

## Introduction

Migration is a defining aspect of the Jewish experience. Since biblical times Jewish migrations have been widely associated with flight from persecution. Long before the Holocaust, accounts of Jewish history highlighted antisemitism and expulsions as overarching causes for Jewish population movements. In the 1904 *Jewish Encyclopedia* Joseph Jacobs characterized Jewish history as a constant chain of “forced” movements “from country to country.” Since the 1980s specialist scholars have shifted to more differentiated interpretations of Jewish migrations. Yet the lachrymose view of Jewish migrations persists in popular publications, textbooks, and even scholarly studies, especially surveys of global migration and refugee issues. In an informative 1996 book about global migrations, Thomas Sowell begins the chapter on the Jews with this sentence: “The tragic history of the Jews as a people wandering the world through centuries of persecution has been . . . remarkable for their achievements.” In the chapter Sowell plays down the agency of Jews as migrants.<sup>1</sup>

Howard Sachar, whose books about modern Jewish history have been widely assigned at American colleges and universities until recently, took a more nuanced view, acknowledging the impact of economic factors. Yet even in the revised 1990 edition of a survey that was first published in 1958 he continued to describe Jewish migration from Eastern Europe after 1880 as “flight.” The author of a recently published history of refugees in Europe after 1492 asserts that the Jewish “emigration” from the Russian Empire before 1914 “can be viewed in large part as a flight from religious and ethno-national persecution.” The respective subchapter is titled “Flight from Pogroms.” Even a superficial search for the phrase “fled the pogroms” in contemporary newspapers and magazines yields dozens of results about Jews leaving the Russian Empire before 1914.<sup>2</sup>

The view of forced migration as a supposed Jewish habitus can be traced to the Christian stereotype of the “Wandering Jew.” According to a legend that first emerged in thirteenth-century Europe, the Jewish figure that is sometimes called Ahasverus was condemned to wander until the second coming of Christ because he struck or cursed Jesus on the way to the crucifixion. Like Ahasverus, “the” Jews remain permanent outsiders without a home. Wherever they settle, they cannot stay. The “Wandering Jew” became a staple of literary discussion during the nineteenth century. The ten-volume novel *Le Juif Errant* (1844) by French writer Eugène Sue found enormous appeal and was translated into English. In the early twentieth century, the view of the Jews as a “wandering people” became influential among Zionist authors. To reinforce the case for “normalization,” or permanent

settlement in a Jewish homeland, they depicted Jewish life in the Diaspora as a period of suffering characterized by oppression and frequent expulsions. This view was suggestive because the rise of Zionism coincided with strong Jewish migration from the Russian Empire and Romania, where Jews faced manifold restrictions and growing violent persecution. Zionist leaders and authors frequently referenced the Exodus. The charismatic founder of the Zionist World Organization, Theodor Herzl, styled himself as a modern Moses.<sup>3</sup>

After 1890 the number of Jewish migrants moving to the United States and more far-flung destinations such as South Africa grew dramatically. In 1904, the year *Jacobs's Jewish Encyclopedia* article was published, more than 100,000 Jews moved to the United States, primarily from the Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires. They made up more than 13 percent of U.S. immigrants. In the previous year, a notorious pogrom in Kishinev had shocked the world. Between 1903 and 1906 hundreds of anti-Jewish attacks claimed Jewish lives across the Russian Pale of Settlement, the western provinces of the Russian Empire where Jews were allowed to live. The Russian authorities appeared unable or unwilling to stem the violence. It is understandable that most observers considered the pogroms the overarching cause for the strong migration.

A closer reading of pre-1914 reports about Jewish migrations, however, betrays surprisingly differentiated interpretations. Several Jewish social scientists, journalists, and aid organizations in continental Europe published accounts about the causes of the Jewish “mass migration.” Based on the analysis of available data these authors judged economic and demographic factors as decisive. After all, the Jewish mass migration between 1870 and 1914 was part of an unprecedented upheaval. Millions of people around the globe were on the move as expanding transportation networks connected little-developed rural regions to globalizing markets for labor, services, and goods.

