

# Out of the Shtetl.\* In the footsteps of Eastern European Jewish emigrants to America, 1900-1914

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Between 1870 and 1924, more than 2.7 million Jews left Eastern Europe and moved overseas. The migration of millions of men, women, and children had an impact on Jewish people world-wide and in many respects its effects can be seen to this day. It was a modern version of the Exodus for a people that wanted to be free of the persecution and economic subjugation it had suffered in its countries of origin and wanted to create a new life overseas. Although the Jewish migration was part of a general migration trend that encompassed more than thirty million people, it had three unique characteristics: first, the percentage of Jewish migrants was significantly higher than the percentage of non-Jewish migrants. At the start of the twentieth century, the world Jewish population was estimated at ten million; about two million of these people – 20 percent – emigrated in 1900-1925. In contrast, only 11.3 percent of the 32 million Italians emigrated, and this was one of the highest rates in the world at the time.<sup>1</sup> Second, the Jews migrated as families. In most cases men arrived together with their wives and children. If the head of the family emigrated by himself, his wife and children joined him soon afterwards. Hence there was a high proportion of women and children in the Jewish migrant population.<sup>2</sup> Third, the percentage of emigrants who returned to their countries of origin was substantially smaller among the Jews than among other nationalities. In 1908-1924, about 33 percent of all migrants returned,

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\* Shtetl: A Yiddish word meaning ‘small town’, derived from the German word *Stadt*. The shtetl was the typical form of settlement among Jews in Eastern Europe until World War II. For hundreds of years there were Jewish towns scattered throughout Eastern Europe in which more than half the population was Jewish. Life in the shtetl revolved around the Jewish religion. Today, the term ‘shtetl’ is symbolic of the annihilated Jewish communities of Eastern Europe.

<sup>1</sup> Jacob Lestchinsky, *Di yidisher vanderung far di letste 25 yor* (Berlin 1927) 1-5.

<sup>2</sup> Liebman Hersch, *Le Juif errant d'aujourd'hui. Etude sur l'émigration des Israélites de l'Europe orientale aux Etats-Unis de l'Amérique du Nord* (Paris 1913). See also Liebman Hersch, ‘International Migration of the Jews’ in: Walter Willcox and Imre Ferenzi, eds., *International Migration* (New York 1931) 471-520. Liebman Hersch was one of the pioneers of Jewish migration research, and his demographic-statistical studies still form the basis for all research on the subject.

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compared with only 5.2 percent of the Jews. Unlike the other people who usually emigrated to make money and go back home at the first opportunity, the Jews had nowhere to return to, and they settled in the countries to which they went.<sup>3</sup>

When we examine the extent of Jewish migration, we find that about half a million Jews migrated during the 33 years from 1879 to 1903, i.e. about 15,000 a year. The change in the extent of the mass migration occurred in 1903. From then until the outbreak of World War I, about two million Jews emigrated to the US, Canada, Argentina, South Africa, Australia, and Palestine. One of the most important, albeit quiet, revolutions in Jewish life took just ten years, changing the Jewish people beyond recognition. It was a revolution because the decision to emigrate resulted in a drastic, fundamental change in every aspect of the Jews' lives (demographically, culturally, economically, and socially). It was quiet because it was generated by ordinary Eastern European Jews who by their personal decision, multiplied by hundreds of thousands of people, altered their own fate and that of the entire Jewish people. Unlike bloody revolutions in which leaders convince the masses to join them, this 'quiet revolution' had no leaders. It was the individual emigrant who stood at the centre of the mass Jewish migration and generated the historical change.

This paper closely examines the emigration process from the decision to emigrate to the moment when the emigrants boarded the ship that would take them to their destination. It will trace the obstacles they faced (dealing with the bureaucracy, crossing the border, and waiting at the port) and attempt to understand how they overcame these obstacles. It should be noted that this period, known to both Jewish and non-Jewish historians as 'the era of mass migration,' has already been the subject of thorough, elaborate scholarship. Research has been done on almost every one of the Jews' destination countries, focusing on the Jews' absorption in the surrounding environment and their influence on it. The issues discussed include absorption patterns, labor conditions, relations between old-timers and newcomers, similarities and differences between immigrants from various ethnic groups, and much more. The present paper looks instead at the process of reaching the new country, focusing on the emigrants'

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<sup>3</sup> Jonathan D. Sarna, "The Myth of No Return: Jewish Return Migration to Eastern Europe", *American Jewish History* 71 (December 1981) 256-268. Sarna notes that only 5% of the immigrants returned from the United States to Russia between 1914 and 1924.

difficulties encountered on their westward journey and how they overcame them.<sup>4</sup>

### **The bureaucracy of emigration**

In order to leave Czarist Russia legally, one needed three things: a passport, a ticket for the ship and good enough health to pass the required medical examinations before boarding the ship.

#### *1. A passport*

One of the salient characteristics of the era of mass migration was a liberal immigration policy in many of the destination countries. In fact, until World War I none of those countries, not even the US, required a passport or entry visa. The American continent was open, with almost no restrictions, to millions of Europeans who wanted to escape their poverty and hardship. However, aspirant immigrants did need a passport to cross the Russian border in order to reach the port of departure.

Obtaining a passport was a difficult, complicated bureaucratic task. Not only was Russian law unsuited to handle mass emigration, but it varied from region to region. The resultant complications were unsolvable and opened the door to local corruption and superfluous, unforeseen expenses. To obtain a passport, a prospective emigrant had to present several papers: an identity card; a 'certificate of probity' from the police stating that there was no hindrance to the person's going abroad; and, if the applicant was male and between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one, a document certifying that he had reported to the recruitment office.<sup>5</sup> Obtaining the required documents was a problem in itself. Many people were not

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<sup>4</sup> Very few studies have focused on the emigration process rather than the absorption of the migrants in their new country. See Pamela Nadell, 'The Journey to America by Steam: The Jews of Eastern Europe in Transition', *American Jewish History* 71 (1981) 269-284. See also Nadell, 'En Route to the Promised Land' in: Kerry M. Olitzky ed., *We are Leaving Mother Russia* (Cincinnati 1990) 11-24; Zosa Szajkowski, 'Suffering of Jewish Immigrants to America in Transit through Germany', *Jewish Social Studies* 39 (1977) 106-107.

<sup>5</sup> Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People (hereafter: CAHJP), ICA/34a. See also 'Vi azoy bakumt men an oyslendishn pas?' *Der yidisher emigrant* 3 (12 December 1907) 9.

registered in their places of residence and therefore had no identity card. Even if one did have a card, it may not have been valid, or not all family members may have been listed on it. To obtain a new identity card, one had to apply to the municipality where one was registered, regardless of how far it was from where one actually lived. The law was changed in October 1906, after which residents were entitled to obtain a permanent identity card (with no expiration date) and a passport for themselves and their family anywhere in the Pale of Settlement or Poland<sup>6</sup>, provided they presented all the required documents. But since the amended law was written in Russian and was not circulated as it should have been everywhere in the Pale of Settlement, the Jews tended to apply for identity cards according to the old rules.

A certificate of probity could be obtained from the police upon presentation of the identity card, provided that there had been no complaints against the prospective emigrant or his family. After receiving the character reference, the applicant was given – at the police station – the other documents required to obtain a passport. All family members up to a certain age were listed in the passport: wife, children, other relatives, and even the maid, if any. If all family members were listed on the identity card, the procedure was simple. But if the wife and children were not listed, the prospective emigrant had to present his children's birth certificates and bring witnesses who knew his wife and children. Since it was standard practice in small towns to record wives and children in communal record books rather than on identity cards, many emigrants had trouble acquiring the necessary documentation.<sup>7</sup>

Wives who wanted to join their husbands in the new country had even more difficulty obtaining a passport. According to Russian law, a wife could receive a passport only with her husband's consent. But since many men had emigrated by themselves to pave the way for the family to follow, and they had not left their wives a separate passport or notarized document certifying that they were married to each other, the women found

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<sup>6</sup> The Pale of Settlement was a region at the western end of the Russian Empire (Lithuania, Belorussia and Ukraine) where permanent residence by Jews was allowed.

