



Roots and Branches

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THE OTHER ELLIS ISLAND

While the vast majority of our immigrant ancestors came through Ellis Island, from 1907 to 1914 thousands of East European Jews participated in a little-known episode in American Jewish history. They immigrated through the Port of Galveston where they were routed to towns throughout the Midwest where lodging and jobs awaited them.

Because of the concentration of immigrant Jews in New York City and rising anti-Semitism in Russia around the turn of the century, Jewish leaders such as financier Jacob Schiff and the celebrated English writer, Israel Zangwill, felt that Jews should enter the United States through a port other than New York. Because of his knowledge of the railroads, Schiff proposed Galveston, Texas, which had good rail connections to points throughout the Midwest. He raided funds for the project including \$500,000 from his own pocket.

In 1910, the Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization investigated the "Galveston Movement" to discover whether it was engaged in the illegal organization of immigration. The transcripts of these examinations are revealing. In the examinations, the immigrants -- most of whom came from Russia -- answered questions about their family origins, reasons for emigration, expectations of America, and their experiences on the voyage. Later, during interviews in their destination cities, they talked about their satisfaction (or lack of it) with conditions of employment.

In 1984, I participated in the first International Seminar on Jewish Genealogy in Jerusalem where I attended a lecture by Bernard Marinbach, author of "Galveston: Ellis Island of West" (1983) Albany, NY. Dr. Marinbach referred to 84 files he had examined as part of the research for his book. You can imagine my surprise and delight to discover that the last name on the list was Hirsch Zukerman -- my grandmother's first husband! I quickly sent for a copy of the transcript and was mesmerized to read details of his voyage of Galveston.

Q: Where did you obtain the money to purchase your ticket?

A: My wife's mother sold her home and gave me the money.

Q: What arrangements have you made for the support of your wife and children in Russia until such time as you are able to send them money.

A: I left her without money.

Q: How do you expect them to live?

A: She will sell her clothes to buy something to eat.

Q: Did she give you all the money resulting from the sale of her house?

A: Yes

Q: How much did your mother-in-law receive for her house?

A: 110 rubles.

This three-page interview revealed the desperate situation of my grandmother and her young children. They were not to join Hirsch Zukerman for three long years. It is difficult to imagine how they survived during that time.

The interviews were conducted during the summer of 1910, both at the Port of Galveston and in the cities where the immigrants settled. They contain a treasure of information about the immigrant and the family left behind.

According to Dr. Marinbach in "Galveston: Ellis Island of the West," the Industrial Removal Office in New York hired Morris D. Waldman to help oversee the settlement of the Galveston immigrants and Dr. Marinbach writes:

"In February (1908), Waldman embarked upon a tour of his own, to see for himself how bad conditions were throughout the West. Writing...from St. Louis, Waldman commented, 'What I have seen thus far is enough to make one blue--men out of work everywhere, starvation staring them in the face. The charities here are crowded with applicants and some of them Galveston men.' He concluded that it was useless at this time to persuade well-meaning communities to accept immigrants if these communities were actually unable to provide work."

Although the plan was controversial and short-lived, in its seven years, 10,000 Jews came through Galveston where they were met at the dock by Rabbi Henry Cohen, Galveston's great humanitarian rabbi, and were welcomed personally by the Mayor of Galveston. The plan ended in 1914 because of new restrictions on immigration, rising anti-Semitism and the threat of war.

These revealing transcripts can be found in the subject's immigration files (Record Group No. 85, Immigration File No. 52) and copies are available from the National Archives Records Center in Suitland, Maryland.

The actual ship's manifest records for the period 1895-1921, Port of Galveston, are in the National Archives in Washington, DC. Copies can be ordered from the National Archives in Washington, DC., the Rosenberg Library in Galveston, Texas and the Houston Public Library in Houston.

The Galveston Movement is the subject of a documentary film by Allan and Cynthia Salzman Mondell entitled "West of Hester Street" and has also been explored in numerous biographical works on Jacob Schiff.

A Beginner's Kit on how to start researching your family history which includes charts, list of archives and libraries, bibliography, maps, family group sheets and more can be ordered from: Miriam Weiner, 136 Sandpiper Key, Secaucus, NJ 07094 (Cost: \$10 plus \$1 postage/handling).