



Down and Out in Eastern Europe

Jews are a most desperate proletariat, there is none like them in all parts of Russia or anywhere else in Europe.

—Report of the Pahlen Commission for the Revision of the Current Laws
Concerning the Jews, 1883–1888¹

OF THE ESTIMATED 10.3 MILLION JEWS IN THE WORLD TOWARD the end of the nineteenth century, nearly one-half lived under Russian imperial rule, which included the 1.3 million who lived within the Kingdom of Poland. An additional 850,000 lived in Habsburg Galicia (as of 1910) and nearly 400,000 more dwelled throughout southeastern Europe, chiefly the Balkans and Romania, bringing the total for all of eastern Europe to 6.2 million. About 2 million, or one-third of the entire Jewish population, immigrated to the United States over a fifty-year period; it began chiefly from Poland and Romania in the 1870s, and continued in considerably greater numbers from the 1880s to the First World War (then primarily from Galicia and Russia), and in the five-year period after the war.² This mass outpouring ended when the United States government instituted immigration quotas that were weighted against east European countries.

The intensity, timing, and volume of this migration have shaped the contours of the historical discussion on the subject. The emigration of one-third of a population in so short a time span is rare (only the mass migrations of the Irish or the Norwegians are comparable) and has aroused interest about its possibly atypical causes. The time frame – from shortly after the American Civil War through the period of America’s dramatic growth as an urban society and first-rank industrial power – places the Jewish immigrant story within a wider framework, once known as the “new immigration”: the overwhelmingly non-Protestant wave of arrivals, mainly from southern and eastern Europe, who packed the steerage compartments of the new, regular, trans-Atlantic

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Excerpt

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JEWISH IMMIGRANTS AND AMERICAN CAPITALISM



1. Jewish Barrel Maker, Podolia, Ukraine, c. 1860s–1890s.

Source: Photograph by Michael Griem. Tel Aviv: Yeda-Am – Israel Folklore Society, by courtesy of the Oster Visual Documentation Center, Beth Hatefutsoth, Tel Aviv.

steamship lines. Jewish immigrants comprised about one-quarter of American immigrants from southern, central, and eastern Europe between 1899 and 1914. Their share in gross migration to the United States was 11 percent of the total; among immigrants who remained permanently in the United States (i.e., net immigration), Jews comprised 14 percent.³ The sheer size of the east European Jewish influx into the United States has given historians the opportunity to treat these immigrants as an aggregate community in its own right.

Past research on the causes and the timing of the Jewish immigration has dwelt upon both the social-political element (persecutions) and on economic elements (socioeconomic deprivation). Mob violence against Jews and Jewish property – “pogroms,” a Russian word coined expressly for this case – broke out in the Pale of Settlement in the spring of 1881, following the assassination of Tsar Alexander II, and this is typically considered to be the spark that touched off the large-scale exodus. The question is far from settled, however, and far more complex for several reasons: (a) The migration actually began, albeit on a smaller scale, in the 1870s, a decade before the major outbreak of anti-Jewish violence. (b) The 1881-era immigrants came initially from centers of Jewish population situated in the northwest and hardest hit by poverty, more than from those southern areas most directly affected by the pogroms. (c) The migration, as it developed, was selective – it was much higher among younger, working-age people rather than across a broad age spectrum – and was responsive to business cycles in the American economy. (d) Although they were clearly economically motivated, as were other migrating groups, Jews did tend to emigrate more than non-Jews. Jews comprised over two-fifths of all Russian emigrants between 1890 and 1915; they tended to be younger than other immigrants and to bring more family members – women and children – with them. These idiosyncratic factors – more intensive out-migration and higher family migration – may attest to the added motivating “push” in their case of a particularly harsh social and political situation.⁴ Both economic and other historical causes served as push-and-pull factors in the emigration of east European Jews. Abe Cahan, the near-legendary socialist leader, author, and editor of the Yiddish daily, *Forverts*, later reflected:

