

## 40

## AN INSIDER'S VIEW OF HULL HOUSE

One of the initial efforts to bring about progressive reform came from individuals such as Jane Addams, who helped establish the settlement house movement in America. Part of a first generation of college-educated women, Addams declined marriage and motherhood and devoted her life to the poor and to social reform. In 1889, she and college friend Ellen Starr bought the Hull House mansion in a Chicago immigrant neighborhood and created a model settlement house that offered services to the poor in the neighborhood: playground, nursery, kindergarten, library, night school for adults, and some job training. But Addams realized that such neighborhood activities were futile unless laws were reformed to address larger problems, so she campaigned to pass state and local laws that would improve conditions in the urban neighborhoods. Addams publicized Hull House and social reform with lecture tours and writing. Hilda S. Polacheck, the author of the excerpted selection below, was a Polish immigrant who discovered Hull House and its offerings. Her account presents a unique insider's view of Hull House and the services it provided for immigrants in the neighborhood. Polacheck credits Hull House, and especially Jane Addams, with making her life in America better.

---

→ **Questions to Consider:** What did Hull House provide immigrants and urban dwellers? Why? How could they finance such an operation? Why did Hilda Polacheck frequently visit and work at Hull House? What was Hull House's impact on the urban neighborhood? Are there similar institutions in contemporary American cities?

---

She took me up a flight of stairs and then down a flight and we came to the Labor Museum. The museum had been opened a short time before and it was a very special addition to the work at Hull-House and very dear to her heart. As I look back, and this may be wishful thinking, I feel that she sensed what I needed most at that time. . . .

There were many classes connected with the Labor Museum. Here we could learn how to cook and sew and also learn about millinery and embroidery. . . .

There was still another function that the Labor Museum filled. Miss Addams found that there was a definite feeling of superiority on the part of children of immigrants toward their parents. As soon as the children learned to speak English, they were prone to look down on those who could not speak the language. I am grateful that I never had that feeling toward my parents, but I often talked to play-mates who would disdainfully say: "Aw, she can't talk English."

---

Hilda Satt Polacheck, *I Came a Stranger: The Story of a Hull-House Girl*, ed. Dena J. Polacheck Epstein (Urbana, IL, 1989), 63-67, 70-73, 91-92, 102. Copyright 1989 The Trustees of the University of Illinois. Reprinted by permission.

I recall having an argument with a girl whose mother could speak German, French, Russian, and Polish but had not yet learned to speak English. That girl did not realize that her mother was a linguist. To her, the mother was just a greenhorn.

For such children the Labor Museum was an eye-opener. When they saw crowds of well-dressed Americans standing around admiring what Italian, Irish, German, and Scandinavian mothers could do, their disdain for their mothers often vanished.

The Labor Museum did not solve all the problems of immigrant parents and their children. There were many problems that were not easy to solve. Children, by going to school and to work, did come in contact with forces in American life and had a better chance of becoming Americanized. But I am sure the Labor Museum reduced the strained feelings on the part of immigrants and their children. . . .

I soon branched out into other activities. I joined a reading class that was conducted by Miss Clara Landsberg. . . .

. . . She opened new vistas in reading for me. In her class we would be assigned a book, which we were to read during the week and then discuss the following session of the class. The class met once a week. I not only read the assigned books but every book I could borrow. Dickens, Scott, Thackeray, Louisa May Alcott, Victor Hugo, Alexander Dumas, and many others now became my friends. The daily monotony of making cuffs was eased by thinking of these books and looking forward to evenings at Hull-House.

For ten years I spent most of my evenings at Hull-House. The first three years of that time I saw Jane Addams almost every night. As more and more people found their way to this haven of love and understanding, she began to relegate the work to other people and to seek rest at the home of friends. But her presence was always felt, whether she was there in person or in spirit. . . .

Bad housing of the thousands of immigrants who lived near Hull-House was the concern of Jane Addams. Where there were alleys in back of the houses, these alleys were filled with large wooden boxes where garbage and horse manure were dumped. In most cases these boxes did not have covers and were breeding places for flies and rats. The city gave contracts to private scavengers to collect the garbage. Its responsibility seemed to end there. There was no alley inspection and no one checked on these collectors.

When Jane Addams called the attention of the health department to the unsanitary conditions, she was told that the city had contracted to have the garbage collected and it could do nothing else. When the time came to renew contracts for garbage collection, Miss Addams, with the backing of some businessmen, put in a bid to collect garbage. Her bid was never considered, but she was appointed garbage inspector for the ward. I have a vision of Jane Addams, honored by the great of the world, acclaimed as the first citizen of Chicago, following a filthy garbage truck down an alley in her long skirt and immaculate white blouse. . . .

Being allowed to teach English to immigrants at Hull-House did more for me than anything that I imparted to my students. It gave me a feeling of security that I so sorely needed. What added to my confidence in the future was that my class was always crowded and the people seemed to make good progress. From time to

time Jane Addams would visit the class to see what I was doing, and she always left with that rare smile on her face; she seemed to be pleased. . . .

But to come back to the subject of textbooks, since there were none, I decided to use the Declaration of Independence as a text. It was a distinct success. The students did not find the words difficult; so in addition to learning English, we all learned the principles of Americanism.

I next introduced the manual on naturalization and the class learned English while studying how to become a citizen. It was all very exciting and stimulating.

My students were now beginning to confide in me. Classes at Hull-House were never just classes where people came to learn a specific subject. There was a human element of friendliness among us. Life was not soft or easy for any of them. They worked hard all day in shops and factories and made this valiant effort to learn the language of their adopted country. At times they needed real help, and they knew that somewhere in this wonderful house on Halsted Street they would get it. . . .

As time went on, I discovered that Hull-House was the experimental laboratory for Jane Addams's interests and services. To create opportunities for young people of the neighborhood, to bring a little sunshine into otherwise bleak lives of older immigrants, to point out the evils of miserable housing; in short, to tell Chicago what its responsibility to the poor was, was just first aid to the problem. She traveled through America spreading the gospel of a better life than she had found on South Halsted Street. As a result, social settlements sprang up all over the country. Chicago became dotted with playgrounds. Social centers were added to these playgrounds and became the responsibility of the city government.

---