

The Russians are Coming, The Russians are Coming

By Jerry Klinger

"A new Jewry has arisen in the United States since 1881"

- Jacob Schiff,

"In 1880 the number of Jews in the city of New York did not exceed 100,000. Since then, owing to the unspeakable horrors of Russian and Romanian oppression, and of the dire poverty in Galicia, the tide of Jewish immigration has increased in volume year after year, until today the Jewish population of New York city amounts to well nigh 750,000, and that of the United States to upwards of 1,250,000, and the numbers are constantly increasing.

Many of these new arrivals have not as yet attained the highest standard of citizenship, are still struggling with poverty and misery, are yet unacquainted with our vernacular, and have brought with them unfamiliar customs, strange tongues, and ideas which are the product of centuries of unexampled persecution.

But what of that! They have come to this country with the pious purpose of making it their home; of identifying themselves and their children with its future; of worshipping under its protection, according to their consciences; of becoming its citizens; of loving it; of giving to it their energies, their intelligence, their persistent industry.

The Pilgrim Fathers did no more than this. The progenitors of the leading families of this country were not otherwise. The lineage of the Russian Jew runs back much further than theirs. He is the descendent of men who were renowned for learning and for intellectual achievements when from the St. Lawrence to the Rio Grande, from Sandy Hook to the Golden Gate, this was a howling wilderness.

The Russian Jew is rapidly becoming the American Jew, and we shall live to see the time when the present dwellers in the tenements will, through their thrift and innate moral powers, hitherto repressed and benumbed, step into the very forefront of the great army of American citizenship."
- Louis B. Marshall. – 1904 – on the 250th Anniversary of Jewish in America

The shores of America, to the West, beacons to immigrants from Europe. The first Jewish immigration began as a trickle after Columbus's discovery of the new world. Earliest significant Jewish immigration had been Sephardic (Spanish) until 1820. The second wave, the German immigration from 1820-1880, had been much larger and supplanted the Sephardic Jewish immigrant in size and eventually, influence in America. The third wave of Jewish immigration to America, known as the Russian immigration, became a mighty, almost desperate, tidal wave of humanity that did not end until American open immigration was closed in 1924. The Jewish poetess Emma Lazarus wrote in her 1883 poem, the New Colossus, the words that years later would be immortalized on the base of the Statue of Liberty. The words of the poem would capture the essence of America's relationship to the immigrant ideal. "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!"

By 1890, Manifest Destiny, the Divine focused goal of American settlement from the Atlantic shores in the East to the Pacific coast in the West, had been realized. The government officially pronounced the frontier closed. America was undergoing a vast radical shift, in the late 19th century, from an agricultural to an urban industrial power. Even the very nature of European immigration radically changed. The new immigrants tended to be Eastern and Southern European as opposed to Western. Between 1880 and 1924 twenty four million people immigrated to America. Included in that great mass of immigration were, primarily, 2.2 million Russian Jews. The Jews who came in the third wave were different socially, educationally, culturally and even religiously from the established American German Jewish community. They were radically different. The very nature of who is, was, and will be an American Jew would be impacted for the next 87 years. A new world was opening.

In 1880 almost 90% of the approximately 300 American synagogues were reform – a direct response to the American environment. It was an evolution of survival, how to be American and yet remain Jewish. In 1913 a local reform journal in Detroit proclaimed "our religion is distinctively American."

But by 1890 there were 530 Jewish congregations and 316 were orthodox. The Eastern European Jew brought with them and tried to recreate the religious world they had come from. By 1900, there were 1,769 Jewish congregations in America, overwhelmingly Orthodox in character. Of this number 1,112, were located in the North Atlantic states where the Eastern European Jew tended to settle. The North-Central area had 344 congregations, mainly around Chicago. The South-Central had about 133 and the West about 70. Only 8% of the Jews lived in the West in 1900. Most of the new immigrants settled in the big cities from Boston to Baltimore and mainly in New York. The immigrant Eastern Jew clustered in centralized Jewish familiar communities, building lives, seeking financial security. Their children tended to move away from Orthodoxy and quickly adapted to the American environment finding the compromise of American Conservatism easily acceptable to them.

