In March 1908, shortly before Passover, three Jewish women started making final arrangements to leave the Russian Empire and move overseas. Not long before, they had received the tickets for the voyage and a little money for expenses that would come up on the way, and they were tremendously excited about being reunited with their husbands. The first to leave was Tzippa Sheinkman, who sailed with her four children to join her husband in the Argentinean capital, Buenos Aires. Shortly thereafter, Raizel Kuschnir and her seven children—Yochanan, 12; Hirsch, 10; Chaim, 9; Rachel, 7; Esther, 6; Baruch, 3; and little Yossel, 1—started making their preparations, and in May they sailed to join her husband, a builder who had settled in Jaffa, Palestine, the year before. The last to leave was Esther Mindes, a hatmaker. After saying goodbye to her relatives and friends, Esther and five of her children—Rosa, 11; Miriam, 9; Chassia, 7; Sheindel, 3; and Monya, 2—went to the train station near their home and set out to join her husband in Boston, Massachusetts.

The three women and their sixteen children, who moved to three

Gur Alroey, “‘And I Remained Alone in a Vast Land’: Women in the Great Jewish Migration from Eastern Europe,” Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society n.s. 12, no. 3 (Spring/Summer 2006): 39–72
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distant countries overseas, did not know one another. The Sheinkmans, from Odessa, left the local port on an Italian ship bound for Buenos Aires. The voyage was long and tiring, lasting about 21 days. The Kuschnirs, from the town of Shpola in the Kiev region, spent 12 days sailing on a Russian ship from Odessa to Palestine. And the Mindeses, from Koretz in Volhynia, crossed the Russian-German border on their way to the port of Hamburg. There they boarded the Arcadia, owned by the Hamburg American Line, for the voyage to America.1

When they arrived in Argentina, Palestine, and the United States, respectively, these three families inadvertently took part in one of the most influential and significant events in modern Jewish history. Jewish emigration from Eastern Europe to lands overseas from the start of the twentieth century until the outbreak of World War I encompassed more than 1.5 million Jews seeking to flee the unbearable socio-economic conditions that were their lot in the Russian Empire. The hundreds of thousands of women and children leaving to join their husbands and fathers who awaited them in the destination countries made this not only the actual migration of a nation and an exception in the history of national migrations but also a complex and complicated process. Thus, for example, among the 1.2 million Jewish emigrants who in the years 1899–1914 left for the United States—the main destination at that period—45 percent were women and about a quarter were children up to the age of 14.2 To Palestine, Canada, and Argentina, the rate of women immigrants was slightly lower at around 40 percent.3

In this article, I will trace the migration process undergone by the Jewish immigrant woman—from the vacillation about where to go to that fateful moment when she received the tickets for the voyage from her husband and set out on her way. Moreover, because married women and children played a major role in the international migration process, I try to assess the real influence of Jewish women in the process as a whole and in deciding to emigrate in particular.4 However, before tracing the obstacle-filled path of Jewish immigrant women en route to their new homes, I will discuss the primary sources on which this article is based.

Sources

An investigation into how one makes the decision to emigrate is a complex and difficult task. Historians who have attempted to deal with this matter have long pointed out the frustrations, foremost of which is the
lack of primary sources for this aspect of emigration. The dearth of contemporary sources has forced investigators to use secondary sources and oral testimonies given many years after the move to the new country, and such testimonies were insufficient for an analysis of the dynamic that led to making the decision to emigrate in the first place. A similar difficulty exists with regard to the female Jewish emigrant in those years. The historian Irving Howe, in his monumental *World of Our Fathers*, declared that “the enormous memoir literature provides some clues, but not enough” to the “emigration drama” of millions of Jewish emigrants. The historiography of Jewish emigration has focused on the “macro” factors in the countries of origin that led to the emigration, on the difficulties of arrival in the chosen countries, and especially on the problems of acclimatization and absorption there. But the initial process of wavering and struggle within the family circle preceding emigration has not yet been investigated and documented, and thus the “emigration drama” of ordinary people—who, together with so many others, have become a statistic in quantitative research—has been absent from the literature of emigration.

The beginning of the Jewish emigration process can in fact be documented. In the wave of early-twentieth-century emigration that began after the pogroms at Kishinev in 1903 and ended with the outbreak of World War I, information bureaus were set up throughout tsarist Russia to assist the Jewish emigrants: one was the Jewish Colonization Association (JCA), financed by Baron de Hirsch; another was the Jewish Territorial Organization (ITO), headed by Israel Zangwill; and two others were sponsored by the Zionist Movement. Of the latter, one was run by the Odessa Committee of the Hovevei Zion (Lovers of Zion), and the other functioned as part of the Palestine Office of the Zionist Federation under the direction of Arthur Ruppin.

A characteristic of all the information offices—without any coordination between them—was the hundreds of letters sent by potential emigrants who asked about the possibilities of settling in various countries. These letters, which were not written for publication or “with an eye to history,” allow us to look into the very heart of the emigration process—not only to the United State but all countries overseas—and the difficulties it involved.

I therefore intend, through the emigrants’ letters to the information offices, to investigate three matters that historiographical research has rarely dealt with in any depth. The first is the degree to which the Jewish woman influenced the decision to emigrate as a family unit even before it was decided where and when they would go. The second is her capacity to implement the decision that was made.
the third is the degree to which the female experience of emigration overseas differed from the male experience.

The Jewish Woman in Eastern Europe: A Socioeconomic Perspective

At the beginning of the twentieth century, more than five million Jews lived within the boundaries of tsarist Russia—half the Jewish people at that period—and 90 percent of them were concentrated in the Pale of Settlement. The Pale of Settlement was created at the end of the eighteenth century following the division of Poland and was widened and altered at the beginning of the nineteenth century; its final form was fixed in 1835. According to the population census carried out by the tsarist government in 1897, there were 5,215,800 Jews in Russia out of a total population of 125,640,000. Thus, Jews constituted slightly less than 4 percent of the population of the empire as a whole. But because they were limited in where they could reside, their relative number in the Pale of Settlement was much higher, at 11.6 percent.11

Most of the Jews in the Pale of Settlement—about 80 percent—were, by the late nineteenth century, concentrated in cities. This was largely the result of a governmental policy that placed obstacles in the way of the Jews in the villages and restricted their settlement there. The “Temporary Regulations” drafted by Minister of the Interior Nikolai Pavlovich Ignatyev and published in May 1882 forbade the Jews to settle in rural areas and prohibited them from leasing agricultural lands. As a result, together with the industrialization process that began in those years, an internal migration began in the tsarist empire that led to a real revolution in all areas of Jewish life and was one of the chief causes of the great migration overseas. Following the move from the village to the city, there was a far-reaching change in the lifestyles of the Jews; an increasing number of them struggled for subsistence in the crowded conditions of the cities of the Pale of Settlement. Many of the migrants were forced against their will to become artisans, industrial workers, and salaried workers and to take whatever jobs came their way.

An important segment in the Pale of Settlement was the women, whose proportion in the Jewish population was higher than that of the men.12 The industrialization process, which caused real changes in the occupational structure of the Jews, led to an even greater change among the Jewish women and drove them into the labor market. The statistics concerning working women in the Pale of Settlement show that women played a very important part in supporting the family. Ac-
According to the population census, 21 percent of women between the ages of 14 and 59 were registered as employed. The economist Arcadius Kahan, however, claims that in reality the proportion of working women was higher. In his opinion, the census did not include the women working in small and family workshops and minor employments, or the women working in the large industries that had begun to spring up in the Pale of Settlement. He therefore estimates that the proportion of women employed was about 28 percent of all working people in the Jewish society.

The entry of women into the labor market and their essential role in the family unit—both from the economic point of view and with regard to rearing the children and running the home—gave them an important position. Most families in Eastern Europe at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth were based on a working couple. Many women engaged in commerce, ran timber businesses, sold agricultural produce, helped run inns and hostels, and set up temporary booths in the markets of the towns to sell their wares.

