

Jews in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century America

In the years following the Civil War, Jewish Americans were more fully accepted into American life than ever before. The last of the anti-Jewish laws on the East Coast were repealed. Jews were active citizens in towns and cities across the country. New elaborate synagogues, Jewish houses of worship, were built. These contrasted sharply with the subdued buildings of the Colonial era and reveal the increased confidence and security that the Jewish community felt. However, popular attitudes towards a new influx of Jewish immigrants resulted in decreased acceptance of all Jews.

Beginning in the 1880s, a tremendous number of Jews began fleeing Eastern Europe for America. Extreme poverty and vicious antisemitism, including horrific anti-Jewish riots and massacres, drove approximately two million Eastern European Jews to America between 1880 and 1924. This is the period of "New Immigration" when there was a massive increase of immigration to America from Southern and Eastern Europe. A Jewish woman, Emma Lazarus, captured America's vision of itself as a refuge for immigrants in her poem "The New Colossus," which is quoted at the base of the Statue of Liberty. It closes, "Give me your tired, your poor, / Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, / The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. / Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, / I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

However, many did not share this welcoming vision of America. The changes in American demographics, along with the country's urbanization and industrialization, fueled an explosion of anti-immigrant sentiment. This led to the passage of the 1924 Immigration Act, which sharply limited the ability for individuals outside of Western Europe to immigrate to America. As a result, Jewish immigration to America was virtually cut off. In addition, the depiction of all Jews as threats to American values became common. Discrimination and prejudice against Jews increased. Hotels and clubs refused to admit them. Universities placed quotas on the numbers of Jews they would accept. Famous individuals such as Charles Lindbergh, Henry Ford, and Father Coughlin publicly expressed antisemitic views and accusations such as blaming World War I and the Great Depression on "the Jews." As the twentieth century progressed, hate groups such as the Ku Klux Klan targeted Jews, along with African-Americans and other minorities, with threats and attacks.

One of the worst incidents of antisemitism in America occurred in 1913 when a Jew name Leo Frank was convicted of murder and rape. Despite scant circumstantial evidence, a Georgia court sentenced him to death. When new evidence emerged that cast further doubt on Frank's guilt, the governor commuted his sentence to life imprisonment. Frank was then kidnapped from prison and lynched. Notably, his lynchers were key in recreating the Ku Klux Klan later that year.

Since that time, additional evidence has revealed the probable innocence of Frank. In 1982, a witness broke his long silence and swore an affidavit that Frank was innocent and that the real killer had threatened to murder him if he ever told anyone what he saw. In 1986 the Georgia posthumously pardoned Frank on the grounds that his lynching had deprived him of his right to appeal his sentence.

Both the trial and the subsequent lynching illustrate the depth of antisemitism at this time. In response to the widespread anti-Jewish prejudice that made this incident possible and the rampant discrimination Jews faced, the Jewish community founded organizations such as the

Anti-Defamation League to combat antisemitism. This paralleled the rise of similar organizations, such as the NAACP, that focused on the rights of other minority groups during this period.

Antisemitism and the fight against it continued throughout the 1920s and 30s. One of the most famous examples is the publication of, and reaction to, antisemitic articles in *The Dearborn Independent*, which had the second highest circulation of any newspaper in the country by 1925. These bigoted articles were subsequently published in a series of booklets called *The International Jew*, which was distributed around the world and remains popular among hate groups today. At the time of its publication, more than 100 prominent American citizens, including President Woodrow Wilson, former Presidents Taft and Roosevelt, W.E.B. DuBois, and William Jennings Bryan, signed a statement that condemned *The International Jew* and the antisemitism it espoused and urged other public leaders to do the same. Though many accepted the antisemitic material, the vocal opposition of notable Americans showed that things could change. Ultimately, the *Dearborn Independent* closed as a result of the furor caused by its libelous attacks against Jewish individuals and promotion of hatred against the Jewish people.