The conservative movement gained its main impetus after the debacle of the "*Trefah Dinner*" in Cincinnati in 1883. The dinner was an effort to find common ground with the then dominant reform Jewish community and the much smaller Orthodox community. The dinner collapsed because of blatant, crude and disrespectful ignoring of Jewish dietary laws. The first course was Oysters, a forbidden food to the Orthodox. The Orthodox walked out in acrimony. A rift was created that has never been healed. The Jewish Theological Seminary was founded in 1886 – a school to produce Conservative Rabbinic leadership. The formation of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, a national interest organization, solidified the position as the emerging dominant American Jewish religious movement in 1913

. The children of the immigrants became the Americanizing element for the parents. Within the first or second generation, Jewish religious orthodoxy did not suffice as a definition of who was a Jew. It worked in the closed environments of segregated, virulent Anti-Semitic Russia. It did not work very well in America. By the 1930's fewer than 1/3 of Jews were affiliated with synagogue communities. The distance from the Old Jewish world of the *Kehilah*, the semiautonomous communities of the Jewish Pale of settlement, became stories and no longer living memories.

It was estimated that in the lower East Side of New York, the most highly concentrated physical location of old World Jews in America, that by 1913, almost half of the stores and pushcart merchants were open for business on the Sabbath. The Old World taboos quickly faded. The Old World social structure of Rabbinic control and respect for the Talmud scholar faded even faster as the freedom of an accepting American environment challenged the old World. The American world opened for the Jew opportunities that were only dreamed of in Poland, Russia or Rumania - if they would only become Americans. The light to a new world was lit; the golden door of economic betterment was open, if the immigrant chose to go through it.

The famed editor of the Yiddish language *Jewish Daily Forward* (founded in New York in 1897) was Abraham Cahan. He was a Russian immigrant, an avowed socialist and liberal, who fled to America in 1882 to escape the great Russian scapegoating of Jews and horrific state promulgated pogroms after the murder of Czar Nicolas the second. He wrote a story "Yekl, A tale of the New York Ghetto." Yekl – Americanized to Jake, came over, as had many Russian Jews, having left his family in the old country until he could save enough to bring them over. He was uneducated but worked hard for three years in clothing manufacturing to save the money all the while becoming Americanized. He learned English, dressed in American style, abandoned his traditional Orthodoxy and saw himself no longer as a "Greeneh" an unadapted European. He brings his wife, Gitl to America. Jake is repulsed by the Old World woman whom he saw. "She was still green." Jake said. His disdain for his un-Americanized early immigrant wife lead to his divorcing her and unhappily marrying an Americanized Jewish woman, Mame. To Jake's horror the wife that he had rejected as being too 'green' at their divorce was perceptively becoming American. For Jake, it was too late. He had rejected her and she him.

So it was for the German Jewish elite and the repulsive response they had to the new Russian Jewish immigrant masses. The established German Americans were horrified that all the progress they had made and acceptance they had achieved in American society would be lost in a resurgence of Anti-Semitic revulsion to the new immigrant. The German American feared that unless the Russian could be Americanized they would be swept up in the fears of resurgent Anti-Semitism. Not all German Americans felt that way but many did. The early founding of the later venerable B'Nai B'rith Organization was originally structured as a German American institution with a distinctively anti-immigration (Russian) flavor. Isaac. M. Wise, the leading reform Rabbi, "*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.*" The misplaced blame of American German Jewish insecurity goes to the very heart and tenuousness of Jewish historical experience. Jews have to be careful as how not to be too assertive in Christian society, they must be more loyal than Caesar's wife, they must be more American than Americans or their toleration and enjoyed freedoms could be ended – even in America. The irony was that the German Jewish fears materialized but not because of the Russian immigration.

America between, 1880-1924, was flooded by masses of immigrants ten times the size of the number of Jewish immigrants. The mass of immigration began to change the nature of society as America passed from an agricultural economy to a world leading industrial urban economy. The resulting tensions and upheaval brought forth deep seated, dormant Anti-Semitism. The Anti-

Semitism was a shock and horror to the German Jew but to the Russian immigrant it was very benign when compared to the monstrosity of physical deprivation and terror that the Czarist and other governments of Eastern Europe promoted to get rid of their Jews.

