

## The Jewish Identity and Legacy Project: Capturing the Stories

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Note: Some video excerpts are found on the Identity/Legacy page of my website



### Jewish Identity and Legacy Project

- Collaboration with Sholom Home, an elder residential facility, and the Jewish Historical Society of the Upper Midwest
- Legacy grants administered by the Minnesota Historical Society funded 17 interviews
- Initial interviews were with elders, a second set with their children and grandchildren
- Interviewees included those who grew up in early Jewish communities, Holocaust survivors and Russian immigrants
- Products created included video, artwork, text and storytelling
- Initial focus was on legacy and identity, underlying story was that of Jewish immigration in the 1900s

### Immigration in Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century

- More than 40% of American Jews were newcomers (less than 10 years) in 1900
- Between 1900 and 1924, 1.75 million Jews immigrated to US
- by 1930 Jews were 3.5% of the population
- Immigration declined after the Immigration Act of 1924 that established quotas based on nationalities at percentages tied to pre-existing levels. This remained in effect until 1965.

*"As in every large-scale immigration the newcomers represented a psychological threat to the established order. They could not fail to influence the older Jewish settler's sense of security. Consequently the lines of "German" and "Russian-Polish" were drawn every more sharply." (Rabbi Plaut of Mt. Zion)*

*"We are Americans and they are not. We are Israelites of the nineteenth century in a free country, and they (the Russian immigrants) gnaw the bones of past centuries... The good reputation of Judaism must naturally suffer materially, which must without fail lower our social status." (Rabbi Isaac Wise)*

### Environment

- Jews lived in a specific geographic area
- Typical profession was as shopkeepers serving Jewish community
- Everyone spoke Yiddish

- Anti-Semitism restricted employment and living outside of community
- Old World customs still prevalent
- Parents of interviewees immigrated in early 1900s
- Russian-Polish, Romanian ancestry versus German ancestry of earlier immigrants

### Immigration Post WWII-Survivors

- Some got out of Europe on the cusp of war
- Survivors lost both family and community
- Many created new families in the DP camp where they met a spouse
- Many remained in Germany for several years waiting for access
- Presence in US reminded existing Jewish community of vulnerability

### What to Call Them

- Refugees – implies nowhere to return to
- Holocaust Survivors – terminology didn't exist
- New Americans

### Influences on Immigration Policy

#### *The Red Scare*

- a 1948 survey by the American Jewish Committee, found 21 percent of Americans believed “most Jews are Communists,” and more than half associated Jews with atomic spying.
- Of 124 people questioned by McCarthy’s Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs in 1952, 2/3rds were Jews - Aviva Weingarten 2008 study

*“There (they) were talking to me in English. I couldn’t understand a word...So there was some guys who understand a little bit of Polish so I had to talk to them. They asked me if I was a Communist. Why you ask me if I was a communist? I was in concentration camp in Germany. When was I a Communist? Communists are Russian.”-Sam Saide*

#### *Anti-Semitism in the US*

- A public opinion poll in 1948 found that 53% favored admitting displaced persons to the United States, but 60% favored placing restrictions if most of them were Jews.  
From Refugees to New Americans: How Holocaust Survivors Became Jewish Americans in the Twin Cities, Amy Sherman 5/18/1994

*“The ads used to read, “No Jews need apply”. It was “no Jews allowed”. The for rent sign on the outside of the house would read, “No Jews”. In plain, plain English. “No Jews” and it reminded me so much of in the South, “No blacks, no Jews or dogs.” They would have it, very plain, outspoken, they didn’t want us and that’s the way it was.”-Fannie Schanfield*

### Immigration Laws

- 1945 Truman Doctrine -assigned immigration quotas to displaced persons
- 15,000 Jewish displaced persons entered the country between 1945 and 1947.
- 1948 Congress passed legislation that would admit 400,000 displaced persons, of whom 80,000 were Jewish.
- The others were Eastern Europeans who had been forced laborers in Germany.
- Favored agricultural laborers that Truman termed “flagrantly discriminatory against Jews.”
- Amended in 1950 and by 1952, Jewish refugees in the United States totaled in excess of 137,000. (US Holocaust Memorial Museum 2015)

## Immigrants from the former Soviet Union

- Jewish immigrants from the Soviet Union began to arrive in the 1970s
- 70% arrived after 1990, following the Soviet Union's collapse.
- Many went via a circuitous route. Many started their journey with Israel as the purported destination, but sought political refugee status in transit to come to the US.

*We're Russian but we're not. We're from Russia, but we've never been Russian. We've always been Jews. Jews here and Jews there. But here we're Americans, American Jew. Over there we were just Jew. Period.*

## Immigrant Challenges

- Language skills
- Feeling patronized
- Jobs below skill level
- Different understanding of how to express Judaism

## Some Useful On-line Sources

"History of US Immigration Laws", Federation for American Immigration Reform  
[http://www.fairus.org/facts/us\\_laws](http://www.fairus.org/facts/us_laws)

Kliger, Sam, "Russian-Jewish immigrants in the United States: Social Portrait, Challenges and AJC Involvement", American Jewish Committee (AJC), AJC studies from 2000-2011  
<http://www.ajcrussian.org/site/apps/nlnet/content2.aspx?c=chLMK3PKLsF&b=7718799&ct=11713359>

Klinger, Jerry, "The Russians are Coming. The Russians are Coming (American Jewish History 1880-1924)", The Jewish Magazine, October 2004  
<http://www.jewishmag.com/85mag/usa8/usa8.htm>

Sarna, Jonathan and Golden, Jonathan, "The American Jewish Experience in the Twentieth Century: Anti-Semitism and Assimilation", National Humanities Center  
<http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/twenty/tkeyinfo/jewishexp.htm>

"United States Policy Towards Jewish Refugees 1941-1952", Holocaust Encyclopedia, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum  
<https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007094> (accessed