Other evidence of America's progress towards a more open-minded society can be found in the fact that Jews were able to obtain high political offices. In 1914, Idaho voters elected the first Jewish governor, Moses Alexander. Two years later, Louis Brandeis became the first Jewish Supreme Court justice. He became an influential justice who argued for the right to privacy and for greater protections for freedom of speech. Brandeis University is named after him. On the other hand, Brandeis' story also reveals the continued existence of antisemitism as an obstacle to overcome. First, many people, including Brandeis himself, believed his long confirmation battle was motivated primarily by antisemitism. Second, after his confirmation, Brandeis had to cope with the antisemitism of his fellow Supreme Court justice, James McReynolds. McReynolds was exceptionally rude to Brandeis because he was Jewish; one year there was no official court photograph because McReynolds refused to stand next to him.

Most of the new Jewish immigrants entered America through Ellis Island in the harbor of New York, Ellis Island was the main entry for immigrants to America from 1892 until 1954. Over a hundred million Americans, including most Jewish Americans, have an ancestor who immigrated to America through Ellis Island. This figure is approximately one-third of the country's population. From Ellis Island, new immigrants spread across the country. Most settled in major cities, which grew dramatically at this time, and took jobs in factories, which were opening and growing as America industrialized. Many of the Jewish immigrants settled in the Lower East Side of New York. As a result, by the early twentieth century, New York had the largest Jewish population in the world.

Living and working conditions for these new immigrants were extremely harsh. They lived in overcrowded tenement buildings with dozens of people sharing a few rooms and a single bathroom. They worked long hours, often between 60 and 72 hours per week, in sweatshops under dangerous conditions for low wages. One of the worst industrial accidents in America's history took place in one of these sweatshops in the Lower East Side. On March 25, 1911 the Triangle Shirtwaist Company, which manufactured women's blouses, caught fire. The exit doors were locked and the ladders of the fire trucks did not reach high enough to rescue the workers. 146 workers, mostly young Jewish and Italian women, lost their lives from the fire or jumped to their deaths. This tragedy led to safety and labor reforms. It also helped spur the growth of the labor movement.

Given the large numbers of Jews who worked in the sweatshops, it is not surprising that Jews became leaders in the early labor movement. Samuel Gompers, the founder of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), one of the first labor unions in the country, was Jewish. He served as its president every year except one until his death. David Dubinsky, a founding member of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), was also Jewish. The AFL and CIO eventually merged and today the AFL-CIO is the largest union in America. Dubinsky is also noted as an opponent of corruption in that organization. In 1969, he was awarded a Presidential Medal of Freedom, one of the two highest civilian awards in the U.S.

Despite harsh conditions, Jewish culture flourished in communities of new Jewish immigrants. Though these immigrants came from a variety of areas in Eastern Europe, they were connected by a shared heritage and by a common language. Yiddish was the first language of most Eastern European Jews. It is written with Hebrew characters and combines elements of Hebrew, German, and various Eastern European languages. American Jews wrote Yiddish literature, published Yiddish newspapers, wrote Yiddish songs, and opened Yiddish theaters. For the most part, however, parents urged their children to adopt American culture. Today, few Jewish Americans are able to speak more than a few words of Yiddish. But, Jewish Americans remain connected by their history and culture.

Jews in the early twentieth century also made major contributions to mainstream American culture. For example, Jews helped create the motion picture industry by helping found major movie studios such as Paramount, Fox, MGM, and Warner Brothers. In fact, the first "talkie" or movie with sound, *The Jazz Singer*, tells the story of a Jewish man who tries to reconcile his professional ambitions with his heritage. This Jewish content was atypical because studio heads feared that it would alienate non-Jewish Americans. Likewise, Jewish entertainers changed their names to be more acceptable to a large audience. Notably, the lead actor in *The Jazz Singer*, Al Jolson, was a Jew who had changed his name from Asa Yoelson. Other famous examples of this include: Harry Houdini (Erik Weisz), the famous magician and escape artist; Irving Berlin (Israel Isidore Beilin) one of the most prolific and influential songwriters in history whose songs include "God Bless America," "White Christmas," and "There's No Business Like Show Business;" and George Gershwin (Jacob Gershowitz), the composer who wrote many jazz standards and musicals, and who is the namesake of the Library of Congress' award for lifetime contributions to popular music, the Gershwin Prize.