in the Pale of Settlement, a contained and controlled area where Russian authorities allowed Jews to live.¹⁰ When Shahn was four, the family moved to the small town of Vilkomir, also in Lithuania. As a child, Shahn studied the Talmud by sheer rote and recital; he even expressed interest in becoming a rabbi but soon tested the religious restrictions--such as walking too far on the sabbath. Faith taught the Jews that they were under the watchful eye of God, but their day-to-

⁹ For a detailed discussion of Shahn's biography, see Frances K. Pohl, Ben Shahn (San Francisco: Pomegranate Books, 1993), and the forthcoming biography by Howard Greenfield to be published by Random House.

¹⁰ Ben Shahn, interview with Dr. Paul Benison, 29 October 1956, Columbia University, New York.

day life was ruled by the menacing eyes of the czar's police. Jews were not safe even in the Pale and were subjected to the tyrannical rule of the czar's bloody pogroms.

Shahn's father, Joshua Hessel Shahn, was a carpenter by trade, an intellectual by temperament, and a socialist by conviction. Joshua wrote philosophical prose for the Yiddish press and helped organize resistance to the czar.¹¹ Shahn later recalled childhood memories of the czar's police chasing his father down the street and his father being imprisoned for his political views.¹² Joshua Shahn fled first to South Africa, then to the United States, leaving his family behind until he was established. In 1906, like so many Eastern European Jews, the Shahns left Lithuania for America and settled in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn. Shahn recalled that poverty marked his life as a young boy in America and remembered being roughed up on the way to school, and pelted with stones and taunted with anti-Semitic slurs. But through education and literature Shahn enriched his mind, and in time Shahn cultivated his artistic talents.¹³ At a young age--fourteen--Shahn entered the work world. Young Ben apprenticed in his uncle's lithography shop, beginning a lifelong love affair with

¹¹ Pohl, Ben Shahn, 7.

¹² Ibid. See also Shahn interview with Benison.

¹³ Pohl, Ben Shahn, 7-10.

letters that would become a hallmark of his art.

Shahn began his artistic training with night courses at the Educational Alliance.¹⁴ Later he enrolled at the Art Students League and the National Academy of Design to receive a more traditional, academic training. In the 1920s Shahn went to Europe, a customary artistic pilgrimage; he traveled abroad in 1924-25 and stayed in Europe again for two years beginning in 1927. Still without a signature style, Shahn experimented with the brushwork and high-key colors of the Impressionists and then with the flat, bold areas of color of Matisse. Yet these French artistic styles did not satisfy his temperament:

I didn't know either where I stood when I came back to America in 1929. I had seen all the right pictures and read all the right books--Vollard, Meier-Graefe, David Hume. But it still didn't add up to anything. Here I am, I said to myself, [thirty-one] years old, the son of a carpenter. I like stories and people. The French school is not for me. Vollard is wrong for me. If I am to be a painter I must show the world how it looks through my eyes, not theirs.¹⁵

In 1922 Shahn married Tillie Goldstein and the two established a home in Brooklyn Heights, breaking from the

¹⁴ The Educational Alliance recently was the subject of an exhibition at New York's Jewish Museum. See Norman L. Kleeblatt and Susan Chevlowe, eds., Painting a Place in America: Jewish Artists in New York, 1900-1945, exh. cat. (New York: Jewish Museum, 1991).

¹⁵ Pohl, Ben Shahn, 10.

traditions and lifestyle of their parents' generation.¹⁶ Recent scholarship has created a one-dimensional portrait of Tillie and set up a dichotomy between her and Shahn's second wife, the artist Bernarda Bryson. For example, the art historian Frances K. Pohl has observed that the more Shahn became drawn to Manhattan's political and artistic organizations and to Bryson, the more distant Brooklyn and Tillie felt to him.¹⁷ According to this narrative, as Shahn struggled between old and new, he began to suppress his Jewish vision of social injustice in his art in deference to current "American" issues.¹⁸ But Tillie Goldstein, who like Shahn was born in Europe, was not the polar opposite of Bernarda Bryson--with the significant exceptions that Bryson was from the Midwest and Protestant. Tillie was politically active--a former suffragette--and was involved with secular Jewish culture and politics on the Left. An intellectual, she was forced to leave school at age thirteen for economic reasons, but she later obtained

¹⁶ The pair later moved to Bethune Street, in Greenwich Village. It is inaccurate to consider Brooklyn Heights as either old-world, immigrant, or Jewish Brooklyn. Within easy reach of Manhattan, Brooklyn Heights was predominantly Protestant, had great pockets of long-established wealth, and a cultural life.

¹⁷ Pohl, Ben Shahn, 14.

¹⁸ In her article "Ben Shahn and the Problem of Jewish Identity," Jewish Art 12-13 (1986-87): 304, Ziva Amishai-Maisels draws a strong correlation between Shahn's turning from Jewish to American social problems and leaving Tillie for Bernarda.

her high-school equivalency degree and attended Cornell University.¹⁹ The details of her marriage to Shahn, their separation, and its repercussions are not germane to this study. However, it is important to state that since the early 1920s Shahn had been active in secular and intellectual circles, and that in the early 1930s he changed both his artistic style and his personal life.

Beginning in 1930 Shahn's subject matter and style became bolder. In that year, Shahn created a series on Alfred Dreyfus, the French army captain who had been falsely convicted of treason in 1894.²⁰ As a child in Russia, Shahn had heard stories about the Dreyfus case.²¹ In his series, Shahn included both individual and group portraits from the Dreyfus affair that he composed in broadly washed tones. This was a much paler handling than the assertive, heavily outlined works of his ensuing years. Significantly, Shahn debuted as a socially committed artist with a theme of injustice suffered by a Jew. Concurrently, he created a

¹⁹ Financially responsible for herself and her two children, Goldstein, in fact, worked for the Index of American Design. I would like to thank Ezra Shahn and Judy Shahn for answering my questions about their mother's biography. Phone interview, 20 August 1996.

²⁰ Albert S. Lindemann, The Jew Accused: Three Anti-Semitic Affairs (Dreyfus, Beilis, Frank), 1894-1915 (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

²¹ Ben Shahn and Forrest Selvig interview, 27 September 1968, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. (hereafter AAA).

Passover Haggadah inspired by one from his childhood.²² Both the Haggadah and the Dreyfus series derive from Shahn's Jewish identity and concern for social injustice. His initial images of social protest and injustice resonate with a distinctively Jewish voice.

In the early 1930s Shahn settled into a shared living and work arrangement with photographer Walker Evans and the painter Lou Block on Bethune Street in Greenwich Village--where previously he had lived with Goldstein. Evans provided Shahn with his first camera, a Leica. At this time Shahn established his reputation as a politically active artist through his paintings of American social injustices. He built on the political spirit of his Dreyfus series with his paintings protesting the fates of the immigrant martyrs Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti (1931-32) and the convicted labor leader Tom Mooney (1932). Both series were exhibited at Edith Halpert's Downtown Gallery. The Mexican muralist Diego Rivera--who had seen and admired the Sacco and Vanzetti series--contributed the checklist essay for the Mooney exhibition.

In 1933 Shahn assisted Rivera on his ill-fated Rockefeller Center mural, Man at the Crossroads. From working with Rivera, Shahn became fluent in both mural

²² When Shahn initially created his Haggadah he was not able to publish it. Years later, this goal was realized. See Cecil Roth, introduction to Haggadah for Passover: Copied and Illustrated by Ben Shahn (London: MacGibbon and Kee, Ltd., 1965).

aesthetics and techniques, and the unification of ideologies of the Left with artistic subject matter.²³ According to Shahn, the most important thing that he learned from Rivera was how to paint in fresco; Shahn is distinguished as one of the few New Deal muralists who could paint in this technique.²⁴

While working as an assistant to Rivera, Shahn witnessed the censoring and destruction of the Rockefeller Center mural. Because he came to Rivera's defense during the controversy, art officials and the popular press labeled Shahn a radical. He made some enemies within these groups that he would have to confront when his own murals were

²³ Juan O'Gorman, "On Mural Painting," in La Palabra de Juan O'Gorman, ed. Ida Rodriguez Prampolini (Mexico City: Instituto de Investigaciones Esteticas, U.N.A.M., 1983), 289-90, assesses the influence of the Mexican school on Shahn as follows: "This artist worked with Rivera in both the Rockefeller Center mural and the New Workers School mural, and although he learned a great deal from the master, his style is very much his own. It is strong and charged with compassion, his message is leftist but not Marxist. His knowledge of the fresco technique seems pure." I am most grateful to Alejandro Anreus for bringing this citation to my attention and for providing its translation.

²⁴ O'Connor, "The Influence of Diego Rivera," 157-84, analyzes the influence of Rivera on Shahn's murals. See also Greta Berman, The Lost Years: Mural Painting in New York City under the WPA/FAP, 1935-1943 (New York: Garland Publishers, Inc., 1978), 64-66: "Shahn translated inspiration he received from Rivera into his own perceptions. Specific Mexican characteristics do not appear in Shahn's work, but the kinship between Shahn and Rivera is revealed in the use of fresco to deal with contemporary problems clearly and on a monumental scale. Even where Shahn does not make use of the fresco medium, the results are simple, large, and powerful, and always treat a pressing social problem directly."

censored or canceled.²⁵ At this time, Shahn was active in the Artists' Union--which Bernarda Bryson helped form--a trade union of "cultural workers" that agitated for greater employment and exhibition opportunities.²⁶

Because of his interest in art and activism, fresco painting and leftist politics, Shahn also became involved with the John Reed Club (JRC). Members of the New Masses had established the JRC in 1929 to promote cultural activities among, and political betterment for, American workers.²⁷ Utilizing the tools and vocabulary of Soviet social protest art and the conceptualization of artists as workers, JRC members criticized capitalism's class and racial divisions.²⁸ Years later, Shahn made great efforts

²⁵ An untitled review of Shahn's Mooney exhibition at the Downtown Gallery that appeared in the New York Sun (6 May 1933) devotes its lengthy first paragraph to Rivera and his Communist affiliation before turning to the subject at hand, namely Ben Shahn's paintings. Ben Shahn Papers, AAA.

²⁶ For information on the Artists' Union and its magazine Art Front, the following dissertations are the most fruitful resources: Gerald M. Monroe, "The Artists' Union of New York" (Ed.D. diss., New York University, 1971), and Francine Tyler, "Artists Respond to the Great Depressions and the Threat of Fascism: The New York Artists' Union and Its Magazine Art Front (1934-1937)" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1991).

²⁷ See Gerald M. Monroe, "The '30s: Art, Ideology and the WPA," Art in America 63 (November-December 1975), 64-67; and Helen A. Harrison, "John Reed Club Artists and the New Deal: Radical Responses to Roosevelt's 'Peaceful Revolution,'" Prospects 5 (1980): 241-68, for information on the political and aesthetic agendas of the John Reed Club.

²⁸ For information on the missions of the John Reed Club and of the Artists' Union, see Tyler, "The New York Artists' Union." In her book Anti-Fascism in American Art (New Haven

to distance himself from the JRC, dismissing the depth of his involvement while acknowledging the lasting "red taint" on his reputation:

That was the first time that I got my name on a bad list, because I had once taken over a class of the John Reed Club. A friend of mine got sick and he was teaching fresco and God, I would have taught fresco anywhere, Catholic, Jewish, Communist, Republican, anything. I loved fresco very much and they mentioned me then. It was the first time I had my name in the paper in that sense you know. I've been in trouble ever since.²⁹

Eager for the opportunity to paint murals, when the federal art projects began in 1933, Shahn aggressively pursued commissions.

This dissertation tells the stories of these murals, of both the rejected and the completed proposals. I have arranged the chapters chronologically, treating proposals of like subject matter--which were done concurrently and were thematically related--within the same chapter. There are six chapters in all. In some, the issue of Jewish identity plays the dominant role; in others, that of social reform; in yet others, both issues in concert. In uniting the murals with their sociopolitical context, I hope to awaken

and London: Yale University Press, 1989), 156, Cecil Whiting summarizes Shahn's commitment to radical politics and characterizes his involvement with the John Reed Club as a "flirtation."

²⁹ Ben Shahn interview with Richard Doud, 14 April 1962, AAA.

the full social message behind Shahn's images, symbols, and narratives. On a recent excursion to view Resources of America again, Shahn's murals for the Bronx Central Post Office (see chapter 4), I was struck once more by the power of these monumental figures at work. As I stood in the post office lobby, I began to think about radio sounds, street conversations, and newspaper banner headlines from the era. What were the social and historical events that informed not only the making of these murals but also the viewers' consciousness as they stood and admired the once newly painted works? In this study, with the benefit of historical hindsight and the focusing lens of critical theories, I wish to reawaken the noise, debate, and facts that, coupled with these murals, created the fabric of the New Deal era.

Chapter One: Prohibition and Prison Rehabilitation:
Images of Social Reform in New York City

In the early 1930s, eager both to paint murals and to earn a regular paycheck, Ben Shahn submitted designs to two separate federal art projects in New York City. The first proposal was a satirical chronicle of temperance and Prohibition painted in the months just after the repeal in 1934 of the Eighteenth Amendment (ratified in 1919). The second proposal, which Shahn researched and began in the years 1933-35, was on the theme of prison reform, contrasting the inhumane methods of Southern punishment and confinement with more modern methods of prisoner rehabilitation meant to enable prisoners to reenter dominant society. In both "Prohibition Era" and the untitled prison narrative, intended for Riker's Island Penitentiary, Shahn addressed contemporary social legislation. Neither mural was actualized. While officials rejected outright Shahn's Prohibition cycle, they initially approved the Riker's mural but then abruptly vetoed the project just as Shahn began to paint.¹ I will consider the murals in relation to Shahn's political sympathies and the sociopolitical events of the

¹ Lou Block, interview with Harlan Phillips, 1965, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. (hereafter AAA): "We were just about to trace our cartoons on the wall when we had our feet knocked out from under us." Block served as the negotiator for the two artists and was also the unofficial archivist of the project, saving vital documents, letters, and clippings. These are now located in the Lou Block Papers, Margaret M. Bridwell Art Library, University of Louisville, Kentucky (hereafter Lou Block Papers).

decade to reveal the relevancy of temperance and prison-reform themes to 1930s culture.

The moment in which Shahn proposed his mural programs was one of transition, in both the political and artistic worlds. In 1933 New York City had elected Fiorella LaGuardia as its new mayor to replace the incumbent, James "Jimmy" Walker, who had fled to Europe amid personal and financial scandal. This change in mayoral administration caused a shift in attitudes and policies toward public service, from the self-indulgence of Walker to the reforms initiated by LaGuardia. The new mayor reevaluated and renovated public space and institutions, which created new opportunities for murals. In the art world, the emergence of new philosophies and approaches to mural painting was more dramatic, with Shahn symbolizing the new and politically charged tendency. In an earlier era, academic muralists had employed an allegorical language to express civic virtue and humanistic ideals.² Beauty, in the form of lovely classically garbed women, was their highest ideal. In contrast, Shahn and other social-realist muralists looked for inspiration to the world around them, the socioeconomic realities of America and its workers. Whereas academic muralists sought to uphold the status quo, social realists aimed to change the social order. Shahn's images showing

² Edwin H. Blashfield, Mural Painting in America: The Scammon Lectures (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913).

working Americans and a message of social reform met with the scorn of conservative forces. It is important to remember that today we acknowledge the 1930s as the era of New Deal mural projects with social imagery, but then, critics such as Royal Cortissoz and artists such as Jonas Lie still saw the academician Edwin Howland Blashfield as the dean of the mural tradition.³

Employing artists from November 1933 until June 1934, the Public Works of Art Project was the first federal art project; its primary purpose was to provide emergency financial relief.⁴ The PWAP encouraged artists to create paintings celebrating American life and lore, drawing nostalgically from American history in the "American Scene" style. The "usable past," the conscious referencing of the distant days-gone-by land of hearty woodsmen, brave frontiersmen, and other brawny, Anglo-Saxon heroes did not inspire Shahn.⁵ Shahn certainly did not resemble that

³ Art Digest, 15 January 1934, 14, quotes Cortissoz as follows: "we are told we can't be good mural painters unless we subscribe to the hypothesis of Diego Rivera, but I prefer to subscribe to that of Mr. Blashfield, a painter who sees mural decoration not as an opportunity for self expression, but as a part of the construction of a building." For information on Lie see "Propaganda in Art Denounced by Lie," New York Times, 15 February 1935, 22.

⁴ Francis V. O'Connor, Federal Support for the Visual Arts: The New Deal and Now, 2d ed. (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, Ltd., 1971), 16-21.

⁵ See Van Wyck Brooks, "On Creating a Usable Past," The Dial 64 (1918), 337-41. In his article "The Search for a Usable American Past in the New Deal Era," American Quarterly 23 (December 1971), 710-24, Alfred Haworth Jones

America. Instead, social issues of the 1920s and 1930s, such as Prohibition and prison reform, inspired him. Shahn's vantage point was New York; his filters were those of a working-class Jewish immigrant. This was America to Shahn. Shahn's ethnic and class identities directed the themes and presentation of his work. Further, having just served as an assistant to Mexican muralist Diego Rivera on his ill-fated "Man at the Crossroads" fresco for Rockefeller Center, Shahn was eager to create images of social commentary for public walls. In "Prohibition Era," painted for the PWAP and intended for the Central Park Casino, Shahn created eight panels that are humorous and satirical. In celebrating Prohibition's repeal, Shahn pointed out that the issues and social attitudes that led to the legislation were, in fact, repressive. By mocking Prohibition and its conservative supporters, Shahn established himself as part of America's liberal political tradition.

Comprising eight separate studies, Shahn's "Prohibition Era" suite was painted with gouache on Masonite boards and depicts bootleggers, society swells enjoying contraband

discusses the "usable past" in relation to writers of the Depression era, proposing that they were "creating a foundation for national confidence" (724). Karal Ann Marling puts a spin on this concept in "A Note on New Deal Iconography: Futurology and the Historical Myth," Prospects vol. 4 (New York: Burt Franklin & Co., Inc., 1979), 421-40. Marling proposes that instead of coy sentimentalism or bowing to conservative pressures, artists engaged the "usable past" and chose to reassert "tradition in painterly iconography as a moral, an aesthetic, and a social responsibility of immense gravity."

liquor, and parades both in support of and in opposition to Prohibition. Layering the flat, matte paint without a great deal of tonal modulation, Shahn applied strong black outlines to accentuate and define forms. Space in all of the murals is very shallow, the figures pushed up close to the picture plane, making the narratives bold, direct, and immediately accessible. In these highly finished studies, Shahn devotes much attention to the architectural details, signage, and lettering in the urban setting. Through the use of winking figures, humorous details, and clever storylines, Shahn creates a wry, sly, and witty mood--clearly pleased that America is no longer a dry nation.

In "Prohibition Era" Shahn introduces thematic concerns that would become constants within his mural corpus. The eight studies show Shahn's affection for personalities and public figures, specifically famous and infamous men. Shahn shared with Rivera a dedication to planning, research and the portrayal of contemporaries within his paintings. Shahn, in fact, assisted Rivera with the visual research for the Rockefeller Center mural. In "Prohibition Era," for example, both New York Mayor Jimmy Walker and gangster Al Capone appear in the Prohibition suite; in later murals, Shahn features Robert LaFollette, Sr., Albert Einstein, Walt Whitman, and Franklin D. Roosevelt. As pointed out by the historian Michael E. Parrish, the "cult of personality," a twentieth-century phenomenon, relates to the prevalence of

personalities and celebrities in American popular culture. From politicians to football heroes, from matinee idols to corporate leaders, these figures were packaged and presented via the growing networks of mass media and consumer culture.⁶ Interestingly, during this period of the common man and the "Forgotten Man," Shahn consistently trumpets the heroics and hijinks of the noteworthy and notorious, utilizing popular culture and popular media sources, such as newspapers, film, and books as the basis for his images.

Shahn constructed his pantheon of famous men and murals along masculinist lines, which would be consistent throughout the whole of his mural production. Shahn's work, including the "Prohibition Era" cycle, repeatedly downplays or dismisses the contributions of women. For example, "Women's Christian Temperance Union" is the only panel in the eight-part series that supports temperance. Shahn places the burden of moral guardianship solely on women, yet he mocks the complexities of their motivations by making drink a humorous issue. In later murals, including those for the Jersey Homesteads, New Jersey (1936-38; see chapter 3) and the Bronx Central Post Office (1938-39; see chapter 4) Shahn chose to overlook or marginalize the contributions of women union activists and women

⁶ For further discussion and examples of such figures, see Michael E. Parrish, The Anxious Decades: America in Prosperity and Depression, 1920-1941 (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1992), 95-99.

laborers. Shahn's focus on the role of men in issues of labor and class, minimizing issues of gender in those same arenas, is consistent with the policies and attitudes of the American left during the 1930s.

Very little documentation remains with which to reconstruct the conception and rejection of the "Prohibition Era" project commission, but the few remaining papers indicate that Shahn proposed both its theme and its location.⁷ Shahn wrote to Lloyd Goodrich, member of the New York City regional committee of the PWAP, to implore: "I enclose a clipping from the Times which has sent my hopes for a wall to fever heights. Please tell me there are prospects. Yours for an endless wall."⁸ Central Park's Casino was the location he had in mind; it was the former haunt of the flamboyant Mayor Walker whom Shahn features in the mural cycle calling for repeal.⁹ Originally built in

⁷ Shahn listed the site for his murals as the "Central Park Casino." Non-Federal Buildings, National Archives, New York City, Box 3546.

⁸ Quoted in Belisario R. Contreras, "The New Deal Treasury Department Art Programs and the American Artist: 1933 to 1943" (Ph.D. diss., American University, 1967), 35. His book, Tradition and Innovation in New Deal Art (Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell University Press, 1983), also provides much useful information; however, it does not directly concern Shahn's proposal.

⁹ See Quinn Halford, "1935," Avenue (December 1993), 24-25. According to Halford, LaGuardia labeled the casino a "whoppee joint."

1865 by the architects Calvert and Vaux, the decaying casino was transformed by Joseph Urban in 1929 into a high-society nightspot. Walker orchestrated the opulent and elaborate redesign, which drew charges that the project violated the park's recreational purposes. Walker saw the casino as a hideaway and playroom for him and his mistress; LaGuardia saw it as a source of revenue for Tammany politicians.¹⁰

In 1935, under LaGuardia, Parks Commissioner Robert Moses tore down the casino to make room for Rumsey Playground.

When Shahn began sketching "Prohibition Era" for the casino, the Twenty-first Amendment, supplanting the Volstead Act (intoxicating substance defined as equaling 0.5 percent alcohol), had recently become law on 7 April 1933.

Prohibition had been a heated issue during the presidential election. The incumbent, Herbert Hoover, ran as a dry candidate, while Franklin D. Roosevelt appealed to the opposite constituency, which prompted John Dewey to quip wryly: "in the midst of the greatest crisis since the Civil War . . . the only thing the two national parties want to debate is booze."¹¹

¹⁰ George Walsh, Gentleman Jimmy Walker: Mayor of the Jazz Age (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1974), 202.

¹¹ Leo P. Ribuffo, The Old Christian Right: The Protestant Far Right from the Great Depression to the Cold War (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983), 18. Ribuffo introduces the issues of ethnicity and religion in relation to the concerns of the temperance movement: Protestants and evangelicals were angry at FDR for joining the wets.

The history of temperance dates far back before Shahn's time. Although America's attempts to control alcohol began in the colonial era, they gained true force in the antebellum period as a vehicle for ethnic control.¹² From its beginnings, divisive class, ethnic, and regional concerns drove the temperance movement. As one of the final reform agendas of the Progressive era, prohibition achieved national success with the adoption of the Volstead Act and the Eighteenth Amendment. To achieve this goal, the American temperance movement successfully wedded clergymen to wealthy capitalists. While these men of the cloth and men of capital publicly sermonized about their great concern for the nation's spiritual salvation, their true agenda was to secure a sober and docile industrial workforce. In 1890 East Coast corporate leaders formed the Committee of Fifty to control political machines by suppressing votes in America's cities.¹³ The Anti-Saloon League (1892-1933), which referred to itself as the "Church in Action against the Saloon," was primarily responsible for the passage of

¹² Parrish, The Anxious Decades, 95-99.

¹³ John J. Rumbarger, Profits, Power, and Prohibition: Alcohol Reform and the Industrializing of America, 1880-1930 (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 84-89, 92-93. For an opposing view see Norman H. Clark, Deliver Us from Evil: An Interpretation of American Prohibition (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1976), 13. Clark dismisses the possibility that an economic agenda drove the temperance movement, stating instead that "the need to maintain values sheltered by the American nuclear family" in light of industrial growth and new social relationships provided the movement's motivation.

the Eighteenth Amendment. Capitalist powers and robber barons bankrolled the League.¹⁴ John D. Rockefeller, Sr., an early and generous benefactor, and the dimestore magnate S. S. Kresge, headed up a committee to draw financial support from other businessmen.¹⁵ According to the temperance scholar John J. Rumbarger:

Men of power and substance, defined, directed and controlled the movement for drink reform . . . wealthy capitalists regarded temperance as integral and necessary to establishing a capitalist, industrial social order.¹⁶

These men saw the local saloon as an obstacle to capitalist society since workers were free to gather there to exchange ideas. The American Journal of Sociology recorded in 1900 that "the names of Karl Marx and leaders of social and political thought are often heard here [in saloons]" and that for urban workers the saloon was "their school for good and evil."¹⁷ Yet as Rumbarger counters, "the saloon of the anti-saloonist capitalists was largely an ideological construct wherein workers gathered, drank

¹⁴ Jack S. Blocker, American Temperance Movements: Cycles of Reform (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989), 95-102.

¹⁵ Ibid., 102-5.

¹⁶ Rumbarger says that the Eighteenth Amendment came about because urban capitalists saw it as a necessary precondition of social reform for establishing industrial order and suggests that the terms of social order were capitalist. Profits, Power, and Prohibition, xix.

¹⁷ Raymond L. Melendy, "The Saloon in Chicago," American Journal of Sociology 6 (July 1900), 294, cited in *ibid.*, 117.

alcoholic beverages, read Marx and Engels, and, thus inflamed, ignored their families and set out to destroy the 'foundations of social order.'"¹⁸

If immigrants could be kept sober, busy with work, and busy at home, they could not form a solid political base in opposition to the ruling class. Urban America, especially New York City, was the new home for these Southern and Eastern European immigrants, whose arrivals in great numbers deepened the split between rural Protestant America and urban "ethnic" America.¹⁹ For corporate leaders, the Anti-Saloon League, and the Committee of Fifty, New York City overbrimming with Catholics and Jews was the greatest obstacle to the national prohibition agenda. They targeted New York and its alcohol-fueled depravity, chastising the wanton city in sermons and verse. In 1916 Wayne Wheeler, a close friend of William Jennings Bryan and a central figure in the Anti-Saloon League, denounced the East Coast's own Sodom and Gomorrah:

Vulgar of manner, overfed, overdressed and underbred, heartless, Godless, Hell's delight, rude by day and lewd by night . . . ruled by boss and prostitute . . . raving, rotten, money-mad; a squirming herd of Mammon's men, a wilderness of human flesh crazed with avarice, lust and vice.²⁰

¹⁸ Rumbarger, Profits, Power, and Prohibition, 198.

¹⁹ Blocker, American Temperance Movements, 108-9.

²⁰ Thomas W. Coffey, The Long Thirst: Prohibition in America, 1920-1933 (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1975), 10.

Beginning in the late nineteenth century, women joined with men to outlaw alcohol and spirits. In so doing, the women of the temperance campaign extended their roles as moral guardians from the private to the public sphere. Established in 1874, the Women's Christian Temperance Union, headed by Annie Wittenmeyer, espoused the "gospel of temperance" in order to reform drunkards individually and personally.²¹ Women networked through Protestant churches, beginning in the Midwest, to shut down saloons. Under its second president, Frances E. Willard, the W.C.T.U. fought for women's rights, suffrage, and feminist issues, and became the largest women's organization in America.²² In the early twentieth century, the W.C.T.U. united with the Anti-Saloon League to work together for a national prohibition ordinance. Finally, in 1919, the Eighteenth Amendment became law.

An immigrant of working class origins, Shahn was closely aligned with the "undesirables" that nativists had sought to keep dry and contained. Yet despite the fact that ethnic and class tensions led to Prohibition, in his preliminary studies Shahn constructs an oppositional

²¹ See Ruth Bordin, Women and Temperance: The Quest for Power and Liberty, 1873-1900 (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981). Bordin is very respectful toward and noncritical of the W.C.T.U. She insists that the temperance movement transcended class and status, that it was not just a Protestant movement, and that it should be viewed as a positive part of the Progressive era.

²² Ibid., 44.

arrangement along gender lines: prim church ladies against libertarian progressive men. Shahn both opens and concludes his narrative with a parade scene--the "Women's Christian Temperance Union" (fig. 1) and the male-dominated "Parade for Repeal" (fig. 2). Only "W.C.T.U." both features women and supports Prohibition. Since Prohibition ultimately failed, the gathered W.C.T.U. ladies are seen as ineffectual and old-fashioned.²³ In "Women's Christian Temperance Union," Shahn painted a cloistered frieze of drably dressed and dour-faced temperance ladies, tightly arranged under a banner that proclaims their holy mission: "W.C.T.U. For God. For Home. For Native Land." Standing motionless and stoic, dressed in dull grays and dusty browns, the women personify a dry, humorless vision of life and contrast greatly with the festive "Parade for Repeal," which is alive with laughing, marching men. Signs and banners, independent of the words they display, function as expressive devices within the two panels. In "W.C.T.U." the banner is precariously perched at the end of a thin pole, the ties of the banner pulled taut to form a triangle which shelters the women as rigidly as if it were the peaked roof of a house. Shahn frames the women in relation to a domestic reference. In contrast, within "Parade for Repeal" the signage is dispersed among the numerous men, chaotically scattered,

²³ I am grateful to Ellen Todd for sharing her thoughts on Shahn's "W.C.T.U." and "Parade for Repeal" with me.

obscuring their messages of repeal. The sensation is one of progressive, forward motion, and the spirit one of jubilation.²⁴

Mayor Jimmy Walker provides the brightest note of color and thus the contrast between the two panels. While "W.C.T.U." speaks to the power of mass politics, "Parade for Repeal" illustrates the power of personal politics and charisma. Walker is slim and sharply dressed in tan, spiffy with his fedora--his is the only covered head in the group--and bright blue tie. Shahn's portrait matches the historian George Walsh's description of Walker in relation to other Tammany leaders: "amid their severe black suits and derby hats, his tastes dictated double-breasted suits and wide-brimmed fedoras. Among impassive faces, his was a ready smile."²⁵ The career of the politician and songwriter known as "Gentleman Jim" is an example of America's adoration of colorful, individualistic leaders. Tied to the history of Tammany politics and Irish immigration in New York City, Walker embodied the type of ethnic political clout that troubled the nativist factions. Never one to let good times be dampened by conservative attitudes, Walker achieved notoriety with his bills to legalize professional

²⁴ Frances K. Pohl, Ben Shahn (San Francisco: Pomegranate Books, 1993), 50-52, compares the bold letters Shahn used on the men's signs with the thin, tremulous letters on the women's signs.

²⁵ Walsh, Gentleman Jimmy Walker, 48.

baseball on Sundays and to decriminalize boxing. He spoke and lived in open opposition to Prohibition. In witty, free-flowing quips he mocked the dry experiment and frequented illegal speakeasies with his mistress.²⁶ Ultimately, in 1932, Walker had to resign, before the governor could oust him from office.

During the Prohibition era, other colorful characters on both sides of the law became public figures, as organized crime took hold of illegal liquor and federal agents fought in vain to uphold the Volstead Act. Shahn depicts both the deceptions and the violence of organized crime, along with the efforts of Prohibition agents and bootleggers.

"Bootleggers" (fig. 3) shows Shahn's delight at the rumrunners' ingenuity as they conceal and transport their booty in the cleverest of ways. Seven men gather near a rigged still complete with a labyrinth of coils and copper tubing that brews homemade alcohol. The men wink at us as they roll up pants and lift coattails to display contraband bottles of "Golden Wedding Rye" tied to legs and suspended from waists. The mood is light, the winking and cleverness make it all seem like play, and Shahn invites us to be in on the joke. But the force of the law is also present. In "Man Carrying a Bottle" (fig. 4) Shahn shows a close-up portrait of a workingman, signified by his cap and

²⁶ See *ibid.* and Stanley Walker, The Night Club Era (New York: Frederic A. Stokes, Co., 1933).

prominent, capable hands engaged in physical labor. The man lugs a hefty barrel of alcohol on his back. In "Federal Agents Pouring Wine Down a Sewer" (fig. 5), federal agents destroy barrels of wine like those the workingman carried; a sign is posted that announces "Violation of Prohibition."

Shahn establishes the contrast between good-time drinking and repressive law in "Speakeasy Interior" (fig. 6) and "Village Speakeasy: Closed for Violation" (fig. 7). During Prohibition, nightclubs and speakeasies sprang up throughout New York City and were especially popular in Shahn's Greenwich Village neighborhood. In "Speakeasy Interior" tuxedoed men and fashionable ladies drink in downtown New York, most probably Greenwich Village's White Horse Tavern, as alluded to by the white horse statuette near the bar. In "Closed for Violation" Shahn sorrowfully laments that Prohibition has literally hit too close to home. He has carefully lettered street signs and building numbers to tell us the closed tavern is number 22 Bethune-- across the street from the studio he shared with Walker Evans. In tribute to his local watering hole, he continues visual puns at the expense of the authorities by having the police stand next to taxi signs, implying that they too are "public hacks."

By showing the powerful hand of organized crime, Shahn acknowledges the dark side of alcohol and prohibition. "Alley Scene" (fig. 8) is made from a montage of disparate

portraits and images, contrasting a gangland murder with top-hatted men and uptown ladies. A long, tunneling alleyway separates these people and bears a portrait of Al Capone on the left. It was during Prohibition that Al Capone became an American symbol of free enterprise and power. Previously, financial power such as he wielded had been denied to members of ethnic groups and the working classes; the attempt to legislate virtue generated corruption that benefited those held down by nativist forces.²⁷

American Jews were not active in the temperance debate, which they felt was mainly an Anglo-Saxon Protestant concern.²⁸ Traditional Jewish culture encourages moderation and restraint with respect to drink. American Jews, in contrast to other ethnic groups, were not great frequenters of bars and had an extremely low percentage of

²⁷ Attempts to control the power and drinking habits of certain ethnic groups were concurrent with a rise in anti-immigrant sentiment that led to immigration quotas. This closing of America's doors would have extreme repercussions on the fate of European Jews in the 1930s. See Parrish, The Anxious Decades, 104-13, for information on the relationship between "Wets, Drys, and Immigrants." Also see Mike Gold, Jews without Money, 3d ed. (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1990), 36. According to Gold, during the 1920s the Ku Klux Klan credited immigrants with bringing the gangster system to America.

²⁸ Jena Joselit, Our Gang: Jewish Crime and the New York Jewish Community, 1900-1940 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 86-88. Joselit summarizes Jewish attitude toward the observance of the Volstead Act as "the law of the land is Jewish law," or adapting to the dominant ethic of their "host" country.

alcohol-related deaths. Yet largely because of exemptions within the Volstead Act, those American Jews involved with crime and bootlegging were able to profit richly during Prohibition. Article 7 of the Volstead Act permitted the production and sale of wine for sacramental purposes, thus acting as a "growth hormone" for the Jewish underworld.²⁹ Numerous rabbis cropped up with fictional congregations in California's wine districts to serve as outlets for the tendering of sacramental wine.³⁰ Between 1924-1932, Jews were only 3 percent of the population, however, they comprised close to 12 percent of those involved with bootlegging.³¹ During 1924 in New York City, almost three million gallons of sacramental wine was supposedly drunk, a figure that amounts to more than a gallon for each Jewish woman, man, and child. To investigate and arrest what the historian Jena Joselit coyly terms this "remarkable increase in thirst for religion," New York State Prohibition administrators hired Isadore "Izzy" Einstein, a.k.a. "Prohibition Agent #1," and his partner Moe Smith as the first Prohibition agents.³² Einstein, who later wrote his

²⁹ Henry L. Feingold, The Jewish People in America: Entering the Mainstream, 1920-1945 (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 49.

³⁰ Ibid., 49. Fake rabbis also established the Association of Hebrew Orthodox Rabbis in California's wine country to obscure their illegal activities further.

³¹ Ibid., 50.

³² Joselit, Our Gang, 97.

memoirs, was known for his colorful disguises. Izzy and Moe arrested close to two hundred people for bootlegging sacramental wine.³³

In his treatment of Prohibition, Shahn mocks attempts to dictate morality and celebrates the demise of the Volstead Act. While Shahn's message and intentions were much more lighthearted than in his previous works of social commentary such as the Sacco and Vanzetti series, the time was not right for satire. Shahn's image, if accepted, would have been installed while America had been legally wet for less than one year. The acknowledgment that the attempt to control the drinking sports of New York society had failed was not in keeping with the tone of the LaGuardia administration. The series was rejected, and the studies were turned over to the city; with time they became the property of the Museum of the City of New York. Within a year's time, the casino was leveled. Social reform was instituted through Moses's playgrounds rather than murals.

The mayoral change from good-time Walker to reformist LaGuardia created new opportunities for public art commissions, such as the renovation of Riker's Penitentiary. Walker had laid the cornerstone in July 1931 for this modern

³³ Parrish, The Anxious Decades, 100-101. Einstein and Smith became minor celebrities due to their brash and innovative methods and costumes. When Izzy nearly froze to death outside a known speakeasy, Moe Smith brought him into the place, demanding that the barkeep "Give this man a drink! He's just been bitten by the frost!" Upon complying with the request, the bartender was arrested.

facility designed to house over 2,100 men. Envisioned as the "latest type of prison," the penitentiary would include psychiatric, psychological, and medical units, along with adequate exercise space, a school, a library, and a social-service center.³⁴ However, by the time Walker had fled to Europe and LaGuardia had assumed leadership, flaws in the design were revealed. Because the building lacked adequate reinforcement it had already begun to sink into the marshy island.³⁵ The LaGuardia administration simultaneously investigated the awarding of the architectural contract, oversaw the repair of the sinking prison, and loudly blamed Tammany Hall waste and extravagance for the expenditures and delays.³⁶

In 1934 Shahn, with Lou Block, was jointly commissioned to work at Riker's. Shahn's designs illustrated inhumane prisons in contrast to modern facilities. Evaluating and supporting those prisons geared at education and reform, exposing those limited to retribution and physical punishment, Shahn approached the project as a pointed social critic, not as the lighthearted social satirist of the earlier Prohibition series. When the Riker's mural project

³⁴ "Payment Held Up on Sinking Prison," New York Times, 17 January 1933, 2.

³⁵ John C. Carlisle, "A Biographical Study of How the Artist Became a Humanitarian Activist: Ben Shahn, 1930-1946" (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1972), 89.

³⁶ "McGoldrick Calls New Prison a Folly," New York Times, 17 April 1934, 25.

was canceled, Shahn's final sketches were scattered and have all but disappeared. Reconstructing the intended program is an uncertain venture. Fortunately, during the 1930s newspapers reproduced several of the sketches, since the cancellation generated much press coverage. Four negative-image photo reproductions of the final studies remain in the custodianship of the New York City Art Commission, although the whereabouts of the originals are unknown. To approximate the artist's visual and thematic intentions, one needs to consult the writings of Block, Shahn, and prison officials.

Riker's Island was a penitentiary, the type of prison believed to punish criminals most effectively while reforming their characters to prevent recidivism. The penitentiary ideal, which originated in eighteenth-century England and France, featured extreme isolation from society, supervision of the inmates' daily lives, and compulsory labor. The penitentiary was well received in the United States, which developed two distinct variations. Quakers in Pennsylvania isolated the prisoners in individual cells in total silence, their only reading matter a Bible; the prisoner might repent his crimes through religious conversion. The second variation, known as the Auburn plan, opened in New York State in 1825.³⁷ Though isolated in

³⁷ See Philadelphia Museum of Art, Eastern State Penitentiary: Crucible of Good Intentions (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1994).

separate cells at night, the prisoners worked together during the day in silence under an elaborate system of regimentation and surveillance that included the lockstep, striped uniforms, and extensive corporal punishment. Less concerned with spiritual redemption, the Auburn system attempted to remold inmates through prison discipline.³⁸ Michel Foucault has approached the penitentiary as an expression of the "political anatomy." According to Foucault, surveillance--the distinguishing feature of the penitentiary--replicated the power mechanism of the larger social body, the "disciplinary society" of the nineteenth century.³⁹ As a 1930s prison, Riker's instituted control through surveillance and containment, while acknowledging and addressing the complex social and psychological factors that foster crime and recidivism.

When Shahn worked on the Riker's mural, two issues regarding prisons were addressed in the media: the rampant use of corporal punishment in Southern labor camps, especially in Georgia, and the 1933 passage of the Hawes-Cooper Act, which limited the interstate sale of prison goods, thereby reducing the demand for goods made in job-training programs in prisons. Although Shahn addressed both

³⁸ Estelle Freedman, Their Sister's Keepers: Women's Prison Reform in America, 1830-1930 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1981), 8-10.

³⁹ Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

issues in his mural, it is important to establish whom he conceived as the audience for his work. He did not see the prisoners as either his primary or sole audience, although he knew that the men would have regular access to the mural. Yet the majority of scholars who have discussed the Riker's mural have made this assumption and developed their arguments accordingly.⁴⁰ From the beginning, Shahn let both the city and the correctional officials know the mural's content and its intended audience, and the artist and patron reached a consensus on these matters. Prison officials, sociologists, and other experts made up Shahn's "captive audience." In a lengthy letter to Audrey MacMahon written in April 1935 after officials objected and halted their mural, Block and Shahn reviewed previous discussions about the mural's audience:

We made it clear then, that the murals were not primarily intended for the inmates, but rather to visitors and visiting penologists. The Commissioner agreed to this objective, and supplemented it by a plan which would include lectures before the murals to students of sociology and kindred subjects, and he further pointed out the interest visiting penologists,

⁴⁰ Francine Tyler, "Artists Respond to the Great Depression and the Threat of Fascism: The New York Artists' Union and Its Magazine Art Front (1934-1937)" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1991), 291-93. Other studies that assume that the Riker's prisoners were the intended audience of the Shahn's mural include Greta Berman, The Lost Years: Mural Painting in New York City under the WPA/FAP, 1935-1943 (New York: Garland Publishers, Inc., 1978), 64-66, and Carlisle, "A Biographical Study," 89-96. Regardless, Berman's work is a significant and groundbreaking study in the then nascent field of New Deal scholarship.

psychiatrists and other specialists in the field of penal activities would find in the paintings. It was also agreed that a fully descriptive booklet would be prepared after the completion of the painting, to be distributed not only to all types of visitors, but to the inmates as well.⁴¹

Ultimately, as I will argue, Shahn's mural commands society to treat prisoners in a humane manner, rather than bullying prisoners into "toeing the line." Shahn places the burden of reform on society and its institutions rather than on the individual criminal. The artist's interest in presenting lectures before his mural and producing an accompanying didactic booklet indicates the educational potential that he envisioned for his work. Reform through action, not merely decoration, motivated the artist.

The artist's decision to focus primarily on prison officials and visiting penologists, sociologists, and so forth, tells much about his perception of the mechanics of society. Through examining and then depicting how society and prisons give rise to crime and recidivism, Shahn is attempting to alter history. His work is a recognition that the individual--free or incarcerated--is shaped by social

⁴¹ Lou Block and Ben Shahn to Audrey MacMahon, 16 April 1935, Lou Block Papers. In a letter to LaGuardia dated 10 December 1934 (Fiorello LaGuardia Papers, Municipal Archives, New York City), the artists wrote: "We would also like to point out that these murals are not directed to the inmates of the penitentiary but, in accordance with the plan of Commissioner MacCormick, are intended to visualize for visitors, especially visiting penologists and students of sociology, the problems which have been set forth in this series of murals."

forces and institutions. Although concerned with the individual humanity of each prisoner, he pushes the sentimental aside to attack the system.

Ben Shahn and Lou Block, who had also assisted Diego Rivera on Man at the Crossroads, cooperatively conceived and proposed the ill-fated mural for Riker's Island Penitentiary. Artists who were employed by the Federal Art Project of the Works Progress Administration (WPA/FAP) were given a handbook detailing Rivera's fresco technique, yet Shahn and Block were fortunate to have acquired the skill directly from the master. Shahn and Block prepared the commission as a pair, traveling and researching together, but then neatly divided the mural into two distinct parts. Shahn picked opposing walls in a prison corridor leading to the multipurpose room, one of whose functions was as the prison chapel. Block selected the chapel itself for his mural and planned fifteen panels on religion. His work was to illustrate the "most important religious influences in America, for their educational and devotional value to the inmates of the institution"⁴²--a more abstract and allegorical scheme than his partner's narrative, realistic investigation.

Audrey McMahan of the College Art Association, director of the Temporary Emergency Relief Administration (TERA),

⁴² Lou Block to Wilbur Glenn Voliva, 4 March 1935, Lou Block Papers.

supported Shahn and Block's plans.⁴³ Commissioner Austin MacCormick, Department of Correction, New York City, awarded them a one-year contract to research and prepare their work. MacCormick arranged for the artists to visit various penitentiaries throughout the state system to interview prisoners and officials, photograph, and sketch (fig. 9).⁴⁴ At each site, Shahn drew thumbnail sketches of the prisoners, the wardens, guards, and the facilities, noting impressions and factual details to incorporate into the mural (fig. 10).⁴⁵ In a notebook Shahn wrote of the quality of prison life that he directly witnessed, the social causes of criminal activity, and avenues for reform, referring to "hopelessness of getting employment when free," "roots of crime in tenements and poverty," "solitary," and "guards who can only order but have forgotten how to

⁴³ Letters in the Lou Block Papers make it clear that Block and Shahn conceived of doing a mural for a prison and began presenting the idea in August 1933.

⁴⁴ Philippa Whiting, "Speaking about Art," American Magazine of Art 28 (August 1935), 492-93.

⁴⁵ For information on Shahn's use of a camera and photographs for planning the Riker's project, see Charlotte M. Mayes, "Three Government-Sponsored Murals by Ben Shahn and Their Relationship to Documentary Photography of the 1930s" (M.A. thesis, Hunter College, 1987), 80-81. According to Lou Block, this was the first time that Shahn used a camera in preparing his paintings; the suggestion came from Walker Evans.

listen."⁴⁶ In these brief notes Shahn identifies the social conditions that seemed to him to foster crime and the inhumane conditions that prevent the imprisoned criminal from reforming.

In addition to making his site visits, Shahn consulted books on Jewish ethics for theoretical and historical background. As a child in Lithuania, Shahn was schooled in Jewish ethics; according to the artist's wife Bernarda Bryson Shahn herself an artist, he retained an identification with these teachings. At the beginning of the Riker's proposal, Shahn reacquainted himself with the texts that he had first studied in Lithuania.⁴⁷ In a sketchbook he listed scholarly books and resources, including texts on biblical and moral issues and on ancient Hebraic laws and rulings, that he could read at the New York Public Library. Samuel Mendelssohn's study of ancient Hebraic law and the Talmud refreshed Shahn's knowledge of rabbinic teachings. In it Mendelssohn wrote:

The system of criminal jurisprudence of the Ancient Hebrews, as recorded in the Talmud and in contemporaneous Rabbinic literature, was one which enforced civil order and secured the safety and peace of society by mildness and consideration,

⁴⁶ The notebook is in the collection of Ezra Shahn, New York City, to whom I am grateful for sharing the material with me.

⁴⁷ Bernarda Bryson Shahn, interview with Alejandro Anreus, Roosevelt, New Jersey, 12 October 1993. I am grateful to Alejandro Anreus for sharing the transcripts with me.

tempering justice with love of humanity.⁴⁸

According to ancient Hebraic law, clemency should be pervasive. Every attempt should be made to acquit the accused and save his life, for it is written in the Talmud that "whoever occasions the destruction of a single life, is as great a sinner as if he had destroyed the whole world; and on the other hand, who so brings about the preservation of a single life, is as meritorious as if he had preserved the whole world."⁴⁹ In his Riker's studies, Shahn presents a humanistic and optimistic view of the individual's ability to reform if given the proper societal and educational support.

In the early 1930s Shahn had easily shifted from illuminating a Passover Haggadah to painting images in support of Sacco and Vanzetti. In the Riker's studies he negotiated deftly between ancient Talmudic teachings and the contemporary American penal system. For the latter, he located visual sources within popular culture and the mass media. By going to the movies, just like other Americans,

⁴⁸ Samuel Mendelssohn, Criminal Jurisprudence of the Ancient Hebrews (Baltimore: M. Curlander, 1891), 15-21. Other books that Shahn consulted include William Bradford, An Enquiry How Far the Punishment of Death Is Necessary in Pennsylvania (Philadelphia: T. Dobson, 1793); James Hastings, Dictionary of the Bible (New York: Charles Scribner, 1924); and Coleman Phillipson, Three Criminal Law Reformers (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, Ltd., 1923).

⁴⁹ Mendelssohn, Criminal Jurisprudence, 21. The Talmud is the literature of the Jews. It treats religious, civil, and criminal law as well as history, mathematics, astronomy, medicine, and metaphysics.

Shahn learned about prison life from what have been called "social-consciousness" films. During the early 1930s, the "motif of imprisonment and entrapment was a popular one," represented by such titles as The Big House (1930), Ladies of the Big House (1931), 20,000 Years in Sing Sing (1930), and Convict's Code (1930).⁵⁰ In his sketchbook, Shahn made a quick note to get stills from these films and others, including the searing I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang (1932).⁵¹

Directed by Mervyn Leroy and starring Paul Muni, I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang perfectly expressed the national mood in 1932: desperation, suffering, and hopelessness (fig. 11).⁵² The film historian Andrew Bergman credits the film with exposing chain gangs, inhumane prison punishment, and unjust, racist Southern law, while breaking away from

⁵⁰ Andrew Bergman, We're in the Money: Depression America and Its Films (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1971), 92-109. Bergman examines the "social-consciousness" films of the Warner Brothers studio. He sees these films as evidence of Jack Warner's "abiding faith" in Franklin D. Roosevelt, his administration, and its policies.

⁵¹ Robert S. McElvaine, The Great Depression: America, 1929-1941 (New York: Random House, 1993), 213. I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang, which came out of the Warners Brothers studio, predates the New Deal.

⁵² Muni's James Allen returns from the world war wanting to leave behind his factory job and advance to the profession of engineer. The American army has trained him to want more out of life. A series of financial and family pressures, a case of bad luck, and run-ins with the system transform Allen from respectable war hero and family man into hobo and outlaw. The film outlines the "process by which an individual could move outside the law by standing still." Bergman, We're in the Money, 94.

racial stereotypes that pervaded white Hollywood films:

In the harsh and mindless world of the chain gang the imagery was all of confinement: the lock, the fence, the chain. And the camera lingered on prisoners' faces, all beaten in, devoid of hope or any sense of potentiality save the dull fears of beating and death. Black prisoners were segregated, and in an era when black people were depicted as having the emotional range of comic strip characters (on a continuum from "Lord have mercy" to a grinning "Yes, ma'am!"), Leroy presented them as suffering, trapped human beings. (In a contemporary chain gang expose, Roland West's "Hell's Highway," the black prisoners could usually be found singing cheerful ditties.)⁵³

In his Riker's studies, Shahn condemns Southern prisons for their routine use of corporal punishment, forced labor, and archaic conditions. In one study, a black and a white prisoner walk outdoors, their gait held back by metal leg shackles, their heads down and dejected, their bodies swimming in oversized uniforms (fig. 12). The jowly prison guard walks closely behind, barking orders, flaunting the authority of the state represented by the white courthouse.⁵⁴ Crumbling field shacks and metal fences that lock in shackled prison laborers would have contrasted sharply with the modern Riker's facility.

