

JEWISH MASS IMMIGRATION FROM EASTERN EUROPE, 1881-1914

By Morris U. Schappes

BEFORE outlining the main developments in the American Jewish labor movement in the first decade of the twentieth century, it is desirable to pause for an examination of the main features of the mass immigration of Jews into our country from 1881 to the First World War. The effect of this immigration upon the American Jewish community and upon relations between the Jews and the general population was vast. The sheer size of the incoming tide changed the quality of the Jewish population here. There was a conspicuous change in the social composition of the American Jewish population, for by the turn of the century the largest single class was proletarian, consisting of wage workers very largely in shops and factories. Accompanying this shift in class character was a deep-going change in cultural life and forms of expression: the main language spoken by Jews in our country during this period was now no longer German or English but Yiddish and the main religious trend swung away from Reform Judaism to Orthodoxy of the East European kind. And connected with these new millions of Jewish immigrants were new secular ideologies: for the workers, a mass movement to unionism, labor fraternalism and socialism, and for some elements the beginning of a Zionist orientation.

Just how big was this Jewish immigration stream? Government statistics from 1899 on, plus very carefully made estimates for the earlier years, show that in the closely studied years, 1881 to 1910, the Jewish immigration totaled 1,562,800.¹ To add the years to 1914 would bring the sum to 1,974,000. When one considers that these almost two million Jews came to a country which, before then, had had about a quarter of a million Jews, one can begin to perceive the kind of transformation that took place.

The Flood of East European Immigration

The Jews, of course, were not the only immigrants that were flocking into the country. In fact, the Italians who came in from 1881 to 1910 were almost twice as numerous as the Jews, for a sum of 3,005,000. Altogether in those 30 years there landed in our ports 17,730,000 newcomers and of this huge number the Jews were only a small portion,

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, figures for these years will be taken from Samuel Joseph, *Jewish Immigration to the United States from 1881 to 1910*, New York, 1914.

8.8 per cent. The fact that the Jewish stream was only a part of a general immigration tide fortunately makes it possible and easier for us to see both what the Jewish immigrants shared in common with all others and also how they differed in certain specific features.

First, then, where did this mass of Jews come from? The Eastern Europe that is referred to included the Tsarist Empire (with Latvia, Lithuania and part of Poland in it), the Austro-Hungarian Empire (including Galicia) and Rumania. It was from these states that there came in the years 1881 to 1910 the vast bulk of the Jewish immigrants, 93.8 per cent (1,467,266); the remaining six per cent were from all other countries of Europe and the Middle East. Of those who came from the three states of Eastern Europe, those arriving from the Russian Empire made up the huge majority of the total Jewish immigration: 71.6 per cent (1,119,059). From Austria-Hungary there were 281,150 (17.9 per cent) and from Rumania, 67,057 (4.3 per cent).

In space, these East European lands were thousands of miles from our coast. But more important than the physical was the "social distance" between the source of emigration and the country of immigration. The social system in Eastern Europe was in several major respects markedly different from ours and the contrasts were bold. In the Russian Empire (and the same is more or less true of the Austro-Hungarian and Rumania), there was still a semi-feudal absolutist autocracy, with the tsar as the absolute monarch, "the autocrat of all the Russias." The nobility and great landowners were the dominant classes, with capitalism developing late and slowly. There had been no bourgeois democratic revolutions, and the bourgeoisie, the capitalists, were just striving for some share of political power. The people were subjects of an autocrat, not citizens, and had no democratic rights. There was a fusion of church and state, a tight interlocking of the big landowners and nobility with the high clergy. There was an official state religion and all persons and groups not part of that religion were severely handicapped and penalized. Finally, although capitalism had begun to develop, the economy there was primarily that of peasant agriculture, with the technical level generally backward and sometimes primitive.