Individually, every emigrant may have thought only about bettering his own lot, or perhaps was leaving because he was ruined by a pogrom, or simply because his circumstances were poor in any case But the entire emigration movement, taken as a whole, surely stemmed from an underlying condition, which made it clear to each Jew that not he alone but the entire Jewish people needed to find a new home. In emigrating, therefore, each was aware that his personal journey was part of a mass trek, a small part of a historic event in the history of the Jewish people.⁵

But beyond the question of immigrant motives per se, what concerns us is the process of adjustment by the immigrants to American conditions. Therefore, the discussion that follows will begin by noting the great gulf – not a mere difference in living standard – that separated life in the old country and the new one.

America's population was 50 percent urban by the First World War. Agriculture contributed a decreasing share of the U.S. national product, representing only one-third of commodity output as early as 1899 (as compared with 53 percent for manufactured goods). By 1910, less than one-third of the labor force was engaged in farming. At the same time, farm productivity grew steadily, increasing agricultural output by some 200 percent from 1869 to 1914. It is indicative, given the declining salience of agriculture and agricultural labor in America, that of all branches of the U.S. economy, farm work attracted the smallest share of foreign-born immigrants during the last decade of the nineteenth century.⁶

By these or by generally Western standards, Russia was a poor, mainly agrarian country. Though urbanization did set in after the 1860s, only 10 to 15 percent of the Russian population was classed as urban by 1897. Twenty years later the figure stood at only 18 percent. The agricultural sector accounted for over half of the workforce, but farming suffered from low productivity and slow modernization.⁷ On the eve of the First World War, Russia's per capita national income approached only one-tenth that of the United States, one-third that of Germany, and one-half that of Italy.⁸

Manufacturing and trade were established sectors in the Russian economy alongside agriculture, but true industrial modernization did not begin to strike root until the 1880s–1890s.⁹ Industrial development was most noticeable in heavy industry and railroad building: Coal, iron, and oil were crucial in this regard, making the Ukraine, the Caucasus, parts of Central Asia, and the Ural region centers of new economic development. Indeed, Russia was to become the world leader in oil production by the early twentieth century. But in production of pig iron, steel, and coal, Russia's output remained a fraction of America's and Germany's. The largest single employment sector among the manufacturing branches was the textiles industry, centered in the central provinces of European Russia (such as Moscow and Vladimir).¹⁰

In 1910, over one hundred Russian cities boasted an electric power supply, but there was no electric power at all in 95 percent of Russian towns with less than 50,000 residents, and over one-third of cities with populations of 50,000 to 250,000. (Note that in 1897, fully 77 percent of Russia's Jews lived in towns of under 65,000 inhabitants.) There were some 220 electricity-producing stations in Russia by 1912, furnishing some 16 kilowatt-hours per person,

compared to some 5,220 stations furnishing 500 kilowatt-hours per person in the United States. In 1914, Russia's electric-powered tram systems, located in 41 cities, were one-eighth the number that had existed two decades earlier (1892) in the United States.¹¹

Finally, Russia's infant mortality rate was the highest in Europe at 240 infant deaths per thousand births in 1913. This was 1.7 times higher than in Spain (140 per thousand) and twice as high as the rate then current in the United States (120 per thousand).¹²

For our purposes, however, the relative backwardness of economic development in the Pale of Settlement, even in Russian terms, is more important than overall economic indicators. Heavy industries were largely located outside the Pale, and even the textile industry, relatively well developed in Poland, was still centered eastward, beyond Moscow. In Russia as a whole, the yearly value of industrial production in 1913 averaged 30 rubles per person; but within the Pale of Settlement it averaged only 6 rubles.¹³ "The visitor to the late nineteenth-century towns in the western provinces would have been struck by the deprivation of their predominantly Jewish inhabitants," concludes one economic historian.¹⁴

