It is never enough to think of migration continent by continent, or nation by nation. Emigrants were not European or even Germans and Swedes: they were dwellers in a Norwegian valley, or in the Black Forest district of Württemberg; they were Slovaks from the northern hills of the Kingdom of Hungary, Bulgarians from Macedonia, or Ashkenazite Jews from Western provinces of Czarist Russia. No scholar, of course, will ever be able to comprehend all this local detail. (Philip Taylor, The Distant Magnet, 1971).

1. Introduction

Migration is an individual experience, not a collective one. Anyone trying to truly understand it has to penetrate the statistics and quantitative research and trace the path of individual immigrants (and their families), who, by their subjective decision, altered their destinies and that of all of humankind. This is not an easy mission for a historian, and, as Philip Taylor noted in the quote that opens this article, it is almost impossible to understand all the reasons that motivated millions of people to uproot themselves from their native lands, cross continents and seas, and move to the new, unfamiliar lands on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. Yet despite the methodological challenge facing those who study immigration, these subjective dramas (multiplied a hundred-thousand fold) are worthy of study and examination.

Migration historians have long pointed to the importance of studying the “micro” to understanding the phenomenon’s causes and characteristics. They tried to place individuals at the center of the historical drama and examine from their perspective the circumstances that led to the decision to
immigrate, the experience of the journey and the way they were absorbed in the new land.

Samuel Baily, for instance, in his book, *Immigrants in the Land of Promise: Italians in Buenos Aires and New York City, 1870-1914*, emphasizes the importance of the “local level” in understanding the causes and characteristics of migration. If we wish to know how the decision to immigrate was made, Baily maintains, we have to focus on the village, which is where all the macro factors accumulated that led to westward migration.1 Dudley Baines, in *Emigration from Europe, 1815-1930*, also warns against regarding an emigrant’s country of origin as a single geographical unit and advises scholars to focus instead on the individual provinces and villages.2

Irving Howe, however, in his monumental work *The World of Our Fathers*, on Jewish migration to the United States, argued that scholars do not have sufficient information to understand why, given a particular economic and political reality, there were those who chose to migrate and those who chose to stay:

> The statements one finds in the memoir literature are persuasive through their repetition. We came because we were hungry; we came because we were persecuted; we came because life in Russia or Poland had grown insufferable. These are the answers one gets over and over again, and there is not the slightest reason to doubt them. But what they do not, perhaps cannot, explain is why some Jews acted on these urgent motives and others did not.3

To cope with these methodological challenges, migration scholars must use specific primary sources that will enable them to examine the migration process “from below,” and from the migrant’s viewpoint. Sources of this type can include records of those leaving and entering the ports of exit and entry; ship manifests; letters written by immigrants, diaries, oral testimonies, or applications to aid organizations. These sources are usually rich in information and through them one can bring the immigrants to life, give them form, and extricate them from statistics and quantitative research.

Letters written by immigrants who were in the midst of their immigration process are perhaps the richest and most authentic source the scholars can use to penetrate the depths of the migrant’s soul while the events were taking place and to understand the dynamics. Quite a few scholars have recognized the inherent potential of this type of source and have published collections of immigrants’ letters.

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1 BAILY (1999, 35).
2 BAINES (1995, 6).
3 HOWE (1977, 57).
The first to do so were William I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki in their five-volume work, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (published between 1918 and 1920). The importance of this study is that it includes letters to relatives from Polish peasants who had immigrated to America as well as letters to the immigrants from their family members in Poland. It is also innovative in terms of its methodology, which places the individual immigrant at the center of migration research. Thomas and Znaniecki recognized that immigration is primarily the story of individuals, and the key to a thorough understanding of the immigration process is to focus on the individual, “and not class determinants, codes and structures, statistical quantities, or other abstracted ‘objective factors’”.

David Fitzpatrick, in the introduction to his book *Oceans of Consolation*, also notes, “Human movement was pictured as a flow, subject to ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors governing its dynamics. The individual human mover was invisible, except in the shape of an identikit figure, conforming to some general model of motivation.”

Samuel Baily, in his book *One Family, Two Worlds*, which tells the Sola family’s story through letters exchanged between family members in the destination country (Argentina) and the country of origin (Italy), notes that “private letters—those written for the personal consumption of a specific individual or family—served as a vital link between immigrants and families and friends back home. They record the subjective observation of those who participated in the process as it was unfolding, not the reconstruction from memory of past events and feelings, nor the observations of simulated or reconstructed behavior.”

Witold Kula, Nina Assorodobraj-Kula, and Marcin Kula’s book, *Writing Home: Immigrants in Brazil and the United States, 1890-1891*, is another example that emphasizes the importance of letters for understanding immigration to the Americas. The letters reproduced in their book were sent by immigrants to their relatives in Eastern Europe a short time after their arrival and during the process of their adaptation into the host society. Scrutinized reading reveals to the reader the immigration process at all its levels and layers: the relationships between those who left and began a new life in new lands and those who stayed behind in the old countries; the immigrants’ attempts to preserve family unity and solidarity; their yearnings for home, and their complex encounter with a new society.

This article examines Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century through letters written by Jews who considered immigrating but didn’t necessarily do so. In contrast to the

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4 FITZPATRICK (1994, 3).
5 BAILY (1988, 2-3).
6 KULA (1986). A touching fact that emerges from this volume is that the letters never reached their destination. They were confiscated by the Czarist censor and were found years later by economic historian Witold Kula.
collections of letters cited above, the letters I include were not sent to relatives, but to Jewish information bureaus that were established in the early twentieth century to provide advice and assistance to Jewish migrants. Most letters were written at a very early stage of the immigration process, often before a firm decision was made to immigrate and a destination had been chosen. There exists a fairly large corpus of hundreds of letters that were sent from the two main countries from which Jews emigrated—the Russian Empire and Galicia—and they shed a new and unfamiliar light on a very early stage of the immigration process that has not been sufficiently studied.