One scans this portion of the design futilely to ferret out any sense of hope or rehabilitation--but there is

⁵³ Ibid., 94-95.

⁵⁴ A memorandum from the mayor's office proposed that scenes of Southern prison camps and police line-ups be eliminated, 7 December 1934, Fiorello LaGuardia Papers, Municipal Archives, New York City.

none. The state's power is omnipotent and ubiquitous, and includes the rights to hold people, to inflict torture, and to garner the rewards of physical labors.⁵⁵ Although he had not yet traveled to the South, Shahn used newspapers, films, and books highlighting Southern injustices, particularly Georgia chain gangs, for ideas and images (fig. 13). In a letter to Walter White of the N.A.A.C.P., Shahn and Block asked him to verify Southern prison conditions and the truthfulness of Joseph Spivak's investigative book Georgia Nigger (figs. 14 and 15).⁵⁶

Shahn's image of the Southern guard and chained prisoners recalls passages and photographs from Spivak's story of David, a black prisoner held in a Georgia camp, and the white guard who rules his life. Of the guard, Spivak writes:

There is little to be earned guarding the chained creatures who lay Georgia's roads but carrying a shotgun and leaning against a shady tree is easier than sweating in the fields or breathing dust in a cotton gin; so Charlie Counts became a guard. During his hours on duty he was lord and master. And though even poverty stricken Crackers look down upon a guard, the sense of power in having men under him soothed the harassing struggle to house and feed and clothe a wife and brood of

⁵⁵ For information on the appearance and social manipulations of forced labor, see Foucault, Discipline and Punish, 25.

⁵⁶ White responded to Lou Block, 21 September 1934, Lou Block Papers. On behalf of the artists, White also wrote to the editor of the Chattanooga News, the Commission on Interracial Cooperation (Atlanta), and the United Press Association. John L. Spivak, Georgia Nigger (New York: Brewer, Warren and Putnam, 1932).

ragged children on the dollar and twenty-five cents a day the county paid him.⁵⁷

In his book, Spivak described and included photographs of the leg shackles that bind the prisoners' legs, which Shahn depicts in the mural. Termed "spikes," these twenty-pound weights were riveted around the legs, creating a "drawn out torture leading to exhaustion." Spivak writes that

during the day they rub against the legs, creating sores which often become infected. Such infections are known as "shackle poison." At night the convicts' rest is repeatedly broken by the need of raising his legs whenever he turns in his bunk.⁵⁸

Spivak's photographs showed convicts hung by their wrists and ankles in stocks, suspended inches above the ground, and left out in the sun. Known as the "Georgia Rack," the stocks would stretch and contain the prisoner and were used liberally in the South.

The early 1930s, saw growing public awareness of and outrage over the torture and inhumane treatment of prisoners, especially African-American men in the South. Conditions in Georgia were notoriously bad. Authorities soundly defended the use of stocks in the over 150 chain-gang camps in the state. A news clipping in Lou Block's papers describes Southern prison camps:

[S]tocks are authorized by the state prison commission as one form of punishment called on its books "restricted movement." The convict sits on

⁵⁷ Spivak, Georgia Nigger, 6.

⁵⁸ Ibid., n.p.

the sharpened edge of a board, hands and feet stretched out before him and locked in holes between two other boards. An hour, the rules say, is the limit of this punishment, which is inflicted by the camp warden on any prisoners who do not work hard enough on the roads, or who breaks discipline in the camps.⁵⁹

Shahn's Southern images were part of his agenda to illustrate the direction for prisons in the 1930s to take. Shahn created a montage of prison life, juxtaposing the positive with the negative, using painted architectural fragments--brick walls, cell blocks, empty factories--to separate one passage from the next. Block and Shahn wrote to Mayor LaGuardia on 10 December 1934, describing the negative portion of the mural as follows:

Police line-up; Cell block in an unsanitary prison; Idleness and the milling of prisoners; Public whipping; Dreary, unproductive labor; Southern prison camps; Prisoners after 5 o'clock in their cells; Over-crowded, unsanitary dormitories; The restrictions of visiting with a metal screen between prisoner and visitor; and the release of the prisoner and an intimation of a return to crime.⁶⁰

Shahn's stylistic debt to Rivera is strong as evidenced by the high horizon line, the interplay of differing recessional levels, the layering of figures, and the use of

⁵⁹ "Chain Gang! Dreaded Stocks, Cages Found in Georgia State Prison Camps," The NEA Service, 1 February 1933, 1.

⁶⁰ Lou Block and Ben Shahn to Fiorello LaGuardia, 10 December 1934, Fiorello LaGuardia Papers, Municipal Archives, New York City. The letter acknowledges that originally the artists had thought of treating the history of penology, presenting the bad features of archaic penal methods, and visualizing the trend toward reform. Block and Shahn decided the murals would have more force if they only depicted prisons of their own time.

the architectural fragments to serve as thematic transitions. If Shahn had been allowed to complete the Riker's mural, the result would have been his mural most closely aligned to those by Rivera. In the first panel (fig. 16) Shahn shows an overcrowded prison, which is little more than a walled-in area to hold prisoners without any recreation, education, or employment. The prison, therefore, is the site to punish the corporal man: men are crowded together like animals and contained, silenced, or shackled; one man is being beaten and whipped. Prison is either confinement or torture. In his next panel, Shahn illustrates the emotional and psychological states that drain prisoners within these inhumane penitentiaries (fig. 17). Here, he emphasizes the individual: faces can be read and emotional states evaluated. In a cramped cell two men are held after lock-up: they are bored or asleep, and idle. In a long corridor crowded with cots, men try to rest, but their sleep is troubled (figs. 18 and 19).⁶¹ During visiting hours a wire screen separates family from prisoner, prohibiting any semblance of normal social interaction. In these two scenes of the extreme torture and psychological isolation of prison life, Shahn illustrates the state's power over a man's body and mind--in the former, by physical acts of punishment, in the latter, by emotional deprivation. The climax hardly comes as a surprise:

⁶¹ Whiting, "Speaking about Art," 492.

"reformed" men leave the prison walls and queue up on the jobless lines, unprepared, without skills in hand. Their return to crime is inevitable.

At the time of Shahn's critique of reform and education, the need for purposeful prison labor was a pressing social and legal issue. During the early 1930s, in the wake of prison riots, social activists called for meaningful labor to help alleviate prison frustration. Ironically, at the same time, the Hawes-Cooper Act was made law and entered public debate. Social reformers wanted prisons to provide opportunities for meaningful work in an attempt to reduce prisoner idleness, as well as to provide income to the families of the incarcerated.

Idleness in prison life is shortsighted and a menace to the general community as well as to the inmates. . . . The governors are concerned over the effects of the Hawes-Cooper Act, Federal legislation which, beginning in 1934, will restrict interstate commerce in prison-made goods.⁶²

The next two panels are optimistic; Shahn shows active rehabilitation, education, and socialization designed to

⁶² "Prison Labor," Saturday Evening Post, 6 September 1930, 26. The article also observes that "if the prisons are self-supporting, then the burden upon the whole community, including labor, in the form of taxes is that much less. Nor is this burden merely that of the prison institution itself; the families of prisoners must be cared for somehow. If the prisoner is enabled to earn wages he can send part of them to his family. In one large prison, for the period 1927-28, forty per cent of the more than 1000 prisoners admitted had wives and children. In one large city, for 1928-29, the welfare department reported 12,810 cases cared for, of which 873 were the dependents of prisoners."

break the cycle of crime successfully. Productive labor is presented as the key to reform and the end to recidivism. Men work outdoors and at machines unhampered by chains or guards (fig. 20). In the unfolding scenes, the men gain tangible skills with which to reclaim their lives. They play baseball, learn to perform automotive repair, and participate in the running of their facility, voting to achieve a group consensus when a prisoner breaks a rule (fig. 21). According to Shahn's sketches, rehabilitation depends on the engagement and enrichment of a man's body, intellect, character, and skills. Action, education, and cooperation define the socialized man.

In these brief passages, Shahn and Block chart the prison's evolution from a site to contain forced laborers into the more elevated conception of a laboratory for individual reform and improvement. This evolution parallels the social shift, described by Foucault, that moved away from the public display of force on the body--"torture as public spectacle" or the focus on the body as a site for punishment--toward working on the soul through isolation. The final scenes, in which Shahn diagrams productive, purposeful labor and education, are indebted to theories of American prison reformers.

Shahn highlights the innovations and theories of one particular reformer, Thomas Mott Osborne. Osborne was praised by Franklin D. Roosevelt as a man who "had courage,

had vision . . . and was right in holding that prisons themselves were the key to the problem."⁶³ Shahn includes in the mural a portrait of Osborne, who was a New York State prison reformer during the early twentieth century (fig. 22). As had Rivera before him, Shahn reaches back into recent history to isolate a figure--Osborne--whom he portrays outside of his actual time, here in the context of the 1930s.⁶⁴ Shahn's interpretation of Osborne's theories form the basis for his Riker's mural. Shahn uses the portrait of Osborne as the transition point from bad to good prisons, writing:

The wall of the chapel entrance contains a symbolic figure of Thomas Mott Osborne pointing the way toward proper prison methods. Behind him is a repetition of the theme of the dreary round of prisoners in dark prison corridors. The long righthand wall contains the positive activities of the institutions which are administered under more enlightened methods. The introduction into prisons of schools for illiterates, facilities for teaching trades with well equipped machine shops and civilian instructors, outdoor recreations, and work under healthful conditions are shown on this wall.⁶⁵

⁶³ Quoted in Frank Tannenbaum, Osborne of Sing Sing (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1933), ix.

⁶⁴ Ida Rodriguez-Prampolini, "Rivera's Concept of History," in Diego Rivera, exh. cat. (Detroit: The Detroit Institute of Arts, 1986), 133.

⁶⁵ Memorandum to Mayor La Guardia, December 1934, Lou Block Papers. In a letter to Audrey MacMahon dated 16 April 1935, Lou Block and Ben Shahn outline suggestions made by Commissioner MacCormick: "At a certain stage in the development of the sketches, a suggestion was made by the Commissioner bearing on two important evils existing in maladministered prisons, sex perversion and drug addiction. He wished that in some way these problems might be

Osborne's concern with the failure of prisons to reform inmates and to break the cycle of crime led him to incarcerate himself voluntarily. Wanting to experience prison life directly before making recommendations and policies, he wrote:

I am curious to find out, therefore, whether I am right; whether our Prison system is as unintelligent as I think it is; whether it flies in the face of all human nature, as I think it does; whether guided by sympathy and experience, we cannot find something far better to take its place, as I believe we can. So by permission of the authorities and with your help, I am coming here to learn what I can first hand. I have put myself on trial in the court of conscience and a verdict has been rendered of "guilty"--guilty of having lived for many years of my life indifferent to and ignorant of what was going on behind these walls. For this crime I have sentenced myself to a short term at hard labor in Auburn prison.⁶⁶

A tight, claustrophobic cell compresses the figure of Osborne, who sits hunched on a stool, his head scraping the low ceiling, his arms and shoulders butting against the confining walls. Dark lines encircle his eyes and brow to express wear and pensiveness. With chin cupped in his hand, Osborne is isolated in his thoughts. This portrait corresponds to one of several passages in Osborne's book in which he describes his 4-by-7-1/2-foot cell, where he spent

incorporated. We realized the importance of his suggestion, but felt that it would add very little plastically, and would have been difficult to present ideologically." Lou Block Papers.

⁶⁶ Thomas Mott Osborne, Within Prison Walls: Being a Narrative of Personal Experience during a Week of Voluntary Confinement in the State Prison at Auburn, New York (New York and London: D. Appleton and Co., 1914), 16-17.

his internment with only a Bible to occupy his time and enrich his soul.⁶⁷

According to Foucault, America based its prisons on the English model of individual cells, an architectural model and penal system related to Christian monastic practices. Isolated within a cell, a prisoner would reflect on his soul to reunite with God.⁶⁸ Shahn, however, avoids the monastic and Christian references of Osborne's isolation and focuses on the socioscientific aspects; the purpose of Osborne's self-imposed isolation is to open a dialogue with imprisoned brethren, not with God or his own conscience. His cell is a research laboratory to gather information that will lead to action and reform. Furthermore, Osborne placed himself within Auburn, a penitentiary that practiced corporal punishment, which he would later denounce in his writings.

In his mural, Shahn diagrams Osborne's theories on prison education, physical exercise, collective decision making, and useful, paid labor. Drawn from Osborne's manifesto, The Prison of the Future, which stipulates the need for "education; not to retaliate for a wrong done but to see that similar wrongs are not perpetuated in the

⁶⁷ Ibid., 24-25, 31. Osborne acknowledges that the cell offers the opportunity to read and write and to review the Bible, but he wonders about people who lack the basic skills to pursue these activities.

⁶⁸ Foucault, Discipline and Punish, 122.

future,"⁶⁹ Osborne's ideal prison is as follows:

Inside the prisoner works in the shop, at some industrial occupation, studies and exercises in a gymnasium built for that purpose. At night he rooms in a clean, airy dormitory. After he has proved to the satisfaction of his fellow-prisoners that he is fit to be trusted with honor and obligation, he becomes a member of the Mutual Welfare League and is promoted to a place outside the walls.⁷⁰

Central to both Shahn's treatment and Osborne's writings is the need for useful prison labor to provide prisoners with wages and useful skills for use back in society. (Yet, of course, getting a job, even if trained and without a prison record, was not easy in the 1930s.) If prisoners were gainfully and meaningfully employed, the cycle of poverty, listlessness, and crime would be broken:

Each man has a choice of occupation. He can work on the farm which raises produce for the entire community or he can pursue the manufacturing occupation which he began in the reception prison In such a prison as this there will be no excuse for a man not showing improvement physically, mentally and morally.⁷¹

In Shahn's mural, shackled and beaten-down Southern prisoners are contrasted with the men in Osborne's modern facilities, who stand upright and are actively engaged in a

⁶⁹ Thomas Mott Osborne, The Prison of the Future (White Plains, N.Y.: H. W. Wilson, Co., 1917), 3. In a debate that resonates today, Osborne argues that courts and prisons aimed at retaliation are fatally flawed institutions and that the notion that fear acts as a deterrent to crime is not true.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 5.

⁷¹ Ibid., 5-7.

variety of tasks. These men exude physical pride, emotional strength, and health. Their prison uniforms-just ordinary shirts, pants, and coveralls-are subdued in comparison to the striped clothes of the Southern prisoners; in fact, only the setting clearly indicates that they are in a prison. The heavy hand of the state is not obviously present. The only man acting in authority teaches automotive repair, his suit and tie symbolizing middle-class respectability in a scene that could be an adult-education class at a local high school (fig. 23).

By depicting men working, playing, acting in cooperation, and socializing, Shahn acknowledges that men function at many levels within society and argues that to rehabilitate these men during incarceration each level must be addressed. The many components of men's social character, as opposed to the few offered to women, are made explicit when Shahn's mural is contrasted with Lucienne Bloch's for the Women's House of Detention, New York City, 1935.⁷²

Prison murals offer a unique opportunity to deconstruct the question of audience vis-a-vis gendered imagery. It is often difficult to establish the demographics and especially the gender of viewers of New Deal murals. Yet with prison murals, we can speak with greater exactitude as to the

⁷² The news media were the first to link the two projects. See "Mural for Prison Rejected by City: But Women Like Theirs," New York Times, 8 May 1935, 21.

gender makeup of an audience. Simply put, murals placed in male facilities were primarily, if not overwhelmingly so, seen by men. Murals placed in female facilities, it follows, were viewed by women. Therefore, Shahn's Riker's mural represents a male artist's depiction of men to be placed in a male environment. In the case of Bloch's mural, the artist, subjects, and audience are all female. A comparison of the two murals illustrates the acceptable female and male social roles for prisoners to achieve, through either personal redemption or institutional reeducation.

Bloch's "The Cycle of a Woman's Life," funded by the WPA/FAP, dealt with the topic of children, which she thought "would interest all women."⁷³ Although Bloch had planned a cycle of murals, she painted only one fresco, Childhood, which has since been destroyed (fig. 24). Created for the women's recreation room, Childhood presented an idyllic scene of women and children of differing races, united by motherhood, playing in a city park.⁷⁴ An image celebrating

⁷³ For information on Lucienne Bloch's mural oeuvre see Michele Vishny, "Lucienne Bloch: The New York City Murals," Woman's Art Journal (Spring-Summer 1992), 24. Bloch, like Shahn and Block, worked with Diego Rivera on the Rockefeller Center murals.

⁷⁴ Jonathan P. Harris, "State Power and Cultural Discourse: Federal Art Project Murals in New Deal USA," Block (Winter 1987-88), 28-42. Harris offers bold, critical assessments of the relation between state and citizen and how this relation is negotiated through federal art projects, programs, and murals. I must, however, fault Harris for his disinterest in examining the murals within a

intimacy between women and children seems an ironic, even taunting, decoration in a prison for women. Yet Bloch insisted that the inmates saw her mural in a positive light. The women, she recalled, would adopt individual fresco children to whom they would give names and identities.⁷⁵ The painted children offered to the prisoners the opportunity to keep active the socially prized skills of nurturing and motherhood.⁷⁶

Bloch's focus on the reproductive or sexual aspects of womanhood is consistent with the framing of women's crimes in relation to sexual activity or sexual purity. As Estelle Freedman has written, the historic infrequency of women's incarceration relates directly to the unique female relationships with institutions of social control. Imprisonment developed simultaneously with the extension to men of political liberties and economic rights; the abuse of these privileges resulted in the denial of political and

specific context of American culture and history. Therefore although he proposes that the children in Bloch's Childhood signify the inmates themselves, and the women teachers of the state (38-39), this is a flawed, provocative reading that lacks grounding in the facts of American womanhood.

⁷⁵ Berman, The Lost Years, 232-33. Bloch also stated that the children became the subject of letters to the outside world, indicating how a mural can "act as a healthy tonic on the lives of all of us."

⁷⁶ For further information on women and prisons, see Freedman, Estelle B. Their Sisters' Keepers: Women's Prison Reform in America, 1830-1930. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1981.

economic liberties through imprisonment. Women, whose social and economic sphere was limited to the home, had fewer liberties to abuse and therefore were less vulnerable to infractions and incarceration.⁷⁷

Freedman, a feminist historian, establishes the history of female-specific crimes and social retribution. She explains that "only after certain categories of female crime emerged within a sexual ideology of female purity were more women punished in jails and prisons."⁷⁸ In the mid-nineteenth century, the small number of women in prison reflected the different types of crime for which men and women were convicted. Of the three major categories of crimes--against person, property, or public order--only perpetrators of the last group included a significant number of women. The most frequent women's crimes were petty street crimes and those defined by moral and sexual codes.⁷⁹ In 1875 Susan B. Anthony provided the strongest expression of the economic origins of women's fall in her address "Social Purity." Anthony distinguished between the causes of crime in men and women, claiming that the former acted from "love of vice," while the latter acted "from absolute want of the necessaries of life." It was financial need, not sexual depravity, that drove women to the

⁷⁷ Ibid., 10-11.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 11.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 14-15.

streets.⁸⁰ The establishment of separate women's prisons was part of the greater process of female institution-building. Ellen Chaney Johnson, a prison superintendent, recommended such "softening" influences on women prisoners as flowers, farm animals, music, and visits to the infant nursery, in order to uphold traditional definitions of womanhood; her ideas are consistent with the wall decoration that Bloch created.⁸¹ Over the years, continuing from the Progressive era into the New Deal, reformers and moral critics remained unconcerned with training incarcerated women to perform productive labor since to do so would have been in opposition to the domestic definition of womanhood.

In Childhood, Bloch celebrates maternal activities and recreations; black and white mothers sit together and enjoy needlework.⁸² Bloch's depiction of motherhood and family is an example of the New Deal's promotion of traditional gender roles through its cultural programs. According to the historian Kimm Carlton-Smith, the theme of women in a park exemplifies the gender-coding of space in New Deal art. Public parks and other areas easily accessible to women

⁸⁰ Ibid., 44-46.

⁸¹ Ibid., 145-47.

⁸² Both Bloch's and Shahn's murals are racially integrated, in comparison with the segregated Southern prisons.

signified the female extension of the domestic sphere.⁸³ As Barbara Melosh has established, in New Deal art women are almost always depicted with children, secondary to their male partner; rarely are they shown alone or with female companions.⁸⁴ New Deal art and theater actively equated womanhood with the maternal and familial.⁸⁵ In viewing Childhood, the prisoner's sanctioned role--that of mother--is reinforced.

While Bloch privileges the emotional and maternal aspects of women's lives, she does acknowledge women's potential as urban workers. In the distance, along the horizon, she has painted highrise housing projects and factories, symbols of the urban, modern, industrial workplace.⁸⁶ However, within Bloch's mural, work and motherhood are not visually balanced, nor were they considered equally viable social options for women in the 1930s. Yet the art historian Jonathan Harris, in analyzing the mural, incorrectly states that Bloch offers women equal

⁸³ Kimn Carlton-Smith, "A New Deal for Women: Women Artists and the Federal Art Project, 1935-1939" (Ph.D. diss., Rutgers University, 1990), 273-75.

⁸⁴ Barbara Melosh, Engendering Culture: Manhood and Womanhood in New Deal Public Art and Theater (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 61.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 3.

⁸⁶ Harris, "State Power," 38. For further information on the status of working women, see Susan Ware, Holding Their Own: American Women in the 1930s (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982), 21-53.

options as either wage-earner or mother. He fails to acknowledge that New Deal America sanctioned the role of mother far and above that of worker for women. Women wage-earners had to face open hostility and were chastised for robbing men of their roles as breadwinners. In fact, Bloch places the role of female wage-earner in the background, foregrounding the role of mother--biology is destiny. Unlike Shahn's male-oriented image, Bloch's mural does not seek to enlighten the prison administrators, nor does she address the issue of rehabilitation or job training. Bloch's mural celebrates motherhood, domesticity, and family, while Shahn's ignores fatherhood and family. Shahn concentrates on male roles and responsibilities that extend beyond the domestic realm into the greater social body.

While Bloch's mural was actualized, Shahn's was not, despite the initial approval of Mayor LaGuardia.⁸⁷ Although the mayor had proclaimed Shahn's designs as "swell" and a credit to his administration, he hedged on matters of aesthetics and deferred to the opinion of the Municipal Art Commission. Although the federal government was to fund the Riker's project, because the prison was a municipal institution the Art Commission held veto power over matters of decoration and design. Overstepping these parameters, they disapproved of the mural on "psychological grounds." The academic painter Jonas Lie was included in the three-

⁸⁷ LaGuardia gave his approval on 12 May 1934.

member committee that convened on 11 February 1935, to review Shahn's designs. When passing this judgment and later addressing the press and critics, Lie stepped forward as the spokesperson, relishing the opportunity to denounce the federal mural program.

As president of the National Academy of Design, Jonas Lie was part of the conservative, old-guard art establishment of New York City. During the 1930s, when the art market had collapsed along with most other luxury venues, Lie continued to sell work and to maintain a steady clientele.⁸⁸ He proudly positioned himself in opposition to the federal art projects and was an outspoken critic of socially relevant art. In February 1935, after rejecting Shahn's mural designs, he spoke to the New York Times on the general subject of American murals and social content in art.⁸⁹ Lie questioned the practice of creating murals with content specific to the uses of buildings for which they were intended--hospital themes for hospitals, prison themes for prisons, and so forth. After viewing an exhibition of mural painters at the Grand Central Art Galleries, in which Shahn participated, Lie denounced social realist imagery:

[T]reason is no less treason because it is pictorial or literary. . . . [A]rt is not art when it is propaganda. [If in a painting] beauty carries across more than propaganda, then

⁸⁸ Tyler, "Artists Respond," 292.

⁸⁹ "Propaganda in Art Denounced by Lie," New York Times, 15 February 1935, 22.

propaganda is justifiable, but if a painting is merely propaganda in the guise of art, then I say down with it.⁹⁰

Lie's criticisms were consistent with his perception of Shahn's murals. Lie and the commission objected to the Shahn mural on the grounds that the imagery might cause damage to the prisoners, charges that masked their aesthetic objections. Lie's unwillingness to object to the mural purely on the grounds of aesthetics and message is intriguing. Instead, he cloaks his objections in the guise of psychological inappropriateness, as if such a gauge were any the less subjective. Lie was untrained to assess the minds of the inmates and the potential for Shahn's murals to catapult the men into revolt. One could argue, rightly, that Shahn was not any better trained to assess mental states. However, Shahn was clearly better informed than Lie as to the realities of prison life and prisoners' lives. Yet despite the limits of Lie's knowledge, the decision of the commission held.

In order to overcome what they believed to be the last obstacle to the completion of the Riker's project and the Art Commission's decision, Shahn, Block, and prison officials arranged for the mural sketches to be exhibited to inmates at Welfare Island, who were soon to be transferred

⁹⁰ Ibid. Lie made his remarks at a panel discussion on mural painting held under the auspices of the Mural Painters Society. Edwin H. Blashfield also spoke and we can assume that he heartily agreed with Lie.

to Riker's Island. The artists and MacCormick, in collaboration with the psychologist Dr. Schulman, designed a survey that was given to forty men, along with the following statement:

Here is a set of pictures showing the good and bad sides of prison life. The small ones are sketches and the large ones will give you some idea of how it will look on the wall. This is planned for a mural in one of the halls of a brand new and modern prison building. The artists would like to know what you think of these pictures.

The men were to examine the sketches, return to their seats, and respond to the following four questions written on a large blackboard:

1. What do you think about these pictures?
2. How do you feel about having them on the walls of a new prison?
3. In your opinion what will other men here think about it?
4. Visitors will also go through the halls. Of what interest do you think these pictures will be to them?⁹¹

In soliciting the opinions of the prisoners, Shahn and the officials went against their initial intent to direct their mural primarily to penal authorities and social agents. This change in strategy was calculated to counter Lie's inflammatory charges of the murals' inappropriateness. The results of the poll were very positive. Of forty respondents, thirty-four expressed support for Shahn's designs, with two men each either stating objections, indifference, or not supplying an answer.

⁹¹ Lou Block and Ben Shahn to Audrey MacMahon, 16 April 1935, Lou Block Papers.

Backed by the support of the prisoners, Shahn and Block naively thought they could overrule the negative decision of the Art Commission. In a letter to Audrey MacMahon they objected to the ruling:

We cannot understand why the question of psychological effect entered into the deliberations of the Commission, and why Commissioner MacCormick did not clarify for them the premises on which the work was originally begun, ie., that the murals were not directed to the inmates. The Art Commission rejected the murals on the ground of their psychological unfitness. They were not vetoed on artistic grounds. At no time were their artistic merit questioned.⁹²

In the interim, Shahn caricatured Lie in a cartoon for the Artists Union newspaper Art Front (fig. 25). Depicting Lie with a bucket of whitewash in hand, a prop that mockingly refers to Lie's numerous public pronouncements on the desirability of painting over political murals, Shahn had his moment to jeer back at Lie. But Lie's power was mightier, and his mouthpiece--the New York Times--more far-reaching than Art Front.

In May 1935 what had been private deliberations on behalf of the mayor, penal authorities, and the Municipal Art Commission became available to the local press. For several weeks, the New York Times covered the rejection of the murals, and Lie was once more given an opportunity to grandstand. Picking up his diatribe where he had left off in February, Lie provided the Times with an interview that

⁹² Ibid.

bore the bold headline, "Anti-Social Move Seen in Relief Art: Jonas Lie Says Some Paintings Are Aimed to Circulate Detrimental Propaganda." The article addressed the Riker's project, with Lie magnanimously offering that the veto was "a service to the city and the country." He continued:

I will not approve paintings which I believe would incite prison inmates to further an anti-social attitude to oppose the existing government and to encourage those already opposed to society, as now established, to increase their opposition to law and order.⁹³

In these calculated charges, Lie misrepresented a mural that espoused sanitary prison facilities, meaningful labor, and fields in which to play baseball as a call for tyranny and social revolt. The press reported, incorrectly, that the murals had been shown to prisoners and that their general disapproval was an important factor in the rejection.⁹⁴

The Times reporter Edward Alden Jewell, curious about Shahn's murals and wanting to get beyond Lie's hyperbole, went to Shahn's studio to view the sketches. The reporter emerged opposing the Art Commission's verdict and convinced that the murals promoted social betterment, not revolt.⁹⁵

Stuart Davis came to Shahn's defense. In the pages of Art Front he denounced Lie as the "back-slapping, hand-shaking,

⁹³ "'Anti-Social' Move Seen in Relief Art," New York Times, 9 May 1935, 13.

⁹⁴ "Mural for Prison Rejected by City," 21.

⁹⁵ Edward Alden Jewell, "Sketches Stress New Prison Policy," New York Times, 10 May 1935, 19.

pot-boiling President of the National Academy of Design."⁹⁶ However, the veto of Lie and the commission stood firm, and the project was abandoned. In 1936 the issue was revived when the American Artists' Congress convened. The participants pointed to the cancellation of the Riker's mural as an example of the growing censorship of art.⁹⁷

To date the British art historian Jonathan P. Harris has provided the most extensive and provocative discussion of the Riker's mural. Dryly theorizing that Shahn's murals are "paradigms of interpellation-into-the-National," Harris sees the images as means by which the state targets and indoctrinates marginalized and disenfranchised individuals, such as prisoners, into the mechanism of the New Deal.⁹⁸ Harris is right to say that the desired end result is the transformation of the social outcast into a productive member of capitalistic New Deal society. I would argue, however, that credence must be paid to Shahn's focus on the state's responsibility to the individual over the individual's debt to society, along with his acknowledgment

⁹⁶ Stuart Davis, "'We Reject'--the Art Commission," Art Front (July 1935), 4-5.

⁹⁷ Matthew Baigell and Julia Williams, eds., Artists against War and Fascism: Papers of the First American Artists' Congress (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 47, 76.

⁹⁸ See Jonathan P. Harris, "The New Deal Art Projects, 1933-1943: A Critical Revision Constructing the 'National-Popular' in New Deal America, 1935-1943" (Ph.D. diss., Middlesex Polytechnic, 1986), and "State Power," 28-42.

of the social factors that both cause and end the cycle of crime. Further, Harris does not situate his argument within the history of American prison reform and the particulars of 1930s. As I have demonstrated, fuller use of the extant documentation and probing the historical context exposes a more potent narrative than Harris recognizes.

In creating his murals for Riker's, Shahn addressed socially relevant issues and legislation as he had previously attempted with the Prohibition cycle. His progressive views placed him solidly within the liberal artistic and political tradition. The Riker's project, like his later Social Security mural (see chapter 6), illustrates the benefits and powers that the state owed its citizens-- free or incarcerated. The themes intermeshed within the penal narrative, namely those of opportunity, citizens' rights, and human potential, were ones Shahn would present in his subsequent murals. The didactic conception of the Riker's mural illustrates Shahn's belief in the ability of both artist and artwork to function as part of the social mechanism for social betterment. In this mural, Shahn casts his lot in with the New Deal, establishing himself as social reformer rather than social revolutionary.

Chapter Two: The Great State of Wisconsin

In 1937 Ben Shahn proposed his third public mural, which he entitled The Great State of Wisconsin.¹ At the center of a remaining study, working with gouache on board, Shahn painted a farmer clad in blue denim coveralls and straw hat who heartily shakes hands in solidarity with a workingman against the backdrop of Wisconsin's capitol building; small scenes of labor flank the pair at either end, agricultural work to the farmer's left, industry to the laborer's right (fig. 26). In total, the study shows scenes of politicians campaigning and instituting legislation, education within a progressive society, and social benefits enjoyed by Wisconsin citizens. The central pair of farmer and laborer refer to the coalition between farmers and industrial workers achieved by Wisconsin politicians in the Gilded Age. They also, according to Shahn, represent "the unity between farm and industrial groups which is vital to the continued growth of the progressive movement."² Shahn had hoped that his work would be installed in the Administration Building at Greendale, Wisconsin, a recently completed, planned community sponsored by the Resettlement

¹ I would like to thank Linda Brazeau for her assistance with this material.

² Ben Shahn to Resettlement Administration, Ben Shahn Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. (hereafter AAA), acc. no. 09.9104154. I consulted this work before it was catalogued and microfilmed.

Administration.³ As with his two previous proposals for the Central Park Casino (1934) and for Riker's Island Penitentiary (1933-35), Shahn pursued a mural commission even though no competition was held. Because officials did not select his Wisconsin mural for execution and because the work was not commissioned, scant information remains and it garnered little, if any commentary. Only two studies, now in private collections, and a brief explanatory abstract that Shahn wrote remain with which to reconstruct his intentions. From these documents we know that Shahn sought to present Wisconsin's continuous liberal, progressive tradition and its innovative social programs and reforms, all indebted to the citizenry and electorate of Wisconsin.⁴

In this chapter, I will discuss the specific scenes and figures that Shahn assembled in his mural to establish the manner in which he defined and depicted Wisconsin's progressive political and social traditions. The generators of Wisconsin's social progressivism, according to the artist, were the nineteenth-century immigrants to the state,

³ There are few documents in which Shahn makes mention of this project. In his written abstract for the proposal he erroneously refers to the proposed site as Green Hills, Wisconsin. Green Hills was the name of another Greendale community in Ohio. The specifics of Shahn's abstract and sketches are clearly about Wisconsin.

⁴ The only artwork that the Resettlement Administration commissioned for Greendale was Alonzo Hauser's sculptural flagpole grouping, 1938, which shows ordinary citizens--farmers, laborers, mothers, and children--encircling the base of the pole. Hauser studied at several Wisconsin art schools and colleges.

the social ideals that they brought, and the political activities that they engaged in. Immigrants and labor are central to Shahn's conception of the locale, as they were with his later murals for the Jersey Homesteads, New Jersey (1936-38), and St. Louis, Missouri (1939) (see chapters 3 and 5). Shahn was in sympathy with Wisconsin's politics, and he saw that the state had drafted model public and social programs that could be applicable nationally.

In relating Wisconsin's sociopolitical history, Shahn pays tribute to Republican Robert M. La Follette, Sr. (1855-1925), who was the patrician of the La Follette political dynasty.⁵ During the 1930s, La Follette's sons, Robert, Jr. (1895-1953), and Philip (1897-1965), both held public office, and his niece Suzanne (1894-1983) was an influential art critic, political activist and prominent supporter of Leon Trotsky.⁶ Robert, Jr., while a United States senator

⁵ La Follette, Sr., served as a congressman from 1884 to 1890, as governor of Wisconsin from 1900 to 1905, and as a senator from 1905 until his death in 1925. He was never successful in his bids for the presidency.

⁶ For information on Suzanne La Follette, the National Committee for the Defense of Trotsky, and her presence at Trotsky's trial in Mexico, see Alan M. Wald, The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left from the 1930s to the 1980s (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 135. For her role in the 1931 formation of the National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners, which was adjunct to the International Labor Defense (ILD), led by the Communist Party, also see Wald, 56. Among her writings of art criticism regarding American art, the federal projects, and mural painting, see Suzanne La Follette, "The Artist and the Depression," The Nation (6 September 1933), 264-65; "The Government Recognizes Art," Scribner's Magazine (February

investigated employers for their labor union-busting tactics, and Philip, while governor of Wisconsin, shaped public policies on relief and employment that were more comprehensive than the New Deal.⁷ Central to the political philosophy of both father and sons was the belief that the unequal distribution of wealth in America and the unbridled power of its corporations had caused the country's economic perils. In 1937, the same year that Shahn proposed his Wisconsin mural, a New York Times reporter articulated the continued centrality of the La Follettes within both state and federal politics to that day:

continuously since 1901 one La Follette or another has sat in the State Capitol or has represented Wisconsin in the Senate at Washington. . . . For years this family has had such national prominence that their name has become almost synonymous with that of Wisconsin.

The article's author emphasizes that their collective tenure was noteworthy because the family always stood "in opposition to party regularity."⁸

The presidential candidacy of Robert La Follette, Sr., marks an important moment in the history of American Jewish

1934), 131-32; "Toward an American Art," The Nation (10 October 1936), 429-30, and Art in America (New York: Harper & Bros., 1929).

⁷ Bernard Weisberger, The La Follettes of Wisconsin (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1949), xiii.

⁸ "The La Follettes Survey New Horizons," New York Times Magazine, 3 January 1937, 9.

voting. American Jewish political attitudes, as Shahn assessed and expressed, had great affinity with the values of the New Deal and the conception of the welfare state. Yet as a voting block, this minority, which constituted 3.69 percent of the population, came late to politics. Thereafter, Jewish voting is marked by intense activism and a high percentage of participation.⁹ Jewish voters backed candidates based on ideology, rather than ethnic loyalty. As the historian Henry L. Feingold points out, twice after World War I, the Jewish vote backed third-party candidates. The first candidate was Eugene Debs, of the American Socialist Party, who received 24 percent of the Jewish vote in 1920; La Follette was the second, in 1924, when he received 17 percent running as a Progressive for the presidency.¹⁰

The political history of Wisconsin and the policies introduced nationally under the New Deal were closely related to each other. In his mural studies, Shahn did more than cast a nostalgic eye back to the distant glory days of

⁹ See Lawrence H. Fuchs, The Political Behavior of American Jews (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1958), 99-107, 177-87; Deborah D. Moore, At Home in America: Second-Generation New York Jews (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 210-11; and Raymond E. Wolfinger, "The Development and Persistence of Ethnic Voting," American Political Science Review 59 (December 1965), 896-97.

¹⁰ Henry L. Feingold, "Courage First and Intelligence Second," in FDR and the Holocaust, ed. Verne W. Newton (Hyde Park, N.Y.: Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute, 1993), 53.

La Follette, Sr. Shahn used this nineteenth-century background to justify both the New Deal social reforms of the 1930s and reforms proposed by Wisconsin's legislators, which were to the left of the New Deal. The historian Paul W. Glad summarized the relationship between the New Deal and Wisconsin as follows:

The complex relationship between the New Deal and Wisconsin Progressivism provides a leitmotif for the history of the state during the Great Depression, but the theme had begun to resonate even before there was a New Deal.¹¹

Historians have shown that social policies often associated with the New Deal were in fact foreshadowed by Wisconsin initiatives. Wisconsin in the 1930s, through the combined efforts of Philip La Follette on the state level and Robert, Jr., on the national level, proved the theory of Justice Louis Brandeis that a single state could serve as a laboratory for the nation.

With "The Great State of Wisconsin" Shahn returned to pursuing mural commissions after a two-year hiatus. During the interim between the rejection of his Riker's project and the start of his Wisconsin proposal, Shahn's personal life changed dramatically. Having left his wife, Tillie, and their young children, Shahn began a new life with the artist Bernarda Bryson, and the two moved to Washington, D.C.,

¹¹ Paul W. Glad, The History of Wisconsin, vol. 5 (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1990), 351.

early in the fall of 1935.¹² Subsequently, Shahn joined the staff of the Resettlement Administration, later renamed the Farm Security Administration, and signed on as a graphic artist with the agency's Special Skills Unit. He produced graphics and assisted with the placement of art in the agency's planned communities.¹³ Shahn documented economically devastated and drought-plagued regions of the South and the Midwest with his 35-millimeter Leica camera.¹⁴ His travels throughout these poverty-stricken areas, expanded Shahn's previously New York City-centered vision of America and its people.¹⁵ His work, however, never took him to Wisconsin.

But Shahn's lack of firsthand exposure to the landscape and people of Wisconsin was not a barrier to his mural design. A conceptually oriented artist, Shahn was motivated

¹² Frances K. Pohl, Ben Shahn (San Francisco: Pomegranate Books, 1993), 14.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁴ For information on Shahn's photography, see Susan H. Edwards, "Ben Shahn: New Deal Photographer in the Old South" (Ph.D. diss., CUNY-The Graduate Center, 1995), and Ben Shahn and the Task of Photography in Thirties America, exh. cat. (New York: Hunter College of the City University of New York, 1995); Laura Katzman, "The Politics of Media: Painting and Photography in the Art of Ben Shahn," American Art 7, no. 1 (Winter 1993), 61-87; and Nicholas Natanson, The Black Image in the New Deal: The Politics of FSA Photography (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992).

¹⁵ See Edwards, The Task of Photography, 5-8, for information on Shahn's travels throughout the South and Midwest.

by Wisconsin's social theories and ideals rather than by scenes of Midwestern greenery, small towns, and their residents. Shahn's preparatory method for this particular mural project was very studious, and he depended on current newspapers, political journals, and history books to begin his designs. He sought both to diagram and to give a permanent face to the forces of social change within the state, and he began his summary proposal with this statement of intention:

I should like to base this mural on the thesis that there has been a continuous liberal-progressive movement in the State of Wisconsin . . . motivated by a common principle--the upholding of the democratic rights and interests of the common man.¹⁶

In his study, Shahn worked with matte tones and unmodulated pigment to create forms that were bold, without dimension, and clinging to the picture plane. He applied strong black outlines to delineate form and establish figure-to-ground relationships. Shahn subdivided the continuous narrative into vignettes, with each segment feeding into the next. In the studies of this unfinished work can be seen hallmarks of Shahn's mural design that were in his Riker's and Prohibition proposals. Within the continuous plane, Shahn places architectural settings, buildings, and walls on sharp recessional angles to frame

¹⁶ Ben Shahn to Resettlement Administration, Ben Shahn Papers, AAA, acc. no. 09.9104154.

and isolate each vignette and to locate its characters within a context. Drawing on his skills as a lithographer and a graphic artist, Shahn includes within the scenes signage, posters, and written documents, all strategically positioned to enable viewers to read the text. The inclusion of text within the painting subtly emphasizes that this is artwork with a message, that there is a story to be read and told. Shahn's working method was equally literary and narrative. Shahn constructed his work from the books he read and from popularly reproduced images of such figures as La Follette, Sr.; this extensive use of libraries and popular photographs would be his method of work throughout his federal mural career.

In the middle of the nineteenth century Wisconsin was an agricultural state, with wheat its dominant crop and with residents of Protestant, Anglo-Irish descent. By the time of the Centennial of 1876, the state's demographics and economy had dramatically shifted, causing it to evolve into a state with a rising urban-industrial economy and an urban-centered population. The rise in industrialism created the need for workers; immigrants from Germany and Scandinavia settled in Milwaukee to meet this need.¹⁷ Germans, refugees from the failed revolution of 1848, brought to their new home a dedication to socialist politics and labor.

¹⁷ David P. Thelen, The New Citizenship: Origins of Progressivism in Wisconsin, 1885-1900 (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1972), 6.

In 1877 German immigrants formed the Socialist Democratic Party, which was especially strong in Milwaukee. According to the historian Robert C. Nesbit, Wisconsin's German Socialists drew equally from the influences of Karl Marx, Ferdinand Lassalle, and the First International, influences that kept them split between decided political action, trade-union organization, and utopian plans for greater social restructuring.¹⁸ Toward the end of the century, foreign-born residents outnumbered those who were native-born, leading to religious and ethnic factionalism.

Shahn must also have welcomed the opportunity to celebrate a state in which labor had been such a strong force. As noted above, the quick growth of industry created a fierce demand for a continuous flow of ready labor. The new immigrants brought to their jobs their commitment to socialism and labor organization. In the mid-1880s the Knights of Labor rose to prominence, leading to divisive competition for power and membership between the Knights, the Socialists, and the unions.¹⁹ Then, on 1 May 1886, state troopers killed five striking ironworkers at a labor rally in Milwaukee. When the troopers' actions were protested, the power of the state stood firmly with the

¹⁸ Robert C. Nesbit, Wisconsin: A History (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 389.

¹⁹ Thelen, The New Citizenship, 36.

industrial employers.²⁰ This resulted in a unified coalition between Socialists, union members, and the Knights of Labor.²¹

In the early twentieth century, Socialists began to define and direct Wisconsin and Milwaukee politics from within the system. In April 1910 Milwaukee voters rebelled against city corruption and brought a Socialist administration into office.²² They chose as their mayor Daniel Webster Hoan, selected Socialists for twenty-one out of the thirty-five aldermen positions, as well as for city solicitor, comptroller, treasurer, two civil judges, and the majority of county supervisors.²³ Hoan and his ticket ran on a political platform that supported complete home rule in municipal matters, ownership and control of public service corporations, and taxation of all property owners.²⁴ Hoan drafted and directed such key labor reforms as an eight-hour workday for all city workers. Decades before Roosevelt's New Deal, Hoan created a system of public works that provided jobs for the city's unemployed. Over a decade into his administration, Hoan attributed Milwaukee's low labor

²⁰ Ibid., 390.

²¹ Nesbit, Wisconsin, 393.

²² George J. Lankevic, ed., Milwaukee: A Chronological and Documentary History (New York: Oceana Publishers, Inc., 1974), 121.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 122.

unrest, its unemployment--which was one of the nation's lowest--extremely low crime and murder figures, its elimination of public debt, and provision of public housing all to his Socialist administration and Socialist political theory.²⁵ Hoan held office well into the 1930s, when he continued to create innovative social programs. In fact, he worked in cooperation with Robert La Follette, Jr. on tax reform measures to present to Congress during FDR's presidency. In 1936 Hoan introduced city-issued scrip to alleviate suffering of public employees. And he supported the Greendale housing program.

In the early decades of this century, the United States lagged behind the rest of the Western world in the development and support of comprehensive planned communities.²⁶ During the lean years of the Depression, civic and social planning took on a new appeal as a means to prevent future downward economic spirals.²⁷ As part of the New Deal, housing reform was linked to the federal works program.

As one initiative, the government constructed "greenbelt" towns on the outskirts of three major cities, which economists and planners deemed impervious to economic

²⁵ Ibid., 124.

²⁶ Joseph A. Eden and Arnold R. Alanen, "Looking Backward at a New Deal Town: Greendale, Wisconsin, 1935-1980," APA Journal (Winter 1983), 40-41.

²⁷ Ibid., 40.

fluctuations.²⁸ Rexford G. Tugwell, first as the Undersecretary of Agriculture, 1934-35, and then administrator of the Resettlement Administration, 1935-36, designed and oversaw the Greenbelt projects (so-named for their periphery of parkways). The Greenbelt projects were conceived as an experiment in economic cooperation, land conservation, civic involvement, and low-cost housing.²⁹ Tugwell was a former professor of economics at Columbia University and a member of FDR's "Brain Trust."³⁰ Other key figures heading up the program were John S. Lansill, director of the Suburban Resettlement Administration, economist Warren Jay Vinton, and architect Frederick J. Bigger, all of whom consulted with educators, sociologists, planners, and economists to form their conception of these planned communities. The Greenbelt town program (1935-38) created three separate communities, providing a total of 2,200 homes. The first project, Greenbelt, Maryland, on the outskirts of Washington, D.C. allowed workers easy access to federal office jobs. Greenhills, Ohio (proximate to

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Arnold R. Alanen and Joseph A. Eden, Main Street Readymade: The New Deal Community of Greendale, Wisconsin (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1987), 5. For an introduction to the entire Greenbelt program, see Joseph L. Arnold, The New Deal in the Suburbs: A History of the Greenbelt Town Program, 1935-1954 (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1971).

³⁰ Alanen and Eden, Main Street, 3.

Cincinnati), and Greendale, Wisconsin (near Milwaukee), were meant to house "heterogeneous populations of factory workers and small minorities of white collar professionals temporarily in need of assistance."³¹

The planners designed the Greenbelt communities so that the housing units and support buildings were surrounded by regions of grass as well as untamed land, to maintain a balance between urban culture, suburban amenities, and rural tranquility. For each of the three communities, officials in Washington appointed local staffs based on their familiarity with the region. In selecting the sites in Maryland, Ohio, and Wisconsin, planners held to the criteria of a stable economic base, a political climate favorable to the federal programs, and cheap land. Wisconsin met all these criteria, and planners purchased a 3,410-acre tract of land which included dairy farms, wooded knolls, and vast green meadows.³² Milwaukee mayor Daniel Hoan was extremely receptive to the plan, which was consistent with his commitment to providing affordable housing and social planning. Local trade unions and ethnic associations were equally enthusiastic and vocal in their support, as were Wisconsin's Governor Philip La Follette and Senator Robert

³¹ Eden and Alanen, Looking Backward, 40. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt visited the Wisconsin site in November; while pleased with the concept and design, she objected to the project's exclusion of African-Americans.

³² *Ibid.*, 42-43.

M. La Follette, Jr.³³

Resettlement Administration officials estimated that construction of the Greendale, Wisconsin project, would employ 5,000 men.³⁴ Resettlement supervisors conducted a preliminary survey of residents to establish which types of housing they would prefer and the types of communal centers that would serve as the focus of this "working man's town." Based on the results, planners decided to build a variety of housing units, from detached single-family homes to attached row houses.³⁵ In April 1936 construction began, and 332 federal workers were employed. By October of the same year the construction crew had swelled to 2,000, the majority of whom were WPA workers. With time, however, it became apparent that specialized and skilled workers unavailable through federal channels would need to be brought in.³⁶ The housing project opened in 1937, offering 750 homes to low- and middle-income workers.

Shahn's mural for Greendale was to have spanned the period from the post-Civil War industrial expansion to the present. As stated, only two studies remain from which to reconstruct the mural's progression and message. It is known that Shahn wished to locate the genesis of Wisconsin's

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 43.

³⁵ Ibid., 45.

³⁶ Ibid., 44-46.

progressive movement in the racial and ethnic stock of Wisconsin's peoples, stating:

it is perhaps partly accountable to the racial stock and background of the settlers that this movement has taken place particularly in Wisconsin. The major immigrant groups were first, the Germans, refugees from the unsuccessful German Socialist uprising of 1848, bringing with them a great social idealism; the Scandinavians with their fine farming tradition; the Irish, always politically gifted; the New Englanders with their rigid beliefs in personal liberty free speech and free education.³⁷

Shahn continues:

The pictorial material of the mural will be first, the racial stock of the people of Wisconsin. The four national types--the Germans, the Scandinavians, the Irish and the New Englanders will occupy the four spaces between the windows in the south wall. These figures in their backgrounds will symbolize the search for economic freedom, the agricultural tradition, in general the formative social ideals brought into the northwest territory by the immigrants.³⁸

Shahn designed his mural to wrap around the four interior walls of the Administration Building. Shahn's narrative, it should be noted, did not progress in a strictly chronological sequence of Wisconsin's achievements and notables. Further, the study that I will be discussing does not portray all the scenes that Shahn cites in his undated abstract.

³⁷ Ben Shahn to Resettlement Administration, Ben Shahn Papers, AAA, acc. no. 09.9104154.

³⁸ Ibid. To date, I have not been able to locate these panels. The La Follette family originally came from northwestern Europe.

