



Jewish immigrants arriving in New York. Source: *Courtesy of Brown Brothers.*

## ONE

### ESCAPING FROM THE OLD WORLD



**T**HE DEATH of one man in 1881 changed Jewish history. Tsar Alexander II of Russia was assassinated that year, on March 13 (March 1 on the Julian calendar then in use in that country). The reaction and counterreaction to his assassination, in combination with the accumulated heartaches and economic burdens of the Jews of Eastern Europe, forced Jews to make a fateful choice regarding their future.

Two-thirds of the Jews living in Eastern Europe decided to remain. Of the one-third that left, the overwhelming number came to the United States. Of those, 73 percent came from the Russian Empire. A very few went to the Land of Israel, then under Turkish control.

The choices these people made would shape their lives and the lives of their descendants. Those who stayed, or their children, eventually came under Soviet rule or were swept up in the whirlwind of the Holocaust. Those who went to the Land of Israel faced decades of struggle to establish the nation of Israel, achieved in 1948. For those who came to America, the struggle was first played out for many on the streets of the Lower East Side.

And although history has yet to decide the full implications of the choices made by those Eastern European Jews at the end of the nineteenth century and in the early years of the twentieth, it was clear that the decision to stay or go and the decision

about where to go would affect not just individuals or families but the very fate of the Jewish people.

The Eastern European Jews were not the first group of Jewish people to emigrate to America. Sephardic Jews had come much earlier, and a great many German Jews arrived in the nineteenth century. The Eastern European Jews, though, came in the largest numbers.

The tsar's assassination took place against the backdrop of a long history of Jewish life in Eastern Europe. Jews had lived there since the thirteenth century, when persecution in Western Europe had become unbearable and a Polish king invited them to journey east. Their lives in Poland and Romania, Hungary, and Russia remained the same for centuries. The Jews characteristically lived in a *shtetl*, a village, and regulated their lives by Jewish religious law. The joys of a Sabbath meal, a prayer, a birth, a wedding, and other happy events punctuated what was generally a burdensome life. It was a life marked by poverty and persecution.

## **FROM DISCRIMINATION TO ASSASSINATION**

By the late nineteenth century, there were many sources of discontent among the Jews of Eastern Europe. In Poland, the government had put the shtetl community councils in charge of collecting oppressive taxes. As Russia annexed more and more of Polish territory, additional young Jews became subject to the Russian military draft. More subtle in effect, the modern world was finding its way even to the small Jewish towns of Eastern Europe, and the economic and religious dislocations of modernity would undermine the long-standing traditional way of life. In short, the Jews were living in a tinderbox of problems waiting for a match to ignite them.

## **WITHOUT OPPORTUNITY OR HOPE**

There were approximately 7.7 million Jews in the world in 1880. Three-quarters of them lived in Eastern Europe; only 3 percent lived in the United States. Most lived in the Pale of Settlement, 386,000 square miles between the Baltic and the Black Sea that included the Ukraine, Byelorussia (modern Belarus), Lithuania, and a large part of Poland. Poland itself had been carved up and parceled out among Russia, Prussia, and Austria at the end of the eighteenth century. The Austrians renamed their part Galicia.

There were sometimes rivalries and disputes among Jews from these different communities. There was, for example, a mutual feeling of distaste between Litvaks—Jews living in the northern part of the Pale of Settlement—and Galitzianers—those living in the southern part, primarily Galicia. Although eventually the conflict became less rancorous and even a source of good-natured ribbing, the two groups were originally filled with mistrust, a feeling that spilled over once they found themselves sharing the small world of the Lower East Side.

The divisions would remain precisely because Jewish life would be organized according to the town of origin in Eastern Europe. The Litvaks saw themselves as bearers of the Enlightenment, filled with modern culture to supplement their Jewishness. They saw themselves as the scholars of Judaism and the Galitzianers as backward mystics. In turn, the Galitzianers thought of the Litvaks as having abandoned Judaism.

But Jews had to face more than rivalries with each other. The industrialization that accompanied modernity meant that the traditional peasant economies, of which Jews in Eastern Europe were all a part, were no longer as stable as they had been. Jews, for example, often went to local fairs and relied on selling their goods. But the emergence of railroads put an end to fairs. Jews, living on the economic margins at best because of religious persecution, found themselves now in dire poverty. They had to compete with each other and their Gentile neighbors. The communal ties were loosened by such circumstances.

The pervasive economic fears, mirrored in the numerous Yiddish synonyms for *poverty* and in the Yiddish literature of such writers as Sholem Aleichem and I. L. Peretz, led to other sorts of fears.

As is often the case in times of economic uncertainty, the government sought to deflect peasant anger away from political leadership and so sought a scapegoat. The Jews became that scapegoat, and even before the famous widespread series of pogroms, or organized attacks on Jews, in the 1880s, members of the Jewish community were subject to attacks.

Many of the peasants found it all too easy to believe stories about the Jews. For example, at one time Jews in Russia were permitted to be innkeepers and bartenders. Their very success doomed them. Soon rumors began circulating that the Jews planned to weaken Russian minds using vodka and take over the country.

There were physical dangers as well. As an immigrant named Mollie Hyman recalled, “In 1904, Russia lost the Russo-Japanese War. The soldiers were coming back home. Before they passed through our little town, there was always a messenger

from the little town before that let the Jews know that the soldiers are coming. If you had any girls, hide them. They used to rape them and kill them.”