Many other women in the Pale of Settlement worked in occupations that did not require any special expertise. Many worked in jobs described as “menial,” such as cleaning, laundering, and acting as maidservants. The rapid industrialization process also drove many women into developing industries like textiles, tobacco, and artificial flowers. In Grodno, for instance, the tobacco industry employed about a thousand people, most of them women and children. However, the clothing industry was the primary occupation for women. They succeeded in transforming their homes into workshops and to combine running the house and rearing the children with providing for the family. It is difficult to estimate the number of women who worked in this industry, but, among about a thousand women who turned to the information offices of the JCA asking for financial assistance in order to emigrate, about half did not give a profession, 26 percent worked as dressmakers or milliners, 10 percent were housewives, laundrywomen, maidservants, and cooks, 4 percent described themselves as merchants, and the remainder listed their professions as, for example, midwives, florists, shopkeepers, bookbinders, or innkeepers.

A letter sent by Rachel Birman to Ruppin, head of the Palestine Office and the official responsible for one of the Zionist information offices in Jaffa, faithfully reflects this reality. Rachel, 36, was from the town of Ekaterinoslav in the south of the Pale of Settlement, married, and mother to an 11-year-old daughter and a 9-year-old son. “Dear Sir,” she wrote Ruppin:
As I have read that the information office provides information concerning every detail of the journey to Palestine, and also concerning the purchase of land and other things, I am turning to you with a request to let us know the possibilities of going there and settling. . . . My husband works in a firm as an accountant and I, for my part, while running the home, am also in the coal business. We have a yard for the sale of this merchandise, and my 20-year-old brother-in-law is also in this. Our assets amount to about six thousand rubles, and because the firm where my husband works is closing and because our tenancy of the yard where we have our business is coming to an end, we have only another year and a half and cannot stay here any longer. We therefore have to look for a new beginning and to start everything anew.18

There were many other women like Rachel Birman in the Pale of Settlement. On the one hand they looked after their families, and on the other hand they managed their family businesses with their husbands and sometimes without them. Quite often these small-scale merchants and shopkeepers had to go beyond their shtetls and offer their wares in more distant places. In such cases, the task of looking after things—both managing the home and children and managing the business while the husband was away—fell on the wife. In cases where the man did not work but learned Torah and did not concern himself with daily material concerns, the burden carried by the wife was even heavier. A glimpse at this phenomenon can be found in Sholem Asch’s book *East River*:

For generations, the Jewish wife was traditionally the provider of the family’s livelihood. It was her task to keep her husband and sons free from all care of material needs in order that they might be able to dedicate their lives to God, to His Torah and His service. Her shoulders carried the yoke of providing the daily bread. She it was who travelled to the market-place. Often at great danger, among drunken peasants and lecherous gentry. It was not only on occasion necessary for her to defend herself against assault but actually to save her life. This assumption of the economic responsibility, in addition to her boundless devotion to her family, bred a dominating type of mother, a reminder of the matriarchal type of family institution.19

The wife’s contribution to the domestic economy and her economic indispensability quite naturally became a dominant and influential factor in the family unit. The decision to emigrate, which was motivated by the family’s desire to improve its economic situation, could not fail to have taken into account the wife’s attitude to being uprooted and taken to a new country and her capacity to adapt to one of the countries available. Her entry into the cycle of labor made her a
full partner in the family’s deliberations on whether to leave the country of origin or to remain there.

The Decision to Emigrate

“Dear friends, two families from a small shtetl who are about to be expelled from there have turned to me, asking whether they have any possibility of managing in Palestine.” This is what a Zionist executive wrote on behalf of two poor families from a shtetl near Vilna to the directors of the Palestine Office in Jaffa:

The people from these families are blacksmiths, and as they live next to a village they have also worked in agriculture, and their whole wish is to come and settle in Palestine.

One of the families has one son who is also a blacksmith, and three daughters who are dressmakers. And the second family has two sons who are blacksmiths and one daughter whose work is making corsets. Please let me know in which way these families can manage in Palestine. They also ask me if the tools of their trade can be obtained there or if one has to bring them from here. I await your speedy reply. Yours sincerely with the blessing of Zion, A. B. Goldberg.20

Although this letter is not directly concerned with women and their place in the decision-making process, something is definitely to be learned from it about their economic importance in the family unit. From the representative’s inquiry on behalf of the families, one gathers not only that the two families asked for information on the economic situation in the country to which they wished to emigrate and on their capacity to be absorbed there, but also that the very mention of the occupations of the girls in the families shows that the women’s contribution formed part of the economic calculations of whether to emigrate. The information office’s reply indicates that the heads of the Palestine Office also saw the women in the family as a significant workforce that could sustain the family economically until the blacksmiths could find their place in the local labor market:

Blacksmiths who are skilled at their craft and good at shoeing horses can find work and a decent livelihood. We therefore generally tell unmarried blacksmiths that they can come: they are not burdened with families and can go from place to place looking for work until they finally obtain it. But we are unable to give an answer to fathers of families who need a livelihood immediately. Skilled dressmakers can earn from sixty to eighty francs a month. If they really know their job, the three daughters can support the
family while the father and son look for work. The one who makes corsets can also find work. If they decide to come, it will be a good thing if they bring their working tools with them.21

From the questions put by the local representative on behalf of the two families and especially from the information office’s reply, one can see that the women had a central place in the considerations of whether to immigrate to Palestine. Their capacity to find work and perhaps even to support the family in the first months of their immigration shows their centrality in the process of coming to a decision.

The case of Yaakov Litvak, a teacher in a progressive heder in the city of Lodz in Poland, also shows us the interdependency of a family that found it difficult to subsist because of the low wages and high cost of living in Poland before World War I. Because the general economic situation was so terrible that, as he wrote, “words fail me to describe the trouble the Jews in Poland have in providing for themselves,” the members of the family decided to immigrate to Palestine in two stages. In the first stage, his wife and children would go there “because the cost-of-living in Lodz is very high,” and it was cheaper to send money from Poland to Palestine and maintain the family in Palestine than in Lodz, and in the second stage Litvak would join his family:

And when my wife and the members of my family will be in our country which is not so expensive and where one’s requirements are few, they will manage with little. My wife can support herself by working because she’s a dressmaker. And perhaps with God’s help I can put together a few hundred shekels, and I too can acquire an inheritance in our land.22

The Palestine Office’s reply was encouraging. If his wife was really a “skilled dressmaker, she could earn about seventy francs a month. If he could send her some money as well, she and the other members of the family could subsist here,” wrote Ruppin to Litvak.23 Despite the fact that the head of the family intended to send money to the family members living in Palestine, the role of the wife in the immigration process was very important. Unlike the husband, who continued his usual way of life in the land of his birth and his familiar environment, his wife had the responsibility of going forth with the children alone and looking after them in a new country that did not resemble her home town, Lodz, in any way whatsoever. Adaptation to the conditions of the country and its climate, finding a place to live and a livelihood, and looking for a suitable framework for the children represented a real challenge for Mrs. Litvak. From the letter and the information office’s reply, we cannot know if the family did in fact follow the office’s
recommendation and go to Palestine, but one can certainly appreciate the role of the mother of the family in the process.

One can thus learn about the centrality of the Jewish female emigrant not only from the direct questions concerning the capacity of women to be absorbed into the labor market but also from the way the questions were put and the considerable use by the writers of the first-person plural. Although most of the letters were written by men—husbands or elder sons—the questions were quite often asked on behalf of both husband and wife. From some of the letters, it would seem that they sat together in their homes by the light of an oil-lamp and wrote the letter in consultation with each other. Expressions like “I ask you to inform us,” “we do not ask” (used by the coal-merchant Rachel Birman in her letter), “We immediately decided that we wished to emigrate,” or “we wanted to buy some land and work,” and many similar expressions appearing in these letters, demonstrate a partnership in making decisions and a mutual dependency in the family circle before the decisions were reached.

