ORAL HISTORY AND MULTI-CULTURAL EDUCATION:
FINDING OUR PLACE IN CLEVELAND’S GLOBAL VILLAGE

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One way of finding our place in the Global Village is to study the people and neighborhoods of Cleveland. Invariably you will find that many of the city’s residents have either emigrated or descended from people from a foreign country. These familiar bonds tie people to events, places and cultures far beyond Cleveland. Ethnic neighborhoods and groups—often defying the popular image of the melting pot—reveal the social and cultural diversity of the city’s over sixty nationality groups.

James Baldwin, an Afro-American writer, once wrote in Nobody Knows My Name: "Even the most incorrigible maverick has to be born somewhere. He may leave the group that produced him. He may be forced to, but nothing will efface his origin. The marks which he carries with him are everywhere." Some marks are more visible than others—such as the language, food, holidays or clothing of a foreign country. But others—such as familial traditions, work habits, or morals—need close scrutiny for us to understand their meaning.

Multi-Cultural Education in Cleveland

Since their beginning in 1836—when the city became incorporated—the Cleveland Public Schools have been concerned with the social and cultural adjustment of the city’s immigrant population. It was the mission of the schools to both successfully teach children of foreign background and mix nationalities together as celebrated in the philosophy of the melting pot. During the Western Reserve Era the one-room school grouped children together but the bias of reading the Protestant Bible at the beginning of the school day and the denial of cultural values outside the norms of Anglo-Saxon America motivated the city’s Irish Catholics and other nationality groups to send their children to parochial schools. Many of these schools (123 existed by 1883) as well as nationality churches which had over 200,000 members by 1920 celebrated the cultures of immigrant people.

Teachers in Cleveland’s Orange Elementary School found it necessary to become bilingual to teach Czech children before the Civil War. In 1872 the public schools began a bilingual program to attract over 2,000 children attending private German schools. Educators believed that the cultural exchange between Germans and native-born children would be beneficial for both groups. As schools increasingly enrolled children of Eastern and Southern European background between the 1880s and World War I, they developed a variety of programs to meet their needs. In 1901 a special language or "steamer class" was opened in Harmon Elementary School for non-English speaking children who were over-age or failing their classes. The educational system developed vocational-technical programs which provided job training but, unfortunately, too often pigeon-holed immigrant children because educators believed that they were "hand-minded" or incapable of traditional academic work. The Murray Hill School in Cleveland’s Little Italy opened the first medical dispensary in America for school children. Citizenship classes, language instruction and social-welfare services for poor immigrants became a major component of the educational program.

Teachers and schools developed multi-cultural programs and events which celebrated the city’s cultural diversity. Mrs. Helen Fedas, a Hungarian immigrant, started a school and social clubs for immigrants on Cleveland’s Near West Side. Mrs. Eleanor Ledbetter, a librarian in Warszawa
or the Fleet-Broadway neighborhood of Polish and Czech immigrants, won international acclaim for her translations and the Foreign Language Collection of the Cleveland Public Library. Raymond Moley, a professor from Western Reserve University and later a member of FDR’s "brain trust" during the New Deal, coordinated the Americanization work of over sixty agencies in Cleveland during World War I.

The Struggle Against Xenophobia

The hysteria against Germans and other immigrant groups during World War I and its post-war aftermath caused America to lose faith in the melting pot. Ten Clevelanders were deported with over 200 aliens on the "Red Ark" during the Red Scare of 1919-1920. Immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe and Asia significantly dropped after quota laws to restrict newcomers from their homelands were passed in 1924. Teachers, librarians, and ethnic groups continued, however, to build an awareness of Cleveland’s Global Village. Nationality holidays, customs, art programs, the cultural gardens in Rockefeller Park, and the All Nations Festival proved that the ethnic vitality of the city’s people would not die under the prevailing xenophobia. Blacks supported Karamu House, churches, educational programs, and the Martin Luther King Day to demonstrate that they too were an important part of the city’s social mosaic. Cleveland State University’s Multi-Cultural Educational Center and monograph series on the city’s ethnic groups, the Ethnic and Black Archival Collections at the Western Reserve Historical Society, the Greater Cleveland Ethnographic Museum, Peoples and Cultures and the bicentennial restoration and celebration of the Statue of Liberty created a greater awareness of the roots of our cultural heritage. As a social historian and a teacher with students drawn from the city’s diverse groups it was natural for me to join this effort.