The full mural program that Shahn designed serves as a blueprint of the "Wisconsin Idea," simultaneously celebrating its political innovations while diagramming the key components that could be replicated in other states or on a federal level. The "Wisconsin Idea" developed in tandem with the Progressive movement in the late nineteenth century.³⁹ In 1912 Charles McCarthy, head of Wisconsin's Legislative Reference Department, wrote a book entitled The Wisconsin Idea, with an introduction by Theodore Roosevelt stating that Wisconsin led all others in pioneering reforms.⁴⁰ As the historian Irving Bernstein notes, it was decades later with the New Deal that the "Wisconsin Idea" went national.⁴¹ The model of social betterment achieved and espoused by Wisconsinites emphasized action rather than theory, and it has been noted that the word action appears repeatedly in the rhetoric of or about the La Follettes.⁴² Shahn's mural specifies ideas and measures espoused in the "Wisconsin Idea" regarding public education, the role of government to better the lives of people, fair labor practices, and the regulation of public utilities.

³⁹ Louis Adamic, "A Talk with Phil La Follette," The Nation (27 February 1935), 243.

⁴⁰ Charles McCarthy, The Wisconsin Idea (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1912).

⁴¹ Irving Bernstein, A Caring Society: The New Deal, the Worker, and the Great Depression (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1985), 43-44.

⁴² Adamic, "A Talk with Phil La Follette," 243.

Therefore, I maintain, that just as Shahn envisioned his Riker's mural as a diagram to instruct prison officials on how best to improve their facilities and prevent recidivism, likewise his Wisconsin mural shows a similar concern with instruction, inspiration, and directing right action.

The first scene from the remaining sketch concerns politics in the late nineteenth century, which saw the rise of political bosses, railroad magnates, and Robert M. La Follette, Sr., whom Shahn portrays on the campaign trail. La Follette, Sr., became a congressman in 1885 but was not immediately reelected.⁴³ In the early 1890s he created his political base by adapting the progressive zeal and rhetoric that Wisconsin citizens had already begun to support, and by talking about decided political, social, and economic issues--something most politicians avoided. La Follette appealed to people through their common bonds of being workers and farmers, a style that was in opposition to the dominant campaign tactic of building political power by reaching out to specific ethnic and religious brethren.⁴⁴ Opportunity was La Follette's dream plan for himself and for Wisconsin, and he structured an economic program to broaden the base of opportunity for both himself and the voters.⁴⁵

⁴³ Thelen, The New Citizenship, 92.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 14.

⁴⁵ David P. Thelen, Robert M. La Follette and the Insurgent Spirit (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 11. Robert La Follette, Sr., thanks to his

In his mural, Shahn places La Follette next to a railroad that has two specific biographical references--La Follette the noted orator who traveled by railroad and La Follette who stood with the farmers against the railroad giants, denouncing the railroad magnates and corporate leaders in his whistle-stop speeches.⁴⁶ In the Gilded Age America's railroads and their wealthy owners wielded undue political and social power, creating an extreme divide between rich and poor; railroads had the largest capital during La Follette's time.⁴⁷ La Follette struggled to take back the Republican party from the control of political machines; in his speech "The Menace of the Machine," he targeted political bosses who controlled the party and invited the patronage of lumber and railroad barons. He stated:

In the states where it is supreme, the edict of

biography, the writings of Lincoln Steffens, and popular lore, has become credited with initiating Wisconsin Progressive reforms. Historian Bernard Weisberger in his book The La Follettes of Wisconsin, 27, summarizes the image as "the legend of Fighting Bob, the lone insurgent, grappling with unrighteous on peoples' behalf, forced to public service after offered a bribe." However, in recent years, the revisionist scholars H. Landon Warner and David Thelen have reexamined La Follette's political image and legacy. In their views, La Follette was swept into Progressivism as an ambitious young man. Thelen strongly argues that La Follette was not the initiator of reform issues or programs in Wisconsin.

⁴⁶ See Robert M. La Follette, A Personal Narrative of Political Experiences (Madison: Regents of the University of Wisconsin, 1911).

⁴⁷ Nesbit, Wisconsin, 363-65.

the machine is the only sound heard, and outside is easily mistaken for the voice of the people. . . it is independent of the people, and fears no reckoning.⁴⁸

As an elected official, he succeeded in passing strong pro-labor railroad legislation, which weakened the railroad's political base and economic control in Wisconsin.⁴⁹ After his gubernatorial service, La Follette successfully ran for the national Senate, where he continued to introduce railroad bills and achieved great national attention.⁵⁰ La Follette depended on rail travel for his exhaustive campaign and lecture schedule. The record shows that in fact La Follette presented 208 speeches in 61 counties, averaging 15 per day during one electoral bid.⁵¹ Since La Follette was known as a fiery speechmaker, Shahn shows his trademark mane of thick white hair, tousled and shaking, as his fist cuts the air in agitated exclamation midlecture.

The journalist Lincoln Steffens (1866-1936) helped bring La Follette to national attention and win mass

⁴⁸ Ellen Torelle, The Political Philosophy of Robert M. La Follette as Revealed in His Speeches and Writings (Madison, Wisc.: The Robert M. La Follette Co., 1920), 54. There were critics who maintained that while La Follette was assailing the political machine, he was fact creating his own.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 59.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 46-51.

⁵¹ Weisberger, The La Follettes, 36.

approval.⁵² Steffens, one of the foremost muckraking journalists, critiqued the political system that La Follette faced, focusing on the alliance between businessmen and political bosses. In La Follette, Steffens gave his readers a genuine hero whom he saw as charismatic, able to stir up and organize people into action.⁵³ Steffens bolstered La Follette's career through articles in the magazine McClure's.⁵⁴ Steffens cited the state of Wisconsin as an example of liberal experiment and reform to which other leaders best look.

In the next segment of Shahn's sketch, in what would have been the lower left register of the mural, Shahn tucks in an image of a Supreme Court Judge Edward G. Ryan seated with his back to us as he reads from an oversized piece of paper. Shahn purposefully tilts up the letter so that viewers would be able to read Ryan's decision upholding the regulation of freight rates. Judge Ryan lectures a gathering of "frock-coated men who represent 'the interests.'"⁵⁵ This confrontation of Ryan and the monied

⁵² Thelen, The Insurgent Spirit, 75.

⁵³ Patrick Palermo, Lincoln Steffens (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978), 64. See also Lincoln Steffens, "Wisconsin: Representative Government Restored: The Story of La Follette's War on the Railroads that Ruled His State," McClure's 23 (October 1904), 563-79.

⁵⁴ Russell Horton, Lincoln Steffens (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1974), 59, 78.

⁵⁵ Ben Shahn to Resettlement Administration, Ben Shahn Papers, AAA acc. no. 09.9104154.

interests, which dates to the 1870s, relates to the political biography of La Follette, as well as introducing another reformist from Wisconsin. The 1870s experienced the great momentum of the Granger Movement, which La Follette later recalled as "the first powerful revolt in Wisconsin against the rise of monopolies, the arrogance of the railroads, and the waste and robbers of public lands."⁵⁶ During the 1870s, while a student at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, La Follette heard Judge Ryan speak on the decision he had written regarding the Granger Law, paving the way for judicial action limiting corporations. At that time, Ryan asked the youth of Wisconsin:

Which shall rule--wealth or man; which shall lead
--money or intellect; who shall fill public
station--educated and patriotic free men, or the
feudal serfs of corporate capital?⁵⁷

These questions, which had a profound impact on La Follette, were ones he would rephrase throughout his lengthy political career.

In the next vignette to the right, the artist juxtaposes frock-coated men with an image of a red bank building. Although the bank maintains a minor visual note within the whole of the mural's design, banks played a powerful role within the state's social and economic histories. In the 1890s Wisconsin suffered a severe

⁵⁶ Belle Case La Follette, Robert M. La Follette, vol. 1 (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1953), 23-25.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

depression, which originated as a bankers' panic; great public suffering and social unrest ensued.⁵⁸ To alleviate the resulting social problems in both urban and rural areas, the state created a vast public works program. Shahn may allude to this by including laboring figures adjacent to the bank. As the historian David P. Thelen chronicles, prior to the 1890s depression, Wisconsin's rich--including its bankers and railroad kings--drew great attention to themselves, celebrating their extravagant, decadent lifestyles. When the banks failed, individual cities within the state held criminal proceedings against these men to reveal their gross misdeeds.⁵⁹ Newspapers documented the extreme contrasts between the lives of the disgraced bankers and the impoverished residents of Wisconsin, laying bare the inequities of the state's social structure.⁶⁰ The depression and the actions of bankers, railroad magnates, and corporate leaders fueled the reformist, Progressive movement of Ryan, La Follette, and others. Throughout his campaigns and tenure as an elected official, La Follette would recall the words of Judge Ryan as he denounced the arrogance and unchecked power of the "Monied Trust," of America's corporations, and its investment bankers.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Thelen, The Insurgent Spirit, 55.

⁵⁹ Thelen, The New Citizenship, 63-64.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 66-69.

⁶¹ Thelen, The Insurgent Spirit, 63.

The central image of Shahn's tribute to Wisconsin's leaders and citizens expresses solidarity and brotherhood between a farmer and an industrial laborer. This unification of labor forces illustrates the shifting economic terrain that Wisconsin traveled between the late nineteenth century and the 1930s. By Shahn's time Wisconsin's economic picture was evenly split between agriculture and industry, in which metal fabricating dominated. In addition, these two figures call to mind the Farmer-Labor Party, a Progressive third political party launched in 1920.⁶² The Farmer-Labor Party was an amalgamation which included among others the Labor Party of Illinois, Connecticut, Indiana, New York, Ohio, and Utah, and which took positions close to that of the Socialist Party on numerous issues.⁶³ The Farmer-Labor Party backed the senior La Follette during his 1924 presidential bid when he ran as an independent Progressive, as did the Socialist Party, the American Federation of Labor, and Justices Felix Frankfurter and Louis Brandeis.⁶⁴ Third-party politics was central to the political climate of 1930s Wisconsin, and

⁶² John Sillito, "Farmer-Labor Party," in Encyclopedia of the American Left, ed. Mari Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle, and Dan Georgakas (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 215-17.

⁶³ Ibid., 215.

⁶⁴ Michael E. Parrish, The Anxious Years: America in Prosperity and Depression, 1920-1941 (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1992), 68-69.

once more the symbolic union of farmer and machine labor was employed. In 1934 Philip La Follette launched the Farmer-Labor Progressive Party, which he expanded to include the Socialist Party.

In the next vignette, Shahn presents a governor signing key legislative acts of social policy and reform: the Minimum Wage Law, the Child Labor Law, the Workmen's Compensation Law, railroad and utility tax laws, as well as other unspecified acts and laws. Also pictured are scenes of implementation of these policies. Again, Shahn's concern is with making the theoretical and legislative clear and vivid. Within this vignette, Shahn emphasizes the continuity between the eras of the elder and the younger La Follettes, including pieces of legislation sponsored by both generations.⁶⁵

Shown in close relation to the governor are images that document the workings of the liberal press. Shahn represents reporters and writers at their desks and typewriters busily looking down as they set their words to paper. These men and their tasks stand for the Federated Press, a liberal news service created for the dissemination of fair labor news. Shahn's inclusion of these reporters demonstrates the sophistication of his political awareness

⁶⁵ Among the initiatives of La Follette, Sr., were the first workmen's compensation law, advanced factory safety legislation, maximum work hours for men and women, prohibitions against child labor, and the first state life insurance.

and his realization that in order for fair practices to be upheld, the public must have access to informative and supportive newspapers. Theory, once more, must be put into both practice and circulation.

In the penultimate panel, Shahn sketched out Wisconsin's progressive educational system (fig. 27). Shahn described the scene as follows:

the university is shown taking a vital part in the economic and legislative business of the state. In its regular curriculum it sends the students into the senate chamber to study legislative procedure, or onto the actual human scene to gather their own sociological data. Through its extension courses for workers and farmers it becomes a functioning part of the community.⁶⁶

As previously stated, in his Wisconsin Idea, Charles McCarthy noted the central role that the university played within the Progressive movement by both providing state residents with the opportunity for higher education and creating close relationships between the university faculty and the political administration.⁶⁷ La Follette, Sr., had graduated from Wisconsin's state system and worked to support the tradition of its graduates giving service to the state as a natural outgrowth of a publicly funded

⁶⁶ Ben Shahn to Resettlement Administration, Ben Shahn Papers, AAA, acc. no. 09.9104154.

⁶⁷ Bernstein, A Caring Society, 43-44, and McCarthy, The Wisconsin Idea.

education.⁶⁸ In the shaping of public policy, La Follette depended on the university academics for the running of the state.

At the center of Shahn's mural study, he represents university President Charles Kendall Adams holding the text of his 1894 speech denouncing state control and censorship over the subject matter taught at the school. For many, Adams's speech upholding academic freedom has become "a sort of Wisconsin Magna Carte," and is noted for its eloquent phrasing:

whatever may be the limitations which trammel inquiry elsewhere we believe that the great state of Wisconsin should ever encourage that continual and fearless sifting and winnowing by which alone the truth can be found.⁶⁹

Flanking President Adams are cloaked graduates resplendent in mortarboards as they make their way into the world. In the final vignette from the proposal, Shahn represents university students within the senate chambers. Yet this close link between social reform, academic freedom, and state service did not win universal approval during either the Progressive era or the New Deal. One state resident, a John B. Chapple about whom little is known, self-published a

⁶⁸ Nesbit, Wisconsin, 426, 435, links the ideas of public education and public service by graduates to German social and educational ideals.

⁶⁹ Robert S. Maxwell, La Follette and the Rise of Progressives in Wisconsin (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1973), 130-31.

tract denouncing the younger La Follettes, accusing the state university curriculum of being anti-God and pro-Communist Party.⁷⁰

It is interesting to note that in addition to his Wisconsin mural, Shahn includes scenes of education in at least three other murals: at Riker's (1933-35), the Jersey Homesteads (1936-38) and the Bronx mural in which Walt Whitman gestures to a blackboard (1938-39; see chapter 4). Jewish culture emphasizes education and study. These scenes of instruction and learning, coupled with the overall didactic intention of his murals, are sympathetic, if not derived from, these Jewish ideals.

Through the course of his mural, Shahn clearly presents the political alliances, leaders, and legislative means used to restructure Wisconsin's greater social and economic systems. Shahn began with the mid-nineteenth century, outlining Wisconsin's successes, and moved into his own 1930s. The immediate context for the mural's viewing was the political tenure of Senator Robert, Jr., and Governor Philip La Follette, both of whom Shahn both knew.⁷¹ The charged rhetoric and action of this new generation of La Follettes illustrate America's support for politics to the

⁷⁰ John B. Chapple, La Follette Road to Communism: Must We Go Further along That Road? (Milwaukee: John B. Chapple 1936), 9.

⁷¹ Bernarda Bryson Shahn, interview with author, 28 January 1993.

left of the New Deal, embrace of third-party politics, and the government's rectifying of social ills created by capitalism, corporations, and monied interests. The brothers stood behind the redistribution of America's wealth and stood alongside her workers and union members. Among their political accomplishments, many of which predated and/or were more inclusive than the New Deal, were unemployment coverage (the first in the nation), state-guaranteed farm loans, greater government regulation of industry, the establishment of state utilities, work-relief programs, and labor-relations acts in advance of the Wagner Act.⁷²

The era and arena in which Shahn conceived of his mural were ones in which the La Follettes and the rich history of Wisconsin sought to restructure America's economic system, promote the rights of laborers, and provide higher education, safer working conditions, and greater security for its citizens. Shahn's mural, however, was never actualized, and with time many of the inroads made collectively by the three La Follettes were chipped away at

⁷² For further information on the political careers of the La Follette brothers, see Robert S. McElvaine, The Great Depression: America, 1929-1941 (New York: Random House, Inc., 1993), 229-31; Patrick J. Maney, "Young Bob" La Follette: A Biography of Robert M. La Follette, Jr., 1895-1953 (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1978); Robert W. Ozanne, The Labor Movement in Wisconsin: A History (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1984); and John E. Miller, Governor Philip F. La Follette: The Wisconsin Progressives and the New Deal (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1982).

by conservatives. Yet, Shahn's mural shows that by his third bid for a public mural the artist had clear social agendas for his work. Shahn never turns to sweeping allegories on good and bad government; rather, his realist vocabulary grounds his works in the world of the workingman. Shahn researched the history of the state and chose themes that highlight Wisconsin's Progressive politics. Though the mural was historic and filled with realistic detail, which allow us to recognize the locale of the mural as Wisconsin, for Shahn it represented the political ideals that for the artist were both universal and timeless.

Chapter Three: Zion in the Garden State: Jersey Homesteads

In 1936 Ben Shahn began preparatory research on a mural for the Jersey Homesteads, New Jersey, a subsistence homesteading community sponsored by the Resettlement Administration;¹ he completed the mural in 1938. This was the first mural which Shahn completed. Within this dissertation, this chapter is the central focus for the contextual exploration of Jewish identity in Shahn's work. The artist Bernarda Bryson, who at this point was actively involved with creating historical images and who was employed, as Shahn was, by the Resettlement Administration, worked as Shahn's assistant on the commission.² Shahn's untitled fresco for the town's school/community center was not only the first mural that he painted, but also his first federal mural commission. The mural's unfolding narrative tells the history of Eastern European Jewish immigration to America, the oppressive labor and living conditions that many Jews found in America's exploitative sweatshops and

¹ In 1945 town residents changed the town's name from the Jersey Homesteads to Roosevelt to honor the late president.

² For further information on Bryson's influence on Shahn's politics, theories, and artistic practice see Susan Noyes Platt, "The Jersey Homesteads Mural: Ben Shahn, Bernarda Bryson, and History Painting in the 1930s," in Redefining American History Painting, ed. Patricia Burnham and Lucretia Giese (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 298-301, 307-8. Bernarda Bryson Shahn acknowledged that she helped to paint the mural but said that the ideas and designs were Shahn's. Bernarda Bryson Shahn, interview with author, 29 March 1995.

tenements, the better lives that they created through trade unionism, and the support they received from such New Deal programs as the Resettlement Administration (fig. 28). In his mural, Shahn proposes a direction that Jewish American culture could follow, a path historically rooted in socially progressive ideals and earlier Jewish utopian initiatives, which complemented the social programs of the New Deal.

In the notes and studies that led to the final fresco, Shahn negotiated between definitions of contemporary American Jewish life until he decided on his focus. During the 1930s Jews were deeply entrenched in the process of acculturation, leaving behind self-imposed segregation to move into the dominant culture, a transition speeded up by the economic rise toward social mobility.³ Modernization and acculturation encompassed secularization, which weakened communal bonds--shared language, traditions, and interdependence.

³ Marshall Sklare, Observing America's Jews (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1993), 21, 26. Henry L. Feingold, Bearing Witness: How America and Its Jews Responded to the Holocaust (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1995), 210, writes that during the 1920s, second-generation American Jews had sought middle-class status; the decade was a period of self-improvement and professionalism, with Jews investing available money in secular education. By the end of the 1920s, Feingold continues, there was a loss of cohesiveness between the first "bewigged" generation and the "clean-shirted, creased trouser" second generation of American Jews. He notes that although traditional sources of community--family and Yiddish-based secular culture--had weakened, many Jews still retained links to community through fraternal organizations (214-16).

By the 1930s, Jews, particularly those among the second generation, were no longer employed as blue-collar workers and had moved into professional and middle-class status.⁴ By the middle of the decade, 35-40 percent of the Jewish workforce was employed in commercial occupations, as compared with 13.8 percent of the general population. Commerce overshadowed manufacturing, which drew only 15 to 20 percent as compared with 26.3 percent for the general population.⁵ However, despite the rise of many Jews into the middle class, the Jewish vote was never divided along class lines and fully supported FDR throughout his presidency; in contrast, most other ethnic groups switched party allegiance to the Republicans as they rose in economic standing.⁶ On the eve of world war, without disavowing

⁴ Howard M. Sachar, A History of the Jews in America (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 428, writes that in 1900, 60 percent of adult Jews were blue-collar workers. By 1933 the figure had dropped to 29 percent nationally and 35 percent in New York City. By the 1930s, only 14 percent of second-generation Jews were blue-collar workers.

⁵ Nathan Goldberg, "Economic Trends among American Jews," Jewish Affairs 1 (1 October 1946): 11-16, quoted in Henry L. Feingold, The Jewish People in America: Entering the Mainstream, 1920-1945 (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 127.

⁶ Lawrence H. Fuchs, "American Jews and the Presidential Vote," in American Ethnic Politics, ed. Fuchs (New York and Evanston, Ill.: Harper Torchbooks, 1968), 52. For further information on Jewish voting, see Albert J. Menendez, Religion at the Polls (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977), 114; Deborah Dash Moore, At Home in America: Second-Generation New York Jews (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 210-11; and Fuchs, The Political Behavior of American Jews (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1956), 77.

Jewish identity, Shahn's mural stresses class identification and cooperative politics over ethnic parochialism and religious tradition. Therefore, I question the assertion by the art historian Susan Noyes Platt that Shahn created this narrative as he "was leaving Jewish life behind."⁷ Rather, his narrative chronicles the transformation that the American Jewish community was experiencing at a moment when one's Jewish affiliation was still marked by one's politics, language, and ideologies, rather than by ritual.⁸

Shahn represents a history that echoed his own biography and that of town residents. Unlike the majority of Homestead residents, Shahn had never worked in the garment industry. He did, however, speak Yiddish, was a union member, had immigrated to the United States from Eastern Europe, was politically on the Left, and had working-class roots. Shahn felt in such harmony with the Jersey Homesteaders that in 1939, after completing the mural, he moved to their town with artist Bernarda Bryson.⁹

Since Shahn's mural concerns history, it is relevant to

⁷ Platt, "The Jersey Homesteads Mural," 301.

⁸ Ziva Amishai-Maisels offers a different interpretation, arguing that Shahn's works express his tentativeness to identify himself as an ethnic Jew. See Ziva Amishai-Maisels, "Ben Shahn and the Problem of Jewish Identity," Jewish Art 12-13 (1986-87), 304-19.

⁹ Originally, as government employees, Shahn and Bryson were not allowed to live in the project. When the town went bankrupt, the pair was permitted to move to the Jersey Homesteads.

ask what role history plays within Jewish culture. Scholars acknowledge the role of memory in Shahn's representation of Jewish life.¹⁰ To date, conceptions of memory, remembrance, and history specific to Jewish culture have not been examined in relation to Shahn's image. The scholar Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, in his book Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory, expresses what to the uninitiated would seem to be a paradox within traditional Jewish culture.

Yerushalmi writes:

that although Judaism throughout the ages was absorbed with the meaning of history, historiography itself played at best an ancillary role among the Jews, and often no role at all; and, concomitantly, that while memory of the past was always a central component of Jewish experience, the historian was not its primary custodian.¹¹

Until recent times, Jewish culture defined and preserved itself, not through the writings of the historian, but through acts of ritual and recital.¹² Yerushalmi cites the work of the scholar Maurice Halbwachs to establish that collective memory, rather than metaphor or a priori knowledge, is "a social reality transmitted and sustained

¹⁰ See Platt, "The Jersey Homesteads Mural," 294-309, and Frances K. Pohl, "Constructing History: A Mural by Ben Shahn," Arts Magazine 62 (September 1987): 36-40.

¹¹ Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1982), 9. I would like to thank Professor Marc Lee Raphael, College of William and Mary, for bringing this book to my attention.

¹² Ibid., 40.

through the conscious efforts and institutions of the group."¹³ Shahn depended on the collective memory of the Jersey Homesteaders both to give form to his mural's narrative and later to respond to its message. Drawn from collective memory, in turn, Shahn's mural itself functions as a tool to preserve collective memory.

In his Jersey Homesteads mural, Shahn presents Jews as an ethnic group rather than as a religious group. The question of Jewish identity--Judaism as an ethnicity, as a religious group, as a cultural group--continues to be central in both Jewish academic and public discourse today. Marshall Sklare tells us that:

according to halachah (Jewish law) the essential requirements for being Jewish is to be born of . . . a Jewish mother. Being Jewish involves two complementary aspects: membership in the ethnic group and membership in the religious community.¹⁴

Paralleling Sklare's statement, Jonathan Boyarin maintains that Jewish identity is both a situation into which one is born, and a choice made on a daily basis, that the "continuity of Jewish identity must be grounded in some form

¹³ Ibid., xv.

¹⁴ Marshall Sklare, America's Jews (New York: Random House, 1971), 26-27. He continues: "Jewish public opinion generally reserves group membership for those born of Jewish parents who either practice Judaism or who are religiously inactive in the sense that they have not converted to another faith. A religiously inactive person is thus identified as Jewish by the following rule of thumb: the religion that he does not practice is Judaism rather than Christianity."

of distinctive everyday practice."¹⁵ But with the emergence of Zionism came a radical rethinking of Jewish identity, transforming Jewish discourse and identification from a religious to a secular mode.¹⁶ In his writings, Ahad Haam shifted the parameters from a theological to a cultural discussion, supporting the definition that to be Jewish meant to identify with the Jewish people and its cultural heritage but not necessarily with the religious practice.¹⁷ The sociologist Arthur Liebman writes in Jews and the Left that a discussion of Jews as an ethnic group allows us to include a wider variety of individuals and groups than would a purely religious definition.¹⁸ Liebman, in turn, quotes Max Weber's definition of an ethnic group:

those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent--because of similarities of physical types or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization and migration--in such a way that their belief is important for the continuation of non-kinship

¹⁵ Jonathan Boyarin, Storm from Paradise: The Politics of Jewish Memory (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), xi-xiii.

¹⁶ Laurence J. Silberstein, "Others Within and Others Without: Rethinking Jewish Identity and Culture," in The Other in Jewish Thought and History: Constructions of Jewish Culture and Identity, ed. Silberstein and Robert L. Cohn (New York and London: New York University Press, 1994), 1.

¹⁷ Ahad Haam, Collected Writings (in Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Devir, 1947), 150, 292, quoted in Silberstein, The Other, 1-2.

¹⁸ Arthur Liebman, Jews and the Left (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1978), 3.

communal relationships.¹⁹

The definition of Judaism as ethnicity allows, for example, the inclusion of the class-linked bonds and organizations that Shahn had affiliated with, and that informed his Jersey Homesteads mural. A religion-based definition would not.

Central to this conception of cultural or ethnic identification is the sense of belonging to, of partaking in, a shared history and communal experience. To paraphrase the scholar Cora Diamond, to be Jewish is not just to share or identify with others' values, aims, and feelings; rather, it is to have a sense of belonging and to share a history with others.²⁰ In his mural for the Jersey Homesteads, Shahn demonstrates his membership in a community as he chronicles their shared history which he helps to preserve.

To tell the history of the American Jewish working class, as Platt notes, Shahn deviated from a strictly linear chronology.²¹ He collapsed barriers of narrative time, bringing together scenes from the late nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries with those from the 1930s. As Platt further notes, Shahn creates portraits that are in fact

¹⁹ Ibid., 2. See Max Weber, "Ethnic Groups," in Theories of Society, ed. Talcott Parsons (New York: Free Press, 1961).

²⁰ Quoted in David Theo Goldberg and Michael Krausz, eds., Jewish Identity (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 6-7.

²¹ Platt, "The Jersey Homesteads Mural," 294-309.

compressions, or layering of specific and historical figures with those of imaginary, or symbolic figures. In so doing, Shahn places episodes and persons from discrete origins in close relation to each other.²² So, for example, Shahn creates an image of a union organizer presenting a speech. While the man's facial features recall those of the union leader John L. Lewis--an identification encouraged by the sign bearing an excerpt from a speech by Lewis placed conspicuously next to the speaker--Shahn generalized his features, thus allowing the man to symbolize generically all union leaders and organizers. Likewise, Shahn paints an image of the German-Jewish engineers Charles Steinmetz (1865-1923) and Albert Einstein (1879-1955) arriving together at Ellis Island in the United States, an event which did not take place. Shahn unites what can be labeled liturgical time, or the spoken memories, stories, and tales gathered from the Homesteaders and the artist himself, with historical or linear time. Events and personages become fused, linking past and present.²³ In this manner, the

²² Yerushalmi, Zakhor, 17, for a discussion of this phenomenon in rabbinic discourse.

²³ Shahn recalled a childhood memory in which the past and present were similarly blended together: "Time was to me then, in some curious way, timeless. All the events of the Bible were, relatively, part of the present. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were 'our' parents--certainly my mother's and father's, my grandmother's and my grandfather's, but mine as well. I had no sense of imminent time and time's passing." Quoted in Frances K. Pohl, Ben Shahn (San Francisco: Pomegranate Books, 1993), 8. I would like to thank Pohl for bringing this passage to my attention.

viewing of the image takes place in the ritualistic and experiential realm. The nature of the experience, specifically the reactualization of the exodus/immigration to America, depends on the composition's tripartite structure and the symbolic and narrative images that Shahn incorporates in the work.

In his notations, sketches, and final work, Shahn includes the feast of Passover in both a narrative and a metaphorical sense. In 1930 Shahn had created an actual Haggadah, the narrative text used for the Passover service.²⁴ The Passover seder, which Yersushalmi refers to as the "quintessential exercise in Jewish group memory," links the past with the present. The author explains:

Here, in the course of a meal around the family table, ritual, liturgy, and even the culinary elements are orchestrated to transmit a vital past from one generation to the next. The entire Seder is a symbolic enactment of a historical scenario whose three great acts structure the Haggadah that is read aloud: slavery-deliverance-ultimate redemption. Significantly, one of the first ritual acts to be performed is the lifting up of a piece of unleavened bread (matzah) before those assembled, with the declaration: Ha lahma 'anya-- "This is the bread of affliction which our forefathers ate in the Land of Egypt." Both the language and the gesture are geared to spur, not so much a leap of memory as a fusion of past and present. Memory here is no longer recollection, which still perseveres in a sense of distance, but reactualization. . . . In each and every generation let each person regard himself as

²⁴ See Stephen S. Kayser, Haggadah for Passover: Copied and Illustrated by Ben Shahn (London: MacGibbon & Kee Ltd., 1965).

though he had emerged from Egypt.²⁵

To create the mural's structure, Shahn echoes the tripartite and narrative division of the Haggadah (figs. 29, 30 and 31): slavery is represented through scenes of persecution, pogroms, and oppression; deliverance, through the liberation achieved by collective action and labor; and redemption, through the New Deal, the unions, and the Jersey Homesteads. As viewers of Shahn's mural, we follow the same path taken by the immigrants and the Homesteaders when we move from the darkness of the Old World to the bright new Eden of the Jersey Homesteads. Our role, as viewers, is to relive the experience of exodus and immigration, a role that Shahn affords us by the extreme legibility of form, space, gesture, and life-size scale of the figures. Further, throughout the mural Shahn includes lettering in the form of signs and documents, to help locate us both temporally and geographically.²⁶

In the handling of forms and arrangement of space, Shahn continues formal ideas he had intended to realize in his canceled Riker's mural (see chapter 1). Setting the horizon line high, Shahn creates several different recessional planes, from images that cling to the mural's surface to those set far back on a sharp diagonal. Shahn

²⁵ Yerushalmi, Zakhor, 44-45.

²⁶ Pohl, "Constructing History," 38.

negotiates the quick jumps between different times and locations by using painted architectural fragments such as brick walls, rows of columns, and doorways as transitional elements.²⁷ The figures and overall design conform to the artist's interest in two-dimensional flatness, necessitating black outlines to define figures and forms, which are rendered in flat, matte paint.

The mural's story begins in the 1930s, where at the upper left, in the darkest portion, a small figure of a Nazi soldier stands adjacent to signs in German of hate and warning: "Germans beware: don't buy from Jews" and "Attention Jews, visit forbidden." This scene refers specifically to the 1933 Nazi boycott against Jews, and the Nuremburg Laws of 1935 curtailing Jewish economic, cultural, and political life in Germany.²⁸ As noted by the art historian Frances K. Pohl, Shahn's inclusion of the Nazi soldier and his slogans contributes to the anti fascist sentiment of the work and is indicative of Shahn's involvement with the Popular Front movement against worldwide fascism.²⁹ To the right of the soldier, two

²⁷ Francis V. O'Connor, "The Influence of Diego Rivera on the Arts of the United States during the 1930s and After, in Diego Rivera: A Retrospective, exh. cat. (Detroit: The Detroit Institute of Arts, 1986), 169.

²⁸ See Lucy S. Dawidowicz, The War against the Jews, 1933-1945 (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1977), chapter 9.

²⁹ Pohl, "Constructing History," 38.

women raise their arms in anguish as they mourn beside open caskets displaying the corpses of the executed political martyrs Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, signaling a shift in time back to 1927.³⁰ Directly below and holding up the coffins is the Ellis Island Registry Hall, where a small, somewhat elusive figure of the Statue of Liberty peers through the doorway at the far end of the room.³¹ Shahn represents the Registry Hall on a deep diagonal, receding far back into the space. Shahn chose to present this room as empty except for a few figures at the bottom despite its reputation for being crowded, noisy, odorous, and filled with many, competing languages and an air of confusion. To the right of the bereft women is a small scene of cramped figures hunched over as they do piecework in their homes, a type of employment that existed beyond the protective contracts of the garment unions.

Shahn created a pastiche of immigrants coming off a ship's gangplank, mixing the anonymous arrivals with portraits of his family, friends, and historical figures. Shahn brought these portraits together despite the fact that each person had arrived at a different time, some from Eastern Europe and others from Germany. Shahn's mother--whom he includes--came to the United States in 1906.

³⁰ These figures relate to Shahn's Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti, 1932.

³¹ Shahn also represents the Statue of Liberty in his St. Louis and in Woodhaven Station, Queens, murals.

Although the artist Raphael Soyer (1899-1987) had arrived as a teenager in 1912 because his father, a Hebrew scholar, had been persecuted in Eastern Europe, Shahn shows the artist as a grown man. The German-born electrical engineer and socialist Charles Steinmetz had arrived in 1889, before Ellis Island was used as an entry point. Shahn places Albert Einstein as the leader of the group. Platt has noted that Shahn's presentation of the physicist "invokes a biblical allegory of Moses leading the Jews into the Promised Land, with Einstein performing the sage role of Moses in the biblical emigration."³² Unlike the residents of the Homesteads who were from Eastern Europe, Einstein came from Germany and had only recently arrived in America. Having renounced his German citizenship in 1933, Einstein settled in Princeton, New Jersey, near the Homesteads.³³ Yet while Einstein's personal history and odyssey differed from those of town residents, he stood as a source of great ethnic pride and hope to American Jews.

In America, Einstein spoke on behalf of Europe's refugees, organizing disparate Jewish groups, raising both money and public awareness about the plight of Jews in

³² Platt, "The Jersey Homesteads Mural," 306. Shahn met Einstein while working on the Homesteads mural. See Frances K. Pohl, Ben Shahn: New Deal Artist in a Cold War Climate, 1947-1954 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989), 83 and 86.

³³ See Pohl, "Constructing History," 38-39, for information on United States immigration, quotas, and refugee policies.

Germany, and in private, writing numerous affidavits that were requisite for the securing of visas.³⁴ Throughout the 1930s and 1940s Einstein monitored the volatile global climate; with an eye fixed on Hitler's growing powers, Einstein applied pressure on government leaders, including FDR, regarding the immigration barriers to both the United States and Palestine. Significantly, as Pohl reminds us, Shahn chose to portray immigration when America's policies prevented refugees and exiles from arriving on these shores.³⁵ With this information in mind, it is clear that Shahn's inclusion of Einstein held a greater resonance beyond that of "biblical allegory."

The montage of elements spilling out from the darkness of the Nazi scene, culminates with these arriving immigrants. This group commands the greatest space within the composition, striding forward, unhampered by architectural elements and tight corners. They symbolize freedom surrounded by the forces of economic and political oppression, exploitation, and persecution. It is the common

³⁴ Jamie Sayen, Einstein in America: The Scientist's Conscience in the Age of Hitler and Hiroshima (New York: Crown Publishers, 1985), 97-102; Peter A. Bucky, The Private Albert Einstein (Kansas City: Andrews and McMeel, 1992), 62-65; Abraham Pais, Einstein Lived Here (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 197-214. See also Einstein, The World as I See It (New York: Covici, Friede Publishers, 1934), especially the chapters "Judaism" and "Germany 1933."

³⁵ Pohl, "Constructing History," 38, and Henry L. Feingold, "Courage First and Intelligence Second," in FDR and the Holocaust, ed. Verne W. Newton (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 56-57.

cause behind their flights to America, namely persecution on either religious or political grounds that matter most, not their varying dates of entry to America. Together the celebrated individuals, Shahn's friends and mother, along with anonymous figures symbolize Jewish refugees throughout history and throughout the diaspora who sought political and religious freedom.

In the second third of the composition, Shahn deals specifically with work and labor unions. Here, men and women sit in an orderly row at sewing machines, the rhythm and regularity of their work underscored by the evenly placed columns, windows, and doors behind them. Above, a woman with children sits at a sewing machine, again illustrating the persistence of piece and home labor. Behind this working woman are buildings that house garment shops, bearing the names and logos of then prosperous cloak manufacturers A. E. Lefcourt, A. Beller, Davidow, and Aronson Brothers.³⁶ The figure of a union organizer dominates the scene as he stands in front of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, mouth open in midspeech, his sign displaying this message: "One of the great principles for which labor and America must stand in the future is the

³⁶ Shahn wanted to include names of manufacturers from the early 1900s who had fought the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union, and who went out of business as a result. See Charles H. Green to Ben Shahn, 11 February 1938, Ben Shahn Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. (hereafter AAA).

right of every man and woman to have a job, to earn their living if they are willing to work." Shahn took the quotation from an address John L. Lewis made at the closing session of the CIO's conference in Atlantic City, New Jersey, on 15 October 1937. A crowd of workers mills below the grandstand; each figure casts his eyes in a different direction, indicating that they have yet to coalesce into a collective body. Once more, Shahn juxtaposes events from different time periods--Lewis's speech of 1937 with the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory.

The cause behind the surge in the garment industry and the employment of female immigrant workers was Charles Dana Gibson's "Gibson Girl," the quintessential American beauty with her slight, upturned nose who popularized the shirtwaist. But it was immigrant Jewish and Italian women who stitched the fashionable garments. In 1909 and 1910 deplorable conditions within the shirtwaist industry led the workers to strike. One of the leaders of the "Uprising of 20,000" was sixteen-year-old Clara Lemlich who sounded the organizational cry in Yiddish.³⁷ These strikes, as well as the devastating fire that killed 146 women, strengthened the unions and created some legislative change.³⁸ Yet Shahn customarily overlooks the collective efforts of women

³⁷ See Susan A. Glenn, Daughters of the Shtetl: Life and Labor in the Immigrant Generation (Ithaca, N.Y., and London: Cornell University Press, 1990). See n. 55.

³⁸ Pohl, "Constructing History," 39-40.

laborers, organizers, and union leaders in his vision of working America, which is all the more ironic in light of Bernarda Bryson's own political activism and artistic career.

The last third of the mural displays the benefits of organized labor and the planned communities and efforts of the New Deal which workers supported. In order for the painted workers and today's viewers to arrive at the depicted version of the Jersey Homesteads, one must pass through the doorway marked "ILGWU"--[International Ladies' Garment Workers Union]--which indicates that we are afforded entry to this better life because of organized labor. Once through the doorway, workers gather in a classroom to learn the history of American labor as mapped out on a chalkboard.³⁹ Most probably, Shahn's classroom scene relates to Benjamin Brown's desire to create a labor college to be named in honor of the social critic Thorstein Veblen. At right, a group of men gather around a table whose top is tilted up to display the town's building plans. Shahn portrayed in this group John Brophy, director of the CIO, Sidney Hillman, president of Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, David Dubinsky of the ILGWU, Heywood Broun, of the American Newspaper Guild, and New York Senator Robert F.

³⁹ Shahn employs the device of learning as indicated by a lecturer at a chalkboard in three separate murals: Riker's shows automotive repair being taught; in the Bronx, Walt Whitman lectures to workers; and here in the Jersey Homesteads.

Wagner. Although Wagner was not directly involved in the Jersey Homesteads, he drafted crucial labor reform acts during the New Deal and proposed the Wagner-Rogers Bill which would have admitted 20,000 refugee children beyond the fixed quotas.⁴⁰ Surrounding these two scenes of men involved in learning and planning are images of fertile land, families, and a thriving--presumably cooperative--factory. Following the mural's progression from the dark scenes of Nazi Germany to this land of growth and plenty, we, along with the workers, have been delivered to a new Eden--one of safety and economic self-sufficiency.

American Jewish history has often been incorrectly portrayed as entirely urban, centralized in New York City's Lower East Side. While Shahn's mural devotes much attention to urban labor and life, he also acknowledges the existence of farming cooperatives. Historical narratives limited to the urban experience overlook the development of Jewish agricultural utopias in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which were a vital element of the American Jewish experience. Both ideologically and practically, the Jewish agricultural movement encouraged the creation of the Jersey Homesteads.

The beginnings of the Jewish agricultural movement in America dates, perhaps, to 1783, when an anonymous letter was sent to the Presidential Continental Congress proposing

⁴⁰ Feingold, "Courage First," 57.

the settlement of two thousand Jews on the land. In 1820 Jews established their first farm colony in Alchua County, Florida. The 1880s marked the beginning of mass East European Jewish immigration to the United States. These new Americans came from the Pale of Settlement in Russia, where 95 percent of Eastern Europe's Jews had lived. The Jews of the Pale lived commercial, urban, and decidedly nonagrarian lives; only 4 percent of them had any involvement with farming. Forced to flee from the Pale of Settlement after bloody pogroms, they met with resistance from America's German Jews whose prior arrival and openness to assimilation had allowed them to prosper. The German Jews wanted to keep the newly arrived Jews at a distance, to send them west and to be colonized in farming settlements. According to the historian Uri D. Herscher, the American Jewish philanthropist Baron Maurice de Hirsch provided funds to establish the Hebrew Emigrant Aid Society (HEAS) and the Jewish Colonization Society.⁴¹ Both organizations supported agricultural ventures for prosperous resettlement. Jewish organizations provided land grants or bought land directly for the newly arrived to settle as agricultural

⁴¹ Uri D. Herscher, Jewish Agricultural Utopias in America, 1880-1910 (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1981), 21-25. Jews scarcely made up more than 1 percent of the nearly 1.4 million agriculturists who immigrated to the United States. Other ethnic groups were much more successful as farmers.

communities.⁴² In 19 these new American Jews formed their own organization, the Jewish Agricultural Society (JAS) and in 1907 began publishing Der Yiddisher Farmer, a monthly journal that ran for fifty years.⁴³ The JAS worked to relocate and acclimate urban workers to rural areas. A joint agroindustrial program, as was the Jersey Homesteads, the JAS sought to combine cooperative working of the land with manufacture. The American Jewish farm movement and the Jewish farmer became popular themes in contemporary Yiddish theater, literature, and films.

While tinged with nostalgia for biblical Israel, the majority of these Jewish organizations and their land programs were not Zionist. For example, Am Olam, or Eternal People, established in 1881, intended to construct socialist or communal agricultural settlements to build a socialist society; approximately 350 idealistic, intellectual farmers were part of the movement.⁴⁴ One prominent member, still influential at the time of the Jersey Homesteads and certainly known to Shahn, was Abraham Cahan (1860-1951), the union organizer, author, and founder of the Jewish Daily

⁴² Gertrude Dubrovsky, The Land Was Theirs: Jewish Farmers in the Garden State (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1992), 18.

⁴³ Ibid., 21-22.

⁴⁴ Liebman, Jews and the Left, 92.

Forward, America's leading socialist Yiddish newspaper.⁴⁵

As a member of Am Olam, Cahan came to America from Russia to work the land, but when he got here he decided to remain in New York City; the ideals and agendas of Am Olam would find new vitality in the 1930s Jersey Homesteads.

In 1935 the federal government released a press report announcing the formation of the Jersey Homesteads, characterizing Jews and the American-Jewish experience in these terms:

It is popularly thought to be unusual for Jewish people to engage in a rural or semi-rural undertaking. The Jewish people are known as a gregarious race who have been highly urbanized for the past two thousand years, in large measure as the result of European laws which prohibited them from owning land. What is not so well known, is that some 120,000 Jews are on farms in this country today. Attempts by other countries to settle Jewish families on the land have failed largely because they neglected the social side of life which is so important to the Jew. The Jew is a sociable citizen. He sets great store by family, friends, and community. He flees from isolation. The Jersey Homesteads plan promises him a semi-rural or suburban life, but one in which neighbors and the community are strongly emphasized. In such a community the advantages of subsistence homesteading are to be enjoyed with no loss of those fine social activities which go to make up the well-rounded life which the Jewish family demands.⁴⁶

As the author of the press release indicates, the

⁴⁵ See Cahan, Bleter Fun Mein Leben (Pages from my life) (New York: The Forward Association, 1926-31), and The Rise of David Levinsky, ed. Jules Chametzky (1917; New York: Penguin Books, 1993).

⁴⁶ United States Department of the Interior Press Release, 10 March 1935, Ben Shahn Papers, AAA.

Jersey Homesteads was to be the latest attempt at experimental Jewish agricultural and communal living. There had been a strong ideological motivation behind the creation of these earlier farm and homesteading cooperatives, as there was now with the Homesteads. Yet ideology and youthful zeal do not guarantee good farmers. As the historian Gertrude Dubrovsky notes: "each effort made by Jewish immigrants and well-meaning Jewish institutions, organizations, and individuals who wanted to help them establish farm colonies were largely failures."⁴⁷ The Jersey Homesteads was not an exception.

Benjamin Brown, born Lipschitz, who had been active in the Jewish farm movement during the early twentieth century, was the main organizer behind the Jersey Homesteads.⁴⁸ Born in 1885 in a shtetl outside Odessa, Russia, Brown came to America at the age of fifteen. He worked first as a peddler, then as a farm laborer, taking his "American" name from his employers. After several years, with a loan from the JAS, Brown bought farmland in Kentucky and began holding meetings in Yiddish to organize Philadelphia Jews into farming cooperatives. In a letter to Das Naye Leben entitled "Far Vus Nit Mir?" (Why not we?), Brown asked the simple question that would motivate him to form the Jersey

⁴⁷ Dubrovsky, The Land Was Theirs, 2-5.

⁴⁸ Robert Alan Goldberg, Back to the Soil: The Jewish Farmers of Clarion, Utah, and Their World (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1986).

Homesteads over two decades later: "Why don't we organize ourselves into groups and grasp the privileges that are open to us in this land?"⁴⁹ In 1911, with Isaac Herbst, Brown traveled to Clarion, Utah, where land was cheaper; his efforts ultimately led to the establishment of the Utah Poultry Association. In 1927 the Soviet government invited Brown to assist with the creation of a National Jewish District in the Biro-Bidzhan region of far eastern Siberia.⁵⁰

In 1933, each independent of the other, both the federal government and Brown, along with other members of the Jewish agricultural movement, developed a similar idea to establish communal homesteads, which would allow residents to achieve economic self-sufficiency through cooperative farming ventures. Alabama's Senator John Bankhead proposed federal legislation to establish a subsistence homestead program; his proposal became part of the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA).⁵¹ Milburn "M. L." Wilson, who became head of the Division of Subsistence Homesteads, believed that the program should involve the homesteaders in the planning and development of their own community, to emphasize the cooperative aspects of

⁴⁹ Ibid., 43.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 126-27.

⁵¹ Kimberly Brodtkin, "From the Jersey Homesteads to Roosevelt: Community and Identity in a New Deal Settlement" thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 1992, 8-9.

homesteading. The key to the various models designed by the federal government and private agencies alike was communal, rather than individual, self-sufficiency. To achieve this sense of community, planners saw the need to establish social, cultural, and political networks such as clubs, newspapers, and meetings to maintain the workings of a town; the subsistence homesteads were consciously both a social experiment and a housing program. In this light, the Jewish agricultural movement can be understood as part of America's larger back-to-the-land movement, which arose in response to the economic depression.

The government's programs and the private Jewish agricultural movement linked up because of the friendship of Brown and Wilson, who had been members of the American delegation sent to Russia to build Biro-Bidzan in the late 1920s. Brown approached Wilson to create a homestead community specifically for Jewish workers employed in New York's garment industry. He planned on purchasing a 1200 acre tract of land, inviting 200 families each to subscribe \$500 to the project, which entitled them to ownership of a house and membership in the cooperative. For many of the residents, the requisite \$500 represented their entire savings. Town planners envisioned the community as having both an agricultural and an industrial economic base, allowing town residents to work in the communal farms during spring and summer months and in the cloak factory during the

winter and fall. David Dubinsky, president of the ILGWU referred to this dual-work arrangement as one that allowed homesteaders to "sew and sow at the same time." The government approved of the project, allocating a \$500,000 loan to the venture; a board was formed, which included such prominent members of the American Jewish community as Albert Einstein.⁵²

During the interim, in 1935 the NIRA had expired but was replaced the same year by the Emergency Relief Appropriations Act, which established the Resettlement Administration. The new head, Rexford Tugwell was less interested than his predecessor Wilson in the homesteading programs. He was, however, interested in new building materials and techniques, such as using prefabricated concrete slabs for the roofs of houses. The architects Louis Kahn and Alfred Kastner designed the town's Bauhaus-style flat-roof houses and communal buildings, using a modernist aesthetic which expressed the social ideals of functionalism underpinning the town.⁵³ Kastner, trained in Hamburg, headed the project and Kahn served as his assistant. The area selected for the Homesteads was near

⁵² The Jersey Homesteads Board was somewhat symbolic and was composed of representatives from labor and civic groups. Brown made the majority of the decisions.

⁵³ William Weaver, "Architecture: Louis Kahn in Roosevelt: Early Lessons of the Historic 1930s Community in New Jersey," Architectural Digest (July 1993), 68, 70, 72, 74.

Hightstown, New Jersey, which ironically was the stronghold of the Ku Klux Klan during this period. Living in this isolated area, the Homesteaders were re-creating the sense of small-town community once known back in Europe's tight-knit shtetls.

The garment industry and its unions were central to the town's conception and to Shahn's narrative. The predominance of Jews in the needle trades and the trade's prominent role in Jewish economic and cultural life date back several hundred years to Europe's shtetls. The reason for this was twofold: laws restricted how Jews could earn their living; and Jews had skills that arose from religious requirements.