<sup>7</sup> 'Vi azoy bakumt men an oyslendishen pas?' 9. There were cases (albeit not many), in which relatives in the US sent their relatives American passports to facilitate their departure from Russia. See Adolphe Danziger, 'Why the Jews Leave Russia', *The Metropolitan Magazine* 23-4 (January 1906) 386.

themselves at a dead end. This difficulty could be resolved in any of three ways: the first and the least practical required the husband to declare before a notary in the new country that he wanted his wife and children to join him. This affidavit had to be signed at the Russian consulate in his place of residence and then sent to his wife. A woman who presented an affidavit signed by a notary and the consul received a passport without difficulty. The second way to obtain a passport was for the wife to declare at the police station that she had been abandoned by her husband and that his whereabouts were unknown. The police, after a short investigation that verified her account, would issue a document confirming her statement, after which a passport could be issued at the district governor's office.<sup>8</sup> The third and most common way was to cross the border illegally.

The bureaucratic obstacles to obtaining a passport were almost insurmountable for prospective emigrants who had difficulty obtaining all the required documents. The separate communal registration of the Jewish population, internal migration that took people far from where they were originally registered, wives without power of attorney from their husbands, and the difficulty of coping with the Russian bureaucracy of the early twentieth century led many emigrants to look for an illegal way to get out of the country.

In late 1911, the demographer and economist Jacob Lestchinsky visited one of the border crossings between Germany and Russia to examine the emigrants' problems and try to suggest ways of dealing with them.<sup>9</sup> Of all the difficulties that Lestchinsky described, the biggest was obtaining a passport; hence the need for the assistance of smugglers. 'Based on my numerous conversations with many people,' he wrote,

I realized that ninety emigrants out of a hundred could not obtain passports due to the necessary conditions. Here, for example, is a widow and her daughter, who went through so many troubles while crossing the border, more than a person can bear. Why didn't this wretched woman get a passport? It was impossible. Three of her sons had already left Russian, and she had to pay a penalty of nine hundred rubles. Here is a young maid of seventeen, who also had a

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<sup>8</sup> 'Vi azoy bakumt men an oyslendishen pas?', 10.

<sup>9</sup> On Lestchinsky and his research on Jewish migration, see: G. Alroey, 'Demographers in the Service of the Nation. Liebman Hersch, Jacob Lestschinsky and the Start of Jewish Migration Research', *Jewish History* 20 (December 2006) 265-282.

bunch of troubles. Why didn't she get a passport? It was impossible. She is an orphan and has no 'papers'; (...) and the same is true of most of the emigrants. At the same time, however, I realized that ten percent, or maybe even more, of the emigrants could have gotten passports, but even they were unfamiliar with this business and got carried away with the stream.<sup>10</sup>

Due to their inability to deal with the Czarist bureaucracy, many Jews did not bother trying to get a passport at all and therefore had to leave Russia illegally. As we shall see, this exposed them to crooks of various kinds who exploited their dependence and called their whole journey into question.

## 2. *A ticket*

Passage on a ship sailing from Bremen, Hamburg, Rotterdam, or Antwerp cost about 75 rubles (\$37.50, equivalent to \$765 today).<sup>11</sup> A child under a year old cost five rubles, and a child between one and twelve was half-price. Travel was cheaper from England – 65 rubles from Liverpool to Philadelphia (\$32.50, equivalent to \$663 today), but getting there was more expensive. The fare from Libau (Liepaja), Latvia, to New York was 70 rubles per person (\$35, equivalent to \$714 today), again with children traveling for half price.<sup>12</sup>

Because taking the whole family was expensive, the head of the family would sometimes go first and, after having made a little money, he would send prepaid tickets to his family back in the old country.<sup>13</sup> The big

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<sup>10</sup> Jacob Lestchinsky, 'Hashkafot kalkaliot', *Ha-olam* (12 January 1912) 5. The ICA's data indicate that 75% of the emigrants crossed the border illegally.

<sup>11</sup> A ruble was worth fifty cents. To figure out what a dollar then was worth in today's terms, divide the sum by 0.049. For dollar conversion factors, see: <http://oregonstate.edu/cla/polisci/faculty/sahr/sahr.htm>. The data are taken from John J. McCusker's article 'How Much Is that in Real Money', *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* (2001) Table A-1, Column 6.

<sup>12</sup> See the ICA booklet *Di fareynigte shtatn fun amerika – algemeyne yedies un onvayzungen far di vos viln forn in dem land* (St. Petersburg 1908) 6-8. See also *Algemeyne yedies far di vos viln forn in fremde lender* (St. Petersburg 1905) 54. My comparison of the fares in 1908 and later years found that they did not change significantly. See, for instance, *Der yidisher emigrant* (1 February 1913) 8-9.

<sup>13</sup> Shmuel Janovsky, director of the ICA information bureau in St. Petersburg, states in his article 'Emigration' that about half of the tickets with which the emigrants traveled were prepaid. See Shmuel Janovsky Archive, Central Zionist Archive (hereafter: CZA) A156, file 26, p. 30.

danger with tickets of this kind was in the destination countries. Con men and crooks found it lucrative to sell forged tickets.<sup>14</sup> Only when the family arrived at the port and wanted to board the ship was the deception discovered, but then it was too late. The relatives were helpless, with no means of reaching the new country and no way of earning a living.

Another danger with tickets of this sort was that the prepaid ticket was paid for in instalments in the destination country and was sent to the relatives in the country of origin before it was fully paid. Since the company that had issued the ticket had not received the entire payment yet, it issued an order not to accept the ticket, and so the relatives found themselves waiting for weeks in the port city until remaining instalments were paid.<sup>15</sup>

Prospective emigrants who had not been sent prepaid tickets purchased their tickets from the various shipping companies, which had offices all over the Pale of Settlement and in the ports. Some emigrants made the purchase themselves; others went through agents, who tried to profit as much as possible from the deal. This mediation encouraged corruption and raised prices. The tickets were usually paid for in instalments. The emigrant made an advance payment to the shipping company and registered the names and ages of the passengers, and he paid the rest of the money upon arrival at the port. The company, for its part, was required to send them on the first ship sailing for the requested destination country.<sup>16</sup>

### *3. State of Health*

In 1882, the US passed a law barring the entry of poor and sick immigrants and requiring shipping companies, at their own expense, to take the unwanted newcomers back to the port of departure. The financial loss to the shipping companies as a result of this law convinced them to subject emigrants to a medical examination before sailing for America. The exams were conducted at border stations and in the ports before boarding.<sup>17</sup> Emigrants suffering from venereal disease, skin or eye ailments, tuberculosis, or other illnesses were not allowed to leave the border station or board the ship. But the medical restrictions also applied to the disabled (hunchbacked, blind, mute, lame, and crippled persons), as well as criminals

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<sup>14</sup> *Algemyne yedies far di vos viln forn in fremde lender*, 4.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>16</sup> *Di fareynigte shtatn fun amerika*, 11-12.

<sup>17</sup> Zosa Szajkowski, 'Suffering of Jewish Immigrants', 106-107.

of various kinds: prostitutes, white slave traders, property criminals, and so on.<sup>18</sup>

#### 4. Cost of migration

In view of the complicated, almost impossible bureaucratic procedure, it is worth examining the cost of the journey for an individual emigrant from the stage of obtaining a passport, or alternatively, crossing the border illegally, to the point of boarding the ship. With hundreds of thousands of people on the move at any given time, the sums of money that passed from hand to hand were enormous. Many people made a living from the migration, from the German-Jewish shipping magnate Albert Ballin, who headed the HAPAG shipping company, to the agents who went around Czarist Russia trying to make a ruble or two from Jews (or anyone else) who wanted to move overseas.

**Table 1: Average cost of emigration from the Pale of Settlement to the US for a single emigrant**

<i>Item</i>	<i>Cost (rubles)</i>
Passport or smuggler	12-15
Medical exam	1
Train fare	15 (adult); 7.5 (child)
Passage on the ship	75 (adult); 37.5 (child)
Food	4
Accommodations in the departure port	5
Money to show US authorities	100/(50)
Total	165-215

Sources: Since most emigrants went to the US, the calculations in the table are based on emigration to that country. On the fare for the ship from Hamburg to New York, see *Der yidisher emigrant* 6 (14 April 1908), 30. Passage on a ship to Boston cost 75 rubles, to Philadelphia and Baltimore 79 rubles, to Galveston 110 rubles, to Canada 70 rubles, to Buenos Aires 81 rubles, to Australia 190 rubles, to South Africa 150 rubles, and to Palestine only 12.5 rubles (*ibidem*, 30). On train fares in the Pale of Settlement, see *Centralbureaus für jüdische Auswanderungsangelegenheiten*, September 1909, p. 9. Since the train fare depended on the distance travelled, an average price was calculated. On the train fare from the border stations to the port, see CZA, A36, file 95b. The price shown in the table includes the train fare within the Pale of Settlement and from there to the port. On

<sup>18</sup> *Di fareynigte shtatn fun amerika*, 16-17.



the cost of the medical exam, see J. Teplitzki, Reisebericht, January 1907, CAHJP, ICA/34c, p. 6. See Alexander Harkavy, *Etses far emigrantn velkhe forn keyn amerika (fareynigte shtatn)* (Minsk 1905) 16-17.