The close policy relationship between government and heavy industry (with labor siphoned in large numbers from the peasantry and situated in the countryside)¹⁵ or big business and finance (spurred mainly by foreign investors) was very noticeable elsewhere in the empire, but played a negligible role in domestic entrepreneurship and the development of the borderlands where Jews lived. Those areas were not prioritized. "Russian state budgets reflected a high level of expenses for both administration and the apparatus to maintain internal [order]," another economist, Arcadius Kahan, reminds us, concluding: "The priorities of the government relegated economic growth and economic welfare to ... a relatively small residual of government revenues."¹⁶ Indeed, it would be fair to say that the regime, in its super-controlling role as social regulator and economic gatekeeper, followed policies that had clear and direct implications for the Jewish population and the region where they lived, along with the rebellious Poles and other minorities.

Russia's economic development had a generally adverse effect on economic opportunity for Jewish trades people, manufacturers, and artisans, who were mainly occupied in the production and sale of consumer goods, an area that did not progress rapidly. Jewish enterprises had less capital and fewer employees, on average, than did non-Jewish ones.¹⁷ In one report from the early twentieth century we read that in the provinces of the Russian Pale Jews had 37.8 percent of the factories but employed only 27 percent of the workers, and the value of products manufactured was only 22.5 percent of the

total value of manufactured products. “This discrepancy,” it was said, “is fully explained by the fact that among the Jewish factories there is a larger percentage unprovided with any mechanical power.”¹⁸ Economic survey data found that 80 percent of Jewish industrial workers (as distinct from artisans) were accounted for by four labor-intensive industries: food, including tobacco products; wood processing, including match production; organic products (leather work and bristle making); and wool processing.

In Poland alone, Jewish workers comprised nearly 44 percent of all workers in non-mechanized factories but only 19 percent in mechanized ones.¹⁹ Figures for Warsaw – a relatively well-developed city with a more established middle class and an industrializing economy – confirm these national trends. Although Jews comprised 33 percent of the city’s population in 1882, they were only 28 percent of all those employed in industry. Of the larger factories in Warsaw (i.e., those employing over 25 workers), only 21 percent were Jewish owned.²⁰ Jews were concomitantly over-represented among clerks in the private sector and among those engaged in providing religious services. Fully 86 percent of street peddlers in Warsaw were Jews! A sizeable minority among Jews (15 percent in 1897) were classified as common laborers, domestic servants, apprentices (i.e., menial workshop assistants), or had no known occupation.²¹

There were important social and legal ramifications to the concentration of Jewish artisans, journeymen, and industrial workers in the smallest workshops, mills and factories, or in home workshops. Russian labor legislation, beginning in 1882, began to institute reforms such as a reduction of working hours, control or elimination of child-labor and night-shift hours for women, institution of written contracts for laborers, and establishment of governmental factory inspection. These reforms, slow to be enforced, were also applied only to workplaces with over 16 employees, and were therefore irrelevant for the bulk of Jewish workers. Even when Jews worked alongside non-Jews in the same factory, a pattern of discrimination left the Jews with low-grade jobs, longer hours, and less pay. Their youngsters stood less chance of obtaining formal vocational training, and Jews, as a group, could not hope to participate in civic affairs. As one observer has put it, “The Jewish laborer ... lived and worked under conditions so [adversely] different from the rest of the working class that they really were a separate, inferior category unto themselves.”²²

Arcadius Kahan estimated the size of the Jewish bourgeoisie, properly speaking, within the Russian Pale at about 16,850 – combining honorary citizens, guild merchants, and people deriving income from real estate and other forms of investment – or about 1 percent of economically active Jews, based

on 1897 figures. If we add their family members as well as 16,700 members of the legal and medical professions, artists, writers, and scientists, along with those whose trade was in “luxury items” (and their respective family members), we reach an estimated total of some 65,000 people (or just about 1.3 percent of the general Jewish population). Regularly employed artisans numbered some 240,000, while factory workers who could be considered the makings of a modernizing Jewish working “class” numbered probably no more than some 40,000 throughout the Pale of Settlement.²³

Kahan also makes the point that among Jewish craftsmen and petty trades people, an undetermined proportion were engaged in the repair and sale of used goods rather than the production or sale of new commodities, while no more than 10 to 12 percent of Jewish craftsmen worked in the high-quality or luxury goods market.²⁴ Taking all these considerations into account, it can be estimated that perhaps as much as 70 percent of the Jewish labor force must be considered the “working poor,” whether they worked at a manual trade or eked out a living in minor and ephemeral “businesses.”

