moved westward because they clung to the dream of national fulfillment while hoping individually to gain some decency of survival.

To separate, for any but analytical reasons, the most exalted motives for the migration from the most self-centered is probably a mistake. What Maldwyn Jones says in his history of immigration holds for the Jews quite as much as for other national groups: "The motives have been very similar from first to last: a mixture of yearnings for riches, for land, for change, for tranquility, for freedom, and for something not definable in words... a readiness to pull up stakes in order to seek a new life."

Only a tiny minority undertook the journey with ideological intent. The national pioneers of Am Olam (Eternal People), marching off to the trains with Torah in one hand and Das Kapital in the other, neither expected nor desired that the masses of ordinary Jews follow in their footsteps; but these idealistic settlers were greatly admired among ordinary Jews, less for their vision of setting up agricultural communes than for their determination to break with haredi lassitude. One Jewish immigrant, Dr. George Price, kept a diary during 1882, the year he left for America, and what he wrote can stand as representative of what millions felt:

- Sympathy for Russia? How ironical it sounds! Am I not despised? Am I not urged to leave? Do I not hear the word abed constantly? Can I even think that someone considers me a human being capable of thinking and feeling like others? Do I not rise daily with the fear lest the hungry mob attack me?... It is impossible... that a Jew should regret leaving Russia.

The other half of the story is told by Mary Antin, who came to the United States nine years after Price:

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.

There was strong resistance to the idea of migration. In the eighties and nineties it was the orthodox Jews who were most skeptical: they had little faith in any mundane solution to their problems and they foresaw that America would mean a weakening of the faith. “Where do you travel and wherfore do you travel?” wrote one of them. “You are heading for a corrupt and sinful land where the Sabbath is no Sabbath. Even on Yom Kippur they don’t fast. And for what purpose are you going there? So you can eat meat every day?... But their meat is treyf [unkosher]. No good Jew would touch such meat.” There were other, more personal reasons. Older Jews were often unprepared for the hazards of the journey; the small
class of prosperous Jews had a stake in remaining where it was; letters from those who had emigrated sometimes painted a bleak picture of “the golden land”; and then, of course, there was that natural conservatism which causes human beings to cling to what they can for as long as they can.

The departure from Russia, Poland, Romania, and Austro-Hungary can be traced along four main routes:

1. Jews coming from the Ukraine and southern Russia would usually cross the Austro-Hungarian border illegally, travel by train to Vienna or Berlin, and regroup themselves for the journey to one of the major ports of embarkation: Hamburg and Bremen in Germany, Rotterdam and Amsterdam in Holland, and Antwerp in Belgium.

2. Jews emigrating from western or northwestern Russia would surreptitiously cross the German border and proceed to Berlin and then the northern ports.

3. Jews from the Austro-Hungarian empire would legally cross the German border, journey to Berlin, and there join with the mass of Jews from Russia to proceed to the ports.

4. Jews from Romania, whose mass migration first began in 1890, traveled mostly through Vienna, Frankfurt am Main, and then the Holland ports, though a few took the sea voyage from Trieste or Fiume.

These paths of migration were seldom direct. Theoretically, Jews from the Ukraine might have embarked from Odessa, going through the Black and Mediterranean seas to the Atlantic. Or they might have crossed the Romanian border, which was considerably closer to them than the Austrian town of Brody, where most of the Ukrainian Jews in fact gathered. The Jews of northern Russia might have gone from Libau, the Baltic port, rather than undertake the illegal and sometimes dangerous trip across the German border. In both north and south, however, the roundabout routes were used for quite sensible reasons. A sea journey from Odessa was rarely practical, since it meant a longer and costlier trip than would be involved in the combination of rail travel across Europe and embarkation from a northern European port. More important, Brody was preferred to the Romanian border because the Romanian authorities were feared as particularly savage anti-Semites while the Austro-Hungarian empire seemed mildly benevolent. As for the north, Libau was for a few years a popular port of embarkation, more than 21,000 Jews sailing from there in 1904 alone; but the Russian passport required at Libau was not only expensive, it also raised the fear, especially among draft-age men, of becoming entangled with czarist authorities. By all accounts, it seemed safer to sneak across the Russo-German border, even if that meant the risk of theft and rough treatment. With systematic perversity, the czarist regime made it hard for Jews to get legal passports yet tolerated illegal border crossings.

The mass of Jews moving westward included thousands of refugees in

Departure and Arrival

direct flight from pogroms, a small number of would-be settlers intent upon creating “normal” modes of Jewish life through agricultural co-operatives (notably the Am Olam, or Eternal People, movement), and the masses of ordinary immigrants traveling as individuals or in family units. The refugees appeared as waves of victims first after the outrages of 1881–1882, then again in 1891, when Jews were driven out of Moscow and other Russian cities, and still again after the Kishinev massacre of 1903. (Another group came after the defeat of the 1905 Russian Revolution, though these were political rather than strictly Jewish refugees.) Of settlers with programs there were a mere handful, not a significant factor in the over-all migration. The mass of Jews leaving eastern Europe were simply the folksmame in an upheaval at once desperate and purposeful, people determined to escape conditions of misery.

Crossing into Europe

The first major exodus began during the summer of 1881, when thousands of refugees, in flight from pogroms that had spread across the whole of the Ukraine, poured into Brody. Starving and homeless, sometimes forced to sleep on the streets, and treated far less well by the Austrian authorities than the legends about Franz-Joseph had led them to expect, these refugees presented a problem not merely for the Jewish community of Brody, obviously unable to care for them, but for the entire Jewish population of Europe. Clinging to their acrid pride even in wretchedness, the east European Jews had harsh things to say about their more prosperous west European brothers. Yet the west European Jewish communities, through such agencies as the Baron de Hirsch Fund and the Alliance Israélite Universelle, did help. Their responses were inadequate and, given the scope of the migration from the east, could hardly be anything but inadequate. But relief poured into Brody, refugees were enabled to travel to Hamburg and Bremen, quarters were set up—often miserable, but set up—in the ports. In Paris a committee headed by Victor Hugo organized a public protest against the pogroms, and liberal newspapers undertook subscriptions to aid the refugees. The world, or at least a few decent portions of it, could still be moved by the sight of thousands of victims, perhaps because it had not yet become hardened to the sight of millions.

In the spring of 1882, after renewed pogroms in Russia, fresh streams of victims poured into Brody, which had now become a magnet for all the helpless who had heard of the relief and emigration depots in that town. During the early months of 1882, there were perhaps twenty thousand refugees clustered in Brody, which normally had a population of no more
than fifteen thousand; and what had at first been envisaged as a limited relief operation by the Alliance now began to confront the Jews of Europe as the task of coping with a mass exodus. During the next few years, permanent agencies, especially, after 1900, the Hilfsverein der Deutschen Juden, were created to help the east Europeans on their way. In view of the strained relations that would continue for decades between German and east European Jews, it is only fair to record that the German Jews worked hard and often well in behalf of the thousands pouring in from the east. They established information bureaus to help the travelers; they negotiated special rates with railway companies and steamship lines; they set up precautions against the hordes of scoundrels, both Jewish and gentile, who tried to fleece the immigrants; they negotiated with governments to ease the journeys. In the peak decade of immigration, 1905–1914, some 700,000 east European Jews passed through Germany, and 210,000 of these were directly helped by the Hilfsverein. Mark Wischnitzer, a historian of immigration close to the institutions created by east European Jewish immigrants, acknowledges that “the German Jewish community always bore the brunt of the tidal wave of emigration from eastern Europe.” Before 1900 its work was inadequate: “Orderly migration requires a long and thorough preparation by experts in the field. . . . The voluntary committees of the 19th century, created ad hoc, were simply unable to perform this work.” Later, things improved—but the problem grew larger. Between 1901 and 1914 the number of Jews who left Europe, almost all of them from Russia, Romania, and Galicia, came to 1,601,441. A leader of the German effort to help the emigrant Jews, Dr. Paul Nathan, came to the conclusion that in the period of 1900–1903 90 percent of them “went forth each year on their own initiative and at their own risk.”

In the earlier years some efforts were made by the Alliance Israelite Universelle to repatriate the Russian Jews, or, more accurately, to persuade them to attempt repatriation. In late 1881, Charles Netter, an official of the Alliance who had been dispatched to Brody, wrote his home office in Paris: “The emigrants must be checked, otherwise we shall receive here all the beggars of the Russian empire.” Netter issued an appeal to the Jewish press in Russia saying that no new emigrants would be received in Brody, but, as the Alliance ruefully admitted, this met “with scant results.” It reveals the magnitude of feeling that had overcome the refugees that, no matter how wretched they were in Brody, they rejected the idea of returning to the land of the czars. In 1882 Netter wrote to his Paris headquarters: “They [the refugees] will get along with or without our help, as shown by the fact that they are already beginning to do so.” A group of Jewish emigrants sent the Alliance a touching declaration in October 1881: America, they said, “is the most civilized region, and offers the most guarantees of individual freedom, freedom of conscience, and security of all property . . . and endows every one of her inhabitants with both civil and political rights.”

Departure and Arrival

the Alliance, in response to heavy pressure from the Board of Delegates of American Israelites, proposed to send only males to New York, a group of refugees wired Paris: “Impossible accept. Spirits broken, hope lost. Even more unhappy than in Russia. Would rather starve than leave families.” Recognizing how stiff-necked these east European Jews could be, the Alliance gave up the idea of repatriation. Its efforts, through circulars and correspondence, to persuade the Russian Jews to remain where they were had about as much effect on them as, in the words of a Yiddish saying, “last year’s snow.”

“Strangely enough,” writes Wischnitzer, “American Jewry [in 1881], a quarter of a million strong, was at first indifferent, apathetic and unfriendly, to say the least” toward the prospect of hordes of immigrants from eastern Europe. Why “strangely enough”? The Jewish organizations in America had been set up by the German Jews; their life was reasonably comfortable, sometimes prosperous; what benefits could they foresee, what but certain embarrassment and probable burden, from a descent of thousands of penniless Jews whom they supposed to be steeped in medieval superstition when not possessed by wild radicalism?

