

TEACHER'S GUIDE

Document Based Activity

Part 2: Family First

MISSION US 4: "City of Immigrants"

Family Economy

In a family economy, multiple members of a family unit contribute to the household income. Historically, family economies have been particularly prevalent in immigrant families, where children's wages proved essential. In this activity, students investigate first-hand accounts of immigrants living in New York City at the turn of the twentieth century, which describe how the family economy impacted their families. The selected excerpts highlight the variety of ways family members contribute to family life, and will help students to understand why children their age might have to go to work. An excerpt from Zalmen Yoffeh's autobiography provides insight into his mother's role within the family economy and her tremendous effort to support their family. Selections from Rose Cohen's autobiography, *Out of the Shadow*, describe her experiences when she and her sister joined the workforce as children. Two letters from the *Bintel Brief*, an advice column in the *Jewish Daily Forward*, one of most popular Yiddish daily newspapers at the time, describe the challenges immigrants faced navigating the family economy. Together, these sources create a context for students to understand the structure of a family economy, and consider its impact on immigrant life in the Lower East Side at the turn of the century.

A NOTE TO THE EDUCATOR

The decision for Lena to work and contribute to her brother's household was typical for Russian Jewish immigrants living on the Lower East Side at that time. The primary source documents included in this activity represent a range of perspectives on how the family economy impacted family life, and provide a historic framework for understanding the structure and challenge of a family economy. The activity culminates with a creative writing assignment where students apply their learning from the analysis of the document(s) to Lena's family and explore how the necessity of a family economy influenced decisions regarding Lena's future.

Activity Components

- *Four Primary Source Documents:*
 - *Document 1: Excerpt from "The Passing of the East Side" by Zalmen Yoffeh*
 - *Document 2: Excerpt from the autobiography, "Out of the Shadow: A Russian Jewish Girlhood on the Lower East Side" by Rose Cohen*
 - *Document 3: 1907 Bintel Brief Letter*
 - *Document 4: 1906 Bintel Brief Letter*
- *Perspectives on the Family Economy Chart: For students to record the perspectives of the different members of the family that are mentioned in the document(s) and how the family economy impacted each of their lives.*



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Steps to Complete

The following procedure is recommended for this activity and can be adapted based on your curricular goals and timing constraints.

1. Ask students to share the ways they help their family (chores, watching siblings, etc.). Write their responses on the board. Then, ask students to brainstorm how different members of their family contribute to the smooth operation of their household (mother, father, siblings, etc.). Use the list to help students consider the different kinds of work involved in family life, both wage work that provides income and "home" work like cooking and laundry. This will help student understand the variety of ways that family members support each other and create a basis for them to understand the concept of a family economy.
2. Distribute primary source document(s) to students. You can give your students all of the documents or choose a selection for them to respond to.
3. Have students work independently or in small groups to investigate the document(s) with the goal of learning as much as they can about different perspectives that family members have on the family economy. Students can record their findings in the Perspectives on the Family Economy Chart.
4. Have students present their findings to the class or a fellow student and share out what was learned about the family economy. Student can respond to the following prompts:
 - a. How did the families in the document(s) work together to create a family economy?
 - b. How did the members of the families feel about their roles within the family economy?
 - c. How did the family's decisions impact the lives of the different members of the family?
5. Now that students understand the structure and necessity of the family economy at the turn of the twentieth century, they can apply their learning to Lena's family in one of the following scenarios:
 - a. Students should create a dialogue between Lena's brother and sister-in-law regarding the decision to send Lena to work or to school. Lena's brother would like her to have the opportunity to attend school, while his wife thinks she should go straight to work and help cover the expenses incurred by taking her in. Students can write the conversation using the perspectives uncovered in the documents to help them craft the arguments that each would raise.
 - b. Students can be assigned to take on the role of the brother, his wife, and Lena, with each detailing their unique perspective on Lena's role within the family economy. Students should be able to articulate whether they think Lena should go to work or to school and why.



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Perspectives on the Family Economy Chart

Use this chart to record the different members of the family that are mentioned in each document, and their perspective on their role within the family economy.

Family Member	What is their role within the family economy?	How do they feel about their role?



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Document 1: Excerpt from "The Passing of the East Side" by Zalmen Yoffeh

"The Passing of the East Side" was written in 1929 by Zalmen Yoffeh, a journalist that grew up in the Lower East Side, and details memories of his childhood. The text was originally published in the Menorah Journal, December 1929 and has been reprinted in How We Lived: A Documentary History of Immigrant Jews in America 1880-1930, edited by Irving Howe and Kenneth Libo.

