Introduction

American Jews and Russian Jews on the Eve of World War I

The history of the relationship between Russian and American Jews began with the mass immigration of Eastern European Jews to the United States in the last quarter of the 19th century. Until then the American Jewish identity had been defined by arrivals from Germany and German-speaking countries, who emigrated in the middle of the century. These immigrants successfully integrated into American society and prospered. The United States did not yet perceive itself to be a superpower, obliged to ensure world order; American foreign policy was dominated by isolationism, and its Jewish community was not yet powerful or confident enough to create international or, in modern parlance, transnational philanthropic organizations, such as the Alliance Israélite Universelle in Paris, the Israelitische Allianz zu Wien, the Anglo-Jewish Association and the Jewish Colonization Association in London, or the Hilfsverein der Deutschen Juden in Berlin, which were formed in Europe by the end of the 19th or very beginning of the 20th century.

American Jews looked upon their coreligionists in Eastern Europe, the Balkans, North Africa, and Palestine as "poor relations," less advanced and less fortunate than themselves, who had yet to achieve the equality and prosperity enjoyed by Jews in the United States. Prior to the 1880s, few American Jews displayed their Judaism. They did not stand out from their fellow citizens either in speech, outer appearance, or cuisine—especially since Reform Judaism, firmly rooted within American Jewry, readily facilitated that lifestyle. Even in naming their organizations American Jews avoided the offensive-sounding word "Jewish," instead using the ancient "Hebrew." Thus, the union of Reform Jewish communities formed in 1873 was named the Union of American Hebrew Congregations. At the same time, American Jewry created and maintained a developed network of religious congregations and welfare organizations, such as the Hebrew Benevolent Society, founded in 1823, and their numerous synagogues rivaled Christian churches in size and grandeur. The largest—Temple Emanu-El—was erected in 1868 at Fifth Avenue and East 43rd Street in New York and boasted such prominent members of

German extraction as Oscar S. Straus, Louis Marshall, Felix M. Warburg, and Irving Lehman.

The historical fate of American Jewry took a sharp turn when, within 30 short years, from 1880 to 1910, a single generation witnessed a more than six-fold increase in the US Jewish population, from approximately 300,000 to about 2 million individuals.[1] The development of transatlantic steamship transportation and mass immigration to the States from Russia, Romania, and Austro-Hungarian Galicia were responsible for the majority of the new arrivals.

With their poverty and lack of familiarity with the simplest comforts, zero proficiency in English and the ways of the Western world, their "backward" religious rituals, their Yiddish "jargon," and the traditional garb that offended the eyes of beholders, Eastern European Jews tore into the long-established and comfortable fabric of life of the older Jewish community. An educated Jew from Moscow, Boris Bogen (Katzenelenbogen), a future Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) executive in Eastern Europe who happened to share a cabin with *shtetl* Jews en route to America, formed a similar impression:

> I turned away in disgust. These people were dirty. They smelled frightfully of the herring and other food they had brought with them and which they were in the habit of unwrapping in the cabin. Their way of living, their interests, their language were more foreign to me than those of our Russian oppressors. Could I ever become a real part of these people and share in their way of life?[2]

In New York City alone, the Jewish population increased from about 80,000 to almost 1,400,000 people between 1870 and 1915.[3] Sympathetic American Jews even set up a special organization, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS, established in 1881), to lighten the burden their coreligionists faced moving from the Old World to the New.[4] Meanwhile, the older Jewish community faced another, far more complicated challenge—that of integrating the new immigrants into American society as rapidly as possible, before they could become a threat to the respectable image of the US Jewish community.[5]

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[1] Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 375.

[2] Boris D. Bogen, *Born a Jew* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1930), 33.

[3] Sarna, *American Judaism*, 153.

[4] HIAS officially began on November 27, 1881 as the Hebrew Emigrant Aid Society (HEAS). Only after it merged with the Hebrew Sheltering House Association in March 1909 to form the Hebrew Sheltering and Immigrant Aid Society did it evolve from a small association dedicated to social aid to a nationwide organization. On HIAS, see Mark Wischnitzer's classic study *Visas to Freedom: The History of HIAS* (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1956).

