

Getting Started in Jewish Genealogy

Class 1: Coming to America: History of Jewish Immigration to the U.S.

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Jewish genealogy is not without its frustrations. Perhaps one of the biggest challenges is understanding the immigration of your Jewish ancestors; it requires an understanding of who they were based on when they arrived in the United States. When they arrived often holds a clue to where to look next. An overall understanding on the Jews and the persecution they have faced at many times throughout history is important and when looking for passenger lists, their name upon arrival may not be the name you know.

History

1600s-1790

Jewish expulsions within Europe can be traced back to the 1100s, though the arrival of Jews to the American colonies and the United States doesn't begin until the 1600s. One of the major expulsions that resulted in immigration to the Americas is the Spanish expulsion of 1492. After their expulsion from Spain, many Jews traveled to Portugal, but in 1497 the king of Portugal, bending to Spanish pressure, ordered:

- the expulsion of all Jewish adults unwilling to convert to Christianity and
- compulsory Christian baptism of Jewish children

From Spain and Portugal, a number immigrated to Amsterdam. After Dutch forces captured Pernambuco, Brazil in 1630, Jews from Amsterdam headed west to Brazil. Here they began to form Jewish communities. When Portugal reasserted its control of the territory in Brazil, the Jews fled. Out of the hundreds of Sephardic Jews who had been residing in Brazil, just 23 wound up in New Amsterdam (New York under Dutch rule) in 1654.

Among the New England colonies, it was the religious tolerance of Rhode Island that attracted a group of Jews in the late 1600s where they settled in Newport. Those who arrived in early Pennsylvania were German Jews. Many of the earliest Jewish immigrants were merchants and settled in colonial ports:

- Charleston, S.C.
- New Amsterdam
- Newport, R.I.
- Philadelphia, Penn.
- Savannah, Ga.



By 1730 the Ashkenazi Jews outnumbered the Sephardic in the American colonies. However, the overall nature of the Jewish communities was Sephardic. The Ashkenazi Jews came from Germany and ultimately Eastern Europe whereas the Sephardic Jews trace back to Spain, the Mediterranean Sea, the Middle East, and Northern Africa. The religious rituals, naming patterns, and general way of life differs between the two sects. During the American Revolution, the synagogues throughout the colonies, as well as almost all other aspects of Jewish religious life, adhered to Sephardic practices. The only area in which the Sephardic influence was not felt was in the business operations of the various Jewish immigrants.

1820-1880

After the American Revolution and the passage of laws that required the keeping of passenger lists, the Jews who were immigrating to the new United States were coming predominantly from Central Europe. Not surprisingly, many of them settled in New York City, Philadelphia, and Baltimore—larger cities that often already had Jewish communities. Those who were German speaking tended to settle in groups in other areas:

- Albany, N.Y.
- Cincinnati, Ohio
- Cleveland, Ohio
- Louisville, Ky.
- Minneapolis, Minn.
- New Orleans, La.
- St. Louis, Mo.
- San Francisco, Calif.

These German-speaking Jews emigrated from:

- Bavaria
- Baden
- Württemberg
- Posen

They were attempting to get away from repressive legislation and disruption to the agricultural peasant economy that was making it difficult for them to succeed. Many of them were single males looking to improve on their lot in life. Coming from small hamlets and market towns, many were tradesmen and cattle dealers by occupation. They were persecuted through taxes, limitations on their right to marry, difficulties finding employment, and trouble finding places to live.

1881-1924

In 1880 of the 250,000 American Jews, approximately one-sixth were Eastern European immigrants. The Pale of Settlement in Russia—the only area they were legally allowed to abide—saw a tremendous increase in Eastern European Jews over the next 40 years. By 1920 Eastern European Jewish immigrants and their children accounted for close to five-sixths of the now 4 million Jews in the United States.

With high birthrates and generally low death rates, the Jewish population in Eastern Europe ballooned from 1.5 million in 1800 to 6.8 million in 1900. These Jews were confined to the Pale of Settlement that



consisted of 15 western provinces of Russia as well as 10 provinces of the Congress Poland (which was Russian-held land). During the 1881-1924 period, Jewish immigration to America breaks down as:

- 75% coming from the Pale of Settlement
- 18% coming from Galicia, Bukovina, or Hungary
- 4% coming from Romania

In addition to the population explosion there were several serious factors that forced families to emigrate:

- Industrialization and modern agriculture directly affected small merchants, peddlers, artisans, innkeepers, teamsters, and others
- The introduction of the Pogroms after the assassination of Tsar Nicholas II (which were nothing more than mob violence and anti-Jewish actions) continued for three decades.
- Economic policies in the Pale of Settlement, such as the May Laws of 1882, resulted in the pauperization of Jews by restricting or forbidding:
 - residence
 - issuing mortgages or deeds to Jews
 - registration of Jews as lessees of real property outside of towns and boroughs
 - issuance to Jews of powers of attorney to manager and dispose of said real property
 - handling business on Sundays and other Christian Holy Days
 - required closing of places of business belonging to Jews on Sundays and other Christian Holy Days
 - deportation of Jews in 1891 from Moscow, St. Petersburg
 - 1892 prohibition of Jews rights to elect or be elected to the town Dumas in the Pale, thus giving authoritative power to a minority of residents to govern against the majority of taxpayers—the Jews
 - punishments of Jews who tried to adopt Christian names
 - [the first six above were the original May Laws of 1882, and were intended to be temporary, but they were added to and revised and were in place until 1917]
- 1905 Revolution

As a result of the Pogroms and restrictive laws, 13,000 Jews immigrated to America in 1882 alone, which was almost half of all of those who arrived throughout the decade of the 1870s; by 1891 that number was up to 50,000. Between 1900 and 1914, 1.5 million Jewish immigrants arrived. From 1906 to 1916, more than 100,000 per annum arrived with the highest number of arrivals in 1906 at 152,000, which comprised 14% of the total number of immigrants to America that year.