During the 1870s and 1880s the general feeling in America was receptive to immigration, though the Jewish community tended to favor a mildly restrictionist approach. Myer S. Isacks, a leader of the German Jews, reported to the Board of Delegates of American Israelites: “The dispatch of poor emigrants to America has long constituted a burden and unjust tax upon our large cities . . . It is habitual with benevolent organizations in certain cities in Europe to dispatch utterly helpless Jewish families to America—only to become a burden upon our charities.”

The records, inner correspondence, and public statements of the American Jewish organizations all through the 1880s bristle with anxieties concerning an influx of debilitated and pauperized east European Jews. All insist that only skilled workers, healthy and young, be encouraged to come. All plead that the American Jewish community, expected to take care of “its own,” lacks the resources to do so. All charge that the Jews of western Europe are not carrying a fair share of the costs.

If we are now inclined to regard such attitudes as unfeeling, we must remember that the security of the Jews already settled in the United States was neither long-standing nor well established. The depressions of the time had done damage to many Jewish businesses, and by the mid-1880s there was already a sizable body of poor Jewish immigrants in the urban ghettos.

A statistical account of expenditures during those years lent some credence to the complaints that funds [among American Jews] were lacking. Although only a small proportion of the many thousands of newcomers who settled in New York City applied for aid to the United Hebrew Charities, from 1881 to 1884 that society expended over $200,000 annually for immigrant welfare. An additional $500,000 was spent each year for general relief. But the amount
consigned for immigrant use... proved insufficient. Three-fourths of the
needy immigrants looked for help to charitable institutions, but only one-
tenth of those seeking such aid received any. . . . The relatively wealthy of
New York's established Jewry found it difficult to sustain an increase of
200,000 Jews in one decade, about $9,000 of whom arrived in New York City
from 1885 to 1889.

That the Jews in America should respond at first with anxiety, even
hostility, is therefore not at all surprising. What is remarkable is that the
German Jews in America soon began systematically to help the immigrants;
by 1891 Dr. Julius Goldman, representing the United Hebrew Charities at a
conference of European Jewish societies, could say that, yes, America was
the best destination for the Russian-Jewish refugees; and by the early 1900's
the German-Jewish leaders had not only organized effective relief in the
larger American cities but also were engaged in a subterranean struggle
against efforts to restrict immigration. Their sense of solidarity, their
moderate but firm liberal principles, their growing ease in America—whatever
the reason, they were now committed, especially through the work of such
figures as Jacob Schiff and Louis Marshall, to supporting the masses of Jews
pouring in from eastern Europe.

They came, these masses, in several mounting waves: first in the eighties
from Russia, then at the turn of the century from Romania, and after 1905
from Russia again. The departure from Romania was especially dramatic. In
1878 the Treaty of Berlin, which Romania had signed with the European
powers, had guaranteed Jews full civil and political rights, but venal Roman-
ian governments had systematically violated this treaty, sometimes through
decrees reducing thousands of Jews to pauperdom, such as one in 1884 that
prohibited them from peddling in the cities. In 1899, when economic depres-
sion led to famine, a pogrom was organized in the city of Jassy by its police
chief, violent denunciations of Jews were delivered in the parliament, and
Jews were expelled from entire districts. There followed a remarkable epi-
sode in which Jews, acting through improvised committees, began to leave
the country as fugueyzer (walkers, wayfarers) who tramped hundreds of
miles across the country.

In towns and townships [writes Joseph Kissman, a historian of the Romanian
Jews], bands of emigrants organized for the purpose of journeying on foot to
Hamburg and thence to America.

The wayfarers of 1899 were different from the earlier emigrants. In the
first place, the human material consisted not of poor, worn out, exhausted
peddlers, but of young, healthy people, mostly artisans and workers. . . .
The very manner in which these groups were organized testified to their
idealism and youthful romanticism. . . .
The members sold all their belongings, saved their meager pennies,
trained themselves in marching long distances, and strengthened their spirit of
brotherhood. Some groups, before departing, went to the synagogue and

Departure and Arrival

took a solemn oath to share with one another their last morsel of bread. . . .
The fugueyzer established a "press" of their own. In these newspapers we
find appeals for aid, articles in which they say farewell to their old home, and
sometimes a bit of verse. Dozens of such papers came out, but apparently no
more than one issue of each. . . . The authorities were surprised at the atti-
trude of the non-Jewish peasantry toward the fugueyzer. Poorest peasants
stood on the dusty roads waiting for them and bringing water, bread, and
milk.

One fugueyzer would later remember a contingent "in double file, clad
in brown khaki, military leggings, and broad-brimmed canvas hats, each
with an army knapsack on his back and a water-bottle slung jauntily over
his shoulder." Another, in a Yiddish reminiscence composed in old age, recalled
the first contingent that set out from Barlad in April 1900, singing a recently
composed "Song of the Fugueyzer": "Geyt, yidelekht, in der wayer velt; in
kanade vet ir feridene gelt." ("Go, little Jews, into the wide world; in
Canada you will earn a living.") The group of seventy-five men and three
girls set off from the center of town:

After the speeches, our captain gave a signal on his cornet, and our march
began. The order of our ranks was the following: first the captain, then two
men with flags, one the Romanian and the other the blue and white, and then
we following, ordinary foot soldiers, four in a row, and finally a wagon with
our baggage. . . . At the outskirts of the city we began saying farewell in
earnest to our parents, sisters, and brothers. It was painful to wrench our-
selves from the arms of our relatives.

Offering amateur theatricals as a way of raising funds, the Barlad fugueyzer
met with fervent receptions in town after town; Jewish communities
greeted them as pioneers, and ordinary Romanian folk were often friendly
too. Our memoirist, honest to the bone, records that as his group was zig-
zagging to the Hungarian border, it discovered that one of its leaders had
absconded with the funds it had painfully accumulated; but to avoid giving
their Romanian enemies a chance to crow, they decided to hush up the
incident, "bite our lips," and sell the wagon for money with which to
proceed.

In the thirty-four years between 1881 and the First World War, 75,043
Romanian Jews entered the United States, approximately 30 percent of the
total Jewish population of Romania. An additional small number went to
other countries. The fugueyzer were only the most exuberant strand of the
Jewish emigration from Romania, those young people who wanted not
merely to escape but to display their feelings while escaping. Though many
of their expeditions disintegrated and they never came to more than a tiny
percentage of the entire emigration, the fugueyzer helped to sustain our con-
tention that the departure of the east European Jews must be seen not merely
as a sum of individual responses but also as a collective enterprise, not merely
as a reaction to material need but also as a sign of moral yearning, not merely as a consequence of despair but also as a token of morale.

The Lure of America

“Even an imaginative American,” writes a Jewish memoirist, “must find it very hard to form anything like a just idea of the tremendous adventure involved in the act of immigration.” Tremendous adventure, yes, but only if that term comprehends a rich share of misery and trauma. The misery of journeying to America is by now a familiar story, but the trauma of undertaking the journey is often suppressed. The purposefulness of Am Olam, the bravado of the fuguey are exhilarating, but far more frequent were the wrenchings of personal ties, the tearing away of sons from distraught mothers and grim fathers. Young men eager to escape, but shaken by the thought of a lifelong separation, would cultivate a secret ally, mother against father or father against mother, appealing to hopes that both shared but one was readier to act upon than the other. “My father,” remembered Stanislaw Mozowski, a Jew from Montenegro,

would not even let me talk to him about my hopes. My place, he said emphatically, was at home. Once in a while my mother would feel that he was in a good mood—wives can sense these things—and she would look at him, put her finger over her mouth as if to say, “don’t say anything, let me do the talking,” and start by remarking about something I had done well, and of course he would agree. Then she would begin to talk about my future. He would immediately stiffen, but sometimes she would continue until he would pound on the table and yell, “Silence! No more, do you hear?”

More characteristic, perhaps, was the experience of Marcus Ravage:

In the evening when we were alone together my mother would make me sit on her foostool, and while her left fingers manipulated the knitting-needles she would gaze into my eyes as if she tried to absorb enough of me to last her for the coming months of absence. “You will write us, dear?” she kept asking continually. “And if I should die when you are gone, you will remember me in your prayers.”

At the moment of departure, when the train drew into the station, she lost control of her feelings. As she embraced me for the last time her sobs became violent and father had to separate us. There was a despair in her way of clinging to me which I could not then understand. I understand it now. I never saw her again.

Trapped in the shtetl, seldom familiar with the experience or idea of travel, and sensing in their bones that, whatever the ultimate benefit, the immediate loss was certain to be irreparable, many of the fathers bitterly resisted the demands of their sons. The fathers were trapped. They could not make out a persuasive case for keeping their sons at home, to be drafted into the army or becoming herring salesmen at town fairs, but neither could they overcome their own sense of despair at the falling apart of their families. For who really knew what this America was like, and who could be sure that, with or without streets of gold, one could remain a Jew there? Let us not suppose for a moment that they were all naive and narrow-minded, these stubborn Jewish fathers. “A person gone to America,” recalls Marcus Ravage, “was exactly like a person dead . . . the whole community turned out, and marched in slow time to the station, and wept loudly and copiously, and remembered the unfortunates in its prayer on the next Saturday.” If most communities were less demonstrative than Ravage’s Vaslui, all shared its underlying feeling.

Yet the inducements seemed overwhelming. Letters from America often vibrated with optimism, sometimes falsely so. The occasional emigrant who came back with the insignia of success—the others never came back—could not always keep from spreading misinformation, like the wonderful Couza, who returned to Marcus Ravage’s home town dressed in frock coat and silk hat, bringing gifts of razors, pen holders, and music boxes, donating 125 francs to the shul (synagogue), and telling everyone “there were many ways of getting rich in America. People paid, it seemed, even for voting.” (Later it turned out that poor Couza, with frock coat and silk hat, lived in a tenement on Attorney Street, and his wife took in piecework.) Steamship agents, spreading Yiddish leaflets, were shameless in their deceptions. Little brochures in Yiddish and Hebrew tempted the Jews with stories of riches and freedom. “I remember having read a book, Paris in America,” writes Gregory Weinstein, which “thrilled me with its description of the blessed life where all men were equal before the law, where manual labor was held in high esteem.”