> These philanthropists were of German immigration and in them was all the wealth of Jewry. They were proud Americans who thought the way to assimilate Europeans was to strip them of their inheritance of language and custom and bedeck them in a ready-made suit of Americanism.[6]

To this end, the existing relief network was expanded, and new organizations were established exclusively for the purpose of working with the immigrants, such as the Chicago Hebrew Institute (founded in 1903), which served as a key institution in the Americanization of Eastern European immigrants. Conservative Judaism, a comparatively weak movement originating in mid-19th-century European "Historical Judaism," became strongly established in the United States when some influential American Jewish leaders used it as a tool to draw Orthodox immigrants toward modernization. The growing self-confidence of the Conservative movement manifested itself, for example, in the rejection of such Reform terms as "Temple" and "Jewish Church" (meaning "synagogue"), "Jewish Easter" (Passover), "Jewish minister" (rabbi) and a broader use of the word "Jewish"—for instance, in the name of the Jewish Theological Seminary, established in 1886 in New York.[7]

To prevent Jewish immigration from turning into a tidal wave with the potential to set off a backlash of anti-Semitism in the United States, the "old-timers" also had to address the situation of Jews in Eastern Europe, especially since the "New Americans," fearing for their families and loved ones, relentlessly campaigned to be reunited with them. "With the rapid growth of the Jewish community of the United States, primarily as a consequence of the virtually enforced emigration of Jews from Russia, Romania, and Galicia, who aroused and maintained a more profound interest in Jewish problems abroad, the feeling began to be expressed that the American community also needed an organization similar to those which had been established in France, Austria, and Germany."[8] A cause for alarm was Russian pogroms—violent mob attacks on Jews, accompanied by murder, rape, and the destruction and looting of property. The immediate impetus came from the Kishinev pogrom of April 1903. In response, the National Committee for the Relief of Sufferers by Russian Massacres was founded by Jacob H. Schiff, Oscar S. Straus, and Cyrus L. Sulzberger. Then came the enormous wave of the 1905 pogroms. The committee aided survivors of the pogroms both in Russia and in the United States, particularly orphaned children. By February 16, 1906, it had collected a total of $1,277,675.44.[9] Later that same year the committee's efforts to aid pogrom survivors led to the creation of the American Jewish Committee (AJC), whose mission is "to prevent the infraction of the civil and religious rights of Jews, in any parts of the world.'"[10]

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[5] Eli Lederhendler, *Jewish Immigrants and American Capitalism, 1880–1920: From Caste to Class* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[6] Bogen, *Born a Jew*, 57.

[7] Sarna, *American Judaism*, 150–51.

[8] Herman Bernstein, "The History of American Jewish Relief: An Account of the Activities and Achievements of the Joint Distribution Committee" (unpublished manuscript, 1928, no. 161168, Library of the JDC NY), 62.

The most lauded AJC achievement was the abrogation of the US-Russian Trade Treaty of 1832 on the grounds that it discriminated against American Jewish citizens of Russian origin. A successful campaign led by the AJC in the American press forced President Woodrow Wilson to rescind the agreement in 1911.[11] The struggle was spearheaded by Jacob Schiff, a banker from Hamburg, who detested the tsarist regime for its anti-Semitic policies and who never abandoned his opposition to loans to Russia by German and US banks—loans that Russia sorely needed after suffering defeat in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–05.[12]

On the eve of World War I, the majority of Russian Jews—numbering around 5.5 million—especially those living in *shtetl*s within the Pale of Settlement, remained traditional, and were deprived of civil rights. At the same time, the Russian Jewish intelligentsia—holders of diplomas from institutions of higher education—grew in number. Like wealthy Jewish merchants, bankers, and railroad-building contractors, the intellectuals had undergone significant secularization and generally encountered less discrimination. Some members of the Russian Jewish intelligentsia felt a responsibility toward their less fortunate brethren, just as the "progressive" Russian intelligentsia was overwhelmed with a sense of guilt and responsibility for the Russian peasants and, later, for the working class as well.

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[9] Zosa Szajkowski, "Private and Organized American Jewish Overseas Relief (1914–1938)," *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 57, 1 (September 1967): 52.

[10] Bernstein, "The History of American Jewish Relief," 62–63.

[11] V. V. Engel, *Evreiskii vopros v russko-amerikanskikh otnosheniiakh* (Moscow: Nauka, 1998).

[12] Priscilla Roberts, "Jewish Bankers, Russia, and the Soviet Union, 1900–1940: The Case of Kuhn, Loeb and Company," *American Jewish Archives Journal* 49, 1–2 (1997): 9–37.

