

It's Hard to Say, "Good-bye" – Challenges Faced by Eastern European Jewish Emigrants

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There were times when it was more difficult for many Jews to leave eastern Europe than to enter the United States. What were the requirements for emigration? How did they know what to do? How did people get from their homes to ports of departure? How and where did they acquire tickets to sail? Did they have help along the way? This presentation takes emigrants, 1880-1914, from their homes to ports of departure.

Permission to Leave

Most of this is specific to the rules of the Russian Empire because the Austrian government had few restrictions on movement after emancipation (1867). Of course, most Jewish emigrants left Russia illegally – without permission. After crossing a border, however, most emigrant experiences were similar.

In 1727, well before there were any Jews allowed in the Russian Empire, Peter the Great decreed the “Regulation on Passports and Escapees” to control the movements of his subjects. After acquiring Jewish subjects due to partition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Czar restricted Jews to areas of the Russian Empire that later became known as the Pale of Settlement.

In 1804, the Russian Jewish Statute of 1804 provided guidelines for control and management of the Russia Empire’s Jewish subjects.¹ Jews, like other Russian subjects, were classified by their economic status or estate. Jews were assigned to one of four estates: farmers (those working the land), manufacturers and artisans (craftsmen), merchants, and city dwellers (burghers). Status would, in some cases, confer additional or different rights. Movement from one estate to another was only possible with permission of local authorities (paragraph 32 of the statute).

A passport, issued by the governor of their gubernia, was required if Jewish manufacturers, artisans and merchants traveled for business purposes beyond the borders of their own province (paragraph 28). The local or county court issued passports to Jews who could show they had fulfilled obligations to their landlords and provided a taxpayer certificate from their Kahal. A Jewish person traveling without a passport, might be treated as a beggar – taken into custody by the police and expelled to Siberia (paragraphs 30 and 46). Nevertheless, many Jewish people moved and permanently resided outside their communities of official residence without authorization.

¹ Vitaly Charny, et al. “1804 Russian Set of Laws Concerning Jews,” Belarus SIG, *JewishGen.org* https://www.jewishgen.org/Belarus/lists/1804_laws.htm

Czar Nicholas I's Jewish Statute of 1835 codified the Pale of Settlement. It also reiterated that any Jewish person leaving their residence and traveling within the Pale or outside Russia needed a passport. Those who left Russia without permission were to be deprived of citizenship and not allowed to return.²

Up until 1856, Russian subjects applying to go abroad were required to pay 250 rubles (the equivalent of several thousand dollars) for each family member listed on an exit passport.³ Fees were reduced substantially (to 5 rubles per 6-month leave) in 1856 by Czar Alexander II. In 1887, the fee was raised to 10 rubles. Officials who administered large territories, gubernias and cities could issue passports.

During this later period applicants had to first approach the police in their place of permanent residence to acquire a certificate that attested to their eligibility to go abroad. Those certified could show that they were upstanding citizens with no criminal charges, large outstanding debts, or tax liabilities against them. In addition, men of draft age had to show that they had completed their military service or were exempt. As an alternative, petitioners could supply a letter of recommendation from a prominent member of their community.

The applicant provided the police certification along with 10 rubles for each six-month period expected to be abroad, and an additional 50 kopecks (there were 100 kopecks in a ruble) for the paper on which the passport was to be issued. All traveling family members were listed on the same document. The passport was good for a period of five years. When they returned from abroad, travelers were obligated to return the passport to the government.

Regina Kopilevich notes that while there are about 98,000 foreign travel passport case files in the Lithuanian State Archives in Vilna, most are for merchants. One would not expect to see exit passport files for those who emigrated, since most left illegally.⁴

Several issues made it difficult for Jews to acquire passports:

- Jewish families were often not registered in their places of residence and had to return to other communities where they were registered
- If their children were not registered, then birth certificates for all family members (or witnesses to family makeup) might be required
- Families were responsible for debts incurred by other family members (e.g., a 300-ruble payment for avoiding the military draft). If such debts were outstanding, no passport could be issued.

Tickets

Tickets were usually purchased one of three ways:

- By a potential immigrant's relative or friend who paid on installment with a local immigrant bank
- Directly from a shipping company office

² "Antisemitism in Imperial Russia," *World Future Fund*:

<http://www.worldfuturefund.org/wffmaster/reading/religion/antisemitism%20russia.htm>

³ Vlad Soshnikov, "Russian Exit Passports: Documentation from the Russian Empire" *Avotaynu* 21:1 (Spring 2005): 3-4.

⁴ Regina Kopilevich, "Russian Empire Passports," *Avotaynu* 37:1 (Spring 2021): 5-10.

- From an agent who traveled to eastern European villages

Whoever purchased the tickets provided the personal identifying information the shipping company needed for the passenger manifests. This information was then compiled and copied onto passenger manifests by shipping company clerical staff.

