

# The Jersey Homesteads Mural Ben Shahn, Bernarda Bryson, and History Painting in the 1930s

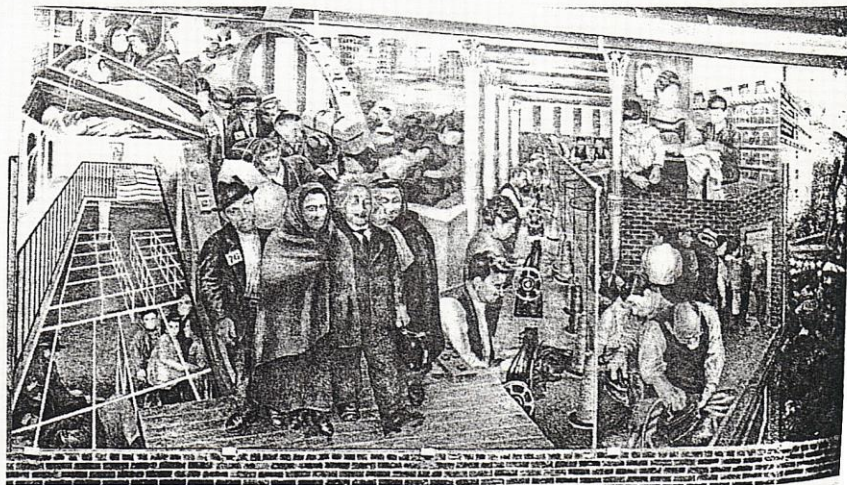
Susan Noyes Platt

In a mural for the community of Jersey Homesteads (now Roosevelt), New Jersey, Ben Shahn, in collaboration with Bernarda Bryson,<sup>1</sup> redefined contemporary history painting by depicting three unusual subjects: Jewish immigration, union organizing, and the planning of a cooperative community in the early New Deal Resettlement Administration (Figs. 85, 86, and 87).<sup>2</sup> The mural, completed in fresco in 1937–8, departs from the tradition of the unified tableau, based in the theory of Diderot, that focuses on a single moment in which the action hangs in the balance, the *peripeteia*. In the traditional tableau there is frequently a single identifiable heroic figure, who with gesture and pose implies the leadership of the moment in history depicted. This concept of history descends into still photography as the “decisive moment.” Instead of the *peripeteia*, the mural created in Jersey Homesteads, New Jersey, presents groups of figures acting as part of an ongoing process. The only suggestion of a decisive moment is provided by one central enlarged and isolated figure, but that figure, a union leader, is intentionally anonymous and emerges from a group (Fig. 86). The decisive moment is replaced by historical process, a process based

FIGURE 85

Ben Shahn, with the assistance of Bernarda Bryson. *The Jersey Homesteads Mural* (Left: Immigration and Sweatshops). 1937–8.

Roosevelt (formerly Jersey Homesteads), New Jersey. Photograph by the author.



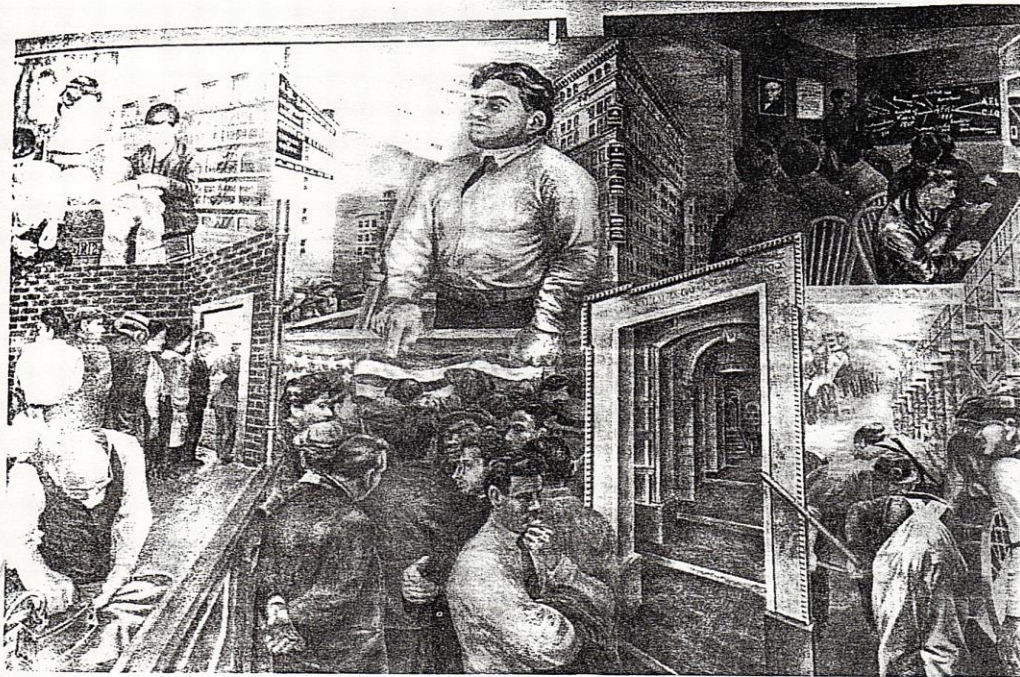


FIGURE 86

Ben Shahn, with the assistance of Bernarda Bryson. *The Jersey Homesteads Mural* (Center: Sweatshops and Union Organizing).

*Photograph by the author.*

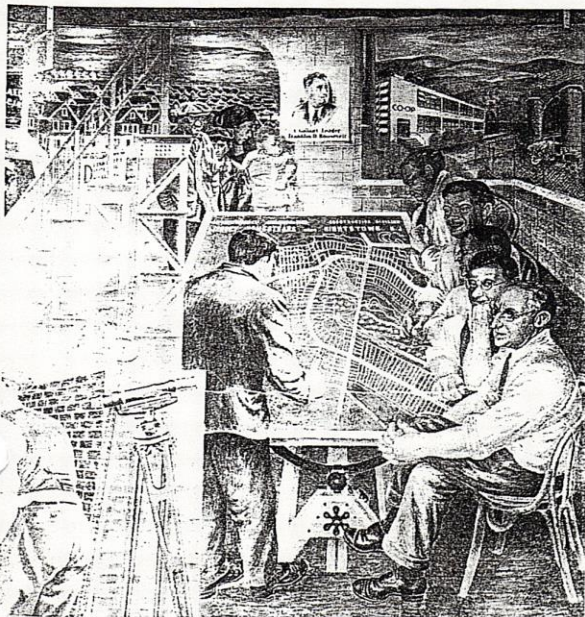


FIGURE 87

Ben Shahn, with the assistance of Bernarda Bryson. *The Jersey Homesteads Mural* (Right: Building a Cooperative Community and New Deal Planning).