Travelling by sea cost about 165 rubles until 1908, and 215 rubles thereafter. As of that year, immigrants to the US were required to show the immigration clerks on Ellis Island one hundred rubles (\$50) instead of the fifty rubles (\$25) required until then. Since Jews tended to emigrate as families, the journey was very expensive. Moreover, in many cases the wife had to obtain her own passport, and if she was unable to do so due to bureaucratic obstacles, she paid smugglers to get her across the border (usually this cost a little less than a passport). If a woman told the US immigration clerks that she was joining her husband, she did not have to show the minimum amount of money to enter the country.

Thus the cost of migration to the US for a family of ten between 1900 and 1908 (parents and eight children, four above twelve years old, and four under twelve) is estimated at 600 rubles for passage on the ship, fifteen rubles to obtain a passport or cross the border illegally, 120 rubles for the train fare (depending on the destination and the distance), and ten rubles for accommodations and food. Thus the total cost for the whole family is estimated at 745 rubles (\$372.50, equivalent to approximately \$7,600 today). For the average Jewish family, whose annual income was five hundred to six hundred rubles (\$250-\$300), it was a fortune. Consequently, families had to wait, sometimes for years, until the head of the family could raise the entire sum and bring his loved ones to America.<sup>19</sup>

It is clear that the poorest Jews could not afford to emigrate. The emigrants were those whose lives were indeed difficult, and sometimes even intolerable, but whose income sufficed for at least the bare minimum needed for the voyage by the head of the family. Another interesting implication of the calculation of costs is the sum of money taken out of Czarist Russia as a result of the mass migration. If we multiply the cost of the journey by two million emigrants to the US from 1899 to 1914, we find that more than a billion rubles changed hands within just fifteen years and was divided among the shipping companies, railroads, hotels, smugglers, restaurants, and so on. Emigration at the turn of the century was an

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<sup>19</sup> On the social implications of men emigrating alone and then bringing their families over, see Gur Alroey, “‘And I Remain Alone in a Vast Land.’ Women in the Jewish Migration from Eastern Europe”, *Jewish Social Studies* 12-3 (2006) 39-72.

economic enterprise and an important source of livelihood, directly or indirectly, for many people.

For many prospective emigrants, the bureaucratic procedures were complicated or even impossible. Incomprehensible, contradictory regulations, obtuseness and obstinacy on the part of the clerks, corruption, and inexperience in dealing with the bureaucracy created a sense of desperation and helplessness. As a result, prospective emigrants started looking for shorter, usually illegal ways of bypassing the bureaucratic entanglement. The search for shortcuts and help in solving the problems that came up led to the rise of a new occupation – ‘migration agents’. These were people familiar with the inner workings of the emigration process, and for a fee they promised to solve the emigrants’ problems. All sorts of crooks hid behind the title ‘migration agent,’ exploiting innocent people by making false promises, taking their money, and sometimes even putting their lives in danger. Known as ‘Agenten shvindlers’ or ‘Geheime Agenten’, they were the main source of the emigrants’ troubles.

### **Migration agents and the Information Bureau for Jewish Migration Affairs**

The surge in migration that swept Eastern Europe at the start of the twentieth century, combined with the bureaucratic difficulties had a huge impact on the Jewish population. One significant manifestation was the rise of migration agents who made a living from emigration and related businesses. ‘Agents of all sorts – secret officials and officials who own companies, and all kinds of helpers. They sprout up like fungi and cover every locality in the country.’ According to one contemporary newspaper, ‘Each city has its own agents, as does every town. And cities and towns have not just one agent but entire groups of agents who compete, fight, struggle, target, and inform on one another.’<sup>20</sup> Many Jews who understood the economic potential exploited those who wanted to get out of Eastern Europe. People who were unable to obtain all the necessary documents offered to pay them to get them passports. These agents succeeded in obtaining the passports through the use of bribes, acquaintance with the local clerks, and especially knowledge of the bureaucratic process and its lacunas – but for a price:

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<sup>20</sup> ‘Ha-emigratzya derekh hof libau’, *Ha-zeman* 123 (6 July 1907) 3.

The deceit and fraud on the part of the agents has been especially great with respect to the preparations for the papers needed to travel abroad. Ninety percent of the migrants, if not more, do not know how to prepare such documents by themselves and are afraid to do so. The inhabitants of the big cities and small towns, and sometimes the poor city dwellers as well, imagine the process of preparing the travel documents to be a hard job, so they turn for help to the ‘almighty’ agent (...).<sup>21</sup>

The agents took advantage of the emigrants’ helplessness to charge more and more for obtaining the documents: ‘The agents and shipping companies will use it, of course, to their own benefit and swindle the migrants.’<sup>22</sup> Every bureaucratic complication caused delays and superfluous expenses, depleting the reserves intended for the initial absorption in the destination country. The largest sums were paid for accommodation and food in the port city; in order to save money, most emigrants stayed in the cheaper hotels under difficult conditions:

And there are hundreds of migrants who have to stay here for months on end, waiting for the travel documents, living in cramped, dark places like fish in a barrel. Three or four in a bed, males and females in one room – there is no decency or proper hygienic conditions.<sup>23</sup>

Another kind of deceit and fraud occurred at the time of purchasing a ticket for the ship. Those who did not have prepaid tickets could purchase tickets directly from the shipping companies in the big cities in the Pale of Settlement or through authorized agents. Quite a few people pretended to be such agents; they collected money and promised their ‘customers’ that they would receive the tickets upon arrival at the port. After the emigrants had travelled hundreds of kilometres and had undergone medical exams in the border station, they approached the shipping company to get their tickets, only to discover that the agent had not transferred the money. They had to wait there, sometimes for many weeks, trying to get in touch with the agent to demand that he settle the payment. Meanwhile, the emigrants

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<sup>21</sup> ‘Ha-emigratzya derekh hof libau’, *Ha-zeman* 121 (4 July 1907) 3.

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>23</sup> Ibidem.

ran out of money and had to go door to door begging, while being supported by Jewish philanthropic organizations.

Due to the bureaucratic difficulties, the fraud, and the tragic situations that ensued, there was a need for organizations and institutions to come to the prospective emigrants' aid, support them, and save them from the con men. The Jewish Colonization Association (ICA) filled this need by founding the Information Bureau for Jewish Migration Affairs.

The ICA had been established in 1891 by Baron Maurice de Hirsch. Its aim was to help Jews emigrate from Europe and Asia to other parts of the world and to establish colonies in North and South America for both agricultural and commercial purposes. In the 1890s, Jewish agricultural colonies were established with ICA financing in Entre Ríos, Santa Fe, Córdoba, and other parts of Argentina. In view of the pogrom in Kishinev in April 1903, the upsurge in emigration, and especially the terrible suffering of the emigrants, the ICA central committee decided, after consulting with the management in Paris and the board of directors, to open the St. Petersburg information bureau in 1904. In that year, the ICA became the main Jewish philanthropic institution handling emigration issues in the Russian Empire. Baron David Ginzburg, chairman of the ICA central committee in St. Petersburg, bore overall responsibility for the Information Bureau. In practice the bureau was run by the attorney Shmuel Yakoblevich Janovsky.