America has a long history of social and economic and political change. Immigrant pressures and the expanding frontier created tensions and pressures that could be released, even if only perceptively, by knowledge of and actual movement West. Conflict between West and East, agricultural vs. developing industrial, open vs. restrictive established society was not new to America. Paroxysms of change rattled America in the years before the great immigrations of 1880-1924. The most well known was the rise of the Know Nothing or American Party before the Civil War. Essentially an anti-immigrant, anti-Catholic, Nativist response to change. The very dynamic of the American experience soon ended the reactionary uprising and the Know Nothings faded away but the seeds remained. It would be in the decimated agricultural South of the post Civil War era and especially the large urban centers of the North, notably New York, where the scapegoat of Anti-Semitism would rise and spread most virulently.

The Jews were relatively few in number in the West and those that were there quickly merged into Western life. The Western Jewish merging was so successful and so accepting that it created a threatening new reality - Jewish community survival because of assimilation. Nativist tensions did exist in the West with the unsuccessful Democratic Party presidential candidacies of William Jennings Bryan in 1896, 1900 and 1908. His campaign promoted the populist imagery of the Westerner "*crucified on a cross of gold*" placating the greedy Eastern Industrialist and hence the Jewish banking cabals. It would be in the East and South that Anti-Semitism manifested itself the most.

Jews had formed an acceptable social cooperation with non-Jews in urban areas of New York. They established elite clubs and social groups that worked well together in 1865. In 1893 the prestigious Union League Club, which Jews helped found, banned Jews entirely. In 1877 Joseph Seligman, a crucial financier of the Union cause during the recent civil war was turned away from the Grand Union Hotel in Saratoga, New York because he was a Jew. Quotas soon emerged restricting Jewish access to higher education. The "Uptown" German Jew blamed the new Russian immigrants for the negative turn in social affairs in their lives and in America.

The South was going through the upheaval of the post Civil War era where agricultural economic downturns predominated, social upheaval with millions of former slaves freed and a wandering of Southern identity and political disaffection led to the rise of the most vicious form of Nativist reaction – antecedents of the Ku Klux Klan. The Klan was, and is today, anti-Black, anti-Catholic and anti-Jewish. They did not show their hatred with simple discrimination but rather with violent physical assault – and violence for Jews reminiscent of the Russian governmental barbarism.

Southern demagogues used the Nativist fears to garner political support and power. White sheeted and hooded Klansmen riding horses through the night spread terror, intimidation and burning crosses. Jews had lived in and were part of the South from the earliest periods of American settlement. They had fought for and died for the South but this was new, this was different. Physical assaults, even mob lynchings, were directed against the Southern Blacks by

the Klan or its sympathizers. In Mississippi physical assault against Jews generally was typified by burning Jewish property and intimidation. Anti-Semitic hysteria against Jews culminated in the 1913 Leo Frank murder case.

Leo Frank had been born in Paris, Texas, April 17, 1884. His parents moved to Brooklyn, New York shortly afterwards and he was raised there. His upbringing was a conventional Jewish middle class experience. After graduating from Cornell University in 1906 his uncle, Moses Frank, invited him to join an enterprise in Atlanta, Georgia. Frank moved to Atlanta, met and married Lucille Selig, from a prominent Atlanta Jewish family in 1910. Frank became a respected member of the Jewish community in Atlanta being elected President of the local B'nai B'rith chapter in 1912.

Frank invested in and became part owner and manager of the National Pencil Company in Atlanta. The factory typical of many factories in the North and South of that period in that it employed women and children at miserably low wages – very similar to the horrific sweatshops of the North that Jews toiled in as veritable slaves in the clothing industry. Frank's world and the world of the Jew in America changed the evening of April 26, 1913. The body of Mary Phagan, a 13 year old, blond, blue eyed, Mary Pickford looking girl, was discovered in the basement of Frank's pencil factory. She had been murdered.