Such Hebrew periodicals as Hamelech and Hatsfira, published in Saint Petersburg and Warsaw, were more cautious, reporting for instance that “there is no land which devours its lazy inhabitants and those not suited to physical labor like the land of America” and that the “lot of Jewish peddlers” was “toil of flesh and weariness of soul.” But even such publications, read in any case by a mere handful of Russian Jews, gave glowing pictures of American opportunity (as well as angrily reporting a banquet of the Hebrew Union College at which shrimp cocktails were served—food as treyf [unkosher] as treyf can be.) In these papers there regularly appeared a little advertisement, “Bank Wechsel und Passage Geschäfte” (“Money Exchange and Steamship Passage Office”), which probably had more impact than any quantity of reporting. Even those who wrote sobbily, like George Price in his booklet Yidn in amerik (1891), could not resist the enticements of myth: the journey across the Atlantic, he told people back home,
was “a kind of hell that cleanses a man of his sins before coming to the land of Columbus.” If so, there would be no lack of opportunity for cleansing.

From Border to Port

For those without legal passports, the first major crisis along the journey was the border crossing into Austria or Germany. Bands of smugglers, increasingly expert, worked on the fears of the emigrants. The imagination of these Jews was stirred and disordered; removed from the small circle of space in which they had spent their lives, they became easy prey to rapacious peasants and heartless fellow Jews. Only when they came under the guidance of the German-Jewish organizations in Berlin, Hamburg, and Bremen could they be shielded from sharpers and thieves. Abraham Cahan’s account of his 1882 crossing of the Austrian border is classic:

We were to leave the train at Dubro 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.

Another emigrant, writing about himself in the third person, adds a touch of excitement:

The crowd was told that in the dead of night they would be permitted to slip across the border provided they paid for the privilege. This they had expected, but what they were not prepared for was the fording of a stream. They were also told to be very cautious, to make no noise, and get over as quietly as possible. Terror lent impetus to swift movement and Alter made a dash for the opposite bank. But to his dismay, the tin cup inside the coffee pot began to rattle. This would surely give the alarm to the guards who would not hesitate to shoot. There was no alternative. . . . He opened his bundle and threw away the can—his first step on the “downward path.”

Departure and Arrival

Legal travelers stumbled upon other hurdles. The German authorities, fearful of plague during the 1880’s and 1890’s, conducted inspections—rigorous, impersonal, but worst of all, incomprehensible—of every trainload of emigrants:

In a great lonely field, opposite a solitary house within a large yard, our train pulled up at last, and a conductor . . . hurried us into the one large room. . . . Here a great many men and women, dressed in white, received us. . . . Another scene of bewildering confusion, parents losing their children, and little ones crying . . . those white-clad Germans shouting commands, always accompanied with “Quick! Quick!”—the confused passengers obeying all orders like meek children . . . . Our things were taken away, our friends separated from us; a man came to inspect us, as if to ascertain our full value; strange-looking people driving us about like dumb animals . . . children we could not see crying in a way that suggested terrible things; ourselves driven into a little room where a great kettle was boiling on a little stove; our clothes taken off, our bodies rubbed with a slippery substance . . . a shower of warm water let down on us without warning . . . we see only a cloud of steam, and hear the women’s orders to dress ourselves—“Quick! Quick!” or else we’ll miss—something we can’t hear.

In Hamburg, more questioning, disinfecting, labeling, pushing, money taken, money stolen, and a strange imprisonment called quarantine:

Two weeks within high brick walls, several hundred of us herded in half a dozen compartments . . . sleeping in rows . . . with roll-calls morning and night . . . with never a sign of the free world beyond our barren windows . . . and in our ears the unfamiliar voice of the invisible ocean, which drew and repelled us at the same time.

But discomfort, hunger, humiliation, were as nothing to the one absolute fear gripping all emigrants: that one of their family might be sent back or kept off the boat after the dockside inspection.* In a sketch that comes from the very center of Jewish experience, Sholom Aleichem describes a family waiting in Antwerp:

* The increasing strictness of these inspections had a direct economic motive: steamship companies were required to take excluded immigrants back to Europe at their own expense. In a 1903 report, Henry Dietrich, the U.S. consul at Bremen, wrote:

“The large German steamship lines have had so much expense in returning emigrants from the United States who have been excluded under our laws that they have entered an arrangement with the Prussian railway authorities under which the latter companies refuse transportation to persons from Austria and Russia who fail to meet certain requirements. Accordingly, Russian emigrants must have passports, steamship tickets to an American port, and a certain sum of money. On the day before each departing steamer every one of these emigrants, who have already undergone the sifting process twice—on the border of their native country and again at Ruhleben—are most carefully inspected for the third time here under the supervision of the United States consul.”
People tell them that they should take a walk to the doctor. So they go to the doctor. The doctor examines them and finds they are all hale and hearty and can go to America, but she, Goldele, cannot go, because she has trachoma on her eyes. At first her family did not understand. Only later did they realize it. That meant they could all go to America but she, Goldele, would have to remain here, in Antwerp. So there begins a wailing, a weeping, a moaning. Three times her mama fainted. Her papa wanted to stay here, but he couldn't. All the ship tickets would be lost. So they had to go off to America and leave her, Goldele, here until the trachoma would go away from her eyes.

Port cities were especially dangerous because there "a whole array of vocations existed to fleece the emigrant... keepers of hostels, railroad employees, ships' officers and crews, and preeminently, ticket agents. Many of these dealers were Jews who spoke Yiddish, and exploited their victims' trust in them. Stolen baggage, exorbitant lodging rates... tickets sold to the wrong destination by unscrupulous agents." Con men, cheap-Jacks, sharpers, white slavers, thieves, money-changers, thugs: a rich assortment of villains drawn from all races worked the ports of the north Atlantic. The Alter whom we encountered fording a stream at the Russian border would later become a prosperous businessman who frequently traveled in Europe, but he always refused to return to Hamburg.

This unsophisticated young man was the easy prey of all kinds of advisers... They told him to stock up on herring and potatoes and bread for the ocean voyage, which he did. He also took the advice of some mean practical joker who told him that if he bought a bottle of whisky and drank the complete contents as soon as he got aboard, he would not be seasick. He did that too. He was not exactly seasick but dead drunk... The voyage lasted seventeen days so he had plenty of time in which to recover.

Once the west European Jewish agencies started to supervise at least some of the land journey of the Russian emigrants, things became better.* The more spectacular cheating was stamped out. There were times when corporate good will thawed into warm generosity. One group of emigrants before the turn of the century was welcomed in Breslau "as though for a wedding feast. Rich ladies and gentlemen acted as waiters; even Jewish military officers waited on us. Physicians were also on hand... and it goes without saying that they were kept very busy, for is there a time when a Jew is not in need of a doctor?" With time the emigrants grew more worldly, learning from the experiences of those who had already gone and heeding the cautions of the Jewish organizations. And since it also became a

* The magnitude of the problem is suggested by the fact that between 1881 and 1904 the number of emigrants departing from Bremen alone was 2,473,019. We do not know how many of these were Jewish, but even if we assume no more than a sizable minority, it becomes evident that the German Jewish agencies simply lacked the resources to handle such vast numbers.

Departure and Arrival

custom for steamship tickets to be sent in advance by relatives in America, the emigrants could be cheated only in relatively small ways.

The expense of the journey from Romania or the Ukraine can be estimated with fair precision; what that expense signified is harder to say. In 1903 steerage from Bremen to New York was $33.50 and from Antwerp $14, though the rates were increased the following year. The cost of getting to one of the ports, together with the expense incurred while crossing borders and paying off officials, was perhaps half again as much. Somehow, vast numbers of Jews in eastern Europe scraped together the money, often by selling their last few possessions and arriving penniless in New York. If an emigrant wanted to bring his wife and children, he had to lay out what for him was a small fortune. Often it was necessary for husbands to go first and bring their families later. Some husbands never did bring their families later.

The Ordeal of Steerage

Was the Atlantic crossing really as dreadful as memoirists and legend have made it out to be? Was the food as rotten, the treatment as harsh, the steerage as sickening? One thing seems certain: to have asked such questions of a representative portion of Jews who came to America between 1881 and 1914 would have elicited staves of disbelief, suspicions as to motive, perhaps worse. The imagery of the journey as ordeal was deeply imprinted in the Jewish folk mind—admittedly, a mind with a rich training in the imagery of ordeal.

Of the hundreds of published and unpublished accounts Jewish immigrants have left us, the overwhelming bulk can still communicate a shudder of dismay when they recall the journey by sea and the disembarkation at Castle Garden or Ellis Island. Only a historian sophisticated to the point of foolishness would dismiss such accounts as mere tokens of folk bewilderment before the presence of technology, or of psychic disorientation following uprooting, journey, and resettlement. Tokens of bewilderment and disorientation there are, certainly, and these contributed to rhetorical exaggeration about the ordeal of the Atlantic crossing. But the suffering was real, it was persistent, and it has been thoroughly documented.

By the time they reached the Atlantic, many immigrants had been reduced to a state of helpless passivity, unable to make out what was happening to them or why. An acute description of this experience has been provided by Oscar Handlin:

The crossing involved a startling reversal of roles, a radical shift in attitudes. The qualities that were desirable in the good peasant [and, we might add, in
nonpeasant Jews also] were not those conducive to success in the transition. Neighbourliness, obedience, respect, and status were valueless among the masses that struggled for space on the way. They succumbed who put aside the old preconceptions, pushed in, and took care of themselves. . . . Thus uprooted, they found themselves in a prolonged state of crisis.