Jews had no means of organized communal self-defense. They relied for strength on their religion and their learning, valuable internal weapons but not very powerful against a peasant with a drink and a gun. They had a vibrant language as well in Yiddish, a language that became a substitute weapon, filled with wisdom in its proverbs and fire in its curses.

All these conditions left the Jewish community with ever-decreasing opportunities. The young, who had grown up hearing of the modern world and the Enlightenment in Europe, wondered why it had not found its way to their corner of the world. Desperate not to have to live as they did, in poverty and fear, and able to see nothing better in the future, they grew up in hopelessness. In many ways, they remained inheritors of a medieval world, one that excluded learning, especially for women, and included a lot of superstitions.

Perhaps the most pervasive of the various superstitions of the Eastern European Jews centered on diligent efforts to avoid the “evil eye,” the *ayin hara*. The fear focused on the belief that some people had the malevolent power to cause harm to others merely with a glance. It was out of fear of such harm that the Jews of Eastern Europe developed various folk beliefs. They thought that if a child’s physical appearance was praised too much, the evil eye might appear. Indeed, revealing too much personal information about the child—the height or weight, for example—might prove dangerous. There were ways of protecting children. A common custom was to place a *royte bendl*—a red ribbon—near the baby, perhaps on its cradle or carriage, to provide protection. Some mothers put a knife under the baby’s pillow.

Various linguistic incantations were developed to avoid the evil eye. It was from such efforts that the widespread expression *kenehara* (elided from *kine ayin hara*) developed; it meant “no evil eye.”

They had other burdens as well that shaped their views.

## **MILITARY SERVICE**

The Jews living in various empires in Eastern Europe were subject to different sorts of military drafts. In Russia, young Jews at the age of twelve began being drafted in 1827. Conscripting Jewish boys at that age, prior to their bar mitzvah, was meant to force them to leave their religion. Later, the boys were drafted at age eight and sent

## PROVERBS AND CURSES

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### SOME YIDDISH PROVERBS

When a father must help his son, both laugh; when a son must help his father, both cry.

God could not be everywhere, and therefore he created mothers.

A half-truth is a whole lie.

A chip on the shoulder indicates wood higher up.

A man is not honest simply because he never had a chance to steal.

The face is the worst informer.

The highest wisdom is kindness.

Better to suffer an injustice than to do an injustice.

For dying, you always have time.

Which king is the best in the world? A dead one.

A wise man hears one word and understands two.

### SOME YIDDISH CURSES

They should free a madman and lock him up.

Hang yourself with a sugar rope, and you'll have a sweet death.

He should be transformed into a chandelier, to hang by day and to burn by night.

May all your teeth fall out—except one, so that you may have toothaches!

Let him suffer and remember.



## SUPERSTITIONS

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If a person breaks two glasses in a day, a third must be broken to avoid evil.

If you put clothes on inside out, you will have bad luck all day.

A kitten that enters a house brings good luck.

If your right eye itches, you'll have good luck, but if your left eye itches, bad luck will follow.

If a young woman sings while she sweeps the floor, she will marry a man who stammers.

A pregnant woman can determine the sex of her child. She must leave the room. Then someone puts a fork on one chair and a spoon on another. Both are covered. The woman then returns to choose a chair. If she chooses the fork, the child will be a boy, and if she chooses the spoon, she will have a girl.

It was bad luck to name a person after someone still alive or someone who died young.



to schools where they received military and Christian religious training. They went directly into the army after their training, entering service at the age of eighteen and being obligated for many years of service.

Once in the army, Jewish newcomers came under tremendous pressure to join the Russian Orthodox Church. In a few cases, Jews who refused were dragged into churches to undergo forced conversion. Golda Meir, the former prime minister of Israel, recalled that her grandfather served in the army from age thirteen until twenty-six, trying to remain kosher by surviving on raw vegetables and bread. He was forced to kneel for hours at a time as officers pressed for his conversion. He resisted, but many others could not withstand the pressure of being denied food or being forced to remain outside in the winter.

## A SISTER'S BRAVERY

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On a cold winter night, a young boy did not return home from religious school. His agitated parents and sister finally spoke to a classmate of the boy's. A renegade Jew who captured boys for the army had grabbed the child.

The sister discovered that the boys were being held in a camp just a few miles from their village. The Jewish holiday of Simchat Torah was approaching when she came up with a plan. She gathered food and also took a bottle of vodka to bribe the sentries. She got into her wagon and rode to the camp.

As she arrived, a sentry approached her. She did a little curtsy and explained her simple desire to give her brother a present for the holiday. The guard remained uncertain until she handed him the gift of a honey cake. He allowed her in, admonishing her that she could stay for no longer than a half hour.

Quickly she found her brother, Velvel. She spoke in a hushed tone: "At the very bottom of my bag is a dress and a girl's hat and shoes. Put the clothes on and wait for ten minutes after I leave. Then just walk right out of the camp. The sentry will believe that you are me leaving. I'll wait for you on the road." The frightened boy did as his sister said.

The girl left, waiting for the sentry to be busy. When he was turned away, she sneaked out of the camp. A half hour later, her brother trudged along the road walking slowly in his dress. The two arrived home safely. Eventually the entire family escaped Russia and journeyed to the United States.



In an interesting historical footnote, Israeli immigration authorities noted that when emigration from the former Soviet Union began, some of those leaving were the great-grandchildren of Jews who had been forced to convert and had intermarried, yet they still considered themselves Jews.