The process of making a decision among single women was different from that among mothers of families. Girls who wished to emigrate alone were dependent on the consent of their parents, who did not easily agree to their daughters going alone on a long and dangerous journey to some country overseas. The letter from Teibel Kardash to the Palestine Office in April 1914 reflects the difficulties a young girl had to face if she wanted to emigrate alone:

Eighteen years ago, I was born to my parents—shopkeepers—in a remote little town in the region of Kiev. My father is an honest householder of good family, a straight and good man who fears God, keeps the Sabbath, and is scrupulous about observing all the commandments. My mother is also a modest and decent woman, although freer in her outlook than my father. . . . For a whole year I have fought my parents, who will not let me travel for fear that I will have to work too hard, seeing that I have no means of supporting myself in a foreign country.24

The question she put to the head of the Palestine Office was whether it was possible to combine work with study in Palestine. Agricultural work was not attractive to the writer. However, “I very much want to gain an education, but I can’t do it without money, and I have therefore decided to work in the daytime and study in the evening.” In his reply, Ruppin supported the girl’s decision:

As you don’t have a skill, you have no other choice than to be an agricultural worker. . . . The season for this work is the winter, and you will have
to postpone your journey until that time. After the day’s work it is possible
to study in the evening. Lessons are given everywhere free of charge. But
one naturally cannot expect much success from studies after a day of la-
bor. Another well-tried path is to become a teacher or a teacher in a kin-
dergarten. Teaching requires training, either privately or in a school. . . .
If you can get a certain sum of money from your parental home every
month for your subsistence, it is worth your coming here to master the
Hebrew language, and you will eventually find yourself a position in a
school or in a kindergarten.25

From many other letters of potential emigrants to the information
offices, we learn that Jewish women played an active role in the deci-
sion to emigrate. Although the letters were sent to Palestine, they defi-
nitely reflect the same reality among other Jewish families who
immigrated to various countries overseas. Most of the families who ap-
plied the Palestine information bureaus did not, ultimately, came to
the holy land. The picture that emerges both from their queries and
from the answers is not only that the Jewish woman did not passively
follow her husband and was captive of a certain social situation over
which she had no control, but that sometimes the success of the move
to the new country and absorption in it rested on her shoulders, at
least until the husband had become acclimatized. This claim is in
agreement with investigations that have shown the importance of the
East European woman in the economic structure of the restricted fam-
ily. Her status as an extra provider in addition to the husband and her
economic indispensability gave her a central role in the considerations
that were so complex and so fateful for the family.

There were, of course, cases in which the wife was not involved in the
decision to emigrate at all. The case of the Kroll family is an example of
a decision made unilaterally by the husband. In 1909, the Krolls moved
to Palestine from Skaryszew, a small suburb of Radom, Poland. The
head of the family, Mendel Kroll, was an expert at painting walls with oil
paints. After arriving in Palestine, he earned a living whitewashing
houses and decorating them with oil paints, using stencils prepared in
advance. Many homes in Tel Aviv, which was just starting to be built that
year, were adorned by Kroll and his family with decorative bands along
the walls, just a few centimeters below the ceiling.

The Krolls’ decision to move to Palestine at the beginning of the
twentieth century was based on a combination of Zionism and a reli-
gious yearning for the Land of Israel. They were a relatively affluent
family that had made a living painting and whitewashing homes in East-
ern Europe. Because their financial situation was not bad, there was no
need for the mother, Tzirel Kroll, to work. Her role as a breadwinner
was secondary, and hence her status and position vis-à-vis the issue of immigration to Palestine was marginal. She was not consulted as to whether to move; it was a done deal that she had to make her peace with. “The desire to move to Palestine did not budge from Mendel’s heart,” their granddaughter describes in her memoirs, *Tsabai ha-ir*:

He shared his dream with his four sons and spun plans for emigration together with them. . . . Tzirel and the girls were not included in the Palestine plans. They didn’t understand the language, since Mendel made a point of speaking with his sons in Hebrew. Sharp-eared Tzippora caught a few key words here and there and translated them for her sister Sarah. Tzirel tried to draw the big secret out of the boys—but they guarded it zealously for fear of the evil eye. Tzirel started suspecting that a big life change awaited her—a change worse than the one she had known, having married and exchanged her pretty village for a small, crowded neighborhood.26

Another reflection of her marginal status in making the decision to emigrate came up when the family arrived at the Jaffa port. The Krolls moved to Palestine in two stages. The two oldest boys, Abba and Chaim, went first, followed about a year later by the rest of the family. The reunification of the family after such a long time is described by Malka Kroll in her memoirs as an emotional event. The prolonged separation and the two boys’ stay in the hot Palestinian climate had altered them unrecognizably. Abba had contracted malaria and lost a lot of weight. “What has this country done to you?” Mendel asked his oldest son when they were reunited. “You, who were called the manly one, you’re skin and bones,” the father continued. “It’s malaria,” he replied to his worried parents. “Everyone who guards orchards is stung by a mosquito and gets the disease,” he explained to his worried parents.

Why didn’t you write to us that you were ill? Menachem Mendel demanded. So as not to scare you. We were afraid Mother would change her mind and wouldn’t want to come here. Nu, replied Mendel in a tone that sounded half-disparaging, half-angry, I decided to move to Palestine, and when I decide something, I do it. I don’t need advice from women. A woman’s place is in the kitchen.27

The image of Tzirel Kroll as reflected in her granddaughter’s memoirs is that of a simple, illiterate woman who spent most of her time in the kitchen and on housework. Because she was not involved in the decision to immigrate to Palestine, she had a harder time integrating than the rest of her family did, and her difficulties lasted longer. Unlike the children, who fit in with the children of other Jewish immigrants in Pal-
When the lights went off in the theater she started screaming, “Mendel, are you here?” “Yes, I’m here,” he replied softly. “Tzirel, calm down.” Then the story started playing out on the screen. Shaken and agitated, Tzirel expressed her excitement vocally. “Oy vey iz mir, soon they’ll kill him. Mendel, tell me he’ll get away. Oy vey iz mir, the girl doesn’t see the crook hiding in the closet. She has to be warned about him. Oy vey iz mir . . . .”

The movie-goers stopped watching the movie. Their eyes were trained on the bewigged older woman who was screaming excitedly. “Oy vey iz mir!” Some of them even mimicked her and joined her in her excited cries, while the other viewers were convulsed with laughter in their seats. At that moment, Mendel wished the earth would open up and swallow him. Menachem Mendel never again took Tzirel to the Eden cinema.28

Implementation of the Decision

Whether or not the Jewish woman was a full partner and her status as a provider was taken into account in the decision about emigrating or remaining in the Pale of Settlement, the implementation of the decision was almost completely her responsibility, and the success of the move to the new country rested entirely on her shoulders. Moreover, even when both male and female emigrants came from the same shtetls, traveled on the same railways, reached the same ports of departure, and sailed on the same ships, each gender experienced the journey differently. One can say without any exaggeration that the emigration of women was far more complex than that of men.

Jewish immigration to the United States and other countries overseas generally took place in two stages: the head of the family left for the country alone, and after some months (and sometimes years) he was joined by the other members of the family. The reason for this fragmentation of the family was first and foremost the family’s eco-
nomic distress and its inability to finance the cost of the journey for all its members. The price of a ticket to the United States for a single emigrant was about 70 rubles, a child under the age of five paid 5 rubles, and a child up to the age of 12 traveled at half price. To the price of the steamship ticket one needed to add the expenses of the journey, which were numerous: obtaining the necessary documents for emigration, food, the train journey, and accommodation in the port of departure until the ship set sail. For a family of six—father, mother and four children—the cost of sailing was very high, reaching 220–30 rubles, not including the expenses of train travel and food throughout the long journey. It was thus a very great expense for a family whose income from a trade or small business was no more than 500–600 rubles a year. The solution to this financial difficulty was for the head of the family to go in advance to the intended country, and, after he had begun to find his feet economically, to send steamship tickets to his family waiting in the country of origin.

The absence of the head of the family and his journey to a new country to prepare the way for the others completely changed the position of the wife in the family unit. After he had gone, the wife was left carrying the heavy responsibility, for a relatively long period of time, of the fate of the family and its livelihood. She had to make innumerable daily decisions without having her spouse standing beside her and consulting with her as was the case before he traveled.

