

A CENTURY OF ORGANIZED JEWISH MIGRATION*

By DR. MARK WISCHNITZER

*Institute on Overseas Studies,
Council of Jewish Federations and
Welfare Funds*

TOMORROW night, May 14, 1948, it will be exactly a hundred years since the first charter of a Jewish emigration society was signed. I have in mind the Emigration Society founded by the leaders of the community of Vienna. On the occasion of the opening of the Fourth International Conference of Jewish Social Work it may be proper to recall the beginnings of organized Jewish migration.

1848 was a year of social unrest and revolutions in many parts of Europe which ended in failure. The abortive risings in Berlin, Karlsruhe, Vienna, Budapest and Prague caused flight, exile, and emigration. The reactionary measures which followed the suppression of the revolutions had their effect on the Jews too. Jewish emigration did not actually start in 1848, but it was quickened by the political events of that year. As a result of repeated migration waves, a total of four million Jews shifted since 1848 from Europe to the Western Hemisphere, Palestine, South Africa and Australia.

Of this total, a third or a half at the most, moved on their own initiative,

* Presented at the Fourth International Conference of Jewish Social Work.

The author's book *To Dwell in Safety: The Story of Jewish Migration in the Past Hundred and Fifty Years—1800—1948*, with a preface by James G. McDonald (Jewish Publication Society of America), will appear in Fall, 1948.

planned alone their migration and paid the expenses involved out of their own pocket. But two and a half million, roughly speaking, needed guidance in legal and technical matters, and particularly financial assistance.

The year 1848 marks, then, the beginning of what we may call Jewish migrant aid. It is interesting to read the Vienna charter in the light of our present experience. There is, for instance, a paragraph there dealing with the problem of the choosing of emigrants. It is stressed that the selection should be guided by the needs of the overseas countries for certain skills and professions. The method adopted for financing emigration is also worth mentioning. Those possessing means were supposed to contribute to the emigration costs of the needy. Emigrants were to be sent in groups of 50 to 100 families, each group electing its own leader responsible for the group during the passage. Members of a group were to help each other, and to take care of a family should its head die during the journey. Loans for settling on the land or establishing a business were also to be provided for.

Another date worth recalling in a survey of the history of migration is the year 1869, when for the first time the activities for the benefit of migrants were coordinated on an international scale. It was the year of the famine in the

province of Kovno, Lithuania. The spontaneous move of starving people to the Prussian border with the slogan, "Let us go to America" presented a serious emergency problem which stirred public opinion on both sides of the Atlantic. French and German Jewish leaders took up the matter together. A committee was set up in Koenigsberg (Prussia). American Jewish leaders were contacted and directives for a selection of fit people were worked out. The experiment was, on the whole, successful.

Time does not permit to dwell on the activities of the Koenigsberg Committee, but it is interesting to note that the idea to charter boats for the emigrants in order to save private and public funds and eliminate the swindler shipping agencies came up there and then.

The mass persecutions in Russia in 1881 and 1891 gave rise to increased Jewish emigration overseas. The situation along the border of Russia with Germany, Austria and Rumania was appalling. Swift action was necessary; numerous committees sprang up in Europe and America to cope with the emergency. However, the American groups were not equipped for large scale action. The result was a tangle of inconveniences, of overlapping, duplication and lack of coordination, all of which might have been avoided if things had been planned by a central agency. It was in 1891 when the emigration passed the 100,000 mark that the *London Jewish Chronicle* appealed in an editorial for the creation of an over-all international body for carrying through a wholesale evacuation of Jews from Russia. This appeal had no tangible results, however.

Things improved in the period of 1904 to 1914. In that decade, about one and a half million Jews emigrated

overseas, particularly with the assistance of two European agencies: the Russian branch of the Jewish Colonization Association with headquarters in St. Petersburg, and the Central Migration Bureau of the *Hilfsverein der Deutschen Juden* in Berlin. Both agencies worked closely together. It was at that time that an information service on conditions in countries of emigration, transmigration and immigration was set up. The results of the findings involving thoroughgoing research were made available through pamphlets, leaflets, bulletins and press releases in several languages. An encyclopedic manual on Jewish migration in Russian appeared in St. Petersburg in 1913. And I may say that were a manual of that type available in the 1930's, it would have been of great service to the emigrants, and social workers alike. The lack of accurate information was sorely felt in those hectic days.