In spite of secularization and acculturation, numerous members of the Jewish financial and commercial elite continued to donate money to the Jewish community and to exert influence on Jewish life; in addition, they frequently served as spokespersons and advocates vis-à-vis state authorities. Both wealthy and university-educated Jews were allowed to reside beyond the Pale. As a result, by the late 19th century, the empire's capital, St. Petersburg, had emerged as an important center of Jewish public activities and philanthropy. As both the commercial and intellectual Jewish elite developed new, modern interests and needs, and due to the fact that Russian law prohibited the establishment of the traditional Jewish community infrastructure outside the Pale of Settlement, a new form of Jewish philanthropic organization evolved, independent of the synagogue and pursuing broader goals, such as promoting modern education and encouraging the development of a secular Jewish culture and other intellectual activities, as well as sponsoring social engineering initiatives aimed at "increasing the social productivity" and "promoting the health" of the Jewish people—in both its direct and metaphoric meanings. Some of these new societies were nationwide, and at their helm stood St. Petersburg's prominent bankers, gold mine operators, and railroad magnates—the Guenzburgs, the Polyakovs, and the Warschawskys.

The first Jewish philanthropic society of this modern type—the Society for Promoting Enlightenment among the Jews of Russia (Obshchestvo dlia rasprostraneniia prosveshcheniia mezhdu evreiami v Rossii; OPE) was established in 1863 and for many years united a broad layer of the Russian Jewish intelligentsia within and around its ranks. The undisputed leader of the Jewish community in St. Petersburg, Baron Evzel Guenzburg,[13] obtained permission to establish the Society and became its first chairman.[14] OPE founders, encouraged by the gradual liberalization during the reign of Alexander II, believed that the situation of Russian Jews would improve as they were integrated into Russian culture and overcame isolationism.[15] With time, however, the Society's governing committee reached the conclusion that Jewish acculturation had gone too far. As early as the 1890s, the OPE began to devote greater attention to national education and upbringing, and supported schools that taught Hebrew. By 1899, the OPE was subsidizing 125 such schools, albeit in modest amounts. These subsidies rose sharply after 1900 once Jewish Colonization Association funds started coming in (see below).[16] In 1907, the OPE opened a two-year training course for Jewish teachers in Grodno. By 1913, 30 regional branches of the OPE functioned in Russia, and its membership reached 7,000. The society even published its own periodical—*Vestnik evreiskogo prosveshcheniia* (Herald of Jewish Enlightenment)—dedicated to Jewish education, culture, and libraries.

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[13] In publications and various documents, the Latin spelling of Baron Guenzburg's name varies from Guinsburg to Guensberg, Gintsburg, and others. I use the spelling proposed by *Encyclopaedia Judaica:* Guenzburg.

[14] Brian Horowitz, *Jewish Philanthropy and Enlightenment in Late-Tsarist Russia* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009), 17–19. On the OPE, see also I. M. Cherikover [Ilia Tcherikower], *Istoriia Obshchestva dlia rasprostraneniia prosveshcheniia mezhdu evreiami v Rossii, 1863–1913* (St. Petersburg, 1913).

[15] When the renowned British Jewish philanthropist Moses Montefiore visited St. Petersburg in 1846, he appealed to Nicholas I to grant civil rights to his coreligionists in Russia. The tsar replied, "They can have them—when they become something like you." Mikhail Beizer, *The Jews of St. Petersburg: Excursions through a Noble Past,* trans.

The Yiddishist movement, which gained momentum after the 1908 Czernowitz Yiddish language conference, campaigned to secure OPE funding for Yiddish secular schools as well. Despite formidable resistance by the Hebraists—Ahad Ha-Am, Bialik, Jabotinsky, and Buki Ben-Yogli (Lev Katznelson), who promoted the model of an "improved" *heder* or Talmud-Torah, the Yiddishist influence within the OPE increased, and at a conference in 1913 the Yiddishists succeeded—for the first time—in passing a resolution whereby the OPE undertook to support Yiddish schools. Nonetheless, until the fall of the Romanov dynasty with the abdication of Nicholas II in 1917, Russian remained the official language of instruction at these schools.[17]

Founded in 1880 upon the initiative of Samuil Polyakov, a major railroad contractor and banker, the Society for Artisan and Agricultural Labor among the Jews of Russia (Obshchestvo remeslennogo i zemledel′cheskogo truda sredi evreev v Rossii; ORT)[18] sought to encourage "social productivity" within the Jewish community, in line with the prevailing contemporary view that physical labor enhanced spiritual health. Traditional Jewish economy, based primarily on commerce, was viewed both by the Russian government and the *maskilim* (enlightened Jews) as "unhealthy." Aside from their idealistic motives, the founders of the ORT also pursued a practical goal: to lower unemployment rates in the *shtetl*s by training certified artisans, who were then, after 1865, permitted to settle outside the Pale. Accordingly, in addition to

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Michael Sherbourne, ed. Martin Gilbert (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 252.

[16] Horowitz, *Jewish Philanthropy and Enlightenment*, 118–20.

[17] Zvi Halevy, *Jewish Schools under Czarism and Communism: A Struggle for Cultural Identity* (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 1976), 76–79.