Between 1841 and 1891, when most European countries experienced strong growth, Ireland's population decreased from more than 8 million to less than 5 million, due largely to strong migration to the United States, Britain, and other destinations. Norway's demographic development also stands out. The almost 200,000 Norwegians who moved to the United States during the 1880s represented close to 10 percent of the country's population, and migration from Norway to the United States remained strong until 1914. Norway's demographic growth slowed down significantly in this period. After 1900, the number of Italian migrants registered at U.S. ports frequently exceeded by far that of Jews from Eastern Europe. Between 1880 and 1914 more than 4 million Italians moved to the United States, primarily from the country's little-developed Mezzogiorno. Like Jewish and many Irish

immigrants, Italian immigrants clustered in a few cities, especially New York. The rates for Italian nationals who returned to their home villages and towns exceeded 60 percent in some years after 1900. Jewish remigration rates were much lower but not negligible.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, in his entry on migration in the *Jewish Encyclopedia* Jacobs conceded that “in recent times a new kind of migration has taken place, due partly to economic causes and partly to persecution.” St. Petersburg journalist L. Wygodski, the author of the subsequent section on migration from Russia, stressed that the pogroms were merely the “stimulus.” The “true cause” of the mass migration was the miserable economic situation of the Jewish population. He identified networks as crucial drivers of the migration and traced fluctuations in the number of migrants to business cycles of the U.S. economy. In recent years several studies have backed up his remarkably far-sighted assessment. Even in the aftermath of the First World War, when Russian, Ukrainian, and Polish nationalists massacred tens of thousands of Jews, displacing many more, Jewish scholars discussing Jewish migration remained committed to critical and differentiated approaches, rejecting simplistic explanations. The “lachrymose” view of Jewish migrations became dominant in the scholarly literature only during and shortly after the Holocaust.<sup>5</sup>

The migrations of millions of people of different cultural backgrounds across long distances were closely intertwined with concerted efforts to better comprehend this seemingly unprecedented phenomenon. Much of the early literature concentrated on the respective national and local spheres. Few authors who wrote about migration before the 1920s were affiliated with universities; instead the publications ranged from journalistic accounts and studies written by independent scholars, urban reformers, and members of migrant aid associations to biased texts whose authors identified migration as a “racial” threat and a grave risk to public health. In several European countries, nationalists, politicians, and military leaders expressed concern about the impact of mass *emigration*, especially since most departing migrants were young men, women, and children. In the United States, Britain, and other destination countries social scientists, public health officials, and urban reformers began to take a closer look at actual *immigrants*. An early example is a scientific study anthropologist Franz Boas conducted in New York around 1910. Using the measurements of the head shapes of more than ten thousand immigrants from different parts of Europe and their American-born children, the study traced significant differences between parents and children to environmental factors, rejecting widespread views that supposed racial differences were biologically determined. Boas’s research was funded by the U.S. Congress, as part of a concerted effort to learn more about immigrants and immigration.<sup>6</sup>

Early on, serious scholarship about Jewish migration stood out because it transcended national debates about the benefits and supposed threats associated with mass migration. Around 1900 it became clear that the dramatic increase in Jewish migration from Eastern Europe marked a decisive shift. Even committed Zionists conceded that a homeland to accommodate millions of Jews from Eastern Europe could not be established in the short term. At the same time Jewish aid associations, which had supported migrants along the main transit routes and in the receiving countries for decades, began to move from situational crisis management to a more sustained approach that depended on coordination across borders but also on the collection and analysis of data. Jewish (and other) aid workers lobbied with government officials on both sides of the Atlantic and nonstate actors, such as steamship line companies. Jewish community leaders made concerted efforts to refute falsehoods spread by antisemitic agitators and spoke up against migration restrictions in different countries. Before 1914, the soft power of Jewish aid associations was not negligible, as this study will show.

The First World War constituted a turning point. A massive refugee crisis and a shift to restrictive migration policies in the United States and other destination countries after 1918 greatly exacerbated the situation of “unwanted” Jewish (and other) minorities in Eastern Europe. A large number of Jews who had been displaced during and after the war, many of whom had become stateless, were stranded in a situation that can best be described as “permanent transit,” unable to return to their homes and unable to join relatives and acquaintances in the United States and a few other preferred destinations. Jewish migration to Mandate Palestine increased during the 1920s, but the remigration rates were high. The Great Depression, the rise of openly antisemitic regimes in Germany, Poland, and Romania whose leaders promoted violent persecution, and the forced expulsion of Jewish populations corresponded with increasingly desperate efforts by Jewish representatives and aid workers to find safe havens. Already in the 1920s Jewish aid organizations began compiling lengthy reports about destinations for Jewish “resettlement” in East Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean. During the 1930s and 1940s the affliction of “unwanted” Jews who were sometimes literally stranded in the no man’s land between borders gave rise to influential studies and concepts that shaped the emerging field of migration and refugee studies.<sup>7</sup>

