

Points of Passage: Jewish Transmigrants from Eastern Europe in Germany Britain, and Scandinavia

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Between 1870 and 1914 several million Eastern Europeans –Jews, Poles, Ukrainians, Lithuanians, ethnic Germans, Hungarians and others – migrated West, overwhelmingly to the United States, and to a lesser degree to Western, Northern and Central Europe as well as other destinations such as Argentina, Palestine, and South Africa. While much is known about their immigration experience, notably in the United States, the paths of migration which took many million people across „green borders“, through European railway stations and ports have been little studied. Ellis Island, literally a point of passage into America, situated spectacularly in the shadow of the Statue of Liberty and opposite the skyline of Manhattan has a much higher symbolic significance than the often inconspicuous departure stations, makeshift facilities for migrant masses at European railway stations and port cities, and former control posts along borders that were redrawn several times during the 20th Century.

The dimensions of the transmigration were impressive. It is estimated that several million migrants crossed Germany from East to West between 1880 and 1914; the numbers for Britain were also high. Jews from the Russian Empire, the Austro-Hungarian province of Galicia, and Romania were perceived as the most prominent group, not only numerically but also in terms of „visibility“. Negative images of Jews were at the forefront of the per-

ception of and public debates about the mass migration of „strangers“ from the „East“ in the West.

The conference „Points of Passage“ brought together historians and sociologists from Europe, Israel, and the United States whose research covers different aspects of the Jewish transmigration through Germany, Britain, the Netherlands and Scandinavia between 1880 and 1930. The conference conveners were Tobias Brinkmann (Parkes Institute for Jewish/non-Jewish Relations, University of Southampton/Penn State University), Christhard Hoffmann (Department of Archaeology, History, Cultural Studies and Religion, University of Bergen), Jochen Oltmer (Institute for Migration and Intercultural Studies, University of Osnabrück), and Stefanie Schüler-Springorum (Institute for the History of German Jews, Hamburg). The Institute for the History of German Jews hosted the conference, which was generously supported by the Fritz Thyssen Foundation (Cologne).

By definition, the transmigration of Eastern Europeans en route to the United States through Scandinavia, Central and Western Europe (as well as Canada and East Asia) straddled national and imperial boundaries. Before 1914, transmigrants left relatively few traces in the historical record because they often spent only a few days in transit and were increasingly isolated from the public. Another obstacle for researchers is the dominance of the nation-state paradigm, even in the fields of migration studies and modern Jewish history. Alien transmigrants, who crossed through nation-states, are ignored by most authors covering the migration histories of or the history of Jewish communities in the major transit countries – because they did not really „belong“. Histories of immigration concentrate on arrival and rarely take the paths of migration into account.

A number of more general points stood at the center of the discussion:

- The migration policies of different states should not be studied in isolation, as they were not always coordinated but closely related.

- In the early 1890s, as ever more people were moving across ever longer distances, the need for internationally coordinated health and hygiene policies became increasingly ap-

parent. Scholars in this field have concentrated on the local and national level in great detail, but neglected the global dimension of health and hygiene policies.

- Jewish leaders on both sides of the Atlantic founded several philanthropic organizations which supported Jewish migrants since the late 1860s. The organizations also coordinated their work with different governments, local authorities and transport companies. Transnational Jewish philanthropic organizations were forerunners of contemporary NGOs. They combined specific interests (supporting Jews in need) with universal goals (human rights, minority protection), acted in the public domain, relied exclusively on donations, and stressed transparency.

- Mass transit migration had enormous economic repercussions. Large steamship companies in Germany and Western Europe made huge profits but small businesses along the paths of migration also depended on the transmigration. Many migrants stopped over to earn money for the remainder of the journey, especially in Britain but also in post-1918 Germany.

- The „Great War“ constituted an important turning point, bringing a period of relatively free migration across Europe and the Atlantic to a sudden end. Jews were hard hit by systematic persecution and deportation during and in the immediate aftermath of the war. After the war, the rise of „paper walls“ (David Wyman) in and after 1918 deprived especially stateless persons (many of whom were Jewish) almost literally of the ability to move, even before the United States introduced massive immigration restrictions for Eastern and Southern Europeans, and Asians.

The conference organizers chose a symbolic venue for the first panel, the site of the former „Auswandererhallen“ (emigrant halls). The Auswandererhallen, managed by the Hamburg-America steamship line, were one of the most important points of passage for overseas migrants in Europe before August 1914.

The two papers of the first panel dealt with the process of out-migration in the Russian Empire. ERIC LOHR (American University, Washington DC) outlined the Russian policy towards internal and cross-border migration.

He examined the rationale behind the paradox of strict legal obstacles regulating migration and the considerable out-migration. Lohr explained the conflicting interests of different government branches that made reforms difficult and argued that the Russian authorities tacitly condoned the strong Jewish out-migration. GUR ALROEY (Haifa University) looked at the causes for and the broader context surrounding the Jewish mass migration from the Russian Empire. He highlighted the importance of socio-economic factors and network migration. The forthcoming study by the late John Klier about the limited impact of the 1881/82 pogroms on the actual migration was the subject of the ensuing discussion.