Those who came from these lands and from such social relations to the United States, and particularly to the areas

in which they concentrated, found the contrast immense. In fact, these millions came exactly because they sought such a great economic, political and social change. They by-passed, for instance, Palestine which, although much nearer to them geographically, offered them no such social contrast. In the United States there was a more or less democratic republic, not an autocracy, achieved by the Revolution of 1776 and the Civil War. Capitalism was more highly developed than in any other country in the world and the ruling class was capitalist. There was a greater degree of separation of church and state than even in most West European capitalist states, and a formal equality of religions. White citizens had formal equality before the law and there was a tradition of militant struggle for democracy and the Bill of Rights, although, the immigrants were to learn soon and sadly enough, the Trusts that were coming to dominate the nation were to begin to try to undermine these rights. Finally, capitalism had transformed the agricultural economy too; machinery and capitalist relations on the land, plus the pull of factory wages in the cities, were drawing millions of farmers off the land into the cities, so that by the turn of the century the United States was the first and only country in the world to have more of its people living in towns and cities than on the land and in villages. Industrialization and urbanization were most conspicuous features. Together with the other new factors they spelled for the immigrants, in whatever language they could read the sky-high letters, the golden word, opportunity. They came to get it.

Conditions of Jews in East Europe

Now what were the specific conditions of life of the Jews of Eastern Europe? A sketch of the situation of the Jews in the Tsarist Empire, from which came almost three-fourths of the immigrants, will serve for the whole area. Rightlessness sums up the position of the Jews. They did not have the right to live and move where they pleased, nor the right to own plots of agricultural land, nor the right to choose an occupation freely, nor the right to education to the best of their ability, nor the right to equality of religious practice, nor the right to use Yiddish publicly and officially, nor the right to security of life, limb and property, for the pogrom was continually in the offing.

These compulsions and this rightlessness produced the following essential characteristics pertinent to our study of this area as a source of mass immigration. At the turn of the century, 94 per cent of the Jews in the Russian Empire lived in the area known as the Pale of Settlement, a huge belt of land, as large as our entire Mississippi Valley, stretching through Western and Southwestern Russia and the Ukraine from the Baltic to the Black Sea. Jews could live outside this Pale, or fence, of Settlement only by special permission. Yet it is important to note that it was precisely in this area, particularly in the northwestern part of it, that Russian capitalism, heavy industry and factory production expanded most rapidly from the 1870s on.

In the Pale, the Jews were only a small minority, about 12 per cent, of the population. But restrictions prevented them from spreading out more or less evenly throughout the territory. Expulsions from the land and restrictions on ownership of land concentrated the Jews in the towns and cities. While for the non-Jews in the Pale, only 7 per cent lived in towns and cities, for the Jews the figure was 95 per cent. In nine of the 15 provinces of the Pale the Jews formed the majority of the urban population.

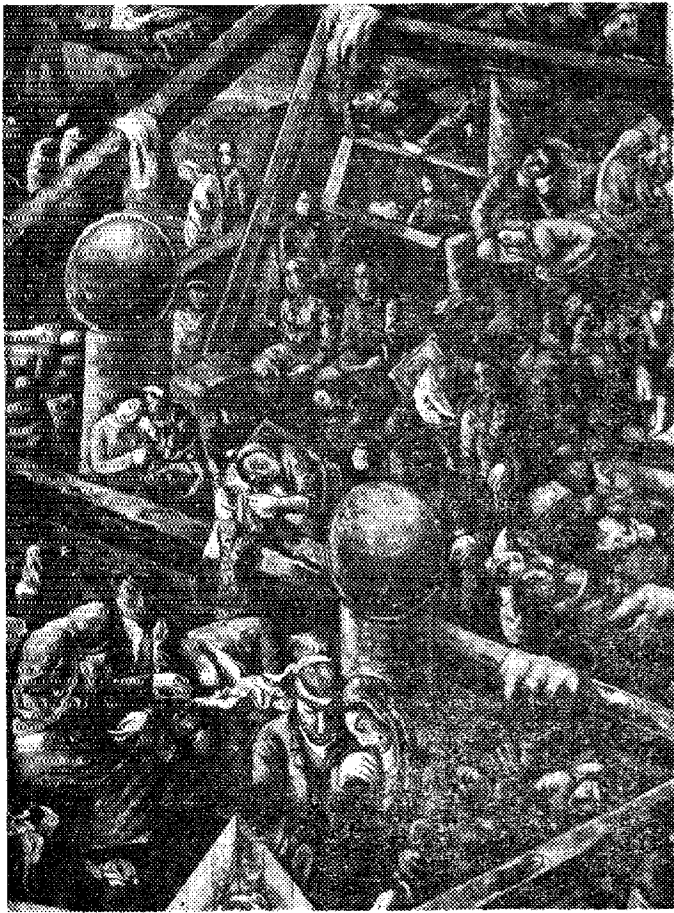
The fact that the Jews were an urban population of course affected their occupations and economic pursuits. Contrary to popular misconception, the majority of the economically active Jews were not engaged in trade and commerce. The Russian census of 1897 shows that in the Pale there were 1,331,500 Jews with occupations. Of these, 426,628 were engaged in commerce and trade, *but* there were 504,844 in manufacturing and mechanical pursuits, and 44,177 in transportation, chiefly carters and draymen (teamsters). There were more workers, artisans, journeymen, apprentices and factory workers, than tradesmen. Moreover, "in the northwest, namely, Lithuania and in White Russia, the industrial occupations claim a much greater proportion of the employed than commerce (44.2 per cent against 23.8 per cent and 42.2 per cent against 27.4 per cent, respectively. . . . In these provinces there is a process of rapid shifting from the commercial pursuits to industrial work. . . . It is from these provinces that until very recently emigration to the United States was strongest."²

