

THE GALVESTON PROJECT: An Early Attempt at Immigration Reform

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“Embarrassed! Who is Jacob Schiff to be embarrassed by my Uncle Benny Daynovsky?”

This was writer Calvin Trillin’s tongue-in-cheek reaction to finding out how and why his Jewish immigrant family had ended up in St. Joseph, Missouri, a hundred years ago. Not that he was unhappy to have grown up in the American heartland. It had worked out just fine. As he records in his tribute to his father, *Messages from My Father*, published in 1996, his family had prospered, as was the case with most other participants in Jacob Schiff’s Galveston Project.

What Trillin had inadvertently stumbled upon was one of the most interesting episodes in American Jewish history. Initiated and underwritten by the most prominent Jewish financier and philanthropist of his day, it was judged to be a failure at the time and is now known only to a small and diminishing number of specialists. However, it was a unique experiment, as Bernard Marinbach notes in *Galveston: Ellis Island of the West*, “...the only substantial example of organized Jewish immigration to the United States. From their recruitment in Eastern Europe to their settlement in the American West, these immigrants were supervised and looked after by organizations of agents.” The Project

benefitted thousands of Jewish families and their descendents, as well as helping to strengthen hundreds of Jewish communities in America's West, South and Southwest.

Trillin was not completely unaware of his family's origins and the route they had traveled to reach his hometown in the Midwest. But, as he recalled later, "when I was a child I didn't realize that there was anything out of the ordinary in getting on a boat in darkest Europe, getting off in Galveston, Texas, and going straight from there to St. Joseph, Missouri." It only dawned on him later that, while he had been well schooled in the familiar Jewish immigration narrative regarding the massive influx of Jews from Eastern and Southern Europe during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, he had heard "nothing at all about the route my family had taken from suburban Kiev to St. Joseph, Missouri." Ellis Island, the Statue of Liberty and the Lower East Side of New York City were all part of the familiar story but "there was not a word about Galveston, Texas. How did this family – a family indistinguishable from thousands of other poor Eastern European Jewish families saying farewell to the Czar, a family that could have expected to fetch up on, say, Delancey Street – land in Galveston?"

It took until the 1970s, by which time Trillin was an established writer, for him to confront this question. A fellow-writer, Eli Evans, sent him a copy of his recently published book, *The Provincials*, which recounted the life-stories of Jewish families living in the Southern States, including their European origins and their transit routes from Europe. As it happened, many of these families had entered the country under the auspices of the Galveston Project.

The impetus for the Galveston Project arose from concern among New York's established German Jewish community about the plight of the large numbers of Eastern and Southern European Jews who were flooding into the City and settling in large enclaves on the Lower East Side. They worried about an anti-Semitic and restrictionist backlash, especially in light of the large numbers, high visibility and foreignness of the newcomers. As Evans put it, "The silk-hat banker, Jacob Schiff, concerned about conditions on the East Side of New York (and embarrassed by the image it created for New York's German Jews) pledged half a million dollars in 1906 to the Galveston Project which helped direct more than ten thousand East European immigrants through Galveston."

Trillin later confirmed that his family were Galveston Project people when he saw copies of the manifests of a couple of ships which had transported immigrants from German ports to Galveston. The first, "the S.S. *Koln*, arriving on October 5, 1907, from Bremen listed my grandfather as Kussiel Trilinski, a thirty-one-year-old joiner (carpenter)" coming from a village "about seventy-five miles west of Kiev." Two-and-half-years later, "on March 10, 1910, the S.S. *Frankfurt* landed in Galveston with a complement of passengers that included my grandmother and two small children – Scheindel, my Aunt Sadie, and Abram, who in America became Abe, my father."

These nuggets of family history further incensed Trillin about Schiff's reported attitude towards Eastern European Jews like him and his relatives. He combed Stephen Birmingham's account of New York's wealthiest Jewish families ("*Our Crowd*" which

was published in 1967) for embarrassing information about the silk-hat banker. This was not difficult, given the cutthroat business practices that often typified America's first foray into corporate industrialism on a massive scale and the complexities of the new type of high finance which was needed to oil the wheels. When millions could be won or lost on the capricious roll of the entrepreneurial dice, the industrial titans and their bankers often sought to minimize their downside risk by fair means or foul. Schiff was a person of high principle but played the entrepreneurial game as vigorously and, when the need arose, as ruthlessly as his peers.

