CHAPTER ONE

Fire, Steel, and the Coming Crisis: The 1920s in Chicago and America

Chicago was the quintessential Gilded Age city, and the south side was its nerve center. As German and Czech immigrants filtered into the neighborhoods surrounding the meatpacking industry, Scottish, Irish, and German immigrants drove stakes into the soil of steelmaking Southeast Chicago. Yet new arrivals soon eclipsed their numbers and cultural influence. Throbbing with industrial vitality, Gilded Age America drew millions of southeastern European newcomers to its shores. By 1930, one out of every ten Americans in a total population of 123 million was foreign born.¹

From the beginning of the century until America’s entry into the First World War, the Golden Door was kept swinging by waves of Europeans in search of something better. In those years, as many as 14 million immigrants landed in the country, most heading to places like Chicago and New York. Between 1900 and 1935, Polish, Serbian, Croatian, Italian, and Slovenian immigrants flooded into the city’s southeast district, drawn by the hope that billowing smokestacks meant jobs. Soon, African Americans from points south of the Mason-Dixon Line as well as Mexicans from below the Rio Grande were vying for space and employment in the crowded Calumet region. By 1919, St. Michael’s was not the only church to occupy sacred space above the row houses of Southeast Chicago. The Croatian Sacred Heart, the Mexican Our Lady of Guadeloupe, the Irish St. Patrick’s, the German East Side Baptist, as well as a handful of other testaments in stone had joined the religious mosaic.² By the beginning of the Depression, Poles were in the majority. For them,
St. Michael’s Cathedral was the anchor in their new world. Semiskilled European transplants crafted independent communities defined by language and custom. A Babel of languages filled the grimy air of the steel district. Along with dreams of prosperity came traditions of community cohesion that would prove vital in periods of crisis.

As multicultural as Southeast Chicago may have seemed to outsiders, the region’s settlement followed patterns defined by steel and ethnicity. The Calumet area was divided into four distinct areas, each marked by the steel factories that served as their centers of gravity. In Southeast Chicago, where the Calumet River flows into Lake Michigan, the Carnegie-Illinois South Works Plant dominated the horizon. Inland Steel and Youngstown Sheet and Tube prevailed in Indiana Harbor in East Chicago on the Indiana side. Imposing as they were, U.S. Steel’s Gary Works, across the state line in Indiana, eclipsed them all. Although it was not the largest operation, employing only just over two thousand workers in the 1930s, Republic Steel in southeast Chicago would gain a level of notoriety that would overshadow its larger competitors. By 1920, according to the census data, 32.4 percent of the semiskilled male workers in the steel industry were born of foreign or mixed parents; 47.2 percent were foreign born. Out of a total of 411,574 male employees in Chicago manufacturing, a full 53.9 percent were foreign born “whites.” By 1907, Slavs and Italians comprised more than 80 percent of the unskilled workers in the Carnegie Steel Company. Like most of the city’s heavy manufacturing, steel was an immigrant worker’s industry.

The local demand for steel, the proximity to major rail lines, the availability of navigable waters, and the access to an expanding pool of labor transformed Southeast Chicago into an industrial powerhouse of the twentieth century. It also transformed the landscape. Slag heaps, scrap depositories, and cavernous, interlocking factories stood alongside cranes, smokestacks, and holding tanks that jutted into the sky like temples to some strange metallic deity. At night, the blast furnaces issued burnt offerings that lit up the night sky in a pastiche of other-worldly colors visible to the cultured residents of Hyde Park.

Tramping about the country, trying to shed his middle-class origins and live the life of the itinerant laborer, future CIO leader Len De Caux remembered seeing Chicago for the first time in 1921. Gazing out of a freight car door as the train rumbled into the south side, “I thought of Dante’s approach to hell,” he wrote. The scene was one of industrial desolation. “No green fields. No hills or streams. No life or habitation. Flatlands covered with swamps and trash dumps. Soot smoke smarted