Why did the view of Jewish migration from Russia as the latest chapter of continuous Jewish flight cast a long shadow over the scholarship for decades after the Holocaust? And why does the pre-1914 flight narrative continue to linger in the general historiography and popular memory? The answer to these questions leads to a striking research gap that is the subject of this book. On a first glance, few fields in modern Jewish history appear better studied than Jewish migrations. Yet works published after the 1940s deal almost exclusively with a single aspect: Jewish *immigration* and its repercussions.<sup>8</sup>

After the founding of the State of Israel in 1948, the problem of permanently displaced Jews and the debate about a wider range of causes and the general implications faded into the background. Instead, Jewish immigration emerged as a redemptive success story of Jews who had “escaped” from Europe and countries of the Middle East and Maghreb to the “promised lands” of the United States and Mandate Palestine/Israel, where they reinvented Jewish *Gemeinschaft*.

The rising interest in ethnicity during the 1960s also explains why many American scholars began to research specific ethnic groups (often their own), as if different ethnic groups existed in complete isolation from each other before, during, and after the journey across the Atlantic. Indeed, not all Jews or Italians migrated because they were Jews or Italians (or Jewish Italians in a few cases) but because they were looking for a better life for themselves and their families. Yet it is also true that most members of specific ethnoreligious groups frequently shared certain economic profiles. Before 1800 European Jews were forced into proto-capitalist niches on the margins of feudal societies, while many Christians were tied to the land or to specific occupations. Scholars have debated the long-term impact of economic profiles and specific proficiencies, especially as migrants were hired for industrial jobs that demanded completely new skills. Migrants may have arrived with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, but they became part of the industrial working class in northern U.S. cities after the American Civil War.<sup>9</sup>

The growing appeal of the ethnicity concept and the focus on immigration among American Jewish authors during the ethnic revival of the 1960s and 1970s were also attempts to come to terms with the irrevocable destruction of Jewish life in Eastern Europe during the Holocaust. In the award-winning epic *World of Our Fathers* (1976), one of the most widely read accounts of Jewish immigrants in the United States, author Irving Howe portrayed Jews on the move as refugees driven from their homes. The Jewish migration from Eastern Europe between 1881 and 1914, as he put it emphatically, was “comparable in modern Jewish history only to the flight from the Spanish Inquisition.” Desperate attempts by Soviet Jewish refuseniks to emigrate during the 1970s only reinforced the bleak view of Jewish migration from Russia before 1914.<sup>10</sup>

Historians in Israel crafted their own distinctive narrative by depicting Jewish immigration to Palestine as a succession of distinctive *aliyot*. The Hebrew term *aliyah* refers to the return of exiled Jews to the ancient land of Israel and describes the act of moving up. According to this narrative, Jews moving to Palestine before 1914 were few in number but committed Zionists who built flourishing agricultural colonies. Jews who migrated elsewhere, a far larger number, are consigned to the background if they are mentioned at all. In recent years this view has been revised. Before the 1930s most Jewish Palestine migrants looked for better economic opportunities, and many settled in towns

and cities rather than agricultural regions.<sup>11</sup> Authors covering Jewish immigration usually have devoted only fleeting attention to the causes. Most do not discuss the journeys of Jewish (and other) migrants. Little is known about Jews and others who returned to their home countries, were prevented from entering destination countries, or were permanently displaced after 1914.<sup>12</sup> Scholars discussing Jewish immigration tend to ignore non-Jewish migrants. In a similar vein, most studies about German or Polish migrants moving to the United States during the nineteenth century exclude Jewish migrants. As a result, surprisingly little is known about ties between migrants of different ethnic and religious backgrounds originating in the same places in Central and Eastern Europe.<sup>13</sup> Much of the scholarship deals with Jewish migration from just one point of origin, the “cursed” Russian lands, to the two main destinations, the United States and (Mandate) Palestine/Israel. The global dimension of Jewish migration from Eastern Europe after 1860 has not been sufficiently explored.<sup>14</sup>

The rise of Holocaust studies after the 1970s has illustrated the shortcomings of looking just at those who managed to immigrate. Desperate attempts by German and Austrian Jews to escape Nazi persecution by fleeing to Shanghai, North Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean during the 1930s and early 1940s are well documented. Hundreds of personal testimonies and memoirs trace the experiences of Jewish refugees from Central Europe. Many German and Austrian Jews were still waiting for immigrant visas when German troops occupied countries they had considered safe, such as the Netherlands and France. In marked contrast, relatively few Eastern European Jews managed to escape. They faced closed gates wherever they turned. In the wake of the notorious Kristallnacht pogrom in November 1938 the Roosevelt administration belatedly relaxed the immigration policy for German and Austrian Jews, but the rigid quotas excluding Jews (and others) born in Eastern Europe remained in place. Few survived regardless, whether they were deported from or murdered in Western, Central, or Eastern Europe. Apart from a few memoirs, diaries, and desperate letters, few documents remain that shed light on their journeys. Indeed, some of the most important sources are the memoirs of Holocaust survivors.

