Jewish Emigration in the 19th Century

Migration—within and from Europe—as a decisive factor in Jewish life.

By Shmuel Ettinger | December 11, 2002

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One of the fundamental changes in Jewish life in the period under review [the nineteenth century] was the enormous movement, mainly from Eastern to Western Europe and overseas, and above all to the United States of America. This migration was the consequence of demographic, economic, and political developments. The high rate of natural increase created population surpluses that could not be absorbed in the traditional Jewish occupations. Capitalist development, which commenced at a rapid pace in Russia after the liberation of the serfs in 1861 and also reached Galicia and Austria at about the same time, opened up new sources of livelihood for a small number of Jews, but caused deprivation to greater numbers, as it had eradicated many of the traditional occupations.

This development was exacerbated by the expulsion of the Jews from the villages and their eviction from occupations connected with the rural economy. Many Jews became artisans and there was fierce competition among them, while others became day-labourers and, in fact, remained without livelihood. These two groups, the artisans and the hired labourers, provided the main candidates for emigration. Under the backward conditions of Galicia, the increase in sources of livelihood could not catch up with the growth of the Jewish population, particularly when the Poles began to organize rural cooperatives and other economic institutions in order to exclude the Jews from economic life. In Rumania, the government and population conducted an economic war on the Jews, the declared aim of which was to drive them out of the country, while in Russia, oppression and harsh decrees were the official method of “solving the Jewish problem.”

Persecution was no less effective a factor than the economic causes. The great wave of Jewish migration commenced with the flight from pogroms. In 1881, thousands of Jews fled the towns of the Pale of Settlement in Russia and concentrated in the Austrian border town of Brody, in overcrowded conditions and deprivation. With the aid of Jewish communities and organizations, some of these refugees were sent to the United States, while the majority were returned to their homes. Jewish organizations to a large extent later lost control over migration, and it became based on individual initiative, as family members who had established themselves in the New World brought over their relatives. A factor of considerable importance in encouraging emigration, even after the first panic of the pogroms had died down, was the disillusionment of the Jews of Russia and Rumania with the hope of obtaining legal equality or at least ameliorating their condition. This emigration movement was largely a “flight to emancipation.”

The effect of political discrimination on migration is attested to by the increase in the number of emigrants after each new wave of pogroms. Migration from Russia increased greatly after the expulsion from Moscow in 1891 (in 1891 some 111,000 Jews entered the United States, and in 1892, 137,000, as against 50,000–60,000 in previous years.) In the worst pogrom year, from mid-1905 to mid-1906, more than 200,000 Jews emigrated from Russia (154,000 to the United States, 13,500 to Argentina, 7,000 to Canada, 3,500 to Palestine, and the remainder to South...
America and several West and Central European countries. Between 1881 and 1914 some 350,000 Jews left Galicia.

Members of other nationalities, particularly from Southern and Eastern Europe, also emigrated in large numbers in this period to the United States and other overseas countries, but Jewish migration was different, both in dimension and in nature. From 1881 to 1914, more than 2.5 million Jews migrated from Eastern Europe, i.e. some 80,000 each year. Of these, some two million reached the United States, some 300,000 went to other overseas countries (including Palestine), while approximately 350,000 chose Western Europe. In the first 15 years of the twentieth century, until the outbreak of the First World War, an average of 17.3 per 1,000 Jews emigrated from Russia each year, 19.6 from Rumania, and 9.6 from Galicia; this percentage is several times higher than the average for the non-Jewish population.

The characteristic feature of Jewish migration was the migration of whole families. The percentage of children among Jewish immigrants to the United States was double the average, a fact which demonstrated that the uprooting was permanent. And in fact, in the last few years before the First World War, only 5.75 percent of Jewish immigrants returned to their countries of origin, while among other immigrants about one-third went back. Nearly half of the Jewish immigrants had no defined occupation, i.e., no permanent source of livelihood, as against some 25 percent of the other immigrants, but of the other half, about two-thirds were skilled artisans (mainly tailors) as against only one-fifth of the general immigrant population.

A further distinguishing feature of Jewish migration was that from the outset it displayed clearly ideological tendencies. A considerable number of the younger immigrants, members of the intelligentsia, were motivated not only by the desire to find a new refuge or a place in which there were greater chances of success. Their departure constituted a protest against the discrimination and injustices they had suffered in their old homes and reflected their ardent desire for a place in which they could live independent and free lives.

From the beginning, controversy existed between the “Palestinians” (Hovevei Zion, Lovers of Zion), who believed that independent existence of the people was only possible in their ancient homeland, and the “Americans” (above all the Am Olam group), who hoped to establish a Jewish state as one of the states of the union to serve as the background for an autonomous, territorial, national experience, or who claimed that the “Land of Freedom” was the most suited to the free development of the Jews, even without an autonomous framework. It was not the ideological argument but the conditions of absorption that determined the direction of migration for the great majority of those forced to flee their countries of residence.

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