

# Jacob Riis – The Story of America's Most Famous Immigrant of the Late 19th Century

Stranger than a Hans Christian Andersen Fairytale

by Norman Berdichevsky (December 2015)



Jacob A. Riis became the most celebrated European immigrant to the United States in the period of mass immigration 1870-1914 and the national spokesman for social reform. He starred in the popular media as the most famous of all the muckraking writers, journalists and photographers at the beginning of the twentieth century. He laid the foundations for crusading journalism and the progressive policies of a generation of reform minded politicians, most notably Theodore Roosevelt who called him "The Ideal American." Upon learning of Riis's death, T.R. wrote to Riis's widow ..... *"I am in deeper sorrow than I can express. I feel as if I have lost a brother. Jacob's friendship has meant more for me than I will ever be able to say."*

Many of today's young Americans in our leading universities are often ignorant or ultra-cynical and in denial of the greatness of the United States and what it afforded tens of millions of immigrants. They refuse to accept the rags to riches story and rejection of the old religious and ethnic hatreds of the past by their own grandparents. The story of Jacob Riis should be required reading again as it was during the first three decades of the 20th century in many college courses on American social history.

Jacob Riis was a frequent guest at the White House and his books, *How the Other Half Lives*, *The Making of an American*, and *The Old Town* were best-sellers and can be reread today to better understand the phenomenon of both the push and pull promoting mass immigration from Europe to the United States following the Civil War. The books launched their author on a tour of dozens of American cities. They made Jacob Riis the most popular speaker in the country, equal in

literary fame with Mark Twain as the highest paid lecturer.

In his native Denmark, he was awarded the highest civilian honor, Ridder af Dannebrog by King Christian IX in 1901, yet he emerged from poverty, one of a family of 15 children (half of whom died in childhood from cholera, tuberculosis or accidents) from Ribe, a remote and isolated town in the barren marshland of rural Southwest Jutland. The town had the reputation of being ultra-conservative, the last in the kingdom to give up whale oil as the fuel for streetlamps and accept kerosene, and the quill for an ink loaded steel nib pen.

Riis emigrated to the United States following an unhappy love affair, arriving in New York in July, 1870, at age 21, seeking employment as a carpenter, almost penniless and armed only with a letter of introduction to the Danish consul. His fantastic success story, like that of Hans Christian Andersen, deserves to be retold. Indeed, Riis had met Andersen on one of his walking tours in Copenhagen, an occurrence ordained by fate for two of the greatest fairy-tale stories of unexpected success against all the odds.

Jacob Riis's father, Niels Edvard was the rector of an academic high school in the small town, a post that had lured him away from Copenhagen but proved to be a disastrous career move. The position was prestigious but paid little. Ribe, at the edge of the Danish Kingdom, on the border with the principality of Slesvig (Schleswig) emerged from the war with Prussia and Austria (see NER September 2015, "[Scorsese's Gangs of New York – How the Left Misuses American History](#)"), the center of the New York slums.

During these stints as a police reporter, he worked the most crime-ridden and impoverished slums of the city and developed a tersely melodramatic writing style, attracting a devoted following among readers. He tried sketching to highlight his writing but this was not effective. In order to illustrate the dark interior of slum dwellings, he did the necessary research to take pictures by the use of flash powder in a pistol-like device that fired cartridges. Recognizing the potential of the flash, Riis informed colleagues in the City's Health Department to go on expeditions with him to the slums and record the atrocious conditions. For three years, Riis combined his own photographs with professionals and succeeded in making a name for himself and assembling an impressive archive of photographs.

## Public Speaking

Disappointed by the offer of the editor of *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* who liked the photographs but not the writing, Riis thought of directly speaking to the public and began a new career. The obvious venue would be a church, but several churches—including Riis's own believed such a subject was politically sensitive and would offend the churchgoers' sensibilities or that they would insult rich and powerful landlords.