With... one dollar a day [our mother] fed and clothed an ever-growing family. She took in boarders. Sometimes this helped; at other times it added to the burden of living. Boarders were often out of work and penniless; how could one turn a hungry man out? She made all the clothes. She walked blocks to reach a place where meat was a penny cheaper, where bread was a half cent less. She collected boxes and old wood to burn in the stove instead of costly coal. Her hands became hardened and the lines so begrimed that for years she never had perfectly clean hands. One by one she lost her teeth – there was no money for the dentist– and her cheeks caved in. Yet, we children always had clean and whole clothing. There was always bread and butter in the house, and, wonder of wonders, there was usually a penny apiece for us to buy candy with. On a dollar and a quarter, we would have lived in luxury.



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Document 2: Excerpt from "Out of the Shadow: A Russian Jewish Girlhood on the Lower East Side" by Rose Cohen

Rose Cohen came to the United States in 1892 as a 12 year old girl. She traveled from Russia with an aunt to join her father in New York City. Shortly after arriving, she worked with her father sewing men's suits, but soon moved to work on her own. Rose ultimately wrote a book about her experiences of tenement life.

About the same time that the bitter cold came, father told me one night that he had found work for me in a shop where he knew the presser. I lay awake long that night. I was eager to begin life on my own responsibility, but was also afraid. We rose earlier than usual that morning, for father had to take me to the shop and not be over late for his own work. I wrapped my thimble and scissors, with a piece of bread for breakfast, in a bit of newspaper, carefully stuck two needles into the lapel of my coat and we started.

"Don't look so frightened," he said. "You need not go in until seven. Perhaps if you start in at this hour, he will think you have been in the habit of beginning at seven and will not expect you to come in earlier. Remember, be independent. At seven o'clock rise and go home no matter what the others do or say."

He began to tell me something else but broke off suddenly and said "goodbye" over his shoulder and went away quickly. I watched him until he turned into Monroe Street.

Now only I felt frightened, and waiting made me nervous, so I tried the knob. The door yielded heavily and closed slowly. I was halfway up when it closed entirely, leaving me in darkness. I groped my way to the top of the stairs and hearing a clattering noise of machines. I felt about, found a door and pushed it open and went in. A tall, dark, beardless man stood folding coats at a table. I went over and asked him for the name (I don't remember what it was). "Yes," he said crossly. "What do you want?"

I said, "I am the new feller hand." He looked at me from head to foot. My face felt so burning hot that I could scarcely see.

"It is more likely," he said, "that you can pull bastings than fell sleeve lining." Then, turning from me he shouted over the noise of the machine: "Presser, is this the girl?" The presser put down the iron and looked at me. "I suppose so," he said, "I only know the father."

The cross man looked at me again and said, "Let's see what you can do." He kicked a chair, from which the back had been broken off, to the finisher's table, threw a coat upon it and said, raising the corner of his mouth: "Make room for the feller hand."

Then I stumbled a bit into the bit of space made for me at the table, and sat down. The men were so close to me on each side I felt the heat of their bodies and could not prevent myself from shrinking away. All at once the thought came: "If I don't do this coat quickly and well, he will send me away at once." I picked up the coat, threaded my needle, and began hastily, repeating the lesson father impressed upon me. "Be careful not to twist the sleeve lining, take small false stitches."

My hands trembled so that I could not hold the needle properly. It took me a long while to do the coat. But at last, it was done. I took it over to the boss and stood at the table waiting while he was



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examining it. He took long, trying every stitch with his needle. Finally he put it down and without looking at me gave me two other coats. I felt very happy! When I sat down at the table, I drew my knees close together and stitched as quickly as I could.

[In a later part of the book, Rose gets sick and is unable to go to work]

In the autumn I had to stay at home altogether, what little I had earned was badly missed. Winter was coming, and none of us had even half warm enough clothing. So father decided that sister would take my place.

She had just learned to read and write a little, and of course she could speak English. It was thought that she had made good progress in the short time, considering the drawback she had had, in not knowing the language. We felt sad, mother particularly, that her education should end here. Sister herself took it in a way characteristic of her. Her days at school had been happy ones. She had been known and loved by teachers and pupils throughout the little Henry Street School. And like the rest of us, she did not look upon "free schooling in America" in a matter-of-fact way. She, a little Jewish girl from an out-of-the-way Russian village of which no one ever heard, was receiving an education! It seemed a wonderful privilege. But when she saw that this was not to be after all, she did not utter a single word of protest or complaint.