In 1970, the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research compiled a bibliography of memoirs penned by Jewish immigrants who came to the United States and Canada during the period of the great migration. The 364 memoirs in Yiddish, Hebrew, and English that were collected constitute an invaluable record of the manner in which women managed their lives during the absence of their husbands: contending with economic hardships, looking after the children, and waiting for the dollars to come from America. Of particular importance are those memoirs written in Yiddish, since the authors were, according to the editor of the bibliography, E. Lifschutz, immigrants “who were not necessarily successful in America.” Those who were, he notes, “wrote their memoirs in English and often with the aid of a ghostwriter.”

The memoirs of Rachel Kositza, published in 1964, serve as a good illustration of the hardships endured by a woman who waited three years with her two children until they sailed for America. In the English introduction to the book, the daughter relates that her mother began writing her memoirs at the age of 86, and they were published only 10 years later (while her mother was still alive). The importance of the book, states the daughter, and hence its importance to this
study, is that it represents an entire generation of women who, despite hardship and adversity, managed to immigrate to America:

It seemed to me that in this respect she was representative of a type that is fast disappearing from American Jewish life—the Jewish immigrant woman who, at the turn of the century, came out of the East European ghetto to the ghetto of America, and by sheer grit and perseverance, undeterred by poverty or hard work, opened up for her children opportunities for higher education and self-development.

The three years that elapsed between the departure of Rachel’s husband and her arrival in the United States are described in her memoirs as difficult years filled with despair and anxiety. After her husband left, she went to live with her brother Natteh. However, it became quickly evident that the brother was unable to provide financial support for his sister and her two children. Consequently, Rachel began looking for work, though her prospects were poor because her children were still young and there was no one to look after them. Her economic situation deteriorated and she lived under harsh conditions:

The apartment became very cold and I did not have enough money to buy wood for heating. So I turned to charity. I don’t know how I survived during those three long years my husband was in the United States. Once in a while I received a letter from him with a little money, but it wasn’t enough.

Besides economic hardship, Rachel also endured the 1905 pogrom against the Jews in Bialystok. She hid with her children while the perpetrators looted, plundered, and massacred. She eventually received the steamship tickets and joined her husband in the United States.

Another example of a mother who was forced to carry the full burden of raising her children and providing for them after her husband went to America can be found in the memoirs of Morris Raphael Cohen, *A Dreamer’s Journey*:

In the winter of 1883–1884, when my father left us to seek in America a more secure way of earning a living for himself and his family, my two brothers were apprenticed to a shoemaker and a tailor respectively, and my mother went to work peddling apples, rolls, etc. As she had to leave the house very early in the morning, before my sister and I were awake, she used to leave a pot of cooked potatoes for our nourishment.

Thus, the departure of the husband/father resulted in the family unit breaking up. The wife/mother was forced to go out to work while
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her children remained at home. In the man’s absence, the burden of providing for the family fell wholly on the woman’s shoulders. If the role played by the woman in the household and in supporting the family was important prior to the departure of the head of the family, then after his departure she not only became the sole provider but also took full responsibility for raising the children. Separation from their father was difficult for the children, too. In his memoirs, These Are the Generations of Adam, Ephraim Liczitzky describes the pain of separation from his father when he was a boy of only seven and a half. Although his father tried to conceal his impending departure from him, he sensed from the general atmosphere in the household that something was about to happen. “I felt as though my father were leaving me too and I did not let go of him until the hour of his departure,” describes Liczitzky:

As soon as I return from heder I cling to him and follow him like a shadow; wherever he goes, I go, wherever he stands, I stand, wherever he sits, I sit, and when he retires to his bed, I throw myself into his bed, I clutch him and press myself next to him and into him and I do not let go even as I succumb to sleep.  

As soon as the head of the family settled into the new country, steamship tickets and money for the journey were sent, and the wife had to execute the second and most complicated stage of the emigration process: joining the husband and father in the new country. When the tickets arrived, it was cause for excitement not only within the family but also throughout the entire town. Another family was immigrating to America to join the many other townspeople already there. In her memoirs, Mary Antin recalls the excitement that gripped everyone as soon the tickets arrived. “One day the steamer tickets arrived,” relates Antin:

Before sunset the news was all over Polotzk that Hannah Hayye had received a steamer ticket for America. Then they began to come. Friends and foes, distant relatives and new acquaintances, young and old, wise and foolish, debtors and creditors, and mere neighbors—from every quarter of the city, from both sides of the Dvina, from over the Polota, from nowhere—a steady stream of them poured into our street, both day and night, till the hour of our departure.

Once the initial excitement subsided, the women had to contend with three main difficulties, almost impassable and dangerous obstacles for emigrants in tsarist Russia of the early twentieth century in
general and for women in particular: bureaucracy that forced them to leave tsarist Russia illegally, insufficient money to cover the necessities of the journey, and the adversities of the journey itself.

**Bureaucracy**

Women who wished to leave tsarist Russia legally to join their husbands in the new country had to cross a bureaucratic minefield. According to Russian law, a woman could only obtain a passport with the agreement of her husband. Because many heads of families emigrated alone in order to prepare an economic infrastructure for their families and did not leave their wives a separate passport or a paper signed by a notary confirming the marriage bond between them, the women found themselves at a dead end. This difficulty could be overcome in two ways. The first and less feasible way was to get the husband to declare in front of a notary in the new country that he wished his wife and children to join him. He then had to get this declaration signed by the Russian consul in the area where he lived and send it to his wife. A wife who presented such a declaration signed by the notary and the consul would obtain a passport without any trouble. The second and simpler way for the wife to obtain a passport was for her to declare at the police station that she had been abandoned by her husband and all trace of him had been lost. The police, after a short investigation to verify her story, would provide her with a document confirming her declaration and permitting her to obtain a passport from the governor of the district.39

For many of the female emigrants (and this applied to male emigrants as well), the bureaucratic procedures for emigration were complex and almost impossible to carry out, especially those connected with obtaining a passport. Contradictory, ill-understood regulations, obtuseness and arbitrariness on the part of the officials, corruption, poor knowledge of Russian, and the limited ability of the female emigrant to cope with the bureaucratic processes on her own gave rise to feelings of impotence and despair.40 This often forced her, like the male emigrant, to seek the assistance of professional agents in order to attempt to cross the borders of tsarist Russia illegally.

The case of Liebe Kirzner, the mother of five children who wished to join her husband in America, is one example out of many of the dangers that lay in wait for the emigrant mother of a family on the way to their chosen country. Like many Jewish women in tsarist Russia, Liebe did not succeed in obtaining the required passport for leaving Russia legally, and consequently she paid 46 rubles to a Jewish agent to take her and the children across the frontier. The agent added them
to another group of emigrants, and the whole party began to cross the frontier at nightfall. Unfortunately, they were discovered by a passing patrol, and in the commotion that followed shots were fired and one of the emigrant women lost her life. Even though Liebe escaped unharmed from the encounter with the patrol, there is no doubt that this violent nocturnal incident made a painful impression on her and her children and cast doubt over her capacity to bring her children safely to their father waiting for them in America.

Another way of leaving Russia illegally was by bribing the sailors working on the ships sailing to America. In one of the newspapers of the period, there was an account of a Jewish female emigrant who contracted an eye disease, and the navigation company with which she planned to sail would not allow her onboard for fear that she would not pass the inspections at Ellis Island and would have to return to Russia at the company’s expense. Because she had already begun the long journey, bought a steamship ticket, and arrived at the port, she had no wish to return to her hometown and wait for her eyes to heal. Instead, she bribed a sailor to come to her in the middle of the night and take her secretly onto the ship as a hidden passenger. The sailor did in fact come at the time agreed on, but unfortunately it turned out that the man was a scoundrel of the worst kind:

The sailor came, put the woman in a cart, took her outside the town, and raped her. After he had inflicted terrible wounds on her, he disfigured her head and face and tore her clothes to tatters. The woman cried out, but nobody heard her, for he had raped her a long way outside the town in a place people did not visit and where there were no passersby. The unfortunate woman lay as though lifeless at the feet of the hired sailor on the sand of the seashore, violated and defiled, wounded and trampled underfoot, and an hour later when she revived she wept and wailed and tore the hair of her head because of her honor which had been violated and her body which had been defiled.