Community Studies at Cuyahoga Community College

My students at the Eastern Campus of Cuyahoga Community College are studying and researching the global roots of Cleveland in a community studies class which focuses on the history of the city’s ethnic neighborhoods and cultures. The class is an outgrowth of my interest in the social history of "ordinary people" who live and work in America. From 1979 to 1980 I attended a National Endowment for the Humanities Seminar at Columbia University under the direction of Professor James Shenton. The seminar concentrated on the history of race and ethnicity in urban America. From 1981 to 1983 I served as the Research Director of the Cleveland Public Library’s Cleveland Heritage Program. I organized Community Studies classes for secondary teachers at the College of Urban Affairs at Cleveland State University during the Fall of 1981 and the NEH’s Summer Seminar at Columbia University in 1984 and 1985. The Cleveland Public Library published A Guide to Studying Neighborhoods and Resources on Cleveland in 1984 as part of the Heritage Program.

The Guide and materials from the NEH Seminar became the basis for the program at Cuyahoga Community College. Both Cleveland State University’s College of Urban Affairs and Case Western University’s American Studies Department adopted the Guide for courses. Students trace the social evolution of Cleveland from a New England village to an ethnic metropolis. They concentrate on researching their families, neighborhoods, or ethnic backgrounds. They compare the experiences of different ethnic groups and listen to other student projects. Oral histories of immigrant life through individual case studies or family histories help students understand our global connections.
The Oral History Project

The following research model is used for interviews of immigrants and migrants:

1) Description of the "Old Country" (Europe, the American South)

2) Family profile in the "Old Country"
   - Social status
   - Religious and cultural background
   - Employment and economic background

3) Reasons for leaving the "Old Country" (Economic, Political or Social)
   - Expectations of New Country
   - Preparations for journey

4) Arrival in America
   - How, when, where, why?
   - First reactions
   - Housing arrangements
   - First employment and work background (before coming to Cleveland if applicable)
   - Difficulties in adjusting to America (language, food, environment)
   - Education and family life
   - Continuities between "Old Country" and new settlement

5) Arrival in Cleveland
   - How, when, where, why?
   - Job opportunities and work life of family members
   - Education, religion and family life
   - Living areas in Cleveland: the social and cultural life
   - Memories of city, neighborhood and nationality life
   - Patterns for children in education, jobs and marriage
   - Was the family "typical" of its immigrant or migrant group?

6) Reflections
   - Descriptions of similarities and differences between Old Country and Cleveland
   - Analysis of what’s been gained or lost
   - Analysis of the Americanization of different generations (customs, language, values)
   - Analysis of future expectations or plans
   - Comparison with others

The student oral history projects will be stored at the Eastern Campus Learning Resource Center with a collection of similar tapes and transcripts from the Cleveland Heritage Program, the Greater Cleveland Ethnographic Museum, and Barbara Simpson’s black history project. The materials need to be organized and prepared for public access. A computer can index and retrieve the parts that a user might need. Community projects will also be stored with the collection for historical exhibitions, plays, curriculum or printed materials and research.

The following excerpt of oral histories tell us how newcomers from foreign countries and the American South attempted to preserve a way of life they had left behind. In the Old World people were knit together in a network of personal relationships around the family, the church and the
community. This sense of belongingness could never be duplicated after immigrants and migrants were uprooted, but emotional needs influenced them to seek a similar life in Cleveland:

We moved on Professor Street [Tremont] almost a block and a half from St. Theodosius. We were halfway between Annunciation and St. Theodosius and other churches. We felt we were in the middle of European culture, shall we say, with all these edifices of God there. The only thing that was missing there was the Temple. There were so many domes and various things it made us feel at home because every little block you go in Greece, I suppose you'll find another chapel or church.

Greek-American
Greater Cleveland Ethnographic
Museum (CEM)

It was like living in a village within the city. People were friendly, and often sat on their porches. Whole families visited each other. Most, but not all, of the people were Irish. Immigrants were still coming; people saved money for relatives in Ireland. Most people didn't think of themselves as being hard off economically. There were well-to-do people living in the Angle.