*Photograph by the author.*

on economic and political forces. Although some identifiable portraits are included, these specific individuals act within as group, not as heroic individual leaders. At the same time, however, there is in some of the individual scenes the symbolism, if not the heroism, of traditional tableaux. The tableau without heroism, but laden with symbols, is a common approach in New Deal murals. But usually history is depicted as static: The anonymous worker, farmer, or homesteader becomes the symbol of historical stability. In Shahn's mural the worker in groups is, instead, a symbol of historical process and change.

In addition, there is a major element in the Jersey Homesteads mural of what Barthes calls the "obtuse" or "third" meaning, that of emotion, beyond narrative discourse. In Roland Barthes, as developed in *Camera Lucida*, the element beyond narrative is personal memory. As elaborated on by Victor Burgin the third meaning is psychological; more than simple recollection it includes the idea of the fantastic and imaginary.<sup>3</sup> In the Jersey Homesteads mural Shahn's personal memories as well as his autobiographical and psychological investment in the imagery he is painting imbues it with this "third" meaning. Burgin also distinguishes between the symbol and the hieroglyph. The symbol is closer to a narrative device, existing within a historical context; the hieroglyph, in Burgin's lexicon, is linked to the imaginary, outside of narrative discourse. In Shahn's mural this analysis can provide helpful insights, although the symbol and the hieroglyph often coincide in the same image. The narrative symbol coincides with the hieroglyph of the imagined. For example, the depiction of the new arrivals hall at Ellis Island is both a symbol of a historical event and a personal memory of Shahn's own life experience.<sup>4</sup> The mural, in fact, coincides throughout with Ben Shahn's own memories and experiences as they intersect with historical events: He came to the United States from Lithuania as a Jewish immigrant in 1906 at the age of eight, participated in radical activities in the Artists Union in New York, then joined the New Deal.

The unusual approach to history painting in Jersey Homesteads is in part the product of the specific moment in Shahn's career in which the mural was executed. Shahn turned to painting contemporary history shortly after the 1927 execution of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti for the murder of a postmaster in South Braintree, Massachusetts. Although the innocence of the accused became a widely adopted cause all over the United States and Europe, the judge refused to stay the execution. Shahn was deeply troubled by the profound injustice of the event, and saw it as comparable to the Crucifixion itself. He turned to individual sacrifice based on social injustice as a central subject of his work for several years.

*The Passion of Sacco-Vanzetti* of 1931–2 uses contemporary individuals as paradigms for the great tragic heroes of history. In early 1931 Shahn began clipping images and headlines from the newspapers as raw material for his contemporary history painting. Other topics he researched, all widely popularized favorites of the left in the early 1930s, were the cases of Tom Moody, accused of throwing a bomb in 1916, and the Scottsboro boys, nine young blacks accused of attacking two white women in Chattanooga, Tennessee.<sup>5</sup> Although Shahn was dealing with popular causes, his style was more con-

frontational than other artists on the left. His images were simplified and flattened, based in part on the frontality of newspaper documentary photographs. One reviewer likened the Sacco and Vanzetti series to the history paintings of Emanuel Leutze and Baron Gros; he saw Shahn as a "valuable witness to our epoch."<sup>6</sup> Shortly after Shahn enlarged three of the series as mural-sealed panels for an exhibition. Consequently, Shahn himself was drawn into contemporary political events: An effort was made to withhold his Sacco and Vanzetti mural study from the exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in the fall of 1932.<sup>7</sup>

A more profound trauma resulted from his work with Diego Rivera at Rockefeller Center where Shahn assisted in the creation of the now infamous fresco *Man at the Crossroads*. As a result of the inclusion of a portrait of Lenin, the work was ordered suspended by the rental agents who feared, more than the Rockefellers, that the portrait would make it difficult to rent the building. Ten months later the mural was destroyed. Shahn was a leader in organizing protests about the original work stoppage. He went on to assist Rivera from July to December 1933 with the creation of a cycle at the New Workers School based on the history of the United States according to the radical Marxist-Lovestonite analysis of class struggle, labor struggle, and revolutionary rebellion. The murals were crowded with clusters of numerous identifiable portraits, a typical Rivera technique for the depiction of history. As first installed, it partnered earlier and later historical figures on opposite walls, a dialectical technique that Shahn would later use.<sup>8</sup>

The importance of these events within Shahn's development as a history painter is fundamental. He was at the very center of one of the major ruptures of the art world of the 1930s. The suspension of the work at Rockefeller Center galvanized a broad spectrum of artists to protest in the streets. In addition, Shahn had an in-depth technical and theoretical apprenticeship under Rivera. Although according to Lucienne Bloch who also assisted Rivera,<sup>9</sup> Shahn was mainly in charge of the historical research for the murals, he would also have learned by observation the complex process of fresco painting, as well as the idea of organizing large historical events in terms of groups that represent a revolutionary process. In Rivera's mural at the New Workers School the structure of the paintings is entirely static. The figures pile up one above the other in a quotation of the type of space and time used in pre-Columbian art: History proceeds not in linear progression, but in symbolic events. Rivera's murals include numerous portraits of historically notable leaders, but those leaders do not stand out above the crowd, they are embedded within it.

Between 1933 and 1935 Shahn created two proposals for large-scale murals, both related to historical issues that were less about individual martyrs and more about changing systems of injustice: The first focused on demonstrations both for and against Prohibition, the second on prisons with a focus on contrasting old and new methods of correction. In their structural and pictorial differences they suggest the changes in Shahn's approach to history painting as a result of his contact with Rivera, changes that are central to the Jersey Homesteads mural.