## Crusading Journalist

Charles Henry Parkhurst and editor of *Scribner's Magazine*, invited him to submit an illustrated article. Titled, "How the Other Half Lives," the 18 page article appeared in the Christmas 1889 edition of *Scribner's*. It included nineteen of his photographs rendered as line drawings. Its publication brought an invitation to expand the material into an entire book that became a best-seller and made Jacob A. Riis into a national figure. Subtitled "Studies Among the Tenements of New York," it was published in 1890.

Riis then began a life-long friendship with future President Theodore Roosevelt, NYC Police Commissioner. Roosevelt introduced himself to Riis, offering to help his efforts. Upon his 1895 appointment to the presidency of the Board of Commissioners of the New York City Police Department, Roosevelt asked Riis to show him night-time police work. During their first tour, the pair found that nine out of ten patrolmen were not doing their job properly. Riis wrote about this for the next day's newspaper, and for the rest of Roosevelt's term the police were on notice that they would be on public display thanks to his colleague and friend, the crusading newspaperman, Jacob Riis.

After Roosevelt became president, he wrote a tribute to Riis that started:..."*Mr. Jacob A. Riis is 'the most useful citizen of New York.' The countless evils which lurk in the dark corners of our civic institutions, which stalk abroad in the slums, and have their permanent abode in the crowded tenement houses, have met in Mr. Riis the most formidable opponent ever encountered by them in New York City.*"

Riis returned the favor and wrote a campaign biography of Roosevelt that praised him. Riis's concern for the poor and destitute often caused people to assume he disliked the rich. However, Riis showed no sign of discomfort among the

affluent, and often solicited their support. He was sufficiently disgusted by the corruption of Tammany Hall to change from being a Democrat to endorse the Republican Party and would support his good friend Teddy Roosevelt in the Spanish-American War. Riis had even learned Spanish shortly after his arrival in the U.S. solely due to his love of languages and fondness for its melodious sound.

The period just before the Spanish–American War was difficult for Riis. He was approached by liberals who suspected that protests of alleged Spanish mistreatment of the Cubans was merely a ruse intended to provide a pretext for US expansionism; perhaps to avoid offending his friend Roosevelt, Riis refused the offer of bribes by the Democrats to investigate this and made nationalist statements.

Several Jewish and Black critics of Riis maintained that his observations of the economic and social situations of different ethnic and racial groups included indictments of their perceived natural flaws and reflected prejudices but there is no doubt that his concern to improve the living standards of the poor was not marred by racism. The proof can be found in many diary entries as well newspaper articles extolling the promise of America, where everyone, whatever their origin, religion or race, from the lowest in society deserve fair and equal treatment when the vicious cycle of poverty and slum conditions were eliminated.

Critics claim that he had no love for the traditional life styles of people he portrayed, but this was never his intention, believing that all Americans should drop the hyphen from their self-proclamation of national identity even if they maintained a love for the language or traditions of their ancestors (as he did and had extolled in his account of Ribe – *The Old Town*). He was quick to judge and condemn those who failed to assimilate, and he did not refrain from expressing his contempt for them. Riis's depictions of various ethnic groups could be harsh. As portrayed in Riis's books, "The Jews are nervous and inquisitive, the Orientals are sinister, the Italians are unsanitary." It is no wonder that such statements today make him out of favor by those who call themselves "progressives" or "liberals." This is a mistake typical of all those who judge the past by the hindsight of today.

In 1901-02 when the United States was negotiating the purchase of the Danish West Indies (American Virgin Islands), Roosevelt wrote to Riis (addressing him

as “Dear Jake”), proclaiming that he would like nothing more than the privilege of offering him the position of Governor under American stewardship as a just reward for his patriotic service. On the deathbed of Caroline Riis (Jacob’s mother) in Ribe, President Roosevelt sent her a telegram (among the first received in the town) as follows:

Dear Mrs. Riis,

Your son is eating breakfast with us. We are thinking of you with love and sympathy.

Theodore and Edith Roosevelt.

It was the talk of all Denmark for weeks! If Hollywood had produced an accurate film of Jacob Riis’s life, it would no doubt have been savagely attacked by critics as a fairytale (which of course it was, but a true one).

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