In recent years scholars have made a concerted effort to analyze long-ignored Yiddish sources such as interviews conducted in the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust, accounts by Polish Jews who fled to the Soviet Union, and Yizkor books that document the history and memory of hundreds of destroyed Jewish communities across Eastern Europe.<sup>15</sup> Very few scholars have researched the system of deportations to ghettos and extermination camps by rail based on the testimony of survivors and other sources. Apart from a short essay by pioneering Holocaust historian Raul Hilberg, the role of various, largely state-owned European railroads in the history of the Holocaust remains understudied.<sup>16</sup>

Why devote a book-length study to seemingly mundane journeys of Jewish and other migrants and refugees? Researching transit journeys of Jews from Eastern Europe between the 1860s and the aftermath of the Holocaust transcends another powerful narrative that continues to shape much of the scholarship in modern Jewish history and refugees. Ironically, historical migration studies and modern Jewish history, two fields with an obvious predilection toward transnational perspectives, remain beholden to the nation-state paradigm. The same states that emancipated their Jewish populations after the late eighteenth century defined and categorized those crossing their borders. The terms “immigrant” and “emigrant” were coined by bureaucrats to distinguish between different types of cross-border movement. States have been regulating migration (and Jewish life) differently over time. Diverging statistical and legal systems and linguistic distinctions make comparisons challenging. Therefore, few authors who cover the history of immigrants venture beyond national borders. Important exceptions are recent publications about the migrations of small groups of Sephardi Jews whose authors have retraced the global journeys between the Levant, Latin America, and Africa. This study looks beyond the traditional centers of Jewish life, at the spaces in between—in a period when new centers in America and Palestine/Israel were emerging and the dominant center of Jewish life in Eastern Europe faced an uncertain future.<sup>17</sup>

Terms such as “illegal” and “undocumented” migrants are often used uncritically even though states have been defining “illegal” migration differently over time. A migrant can be considered a deserving political refugee on one side of a border but treated as an unwanted economic migrant on the other. Following regime changes welcome refugees can be recategorized as unwanted economic migrants. In a study of twentieth-century migration to the United States, historian Mae Ngai emphasizes a seemingly obvious point: the illegal (im)migrant is a legal construct. The term “migrant” itself has to be used carefully. After the First World War nation-states such as Romania began to label Jews and members of other unwanted minority populations as “migrants” to justify their exclusion, expulsion, or “resettlement,” the term the Nazi regime would use as a cipher for systematic mass killings during World War II.<sup>18</sup>

The mutual influences between changing migration policies enacted by different states remain little understood. Migration historian Adam McKeown has pointed to links between Chinese exclusion policies in the United States, Canada, South Africa, Australia, and other destination countries between the late nineteenth century and the 1940s. This study raises a similar argument relating to Jewish migrants from Eastern Europe. Before 1914 the overwhelming majority moved to the United States, and smaller groups settled in Western Europe and more far-flung destinations in Latin America, South Africa, and Palestine. Already in the early 1880s American Jewish observers grasped that Chinese

exclusion could serve as a blueprint for excluding other “races” that were considered “undesirable.” The American lawmakers who drafted restrictive immigration bills in 1921 and 1924 specifically sought to exclude unwanted “races,” not least Jews from Eastern Europe. After 1918 several other major destination countries, such as Britain, Canada, and Argentina, also began to exclude Jewish migrants.

Ellis Island makes repeated appearances in this book, not as a celebrated gateway but in its lesser-known role as an offshore transit and deportation facility, especially after the mid-1920s. Many “unwanted” migrants never even reached Ellis Island. Aristide Zolberg was one of the first scholars who pointed to the far-reaching repercussions of America’s immigration restrictions after 1921 for the migration policies of other states. State officials in Central Europe and the transatlantic steamship lines coordinated their treatment of transmigrants from the Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires already during the 1880s to ensure they adhered to U.S. immigration regulations, a practice Zolberg described as American “remote control.”<sup>19</sup>