The Prohibition series of gouaches are, like *The Passion of Sacco-Vanzetti*, separate, static images. Frontal facing rows of demonstrators are the primary composition. The prison series, created in collaboration with Lou Bloch and with the assistance of Lydia Nadajena, who drew the perspective, is far more complex. Intended for the Riker's Island Penitentiary, it was based on exhaustive research. The perspective used deep space projections in alternation with flat shallow spaces in a way that would be adopted in a modified form at Jersey Homesteads. Shahn began to work in terms of a filmlike sequencing of images connected with formal devices, particularly the alternation of the deep shot and the close-up. The alternating deep and flat space also paired old and new methods of penology on opposite sides of a narrow corridor.

At this time Shahn also began to use the Leica camera. As an instrument to record the Depression in New York City streets it provided more intimate and personal views than newspaper mug shots. Although his photographs were primarily taken in public streets and parks, or as views of people through windows and on city stoops, they begin to image the individual and humble, in contrast to large publicized and received examples of social injustice such as the Scottsboro Boys. This more intimate approach was probably, in part, a response to Bernarda Bryson's own deep-seated concerns about individual deprivation. The Leica opened Shahn's perspective both psychologically and physically, allowing informal images (albeit often taken with a right angle lens without the subject's knowledge). In his early photography, he functioned apparently without programmatic intent or a self-conscious, unified agenda, at a time of the dissolution of social mechanisms. Independent of a single ideology, he collected images of the Jewish ghetto, of poverty, of the life of the streets of New York, of artists' demonstrations.<sup>10</sup>

From 1933 to 1935, Bernarda Bryson also provided a new perspective for Shahn. Bryson came from Ohio as a newspaper reporter to interview Diego Rivera while he was working with Shahn at the New Workers School in the summer of 1933. An active advocate of social causes, Bryson was such an articulate thinker and speaker that on moving to New York in the early fall of 1933 she immediately became a leader of radical causes in New York, particularly the Unemployed Artists Association and the Artists Union. Her contact with Shahn developed most prominently during the summer of 1934 when they began to work together on the newspaper *Art Front*, the newspaper of the Artists Union.<sup>11</sup> Ben Shahn provided layout, promotion, and editorial suggestions, such as filmic sequences of photographs of the artists' demonstrations. Both his involvement with Bryson and the newspaper work deeply engaged him in the mass labor and economic issues of the Depression, as well as in the artists' particular plight. Bernarda has stated about the idea of collaboration with Ben Shahn that "our relationship went deep into theory. Both in art and in life. I am sure that I had great impact upon Ben's thinking – even upon his writing, but not upon his art."<sup>12</sup>

Such a statement underlines both Bryson's strong intellect as it worked in synergy with Shahn's throughout the rest of his life as well as her own social

conditioning concerning Shahn as an autonomous artist. Yet, irrefutably, his work in conjunction with Bryson in the mid-1930s, demonstrates their strong interaction. Such an intellectual and technical collaboration is definitely a factor in considering their imaging of history. It is one of the reasons why Bryson and Shahn stand out distinctly from other members of the American scene mural movement as it was later formulated by the New Deal. Their work, taken collectively, encompasses many media and many intellectual concepts that are not simply programmatic responses to a government initiative.

In the fall of 1935 Bernarda Bryson and Ben Shahn both went to work for the newly created Resettlement Administration of the New Deal in Washington, D.C. It was through this program that they created the Jersey Homesteads mural two years later. The Resettlement Administration provided them with conceptual and artistic agendas as well as the political contacts that led to the creation of the Jersey Homesteads mural. First developed under the leadership of Rex Tugwell, an idealistic economics professor from Columbia University, the Resettlement programs were intended to provide new housing and a better standard of living for impoverished workers in both urban and rural areas. The larger goals were relief of suffering, development of self-sufficiency, and maintenance of the family.<sup>13</sup> Shahn and Bryson were part of a close-knit group of radical thinkers that provided creative ideas for using art to promote the new programs.

Initially, Shahn was hired to publicize the programs of the Resettlement Administration with posters and graphics. As research for this activity, he proposed the idea of visiting the mining areas of Pennsylvania and Appalachia. He and Bryson took an epic two-month trip (with Bryson doing all the driving) intended for the purpose of photographing resettlement clients. They ended up driving through Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi. From September to October 1935, Shahn and Bryson approached impoverished rural workers. Bryson would often engage people in conversation while Shahn would capture them informally with a right angle lens. Although they were working with the support of the government, their photographic journey was not made simply to create propaganda. Bryson and Shahn engaged serendipitously with the South, with the people they met, with its life.<sup>14</sup>

The images that came out of their journey (an itinerary that would later become almost ritual for socially concerned writers and artists) were fundamental to the development of the more famous Farm Security Administration images. Shahn and Bryson were pioneers in this use of photography by the federal government, although they were soon followed by Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, and many others. Later Depression photographers were, however, more programmatic in their intentions and more edited by the ideology of the government to project a sense of the role of the government in creating a new stability out of desperate conditions.<sup>15</sup>

Although Shahn's photographs are often used in his murals, a film project in collaboration with Walker Evans reinforced the idea of cinematic scale and sequence. The film requested by the Resettlement Administration was a

promotion for a new greenbelt community just outside Washington, D.C. The Shahn/Evans film was never created, but its form as well as its conceptualization is revealing:

We propose to make a film, the subject matter of which will be people – the greater half of our nation. We want to show how they live now, and to show a way of life in planned communities such as the greenbelt town offers. To do this we will employ a device of flash-backs [sic] into the histories of five typical American workmen who apply for work on a greenbelt project. . . . For some of the material we will rely upon stock or news shots. For the rest we will rely upon the actual conditions and people as we find them. . . . Through such a film we hope, first to build up a public sympathy and understanding of the need of housing for some 40,000,000 Americans; second to popularize the idea of the planned community. We wish not only to awaken in our audience some feeling of responsibility and concern for the great segments of population shunted into the cast-off segments of our cities, the worked-out farms of our country; but we wish to articulate for our audience their own needs in housing, to spread some understanding of what housing can and ought to be for people of low income.<sup>16</sup>

Although the film addressed Greenbelt, Maryland, its techniques and concepts could also describe the program of Jersey Homesteads and its mural. The idea of history in flashback suggests the concept that probably underlay the immigration scene at Jersey Homesteads.