Young Jews and their families sought ways to avoid the draft, although that was difficult because at first the various Jewish communities had quotas of recruits, quotas that were double those for the general Russian population. When, for a time, eldest sons could avoid conscription, families without any sons adopted the second sons of families. The film producer Samuel Goldwyn recalled that in his hometown, two brothers had shot each other, one in the arm and the other in the leg, each attempting to cripple the other so as to avoid service. In more common cases, a cleaver was used to cut off the index finger—the trigger finger, rendering the young man unfit to serve.

In 1874, the quota system was replaced, and all Jews had to serve starting at age twenty-one. In reaction, at least one Jewish community sought to evade conscription by reporting an unusually high number of deaths among twenty-year-old males. As noted, some Jewish males mutilated themselves so that they would be declared unfit to serve, but starting in 1876, communities had to provide another soldier for each unfit potential recruit. Furthermore, any Jewish subject who had given shelter to a Jewish army deserter was arrested and forced to do hard labor. The Jewish community that knew of a runaway and didn't report him could be fined as much as 300 rubles.

## **THE ASSASSINATION**

There was a military parade in Saint Petersburg, Russia, on March 13, 1881. Tsar Alexander II was to ride in the parade, and a group of anarchists, who had been plotting to kill him, chose the date to make an attempt. The conspirators mined a tunnel under Malaya Sadovaya Street. Then four of them, each holding a bomb wrapped in a handkerchief or newspaper, went to various spots on the parade route.

The tsar arrived at the parade by a route that avoided Malaya Sadovaya Street, and Sophia Perovskaya, the worried leader of the group, watched in anger as he turned to go back the way he had arrived, bypassing the mines. She sent a signal to two of the men with her to go to another spot along the Yekaterininsky Canal.

They dashed away and got there before the imperial carriage arrived only because the tsar had stopped to visit his cousin. When the carriage finally appeared, one conspirator, nineteen-year-old Nikolai Rysakov, ran up to it and forcefully threw his bomb at the horses' legs.

The bomb exploded. Two people were killed, and the carriage was damaged, but the tsar survived. Rysakov was immediately captured. The tsar, refusing the advice of his guards, insisted on stopping to examine the scene. As he walked around, another bomber, Ignaty Grinevitsky, lurched toward him and threw his

bomb. It exploded, killing the assassin and wounding his target. The guards lifted Alexander and rode toward the palace. There was a trail of blood in the street as the carriage drove madly. The tsar died several hours later.

## POGROMS

None of the four assassins was Jewish; the actual killer was Polish. All of them were put to death. However, a Jewish woman named Hestia Helfman had helped rent the apartment that served as the headquarters for the conspiracy. She was found guilty as well. But she gave birth after her trial, and her death sentence was then commuted to life in prison. She and her infant daughter died there. Her participation inflamed those who already hated the Jews.

Alexander III became the new emperor. Konstantin Pobedonostev, the new tsar's teacher, was a fanatical hater of Jews who now had the power to put his hatred into political action. He declared that one-third of Russia's Jews would emigrate, one-third would convert to Russian Orthodoxy, and one-third would starve to death.

## THE ATTACKS

The first organized pogrom (a word derived from the Russian *pogromit*, meaning "demolish") began in Elizavetgrad (today's Kirovograd) at the end of April 1881. There were thirty more attacks in three days. In 1881, twenty thousand Jewish homes were destroyed. By 1882, more than two hundred communities had been attacked.

A new and even worse series of pogroms took place between 1903 and 1906. The most infamous of these occurred in a town called Kishinev. In February 1903, a boy with multiple knife wounds was found in Kishinev. Articles were published that the Jews had killed the boy to get his blood to make matzoh—an absurd but long-standing anti-Jewish charge. There was a growing chorus within the town calling for revenge.

The pogrom began on April 19 (April 6 on the Julian calendar), which was Easter Sunday and also the last day of Passover. Twenty groups, each with between twenty and twenty-five people, headed toward the Jewish area of the town. They broke windows and began robbing shops and houses. The police did not stop them. The marauders stopped their attacks at dusk.



Cities and towns where Jews fled pogroms between 1881 and 1906. Most took place in the Pale of Settlement, a region where Jews had been officially allowed to reside since 1825.

The crowds came back the following morning. Boys tossing stones came first. They were followed by adults, armed with crowbars, who attempted to destroy all they could find. They were followed by others who carried off Jewish goods. By eleven in the morning, the streets of the Jewish section of the city were littered with broken furniture and glass. Pillow feathers covered the roads. The archbishop of the area traveled through the crowd. The police refused to interfere, though they did direct some rioters to houses owned by particular Jews.

It was about noon when the crowd began to murder Jews and rape women and young girls. Some Jews began to gather objects to be used as weapons of self-defense. These men were arrested.

When the pogrom ended that evening, forty-nine Jews had been killed and more than five hundred injured. Seven hundred houses and six hundred businesses were destroyed. In all, about two thousand families were left homeless.

The story of the pogrom made its way around the world. As the April 28, 1903, *New York Times*, which overstated the number of dead, put it:

The anti-Jewish riots in Kishinev, Bessarabia [modern Moldova], are worse than the censor will permit to publish. There was a well-laid-out plan for the general massacre of Jews on the day following the Russian Easter. The mob was led by priests, and the general cry, “Kill the Jews,” was taken up all over the city.

The Jews were taken wholly unaware and were slaughtered like sheep. The dead number 120 and the injured about 500. The scenes of horror attending this massacre are beyond description. Babes were literally torn to pieces by the frenzied and bloodthirsty mob. The local police made no attempt to check the reign of terror. At sunset the streets were piled with corpses and wounded. Those who could make their escape fled in terror, and the city is now practically deserted of Jews.

