

# The Door and the Cage

## A Study of Jewish and Black Communities in Harlem from 1900 to 1930

In 1920, Harlem was home to roughly 80,000 blacks and 178,000 Jews. In 1930, there were only 5,000 Jews left in the neighborhood, while the black population had more than doubled, reaching close to 165,000. Symbolically, the Temple Israel of Harlem became the place of worship of the Mount Olivet Baptist Church, a black congregation.

In this study, I examine this divergence in the Harlem population and explain that it shows a relative assimilation of Jews to white mainstream America *vis à vis* blacks. While attempting to explain this difference, the thesis explores the relations between eastern European Jewish immigrants and southern-born black migrants. I argue that the Jews' achievement is partly due to their leapfrog over the blacks that helped them integrate more easily in a racist society.

### I – Introduction

Points out issues and asks the main questions: did the word ghetto describe the same sociological institution for blacks and for Jews? What does it tell us about the process of assimilation to the American society?

Lays out the groundwork by clarifying the use of some concepts and designations.

### II – Migrations

Examines the background of the two migrant groups, in order to show how their comparison is relevant.

### III – Blacks and Jews in Harlem

Gives a brief historical perspective on the lives of blacks and Jews in Harlem from 1900 to 1930.

### IV – The Ghettos: Trying to Explain the 1920's Divergence

Attempts to explain the divergence of the 1920's.

### V – Leapfrogging into America

Explains the divergence by looking at the relations between the two groups.

Concludes by putting the study into a wider and more immediate perspective.

"Though English was my native tongue and America my native land, the, an alien, could operate a store and earn a living in a neighborhood where I could not even live."

-Richard Wright about the wife of his Jewish employer, M. Hoffman, in *Black Boy* (1945)

Eastern European  
Migrant/Immigrant  
May Laws Jim Crow  
Great Migration Black  
Pogrom Jew Color line  
Racism Whiteness Ghetto  
Transitional space Yiddish  
Succession-invasion theory

Sons of Ham Christ-killers

"Jews of the race" Blackface

Jazz Psychological wages of  
whiteness 1920's divergence  
Harlem Renaissance movement

The "white man's middleman"

Leapfrog Centrifugal force

Black Hebrews

Caucasian Jews

White America

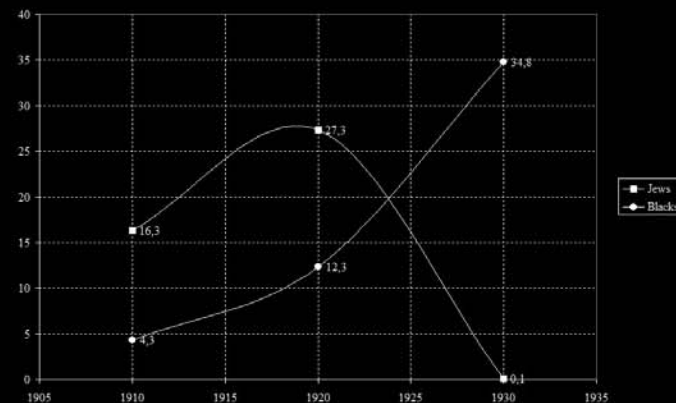
Black bottom

Assimilation

#### Sources used for this poster:

- Bevenidge, A., (2008, August), An Affluent, White Harlem? *Gotham Gazette*.
- Gurock, J., (1979), *When Harlem Was Jewish: 1870-1930*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Osofsky, G., (1963), *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto, Negro New York, 1890-1930*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Schoemer, A., (1968), *Harlem On My Mind*. New York: Random House.
- Wright, R., (1991), *Black Boy*, in *Later Works*. New York: The Library of America.

Percentage of Jews and Blacks in Harlem Population (1910-1930)



1st Ave. & 112th St., 1917 - N.Y. Public Library



7th Ave. & 30th St., 1904 - Museum of the City of N.Y.