During these same months Bernarda Bryson was involved with creating historical images. She was asked to set up a lithography workshop as part of the special skills division of the Resettlement Administration that encouraged the idea of crafts such as furniture design, ceramics, and printmaking. Bryson began to create a “Frontier Book” inspired by a Roosevelt speech that the new frontier was that of the social frontier. The book was to have covered the importation of immigrants, the middle passage, as well as the movement west and the vanishing frontier. She also created lithographs and watercolors based on the history of the Underground Railroad, a topic with which she was intrigued not only because of her social principles, but also because her own grandparents’ home was a stop on the Underground Railroad in Athens, Ohio.<sup>17</sup> Bernarda Bryson’s historical images in these prints, although on a much smaller scale than murals, also mediated between memory, personal experience, and the national narrative discourse.

It was at this point, following several years of working on a small scale with lithography and photography, as well as film and mural conceptions, that Ben Shahn and Bernarda Bryson took on the commission to create a mural for Jersey Homesteads, their first executed mural-scaled fresco. According to Bernarda Bryson the community was founded as follows:

It began expressly with a group of New York workers in the garment trades. They discussed nostalgically how great it would be to have a factory in a rural area where – during off seasons for instance – they would not be languishing unemployed in teeming city areas, but could have a plot of land, a garden and so on. In pursuance of this dream, each of some eight to fifteen families raised five hundred dollars each. They had

heard of Benjamin Brown who was noted for having instituted cooperative projects in the United States . . . and in Russia. They went to him. He located a tract of land contiguous to his own in New Jersey. Hearing of the oncoming New Deal projects, Mr. Brown took a delegation of the garment workers to Washington where they met with Harold Ickes, Secretary of the Interior, who immediately approved the project.<sup>18</sup>

The New Deal provided a huge infusion of funds for the building of the community, and named it Jersey Homesteads in order to invoke a reference to the pioneers. After several calamitous events,<sup>19</sup> the government hired Alfred Kastner, a German architect from the Bauhaus and student of Gropius, assisted by Louis Kahn, to build the town. Although the local residents might well have preferred a traditional style of architecture (as indicated by the frequently gingerbread transformations that have taken place in the houses over the decades since they were built), the utopian Bauhaus principles of functional architecture for workers dominated the entire planning. The government, although it provided the essential funds for the building of the community, also, in essence, preempted the possibility of individual initiative from the residents.

Kastner invited Shahn, with Bryson as his assistant, to create a fresco in the town, and designed what was originally the community building with the mural in mind. The dimensions of the wall and the lighting and viewing of the mural were all part of the original planning process. The first anonymous description of the mural read as follows:

Mr. Shahn is to work out a script for the mural with a number of variations to same. The theme is to center about contemporary life to the Jewish emigrant, to touch on immigration and emigration, his assimilation into the country, industrialism and unionism with contrapointal adoption of programs elsewhere, and immigration to Palestine.<sup>20</sup>

Initially the mural was conceived by Shahn entirely as a narrative that invoked Jewish history, hopes, and memories. His narrative about the mural is filled with intimate characterizations of Jewish life, most of which do not emerge in the final mural. On the other hand, as a passionate narrative written at a time when Shahn was leaving Jewish life behind, it clearly demonstrates his personal relationship to the mural's subjects, particularly with respect to his place as a Jewish immigrant who aspired to be free of the bonds of tradition and to assimilate into the life of the United States:

The mural should begin with the life of the Jews in [a] Russian Ghetto. They are seen living in humbleness and fear, caring for their own as best they can, keeping up homes for their aged and schools for their young. They are deeply buried in their religion, finding there some compensation for their exclusion from the 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 Jerusalem."

Around a table the Jews sit at the feast of the Passover. Behind them rages a pogrom. An inflammatory anti-Semitic myth often spread among the Russian peasants holds that at the 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 the 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 the 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.<sup>21</sup>

As first characterized by Shahn in this narrative, in the spring of 1936, the entire Jersey Homesteads mural focused on Jewish oppression, immigration, and dreams. His narrative speaks of the history of a generation of Jewish immigrants whose parents arrived in the early part of the twentieth century. The narrative could easily have been based not on research but on the conversations in his home of the conditions in Russia and the hopes in the new country. The conflation of personal memory, personal experience, and received history parallels that of the images of the completed mural.

A directive of a year later significantly altered this original plan, upon which Shahn had based two sketches.<sup>22</sup> The memo of April 15, 1937, reflective of the ideology of the now well-established government art programs sponsored by the Treasury Department and the Works Progress Administration, read that

The theme of the picture may be described as the "American Scene." Its dominating composition shall show the arrival of the immigrants at the left, acclimatization and organization into the American community in the center, and the revitalized pursuit of human observations [sic] under the newly acquired democratic technique at the right.

The time, dress, and incidents used are characteristics of today and their application shall be without prejudice against race, creed, or color.<sup>23</sup>

The compromise for Jersey Homesteads was that Shahn was permitted to present a specifically ethnic history, as long as he showed it blending into the American scene and not as disruptive or lacking in decorum. As finally completed, the mural, with only minor changes, met the approval of the authorities in Washington, D.C., all enthusiastic about Shahn personally in spite of his radical apprenticeship with Rivera. The approval stressed the fact that "the mural emphasized the human side of the story as against political or religious. Its presentation is quiet and it deliberately avoids the portrait of struggle or conflict or any other sensational matter as not befitting the dignity of the theme."<sup>24</sup>

On the left the mural is dominated by a large wedge-shaped group of immigrants walking briskly toward the foreground across a red bridge with Albert Einstein among the leaders. Next to Einstein and actually leading the group is a dominating female figure that is Shahn's mother,<sup>25</sup> as well as the archetypal Jewish matriarch; she wears a shawl covering her head, the traditional dress of a Jewish woman, and borrows from images of Shahn's own great-grandmother. To her right is Raphael Soyer, although his features also suggest Shahn's father. Further back, almost buried in the midst of the crowd, is another famous scientist, Charles Steinmetz, the brilliant hunchbacked electrical engineer who became known as the "modern Jove" when he created lightning in his laboratory in 1922.<sup>26</sup> Many of the figures prominently wear badges that identify their number on the ship manifest, without which they could not enter the United States. Badges were also used during early pogroms to identify Jews, as well as in Nazi Germany. Such a device underlines Shahn's intention to overlap historical time within a dynamic of social change.