Slipping over the border illegally at night through the use of guides and the practice of giving bribes was quite common. According to data that appeared in one of the Russian newspapers of the period and was published by the JCA information offices, about 75 percent of the emigrants leaving Russia chose this option. Because there was a high proportion of women and children in the Jewish emigration, stories like those of Liebe Kirzner and the woman who was raped were probably not unusual.
In other cases, the difficulty in emigrating was not connected with crossing the frontier illegally or encountering military patrols but was the result of an inability to obtain the money necessary for the journey. On many occasions, the head of the family sent his wife and children only a steamship ticket, in the hope that she would succeed in amassing the sum of money to cover the other expenses of the trip. The difficulty in raising the money forced the women emigrants to turn to one of the many information offices in the Pale of Settlement to ask for financial support. A typical case, revealing the distress of the Jewish female emigrant, can be found in a letter of one of the officials of the information office in Odessa who would report every week to his superiors about the happenings in the office. This official, B. Spielberg, often sympathized with the importunate emigrants, sensing their aims and motivations, and hence his descriptions of the emigrants are interesting and colorful. He admitted on a number of occasions that the daily friction with the emigrants made him feel embarrassed and uncomfortable. “Only two things that have happened have caused me much unpleasantness,” he wrote to his superiors:

Yesterday, a woman came with six children and demanded that I should give (that the committee should give) her the twenty rubles she is missing to travel to the United States. She wept and cried, and said that if she wasn’t given the money she needed, she would throw herself and her children in the sea. I told her to go to a rabbi and I also gave her a ruble.

The woman did not take his advice, threw the coin back at him, and left the hall of the information office, shouting that Spielberg had told her to throw herself and her children in the sea. “The [other] travelers were angry at such cruelty,” he wrote, “but I went out after her and explained the matter to the travelers.” He continued:

Today in the morning when I came to the committee, the woman was already waiting for me with her children in the street and once again shouted and wept and said that if she wasn’t given the money she would go with her children to the sea. . . . She wept and shouted until the travelers themselves collected fifteen rubles and gave them to her (two rubles were also taken from me). . . . There are always demands for money, and I felt it was right to write to you about it.
Even if the mother of a family succeeded in coping with all the bureaucratic difficulties, did not fall into the hands of crooks who sought to take her money and exploit her dependent situation, and did not slip across the border illegally, traveling thousands of kilometers with her children to the country of choice was a complex undertaking in itself. From the moment when the husband sent the ticket and his call to come and join him came through, the wife had to contend with a number of difficulties from which the man was exempted: liquidating the business, selling the house, and especially traveling and sailing with the children—most of whom were small—which made the whole process much more complex and dangerous.

The story of Lora-Riwka Kosowsky, who turned to the JCA information office for assistance, is an instructive example of the “emigration drama” of the female Jewish emigrant at the beginning of the twentieth century. In her very typical and characteristic story, there are no family tragedies or special difficulties like those of Liebe Kirzner, but the very fact that nothing special happened exemplifies the emigrant experience.

One day in early 1912, Lora-Riwka, a 37-year-old woman from the city of Minsk, turned to the information office closest to where she lived and asked the local representative for financial assistance in order to travel to her husband, who was waiting for her in Rochester, New York. Because she already had the steamship tickets, she received financial assistance in the amount of 20 rubles to cover the expenses of the journey by train. When the train tickets were bought and the family belongings packed, Lora-Riwka and her children (Moses, 15; Selik, 12; Chaim, 11; Keila, 7; Chaja, 5; and Mendel, 4) traveled northward—a journey of about five hundred kilometers—to the port of Libau, where they waited for a few days until the ship sailed. The ship, “Birma” of the East Asian line, reached Ellis Island on April 7, 1912, where Mr. Kosowsky was waiting to bring his wife and children to their new home in America.44

Even if the children had behaved perfectly and did not quarrel among themselves, and even if they did not fall ill en route and did not get lost in one of the crowded markets, Lora-Riwka’s journey to America was completely different from that of her husband, who had traveled alone and did not have to worry about six young children. If we multiply the case of the Kosowskys hundreds of thousands of times, we may arrive at a higher estimation of the role of women in one of the most fateful events in the life of the Jewish people in the modern period.
The journey of unmarried female emigrants was more complex and sometimes more dangerous than that of married women with children. Their unaccompanied emigration drew to them various dubious types—especially white-slave traders—who accosted them and exploited the fact of their being alone and their lack of familiarity with the emigration process in order to deceive them into coming to one of the brothels overseas. A number of times, the immigration offices warned emigrant women not to set out alone and tried in various ways to restrict the white-slave traders’ activities:

From time to time circulars were sent to the sub-committees, pointing out the necessity to specially supervise the activity of the agents, to keep a watchful eye over the men and women passing with young girl emigrants as their would-be bridegrooms, chaperons, fellow-travellers and so on. The sub-committees were also instructed to supply the girl emigrants travelling by themselves with addresses of foreign Jewish benevolent institutions, to inform the latter of the arrival of the emigrants in case of necessity, to have the emigrants met at the railway stations by workers of the committee and so forth.

In a special report published by the JCA information office dealing with this phenomenon, many cases are described of young female emigrants who fell victim to this wretched trade. The case of G (the report did not give her full name) is one example out of many of an emigrant who was enticed by a white-slave trader in the course of her journey to one of the countries overseas.

In the winter of 1911, G, a young girl from Minsk, set out for the port of Bremen in order to sail from there to her relatives in Chicago. In the course of her journey by train, the girl met an older woman who proposed making a tour of a few hours of the German capital, Berlin. The woman’s suggestion did not arouse the girl’s suspicions, and her curiosity to see the city before setting sail overcame her. “When they were walking about Berlin, an unknown gentleman approached them, took the young girl by the hand, and wanted to put her into a cab.” In the confusion that followed, the girl fainted and a policeman passing in the area called for medical assistance, and in the meantime the two crooks disappeared. Ultimately, G missed the ship that was to take her to America and was detained for questioning in Berlin.

On the face of it, there should not have been any difference between men and women in the emigration process. But the difficulties of the journey and the ways of dealing with them are a prime example of the gender difference—especially of an experiential nature—that characterized both parties. The challenges facing emigrant women in
general and Jewish emigrant women in particular were greater and more complex than those confronting male emigrants, both from the point of view of family ties and of responsibility for the fate of the family and from the legal point of view and that of the status of women—which affected their acquisition of the documents they needed—in Russian society at the beginning of the twentieth century.

From the few examples cited in this article, we see that the stereotyped image of immigrant Jewish mothers as “physical and psychological supporters of their family” has a very real basis in fact. The cases of Lora-Riwka Kosowsky, Liebe Kirzner, and even the woman who threw a coin back at the official in the emigration office correspond to that image. These are women who did not conform to a domestic ideal but were the driving force of the process and bore the responsibility for its implementation.

**When Husbands Desert Their Wives**

In March 1909, Mina Malka Polyakov contacted the daily newspaper *Der Fraynd* with a request to publish the following notice:

> My husband deserted me and our six children eighteen months ago and I am lonely, sick, and in trouble. . . . My husband is from Vitebsk, his name is Meta Polyakov, and he is a painter by trade. He went to America. Anyone who knows him or has seen him would be doing a great act of kindness by writing to me immediately. In the meantime, compassionate Jews, please help me in my time of need, for my children are dying of cold and hunger.

Another notice published in the East European Jewish press read:

> Compassionate Jews. I call upon you for assistance in finding my husband who deserted me and his three children five years ago without any means of support and I do not know where to find him. His name is Moshe Aharon Chaimovitz, approximately 29–30 years of age, medium build, with curly blond hair, and shortsighted, dark eyes. He is a cobbler, although I have recently been told that he is a craftsman in a toy factory.