Arriving in America after the 1848 revolution, German Jews were the first to become involved with the manufacture of clothing. Back in Eastern Europe, Jewish life was marked by extreme poverty, for few trades were open to Jews. There, many Jews found their livelihood in the preparation of clothing; 25 percent of Jewish artisans were tailors.⁵⁴ This career path grew in part out of the stringent requirements of religious law--sha 'atnez--which forbids observant Jews to wear clothing that mix linen and wool; therefore, Jews had to make their own clothes.⁵⁵ Religious dictum soon fostered a viable livelihood. When sewing

⁵⁴ Liebman, Jews and the Left, 82

⁵⁵ Glenn, Daughters of the Shtetl, 19-21.

machines arrived in the Pale during the 1870s, eager parents apprenticed their children to the "golden trade."⁵⁶ In March 1881 the assassination of Czar Alexander II was followed by waves of bloody pogroms, which led to mass Jewish exodus. In his novel The Rise of David Levinsky, Abraham Cahan recounts the resulting changes within the American garment industry:

The time I speak of, the late '80's and early '90's, is connected with an important and interesting chapter in the history of the American cloak business. Hitherto in the control of German Jews, it was now beginning to pass into the hands of their Russian co-religionists, the change being effected under peculiar conditions that were destined to lead to a stupendous development of the industry. . . . The transition was inevitable. While the manufacturers were German Jews, their contractors, tailors, and machine operators were Yiddish-speaking immigrants from Russia or Austrian Galicia. Although the former were of superior commercial civilization, it was, after all, a case of Greek meeting Greek, and the circumstances were such that just because they represented a superior commercial civilization they were doomed to be beaten. The German manufacturers were the pioneers of the industry in America. It was a new industry, in fact, scarcely twenty years old. Formerly, and as late as the '70's, women's cloaks and jackets were little known in the United States. Shawls were worn by the masses. What few cloaks were seen on women of means and fashion were imported from Germany. But the demand grew. So, gradually, some German-American merchants and an American shawl firm bethought themselves of manufacturing these garments at home. The industry progressed, the new-born great Russian immigration--a child of the massacres of 1881 and 1882--bringing the needed

⁵⁶ Ibid., 21. Nearly 90 percent of the garment industry workforce was female. This figure makes clear Shahn's dismissal of women workers.

army of tailors for it.⁵⁷

Leaving insular, peasant Jewish life behind for America's urban ghettos, Russian Jews had few employment opportunities besides those of peddling and textiles. As a reporter wrote in McClure's in 1904:

There are not many things that an unskilled foreigner, not knowing any English, can do; but almost any man or woman can sew. And thus flourished the sweatshop, the home of the 'task system,' where men, women and children worked together in unhealthy, often diseased, and sometimes immoral circumstances. Nowhere in the world at any time, probably, were men and women worked as they were in the sweatshop--the lowest paid, most degrading of American employment.⁵⁸

During the 1910s and 1920s, Cahan's Jewish Daily Forward chronicled the exploitation of workers and the strength of trade unionism within the garment industry. During the 1930s the Forward became the organ through which organizers of the Jersey Homesteads, leaders of the ILGWU, and future residents of the cooperative negotiated their differences. The greatest contention was over the establishment of a garment-manufacturing factory in the town.

In his memoirs Dubinsky wrote a version of the founding of the Jersey Homesteads that differs dramatically from other, more placid accounts. Dubinsky recalled that he had

⁵⁷ Cahan, The Rise of David Levinsky, 201.

⁵⁸ Ray Stannard Baker, "Plight of the Tailor," McClure's (December 1904), quoted in Out of the Sweatshop: The Struggle for Industrial Democracy, ed. Leon Stein (New York: Quadrangle Publishers, 1977), 22.

received a telephone call from First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, telling him that Morris W. Haft, one of New York City's leading cloak manufacturers had convinced Tugwell to establish a cooperative factory in New Jersey. The First Lady enthusiastically supported the plan; Dubinsky decidedly did not:

I told her right away I thought it was all a dream. Garment workers couldn't be farmers at the same time. Morris W. Haft wanted to dismiss a lot of his workers and get cheaper labor in Hightstown, that was really behind the plan. . . . Not only would the workers not become farmers, but the union could not under any circumstances become a party to letting Morris W. Haft throw out several hundred workers in New York and open a runaway shop in New Jersey.⁵⁹

Brown's economic plan hinged on a cloak manufacturing factory; initially the shop would be set up by a private manufacturer until the homesteaders were up to speed and able to take over the operation. The firms of Siegel Brothers and Morris W. Haft Company were both interested in the venture. Wary that the manufacturers were trying to establish nonunion shops, Dubinsky blocked progress on the Homesteads. In a letter to the Jewish Daily Forward, the union leader wrote:

We told them [organizers of the homesteads] furthermore that if the firm of Siegel Brothers has become so philanthropic and is interested in the question of colonizing cloakmakers in the country, not for personal reasons,--that is, for the purpose of getting rid of their New York workers and of having their garments made more

⁵⁹ David Dubinsky and A. H. Raskin, David Dubinsky: A Life with Labor (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1977), 205-7.

cheaply,--the Union would not object if the firm would take 200 workers from their shops, such as are agreeable with the land, and transfer them to Hightstown.⁶⁰

Town supporters brought in Albert Einstein to negotiate with Dubinsky, hoping that he could convince the union leader to support the town and its factory. According to Dubinsky and his biographers, it was actually the garment manufacturer Haft who had initially approached Tugwell, and it was also he who in turn asked Einstein to appease Dubinsky and the unions: "the jobber went to Einstein and appealed to him on racial grounds. It would be wonderful, he said, to demonstrate that Jews were not inveterately urban, but could live happily in the countryside."⁶¹ The difficulties leading to the town's establishment and the union's ultimate support of the factory illustrate that the Jewish, left, and labor communities were unified neither in voice, nor vision.

Shahn considered these differing voices when preparing his mural. In a letter to Adrian Dornbush, Director of

⁶⁰ David Dubinsky, "The Project of the Hightstown Colony and the Cloakmakers' Union," Jewish Daily Forward, 6 November 1935, 3, Roosevelt, New Jersey, Collection, Rutgers University Library, New Brunswick, N.J.

⁶¹ Benjamin Stolberg, Tailor's Progress: The Story of a Famous Union and the Men Who Made It (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1941), 167. The meeting between Dubinsky and Einstein turned into a press event, with the two men fighting for over an hour in the company of photographers and reporters. The two men came to an impasse with Dubinsky shouting, "My dear Dr. Einstein, when it comes to physics you're the professor. But when it comes to tailoring, I'm the professor."

Special Skills, Resettlement Administration, the architect Alfred Kastner detailed a recent conversation he had with Shahn about the Jersey Homesteads mural. One of the topics covered was the establishment of a committee to "cooperate on the discussion and interpretation and acceptance of the preliminary sketches."⁶² The committee of four men proposed as project advisors represent distinct, divergent voices within American Jewry, yet each addressed then current sociopolitical concerns: Felix Adler, Rabbi William H. Fineshriber, Meyer Schapiro, and Baruch Charney Vladeck.

Felix Adler (1851-1933) was born in Germany, the son of a reform rabbi.⁶³ Adler, who studied at Columbia University, served as a rabbi at New York's Temple Emanuel yet found that even reform Judaism was incompatible with his rationalist ideals--or some would say with his assimilationist tendencies. In 1876 Adler established the Society for Ethical Culture, which worked to popularize ethical practice apart from either religion or dogma. In a

⁶² Letter from Alfred Kastner to A. J. Dornbush, 2 March 1936, Ben Shahn Papers, AAA.

⁶³ Obviously, since by the time of Shahn's mural commission Adler had been dead for three years, he was not involved with the project. However, Adler represents an important element of American-Jewish history, the tensions between assimilation and traditional lifestyle, and the tensions between German and Eastern European Jews. While much of the Ethical Culture philosophy is built on traditional Jewish ethics, the movement is an example of Jewish acculturation in the face of predominant Protestant culture. See Felix Adler, Life and Destiny (New York: American Ethical Union, 1944).

recent discussion of Adler and his Ethical Culture movement, the historian George Hutchinson states:

Adler, believing that all religions had a common ethical basis, advocated a "social religion" that placed a heavy emphasis upon ethics, which, indeed, dominated the curriculum of the Ethical schools in grades one through five. In particular, Adler sought to awaken in children a sense of "humanity" and sympathy, stressing both the unity and variety of human beings. Points of likeness, Adler emphasized, help create sympathy between people, while points of difference help them overcome provincialism and widen their horizons; all types made their contributions to human civilization. . . . In a period of massive immigration and rising nativism, he viewed "Americanization" as a process of harmonizing, and not "melting" differences, with each group having much to offer from its own tradition.⁶⁴

Praised by some for their commitment to progressive social programs for children, the poor, labor, and civic reform, critics labeled the Ethical Culture movement as merely another variant of Jewish assimilation and "watered-down" Judaism.

Rabbi William H. Fineshriber (1878-1968) served for many years as the rabbi of Philadelphia's reform Congregation Keneseth Israel. From the pulpit and in his writings, Fineshriber was an outspoken opponent of political Zionism and consistently spoke against the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. In early notations, in which Shahn tried to present agricultural living as a viable

⁶⁴ George Hutchinson, The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White (Cambridge, Mass. and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995), 39-40. Hutchinson discusses Adler in relation to Alain Locke, who was raised and schooled in the movement.

option, he considered including references to Zionism and Jewish Palestine. Ultimately, in his final version, Shahn omits any such reference. Shahn did, however, include a prominent portrait of Albert Einstein who was a vocal supporter of Zionism, open immigration to Palestine, and the establishment of a binational Arab-Jewish state.⁶⁵

Most likely, Shahn and Meyer Schapiro (1904-1996) knew each other through their work on Art Front. Schapiro shared with Shahn several biographical similarities. This archetypal Jewish immigrant and intellectual was born in Lithuania and arrived in the United States in 1906--the same year as had Shahn. During the 1930s Schapiro contributed to Art Front important articles discussing murals, cultural identity, and class versus ethnic-identification, all issues germane to Shahn's murals.⁶⁶

Baruch Charney Vladeck (1886-1938), born in Russia near Minsk, studied religion as a teenager but soon abandoned theology in favor of direct political action with the Bund. An active socialist, by the time he came to the United States, Vladeck was less set on achieving social revolution. A writer of Yiddish prose and poetry, Vladeck became an

⁶⁵ Sayen, Einstein in America, 105-7.

⁶⁶ See Andrew Hemingway, "Meyer Schapiro and Marxism in the 1930s," Oxford Art Journal 17 (1994), 13-29; Patricia Hills, "1936: Meyer Schapiro, Art Front, and the Popular Front," *ibid.*, 30-41; Meyer Schapiro, "Public Use of Art," Art Front (November 1936), 4-6, and "Race, Nationality and Art," Art Front (March 1936), 10-12.

editor at Cahan's Jewish Daily Forward. During World War I, he assumed a leadership role in the American Socialist Party and served on the New York City Board of Aldermen as a Socialist. During the 1930s Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia appointed Vladeck, a champion of public housing, to the New York City Housing Authority. Dissatisfied with a split within the Socialist Party during the 1930s, Vladeck moved more to the right, and with Dubinsky founded the American Labor Party.⁶⁷

We do not know if this committee ever convened to review Shahn's ideas, but we do know that Shahn consulted with Vladeck during his initial research. Despite, their differences, each man contributed to the social, cultural, and intellectual climate in which Shahn sought to formulate American Jewish working class history. Although each man differed as to his relation with Jewish secular and religious groups and organizations, as a collective they spoke to such significant issues within the American Jewish community as cultural nationalism, Jewish identification with the Left, assimilation, and class identification. When tracing Shahn's progression on the Jersey Homestead mural from his initial impulses and notations through to the outlines and sketches, the artist's consideration of these

⁶⁷ See Robert Livingston Schuler, ed., Dictionary of American Biography (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1958), 684-85, and Encyclopedia Judaica (Jerusalem: McMillian Company, 1971), 16:200.

issues and questions becomes apparent.

In his earliest notations, Shahn more openly questioned the problems of assimilation and status of Jewish security globally and in America. To develop his preliminary ideas, Shahn created a list of names, dates, and events.⁶⁸ Shahn subdivided his outline into three sections: background, immigration, and unionization. Although the titles changed as Shahn moved toward the mural's completion, the three-part structure remained consistent.

For the background section, Shahn quickly scribbled the words Ghetto in Russia, Poland, etc. noting that "Jews were forced to remain in ghettos and unable to exercise citizenship." Shahn continues to describe the oppressive nature of life in the Pale, listing the words persecution, Passover festival, and the accusation of blood ritual; Shahn next writes Mendel Beilis case⁶⁹ and the words Dreyfus case

⁶⁸ Undated manuscript, Ben Shahn Papers, AAA.

⁶⁹ In Russia in 1911 a young child was found dead; the monarchist press charged that a Jew must have been the murderer, claiming that Jews used blood as part of religious rituals. Despite police evidence as to the true murderer's identity, focus shifted to Menahem Mendel Beilis, the superintendent of an area brick kilns. He was imprisoned, and his case drew great attention. During the course of the trial, a Catholic priest presented "scientific evidence" that Jews in fact used blood during Passover and other rituals. Eventually, Beilis was cleared; ultimately, for personal safety he fled to the United States. Bernard Malamud based The Fixer on the Beilis case. See Albert S. Lindemann, The Jew Accused: Three Anti-Semitic Affairs (Dreyfus, Beilis, Frank), 1894-1915 (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

in parentheses.⁷⁰ Shahn continues to describe the sparse, oppressive conditions in Eastern Europe, where Jews were forced into military service and prevented from doing any other work besides that of tailoring or carpentry. In his notes, Shahn concluded that because of fear and distrust directed against them, Jews turned to religion for solace and compensation and led segregated lives of despair. Because of this pronounced "racial persecution" and economic distress, according to Shahn, some Jews turned hopefully to Zionism, others joined revolutionary movements, and still others immigrated to America.

In the second section, Shahn's concern is immigration to America and New York. Shahn made a note to look at the political activist and writer Mike Gold's book Jews without Money, a fictionalized autobiography of life on the Lower East Side.⁷¹ Here, Shahn sets up a dichotomy between the older generation, who for years had lived in the ghettos and shtetls, and the younger generation of American Jews. The former, he observes, are "so set that once here [they are] unable to become assimilated--live in strongly defined racial groups, continue trades and habits of old country, [the] older generation never assimilated." Shahn contrasts

⁷⁰ Shahn had created a series on the French Captain Alfred Dreyfus in 1930. These are his first works addressing sociopolitical events and issues of justice.

⁷¹ Mike Gold, Jews without Money (New York: Horace Liveright, Inc.), 1934.

older Jews with the new or younger generation who, thanks to schooling in America, become assimilated.⁷² Shahn acknowledges the naturalness of generational and cultural conflicts, citing as his example the older generation's strong sense of class consciousness, which becomes expressed in unionization activities but which had not yet solidified their children.

It is the actions of the older generation that inspired Shahn's ideas and as well, that create the mural's sense of momentum and move its narrative forward to the third section, unionization. Here, Shahn centers primarily on the activities of the needle trades and notes the persistence of divergent views within the Left and the garment unions. Shahn writes the names of two Yiddish newspapers--Freiheit, which began publishing in 1922 and was the unofficial organ of the Communist Party, and the word Forvertz, which translates as "Forward," which was Socialist until Cahan severed ties with the Socialist Party in 1936.⁷³ Shahn's swift, cursory notations mention the importance in the garment industry of famous strikes and the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire; he notes that some positive social legislation resulted from these events. In this beginning stage, Shahn already expresses his intention to document the history of unionization in the needle trades, along with the

⁷² See Cahan, David Levinsky, 244-45.

⁷³ Liebman, Jews and the Left, 332-46.

working conditions within sweatshops and life in the Lower East Side's ghettos. He uses personal recollection to illustrate that the only escapes from the harsh realities of the immigrant's life and work in this "land of opportunity" came from such simple amusements as picnics. Yet through all the hardship, Shahn writes in his notes, the immigrants maintained their craving for land.

In the final section of his outline, Shahn turns his attention to Hitler's Germany, the international refugee situation, and the current situation of world Jewry. He opens this section with Jews perilously on a precipice from which Shahn tries to find the route toward security. Shahn's first notation refers to the "crisis of '29," which he couples with the words massacre in Palestine.⁷⁴ In this context, I would argue that the "crisis" that Shahn refers to probably was the outbreak of riots in Palestine rather than America's stock-market crash; both happened in 1929.⁷⁵ Shahn acknowledges the dangers that German Jews experienced by falsely believing that they were safe in Germany. As he succinctly phrased the situation: "Assimilation not enough

⁷⁴ Sayen, Einstein in America, 105, writes of the riots in Jerusalem in 1929: "In August 1929 tension developed when a Jewish partition to separate men and women was erected at the Wailing Wall. The Arabs began to demonstrate loudly and burn books. One Jew was killed in a brawl. Three days later his funeral became a massive Jewish demonstration. On August 23 the Arabs inaugurated a series of bloody riots and massacres of Jews which began in Jerusalem and spread throughout Palestine."

⁷⁵ Ibid., 105.

witness Germany. . . . Ascent of Hitler."⁷⁶ The answer that Shahn proposes is for the whole working class to embark on cooperative ventures, citing the example of the aid offered to coal miners by needle trades workers in the fight for industrial unions. Ultimately Shahn proposed that Jews should forge bonds through union and class affiliation, rather than adopting isolationist positions or assimilating.

What does Shahn establish in this brief outline? Clearly, he acknowledges that the question of safety continues to be relevant. He bracketed the mural's central portion with scenes of persecution in both nineteenth-century Russia and modern Germany. Despite the importance given to unions and class-based organizing, a pervasive foreboding attitude permeates his narrative. In a later, but undated version, Shahn further develops his conception of the mural, filling in more narrative details. He continues the tripartite structure of his mural. The themes of immigration and unionization still define the narrative. Shahn writes:

The mural should begin with the life of the Jews in [a] Russia Ghetto. They are seen living in humbleness and fear, caring for their own as best they can, keeping up homes for the aged and schools for their young. They are deeply buried in their religion, finding there some compensation for their exclusion from civil life about them. A fragment of a dream of return to the Holy Land is shown, and the nostalgic prayer: 'On the coming year let us all hope that we will be reunited in

⁷⁶ In between these two phrases Shahn wrote the words danger of identifying self with, the last word is illegible.

Jerusalem.' Around a table the Jews sit at the feast of Passover. Behind them rages a pogrom. An inflammatory anti-Semitic myth often spread among the Russian peasants holds that at the time of Passover the Jews must have the blood of a Christian child. Because of this, pogroms sometimes begin at this time. The tragic conclusion of the pogrom is seen in a coffin, surrounded by a mournful family.

The Passover symbolizes the departure of the Jews from Egypt, the land of bondage. So, with the feast of Passover, and out of the background of Ghettos and pogroms comes a stream of immigrants to America with hope in their faces. Above them hovers the dream of America--a land of fruit and flowers, big cities with streets paved with gold, the Statue of Liberty--symbol of a new life to the immigrant.

Looking away from the stream of immigrants is shown a dim loft in a New York sweatshop, three Jewish workers bend over long lines of machines straining to see in the dim lights. Other workers bend over gas irons smothered in clouds of steam. Others laboriously operate antiquated and back-breaking machinery. Here the Jews, disillusioned in their dream of America, again dream of the return to Zion. Or some think longingly of the open fields which they have seen in America, and yearn for the soil and the ancient agricultural pursuits of their race. A scene in a New York ghetto is shown. The older immigrant Jews, cast in a mould by generations of fear, are found living in segregated groups, carrying on their traditional trades and customs, not venturing into fields which were forbidden.

Out of this scene of the New York ghetto and the older Jews surges a new generation--the young American Jews. Free from fear and oppression, they are now fully assimilated into their surroundings. They take part in the life of the country, its culture, its sports, its business, politics, and professions. Many of them work in the needle trades, but these are no longer sweatshop workers. They are meeting in unions of the needle trades, they are addressing crowds of workers, they picket in a strike. . . .

A young Jewish worker stands with his two children where a pathway divides. Over him hangs a dark reddish cloud in which the horrors of Jewish persecution in Hitler Germany are shown. The cloud hangs low with a suggestion of imminence. Before him one path leads toward the

Holy land, toward Tel Aviv, and the New Jewish settlements in Palestine. He looks longingly-- shall he return to the homeland? But he seems rooted to the ground. He is an American, his children are Americans. . . . A second branch of the path leads in the direction of another old dream of the Jews-- a return to the land. Here is shown the co-operative community with its various aspects of communal living. . . . There is seen here an adding to and an enriching of the group, without sacrifice of the racial and cultural treasures. The Jew is shown able to realize his potential growth. . . . practicing his trade and living on the land.⁷⁷

In his final sketches and in the mural, Shahn removes any references to Palestine and the option to flee from America. Several art historians have reviewed Shahn's preparatory sketches, noting specific changes that Shahn made between them and his final fresco (figs. 32 and 33).⁷⁸ Each has noted that Shahn chose to replace Yiddish with English on the signboard containing John L. Lewis's speech,⁷⁹ to remove a Passover scene and the image of Jews praying at the Wailing Wall, and to reconfigure the identities of the slain men in the coffin from Jews killed in a pogrom to African Americans, and finally, to the corpses of Sacco and Vanzetti. In addition, Shahn added the portrait of Einstein which was not originally included in

⁷⁷ Undated manuscript, Ben Shahn Papers, AAA.

⁷⁸ See Amishai-Maisel, "The Problem of Jewish Identity"; Platt, "The Jersey Homesteads Mural"; and Pohl, "Constructing History."

⁷⁹ See Maxine Goldsmith, "The Place of Yiddish in a Changing Jewish Ethnicity" (M.A. thesis, Arizona State University, 1988), for information on the prevalence and shifts in use of Yiddish.

the sketches.⁸⁰

Why these thematic shifts, in particular, the move away from specific ethnic references? In noting these changes, art historian Ziva Amishai-Maisels claims that Shahn expressed simultaneously his fear of ethnic parochialism and his need to identify as an ethnic Jew. Amishai-Maisel, unlike the sociologist Arthur Liebman, clings to a religion-based definition of Judaism. In so doing, she fails to acknowledge the centrality of class issues and labor in Shahn's life and art, and as well among the Left.⁸¹ Pohl presents the most convincing argument for these changes, which she bases on the sociohistorical events that engaged Shahn. She argues that Shahn held back on overtly ethnic elements, not to deny the centrality of Judaism, but rather because of his growing involvement with the Popular Front, which sought to strengthen class affiliation. With the Popular Front, Jews on the Left and in the garment unions first shifted their allegiance to FDR.⁸² I would argue

⁸⁰ Pohl, "Constructing History," 38, identifies the scene as a family dinner. I would suggest, however, that Shahn shows the Passover being celebrated as indicated by the father reclining against pillows as he sits in his chair, which is part of the proceedings.

⁸¹ Amishai-Maisel, "The Problem of Jewish Identity," 304. Interestingly, throughout her essay, Amishai-Maisel refers to Bryson only as Shahn's widow and a Christian, never as an artist, nor as Shahn's co-worker on mural projects, nor as the more politically engaged of the pair. Platt acknowledges Bryson's creative and political influence on Shahn and her contributions to his murals.

⁸² Liebman, Jews and the Left, 54.

that the only visual language that would be expressive of the whole identity of the Jersey Homesteaders would marry class with ethnicity. The changes Shahn made serve to create this language and thus document the specificity of Jewishness within the Jersey Homesteads.

At the outset of this chapter, I posed the question of the role of history within Jewish culture and how Shahn's mural serves to perpetuate Jewish history. How does the mural function and what is demanded of us as viewers today? While the didactic intent of the mural is still clear, its message and impact have shifted from that which Shahn proposed. Concurrently with Shahn's work on the mural, Jewish history was changing rapidly. By the 1930s, Jews had moved from a primarily working-class status to middle class; soon, fewer were involved with the garment industry and with labor. While Shahn brings his narrative to a happy resolution by juxtaposing Homesteaders with fertile crops and a productive factory, both ventures had already failed by the time Shahn had completed his mural. Further, the direction that Shahn proposed, namely cooperative living, proved not to be chosen by most Jews, who instead ascended into the middle class.

With the exception of the images of the Nazi soldier and the portrait of Einstein, Shahn removed all ominous scenes of false accusations, pogroms, persecution, and political refugees. As the art historian Linda Nochlin

writes, "hovering, unspoken for the most part, above the discourse about Jewish identity and representation after the middle of the twentieth century is the shadow of the Holocaust."⁸³ Likewise, this exploration of Jewish identity within Shahn's murals is undertaken with the stark awareness of the rise of National Socialism in the 1930s and the barriers to Jewish refugees fleeing to safety. Shahn painted his mural in the years that predated the Jewish Holocaust, and since that time his vision has proven too optimistic for what was to come. As we now know, federal policy prevented the refugees free entry to the United States and British policy prevented escape to Palestine (see chapter 5).⁸⁴ In retrospect, the resulting extermination of millions of Jews and non-Jews by Hitler casts a naive glow over the last vignette and Shahn's hopeful conception of class-based identification for Jews in America.

⁸³ Linda Nochlin, in The Jew in the Text: Modernity and the Construction of Identity, ed. Nochlin and Tamar Garb (London: Thames and Hudson, Ltd., 1995), 10.

⁸⁴ See Sayen, Einstein in America, 110-12, and Newton, FDR and the Holocaust.

Chapter Four: "The Best and Scope of America":
The Bronx Murals

Painted on the walls of the Bronx Central Post Office located on the Grand Concourse, Ben Shahn's mural Resources of America (1938-39) documents and pays tribute to American workers.¹ Shahn depicts 1930s workers from America's industrial and agricultural sectors as they busily transform raw materials into finished products; there are thirteen panels in all. Uniting and directing the proceedings is the nineteenth-century poet Walt Whitman, whose portrait serves as the focal point for the series. A visitor from the previous century, Whitman expounds with the laborers on American democratic ideals. A quotation from Whitman's verse was meant to inspire both the painted workers and Bronx residents. Yet, without intending to, Shahn selected a passage that enraged local Catholic clergymen, who angrily responded with a letter-writing campaign, protesting and denouncing the mural. Their efforts convinced Shahn to substitute for his first choice another passage that proved to be less of a theological irritant. The new verse mollified the mural's opponents and Shahn was able to complete his designs as originally planned.

My analysis of Shahn's worker-image cycle and the controversy over the Whitman quotation is divided into two

¹ During the 1930s the post office was known both as the Central Post Office and the Central Annex. It is now called the Bronx General Post Office.

parts. The first will directly concern the images and figures of labor in Shahn's cycle. I examine these images within the context of 1930s social and cultural history in order to compare and contrast the factual reality of 1930s work and labor with Shahn's painted interpretation. The second part focuses on the quotation from Whitman and the ensuing controversy. In reviewing documentation of the contention, I was struck by the Catholic Church's use of terms suggesting, as well as directly referencing the rise of Nazis and fascists in Europe to discuss Whitman's words.² For his part, when responding to objections to his Bronx mural and the Whitman passage, Shahn related such limits on the freedom of speech to the growth of reactionary, right-wing politics both at home and abroad. During the 1930s Father Charles Coughlin, whom Shahn later satirized, was the most potent spokesman for American fascism and anti-Semitism.³ Shahn's references to the rise of fascism and to art censorship indicate his growing awareness and anxiety about the world political situation. Shahn was not alone. Artists were concerned that limits on their freedom would too easily become limitations on other

² I must clarify that I am referring to specific reactionary factions within the Catholic Church during the 1930s whom I identify and discuss in the course of this chapter. I appreciate Alejandro Anreus's sensitizing me to differing ethnic affiliations and varying ideologies within the Church hierarchy, histories, and parishioners.

³ I am grateful to Professor Matthew L. Rohn for bringing these issues to my attention.

rights and liberties. The spread of fascism overseas, as well as homegrown anti-Semitism and fascism, prompted artists and activists to sound the alarm. As I will document in this and subsequent chapters, Shahn's murals pay tribute to American freedoms while expressing concern for their preservation.⁴

In 1937, the year before the Bronx commission, Shahn began murals for the Jersey Homesteads, New Jersey, on the interrelated themes of labor history and Jewish history. In 1939, for an unsuccessful bid for the St. Louis Post Office commission, Shahn created several panels on constitutional freedoms, including two panels on immigration that show some people fleeing to America against a backdrop of war and others held in a concentration camp. As I will argue, in the Bronx mural Shahn continues to confront the same themes of worker identity and freedom that he depicted in the New Jersey mural and that are central to both American and Jewish ideologies. The New Jersey, Bronx, St. Louis, and Woodhaven Station, Queens (1940) murals should be seen together as his suite on the issue of freedom.

Calloused hands, broad muscular backs, and strong forearms compose Shahn's mural for the Bronx Central Post

⁴ For further information on artistic responses to fascism, see Matthew Baigell and Julia Williams, eds., Artists against War and Fascism: Papers of the First American Artists' Congress (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1986), and Cecile Whiting, Antifascism in American Art (New Haven, Conn. and London: Yale University Press, 1989).

Office. As one scans the thirteen panels, the eye stops at the backs of laborers turned away as they work or at downcast eyes that look sharply at wage-earning tools and tasks. In contrast to Shahn's previous murals that include the physiognomies and personalities of famous men, such as Mayor Jimmy Walker or Albert Einstein, in the Bronx mural Shahn downplays individualities. He obscures faces and leaves identities unknown; the participants are far too busy to look up to acknowledge the presence of an audience. We are spectators, voyeurs, as the quick pace of work clips along for these men and women of the 1930s.

Working with egg tempera, Shahn painted the cycle in an overall tawny, rust color. By limiting his palette to a single tone, he brings unity and rhythm to the thirteen panels, providing a vision of solidarity that transcends the separate regions and occupations of America. Based less on the fractured and flattened forms in his earlier works, the figures in the Bronx mural are round and bulky, stocky and unglamorized. These people contrast starkly with the romantic ideal of worker-as-hero popularized elsewhere during the 1930s, employed by such artists as Fletcher Martin.⁵ Pumped up with testosterone, well-defined pectorals tugging at shirt sleeves and square, determined

⁵ See Fletcher Martin's Trouble in Frisco, 1938, reproduced in Philip S. Foner and Reinhard Schultz, The Other America: Art and the Labour Movement in the United States (London: Journeyman Press, 1985), 23.

chins thrusting confidently forward, the worker-as-hero glorifies the male by emphasizing his physique.⁶ The capable body suppresses any expression of emotion or individuality. Images of the worker-as-hero deny the worker's humanity and his vulnerability to the hazards of the job. He is invincible. But in making a worker larger than life effectively transforms him into just another machine. By infusing the body with a greater sense of emotion and fashioning the body from softer forms, Shahn crafts a vocabulary that emphasizes the 1930s worker as an ordinary person, in contrast to the worker-as-hero; the bodies on the Bronx walls are notable for their lack of prettiness and for their lack of overarticulation of muscle.

Steelworkers, textile workers, cotton pickers, and electrical workers, men threshing hay, women spooling lines of thread -- all are active, all are productive. However, does full employment and a land fertile with ripe cotton and golden grain not seem ironic, if not deceitful? If this is Depression America, where are the scenes of sit-down strikes, or of breadlines, or of dry, dusty land? This is the question that the art historian Karal Ann Marling wryly poses and answers, acknowledging that viewers and scholars alike often simplify and misread New Deal imagery. In her discussion of realism within federal murals, Marling

⁶ Clearly, the focus on male labors can be distancing for the female viewer, preventing identification with the worker and his routine.

deconstructs the image of the productive, satisfied worker to lay bare the ideological concerns that necessitated such imagery. Marling argues that if we consider Shahn's Worker with an Electric Drill (fig. 34) within the context and realities of the 1930s, such an image of prosperity takes on the air of political propaganda. She concedes that "New Deal Realism is, at best, less than honest." Marling concludes that images such as Shahn's electric worker, and the pictorial representation of the "usable past" by other artists, indicate a desire on the part of artists to establish a communal sense of faith in America's future, an ideal they present as a moral duty and social responsibility.⁷

My analysis of Shahn's mural builds on the same sense of incongruities that initiates Marling's investigation, the same sense of intellectual suspicion of accepting benign imagery that resists being woven into the tumultuous historical record of the Depression. I agree with Marling's reading of the New Deal murals as fictional interpretations, rather than factual documentation, of the Depression and New Deal experiences, but I will probe even further the disjuncture between imagery and events and provide greater contextual information on labor in the 1930s. Marling's reading ultimately retreats into the realm of the mind,

⁷ Karal Ann Marling, "A Note on New Deal Iconography: Futurology and the Historical Myth," in Prospects, vol. 4 (New York: Burt Franklin, and Co., 1979), 420-40.

concentrating on the need on the part of artists and the general population to create and accept optimistic visions.

Before exploring the individual scenes within Shahn's Resources of America cycle to contextualize them within the particulars of 1930s labor events and law, I wish to establish the history of the commission and Shahn's consistent involvement with labor and labor imagery. One fact that New Deal art scholars must always contend with, which presents a caveat to the idea of artistic autonomy, is that the federal murals were commissions. Shahn and other federal mural painters had to be responsive to officials and to the immediate public. The artist created an image within the matrix and policies of an official artistic program and language. Among other subjects, this artistic program accommodated images of America's workers as suitable subject matter for murals.

In 1938 the Treasury Department announced a call for submissions to the Bronx competition. This was the first Treasury Department competition for a New York City building, and 189 artists submitted proposals.⁸ The Bronx commission, administered by the Section of Painting and Sculpture established within the Treasury Department

⁸ Virginia M. Mecklenburg, The Public as Patron: A History of the Treasury Department Mural Program, exh. cat. (College Park: University of Maryland Art Gallery, 1979), 107. The competition was open to all artists who were residents of, or attached to, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, and Connecticut.

(hereafter referred to as the Section), was an important competition; the financial reward was large, and it drew a great deal of public notice.⁹ The guidelines of the commissioning agency encouraged works that adhered to the American Scene in terms of style and subject matter with an interest in historical themes. The criteria that drove the commission was quality, not work relief.¹⁰ Shahn was awarded the commission in the Spring of 1938.¹¹

Working with the artist Bernarda Bryson Shahn, Shahn sketched a thirteen-panel suite inspired by Whitman's poem "I Hear America Singing," which he called The Resources of America.¹² This title and theme celebrate the agricultural and industrial resources of America and its working people. Shahn, whose vision and experience of America had previously been limited to New York City, traveled as a photographer

⁹ Marlene Park and Gerald E. Markowitz, Democratic Vistas: Post Offices and Public Art in the New Deal (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), 12-13.

¹⁰ For further information on policies and projects of the Treasury Department art programs, see Belisario R. Contreras, "The New Deal Treasury Department Art Programs and the American Artist: 1933-1943" (Ph.D. diss., American University, 1967), and his Tradition and Innovation in New Deal Art (Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell University Press, 1983).

¹¹ See "Artists Named for Postoffice Murals in Bronx," New York Herald Tribune, 22 May 1938, 22.

¹² Bernarda Bryson Shahn says that she also submitted her own proposal for the Bronx commission, which was not selected, and that she much prefers Ben Shahn's designs over her own. She assisted with the painting of the Bronx murals. Bernarda Bryson Shahn, interview with author, 28 January 1993.

for the New Deal's Resettlement Administration/Farm Security Administration (RA/FSA) from 1935 to 1938. The sights and people of rural America that he recorded with his Leica camera, coupled with the spirit of Whitman, became fodder for his vision of labor in the Bronx mural.¹³ As Bryson Shahn recalls, "Ideologically Ben was at that time considerably more under the influence of Walt Whitman, than of Rivera, an orientation strongly supported by his travels in America and by his Leica observation."¹⁴ Enriched by these journeys, Shahn sought through his mural to connect the people of the Bronx with their fellow workers across the land. As art historian Marlene Park states, by highlighting and including industries and workers from different regions of America, Shahn illustrates the economic growth of the entire United States.¹⁵ Shahn chose not to celebrate local industry -- a standard subject for New Deal murals -- so that he could promote the national over the local. As Park and Markowitz assert, "productive work, rather than local industry, is the subject of these murals."¹⁶

¹³ See Laura Katzman's "The Politics of Media: Painting and Photography in the Art of Ben Shahn" American Art 7, no. 1 (Winter 1993), 61-87.

¹⁴ Bernarda Bryson Shahn, Ben Shahn (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1972), 288.

¹⁵ Marlene Park, "City and Country in the 1930s: A Study of New Deal Murals in New York," Art Journal 39 (Fall 1979), 39.

¹⁶ Park and Markowitz, Democratic Vistas, 78.

By illustrating a variety of labors from different regions of America, Shahn steps aside from the New Deal muralist's role as mirror of the immediate community and chronicler of its lives. Shahn positions himself in the role of artist as educator, as envoy and translator for the post office's visitors of the America that he saw beyond the Grand Concourse. As he stated, he wanted to break through the provincial mindset of city dwellers, to make them part of the greater United States: "having experienced America myself, I decided to those people who are as provincial as only city people can be, to show them the best and scope of America."¹⁷ Shahn does not paint as a member of an immediate community as he had done in the Jersey Homesteads, New Jersey. Assuming instead the privileged position of instructor, he assumes in relation to the workers, a role parallel to that of Walt Whitman.

In the early 1930s Shahn had begun to promote the cause of labor. In her article "Ben Shahn and Fortune Magazine: Representations of Labor in 1946," Frances K. Pohl chronicles Shahn's involvement with labor as both artist and activist.¹⁸ Among the highlights of his career are his 1932 gouache panels on the trial of the labor leader Tom

¹⁷ Ben Shahn, interview with Dr. Paul D. Benison, Columbia University, Oral History Collection.

¹⁸ See Frances K. Pohl, "Ben Shahn and Fortune Magazine: Representations of Labor in 1946," Labor's Heritage 1, no. 1 (January 1979), 47-55.

Mooney; his contributions to the magazine Art Front and his involvement with the Artists Union during the 1930s; his 1937-38 celebration of the ILGWU in the Jersey Homesteads mural; and his posters designed for the Steelworkers Organizing Committee in the late 1930s.¹⁹ As Pohl details in her books and articles, Shahn should be tagged neither a white-collar artist nor a bohemian "proletariat wanna-be" delving into the ethos and environment of the worker.²⁰ Before embarking on a career as a fine artist, Shahn had trained and was employed as a lithographer, and was always proud to be a union member. Years after he completed the Bronx murals, Shahn would, with humor and pride, recall how his paintings helped a local union to organize:

I went back to look at them one day and the service crew foreman saw me. "You the guy who did these pictures?" I said yes and asked him how he liked them. "Not particularly, but I'm sure glad you put all these guys in overalls up on the walls. It helped me organize the building crew. Made 'em think they were important."²¹

¹⁹ Ibid., 48-49.

²⁰ See Frances K. Pohl, "An American in Venice: Ben Shahn and United States Foreign Policy at the 1954 Biennial," Art History 4, no. 1 (March 1981), 80-113; Ben Shahn (San Francisco: Pomegranate Books, 1993); "Ben Shahn and Fortune Magazine"; Ben Shahn: New Deal Artist in a Cold War Climate, 1947-1954 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989); "Constructing History: A Mural by Ben Shahn," Arts Magazine 62 (September 1987), 36-40.

²¹ Excerpt from "Ben Shahn: An Interview," Magazine of Art (April 1944), cited in John D. Morse, ed., Ben Shahn (New York: Praeger, 1972), 62. For information on how the United Auto Workers would bring recruits to Rivera's Detroit murals for inspiration, see Terry Smith, Making the Modern:

While the Jersey Homesteads mural is Shahn's most public statement in support of American unions and labor and is also the most direct expression and chronicle of the American-Jewish labor experience, I believe that the Bronx mural should also be seen as an expression of the Jewish presence within American labor. It, like the other murals, resonates with Shahn's experience and his vantage point as a Jewish-American immigrant. As discussed by Joseph Freeman in An American Testament: A Narrative of Rebels and Romantics (1936), on arriving in America, Jews--in particular, those from Eastern Europe--became keenly aware of their outsider status.²² To counter their sense of powerlessness in art and politics, Jews affiliated and identified with the working class and proletariat.²³ To many Jews, this was a continuation of the politics that they lived back in Eastern Europe, where they had been involved with the Bund, the major socialist organization.²⁴

Industry, Art, and Design in America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 235.

²² See Joseph Freeman, An American Testament: A Narrative of Rebels and Romantics (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1936).

²³ Richard H. Pells, Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 163-66.

²⁴ For information on Jewish immigration and Jewish involvement with the Left in both Eastern Europe and America, see Irving Howe, World of Our Fathers (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovic, 1976), and Arthur Liebman, Jews and the Left (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1978).

American Jews became central to the labor movement, forging an alliance on the Left between themselves and labor.²⁵

Contemporary with the involvement of both Jews and non-Jews in the labor movement, proletarian culture flourished despite the disclaimer of Leon Trotsky in Literature and Revolution (1925, American ed.) that there could not be proletarian culture until society was free of class division.²⁶ After a summary treatment by Daniel Aaron in his Writers on the Left, American proletarian fiction has recently been reevaluated by Barbara Foley and Paula Rabinowitz.²⁷ While the work of proletarian writers was tightly interwoven with the cultural and political policies of the Communist Party (with which Shahn had a tenuous and indefinite relationship), the writings of such authors as Mary Heaton Vorse, Erskine Caldwell, Richard Wright, and the scholarship of Foley and Rabinowitz serve as tools to aid an understanding of Shahn's murals. From contemporary writings, defined by issues of class and labor and produced

²⁵ See Maurice Isserman, Which Side Were You On? The American Communist Party during the Second World War (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1982).

²⁶ Leon Trotsky, Art and Revolution: Writings of Literature, Politics, and Culture (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970).

²⁷ See Daniel Aaron, Writers on the Left (New York: Avon Books, 1961); Barbara Foley, Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941 (Durham, N.C., and London: Duke University Press, 1993); and Paula Rabinowitz, Labor and Desire: Women's Revolutionary Fiction in Depression America (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

without the constraints faced by the New Deal muralists, emerge themes and visions alternative to Shahn's Resources of America. These texts narrate strife and action, uprising and oppressive forces--conditions that led to continuous labor battles and strikes during the Depression.²⁸

Shahn's peaceful work scenes are free from the labor conflict and violent strikes widely depicted in 1930s theater, art, and literature.²⁹ The strike novel is, in fact, a subcategory of proletarian literature that came about as an independent genre during the 1930s.³⁰ As discussed by Faye M. Blake, its plot focuses solely on the strike, instead of on an individual. The strike serves as a metaphor, moral, thematic, or emotional: it represents either the beginning or the end of an action; the opportunity to lift the characters to a new moral height; or

²⁸ Faye M. Blake, The Strike in the American Novel (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1972), 125.

²⁹ Contemporary images of strikes include Anton Refregier, San Francisco Waterfront Strike, 1934; William Gropper, Youngstown Strike, 1937; Louise Gilbert, The '34 Strike--Calling Out the National Guard, 1934; and Philip Evergood, American Tragedy, 1937. For information on the latter see Patricia Hills, "Philip Evergood's 'An American Tragedy': The Politics of Ugliness, the Politics of Anger," Arts Magazine (February 1980), 138-42.

³⁰ Examples of strike novels include: Mary Heaton Vorse, Strike! (New York: Horace Liveright, 1930), which concerns the efforts to organize a Southern textile mill; Erskine Caldwell, God's Little Acre (New York: Viking Press, 1933), and Jack Conroy, The Disinherited (New York: Covici Friede and Co., 1933).

as an instrument of spiritual redemption.³¹ But instead of uniting and striking, Shahn's workers work. He never represents outer authorities nor refers to the state or to bosses. Each worker is separate; they do not unite as a collective body to convey a sense of power. Fists clench tools rather than rise in mass protest.³²

The Bronx workers speak to us through their bodies, bodies at work, bodies positioned almost on the same plane as our own. Because their backs are turned toward us (fig. 35), we are able to project ourselves onto their painted figures, into their environment, mimicking their actions. Since they are neither larger than life nor directly confronting us, we are able to merge with the scene. In several instances, we can and do become the workers.

The bodies that we observe, except for one, are male, and they are white, except for one. For the most part, this is a mural about white male laborers. As discussed by Paula Rabinowitz in Labor and Desire: Women's Revolutionary Fiction in Depression America, proletarian culture was gendered and coded in a manner consistent with the division of labor and socialization along the gender and racial lines prevalent in American society. The proletariat writer

³¹ Blake, The Strike, 141.

³² Shahn did paint men with clenched fists upraised in the Woodhaven Station mural to portray freedom of speech. See chapter 5 of this dissertation.

Meridel LeSueur addresses this gender encoding of texts and bodies within fiction:

The differentials between male and female bodies are located in the belly. The body of the working man of the 1930s -- and to an extent its text -- is hungry, an empty space once filled by its labor; the body of the working class woman, as well as her text, is pregnant with desire for "children," for "butterfat" to feed them, and, most significantly, for "history" to change the world for them.³³

Naturally, at a time of great lack, the desire and ability to produce children -- more mouths, more in need -- would be seen as negative.³⁴ Therefore, in order to present the female worker in the Bronx mural as a wage-worker, Shahn has to suppress corporeal evidence of her sexuality, reproductive powers, and her "womanness." Breasts are nonexistent, the region of her abdomen obscured and thus denied (fig. 36).

Depression-era women, underrepresented by this single female figure, shared with men the burden of mass unemployment; yet, unlike men, they were limited by societal attitudes and legislation that controlled their wage-earning capabilities. FDR's Economy Act of 1933 denied federal employment to members of the same family. In federal programs, as in the private sector, men earned higher wages.

³³ As quoted in Rabinowitz, Labor and Desire, 3.

³⁴ As noted by Caroline Bird, The Invisible Scar (New York: David MacKay, Co., 1966), 51-53, the birthrate declined dramatically and without precedent during the Depression.

A woman who wanted to work was considered selfish and destructive when so many men, seen as the God-intended providers of the household, were unemployed.³⁵ But women did work; women wanted to and had to work. According to Susan Ware, during the Depression 25 percent of American women sought paid employment outside the home.³⁶ Mary W. M. Hargreaves documents that of the over eleven million women employed during the era, less than one and a half million were professional or semiprofessional; the largest group were in service industry or in domestic service, the next largest comprised over three million clerical and sales workers; and finally, more than two million women worked in factories.³⁷

Professional or not, skilled or unskilled, low pay was uniform for women workers, who received half the salary of

³⁵ In her dissertation on the status of women within the federal art projects, Kimn Carlton-Smith discusses policies and attitudes that limited women's opportunities. See "A New Deal for Women: Women Artists and the Federal Arts Project, 1935-1939" (Ph.D. diss., Rutgers University, 1990). Men were seen as the wage earners; even future Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins labeled working women in 1930 as "pin-money workers" and "a menace to society, a selfish, short-sighted creature, who ought to be ashamed of herself." In 1932 the executive council of the AFL recommended that when a husband was employed, a wife should not be hired.

³⁶ Susan Ware, Holding Their Own: American Women in the 1930s (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1982), 21.

³⁷ Mary W. M. Hargreaves, "Darkness before the Dawn: The Status of Working Women in the Depression Years," in Clio Was a Woman: Studies in the History of American Women, ed. Mabel E. Deutrich and Virginia C. Purdy (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1980), 180.

males in the same position.³⁸ The statistical and experiential data for women establish that, regardless of race and regional difference, consistent male versus female tensions existed within labor and among the unemployed. For example, unemployed men began to appropriate formerly female careers.³⁹ William H. Chafe in The American Woman: Her Changing Social, Economic, and Political Roles, 1920-1970, presents information on women's magazines from the 1930s, magazines such as McCall's and Ladies' Home Journal that reinforced the existing attitude that white women should stay at home.⁴⁰ Because of their large circulations, these magazines effectively promoted the sexual division of the workplace. Despite women's need, and intrinsic right, to work, this backlash against women severely limited their opportunities. In many cases the domestic realm became their only employment option, particularly for urban, African-American women.⁴¹ In the Bronx, the borough where

³⁸ Ibid., 180. See Lois Scharf, To Work and to Wed: Female Employment, Feminism, and the Great Depression (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1983), 86.

³⁹ Scharf, To Work and to Wed, 86, and Ware, Holding Their Own, 42-44. Scharf discusses that women employed in what had been considered feminized careers--teaching, nursing, social work, and librarianship--now faced competition for their jobs from unemployed men.

⁴⁰ William Henry Chafe, The American Woman: Her Changing Social, Economic, and Political Roles, 1920-1970 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 106-7.

⁴¹ Ibid., 107. Single, white, native-born women sought and obtained employment in greater numbers and proportions relative to foreign-born and African-American women. See

Shahn painted his murals, "slave markets" were set up on 167th Street and Jerome Avenue so that domestic workers, primarily black women, could earn wages. The Crisis, the official monthly of the NAACP, vividly described women's haggling to earn a nine-to-fifteen cent hourly wage for their physical labors.⁴²

The marginalization of women within the workforce was a means to contain their powers and opportunities and corresponds to the limited attention Shahn gives to women within the Bronx cycle. Painted on the northeast wall is a female textile worker (fig. 36), which calls to mind Diego Rivera's images of weavers and dyers in his mural for the Court of Labor, Mexico City.⁴³ Spools and bars that run the height of Shahn's image act as a visual barrier between her and us, physically locking her in. We are keenly aware of her agile, dexterous hands, which deftly grasp spindles and fine silken threads.⁴⁴ Delicacy defines her actions

Scharf, To Work and to Wed, 107.

⁴² Ibid., 116. The impact of the Depression was divided by race, gender, and class, but African-Americans suffered the most.

⁴³ For a fictionalized version of life and work in the textile industry see Martha Gellhorn, The Trouble I've Seen (New York: William Morrow, 1936). For information on wages and conditions in Tennessee cotton mills during the late 1920s and early 1930s, see Michael Parrish, The Anxious Decades: American Prosperity and Depression, 1920-1941 (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 1992), 92.

⁴⁴ For information on the Depression's impact on working women see Alice Kessler-Harris, Women Have Always Worked (Old Westbury, N.Y.: The Feminist Press, 1981).

with gestures reminiscent of genteel women dutifully doing needlework in nineteenth-century genre paintings. The effect is one of total integration of work and worker; the mood one of reverential silence and absorption -- a Madonna of the Mills as she demurely casts her eyes downward.⁴⁵ This lone, contained, and silent woman is not consistent with the public and vocal role in labor that American women assumed during the 1930s. In the Roosevelt administration, Frances Perkins, the first woman cabinet member, served as Secretary of Labor.⁴⁶ Women held key positions in the New Deal administration, setting national policies and instituting reforms.⁴⁷ Yet, just as Shahn limits the public face of working women within his Jersey Homesteads mural, choosing to celebrate David Dubinsky over Rose Schneiderman or Clara Lemlich -- all active as labor organizers, thereby bypassing an opportunity to herald women active in textile unions as organizers and leaders, so he continues to limit women in the Bronx mural.

The severity of America's economic disaster, in both New York City and the nation, constitutes the backdrop

⁴⁵ Parrish, The Anxious Years, 403: "By supporting the right of workers to unionize and bargain collectively, the New Deal also provided some assistance to women wage earners, especially those in the garment industry and textile production, in which nearly 40 percent of the workers were female."

⁴⁶ Yet, as already discussed, Perkins was not always sympathetic to the plight of working women.

⁴⁷ Chafe, The American Woman, 42-44.

against which Shahn crafted his panorama of productivity and hope. When FDR assumed leadership of the country in 1933, over 25 percent of America's labor force was unemployed.⁴⁸ Throughout the 1930s, work was on the minds of Americans, but it was never as bountiful nor as peaceful as Shahn presents.

During the First Hundred Days of his presidency, Roosevelt established some of the most innovative social programs that this country has known. His administration and Congress instituted reforms to alleviate the dire agricultural, banking, and unemployment crisis. In March 1933, ignoring the conservatives' cries of "socialism," Congress quickly passed a bill to create the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA). In May Roosevelt signed the Farm Relief Act into law, incorporating the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) that would revive farm prices through government-subsidized limits on production.⁴⁹ The Public Works Administration (PWA), created under Title II of the National Industrial Recovery

⁴⁸ Irving Bernstein, A Caring Society: The New Deal, the Worker, and the Great Depression: A History of the American Worker, 1933-1941 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985), 18.