In 1898, the Jewish Colonization Society made a study that more than confirmed these figures, for it registered 500,986 artisans, of whom 15.3 per cent were women and girls. These artisans made up 44 per cent of the Jewish working population. In addition there were factory workers; it is a notable fact that in 1898 one third of all the factories in the Pale were owned by Jews and they employed many Jewish workers. Although there were Jews in some 60 different classes of occupations listed by the official census of 1897, there was a special concentration of workers in the following industries: clothing (254,384), metal-working (43,449), wood-working (42,525), building (39,019), textile (34,612) and tobacco (7,856). It was with this urban background and with such occupational characteristics that the East European mass immigration of Jews arrived on our shores.

Jews Take Root in the U.S.

Once in the United States, what happened to the Jews? To what extent, for instance, did they stay here, become permanent residents? It should not glibly be assumed that since immigrants had traveled thousands of miles to get here, they would of course stay put. The extent to which immigrants remained depended upon the extent to

²I. M. Rubinow, *Economic Condition of the Jews in Russia*, Washington, D. C., 1907, p. 502; the facts used in the next paragraph are also from the same source, p. 520, 524, 498-499. This study was issued by the U. S. Bureau of Labor.



Detail from "EMIGRANT SHIP" Painting by Lazar Segall

which they were able to take economic root here, that is, to make a living. Millions of immigrants went back where they came from, not having found here the glories they expected. Thus from 1908, when figures of immigrants returning home begin to be available, to 1914, the total immigration was 6,709,357; but the number of immigrants departing from the United States was 2,063,767, or 30.76 per cent! Three out of every ten who came here went back there! For the Jews, however, the percentage of return for these years was only 7.14 per cent; only seven out of every hundred Jews went back. In fact, the Jews were second in stability of all the immigrant groups, second only to—the Irish. In the years 1908 through 1910, for instance, eight out of every hundred immigrant Jews went back, but only six out of every hundred Irish returned. These two groups are exceptionally stable, when compared, in the same years, to the Hungarians, of whom 64 per cent went back, or the North Italians, of whom 62 per cent went back, or the South Italians, of whom 56 per cent returned, or the Croations and Slovenians, of whom 56 per cent returned. For varying reasons, the Jews and the Irish both made a go of it here, fitting themselves into the American economic requirements. Secondary, although noteworthy, is the fact that both the Irish and the Jews had come here not only to improve their economic situation but to escape persecution, one, of British landlordism, the other, of tsarism.