The group purposely conflates several eras of immigration. Steinmetz and Shahn's own family came as political radicals to the United States fleeing late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Jewish pogroms in Russia,<sup>27</sup> whereas Einstein came to escape from Hitler's repressive policies in 1933. Bryson recently stated that emphasis on the large group of immigrants combined with specific individuals was intended to underline that immigrants made major contributions to the society to which they came.<sup>28</sup> Einstein was also living in nearby Princeton and was a supporter of the Jersey Homesteads community.

Shahn used many approaches to suggest action and drama without utilizing heroic individuals or traditional gestures: Several different diagonal perspective constructions are based on Renaissance techniques. At the same time he punctuates the coherent mass of the immigrants by assertive portraits, photographs drawn from family albums, Lewis Hines's photographs, and anonymous newspaper images. These contradictory modes conflate the idea of memory and history, or in Roland Barthes's terms, the punctum and the

studium. They combine symbols of history, both spatial and figurative, drawn from Shahn's research in photographic files, with the hieroglyphs of his own imaginary and real personal history.

The mural is even further complicated by adoption of the Brechtian epic theater technique of groups of workers as symbols of active social forces. The mural also invokes the spatial and temporal collage of such films as Sergei Eisenstein's *Potemkin*, in which long shots and close-ups, flashbacks, contemporary events, and even hallucinations are combined: In the immigration segment smaller scenes refer to related developments. The intolerant actions of the Nazis appears in a ghetto scene in the upper left corner. Prominently, in the lower left, is the Registry Hall at Ellis Island. It is shown starkly without benches as it was when Shahn arrived, but entirely empty except for one isolated family and a single man, an accurate depiction, since men frequently immigrated separately from their families. Above the immigrant group are families sleeping in a city park. These images all inhabited Shahn's memory. They replace the original plan for these spaces of nineteenth-century pogroms, Russian ghetto life, and the Jewish Passover.

The central section of the mural focuses on the process of unionization. It includes several types of garment workers: assembly line workers with sewing machines, pressers bending over steam irons, and home piece, workers dominated by a maternal figure. All of these figures are compressed into tight spaces in contrast to the expanding wedge of the immigration scene. In this section Shahn was also using photographic images of sweat shop conditions, but he has a less personal connection to the scenes because his own family were skilled craftspeople. The stasis of the sweatshops is countered by the line of the workers (among whom, significantly, is Bernarda Bryson) filing into a union hall with brickwork that ties the mural to the brick of its setting, originally the community center of the town. Because Bryson was a key figure in encouraging Shahn's activities in the Artists Union, her placement is revealing.

At this point there is a sense of break (or scene change) in the sequencing of the mural as it shifts to the process of unionization. The last two parts of the mural are also distinguished by having only one female, a traditional mother in the background; with the emergence of the union the action is by men, although historically young girls played a dramatic role in the process of unionization.<sup>29</sup> The only dominant individual figure in the mural is the large speaker based on a "soapbox orator" from Shahn's own photographs in New York on the Lower East Side, now metamorphosed into a union leader. Again the sense of a zoom close-up against a film set is suggested: Behind the speaker are the buildings of businesses that figured in the early oppression and tragic events that led to the creation of the union. Standing out clearly is the famous Triangle Shirt Factory where a horrific fire in 1911 killed 146 young girls who were trapped behind locked doors intended to give access to stairways.

The union organizer is the largest figure in the mural and the closest to a hero, but he is understated: He does not gesticulate except to point down to the workers below him, several of whom are also based on Shahn's own photographs. The words of the speech are written on a sign (suggesting a silent

movie with captions). They are drawn from a speech by John L. Lewis, first leader of the Congress of Industrial Organization (CIO). The leader resembles Lewis, but is, as with most of Shahn's so-called portraits, a composite of several people.

Directly below the union leader is a pensive worker who emerges from the crowd, brooding on the speaker's message and pausing between the past turmoil of the milling workers and oppressed factory workers and the future, represented by a sequence of ordered doorways that are replicas of the doorways of successive union halls, based again on photographs. This central part of the mural is by far the most complex. The process of unionization is an abstract idea, much less specific than the process of immigration. Shahn had few visual references other than newspaper images from which to work. He himself was a part of the process only in the context of the artists' demonstrations of the mid-1930s, so he observed it as a commentator. He is working with his own images of workers, rather than his remembered memories of immigration. The abrupt spatial and thematic segments seem to function as a metaphor of the difficult psychological transition that he himself was undergoing, from his roots in the restricted immigrant community of his youth, to the turbulent world of the activist mid-1930s, and thence to the New Deal world of Washington, D.C., where he had a home with Bernarda Bryson for the first time.

The next section of the mural displays ordered and purposeful groups. It juxtaposes the benefits of unionization, a scene of education on the history of labor in a classroom,<sup>30</sup> and the cooperative construction of a factory building in an agricultural setting. The workers constructing a factory are a specific reference to the Jewish garment workers who originally founded Jersey Homesteads in 1932.

The conclusion of the mural is the New Deal. The last scene shows the specific men who took on the support of the utopian community that represented the ideals of the Resettlement Administration, including Rexford Tugwell, David Dubinsky, head of the International Garment Workers Union, and Heywood Brown, a spokesman for labor. They are seated around a table, with the plan of the community tilted up as both an emblem of the planning of the town itself and of the planning process of the entire Resettlement Administration.

Although the individuals in the New Deal scene are more specific than in any other section of the mural, that specificity is paired with their activity as a group understood as part of a process, rather than an individual initiative. It was around this table, with the planners of the Resettlement Administration, that Shahn could have placed himself and Bernarda Bryson, for they both were involved as artists in its early programs. Behind the prominent New Deal group is a small "flashback" of a young family leaving a poorly planned community to join the new cooperative. The spatial stasis of the segment of New Deal administrators contrasts with the dynamic processes of immigration and unionization. It invokes the interest of the New Deal in reestablishing stability and traditional family units.

Without showing any sign of the extensive strife of the labor movement,

Shahn, with great subtlety, made one theme a clear reference to the Marxist interpretation of history in terms of economic forces driving social change and the power of the worker. Shahn legitimizes the radicality of his interpretation through devices that link the mural to traditional history painting. Not only does he structurally quote the spatial relationships of Renaissance murals, he also 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. The prominent female with covered head at the foreground of the painting subtly refers to the madonna as well as a symbolic Jewish matriarch. This conjunction of a Marxist view of historical process with Jewish and biblical references, and conveyed with formal devices that are both conventional and avant-garde, provides the basis for Shahn's success in bypassing the potentially heavy censorship of the American scene theme.