The police quickly drew their attention to the very nervous factory manager, Leo Frank, whereupon the finger of accusation was pointed. Frank was brought to trial for the murder. His demeanor bespoke his guilt and not the evidence that was presented. Frank was convicted of the murder mostly because he was a Jew. The case was a sensational one raising fiery feelings and highly questionable law. When appealed, the conviction was upheld on the basis of the jury felt he was guilty aside from the lack of evidence. Frank was sentenced to death. With great personal and political courage the Governor of Georgia – Governor Slaton commuted the sentence to life. But that was not enough for the good citizens of Marietta, Georgia where Frank was held in jail. August 17, 1915 they broke into the jail and lynched Frank from a nearby tree. Governor Slaton's political career was destroyed.

The prosecutor – Solicitor General Dorsey became governor of Georgia from 1916-1921. Tom Watson, a populist demagogue and Jew hater was elected to the Senate in 1920. The Knights of Mary Phagan gave rebirth to the tarnished Ku Klux Klan. In defense of Frank the Jewish Anti-Defamation league was formed and survives to this day. The Frank case changed the American criminal trial landscape. The single most important decision came in 1923. U.S. Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote for the majority decision that due process in criminal trials was compromised by an inflamed public climate. The Frank case was the specific precedent cited. It was further developed that perjured testimony was inadmissible in a trial. Frank's trial was politically, publicly and anti-Semantically incendiary, rank with false and eventually recanted testimony. On March 11, 1986, the Georgia Board of Pardons granted Leo Frank a posthumous pardon.

The Frank case confirmed in many American Jewish minds the necessity for vigilance and respect for the rule of law. It affirmed an innate Jewish sense of justice born from historic world experience. "*Justice, Justice shall you seek*" was the ancient prophetic warning. The American

Jews took it to mean to protect themselves they must be ready to protect the weakest in society. Jews were amongst the earliest and most prominent supporters of the early Black American civil rights organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The first chairman of the NAACP was a Jew from New York, Joel Springarn. Jews played early prominent roles in the NAACP providing leadership, political, legal and significant financial aid - Rabbi Steven Wise, leading American Reform Rabbi, Louis Marshall head of the American Jewish Committee, Felix Frankfurter future U.S. Supreme Court Justice, Lillian Wald, famed social and health care worker, Herman Lehman, Herbert Seligman, financiers.

Wave upon wave of crushing humanity streamed to America between 1880 and 1924 only abating for a short period during the First World War. Repeated pogroms fermented by the Russian government, economic deprivation and desperation along with modern, improved relatively cheap transatlantic mass transportation offered a way out. The horrifying Kishinev pogrom – a veritable state sponsored massacre, confirmed two ideas in Jewish minds. The first was but a dream to the young and only a handful of idealistic Jewish minds, an idea that did not take in the soil in which it was first born – Austria – the idea was Zionism.

The idea of Theodore Herzl that the only viable answer to the "*Jewish Question*" was a return to their ancient homeland of Israel. It was a dream and even if Herzl said "if you dream it, it is not a dream" the practical reality for millions of Jews was not Israel but America. Zionism was an idea that traveled to America but did not take root until a generation later. The accusation of dual loyalty, are you an American or a Jew could not be resolved and led to bitter acrimony in the Jewish community. The synonymous concept that an American Jew by faith, an American by nationality and loyalty but a supporter of fellow Jews rights to secure life and liberty in Israel or other lands had not evolved. American Zionism would not be defined until the 1930's.

The Jewish immigrants came and came, fleeing from hopelessness to hope. They were willing to endure, willing to sacrifice, willing to improve their lives, if not for themselves then for their children. Many crowded into tenements on the lower East Side of New York. Over crowding and simple Darwinistic fighting to survive brought out the best and worst in people. The immigrants brought with them small enterprising skills and trades that soon would dominate the American textile industry.

Small cottage industries emerged in clothing manufacturing. The cottage business frequently evolved into tiny sweat shops, called that because of the long, difficult hours at barely subsistence wages in terrible, exploitative, concentrated, unsanitary working conditions. Jew exploited Jew to get ahead in the seething mass of Jewish immigrant life. By 1900, 85% of the production of men's clothes and 95% of women's apparel was being produced by Jewish manufacturers. Sadly, sometimes, tragedy forced changes that would benefit America. The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire of 1911, in which 146 mainly young Jewish women died, led to the creation of better and safer working conditions for all Americans.