Another aspect to be factored in is the higher-than-average natural increase of the Jewish population. From 1825 to 1880, the annual net population increase among Jews was over 1.5 percent, going from 1.6 to 4 million in those years, and leaping to 5 million by the time of the 1897 Russian census. By comparison, the non-Jewish population of Russia experienced an annual net increase of about 1.1 percent. By the end of the century, one-quarter of the Jewish population was under ten years of age, and half were under twenty.²⁵ Given this large number of dependents, the gainfully employed Jewish population was limited to about 30 percent of the total (about 1.5 of 5 million in 1897). In certain big cities such as Warsaw, the rate of labor force participation among Christians was twice that of the Jews!²⁶ (By comparison, U.S. figures for 1900 indicate a national labor force participation rate of 50.2 percent.) Viewed differently, however, the figure of 1.5 million economically active people is statistically equivalent to almost 60 percent of all Jews aged 20 to 59 plus a quarter of those aged 10 to 19.²⁷

We may take these figures on labor force participation as a further indicator of how difficult it was for Jewish breadwinners to support themselves and their families, *despite* widespread (even if uncertain or part-time) employment and despite their enjoyment of certain social advantages, that is, relative freedom to move around, location primarily in towns and cities, and a 65 percent male literacy rate (33 percent for females) – comparatively high for Russia at the time.²⁸ Historian Heinz-Dietrich Löwe aptly referred to their situation as “urban poverty in an agrarian society,” and explained that their socioeconomic profile (their livelihoods based on commerce, crafts, and



2. Jewish Porters Waiting for Jobs, Łódź, Poland, 1916.

Source: Courtesy of the Gringras Collection and the Oster Visual Documentation Center, Beth Hatefutsoth, Tel Aviv.

limited industry, along with relatively high literacy) cannot be taken to imply that they were a vanguard of modernity in a backward country. “Rather,” as he put it, “industrialization probably hit them harder than any other section of the population [...]; at the same time they were excluded from the opportunities it offered.”²⁹

Referring to the economic marginalization of the Jews, another student of the period aptly concluded that it did not result from the contrast between pre-industrial and industrial economic pursuits. “It was the outcome, rather, of the loss of the middleman minority status which Jews had had in Europe for at least a thousand years ... Jews had always been subject to a cultural division of labour, but in the pre-modern era their position within that division of labour had been ... unusual ... in that it combined economic privileges with political powerlessness.”³⁰ Gone, now, were those economic privileges.

Levels of Jewish indigence were indeed considerable.³¹ By 1883, the Jewish community of Odessa, for example, was spending nearly half of its entire communal outlay on charity. In Vilna (Vilnius, Lithuania), the unemployed were offered welfare support through a type of work relief program (“Relief Through Labor”) where eighty shoemakers sat at work in one room while fifty “old women” were employed in another room “sorting pieces of paper,”

and shirtmakers were put to work in yet a third room. Notwithstanding such efforts, by 1912, 34 percent of the communal welfare budget in Vilna was required to support the poor house and the soup kitchen.³²