In later years, tickets might include all or most of the overland and maritime transit routes required for emigrants to travel from their homes to their destinations. Families often sold nearly all their belongings to raise the money to pay for the trip.

Travel, Border Crossing and Ports of Departure

The busiest departure ports changed over time. They included Libau (Liepaja, Latvia – a Russian Empire port); Hamburg and Bremen, Germany; Antwerp, Belgium; Rotterdam, Netherlands; Trieste, Italy; Odessa, Ukraine; Liverpool and Southampton, England; Glasgow Scotland; Genoa, Italy; La Havre and Marseilles, France; and Amsterdam, Netherlands. About 75 percent of Jewish immigrants sailed from the first three ports listed.

Emigrants often sought the least expensive, least complex, or surest exit route. While the port of Libau (Liepaja, Latvia) was competitive in terms of the price of trans-Atlantic tickets and required no border crossings, Russian officials required some paperwork of those departing. So, Libau was not always the first-choice departure port. While New York ultimately was responsible for about 50 percent of U.S. immigrant entry, arrival ports might also be selected by immigrants based on rumors of how strictly immigrant vetting regulations might be enforced.

In most cases (depending upon the year of departure and railroad development) emigrants walked or rode wagons to the nearest community with a train station and then took the railroad to the border. The Russian Empire and its neighbors used different railroad track gauge widths. If emigrants rode the railroad to the border, they had to disembark and change trains to continue.

Border towns were always busy even before emigration increased. Legal trade and smuggling were rampant. Jews from southern Russia typically crossed the border at Brody. Those from northern portions of the Pale crossed into Prussia. The flood of emigrants increased business for professional smugglers by providing a new product. Emigrants were often easy prey for those apt to take advantage. Recognizing the need at the border, organized Jewish groups, such as the Jewish Colonization Association, began to aid emigrants with food, money, and advice.

Treatment of overland travelers changed over time. Initially, Hamburg was the main processing port, but it was quickly overwhelmed. The German Central Committee for the Russian Jews set up 60 control stations at their border access points to meet and evaluate the Russians who hoped to travel over German land to their ports of departure.

A Cholera outbreak in 1892 in Russia and Hamburg increased scrutiny and quarantine of passengers. Once successfully across the border in Germany, men and women were separated and travelers were quarantined for 24 hours while they bathed. Their clothes were fumigated. Doctors inspected individuals for those issues that might cause American immigration authorities to reject an immigrant. Shipping lines

were financially liable for the costs of return passage if immigrants were rejected upon arrival at United States ports. With increased inspections both before and after arrival at ports of departure, only 2-3 percent of passengers were rejected at Ellis Island.

In Russia, the train carriages were normal passenger cars with some comforts and passengers could buy refreshments at train stations along their route. Once in Germany, however, travelers were placed in freight cars marked “For Immigrants Only.” The cars had no seats or other facilities. The trip from border crossings to either Bremen or Hamburg took between 24 and 48 hours.

In Hamburg, the Germans created systems to keep the Russian passengers isolated and away from the German populace. Once at their port of departure, migrants often had to wait a few days not only for their ship to sail but also to be individually medically cleared for the voyage. Answering the need, by 1902 Hamburg had constructed migrant facilities with quarters, kosher food service, and a synagogue on an island. The facilities were designed to hold about 4,000 migrants. The encampment kept migrants from entering the city of Hamburg.

Bremen had no such restrictions and while most Jews stayed on the outskirts of the city, they were free to enter and explore Bremen.

Voyage

Prior to steam ships, travel across the Atlantic Ocean took about five weeks. Harnessing steam in the second half of the nineteenth century enabled faster and more efficient travel both on land and across the sea. Initially, steam ships took ten days to two weeks to cross to the United States. In 1900, an immigrant might have expected to complete his journey from shtetl to New York in about three weeks. Sailing time was usually about 10 days. Before the start of World War I, some ships made the ocean voyage in as little as a week.

Shipping companies started to embrace passenger travel when they realized the value of traveling with “freight” on both legs of their trans-Atlantic voyages. Typically, they would travel from the U.S. with holds filled with timber and other goods for European consumers. They carried less voluminous goods back the other way. Selling space to steerage passengers filled the ships and the companies’ coffers. At first steerage accommodations were miserable (dormitory-style metal bunks with 100 to a room). But over time, social reformers, politicians and commercial competition led to improvements: more comfort, privacy (cabins with 2-8 people), and better food.

Depending on the ports from which a ship sailed, some ships made stops at other ports before heading across the ocean. Ships from Libau usually stopped in British ports before heading to the US or South Africa. Larger ships from Hamburg would directly head across the ocean. Hamburg and Bremen departures on smaller steamers might stop in Grimsby or Hull, England. Passengers crossed England by rail and departed for the United States on a trans-Atlantic steam ship from Liverpool. Ships that left from Belgian, Dutch or French ports might head immediately to sea or stop first in close British ports, such as Southampton.

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