[18] On the ORT, see Leon Shapiro, *The History of ORT: A Jewish Movement for Social Change* (New York: Schocken Books, 1980); Arie Munits, *Irgunei "ORT" be-Vrit-Hamoatsot beshanim 1917–1938* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1980); and Jane Havel and Marianne Ryan, eds., *ORT, 1880–2000: Facing the Future* (London: World ORT Publishers, 2000).

providing loans to artisans and peasants, the ORT supported Jewish schools that taught artisan skills and the basics of agriculture (150 schools from 1880 to 1906). The ORT operated as a temporary relief committee, obtaining official legal status only in 1906, when the policy regarding public organizations was liberalized as a consequence of the 1905 Revolution. When membership fees were reduced, the process of democratization within the ORT began. In 1910, the ORT had 1,292 members; by 1913, ORT artisan labor societies operated in 20 Russian cities.

Another society promoting "social productivity" was the Jewish Colonization Association (JCA), founded in 1891 by Baron Maurice de Hirsch in London for the purpose of relocating Russian Jews to Argentina, where they would engage in agriculture. In 1892, the JCA established a local branch in St. Petersburg, presided over by Baron Horace Guenzburg, son of Evsel, who now, after his father's death, stood at the helm of the Jewish community in the Russian capital. When it became clear that the main goal of the JCA had met with rather limited success, the association began to provide more money to support Jewish agriculture and artisanship in Russia.

The Society for the Protection of the Health of the Jewish Population (later: Obshchestvo zdravookhraneniia evreev, the Jewish Health Society; OZE)[19] was founded in 1912 by a group of prominent St. Petersburg physicians. The founders of the OZE felt a sense of responsibility and commitment towards the masses, and advocated accessible and free medical care for all. They were also convinced that Jews possessed a set of unique sociodemographic traits, biological and psycho-physical features that were the consequence of living in urban areas for centuries and enduring persecution, social isolation, and restrictions on professional activities, as well as observing religious traditions such as circumcision and *kashrut* (dietary laws). The first chairman of the OZE was a military physician, Rear Admiral (Ret.) Semen Kaufman.

The OZE strove to create its own public network for medical and sanitation services, as well as preventive medical care, among the Jews. This infrastructure would compensate for social and legal discrimination and address health conditions common among Jews, while taking religious and ethnic traditions into account. The OZE adopted a historical mission of bringing about what they called "a physical revitalization of the Jewish nation." By the end of 1913, as many as eight branches of the OZE were registered within the Pale of Settlement.

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[19] On the OZE, see G. M. Pozin, *Obshchestvo okhraneniia zdorov´ia evreiskogo naseleniia: Dokumenty, fakty, imena* (St. Petersburg: Evreiskii obshchinnyi tsentr Sankt-Peterburga, 2007); Nadav Davidovitch and Rakefet Zalashnik, "'Air, Sun, Water': Ideology and Activities of OZE (Society for the Preservation of the Health of the Jewish Population) during the Interwar Period," *Dynamis*, no. 28 (2008): 127–49; Michael Beizer, "OZE," in *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/OZE (accessed 28 September 2014); Beizer, "'Que le Juif courbé redresse l'échine': La naissance de l'OZE en Russie (1912–1917)," in *L'oeuvre de Secours aux Enfants et les populations juives au XXe siècle Prévenir et guérir dans un siècle de violences*, ed. Laura Hobson Faure, Mathias Gardet, Katy Hazan, and Catherine Nicault (Paris: Armand Colin/Recherches, 2014), 24–45.

Therefore, on the eve of the First World War, Russian Jewry had developed modern, nationwide, non-profit organizations that answered a variety of needs, including public health, Jewish education and culture, vocational training, and so on. The activists who established and maintained these organizations were referred to as the "organized Jewish public." It is not surprising that German philosopher Hermann Kohn, who visited the Russian capital in 1913, said at a reception organized in his honor that no other city in Europe could boast as many members of the Jewish intelligentsia infused with a true Jewish spirit as those of St. Petersburg.[20]

Russian Jews lacked only a recognized national umbrella organization to represent them before the central authorities. The appearance of such an organization was hindered on the one hand by the government, which feared a Jewish *status in statu*. On the other hand, it was delayed by disagreements among Jewish Orthodox, assimilationists, liberals, socialists, and Zionists on every core issue of Jewish life. World War I, which broke out in August 1914, made them search for a common platform.

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[20] Mikhail Beizer, *Evrei Leningrada: 1917–1939. Natsional′naia zhizn′ i sovetizatsiia* (Moscow: Mosty kul′tury; Jerusalem: Gesharim, 1999), 21.