In order to accomplish its goal – providing information to hundreds of thousands of Jews – the ICA established more than five hundred regional and local information bureaus all over the Russian Empire in places with high rates of Jewish emigration. In 1906 it had risen to 160 information bureaus in the Pale of Settlement, in 1907 there were 296, in 1910 to 449, and in 1913 the number reached a peak of 507.<sup>24</sup> These bureaus were crucial to the migrants, saving them money and sparing them anguish. ‘These bureaus,’ the newspaper *Hed ha-zeman* wrote:

Receive a huge number of different questions in writing, on a daily basis, about various migration issues. And hundreds of thousands of people actually come to these committees to obtain information. These committees help the emigrants solve various questions and resolve doubts about obtaining passports from foreign countries,

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<sup>24</sup> CZA, A156, file 26, p. 6.

and sometimes also by providing financial support to emigrants who are not going to America.<sup>25</sup>

In addition to offering assistance in obtaining passports, the ICA's central bureau in St. Petersburg distributed leaflets on aspects of emigration throughout the Pale of Settlement. In order to fight the agents and the black market of information that they controlled, the bureau published numerous booklets to assist and provide guidance to the emigrants; it distributed them through the regional and local bureaus, some at no charge and others for very low prices. The idea was to weaken the power of the agents, who had the advantage of experience and knowledge about emigration. 'Each piece of emigration-related news that was published, each bit of practical advice, and every kind of help in obtaining travel papers was a blow to the agents. The emigrants realized that the bureau helps and is dedicated to the emigrant for no profit.'<sup>26</sup> Information Bureau representatives explained to prospective emigrants the complexity of the process and the dangers involved. Sometimes it had to explain things that seem self-evident. For instance, one issue of *Der yidisher emigrant* – a newspaper on emigration affairs published under the auspices of the Information Bureau – had an article by the ICA representative S. Bloch, who had sailed from Bremen to Argentina, on an assignment from the Information Bureau, so that he could describe conditions first-hand. The article, published in 1909, called readers' attention to the issue of the distribution of fresh water during the voyage. 'Very often,' wrote Bloch, 'conflicts break out over the use of fresh water (*z'is vaser*).'<sup>27</sup> The passengers on the intermediate deck were not given enough water and had to see to it that they got the amount to which they were entitled. But the interesting point in Bloch's story is not the fight over water, but his need to explain what sweet water is. 'Sea water is salty and undrinkable,' Bloch explained. 'Therefore the ship has to be supplied with drinking water when still at shore. This water is called 'fresh water.'<sup>28</sup> The very fact that Bloch had to explain to his readers that ocean water is salty and undrinkable indicates

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<sup>25</sup> Y. L. Kaanovich, 'Mi-tokh ha-tehum', *Hed ha-zeman* 143 (16 July 1907) 2-3.

<sup>26</sup> See CAHJP, ICA/36a, pp. 1-3. See also 'Di bedaytung fun der arbet fun informatsyones byuro', *Der yidisher emigrant* 4 (15 January) 13.

<sup>27</sup> S. Bloch, 'Fun bremen keyn argentina', *Der yidisher emigrant* 21 (28 November 1909) 6.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*, 7.

how deficient was the Jewish emigrants' general knowledge. Most of the emigrants had never before left the shtetl, and the ocean was an unfamiliar – often even terrifying – natural phenomenon. The Jewish journalist Joseph Roth wrote that it was not America that terrified the Jewish emigrants, but the ocean. 'He is well used to crossing large expanses of Land but never water,' Roth wrote:

(...) The Eastern Jew is afraid of ships. He doesn't trust them. For centuries he has been living in the interior. The steppes, the limitlessness of the flat land, these hold no terrors for him. What frightens him is disorientation. He is accustomed to turning three times a day toward Misrach, The East. It is the deeply felt need to know where he is, to know his Location.<sup>29</sup>

The bureau's publications covered various topics and came out in Yiddish and Russian.<sup>30</sup> The most widely distributed booklet, sold for a symbolic price of six kopeikas, contained 'general information for those who want to emigrate to foreign countries' (*algemeyne yedies far di vos viln forn in fremde lender*). It explained in succinct, plain language what emigrants had to know before setting out, offering practical advice and brief descriptions of the various destination countries. Readers learned that it was not advisable to go without a certain amount of money. They found out about exchange rates, border crossings, and the danger of the agents; they learned about seasickness and how to cope with it, where to buy tickets for the ship, the hazards of prepaid tickets, how to obtain a passport, and what kind of luggage to take. Finally, they received a brief explanation on etiquette in the various destination countries: the US, Canada, South Africa, Australia, and Palestine. 10,000 copies of this booklet, which was published in 1906, were printed each year.<sup>31</sup> Emigrants could also obtain detailed, up-to-date information about the destination countries from special booklets on each country: Argentina, Australia, Canada, South Africa, Chile, and, of course, the US. These booklets provided geographical descriptions of the country (including a map) and information on the climate and fauna, the local population, exchange rates and the purchasing power of the local currency, agricultural work and other ways of making a living, the cost of living, and

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<sup>29</sup> Joseph Roth, *The Wandering Jews. The Classic Portrait of a Vanished People* (New York 2001) 97-98.

<sup>30</sup> See, for example, note 11.

<sup>31</sup> Janovsky Archive, CZA, A156, file 26, 10.

the cost of the voyage from various ports to that country. The most comprehensive booklet was about the US. It provided information on each state, including employment options. The circulation of this booklet was about 6.000 copies a year and a newly revised edition came out each year.

In 1907 the ICA launched a newspaper, *Der yidisber emigrant*, focusing on emigration. Readers usually found one or two main articles in every issue about an aspect of emigration (commerce and industry in Argentina, trachoma, the economic crisis in the US, Bremen port, emigration from Bessarabia, etc.), information from the regional and local bureaus, announcements by the central bureau in St. Petersburg, prospective emigrants' questions and the editors' answers, information about dangerous agents, and a table of names of ships, ticket prices, the duration of the voyage, and stops on the way (if any). The newspaper's circulation was quite high by the standards of the times: 5.000 copies in 1906, 50.000 in 1907, and a record 70.000 copies in 1908. In subsequent years the circulation ranged between 50.000 and 60.000.<sup>32</sup> Assuming that each copy was read by several people, the readership was much higher. In addition, the bureau published English-Yiddish and Spanish-Yiddish dictionaries to facilitate the initial adjustment to life in the new country.

Aside from the help the Information Bureau gave prospective emigrants, its work should be seen as an attempt to put some order in emigration. Its clerks kept lists of people who had contacted it and explained to them the dangers and difficulties involved in crossing the ocean. The ICA sent employees to the border crossings and departure ports, and sometimes even asked them to go to the destination countries in order to go through the emigration experience themselves.<sup>33</sup>

### **Crossing the Border**

In late 1893, at the initiative of the German shipping companies Nord-Deutscher Lloyd and Hapag, inspection stations were established at various

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<sup>32</sup> Janovsky Archive, CZA, A156, file 26, 13.

<sup>33</sup> The ICA's activity has given historians rare primary material that has not yet been used in historiography. Emigrants' letters, records of emigrants who contacted the information bureaus, guidance literature, and reports on border crossings and ports enable us to examine the Jewish emigration from a perspective that has never before been investigated.

points on the Polish-German and Russian-Austro-Hungarian borders. The reason was a cholera epidemic in Hamburg a year earlier that had killed some 8,600 local residents. Naturally, the emigrants were accused of bringing and spreading the disease. These accusations were not necessarily xenophobic and nativistic. In the spring of 1892 there had been several cases of cholera in the southern parts of the Russian Empire, so everyone believed that the Eastern European emigrants had introduced the disease to Hamburg. This belief was reinforced by the renowned scientist Robert Koch, who had identified the *Vibrio* bacterium that causes cholera and would later win a Nobel Prize; Koch visited the emigrants' camp and stated that the Russian emigrants had indeed caused the epidemic. Only later was it discovered that it was six French sailors who had carried the lethal germ. Until that became clear, however, the Russian emigrants in Hamburg were quarantined and the German-Russian border was closed to emigration.

These preventive measures caused the German shipping companies real financial losses and cast a heavy shadow over their future. To resolve the crisis, Hapag and Nord-Deutscher Lloyd suggested to the government that inspection stations be opened at the border so that emigrants could undergo medical exams before entering Germany. Because the inspection stations were funded by the shipping companies, numerous agents of those companies were present, exerting pressure on the emigrants to sail with them.

As a result of all this, the border crossings were the bottleneck for Jewish emigration from the Pale of Settlement. Great masses of emigrants gathered at these points, on the Russian and the German or Austro-Hungarian sides. Since the crossing was a critical stage in the emigration process, the information bureaus made great efforts to shorten the emigrants' stay in the border towns and help them cross safely. In 1906 the Information Bureau sent a representative named Teplitzki to two border crossings – Wirballen on the Russian side of the border and Eydtkuhnen on the German side – to gain an understanding of the emigrants' difficulties. His descriptions present a sad picture. He found that those who chose to cross the border legally faced numerous problems, including an unfriendly attitude among the soldiers stationed there.