As a result they reached their new homes exhausted—worn out physically by lack of rest, by poor food, by the constant strain of close, cramped quarters, worn out emotionally by the succession of new situations that had crowded in upon them. At the end was only the dead weariness of an excess of novel sensations.

Let us sample a few memoirists, of widely varying sensibilities, as they recall the Atlantic journey. Morris Raphael Cohen, a philosopher distinguished for acute skepticism, wrote:

We were huddled together in the steerage [of the ship Darmstadt] literally like cattle—my mother, my sister and I sleeping in the middle tier, people being above us and below us. . . . 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 [fourteen-day] 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. . . .

More than the physical hardships, my imagination was occupied with the terrors of ships colliding, especially when the fog horn blew its plaintive note. . . . One morning we saw a ship passing at what seemed to me a considerable distance, but our neighbor said that we were lucky, that at night we escaped a crash only by a hair’s breadth.

Here is a passage from an unpublished memoir by a barely literate woman writing in Yiddish more than fifty years after her arrival in 1891:

The sky was blue—the stars shining. But in my heart it was dark when I went up on the ship. . . . We rode three weeks on a freight train so I had plenty of time to think things over. My future . . . where am I going? to whom? what will I do? In Grodno I was at least someone in the store. But in America, without language, only a bit of education. . . . Young people laughed and joked even though in my heart it was like the storm at sea. . . .

And then a real storm broke out. The ship heaved and turned. People threw up, dishes fell, women screamed . . . but in my heart I didn’t care what happened.

And here is the voice of a self-educated immigrant whose sense of life’s indignities recalls the English novelist Smollett:

On board the ship we became utterly dejected. We were all huddled together in a dark, filthy compartment in the steerage. . . . Wooden bunks had been put up in two tiers. . . . Sea sickness broke out among us. Hundreds of people had vomiting fits, throwing up even their mother’s milk. . . . As all were crossing the ocean for the first time, they thought their end had come. The confusion of cries became unbearable. . . . I wanted to escape from that inferno but no sooner had I thrust my head forward from the lower bunk than someone above me vomited straight upon my head. I wiped the vomit away, dragged myself onto the deck, leaned against the railing and vomited my share into the sea, and lay down half-dead upon the deck.

In all such recollections, the force of trauma overcomes differences of personality and cultivation. Steerage could reduce people to a common misery, and insofar as it did, their reactions were likely to be the same whether they were illiterate or students of the Talmud. We may suspect that the shock of being uprooted led some memoirists to overstate, we may have ironic reservations about the Jewish appetite for remembered woe; but there is plenty of dispassionate evidence, ranging from government reports to accounts by journalists who themselves took the trip in steerage, that supports the dominant immigrant memory. Edward Steiner, an Iowa clergyman, wrote a book in 1906 called On the Trail of the Immigrant, sober in content yet full of passages like this one:

The steerage never changes, neither its location nor its furnishings. It lies over the stirring screws, slopes to the staccato of trembling steel railings and hawser. Narrow, steep and slippery stairways lead to it.

Crowds everywhere, ill-smelling bunks, uninviting washrooms—this is steerage. The odors of scented orange peels, tobacco, garlic and disinfectants meeting but not blending. No lounge or chairs for comfort, and a continual babel of tongues—this is steerage.

The food, which is miserable, is dealt out of huge kettles into the dinner pails provided by the steamship company. When it is distributed, the stronger path and crowd . . .

On many ships, even drinking water is grudgingly given, and on the steamship Statendam . . . we had literally to steal water for the steerage from the second cabin, and that of course at night. On many journeys, particularly on the Fürst Bismarck . . . the bread was absolutely unbearable, and was thrown into the water by the irate emigrants.

By the turn of the century conditions had in some cases improved. The German lines offered a modified steerage on their newer ships, a sort of separate state room containing two to eight berths and with improved sanitary conditions. The lucky ones came on these ships, some of which, like the Kaiser Wilhelm, could now make the trip from Hamburg to New York in a bit less than six days. And even the gloomiest of accounts speak about the upsurge of hope and animal spirits among the younger immigrants. there was often music, card playing, even dancing when the weather was calm and the decks could be used. Sometimes, the more ambitious younger emigrants brought along Russian-English dictionaries and tried to master a few words for the moment of their arrival. Above all there was talk: the Jewish immi-
toward America

grants' burgeoning nostalgia for the old country and curiosity about the new.

A congressional committee investigating steerage conditions in 1910 offered an enormously detailed report which, in bureaucratic prose, substantiates the recollections of the immigrants themselves. In the old-type steerage, it reported, "filth and stench . . . added to inadequate means of ventilation," creating an atmosphere that was "almost unendurable.... In many instances persons, after recovering from seasickness, continue to lie in their berths in a sort of stupor, due to breathing air whose oxygen has been mostly replaced by foul gases." A woman investigator, disguising herself as a Bohemian peasant, gave vivid details:

... one wash room, about 7 by 9 feet, contained 10 faucets of cold salt water, 5 along either of its two walls, and as many basins. This same basin served as a dishpan for greasy tins, as a laundry tub for soiled handkerchiefs and clothing, and as a basin for shampooing without receiving any special cleaning. It was the only receptacle to be found for use in the case of seasickness.

The toilets for women were six in number.... They baffle description as much as they did use. Each room or space was exceedingly narrow and short, and instead of a seat there was an open trough, in front of which was an iron step and back of it a sheet of iron slanting forward.... The toilets were filthy and difficult of use and were apparently not cleaned at all in the first few days....

... Everything was dirty, sticky and disagreeable to the touch. Every impression was offensive. Worse than this was the general air of immorality. For 15 hours each day I witnessed all around me this... indecent and forced mingling of men and women who were total strangers and often did not understand a word of the same language.

If a certain prissiness creeps into this report, a tone we will encounter even in the most warmhearted of native responses, it does not finally matter. For about a crucial moment of the immigrant experience, this investigator offered a good portion of the truth.

At Ellis Island

"The day of the emigrants' arrival in New York was the nearest earthly likeness to the final Day of Judgment, when we have to prove our fitness to enter Heaven." So remarked one of those admirable journalists who in the early 1900's exposed himself to the experience of the immigrants and came to share many of their feelings. No previous difficulties roused such overflowing anxiety, sometimes self-destructive panic, as the anticipated test...
Toward America

Then a sharp turn to the right, where the second doctor waits, a specialist in “contagious and loathsome diseases.” Leprosy? Venereal disease? Fauus, “a contagious disease of the skin, especially of the scalp, due to a parasitic fungus, marked by the formation of yellow flattened scabs and baldness”?

Then to the third doctor, often feared the most. He stands directly in the path of the immigrant, holding a little stick in his hand. By a quick movement and the force of his own compelling gaze, he catches the eyes of his subject and holds them. You will see the immigrant stop short, lift his head with a quick jerk, and open his eyes very wide. The inspector reaches with a swift movement, catches the eyelash with his thumb and finger, turns it back, and peers under it. If all is well, the immigrant is passed on. . . . Most of those detained by the physician are Jews.

The eye examination hurts a little. It terrifies the children. Nurses wait with towels and basins filled with disinfectant. They watch for trachoma, cause of more than half the medical detentions. It is a torment hard to understand, this first taste of America, with its poking of flesh and prying into private parts and mysterious chalking of clothes.*

After into lines, this time according to nationality. They are led to stalls at which multilingual inspectors ask about character, anarchism, polygamy, insanity, crime, money, relatives, work. You have a job waiting? Who paid your passage? Anyone meeting you? Can you read and write? Ever in prison? Where’s your money?

For Jewish immigrants, especially during the years before agencies like the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) could give them advice, these questions pose a dilemma: to be honest or to lie? Is it good to have money or not? Can you bribe these fellows, as back home, or is it a mistake to try? Some are so accustomed to bend and evade and slip a rubie out of a hand that they get themselves into trouble with needless lies. “Our Jews,” writes a Yiddish paper,

love to get tangle up with dishonest answers, so that the officials have no choice but to send them to the detention area. A Jew who had money in his pocket decided to lie and said he didn’t have a penny. . . . A woman with four children and pregnant with a fifth, said her husband had been in America

* Years later a scrupulous British ambassador, A. C. Geddes, visited Ellis Island and reported back to his government. By 1924, when he wrote, the high point of immigration had been passed, yet conditions struck him as bad:

“The line of male immigrants approached the first medical officer with their trousers open. The doctor examined their external genitalia for signs of venereal infection. Next he examined inguinal canals for hernia. The doctor wore rubber gloves. I saw him ‘do’ nine or ten men. His gloves were not cleansed between cases. I saw one nice, clean-looking Irish boy examined immediately after a very unpleasant-looking individual. . . . I saw the boy shudder. I did not wonder. The doctor’s rubber gloves were with hardly a second’s interval in contact with his private parts after having been soiled, in the surgical sense at least, by contact with those of the unpleasant-looking individual.”

Departure and Arrival

fourteen years. . . . The HIAS man learned that her husband had recently arrived, but she thought fourteen years would make a better impression. The officials are sympathetic. They know the Jewish immigrants get “confused” and tell them to sit down and “remember.” Then they let them in.

Especially bewildering is the idea that if you say you have a job waiting for you in the United States, you are liable to deportation—because an 1889 law prohibits the importation of contract labor. But doesn’t it “look better” to say a job is waiting for you? No, the HIAS man patiently explains, it doesn’t. Still, how can you be sure he knows what he’s talking about? Just because he wears a little cap with those four letters embroidered on it?

Except when the flow of immigrants was simply beyond the staff’s capacity to handle, the average person passed through Ellis Island in about a day. Ferries ran twenty-four hours a day between the island and both the Battery and points in New Jersey. As for the unfortunates detained for medical or other reasons, they usually had to stay at Ellis Island for one or two weeks. Boards of special inquiry, as many as four at a time, would sit in permanent session, taking up cases where questions had been raised as to the admissibility of an immigrant, and it was here, in the legal infighting and appeals to sentiment, that HIAS proved especially valuable.