The themes themselves are not entirely unique among New Deal murals. Another example of sweatshops appears in George Biddle's murals for the Justice Department, completed in 1935.<sup>31</sup> Biddle creates static tableaux that become symbols of deprivation. Despite his deep concern for the subject, he makes whimsical errors: In the sweatshop he put himself at a sewing machine, although nothing could have been further from the experience of the wealthy scion of a Philadelphia family that dated back to before the Revolution. Shahn was closer to the subject matter. Although his own family was not part of the textile sweat shops, his understanding of the psychological conditions gives his three sections of sweat shop workers an intensity through his brilliant use of compressed space. The figures are physically jammed together or lined up on a long, deep narrow table. As suggested in his outline, the narrowness of life and mind in New York was as oppressive as the ghetto of the Russian pale. Biddle's images suggest emotional despair and isolation from the rewards of society; Shahn's scenes project resignation and claustrophobia.

Another thematic comparison can be made with Edward Laning's Ellis Island cycle of murals completed in the spring of 1937, just before Shahn commenced work. Although the overall theme *The Role of the Immigrant in the Development of America* is entirely different, the arrival scene is similar. A close comparison reveals again the immediacy of Shahn's mural. The arriving group faces us more directly and includes specific people. It also suggests the tightness of a compact community, whereas Laning's immigrants are more isolated. Laning includes a reunion scene of husband and wife, rather than Shahn's accurate "holding pen" of the Registry Hall at Ellis Island. Laning suggests the symbol of the holy family with a mother/father/child as the prominent cluster in the foreground, whereas Shahn's central figure beside Einstein is a powerful mother figure without child, a reference to the fact that families were frequently separated in the immigration process. Last, Laning's use of large half-naked figures draws not only from the academic tradition but also from the symbols of American work, as seen in the pioneering murals of Thomas Hart Benton. Benton's murals were, in fact, a fundamental reference point for many of the murals of the 1930s.

Benton's painting, above all *America Today*, was accessible throughout the 1930s in the New School for Social Research in downtown New York.<sup>32</sup> In a series of nine active scenes that branched out from an energizing gyro engine he presented America from farm to city, including such industrial subjects as "Coal Mining" and "Steel." These panels were dominated and unified by huge foreground male bodies (often posed for by Jackson Pollock) with a background of smaller scaled details. They interrelated in sequences based on the early western film sets that Benton himself had worked on in the teens. Significantly his film set source was more oriented toward the traditional tableau than those of Shahn, who was familiar with the more avant-garde techniques of Eisenstein and Brecht. Benton transformed the academic formula of the heroic leader by monumentalizing different types of workers and activities in front of a "set," very much like early Hollywood westerns. Benton's link to Marxism is in the glorification of the worker but he emphasized specific activities and individuals, rather than groups and process.<sup>33</sup> In contrast, Shahn's link to Marxism is in his Brechtian use of dense communal groups that invoke economic forces.

Although no other New Deal murals are known to refer to the idea of union organizing, a mural by Marion Greenwood does address urban resettlement. Marion Greenwood's fresco *Blueprint for Living in the Community Center of the Redhook Housing Project* in Brooklyn, like Shahn's, addressed a New Deal Resettlement program. Completed in 1940, the mural also contrasts the old and new, and like Shahn's depicts the actual building of the new town. Greenwood had worked in Mexico as a fresco painter, and was highly regarded by Diego Rivera. Her monumental workers are simplified and modernized, with an emphasis on the act of building and the sense of community. The image was integrated with the architecture of the room. On the other hand, she clearly conforms to government ideology in showing the men working and the woman as a mother.<sup>34</sup>

The Jersey Homesteads mural was more autobiographical and oriented to Marxist theories and Jewish history than any of Shahn's own later mural cycles. During 1938–9 Ben Shahn and Bernarda Bryson worked together on a second major mural cycle at the Bronx Post Office. *Resources of America* consists of thirteen paintings created in egg tempera rather than fresco. Much less an integral part of a specific community than the Jersey Homesteads Project, and sponsored by the Treasury Section of Fine Arts, a more established group of art sponsors than the by-then-defunct Resettlement Administration, the cycle of thirteen paintings was tied to the ideology of the New Deal and American workers as emblems, rather than to a narrative about the inhabitants of the community itself.

Bryson and Shahn won the commission jointly, a result of their close friendships with the administrators of the New Deal. Bryson's conception, as it survives in sketches, was linked directly to New Deal programs. She includes such subjects as a mother and child in front of slum housing, a destitute city dweller, and the building of new housing and parks; she also included a

rancher, a miner, a farmer, a railroad foreman, and dam builders. The focal point of her cycle was Franklin Roosevelt, framed by an artist and a teacher (both women). The murals as executed for the Bronx Post Office followed Ben Shahn's proposals rather than Bryson's, as Bryson felt that "Either set of original designs would have been a complete concept in itself. To break up either would have been destructive to it. I chose to follow Ben's designs."<sup>35</sup> On the other hand, Shahn and Bryson were working so closely at this point that such a statement may be exaggerated. Some evidence shows that Bryson worked from Shahn's photographs in her sketches and that he embodied some of her approaches in his conception.

As installed, the mural has Walt Whitman as the focal figure instead of Roosevelt. Two large-scaled single panels focus on workers picking and baling cotton, both based on Shahn's photographs taken in 1935–7. Other panels depict textile factory workers including a girl spooling and a man weaving, an electrical engineer holding a plan, an agricultural scene of a thresher and worker, and a hydroelectric dam. The connection to New Deal programs is looser than in Bryson's plan, but the overall theme is the same in terms of the building of society.

In both the sketches and completed mural, the imagery is segmented in many separate panels, the result of the post office design. The imagery is symbolic rather than narrative. Shahn's handwritten notes on a letter authorizing the murals comment, "Ideal situation would be simplicity of symbol and integrity of artist."<sup>36</sup> The relationship of the typical viewer in the Post Office to the murals' subject matter was remote, except in so far as the Bronx had a working-class population and the mural depicted workers. As history painting, the Bronx imagery presents isolated symbols of American industry, several of which are the same as those presented by Benton in his New School murals (agriculture, mining, hydroelectricity). Furthermore, the subjects are less connected to Shahn himself, except in relationship to his photographic trips sponsored by the Resettlement Administration. His radical and complex approach to murals at Jersey Homesteads has now become a more programmatic and generalized image of the American scene.

