

## Jewish Immigration to the United States

Anti-Semitism, overpopulation, and racial discrimination prompted many Jews to leave Eastern Europe in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Between 1880 and 1924, when the United States adopted immigration restrictions, more than two millions Jews came to America. Many of these immigrants were unskilled laborers, struggling to learn English. Enticed by freedom and opportunity, they primarily settled in large cities such as New York, Philadelphia, Boston, and Chicago and found work in factories, manufacturing, and construction. This wave of immigrants embraced the American experience and made the country their new home. By the turn of the century, most major cities in the United States had thriving Jewish communities.

As Jews assimilated to the United States they made significant contributions to the country's intellectual and cultural life. In *The Shawl*, Simon Persky brags that film legend Lauren Bacall (born Betty Joan Perske to Jewish immigrant parents) is his cousin. Broadway composer Irving Berlin, magician Harry Houdini, and science fiction writer Isaac Asimov all came to America as children, part of the vast wave of European Jewish immigrants. Like Simon Persky, they found an America full of opportunity and embraced the American dream.

However, after World War I attitudes toward immigration began to change. Congress passed a series of laws to limit the flow of immigrants. During the Holocaust, obtaining a visa became an issue of life and death. The United States, like many countries, initially refused to allow Jewish refugees and stood silent while millions of Jews died at the hands of the Nazi regime.

Just before the outbreak of World War II on May 13, 1939, the *St. Louis* sailed from Hamburg to Havana, Cuba. Almost all the passengers were Jews fleeing Nazi anti-Semitism. Most applied for U.S. visas and planned to stay in Cuba only until they could enter the United States. Ultimately, Cuba did not allow the ship to dock. The passengers on board were stranded. The United States government was aware of the situation and had been asked to allow the refugees safe haven. The government refused, and most of the passengers were sent back to Europe just as World War II began.

Nearly five years later in January 1944 the Roosevelt Administration, faced with undeniable evidence of what was taking place in the Nazi extermination camps, formed the War Refugee Board. An executive order established a new policy that promised “to take all measures within its power to rescue the victims of enemy oppression who are in imminent danger of death and otherwise to afford such victims all possible relief and assistance consistent with the successful prosecution of the war.” This directive created a safe haven for many Jewish Holocaust survivors.

Though many refugees embraced the opportunities provided in America, Rosa Lublin represents the feelings of refugees—Jewish and non-Jewish—who never desired to leave their home countries and who did so only under duress. Rosa longs for the security, comfort, and familiarity of her native Poland even as she realizes that it's the product of a past life, a life stolen from her by the atrocities of the Holocaust.