## **MAY LAWS AND OFFICIAL DISCRIMINATION**

The Jewish victims became identified as the very cause of their own misery. In 1881, the new tsar, claiming he needed to protect Russian peasants from economic control by Jews, instituted a new series of laws in May. Jews were no longer allowed to live in any area or town with fewer than ten thousand inhabitants, even in the Pale of Settlement.

This was nothing less than a legal attempt to destroy the shtetl existence of the Jews. Their access to higher education was severely restricted by a quota imposed on Jews who wished to enter secondary education. Similar quotas were placed on various professions. Russians were permitted to expel the “vicious” in the villages—most of whom the judges found to be Jews. If Jews left their village for a short trip, they had trouble reentering to see their families. Jews could not take a widowed parent to his or her home village. They could not inherit a business in another village. If they got sick, they were not allowed to go to a hospital in another village. Any violation of these could lead to the loss of their right to live in their home village.

Having made higher education in Russia impossible, later steps sought to deprive many Jews of a professional livelihood. Jewish lawyers, who had made up 22 percent of the members of the Russian bar, were now allowed to constitute no more than 9 percent. Jews who lived outside the Pale of Settlement were suddenly targeted

## THE ODESSA POGROM

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A pogrom in Odessa took place October 18–22, 1905. Crowds attacked the Jews in their poor neighborhood known as the Moldvanko for three days and nights. There were 299 Jews murdered. A Jewish nurse working in a local hospital recorded what happened when the hospital staff went to visit the site of the pogrom. The nurse described the initial sights as they arrived.

“About ten Catholic [Greek] Sisters with about forty or fifty of their schoolchildren led the procession. They carried ikons or pictures of Jesus and sang “God Save the Tsar.” They were followed by a crowd containing hundreds of men and women murderers. . . . They ran into the yards where there were fifty or a hundred tenants. . . . They began to throw children out of the windows of the second, third, or fourth stories. They would take a poor, innocent six-months-old baby . . . and throw it down to the pavement. You can imagine it could not live after it struck the ground, but this did not satisfy the stony-hearted murderers. They then rushed up [to] the child, seized it and broke its little arm and leg bones into three or four pieces, then wrung its neck too. They laughed and yelled. . . .

It was not enough for them to open up a woman’s abdomen and take out the child which she carried, but they took time to stuff the abdomen with straw and fill it up. . . . It was not enough for them to cut out an old man’s tongue and cut off his nose, but they drove nails into the eyes also.”



so that they would be forced to return there. Many Jewish artisans suddenly faced a law that if they used a machine in their trade, they could no longer be called an “artisan” and had to leave to return to the Jewish area. If Jewish jewelers sold chains they had not manufactured themselves, they were reclassified as merchants and told to return to the Pale. Such forced exits often came with a single day’s notice.

An entire Jewish way of life was ending. The shock to the Jewish social system was enormous.

## THE DECISION TO LEAVE

The pogroms and the May Laws were the tipping point, the moment that all the built-up fears, the economic dislocations, the loss of hope, and the belief that the past was the prologue to the future combined to give a final push. But it is important to emphasize that the pogroms alone did not cause mass Jewish emigration. The departures, which had begun in Eastern Europe in the 1870s before the pogroms and in Germany decades earlier, were motivated by economic factors. The pogroms remain large in the Jewish imagination of the era, but they should not be considered the exclusive reason for leaving.

The Kishinev pogrom was a profound prod for those who wanted to leave but weren't sure about the future of Russia. However, any decision to go into exile—to leave their native land; cross an ocean; surrender Yiddish, the *mamaloshen* (mother tongue)—and live in a foreign and forbidding world, was not an easy decision.

Students in particular were changed by the pogroms. Jewish students had a profound belief that education combined with social revolution would fundamentally alter Russian society, making it a far better place with a real future. Yet their revolutionary “friends” had supported the attacks on the Jews. Abandoned by their friends, they were losing what was left of their self-identity, their belief in the future, and their hope. More than their parents, who found it difficult to leave settled lives, and far more than their Orthodox Jewish neighbors, who saw the Russian outbreaks as yet another example of the age-old hatred of Jews that would have to be endured by remaining faithful to God and Jewish law, the young students were shocked into action.

## THE DREAM OF AMERICA

Some of the students believed that wherever the Jews went, hatred would inevitably follow. Therefore, influenced by such nationalist thinkers as Moses Hess, they concluded that they had to create their own homeland where they could be in charge of self-defense. This tiny minority of students focused on a return to the Land of Israel, the historical homeland of the Jews.

But among the common folk and most students, the talk everywhere in Eastern Europe was of the United States, the “Goldene Medina,” the Golden Land, which was really less a description of reality than the embodiment of a dream. They wanted to believe, needed to believe, that the streets were paved with gold, that the gates

## THE GOLDENE MEDINA

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Mary Antin, most famous as the author of *The Promised Land*, explained the attractions of emigration in her book *From Plotzk to Boston*:

America was in everybody's mouth. Businessmen talked of it over their accounts; the market women made up their quarrels that they might discuss it from stall to stall; people who had relatives in the famous land went around reading their letters for the enlightenment of less fortunate folk. . . . Children played at emigrating; old folks shook their sage heads over the evening fire, and prophesied no good for those who braved the terrors of the sea and the foreign goal beyond it; all talked of it, but scarcely anyone knew one true fact about this magic land.



of the New World would open wide for them and lead to the lush fields of freedom. It was a land where even the Cossacks could not ride their horses and where people could become rich overnight. As the immigrant Marcus Ravage's uncle told him, people in America got paid for everything—even for voting.