Connected with the factor of permanence of residence was the fact that the Jewish immigration was uniquely a family movement, with a very large number of women and children under 14 accompanying, or sometimes following, the men. Thus from 1899 to 1910, the percentage of women in the Jewish immigration was 43.4, and of children 24.9. The Jews had the highest percentage of children of any immigrant group; the percentage of Jewish women, however, was second to the Irish, with 52.1. With the Irish, though, the high percentage of women did not indicate a family migration; these were not so much wives and mothers coming over, as young girls, who were often saved from the famine of the Irish farm by being sent over to become servants in our country.

Where the Jews Settled

In what parts of the country did the Jewish immigrants settle? In pretty much the same parts as all the other immigrants, but with a slight difference. First it should be understood, however, that where immigrants settle was not determined by any abstract desire of theirs for climate, scenery or geography. These immigrants were not tourists, out to see new territory. They had to make a living and where they settled was decided for them and by them by the opportunities for employment made available by the employers, the economic rulers, of the country. Having arrived in a port on the Atlantic seaboard, New York, Philadelphia, Boston or, for a time, Baltimore, the immigrants' first desire and need was not so much to begin to supplement his overseas voyage by inland travel as to find work. If they found it in the port of entry itself, they remained there—and for that reason our main seaports are to this day large centers of immigrant population of all nationalities. If they had to go away from the port of entry to find work, they did so, provided they could afford the trip, or get financial aid, from employers or philanthropic agencies, for the trip.

Where then did the immigrants settle? From 1899 to 1910, more than two-thirds (67.5 per cent) settled in the North Atlantic states, New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey and New England, the states with the main ports of entry. Similarly the Jews settled overwhelmingly in these states, with a significantly higher percentage of 86, the reason for which we shall see later. Almost one quarter (22.4 per cent) of all the immigrants went westward from the seaboard and settled in the North Central states, Illinois, Ohio, Missouri, Michigan, etc. Some Jews also went westward to these states, 10.3 per cent. Adding these figures, we find that 89.9 per cent of all immigrants in those years settled in the North Atlantic and North Central states, while for the Jews the sum is not much different, 96.3 per cent. As for all the other states in the Union, the South Atlantic, the South Central and the Western, employers did not make them attractive for the immigrants, and so they got only 10.1 per cent of all of them, and 3.7 per cent of the Jews.

Now we shall see later that the fact that the vast majority of Jews settled in the ports of entry, particularly the main one, New York, was a perfectly normal result of the requirements and opportunities of the American economy. But the older generation of Jews, who were on hand and in influential positions in Jewish communal life when the new wave of East European immigration began to roll in, tried hard but vainly to change this result. Pressed mainly by the fear of rising anti-Semitism, these Jewish leaders sought with enormous futility to check the general American economic trend to rapid urbanization in ever larger cities by trying to disperse the Jews away from New York. In 1882, 3,693 Jews arrived in the port of New York. The Hebrew Emigrant Aid Society of New York sent 2,617 of them (71 per cent) to 165 cities in 32 states.³

In 1901, the Industrial Removal Office was established for the purpose of arranging for the removal of Jews from New York (and later for a time from Philadelphia and Boston) to the interior. From 1901 to 1911, the I. R. O. distributed 53,372 Jews throughout the United States, but they were only 5.3 per cent of the 850,470 Jews landing in New York in that period. By 1917, the I. R. O. had sent 72,483 Jews to 1,670 cities in all 48 states, but the effort was fruitless. For the overall figures show that, despite all this planning and organized dispersal, of the 1,334,627 Jews who arrived in New York from 1881 to 1911, 73.5 per cent stayed there, and some of the 26.5 per cent who went elsewhere drifted back. Even a project financed by the banker, Jacob H. Schiff (of Kuhn, Loeb and Co.), to have Jewish immigrants land in the port of Galveston, Texas, in order that they might from there be dispersed to western states, resulted only in some nine to ten thousand getting to Galveston from 1907 to 1914, when the project was abandoned.⁴

Why They Settled Where They Did

The basic American economic trend could not be changed by subjective ideological considerations. The Jews, like all other immigrants, settled where they did because that was where, in the American economy, they could find work. Why, then, the significantly higher concentration of Jews in the North Atlantic states (86 per cent) as compared with that of the general immigration (67.5 per cent)? The answer is to be found in the *kind* of work the Jews were able to find employment in as compared with the work obtainable by the non-Jewish immigrants.