The number of those detained at the island or sent back to Europe during a given period of time varied according to the immigration laws then in effect (see pp. 53–54) and, more important, according to the strictness with which they were enforced. It is a sad irony, though familiar to students of democratic politics, that under relatively lax administrations at Ellis Island, which sometimes allowed rough handling of immigrants and even closed an eye to corruption, immigrants had a better chance of getting past the inspectors than when the commissioner was a public-spirited Yankee intent upon literal adherence to the law.

Two strands of opinion concerning Ellis Island have come down to us, among both historians and the immigrant masses themselves: first, that the newcomers were needlessly subjected to bad treatment, and second, that most of the men who worked there were scrupulous and fair, though often overwhelmed by the magnitude of their task.

The standard defense of Ellis Island is offered by an influential historian of immigration, Henry Pratt Fairchild:

During the year 1907 five thousand was fixed as the maximum number of immigrants who could be examined at Ellis Island in one day; yet during the spring of that year more than fifteen thousand immigrants arrived at the port of New York in a single day.

As to the physical handling of the immigrants, this is [caused] by the need for haste—. . . . The conditions of the voyage are not calculated to land the immigrant in an alert and clean-headed state. The bustle, confusion, rush and size of Ellis Island complete the work, and leave the average alien in a state of stupor. . . . He is in no condition to understand a carefully-worded
explanation of what he must do, or why he must do it, even if the inspector had the time to give it. The one suggestion which is immediately comprehensible to him is a pull or a push; if this is not administered with actual violence, there is no unkindness in it.

Reasonable as it may seem, this analysis meshed Yankee elitism with a defense of the bureaucratic mind. Immigrants were disoriented by the time they reached Ellis Island, but they remained human beings with all the sensibilities of human beings; the problem of numbers was a real one, yet it was always better when interpreters offered a word of explanation than when they resorted to “a pull or a push.” Against the view expressed by Fairchild, we must weigh the massive testimony of the immigrants themselves, the equally large body of material gathered by congressional investigations, and such admissions, all the more telling because casual in intent, as that of Commissioner Corsi: “Our immigration officials have not always been as humane as they might have been.” The Ellis Island staff was often badly overworked, and day after day it had to put up with an atmosphere of fearful anxiety which required a certain deadening of response, if only by way of self-defense. But it is also true that many of the people who worked there were rather simple fellows who lacked the imagination to respect cultural styles radically different from their own.*

One interpreter who possessed that imagination richly was a young Italo-American named Fiorello La Guardia, later to become an insurgent mayor of New York. “I never managed during the years I worked there to become callous to the mental anguish, the disappointment and the despair I witnessed almost daily... At best the work was an ordeal.” For those who cared to see, and those able to feel, there could finally be no other verdict.

A Work of Goodness

Whatever could be eased in the trauma of arrival, the Jewish community tried to ease. When the immigrants reached Ellis Island, they found waiting for them not only the authorities with their unnerving questions,

*Nor were such limitations confined to the lower ranks of immigration officials. The Immigration Commission of 1910, created by Congress, published a Dictionary of Races or Peoples, which, together with elementary anthropological material, could announce that “the Jewish nose, and to a less degree other facial characteristics, are found well-nigh everywhere throughout the race, although the form of the head seems to have become quite the reverse of the Semitic type. . . . Taking all factors into account, and especially their type of civilization, the Jews of today are more truly European than Asiatic or Semitic.” It would probably be a mistake to regard such passages as evidence of deliberate anti-Semitism; they indicate, however, that notions were afloat that hardly encouraged a warm-hearted response to alien peoples.

but also the friendlier faces of HIAS representatives. HIAS is one of the few Jewish agencies that over the decades has been praised by almost every segment of the American Jewish world—no small feat in a community that has been notoriously contentious. It was also one of the first major institutions in America set up and administered by east European Jews on their own.

There had been Jewish immigrant aid societies as far back as the 1870’s. In 1881 the Hebrew Emigrant Aid Society (HEAS) was founded, and eight years later, the Hakhnosas Orkim, a sheltering home for penniless immigrants. A makeshift group, the HEAS was utterly unprepared for the flood of immigration. In 1882 it sent east European Jews to farm colonies in Connecticut, New Jersey, and Colorado, but without sufficient training or funds; the colonies quickly collapsed. In October 1882 some four hundred immigrants housed by HEAS on Ward’s Island to await medical inspection rioted, charging, the New York Times reported, that they were being “brutally treated by HEAS officers, who fed them decayed food and beat both men and women on the least provocation.” The riot was quelled and the rioters placated, but the incident left a feeling of dismay on the East Side. Shadowed by these failures, HEAS dissolved in 1883. It took another nine years before HIAS, as it came to be known throughout the world, was formed in New York City, as the result of a meeting called in an East Side store by a landsmanshaft* anxious to provide burial for Jews who had died on Ellis Island.

One of the first things HIAS did was to station on the island a representative who could mediate between the immigration officials and the flow of incoming Jews. Between 1904 and 1909, when immigration came to a peak, this representative was Alexander Harkavy, whose name is still remembered as the compiler of a Yiddish-English dictionary. Both their ignorance of legal formalities and their language handicaps made it hard for immigrants to cope with Ellis Island officials; the presence of Harkavy and his successor, a shrewd lawyer named Irving Lipsitch, acted as a strong restraining hand upon authorities who might otherwise have been inclined to dispose of cases a shade too rapidly.

HIAS representatives were sent to the shipping lines of Britain and Germany to protest steerage conditions. The Hamburg-American line was pressured into posting Yiddish notices explaining its ship regulations. On shore, HIAS worked out a system of placing immigrants with their relatives—not as easy as it might seem, since the relatives often knew only a bit more about American ways than did the immigrants. And as soon as they were checked out at Ellis Island, the newcomers would be steered by HIAS agents past the numerous sharpeners, some posing as pious Jews, who waited on shore. These swindlers would remain a constant disgrace to the East Side;

* An association of people who had emigrated from the same town or district.
in March 1912 HIAS reported that it was prosecuting Hyman Eskin and David Tefiff for cheating immigrants.

All immigrants received at Ellis Island a Yiddish bulletin issued by HIAS, full of hardheaded advice—an English translation was issued in 1912 under the happy auspices of the Connecticut Daughters of the American Revolution:

The immigrant who needs assistance from [HIAS] agents should hold in his hand or have pinned upon his coat . . . the card of identification which has been given out by the ship's doctor. . . . The agent will come to meet the immigrants and, when necessary, will act as their interpreter in the examination that is necessary before admission.

The immigrants who have been admitted, but have neither relatives nor friends to receive them, are taken by these same agents to the office of HIAS. . . . They will be accompanied, together with their baggage, either to their respective destinations in other parts of the city, or to the railway station to continue their journey. The agents who undertake this duty are entirely worthy of confidence, and their services are rendered without any charge whatever.

The home of HIAS is open day and night. . . . Accommodations are provided for men, women and children. There is an interpreter for Oriental Jews. . . . Pen, ink and paper are supplied free, as are also newspapers. Immigrants may use this Society as a forwarding address for letters. There are excellent baths, always at the free disposal of guests.

HIAS also ran an employment bureau, which, said its First Annual Report, “was kept open every night, except Friday.” City editions of the papers would be rushed over from Park Row, and the staff would remain until morning, trying to match immigrant to want ad.

In 1908 HIAS began to issue a bilingual monthly, The Jewish Immigrant, mostly in Yiddish, which was circulated widely in Russia, providing reliable information on who could and could not be admitted in the United States. Alexander Harkavy conducted a homely Yiddish column explaining immigration laws and giving advice on proper behavior at Ellis Island. Such bits of help proved extremely valuable, since it gave the immigrants not merely practical guidance but a sense that there were friends and brothers waiting for them.

* A piquant incident is described by Mark Wischnitzer:

“HIAS maintained the American Jewish tradition of nonsectarian philanthropy. A group of 24 Russian peasants landed in New York . . . in 1907. Having no relatives in the U.S. to act as guarantors, and lacking the $15 required in lieu of a guarantee, the men in the group were detained for deportation. Harkavy recommended Commissioner Williams, pointing out that the Russians were hale and hearty farmers who were not likely to become public charges. When he was unsuccessful in his representations, Harkavy signed a guarantee for the men, who were then found lodgings at HIAS expense. . . . All of the men obtained work after a while, with the exception of one hospitalized in Philadelphia (HIAS met the bill of about $100).

The peasants wrote home that no Russian representative had met them . . .

Departure and Arrival

By 1914 HIAS had grown from a modest welfare society with a budget of less than ten thousand dollars to an organization with a nationwide membership, offices in Washington, D.C., and a number of port cities, and alliances throughout the world. During 1912 there were more than 150,000 callers at its information bureau at 219 East Broadway. New immigrants helped at its home that year numbered 14,592, of whom over 3,000 were given shelter. Its naturalization aid meetings were attended by nearly 12,000 at different periods during the year, Sabbath afternoon classes by 4,000 children; at times space had to be bought elsewhere to shelter the overflow of immigrants.

Gradually—and as an early indication of the ability of East European Jews to adapt themselves to the American political structure—HIAS learned to function as a pressure group working to get back nativist and/or bureaucratic attempts to reduce the flow of immigration. When a committee of the New York State Legislature proposed in 1911 to deport aliens suffering from mental disorders, HIAS attorneys persuaded the committee that immigrants afflicted with such disorders within three years after their arrival should not be liable for deportation if it could be shown that their ailment had been caused by some event after they had reached American shores—which was virtually to remove the possibility of deportation on mental grounds. In 1913 HIAS fought hard against the Burnett bill, previously vetoed by President Taft, which would have required a literacy test for immigrants. Such campaigns brought the East European Jews who ran HIAS into effective alliance with the German Jews who had more experience and skill at lobbying. Superbly energetic and persistent, HIAS learned to play the bureaucratic game at least as well as the government’s bureau-

but that a Jewish society had intervened in their behalf . . . . When it learned of this, the Russian government . . . . offered the HIAS an annual subsidy of six thousand rubles for assistance to Russian subjects.