Of course, the reality would be different. As one wry immigrant observed, “When I left for America, I was told the streets were paved with gold. When I got here, I found that not only were they not paved with gold, they weren't paved at all. And not only weren't they paved, but I was expected to pave them!”

But it was the dream that the Jews needed to sustain them through a dangerous and unsettling present and provide a vision of an alternative future. And unlike members of other national groups, Jews who went to America planned to stay. The trip was not simply an economic adventure leading to a return to Europe with money. Instead, the journey to America was mythic—it was a trip laden with danger but, once survived, it would lead to nothing short of a rebirth, the start of a new life.

Although it was mostly the young who went, they were not the only immigrants. Jewish families frequently traveled together, certainly much more commonly than other ethnic or religious immigrants. Parents concerned about the future of their very young children made the journey.

Some women went to America because “that’s where all the Jewish young men had gone,” leaving none to marry back home. Because many married men went to America first, intending to save enough money to bring over their wives and children—and often their parents—there were many married women, called “American widows,” who stayed behind in Europe. In some cases, husbands who had gone to America sent letters back to the Old Country demanding a divorce.

Not all Eastern European Jews were so smitten with America. For every one eager to get to the Goldene Medina, two others thought of the faraway land as the Treyfene Medina, the unkosher land. One rabbi declared that anyone who left for America was living in sin. The majority of traditional Jews were concerned that in such a country, people would turn to money, not God, that soon all the treasures of the Talmud would be forsaken for more worldly treasures, and that Jews would forget *halachah*, Jewish law that guided their lives and those of their ancestors for generations.

## THE ECONOMIC LURE

The various push factors of economic hardship and physical attack were complemented by the pull factor of the dream of America. For its part, America contributed to that dream by its very real economic and demographic situation. The Civil War had resulted in six hundred thousand American deaths. That meant that beyond the human tragedy, there was an incredible shortage of workers.

This shortage came at the very same time as the Industrial Revolution was transforming the American economy. The country had always an abundance of natural resources, but in the era between the end of the Civil War and the beginning of the twentieth century, America’s economy exploded. There was a 700 percent increase in manufactured goods. The country’s national wealth quadrupled. America needed workers if this boom were to continue.

Despite this attraction, the poverty-stricken Jews in Eastern Europe might still have been unable to afford the journey had it not been for the emerging use of steamships. Such ships could normally cross the Atlantic in eight to fourteen days, depending on the weather, whereas previous sailing vessels could take as long as three months to make the voyage.

The new steamships made money by bringing freight they collected in America back to Europe. However, that meant that the trip to America was wasted because the ships were empty. Once the steamship lines realized they could make additional money by carrying passengers on the voyage to the United States, even the low fares they charged added considerably to their overall profits. The companies courted potential travelers, creating alluring posters portraying lavish parties on board the ship that would bring travelers to the land of freedom and gold.

## THE JOURNEY

The decision to leave, as wrenching as it sometimes was, as necessary as it was thought to be, was only the beginning. Once the choice had been made and sufficient money had been saved, the journey itself had to begin. That journey was often fraught with danger. Indeed, most accounts of the arrival of Eastern European Jews emphasize the difficulty of traveling by ship or the indignities suffered at Ellis Island, but it is crucial to recall that by far the most dangerous part of the trip was getting from a hometown to one of the ports of embarkation.

### DANGEROUS TRAVEL

Leaving Russia legally was costly. Bribes were needed to get the necessary visas and other travel documents. These frequently took months, and sometimes years, to obtain. Illegal emigration was just as expensive because similar bribes were needed, and danger was a constant companion of the journey.

For example, the comedian Jack Benny's father, Meyer Kubelsky, had been smuggled out of Lithuania. Meyer's father had gotten a passport for his son, but the young man was then told he was still not allowed to leave. The desperate father owned a tavern and wine shop and spoke to the man who delivered empty bottles. Meyer hid under the bottles to make his escape.

The travelers didn't take much. Mostly, they tied their few belongings in a blanket or a sheet. They took a pillow—goosefeather pillows were prized—along with a souvenir from the Old Country, some religious item perhaps, and some food.

Many of the travelers went by train when they could afford it, but most could not. The train ride itself was rarely enjoyable. Many Jews had never even seen a train before, and suddenly they were in boxcars, some with benches, some without. On

some trains, men and women had to travel separately. To escape to the border town of Brody, many riders in third-class railroad cars had to travel for twenty to sixty hours.

There were also thieves and scoundrels ready to cheat the would-be travelers. Sometimes travel agents sold tickets to London but charged for a journey to New York.

And the travelers never knew what would happen along the way. The singer Sophie Tucker was born on such a voyage. Her mother and two-year-old brother were making the trip. Sophie's mother, realizing she was about to give birth, tapped the driver of their cart on his shoulder and told him of her condition. The driver stopped and let her off. But then he drove away. The desperate woman found a house nearby, and the baby was born. Sophie Tucker's mother was seventeen.

In general, Jews from Eastern Europe left by one of four principal routes: (1) Jews from the Ukraine and southern Russia crossed into the Austro-Hungarian Empire (mostly illegally), traveled to Berlin or Vienna by train, and from there went to one of the ports where they could get on a ship to America. The main ports were Bremen and Hamburg in Germany, Amsterdam and Rotterdam in the Netherlands, and Antwerp in Belgium. (2) Jews in western Russia crossed the German border and headed for Berlin and then one of the ports. (3) Jews who lived in the Austro-Hungarian Empire were allowed to cross the German border legally and would then go to Berlin and on to one of the ports. (4) Romanian Jews mostly traveled to Vienna and then to one of the ports in the Netherlands.