Migration Patterns

The Jews from southern Russia tended to cross into Austro-Hungary before moving on to Vienna or Berlin. Those from western Russia crossed into Germany and headed to Berlin. From these cities they moved on to one of the transatlantic ports: Hamburg, Bremen, Rotterdam, Amsterdam, or Antwerp.

U.S. Immigration Concerns

With the increasing number of Jewish immigrants entering the United States, anti-immigrant sentiments grew among some Americans who were generally concerned by the large number of Southern and Eastern European immigrants who flocked to America after 1881. Restrictionists called for tighter controls including literacy tests. Immigration laws were getting tighter, identifying an ever-growing list of issues that were designed to determine what was an “unacceptable immigrant.” One of the biggest concerns was the poverty from which the Jews of the Pale of Settlement left and thus brought with them to America.

Post-1924 Immigration

The advent of immigration quota restrictions severely limited the number of Jews who were allowed to receive a visa and thus enter the United States. The quota was based on a certain percentage of the total number of individuals from each country as identified in the 1910 census. It was designed to limit those coming from Eastern Europe and other places. When the Nazis began to take control of Germany, they would eventually take passports from the Jews, preventing them from traveling outside of Germany. In addition, if a Jewish immigrant could find a way to qualify for an “affidavit in lieu of a passport” they were often still hindered by the quota restrictions, which were not adjusted to assist the persecuted Jews.

Immigrant Aid Societies

The Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) was founded in 1881 to assist Jews fleeing the Pogroms and other persecution. They operated in various port cities along the Eastern coast of the United States. Some of their records, especially the cards created as a sort of index of passengers they helped, are available for genealogists to search. The services offered by HIAS went beyond assisting immigrants after they disembarked. HIAS offered to:

- Sit in on Board of Special Inquiry Hearings
- Serve as interpreters
- Help locate family and friends (especially after World War II)
- Find housing and work for recent immigrants
- Hold naturalization classes
- Arrange marriages for couples
- Accompany immigrants to residences in major cities or railroad stations
- Hold religious services at immigration stations like Ellis Island
- Put up bonds for any immigrants deemed an LPC (likely to become a public charge)

Public Charge Bonds

One of the catch-all phrases used in assessing if an immigrant was considered unacceptable was “likely to become a public charge.” This was used on immigrants from many different countries, not just Jews, and often suggested that the immigrant—for reasons often not expressed—would end up relying on the support of the city or state in which they settled. In other words, they would go on welfare or end up in a city hospital, asylum, or other institution. HIAS often posted bonds that assured the U.S. government that the immigrant would in fact get a job and become a contributing member of society. If the immigrant failed to do so, the U.S. government received a monetary compensation regarding debts incurred by the immigrant named on the bond.

Passenger Lists

For those early Jewish immigrants of the colonial period there are no passenger lists as we know them. Published books focused on the topic of Jewish immigration may help you identify other resources. Passenger lists of the United States were not begun until 1820, and they have undertaken many revisions over the years.

When researching your Jewish immigrant ancestors, especially those coming after 1880, you may find it difficult to identify them on a passenger list for many reasons:

- Arrival under their Yiddish name, Yiddish nickname, or European civil name
- Online databases may have mis-indexed names as a result of hard to read handwriting or typos
- The shortening or Anglicizing of their surname after immigration preventing you from know the name under which they arrived
- The ineffectuality of traditional “Soundex” searching because of the many consonants found in Eastern European surnames

Even when you know who you are looking for, passenger lists can be difficult to read. They can, however, offer a lot of useful information on your ancestor once you’ve found them. And for those arriving after 1882, one of the best clues is often their last residence, which may be where they were born. Beginning in 1907, U.S. passenger lists went a step further and asked where the immigrant was born.

Of course, when working with these placenames remember that much has changed in Eastern Europe and a town under the Russian Empire may now be a part of Poland or Lithuania, while a Hungarian town may be part of Romania. Usually, the town names have changed. Likewise, the town in Yiddish often differed from the name of the town in Polish, Lithuanian, German, or Hungarian.

Tip: Use JewishGen’s Town Finder when trying to identify towns of origin.



Some of the European ports from which Jews emigrated have what are referred to as “departure lists.” The questions asked on some of these lists may offer more information on your ancestor than what was asked on the American arrival list.

Tip: See if your ancestor left from a port that kept departure lists.

The two most useful ports for departure lists are Hamburg, Germany and Bremen, Germany: the Hamburg passenger lists exist for the years 1850-1934; the Bremen passenger lists survive for the years 1907-1939. Often through these lists you may find an ancestor and then be able to figure out how they eventually came to America. Some traveled directly, from the German port to an American port. Others took an indirect route from Germany to the United Kingdom where they embarked on another boat to get them to America. If you know their travel route and you can find them in a departure list and an arrival list, you will often know from where they were coming (last residence in Europe) and to whom they were going in the United States, offering perhaps family members you can research further.

In Conclusion

The more you understand the history of Jewish immigration to America the more you will understand not only why your ancestors came to America, but what life was like for them in the country they left. The largest number of Jewish immigrants begins in 1881 and continues up through 1924 when the introduction of the U.S. immigration quotas dramatically reduced the number of immigrants who could venture to America. While U.S. passenger lists are often the first record considered in identifying origins of your Jewish ancestor, you may find other information or more information from departure lists or through the records generated through the help your ancestor received through the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society.

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