

# AN IMPERFECT STORM IN GALVESTON

## THE DISCRIMINATORY EXPERIENCE FACED BY JEWISH IMMIGRANT WOMEN



### BY IVY ALBRIGHT

Opposite page: The introduction in the 1896 *Galveston Blue Book* notes that the publication "is a necessity in metropolitan life, because it forms the only reliable social guide for well-regulated households." One section is devoted to a code of behavior reflecting the ideals of the Victorian-era purity movement, which became a tool to discourage admittance of unmarried Jewish women at the Port of Galveston. All images courtesy of the Rosenberg Library, unless otherwise noted.

hen studying transatlantic history, Galveston does not come to the forefront of most research. Nestled in the Gulf of Mexico, the Texas port was first notably recognized by the pirate Jean Laffite in the early 1800s. By the end of the 19th century, the city was a prosperous international center of commerce and a port of immigration. Settlers from other countries began arriving in Galveston in 1865, and by 1924, an estimated 200,000 newcomers had entered the United States there. Among the greatest population to make the transoceanic journey to the Texas port were Jewish men. Female immigrants also disembarked, but they faced greater entry challenges than their male counterparts. Records show that young single women unaccompanied by their families, especially those of Russian Jewish descent, were more disproportionally turned away in Galveston than at other U. S. ports of entry, wrongfully accused of being morally corrupt.

To understand why this happened, one must look at the bigger historical picture, which included the gathering clouds of World War I and puritanical colonial laws that shaped ideologies on sexual morality in the New World. Those beliefs resulted in a list of acceptable and unacceptable behaviors that influenced the rise of purity movements across the United States in the late Victorian era (early 1900s). As a result, stricter regulations were put in place that created exclusions for incoming female immigrants and helps explain why the names of more Jewish men are found in Galveston immigration records than Jewish women.

#### A BRIEF HISTORY OF JEWISH IMMIGRATION

After the 1881 assassination of Czar Alexander II, then emperor of Russia, *pogroms* (violent attacks) persecuting and inciting violence against Jewish people began. This anti-Semitism movement continued into the 20th century, spreading across Europe and resulting in a mass transatlantic migration of Jews. Desperate to escape prejudice and unjust treatment, America offered freedom of religion and economic opportunity. Thus, when Ellis Island's immigration station opened in 1892, the center welcomed an influx of European Jews fleeing persecution. They began settling in New York City's Lower East Side, and by 1905, almost one million new arrivals practicing the Jewish faith resided in the metropolis. Most lived in overcrowded flats and in unsanitary or unhealthy conditions. To ease this situation and limit anti-immigration laws, the Galveston Movement was born.

New York City philanthropist Jacob Schiff, Rabbi Henry Cohen of Galveston, activist and English playwright Israel Zangwill, and East Coast rabbi and social worker Morris Waldman formed the Jewish Immigrant Information Bureau (JIIB), informally known as the Galveston Movement, which operated from 1907 to 1914. JIIB organizers realized that the geographical location of Galveston offered several advantages. First, it was physically removed from the Atlantic coast, diverting attention away from New York City. Secondly, Galveston already had direct German steamship connections and a transcontinental railroad network, which allowed transportation of Jews elsewhere in Texas and into the South, Midwest, and West for permanent relocation or long-term residency. This was important because Jewish immigrants were discouraged from settling in Galveston upon arrival, as there were few employment opportunities there for those not fluent in English.

While the Galveston Movement rescued approximately 10,000 or more Jewish immigrants from Russian and Ukrainian villages, resettlement criteria created gendered exclusions and bias from the start. The relocation effort was marketed towards and favored young men under the age of 40 who already possessed desirable skills, such as saddle makers, shoemakers, ironworkers, butchers, and plumbers. When they landed in Galveston, the new arrivals would be provided with money by JIIB to get them started. They also received a free train ride to locations within and outside of Texas that had been selected for them based on their skills and requests for specific laborers made by these destination cities. However, as the economic depression of 1907, which lasted two years, worsened and led to high unemployment rates, even native residents had a difficult time finding jobs. This resulted in tighter immigration restrictions. Beginning in 1909, arriving men had to be the head of a household, possess at least \$25 dollars, and agree to send for their families later. These challenges greatly reduced the number of immigrants the Movement could rescue. The program had hoped to save at least two million people, but only two thousand were processed from 1909 through 1910, and most of those were male.

Form 2289 A TIME FILED THEO. N. VAIL, PRESIDENT June 13 to 1915 SEND the following Night Letter, subject to the terms on back hereof, which are hereby agreed to Chrs. L. May Secretary america. 1624 H St Washington lagent take charge line Shall be glad to assas fragen floo of friendless destitute refugees for lette Right to to as

Above: In this 1915 telegram to the Red Cross, Rabbi Henry Cohen, cofounder of the Jewish Immigrant Information Bureau, acknowledges a personal commitment to assisting "destitute refugees," a year after the Galveston Movement officially ended. Original in color.