Many departing Jews embarked on foot to the German ports, where they would get a boat for America. They were known as the *fusgeyer*, the wayfarers. They had sold their valuables, joined together often with others who came from the same community or had the same trade or were of the same gender (there were groups made up exclusively of women), and made a common fund to ensure that all in the group could make the journey.

This journey was often perilous. For some who were of military age, passing through customs was impossible. They were compelled to cross the border at night. For this, they relied on professional smugglers. One trick was to stand at a border crossing and wait for the soldiers to go after thieves, who constantly sought to smuggle illegal goods. While the guards were otherwise occupied, the escaping Jews made their way across.

Abraham Cahan (pronounced Cahn), editor of the *Jewish Daily Forward* and author of *The Education of David Levinsky*, the most famous of the immigrant novels, recalls his own perilous border crossing.

We were to leave the train at Dubno where we were to take a wagon through the region around Radzivil on our way to the Austrian border. That would be our last city in Russia; across the border was . . . Brody.

In the evening we followed two young Ukrainian peasants to a small, freshly plastered hut. One of the peasants was tall and barefooted and carried a small cask at his side. In Austria, there was no tax on brandy, so he smuggled it into Russia; on his return trip, he carried tobacco, more expensive in Austria, out of Russia.

We waited a long time in the hut before realizing we were being held for more money. Having paid, we moved on. We made a strange group going across fields and meadows in the night, halted suddenly every few minutes by the tall peasant holding up his finger and pausing to listen for god-knows-what disaster. . . .

We stumbled on endlessly. It seemed as if the border were miles away. Then the peasant straightened up and announced we were already well inside Austria.

Legal emigrants faced German guards concerned that the poor Jews were bringing diseases into their country. They therefore subjected the Jews to lengthy personal inspections.

## **TO THE PORTS OF DEPARTURE**

The very first waves of the emigration affected by the pogroms began in the summer of 1881. The fleeing Jews went to the town of Brody, a center of departure located between Russia and Galicia, under the control of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Charles Netter was sent from France to oversee relief efforts at Brody and get the refugees from there to Hamburg.

At Hamburg and other ports, the Jews faced additional problems. First of all, they endured additional inspections. Although steamship companies had a tremendous economic incentive to lure passengers, there was a catch. If, when the immigrants arrived in America, they were deemed unsuitable for immigration, the steamship companies had to take them back free of charge and in space that would otherwise be available for cargo.

Therefore, the companies made sure that inspectors at the docks were extremely careful in their choice of customers. Those who intended to travel were disinfected, and questionable ones were quarantined. They commonly stayed, hundreds of

them, sleeping in rows for two weeks until they could be inspected again. Families, of course, were deeply concerned that one member would be left behind while others were allowed to travel.

Jews in ports were also subject to thieves. Hostel owners overcharged. Ticket agents either overcharged or gave too little change. Professionals stole baggage. There were the usual assortment of con artists and white slave traders who promised young women marriage or employment but gave them a harsh life in prostitution instead. Young men were told the voyage was long and they would need enormous amounts of food; unnecessary supplies were sold at exorbitant prices.

## **PROVIDING AID**

Most of the abuses and difficulties did get better—especially after the turn of the twentieth century, when there was help. French Jews established the Alliance Israélite Universelle, British Jews the Anglo-Jewish Association, and German Jews the Hilfverein der deutschen Juden. Agents of these various groups were at ports and railroad stations. The groups worked to get reduced train fares and provided food and sometimes money.

Hamburg was one of the principal embarkation points for travelers, so emigrating Jews were met at the trains arriving there by representatives of the Hilfverein—which took control of travelers from the moment they entered Germany until they left on ships—and taken to a special immigration house, where there was a large room with benches along each wall.

Once there, all the travelers got coffee and rolls. A clerk, sitting at a desk in the center of the room, took down the travelers' names and examined their steamship tickets. The date was given for the next sailing of the ship.

But even after they had escaped the Russian or Polish rulers, the Jews had to face thieves among themselves. One traveler, Benjamin Gordon, told of being approached by a man in Hamburg. The man claimed to come from a town near Gordon's. As the two spoke, Gordon revealed that his boat needed repair and he would have to wait. The stranger suggested that Gordon exchange his ticket for that of the stranger's friend, whose boat was leaving in two days. The stranger only asked for \$5 in addition to the ticket. Gordon said he had only \$3, and the two agreed on the price.

The stranger told Gordon where to meet him the next day to get the ticket. Gordon found out the next day that the stranger had checked out. Gordon reported

the incident and was told the city was filled with confidence tricksters. Luckily, Gordon had registered the ticket number, so the fraudulent user was arrested—but he was not the thief who had tricked him into buying the stolen ticket. Gordon got his ticket back and was pleased when he learned that the thief had finally been arrested.

Finally, however they did it, Jews from Eastern Europe found their way to the ports and onto steamships. They were about to begin a very adventurous ocean journey.

## STEERAGE: THE LONG JOURNEY

The voyage across the ocean was a journey deeply embedded in the memory of the immigrants. For all of their lives, they would remember the name of the ship they came on, the date they finally reached America, and the shudder-inducing details of the voyage itself.

Many of them had youth on their side. They came from a people that specialized in survival. Their particular personalities thrived on adventure, on jumping into the unknown. Still, whatever personal or cultural skills and enthusiasm they brought with them, all these were tested by the harrowing conditions of the voyage across the ocean toward a new life in the Golden Land.