The focus of most migration scholars on the modern state and the legal categorizations state officials applied to people on the move has obscured the influence of humanitarian organizations and private businesses facilitating journeys across borders, before and after 1914. Retracing the journeys of Jewish migrants from Eastern Europe across borders (and national historiographies) after 1860 sheds light not just on individual agency but also on nonstate actors operating between and beyond borders: Jewish and other migrant aid associations, railroad companies, steamship lines, travel agents, and smugglers. Authors of richly illustrated coffee-table books about the great ocean liners rarely discuss the backgrounds of crew members and the experiences of passengers traveling in steerage, several decks below the luxurious first-class quarters. The history of several Jewish aid associations is well researched, albeit almost exclusively in their respective national setting. It is hardly known that after 1870 most members of the Paris-based Alliance Israélite Universelle lived in Imperial Germany. Apart from a pioneering study about its state-of-the-art school network in the Ottoman Empire little has been written about the assistance Alliance members provided in different parts of Europe and the Levant to local Jews and Jewish migrants before and after 1914.<sup>20</sup>

More than a few Jewish entrepreneurs played prominent roles in the mobility business during the nineteenth century, on both sides of the Atlantic. Some scholars covering the dramatically increasing migration from the Russian Empire after 1870 recognize the impact of an improving transportation network but provide only limited information about its builders. In 1862 a group of investors led by Emile and Isaac Pereire, two Sephardi brothers from Paris, completed the Warsaw–St. Petersburg railroad that connected northern Russia, Lithuania, and Poland with Central Europe—and thus

provided access to North Sea ports with regular transatlantic service. Most migrants from the Russian Empire traveled on steamers of the Hamburg-America Line (HAPAG) and its affiliated carriers. Albert Ballin, HAPAG's chief executive after 1900, was one of the most influential Jewish mobility entrepreneurs of his time.<sup>21</sup>

The main protagonists of this book are migrants, facilitators, and mostly Jewish authors who wrote about Jewish and general migration after 1860. Facilitators comprise smugglers on the border, ticket agents, railroad investors, employees and executives of steamship lines—service providers whose businesses depended on relatively permeable borders. Representatives of Jewish aid associations were facilitators of a different kind. They did not charge migrants but extended support, gave advice, and lobbied on their behalf. State officials, legislators, and observers, including journalists and writers, populate the supporting cast. After 1914, when states began restricting migration and hundreds of thousands of Jews had lost their homes, different protagonists moved to center stage, Jewish representatives who pondered solutions for permanently displaced people and Jewish scholars who laid the conceptual foundations for migration and refugee studies.

Most of the men and a few women who wrote about Jewish migration during the twentieth century were themselves Jewish migrants. They were born between the 1870s and 1890s and followed similar paths that took them from the Russian Empire via interwar Berlin and Paris to New York in the early 1940s. Several were close collaborators. Only a handful managed to obtain university positions, sometimes late in life. They earned income as journalists, aid workers, translators, and even language teachers, or worked for small Jewish research institutes.

The sources for this study range from personal letters, memoirs, and business files to reports of Jewish aid associations and Jewish communities, the personal papers of scholars, rabbis, and Jewish representatives, government records, court files, newspapers, and photographs, as well as scholarly and literary publications. The dispersion of the sources in archives across Europe, North America, Israel, and beyond is part of the challenge of writing a book that retraces the journeys of migrants through different countries and territories over almost a century. The limited use of Yiddish- and Russian-language sources is a conscious choice. Instead of analyzing debates about Jewish migration in Yiddish publications around the globe (a fascinating subject in its own right), this study seeks to examine encounters and exchanges between Jews from Eastern Europe and others: the representatives of Jewish communities in transit and destination countries such as Germany, Britain, and the United States, state officials and legislators, a wide range of nonstate actors, as well as the broader and scholarly public spheres. Early on Yiddish-speaking migrants acted as brokers who specifically targeted Jewish and general audiences who did not read Yiddish. They were journalists, aid workers,

writers, and scholars. Frequently this betrayed attempts to normalize the view of Jewish migrants and migrations and dismiss widespread stereotypical perceptions of Jewish migrants.

A particularly important language in these exchanges was German. Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire were major points of passage for Jewish migrants from the Russian Empire. Many young Jews (and non-Jews) from Eastern Europe attended universities in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland before the 1930s, often publishing dissertations and other works in German. For decades German was the official language of the World Zionist Organization. German remained a major Jewish lingua franca even after 1933, not least in the sphere of secular and religious Jewish organizations. For instance, during the second half of the 1930s the World Jewish Congress (WJC) conducted its meetings in Geneva in German. The minutes were translated into English for the staff at the WJC's New York office.<sup>22</sup> Russian-language sources are of limited importance for a study dealing not with Russian policies toward Jewish "emigration" but with the journeys of migrants who overwhelmingly left the Russian Empire days after they had departed from their hometowns.<sup>23</sup>