#### DIFFERENT IMMIGRATION CIRCUMSTANCES

The experience of Jewish immigrant women was altogether different. As early as 1905, there were allegations that prominent Galveston Jewish business leaders were encouraging prostitution among immigrant women. These false and damaging accusations probably were used not only to exploit Jews, but also as a strategy to take advantage of local business leaders of that faith. As a result, from 1907 to 1913, single female Jewish immigrants were four times as likely to be denied entrance at the Port of Galveston compared to those landing at Ellis Island, with nearly all of the newly arriving Texas newcomers in this category being identified as alleged prostitutes. No criteria for this discriminatory classification seems to have existed, with the prejudice apparently specific to Galveston politics and unsubstantiated rumors circulating within the city. Immigrant

men, on the other hand, were rejected at the port based on medical reasons and almost always were admitted at another U. S. processing center.

Unaccompanied young single female settlers who were refused entry in Texas had only a few options. They could attempt to enter the United States at a different port, go back to their home country and face persecution, or find immediate employment in Galveston. However, to remain and secure a job was problematic for several reasons. First, JIIB had assured the Jewish community of Galveston that the organization's efforts would not become burdensome. Local residents did not want Russian Jewish immigrants living in the city long-term as most of them were poor, illiterate, or did not speak English. Also, lone young women were presumed to be susceptible to immoral behavior and considered easy targets for white slavery. Finding work was yet another obstacle, though some managed to overcome that hurdle.



In 1907, records show that 82 female immigrants belonging to the tailoring trade were allowed entry at the Galveston port.

#### AN ADDITIONAL FACTOR: THE REFORMATION CRUSADES

There also was a social movement happening in the state that unduly influenced immigration in Galveston. White, upper class, Protestant women were spearheading a morality campaign that targeted large urban cities, including Austin, Dallas, Houston, and eventually Galveston. Victorian views, which wished to ensure that women were innocent, feminine, submissive, and dutiful mothers or wives, were encouraged. For instance, the Galveston Blue Book, published in 1896, named the city's elite residents, listed clubs to which they belonged, and included a social code of conduct with "detailed social intercourse between the sexes." The publication advocated that women stay true to their domestic duties and purity. This set of beliefs continued to dominate societal norms into the 20th century. By 1906, almost half of Galveston's population practiced the Protestant faith and shared these traditional ideologies. These beliefs eventually became a tool

used against unwelcome female immigrants of lower racial and socioeconomic classes.

Some social reformers went as far as enlisting the U.S. Bureau of Immigration as the frontline of defense at the nation's ports. The Page Act of 1875 prohibited immigration of women for immoral purposes. That set the precedent for The Immigration Acts of 1903 and 1907, which applied even stricter regulations against unwanted foreigners and were directed at excluding prostitutes, thus becoming the first federal immigration laws that made importing women for prostitution illegal. Even though there is no evidence that any Jew engaged in prostitution in Galveston (in fact, there was strong opposition to the practice), enactment of this legislation only strengthened moral purity movements and allowed for easier exploitation of single female immigrants.

Despite the lack of proof, the unsubstantiated rumor of immigrant prostitution in Galveston circulated and was believed to be true in a place that was known internationally for its immoral and lewd behavior. By 1880, the city had more than 400 saloons and 55 brothels. In 1916, there were 1,000 known working prostitutes on the island. Moreover, the rise in liquor sales was regarded as a threat to society. In an interesting twist—and a desperate attempt to protect their businesses from evangelicals advocating for prohibition and divert attention elsewhere—Texas beer makers in 1905 created false allegations about Jewish men exploiting immigrant women. The brewers claimed their evidence derived from the fact that buildings used for bordellos or other corrupt behaviors were owned or rented by Jewish men. The beer makers threatened Jewish merchants with negative publicity about alleged female prostitutes of that faith in what ultimately became a failed attempt to blackmail and leverage money from business owners.

The adversity that these newcomers, particularly Jewish women, faced has led scholars to question whether the efforts of the Jewish Immigrant Information Bureau did more harm than good. What is not debated is the fact that Jewish immigrants endured in spite of these challenges, and today, the Galveston Movement is regarded as one of the most important transatlantic events of the 20th century. These little-known historical facts about Jewish immigration to Texas, however, paint a more complete picture of a time when diverse social issues, an overburdened immigration system, and the upheaval of military conflict all galvanized during a politically challenging chapter of the state's and nation's history.  $\bigstar$ 

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Opposite, top: Immigrants, seen here arriving in Galveston circa 1910, faced many challenges, the first of which was meeting strict requirements for entry into the United States. Bottom: Rabbi Henry Cohen sometimes used his own resources to purchase clothing and supplies for Jewis newcomers, who had fled their homeland with little money and few belongings.

This page: Rabbi Henry Cohen (second from left) poses with some of the 54 Russian Jewish immigrants who arrived on the *SS Cassel* during the Galveston Movement. Tags are visible on some of the individuals. Photograph courtesy of The University of Texas at San Antonio Special Collections.