This article has three complementary sections. The first deals with the scope of Jewish migration and its characteristics at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. In light of the quantitative findings in the first section, I demonstrate how the letters breathe life into the statistics and add an important layer to the quantitative research, without which it is impossible to truly understand the immigration process. The second section focuses on the information bureaus to which these letters were sent; their role during the period of mass immigration, and the aid they provided to the Jewish immigrant. The third and last section looks at three major topics that the letters raise: The causes of Jewish immigration, the immigration experience, and gender perspectives on the journey to the destination countries. For each topic I bring a representative letter and analyze it with reference to the quantitative findings in the first section of the article.

2. The scope and characteristics of Jewish immigration in the years 1875-1924

a) The scope of immigration

Anyone seeking to estimate the number of Jews who emigrated from Eastern Europe to destinations across the ocean will find that there are no accurate figures regarding the dimensions of Jewish immigration and there is a genuine difficulty in even making approximations. Throughout this entire period of migration the primary countries of origin did not keep orderly records of those who left them. All the statistical information regarding Jewish immigration comes from records kept by the destination countries.

But even the countries absorbing migrants didn’t always keep records that allow for gauging the extent of Jewish immigration. Until 1899, those entering the United States were not asked about their ethnic origins; they were registered by immigration authority clerks simply as Russians or Poles, making it difficult to determine who among them were Jews. Moreover, almost no data whatsoever exists about Jews who immigrated during this period to countries other than the United States—not regarding their
countries of origin or even their destination countries. Thus, any effort to arrive at the number of Jewish migrants from the 1870s through the end of the nineteenth century is based solely on estimates.\footnote{Most estimates put the number of Jews who reached the United States from 1875-1899 at around half a million. See SAMUEL (1914); ALROEY (2011).}

At the dawn of the twentieth century, recordkeeping substantially improved. Immigration authorities in nearly all the destination countries began to keep detailed records about those entering that included information such as age, occupation, country of origin, and, in particular, ethnic affiliation. On July 1, 1898, the U.S. authorities began to classify migrants by “race or people.” Thus it is only from 1899 that we have access to full and accurate statistics about Jewish immigration to the United States.\footnote{HERSCH (1931, 471-520).} In Canada and Australia, statistical records on immigrants were kept starting in 1900-1901; in Argentina in 1904, in Palestine in 1905; and in South Africa only in 1912.\footnote{WISCHNITZER (1948, 291-292).}

The era of mass Jewish emigration from Eastern Europe breaks up into four periods: The first covers the years 1875 to 1898; the second, 1899 to 1914; the third, the years of World War I, 1914 to 1918; and the fourth, from 1919 until the United States shut its gates to immigrants at the end of 1924.

During the first period—the longest of the four—some half-a-million Jews immigrated to the United States at an average of 22,000 a year. The primary reasons for their immigration were the economic crisis and the Jews’ worsening political position in imperial Russia. From 1881 to 1882, a wave of violence against Jews broke out in Russia, and many lost all their property. Ten years later, in 1891, the Czar expelled some 20,000 Jews from Moscow, and the number of Jews immigrating to the United States picked up substantially after that point.

During that same year, more limited Jewish immigration to South America began as well. Baron Maurice Hirsch bought large tracts of land in Argentina, with the aim of encouraging Jewish settlement and turning the immigrants into farmers. Thus, he paved the way for Jewish immigration, turning early twentieth century Argentina into a destination for a significant number of Jews.

The record years for Jewish immigration were the 15 years from 1899 to 1914. More than 1,700,000 Jews migrated during this period. If it were possible for us to get a bird’s-eye view of Jewish migrants during this period of mass immigration, we would see streams of people on the roads, flocking from the villages to the big cities, and continuing from there to the border towns and ports of exit. The overwhelming majority of these migrants reached the United States, while the others immigrated in much smaller numbers to Canada, Argentina, Australia, South Africa, and Palestine.

\footnote{Most estimates put the number of Jews who reached the United States from 1875-1899 at around half a million. See SAMUEL (1914); ALROEY (2011).}
The years 1904 to 1908 were the top years for Jewish migration; during these five years the number of Jews who entered the United States alone was more than 600,000—more than the total number of immigrants who had reached American shores during the first period of immigration in the late nineteenth century.

World War I sharply slashed Jewish immigration, with only 73,000 Jews immigrating during the war years. When the war ended, however, Jewish migration resumed, reaching around the same dimensions as it had until 1914. Between 1919 and 1924, some 400,000 Jews immigrated. Then, on January 1, 1925, the United States instituted an immigrant quota system that basically slammed the gates shut to immigrants. For the Jewish people, the era of mass immigration had ended. From that point, Palestine gradually began to replace the United States as the primary destination country for Jews seeking to escape from Europe.

b) Characteristics of Jewish migration

Some 2,700,000 Jews dispersed within 50 years (1875 to 1924) among four continents: America, Asia, Africa, and Australia. The overwhelming majority went to the United States, and the rest to Argentina, South Africa, Canada, Australia and Palestine. Although Jewish migration was an inseparable part of general migration trends at the time, it also had five distinctive characteristics:

a) The ratio of Jewish migrants to the number of Jews in the world was significantly higher than that of any other ethnic group that migrated from Europe to the new world. Of the 60 million people who migrated from 1830 to 1924, some four million were Jews—six percent of the total migrant population, while Jews were only 1.5 percent of the world population. Moreover, the number of Jews in the world at the beginning of the twentieth century was estimated at 10 million. Between 1900 and 1924, about one-fifth of the Jews in Europe (20.6) moved to other countries. In comparison, only about 11.3 percent of 32 million Italians emigrated—and this was one of the highest emigration rates at the time.10

b) Jewish migration was family oriented. The percentage of women and children was especially high. Some 44 percent of Jewish migrants were women; children under 14 made up a quarter. The Jewish migrant generally took his family because it was considered a permanent move, made with no plan to return to the country of origin. After World War I, the ratio of women rose even higher to more