However, there is more to the story than Trillin, Birmingham and Evans suggest. Schiff was certainly no angel but neither was he the villain that their accounts might lead us to believe. By any fair measure, he would have to be viewed as a remarkable individual whose contributions to society, especially the Jewish community, far outweigh his alleged sins. For example, as Roy Rosenberg notes in *Everything You Need to Know About America's Jews and Their History*, "Schiff fervently believed in the Jewish principle that charity was an obligation (*sedaka*, meaning justice). He voluntarily tithed ten percent of his income as a minimum for charitable causes; until he exceeded this ten percent obligation, he did not consider that he had yet disbursed any of 'his money.' Whenever possible, he kept the amount of his benefactions secret."

Schiff had been born in Germany into a wealthy family of bankers, scholars and rabbis. He immigrated to the U.S. at age 18 and quickly established himself as a successful broker and financier. He joined Kuhn, Loeb and Company, the prominent merchant

banking and brokerage firm in New York City in 1874, became its head in 1885, and was soon one of the wealthiest and most influential businessmen of the Gilded Age. His remarkable rise to prominence was due to the fact that he was a precocious and especially gifted master of the complex relationships that had developed among finance, manufacturing, and the railroads in the burgeoning American industrial economy.

Unfortunately, as the Jewish people have learned to their cost through the ages, while wealth is a *sine qua non* of security, it guarantees nothing. And New York's Jewish elite were soon to be tested by an unexpected threat to whatever security they thought their financial success and their Americanization had brought them. "In the years between 1870 and 1905," Birmingham notes, "more than a third of the Jews of Eastern Europe left their homes. Over 90 percent of these came to the United States, and most of them settled in New York City."

The vast majority of this migration originated in what was called The Pale of Settlement which, as Gerald Sorin notes in his 1992 book, *A Time for Building: The Third Migration, 1880-1920*, was comprised of "the fifteen western provinces of European Russia and the ten provinces of Russian-held Poland. Nearly four million Jews, considered by the Russians a pariah people, were confined to the Pale and, for more than two centuries, to the ethnically homogeneous *shtetlekh* (small towns) therein." By the late 1800s, in the face of Russian Government policy which sought, through implicit and often overt support of thousands of violent anti-Jewish pogroms, to drive them out of Russia, "millions of Jews left the *shtetlekh* and cities in which they had built their lives."

Thanks to the unprecedented industrial and economic expansion that was occurring in the United States at that time and its openness to immigrants, this was the preferred destination. In fact, “more than 73 percent of Jewish immigrants to the United States between 1880 and 1920 came from the Russian Empire, particularly from the Pale of Settlement.” Sorin adds that, during the period 1891-1924, “more than three million Jews crossed borders in Eastern Europe (and) more than 80 percent ended up in the United States.”

The journey that Eastern and Southern European Jewish families took to reach America was both expensive and hazardous. As Sorin notes, the challenges they faced were forbidding, “not the least of which was the lengthy and circuitous expedition out of Russia, Romania and Galicia.” Assuming they could make it to such ports as Hamburg, Bremen or Amsterdam, a steamship ticket would cost them \$34 per person in 1903 dollars – a substantial amount for ordinary working people, be they small merchants, artisans or shop-keepers. Added to this cost was the especially difficult and expensive trek across Europe to reach those seaports. If they could avoid being robbed by people they encountered along the way – whether they be out-and-out thieves or their equivalent in other form, such as victimizing travel agents or corrupt government officials -- they were lucky. For most, selling all they possessed yielded just “enough money to get to Western Europe and finally to the New World – penniless and bereft of possessions.”