But to return to the decade 1904-1914, it should be pointed out that much useful work had been done in addition to operating the information service. Elementary language courses were arranged, English-Yiddish and Spanish-Yiddish dictionaries were published, medical centers for treatment of eye diseases were set up, protection was offered against swindler agents, negotiations were carried out with shipping and railway lines, and luggage transportation agencies, price reductions were obtained, and other important services provided.

World War I, while not stopping Jewish emigration overseas altogether, practically disrupted the organizational set-up of migrant aid. As military operations ended in 1918, hundreds of thousands of Eastern European Jews found themselves homeless, displaced and without a livelihood. In 1918-20, the territory from the Baltic to the Black Sea

A CENTURY OF ORGANIZED JEWISH MIGRATION

was ravaged by famine, disease and civil war. For the Jews there were, in addition, pogroms during which scores of thousands perished in the Ukraine, White Russia and Poland. A mass exodus set in, a general *sauve-qui-peut* of terrorized, terrified human beings. On December 6, 1920, the *Alliance Israélite Universelle* launched an appeal to the League of Nations to take matters in hand. "The problem," said the Alliance, "is fundamentally an international one. . . . Only the League of Nations can cope with it." This appeal to the League was followed by similar pleas from other Jewish bodies. Meeting after meeting was held; views were exchanged again and again. The results, as we know, were nil. Ultimately, the private Jewish organizations came to realize that they must act on their own.

Local and national committees were formed, then, in Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Rumania for directing emigration and repatriation. These committees sprang up like mushrooms. Every committee had the same refugees on their files and was rivaling with each other. Meanwhile the JDC took up repatriation and resettlement; the Jewish Colonization Association renewed and enlarged its emigration apparatus; and the HIAS established offices in Europe.

It was felt that some sort of unification of the services was necessary. The ICA made an attempt to organize a Central Emigration Council under its direction. This attempt failed, but the local and national committees in Eastern Europe along with HIAS formed in 1921 a United Committee for Emigration, known as EMIGDIRECT. The ICA and other important agencies did not join the EMIGDIRECT at that time. This is to be deplored because with the adoption of the Johnson Bill

by Congress in 1924 which drastically restricted immigration to the U.S.A., common planning and common action of the Jewish agencies for exploration of other areas of immigration would have been indicated.

After much experimenting a solution was found, and in 1927, ICA, HIAS and EMIGDIRECT built a united front under the name of HICEM. Although the work was at first of a limited scope, in view of the fact that the yearly average of overseas emigration of 100,000 before World War I had shrunk to 30,000 in the 1920's on account of immigration restrictions, the catastrophe of German Jewry in 1933 was to take up all the energies and resources of HICEM. HICEM worked in subsequent years in active collaboration with the Jewish bodies in Germany, England, France, America and other countries in the Old and New World. HICEM continued its overall programs during the last war, programs which were financially supported by JDC and other agencies.

With the withdrawal of ICA in November, 1945, a new situation arose which resulted in the liquidation of HICEM. Since then three agencies have been active in migration work: JDC, HIAS and the United Service for New Americans, along with the Jewish Agency for Palestine which has directed immigration to Palestine since the 1920's.

The experiences in the field of migrant aid in the past hundred years, which I have sketched in this rapid survey, show that much more could have been done for the sake of the emigrants by a central emigration agency. Better information, better preparedness, better coordination of programs could have been achieved.

But to conclude in a more optimistic vein, one must concede that with all

A CENTURY OF ORGANIZED JEWISH MIGRATION

their shortcomings, overlappings and ill-conceived migration projects, the organizations have performed a tremendous work. I refer to the two and a half million people on the move who have been helped one way or another in those hundred years. In the crucial period of 1933 to 1945, several hundred thousand Jewish people were saved from the clutches of Nazism by the private or-

ganizations without, and this should be noted, very much help on the part of the great democracies.

The work is not finished. Hundreds of thousands of our people anxiously await their liberation. They have to be brought out of Europe. We all trust that the organizations concerned will tackle this overwhelming problem with success.