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10 HERSCH (1931, 474).
than 50 percent. In contrast, among the Italians who migrated to the United States, only 18 percent were women; among the Russians they comprised 14 percent and among the Romanians only 13 percent.\textsuperscript{11}

This demographic component had many social ramifications that are clearly reflected in the migrants’ letters, which I discuss later on.

c) Because Jewish migration was family-oriented, the number of dependents was especially high. A relatively high percentage of women and children arrived in the United States with no occupation. During the years 1899 to 1914 the number of dependents in the Jewish migrant population was estimated at 43 percent, while among the general immigrant population it was only 26 percent. After World War I, the percentage of dependents among Jewish immigrants grew even further, reaching 54 percent.

d) The occupational composition of Jewish migrants was different than that of the general migrant population. Over two-thirds of those gainfully employed worked in skilled trades and less than one-third in sundry other trades; while among the immigrants as whole, only one-fifth of gainfully employed immigrants worked in skilled trades and almost four-fifths in the miscellaneous trades. The main reason for this difference is that non-Jewish migrants generally came from villages and had farmed for a living. The Jews came from cities and towns and were tradesmen in their native lands. The occupational composition had a major influence on the patterns of absorption into their new society.

e) Because Jewish migration was intended to be permanent, the rate of return to the country of origin was low. From 1908 to 1924 the rate of immigrants to the United States who emigrated back was about 33 percent, while among Jews it was only five percent.\textsuperscript{12} The main reason for the low rate of returnees is that the Jews did not have a homeland to return to. By contrast, among many other migrant groups the migration was intended to be for a short period, in order to make money and return to their homelands as soon as possible.

The above quantitative data is important for understanding the reasons for Jewish migration, its scope, and the makeup of the migrant population. But this is not sufficient. If we want the immigrants to take shape and come to life, we must try get behind the enormous number of 2,700,000 Jewish migrants. How did the Jewish emigrant make the decision to leave home? Why, in the same economic situation, did some leave and some stay? How much time passed from the moment they made the decision to emigrate until they implemented the decision? Can we trace the journey experience from

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{12} SARNA (1981).
the immigrant point of view? The letters sent to the various information bureaus by Jews considering emigration, some of whom actually emigrated, can give us answers, albeit partial, to some of the above questions and tell the emigration story from the Jewish migrant’s perspective.

3. The Information Bureaus

At the dawn of the twentieth century, in both the countries of origin and the destination countries for Jewish migration, information bureaus were opened whose purpose was to help migrants make the decision to leave and to provide them with reliable and updated information about the process, the journey westward, and the absorption possibilities in the destination countries before they set out.13

In October 1904, a conference in Frankfurt was convened by the three largest Jewish philanthropic organizations—the Hilfsverein der Deutschen Juden, the Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU) and the Jewish Colonization Association (JCA), which sought to put Jewish migration and its ensuing problems on the public agenda. At the conference it was decided to establish information bureaus in the countries of origin and along the migration routes. The JCA, which opened in St. Petersburg in 1904, was the largest and most active information bureau. In 1906, the JCA had 160 information bureaus scattered throughout the Pale of Settlement14 in the Russian empire; by 1907 there were 296 bureaus; in 1910, 449 bureaus; and in 1913, 507 bureaus.

In 1905, the Zionist movement opened an information bureau in Odessa for those seeking to immigrate to Palestine; during the following years, four more bureaus were opened along the sailing routes to Palestine—Constantinople, Beirut, Haifa, and Jaffa. In 1908 another information bureau was established in Palestine as part of the Palestine Office, headed by Arthur Ruppin and Jacob Thon. The Palestine Office was directly subordinate to the Zionist Organization and one of its main functions was to serve as an information bureau providing information to potential immigrants about Palestine and their prospects there. The Jewish Territorial Organization (JTO) also set up an information bureau in Kiev to provide information to Jewish migrants. In the United States there were two Jewish aid organizations supplying information to immigrants—the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) and the Industrial Removal Office (IRO).

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13 For more information on the information bureaus, see ALROEY (2011, 13-32).
14 The Pale of Settlement was a geographic area in Imperial Russia that was annexed to Russia after the division of Poland in 1791, in which Jews were allowed to live and beyond which Jewish residency was generally prohibited. The area included what is today Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus and western Russia.
Jews who were considering emigration or were interested in exploring their chances of succeeding in the new country would contact one of the authorized officials of the information bureaus. These officials handled inquiries, answered questions, and offered guidance and advice to the emigrants to help prepare them for the move. The bureaus’ documentation was preserved in various archives and they are a rich and varied source of information. They enable us to get a glimpse at the heart of the migration process, from the stage of immigrants’ deliberations through their arrival in the new country and acclimation there.

The documentation saved in the information bureaus’ files can be divided into four categories:

a) Aggregated data regarding the total number of inquiries to the information bureaus. These statistics are not much different from the America immigration authorities’ statistics and it is hard to learn much from them about individual migrants and their families.

b) Instructional literature and other printed matter distributed to emigrants that provided them with relevant information. These brochures are written in the same FAQ (frequently asked questions) style that we are familiar with from the Internet; they include substantial information about the migration process.

c) Records of inquiries by individuals to their local bureaus requesting financial assistance for emigration.

d) Letters by migrants sent to bureau officials with specific questions regarding the destination country and their chances of succeeding there.