Decisive, of course, in finding a job was not the wish or need of the immigrant but the need of the employer. The skills the immigrants brought with them from the country of origin were secondary factors in determining what they did here. The immigrant had no power to compel an employer to engage him to do the work the immigrant knew or liked; the employer and the employer alone de-

cidated what skills he would hire on the expectation that he could make a profit from their use. Now the overwhelming majority of the almost 18 million immigrants who came in between 1881 and 1910 were of peasant stock, with peasant backgrounds and skills. Did they become farmers or agricultural workers here? Not at all. How could they, when the march of industry was sucking hundreds of thousands of American farmers from the land into the cities and factories? But if the American economy did not need immigrant farmers, it did need masses of what were called "unskilled" and semi-skilled workers in heavy industry, in construction work.

It was such work that the peasant brawn could find an employer for. Each immigrant group was herded into a special kind of occupational concentration. The Italians were concentrated in construction work, road-building, ditch-digging, not because the Italian farmer had crossed the Atlantic swelled with the dream of digging America's ditches but because if he did not take that kind of work he found it hard to get any other. Similarly the Slav peasants were drawn into the coal and steel areas, the Bohemians into the slaughter and packing houses of Chicago, and so forth. Obviously since many of the heavy industries that drew upon this mass of immigrant peasant labor were located in the North Central rather than the North Atlantic states, there was the westward movement of about one fourth of the immigrants into these states, as well as the movement of part of those that remained in the North Atlantic states into the western part of these states (Pittsburgh area, the Buffalo area).

Jews the Most Skilled Immigrant Group

We have seen, however, that the Jews were unique in this vast immigration tide in being not of peasant but of urban origin (owing to tsarist restrictions in the countries of origin). The Jews came from urban centers and they had urban occupations and urban skills. Some of the trades in which large numbers of Jews had developed skills were also, at the time of the arrival of the Jewish masses, expanding here. Occupation restrictions in Eastern Europe had concentrated the Jews in light industry. In the United States, light industry was also expanding rapidly and geographically it expanded precisely in the large cities on the Atlantic seaboard, particularly the ports of entry. No more than any other immigrant could the Jews compel employers to hire them at the skills they brought with them. But since production in those crafts was being expanded, the immigrant Jewish workers' skill and need for a job merged with the employers' need for just such workers. This confluence, this flowing together of available skill with employers' needs, was unique. We have seen that in Eastern Europe, the Jewish workers were concentrated in clothing, metal-working, wood-working, the building, textile and tobacco industries. These available skills were much in demand by employers here. Therefore there developed a continuity of occupation. This was not because Jews for

³ Zosa Szajkowski "The Attitude of American Jews to East European Jewish Immigration (1881-1893)," *American Jewish Historical Society Publications*, Vol. 40, 1951, p. 272-273.

⁴ Rose Margolis, *History of the Industrial Removal Office*, typescript thesis, The Graduate School for Jewish Social Work, New York, 1936, p. 143, 42, 173.

some mystical reason prefer to be clothing workers rather than anything else, but because immigrant Jewish clothing workers looking for work will, of course, try to find work at what they can do rather than at something they might abstractly prefer to do but cannot. And if there are jobs open in your own trade of course you take them. And if you have no skill and can get a Jewish worker to help you learn *his* skill you do so, to get a job. Thus a pattern was set over which the Jews subjectively had little or no control.

It is necessary to take into account the little-known or disregarded fact that, from 1899 to 1910, the Jewish immigrants had the highest percentage of skilled workers of any immigrant group. The average of skilled workers in the total immigration was 20.2 per cent, but among the Jews 67.1 per cent were skilled workers! Since the average was lowered by the peasant masses, it is well to know that the Jewish skilled workers had a higher percentage than those immigrants who came even from industrially advanced countries like Scotland (57.9 per cent), or England (48.7 per cent), or Czechia and Moravia (40.8 per cent). It was the skilled worker who was the main figure in the Jewish immigration of that period.