The second panel was devoted to the infrastructure of the migration from East to West. RUTH LEISEROWITZ (Free University Berlin), who has recently completed a detailed study on Jews in the Prussian-Lithuanian borderlands, described the everyday experiences of Jews on both sides of the border and their involvement with Jewish migrants in transit. NICOLE KVALE (University of Wisconsin, Madison) illustrated another little known aspect of the migration, the train journey of Jewish migrants through Prussia before 1914. She talked especially about the system of sealed trains that can be traced back to the 1880s. BARBARA LÜTHI (University of Basle) analyzed the „medicalization“ of European border controls and the effects on Jewish migration in the period after 1900. She stressed that in Central Europe especially migrants from Eastern Europe were associated with disease. CARL HENRIK CARLSON (University of Uppsala) discussed the impact of Jewish transmigrants from Eastern Europe in Sweden between 1860 and 1914 against the background of (limited) Jewish settlement in Sweden. URSULA WÖST (Emigration Museum Hamburg) gave a historical overview of the origins, development, and legacy of the former Hamburg Auswanderhallen site, which since 2007 serves as the ‘home’ of the Emigration Museum Hamburg. NICK EVANS (University of Hull) presented some results of his forthcoming study on the transmigrant corridor across Northern Britain between 1881 and 1924. The relative proximity of the North Sea ports of Hull and Grimsby to Liverpool ex-

plains the rising attraction of this route for Eastern Europeans before 1914. TONY KUSHNER (University of Southampton) chose the case of a protracted return migration of a group of Russian subjects from Brazil to highlight the impact of rigid Russian regulations on average migrants. PER KRISTIAN SEBAK (University of Bergen) who has worked extensively on the history of the transatlantic steamship lines concluded the infrastructure panel. He discussed the role of Scandinavian steamship lines between 1904 and 1918, in particular the rise of the DFDS (Det Forenede Dampskibs-Selskab) line.

The papers of the third panel concentrated on the political sphere and Jewish institutions. In his talk „Paper Walls and their Gaps: Continuity and Change in the Passport System“ ANDREAS FAHRMEIR (Goethe University, Frankfurt am Main), traced the origins and concrete effect of identity controls in the period before 1914. The talk was partly based on his recently published comparative study on the impact of citizenship regimes in Germany, France, Britain, and the United States. TOBIAS BRINKMANN (University of Southampton/Penn State University) described the rise of transnational Jewish philanthropic organizations after 1860. He argued that the German Jewish Hilfsverein der Deutschen Juden (Aid Association of the German Jews) and its sister organizations in other countries can be defined as forerunners of contemporary NGOs because they combined specific with universal goals. ANNE CHRISTIN SASS (Free University Berlin) discussed the work of Emigdirect during the interwar period. In contrast to the Hilfsverein Emigdirect was organized by migrants themselves. Its work was shaped by the massive immigration restrictions and the increasingly difficult status of Jewish populations across Eastern Europe. CHRISTHARD HOFFMANN (University of Bergen) analyzed the coverage of the Jewish transmigration in the Jewish press. He differentiated between different Jewish papers, stressing especially the extensive coverage of Zionist papers. For Zionists the mass migration and the increasingly precarious situation of Jews in Russia and Romania appeared to confirm the urgency of establishing a Jewish state. KLAUS WEBER (Rothschild Ar-

chive, London) concluded this session by presenting results of his recent research on „The Jews' Temporary Shelter“ in London between 1885 and the 1930s.

The two papers of the final session went beyond the actual topic, by drawing connections to other migrations in the past and present. NELLY ELIAS (Ben Gurion University of the Negev, Beersheva) explored the transitory identities of Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union in Germany. LEO LUCASEN (University of Leiden) gave an overview over a recent project on assessing the actual dimension of European migration in the period between 1500 and 1800. Both papers raised crucial general questions, in regard to identity and the gap between perception and the actual extent of mass movement.

The conference convenors aim to build an international network of scholars working on different aspects of Jewish (trans-)migration between 1860 and 1950. Selected papers of the Hamburg conference will be published.

Program Overview:

Causes

Eric Lohr

Population Policy and Emigration Policy in Imperial Russia

Gur Alroey

Leaving the Shtetl: Reevaluating the Causes of the Mass Jewish Migration from Eastern Europe, 1875-1924

Infrastructure I - Across the Continent

Ruth Leiserowitz

Jews in the Prussian-Lithuanian Borderlands

Nicole Kvale

Emigrant Trains: Jewish Migration through Prussia, 1880-1914

Barbara Lüthi

„[G]erms of anarchy, crime, disease and degeneracy“: The Medicalization of European Borders and Its Effects on Jewish Migration after 1900

Carl Henrik Carlsson

Jewish Transmigrants from Eastern Europe in Sweden 1860-1914

Infrastructure II - Across the Sea

Ursula Wöst

The Hamburg Auswandererhallen: Origins and Development

Nick Evans

The stepping-stone to America: the Transmigrant Corridor across Northern Britain, 1881-1924

Tony Kushner

The Boys and Girls not from Brazil: From Russia to Rio and Back Again via Southampton, Antwerp and Hamburg, 1879-1880

Per Kristian Sebak

Scandinavian Steamship Lines and Jewish Transmigration, 1904-1918

Politics and Jewish Institutions

Andreas Fahrmeir

„Paper Walls and their Gaps: Continuity and Change in the Passport System“

Tobias Brinkmann

A Proto-NGO? The German-Jewish Hilfsverein and the Jewish Mass Migration from Eastern Europe

Anne-Christin Saß

Emigdirect – A Jewish Migration Organization as Mediator between East and West

Klaus Weber

Tide of Migration: The Jews' Temporary Shelter in London, 1885-1930s

Metalevel

Christhard Hoffmann

The Jewish Transmigration and its Public Perceptions

Nelly Elias

Identity Seeking and Cultural Preservation Among Recent Jewish Immigrants in Germany

Leo Lucassen

Migration – Then and Now

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