The inquiries to the information bureaus and the letters sent by the migrants are a treasure trove of great importance to the study of Jewish migration. They enable researchers to reach the individuals behind the statistics and quantitative research by providing names, gender and occupation—and sometimes even height, eye color, and hair color. As noted, this article seeks to analyze the content of these letters and show what can be learned from them about Jewish migration and its social makeup. However, before I bring examples of representative letters and analyze them, I would like to illustrate how, from a “simple” record of an applicant to the information bureau, one can learn about Jewish migration from an unusual and unique perspective.

Document 1 below summarizes the applications to the JCA’s information bureaus during the year 1912. It has nine columns: first and last name, age, occupation, city of departure, port of departure, shipping company, destination city, relative in the destination country and the amount of money the applicant received from the bureau.

This summary of all the immigrants’ applications enables the construction of a database of names that enables one to study not just the
demographic makeup of Jewish migration, but to examine it at a much higher, sharper, and more accurate resolution.\textsuperscript{15} We no longer need to rely on general statements regarding the high migration rate of women and children, or about the migrants’ occupations. We can try to determine the ages of women who emigrated, the size of families, the ages of children, what kinds of trades the immigrants practiced, which cities and towns they came from, their ports of departure, their destinations, and their relatives in the new land.

These records allow the researcher to examine Jewish migration from both a macro and a micro perspective. In other words, building a database that includes all the applicants’ names does more than just enable a statistical analysis of inquiries to the information bureaus; it also allows us to extract and examine one representative example of a family who migrated to one of the destination countries. Moreover, we can cross-reference this data from the countries of origin with relevant databases compiled in the destination countries. These records enable one to follow the journey of migrants from their city of origin until their destination city, and answer the many questions, such as: What was the duration of their journey? What ship did they travel on? What was their port of departure? Who waited for them at the destination port?

\textsuperscript{15} For more on the names database, see: http://mjmd.haifa.ac.il.
Let’s take the example of the child Leon Kaplan, No. 33 on the above document. From the information bureau record we can see that he was 9 years old, lived in Odessa, which is on the Black Sea, and sailed from the port at Libau on the Baltic Sea to his father in New York, and received 13 rubles from the bureau to cover his expenses en route. Just from this listing, we understand that little Leon crossed the Pale of Settlement by train from south to north, a distance of more than 1,000 kilometers. All this can be found from his JCA information-bureau record that was preserved at the Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People.

But this is merely a clue to understanding his entire journey. Leon Kaplan immigrated to New York, which means that he is recorded in the Ellis Island database, and the two sources of information can be crosschecked.

**Document 2**

*Leon Kaplan’s Passenger Record (Ellis Island)*

From this record it emerges that Leon Kaplan arrived in New York on April 16, 1912 on the ship *Lituania*. From the Ellis Island database, we would be able to get the names of other passengers on the ship with whom Leon shared his journey. The most important source of information is
the details the boy gave the U.S. immigration official. In Document 3, on line 16 of the ship’s manifest, we see that his mother paid for his passage, his father’s name is Brodski Kaplan, and that he lived in the Harlem neighborhood of Manhattan (a heavily Jewish area at the time), at 113 East 120 Street.

**Document 3**

*Ellis Island passenger manifest for the “Lituania”*
While Leon Kaplan is an individual case, since he was pulled from a large names database he can be of assistance. Although most immigrant children did not immigrate alone, the application to the information bureau, the train trip, the sailing conditions and the arrival at Ellis Island were integral to the migration experience and were common to children and adults alike. Because there is extensive literature on every stage of the journey, we can place Leon’s story in a much broader historical context that goes beyond his individual case.

Moreover, Leon Kaplan is just one child of many who were registered (together with their parents) at the JCA information bureaus. Because the records are so detailed, we can segment the children’s age by various age categories. The aggregated data from Ellis Island is very general, and can tell us only that a quarter of those who entered the United States during the period in question were up to 14 years old. We cannot know from this how many were infants and how many were 14. But this detail is important to understanding the journey to the new land, the process of the family’s absorption there and its economic stability. A 14-year-old boy, for example, could be expected to contribute to the family’s support, while an infant is a dependent. A journey made by a family with teenagers is a totally different experience than one made by a family setting out with small children.

These names databases thus provide a lot more information than the aggregated databases: The size of the family, the towns of origin, the occupations, the shipping companies they traveled with to their destinations, and the relatives waiting for them there. Every individual in the database is a world unto himself, every family has its own story and all the individuals and families together create a complex, variegated picture of Jewish migration.

These databases can also help us answer some larger questions. For example, what were the geographic patterns of Jewish migration? No longer need we make a general statement that the country of origin for most Jews was the Russian Empire. These databases offer us a clear picture of which districts and towns the migrants came from, and can help us determine which areas had the highest rates of Jewish emigration. This answer, in turn, will allow us to examine how the pogroms that swept the southern and southwestern part of the Pale influenced the scope of migration. Another question regards the shipping companies that transported these migrants. How many sailed with HAPAG, and how many with Norddeutscher Lloyd or Red Star Line? The preference of one company or another can tell us about the Jews’ migration paths and the way they got from their towns of origin to the destination port.

4. The letters

Jews who were considering emigration wrote to the information bureau officials requesting information that would help them make a decision. These
letters are an important primary source because they were written in real
time and from the migrant’s perspective. One can find in them descriptions
of family members and their occupations, the resources they had at their
disposal, and their questions about the destination country and the chances
of their integrating in the new land. Sometimes the bureaus received letters
from migrants who were victims of fraud, or who were detained at a border
crossing or at the port of exit, who needed the bureau’s assistance. Another
type of letter in the bureaus’ archives came from women whose husbands
had emigrated ahead of them asking them for information about their
husbands, who at best would write infrequently to their families and at worst
cut off all ties with them.

Inquiries to the information bureaus were often written at a very
preliminary stage of the migration process to an official whom they didn’t
know, and they are different in style from the personal letters migrants would
write to their families. The inquiry was usually formal, requesting reliable
answers to questions so that the inquirer could make a thoughtful and correct
decision. These letters generally gave an accurate picture of the inquirer’s
socio-economic status.