⁴⁹ The Agricultural Adjustment Administration immediately started the unpleasant task of eliminating "surplus": the slaughter of 6,000,000 piglets and 200,000 sows, and the plowing under of 10,000,000 acres of cotton. With the coming of the dust bowls, nature itself contributed to the destruction of the land and the elimination of crops and livestock.

Act, sponsored public-works projects to stimulate the depressed economy and to provide jobs. With a \$3.3 billion appropriation, the PWA was Roosevelt's main instrument with which to revive the crippled nation.⁵⁰ The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) took young boys on the dole and set them to work reforesting the land. Also in May, Roosevelt created the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) to provide power, reclaim the land, and improve the quality of life in the region. Finally, in June, Congress established the National Recovery Administration (NRA), which FDR called "a partnership in planning" between business and government. The NRA was to administer economic plans, eliminate child labor, improve working conditions and establish minimum wages, maximum hours, and prices. These programs and initiatives -- the AAA, PWA, CCC, TVA, and NRA -- were designed to bring the country back from economic collapse. America, however, did not steadily march out of the Depression to achieve the idyllic image of American productivity pictured in Shahn's Resources of America. Between the establishment of the first New Deal in 1933 and the second New Deal in 1935 to the birth of Shahn's mural cycle in 1938, the economy would rise and crash repeatedly. Congress and the Supreme Court would question, limit, or override FDR's legislation while the president continued to

⁵⁰ Robert S. McElvaine, The Great Depression: America, 1929-1941 (New York: Random House, 1993), 152.

institute additional legislation.⁵¹

In 1935 FDR found it necessary to rework policies, which he announced at his Second Hundred Days. The Wagner Act was central to the second sweep of reforms. Senator Robert Wagner's National Labor Relations Act, contained within the NRA, has been referred to as the "most important and revolutionary federal law put on the statute books in the 1930s."⁵² Section 7(a) sanctioned collective bargaining powers for unions that immediately proved useful to the efforts of John L. Lewis, the leader of the United Mine Workers Union's to rebuild his diminished union. Other reforms launched by FDR included the Social Security Act, which provided unemployment insurance, and old-age and survivors' pensions.⁵³ Shahn would celebrate this major landmark of social reform that made social security a basic function and obligation of government in his 1940-42 mural, which I discuss in chapter six.

Without doubt, the New Deal spurred recovery in the economy between 1933 and 1936. But in the years 1937 and

⁵¹ On 27 May 1935, the Supreme Court declared the NRA unconstitutional in the case of *Schechter Poultry Corporation v. the United States*.

⁵² Parrish, *The Anxious Years*, 354.

⁵³ Sean Dennis Cashman, *America in the Twenties and Thirties: The Olympian Age of Franklin Delano Roosevelt* (New York: New York University Press, 1989), 194, notes that while the Social Security Act covered 27 million people, it excluded many in agriculture, domestic service, and those working for small employers.

1938, the economy plummeted. Previous gains were swiftly lost, some in a quicker flash than in the 1929 crash. FDR immediately went to work on Congress, ultimately winning approval for a \$3-billion program of relief and public works.⁵⁴ The "Roosevelt Recession," as big business leaders had dubbed the recent economic spiral, came to an end in December 1938, just as Shahn began his work in the Bronx Central Post Office.⁵⁵

Throughout the Bronx mural cycle, Shahn illustrates progress and productivity by juxtaposing and pairing figures and panels; except for Whitman each image has a foil or a mate. The viewer is able to follow the transformation of raw material into finished products, as well as to see the regional specificity of production. The counterpart to the female textile worker is a larger-than-life image of a man presiding over a loom (fig. 37). Surrounded by a sprawling mill complex, composed of numerous red brick buildings, the likes of which supported many towns in New England and the Southeast, he maintains mastery over his machines and environment. With rolled-up sleeves exposing powerful forearms, his large, meaty hands plunge simultaneously into our space and into the threads of the loom. The repetition of geometric forms -- round spools, boxlike mill windows,

⁵⁴ Ibid., 213.

⁵⁵ See Frank Freidel, Franklin D. Roosevelt: A Rendezvous with Destiny (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1990), for further information on the "Roosevelt Recession."

sharp, straight lines of thread -- creates a rigid sense of control. Numerous lines, representing fine threads, extend outward from the loom, artfully reminiscent of the golden shafts that radiate from divine figures in Annunciation scenes of the Renaissance.⁵⁶

In 1935 Shahn created a poster for the United Textile Workers of America picturing a mill facade, presaging that in the Bronx mural. In the poster, however, workers' hands hold up banners proclaiming demands that Shahn supported -- the National Textile Act, higher wages, shorter hours, and so forth. Shahn produced the mural as a partisan act, and unlike murals, a public commission, where he had to conform to conservative agendas, Shahn was freer to express his political opinions. In 1937, the year before Shahn's Bronx cycle, labor actions rocked the textile industry; the violence that ripped apart the mill towns contrasted with the solemnity of Shahn's images. The same year both the United Textile Workers and the CIO moved to unionize the textile industry.⁵⁷ As discussed by Gerald Markowitz and David Rosner, cotton has performed an important role in

⁵⁶ In a memorandum Forbes Watson, art critic and technical director of the PWAP, wrote to Edward Rowan, 22 September 1939, he praises the image: "the use of mechanical subject matter such as the threads in the weaving panel is a positive feat of wizardry." Ben Shahn Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. (hereafter AAA).

⁵⁷ Irving Bernstein, Turbulent Years: A History of the American Worker, 1933-1941 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970), 616.

American economic and social history. By the 1930s the Southeast had replaced New England as the world's leading producer of cotton cloth.⁵⁸ Conditions had been difficult in the industry before the Depression, and they worsened after the crash. Wages were low, speed-ups the norm, and hours long. Out of both desperation and a strong sense of faith in the Roosevelt administration, workers wrote directly to federal officials and to the president, pleading for assistance and justice:

The labor conditions at the Appalachian Cotton Mills here are worse than miserable--they are no less than slavery. The mill has only two shifts, day and night shifts, and each of them 10 hours long. The scale of the wages is very low, and the mill is a veritable sweatshop. None of the women workers know what they are making, until they draw their pay check at each weekend, and their wages [sic] is not sufficient for them to live on.⁵⁹

The impact of the Depression, opportunities for employment within work-relief programs, and policies of organized labor were different for black and for white Americans. African-Americans continued to suffer disproportionately throughout the Depression, just as they

⁵⁸ Gerald Markowitz and David Rosner, eds., "Slaves of the Depression": Workers' Letters about Life on the Job (Ithaca, N.Y. and London: Cornell University Press, 1987), 74.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 76. The editors of this volume note that, as is the case here, workers in their letters frequently made reference to slavlike working conditions. As well, they clearly stated the physical toll caused by speed-ups, which had become the standard. Finally, women workers, who had constituted 40 percent of the textile workforce, were rapidly being replaced by men.

had suffered disproportionately beforehand. This situation was the same in both the South and the North. As discussed by Parrish, Southern agriculture was controlled by race and class-oppressive attitudes and policies.⁶⁰ Hastening the decay of the family farm, was a replacement system of industrial agricultural came in, creating a system of "factories in the fields."⁶¹ As the historian Robert S. McElvaine notes, sharecroppers and tenant farmers in the region were long subjected to exploitation; one-fourth of the South's population fell into these two categories.⁶²

Two mural panels record Southern life and the physical labors of growing, picking, and transporting cotton. As historian Theodore Saloutos discusses, the AAA launched its cotton program as its first recovery initiative. In 1932, before the New Deal, a bale of cotton brought half of what it did between 1909 and 1914; prices averaged 5.7 cents a pound and soon dropped to 4.6 cents. In order to increase both the prices and profits, the AAA tried to get cotton growers to sign government contracts to remove their acreage from cultivation. Growers were required to take 25-50 percent of their acreage out of commission in order to control the domestic price of cotton without jeopardizing

⁶⁰ Parrish, The Anxious Years, 300-304.

⁶¹ Bernstein, The Turbulent Years, 142.

⁶² McElvaine, The Great Depression, 150.

the prices on the world market.⁶³ In January 1936 the Supreme Court declared the AAA unconstitutional; Congress devised an alternative plan, the Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act of 1936, to continue the "no-grow" incentive program.⁶⁴

During 1935-38 Shahn had traveled throughout the rural areas of West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, Mississippi, and Louisiana, recording the lives and struggles of tenant farmers, small-town folk, and cotton pickers for the FSA/RA. These journeys, as Shahn later expressed, reshaped his New York, leftist assumptions about America, noting that "theories melted before such experience." The photo-historian Nicholas Natanson confirms that a significant portion of Shahn's Southern photographs attend to the lives of African-Americans (for example, nearly half of the 125 Arkansas photographs).⁶⁵ In his cotton-picker series from the Alexander Plantation, Pulaski County, Arkansas, Shahn sought to challenge the stereotypical images created by other white photographers, striving instead to capture an individual's spirit and struggles, unlike those who created sentimentalized, romanticized, and racist images of "smiling

⁶³ Theodore Saloutos, The American Farmer and the New Deal (Ames: Iowa State University, 1982), 66-69.

⁶⁴ Cashman, America in the Twenties and Thirties, 199.

⁶⁵ Nicholas Natanson, The Black Image in the New Deal: The Politics of FSA Photography (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 89.

blacks at work."⁶⁶ On his return North, Shahn incorporated the insights and actual photographs taken during his Southern travels into his mural of the cotton industry. But despite the AAA's efforts and programs, in 1938, the same year that Shahn designed his Bronx mural, FDR identified the Southern states as the country's major economic problem and the region hit hardest by the Depression.⁶⁷

In Shahn's image, an African-American picker working alone in a cotton field bends forward to pluck puffs of white cotton from bushes (fig. 38). This physical motion, referred to as "stoop labor," requires him to bend lower and deeper than any of the workers in the other panels; such work was done only by marginalized people.⁶⁸ The heavy sack that drags behind, bulging with harvested cotton, causes the man to endure great physical strain. Shahn's image parallels the words of Langston Hughes's poem "Cotton":

There stands the white man
Boss of the fields--
Lord of the land
And all that it yields.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 89-100.

⁶⁷ Louis D. Rubin, Jr., "Trouble on the Land: Southern Literature and the Great Depression," in Literature at the Barricades: The American Writer in the 1930s, ed. Ralph F. Bogardus and Fred Hobson (Mobile: University of Alabama Press, 1982), 97.

⁶⁸ Bernstein, The Turbulent Years, 144.

Here bend the black folks.
 Hands to the soil--
 Bosses of nothing,
 Not even their toil.⁶⁹

In the companion mural, two white men busily load a truck with bundles of cotton (fig. 39). The implied narrative is that they will drive their load to another site; their position within the production of cotton and goods is closer to the marketplace and capital rewards than the position of the picker who is simply earning a wage. Although their work is physically demanding, these white men remain in the privileged upright position. In light of the contractual agreements with growers not to produce cotton, Shahn's scene of shipping goods to market seems artificial. The true benefits, as Saloutos indicates, came to those who did not grow cotton -- and who were not the stuff of inspirational murals.⁷⁰

Despite the fact that industry had surpassed agriculture as the economic force within America, Park and Markowitz note that the majority of Shahn's panels depict farm and agricultural narratives.⁷¹ This indicates, I believe, romantic nostalgia for preindustrial labor and positions the agricultural worker as an exotic novelty in

⁶⁹ Faith Berry, ed., Good Morning Revolution: Uncollected Writings of Social Protest by Langston Hughes (New York: Citadel Press, 1973), 13.

⁷⁰ Saloutos, The American Farmer, 66-69.

⁷¹ Park and Markowitz, Democratic Vistas, 48.

relation to a city dweller such as Shahn. For example, at the center of the post office, Shahn paints on opposite walls agricultural scenes from the heartland. High-growing stalks of wheat color panels a rich golden, tone. Although government efforts had targeted this beleaguered region and its crop, by the late 1930s actual farm conditions differed vastly from Shahn's celebrations of bounty. As Markowitz and Rosner write:

Like the workers in the cotton textile industry, American farmers rarely shared in the prosperity of the 1920s Many farmers found themselves on the brink of bankruptcy even before the stockmarket crash of 1929 threw the entire economy into a tailspin. When the Depression hit, farmers were pushed over the edge. Between 1929 and 1933, farmers' incomes declined 50 percent while farm prices dropped nearly 60 percent. At the same time, an onslaught of natural disasters--drought, locusts, erosion--staggered the farm belt. Between 1930 and 1933 nearly one third of all farms in the country were sold or auctioned off. By 1935 more than 3 million farm workers had been forced into mass migration.⁷²

As with the cotton-management programs, the AAA devised a program of incentives for not growing grain in order to boost market value.⁷³

Shahn's two panels of grain production create a sense of fruitful harvest in the farm belt. The first depicts a single figure pitching hay skyward (fig. 35). Shahn positions the man's back toward us as he works. The expanse and power of his broad back in motion as he heaves grain

⁷² Markowitz and Rosner, Slaves of the Depression, 102.

⁷³ Saloutos, The American Farmer, 75-76.

upward confronts the viewer. Since the man does not face us, and since in proportion and location on the wall his body is on a human scale, we can project our identity onto this anonymous worker to experience the rhythm of his job.

There exist a tradition of images and an established iconography of the farm laborer in both nineteenth-century American genre and European realist painting. However, Shahn's figure is not a descendant of Jean-François Millet's grain workers or William Sidney Mount's young farmboys.⁷⁴ Piety does not concern this American worker as it does Millet's ennobled worker; productivity is of greater concern as he pitches golden shafts of wheat skyward.

While the theme of an individual laborer comfortably harks back to nineteenth-century genre paintings of yeoman farmers, its paired foil belongs solidly to the twentieth century and brings together both manual and machine labor (fig. 40). Activity and motion define this panel, with thresher blades whirling, machines shooting out cut grain, and men charged with energy. The contrast between manual labor and machine energy is underscored by the way the powerful, muscular arm of the man in the foreground echoes the diagonal thrust of the thresher that spits out wheat. This paralleling of forms drives home the point that farm

⁷⁴ For further information on American genre painting, see Elizabeth Johns, American Genre Painting: The Politics of Everyday Life (New Haven, Conn., and London: Yale University Press, 1991).

labor in the 1930s depended on both human muscle and machine power, an eyeopener to residents of the Bronx who knew very little about grain, threshing, and produce.

Shahn's panels of the textile industry and agriculture show areas of the American economy restructured by the Roosevelt administration. Yet in these instances, the government interceded within established industries rather than acting as innovative agent or trying to rectify the chaos wrought by nature and mismanagement. When he depicted an image of the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), Shahn isolated a specific New Deal initiative and success. As noted by art historian Helen A. Harrison, Shahn's image of the TVA is noteworthy because it is in a New York City building, whereas the majority of images of the TVA, not surprisingly, are in Tennessee. Shahn knew Tennessee. He had visited the state as part of his work for the FSA and was friends with William Agee, the author of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.⁷⁵ Agee was from Knoxville and wrote about the erosion of the Tennessee Valley area.⁷⁶ Yet neither Shahn's insights into the region that he could have gained from Agee nor firsthand impressions filter into his mural. Shahn's selection of this subject is, however,

⁷⁵ James Agee and Walker Evans, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men (Boston: Houghton and Mifflin, 1941).

⁷⁶ Walter L. Creese, TVA'S Public Planning: The Vision, the Reality (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 33.

consistent with his interest in the national over the local.

Social critics considered the TVA, created in May 1933, one of the great accomplishments of the New Deal. Walter L. Creese notes that planners based the TVA on European utopian models and social projects that had already touched the region. The TVA was consistent with the New Deal corrective ideology to create programs that integrated remote people into the greater social body.⁷⁷ The arrival of electricity within homes symbolized the greatest change in people's lives and literally suggested the "power" of the administration to alter lives and its "charge for social change."⁷⁸ As was often the norm for New Deal initiatives, however, the TVA continued the repressive racist policies that were considered "the way things are and should be" in Tennessee. Officials maintained racially segregated hiring practices.⁷⁹ Therefore, Shahn's depiction of a white man as a TVA laborer is realistic given hiring practices, yet there is no indication that Shahn intended this as a comment on the TVA's racist policies.

Shahn does not create a textbook celebration of this marvel of engineering. Shahn shared with Diego Rivera, John Dewey, and Lewis Mumford a vision of technology as beneficial to society, as opposed to Jose Clemente Orozco's

⁷⁷ Ibid., 13.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 67.

⁷⁹ Parrish, The Anxious Years, 398.

view that technology was impersonal and ultimately destructive.⁸⁰ Yet, Shahn was not as enchanted by the designs and workings of machinery as was Rivera. The hero of Shahn's mural is the worker whose presence and personal power is foregrounded over those of nature and industry (fig. 41). Shahn prominently renders the worker's muscular arm and hand as he dramatically and dangerously hangs suspended over the roaring currents of the water. Shahn's conception of work and worker falls into step with New Deal art's ideological construction and celebration of manly labor.⁸¹ In demeanor and dress, its companion panel of an urban electrical engineer--the only white collar, urban worker depicted in the thirteen panels--is contained and genteel (fig. 42). Unlike the other American workers, this man does not have calloused hands and muscular forearms. In fact, the blueprint that he holds acts as a physical barrier to our vision, distancing and diminishing his hands as tools. His tools are not machines, blades, and power; rather, his tools are the pencils in his chest pocket and his blueprints.

The heaviest industrial labors appear in the panels

⁸⁰ Laurance P. Hurlburt, The Mexican Muralists in the United States (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989), 147.

⁸¹ See Barbara Melosh, Engendering Culture: Manhood and Womanhood in New Deal Public Art and Theater (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 122-123, for information on Shahn's image of the TVA in relation to those by other New Deal artists.

dedicated to the steel and automobile industries and to mining. Although strikes tore through these industries during the 1930s, as previously stated, a sense of calm, productivity, and opportunity defines these images. For example, Shahn created his image of steelworkers engaged in their labors in the wake of the famous sit-down steel strike of 1937.⁸² Despite the recent history of labor unrest and struggles, sit-down strikes, bloody battles to unionize, and charged negotiations throughout the decade, Shahn creates a positive image of peaceful productivity, one that literally glows with the warmth of heat reflected from the torches and smelting ore. Workers are active; strife is absent. Instead of unrest, Shahn focuses on the transformation of raw material into useful, finished products; for example, on the west wall he shows a steel mill (fig. 43), and opposite, a worker in an automobile plant works with a steel plate (fig. 34).

Consistently throughout this cycle, Shahn zeros in on the individual instead of uniting the workers into an assembly of collective power. Unity is only hinted at by the predominant tawny tone and the workers gathering to listen to Walt Whitman. The absorption of the individual in the present moment overrides the sense of the collective and of the future. While we might fault Shahn for omitting the realities of work and the heaviness of labor, he chose to do

⁸² Bernstein, The Turbulent Years, 480.

so to emphasize production and opportunity. This supports Marling's assertion that artists upheld tradition at the expense of critical realism. It is a reminder, yet again, that ideologically and aesthetically Shahn was devoted to the New Deal rather than leftist concerns and to a humanistic vision rather than party aesthetics. In embracing the role of the dutiful New Dealer, Shahn specifically sought to avoid controversy by creating benign images of labor in the Bronx cycle. Nevertheless, controversy indeed did arise.

In the center panel of the series, Walt Whitman lectures to assembled Depression-era laborers; two small panels of mine workers -- one operating a pneumatic drill, the other pushing a handcar on rails -- flank this central horizontal panel as if devotional figures from a Renaissance triptych paying homage to Whitman (fig. 44). Shahn's inclusion of the Whitman portrait parallels Rivera's portrait of Whitman holding a scroll in his New Workers School fresco, 1933; Shahn, therefore simultaneously pays tribute to both Whitman and Rivera. Only male workers, white males at that, gather before Shahn's portrait of the poet, consistent with what the art historian Wanda M. Corn describes as the conception of Whitman as a "father figure" who was lauded and celebrated in masculinist terms: "lusty,"

"virile," and "manly."⁸³ In total, Shahn's central image is a pastiche of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: it contains the nineteenth-century poet, workers from the twentieth century, and a futuristic industrial structure in the background (fig. 45). This compression of centuries suggests that America, as represented by the words and ideology of Whitman, will move through the decades powered by the strength of the working class and the common man.

With flowing beard and resembling a hybrid of Karl Marx and Moses, Whitman in Shahn's initial design gestures to this inscription on a blackboard:

Brain of the New World, what a task is thine,
 To formulate the Modern--out of the peerless grandeur
 of the modern,
 Out of thyself, comprising science, to recast
 poems, churches, art
 (Recast, maybe discard them, end them--maybe their work
 is done, who knows?)
 By vision, hand, conception, on the background of the
 mighty past, the dead,
 To limn with absolute faith the living present.

The quotation is from the lengthy poem "Thou Mother with Thy Equal Brood," from Leaves of Grass, which likens the United States to a mother and the individual states to her children. Originally entitled "As a Strong Bird on Pinions Free," it was the commencement poem at Dartmouth College,

⁸³ Wanda M. Corn, postscript, in Walt Whitman and the Visual Arts, ed. Geoffrey M. Sill and Roberta K. Tarbell (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 173.

June 26, 1872.⁸⁴ It was these words by Whitman, who in the 1930s was included in the Catholic Church's Index of Forbidden Books (revised 1917) which listed problematic texts and figures, that provoked the church's ire. As a writer contemporary to the controversy ironically noted, Whitman "after death, still remains a 'stormy petrel' of American culture -- a subject of bitter controversy and censorship."⁸⁵

In December 1938 Shahn's accepted mural designs were installed in the lobby of the Bronx post office where they came to the attention of the Reverend Ignatius W. Cox, S. J., Professor of Ethics, Fordham University. Offended and outraged by what he saw, Cox quickly delivered a sermon entitled, "Is the Government Sponsoring Irreligion in Art?" before three thousand parishioners at the Church of Our Lady of Angels, Brooklyn, describing and denouncing Shahn's work:

A bearded old man is seated at a desk before an audience of ten men and youths of varying ages. The right arm of the teacher is raised and is pointing to a blackboard on which is inscribed the following [cites verse]. Not to speak of the vagueness of all this, the note of religious skepticism is quite clearly conveyed, and some sort of an absolute faith in the living present is indicated. The wording is an insult to all religious-minded men and to Christianity. It does

⁸⁴ "Bronx Postoffice Mural Assailed by Father Cox as Insult to Religion," New York Times, 12 December 1938, 3. Jose Clemente Orozco's portrayal of higher education as a skeletal mother giving birth to knowledge stillborn created controversy at Dartmouth.

⁸⁵ "Whitman Censored," Art Digest 14 (1 January 1939), 13.

indulge in propaganda for irreligion. As such the mural should never be executed.⁸⁶

His sermon was reproduced in metropolitan-area newspapers, along with further quotes by the reverend:

It [the quotation] does indulge in propaganda for two false and fatal pseudo-messianic movements which are competing with Christianity for the allegiance of men's mind. They are Bolshevism of the Russian Asiatic type and Nazism of the European type Both are condemned by the church and neither can be overcome except by the church.⁸⁷

Cox urged parishioners to write letters to the Bronx postmaster, Albert Goldman, to Washington, D.C. and the Postmaster General, James A. Farley, and to those officials within the Treasury Department who were responsible for commissioning and maintaining the mural. Parishioners immediately sent letters to Washington protesting the Whitman quote and the Shahn mural. A typical letter objects that "the sentiments of this inscription seem so far distant from American ideals and so suggestive of Asiatic

⁸⁶ New York Times, 12 December 1938, 3. Note Cox's failure or inability to identify the "bearded old man" as Whitman.

⁸⁷ "Protest Halts Whitman's 'Irreligious' Verse for Postoffice Mural," New York Herald Tribune, 12 December 1938, 7. Not everyone took Cox and the objections seriously. Roy E. Stryker, in a letter to Shahn, cynically (and perhaps truthfully) assessed the situation as follows: "Just saw the New York Times, regarding the statement of your friend Reverend Cox; congratulations on such an effective publicity bureau! I recommend that some government agency should hire this particular person--whoever she or he is. I have a suspicion that Father Cox wants to be the Archbishop. Just what you will get out of it, I don't know--I presume that you will do a mural for the cathedral." Roy E. Stryker to Ben Shahn, 13 December 1938, Ben Shahn Papers, AAA.

philosophy."⁸⁸ Several letters from both individuals and groups insist that the Whitman quotation promotes pagan thought or atheism:

We wish to make a formal protest against the inscription on one of the murals which depicts Walt Whitman exhorting a class of ten men and boys to "recast" or "maybe discard" the religion and culture of the present day world in favor of a better world. This is an insult to all religious minded men and to all established forms of religion, inasmuch as it propagates atheism and irreligion.⁸⁹

In interviews Cox drew an analogous relationship between the words of Whitman, the policies and intentions of the federal art projects, and political fascism in Europe.

Cox presented his sermon from a Brooklyn pulpit; later Shahn ridiculed this event in the painting Myself among the Churchgoers, 1939 (fig. 46). Brooklyn was, of course, the borough of Shahn's youth as well as home to numerous Jews and members of other ethnic and immigrant groups. Brooklyn was also important to Father Charles Coughlin. Coughlin's career had begun in the Midwest, where a "deep, diffuse anti-Semitism had long been part of the culture."⁹⁰ Nicknamed the "Radio Priest," Coughlin began broadcasting

⁸⁸ J. Francis A. McIntyre to Postmaster James A. Farley, 12 December 1938, National Archives, Washington, D.C., Record Group 121.

⁸⁹ Joseph A. Monaghan to Christian J. People, 16 December 1938, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (RG-121).

⁹⁰ Alan Brinkley, Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), 270.

sermons in 1926 when radio was still new; the Depression saw the rise of two radio masters: FDR and Coughlin. At his peak, Coughlin's voice was broadcast from over thirty stations nationwide, reaching a total of over forty million listeners.⁹¹ He received approximately eighty thousand letters per week, more than any other American, including the president and Eleanor.⁹² Journalists soon noted Coughlin's extraordinary, as well as dangerous, propensity for propaganda:

He developed the possibilities of the radio as a source of power for himself, or as he would put it, for his ideas The story, then, is of the development of the radio as an instrument of personal propaganda.⁹³

Initially, his sermons concerned traditional matters of faith, but after 1930 he became increasingly political and reactionary. Ultimately, his speeches were almost exclusively political, and Coughlin's politics were the politics of hate and unabashed anti-Semitism. He presented an openly anti-Semitic speech on 12 June 1930, in which he violently attacked the Communist Party.⁹⁴ After Communists, he quickly targeted Jews, groups that to Coughlin were usually one and the same. Jewish bankers and

⁹¹ Ibid., 84.

⁹² Raymond Swing, Forerunners of American Fascism (New York: Julian Messner, Inc., 1935), 40.

⁹³ Ibid., 34.

⁹⁴ Brinkley, Voices of Protest, 93.

their tyrannical control of the gold standard, he claimed, caused the Depression. In a 1930 broadcast, he likened Jews to hated, modern Shylocks.⁹⁵

In Coughlin's mind, the New Deal was actually a united Jewish and Communist conspiracy.⁹⁶ Jewish, New Deal, and Communist became analogous in his rhetoric.⁹⁷ In 1935 over twenty thousand Coughlin supporters gathered in Brooklyn to hear the fiery priest.⁹⁸ Patrick Scanlan, the editor of the Brooklyn Tablet, the official newspaper of the Brooklyn Catholic archdiocese, openly championed Coughlin. Coughlin devotees organized into the Christian Front (the first chapter was in Brooklyn), which promoted America as a Christian nation and which attacked Jews verbally and physically.⁹⁹ When the FBI raided the Brooklyn headquarters of the Christian Front they uncovered a cache of weapons, along with detailed plans to eliminate Jews and Communist Party members.¹⁰⁰ Coughlin responded to

⁹⁵ Ibid., 270-271.

⁹⁶ Parrish, The Anxious Years, 325.

⁹⁷ Speeches became openly and virulently anti-Semitic; after 1935 the proportion of Jewish names included and derided within his speeches increases significantly.

⁹⁸ Sheldon Marcus, Father Coughlin: The Tumultuous Life of the Priest of the Little Flower (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1973), 130.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 155.

¹⁰⁰ Brinkley, Voices of Protest, 267.

Kristallnacht by justifying the Nazis' treatment of Jews.¹⁰¹ The following month, in December 1938, the New York Post reported that speeches by Coughlin were identical to those by Goebbels.¹⁰² One of Coughlin's most vocal opponents was Rabbi Stephen Wise who had served as moral conscience to FDR by applying political pressure to grant asylum to German-Jewish refugees on the SS St. Louis.¹⁰³ It was during this sequence of events during late 1938 and early 1939 that Cox and his parishioners united to voice their objections to Shahn's murals.

In the rhetoric of Coughlin and within the context of the Bronx mural controversy, identities and ideologies that seemed foreign and dangerous were seen as one and the same: labor union agitator; Jew; Communist; and, perhaps, artist. To battle one label was to battle them all. When instructed to alter the Whitman quotation, Shahn objected, questioning the right of one group to dictate public taste in art, stating with concern that "with democracy rather on its mettle these days, it gives one quite a shock to hear

¹⁰¹ Marcus, Father Coughlin, 160. A concurrent event was Henry Ford's acceptance of a medal from Hitler.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 169.

¹⁰³ The St. Louis left Hamburg, Germany, in May 1939 with 907 Jewish passengers fleeing the Nazis, yet was turned away from American shores. The relationship between the S.S. St. Louis and Shahn's designs for the Missouri Post Office was first proposed by Pohl, "Constructing History," 39. See chapter five of this dissertation.

'verboten' directed against a traditionally American poet. . . . [O]ne must protest that Whitman is one of our most honored and loved American poets. He is a part of our cultural tradition."¹⁰⁴

The words that Shahn selected to respond are telling, in particular his use of the word verboten. I agree with Harrison's observation that Shahn's choice of the word verboten illustrates both his awareness of and concern for the growth of art censorship within Nazi Germany.¹⁰⁵ However, I maintain that his awareness and concern went beyond the issue of artistic censorship. It stemmed from the oppression he witnessed as a child, the persecution of his father for his socialist activities and beliefs, and the growing concern among Jews for relatives in Europe and for their own lives in America. This was not the first time that Shahn used German; he painted German text -- including the key word verboten -- in his Jersey Homesteads mural. Shahn created images of German signs that read: "Germans beware: don't buy from Jews," and "Attention Jews, Visit Forbidden." The Jersey Homesteads mural documents the history of Jewish immigration, both in the late nineteenth century and during the 1930s, in relation to political and

¹⁰⁴ "Protest Halts Whitman's 'Irreligious' Verse for Postoffice Mural," New York Herald Tribune, 12 December 1938, 1, 7.

¹⁰⁵ Helen A. Harrison, "Social Consciousness in New Deal Murals" (M.A. thesis, Case Western University, 1975), 164.

religious persecution. By using the word verboden, Shahn widens the context of his Bronx mural to include greater, more pressing issues of life and freedom on the global front.

Ultimately, despite the irony and ridiculousness of deeming Whitman a threat to the souls of the young, Shahn relented. Shahn's desire to secure and advance on the project was greater than his desire to do battle for the original Whitman quotation, although a good deal of dickering between Shahn and federal officials took place before they agreed on an acceptable passage. He painted instead a quotation from Whitman's "As I Walk These Broad Majestic Days":

For we support all, fuse all,
After the rest is done and gone,
We remain;
There is no final reliance,
But upon us,
Democracy rests finally upon us
(I, my brethren, begin it).

It is my position that the conflict over the Whitman quotation needs to be examined within the context of rampant anti-Semitism of the 1930s promoted by, among others, Father Charles Coughlin.¹⁰⁶ However, when this incident is seen in the context of the rise of anti-Semitism and fascism, it

¹⁰⁶ The Bronx controversy was not the only incident in which the Catholic Church objected to a New Deal mural by a Jewish artist. See Contreras, The New Deal Treasury, 222, for information regarding Maurice Sterne's murals. John Dewey felt objections to Sterne's mural carried the taint of anti-Semitism.

can be understood as an indictment of basic human freedoms. When we examine the subject matter of Shahn's murals as a whole, the theme of freedom reappears several times, always against the specter of the rise of fascism in Europe and concern for America. My argument centers not only on the images that Shahn created but also on the use of terms specific to European political movements and references to fascism and Nazism. Representatives of the Church would, on occasion, compress the ideologies of the Left with conservative forces; both were enemies of the Church and therefore of Americans. The images that Shahn created for the Bronx and the controversy that they created, echo and predict the stretch of concerns that define the 1930s. The words and actions of the New York Catholic archdiocese and the words and actions of Coughlin fueled Shahn's concern for freedom and for the plight of European Jews. This must be understood in order to establish the subjects of his subsequent St. Louis and Woodhaven Station, Queens, murals: the American constitution, the rise of Nazi power in Germany, political and religious persecution, immigration, and the Bill of Rights.

Inspired by his travels across America and his first completed mural in the Jersey Homesteads, New Jersey, Shahn entered into the project with a desire to present a optimistic vision of productivity throughout America. The controversies over language, his own political involvement

with the fight against fascism, and the worsening situation in Germany, all shaped the content of the mural and the experience that he gained when it was done. For his next projects, American freedoms would figure centrally in his conceptions and designs. The decade of the 1930s began with concern for employment; it ended with a concern for the inevitability of war. Shahn's mural production parallels a shift in America as the nation expanded its social and political concerns.

Chapter Five: The Four Freedoms: St. Louis and New York City

In 1939 and 1940 Ben Shahn proposed thematically related murals for two separate post office commissions sponsored by the Section of Painting and Sculpture. The first, Four Freedoms, was submitted anonymously to the competition in St. Louis, Missouri. Working with tempera on boards measuring 5 1/2 by 15 1/2 inches, Shahn grouped the nine required studies into three themes of his own choosing: the First Amendment's Four Freedoms guaranteeing freedom of speech, religion, peaceful assembly, and the citizens' right to petition the government; immigration to America, represented by scenes of ragged immigrants arriving to begin their new lives of opportunity and freedom; and regional history with scenes of Missouri river traffic, wagon trains, and frontier life. His designs were not selected. The following year, in response to an official invitation, Shahn condensed his nine-panel proposal into a single canvas. Representing America's constitutional freedoms, the painting was installed in the Woodhaven Station Post Office, Queens, where it remains on view today.¹

¹ Edward B. Rowan to Ben Shahn, 6 January 1940, Ben Shahn Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. (hereafter AAA). Rowan writes: "The Section of Fine Arts invites you to submit designs for a mural decoration for the Jamaica, New York, Woodhaven Branch, Post Office on the basis of competent designs submitted in the St. Louis, Missouri, Post Office competition." Bernarda Bryson Shahn recalled that Edward Bruce gave the Queens commission to Shahn as a "consolation prize" after the disappointment of St. Louis. Interview with author, 28 January 1993. The Queens commission paid

Unifying these two proposals are the general theme of the Four Freedoms and the sub-theme of immigration, which Shahn selected based in part on his own experiences as an immigrant and in part on being an artist who had encountered censorship. But the wider resonance of themes becomes evident when the images are explored in relation to Franklin D. Roosevelt's and federal policies on European refugees and immigration in the years leading up to 1941.² According to the historian Henry L. Feingold, 1941--which was the year that Shahn installed his Woodhaven Station painting--concluded the "refugee phase of the Holocaust," which had begun in 1933.³

It is important to chronicle the history of events targeting German-Jewish citizens during the years 1933-41, unfolding as Shahn's mural career progressed. Beginning in 1933 many thousands of Jews lost their livelihoods, and Nazi

Shahn \$1,750. See Francis V. O'Connor, Federal Support for the Visual Arts: The New Deal and Now, 2d ed. (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, Ltd., 1971), 36.

² On 11-12 November 1993, scholars convened at the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, N.Y., for the conference "Policies and Responses of the American Government toward the Holocaust." The proceedings have been compiled into a book. See Verne W. Newton, ed., FDR and the Holocaust (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996).

³ Henry L. Feingold, Bearing Witness: How America and Its Jews Responded to the Holocaust (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1995), 7. I would like to thank Professor Marc Lee Raphael, College of William and Mary, who generously suggested bibliography on American-Jewish history and on the refugees.

power began to destroy small Jewish communities.⁴ In March 1933 Hitler and Goebbels instituted a large-scale boycott of all Jewish businesses in Germany, which led to outbursts of anti-Jewish violence; Shahn's mural for the Jersey Homesteads includes a scene illustrating the boycott. The boycott was followed by the dismissal of Jews from positions within the government and certain professions, and prohibitions against Jews' serving on juries.⁵ A month later, the Nazis instituted a series of ordinances that severely limited non-Aryan involvement in German civic and professional life, which, according to the historian Lucy S. Dawidowicz, in effect channeled the violence of anti-Semitism into law.⁶ The intellectuals Leo Baeck and Martin Buber established the Reichsvertretung der Deutschen Juden (the Federal Representation of German Jews), which aimed to centralize leadership for the Jews, offering guidance to Jews who had been forced to change their professions and assistance with social and cultural matters. Baeck served as the chair with the broad goal of representing all Jews within Germany.⁷ It became increasingly clear that the

⁴ Lucy S. Dawidowicz, The War against the Jews, 1933-1945 (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975), 172. For a fuller discussion of Jewish life in Germany during the crucial years 1933-38, see her chapter 9.

⁵ Ibid., 52-55.

⁶ Ibid., 58, 63.

⁷ Ibid., 181-82.

right to be both Jews and Germans was being stripped away and that emigration would become a necessity. However, the obtaining of exit visas proved difficult, as was resettlement.

In September 1935 the Nazi leaders instituted the Nuremberg Laws, which officially disenfranchised Jews, who were now classified as noncitizens. Anti-Semitism had become the official state policy, a crucial point that the American press refused or was unable to comprehend and duly report.⁸ Jews were eliminated from the life of the German state and were no longer permitted to call themselves Germans. The Nazis confiscated Jewish property, and with severe limitations on their ability to work, Jews within Germany became impoverished.⁹

From 1936 to 1938 life for Jews in Germany became steadily even more precarious, controlled, and oppressive. According to Dawidowicz, 1938 was "the last year any communal autonomy was exercised. The accelerated confiscation of Jewish property and the final of expulsion

⁸ Deborah E. Lipstadt, Beyond Belief: The American Press and the Coming of the Holocaust, 1933-1945 (New York: The Free Press, 1986), 57-61.

⁹ Dawidowicz, The War against the Jews, 195: "In 1936, 20 per cent of German Jews were in need, or 83,761 out of 409,000 people. That year, Jewish public kitchens dispensed 2,357,000 free meals. More than 75,000 persons, one-third of them in Berlin, received free matzos during Passover, the largest number of applicants for Passover relief in the history of Germany."

of Jews from the economy began."¹⁰ Until 1938, when both the Anschluss and Kristallnacht took place, the Jewish exiles--as refugees were then considered--assumed that they would return to Germany once Nazi power had fallen.¹¹ The events of 1938 disproved this belief, changing the status of the exiles into refugees. In Germany all Jewish cultural associations had to be registered. Personal property with a value of more than 5,000 marks had to be disclosed. The remaining Jewish enterprises had to be clearly marked as being Jewish-owned. Jewish doctors had their licenses to practice cancelled, as did lawyers. Jews with German and non-Jewish names had to alter their names by adding suffixes--Sarah for women, Israel for men--to mark them. Passports were confiscated and new ones issued with a bold red J on the front.

In March 1938 Germany invaded Austria to force it to unify with the German Reich; this action immediately made the Austrian-Jews pariahs. The Anschluss was only the initial stage in a series of events that completely destabilized the lives of Jews within Central and Eastern Europe. Kristallnacht, or the Night of Broken Glass, erupted on 9-10 November 1938 when Germany exploded into days of violence directed against the Jews. Nazis torched synagogues, desecrated cemeteries, broke the windows of

¹⁰ Ibid., 196.

¹¹ Newton, FDR and the Holocaust, iix.

Jewish shops, physically harassed Jews, and arrested nearly 30,000 Jewish males.

In her book Beyond Belief: The American Press and the Coming of the Holocaust, 1933-1945, the historian Deborah E. Lipstadt writes that from 1933 onward, the United States press had begun to report on the persecution of the Jews, yet most journalists failed to grasp such persecution as the inherent expression of Nazism. Doubt, skepticism, and the misattribution of official Nazi actions as "mob reaction" clouded the coverage of these early years.¹² In St. Louis, Joseph Pulitzer's St. Louis Dispatch was one of the newspapers that either misrepresented and/or misinterpreted the Nazis' actions, never acknowledging that anti-Semitism had become state policy. On 25 November 1938 Pulitzer's paper surmised that Kristallnacht was the "looting of a people," or financial extortion, rather than a bloody attack on a people.¹³ Ironically, Pulitzer would later be immortalized as a leading Missouri citizen in the murals selected for the St. Louis Post Office.

In the spring of 1939 the Section announced its important competition to decorate the public lobby of the St. Louis, Missouri, post office. This major commission carried an award of \$29,000; in Washington, D.C., the mural

¹² Lipstadt, Beyond Belief, 13-18.

¹³ See Lipstadt, Beyond Belief, for further information on how the United States press covered Kristallnacht.

painters Howard Cook, William Gropper, and Ward Lockwood would judge the applications.¹⁴ Several months passed from the initial call for applications, to the extension of the deadline on 5 April 1939 when the Section, in response to artists' requests, changed the deadline from 15 June to 1 September 1939, and finally to the selection of the designs by the Chicago artists Edward Millman and Mitchell Siporin in October 1939.¹⁵ When the competition's progression from its beginning to the selection of the winners is examined, it is seen that events defining the course of world history sharply punctuated the Midwestern commission's unfolding timeline, as the nation was pulled into world war.¹⁶ For example, the revised deadline of 1 September 1939 was the same day that Germany invaded Poland. It is understandable that although Missouri was Shahn's sole focus, Germany also held his attention.¹⁷

¹⁴ Section of Fine Arts Competition Guidelines, Ben Shahn Papers, AAA. See Karal Ann Marling, Wall-to-Wall America: A Cultural History of Post-Office Murals in the Great Depression (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 295.

¹⁵ "Civil War and Post-War Scenes in Postoffice Mural," St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 1 October 1939, 10.

¹⁶ Edward Millman and Mitchell Siporin unveiled their completed fresco in July 1942.

¹⁷ For information on Hitler's implementation of the Final Solution, see Christopher Browning, The Path to Genocide: Essays on Launching the Final Solution (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). Browning's book focuses on what he sees as the evolution of policies to deal with "the Jewish Problem," between the outbreak of war in September 1939 and the implementation of

Shahn created his designs for the midwestern post office while living in the Jersey Homesteads. In this East-Coast workers' cooperative, Shahn was steeped in liberal thought, political debate, and a shared concern for the plight of European Jews. The family and communal histories of the Jersey Homesteads residents had been marked by persecution by the Russian government--as was Shahn's--and residents drew parallels between their own past experiences in Tsarist Russia and the current crisis in Nazi Germany.¹⁸ Residents governed the Homesteads through meetings, debate, resolutions, and cooperative actions that they meticulously recorded in the minutes of the Borough Meetings and of the Joint Board of the Jersey Homesteads. The majority of these ledgers contain reports on trash collection, dental plans, adequate playgrounds lighting, and the appointment of nursery-school teachers. But just as international issues

the Final Solution. Browning argues that the Final Solution was not a premeditated plan of Hitler's, although the Nazi leader played a central role in its decision-making process. Browning proposes that the Final Solution, in fact, emerged from a series of decisions that took place between the spring and fall of 1941 and was primarily the result of the failure of the Russian campaign. Those opposing Browning's views include Henry L. Feingold, who maintains that the Holocaust was in fact preplanned. See Newton, FDR and the Holocaust, 11.

¹⁸ See Ziva Amishai-Maisels, "Ben Shahn and the Problem of Jewish Identity," Jewish Art 12-13 (1986-87), 304-19, and Frances K. Pohl, "Constructing History: A Mural by Ben Shahn," Arts Magazine 62 (September 1987), 36-40. I would like to acknowledge Frances K. Pohl's suggestion that I consider Shahn's St. Louis mural in relation to the plight of the S.S. St. Louis.

rose to the surface in Shahn's St. Louis designs, so they did in the daily life of the Jersey Homesteads. In November 1938 Mayor Goldstein presented the following resolution in response to Kristallnacht:

Be it resolved that the Council of the Borough of Jersey Homesteads hereby express its profound horror at the bestial attacks upon the helpless minorities of Germany and requests the President of the United States to declare his condemnation of these barbaric acts in the spirit in which the late President Theodore Roosevelt acted on behalf of our government after the notorious Kishinev pogroms in 1904.¹⁹

Residents of Jersey Homesteads passed the resolution.²⁰

The Section proposal required that artists submit a total of nine designs. Each artist was provided with a thick bibliography on St. Louis history, legends, and lore, which the local library had prepared to help applicants with their designs.²¹ The sponsors suggested that the history

¹⁹ Minutes of Borough Meetings, 15 November 1938, Roosevelt, New Jersey, Collection, Rutgers University Library, New Brunswick, N.J. For information on Kishinev pogrom, see Edward H. Judge, Easter in Kishinev: Anatomy of a Pogrom (New York and London: New York University Press, 1992).

²⁰ Entered into the minutes are notations that the American Jewish Congress had contacted a town resident on behalf of a German refugee doctor who wanted to practice in the town. Minutes of the Joint Board of Jersey Homesteads, 10 February 1938, Roosevelt, New Jersey, Collection, Special Collections.

²¹ Ben Shahn Papers, AAA. For example, the guidelines suggested the following books: F. A. Culmer, A New History of Missouri (Mexico, Mo.: McIntyre Publishing Company, 1938); Walter B. Stevens, Centennial History of Missouri (St. Louis and Chicago: S. J. Clarke Publishing Co., 1921); and Walter Williams and Floyd Calvin Shoemaker, Missouri, Mother of the West (Chicago and New York: The American

of the U.S. mail in Missouri was the most appropriate theme for a post-office mural; this obvious theme was popular with the Section. Officials described the theme's appeal in the detailed call for submissions:

The transportation of the mails in the area of St. Louis from its earliest beginning to the present day is a subject of great interest involving much of the history of St. Louis. It has been suggested that a continuous story based on the colorful history of the mail in and around St. Louis would offer fascinating subject matter for frescoes.²²

One has to look carefully at Shahn's studies to glean details that he could have gotten from the books recommended to supply him with information specific to St. Louis, for Shahn was not interested in re-creating the heyday of the Pony Express or flatboats on the Mississippi. He looked at different sources and time periods for his subject matter.

With tempera paints, Shahn mapped out nine horizontal designs. In each panel, Shahn presents a different theme established with numerous figures, locations, and vignettes. These pictorial elements flow left to right across the horizontal panel. Because the panels do not hold to a consistent and central sight line, the perspective shifts several times within each one. According to the art historian Francis V. O'Connor, it was in Shahn's earlier Jersey Homesteads mural that the influence of Diego Rivera

Historical Society, Inc., 1930).

²² Ben Shahn Papers, AAA.

is most evident. There, Shahn utilized such Rivera-like elements as presenting figures in tiers, shifting the recessional planes, and painting architectural elements to serve as transitions between passages.²³ O'Connor notes that in turn Shahn's designs for both St. Louis and Queens most closely resemble the Jersey Homesteads mural's format--and therefore, show the residual influence of Rivera--of a central motif flanked by two recessional motifs diverting to the left and to the right.²⁴

Each St. Louis panel is a montage on the theme of either immigration, freedom, or Missouri history. Of his nine panels, Shahn dedicated only three to such local concerns as Missouri stories, personalities, and symbols. The majority of the panels concern national freedoms and ideals. As previously stated, the panels can be grouped according to one of three themes, but they do not form a continuous narrative.

The sequence that Shahn envisioned for the mural is as follows: Freedom of Religion; Freedom of Speech; Missouri State Seal; Freedom of the Press; Vox Pop; Opening of the Frontiers; Immigration; a second panel entitled Immigration; and River Traffic. The order of this sequence is without

²³ Francis V. O'Connor, "The Influence of Diego Rivera on the Art of the United States during the 1930s and After," in Diego Rivera: A Retrospective, exh. cat. (Detroit: The Detroit Institute of Art, 1986), 169.

²⁴ Ibid., 170.

apparent meaning. To more fully explore the relevance of the themes, I will discuss the nine panels in groups, beginning with the three panels specific to Missouri's history. Of Shahn's entire proposal, these three panels adhere most closely to the Section's suggestions.

At the center of Missouri State Seal, Shahn positions the state emblem and motto, Let the Welfare of the People Be the Supreme Law (fig. 47). In fact, as a group, all nine panels illustrate Shahn's understanding of what is necessary to maintain the welfare of the people. Bracketing the central emblem, Shahn creates vignettes that are consistent with his belief that social welfare should be improved through government initiatives. He represents programs for pediatric health care, playgrounds, cooperative learning programs, the construction of highways, small-town communities, and the elderly to enjoy a quality life. For Opening of the Frontiers Shahn drew on stock images of the laying of railroad track, the founding of small midwestern towns, the tilling of fields, and the arrival of wagon-train pioneers (fig. 48). In this panel nature, mature trees, and rich lands together signify opportunity, growth, and new beginnings. In River Traffic (which actually was the final panel in his proposal) Shahn painted workers and riverboats moving cargo along the Mississippi River (fig. 49). Here, Shahn manipulated the unfamiliar theme of St. Louis and its people to focus on work, thereby reinforcing his lifelong

dedication to labor and the working class.

Immigration is the next thematic grouping within the Four Freedoms series. Shahn painted two studies both entitled Immigration, a subject of his own design and with no relation to the sponsor's suggestions. An urgent and violent mood pulses through the first Immigration scene, a panel he sub-divided into three parts (fig. 50). In the first third, a family begins a new life with babies and bundles in hand. This hopeful scene brushes up against that of a crude prison or concentration camp fashioned with barbed wire, which holds a half dozen semiclad and despondent men. The ominous background, darkened sky, and bare ground create a bleak mood but do not establish either the time period or location of the scene. Shahn ends the panel with strong symbols and images of war. Within this concluding passage, a gas-masked military figure reaches back toward the previous scene of the camp; with his left hand he pulls taut the barbed wire of the crude pen. With this gesture, Shahn forces us to confront the interrelationship between immigration, detention, and war.

The art historian Ziva Amishai-Maisels identifies the central passage of this panel as the prototype for Shahn's Concentration Camp, 1944.²⁵ When Shahn was creating his

²⁵ Amishai-Maisels, "The Problem of Jewish Identity," 306. See also Joe and Emily Lowe Art Gallery, The Mural Art of Ben Shahn, exh. cat. (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University, 1977).