Working conditions were so bad that soon labor movements were born to try and improve things collectively. Jewish communal thinking merged with the seeds of socialist thought that the immigrants had been exposed to in Europe. Labor struggles grew into full fledged strikes in the textile and other industries. Many strikes failed but slowly they began to succeed. The largest

and best known labor union was the International Ladies Garment Workers of America, founded in 1900, primarily, by Jewish workers. Jews took on prominent roles in the development of the American labor movement – men such as Samuel Gompers. From 1886 until his death in 1924, Gompers led the American Federation of Labor (AFL), as its President, in untiring efforts to improve the condition of the American worker. In the latter part of the 20th century, the Congress of Industrial Organization merged with the AFL to form the greatest American pro-labor organization in history, the AFL-CIO.

America continued to change and struggle towards becoming a national melting pot. Old World people and Old World thoughts eventually merged and expressed themselves in New World terms, usually through the next generation. Throughout the entire period of mass immigration many older Americans despaired and feared the changing crush the immigrants might have. The Jewish immigrant from the Old World chose to be Americans. They quickly adapted and adopted American ways. Jews valued becoming Americans and rose to defend America in numbers out of proportion to their population.

When the battleship Maine was blown up in Havana, Cuba of the 212 sailors who went down with the ship – 15 were Jews. The first of Teddy Roosevelt's famed Western "Rough Riders" to fall in the Spanish American War was a 16 year old Jewish boy – Jacob Wilbusky. In the Spanish American war and in World War I, Jews volunteered and fought to defend America in greater numbers than was their representative percentage of the country's population.

America continued to respond, welcome and integrate Jews into America. Dalin and Kolatch's noted this in their book, *the Presidents of the United States and the Jews*:

RUTHERFORD B. HAYES was the first President to designate a Jewish ambassador for the stated purpose of fighting anti-Semitism. In 1870, he named Benjamin Peixotto Consul-General to Rumania. Hays also was the first President to assure a civil service employee her right to work for the Federal government and yet observe the Sabbath. He ordered the employment of a Jewish woman who had been denied a position in the Department of the Interior because of her refusal to work on Saturday.

THEODORE ROOSEVELT was the first President to appoint a Jew to a presidential cabinet. In 1906 he named Oscar S. Straus Secretary of Commerce and Labor. Theodore Roosevelt was also the first President to contribute his own funds to a Jewish cause. In 1906, when he received the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts while President to settle the Russo-Japanese War, Roosevelt contributed part of his prize to the National Jewish Welfare Board. In a report to congress, 1918, Roosevelt accounted for the disposition of his Nobel prize funds: "To the Jewish Welfare Board, for War Activities, through the treasurer, Mr. Walter E. Sachs \$4,000.00"

WILLIAM HOWARD TAFT was the first President to attend a Seder while in office. In 1912, when he visited Providence, RI, he participated in the family Seder of Colonel Harry Cutler, first president of the National Jewish Welfare Board, in the Cutler home on Glenham Street.

WOODROW WILSON was the first President to nominate a Jew, Louis Dembitz Brandeis, to the United States Supreme Court. Standing firm against great pressure to withdraw the nomination, Wilson insisted that he knew no one better qualified by judicial temperament as well as legal and social understanding; confirmation was finally voted by the Senate on June 1, 1916. Wilson was also the first President to publicly endorse a national Jewish philanthropic campaign. In a letter to Jacob Schiff, on November 22, 1917, Wilson called for wide support of the United Jewish Relief Campaign which was raising funds for European War relief.

WARREN HARDING was the first President to sign a Joint Congressional Resolution endorsing the Balfour Declaration and the Palestine Mandate supporting the establishment in Palestine of a national Jewish home for the Jewish people. The resolution was signed September 22, 1922.

From the very beginning of America the concern was how to attract immigration to the vast emptiness of the continent. The American Indian was not considered as part of the people populating the country. They were not granted American citizenship until 1924. The door of open immigration was officially closed with the Immigration Act of 1924. Immigration was no longer encouraged by America, it had to be actively sought by aspiring immigrants.

In the ensuing years America integrated its immigrants, not always smoothly, becoming the richest nation on earth.