# 1 | WAITING FOR NOTHING

THE MORNING THE POORMASTER was killed, twenty-three men and women were waiting for him outside his office. Just a few weeks earlier, a nationwide recession had returned them to the desperation of the Depression's early days, when millions had been forced to scavenge for scraps of food. Grim, already exhausted despite the hour, they lined the reception room and the walls of the narrow adjoining hallway. They waited to plead with Harry Barck for some bread tickets, or a check for a few dollars. Their spouses and children waited, too, on the other side of town from city hall, in tenement rooms gone cold and dark through unpaid bills.[1]

The poormaster made quick work of the line that morning. In fewer than fifteen minutes he had dismissed six aid-seekers, not even bothering to fill in the section on his printed Relief Client list that called for the number of relatives dependent on each interviewee. "Next case!" the waiting men and women heard him shout each time his door was opened by a rejected applicant. "Next!"[2]

Around 9:30, at the sound of the interior door suddenly yanked ajar, sixteen men and women turned their heads expectantly, listening for the seventy-four-year-old poormaster's customary dismissal of the last applicant and his summoning of the next. Instead, there was a woman's indistinguishable shouting and the huffing sound of someone moving quickly. Young, dark-haired Lena Fusco rushed from Barck's inner office

into the reception room penned in wood and pebbled glass. The towering, thickset poormaster followed immediately behind her, pausing to wipe the woman's spit from his face before summoning patrolman Thomas Carmody. The officer had been posted in the hallway ever since an altercation between Barck and a relief applicant two weeks before.[3]

"Lock her up!" Barck ordered Carmody, who grabbed Fusco's elbow as she swore in an Italian dialect he didn't understand. The elderly poormaster's face was colored with anger, and flecks of the woman's spit were splattered on his tweed suit. He had removed his round, wire-frame glasses. "Take her out!" he demanded. Then he added, starkly, "I won't give her any more [bread] tickets."[4]

View of the poormaster's private office from the waiting room, showing the secretary's desk. Forensic photograph taken by a police photographer on February 25, 1938, following the killing of Poormaster Barck.

From the case file *State vs. Joseph F. Scutellaro*, 1939. Courtesy of the Hudson County Prosecutor's Office.

The clutch of aid-seekers outside Barck's door would have known what that meant: the only person who could approve aid to Lena Fusco had just cut her off.

Not that this power was new. Harry Barck had been Hoboken's gatekeeper of poor relief for forty-two years, and like local officials in municipalities, townships, and counties all across the country, he had been authorized to determine how much aid was to be granted the destitute of his region. And Barck and his colleagues were not inclined to be charitable. Harsh treatment of the jobless poor had been, from colonial times, a deterrent against claims on public funds, as well as an established expression of community disapproval. Local politicians had long extolled their poormasters' meanness, portraying it as both a benefit to taxpayers and a way for the poor man to regain self-worth. "Under the philosophy of this ancient practice, the applicant is in some way morally deficient," protested Harry L. Hopkins, who sought to eradicate that notion when he became federal emergency relief administrator during the Depression. Despite cycles of economic downturn and unemployment during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, local overseers had maintained, as their predecessors had done, that work was always available for any able-bodied man who truly wanted it. If a man was poor, they insisted, he had only himself to blame: he drank too much or he was lazy.[5]

Even when the Depression struck and made millions of men and women jobless, traditional overseers like Harry Barck persisted with their entrenched beliefs and practices. During a cross-country tour of local relief offices commissioned by Hopkins, writer Lorena Hickok repeatedly encountered these hardliners and noted with disgust their habitual withholding. Aid-seekers in Calais, Maine, she reported, were subjected to treatment that was "almost medieval in its stinginess and stupidity." More than two thousand miles away, Hickok had found more of the same. "They think there is something wrong with a man who cannot make a living," she wrote of relief administrators in Bismarck, North Dakota. "They talk so much about 'the undeserving' . . ."[6]

But the knowledge of shared misery would not likely have comforted the Hoboken relief applicants who waited for the poormaster that February morning. All who heard Harry Barck's sharp retort to Lena