It is possible that the Jewish immigration before 1899 from Eastern Europe did not have quite as high a percentage of skilled workers, but the figures of the 1890 survey of the occupations of East European Jews in New York (quoted in my article, *JEWISH LIFE*, October 1954, p. 18), reveal a high percentage of skilled workers even then. As for the suggestion made by some that the Jews deceived the immigration authorities by claiming to be skilled workers when they were not, there is no reason to assume that if they did so they did it to any greater extent than other immigrants. There are to the contrary the known facts about the occupational characteristics of the Jews in the countries of origin themselves, as given earlier in this article. Furthermore, a British census in 1901 of 29,522 East European Jewish immigrants revealed the fact that about 85 per cent were workers and only 7 per cent traders. In Canada, the figures indicate that from 1905 to 1914, of the economically active Jewish immigrants, 53 per cent were skilled workers. And in the United States again, from 1910 to 1914, the percentage of skilled Jewish workers rose from the 67.1 cited for the previous period to 68.19 per cent.⁵

Moreover, these facts about the skilled occupations of the Jews when they arrived are corroborated even by the fragmentary data we have about the work they did after settling here. Thus a United States census study made in 1900 shows that in New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, Boston and Baltimore, about 60 per cent of the Russian Jews were factory workers (33 per cent of them in the needle trades). A study of the 36,231 Jews dispersed from New York by the Industrial Removal Office from 1902 to 1917 reveals that 61 per cent were skilled workers (23 per cent of them in the needle trades).⁶

⁵ *Universal Jewish Encyclopedia*, Vol. 7, p. 547-549.
⁶ N. Goldberg in E. Tcherikower, ed., *Ge'ichia fun der Idisher Arbeter Bewegung in di Farainikht Shtaten*, New York, 1943, Vol. 1, p. 349-351; *American Jewish Year Book*, Vol. 51, 1950, p. 55-56; Rose Margolis, *work cited*, p. 153.

The main characteristic of the mass Jewish immigration before World War I was not that of the "*luftmensch*" who lived on air but that of the craftsman and skilled worker. Under conditions in our country during this period they developed a Jewish section of the American working class. They provided the proletarian emphasis that is outstanding for that period. Their union organization, strikes and political struggles dominate the Jewish life of the time. When their employers were German Jews, they differed from them in class, national origin, language and culture, and in religious background. When their employers became Russian Jews, the class conflict did not lessen, although it may have been conducted in the same language, Yiddish, and against a similar religious background. To the dismay of the upper and middle class Jews, this proletarian mass built their own labor, fraternal and political organizations in close cooperation with those of the American working class as a whole, they established their own cultural organs of press, literature, music and theater, and their own religious as well as secular institutions. By 1914 the new immigration had changed—much for the better—the face and the social composition of the American Jewish population, now numbering about three million.

Jews and the Cry for Justice

By Howard Fast

THREE hundred years ago, Asser Levy led the first group of Jews to settle in what is now the United States, ashore at old New Amsterdam. In the 300 years since then, the original handful have increased to over five million—and it may truthfully be said that their stamp, their mark, their speech, culture and work are everywhere in this enormous land of ours.

It is not my purpose to tell any part of that epic of 300 years; it will be done elsewhere and by those better qualified; but in this small greeting, I want to take note of one thing that should still make a measure of pride in the hearts of all Jews.

There was never a time in those 300 years when most Jews were not denounced by bigots, racists and reactionaries as advocates of change, as radicals of one sort or another, as restless souls who could not be content with the matter of fact of things as they are.

There were villains and scoundrels among these 300 years of Jews—and what people is without them?—but never in those 300 years did a cry for justice rise in the United States or in the colonies before there was a United States that Jews did not respond to.

Never was there a movement for the liberation of man, for social justice, for the advancement of the working class, whether it was the first splendid revolution, the march of old John Brown, or the building of the Knights of Labor, that did not have its Jewish volunteers.

And never did a cry of pain or agony go up, a cry of hunger or injury, that Jews did not respond to.

For other things too, the American Jew will be known and remembered; but remembered best of all, I think, and deepest in the heart of this nation, because in such great number he remembered his own oppression and was not indifferent to the oppression of others.