Crossing the border took several days. Upon arrival in the railway station, the emigrants were divided into groups by the police for disinfection and a medical exam. After a policeman had verified that no emigrants were left on the train, he handed the emigrants over to the representative of the inspection station, who led them on foot to a camp far



from the railway station. ‘The men carry the luggage’, Teplitzki wrote, ‘and the women carry the little children in their arms.’<sup>34</sup> Heavy luggage was usually left at the station; often it vanished and the emigrants did not get it back. Regarding the inspection station, Teplitzki wrote:

It is separated from the outside world. At the gate of the inspection station, which is always closed, stands a policeman. After passing through the gate, one enters a long, narrow corridor between very high fences; only then does one arrive at the station yard. The inspection station building is small, old, and made of planks. It consists of three equal parts, with waiting rooms for the emigrants in the two outer parts: one of them for new emigrants who have not undergone the medical examination, and the other for those who have undergone the medical examination and have been found healthy. Emigrants who are found to be ill are sent back or taken to a detention camp in the same yard. The inner part of the building is also divided into three sections: at the two ends are bathrooms for men and women, and in the middle section there is a device for disinfecting luggage (...). The waiting rooms contain long benches and tables, and the walls are full of advertisements for German shipping companies and sections of the emigration regulations.<sup>35</sup>

The inspection station staff comprised seven people: a physician, four washing inspectors (two men in charge of the men’s washing and two women in charge of the women’s washing), one person in charge of disinfecting the emigrants and their belongings, and a guard. In 1905 the washing and disinfection were eliminated and the main function of the border station was the medical exam and the purchase of tickets for the ship. Medical exams were conducted in Wirballen every afternoon at three o’clock. The purpose was not to safeguard the emigrants’ health and well-being, but to identify illnesses that would keep them out of Ellis Island so that the shipping company would not have to cover the cost of taking them back to Europe. Usually the physician looked for trachoma and favus (a skin disease).<sup>36</sup> Emigrants who stayed longer in Eydtkuhnen had to have a medical exam every day. The exam was usually quick; only seldom were emigrants barred from crossing the border and sent back (the stricter

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<sup>34</sup> J. Teplitzki, ‘Reisebericht’, January 1907, CAHJP, ICA/34c, p. 6. For more about Wirballen, see: D. R., ‘Verbalen’, *Der yidisber emigrant* 3 (15 February 1909) 10-11.

<sup>35</sup> Teplitzki, ‘Reisebericht’, 7.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*, 9.

medical exam was conducted in the port prior to boarding the ship). According to Teplitzki, the main reason for rejection was trachoma. Each emigrant was charged 2.25 marks (one ruble) for the exam.

From the moment the exam was over, the emigrants were not allowed to leave the inspection station. They were kept there in dreadful conditions. 'The border station is a cramped place even when there are few emigrants; all the more so in times of pressure,' another Information Bureau representative wrote in *Der yidisber emigrant*. 'Most of the emigrants in the station wait a whole day with their luggage, while no one pays attention to them. About 150, or sometimes 200, people are concentrated in two small rooms. It is so crowded and dense that there is not even room to sit down.'<sup>37</sup>

The emigrants' quarters in Eydtkuhnen are unsatisfactory. The apartments are cramped and dirty. A small room has seven or eight beds. When there are many emigrants, they have to sleep two or three to a bed or they can choose to use wooden crates as beds. Linens are clearly visible, but the emigrants are not allowed to use them.<sup>38</sup>

Sometimes emigrants had to stay in the border station for about a week, and then food became a problem. Although there was a small shop in the camp that sold hot food, due to their great poverty and the requirements of kashrut<sup>39</sup> many made do with herring and potatoes, which they had brought from home or bought on the way.<sup>40</sup> But the biggest problem in the border station was the incessant pressure from shipping company agents who tried to sell the emigrants tickets for excessive prices. Those who already had tickets were urged to upgrade them or exchange them for tickets with a better, faster shipping company. Many emigrants overpaid for their passage, and some of those who paid agents never received their tickets. 'It must be stated clearly,' the Information Bureau representative wrote. 'The German shipping companies actually own the border stations.'<sup>41</sup>

The emigrants who suffered the most from the pressure of the agents were those who held tickets of non-German shipping companies. In 1904, the

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<sup>37</sup> A. A., 'Di daytshe kontrol stantsyes', *Der yidisber emigrant* 12 (15 July 1909), 3.

<sup>38</sup> Teplitzki, 'Reisebericht', 8.

<sup>39</sup> The rules of the Jewish religion governing what one may eat and drink.

<sup>40</sup> A. A., 'Di daytshe kontrol stantsyes', 3.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem*, 4.

German Interior Minister issued an order barring migrants from entering Germany and crossing the country on their way to the port unless they had tickets from a German shipping company.<sup>42</sup> People from the northern part of the Pale of Settlement who wanted to travel with non-German shipping companies had a real problem that lengthened the trip and increased its cost. They had to travel south by train, cross the Russian-Austro-Hungarian border, and from there take a train to the Netherlands or Belgium. This order, which followed the surge in migration at the start of the twentieth century, was in fact the renewal of a similar order issued in the early 1880s. Thus the German shipping companies – the Hamburg America Line and Nord-Deutscher Lloyd – forced the emigrants to buy tickets from them.<sup>43</sup> Alexander Harkavy, a representative of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) who toured European ports and followed the emigrants' hardships there, wrote in his diary that emigrants in Rotterdam complained about their long trip to the port because Germany had prevented them from entering its territory. As a result, Harkavy wrote: 'they must in consequence make a long route. They have to go by way of Austria to Basel, Switzerland; from there to Antwerp and then to Rotterdam'. For this reason, only the 'prepaid' arrive at this port.<sup>44</sup>

The hardships at the border stations led to visits by German government clerks from Berlin. But these were not frequent enough. During the inspections the emigrants were treated humanely, but afterwards the situation reverted to what it had been before. It should be noted, however, that the non-Jewish emigrants were treated no differently. The border stations in the early twentieth century were crowded with emigrants of all backgrounds. According to Information Bureau data, more than 10,000 people might pass through the Wirballen-Eydtkuhnen border station in a month. Since most of these people, Jews and non-Jews alike, were poor, they did not elicit empathy. The individual disappeared in this mass examination and classification process. Consequently, many emigrants were hurt by the inflexibility and arbitrariness of the clerks and soldiers.

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<sup>42</sup> Szajkowski, 'Suffering of Jewish Immigrants', 108. Janovsky wrote that emigrants with tickets from the Belgian shipping company Red Star Line were the only ones allowed to cross into Germany. See S. Y. Janovsky and A. I. Kastelyansky, *Spravochnaya kniga po voprosam emigratsii* (St. Petersburg 1913) 11-12.

<sup>43</sup> Szajkowski, 'Suffering of Jewish Immigrants', 105.

<sup>44</sup> Alexander Harkavy, 'Diary of a Visit to Europe in the Interests of Jewish Emigration, 1906-1907', *American Jewish Historical Society, Harkavy Papers*, 2.

Crossing the border legally with a passport was no guarantee of comfort or safety. The crowding, waiting, medical exams, disinfection (until 1905), and shipping company agents made the border stations pressure cookers where the emigrants were vulnerable to the manipulations of the shipping companies and soldiers.