“John Bernstein [an early HIAS leader] recounted years later how the offer came up for discussion at a special meeting of the Board of Directors. Some favored accepting the money; others argued that it was in line with the anti-Semitism that Judaism was fighting against. In the end Bernstein prevailed, saying that HIAS should accept the money and use it to improve the situation of the Jews. The offer was not only a source of income, but also a way to show that HIAS would not back down from its stand against anti-Semitism.”

* An illustration of HIAS’s doggedness in fighting for the rights, sometimes more than the rights, of immigrants: In 1914 Joseph Aronoff, in the United States for a year and earning ten to twelve dollars a week, was notified that his wife and four children, who had arrived on the S.S. Koenig Ludwig at Baltimore, were to be returned to Europe because two of the children, Rachel, ten, and Kazia, eight, had contracted tinea tonsurans (ringworm of scalp), a contagious disease requiring an indefinite period to effect a cure. HIAS followed up this case for two years, arranging for prolonged and difficult treatment, warding off attempts by the authorities to declare the children incurable and thereby deportable. The family struggled to pay the hospital bills, enormous for the time; a private benefactor, one Mr. X, was recruited by HIAS to cover part of the cost; the children were cured and remained in America.
Toward America

In later years it became fashionable to sneer at the tendency of American Jews to create a bureaucratic plethora of organizations. No doubt there was a point to such criticism—but not with regard to HIAS. Thousands of sons and daughters, as also their sons and daughters, would find life a little easier, a little more comfortable because of the men who waited at Ellis Island with those blue caps on which the Yiddish letters for HIAS had been embroidered.

“Hordes” of Aliens

The sheer magnitude of immigration from Europe during the last third of the nineteenth century made it certain that old-stock Americans, even if favoring in principle an open door for aliens, would begin to feel uncomfortable. From the vantage point of distance, what seems remarkable is not the extent of antiforeign sentiment that swept the country but the fact that until the First World War it did not seriously impede the flow of immigration.

“We are the heirs of all time,” wrote Herman Melville in the 1840’s, “and with all nations we divide our inheritance. On this Western Hemisphere all tribes and peoples are forming into one federated whole; and there is a future which shall see the estranged children of Adam restored as to the old heathen-land in Eden... The seed is sown, and the harvest must come.” Forty or fifty years after Melville wrote these classically patriotic lines, the “harvest” had turned sour for many Americans, both the fastidious patricians and embattled plebeians.

In the 1860’s and 1870’s, when cheap labor was needed by the railroads and both western and southern states were eager to absorb white settlers, American business interests sent special agents to Europe in order to attract immigrants. Popular sentiment remained attached to the notion that America was uniquely the land of refuge from tyranny and a country where fixed class lines gradually softened. Jews, to be sure, were already encountering social discrimination in the 1870’s, some of it due to a feeling that the recent immigrants from Germany, unlike their refined Sephardic cousins who had been here for a long time, were too “loud” and “pushy” in their social ascent. For the most part, however, there was not yet any large-scale articulation of anti-Semitic prejudice, if only because the Jews did not yet figure in the popular imagination as a major force in American life. Only during the last two decades of the century did the multiplication of aliens come to seem a national problem. Historians of immigration have distin-

Departure and Arrival

ghished, with rough usefulness, between “old” and “new” immigrants, the former mostly from northern and the latter from southern and eastern Europe. Close in cultural style to Protestant Americans, the “old” immigrants seemed more easily assimilable and thereby less threatening than the “new.” By the eighties and nineties the mass influx consisted largely of “new” immigrants, ill-educated and often illiterate peasants whose manner could unnerve native Americans. And most immigrant Jews were regarded as among the “new.”

Nativism as a movement taking the “immigrant hordes” as a target for attack began to make itself felt during the eighties; in its rudimentary forms it emerged as xenophobia bristling with contempt for unfamiliar speech, dress, food, and values. Much of the hostility toward immigrants was stoked by the fear of radicalism which swept the country during the late eighties, partly as a result of the Haymarket Affair of 1886; in which six immigrants were sentenced to death after a bomb explosion at an anarchist rally in Chicago, and partly as a result of fierce labor struggles across the country, which could be attributed conveniently to foreign agitators. Second only to antiradicalism as a nativist motif was a virulent hatred of Catholicism. The Roman Church was feared as a vessel of medieval superstition, dripping with European decadence; and by the last years of the century public warnings began to be heard, not for the first or last time, that “they” are taking over.

It would be an error to suppose that anti-immigrant feelings were confined to a single social class or political outlook. Brahmins and rednecks, bourgeois and proletarians, reactionaries and populists—all joined the outcry against the intruders. The one constant was that the outbreak of a depression, something that occurred with distressing frequency during the eighties and nineties, meant both a drop in the number of immigrants and a rise in sentiment against them. These were hard years in American society: unsettled by the consequences of rapid industrialization and uncontrolled urbanization, tormented by incomprehensible economic collapses, haunted by the fear that the country, as it moved away from the age of the independent farmer, might come to take on the social bitterness of Europe. The “new” immigrants, helpless in urban slums, seemed to many native Americans both symptom and cause of a spreading social malaise. Could they be expected to honor the democratic outlook of the Founding Fathers? Would they not disdain the traditions of individualism on which the nation had thrived? Were they not hopelessly marred by ignorance, dependence, superstition? If so enlightened a public figure as Henry George could write in 1883, “What in a few years more, are we to do for a dumping-ground? Will it make our difficulty the less that our human garbage can vote?”—if so humane an intellectual could speak in this way, it need come as no surprise that mere editorialists and common folk began to look upon the alien “hordes” as a threat to their well-being.
Some liberal academicians joined the cry for restricting immigration, though with arguments more subtle than those of the newspapers or the streets. They saw the immigrant masses as a threat to democratic survival, their presence as making still harder the solution of already difficult social problems. As John Higham, the historian of nativism, has remarked:

It was not difficult for this early generation of urbanized reformers—full of dark forebodings and ill-experienced in realistic social analysis—to fix upon the immigrants as a major source of current disorders. Nor was it entirely unreasonable for men who feared a decline of opportunity and mobility to lose confidence in the process of assimilation. In discovering an immigrant problem, the social critics of the eighties might not indulge in the characteristically nativist assault on the newcomer as a foreign enemy of the American way of life. . . . But they raised the question of assimilation in a broadly significant way by connecting it with the issues of the day. They gave intellectual respectability to anti-immigrant feelings.

Other segments of the population joined the attack. Influential figures in the Brahmin elite of New England warned that the millions of immigrants were a threat to political controls and cultural authority; they feared, with reason, that an America bustling with foreigners would mean an end to their caste pre-eminence. In 1894 a small group of Bostonians formed the Immigration Restriction League, which proved to be a skillful propaganda agency for the campaign against aliens. Equally skillful in his own way was the Congregational clergyman Josiah Strong, who thundered against the massing of aliens in the cities, where they would spawn crime, immorality, radicalism, and Catholicism. The Republican party, protector of Anglo-Saxon respectability, served as the political home for the restrictionists, though in a while some of the party’s more sharp-eyed leaders noticed that votes of foreign-born citizens were every bit as good as those of natives. Even the reform movements that kept cropping up in the nineties—temperance, women’s rights, clean government—saw the immigrants as besotted and benighted.

For the unions, the problem was especially hard. Many native-born workers looked upon aliens as unfair competition, ready to work for wages that no respectable American would accept—and it would be foolish to deny that this complaint had some validity. * Unions often saw the immigrants as a mass of potential strikebreakers, again with some validity. Jewish immigrants seldom came into direct conflict with unionized American workers, first because they usually worked in trades that had barely been touched by native unionism, and second because some of them brought over

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* "The tremendous immigration influx of 1881, followed by the industrial depression of 1883–1886, persuaded many wage-earners that the whole incoming stream directly threatened their livelihood. In New York City an Independent Labor Party petitioned Congress to impose a head tax of $1.00 on each entrant. Philadelphia saw the appearance of a National Home Labor League, aiming 'to preserve the American labor market for American workingmen'".

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**Departure and Arrival**

A tradition of class solidarity that would have made it seem shameful to become a scab. Yet during the eighties and nineties Jewish immigrants were occasionally tricked into brief service as strikebreakers—one immigrant who arrived in the early eighties, I. Kopeloff, has left a recollection of being taken directly from Castle Garden to the New York waterfront, put to work at heavy labor, and then suddenly pounced upon by an enraged mob. Only later did Kopeloff and his fellow immigrants discover they had been used to replace striking workers; they immediately left in indignation.

Some unions clung to sentiments of internationalism, and, more important, large segments of union membership were themselves foreign-born and therefore inclined to be unsympathetic to restrictionist agitation. The unions were largely responsible for the passage in 1885 of the Alien Contract Labor Law, which brought to a halt the practice of importing European labor under contract to work for wages below union scales. For a few years during the late eighties and early nineties, such union leaders as Samuel Gompers, himself a Jewish immigrant who had worked as a cigar maker in New York, tried to check the restrictionist wing in the A.F.L. Only during the mid-nineties, when the country was struck by a very sharp depression in which millions of workers found themselves jobless, did the unions come out in favor of restricting immigration.

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**Open Door—and Closed**

All through the several decades between the early eighties and the First World War, a struggle took place in American society between the partisans of free immigration and the advocates of restriction. Partly to regulate but also to limit immigration, a series of acts was passed by Congress—though, more important from the standpoint of those who wished to enable the Jews to find refuge in the United States, most of the proposals for radically cutting down the number of immigrants were beaten back. Let us note, as pertinent to our story, a few of the acts that were passed:

1882—an act extending the category of "excluded classes" to include lunatics, idiots, and "any person unable to take care of himself or herself without becoming a public charge." This last clause would become a major cause of dispute between immigration authorities and HIAS, since the vagueness of its language opened the possibility for arbitrary rulings. The act also stipulated that aliens excluded upon arrival were to be returned to Europe at the expense of the shipowners—which meant that more stringent physical tests would now be given at the European ports.