Below are three letters that illustrate different aspects of the Jewish
migration experience. The first describes the socioeconomic reasons for the
great Jewish migration from Eastern Europe at the end of the nineteenth and
beginning of the twentieth centuries, but from it we can also learn about
the apprehensions surrounding the decision to migrate. The second letter
describes the hardships of the journey to America and the difficulties of a
migrant who was detained at the port of Bremen and wasn’t allowed to board
the ship to the United States because he had trachoma. The third letter is if
from a woman whose husband immigrated to the United States and seemed
to have abandoned her in Eastern Europe.

Letter 1
Zakharin, November 11

Dear Sir:
I am writing to you on behalf of one family, asking you to express your
opinion if you have the chance. I am sure you will not turn me away, because
your reply is important and valuable to me. This family, in which the writer
of these lines is one of the sons, comprises ten people, seven males and three
females, that is, a father, mother, six sons, and two daughters. The parents
are fifty-three years old. The eldest son is twenty-seven. The child of their
old age is a six-year-old girl. The family’s situation is as follows: The eldest
son completed the Grodno pedagogical courses two years ago and is now the
principal of a Talmud Torah in a small town in the province of Mogilev. The

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16 See the letter by David Koheleth to Arthur Ruppin, the director of the Zionist
Organization’s Palestine Office: Central Zionist Archives, L2, file 133/3.
second son, who has now returned home after three years of military service, works in the office of a lumberyard for 25 rubles per month. The third son is in a similar situation. I should add that these last two were shoemakers until recently and knew the work thoroughly; they only left it about three years ago because it does not provide a living. The fourth and fifth, aged fifteen and seventeen, are at home. The youngest son is eight years old and attends school. The two girls, aged six and twelve, are at home. The father of the family is a shoemaker whose trade—due to the large number of craftsmen engaged in it and the intense competition among them—brings in barely enough for food, and even that with great difficulty. Everyone in the family is healthy, strong, and hard working. Five years ago, the family lived a life of poverty, barely earning enough for their dry bread, because the children were still small. Only recently, when the boys grew up and started helping out, one here and one there, did things improve a bit. About six years ago, the family moved to a village in the province of Mogilev because they thought it would be easy for them to make a living in the village. In the village the family leases vegetable gardens in the summer and sells the produce and also engages in petty commerce. All the family members are hard working, quick, capable of all sorts of work, and not deterred by any kind of work, as long as it pays. And although the family earns its bread, albeit with difficulty, it is not content with its present situation, as disaster can be expected and there is no way to provide for the future. The family does not feel any solid ground under its feet, and its [members’] lives are in danger. Being completely dependent on the uryadni, who could evict them at any moment, they must suffer insult from the village farmers and must flatter them while they bleed at the sight of such cruelty. The family aspires to a quiet life, a life full of work and emotional satisfaction. The family members are innocent and honest, brotherly peace prevails among them, and they have no differences of opinions.

In light of all this, the family is thinking about leaving this country and heading for another country that will treat them in a more welcoming fashion. We family members are aware that it will not be easy to attain our goal, but we trust that with hard work we will succeed. We are not aiming for a life of luxury or asking for easy work; we just long for a quiet, satisfying life. We are not idealists, but we are willing to make sacrifices—provided that we are assured that our future will eventually be secure and stable, and that ground under our feet will not collapse. If we see that there is no way for the entire family to leave the country all at once, then we have decided that the older sons—that is, the second and third sons—will emigrate first, and after a while the rest of the family will go. We currently have 800 rubles.

Sir! If possible, express your opinion on this matter. Please help us by sending us your instructions and your advice: Would we be able to move to Palestine and settle on the land or even in some city? Will we find what we are looking for in the Land of Israel? Or would we better off heading for other countries, because the living conditions in Palestine are not suitable for us? We are afraid that we will fail and ruin our already-precarious position. Please do not delay in replying.
Respectfully,
In the name of the entire family,
D[avid]. Koheleth
Address:
Shtetl Zakharin, Mogilev Province
to D[avid]. Koheleth

This letter by David Koheleth is a good example that illustrates how, through an individual case, we can learn some of the reasons behind Jewish emigration in the early twentieth century. The letter extricatess from the statistics and quantitative research one (representative) Jewish family that was experiencing one of the macro causes of Jewish migration. Through this family’s difficulties and dilemmas we can understand how the “push factors” in the country of origin undermined the economic stability of the Koheleth family, which was weighing immigrating to Palestine or to any other country in which they could start a new life.

Two macro processes that led to mass migration at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries emerge from David Koheleth’s letter:

Demographic growth. One of the most prominent and important developments in Czarist Russia from the early nineteenth century to the start of World War I was the area’s accelerated demographic growth. Natural increase in the Russian empire compared to other countries in Europe was unusual and quite amazing in its scope. During a period of only 50 years (1860 to 1913) the Russian population more than doubled, from 74 million people to 164 million.

The primary reason for this population growth was the sharp drop in mortality rates as a result of medical developments and improvements in sanitary conditions, while the birth rate did not change. More and more children survived their early childhood, and as a result the gap between the number of births and the number of deaths widened.

But compared to the general population growth in Russia, the natural increase among Jews was much faster. If at the start of the nineteenth century the number of Jews in Russia was an estimated one million, but the end of the century the Jewish population had increased fivefold. One outcome of this growth in the Jewish population was its large proportion of young people. The age distribution in the Jewish population according to the Russian census of 1897 shows that 29 percent of the population was children under nine, 23 percent was between 10 and 19; 28 percent were between 20 and 39; 14 percent were between 40 and 59; and six percent were 60 and older.¹⁷ In other words, more than half of the Jewish population was under 20 years old.