The conditions prompted a group of about thirty Jewish emigrants at the Ilawa inspection station on the Polish border to write an 'open letter' (*ofener briif*) to Albert Ballin himself. They posed six rhetorical questions to the influential German-Jewish shipping magnate who controlled westward migration autocratically and who was responsible for the inspection stations.

a. Is Mr. Ballin aware of the suffering the emigrants experience in the inspection station? b. Does Mr. Ballin know that the inspection station owned by your shipping company, along with the agents in Russia, shamelessly gives backing to all sorts of criminals and gangs of thieves and robbers? c. Do you know, Mr. Ballin, that agents of yours in the border stations in Russia, together with smugglers, illegally take large numbers of emigrants across the border and take responsibility for their lives in contravention of justice? d. Do you know, Mr. Ballin, that two emigrants committed suicide this year in the inspection station, one by hanging himself in the inspection-station synagogue and the other by throwing himself on a knife and being wounded, and afterwards hanging himself? e. Do you know, Mr. Ballin, that men, women, and children who travelled via France wander about and are kept in harsh conditions and that their children suffer from lice and wounds? f. If you have ever seen the station, then you know what it looks like. In New York they call the station 'the island of tears'; your station can be called 'the place where you get devastated.' No other name suits it.<sup>45</sup>

The letter to Ballin is interesting not only because of the description of the suffering in the transit stations, but also because the emigrants clearly expected him to come to their aid due to his Jewish descent. 'People of other nationalities are not treated any better', wrote the emigrants, 'but we

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<sup>45</sup> 'Ofener briif tsu hern ballin' (undated, 1914?), CZA, A36/3. The importance of this document is that it is one of the few primary sources describing the hardship and suffering in the transit stations from the emigrants' viewpoint and in 'real time.' Most of our sources are memoirs of emigrants and reports by various organizations describing what went on in the ports.

Jews are a people of orphans, and there is no one in the world to come help us. Since you are of Jewish origin, you have to be aware of the inhuman suffering of your people' and take responsibility 'for the troubles of the Jewish emigrants', who suffer in the inspection station.<sup>46</sup> It is highly doubtful whether Ballin received the letter and whether he responded to the emigrants' complaints. The transit station was primarily a business venture of the shipping company, whose aim was to send as many emigrants as possible overseas quickly; Ballin's Jewishness was irrelevant. The emigrants who needed his company's services paid the price.

The second and more common option was to cross the border illegally with the help of local smugglers. Those who sneaked across faced other difficulties, no less complicated and even dangerous. As stated above, many could not obtain passports. In Wirballen, for instance, 14,000-16,000 Jews crossed, half of them illegally.<sup>47</sup> The Information Bureau data on total Jewish emigration until the beginning of World War I indicate that more than 80 percent of the emigrants crossed the border illegally.<sup>48</sup>

Sneaking across the border with the help of smugglers was dangerous and was generally done at night. Sometimes the emigrants got lost or lost their luggage in a river. Some were caught by soldiers patrolling the border, at which point the smugglers disappeared, leaving the emigrants helpless and dumbfounded. Their concentration in the border towns attracted different kinds of agents, who waited for the emigrants as soon as they got off the train. One of the busiest border towns was Sosnowiec, which had 'the most dangerous swindler-agents'.<sup>49</sup> One of the most professional and dangerous of the agents was 'Fishl', a master of his craft. Posing as a rabbi, Fishl would join a group of emigrants in a wagon shortly before their arrival in the border town. During the ride he would make friends with the passengers and cheat them out of their money, promising to help them at the border crossing. But as soon as they arrived in the town, Fishl would disappear with their money.<sup>50</sup>

Sneaking across the border in the dark was the most sensitive, critical stage for the emigrants. Half way, when they did not know exactly where they were, the agent would demand more money for his services, in addition to

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<sup>46</sup> 'Ofener brief.

<sup>47</sup> D. R., 'Verbalen', 11.

<sup>48</sup> 'Fun der preysish grenits', *Der yidisher emigrant* 1 (1 January 1909) 3.

<sup>49</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>50</sup> Ibidem.

what he had been paid before setting out. The emigrants, afraid to be left alone in the forest or to be caught by soldiers, had no choice but to pay in order to arrive safely at their destination:

When a Jew was lucky enough to reach the border village, the agent's accomplices would come and extract more money from him on various pretexts. And the migrant would give it to them against his will, as he was trapped and concerned about the money he had already spent. Then the 'border-crossing' process began. After midnight drunk farmers, whom none of the migrants would have dared to go near even in the streets of a bustling city, would come and take the panicked, terrified wretches 'under their protection.' (...) They were afraid of what was before them and what was behind them. They were afraid of their escorts and afraid of the border guards. And the drunk men would take advantage of the migrants' mood to abuse them and suck their blood and the rest of their money. Sometimes they would be left as empty vessels and arrive at their destination empty-handed; at other times they and their money would remain on that side of the border.<sup>51</sup>

As mentioned above, one of the goals of the ICA Information Bureau was to prevent emigrants from crossing the border in the company of criminals and smugglers. *Der yidisher emigrant* printed scores of accounts of emigrants who had been cheated while crossing the border. In this manner the Information Bureau tried to warn people what to expect if they crossed illegally: the emigrants were putting themselves in the hands of crooks who would take advantage of them at every chance they got. The case of Liebe Kirzner, a mother of five who wanted to join her husband in America, is just one example that illustrates the dangers that lay in wait for the emigrants.

Like many Jewish women in Czarist Russia, Mrs. Kirzner was unable to obtain the passport required to get out of Russia legally and had to pay a Jewish agent 46 rubles to take her and her five children across the border. The agent took them and another group of emigrants, and they all started across as night fell. Unfortunately, a patrol found them; in the tumult some shots were fired, and one of the emigrants lost her life.<sup>52</sup> Although Mrs. Kirzner and her children came out alive, the incident, with its shouting and

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<sup>51</sup> Sfog, 'Halalei ha-emigratzya', *Ha-zeman* 144 (17 July 1907) 2.

<sup>52</sup> *Emigrantn un agentn: nit keyn oysgetrakhte maasyos* (St. Petersburg) 17.

gunfire, undoubtedly made a strong impression on her and her children and left her worrying about whether she could bring her children safe and sound to their father who was waiting for them in America.

In most cases, attempts to cross the border did not end with the death of Jewish emigrants. The repeated attempts by men, women, and children, night after night, nevertheless show the difficulties and tension that many Jews suffered on their way overseas.<sup>53</sup> However, despite the hardship and danger, the vast majority of emigrants took the risk. Apparently, the forces pushing them out of Czarist Russia were so strong that the Jews were not dissuaded by the risks.

### **Ports of Departure**

Most of the emigrants sailed from Hamburg or Bremen. The German shipping companies were the first to understand the economic potential of emigration and turned their steamships into passenger ships in the 1870s. Adapting the ships so that they could carry hundreds of people drastically reduced fares in the 1880s. At the start of the twentieth century the prices stabilized and did not drop further until World War I. But in 1905 the Latvian port of Libau (Liepaja) opened, posing a real threat to Western European shipping companies. 'The Libauian Danger,' as it was known in Western Europe, diverted the flow of emigrants to this port on the Baltic coast. The German shipping companies were liable to lose the business of the Eastern European emigrants, especially Jews from Russia, for whom getting to Libau was much easier and more convenient.

Table 2 shows that 66 percent of the emigrants sailed from ports in Western Europe; 46 percent left from Hamburg and Bremen. A large proportion, 30 percent, departed from Libau. After Libau port opened in 1905, the number of emigrants leaving from there increased gradually; direct routes to the US and Argentina were established, without stops in England. In response to this threat to its profits, the Hamburg America

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<sup>53</sup> For more on the fears of the emigrants when crossing the border, see YIVO, RG 102, file 35, 'The Case of J. Spievak'. In the 1940s, YIVO printed a notice in the Jewish press asking Jewish immigrants to answer two questions: Why did they leave Europe? And what had they achieved in the US? More than 350 autobiographies were sent to YIVO in response, and some of them describe crossing the border illegally.

Line started a direct route from Libau to the US under the assumed name of East Asia.<sup>54</sup>

**Table 2: Jewish emigration by port of departure, 1905-1914**

<i>Port of departure</i>	<i>Percentage of total Jewish emigration overseas</i>
Libau	29
Hamburg	25
Bremen	21
Antwerp	10
Rotterdam	7.5
Trieste	2.4
Odessa	1.7
Miscellaneous <sup>55</sup>	3.4
Total	100

Sources: The table is based on a sample of thousands of applications from Jews who contacted the Information Bureau asking for help in paying their train fare. It should be noted that the applicants had already purchased tickets for the ocean voyage, so the ICA had no influence on their emigration or their choice of destination country. On the applicants to the Information Bureau, see <http://mjmd.haifa.ac.il>.

The emigrants' hardships did not end when they reached the port. On the contrary, as they were far from their homes and in a new environment the language of which many of them did not know, they faced new problems that cast doubt on the success of their journey. In most cases they arrived at the port a few days – sometimes even a week or more – before their departure. During this time they had to find cheap accommodation, buy food, equip themselves for a journey of two to three weeks depending on the destination, and finally, prepare for additional medical exams before boarding the ship. Below we examine how they coped with these difficulties in five main departure ports used by Jewish emigrants in the early twentieth century: Hamburg, Bremen, Rotterdam, Amsterdam, and Antwerp.