St. Louis proposal, American newspapers had begun to report the existence of concentration camps. In the wake of Kristallnacht, American reporters wrote that the Nazis had rounded up between 20,000 and 60,000 people who were then sent to Dachau, Oranienburg-Sachsenhausen, and Buchenwald; while these camps had yet to practice mass extermination, frequent killings did occur. In April 1939 Time magazine reported:

[T]oo many alumni have emerged from concentration camps with the same story to leave any further doubt that sadism and brutality are part and parcel of the concentration camp routine.²⁶

Shahn continued the threatening spirit in the second Immigration panel (fig. 51). Shahn intended to place the two immigration scenes next to each other. Continuing imagery from the first panel, the second Immigration panel opens with scenes of war. Anonymous soldiers clad in metal helmets flank a bombed-out building. At center, from a dizzying overhead perspective, Shahn painted people scurrying in a chaotic and random manner. Toward the right, the lean figure of a man wearing the long coat and beard of an Orthodox Jew catches the eye, an incongruous inclusion in a tribute to St. Louis, which did not have a large religious community. Rather than signifying Missouri, this man symbolizes the Eastern European Jews who made a mass exodus from Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth

²⁶ Lipstadt, Beyond Belief, 143.

centuries, the period of Shahn's own arrival.²⁷ According to Ronald Takaki, a scholar of ethnic studies, by the beginning of World War I, one-third of all the Jews in Russia and Eastern Europe had migrated from their homelands, and most settled in America. The majority of these settled in New York City.²⁸ Shahn concludes this panel with a picture of a nineteenth-century immigrant from Europe, his meager belongings in hand, standing in front of Castle Garden and the Statue of Liberty. (Castle Garden was the site of immigrant entrance to the United States from 1855 to 1892, the year Ellis Island opened.) Although symbolic of national ideals, the Statue of Liberty has become associated with New York City and therefore added an eastern flavor to this midwestern mural.

The Statue of Liberty made a powerful and lasting impression on new arrivals.²⁹ David, the young protagonist

²⁷ Between 1881 and 1914 close to two million Jews, mainly from Eastern Europe, arrived in America. See Arthur A. Goren, The American Jews (Cambridge, Mass., and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1982), 1, 37, and Moses Rischin, The Promised City: New York's Jews, 1870-1914 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962), 20, 33.

²⁸ Ronald Takaki, A Different Mirror: A History of Multi-Cultural America (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1993), 279, and Rischin, The Promised City, 33.

²⁹ Shahn arrived in 1906, which was the peak year of Jewish immigration. That year, 153,748 Eastern European Jews arrived. See Gerald Sorin, A Time for Building: The Third Migration, 1880-1920, vol. 3 of The Jewish People in America, ed. Henry L. Feingold (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 12, and Goren, American Jews, 41, who notes that Jews constituted 14

in Henry Roth's classic novel of Jewish-immigrant life, Call it Sleep, experiences his first sighting of the statue. In the novel, young David is approximately the same age that Shahn was when he arrived with his family in 1906, and we can imagine the artist's youthful thoughts in harmony with David's:

[A]nd before them, rising on her high pedestal from the scaling swarthy brilliance of sunlit water to the west, Liberty. The spinning disk of the late afternoon sun slanted behind her, and to those on board who gazed, her features were charred with shadow, her depths exhausted, her masses ironed to one single plane. Against the luminous sky the rays of her halo were spikes of darkness roweling the air; shadow flattened the torch she bore to a black cross against flawless light--the blackened hilt of a broken sword. Liberty. The child and his mother stared at the massive figure in wonder.³⁰

In the minds of immigrants and in the lexicon of American images, the "Lady" became synonymous with opportunity, freedom, and liberty; Shahn would employ her image several times in his career, including in the Jersey Homesteads mural, the St. Louis proposal, and the Woodhaven Station mural. Traveling to America on crowded boats, immigrants swelled the decks to catch sight of her, as Emma Goldman later recalled:

[My sister] Helena and I stood pressed to each other, enraptured by the sight of the harbor and the Statue of Liberty suddenly emerging from the mist. Ah, there she was, the symbol of hope, of

percent of the total immigration for 1906.

³⁰ Henry Roth, Call it Sleep (New York: Noonday Press, 1934), 14.

freedom, of opportunity.³¹

Unmistakably, in this panel Shahn has turned back to the "golden age" of immigration, the years between 1880 and 1924, when the vast majority of immigrants arrived. Many Jews, including the Shahn family, fled ethnic persecution and sought a new life in America, welcoming the freedoms that their new country promised but, of course, did not always deliver.

Shahn's panel Freedom of Religion was intended to open his submission to the St. Louis competition (fig. 52). Within its horizontal frame, Shahn assembled identifiable symbols, people, and structures to represent America's dominant faiths. At the upper left, African-American Baptists stand mid-thigh in water awaiting full immersion in baptismal waters. The calm of the women cloaked in white is contrasted with the man at right who ecstatically thrusts his arms outward. Two church facades, presented as generic Christian structures, fill the composition's lower right. The Statue of Liberty's uplifted torch dominates the center. Shahn painted the statue's fist and torch as if they were formed from stained glass rather than three-dimensional bronze; for years, the Statue of Liberty's torch had been made from stained glass. Stained glass, of course, commonly decorates churches. By representing the Statue of Liberty as if it were flat and made of glass, Shahn fused the ideas

³¹ Takaki, A Different Mirror, 282.

of freedom and religion. At the right of the panel, two white men stand in a church entrance, shaking hands in welcome.³² In the upper right, Catholic clergy in ceremonial vestments walk in an orderly processional. Below these men, tucked in the lower right corner, Shahn painted the front of a synagogue with the Ten Commandments carved in Hebrew on linked tablets to represent Judaism.

The church facades in the sketch recall Shahn's easel painting Portrait of Myself among Churchgoers, 1939 (fig. 46). Shahn specifically painted this work as a pointed, but witty, retort to the forces of censure that opposed his commission for the Bronx Post Office and his use of the Whitman quotation. In the easel painting, the artist includes a church signboard bearing the name of the Brooklyn church, The Lady of Angels, and the sermon, "Is the Government Fostering Irreligion in Art?" which the Reverend Ingatius W. Cox, S.J., had presented to stir up controversy and to force Shahn to replace the Whitman passage.

In contrast, the theme of religion also figured within

³² Shahn based this vignette on photographs taken during a trip to Central Ohio in 1938 and to the South, possibly Linworth Methodist Episcopal Church, Central Ohio, 1938 (Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University) as well as Untitled (Street Scene, Natchez), 1935 (Collection Ford Motor Company). See Susan H. Edwards, "Ben Shahn: New Deal Photographer in the Old South" (Ph.D. diss., City University of New York-The Graduate Center, 1995), and Ben Shahn and the Task of Photography in Thirties America, exh. cat. (New York: Hunter College of the City University of New York, 1995).

the winning designs by Millman and Siporin. In their proposal and the finished murals the artists represented a group of early settlers kneeling in communal prayer to symbolize the coming of Christianity to St. Louis. Whereas Shahn's mural includes numerous faiths, by focusing on the earlier history of St. Louis, the Millman and Siporin mural legitimizes only the path and deeds of Christians.³³

Shahn next interpreted the clause of the First Amendment that provides for freedom of speech (fig. 53). At the upper left, Shahn pictured a mass of clenched, upraised fists, some waving caps, but shown only from the elbow up. The gathered crowd responds enthusiastically to the figure of a man whose rolled shirtsleeves expose powerful arms that he thrusts spread-eagle into the sky. In Shahn's artistic vocabulary these sturdy forearms, rolled-up sleeves, and workers' caps all symbolize common Americans or workers. In Freedom of Speech Shahn depicted the presentation of speeches ranging from the impromptu to those that are formal and broadcast through sound systems. In Freedom of the Press, the fourth panel within the series, Shahn shows the dissemination of the news through both print and telegraph

³³ See "Civil War and Post War Scenes in Postoffice Mural," St. Louis Post Dispatch, 10 October 1939, 5, and untitled clipping, St. Louis Post Dispatch, 1 October 1939, n.p., which bears the legend "to the right a group kneels in prayer, symbolizing the coming of the church into Missouri." Clippings, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis. I would like to thank Emily Blumenfeld for bringing these clippings to my attention.

(fig. 54). Shahn often used images from newspaper photographs and popular media as the basis for his paintings and, like a journalist, sought to inform and communicate through his work. Ironically, as Lipstadt establishes, in large measure America's journalists did not provide a truthful picture of the refugee crisis and conditions for Jews under Nazi rule.³⁴

American citizens actively set the course of their government by voting, speaking out, and petitioning in Vox Pop (fig. 55). At the left a steady stream of working- and middle-class men with petitions in hand, whom Shahn differentiates by their rolled sleeves and caps versus suit jackets and sharp fedoras, walk in a steady stream up the stairs of the Supreme Court to voice their opinions. At center men gather with signboards bearing slogans. Shahn includes ballots and people within voting booths at the right of the panel. Finally, the lone figure of a woman stands, leaning forward to speak out at a meeting, and her words give the man before her cause to reflect, as indicated by his hand-cradling-chin pose that mimes thought.

Freedoms, immigration, and a nod to the mighty Mississippi--in his St. Louis proposal Shahn chose to emphasize the nation's identity over that of the immediate

³⁴ See Lipstadt, Beyond Belief. As contrast, it is useful to review the New Republic's and the Nation's coverage of the refugee crisis, the Evian Conference, immigration debates, and the S.S. St. Louis.

community. Yet the subject of immigration, which Shahn addressed in his panels, became the subject of debate in the 1910s and continued into the 1930s. Until the 1910s America had maintained a policy of unrestricted immigration, which enabled the mass influx of Eastern European Jewry that had begun in the 1880s. But during the 1910s, popular sentiment rose up against the immigrants. In 1915 the Ku Klux Klan was refounded to control minority groups, including Jews, while xenophobic authors decried the destruction of America's superior racial stock due to unrestricted immigration.³⁵

The United States' entrance into World War I coincided with the end of liberal expansion and immigration policies. St. Louis has a meaning particular to both American-Jewish history and to these debates on war and immigration. On 7 April 1917, the day after the United States Congress declared war on Germany, the Socialist Party met in St. Louis, where Morris Hillquit (1869-1933) presented the "St. Louis Proclamation," reaffirming his party's condemnation of the war "as a crime against the people of the United States and against the nations of the world" and rejecting the concept of the war as a defensive measure. Hillquit was a prominent civil-rights and labor lawyer, and the leading attorney and negotiator for the International Ladies Garment

³⁵ Arthur Hertzberg, The Jews in America: Four Centuries of an Uneasy Encounter: A History (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 240-45.

Workers' Union.³⁶ In 1917 the government passed the Espionage Act and, the following year, the Sedition Act, which associated aliens with treason. During what Arthur A. Goren describes as the ensuing "frenzied nativism of the 1920s," anti-Jewish agitation intensified, and Jews, in particular but not exclusively, were likened to radical Bolsheviks plotting to overthrow the government. Government agents and journalists tried to ferret out revolutionaries within the Jewish radical movement.³⁷

In 1921, on the heels of this "Red Scare," Congressman Albert Johnson of Washington, chair of the House Immigration Committee, proposed a two-year suspension on immigration as an emergency measure to prevent an influx of Jews from Poland, where they had been the target of violence.³⁸ The Senate voted to limit the number of new arrivals in any one year to not more than 3 percent of their existing ethnic stock present in the United States according to the 1910 census.³⁹ The House supported this measure, which

³⁶ See Morris Hillquit, Loose Leaves from a Busy Life (New York: DaCapo Press, 1934), and Norma Fain Pratt, Morris Hillquit: A Political History of an American Jewish Socialist (Greenwich, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1979), 125-27, for information on the St. Louis proclamation. The ILGWU, led by David Dubinsky, was involved with the founding of the Jersey Homesteads, where Shahn both painted and lived (see chapter 3).

³⁷ Goren, The American Jews, 81.

³⁸ Hertzberg, The Jews in America, 239-40.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 240.

President Warren Harding signed into law. Pressure mounted for even more restrictive figures--the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act further reduced this figure to only 2 percent and pushed the date back to 1890. The Johnson-Reed Act immediately ended mass Jewish immigration. The varying percentages by which each foreign group was permitted entry reveal the government's biases against certain ethnic groups.⁴⁰ For example, while the bill provided for entry of only 600 Jews from Romania, a total of 34,000 nationals from Great Britain and Northern Ireland could enter the States.⁴¹ Speaking in support of the measure, Secretary of Commerce Henry H. Laughlin presented "scientific" data from tests administered by army experts that proved that people from Eastern and Southern Europe were intellectually inferior to Native-born Americans--of course, these tests were based on standardized English--and anthropological and eugenicist tracts that similarly denigrated immigrants.⁴²

During the 1930s nativist factions sought to maintain low immigration quotas in light of the lingering effects of the Depression, high unemployment, and diminished economic power. In 1930 President Herbert Hoover instructed the State Department to adhere strictly to the "public charge"

⁴⁰ Ibid., 240-45.

⁴¹ Ibid., 242.

⁴² Howard M. Sachar, A History of the Jews in America (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 320-21, and Hertzberg, The Jews in America, 243.

provision of the original 1917 Immigration Act which addressed the likelihood of a new arrival's remaining unemployed.⁴³ Because of the stringent interpretation of this provision, total immigration figures for both Jews and non-Jews dropped from 242,000 in 1931 to 35,000 in 1932.

In November 1932 both Germany and the United States went to the polls, and each, in effect, brought about a change in their political regimes. FDR won by a landslide in an election that saw the Jewish vote giving 85 to 90 percent of its support to the Democrats.⁴⁴ The devotion of Jews, including Shahn, to FDR is painfully ironic in light of what many see as his administration's inaction during the 1930s when he could have lifted the immigration quotas and

⁴³ Sachar, A History of the Jews, 474. Richard Breitman notes that the Labor Department had wanted to bypass this strict interpretation of the State Department's "public charge" clause by making it possible to approve visas for those who had relatives who would promise financial support. However, having succeeded with this change, the Labor Department bowed to the political climate and backed off. In a compromise, the Labor Department kept their distance, but the State Department instructed consuls to be more lenient with applicants. See Newton, FDR and the Holocaust, 7.

⁴⁴ For information on Jewish voting, see Albert J. Menendez, Religion at the Polls (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1977), 114; Deborah Dash Moore, At Home in America: Second-Generation New York Jews (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 210-11; Lawrence Fuchs, "American Jews and the Presidential Vote," in Fuchs, ed., American Ethnic Politics (New York and Evanston, Ill.: Harper Torchbooks, 1968), 52-54, and Fuchs, The Political Behavior of American Jews (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1956), 77.

welcomed the refugees.⁴⁵

After the rise of Hitler and the Nazi party, which forced the emigration of Jews and other "undesirables" from Germany, the 1924 quotas became especially inadequate.⁴⁶ Further, although the government had fixed immigration quotas at just over 150,000, the actual immigration figures lagged far behind.⁴⁷ As Richard Breitman notes:

The German immigration quotas during the Depression were unfulfilled; this was deliberate. Many tried to get out and go to the United States in 1933-1934 but were denied entry. Sixty thousand left Germany but were, in effect, barred from the United States. Those who came in 1933-1934 were more political, but they could also get in more easily because of their connections. The immigration policy did serve as a filtering mechanism. By manipulating administrative devices during the 1930s (without changing the law), the FDR administration could cause refugee flow to fluctuate, depending on which way it was

⁴⁵ In his essay, "'Courage First and Intelligence Second': The American Jewish Secular Elite, Roosevelt, and the Failure to Rescue," in Newton, FDR and the Holocaust, 55-56, Henry L. Feingold writes: "But from a political point of view, that loyalty [the Jewish vote], the certain knowledge that the Jewish vote was his [FDR's], diminished the leverage of Jewish leaders, who could not threaten removal of the Jewish vote. He did not have to transact business with the Jews. The Jewish 'love affair' with Roosevelt was from the outset fated to be unrequited."

⁴⁶ Feingold, The Politics of Rescue, 3.

⁴⁷ Arthur D. Morse, While Six Million Died: A Chronicle of American Apathy (New York: Random House, 1968), 134. Although the following statistics do not indicate which of these immigrants were in fact Jewish refugees, the following are the totals for German immigration in the indicated years: 1933, 1,919; 1938, 16,282; 1939, 33,515; and 1940, 21,520. Donald P. Kent, The Refugee Intellectual: The Americanization of the Immigrants, 1933-1941 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1953), 12.

manipulated.⁴⁸

The American Jewish Committee, the Coordinating Foundation, the American Jewish Congress, the Anti-Defamation League, and the Jewish Labor Committee, along with non-Jewish organizations, fought to bring a sum total of 157,000 German Jews into the United States for the years 1933 through 1941.⁴⁹ This figure is almost the same as entered in the single year 1906.⁵⁰

Consuls had the ultimate decision over who would or would not be granted a visa, which they drastically under-issued. Seeing Jews as "distasteful," the consuls saw refugees as either potential economic burdens or spys, or both.⁵¹ A major obstacle was Breckinridge Long, head of the Special Problems Division of the State Department, who was "determined to stop the flow of immigrants."⁵² Long, an early admirer of Hitler and Mussolini, was concerned to

⁴⁸ Newton, FDR and the Holocaust, 6.

⁴⁹ Goren, The American Jews, 87-88, and Naomi Cohen, Not Free to Desist: The American Jewish Committee, 1906-1966 (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1972), 186-88. For further information on Jewish Americans during the refugee crisis, see Feingold, Bearing Witness. Feingold writes that during this crucial period, American Jewry was disunited, in large part, because of the process of secularization, modernization and acculturation. Therefore, any sense of communal bonds were fractured. See also his "'Courage First,'" in FDR and the Holocaust.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., 78.

⁵² Feingold, Bearing Witness, 78.

the verge of paranoia that Germany had planted agents among the Jewish refugees.⁵³ As a result, he built what David Wyman termed "paper walls," or undue layers of policies and bureaucracy, which kept out refugees and kept the already inadequate immigration quotas undersubscribed. Angered over Long's policies, Eleanor Roosevelt confronted the president and referred to Long as a fascist. Admonished by FDR never to call Long that again, Eleanor responded that while she would refrain from badmouthing Long, her silence would not change what he in fact was.⁵⁴

In 1934, speaking at the American Federation of Labor Convention in San Francisco, Charney Vladeck called for people to fight the rise of fascism internationally. Vladeck urged conventioners not to think in divisive terms of parochial ethnicity, but rather to think in terms of inclusive bonds of class and labor. Vladeck warned the crowd to see the consistent isolation of Jews as a warning flag of the historical continuum against labor:

And that is the fact that since the coming of the industrial age, the Jews have been a true barometer for the labor movement. Whenever and wherever a government begins to persecute the Jews, it inevitably follows with persecuting the workers. Whatever the name of the country and whatever the location, the quality and the liberty, or the lack of them, enjoyed by Jews is

⁵³ Ibid., 86. Feingold writes that Long's diaries reveal that he was not a "strident anti-Semite," but rather that the issues were those of class, gentility, and breeding (172).

⁵⁴ Newton, FDR and the Holocaust, 8.

likewise true of labor. That is why organized labor throughout the world, outside of sentimental reasons, is against anti-Semitism, because it knows that the first blast against the Jews is only the forerunner of a dark storm against labor.⁵⁵

One year later, in 1935, the Nazis instituted the severely restrictive Nuremberg Laws.⁵⁶ As the decade progressed, it would become hard not to think in nationalist and ethnic terms when addressing the refugee problem.⁵⁷

After Kristallnacht what had been mainly social and economic pressure in Germany flared into violence, and the crisis situation fueled a corresponding rise in American anti-Semitism.⁵⁸ American anti-Jewish, antirefugee, and antiforeign sentiment applied further pressure to maintain the inadequate Johnson-Reed quotas at this desperate time. In 1930s America three major factors generated public resistance to immigration: unemployment, nativist nationalism, and anti-Semitism. These three positions, naturally, were interrelated and mutually supportive. If Europe's refugees came to these shores, many Americans

⁵⁵ Bruce Bliven, The Jewish Refugee Problem (New York: League for Industrial Democracy, 1939), 4. Bliven, editor of New Republic, dedicates his booklet to Charney Vladeck.

⁵⁶ Feingold, The Politics of Rescue, 4.

⁵⁷ Bliven, The Jewish Refugee, 25, reminds us that Jews were a minority in America. In 1936 Jews represented only 3.5 percent of the total population.

⁵⁸ David Wyman, Paper Walls: America and the Refugee Crisis, 1938-1941 (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1968), 36.

argued, they would rob its citizens of much-needed jobs. In a July 1938 Fortune poll, 64.7 percent of respondents cited economics and job opportunities as the reason for their objections to liberalizing immigration policies.⁵⁹ The same year was dubbed the "Roosevelt Recession," which saw a jump in unemployment and increased resistance to freeing up immigration quotas.⁶⁰ But fear of economic competition does not explain such staunch resistance to increased quotas, since six out of ten Americans also opposed special quotas for children who would pose no immediate threat to job security.⁶¹ Opposition to increased immigration continued into the 1940s--between 1938 and 1943 approximately eight out of ten Americans opposed increasing immigration quotas even if they would allow entry for political refugees from Nazi-ruled countries.⁶² Those who

⁵⁹ Ibid., 47.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 5. In 1938-39, unemployment held firm, affecting between 8 and 10 million Americans.

⁶¹ Charles Stember, Jews in the Mind of America (New York: Basic Books, 1966), 9. Feingold, The Politics of Rescue, 8, notes that 42.3 percent of Americans believed that hostility toward Jews stemmed from unfavorable Jewish characteristics. These attitudes prevailed into the war; for example, a 1944 poll found that Jews were the least desirable of all immigrants, with the exception of Germans and Japanese, the countries with which the country was at war.

⁶² Stember, Jews in the Mind of America, 10.

opposed the entry of refugees and instead supported maintaining the quotas included the Daughters of the American Revolution, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, and the American Legion.⁶³

In 1938 in New York City, the primary destination of most refugees and immigrants, opponents of increasing the immigration quotas found support from Father Charles Coughlin. They organized a rally to picket the radio station WMCA, which had refused to air Coughlin's broadcasts, and carried signs with such slogans as "Refugees Get Jobs in This Country! Why Don't 100% Americans?"⁶⁴ The Brooklyn Tablet, the reactionary newspaper of the Brooklyn Catholic archdiocese, fueled nativist and antirefugee sentiments by publishing false accusations that Jewish businesses were pledged to hiring refugees who would throw Americans onto relief by taking away their jobs.⁶⁵ These

⁶³ Jamie Sayen, Einstein in America: The Scientist's Conscience in the Age of Hitler and Hiroshima (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1985), 112.

⁶⁴ Wyman, Paper Walls, 6.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 5-6. Banner headlines from the Brooklyn Tablet contain terms that veil the malevolence of the paper's editorial policy. Repeatedly, Coughlin is presented as the victim of oppressive forces and the true guardian of American liberties, freedom of speech, and religion. For examples, see "Thousands Oppose Move to Suppress Father Coughlin: Freedom Is Threatened," Brooklyn Tablet, 3 December 1938, 1; "Thousands Picket a Radio Station," Brooklyn Tablet, 10 December 1938, 1, 26; and "Father Coughlin Again Pleas for United People," Brooklyn Tablet, 17 December 1938, 1, 14. Examples of journals that denounced such rhetoric include the Nation. See, for example, William C. Kernan, "Coughlin, the Jews, and Communism," The Nation

slandorous rumors and allegations forced A & S, Stern Brothers, and other Jewish-owned department stores to publicly deny the existence of any preferential hiring practices. Proponents of open immigration, such as the New Republic's editor Bruce Bliven, countered the argument that the nation's dire economic situation demanded that the borders be held tight:

With 10 or 12 million people out of work, it is argued, we should be foolish to add to our burden by bringing in hundreds of thousands more. No one with any understanding of economics would ever make such a statement. Whether you have unemployment or not does not depend on the size of your population but upon your economic system, the use you make of your resources.⁶⁶

United States Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins also supported open immigration and dismissed the argument that refugees would take jobs from unemployed Americans, or that relaxing the borders would further cripple the economy. Instead, she asked the president to lift the immigration quotas and other restrictions that blocked access to safety for thousands.⁶⁷ FDR did neither. FDR eventually combined the German and Austrian quotas in March 1938 to allow entry

147, no. 25 (17 December 1938), 655-58.

⁶⁶ Bliven, The Jewish Refugee Problem, 23.

⁶⁷ Herbert Druks, The Failure to Rescue (New York: Robert Speller and Sons, Inc., 1977), 5. "Refugees and the Economy," The Nation 147, no. 24 (10 December 1938), 609-10, proposed that the United States cut off trade with Germany; tax the bank balances and property of nonresidential aliens of states indulging in persecution, and liberalize immigration laws.

for more refugees after the Anschluss.⁶⁸ But this merely raised the numbers to an inadequate 27,000.⁶⁹

During the period when Shahn designed his St. Louis and Woodhaven Station murals, the refugee issue consistently made front-page news, and Dorothy Thompson was one of the reporters who pushed the issue to the forefront and held it there.⁷⁰ In July 1938 FDR called for an international meeting to confront the refugee situation brought about by Berlin's extrusion policy. The Evian Conference, in which

⁶⁸ See Newton, FDR and the Holocaust. In this volume, Karen J. Greenberg summarizes important works dealing with the refugee crisis, and what each scholar argues as Roosevelt's culpability: Arthur Morse's While Six Million Died: A Chronicle of American Apathy (New York: Random House, 1967) is extremely critical of United States policy, whereas Henry L. Feingold, The Politics of Rescue: The Roosevelt Administration and the Holocaust, 1938-1945 (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1970), while acknowledging United States governmental inaction, holds back from assigning blame. Wyman, Paper Walls, accuses the Roosevelt administration of being "active complicitors in the Holocaust." See Greenberg, "The Burden of Being Human: An Essay on Selected Scholarship of the Holocaust," in Newton, FDR and the Holocaust, 32. I feel that Feingold's more recent publications are more pointed in their criticism of Roosevelt, members of his administration, and the executive branch.

⁶⁹ Robert Dallek, Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932-1945 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 167. Moreover, Dallek writes, the United States would not give entry to the full quotas of Europeans allowed under law (446).

⁷⁰ Feingold, The Politics of Rescue, 23. See Dorothy Thompson, Refugees: Anarchy or Organization? (New York: Random House, 1938). Oswald Garrison Villard, "Issues and Men," The Nation, 147, no. 10 (3 September 1938), 226. See also Robert Dell, "Hope for Refugees," The Nation, 147, no. 6 (6 August 1938), 126-28. Villard solely credited Thompson with prompting FDR to form the Evian Conference.

thirty-two nations participated, was created to establish an international organization that would facilitate emigration from Germany. Participants agreed on a working definition of the refugee as one "who must emigrate on account of [his] political opinions, religious beliefs, or racial origins."⁷¹ But according to Feingold, since participating nations would not be required to change their immigration policies, the Evian conference was preordained to fail and was merely an "exercise in futility."⁷²

The Intergovernmental Committee on Political Refugees (the IGC) grew out of the Evian Conference and fixed as its primary goal the working out of an agreement with Germany. Clearly, there were policy makers in FDR's administration and in Congress who believed that negotiating with Nazi leaders was possible and viable.⁷³ The IGC produced a Statement of Agreement, which Dorothy Parker wryly and accurately coined a "ransom offer." The proposal would have required German Jews to sell their remaining capital goods in exchange for phased emigration, which in turn depended on three factors: continued stability within Germany; cooperation with outside Jews; and the availability of

⁷¹ Wyman, Paper Walls, viii. During the 1930s and 1940s, the concept of a Jewish race was widely accepted. Stember, Jews in the Mind of America, 50, notes that as late as 1946, 42 percent of respondents thought Jews were a separate race.

⁷² Feingold, Bearing Witness, 75-76.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 76.

resettlement havens. None of these three conditions could be fulfilled.⁷⁴

While FDR commanded a leadership role by calling for the Evian Conference, under his stewardship American policy did not assist the refugees. Between 1938 and 1941 Germany continued to allow Jews to leave the country, but the refugees had nowhere to go. America's hesitancy and inaction, were, unfortunately, consistent with a worldwide paralysis in response to the refugee crisis. European states maintained they were already overpopulated and so turned to the United States to take action.⁷⁵ On the matter of how European nations dealt with the refugee situation, Karen J. Greenberg writes:

During the 1930s, the issue of the refugees was understood by the countries outside of Germany as one of primary importance. Throughout the 1930s, Hitler encouraged emigration of the Jews as a means of ridding Germany and its annexed territories of their evil influence. Most of the European countries, England, and the United States tightened their policies in response to the growing masses of refugees that came with the onset of Germany's expansion and then war. Spain, Italy, France, and Switzerland found themselves reconsidering their immigration policies in light of the onset of the Jewish migration from Germany, but only Denmark and Finland actually worked to liberalize those policies. Britain remained stalwart against the admission of refugees from Nazi Europe and adhered to the 1939 White Paper in regard to Palestine. The White Paper held that, at the most, seventy-five thousand Jewish immigrants would be allowed into Palestine in the subsequent five-year period and that after that,

⁷⁴ Ibid., 76-77.

⁷⁵ Druks, The Failure to Rescue, 1-3.

there would be no further Jewish immigration to Palestine.⁷⁶

Against this tide of indifference and inaction, New York Senator Robert F. Wagner spoke out boldly on behalf of the refugees and fought to lift the immigration quotas. Previously, in his Jersey Homesteads mural, Shahn had paid homage to Wagner and his progressive labor legislation.⁷⁷ On 9 February 1939 Wagner introduced a bill on the Senate floor that would have permitted special provisions to facilitate the entry of children into America.⁷⁸ The history of the Wagner-Rogers Bill involved the action of both the Executive Branch and the Congress, thereby enabling historians to chart a broader governmental reaction to the refugee crisis beyond Roosevelt himself.

Wagner's bill called for the admission of 20,000 German refugee children under the age of fourteen on a nonquota basis over the next two years.⁷⁹ Wagner strategically selected specific numbers and used guarded terms when

⁷⁶ Greenberg, The Burden of Being Human, 31-32.

⁷⁷ Pohl, "Constructing History," 39.

⁷⁸ Saul Friedman, No Haven for the Oppressed: United States Policy toward Jewish Refugees, 1938-1945 (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1972), 91-92.

⁷⁹ Residents of Roosevelt, New Jersey, had previously shown concern over the fate of the refugee children. Within town records it is noted "the question of the refugee children was taken up. A motion was made and accepted to refer the refugee situation to the civic council to decide." Minutes Joint Board of the Jersey Homesteads, 17 August 1938, Roosevelt, New Jersey, Collection.

addressing the refugee situation. His proposed figure of 20,000 was exactly the same as the anticipated need; his use of "German" instead of "Jewish" children was less likely to provoke anti-Semitic opposition among the American public and its elected officials.⁸⁰ As Feingold notes,

[t]he incident is important because it was one of the few examples we possess that shows concretely what Roosevelt actually was willing to do for refugees. It also serves as a paradigm of the role of Jewish leadership and organizations. They were divided, uncertain, and fearful of domestic anti-Semitism. The brunt of support for the measure was borne by non-Jewish agencies.⁸¹

Importantly, Feingold notes that two components of the Jewish Labor Committee--the International Garment Workers Union and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America--both supported the bill. Further, the rank and file donated a day's pay--this during the depths of the Depression--to help the refugees, and that both the American Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Organizations endorsed the bill. Therefore, those Jews still within the working classes were able to unite and speak out en masse.⁸²

Congress voted down the measure, which drove Wagner to take to the air waves in a last-ditch effort to build popular support for his measure. He opened his dramatic radio address with a description of the plight of refugees

⁸⁰ Friedman, No Haven for the Oppressed, 91-92.

⁸¹ Feingold, "'Courage First,'" 58.

⁸² Ibid., 58 n. 28. See the New York Times, 9 February and 10 November 1939.

on the SS St. Louis to exemplify the desperation of the situation.⁸³

In her 1987 article, "Constructing History: A Mural by Ben Shahn," focusing on the Jersey Homesteads mural, art historian Frances K. Pohl briefly links together the refugee crisis with Shahn's St. Louis mural:

[T]he U.S. government's refusal in the summer of 1939 to allow the Jewish refugee ship SS St. Louis to dock in the U.S. was a much-publicized example of a less-publicized wartime policy. It is somewhat ironic that in the same year, Shahn's mural design for a panel on "Freedom of Religion," which included a synagogue and the torch from the Statue of Liberty, was rejected by the Treasury Department for the central post office in St. Louis, Missouri.⁸⁴

In mid-May 1939, the SS St. Louis, operated by the Hamburg-American line, left Germany for Havana; the ship carried 907 refugees bearing passports stamped with a red J to clearly mark that they were Jews. All the passengers held landing permits signed by the Cuban Director of Immigration Colonel Manuel Benites, which the Hamburg-American line bought wholesale and resold to the refugees

⁸³ Wagner spoke on 7 June 1939, six days after Cuba had ordered the St. Louis out of Havana harbor. See Gordon Thomas and Max Morgan Witts, Voyage of the Damned (New York: Stein and Day, 1974).

⁸⁴ Pohl, "Constructing History," 38. I would like to acknowledge Frances K. Pohl's suggestion that I consider Shahn's St. Louis mural in relation to the plight of the S.S. St. Louis.

for \$150 each.⁸⁵ However, the week before the ship departed from Germany, Cuban President Frederico Laredo Bru had signed Decree Number 93, which immediately invalidated all landing certificates. Cuban officials had advised the Hamburg-American line in advance of the ship's European departure that the passengers held useless landing permits and, thus, that the journey might prove useless. Nevertheless the company let the ship proceed on its cross-Atlantic trip to Havana knowing that the voyage would be futile.⁸⁶ On 27 May 1939, while the St. Louis Post Office competition was still accepting applications for its decorative mural, the SS St. Louis arrived and docked in Havana. When the ship's passengers attempted to disembark, Cuban officials denied them permission to leave the ship.⁸⁷ Immediately, the passengers were thrown into diplomatic limbo, beginning several weeks of waiting, negotiations on their behalf, and extensive news coverage of their ordeal.⁸⁸

For the refugees on the SS St. Louis Cuba was to have

⁸⁵ Dawidowicz points out that since the Nazis had removed Jews from German economic life, most were left without money or possessions.

⁸⁶ Wyman, Paper Walls, 38.

⁸⁷ Feingold, The Politics of Rescue, 65-66.

⁸⁸ See "Fear Suicide Wave on Refugees' Ship," New York Times, 1 June 1939, 16; "Cuba Orders Liner and Refugees to Go," New York Times, 2 June 1939, 1; and "Man's Inhumanity," New York Times, 9 June 1939, 20.

been only a temporary place of sanctuary en route to the United States and safety. They had fulfilled U.S. immigration requirements and held quota numbers that would ultimately allow them safe entry into the United States, but their entrance dates varied from three months to three years after their arrival in Cuba. Still, they believed that the United States would certainly be humane and waive the delay since they had papers in hand.⁸⁹ But the United States did not. As the weeks dragged on, newspapers reported that some passengers attempted suicide. They printed impassioned letters from refugee mothers to their children and the desperate testimony of the relatives waiting on shore. The Daily Mirror, on 6 June 1939, printed this letter from a mother on board:

It is strange how near, and yet how cut off we really are. Because many boats come close to us throughout the day bringing greetings from relatives and friends, many millions of rumors are gossiped on the boat. The result is that two-thirds of the passengers are absolutely panicky. I am not one of them.⁹⁰

Jewish relief agencies gathered these reports and testimonies with the hopes of persuading the United States to immediately validate the quota numbers, but they were unsuccessful. The United States inaction, in effect, forced the ship to turn back to Europe, where the crew distributed

⁸⁹ Morse, While Six Million Died, 282-83.

⁹⁰ Druks, The Failure to Rescue, 24.

the passengers among various countries.⁹¹ Of the 907 refugees, 215 were placed in Belgium, 287 in England, 181 in the Netherlands, and 224 in France. On 1 September 1939, Germany invaded Poland, beginning World War II; the only refugees from the SS St. Louis who could possibly have survived the Nazis were those relocated to England.⁹² Nazi propaganda fully exploited the U.S.'s refusal of the SS St. Louis, wryly writing in the August 1939 issue of Der Weltkampf:

We are saying openly that we do not want the Jews while the democracies keep on claiming that they are willing to receive them--and then leave the quests out in the cold! Aren't we savages better men after all?⁹³

Because Shahn's designs for the St. Louis competition do not bear a specific date of completion, it is difficult to insert them precisely into the chain of events from Kristallnacht to the Evian Conference and the plight of the SS St. Louis. However, the continued and pervasive coverage of all these events, indicative of the mounting international crisis, created the charged climate in which Shahn worked, reacted, and responded. In the New York City area the plight of the St. Louis was constant front-page news, complete with photographs and eyewitness testimony.

⁹¹ "907 Refugees End Voyage in Antwerp: 272 to Remain in Belgium," New York Times, 18 June 1939, 1 and 20.

⁹² Thomas and Witts, Voyage of the Damned, 295-304.

⁹³ Ibid., 299-300.

In his St. Louis proposal, Shahn neither directly answered the rhetoric of the Nazis, confronted American inaction, nor explicitly narrated the events of the refugee crisis and the SS St. Louis. Instead, Shahn emphasized the values of liberty and freedom and the lives and the opportunities made possible because of past liberal immigration policies--including his own life, as contrasted with the horrors of war, concentration camps, and religious persecution. Perhaps, however, Shahn moved too far from the focus on Missouri history. As previously stated, the jurors awarded the commission jointly to Edward Millman and Mitchell Siporin, who portrayed an abundance of famous figures from Missouri history--Mark Twain, Daniel Boone, Senator Thomas Hart Benton, Joseph Pulitzer, and George Caleb Bingham--in panels that celebrated the state. The jury of artists never recorded their reactions to Shahn's anonymous proposal nor qualified its rejection. However, an unofficial reaction hints at the problematic nature of the subject matter that Shahn chose to address:

I am glad that Mr. Shahn is going to have another job and hope that he keeps it as simple and powerful as the Bronx job. Much as I admired the St. Louis designs it seemed to me that they contained political distractions that interfered with the simplicity and convincingness of which the artist has proved himself so capable.⁹⁴

⁹⁴ Forbes Watson to Edward B. Rowan, 22 September 1939, National Archives, Washington, D.C., Record Group-121. In a later, secondary citation, James Thrall Soby writes that Shahn's murals "were rejected on political grounds," yet he does not specify if by politics he is referring to the

Shahn soon had the opportunity to distill his ideas and images on immigration, freedom, and the First Amendment into a one-panel mural. In early 1940 Section officials invited Shahn to submit designs for the Woodhaven Station Post Office.⁹⁵ In February 1940 Shahn turned over his designs to officials who granted their approval the following month.⁹⁶

The Woodhaven Station mural refocuses the ideas that Shahn had proposed for his St. Louis mural. Freed from the distractions of tailoring his ideas to Missouri history and now working with a symbolic vocabulary, which included the Statue of Liberty and was more suited to New York City, Shahn concentrated on his interrelated message of American freedom and immigration. To symbolize these dual concerns, Shahn placed the Statue of Liberty's oxidized green hand and uplifted torch prominently at the composition's center (fig. 56). The powerful hand within the Queens mural calls to mind another, earlier representation of a hand by Shahn. As part of his 1930 Haggadah, Shahn represented the "mighty hand" and "outstretched arm" of God, symbolizing divine

proposal's content or to personal conflicts among the judges. See Ben Shahn: Paintings (New York: George Braziller, 1963), 15.

⁹⁵ Edward B. Rowan to Ben Shahn, 6 January 1940, National Archives, Washington, D.C., Record Group-121.

⁹⁶ Edward B. Rowan to Ben Shahn, 19 March 1940, Ben Shahn Papers, AAA.

liberation.⁹⁷ Where a Haggadah relives and retells the story of the Exodus, Shahn's Woodhaven Station mural relives and retells the impetus for immigration to America. Shahn drew a parallel between the ancient and the recent exodus, and the relationship of both to the feast of Passover in his proposal for the Jersey Homesteads, writing:

[T]he Passover symbolizes the departure of the Jews from Egypt, the land of bondage. So, with the feast of the Passover, and out of the background of the Ghettos and pogroms comes a stream of immigrants to America with hope in their faces. Above them hovers the dream of America-- a land of fruit and flowers, big cities with streets paved with gold, the Statue of Liberty--symbol of a new life to the immigrant.⁹⁸

Shahn based his Queens mural on vignettes and elements previously introduced in the nine St. Louis studies. In Queens, Shahn focused solely on the Bill of Rights and the Four Freedoms. The mural's elements and narratives spin outward from the unifying torch at center. Shahn painted with subdued tones of brown, blues, and reds using egg tempera on canvas, tightly compressing and layering the various symbols. A sense of monumentality pervades the single image, which measures just over 10 feet high by 15 feet wide. This sense of mass is achieved through the bulkiness of the figures, especially the pressman's arms

⁹⁷ Stephen S. Kayser, Haggadah for Passover: Copied and Illustrated by Ben Shahn (London: MacGibbon and Kee Ltd., 1965), viii. The Haggadah recounts not only historic events but also the ongoing struggle against oppression.

⁹⁸ Ben Shahn Papers, AAA.

that directly echo the prominence of the statue's hand.

In a lengthy and precisely worded letter, Shahn walked officials through his designs to explain each element's visual and narrative function:

The central area of the panel over the door is occupied by the most familiar American symbol of freedom--the hand and torch of the Statue of Liberty. Beneath this are the words of the Bill of Rights guaranteeing freedom of religion, press, speech and petition and assembly. Immediately to the left of the hand is the huge geared wheel of a printing press. On the folding arm of the press are seen, in process of being printed, the ballots of the several political parties--the ballot being to my mind the guarantee of all our freedoms. The section of the printing press continues behind the hand and torch to the right side of the panel where folded newspapers come down a chute.

Shahn continues:

To the left of the quotation are seen two speakers, one with all the paraphernalia of the authorized speaker--loud speaker, radio microphone, a well-constructed platform. Behind, with his back toward us is seen the impromptu speaker who can be seen in any public square any day exercising his right to free speech. Before him are many hands waving approval. The upper left corner of the panel is devoted to freedom of religion. Through an archway adorned with characteristic symbols of the Catholic Church are seen: (1) the spire of a small church which might be Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodist or an other Protestant denomination, (2) the tablets of the law on the face of a Synagogue. The right hand area of the panel shows a line of people filing into a public building carrying petitions in their hands. Above the building converge telegraph wires (which have recently proved an important vehicle of petition).⁹⁹

Beneath the statue's torch, at center, Shahn letters

⁹⁹ Ben Shahn to Inslee Hopper, 19 February 1940, National Archives, Washington, D.C., Record Group 121.

the First Amendment:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech or of the press or the right of the people peaceably to assemble and to petition the government for a readdress of grievances.

Before Shahn could commence with his program as he desired, he had to both address and negotiate the opinions of Edward B. Rowan, Assistant Chief, Section of Fine Arts, and Forbes Watson. The three men quibbled over small points of perspective, scale, and placement of the figures. Rowan and Watson objected to the "printed label" accompanying the image, which they felt was not needed to convey the mural's theme to the public.¹⁰⁰ In his thorough response, Shahn challenged each point on formal and technical issues. He wrote with the greatest degree of clarity and emotional charge in defense of his use of a "label." Shahn's letter provided an opportunity to reassert his artistic purpose and philosophy and the way he perceived the political climate in which he worked:

The thing that I have tried to put into this mural, I feel very strongly. I feel that it has profound significance for every American, more significance every day because of increasing threats to our rights and liberties. I feel that if I, as an artist, can bring home to the people who see this work any added realization of how these basic rights project into their lives and activities, then I've done as good a piece of work as I want to, and don't much mind breaking the

¹⁰⁰ Edward B. Rowan to Ben Shahn, 11 June 1940, Ben Shahn Papers, AAA.

rules for pure art.¹⁰¹

Shahn's deliberate choice of words in both his mural and in his correspondence reinforces the thrust of his imagery and his self-envisioned artistic role. Shahn saw himself as an educator trying to reach the public to preserve American freedoms.

On 6 January 1941, the President addressed the members of the Seventy-seventh Congress in his annual message. The nation, according to FDR, was at an "unprecedented" moment in its history due to the serious threat to American security from outside its borders. Toward the conclusion of his speech, FDR spoke of a "world founded upon four essential human freedoms:"

The first is freedom of speech and expression-- everywhere in the world. The second is freedom of every person to worship God in his own way-- everywhere in the world. The third is freedom from want--which, translated into world terms, means economic understandings which will secure to every nation a healthy peacetime life for its inhabitants--everywhere in the world. The fourth is freedom from fear--which, translated into world terms, means a world-wide reduction of armaments to such a point and in such a thorough fashion that no nation will be in a position to commit an act of physical aggression again--anywhere in the world.¹⁰²

Shahn completed and installed the Woodhaven Station

¹⁰¹ Ben Shahn to Edward B. Rowan, 18 June 1940, Ben Shahn Papers, AAA.

¹⁰² Samuel Rosenman, ed., The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt (New York: The MacMillian Company, 1941), 672.

mural in 1941 as the national and international climates became even more insecure. Shahn depicted the Four Freedoms before FDR described them. In light of FDR's inaction during the refugee crisis and his decision to maintain the Johnson-Reed Act immigration quotas, it is obvious that his administration, the State Department, and Congress did little to ensure these liberties for prospective immigrants. Instead of merely paralleling the concerns and policies of a president he admired, Shahn's St. Louis and Woodhaven Station murals offer a moral and legislative direction that America, in fact, chose not to follow.

Chapter Six: The Meaning of Social Security

The two major crises of the 1930s were the Great Depression and the global spread of fascism. In FDR's 1932 inaugural address, he devoted one brief sentence to foreign relations and the worsening international situation, emphasizing instead domestic recovery and national interests.¹ Although the many programs of the New Deal helped to moderate the effects of the Depression and installed social-welfare programs intended to prevent future economic collapse, the New Deal neither employed the majority of the nation's workforce nor fully revitalized industry. The war effort did. Ben Shahn's mural The Meaning of Social Security (1940-42) in Washington, D.C. was his final New Deal mural and concluding tribute to the economic and social programs FDR instituted (fig. 57). Himself turning away from the pressing international situation, Shahn relied on the photographs and paintings he made in the 1930s for visual prototypes and thematic direction. For Shahn, like other artists and activists on the Left who had aligned with the New Deal under the banner of the Popular Front (1935), had, by decade's end, lost his clear ideological direction in the wake of the Soviet-German nonaggression pact and the vacillating policies from the Soviet Union. By 1940 American elected officials realized

¹ Michael E. Parrish, The Anxious Decades: America in Prosperity and Depression, 1920-1941 (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1992), 439-40.

that political isolation and neutrality would be impossible to maintain as the war became inevitable. Within this context, working in Washington, D.C., Shahn expressed faith in the spirit of the Popular Front and in the New Deal, by creating a sympathetic portrait of the homefront.

On 8 June 1934, before a special Congressional session, FDR proposed that the "government undertake the great tasks of furthering the security of the citizen and his family through social insurance."² He presented Social Security and the New Deal as preventative programs that would support the capitalist system rather than reform the underlying socioeconomic structure.³ Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins, who served on the committee that drafted the legislation, described its powers as follows:

[T]his Act establishes unemployment insurance as a substitute for the haphazard methods of assistance in periods when men and women willing and able to work are without jobs. It provides for old age pensions which mark great progress over the measures upon which we have hitherto depended in caring for those who have been unable to provide for the years when they no longer can work. It also provides security for dependent and crippled children, mothers, the indigent disabled and the

² The 73rd Congress, Second Session, H. R. Document No. 397, quoted in Arthur J. Altmeyer, The Formative Years of Social Security (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1966), 3.

³ Douglas J. Brown, The Genesis of Social Security in America (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University, Industrial Relations Section, 1969), 1-2.

blind.⁴

FDR spoke of establishing a system of "cradle to grave" insurance, which would safeguard each American against the vicissitudes of life.⁵

The depth and pervasiveness of the financial disaster of the 1930s was proof-positive that economic ill-fortune was neither a moral nor an individual happenstance. In the 1930s Abraham Epstein was one of the leading theorists of and proponents for a comprehensive social-security plan that, unlike FDR's version, would redistribute the country's financial resources.⁶ Looking critically at the economic depression, Epstein wrote:

[T]he establishment of economic security has become a paramount issue because our modern system of industrial production has rendered our lives insecure to the point of despair. The wage system has made economic security depend entirely upon the stability of our jobs. . . . Economic insecurity to-day confronts almost our entire population because the overwhelming majority of the United States earn their livelihood by working for others, receiving for their labor a wage or

⁴ Frances Perkins, "The Social Security Act," [transcript of radio address, 2 September 1935], in Vital Speeches of the Day 1 (1935), 792-94.

⁵ Anthony J. Badger, The New Deal: The Depression Years, 1933-1940 (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), 227. Early on, the phrase social insurance, rather than social security was used; the later phrase was most probably coined by Abraham Epstein, Secretary of the American Association for Social Security. See Epstein, Insecurity: A Challenge to America, 2d ed. (New York: Random House, 1938).

⁶ See Louis Leotta, "Abraham Epstein and the Movement for Old Age Security," Labor History 16 (Summer 1975), 359-77.

salary.⁷

The fight for Social Security, therefore, was a workers' fight, which in part explains its appeal to Shahn.

With the implementation of Social Security, the United States moved closer to what every major European country had done decades before (and done better), namely, to provide workers with insurance against three plagues that jeopardized their individual economic well-being: unemployment, poverty in old age, and ill health. Shahn used these as his themes. In his two panels, he offers an immediate transition from beleaguered children working in the coal mines to energetic boys shooting hoops. With a quick pivot on one's heels, the viewer places the negative pre-Social Security days behind and turns to enjoy the program's benefits. But the push to establish the Social Security Act was never so smooth, nor its implementation as quick. Rather, in debates that reached far back into the nineteenth century, America sought to provide--as well as to limit--economic security for its workers. Despite the lengthy gestation of the legislation when Shahn began to work on his mural in tribute to the Social Security Act in 1940, the Act remained inadequate and exclusionary, focusing largely on middle-class stability. Persistent racism, sexism, and poor planning immediately excluded approximately

⁷ Epstein, Insecurity, 3-5.

40 million people from receiving benefits.

Prior to the Progressive era, society had cast those in need into either workhouses or poorhouses, making them depend on--as well as contend with--the beneficence and moral righteousness of private charities. The charities argued that character weaknesses, rather than a flawed socioeconomic system, were what drove people into economic decline. These voluntary associations and charities acted as mediators or wedges between the individual and the state.

In addition to private charities, during the Progressive era, a network of private and public insurance and assistance providers doled out a modicum of aid.⁸ Immigrant Jews and other ethnic groups formed their own benevolent associations, landsmanshaften, to provide assistance in the new land--a grassroots anticipation of the Social Security Act.⁹ Some corporations and industries, such as U.S. Steel and the railroads, provided temporary disability and death benefits, yet because employees were not vested, if they lost their jobs they lost these limited benefits.¹⁰ This mishmash of landsmanshaften, fraternal

⁸ W. Andrew Achenbaum, Social Security: Vision and Revision (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 15.

⁹ Irving Howe, World of Our Fathers: The Journey of the Eastern European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976), 183-90.