The irony of such trips is that, perhaps because of the limited duration of the travel, perhaps because of vivid memories of what they were fleeing from, the immigrants had surprisingly positive memories of the journey. Perhaps they saw it as a test or a pain like childbirth before they could be reborn as Americans. Perhaps they were glad to be anywhere but their former homeland. Whatever the reason, it should be remembered that, as would happen on the Lower East Side, the painful realities were often recalled with a fondness seemingly at odds with what the experience was actually like.

## THE SHIPS

The cost of a trip across the Atlantic varied from \$12 to \$35, including food. This was more than the average Jew's annual income, so savings had to be accumulated over several years, or more typically, a relative in America bought the *shifskart*, the steamship ticket.

## A STORMY CROSSING

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Benjamin L. Gordon recorded his memories of storms during his trip across the Atlantic in his memoir *Between Two Worlds*:

One day before the ship was scheduled to land, we ran into a mighty north-eastern storm. The sky became black as Stygian night and the sea became more and more turbulent, dashing up fierce gray waves. The ship quivered, creaked, and wheezed, and the high waves slapped viciously against the small portholes of the cabins. It was impossible to stand or even recline without having a strong grip on some fixed object. Many people rolled on the floor amidst tables, chairs, and luggage. I became violently ill during the eight hours that the storm lasted.



The ships sought maximum profit, which meant that they wanted to carry the most people possible in the least possible space. The poor Jews had to travel not as first- or second-class passengers but in steerage. Steerage was the name given to the area below the ship's decks where the steering mechanisms at the ship's stern had once been housed. Passengers in this area would feel more acutely each pitch and toss on the ocean's waves than they would in other parts of the ship. Steamships never ceased rolling on the ocean, so the voyage was extremely difficult for many passengers. Seasickness was a common ailment. Of course, almost none of the Jewish passengers had been on ships before, and so the movements were unfamiliar. Furthermore, the winds were frequently chilly, which kept passengers below decks, as did any rain.

Travel conditions varied considerably, depending on the ship and when the immigrants made their voyage. Before 1900, conditions were considerably worse than afterward because of new regulations and oversight. Some of the German vessels



Jewish immigrants on their way to America around the turn of the century. *Source: Courtesy of Brown Brothers.*

got better, eventually even installing kosher kitchens. By general consent, the *Staatendam* was the worst of the ships. There were reports of the passengers in steerage on that ship needing to steal water just to survive.

## LIVING ON BOARD

Benjamin Gordon had made his shaky journey on the *Bohemia*. What he recalled most was the shouting, the cries of tiny children, and the musical instruments, played especially by Hungarian and Slovak passengers. The music brought with it hand clapping and foot stomping. The sound was overwhelming. The nights, though, were worse.

Because of the crowding, passengers stayed seated on their own luggage or on the decks. Gordon spent his nights on a chair on a deck. Most passengers did not wash or shave for the entire voyage. The avoidance of washing, of course, led to a pungent, pervasive smell of sweat throughout the area. The steerage area was almost never washed except at the end of the trip when the ship would be inspected.

A typical immigrant slept on a cot; cots were stacked three high. A passenger's berth was in the shape of an oblong box that measured 2 feet 6 inches by 6 feet 2 inches. An iron pipe sometimes separated the berths. Passengers frequently were so close that they touched shoulders while lying in their berths. This proximity had an ironic effect: the very tightness provided protection from the waves. Had the passengers not been packed so closely together, the movement of the ship would have sent them flying onto the floor.

Sometimes there was a pillow; sometimes a life preserver served that purpose instead. What blankets were provided were so thin that passengers inevitably fought the cold by sleeping in their clothes. The virtual complete lack of privacy prevented any of them from shedding too many clothes anyway. Any supplies brought by passengers were kept in the berth. They were not allowed to be kept on the floor, and there was no place on the ship to store them. The tiny portholes were kept shut to keep out the bad weather; this had the effect of keeping every smell inside. There were washing and lavatory rooms, few in number and filthy, usually with water several inches deep sloshing on the floor. No soap or towels were provided. The lines for the washrooms were so long that some passengers got up as early as 5 A.M. to be sure they would have time to get washed before breakfast, served two hours later.

Steerage was divided by gender, but this separation rarely prevented romantic encounters. These were so frequent—young people were in very confined spaces for weeks on end, after all—that the owners ordered strict regulations about intimacy on ships. There were notices on steerage cabin walls with a warning: "All couples making love too warmly would be married compulsorily at New York if the authorities deemed it fit, or should be fined or imprisoned." Despite such warnings, many romances bloomed on the ships.

Passengers tried to divert themselves in other ways as well. Some tried to read about America, but half of the immigrants could neither read nor write. Others talked or just stayed in their bunk or listened to another passenger's attempt at playing a whistle.

Sometimes first-class passengers would mock the passengers in steerage. In at least one instance, a passenger would stand on a deck above the poor travelers and throw down pennies, oranges, and candies just to see the crowd scrambling to get them. The author Robert Louis Stevenson once crossed the Atlantic, booking a second-class cabin so that he would have access to a writing table. He spent most of the actual voyage, though, with the steerage passengers. He wrote about attitudes toward these poor immigrants and why they were treated differently: “In the steerage there are males and females; in the second class ladies and gentlemen.”