Irish-American
Cleveland Heritage Program (CHP)

Most of my neighbors were Croatians. I was down off 47th Street and my landlady was Zumberak. They were all Zumberakians down there. There were two Slovenians on the street and the rest were Croatians. Then from there on in, I was with my people all the time. St. Clair was bustling all the time.

Croatian-American, CEM

It was a very quiet and isolated area as you come down Eightieth Street. With the exception of Blacks and Appalachians, the population was first generation immigrants. Therefore, language was difficult. However, we were able to communicate. Every family had a garden and they would exchange seeds and plants. Cooking and canning recipes were handed over the back fence. Many mason jars of wines were sampled. The children went to Kinsman School. On Saturday, most of us would meet at the Sunbeam Matinee. People did not lock their doors and they knew their neighbors. It was a common thing to borrow flour, sugar, eggs, etc. People traded services.

Afro-American, CHP

Cleveland was not like it is now. White and colored were mixed together. There were Germans, Irish, Italians and Negro. We all lived together. It was a long while before we knew that we were colored. Where I lived on 28th Street, my people rented from a German lady. She would watch me when my mother would go to the store. I learned to talk German when I was old enough. When I got older they took me to school. The teacher looked at me and talked to me, but I wouldn't answer. She told one of the teachers that she was going to have to talk to my mother--that I didn't seem to know what she was talking about. She called my mother and told her she thought I was in the wrong school, "he won't answer, he won't talk." My mother said to her, "Well, I did forget to tell you one thing--he doesn't understand English." The teacher asked,
"Well, what do you talk?" My mother said she knew German and we learned it from a German lady. I was six years old then. I heard my folks talk English, but they never say anything to me. I always talked German.

Afro-American, CHP

"The Peoples of Cleveland"

"The Peoples of Cleveland," a play on the city's immigrant and minority neighborhoods, was derived from these oral history materials. Slides, music and dance accompany the script. The play is based on "Baltimore Voices" that was created by Tedd Durr at the University of Maryland. He and a group of social studies teachers organized the Baltimore Neighborhood Heritage Program which worked with a local theater to produce an oral history play.

George and Stephanie Hrbek, the Director of the Near West Side Community Theater, helped organize the script. It was the inspiring talent and work of the latter person, her co-director Lauren Persons and musical director Bob Navis that breathed and shaped the creative vitality of the play. It was first performed at the concluding program of the Heritage Program at Cleveland State University in June, 1983. The play has been seen by almost forty public audiences: churches, schools, the Cleveland Workhouse, labor and fraternal organizations, the Annual Faculty Symposium at Cuyahoga Community College, and The Cleveland Growth Association whose Leadership Cleveland Program voted it the most outstanding part of its training. [Editor: "The Peoples of Cleveland" was performed on November 6, 1987 as part of the Western Reserve Studies Symposium.] Different public audiences have appreciated the play for a variety of reasons. The elderly recognize the play as legitimating and acknowledging their lives--unknown but nevertheless courageous and worthwhile. Neighborhood, labor and ethnic groups see their struggles and accomplishments portrayed in the play.

I trained representatives from the Women's Issues Committee of the Commission on Catholic Community Action to record the history of their peers in Cleveland. The staff of the Near West Side Community Theater have produced "Harvesting My Dreams" which premiered at St. Malachi's Church on March 28, 1987. Sister Ruthmary Powers, a member of the summer seminar at Columbia University, has used oral history with her students at Holy Family School in Cleveland.

Finding Our Place

Community studies and oral history are two sources of information on cultural diversity that make the city smaller as well as larger. For if we investigate the ethnic family, neighborhood or group under a microscope, we will also connect ourselves to the Global Village. The marks of its inhabitants--both locally and internationally--become more visible and meaningful as we become more aware. As T. S. Eliot, the English poet, declared in "Little Gidding," we will "arrive where we started and know the place for the first time." Like another spiritual explorer and healer of the Global Village, Dag Hammarskjold, the Secretary-General of the United Nations from 1953 until his death in 1961, we will also realize that we are part of an even greater journey:

In a dream I walked with God through the deep places of creation; past walls that receded and gates that opened, through hall after hall of silence, darkness and refreshment--the dwelling place of souls acquainted with light and warmth--until around me, was an infinity into which we all flowed together and lived anew like the rings made by raindrops falling upon wide expanses of calm waters.

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