¹⁰ Roy Lubove, The Struggle for Social Security, 1900-1935 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968), 12.

orders, trade unions, and employer plans reached only a small portion of the population. Proponents of national social insurance believed that only a federal, comprehensive program would provide all of America's workers with unemployment benefits, health coverage, death and disability provisions, and provide for the ill, the elderly, and dependent mothers and children.

The social-insurance movement arose in concert with the professionalization of social work and a call to transfer social responsibility from volunteerism to the state. According to the historian Roy Lubove, advocates of social insurance

addressed themselves to problems of security in a wage-centered, industrial economy. They maintained that neither public welfare nor private social work nor voluntary insurance sufficed. . . . The social insurance movement was a thrust toward rationalization of the American welfare system; it aspired to centralization, the transfer of functions from private to the public sector, and a new definition of the role of government in American life.¹¹

Rather than address the root causes of poverty, objectors to federal assistance upheld as icons the middle-class values of self-reliance and prudence, claiming that federal social insurance would prevent workers from learning how to save and be productive and would needlessly enlarge the state.¹² Conservative business interests opposed federal assistance,

¹¹ Lubove, The Struggle, 2-3.

¹² Achenbaum, Social Security, 13.

as union leaders did initially. AFL leader Samuel Gompers argued that social insurance would take power away from the workers, undermining the viability of trade-union pensions and crippling the fight for increased wages and improved work conditions.¹³

Workers' compensation was the earliest social-insurance program established in the United States and the only one in operation prior to the New Deal. Advocates declared that workers' compensation was a preventative social measure to ward off economic disaster. Investigation of the causes of worker death and injury in Pittsburgh's heavy industries successfully shifted the burden of responsibility from the individual worker to that of the employers, establishing that high speed, high productivity demands, and dangerous machinery--rather than personal negligence--caused accidents. Employers and business interests came around to supporting workmen's compensation since it would be a more predictable expense than potentially costly liability suits.¹⁴

From 1915 to 1920 reformers mounted a widely debated campaign for a national health plan. They saw that preventing worker illness was essential to economic stability, citing the high incidence of wage earners

¹³ Lubove, The Struggle, 16, and Achenbaum, Social Security, 13.

¹⁴ Lubove, The Struggle, 46-49, 55-60.

becoming ill and throwing their families into economic crisis and decline. These reformers recognized that national health coverage was the logical counterpart to workmen's compensation. The American medical profession, Christian Scientists, and private insurance companies united to mount a successful opposition to national health coverage.¹⁵

Conservatives framed the problem of female-headed households with dependent children as a moral issue, clouding the women's urgent pecuniary needs with concerns about their behavior. These moral conservatives cried that public relief would lead to dependence and the decay of Anglo-Saxon Americans, claiming that private charities offered sufficient assistance to women in need.¹⁶ Even liberal reformers failed to argue that if women were afforded greater access to the workplace, coupled with higher wages and adequate childcare, one-income families could be self-sufficient. Instead, social reformers designed pensions or monetary payments to mothers, stabilizing them within the domestic sphere and in the roles that the middle class prescribed of housekeeper and mother.

Clearly, some progress had been made by the time FDR assumed leadership of the nation. The economic crash disproved the claims of strident moralists who worked to

¹⁵ Ibid., 83.

¹⁶ Ibid., 92-93.

prevent social insurance on the basis of character issues. The pervasiveness of the immediate suffering, and the precarious future for all Americans--most especially the elderly--motivated the president, Congress, and citizens into action. In the 1930s the debate over old-age pensions intensified with mounting public pressure and was joined by debates over the proper model for unemployment insurance. These two pressing concerns--old-age pensions and unemployment insurance--formed the immediate political context in which FDR worked out the Social Security Act of 1935.

One of the preliminary points that advocates of unemployment insurance struggled with was whether to create a program centered on unemployment prevention or instead to focus on providing benefits when prevention (inevitably) failed. In the early 1930s two states, Ohio and Wisconsin, each had launched its own unemployment-insurance program. Abraham Epstein worked with Isaac Max Rubinow (1875-1936)--a prominent leftist theorist on social insurance who had emigrated from Russia--to create the Ohio plan. Their initiative, if applied to the federal level, would have

redistributed wealth within America.¹⁷

Epstein and Rubinow maintained that unemployment prevention was unrealistic because the socioeconomic forces that create joblessness were well beyond the control of individual employers and employees. Instead, they focused on pooling financial resources for redistribution, which would enable adequate benefits to be paid to unemployed workers. It appears that Epstein and Rubinow's plan met with resistance as a national program in part because the pair privileged the collective good over that of the individual. Because they sought to redistribute wealth, they doubted the myth that America was a classless society, a turn away from capitalist tenets. For all this, and no doubt for more as well, the Ohio Chamber of Commerce called Rubinow a Bolshevik and a fraud--the former a telling derogatory term affixed to those on the Left, in particular Jews. W. Andrew Achenbaum summarizes such resistance to their plan as follows:

[M]en like Abraham Epstein and I. M. Rubinow had vociferously advocated social insurance long before Roosevelt became a figure of national political importance; presumably they would have been too much of a good thing. They were of European (Russian-Jewish) immigrant background, and their ideas about the nation's

¹⁷ See I. M. Rubinow, The Quest for Security (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1934). See also Jerry R. Cates, Insuring Inequality: Administrative Leadership in Social Security, 1935-1954 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983), 22-23, and James T. Paterson, America's Struggle against Poverty, 1900-1980 (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1981), 45.

responsibilities to care for all its downtrodden and disadvantaged--regardless of the contributions these people had made to the commonwealth--did not seem to fit the American grain.¹⁸

In contrast, the Wisconsin model was more conservative and opposed the redistribution of wealth; Epstein dismissed the Wisconsin initiative as "the most stupid undertaking that has ever been suggested." In 1932 Wisconsin became the first state to pay unemployment insurance to its residents. The Wisconsin plan was developed around the theoretical work of the institutional economist John Commons and the reform leader John Andrews, both of whom had been involved with the Wisconsin university system and with establishing state policy. Their work was another example in Wisconsin of the manner in which the university and policy makers worked together to create state policy, as the La Follettes had done earlier (see chapter 2). Jerry R. Cates has discussed how Andrews and Commons crafted their proposal around what they saw as the dominant American values of individual initiative, competition, and thrift--in opposition to Epstein and Rubinow's valuing of cooperation and communal responsibility. The Wisconsin team seized on the capitalist tools of competition and the mighty profit motive as the ways to achieve national economic security.¹⁹ The pair believed that individual employers could, in fact,

¹⁸ Achenbaum, Social Security, 21.

¹⁹ Lubove, The Struggle, 174.

effectively prevent unemployment.

FDR favored the Wisconsin model over that of Ohio; in fact, he selected planners associated with Wisconsin to assist him.²⁰ The 1935 act, like the Wisconsin model, is a regressive payroll tax program with no government contributions, effectively blocking the redistribution of wealth.²¹ America's Social Security system is contributory--individuals must contribute in order to draw wage-related benefits later.²² According to Cates, this regressive and wage-related program soundly works against the poor. The end result would have been different if Epstein and Rubinow's Ohio plan had been instituted on the federal level.

By the time that FDR began to create his New Deal programs, the mass appeal of Huey Long's and Dr. Francis E. Townsend's utopian plans pressured him to address the problem of the indigent aged; this, despite the president's prior announcement that the time was not right for old-age pensions.²³ Modern industrial society had both undermined financial self-support and uprooted families, creating a change in the family structure that resulted, in part, in

²⁰ Ibid., 1-2.

²¹ Cates, Insuring Inequality, 24.

²² Ibid., 15-16.

²³ Ibid., 32, and Robert S. McElviane, The Great Depression, America, 1929-1941 (New York: Random House, 1993), 242.

the economic insecurity of the elderly. By dint of sheer numbers, America's aged had moved from the margins of political influence to assume a central, powerful position in the fight for Social Security.²⁴

The sand castle, utopian schemes of both Townsend and Long caught the hopes and imagination of many. Senator Huey P. Long's "Share Our Wealth" Society would have paid \$30 per month to each American over the age of sixty with an annual income of less than \$1,000 and property valued at not more than \$10,000. The money for this monthly dole would have come from federal taxes on earned income, inheritance, and the exchange of property. The California physician Francis E. Townsend proposed that every citizen over the age of sixty be granted \$200 per month on the conditions that they not be gainfully employed and that they spend this pension within thirty days of receipt. The funds for Townsend's pension would be raised with new federal taxes. Not surprisingly, the majority of Townsendites were the elderly who stood to benefit from the flat pension.²⁵ In 1936 over 3.5 million Americans were Townsend Club members and over 20 million affixed their names to petitions in support of the

²⁴ Frank Friedel, ed., The New Deal and the American People (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1964), 79.

²⁵ However, since the majority of Townsendites were retired elderly, they would not benefit from the Social Security Act, since they had not contributed to its coffers. See Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, Poor Peoples' Movements: Why They Succeed, Why They Fail (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), 31.

measure--this figure represents one-fifth the total adult population and the largest number of signatures on a petition to date.²⁶ Plan supporters lobbied Congress with a massive postcard writing campaign, which the historian J. Douglas Brown recounts:

[T]he most effective piece was a simple card depicting two scenes. One showed a forlorn old couple trudging up a snowy road with their few belongings. Underneath was the title, "Over the Hill to the Poorhouse." The other picture showed the same couple seated before a cheery fire, the old lady knitting and the old man smoking his pipe. Its title was "Comfort in Old Age." Across the bottom of the card was the clear-cut message, "Vote for the Townsend Plan."²⁷

But not every individual and group fell prey to Townsend fever. As historian the Robert S. McElvaine wryly notes, the Townsend plan had the rare distinction of being opposed by the Liberty League, the Socialist Party, the Communist Party, the National Association of Manufacturers, and the American Federation of Labor.²⁸ In addition, professional economists predicted that the Townsend plan would have cost 50 percent more than the combined yearly budgets of the federal, state, and local governments. As a contemporary critic of the plan concluded, the plan would turn over a greater portion of the national income to those

²⁶ McElvaine, The Great Depression, 242.

²⁷ J. Douglas Brown, An American Philosophy of Social Security: Evolution and Issues (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977), 7.

²⁸ McElvaine, The Great Depression, 242.

aged sixty and above, providing this population with a standard of living far greater than the majority of the country.²⁹

But the vocal Townsendites were not the only faction to push FDR towards creating social welfare programs once he had built the foundation of the New Deal. Indeed, the collective movement within which labor, leftists, conservatives, and dreamers all crafted their own schemes hastened the federal initiative. In 1932 the American Federation of Labor reversed its opposition and endorsed state-funded unemployment benefits and called for a federal old-age and social-insurance program.³⁰ Abraham Epstein had launched the American Association for Old Age Security in 1927 and changed its name in 1933 to the American Association for Social Security, a tactic intended to broaden the organization's constituency and appeal. The Communist Party proposed a more comprehensive unemployment bill, known as the Workers' Unemployment Insurance Bill. The party lobbied hard for this measure, which taxed those with high incomes to create relief funds for the whole duration of workers' unemployment.³¹ The Workers' Unemployment Insurance Bill metamorphosed into the Lundeen

²⁹ "The Townsend Plan," Christian Century 51 (26 December 1934), 1646-47.

³⁰ Achenbaum, Social Security, 18.

³¹ Harvey Klehr, The Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Decade (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 283-84.

Bill, sponsored by Representative Ernest Lundeen of Minnesota. Lundeen, of the Farmer-Labor Party, introduced his bill into Congress in 1934 at the same time as FDR's fight for Social Security. Lundeen's bill received tremendous support from various left-wing groups, which shared goals with the Minnesota congressman. A contemporary critic noted:

[T]he main driving force behind the Lundeen bill was originally furnished by the communists. But many noncommunists came to support it because they believed it to be the most thoroughgoing and adequate proposal which had been put forward for taking care of the unemployed. . . . While officially opposed by the American Federation of Labor, it was endorsed by a number of city federations and by a very large number of local unions. It was also supported by a surprisingly large number of social workers.³²

The Lundeen Bill offered greater equity and would have, unlike FDR's measure which passed Congress, provided for all workers. The Lundeen Bill and the Townsend movement, which FDR effectively suppressed with his own initiative, proved strategically useful to the administration. FDR was able to motivate the conservative right to accept his more moderate proposal, lest they risk letting the Townsend-Lundeen momentum build over time. In effect, the Center used the

³² Paul H. Douglas, Social Security in the United States: An Analysis and Appraisal of the Federal Social Security Act (1936; New York: Da Capo Press, 1971), 76-77. For contemporary debate over this bill, see D. W. Douglas, "What Kind of Unemployment Insurance," Social Work Today 1 (May-June 1934), 3-6, and Mary Van Kleeck, "The Workers Bill for Unemployment and Social Insurance," New Republic 81 (12 December 1934), 121-24.

Left against the Right to achieve its aims.³³

In 1935 Congress voted to support the president's Social Security Act; that same year, Shahn was involved with the formation of the American Artists' Congress (1935-42), which was part of the Popular Front campaign against global fascism.³⁴ During the summer of 1935 the Soviet leadership called on Communists throughout the world to temporarily put aside the goals of the class struggle and the destruction of capitalism and to align with liberals, moderates, labor unions (the AFL and independents), and socialists to fight for democracy and peace. The fight against fascism became the new, primary objective. The Popular Front sought to broaden the appeal of the Left, to break its isolation, and to form new sociopolitical alliances between the Left and democratic society. To express their commitment to democracy, Popular Front supporters employed new folksy and nonthreatening rhetoric, such as Communist Party-USA leader Earl Browder's claim that "Communism is twentieth-century Americanism." Appropriating these patriotic embellishments with the intention of soothing conservative resistance, Browder stated:

Communists were the most consistent fighters for democracy, for the enforcement of the democratic features of our Constitutions, for the defense of the flag and the revival of its glorious

³³ Douglas, Social Security, 82.

³⁴ Frances K. Pohl, Ben Shahn (San Francisco: Pomegranate Books, 1993), 33.

revolutionary traditions.³⁵

The Popular Front rethought the role of artists within society as well. Artists were urged to build alliances with labor, with socialists, with democrats, and with those fighting fascism and fighting for democracy. American artists were encouraged by Meyer Schapiro and others who supported the Popular Front to capture the broad, humanistic concerns of Americans and to downplay both their bohemian and their revolutionary images.³⁶

During the Popular Front era, the Left espoused a new openness to ethnic origins and nationalities. As the historian Harvey Klehr writes, earlier in the 1930s the Left and the American Communists stressed the need to "Americanize," a goal that America's white Protestant majority had also demanded of ethnic immigrants.³⁷ But whereas American-nativists wanted the great unwashed to homogenize and blend so as not to undermine the nativists' sociopolitical dominance in America, the Left argued that

³⁵ Mark Naison, Communists in Harlem during the Depression (New York: Grove Press, 1985), 170.

³⁶ Matthew Baigell and Julia Williams, eds., Artists against War and Fascism: Papers of the First American Artists' Congress (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 13-14.

³⁷ Klehr, The Heyday, 381-85. For examples of American nativists' concern over the impact of Jewish immigration, see Burton J. Hendrick, "The Jewish Invasion of America," McClure's Magazine 40 (March 1913), 125-65. I would like to thank Andrew Walker for sharing this article with me.

language, custom, and other ethnic markers were subservient to class and that ethnic cohesion was a barrier to class struggle. This new openness to ethnicity was especially appealing to leftist Jews who would now be able to maintain their cultural traditions, the Yiddish language, Zionist beliefs, and religious observance, if so desired, while being committed politically to the fight against fascism and the fight for democracy. As Klehr observes, under the Popular Front, leftist Jews could announce themselves as the most strident opponents of Nazism.³⁸ The CP-USA formed new ethnic bureaus, the largest being the Jewish Bureau, which hosted a variety of cultural and political activities. The bureau ran schools, published newspapers, and supported cultural activities.³⁹ The Popular Front's alignment with FDR and the New Deal also had a particular appeal for American Jews who had already expressed great faith in the president and his reform policies.⁴⁰ Browder and the CP-USA stood behind FDR and the New Deal, in solid opposition to popular, radical right-wing voices--Father Coughlin, Dr. Francis Townsend, and G. L. K. Smith, Huey Long's

³⁸ Ibid., 383.

³⁹ Ibid., 382-83.

⁴⁰ For information on Jewish support of FDR, see Deborah Dash Moore, At Home in America: Second-Generation New York Jews (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 210-11, and Lawrence Fuchs, "American Jews and the Presidential Vote," in Fuchs, ed., American Ethnic Politics (New York and Evanston, Ill.: Harper Torchbooks, 1968), 52-54.

speechwriter who went on to back Townsend after Long's assassination.⁴¹ The Popular Front permitted a new multi-faceted definition of allegiance to social reform in which one's commitment to a leftist social agenda, the policies of the New Deal, Jewish cultural identity, and Americanness were not at odds with each other.

FDR submitted his proposed bill to Congress on 17 January 1935, making provisions for the elderly the top priority. The bill passed through both houses quickly--by mid-July--and was signed into law. Within one year, a governing board for the new agency was established. The new agency began with a small staff including experts and attorneys; since these positions were not covered by Civil Service, the people filling them were nominated by FDR and approved by Senate.⁴² Among the social workers, lawyers, and office workers appointed to the Social Security agency were some Jews--how many is not known, but there were those within the government who felt that regardless of the actual numbers, it was excessive. Altmeyer later recalled:

[T]his story was to the effect that a very large proportion of the personnel appointed to the Board was Jewish. I became aware of this rumor when I was told by a member of the Ways and Means Committee that the Board was appointing "too many damned New York Jews." The Chairman also told me this in more kindly and diplomatic language, saying that he had a very high regard for "members of your race" but that he and his associates were

⁴¹ Klehr, The Heyday, 188-91.

⁴² Altmeyer, The Formative Years, 50-51.

disturbed at the large number the Board was hiring. He was quite surprised to learn that I was not, in fact, Jewish. . . . The President himself received a number of complaints on this score and asked me what the facts were. Upon being informed that, while no statistics had been kept, the percentage of Jewish employees was very small, certainly much less than 5 percent of the total personnel, he remarked laughingly that that was a smaller percentage than at Harvard.⁴³

Altmeyer's reminiscence provides a reminder of the misperception that Jews had a disproportionate amount of influence over FDR and the New Deal, which was sometimes referred to as the "Jew Deal."

Social Security employees began the work to set up the agency, which included creating systems to bring all Americans into its records--hence, the creation of Social Security numbers--and making steps toward paying out of benefits. The 1935 act mounted a two-pronged attack to solve America's economic crisis: it would both assist, theoretically, those already in need, as well as establish insurance programs such as old-age pensions to prevent people from falling into need in the future.⁴⁴ Still, even as the forms were being filled out and the routine established, the attitudes that public assistance was degrading and not a right persisted.⁴⁵ Further, conservative opinions that the nation's Social Security

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 25.

⁴⁵ Cates, Insuring Inequality, 29.

program should be "American"--meaning that citizens would have to contribute so that they would take responsibility for their own welfare and the program--dominated how policies were drafted; therefore, the act never addressed the root causes of poverty, nor did it give a flat payment to all recipients. Rather, even in old age or if financially dependent on the state, beneficiaries would be contained within their original social class--payments were based on how much an individual had previously earned and contributed to the system.

Powerful Southern legislators targeted African-American workers for exclusion. Due to Southern lobbying, Social Security did not provide for farm workers and domestic workers; nationally, as many as 65 percent of African-American men and women worked at these two occupations.⁴⁶ Disproportionately, across the nation, African-American workers were legislated out of old-age pensions and unemployment insurance. The historian Robert S. McElvaine describes Southern attitudes in the late 1930s and 1940s:

[T]he fears of many southern whites were captured by the Jackson Daily News, which declared: "The average Mississippian can't imagine himself chipping in to pay pensions for able-bodied negroes to sit around in idleness on front galleries supporting their kinfolk on pensions, while cotton and corn crops are crying for workers to get them out of the grass." In order to get southern support for the bill, congressional leaders

⁴⁶ Lynn Cheryl Greenberg, "Or Does It Explode?" Black Harlem in the Great Depression (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 149.

excluded from the provisions of the law many of the people most in need of protection--farm and domestic workers.⁴⁷

Approximately 9.4 million agricultural and domestic workers and government employees were left out of the Social Security safety net, as were an additional 7 to 8 million self-employed workers who were not required to contribute toward their pensions. Social Security overlooked workers in small firms, crews of ships, employees of nonprofit charitable, religious, and educational institutions, and the more than 24 million women who earned their living as housewives.⁴⁸ While the Committee on Economic Security, which assisted in the research and drafting of act, recommended that domestics and agricultural workers be eligible for old-age pensions, Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau effectively argued that collecting these workers' contributions would stretch the fledgling agency's resources.⁴⁹ Domestics and agricultural workers would not be brought into the system until 1950.⁵⁰

The contention that Social Security was originally a

⁴⁷ McElvaine, The Great Depression, 256.

⁴⁸ Eveline M. Burns, Toward Social Security: An Explanation of the Social Security Act and a Survey of the Larger Issues (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1936), 24-27.

⁴⁹ Badger, The New Deal, 231.

⁵⁰ See Burns, Toward Social Security, 25-27. Written in 1936 when the act was new, Burns points out its glaring inadequacies and exclusions toward African-Americans and women and the extreme vulnerability of African-American women.

benefit for white male wage earners from the middle and upper classes is correct.⁵¹ Many of the provisions discriminated against female wage earners, especially if married; completely if domestic or agricultural.⁵² Furthermore, those who did receive coverage found the program problematic. For example, the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) initiative was established to provide maternal- and pediatric-aid programs. But great inequities existed from state to state in the amount of benefits paid, resulting in a lack of a national standard. The wealthier eastern industrial states paid out more than did the poor rural southern states; in 1939 AFDC payments to families ranged from \$8.10 per month in Arkansas to \$16.07 per month in Massachusetts. Ten states had not joined the program, and even in participating states, at least two-thirds of the children did not receive benefits.⁵³

By 1939-40, as the Social Security agency was preparing to make its first payments, its critics were still pointing out the program's shortcomings. Yet, despite this, FDR was not inclined to expand or modify the Social Security Act. Furthermore, even if the president had been motivated to improve the bill, it is doubtful that Congress would have

⁵¹ Ibid., 27.

⁵² Susan Ware, Holding Their Own: American Women in the 1930s (Boston: Twayne, 1982), 41.

⁵³ Badger, The New Deal, 231.

supported him. By the late 1930s and early 1940s, although economic need persisted throughout the country, bit by bit New Deal programs were being retrenched. Programs were cut, pink slips distributed, and public funds and support reduced. Ignoring the demand for greater social planning and reform, and despite the need to get more money and food to the country's citizens, Congress began to turn sharply away from domestic problems; by 1940 the government was moving toward war preparedness.

At this juncture, in March 1940, the Section held a national mural competition for the new Social Security Building, Washington, D.C., which, according to Marlene Park and Gerald Markowitz, "dramatized as well as publicized the significance of the newly enacted Social Security legislation."⁵⁴ This important commission carried an award of \$19,980 and drew talented, hopeful applicants from across the nation.⁵⁵ Shahn's proposal was chosen from among 375 submissions in an anonymous competition.⁵⁶ Although the Section officials did not specify a theme, they published a bulletin to publicize the competition that included an essay by the Social Security Board member A. J. Altmeyer, "The

⁵⁴ Marlene Park and Gerald E. Markowitz, Democratic Vistas: Post Offices and Public Art in the New Deal (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), 62.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Telegram from Edward Bruce to Ben Shahn, 25 October 1940, Ben Shahn Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. (hereafter AAA).

Meaning of Social Security," which cited FDR's 8 June 1934 address to Congress. Shahn based his ideas on this quote:

[A]mong our objectives, I place the security of the men, women, and children of the Nation first. This security for the individual and for the family concerns itself primarily with three factors. People want decent homes to live in; they want to work; and they want some safeguard against misfortunes which cannot be wholly eliminated from this man-made world of ours.⁵⁷

The Section received proposals of such high quality that in addition to Shahn, they recommended fourteen other artists receive commissions.⁵⁸ The jury was comprised of the established artists Edward Biberman, Kindred McLeary, Franklin Watkins, and Marguerite Zorach, who praised Shahn's work in a report that circulated through a press release and from which newspaper quotes were taken. The jury praised his work in their report:

[T]he elements that finally weighed in favor of the winning designs were as follows: Indications that the artist drew from life, not relying entirely on his or her supreme knowledge of design. There is a variety in the tempo and texture. The pattern advances and recedes, changing its beat, the crowded parts are always finding relief. This element we found lacking in most other entries. The color is somber, but good, and in keeping with the meaning of the subject theme, and it is well integrated in the design. There is continuity, and the mural as a

⁵⁷ The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt, vol. 3, 1934 comp. Samuel I. Rosenman (1938; New York: Russell and Russell, 1969), 288. I would like to thank the historian Dewar McLeod for suggesting pertinent bibliography on the New Deal and the Social Security Act.

⁵⁸ Park and Markowitz, Democratic Vistas, 63.

whole is well bound together. The enlarged details promise a proper execution of this work and we feel well satisfied and confident in our unanimous choice.⁵⁹

On receiving the commission, Shahn wrote to Edward B. Rowan, administrator of the Section of Fine Arts, to express his pleasure at having been selected to decorate the Social Security Building. Shahn told Rowan how relevant Social Security was to his life and to his work as he looked back over the decade:

It seems to me that in all my work for the past ten years I have been probing into the material which is the background and substance of Social Security. The decoration of this building calls forth research--if you can call it that--which I have been doing consciously and unconsciously throughout my life, all of it having to do with the problem of human insecurity.⁶⁰

In his publicly and privately funded work in the 1930s, Shahn portrayed individuals cast into uncertain or insecure situations due to economics. But in his letter to Rowan, Shahn ignores the fact that he had also identified the social causes and institutional factors that caused individual insecurity, as well as suggested--when possible--avenues toward reform. His works were often more politicized than he conveys in his letter. Still, Shahn

⁵⁹ Federal Works Agency, Public Buildings Administration, Section of Fine Arts, Press Release, 30 October 1940, National Archives, Washington, D.C., Record Group 121, and Report of Jury on Designs by Ben Shahn, National Archives, Washington, D.C., Record Group 121.

⁶⁰ Ben Shahn to Edward B. Rowan, 7 November 1940, National Archives, Washington, D.C., Record Group 121.

wrote excitedly to Edward Bruce on 6 November 1940, the day after FDR's election to a third term, scribbling across the bottom of the page, " and Jersey Homesteads went 93 percent for Roosevelt!"⁶¹ Shahn wrote to Bruce that "the [Social Security] building itself is a symbol of perhaps the most advanced piece of legislation enacted by the New Deal, and I am proud to be given the job of interpreting it, or putting a face on it, or whatever you want to call it."⁶² Planning for the Social Security Building had paralleled Congressional approval of the act in 1935. The lead architect Louis A. Simon designed a structure large enough to consolidate and house the burgeoning bureau, which is located in the southwestern rectangle of Washington, D.C.⁶³ Originally, plans to decorate the new building were more grandiose, and the architects envisioned a more extensive decorative mural and sculpture program throughout the structure. In the end, Shahn, Philip Guston, and Seymour Fogel were awarded individual mural contracts.⁶⁴

Painted in tempera on opposing walls in a corridor,

⁶¹ Ben Shahn to Edward Bruce, 6 November 1940, National Archives, Washington, D.C., Record Group 121.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Heritage Studies, Inc., "Building History," in Short and Ford Architects report for the General Services Administration, 1996, 11-17.

⁶⁴ See Michele Vishny, "On the Walls: Murals by Ben Shahn, Philip Guston, and Seymour Fogel for the Social Security Building, Washington, D.C.," Arts Magazine 61 (March 1987), 40-43.

Shahn's murals contrast the economic difficulties experienced by working Americans before the Social Security Act, and their improved lives after its implementation. He subdivided each mural into three parts. In recessed areas of the east wall, he displayed idle men with sleeves rolled up ready to work but with no jobs in sight; thin, barefoot children with crutches who work in mines (fig.58); and an elderly woman with a stoic, drawn face sits on a park bench. On the west wall, Shahn presents construction workers making progress on a new house; a united and happy family; urban teenagers enjoying a game of handball; and a harvest scene--collectively these elements symbolize security and stability.

As with prior murals, Shahn concentrates on the lives of the working class, yet unlike his earlier works, Shahn focuses on individuals rather than on groups, and on personal experiences and emotions rather than on policy and reform. Instead of raised fists, Shahn shows clasped, idle hands (east wall) or arms drawing family near (west wall). Action, change, and dynamism defined most of his previous murals, giving a sense of both temporal change and the evolution of people's social condition. He achieved this by showing citizens ascending stairs to vote and participate in the political process, by workers gathering to plan their collective futures, or by immigrants arriving in America. Shahn presented the past and the present and alluded to the

future in his Jersey Homesteads mural (chapter 3); in the Bronx mural, with his image of Walt Whitman gathering with workers to look toward the next century, Shahn points towards the future (chapter 4). But in the Social Security mural, Shahn limited the narrative to either the period immediately before or after enactment of the Social Security Act and does not anticipate the future, even though much work was still needed to provide for all Americans. From the time the 1935 act was passed and after, both the AFL and the CIO were pushing FDR to modify and amend the conservative bill.⁶⁵ Even in 1940, it was known that the Social Security Act was incomplete and excluded numerous Americans from its benefits. The future for these many Americans remained uncertain and insecure.

Shahn created his murals in a somewhat narrow corridor outside a hearing room on the building's lobby level. Of the four murals he produced under the New Deal art projects, the Meaning of Social Security is physically the most accessible and immediate. Unlike his other murals that are situated above eye level, the Social Security mural is placed low to the ground. The viewer can walk right up to the painted wall and stand directly opposite painted figures that are approximately human size. Along with the Bronx mural, the Social Security murals belong to what the art historian Francis V. O'Connor identifies as Shahn's

⁶⁵ Cates, Insuring Inequality, 58-59.

monumental style.⁶⁶ In these two works, Shahn gives each figure sufficient space within the composition to breathe, instead of crowding many figures together in scenes full of details and complex settings.

Shahn established his mural narrative by way of contrast--good versus evil--each relegated to its own expanse of wall, the same format he had intended for the earlier Riker's mural. On the east wall, Shahn presents scenes of human insecurity such as the vulnerable elderly, impoverished mothers with children, the unemployed, and the exploitation and maiming of child laborers.⁶⁷ Shahn selected the east wall for the scenes of insecurity because the wall panels were recessed, a configuration which he felt conveyed a sense of "the evils of insecurity being ameliorated." He continued:

[U]nemployment being the greatest cause of insecurity, I have devoted to it the large central panel. I have tried to give the feeling of endless waiting, men standing and waiting, men sitting and waiting, the man and boy going wearily into the long empty perspective of a railroad track. Against a background of the typical stark, unlovely company house, I have placed in close proximity waiting men and discarded machines. The panel to the left depicts the insecurities of childhood. The little girl of the mills opens doors to show us breaker boys working in a mine.

⁶⁶ Francis V. O'Connor, "The Influence of Diego Rivera on the Art of the United States during the 1930s and After," in Diego Rivera: A Retrospective, exh. cat. (Detroit: The Detroit Institute of Arts, 1986), 170.

⁶⁷ It is important to note that the Social Security Act did not contain provisions specific to child labor and safety.

The crippled boy issuing from the mine symbolizes the perils of child labor. To the right, a homeless boy is seen sleeping in the street; another child leans from a tenement window. The panel to the right shows the insecurity of dependents--the aged and infirmed woman, the helpless mother with her small child.⁶⁸

Shahn approached the Social Security murals in a new manner. Past proposals and commissions were prepared with extensive library research, contacting key personnel, reviewing newspapers for portraits and visual sources, and culling texts for quotations to include in the painting. For the Social Security mural, by contrast, the artist depended heavily on his own photographs and easel paintings, which he in turn had based on his photographs. The artist's previous work served as his own archives and pictorial resource. He had shot most of the photographs several years before the Social Security commission was founded, and therefore the Social Security mural is twice removed from the original referent. As the nation moved toward war and as Congress was dismantling the New Deal, Shahn looks back to the New Deal's nascent ideals and policies. Henry Varnum Poor, a painter and member of the Social Security Commission, felt that the mural was "in many ways distressingly drab and built up out of strangely fotografic [sic] and pieced-together details not always organically related." Yet, Poor does not entirely dismiss the work,

⁶⁸ Ben Shahn to Edward B. Rowan, 7 November 1940, National Archives, Washington, D.C., Record Group 121.

whose images he praises for their "force and their poignancy."⁶⁹

Shahn used photographs from his trips through Ohio and West Virginia for the RA/FSA during 1935-37, as well as personal photographs taken earlier in New York City in 1931-32. For example, the image of the elderly African-American woman seated with crutches on a park bench includes the background from one photograph, shifts the crutches from a more heavy-set woman to this leaner figure, and ultimately removes the heavier woman in the final mural (fig.59). By removing the woman's companion and outfitting the pictured woman with crutches, Shahn underscores her symbolic function and her sense of isolation, loneliness, and physical vulnerability (fig. 60). Although she is seated pressed up next to a Caucasian woman and child--each of whom sit barefoot in a bleak, urban setting--the two adult women seemingly have no relation to each other. Historical research tells us that while Social Security's AFDC would have provided pensions to the mother and child, in all likelihood the elderly woman would have not benefited from the 1935 act, nor from its amendments. Likewise, relief was not quick to come to those workers in the rural South, photographs of whom Shahn used to construct his central

⁶⁹ Quoted in a letter from Gilmore D. Clarke to Edward Bruce, 1 July 1941, Ben Shahn Papers, AAA.

panel of unemployment (fig. 61).⁷⁰ Furthermore, while it has been noted that Shahn's mural shows racial integration, the Social Security Building itself upheld Jim Crow laws, maintaining racially segregated bathroom facilities as was the law in Washington, D.C., until President Harry S. Truman reversed it.

On the western wall, Shahn creates small scenes that are emblematic of a life free from economic worries. The artist leads us through his mural as follows:

I have used the long unobstructed wall on the west side of the building to interpret the meaning of social security, and to show something of its accomplishments. On this wall I have developed the following themes: "Work" "The Family" "Social Security" As a plastic means of emphasizing these themes I have placed each group over a doorway in large scale, projecting them somewhat forward from the rest of the mural. Using the Family as a central theme, over the middle door, I have placed over the left door, the theme of Work, over the right that of Security. Immediately surrounding the Family are, on the right side, the building of homes, on the left, a suggestion of tremendous public works, furnishing employment and benefiting all of society. At the extreme left of the panel are seen youths of a slum area engaged in healthy sport in handball courts. At the extreme right is seen the Harvest--threshing and fruit-gathering, obvious symbols of security, suggesting also security as it applies to the farm family.⁷¹

Rather than a literal description of Social Security as a program to alleviate suffering, and without assessing the

⁷⁰ See Susan H. Edwards, "Ben Shahn: A New Deal Photographer in the Old South" (Ph.D. diss., City University of New York-The Graduate Center, 1995).

⁷¹ Ben Shahn to Edward B. Rowan, 7 November 1940, National Archives, Washington, D.C., Record Group 121.

work still needed to be done to strengthen the act, Shahn creates a broad celebration of the New Deal. Children play rather than work and families are united. But as the historian Barbara Melosh has noted, "manly labor" is one of the main factors in the shift from the negative to the positive wall. By employing men--although by the early 1940s the New Deal had slashed its employment rolls--the government was restoring manhood as well as the economy.⁷²

As previously stated, Shahn's earlier murals and proposals were noted for the many details that reveal his research into and involvement with the chosen theme--for example, the inclusion of pertinent quotations and text, portraits of important personages, and geographically specific settings. Rather than such exactitude, in the Social Security mural Shahn sought to evoke a more generalized spirit of the New Deal and Social Security. He brings sentiment, emotion, and the individual to greater prominence; the mural, void of telling signage and emblematic portraits, is less instructive but much more evocative than his prior pieces.

Of Shahn's four completed murals for the New Deal art projects, this final work was the only one not to utilize a scene of gathered workers. In each previous work--Jersey Homesteads, the Bronx Central Post Office, and Woodhaven

⁷² Barbara Melosh, Engendering Culture: Manhood and Womanhood in New Deal Public Art and Theater (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 88.

Station (see chapters 3-5) Shahn presents a gathering of workers listening to a speaker. Such a scene illustrates the importance of collective power, political unity, the presence of working class, and education. In contrast, The Meaning of Social Security explores the individual and family units rather than larger social groups. The power is within the individual home, not within organized labor. Yet it is ironic, that in depicting this innovative piece of social legislation, intended to weave people into the social fabric, Shahn shows us the individual rather than the communal. In fact, the hand of the state, which swooped down to rescue the blind, the mother and child, and the unemployed, is only implied through the act of one man filling out a form. Paperwork becomes the lifeline linking the citizen to the state.

The Social Security mural invites comparison with Shahn's earlier proposal for Riker's Island Penitentiary, a comparison that links the debut and eclipse of the artist's mural production. Both murals were for buildings housing a specific population--the incarcerated and federal workers--and both buildings were created to manifest social change. For both proposals, Shahn had the opportunity to design murals for the walls of a long hallway. This architectural arrangement, naturally, invited Shahn to compare and contrast societal evils with social benefits. The artist's thematic and stylistic change from the early 1930s to the

the later Social Security commission is most clear. For the Riker's proposal, Shahn--who depended heavily on research for his composition--detailed specific elements for social change, noting each nuance that defined inferior prisons and those that fostered social reform. By 1940 and the Social Security mural, by contrast, Shahn is less interested in social reform and instead moves closer to the life of individuals, their circumstances, and their emotional states.

Thus, Shahn's Social Security mural illustrates the artist's stylistic and thematic evolution from social realism to what he termed "personal realism."⁷³ This evolution spanned the course of the 1930s, the period of Shahn's mural career. Central to this softening of political stance and this privileging of the personal was Shahn's trips photographing the country for the Farm Security Administration. The photographs he produced became the source of several easel paintings and were incorporated into the Social Security mural. The works within the personal-realism style focus more intently on individuals and their expressive, emotional state and are less didactic or brash than his earlier works. This greater appreciation for humanism, over that of a social agenda, echoed the Popular Front's openness to artistic styles and messages.

In addition, Shahn's shift toward a greater concern for

⁷³ Pohl, Ben Shahn, 60.

the individual and humanism, and a tempering of his outward political stance in the Social Security mural, relates to the mural's location and the time in which Shahn was painting. Shahn worked on the mural in Washington, D.C., as the nation put aside the New Deal and picked up the war effort. Many of his prior projects, both those completed and not, were located in self-contained communities, intended for either disenfranchised, marginalized audiences or the general public that frequented post offices. Yet, with the Social Security commission, Shahn was painting about the federal government, in a federal government building, in the nation's capital.

Shahn did not begin work on the mural until December 1941, a delay caused in part because of the war and the draft. Shahn had originally planned to paint in buon fresco and had been working with the artist Jean Charlot to refine his fresco technique in anticipation of the commission. However, when Shahn's plasterer, John Ormani, was drafted, he needed to switch to tempera.⁷⁴ American workers--such as Ormani--and citizens were becoming soldiers and the nation was quickly changing. Creating a mural in harmony with the patriotic spirit building throughout America, Shahn upheld the values of work and family in his mural, pointed to successes under the New Deal, and ignored his hallmark

⁷⁴ Shahn tried unsuccessfully to get Ormani released from the service. Ben Shahn to Edward Bruce, 14 July 1941, National Archives, Washington, D.C., Record Group 121.

themes, as gathered workers which would have seemed unpatriotic.⁷⁵ America's political climate had changed, and this change was manifested in the labor, leftist, and artists' groups in which Shahn participated. Despite continued labor struggles, both the AFL and the CIO pledged to refrain from striking during the war years.

Disillusioned in the wake of the Soviet-German Non-Aggression pact, the anti-Stalinist Left supported FDR, the New Deal, and America's participation in the war. And in 1942 the American Artists' Congress, which Shahn had helped to establish, folded. Symptomatic of the changes the country was undergoing is the fact that during the early 1940s, as Shahn worked on his mural, the Social Security Building housed the War Department (the Pentagon was not built until 1942).⁷⁶ Instead of social workers and reformers, Shahn's audience was made up of army personnel, one of whom praised Shahn's mural as "important to keep in front of all of us while we're fighting this war."⁷⁷

The Social Security Act was just one component of the New Deal and was packaged as a means to prevent future economic collapse. By examining Shahn's Meaning of Social Security, within the context of the Social Security Act's

⁷⁵ E-mail from Frances K. Pohl to the author, 30 August 1996.

⁷⁶ "Building History," 39.

⁷⁷ Pohl, Ben Shahn, 20.

history and the conditions of the New Deal in 1940, it becomes clear that Shahn's mural is not an exact chronicle of this important piece of social legislation. Rather, Shahn captured what to him were the spirit and the promise of the New Deal and of the Popular Front. Further, whereas it took an economic crisis the magnitude of the Great Depression to institute the Social Security Act and other social reforms, before committing the necessary funds for recovery, the administration needed the onset of a war of global proportion to truly focus on the economy. Between April and June 1940, Congress appropriated over \$10.5 billion dollars for national defense, which jolted the economy, sent Americans back to work, and effectively ended the economic depression.⁷⁸ In 1943 the Section would cease funding public murals and folded.

⁷⁸ Parrish, Anxious Decades, 465.

Conclusion

In the course of the New Deal era, under the auspices of the federal art programs, Ben Shahn completed four murals of a total of nine commissions he sought. Exploring these four completed murals and five failed proposals against the background of Jewish identity, social reform, and government patronage reveals that the artist was deeply engaged with national political issues and the experiences of the American Jewish community. Over the nine years--1933 to 1942--when Shahn was either pursuing commissions or painting New Deal murals, his style steadily evolved from one of social realism to personal realism. Although Shahn was always conscious of his Jewish identity, which he sought to express within the liberal political tradition, it was not always relevant to the content of a particular commission. Decisive factors included the mural's location, its intended audience, guidelines from the commissioning agency, and the immediate political events. Furthermore, while in some murals--such as the Jersey Homesteads--Jewish identity, by which I mean secular culture, appears as iconographic and narrative elements, at other times the relationship of the murals to Jewish identity is more oblique. Jewish dedication to FDR and the New Deal, which Shahn shared, and the experience of cultural assimilation opened the artist to images of social reform that are not ethnically specific. Shahn's interpretation of the American Scene--and support

for the Popular Front--and the effects of assimilation united to neutralize hallmark ethnic expressions in many of his works.

Cultural identity is not fixed and stable. To fully comprehend Ben Shahn's New Deal murals, one should approach them within their original sociohistorical context. This context includes events within American Jewish history and the Jewish cultural experience, which enables us to understand the messages of Shahn's murals and his motivations. For Jews of Shahn's generation, the cultural goal was assimilation; for the greater community it was also ascendance into the middle class. As a consequence, this economic rise resulted in a lessening of involvement with the Left. Thus, Shahn's messages and experiences of labor, immigration, and social reform are the stuff of distant ethnic history and legend to contemporary American Jews. The experiences of an ethnic group are not automatically transported through bloodlines; rather, they are invented and reinvented within each generation.

This dissertation focuses on Shahn's murals and the issues of Jewish identity and of social reform during the New Deal era. Shahn would continue to assert these two issues throughout his life and career. Later, he would also become involved again with public wall art.

Beginning in the 1950s, after a trip to Italy, Shahn began creating murals once more. This time, in lieu of

federal commissions, Shahn's patrons included institutions of learning and worship, as well as private individuals. The medium he employed was new to him. In place of fresco and wall painting--which had been directly inspired by the Mexican mural movement--he now worked in mosaic, inspired by the early Christian and Byzantine churches of San Vitale and San Apollinaire Nuovo and the mausoleum of Galla Placidia in Ravenna, Italy.¹ In addition, he replaced the Mexican school's political iconography and agenda with a religious or spiritual example.

Most important, at this later part of his life and career, Shahn privileges Judaism, not Jewishness and secular culture.² Although Shahn had displayed an interest in Judaism when he made a Haggadah in 1930, this interest was not sustained. Unlike during the New Deal, which did offer Shahn the occasion to bring together the factors of social reform and secular Jewish identity, in his mosaics Shahn chose to pursue these factors separately.

With his return to wall art, Shahn's renewed interest in religious imagery becomes apparent. He explored his religious heritage continuously and in its different facets,

¹ Frances K. Pohl, Ben Shahn (San Francisco: Pomegranate Books, 1993), 28.

² See Alan M. Wald, The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left from the 1930s to the 1980s (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), for an important discussion of the growing conservatism of Jewish intellectuals on the Left.

while showing a nonparochial interest in other religious imagery. During the 1950s and 1960s, Jewish identity and personal realism merge in his art. This revitalized interest in Judaism includes a visual exploration of mysticism, Hebrew letters, and biblical figures and psalms.³

This new direction of Shahn's was taken by others of his generation. His immersion in religious and universal imagery is symptomatic of the post-Holocaust fragmentation of Jews on the Left. Ethnic parochialism, the search for personal meaning in the wake of global devastation, and the emergence of a greater sense of nationalism with the establishment of a Jewish state, all supplanted the strong class and political bonds Shahn knew during the 1930s. These shifts in style, medium, and message, as the art historian Frances K. Pohl has stated, evidence Shahn's growing concern with presenting the universal in his art. During the Cold War period and after, he replaces the earlier more strident, socially charged imagery with one that is more personal.

In the mid-1960s, toward what ultimately proved to be the end of his career and his life, Shahn received the opportunity to create a large-scale mosaic for Syracuse

³ Pohl, Ben Shahn, 150-56.

University; the work was completed in 1967.⁴ Shahn chose as his subject a pastiche of images drawn from his Sacco and Vanzetti series of nearly forty years prior.⁵ At the height of American unrest, when the new Left was active, Shahn reached far back to his own political and artistic origins, rather than out to the immediate turmoil. While Shahn did create prints and posters of contemporary politics during this time, he chose not to create similar imagery for the large-scale public mural.

Through his art and his writing, Shahn argued for the unity of form and content and the importance of representational art.⁶ What he often chose to represent was the sociopolitical and cultural environment with which he was engaged. The preceding chapters should be seen as an argument for examining Shahn within the political and cultural climate that served as both the source and the audience for his murals. The 1930s and early 1940s were a particular moment for Jews in America, one now distant. For Shahn the New Deal era was a singular opportunity for him to explore and depict themes of Jewish identity with relation to social reform for a public forum. Shahn's New Deal

⁴ See Syracuse, N.Y. The Mural Art of Ben Shahn Exh. cat. (Joe and Emily Lowe Art Gallery: Syracuse University, 1977)

⁵ Martin H. Bush, Ben Shahn: The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1968).

⁶ Ben Shahn, The Shape of Content (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1957).

murals were the height of his secular, Jewish expression of America, which record a yet-to-be-repeated moment in American Jewish and social history.