The social position of the Jewish population within east European society has always been a subject laden with considerable ideological and political freight. Recent scholarship on Polish Jewry, for example, has tended to argue that Polish political, social, economic, and cultural history is incomplete without merging the Polish and the Jewish narratives. This argument, in turn, plays a part in recent, post-communist reconstructions of Polish historiography.³³ Without prejudice to that particular argument, however, it is not farfetched to say that by the end of the nineteenth century the position of the Jews in Russian society was anomalous, as much as that of the formerly enserfed peasantry if not more so. Their very existence and character appeared in the eyes of imperial Russian officials as a persistent policy problem. Jews seemed to be a vestige of the old-regime system that a modernizing Russia was struggling to reconstruct, moving from inconsistent to draconian methods: expulsions from rural districts, prohibitions on land purchases, expulsions from Moscow and St. Petersburg, exclusions from professional and civil service positions, “*numerus clausus*” limitations in secondary and higher education, and the repeal of residence licenses for locations outside the Pale.³⁴

From 1898 to 1902, the Jewish Colonization Association (JCA), a major European Jewish philanthropic foundation established by Baron Maurice de Hirsch, compiled a major report on Jewish economic conditions in Russia. The following were among its findings:

- Master tailors in the Polish provinces could occasionally earn as much as 6 rubles in a good week, or nearly 300 rubles (about \$154.50) per year, but in reality their average income was more likely to dip as low as 100–120 rubles.* These, however, were the most fortunate among artisans and employees in light industry. Tailors and shoemakers in the Polish town of Opole (Lublin province) worked 16-hour days in squalid and cramped conditions and could not support themselves and their families due to chronic unemployment in the summer season.
- Similarly, female lace-makers in Opatów, who were only intermittently employed, could expect earnings of no more than 45 rubles a year.
- In Gorkii, Mogilev province (White Russia [Belarus]), the average artisan worked only 6 to 8 months out of the year. The report also noted

* A ruble was roughly equivalent in value at the time to \$0.51. In terms of the local purchasing power of the ruble in Russia, however, the ruble may be considered comparable to the dollar in America.

that artisans in that province appeared most frequently among the applicants for poverty relief at Passover (a customary, special alms-giving occasion), while in the major port city of Odessa, in 1900, a municipal welfare committee recorded 1,427 Jewish artisans living in extreme poverty amid deplorable conditions.

- In Vilna, female knitting loom operators worked 15-hour days and earned the incredibly low wage of less than 1 ruble per week. Out of this miserly wage, they also had to “repay” their boss for providing light in the factory during the dark hours and for the oil used in lubrication of the machines.
- Independent craftsmen had lost what control they might once have had over their labor and profits. In reality they worked as subcontractors for larger enterprises, with a status equal to that of any lowly employee working for a basic wage. “What is saddest of all,” stated the report, “is [the artisan’s] inability to exert any impact on his state of poverty through his own efforts.”³⁵

One must not conclude, however, that in the germinating “industrial revolution” of late tsarist Russia, such conditions were simply the social cost paid by those engaged in outmoded, handicraft labor, with resulting overall benefit and progress of a modern industrial economy and its labor force. Industrial workers did not enjoy the “upside” of the movement toward industrialization. Data showing higher output per worker (in terms of product value) among Jews in industrial plants in the late nineteenth century simply meant that more work was done for less pay.³⁶ As Kahan put it, in rather more laconic terms: “Given the rate of underemployment within the Jewish communities or within Jewish crafts (as witnessed by both the seasonal variations in employment and the widespread secondary or auxiliary employment even among skilled craftsmen), and the existence of a downward wage flexibility, it is likely that the labor costs of many goods or ... services were lower within the Jewish community than within the general market.” Furthermore, he noted that although there was a net increase of Jewish factory labor, despite a certain reluctance of Jewish manufacturing entrepreneurs to employ Jewish workers, the spread of industrial employment “took place under conditions of declining wages and income” in other parts of the “Jewish economy.”³⁷

The case at hand is reminiscent of the English textile workers in England earlier in the nineteenth century, about whom the British labor historian E. P. Thompson wrote: “For the power loom masters it was ... a great convenience to have [domestic craft workers as] an auxiliary cheap labour force as