

# AILF Overview of U.S. Jewish Immigration History

Last updated December 6, 2004

The year 2004 marks 350 years since the first Jews settled in America. Despite a history of tremendous ethnic and religious persecution, Jews in America have met adversity with both persistence and success. The legacy of Jewish immigration to America is an exemplary story of reaching for, and attaining, the American dream despite humble and difficult beginnings. Jews in America can proudly reflect upon the past 350 years as a period of incredible accomplishment.

## **Colonial Years**

During early colonization, the number of Jewish immigrants in America was low. In fact, it took nearly one half century from the founding of Jamestown in 1607, the first colony in the new world, before the first recorded Jewish immigrant came to America.

Most scholars agree that the first Jewish settlement of any significant size in the new world occurred when a small band of refugees, 23 Sephardic Jews (or Jews of Spanish heritage) from Brazil, came to New Amsterdam (New York) in 1654. They came seeking the rights of free men and women in a place where they could worship without restraint and avail themselves of both the opportunities and obligations of a liberal society.

Once in America, they found that New Amsterdam in many ways was no different from where they came. They were treated as separate citizens. They could not engage in retail trade, practice handicrafts, hold public position, serve in the militia or practice their religion in a synagogue or in gatherings.

By the time of the American Revolution over 100 years later, the size of the Jewish population in the new world had grown by only small measures, and at a fairly slow pace. In 1789, Jewish immigrants in America had established only five major communities. All of them were in the large cities at the time such as New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Charleston, and Newport.

## **Leaving Europe**

German immigrants dominated the following period in American Jewish history, which occurred during the first half of the 19th Century. The initial group came because of the scarcity of land, rural poverty and government restrictions in Germany on marriage, domicile and employment. America, in the early part of that century was experiencing a period of rapid geographic expansion, and the German Jews became an integral part of the developing Midwest.

The second wave of Jews came after the failed German revolution in 1848. They were older and more educated than those who characterized the first wave. There were significant German Jewish communities in Michigan, Ohio and Illinois.

Following brutal programs in Russia and Poland in the late 1800s and early 1900s, large groups of Jews immigrated to the United States from Eastern Europe. Many of these immigrants were merchants, shopkeepers, craftsmen, and professionals. Some of them were also members of what might be classified as the "industrial proletariat." They were among the most successful immigrants at raising capital and starting many of the major businesses that exist in America even today. Together, the Jewish immigrants of the late 19th and early 20th Century also brought with them a rich Yiddish culture that expressed itself particularly well through journalism, fiction, poetry, and theater.

## **Holocaust**

The Holocaust in Europe opened a new, dark chapter in the story of Jewish immigration to America, when visas became an issue of life and death. Most of the countries able to provide protection to immigrants from Nazi persecution, including the United States, ignored the petitions of Jewish refugees and stood silent while millions perished. One of the stories that epitomizes the tragedy of such apathy is the 1939 voyage of the SS St. Louis, a German transatlantic liner.

On board the St. Louis were 936 passengers, all but six of them Jews, attempting to escape persecution by the Nazis. The passengers possessed valid visas to Cuba, but in an eleventh hour turnaround, the Cuban government refused to honor these visas. The St. Louis cruised by the Florida shores, where the passengers could see the lights of Miami, while appeals were made to the Roosevelt Administration to allow the ship to dock. The appeals were fruitless, and finally, the St. Louis was forced to return to Europe. Except for 288 passengers who found refuge in Great Britain, nearly all of the original St. Louis refugees were later killed in the infamous death camps operated by Hitler's minions.

The Roosevelt Administration continued its restrictive immigration policies with respect to European refugees until 1944, when the War Refugee Board was established. By then, roughly 5 million Jews had been killed in Europe.

The post-WWII era saw an influx of Jewish Holocaust survivors. This group exhibited an unusual resilience in picking up the pieces of their shattered lives in the United States. Many who lost entire families during the Holocaust remarried and had new families.

### **Legacy**

From the very first Jewish immigrants to those arriving today in the 21st Century, the purpose for their immigration to America has been freedom and opportunity. In so many ways they faced a mighty struggle to gain the liberties they sought, and relied heavily on their own culture of discipline, study and hard work to forge new opportunities for success and excellence. As a result of Jewish immigration, some of America's greatest cultural icons have emerged.

Consider a history of American movies without Samuel Goldwyn. American music without George and Ira Gershwin, Benny Goodman, and Leonard Bernstein. American song without Irving Berlin, Al Jolson and Oscar Hammerstein II. American opera without Robert Merrill, Roberta Peters, Richard Tucker or Beverly Sills. American magic without Harry Houdini. American jurisprudence without Louis Brandies. American theater without Arthur Miller or Lillian Hellman. American baseball without Hank Greenberg or Sandy Koufax. American fashion without Ralph Lauren or Calvin Klein.

Imagine also the course of American physics without Albert Einstein, Robert Oppenheimer or Leo Szilard. Imagine American medicine without Jonas Salk and Albert Sabin. Imagine the world of American finance without Henry Morgenthau or Bernard Baruch. American business without Levi Strauss or Helena Rubenstein.

In every case, Jewish Americans have altered the course of their respective disciplines. Clearly, the families and descendants of Jewish immigrants to our shores have contributed mightily to virtually every aspect of the American landscape.

---

*Special thanks to AILF Trustee Eleanor Pelta, who edited this essay for the Foundation.*

---