### *1. Hamburg and Bremen*

Upon crossing the Russian–German or Russian–Austrian border, the emigrants took a train to the port of Hamburg or Bremen. The train fare

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<sup>54</sup> 'Rapport de M. Janovski sur son voyage d'inspection (Octobre-Novembre 1907) L'émigration via Libau', CAHJP, 34a.

<sup>55</sup> Hangö, Amsterdam, Genoa, Liverpool, and Marseilles.



was between seven and ten rubles, and the trip, depending on the border-crossing point, generally lasted 24 to 48 hours.<sup>56</sup> After they crossed the border, the emigrants found themselves in a new country and a completely unfamiliar environment. From now on every difficulty they faced, especially those that came up while they were waiting in the port, was to be resolved by the Hilfsverein der Deutschen Juden. An information bureau, known as the Central Office of Migration Affairs, was established in Berlin in October 1904 by the Alliance Israélite Universelle, the ICA, and the Hilfsverein to help Jewish migrants.<sup>57</sup>

Emigrants who would sail from Hamburg did not actually enter the city at all.<sup>58</sup> They were housed in special halls outside Hamburg. Until the 1890s, Jewish emigrants had stayed in hotels near the port. But as more and more refugees from Russia and Galicia passed through Hamburg in the 1880s and 1890s, the hotels could no longer offer them their services. Many Jews found themselves in a bind, with nowhere to stay until the voyage. Their bleak situation prompted the Hamburg Jewish community to come to their aid and open shelters for them. The most salient effort was by Daniel Wormser, a teacher in a religious school who established a shelter with funding from Baron Hirsch and provided assistance to hundreds of Jews waiting to board the ships.<sup>59</sup>

But one personal initiative was not enough. The number of emigrants in the city rose considerably from year to year and a radical solution was needed quickly. In 1891 – the year that Hapag changed its name to Hamburg Amerika Linie (Hamburg America Line) – the shipping company was required to set up proper shelters for the emigrants and see to their needs until the voyage. That year Ballin established eight temporary structures that provided an immediate solution for some 1,400 people. Wormser arranged for kosher food for the emigrants and even opened a

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<sup>56</sup> Centralbureaus für jüdische Auswanderungsangelegenheiten, September 1909, CZA, A36/95b.

<sup>57</sup> On the Berlin information bureau, see ‘Ha-nedida ha-yehudit veba-temikha lanodedim’, *Hed ha-zeman* (2 August 1908) 1. See also Mark Wischnitzer, *To Dwell in Safety. The Story of Jewish Migration since 1800* (Philadelphia 1948) 100-105.

<sup>58</sup> For a comprehensive study of the emigrants’ conditions in Hamburg, see Katja Wustenbecker, ‘Von Hamburg nach Amerika. Hilfsorganisationen für jüdische Auswanderer 1880-1910’, *Zeitschrift des Vereins für hamburgische Geschichte* 91 (2005) 77-102.

<sup>59</sup> Salomon Goldschmidt, *Daniel Wormser. Eine biographische Skizze* (Hamburg 1900).

synagogue for them. This new emigrant camp was inaugurated in July 1892, but a month later a cholera epidemic devastated the city, halting emigration almost entirely. In 1900 – when emigration again reached its pre-epidemic dimensions, the city of Hamburg decided to transfer the camp to a new place and Hapag started building a larger, better-quality emigrant camp. In 1901 the camp – known as Auswanderer-halle – opened in Veddel, a suburb of Hamburg; it housed 4.000 emigrants, and in peak periods more than 5.000.<sup>60</sup> The camp was divided into three areas: A, B, and C. Area A was the unclean section (*unreine Abteilung*), where the emigrants were held and sent for disinfection. Afterwards they were moved to area B (*reine Abteilung*) – usually divided up by ethnicity and religion – where the sleeping quarters were located and the routine, pre-boarding medical exams were carried out. Emigrants found to be ill were sent to area C for medical care.<sup>61</sup> About 150 people worked in the camp, including 28 translators into Russian, Polish, Hungarian, Yiddish, and other languages.<sup>62</sup>

The new camp had many advantages. The isolation from the city minimized the friction with local residents and spared the emigrants from exploitation by innkeepers, con men, and ordinary thieves who considered them easy prey. But the main reason for keeping the emigrants in a special place outside the city was not concern for them but an attempt by the German administration to prevent them from settling in the city. Thus, because the emigrants were kept outside Hamburg, the local residents were not even aware that tens of thousands of emigrants were arriving in their city each year. The separation between the emigrants and the local population was almost total.

Living conditions in the halls were good. ‘The departure halls made a good impression on me’, Janovsky wrote about his visit to Hamburg. ‘They are neat, clean, and administered efficiently.’ The Hilfsverein had an office in the halls, with a representative who handled applications and problems that arose:

The office is open daily from 9:30 to 1:30 and from 3:30 to 6:30.  
The general work procedures in the office are as follows: The various committees of the relief organizations on the border provide

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<sup>60</sup> Hamburg Staatsarchiv, Auswanderungsmat I, IV D I 177.

<sup>61</sup> On the layout of the camp, see *Die Auswanderer-Hallen der Hamburg-Amerika Linie in Hamburg* (Hamburg 1908) including the map there.

<sup>62</sup> See Hamburg Staatsarchiv, Auswanderungsmat I, II E III 4.

emigrants who do not have enough money for the trip with tickets for the ship at a discount of 20 marks off the price stated on the ticket. When they arrive in Hamburg, the passengers find themselves under the protection of the local office. They are exempt from a ten-mark fee in the port for room and board. The local office pays on their behalf 1.50 marks per day and 80 pfennig for each item taken from the railway station to the ship. On average, the office spends about 8 marks on each passenger (...). A large part of the office's activity consists of providing the emigrants with clothing. The office has a large stock of clothes donated by Jews from Hamburg and elsewhere in Germany. When the supply of clothes runs out, Mr. Lasker issues a call to all the Jewish communities, and immediately new clothing arrives. The office sees to it that the emigrants arrive in America clean and dressed in the European style, because this plays an important role in receiving permission to enter the country.<sup>63</sup>

The big fear of everyone involved – the shipping companies, the Hamburg Jewish community, and of course the emigrants themselves – was that the American immigration authorities would not let them enter. Hapag was concerned because it would have to cover the cost of returning the emigrants to Europe. The Jews of Hamburg realized that emigrants who returned would be a burden on their community, and the emigrants were concerned because they had put all their hopes in the move to America, expecting to realize their dreams there. For this reason intense efforts were made – albeit for very different reasons – to minimize the number of rejections. Aside from clothes, the Hilfsverein gave needy emigrants 10-20 marks so that they would not arrive in America penniless. In addition, Janovsky wrote, it provided medical care, cleared up misunderstandings about tickets for ships, and dealt with lost luggage.

Emigrants who were not permitted to board the ship received financial assistance so that they could return to Russia. The encounter between those who wanted to get out and those coming back, in the departure ports in general and in Hamburg in particular, was interesting. The people travelling westward were full of expectations; the returnees, having failed to achieve their goal, were miserable. In this context, it should be noted that the available records about the scope of the migration refer only to those migrants who reached their destinations and were recorded by the local immigration clerks. We have no data on those who started the

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<sup>63</sup> S. Janovsky, 'Reisebericht' (20 July-20 August 1910), CAHJP, ICA/35c, pp. 2-3.

process and for whatever reason did not complete it. Clearly, if these people were included in our calculations, the number of Jewish emigrants would be much higher.

The emigrants underwent a comprehensive medical examination in Hamburg port. For those who had gone through the border stations it was the second medical exam, and it was more meticulous than the first one. After receiving confirmation that they had passed the exam, the emigrants were sorted by destination country and boarded the ships. Thousands of Jews and non-Jews passed daily through the Hamburg transit station – an assembly line that discharged them into the cramped, crowded, dark quarters in the belly of the ship.