The stories of Malka Polyakov and Mrs. Chaimovitz were by no means uncommon during the great migration from Eastern Europe. Many of the men who departed for countries overseas in the first stage in order to settle down, save money, and bring the remaining members of their family to join them, nevertheless arrived in the New
World and subsequently severed all contact with their families. The incidence of husbands deserting their wives had been almost unknown to East European Jewish society prior to the mass migration to countries overseas. The only previous evidence was from the late 1860s and early 1870s, when women were sometimes deserted by their husbands following the severe famine that struck the northwestern region of the Pale of Settlement.50 The search for new sources of income resulted in the disappearance of husbands who subsequently cut off all contact with their families.

The unprecedented mass migration of the early twentieth century resulted in a renewed upsurge in desertion by husbands to levels never before encountered in Jewish society. The dispersal of two million Jewish emigrants to all corners of the earth created an intolerable reality for women who waited for a sign of life from their husbands, which was often not forthcoming for several years.51 Although it is not known how many women were deserted by their husbands during the great migration, references to the phenomenon in the press of the time shows that it was considerably widespread:

That Jewish migration touches upon every walk of life is nothing new. Young and old, men and women, all seek the path and hope for a better life. It is no easy thing to come [to a new country] and build a new home there. Not everyone finds a "schtickel broit" there, just as they did not find it in their home countries. [This] movement of population has unleashed a new disease that was scarcely known previously. Women whose husbands have gone to America, or any other country, have left behind several family members, and nothing more is known of them.52

Although no data are available regarding the number of women who were deserted by their husbands in Eastern Europe, there is some quantitative data regarding their numbers in the United States in the early twentieth century. From the end of the nineteenth century, Jewish charitable organizations in various cities in the United States began helping poverty-stricken Jewish immigrants who had settled there. These charitable works led to annual conferences being held in cities all over the United States that focused on the hardships encountered by the Jewish immigrants and sought solutions and suitable financial means to resolve their problems.

One of the issues discussed at these conferences was the problem of women who had been deserted by their husbands. The data presented there regarding the scope of the problem indicate that this was quite a common occurrence. At the 1910 conference held in St. Louis, the director of the New York branch of the United Hebrew Charities, Morris
Waldman, painted a gloomy picture of the scope of the problem. In 1909, he noted, 1,046 women who had been deserted by their husbands appealed to him for help. Most had arrived in the United States some time previously to join their husbands, who subsequently deserted them. Some of the cases, however, were of women still living in Eastern Europe who had lost all contact with their husbands and were seeking help in locating them. The case of Mashe Zilande is a typical case of an agunah awaiting some sign of life from her husband. Her letter to the Industrial Removal Office reflects her distress:

I, Mashe Zilande, a lonely, poor woman [ikh elnte areme Mashe Zilande], beg the distinguished gentlemen in the Office to make efforts on my behalf. I am in great distress and am forced to appeal to the gentlemen in the Office to have mercy on a lonely woman with two poor children. My husband’s name is Moshe Zilande, who left his two poor children. One of the children is named Avraham and the other is Eidele. Nine months have already passed and we have not heard from him. My two poor children are six months old. My husband has not sent even a letter, I have nothing to feed my two children, and I am very alone like a stone [azoy vi a shteyn], as are my miserable children. The unfortunate children [di kinder nebekh] and the miserable children miss their beloved father and I am sad day and night. I don’t want to remain an agunah in my youth [oyf mayne yunge yorn az ikh zol nisht far blaybn keyn agunah]. I can do nothing but appeal to the dear God [liber Got] and then to the Office [asking it to search for] my husband, who is well known as Moshe Zilande. . . . Perhaps he is in New York [filaykh gefint er zikh in Novyork]. Perhaps it is possible to try to investigate because I have nothing with which to support my two poor children and this letter is drenched with my tears [dizer leter vert ob gevashn mit mayne trern]. . . . I conclude the letter from the lonely woman [elnte froy] Mashe Zilande of Siedlce.

Seven times Mashe Zilande mentions her small, fatherless children, and four times she mentions being lonely. The numerous repetitions tell us something about the depth of emotion that this mother of two felt when writing the letter. It seems that her husband had left for the United States when she was in her sixth month of pregnancy, since her children, the letter says, are half a year old and her husband has been away for nine months. Mrs. Zilande also mentions her children’s names—Avraham and Eidele—because her husband does not know their names and does not even know that she had twins. Mashe’s biggest fears are of being an agunah at such a young age (based on the age of the children, she is probably in her twenties) and having to support two small children in the impossible conditions prevailing in tsarist Russia in general and Poland in particular. The number of applica-
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The focus of discussion in this article is the Jewish women who were deserted in Eastern Europe by their migrant husbands, rather than women who had already joined their husbands in one of the destination countries. A long time elapsed from the time the husband departed on his journey until his wife received the first signs of life from him. The search for employment in the destination country, long working hours, difficult living conditions, and the fact that the husband did not necessarily know how to read and write and was dependent on the goodwill of those who did, resulted in contact with his family being sporadic—even if he had no intention of deserting them. In her memoirs, Rachel Kositza relates that her husband scarcely wrote to her and her children: “Once during Passover and once during Sukkoth he wrote a few words and sent five dollars.” More than five dollars, she adds, “he did not send and it was once or twice a year. He simply did not write. . . . Those were three years of great hardship.”

Mary Antin relates that on the eve of their departure, Haya Dvoshe, the wigmaker’s wife, begged her mother to promise that she would look for her husband:

Promise me, I beg you. I don’t sleep nights for thinking of him. He emigrated to America eighteen months ago, fresh and well and strong, with twenty-five rubles in his pocket, besides his steamer ticket, with new phylacteries, and a silk skull-cap, and a suit as good as new—made it only three years before. . . . Sent one letter, how he arrived in Castle Garden . . . and since then not a postal card, not a word, just as if he had vanished, as if the earth had swallowed him.

Only after a prolonged period, during which there was no contact with their husbands, did the women begin to comprehend their impossible situation. Their temporary status as breadwinners, bearing the full burden of childrearing during their husbands’ absence, became permanent. Unlike widows, who according to Jewish religious law could remarry and rebuild their lives—at least in economic terms—deserted wives were forced to continue living in economic hardship and, more particularly, in uncertainty. In this reality, they were faced with two options: The first was to appeal to the rabbis or charitable institutions for assistance in locating their husbands and obtaining a divorce, thus enabling them to rebuild their lives. The second was to scrimp and save and journey to the destination country with their children to try and find their husbands there.
One of the applications to the Jewish Charities in the United States was from a woman who came to the United States with her children in 1911 after receiving no sign of life from her husband for over seven years. He had come to the United States in 1904 and found employment, but had then severed all contact with his family. Upon her arrival, the search for him commenced, until he was finally located in Brooklyn. When asked why he had stopped corresponding with his family, he replied that “he wasn’t yet ready [financially] to receive them.” Another case is that of 28-year-old Louis Rosenbloom, who left for the United States six weeks after his wedding. At first he kept in touch with his new wife, but as time elapsed the letters gradually became few and far between until they stopped altogether. His wife finally decided to immigrate to New York and look for him there. When she was unable to find him, she appealed to Abraham Kahan, the editor of the Yiddish newspaper *The Forward*, for help. A photo of Louis Rosenbloom was published together with photographs of other deserting husbands in *The Forward* under the title “A gallery of disappeared men.”

What led men to desert their wives and children in Eastern Europe? An attempt to answer this question raises methodological difficulties, since it should be addressed from the perspective of the deserting husbands. However, because not all of the missing husbands were located, and because those that were did not want to elaborate on the subject, the information available to us is limited. Nevertheless, attempts were made by the Jewish Charities in the early twentieth century to understand the phenomenon in order to contend with it more successfully. Of 561 cases of husbands who were located and questioned, 30 percent of the men deserted their wives in favor of another woman they met in the United States. Another 30 percent cited incompatibility with their wives stemming from age and character differences. And another 30 percent, which has particular bearing on women who were deserted by their husbands in the destination country, stated that they migrated to other cities in search of work and lost contact with their families. The remaining 10 percent provided unsatisfactory explanations.