In the following year, 1939, Shahn returned to the theme of immigration in a proposal for a post office in St. Louis. Although these sketches also encompassed several other themes such as the four freedoms and the history of the frontier and river life, the immigration images are a striking contrast to the subtle understatement of the Jersey Homestead painting. In the two immigration designs dramatic images of Nazi guns, concentration camps, and desperately fleeing Jews unequivocally present the violent destruction of the compact Jewish community seen in the earlier painting. The murals were not accepted.<sup>37</sup> Another mural executed in 1939 was based on *The First Amendment* and included a dramatic diagonal organization and a dialectical relationship of the capitalist and the worker to left and right, both quotations from Rivera's format at Rockefeller Center in *Man at the Crossroads*.

Shahn's final painted mural completed in fresco in 1940–2 was the *Mean-*

*ings and Benefits of Social Security*. In this painting, he returned to Rivera's dialectical model by pairing images. In this case, one wall showed conditions before Social Security, and the other, after Social Security. Using several of his own earliest New York photographs as well as other sources, Shahn depicted no famous people, only ordinary people. He contrasted the handicapped and unemployed, old and young, with, on the facing wall, people enjoying sports and building buildings. The *Meanings and Benefits of Social Security* is by a loyalist to the New Deal who avidly believed in its programs.

Shahn as a history painter, with the frequent assistance and collaboration of Bernarda Bryson, created through his several murals a variety of images that present both specific representations and hieroglyphic emblems of the New Deal and its programs. Yet only in the Jersey Homestead murals, with its layered density of personal and political references, did he fully develop the many aspects of history that constantly interact and reinforce each other, particularly the intersection of the symbolic historical tableau and the hieroglyphs of his personal memory. In its unusual subjects, its experiment with the intersection of narrative history and personal memory, and its use of spatial relationships borrowed from a wide spectrum of historical sources, the mural is one of the most complex images of the entire decade of the Depression.

Yet, in the end, the Jersey Homesteads mural depicts simply a myth. In spite of Shahn's optimistic image of stabilization, Jersey Homesteads, because of economic forces beyond its control, was already failing as an industrial and agricultural cooperative by the time Shahn and Bryson completed the mural. By January of 1938 there was a tenant crisis, problems with organized labor and the idea of the cooperatives, a lack of jobs, and a break with the Resettlement Administration. Anti-Semitism from nearby communities such as Hightstown, a center for the Ku Klux Klan, was also painfully isolating for the original Jewish residents. In addition, many of them found living in the country unpleasant and even frightening compared to the urban life to which they were accustomed.

The houses were put up for private occupancy. Ben Shahn and Bernarda Bryson moved into the community. Today, only a few descendants of the garment workers remain. The town is predominantly writers and artists, or academics from nearby institutions. Today, Jersey Homesteads, renamed Roosevelt, has no industry or cooperative agricultural programs supporting the community, the result certainly of current economic and political forces as powerful as those that drove the creation of the community in the first place. Ben Shahn is not available to paint this contemporary chapter, but the economics that drive suburbia would probably not particularly inspire him.



40. For a discussion of these views, see Arnolde De Leon, *They Called Them Greasers: Anglo Attitudes Toward Mexicans in Texas, 1821–1900* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983), especially Chapters 2 and 8.
41. In this respect, McArdle's painting conforms to Slotkin's understanding of the process of myth. As he notes in *The Fatal Environment*, myth provides rules for behavior by "transforming secular history into a body of sacred and sanctifying legends" (p. 19). For information on the gun platform and whether or not one was actually constructed at the Alamo, see Ratcliffe, p. 109, n. 72. My interpretation doesn't depend on the outcome of this debate and is not intended as an endorsement of one side or another. In fact, I find the fact that there even is such a debate more telling than the establishment of a "truth" one way or another.
42. McArdle, "Brief Description or Reading of the Painting," in "Companion . . . Vol. II," pp. 25–9.
43. Slotkin, *Fatal Environment*, pp. 19–20.
44. See Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans*, pp. 76–95. As Montejano points out, "race relations, which drew heavily from the legacy of the Alamo and the Mexican War, were maintained and sharpened by market competition and property disputes," p. 82.
45. Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory*, p. 141.
46. See Vivien Green Fryd, *Art and Empire: The Politics of Ethnicity in the U.S. Capitol, 1815–1860* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 209–13, for a discussion of Leutze's painting and its physical context.

## Chapter 17

1. Bernarda Bryson Shahn has described her role as follows: "The conception was Ben's; I did a lot of the painting, of course, under his instructions and/or guidance." Letter to the author (July 5, 1992).
2. A previous study of this mural is by Frances K. Pohl, "Constructing History, A Mural by Ben Shahn," *Arts Magazine* (September 1987), pp. 36–40. See also Frances K. Pohl, *Ben Shahn with Ben Shahn's Writings* (San Francisco: Pomegranate, 1993), pp. 11–21.
3. Victor Burgin, *The End of Art Theory* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press International, 1986), pp. 112–21, 129; Burgin argues for a separation of hieroglyph and *peripeteia* but states that Barthes "conflates" them. Barthes's approach is then more accurate for Shahn, who also conflates them. See also Roland Barthes, "The Third Meaning," in *A Barthes Reader* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), pp. 317–33; and Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).
4. For the artist's description of this process see Ben Shahn, *The Shape of Content* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957), pp. 29–30.
5. Gardner Jackson to Ben Shahn (October 13, 1931). Shahn Papers (1991), Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. (AAA); On Tom Mooney see file "Tom Mooney," Shahn Papers (1991), AAA; and Diego Rivera, "Foreword," *The Mooney Case by Ben Shahn* (New York: Downtown Gallery, 1933); on Scottsboro Case see file "Scottsboro Boys," Shahn Papers (1991), AAA.
6. Jean Charlot, "Ben Shahn," *Hound and Horn*, 6, 4 (July–September 1933), p. 633. Jean Charlot was a close friend of the Mexican mural painters and a participant in the mural renaissance in Mexico. Another reviewer referred to the works as