1885—the Alien Contract Labor Law, already described, which did not seriously affect Jewish immigration.
1891—an act that added to the “excluded classes” paupers, polygamists, persons suffering from “a loathsome or dangerous contagious disease,” and persons whose tickets had been paid for by someone else, unless it was shown that they were not otherwise objectionable. The last two provisions, even if not malicious in intent, led to hardships for Jewish immigrants.

1891—the most comprehensive act yet passed on immigration, transferring entirely the inspection of immigrants from the states to the federal government, prohibiting the encouragement of immigration by advertisement, and extending the principle of deportation to “public charges.” This last provision led to some harassment of immigrants, as fearful stories spread among them about the danger of being sent back to Europe after a year in the United States if they could not support themselves. An unintended consequence, however, may have been strengthened arrangements in the Jewish community for self-help.

1902—an act tightening immigration and especially fulfilling the wishes of President Theodore Roosevelt that “we should aim to exclude absolutely not only all persons who are known to be believers in anarchistic principles . . . but also all persons who are of a low moral tendency or of unsavory reputation.”

Irksome as such laws were from the point of view of the immigrants and their defenders, none constituted nearly so great a threat as the recurrent proposal that persons unable to read or write their own language be barred. Such a law, moreover, would have been a severe blow to free immigration, and each time it was proposed in Congress, all the resources of the various ethnic communities had to be mobilized in opposition. By the turn of the century, these resources were considerable, for the foreign-language press had grown into a powerful institution, the economic strength of the immigrant communities had increased, and in a number of states immigrants had become citizens in sufficient numbers to swing crucial elections. Three times literacy proposals passed the Congress, three times they were vetoed by presidents—Cleveland in 1897, Taft in 1913, Wilson in 1915.

In the struggle against restrictionism, the German Jews developed notable skill in employing the kinds of quiet pressures that have played a crucial role in American politics. The single most effective publicist in behalf of free immigration was Louis Marshall, a brilliant lawyer of German-Jewish descent and for many years head of the American Jewish Committee. Though a formidable speaker ready to take on restrictionists in public debate, Marshall worked best behind the scenes, through well-argued and well-manicured appeals to public officials. He kept pointing out that illiteracy was not immoral or anything wrong with the immigrant (or anyone else), but that “men able, sometimes, to speak fluently five or six languages” may nevertheless be “degenerates, forgers, blackmailers.” Quite free of illusions as to the mental breadth of the politicians he wished to influence,

Departure and Arrival

Marshall was on occasion prepared to tap their antiradical prejudices—as in a 1907 letter to Governor Page of Vermont in which he remarked that “an educated immigrant is not ordinarily the most beneficent. The ranks of the anarchists and the violent socialists are recruited from the educated classes, frequently from among those who read and write several languages.”

The Jewish socialists, favoring mass pressure rather than private persuasion, were always dubious, often scornful of Marshall’s methods—though it must be admitted that their hostility was partly the result of a refusal to adapt themselves to the workings of American politics. On the level of expediency, Marshall understood the politics of America far better than they did. The best chance for maintaining a free flow of immigration, he felt, was to keep the issue out of the public arena; he had no wish to rouse the deep, almost unconscious sentiments which he knew to lie waiting in the most kindly of gentle souls. In 1905 he wrote to a friend,

I consider a public discussion of [the immigration] question at this time by any Jewish organization, an extremely unfortunate step. It serves to attract the attention of Congress and of the various labor unions, to the fact that we expect a large influx of Jewish immigrants from Russia. It is a subject which can only be handled with the greatest delicacy.

In sharpest contrast to Marshall’s tactics—indeed, as part of a prolonged debate within the Jewish community—was the approach of the labor and socialist groups that believed in public militancy and mass demonstrations. Some historians have suggested that in fact there occurred a tacit division between polite lobbyists and rude protesters; if so, neither would have admitted it.

In the spring and summer of 1909 the East Side was deeply shaken by a conflict between many of its leading spokesmen and the New York commissioner of immigration, William Williams. The commissioner had decreed that an immigrant would need twenty-five dollars in order to be admitted, a sum that for most arrivals from eastern Europe represented a small fortune quite beyond their ability to secure. Appointed by President Theodore Roosevelt, Williams had introduced desirable reforms at Ellis Island, even posting signs reminding officials to be courteous to aliens. Intractable, public-spirited, honest, Williams believed in a “strict” interpretation of the immigration laws; privately, in correspondence with Roosevelt, he had expressed the view that “all below a certain physical and economic standard” should be excluded. Precisely his righteousness kept him from bending to humanness—a rigidity not unknown among American reformers—and made him come to seem an enemy of the immigrants. HIAS agents found him much harder to deal with than his predecessors.

Directly after the edict requiring a twenty-five-dollar fee, the Jewish Daily Forward, by 1909 a considerable power in the East Side and even, for that matter, in New York, began a fierce campaign against Williams. Day
after day it hammered at his cruelty, his prejudice; the support of leading liberals was enlisted; angry mass meetings were held. On July 7 the Forward printed a letter from one hundred immigrants detained at Ellis Island pleading that when breaking up their homes in Europe they had known nothing about the twenty-five-dollar requirement. “Most of the immigrants working in factories today,” thundered the Forward, “came to these shores without a penny. But they are the ones who have built up the palaces, machines, food and clothing which America enjoys. Williams’s new ruling has no common sense and no fair play.”

Surprised by this outcry, Williams retreated in part, saying that only “some” immigrants would be required to have twenty-five dollars; yet he continued to direct his staff toward a harsher series of examinations, and the result was a sharp increase in the number of immigrants sent back from Ellis Island. On July 14 the Forward reported that some of those detained had gone on a hunger strike, led by Alexander Rudenief, son of a Russian army doctor, who had made a flaming speech in the mess hall that the food “is suitable for hogs. We are treated like wild beasts. We sleep on a wet floor.” Continued the Forward reporter: “The officials were afraid that a revolution would break out and an inspector ran into the room with a revolver. The immigrants looked at him scornfully—it had not occurred to them to use violence.”

Secretary of Commerce and Labor Charles Nagel, himself a second-generation American, rushed to New York to investigate the scandal. “The twenty-five dollars is not important,” he said; “the immigrant must prove he is healthy and has a trade.” But again, the seeming reasonableness of this remark could be turned against the immigrants, many of whom, never in a position to learn a trade, had been forced to live by their wits. The Forward did not let up, even after the twenty-five-dollar provision was relaxed. On August 2 it reported that during the month of July 1,333 immigrants had been sent back from Ellis Island, twice the usual number. A month later it carried a report from its Russian correspondent, A. Litwin:

> You can’t imagine the chaos that Williams’s twenty-five-dollar edict has created in the towns and villages of Russia. Thousands of emigrants on the eve of departure don’t know what to do. Those who had a few extra rubles, though not the entire fifty, decided to take a chance and embark... while cabling to their friends in America.

The Forward kept denouncing the treatment of immigrants at Ellis Island, and when Williams left his post a few years later, it ran a headline, “The Man of Ellis Island Resigns.” But such victories were only temporary, perhaps illusory, since the basic trend in American politics was by now toward restricting immigration. A forty-volume congressional report issued in late 1910 prepared the way; the First World War brought immigration entirely to a stop; and by 1924, after a brief postwar rise in the number of

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**Departure and Arrival**

European Jews accepted in the United States, restrictionism gained a seemingly permanent victory.

**The Jews Who Came**

The most difficult questions remain: who came? Which Jews? Rich or poor, city or shetel, old or young, religious or secular? Are there verifiable distinctions of character, sensibility, opinion, and condition to be observed between those who remained and those who left? And were there differences between the kinds of Jews who came to America in the 1880’s and those who came in the first decade of the twentieth century?

Like most truly interesting historical questions, these do not lend themselves to convenient answers. Few statistics, and those usually inadequate, were kept among the east European Jews. (Many evaded legal registration in order to save their sons from the draft; others drifted about so much they were probably never counted.) In the United States, immigration statistics prior to 1899 were classified by country of nativity, not by race, religion, or nationality, so that with regard to the last two decades of the century students of Jewish immigration such as Samuel Joseph and Liebmann Hirsch could do no more than work up estimates. Even the statistics for the years after 1899 do not provide answers to many questions one would like to ask—and in regard to the replies Jewish immigrants gave about their occupations, a decided skepticism is in order. (A portion of those innumerable “tailors” surely had less than expert acquaintance with needle and thread.)

The enormous memoir literature provides some clues, but not enough: the habit of sociological scrutiny was not yet strongly developed among east European Jews, nor were the necessary conditions of leisure and detachment available. Besides, to those who came to the United States the need for flight seemed so overwhelming that they rarely supposed their journey required elaborate explanation. The statements one finds in the memoir literature are persuasive through their very repetition.* We came because we were hungry; we came because we were persecuted; we came because life in Russia or Poland had grown insufferable. These are the answers one gets over and over again, and there is not the slightest reason to doubt them. But

* In 1891 the Department of the Treasury sent two special commissioners, John B. Weber and Dr. Walter Kemper, to investigate the causes of emigration from Russia to the United States. They spent several months touring the major concentrations of Jewish settlement in Russia. Their conclusion seems classically precise: “Aside from a small proportion of Jews who look longingly and hopefully toward Palestine, next to their religion and their persistent eagerness for education, America is the present hope and goal of their ambition, toward which their gaze is directed as earnestly as that of their ancestors toward the promised land.”
what they do not, perhaps cannot, explain is why some Jews acted on these urgent motives and others did not.

The statistics give some clues, not why people came but which people came. Between 1881 and 1914 close to two million Jews arrived in America, the overwhelming bulk of them either directly or indirectly from eastern Europe. A migration of such magnitude must have drawn upon all segments of the Jewish population, though in varying proportions at different points in time:

The Jewish migration was much more a movement of families than that of other European nationalities and groups.