The explanation of seeking employment in other cities appears irrelevant, since the husbands and their families were separated by such great distances anyway; it would seem to make no difference to them or their families whether they sought work in New York or any other city in the United States. (This was not the case if the family was already in New York and the husband went to seek employment elsewhere in the United States, subsequently severing all contact with them.) In the case of wives deserted in Eastern Europe, then, the most likely reasons
for desertion by their husbands were perceived incompatibility and relationships with other women.

Clearly, it is difficult to substantiate this assertion empirically. However, if we compare the Old World, which the men left behind, with the New World, to which they came without their families, it may be possible to clarify the reasons that caused them to desert their families. The greater the number of years the men spent in the destination countries without their families, the deeper became their alienation from their families and the East European world they had left behind. The reasons for marriage in Eastern Europe in most cases were not the product of youthful love but, rather, marriages dictated by a traditional society that did not look favorably on young women living separate and independent lives of their own. In her book *The World of Our Mothers*, Sydney Weinberg interviewed 46 women who came to the United States during the great migration. One of the interviewees told the author that her marriage to her sickly second cousin was the result of incessant pressure from her mother, who wanted to see her daughter settled with a family and children of her own.62

In his memoirs, Morris Cohen describes that his mother’s marriage “was not the result of a romance [a rare and unfamiliar term in those days], but occurred in the usual way through the services of a marriage broker who introduced the two sets of parents.” Of the manner in which she found out about her impending marriage, Cohen writes:

> She was in charge of a booth at an annual fair, selling some linens, when my father, his father and the marriage broker approached and pretended that they wanted to buy some of the things that she was selling. She realized what they were after and said to my father, “What is the use of pretending? I know why you came. Do I please you?”63

However, despite their forced introduction and their contrasting characters, they lived together for 67 years in mutual devotion and absolute fidelity. “The love that grows out of devotedly living together in common efforts proved, at least in their case, more enduring than a romantic love that is often only temporary attraction.”64

The great migration to foreign lands caused a significant rupture in the structure of the East European Jewish family. The delicate fabric of the relationship between a man and a woman began to unravel with the departure of the husband. Introduction into a more liberal society and encounters with Jewish and non-Jewish women without the mediation of a marriage broker posed temptations that some of the men were helpless to resist. The new reality in which they found themselves, coupled with being so far away from their families, created the illusion
of a “second chance” in their lives. They were now able to embark on a life that was totally different from that which had been their lot in Eastern Europe. The shtetl wives, the introduction to whom had been in accordance with the interests of parents and marriage brokers, were replaced by other women whom they met under entirely different circumstances.

The vast majority of men who came alone to the destination countries did not desert their families in Eastern Europe but brought them over at a later stage. However, even the reunion between the head of the family and his recently arrived family sheds light on the degree of alienation resulting from prolonged loss of contact. Members of the family frequently had difficulty recognizing the head of the family when they disembarked at the port. His appearance, fashionable clothing, clean-shaven face, and the often-distorted original surname accentuated the differences between them. If this was the case with reunited families, then it would have been particularly true in the cases of husbands who deserted their wives and children. The sense of alienation, which constituted an inseparable part of loss of contact with the family, was compounded by moral licentiousness and shirking of responsibility by husbands toward their families, which in turn led to their desertion of those back home.

Conclusion

The search for the place of women in the general historiography of emigration has resulted in real changes in historical perspective and a new vision of the degree to which women have contributed to the emigration process. Yet, despite its important and pioneering contribution to the historiography of emigration, the investigation of the role of women has not deviated from the prevailing tendency to focus on the absorption of immigrants and their integration into the majority society. Few studies have focused on the initial stages of emigration, including the process of making the decision to emigrate, the hardships of the journey, and the obstacles that the emigrants had to overcome until they arrived in their chosen country.

In Jewish emigration to all countries, there was a high proportion of women and children, and so I have sought to examine the role of the Jewish woman in the initial stages of the emigration process. The archival records of the information offices that helped the Jewish emigrants also allow us to look into the very heart of the emigration process. The letters to the officials in the information offices are an ac-
curate reflection of the “emigration drama” that took place in the East European Jewish family, and they permit us to see the complexity of the process of arriving at the decision to emigrate and the Jewish woman’s role in it.

Esther Mindes, with whom this article began, reached the United States on January 13, 1909, together with her children. The first thing they saw was a huge statue of a woman holding aloft the torch of liberty. The symbol of freedom and hope 93 meters high—the size of the immigrants’ hopes—held their gaze until they reached the island of tears, Ellis Island. The words of Emma Lazarus’s unforgettable poem, “The New Colossus,” engraved on the pedestal of the statue, were realized in full for the Mindes family and many others. According to U.S. immigration records, the Mindeses passed the medical exams and were permitted to continue on to Boston.65

The fate of the Sheinkmans in Argentina is unknown. The archival sources available to scholars of Jewish immigration to Argentina do not indicate what happened to the family. However, the Sheinkmans are not mentioned in the JCA’s lists of immigrants who returned. They, too, seem to have reached their destination safely.

The Kuschnirs arrived in Palestine in the early summer of 1908. The Ottomans were not creating any unusual difficulties for new arrivals, and Raizel, with her seven children, landed safely at the Jaffa port. Small rowboats surrounded the ship on all sides, and local stevedores carried Raizel and her children on their backs into a small boat rocking in the sea. (The experience of a stranger lowering a Ukrainian Jewish woman into his boat with his hands and bringing her into the port was unique to the immigrants’ initial encounter with their destination country.) Like many immigrants in those days, the Kuschnirs settled in Jaffa and later moved to Tel Aviv. World War I was a very hard time for the Kuschnirs. On the eve of Passover 1917, they were among ten thousand people evicted from Tel Aviv to the north. Due to their shaky financial situation, they found themselves living under harsh conditions in the Lower Galilee, on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, together with other poor families. Three months after arriving in Tiberias and exactly eight years after their immigration from Shpola to Palestine, the eldest son, Yochanan, died of typhus.66

The voyage itself was just one stage in the immigrants’ journey. When they landed at Ellis Island, Jaffa, Buenos Aires, and elsewhere, the Sheinkman, Mindes, and Kuschnir families—along with hundreds of thousands of other Jewish immigrants—encountered new challenges that were completely different from those that had characterized their long journey from Eastern Europe. The main difficulty with
which the immigrants had to contend as soon as they arrived in their new land was integrating in the new society. In the United States, Argentina, and other destination countries across the ocean, they would try to fit into the majority society and improve their financial status. In Palestine, they would also find themselves in the midst of a national struggle between those who had just entered the country’s gates and the Arabs living in the same land.

Notes

1 For the stories of the Mindes, Sheinkman, and Kuschnir families, see the Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People (CAHJP), JCA section, folder 34c. On the arrival of the Mindes family in the United States, see www.ellisisland.org. The names of thousands of Jewish migrants who moved overseas at the beginning of the twentieth century are available in the JCA Archives, in the section pertaining to the information bureau that dealt with migration. The personal stories of the families described here, along with hundreds of thousands like them, enable us to trace the migration process one stage at a time.


3 On the statistical aspect of Jewish immigration to Palestine in the early twentieth century, see Gur Alroey, Immigrantim: Ha-hagirah ha-yehudit le-erets yisrael be-reshit ha-meah ha-esrim (Jerusalem, 2004). The information on Canada and Argentina is from a database of more than 6,000 emigrants who left the Pale of Settlement in the early twentieth century. The names of emigrants were collected by me in CAHJP, JCA files.

4 Among the books and articles that examine the feminine side of the Jewish migration, see, Elizabeth Ewen, Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars: Life and Culture on the Lower East Side, 1890–1925 (New York, 1985); Sydney Stahl Weinberg, The World of Our Mothers (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1988); Susan A. Glenn, Daughters of the Shtetl: Life and Labor in the Immigrant Generation (Ithaca, N.Y., 1990); and Paula E. Hyman, Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History: The Roles and Representation of Women (Seattle, Wash., 1995). See also Paula Hyman, “Culture and Gender: Women in the Immigrant Jewish Community,” in The Legacy of Jewish Migration: 1881 and Its Impact, ed. D. Berger (New York, 1983), 157–68. The common denominator of these important works is that most of them focus on the adjustment process of Jewish women in the host society. I intend in this article to examine the role of East European women at the beginning of the process, before they arrived in the United States or elsewhere overseas.