## **FOOD**

Meals were often served from galleys in big pails, and depending on the ship, passengers ate at tables or in their berths. The food served to steerage passengers was of the lowest and cheapest possible quality. Breakfast typically consisted of watered-down coffee, ugly-looking potatoes, biscuits, and bread. Dinner, served at noon, usually started with soup—“a hot compound with a faint reminiscence of gravy and mutton bones, some grains of barley, and fragments of celery and cabbage; sometimes, instead, a thick mixture of ground peas”—and then included tough meat or nearly inedible salt fish or rice. At five, there was tea with hard biscuits and butter. Emma Beckerman recalled her mother grimacing as she gingerly cut green spots out of the bread and ate it with the soup, which to the young Emma appeared to be seawater. Benjamin Gordon couldn’t eat the food, so he lived for his three-week voyage on bread, butter, cheese, and tea.

The ships, some of which had supposedly kosher areas, generally ignored all the rules of keeping kosher.

## **THE CREW**

In the early years of steamship travel, the crew frequently thought of the steerage passengers as being in captivity. They flirted with young women and threatened any man seeking to protect the woman from their advances. Women took to staying below deck after dinner to avoid seeing the sailors. Still, the crew had access to the women’s compartment and would enter whenever they wished.

The crew screamed obscenities at the passengers. Sometimes crew members resorted to violence or the destruction of the immigrant’s belongings. The passengers were very reluctant to confront the crew because they were seen as authority

## STEERAGE

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In his memoir *A Dreamer's Journey*, the philosopher Morris Raphael Cohen recalled his own voyage:

We were huddled together in the steerage literally like cattle—my mother, my sister and I sleeping in the middle tier, people being above us and below us as well as on the same level. Naturally, we could not eat the food of the ship, since it was not kosher. We only asked for hot water into which my mother used to put a little brandy and sugar to give it a taste. Towards the end of the trip when our bread was beginning to give out we applied to the ship's steward for bread, but the kind he gave us was unbearably soggy. The hardships of the trip began to tell on my mother, so that she took sick and developed a fever, but the ship's doctor did not think it was serious and prescribed some bouillon for her. As the law regulating kosher foods does not apply to medicines my mother took it, but I wouldn't touch it.



figures and passengers feared that somehow such a response would hurt their chances of being admitted to the United States.

Unsurprisingly, crew members could be bribed. Luggage that had not been fumigated could be sneaked on board. Food from the upper-deck kitchens could be gotten.

## ARRIVAL

Some ships sought to provide a final good memory of the voyage by handing out candy to women and a pipe and tobacco for men. But for the numbed, filthy passengers, the very idea of getting off the ship was reward enough.

## FIRST GLIMPSE OF AMERICA

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The great novelist Anzia Yezierska, author of such novels as *Bread Givers*, recalled her own reaction as she finally saw America:

Land! Land! Came the joyous shout. America! We're in America! Cried my mother, almost smothering us in her rapture. All crowded and pushed on deck. They strained and stretched to get the first glimpse of the golden country, lifting their children on their shoulders so that they might see beyond them. Men fell on their knees to pray. Women hugged their babies and wept. Children danced. Strangers embraced and kissed like old friends in love. Age-old visions sang themselves to me—songs of freedom of an oppressed people. America—America.



It was always an exciting moment when land was finally spotted. Passengers saw Long Island first, though they probably weren't aware of it. Many passengers, overwhelmed with emotion, simply cried when they saw that their voyage had ended and there, right in front of them, was that magical Eden, the Golden Land.

People grabbed their belongings, tying up their sheets and blankets, combing their hair, washing as best they could, trying to make their appearance as pleasant as possible for their encounters with the inspectors who would have the fearsome power to reject them at the last minute after so arduous a journey buoyed by so much hope. The steerage passengers would go onto the deck, wanting to drink in their first impressions of their new home. George Gershwin's father leaned out so far his hat flew off in the breeze. He had tucked the name of the family's only contact in America inside the hat.

The ships would enter the Narrows, the harbor entrance between Staten Island and Brooklyn. Passengers were amazed at the enormous array of ships all around them.

A small cutter would then come alongside the ship. The steerage passengers might not have realized that the two men and the woman in uniform who were climbing the ladder were headed to the second-class area's saloon, where the inspector would ask a couple of questions. The other man was a doctor who looked at the eyes of each second-class passenger.

Because the passengers were barely examined at all, booking such a ticket became a way around the rules for steerage passengers who would be subjected to a much more rigorous examination. Indeed, it was not unheard of for a member of a family who had been deported back to Europe to save enough, with the assistance of those admitted to America, to buy a second-class ticket and thereby get through the cursory inspection. When the second-class passengers were done, the inspector looked at the ship's passenger list of names of first-class passengers. A quick look was enough; they were fine.

The ship continued to move as the inspections took place. The steerage passengers pushing toward the rail could see the magnificent Statue of Liberty on the left. Parents lifted their young children on their shoulders for a better view. It was a view that many of the children would carry in their minds for the rest of their lives. The impressive Manhattan skyline loomed a mere 2 miles away.

The ship then sailed past Ellis Island, just north of the Statue of Liberty, and into the Hudson River, where it finally docked. The steerage passengers were quickly pushed away from the rails; authorities feared that some of them would leap onto the dock. After the passengers in first and second class got off, the immigrants streamed onto the pier and, after about an hour, were herded onto a ferryboat until it filled. Barges were used to transport any remaining passengers.

The passengers knew they were on their way to an inspection that could end their dream and send them back to Europe or open the final gateway to freedom and rebirth. The inspection was their last test before entering America, and most were very scared as they approached the island where their fate would be sealed.