

Jewish Immigrants from the Russian Empire

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand why Jews living in the Russian Empire emigrated to America and from where.
2. Discuss the routes Jewish immigrants took to get to New York.
3. Explore available records to research Russian Jewish immigrants.

WHY JEWS LEFT THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE

Russian Empire Definitions

The (Imperial) Russian Empire was a country that existed from 1721-1917. It stretched from the Baltic Sea and eastern Europe to the Pacific Ocean. It was an absolute monarchy ruled by Russian emperors called Tsars. The official language was Russian, and the official church was the Russian Orthodox Church. In 1914, it spanned over 13.5 million miles, and its population was over 128 million people.

Within the Russian Empire, the Pale of Settlement emerged in the western region when large numbers of Jews were absorbed after three partitions of Poland in 1772, 1793, and 1795. Russian leadership allowed Jews to remain in current areas of residence but prohibited Jewish settlement elsewhere in Russia with minor exceptions. The Pale included Russian Poland, Lithuania, Belarus, a portion of Latvia, most of Ukraine, the Crimean Peninsula, and Bessarabia. In the 1897 Census, it indicated that almost five million Jews lived within the Pale with only about 200,000 Jews living elsewhere in European Russia.

Reasons to Exit

- Because of restrictions to only live within the Pale of Settlement.
- For a higher standard of living.
- To get away from oppressive policies of cultural and religious assimilation.
- To avoid military conscription.
- For safety.

Within the Pale, Jews made up about nine percent of the population, and they were restricted from living in some cities or owning land. They tended to live in small provincial market towns called shtetls which experienced a golden period of prosperity before 1840, but later, became poverty-stricken. In 1900, no province or guberniya in the Pale of Settlement had less than 14% of its Jews on relief, and in some places, it was much higher.

IMMIGRATION ROUTES

Russian law did not recognize the right to emigrate, and emigration was not regarded as legal. As such, few people left before 1870. The process involved completing the required paperwork for foreign travel, and obtaining a passport was a lengthy, expensive, and complicated process.

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Travel requirements included:

- Passport requiring Certificate and Identity Card
- Purchasing Train and Ship Tickets
- Passing a Medical Exam
- Possibly Avoiding Fines at Inspection Stations
- Food, Supplies, and Accommodations Enroute

Authorization for passports was located in provisional seats and local administrators interpreted and enforced rules in different ways. Before a passport was issued, a certificate verifying that there were no impediments such as eligibility for military service or outstanding debts was required. To apply for a certificate, an ID card was needed and many would-be emigrants were not registered in their district and did not have such a card, or, they had an ID card, it might have either expired or did not list all family members.

Travelers would need to buy rail and steamship tickets and pass a medical exam. There were legitimate tickets, often paid in installments, and there were rigorous medical exams. A family could spend weeks in a port city until they paid their full fare or were healthy to travel.

As a result of difficulties leaving the country legally, middlemen were a necessity. They functioned to secure passports or convoy people across the border without them. Some were agents of shipping companies and trustworthy. Others were swindlers and police informers. The later might register travelers in a district where obtaining passports was relatively easy or if obtaining documents was impossible, middlemen convoyed people over the border without them. By 1900, Russian authorities estimated that between 50-90% left without a passport.

Most traveled to a railroad station and took a train over the border into Germany or the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and then onto departure points from Hamburg, Bremen, Antwerp, or Rotterdam, where they boarded a steamship to North America.

The primary exit routes were through Germany because of geographical proximity from the Russian Empire or through the Russian-empire port city of Libau, now called Liepaja in Latvia, where there was a railway line through the Pale of Settlement which did not require crossing the border. About two-thirds of these transatlantic passengers were Jewish.

Challenges for Women

Women endured additional bureaucratic and financial difficulties while travelling. Husbands often left first and later sent for wives and kids. Married women could not obtain a passport without her husband's permission. This might require a husband already in America to provide written permission notarized by a Russian consulate in the U.S. Another option was to declare abandonment with police, whereby an investigation would be conducted before obtaining the passport.

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Sometimes, husbands only sent tickets and no other money for food, supplies or accommodations enroute. Being alone in port cities made women easy prey for swindlers and thieves. And some emigrant men deserted their families leaving a woman without support and wondering what happened.

RECORDS

Repositories, Websites & Other Resources

- American Jewish Archives
- American Jewish Historical Society
- Ancestry.com
- FamilySearch
- JewishGen (along with partner organizations Litvak SIG and JRI-Poland)
- Jewish Genealogy Society of New York Website Databases
- Miriam Weiner's Routes to Roots Website and Publications
- NARA
- YIVO

There are a variety of records in the United States and abroad to help document these journeys including:

- U.S. Civil Records Generated by the Government
- Russian Empire Records
- Jewish Institutional Records
- Newspapers

Jewish Institutional Records

- Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) *Historical Records*
- Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (The Joint) *Remittance Records*
- Industrial Removal Office (Romanian Committee) *Removal Records*
- Defunct Landsmanshaften *Records*
- New York Hebrew Orphan Asylum *Records*
- Kurlander Young Men's Mutual Aid Society (KYMMAS) *Records of Genealogical Value*
- Jewish Consumptives Relief Society *Patient Applications*
- Gallery of Missing Husbands *Newspaper Column*
- American Jewish Committee Office of Jewish War Records' *Surveys*
- National Jewish Welfare Board Jewish *Chaplain Surveys*

FOR FURTHER REFERENCE

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