One of the pioneering methodological initiatives in this sphere was that of the historian Samuel Baily, who proposed studying the villages (the “local level”) from which Italian immigrants came in an attempt to find the combination of factors that made Italians immigrate to New York or Buenos Aires at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. See Samuel Baily, *Immigrants in the Lands of Promise: Italians in Buenos Aires and New York City, 1870 to 1914* (New York, 1999), 31–46. Another study offering a similar solution is that by Jose Moya, who proposed the macro-micro as a methodological means of examining the way the decision to immigrate to Argentina from villages in Spain was made. See Jose Moya, *Cousins and Strangers: Spanish Immigrants in Buenos Aires, 1850–1930* (Los Angeles, 1998).


10 In the Palestine Office’s files at the Central Zionist Archive (CZA), there are thousands of letters that were sent by potential immigrants who were considering immigration to Palestine. These letters enable us to understand better the considerations of the East European Jewish family before they made the decision to migrate.


12 Arcadius Kahan, *Essays in Social and Economic History* (Chicago, 1986), 48. Kahan points out that the proportion of women in the Jewish population was 51 percent, but in certain areas such as Podolia, Grodno, Volhynia, and Minsk the proportion was higher.

13 Ibid., 6, 64–65.

14 On the role of women in providing for the family, see, e.g., Hyman, *Gender and Assimilation*; Glenn, *Daughters of the Shtetl*, 8–49; and K. Friedman-
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15 Glenn, Daughters of the Shtetl, 16–18.

16 Ibid., 18, and Rubinow, “Economic Condition of the Jews in Russia,” 545–46.

Among the 3,335 emigrants who applied to the JCA for financial assistance, a little more than a thousand were women over the age of 17. This group was in many ways a representative sample of the Jewish emigrants in the Vale of Settlement in the period from the beginning of the twentieth century to the outbreak of World War I. On these applications for assistance, see CAHJP, JCA section, files 32–42. See also Rubinow, “Economic Condition of the Jews in Russia,” 525.

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18 Letter from Rachel Birman to Arthur Ruppin, June 26, 1913, CZA, L2, file 133/1. Unless other indicated, all translations from foreign-language sources are mine.

19 Sholem Asch, East River (New York, 1946), 49.


21 Ibid., Jan. 20, 1914 (emphasis added).

22 Letter from Yaakov Litvak to A. Ruppin and J. Thon, Jan. 4, 1914, CZA, L2, file 133/3.

23 Ibid., Feb. 18, 1914.

24 Letter from Teibel Kardash to A. Ruppin, Mar. 16, 1914, CZA, L2, file 133/3.


26 Malka Kroll-Alexandrovich, Tsabaei ha-ir (Tel Aviv, 1989), 69.

27 Ibid., 10.

28 Ibid., 174.


30 The director of the JCA information office in St. Petersburg pointed out in his essay (in French), Émigration, that about half the tickets on which the emigrants traveled were “prepaid.” On this, see CZA, Archive S. Janovsky, A 156, file 26, p. 30.


32 Ibid., introduction (unnumbered page).


34 Ibid., 97.

35 Ibid., 98.

36 Morris Raphael Cohen, A Dreamer’s Journey (Boston, 1949), 18.

37 Ephraim Litzitzky, Eleh toldot adom (Jerusalem, 1956), 13.

38 Mary Antin, The Promised Land (New York, 1912), 163.

39 Y. Bar, “Vi azoy bakumt men an oyslendishen pas?” Der yudisher emigrant, Jan. 12, 1908, pp. 8–9.
40 On the dangers awaiting Jewish emigrants on the way to their chosen countries, see Alroey, “Bureaucracy, Agents and Swindlers,” 214–31.
41 Emigrants un agenten: Nit keyn oysetrakhte mayses (St. Petersburg, 1912), 17.
42 “Me-arei ha-medinah,” Ha-zman, Aug. 8, 1907, p. 3.
43 The following quotations are from B. Spielberg’s letter to Menahem Ussishkin, undated (1912?), CZA, A 24, file 54/1.
44 The story of Lora-Riwka Kosowsky has been reconstructed by combining various archival sources and the computerized pool of information at Ellis Island. For her application to the information office at Minsk, the financial assistance she received, and the fact that she sailed from the port of Libau, see CAHJP, JCA file, No. 37a. For the time of her arrival at the port of Libau, her arrival in New York, and her meeting with her husband, see www.ellisisland.org. Volunteers of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints entered into the computer pool 22 million names of immigrants who came to the island in the years 1892–1924. Through the search engine, I found the ticket of the Kosowsky family. An examination of the document of the immigration authorities, where the name of the family—which was scanned by the same volunteers—is to be found, shows that Lora-Riwka’s husband was waiting for her at the port. From the time of the ship’s arrival in New York, we can know the time it set out from Libau. The journey by sea took 11 to 12 days, and thus the time of departure from Russia must have been March 26 or 27, 1912. For the time it took to sail from Libau to New York, see Der yudisher emigrant, Mar. 1, 1911, p. 16. The CAJHP lists the names of thousands of immigrants who received assistance from the information offices of the JCA scattered throughout the Pale of Settlement. The case of the Kosowsky family is one of hundreds of cases I have succeeded in reconstructing by combining the information from the lists of the JCA and from the computerized pool at Ellis Island. This cross-fertilization permits the historian to follow individual immigrants from the time they set out on their way until they arrive at their destination as well as to gain a better understanding of the immigration process and see it in a more human light.
46 CAHJP, JCA file, no. 38, p. 3.
47 See Hyman, Gender and Assimilation, 125–27.
48 Ben Eliyahu, “‘An erneste frage’ (A Serious Question),” Der yudisher emigrant, Mar. 16, 1909, p. 2.
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49 Ibid.
52 Eliyahu, “An erneste frage,” 1. See also “Agunot,” *Der yudisher emigrant*, Jan. 1, 1912, p. 13; *Der yudisher emigrant* (America), May 1, 1912, p. 10; and *Der yudisher emigrant* (Canada), July 15, 1912, p. 16.
53 National Conference of Jewish Charities in the United States, conference proceedings (Baltimore, 1910), 56.
54 An *agunah*, in Judaism, is a married woman the fate of whose husband is unknown. The disappearance of the husband left the woman on her own without the possibility of obtaining a divorce and marrying again.
55 Mashe Zilande to the Industrial Removal Office, June 26, 1907, IRO, I-91, box 122 (Russia files); emphasis added.
56 For several cases of deserted wives in Palestine, see Alroey, *Immigrants*, 142–43, and National Conference of Jewish Charities, conference proceedings (Baltimore, 1912), 66.
59 National Conference of Jewish Charities (1912), 70.
60 Ibid., 64.
61 Ibid., 65.
62 Weinberg, *World of Our Mothers*, xx–xvi. For a more comprehensive discussion on the issue, see ibid., 23–40.
64 Ibid.
65 For the story of the Mindes family, see CAHJP, JCA section, folder 34c, and the computerized database of Ellis Island.
66 For the story of the Kuschnir family, see CAHJP, JCA section, folder 34c. On the family’s experience in Palestine, see David Cohen, *Shpole* (Haifa, 1965), 307. On the death of Yochanan Kuschnir in the Lower Galilee during World War I, see CZA, J-90, folder 118, list of dead, no. 231.
Abstract

Jewish emigration from Eastern Europe to lands overseas from the start of the twentieth century until the outbreak of World War I encompassed more than 1.5 million Jews seeking to flee the unbearable socioeconomic conditions that were their lot in the Russian Empire. Hundreds of thousands of these migrants were women and children who left to join their husbands and fathers already in the destination countries. This article traces the multifaceted migration process undergone by the Jewish immigrant woman—from her role in the decision-making process about where to go, to that fateful moment when she receives the tickets for the voyage from her husband and sets out on her way. Because married women and children played a major role in the international migration process, I assess the influence of Jewish women in the process as a whole and in deciding to emigrate in particular.

Keywords: Jewish women, immigration, Eastern Europe, international migration