The high rate of children and teens, on the one hand, imposed a heavy burden on breadwinners, who had to support so many dependents, while at the same time it led to lowering the working age. The age structure of the Koheleth family, as reflected in the letter, is very much in keeping with the census data. The parents are 53, the oldest son (the letter writer) is 27, the two children after him are after military service and are in their early 20s, and the other children are 17, 15, 12, 8, and 6. Such a large number of children posed an economic hardship for the family and only when the children grew older and could help contribute to the family income did their financial situation improve a bit.

Livelihood and economic status. Some 70 percent of Jews living in the Russian empire were craftsmen, storekeepers and small traders; 20 percent provided services to the Jewish and non-Jewish population, running pubs, teaching, managing charity institutions, etc.; five percent were in the free professions and the rest engaged in farming (three percent) and in other occupations.18

Such a large proportion of craftsmen and merchants led to fierce competition, which led to lower prices and forced many to sell their wares at a loss. The poverty deepened and the economic status of many Jews in the Pale of Settlement weakened. Many began to consider emigrating to seek employment across the sea. This socioeconomic reality is clearly reflected in the letter. The letter writer notes that due to the competition between shoemakers his father was barely able to make a living and the family was going hungry. Two of the eight children were working in a small lumberyard and contributed a bit to the family’s welfare. The family had move to the village of Zakharin in White Russia and leased a small plot of land, where they grew some vegetables that they sold on the weekly market day.

The letter also illustrates the way a decision to emigrate was made. The family is interested in accurate and reliable information that will help them make a prudent decision. They wrote to the Palestine Office, noted the sum of money they had available, gave details about their economic status, and asked about their chances of success in Palestine or in any other country. Knowing that moving the whole family at once might be difficult, they propose sending two of children ahead to lay the groundwork for their arrival. Although it mentions harassment by other village residents, the letter does not indicate an urgent need to flee, but a rational process in which the advantages and disadvantages of emigrating are being taken into account. In its family makeup and employment profile the Koheleth family is definitely a representative example of the Jewish immigrant population of the early twentieth century. Their modest aspiration, to find “a quiet, satisfying life,” encapsulates the Jewish migration story of the late nineteenth and early

18 Ibid.
twentieth centuries. The search for quiet and satisfaction is the prime factor for immigration in general, and of Jewish immigration in particular.

Letter 2\footnote{See Alter Perling to Israel Zangwill, president of the Jewish Territorial Organization, November 18, 1908, Central Zionist Archives, A36, file 97.}
Bremen, November 18, 1908
Honorable President of the Jewish Territorial Organization
Mr. I. Zangwill,

The writer of this letter is a “Jewish emigrant,” that is, a homeless wanderer, a true wandering Jew. For a year I have been far from my home—the Jewish ghetto in Russia—and have been roaming through Germany. I have been thrown out of Berlin and Koenigsburg many times, and finally, with great difficulty, I obtained a ship ticket from one of my cousins in New York, but in Bremen I was stopped with a mild case of trachoma. In short, I had to stay in Bremen to have my eyes treated, and now they are healed and I should be able to go to America, but the doctor told me that he could not guarantee that I won’t be sent back because in America they are very strict right now. Many of those that the European doctors had let through were sent back from New York and Baltimore—then the ship ticket is lost. And if I were to be sent back from America I would be devastated. I can never go back to Russia and it is impossible for me to remain in Germany. Then the only option left for me would be to jump off a bridge.

I myself am a healthy, young man of twenty-one—robust, full of courage and energy. I’m missing only one thing: “a home,” a country, a place on this great planet where I can focus my strengths on making a living for myself. I’m not seeking any fortunes, I’m not chasing after luxuries—only what the patriarch Jacob prayed for: “bread to eat and clothes to wear”. We Jews have borekh-hashem 689,000 organizations which “provide for” Jewish emigrants. All of them beat the philanthropic drum: we must care for the Jewish emigrant. We must help the Jewish homeless. We must find a home for the Wandering Jew. Everyone is doing something, everyone is working, each one on his own part, within his own system … and the Jewish emigrant?

I have been here in Bremen for quite some time now. Thousands of Christian emigrants come through on their way to all parts of the world. Many were stopped with trachoma but they leave anyway: for Brazil, for Argentina, not including the thousands that are leaving for Brazil without a penny to their name—basically they leave without emigration offices … without relief organizations. But the unfortunate Jewish emigrant? He ends up bone-weary. He ends up deracinated. He suffers beyond measure and without an end until he loses hope and the will to live—we are worse off than any other people! The tragedy of our exile is boundless. It is not my intention to reproach our organizations. I am not a newspaper writer, and my articles have never been buried in an editor’s inbox.
I turn now to the ITO so that I can be sent somewhere where I can live—and where I will be allowed to live. Send me to Galveston, Texas. Send me to Brazil! I don’t care if it’s in the remotest place in the world, just get me a home!! In a word: help a miserable Jewish emigrant!!

My ship ticket was to be from Bremen to Baltimore and then New York. Four weeks ago I sent the ticket back to America and today I have just received the 120 MK that the ship ticket cost. Therefore I am requesting that the ITO send me to Galveston, Texas, for the 120 MK. My eyes are completely healed, not a trace of trachoma remains. And the Bremen ship doctors would let me through but I am afraid that America would send me back from Castle Garden. In Galveston I have no one who might take me in. I also have no money to show, I do not even have an address or a friend in Texas. I only request from the ITO that they escort me off the ship and procure work for me. It doesn’t matter to me what kind of work, whether factory work or agricultural labor, just so I can earn enough to live on.