- part of our "modern revolutionary mythology" (Matthew Josephson, "The Passion of Sacco-Vanzetti," *The New Republic* [April 20, 1932], p. 275).
7. Lincoln Kirstein, *Mural Painting in America* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1932). On the censorship incident see Hugo Gellert, "We Capture the Walls!" *Art Front* (November 1934), p. 8.
  8. Diego Rivera, *Portrait of America*, with an explanatory note by Bertram Wolfe, (New York: Covici Friede, 1934). See especially panel XII, pp. 183–91 "The New Freedom," ill. p. 185. Lawrence Hurlburt, *The Mexican Muralists in the United States* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989), pp. 175–93. See also Ida Rodriguez-Prampolini, "Rivera's Concept of History," in *Diego Rivera, A Retrospective*, ed. Cynthia Neuman Helms (New York: Founders Society, Detroit Institute of Art and in conjunction with Norton, 1986), pp. 131–7.
  9. Interview with Lucienne Bloch (November 2 and 3, 1992).
  10. Laura Katzman is examining in depth Ben Shahn's relationship to photography. See her article "The Politics of Media-Painting and Photography in the Art of Ben Shahn," *American Art*, 7, 1 (Winter 1993), pp. 61–87.
  11. Interviews with Bernarda Bryson (August 2, 1991 and March 16, 1992). See Bernarda Bryson interview with Lisa Kirwin (April 29, 1983), AAA. Bryson mentioned here that she was actually able to get her phoned-in reports included in the *New York Times* by knowing how to sound like one of their reporters.
  12. Letter to the author (July 5, 1992).
  13. Sidney Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics, The Rise and Decline of the Farm Security Administration* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1968), pp. 107–18. See also Eleanor Roosevelt, *This I Remember* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1949), pp. 125–33. Eleanor Roosevelt was instrumental in urging help for these workers. There were three programs: rural rehabilitation, land reform, and the community program, which was to combine industry with subsistence farming in a cooperative community.
  14. Interview (July 16, 1993). Bryson spoke of going to towns simply because they liked their names, such as Freeze Fork, Kentucky, and Sweet Home, Georgia.
  15. Jack Hurley, *Portrait of a Decade, Roy Stryker and the Development of Documentary Photography in the Thirties* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1972), p. 50. According to Hurley, Shahn was instrumental in formulating Stryker's use of photography. See also John Tagg, "The Currency of the Photograph: New Deal Reformism and Documentary Rhetoric," in *The Burden of Representation* (London: Macmillan, 1988), pp. 153–83.
  16. "We Are the People," typescript, Shahn Papers (1991), AAA.
  17. Interview (July 16, 1993).
  18. Letter to the author (September 7, 1993). Edwin Roskam, *Roosevelt, New Jersey: Big Dreams in a Small Town and What Time Did to Them* (New York: Grossman, 1972), pp. 19–29. See also Memorandum, Shahn Papers (1991), AAA.
  19. "Two other architects preceded Kastner – one wanted to build tamped earth houses – he was let go. The second designed pre-fab houses and a huge factory was erected off the edge of town for the purpose of manufacturing the slabs. It was badly designed, was stopped and for a number of years stood at the edge of town, empty. Next a contractor made off with four million dollars worth of supplies." Letter to the author from Bernarda Bryson Shahn (September 7, 1993).
  20. Interoffice Communication to Adrian Dornbush from Alfred Kastner (March 2, 1936), Shahn Papers (1991), AAA.
  21. Shahn Papers (1991), AAA.

22. These sketches are illustrated in Bernarda Bryson Shahn, *Ben Shahn* (New York: Abrams, 1972), pp. 147–8.
23. Shahn Papers (1991), AAA.
24. Letter from Adrian Dornbush to Milo Perkins (January 1937), Shahn Papers (1991), AAA.
25. Bernarda Bryson Shahn, letter to the author (July 5, 1992).
26. Ann Novotny, *Strangers at the Door* (Riverside, N.Y.: Chatham Press, 1971), p. 15. A photograph of Steinmetz with Einstein appears on this page.
27. Seldon Rodman, *Portrait of the Artist as an American, Ben Shahn, A Biography with Pictures* (New York: Harper, 1951), pp. 156–9. Photograph of Shahn's father, mother, and great-grandmother appear in this text.
28. Interview with Bernarda Bryson Shahn (July 16, 1993).
29. Shahn had a pamphlet on the history of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union that outlined the dramas of the early years of the union, dramas that frequently centered around young girls. Educational Department, *The Story of the I.L.G.W.U.* (New York: Abco Press, 1935). Shahn chose to focus on the more publicly recognizable male leaders.
30. The two unions, AF of L and CIO, were still sensitively separate as indicated in a letter that documents Shahn being asked to avoid suggesting a sequential relationship between the two groups in his diagram in the background of the painting. Adrian Dornbush to Milo Perkins (n.d.), Shahn Papers (1991), AAA.
31. Illustrations of the murals by other artists discussed can be found in the following books: Francis O'Connor, ed., *The New Deal Art Projects, An Anthology of Memoirs* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1972), George Biddle, p. 33, and Edward Laning, pp. 84–5, 96–7; Francis V. O'Connor, *Art for the Millions* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1975), Marion Greenwood, p. 51.
32. For illustrations of the mural see Henry Adams, *Thomas Hart Benton* (New York: Knopf, 1989), pp. 157–67, 185–91.
33. Erica Doss, *Benton, Pollock and the Politics of Modernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991) has the most recent and useful discussion of Benton's murals.
34. On the theme of sexual stereotyping in New Deal murals, see Barbara Melosh, *Engendering Culture: Manhood and Womanhood in New Deal Art and Theatre* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992). Melosh errs in not distinguishing the changes during the course of the New Deal in gender images; she focuses in painting only on the late Treasury Section Post Office murals.
35. Letter to the author (July 5, 1992). The finished mural does seem to use Bryson's design in the case of some of the workers.
36. Undated handwritten note, Shahn Papers (1991), AAA.
37. One other unexecuted immigration series had been proposed earlier for Greenhills, Wisconsin, that related to the history of the "progressive-liberal movement" and the "major immigrant groups, the Germans, refugees from the unsuccessful German Socialist uprising of 1848, bringing with them 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." Undated typescript, Shahn Papers (1991), AAA.

## Chapter 18

1. Letter from May Stevens to author, dated November 29, 1993. I want to thank the