That the Jewish movement is essentially a family movement is shown by the great proportion of females and children in it. From 1899 to 1910, out of a total immigration of 1,074,444 Jews, 567,812 or 56.6 percent were males, and 466,630 or 43.4 percent were females.

Between 1899 and 1910, 267,658 or practically one-fourth of all the Jewish immigrants were children under fourteen years.

For the entire period the percentage of females in the Jewish population was much higher than in the total immigration, 43.4 percent of the Jewish immigration being females as compared with 30.5 percent of the total.

The proportion of children under fourteen years of age was 14.8 percent, while that in the total immigration was only 12.1 percent.

The Jewish migration, like that of all other groups, was overwhelmingly a movement of young people.

Between 1899 and 1909 the percentage of Jewish immigrants in the age group fourteen to forty-four was 69.8, while that of every other age group was considerably higher, the Greek reaching 94.6. There is a plausible explanation for this difference. Because the Jews brought more young children, came as families (either all at once or in sequence), and also brought a somewhat higher percentage of older people, than most of the immigrant groups, the percentage of those between fourteen and forty-four had necessarily to be lower among them. Nevertheless, the immigration was, as it had to be, overwhelmingly a movement of young people.

The Jewish immigration was directed much more toward permanent settlement in the United States than was that of other European groups.

While only two thirds of the total number of immigrants to the United States in the years between 1898 and 1914 were to remain here permanently, 94.8 percent of the Jews remained permanently. In the crucial year of 1908, only 2 percent of the Jewish immigrants returned to the old country. Neither legal impediments, nor hardships upon arrival, nor recurrent depressions could drive the Jews back to Europe. A study of the immigration statistics shows that in the years directly after a depression the total number of immigrants declined but that the decline among Jewish immigrants was both slower and less precipitous.
Toward America

zation already mentioned. The proportion of teachers, rabbis, engineers, musicians, and physicians among the Jewish immigrants did not change radically in the years between 1899 and 1908, but the number of such persons did go up sharply (91 Jewish teachers in 1899, 269 in 1907; 197 "other professionals" in 1899, 1,045 in 1907). The character of the immigrant communities in New York and elsewhere was crucially affected.

Here is a statement by an ordinary Jewish immigrant who, still sharp-witted at the age of eighty-two, was interviewed in an old-age home:

I am a tailor and I was working piecework on Russian officers' uniforms. I saved up a few dollars and figured the best thing was to go to the U.S.A. Those days everybody’s dream in the old country was to go to America. We heard people were free and we heard about better living. I was seventeen when I came in 1905. I was the first to leave from my family. My father didn’t want me to go. I figured, I have a trade, I have a chance more or less to see the world. I was young.

A few phrases ring out: “everybody’s dream...was to go to America” and “I have a chance more or less to see the world,” the first characteristic but the second not. Strictly speaking, not everyone did want to go to America, but as hyperbole, the statement touches upon a central truth. As for “a chance more or less to see the world,” it is not the kind of phrase that appears frequently in Jewish memoirs, perhaps because their authors, by the time they came to write, did not look upon such a confession as weighty enough. But to read these memoirs extensively is to grow convinced that “adventure” did play a role—if not in the sense of Treasure Island, then in the sense of Kim: if not fun for the devil, then journey for a breakthrough. Even in those airtight Talmud Torahs, even in those claustrophobic shtetlkh there were Jewish boys panting for a chance to get out and stretch their legs. A few may have resembled the younger later to become Darwin Hecht, M.D., who began running away from home before he was ten and decided to leave for America at the age of eleven.

When Mother saw me copying the addresses she asked me where I was going this time. I told her I was going to America. To my surprise, she said, “Very well, you can go.” She looked over the addresses I had copied to make sure they were correct. The next day she assembled a few items, such as a change of underwear and some food, and tied it all in a large multi-colored handkerchief. She gave me 40 groschen [ten cents] and a post card with my home address on it, and she told me to mail it as soon as I crossed the Russian-German border. She took me to the railroad station, kissed me goodbye, and put me on the train with no railroad ticket, no ship ticket, no passport. She

*The Forward’s Russian correspondent, A. Litwin, wrote in 1909: “If they could afford it, half the Jewish workers in the big cities and all in the small towns would emigrate. They save up the hundred rubles for the ticket for years, adding a groschen to a groschen, going half-naked, borrowing and pawning.”

Departure and Arrival

probably thought this would be another escapade and that I would be back home as usual, though what was really in her thoughts I will never know. Thus my venturesome journey to America began.

As he made his way across Europe, this Jewish Roderick Random hid under railroad seats, was arrested as a vagrant in Hamburg, smuggled himself under a woman's skirt to get on board ship, and, that failing, clambered up the side of the ship to stow away. Discovered, he became the ship's darling and told the captain a yarn about “going to look for my father who had deserted my mother.” Surely there were always a few such Jewish boys, unspoiled by their environment for the risks and pleasures of adventure.

At least for the 1880s and 1890s, if somewhat less so for the later years, there is truth in the remark of a Jewish historian that “the Jewish immigrants...constituted in great part the ‘dissenters,’ the poor and underprivileged, the unlearned and less learned, and those who were influenced by secularism.” This estimate conforms to the observation frequently made by Yiddish memoirists and historians that the immigrants of the 1880s tended, socially speaking, to be the flotsam and jetsam of the old country, the luftmensch without trades or roots driven to take a chance across the sea.

At some points, such as after the 1881 pogroms or the 1903 Kishinev massacre, there were large-scale movements of Jews from regions of eastern Europe that were closer in character to mass flights than to ordered migrations. When these occurred almost everyone left who could leave—though here too the sick and the old remained because they had no choice, while those who rejected immigration often clung to shattered homes and businesses. But in the years when conditions in Russia reached a measure of stability, people were able to make choices. Clearly, age was a decisive factor: the young were always a large portion of the immigrants, grown restless precisely through the stimulus created by the Yiddish cultural-political upsurge, or stirred to personal hope by reports from relatives already in America. In part, the Jewish migration was a function of the intellectual and spiritual turmoil within the Jewish community of eastern Europe; and some, if not the majority, of those who left would have wanted to get away even if there had been no hunger or persecution.

At least before 1905 Jews who held strong religious or political convictions were less likely to emigrate than those who did not. The socialists of the Bund believed they should stay in Russia and Poland in order to organize the Jewish working class; the Zionists, that America was a false hope, no more than the Diaspora aglitter, and that preparations for leaving should be directed toward the Holy Land; and the Orthodox Jews, that America was a jungle of worldliness in which the faith might be destroyed. Once the Russian Revolution of 1905 failed, some Bundists fled to avoid imprisonment; others concluded they had exhausted their possibilities in the old country, so they too joined the trek to America; but many Bundists remained, to rebuild their movement into the powerful force it would become.
during the twenties and thirties. The number of Orthodox Jews entering the
migration also increased, not out of ideological decision but because the
postrevolutionary reaction in Russia was deeply discouraging to Jewish life.

As for the vast majority of ordinary Jews, the *folkjman* who re-
spended more to the urgencies of their experience than to any fixed ideas,
they had no “principled” reason whatever for remaining under the czar.
Many stayed, there were ties of sentiment, family obligations, personal fears,
all the elements of psyche and will that shape our lives. But by 1905 those
who decided to leave the old world were no longer merely the displaced and
declasse but increasingly the energetic, the vigorous, the ambitious. “The
happy and powerful,” De Tocqueville has written, “do not go into exile.”
Yet, but sometimes the aroused and determined do.

Most historians of the Jewish immigration have agreed that the social
and cultural characteristics of the Jewish immigrants in the 1905-1914 pe-
riod were notably different from those who came during the last two dec-
ades of the nineteenth century. By and large, the later immigrants brought
with them a somewhat higher cultural level than those who had come
twenty-five or thirty years earlier: first because there had occurred in the
interim a resurgence of Jewish consciousness in eastern Europe (the Bund,
Zionism, Yiddish literature, a range of political and religious movements),
and second because important segments of the Jewish intelligentsia now felt
that the time had come to leave. That some progress had meanwhile been
made among the Jews in New York caused the journey to seem less fearful;
an immigrant in 1905 was not quite the pioneer he would have been in
1881.

The point should not be exaggerated. Given the sheer magnitude of the
migration, there were bound to be large numbers of ignorant or barely
educated Jews arriving in any year between 1881 and 1914. And even in the
1880’s there were already the thin beginnings of a Yiddish-speaking intelli-
gentsia in New York. By the turn of the century, however, such notable
figures of Yiddish culture as Abraham Reisen, the poet, and Abraham Lies-
ken, the poet and publicist, were coming to America, men who represented a
distinctly higher level of cultural sophistication than the New York “sweat-
shop poets” of a few years earlier.

Finally, it would be a mistake to suppose that the regional, class, and
social distinctions that can be applied to, say, the Italians who came to
America will help very much in explaining the east European Jewish immi-
gration. The Italians came from their own independent nation, in which
they had developed a far more stratified and internally diverse society than
had the Jews, and this fact was strongly reflected in the regional, class, and
cultural character of the Italian immigration. Individual Italians might be in
flight, but not the Italians as a people. Of the Jews, however, it can almost be
said that a whole people was in flight. So cautious a historian of Jewish
immigration as Liebmann Hersch makes this point:

On the average, of 1,000 Jews in the Russian Empire, 13 came annually [be-
tween 1899 and 1914] to the United States and 15.6 emigrated annually from
Russia. This is one of the highest rates of emigration recorded in the history
of modern migrations. As it is an average rate for a period of 16 years and
as 95 percent of the emigrants remained abroad, we must go back to the great
Irish emigration in the middle of the nineteenth century to find an exodus of
equal magnitude.

It is best to turn back to the folk voices themselves. An unpublished
Yiddish memoirist writes, “They pushed me into America”— “they” being
all those forces of oppression he encountered in his youth. Another unpub-
lished Yiddish memoirist recalls still more vividly, “A powerful storm-wind
ripped us out of our place and carried us to America.” No one in the path of
that “storm-wind” was left untouched.