I am a healthy man who can—who wants to—work, as I have written before. But since there is a ship for Galveston that departs a week from Thursday, the 26th of November, I must have an answer by Wednesday the 25th of November. I believe that you will be able to give me a precise and correct answer within this amount of time. Therefore I ask that you answer me right away, I am counting on it. Because if not November 26, the next ship for Galveston does not set sail for another six weeks.

I end off with the good hope that the honorable Jewish Territorial Organization will direct all its resources to help an unfortunate Jewish emigrant, so that my voice is not “a voice that calls out in the desert.” In case this letter does not arrive on time, or your letter arrives after N. [November] 25, perhaps the local committee of the Hilfsverein der deutschen Juden can send me to Galveston. I ask that you write from London to the Galveston Immigration Bureau telling them to escort me off the boat there (I will also write them myself).

Respectfully,
Emigrant Alter Perling

P.S. There is another emigrant here who has been having his eyes treated for a while. The trachoma is cured, but he is left with painful aftereffects. In addition it is very difficult to get to the New York Baltimore harbor [sic]. He also wants to go to Galveston and has money for a ship ticket. So, he is hereby also requesting a reply saying that the ITO will send him to Galveston.

Perling A.
My address:
Alter Perling
Bremen
Auswanderhalle 5

Alter Perling’s letter describes some the difficulties emigrants endured when crossing the ocean. From the moment a decision was made to emigrate and a destination country was chosen, preparations for the journey began,
and they were by no means easy. Emigrants had to obtain the relevant documents that would allow them to leave the country legally, buy a train ticket, travel by train—a journey that was often thousands of kilometers—from their hometowns to the ports of exit, undergo medical exams, and travel, nearly always in steerage, to the destination ports, where they once again faced medical screenings.

Perling’s letter from Passenger Hall 5 at Bremen Port refers to the medical exams conducted by the shipping company on the migrants. En route to their destinations, the emigrants to the United States would undergo two or three medical examinations. The first was at any of the several border crossings along the Polish-German or Russian-Austro-Hungarian borders; the second was at the exit port, before boarding ship, and the third was at Ellis Island. The examination at the port of exit by the shipping company doctors was especially stringent, because an immigrant found ill at Ellis Island was sent back to the port of exit at the shipping company’s expense.

Perling, as he notes in his letter, was examined by the doctors of the Norddeutscher Lloyd shipping company and was found to have trachoma. He was refused boarding and found himself stuck in the passenger hall at Bremen. Trachoma is an eye disease that, in developed countries, is considered a poor people’s ailment—prevalent in societies with extremely poor sanitary conditions. It terrified the immigrants and was a source of great distress for the many people who developed it during the journey and did not know if they would be able to pass the medical exams.

One of the doctors well known in the Jewish world for treating the eyes of migrants was Max Mandelstamm. He opened a clinic in Kiev and took part in public activities aimed at increasing awareness among the Jewish population of eye diseases and the dangers they posed. In his article “Trachoma and Emigration to America,” he argued that trachoma was just an excuse for the American authorities to send immigrants back. In his studies he revealed that many migrants were sent back even though their eyes had healed and only scars on their corneas testified to their having been sick. But it should be noted that despite Mandelstamm’s sharp criticism, only a very small percentage of immigrants in general—and Jewish immigrants in particular—were refused entry to the United States because of trachoma. From the start of the twentieth century until 1925, an average of only 1,500 migrants annually were refused entry at American ports and borders due to trachoma, less than one percent of all those entering the United States every year.20

The case of Alter Perling is a good example that is consistent with Mandelstamm’s criticism of American immigration authorities. He became ill and was treated, but the local doctor still refused to send him to America.

20 MARKEL (2000, 526).
The scars left on his eyes after the trachoma decreased his chances of sailing through the examination at Ellis Island. But the letter is important primarily because it describes the suffering of migrants left in limbo. Studies tell us that many migrants became ill and had to return to their native lands, yet very little is known of their feelings, distress, and dilemmas once they were found ill.

Being denied boarding by the shipping company was particularly tragic for the Jewish migrant. Unlike migrants from other ethnic groups that were found ill and sent back to their villages, the Jewish wanderers had no homeland to return to. From the moment a Jewish family decided to emigrate from their place of birth, it was meant to be forever; they would sell their home and possessions and became, as Perling put it, “homeless wanderers.” They couldn’t go back to Russia, and Germany would not let them remain. They were no longer part of Lithuania, Poland, or Galicia and yet they were not yet part of America, Canada, South Africa, or Argentina. The feeling of uncertainty, of wondering “who am I” and “where do I belong,” stand out in Perling’s letter: “I’m missing only one thing: “a home,” a country, a place on this great planet where I can focus my strengths on making a living for myself.”

Letter 3\textsuperscript{21}
January 26, [1907?] Sjedletz

I, wretched, poor Mashe Zilazne, come to beg your pardon many times over, you highly esteemed people who toil on the committee, forgive me my hardship which brings me to this, that I am forced to write to the gentlemen of the committee that they should be so kind as to have compassion and pity on me, a wretched woman with my two poor children.

I beg you to hear me out, dear people and gentlemen who are on the committee, ever since my husband who goes by the name Moyshe Zilazne left me and my two poor children, one of whom is called Avrom, and the other son Ayzele, and it has already been nine months since he left me and my two poor children, and six months already that he has not sent us one letter. I don’t have any way of feeding my children and I’m as miserable as can be. It is terrible for my poor children and me. And the poor children miss their dear father. And I mourn my young years that I should—God forbid—end up an agune [abandoned woman]. Of course I have nowhere else to seek advice but first from dear God and then from the committee which is well known also to my husband. He is a housepainter and is called Moyshe Zilazne. Please have mercy on me and on my children and announce it in the papers perhaps he is in Noviyorek [New York], and take the trouble for me and find out for me since I don’t have any way of feeding my poor children and myself, and this letter is getting soaked with my tears. I will always pray that you may have long lives, dear committee,

\textsuperscript{21} See the letter by Mashe Zilazne to the IRO, I-91, American Jewish Historical Society (Russian Files).
I beg your pardon again and again for bothering the gentlemen of the committee to do me this favor of writing in the newspapers. I am relying on the committee to take the time to find out as quickly as possible. My wretched children will always pray for you because I’m a miserable orphan with no parents who is forced to ask for this and for my weak, weak pen it is totally impossible to announce in the paper. And if I receive an answer from the committee and a letter from my dear husband, I will be forever grateful to the gentlemen who work so hard on the committee, certainly I am assured that the committee will definitely fulfill my requests. We have no bread to eat. I will end my writing now, from me, miserable woman Mashe Zilazne of Sjedletz.

