Preface

Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, immigrants from Europe came to America in search of a better life for themselves and their offspring—or just for better wages in order to maintain their family life. These immigrants made up three-fourths of the population in many urban centers and were largely responsible for the industrialization and urbanization that created the modern United States. About 30 to 50 percent—the exact number varies by ethnic group—were women. *Peasant Maids—City Women* examines where these women came from, analyzes their place in the societies they left behind, and shows how their lives changed and how they participated in building urban America.

The book focuses on the four largest ethnic groups in Chicago around the turn of the century: Germans, Irish, Swedes, and Poles. It begins its story in the respective home countries. Because of the vast regional variations in nineteenth-century Europe, however, we did not look at nation-states but chose regions that sent many migrants to Chicago. The first part of the book presents concise social histories of four seemingly different European rural cultures, with an emphasis on gender rarely found in European historical scholarship. At the end of each chapter we know why some women wanted to emigrate. The stories continue in Chicago, where we examine how the women organized their lives in the city's ethnic neighborhoods.

Each chapter follows a similar outline. After a brief description of the national historical framework, the regions are introduced with basic information on geographical, social, and political structures. Then follows in-depth analysis of the life-course experience of women, their functions and roles in rural society, their work as well as their prospects. Chapters in the second part describe the neighborhoods and parishes that provided living space for the four ethnic groups. We obtained demographic information on family formation and family change. The statistical skeletons were fleshed out with information on family crises and family culture. The broader picture of community formation and ethnic women's organizations introduces an ethnic women's movement that has hitherto gone unnoticed in

historical writing. In the end we assess the change that took place in immigrant women's lives, and also the degree to which these women participated in constructing modern Chicago.

This research design was accomplished through close cooperation among five scholars from the four ethnic groups involved: Deirdre Mageean from Ireland, now living in Maine; Margareta Matovic from Sweden, living in Stockholm; Maria Anna Knothe from Warsaw, Poland; and Monika Blaschke and Christiane Harzig, both living in Bremen, Germany. This multiethnic research team allowed for extensive use of original sources and language material, and each scholar brought with her firm knowledge and understanding of national histories and historical discourses. We nevertheless followed a joint research agenda, agreeing on major research questions, interpretative framework, and chapter outlines. The chapters are comparable and specific at the same time—the scholars represented not only four languages and four national academic traditions but also three academic disciplines (history, sociology, and anthropology).

Something else became apparent throughout the work: a three-month stay in Chicago, living together and cooperating in research and also in housekeeping, provided us with a delicious variety of ethnic cooking and also gave us the chance to get to know each other. We realized how much our personalities shaped and influenced our academic research. With the days of historicism and the search for a positivistic, value-free objectivity long past, historians have become aware of the limitations imposed and opportunities offered by the personality a researcher brings to the job. We know how much the facts we collect, the sources we consult, what we decide to include and to leave out, shape the way we organize our storyline and influence our interpretations. Very rarely, however, do we have the chance to experience these processes at work. The sensitive reader will grasp the different personalities behind the various chapters, and we are convinced the book is better for it.

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CHRISTIANE HARZIG

Bremen

Peasant Maids—
City Women