On the first morning of going to the shop, for she was starting in as a finisher on buttonholes, she rose very early, as I had once done. I lay on the couch in the front room, which was my place now, and watched her. This morning reminded me of the first one when I left for the strange shop. Sister was about the same age, there were the same preparations, the same grey light in the room. The only difference was that now mother was here to put the thimble and scissors into her little coat pocket, and tuck the little bundle of lunch under her arm, and close the door after her, and then stand so still with her face pressed against it.

I stayed in the house all day. I felt despondent. This illness was such a long, drawn-out affair. It had had no definite beginning and promised to have no end. [Father] saw that I suffered no pain, I was merely pale and not overly strong. What of that? He himself was not strong. He found sitting in the shop harder and harder as the years were passing. He had been working as a tailor since he had been twelve years old. And just now his eyes were troubling him. For he has inherited his grandmother's weak eyes. And so he felt, no doubt, that just when I should have been a greater help to him I became a care and expense.



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Document 3: 1906 Bintel Brief Letter

"The Bintel Brief" was an advice column in the Jewish Daily Forward, the most popular Yiddish daily newspaper in America at the turn of the twentieth century. "Bintel Brief" means "bundle of letters," and refers to the letters the Forward published from Jewish immigrants seeking advice on their new life in America. Letters ranged from dealing with tough bosses at work, to decisions about school, to matters of love lives. The Bintel Brief became an important source of advice for Jewish immigrants. This 1906 letter was translated from Yiddish to English, and included in "A Bintel Brief: Sixty Years of Letters from the Lower East Side to The Jewish Daily Forward," edited by Isaac Metzker, 1971.

Worthy Editor,

We are a small family who came recently to the "Golden Land." My husband, my boy, and I are together, and our daughter lives in another city.

I had opened a grocery store here, but soon lost all my money. In Europe, we were in business; we had people working for us and paid them well. In short, there we made a good living, but here we are badly off.

My husband became a peddler. The "pleasure" of knocking on doors and ringing bells cannot be known by anyone but a peddler. If anybody does buy anything "on time," a lot of the money is lost, because there are some people who never intend to pay. In addition, my husband has trouble because he has a beard, and because of the beard he gets beaten up by the hoodlums.

Also, we have problems with our boy, who throws money around. He works every day till late at night in a grocery for three dollars a week. I watch over him and give him the best because I'm sorry that I have to work so hard. But he costs me plenty and he borrows money from everybody. He has many friends and owes them all money. I get more and more worried as he takes here and borrows there. All my talking doesn't help. I am afraid to chase him away from home because he might get worse among strangers. I want to point out that he is well versed in Russian and Hebrew, and he is not a child any more, but his behavior is not that of an intelligent adult.

I don't know what to do. My husband argues that he doesn't want to continue peddling. He doesn't want to shave off his beard, and it's not fitting for such a man to do so. The boy wants to go to his sister, but that's a twenty-five-dollar fare. What can I do? I beg you for a suggestion.

Your constant reader,

F.L.

ANSWER:

Since her husband doesn't earn a living anyway, it would be advisable for all three of them to move to the city where the daughter is living. As for the beard, we feel that if the man is religious and the beard is dear to him because the Jewish law does not allow him to shave it off, it's up to him to decide. But if he is not religious, and the beard interferes with his earnings, it should be sacrificed.



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Worthy Editor,

Allow me a little space in your newspaper and, I beg you, give me some advice as to what to do.

There are seven people in our family – parents and five children. I am the oldest child, a fourteen-year-old girl. We have been in the country two years and my father, who is a frail man, is the only one working to support the whole family.

I go to school, where I do very well. But since times are hard now and my father earned only five dollars this week, I began to talk about giving up my studies and going to work in order to help my father as much as possible. But my mother didn't even want to hear of it. She wants me to continue my education. She even went out and spent ten dollars on winter clothes for me. But I didn't enjoy the clothes, because I think I am doing the wrong thing. Instead of bringing something into the house, my parents have to spend money on me.

I have a lot compassion for my parents. My mother is now pregnant, but she still has to take care of the three boarders we have in the house. Mother and Father work very hard and they want to keep me in school.

I am writing to you without their knowledge, and I beg you to tell me how to act. Hoping you can advise me, I remain,

Your reader,
S.

ANSWER:

The advice to this girl is that she should obey her parents and further her education, because in that way she will be able to give them greater satisfaction than if she went out to work.