Please answer to this address:
Sjedletz, the street is called Ogrodowa Ulica
c/o [Yudel] Markesfeld, number 29
Adieu
My husband’s name is Moyshe Zilazne
I, his wife, am called Mashe Zilazne
One son is called Avrom, and the second son Ayze[le.]

One of the most prominent characteristics of Jewish migration was its familial nature. The typical Jewish migrant took his wife and children to settle in the new land and begin a new life. But because the cost of traveling with a whole household was frequently beyond the means of the average family in the Russian Empire, often the husband would emigrate first and then, after he had worked a while and saved money, he would bring his family over. This dynamic of immigration had far-reaching consequences for the structure of the nuclear family, which was splintered and weakened during the Great Immigration. It brought about a new social reality in which women were in charge of family life and brought up their children alone, while the head of the household was in the United States for an unknown and unlimited period of time.

The historiography of the Great Immigration from Europe to the Americas has naturally focused on the immigrants and their difficulties adjusting to their new land. Very little has been written about those who were left behind in the home country to maintain their regular routine. This group was a passive element in the immigration process but an integral part of it; without it, it is impossible to understand the full complexity of the move to the new land. In the case of Jewish immigration the reality was much more complex, because those remaining in the old country were women, children, and other family members who were counting on the success of the husband’s journey and were dependent on the money he would send home.

This lack of information leaves many questions unanswered. How did the father’s absence influence the family unit? How did the wife cope with his absence and how did she handle the economic burden and raising the
children alone? Did the husband’s absence influence the gender roles in the family? How much time would pass until the husband booked passage for the family and the family was reunited? What were the social ramifications of the lengthy disconnection between father and children and between husband and wife? Quantitative data research cannot answer these questions; for this the research needs letters, diaries, and any personal documents that can shed light on these issues. The case of Mashe Zilazne is an example of a social phenomenon that was common in Jewish society during the period of the Great Immigration. The letter reveals her economic distress, but primarily her fear of becoming an aguna at such a young age.

Husbands emigrated to the United States and, for various reasons, never sent for their wives and children; instead, they remarried and started new families without either family knowing about the existence of other. Such abandoned women are called agunot in Jewish law, and their social and legal status in Jewish society is very complex and problematic.

In light of the growing number of agunot in Eastern Europe, many aid organizations, particularly in the United States, tried to assist these miserable women. In 1911 they formed a special department called the Desertion Bureau, which a year later was spun off into an independent organization called the National Desertion Bureau, headed by Charles Zunser. The NDB’s archives are held by YIVO in New York and include a card file of names of agunot.

5. Conclusion

Koheleth, Perling and Zilazne are but three of three million people. Their letters describe three stages in the migration process: A family that was considering emigration, though it is not clear whether they emigrated or remained in the Pale of Settlement; a migrant who set out on his journey but was unsuccessful in completing it; and a woman whose husband immigrated to New York and disappeared. Their personal stories, however, represent tens of thousands of Jewish emigrants who sought to uproot themselves and make a better life for themselves in a new land. Their letters—and similar letters sent to the information bureaus—allow us to understand the migration

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22 For answers to some of these questions, see ALROEY (2006).
23 The aguna (literally “anchored woman”) in the classic sense refers to a married woman whose husband is missing. Such a woman cannot remarry and, what is worse, if she becomes pregnant by another man, their child is a mamzer (bastard) under Jewish religious law and will not be able to marry most other Jews. During the period of the Great Migration, there was a substantial rise in the number of agunot in Jewish society, because many husbands traveled to America and disappeared without a trace. Thus Mashe Zilazne’s letter describes a situation that was not uncommon.
24 For more on this office and its work, see FRIDIKS (1981).
experience “from below” and especially to extricate the anonymous migrant from the immigration statistics and theories.

Instead of an economic model, a banal statistic, or a fraction of a percentage point, these letters turn the migrant into a living, breathing figure through whom one can follow the immigration drama and understand it in a direct and humane way.

In light of these three letters, it seems that there is no more fitting way to end this article than by quoting from the Ellis Island, by Georges Perec and Robert Bober:

Four million immigrants came from Ireland, Four hundred thousand immigrants came from Turkey and Armenia, five million immigrants came from Sicily and Italy, six million immigrants came from Germany, four hundred thousand immigrants came from Holland, three million immigrants came from Austria and Hungary, six hundred thousand immigrants came from Greece, six hundred thousand immigrants came from Bohemia and Moravia, three million five hundred thousand immigrants came from Russia and the Ukraine, one million immigrants came from Sweden, three hundred thousand immigrants came from Romania and Bulgaria […] Rather than simply saying: in thirty years sixteen million emigrants passed through Ellis Island, attempting to give palpable form to what those sixteen million individual stories were, the sixteen million stories, identical and distinct, of the men, women, and children driven, from their native land by famine or poverty, or by political, racial, or religious oppression, leaving everything behind—village, family, friends—taking months and years to set aside the money needed for the trip, finding themselves here, in a hall so vast that they never would have dared imagine that there could anywhere exist so big a place, lined up by fours, waiting their turn.25

Bibliography