In Bremen port the procedure was different. The emigrants stayed in the city and moved about freely. The Jewish ones stayed at the edge of the city in an area known as ‘Stadt Warschau’. The Hilfsverein office was located in this area, ‘and many emigrants go there.’ Quite often, Janovsky wrote, ‘the emigrant does not have the sum required for emigration and the local representative makes up the difference for him.’ As in Hamburg, the Hilfsverein provided emigrants with clothes and shoes so that they would make a good impression at Ellis Island. The medical exam in Bremen was conducted a day prior to boarding the ship, which was a great disadvantage for the emigrants. Anyone who was deemed unfit found out about it just one day before departure, so the Hilfsverein representative did not have enough time to take care of the problem and try to solve it. On the day of departure, special trains took the emigrants to a town near the port, and there they boarded the ship.<sup>64</sup>

## *2. Rotterdam, Amsterdam, and Antwerp*

Of all the seaports, Antwerp’s was the busiest. In 1910, for instance, 72,000 emigrants sailed from there. The main shipping company was the Red Star Line, which took passengers to New York, Boston, and Philadelphia. Emigrants who arrived by train met the representative of the shipping company in the station, and he brought them to buildings that had been converted to house them. These buildings belonged to Jews –

who had signed an agreement with the various shipping companies. The passengers of the Red Star Line are housed in certain apartments, the passengers of the Cunard Line stay in other

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<sup>64</sup> Janovsky, ‘Reisebericht’, 8-9.

apartments, and so on. The passengers of the Red Star Line receive room and board at the company's expense for seven days, whereas the passengers of the British shipping companies pay two francs for the food in the daytime. The monitoring of the living conditions is done by the shipping companies.<sup>65</sup>

Far fewer Jews sailed from Rotterdam and Amsterdam than from Hamburg and Bremen. According to the Information Bureau data, an average of 30,000-40,000 Jews emigrants passed through Rotterdam port per year. Two main shipping companies operated in Rotterdam: Atlantic Express and the Dutch Lloyd. When the emigrants arrived, they were assigned to hotels based on the company with which they would be travelling. 'Unlike the Holland-America passengers, who get an excellent hotel, customers of Atlantic Express stay in ten residential buildings that are reminiscent of the most horrible buildings in Libau,' Janovsky wrote –

Whereas the latter [in Libau] have one or two stories, the buildings in Rotterdam are cramped buildings of four or five stories. Emigrants who are there for one day stay on the first and second floors. The other floors have dormitories, unlike the first floor, which has rooms. Very narrow stairways lead to these dormitories, and on each of these floors are three or four rooms of different sizes with many sleeping arrangements, mostly wooden beds, set up as on the ship, one above the other. These rooms are chock full of beds, with only a narrow passage to reach them.<sup>66</sup>

The living conditions and crowding made the dormitories safe. 'I had an anxiety attack,' Janovsky wrote, 'when I thought how easy it would be for a fire to break out here. The house would have caught fire and the people inside would have been left with no way to be saved, except via the wooden stairs which one has to be careful climbing in the daytime.' During the day the rooms were cleaned and aired, and the passengers were not allowed in, but this did not give the emigrants any real relief. Those who sailed with the Dutch Lloyd had much better conditions. The Montefiore Association in Rotterdam – subsidized by the ICA and sometimes by the Alliance Israélite Universelle as well – helped the emigrants, but it had limited resources.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Janovsky and Kastelyansky, *Spravochnaya kniga*, 10.

<sup>66</sup> Janovsky, 'Reisebericht', 8-9.

<sup>67</sup> Harkavy, 'Diary', 2.

‘The Montefiore Association’s clients’, Janovsky wrote, ‘are mainly emigrants who were sent back from America or England.’ The association’s job was to take care of their medical treatment, house them, and send them back to their countries of origin.<sup>68</sup>

Conditions in Amsterdam were the best, but the options for sailing from this port were quite limited, so the number of emigrants was small. Emigrants who arrived in Amsterdam were received in the railway station by a shipping company clerk and were housed in company-owned buildings. Every policeman had the address of the associations that helped the emigrants, so they could be contacted in case of need.<sup>69</sup> Emigrants who arrived with prepaid tickets had to find accommodation on their own –

The emigrants get rooms on the third and fourth floors, and another room on the fifth floor. On the first floor are the kitchen and staff rooms, and on the second floor is the office and a dayroom for the emigrants (as well as a dining hall). The emigrants do not have access to the bedrooms during the day. The rooms are kept very clean – everything is shining. The beds are made of iron, and they come with a straw mattress, two sheets, blankets, and one pillow. In one room there is a sewing machine, and in another room there are cribs for babies. The emigrants who stay here are those travelling with the Dutch Lloyd, and they stay until they leave for Argentina.<sup>70</sup>

The wait in the ports, followed by the ocean voyage westward, was the last stage in the emigrants’ journey. When they arrived in the destination ports, hundreds of thousands of Jews would have to confront new challenges, different from those that had characterized the long trip from Eastern Europe. Their main difficulty after landing in the new country would be integrating in the new society.

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Despite the dangers and the bureaucratic hardships, hundreds of thousands of Jews set out for the west. To make things as easy as possible for them,

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<sup>68</sup> Harkavy, ‘Diary’, 16. According to Janovsky, in 1909 the Montefiore Association took care of 1,500 Jewish emigrants who had been sent back from America.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibidem*, 5.

<sup>70</sup> S. Janovsky, ‘Reisebericht’, Amsterdam (January 1910), CAHJP, ICA/35c.

the ICA established the Information Bureau for Jewish Migration Affairs, and it was a big help to the emigrants, especially to women and children, as it significantly reduced the dangers involved in travelling to the new land.

The ICA was, of course, not the only philanthropic organization that helped Jewish emigrants. It had been preceded by the Alliance Israélite Universelle, which had helped emigrants immediately after the pogroms of the early 1880s. The Hilfsverein, established in 1901, also provided assistance. But unlike the Alliance and the Hilfsverein, which worked mainly on behalf of Jewish emigrants in Western and Central Europe, the ICA helped the emigrants in Eastern Europe in their initial, pre-emigration stages. This was the biggest difference between the three Jewish philanthropies that tried to introduce some order into Jewish emigration.

The activity of the Hilfsverein in Germany in general, and in Hamburg port in particular, was motivated first and foremost by fear that the *Ostjuden* (a derogatory term used by Western European Jews for Eastern European Jews) would settle in Germany, thereby endangering the German Jews' own integration in the surrounding society. The historian Steven Aschheim notes in his book *Brothers and Strangers* that the arrival of the Jewish emigrants in German port cities put the German Jews in a new, complicated predicament. Jewish emigration from the east to the west coincided with an increase in antisemitism in Germany, and the German-Jewish community felt threatened on two fronts: by the *Ostjuden* and by Adolf Stoeker, Wilhelm Marr, and other antisemites.<sup>71</sup> The physical presence of Eastern European Jews in the streets of German cities was seen by everyone. From 15,000 foreign Jews in Germany, their number rose to 78,000 in 1910, equal to about 12.8 percent of the Jewish population of Germany.<sup>72</sup> For this reason, the Hilfsverein wanted to prevent Jews from settling in Germany and to send them to America as quickly as possible. In other words, the help did not necessarily stem from concern for the Jewish emigrants, but from fear of them and of what they represented. Facilitating the emigration and assisting the emigrants was the Hilfsverein's way of solving the problem by transferring it to the American continent.

The ICA's interest, on the other hand, was completely different. Its attempt to put the emigration in order was free of any ulterior motives. The transit stage was the most critical, sensitive, and complicated part of the

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<sup>71</sup> Steven E. Aschheim, *Brothers and Strangers: The East European Jew in German and German Jewish Consciousness, 1800-1923* (Wisconsin 1982) 33-34.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibidem*, 42.

emigration process. From the moment the emigrants set off on their way, they had nowhere to go back to. Their homes, their businesses, and their belongings had been sold; all they owned was what they carried in their bags. Failure to reach their destination would mean economic collapse and tragedy for the family. Heartbreaking stories of emigrants who were deceived, trapped, and jailed while crossing the border, and of girls who fell victim to traffickers in women, were described in the contemporary press. In view of these tragedies, the ICA could not sit around doing nothing, and it offered its help to the Jewish emigrants. Its activity led to the establishment of an information infrastructure that facilitated the emigrants' attempt to actualize their decision. Thus the ICA made the emigration process simpler, more feasible, and more convenient for many who sought to escape their intolerable conditions in Eastern Europe and start new lives overseas.