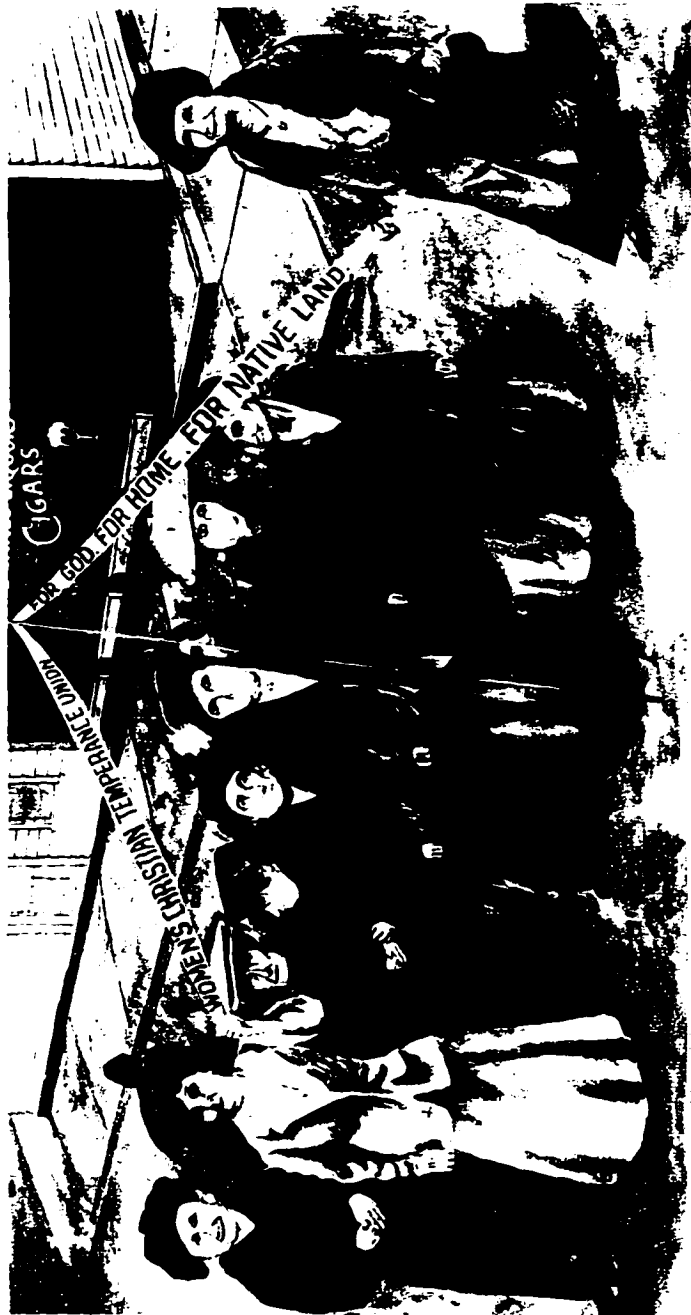


fig. 1 Women's Christian Temperance Union, c. 1934
 Gouache on board
 16 x 31 1/2"
 Museum of the City of New York

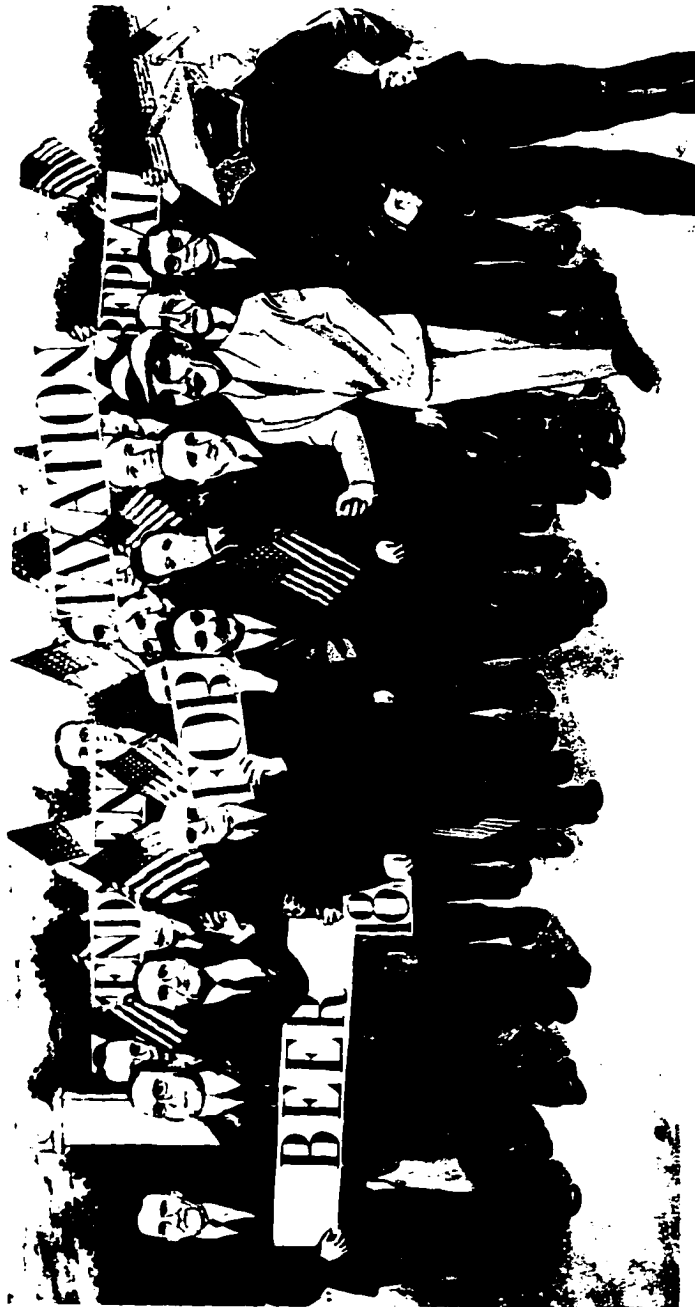


fig. 2 Parade for Repeal of Prohibition, c. 1934
Gouache on board
16 1/2 x 31 3/4"
Museum of the City of New York



fig. 3 Bootleggers, c. 1934
Gouache on masonite
15 3/8 x 16 3/8"
Museum of the City of New York



fig. 4 Man Carrying a Bottle, c. 1934
Gouache on board
5 3/4 x 11 3/4"
Museum of the City of New York



fig. 5 Federal Agents Destroying Wine, c. 1934
Gouache on board
16 x 10 3/4"
Museum of the City of New York



fig. 6 Speakeasy, c. 1934
Gouache on board
9 1/2 x 24"
Museum of the City of New York



fig. 7 Village Speakeasy: Closed for Violation, c. 1934
Gouache on board
9 1/2 on 24"
Museum of the City of New York



fig. 8 Alley Scene, c. 1934
Gouache on board
16 x 24"
Museum of the City of New York

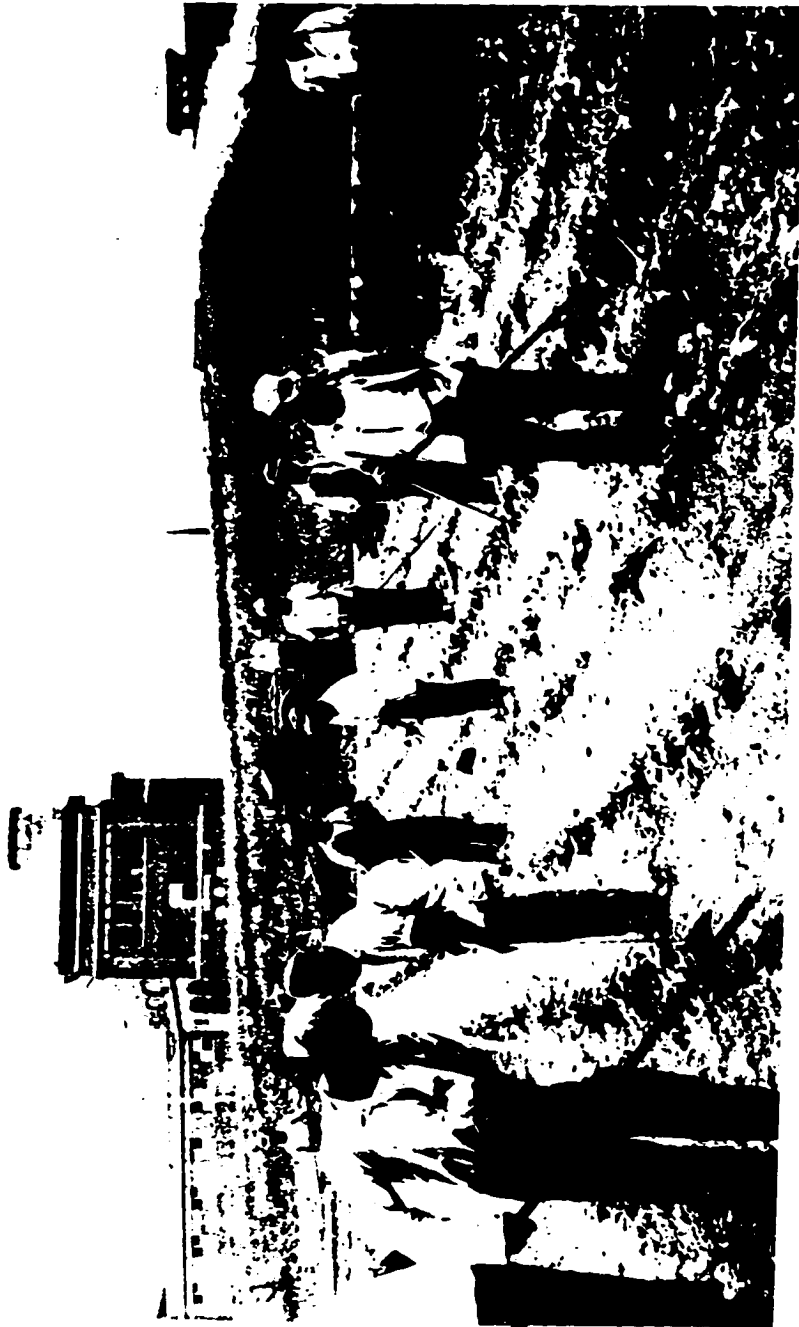


fig. 9 New Hampton Reformatory, New York, 1934
Photography
Reproduced in Harvard (1975), 31.



fig. 10 Study for Riker's Island Mural, c. 1934-35
Ink and wash on paper
5 x 7"
Reproduced in Prescott (1976), 34.



fig. 11 I am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang, 1932
Publicity photograph from the movie
Starring Paul Muni, at extreme left
Warner Brothers Studio
Reproduced in Bergman (1971), 125.



fig. 12 Southern Prison Scene: Study for Riker's Island
Mural, c. 1933-34
tempera on board
Private collection
Photograph courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery

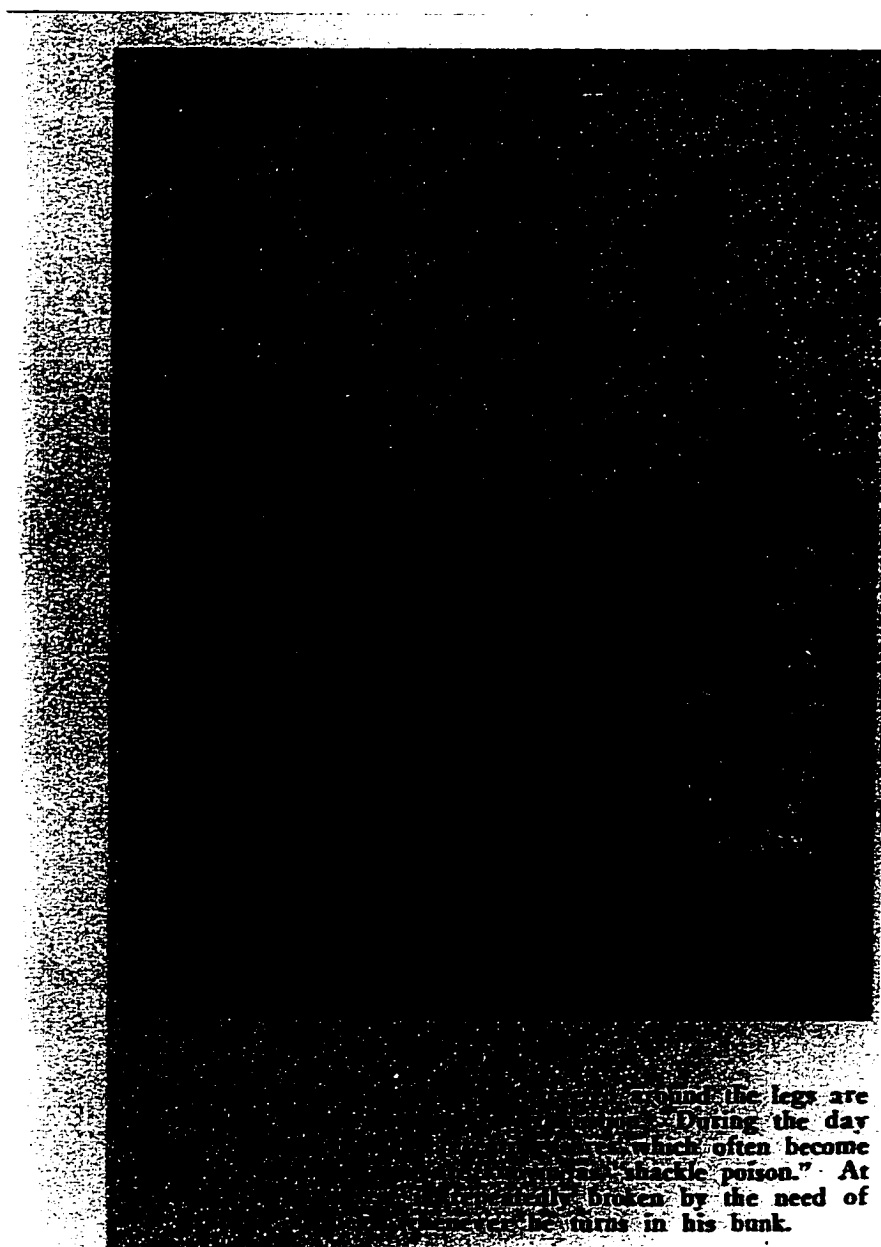
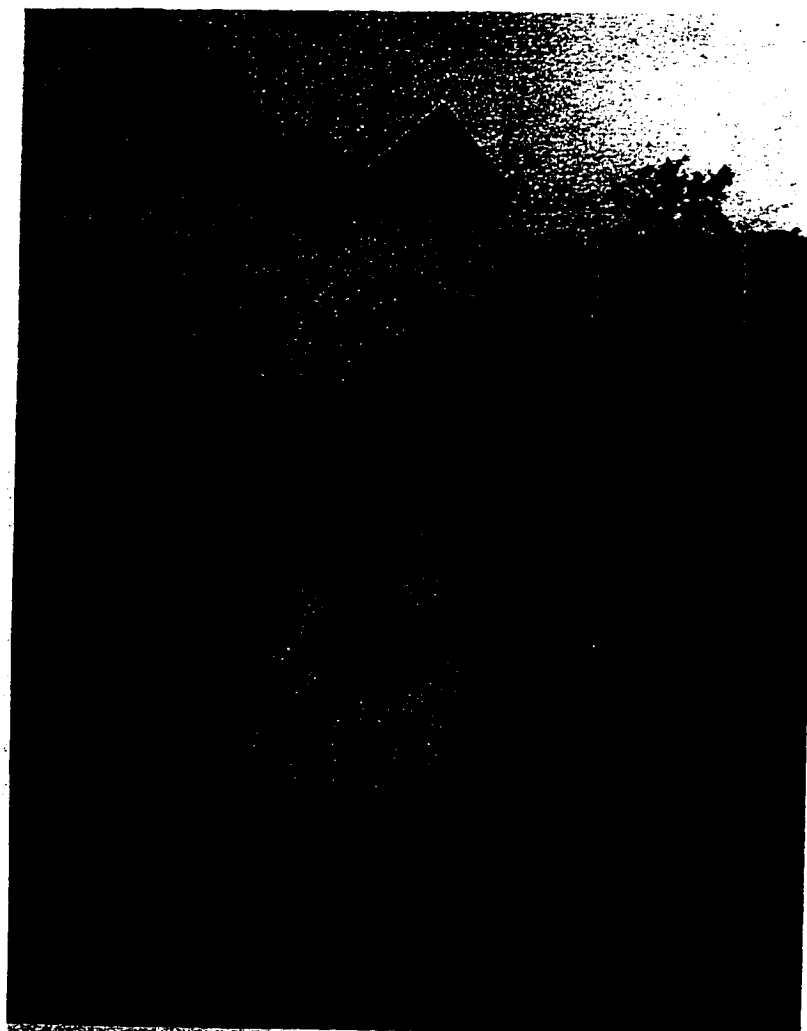


fig. 14 "Spikes," taken from Georgia Nigger by John Spivak,
Brewer, Warren and Putnam, New York, 1932
Photographs and Prints Division
Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture
The New York Public Library
Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations



STOCKS

The convict hangs by wrists and ankles two inches from the ground. He is left thus under the tropic sun. The position is an excruciating torture which quickly produces unconsciousness.

fig. 15 "Stocks," taken from Georgia Nigger by John Spivak, Brewer, Warren and Putnam, New York, 1932
Photographs and Prints Division
Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture
The New York Public Library
Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations



fig. 16 Study for Riker's Island Mural, c. 1933-34
Photostat of study
Courtesy of the Art Commission of
the City of New York



fig. 17 Study for Riker's Island Mural, c. 1933-34
Photostat of study
Courtesy of the Art Commission of the
City of New York



fig. 18 Prisoners in Bed

Ink on paper

Clipping in Lou Block Papers, Margaret M. Bridwell
Art Library, University of Louisville, Kentucky



fig. 19 Prisoners in Troubled Sleep: Study for Riker's
Island Mural, c. 1934
Ink on paper
Reproduced in Magazine of Art (July 1935), 492.



fig. 20 Study for Riker's Island Mural, c. 1933-34
Photostat of study
Photograph courtesy of the Art Commission of the
City of New York



fig. 21 Study for Riker's Island Mural, c. 1933-34
Photostat of study
Photograph courtesy of the Art Commission of the
City of New York



fig. 22 Study for Riker's Island Mural: Figure of Osborne,
c. 1933-34
Watercolor and ink on paper
9 1/2 x 5 1/2"
Reproduced in Magazine of Art (July 1935), 493.

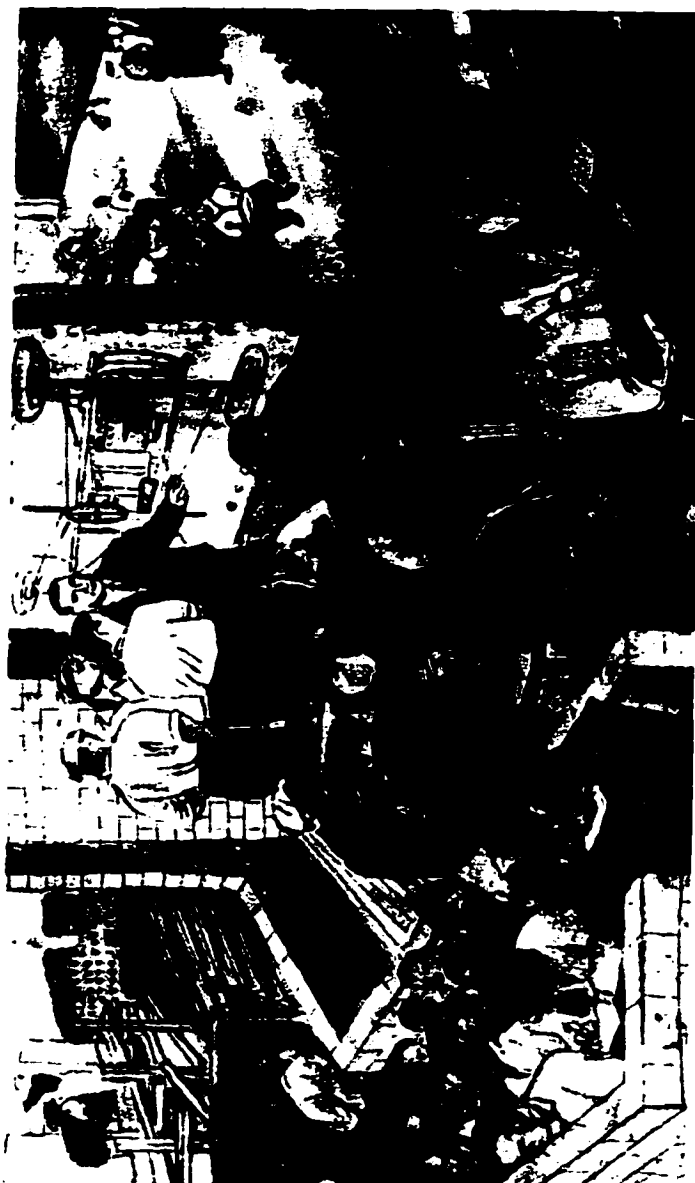


fig. 23 Reforms Instituted by Osborne and his Followers, c.
1933-34
Tempera on board
11 x 33"
Reproduced in Wichita Art Museum, (1985), 110.



fig. 24 Lucienne Bloch, The Cycle of a Woman's Life:
Childhood, 1935-36
Fresco
Approximately 23 square meters
Womens House of Detention, New York City (destroyed)
Reproduced in McKinzie (1973), figure 42.



fig. 25 Cartoon: "Jonas Patrick Henry Lie"
Art Front (April 1935), 2.

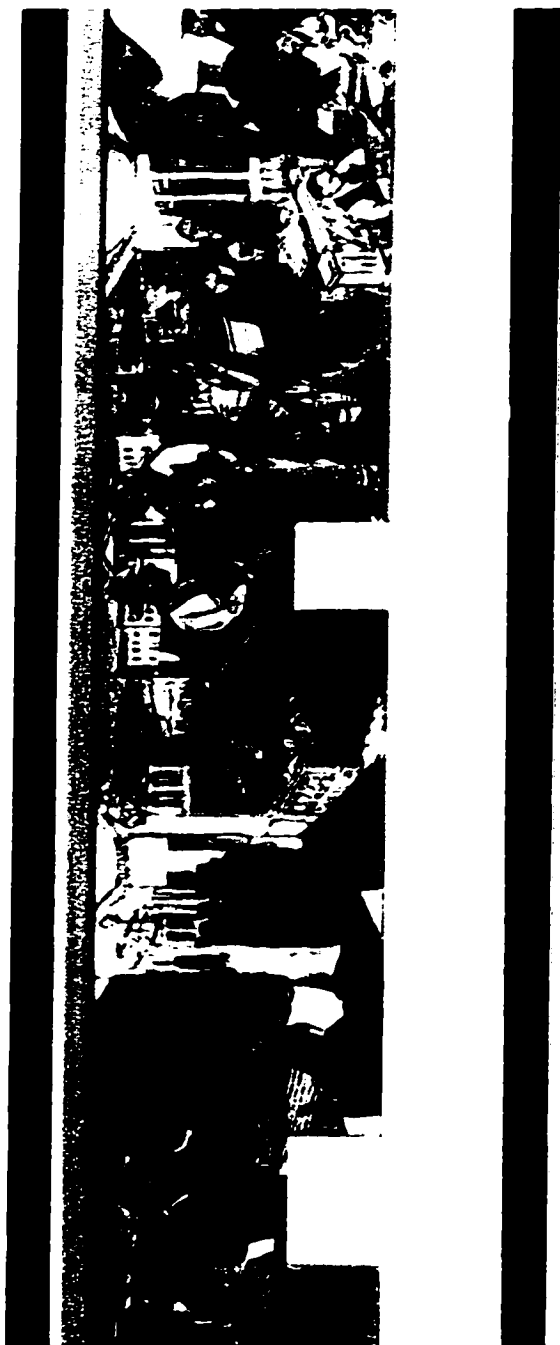


fig. 26 Study for The Great State of Wisconsin, c. 1937
Gouache on board
10. 2 x 44. 5 cm
Photograph courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery



fig. 27 Detail: The Great State of Wisconsin, c. 1937
Gouache on board
Photograph courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery

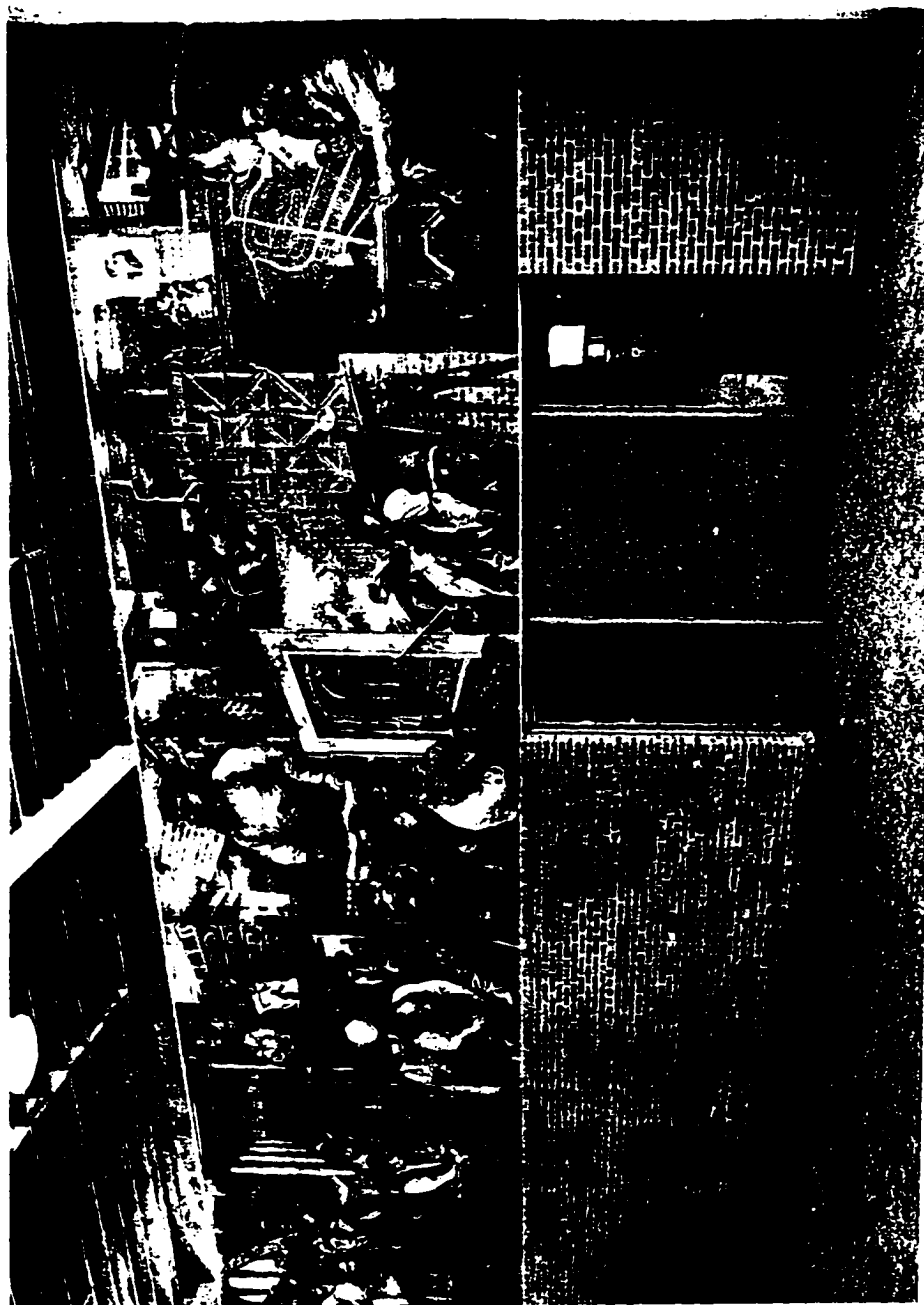


fig. 28 Jersey Homesteads Mural, 1937-38.
Roosevelt, New Jersey
Fresco
12 x 45'
Reproduced in Pohl (1989), figure 23.



fig. 29 Jersey Homesteads Mural, 1937-38.
Roosevelt, New Jersey
Fresco
Detail, left section
Reproduced in Pohl (1989), figure 24 from a
photograph provided by Stephen L. Taller.



fig. 30 Jersey Homesteads Mural, 1937-38.
Roosevelt, New Jersey
Fresco
Detail, center section
Reproduced in Pohl (1989), figure 25 from a
photograph provided by Stephen L. Taller.



fig. 31 Jersey Homesteads Mural, 1937-38.
Fresco
Detail, right section
Reproduced in Pohl (1989), figure 26 from
a photograph provided by Stephen L. Taller.



fig. 32 Study for Jersey Homesteads Mural, c. 1936
Tempera
20 x 29"
Private collection
Reproduced in Pohl (1993), 58.

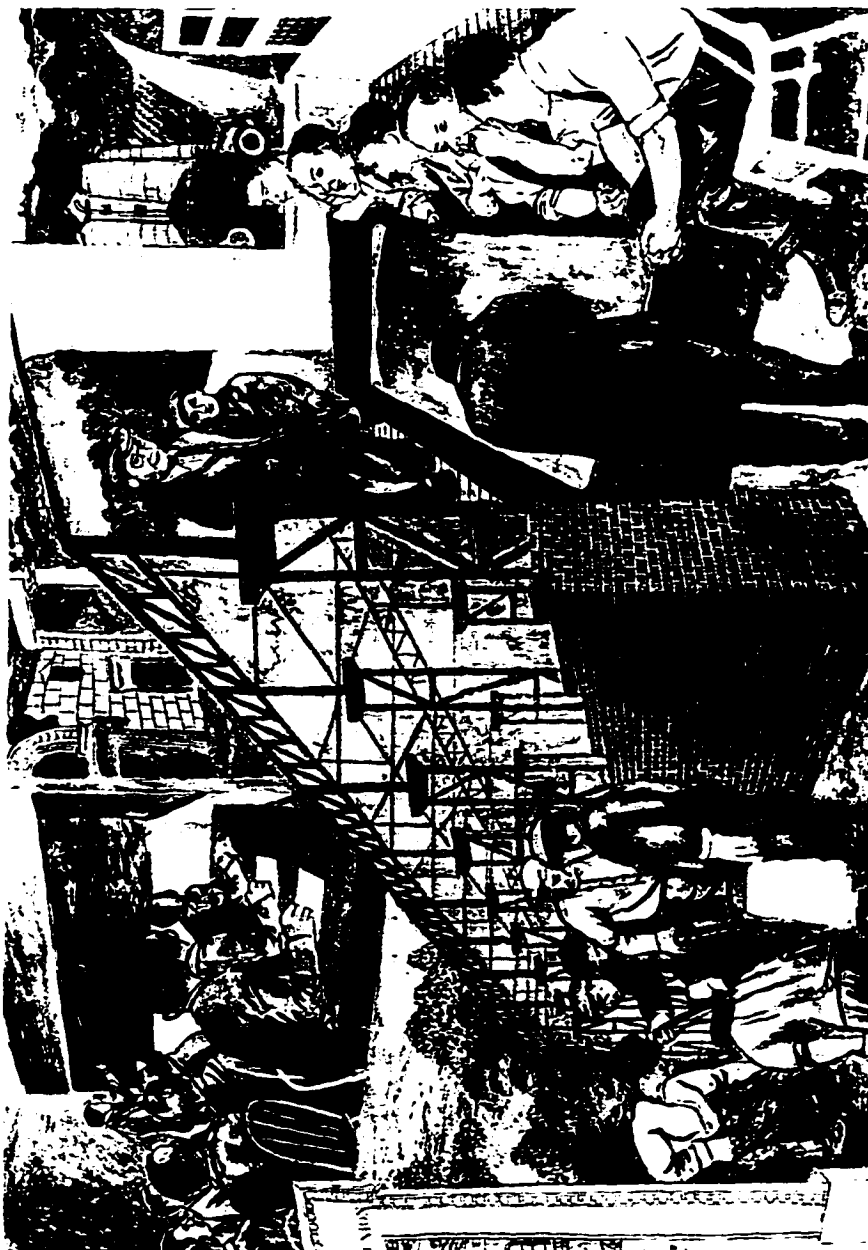


fig. 33 Study for Jersey Homesteads Mural, c. 1936
Tempera
20 x 29"
Private collection
Reproduced in Pohl (1993), 59.



fig. 34 Worker with an Electric Drill:
Study for Resources of America, c. 1938-39
Tempera on cardboard
32 1/2 x 14 1/2"
Reproduced in Melosh (1991), plate 4.



fig. 35 Worker Pitching Hay: Resources of America, 1938-39.
Egg tempera applied to plaster
1 in a series of 13, each approx. 12 to 18' high
Bronx Central Post Office, New York City
Photograph courtesy of Addison Thompson



fig. 36 Female Textile Worker: Resources of America,
1938-39.

Egg tempera applied to plaster
1 in a series of 13 each approx. 12 to 18' high
Bronx Central Post Office, New York City
Photograph courtesy of Addison Thompson



fig. 37 Man in Textile Factory: Resources of America,
1938-39.
Egg tempera applied to plaster
1 in a series of 13 each approx. 12 to 18' high
Bronx Central Post Office, New York City
Photograph courtesy of Addison Thompson



fig. 38 Picking Cotton: Resources of America,
1938-39.

Egg tempera applied to plaster
1 in a series of 13 each approx. 12 to 13' high
Bronx Central Post Office, New York City
Photograph courtesy of Addison Thompson

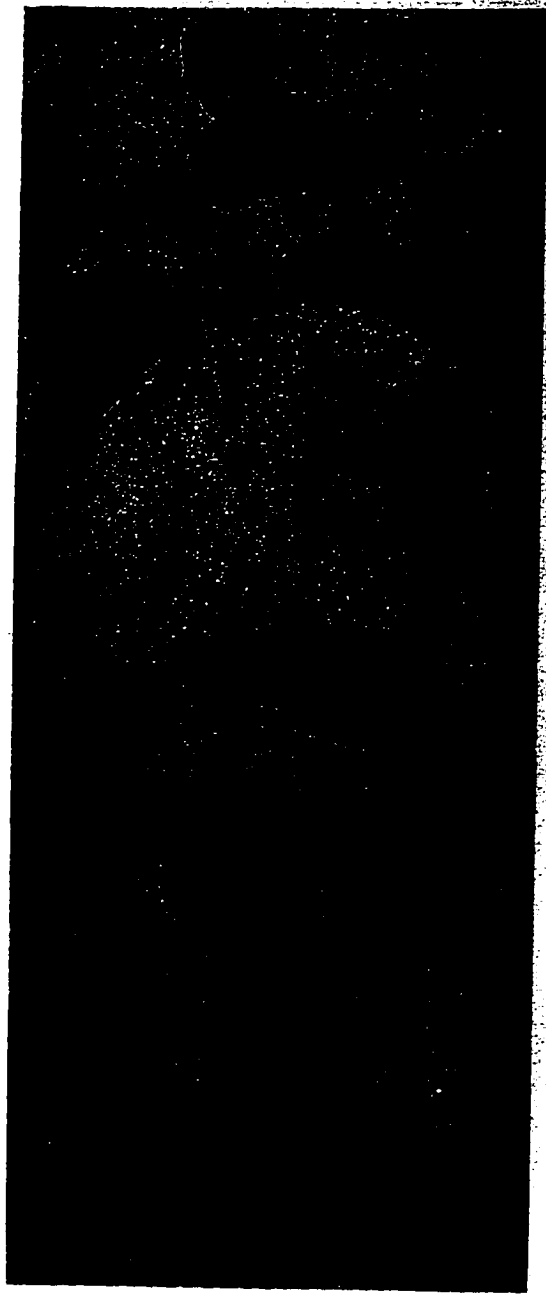


fig. 39 Bailing Cotton: Resources of America, 1938-39
Egg tempera on plaster
1 in a series of 13 each approx. 12 to 18' high
Bronx Central Post Office
Photograph courtesy of Addison Thompson

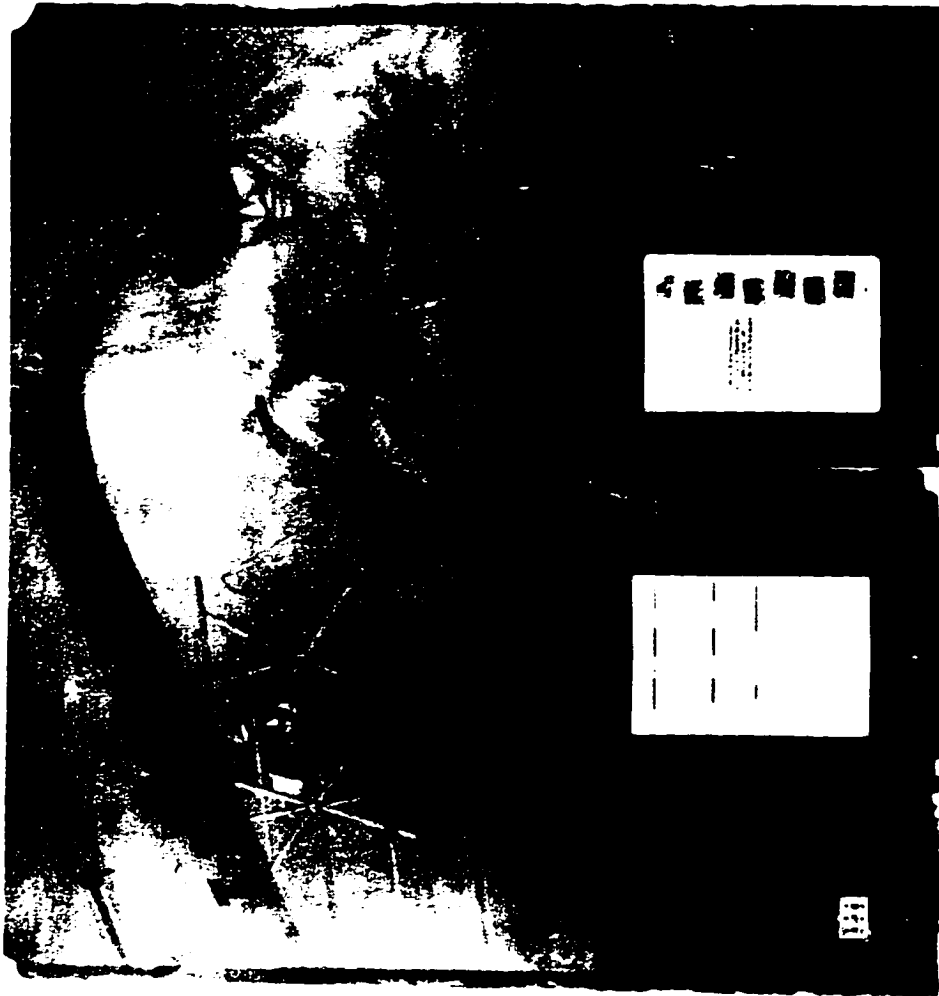


fig. 40 Harvesting Wheat: Resources of America, 1938-39
Egg tempera on plaster
1 in a series of 13 each approx. 12 to 18' high
Bronx Central Post Office
Photograph courtesy of Addison Thompson



fig. 41 Tennessee Valley Authority: Resources of America,
 1938-39
 Egg tempera on plaster
 1 in a series of 13 each approx. 12 to 18' high
 Bronx Central Post Office
 Reproduced in Melosh (1991), fig. 5.10.



fig. 42 Electrical Engineer: Resources of America, 1938-39
Egg tempera applied to plaster
1 of a series of 13 each approx. 12 to 18' high
Bronx Central Post Office, New York City
Photograph courtesy of Addison Thompson

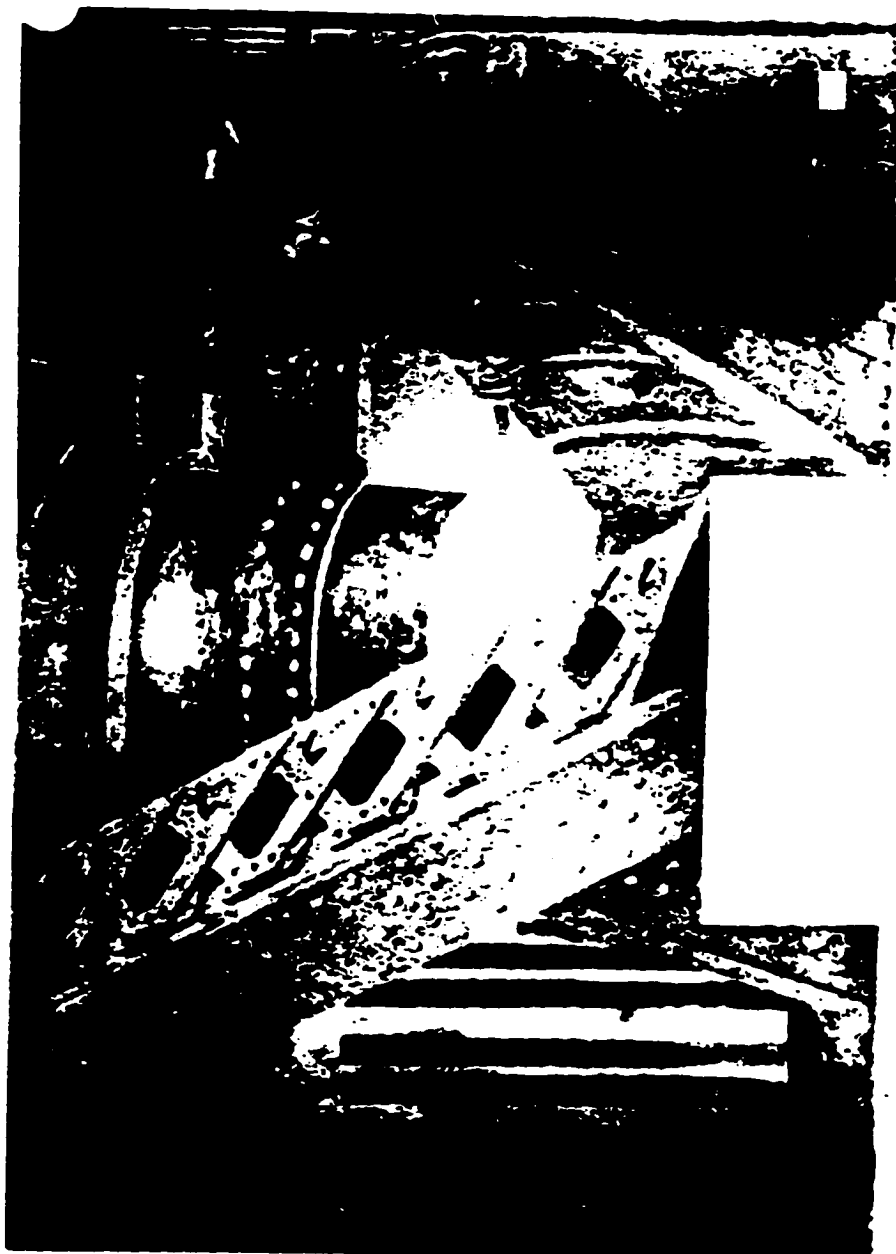


fig. 43 Steelworker: Resources of America, 1938-39
Egg tempera applied to plaster
1 of a series of 13 each approx. 12 to 18' high
Bronx Central Post Office
Photograph courtesy of Addison Thompson



fig. 44 Walt Whitman and flanking panels: Resources of America, 1938-39
Egg tempera applied to plaster
1 of a series of 13 each approx. 12 to 18' high
Bronx Central Post Office
Photograph courtesy of Addison Thompson



fig. 45 Walt Whitman (detail); Resources of America, 1938-39
Egg tempera applied to plaster
1 of a series of 13 each approx. 12 to 18' high
Bronx Central Post Office
Photograph courtesy of Addison Thompson

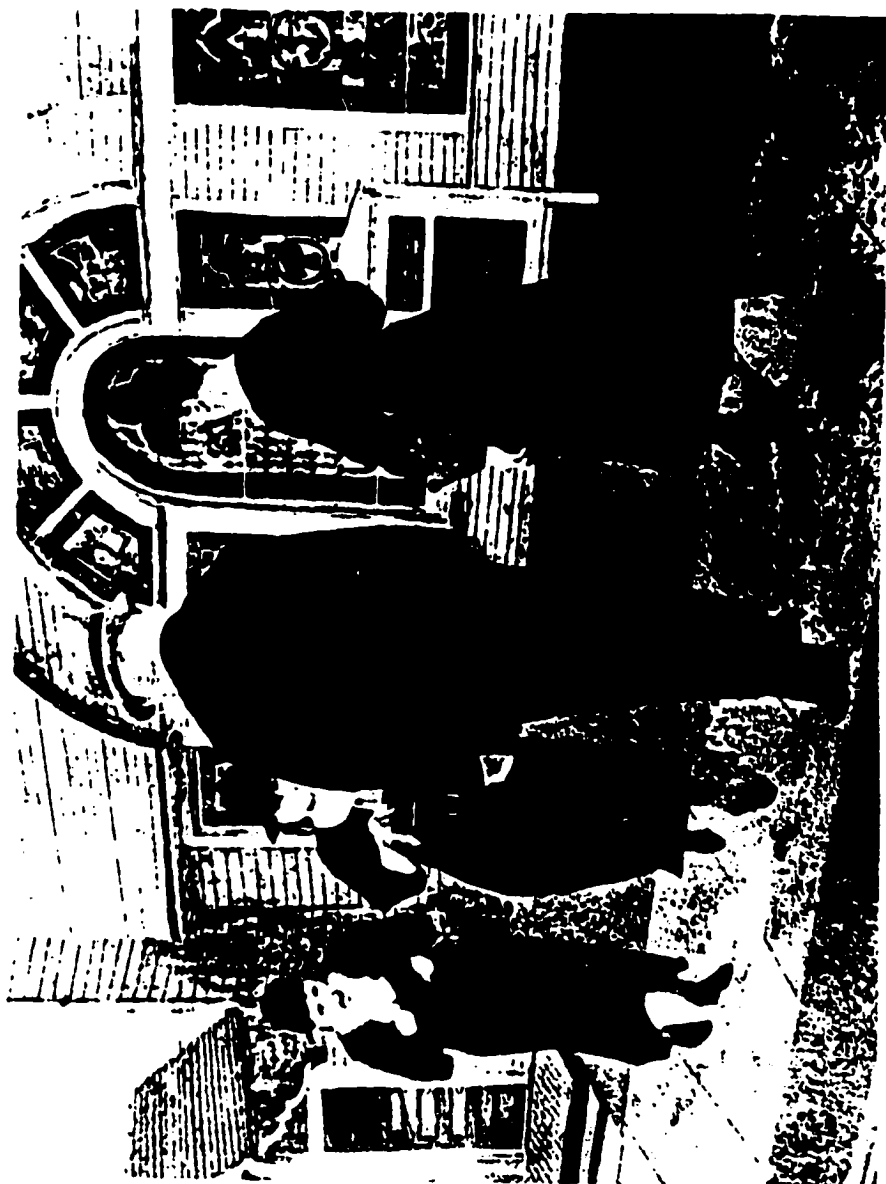


fig. 46 Myself Among the Churchgoers, 1939
Tempera
20 x 29 1/2'
The Regis Collection, Minneapolis, Minnesota
Reproduced in Pohl (1993), 66.

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UMI



fig. 56 The Four Freedoms, 1939-41
Egg tempera on canvas
8' 6" x 16'
Woodhaven Station Post Office, Queens, New York City
Photograph courtesy of David Linden

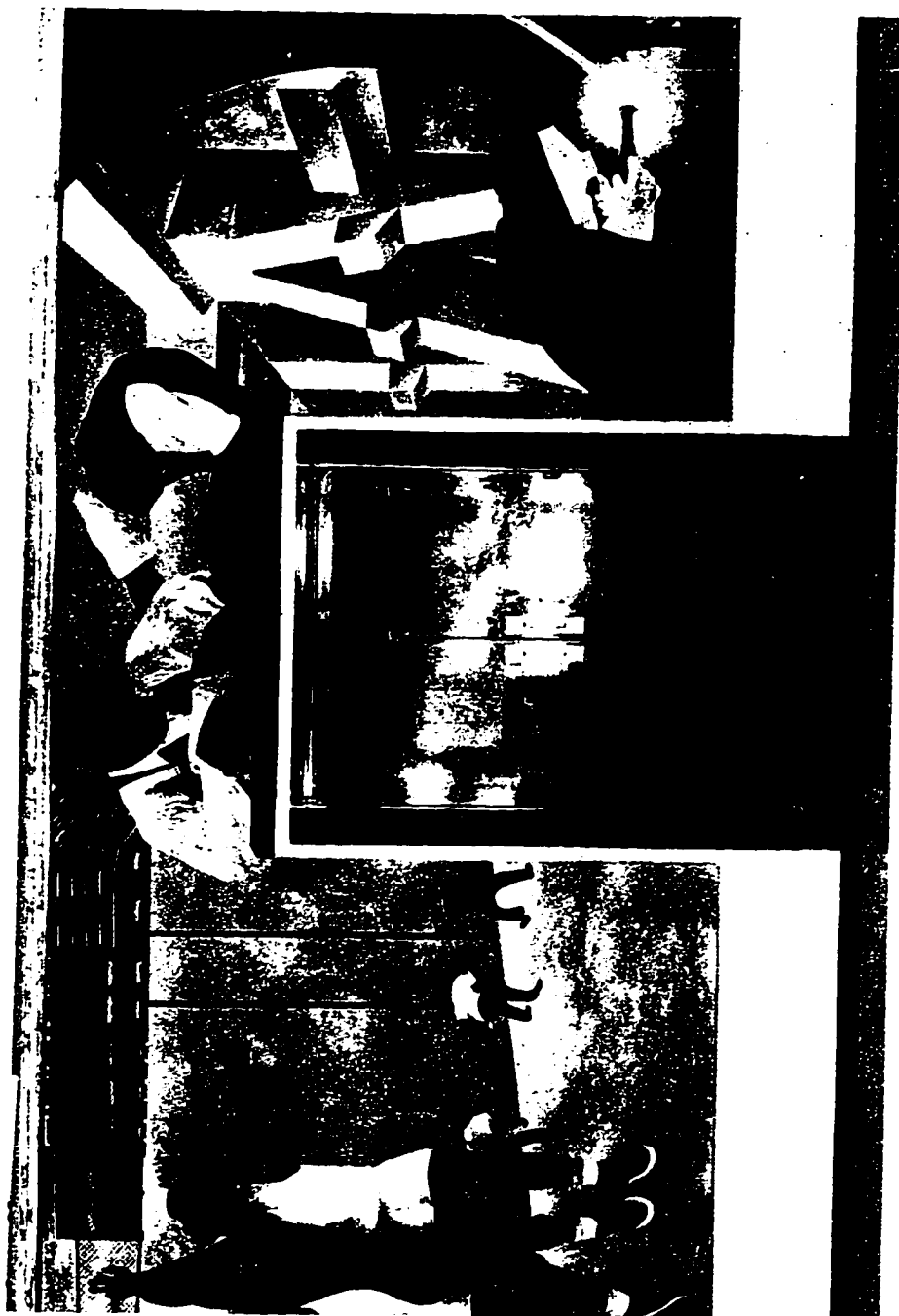


fig. 57 Social Security Mural, 1940-42
Tempera
Social Security Building
(now Wilbur J. Cohen Federal Building)
Reproduced in Pohl (1989), 41.

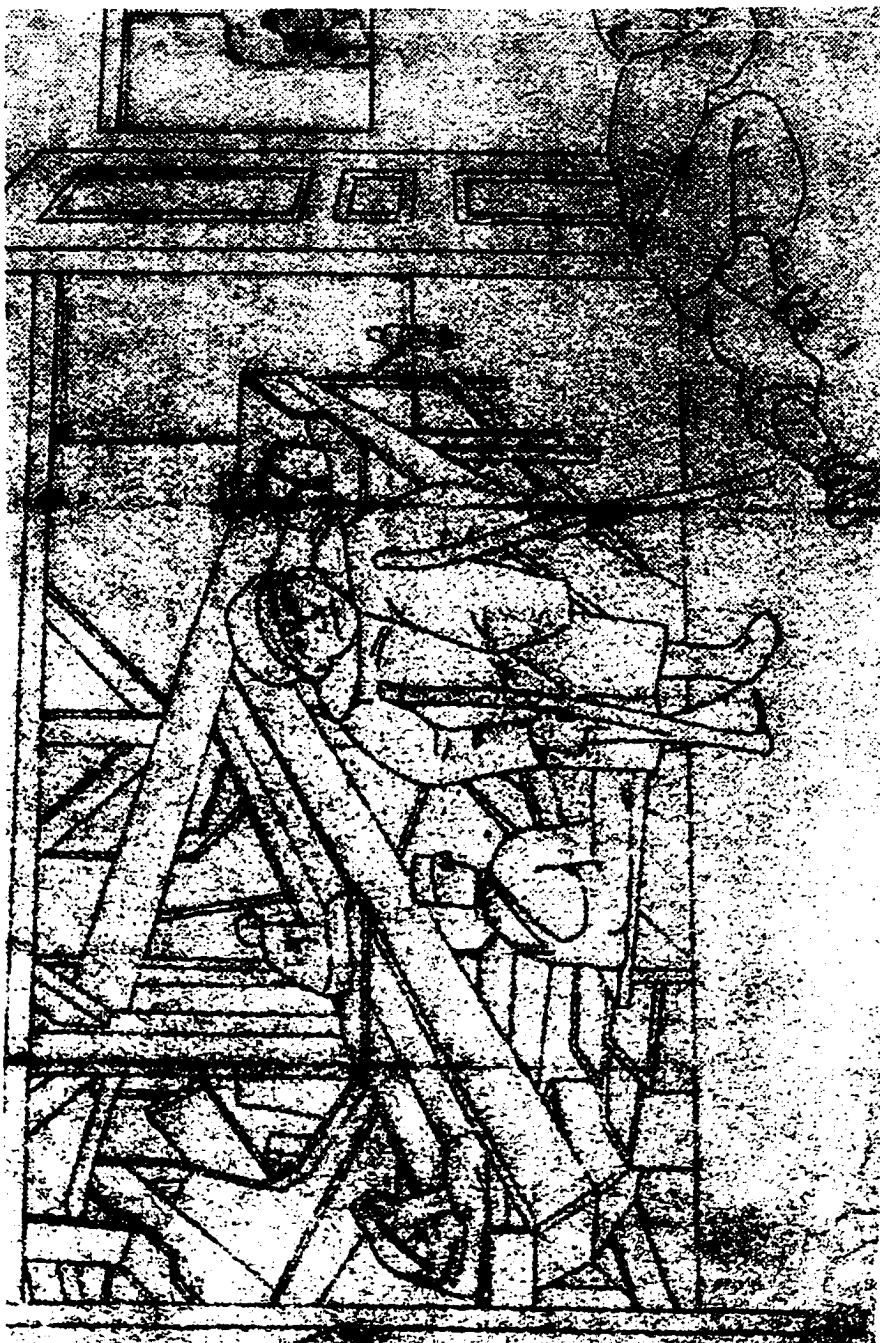


fig. 58 Study for Social Security Mural, 1940-42
Cartoon
Reproduced in Contreras (1983), 125.



fig. 59 New York City, circa 1932
Photograph
Reproduced in Pohl (1993), 67.



fig. 60 Study for Social Security Mural, 1940-42
Cartoon applied to wall
Reproduced in Pohl (1989), 40.



fig. 61 Social Security Mural: Unemployment, 1940-42
Mural sketch
Reproduced in Contreras ((1983), 123.

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