If these hazards were not enough, the Czarist government presented its own unique challenges. While clearly wishing to see the last of the Jews and unofficially allowing

them to leave, it made it almost impossible for them to obtain the passports needed for international travel, thereby creating the necessity for illegal border-crossing and a market for those adroit at exploiting the contradictions of the situation. Especially hazardous for young men was the fact that, if the Russian authorities encountered them, they were at risk of being drafted into the Army – a terrifying thought for fleeing young men and their families. When Trillin told his Missouri relatives about his proposed article on Jacob Schiff and Uncle Benny, which he hoped to have published before his uncle's 90th birthday, "Don't mention his name," Uncle Benny's son said. "The Russian Army is still looking for him."

The estimated 700,000 Jews who made it to the Baltic or other North Sea ports between 1905 and 1914 faced less than ideal conditions during their transatlantic crossings which could last for up to three weeks. For their \$34 per person fare they were accommodated in something called "steerage." As Sorin notes, this was the "brainchild of Albert Ballin, a German Jew and the head of the Hamburg-America Line." Transatlantic vessels typically carried raw materials, such as timber, from America to Europe but on the return trip they carried items that weighed less and took up little space. Realizing the profit potential in the growing emigration traffic, Ballin had the empty holds fitted with rudimentary beds, and the infamous steerage was born." Besides being profitable, loaded vessels are easier to steer, as the name implies, than empty ones – so practicality and profitability fortuitously flowed from the human cargo.

This cargo was typically bound for New York City, which, for all intents and purposes, most immigrants equated with America. As a consequence, the City's Jewish population which was "less than nine percent in 1870 and, as such, ...no more than the object of casual curiosity," by 1907, had grown to about 25 percent, with ninety thousand arriving every year. "These statistics presented the Americanized German Jews in New York with the most pressing and painful problem they had ever faced." Despite their common religious faith, a significant degree of antagonism developed between the Germans and the Eastern Europeans, between Uptown where the wealthy lived and the Lower East Side where the newer arrivals clustered.

Birmingham notes that the "mass of gruff-voiced, 'uncouth' 'unwashed' Russians who had the temerity to call themselves fellow Jews and therefore brothers was a distinct embarrassment." Recurring press accounts of what was going on in the Lower East Side's Jewish quarter – "overcrowding in tenements, vermin, garbage, marital disorders, violence, starvation, and crime – were a grievous thorn in the German Jewish side. To be identified as a Jew along with 'those people' 'the dregs of Europe' was intolerable. They made a bad name for everybody." The bedrock fear was that their newly-arriving co-religionists would feed the latent and often blatant anti-Semitism of their fellow Americans. Ironically, some came close to subscribing to the nativist sentiments that were prevalent at the time, referring to the newcomers as "something akin to the Yellow Peril" and supporting measures to restrict immigration.

An especially potent source of the German Jewish community's antagonism towards the newcomers, Birmingham notes, was their experience in and commitment to union organizing. The Pale of Settlement "had become a hotbed of revolutionary activity" and the pogroms were a reaction, at least in part, to "the desperate, and largely unsuccessful, attempts of the Jewish workers to organize trade and labor unions." Many of these activities were "marked by violence, bloodshed, and arrests. In the first years of the twentieth century, thousands of persons were arrested for political reasons, most of them Jews." The failure of the 1905 Revolution and the wholesale violence that followed deprived them of any hope of relief – "the only answer was to escape to America, the land of the free." Once here in large numbers, they were seen by the German Jewish community as not only feeding anti-Semitism and nativism, and all that that implied, but also as a direct threat to their economic interests, widening the gulf between them. "It was worker versus boss, mass versus class, vulgar versus genteel, 'foreigner' versus 'American,' Russian versus German, Jew versus Jew."

The German Jewish community began to look for ways to address these issues. Schiff had long been active in fighting for the welfare of Jews who were suffering under Czarist oppression. Incensed by the Czar's violent actions against Russia's Jewish communities, especially after the pogroms, Geoffrey Widoger notes in his *Dictionary of Jewish Biography* (1991), he "made a number of public statements in which he called the Russian Government 'the enemy of mankind' and in which he had urged an armed revolution against the Czar." In order to do what he could, at long distance, he actively supported Japan in its war with Russia, by arranging sufficient lines of credit in the

United States and Western Europe. For these services, Schiff was feted at a private dinner with the Emperor, an unprecedented honor for a Westerner, and received an Imperial Medal by way of thanks. He also convinced President Theodore Roosevelt to send a personal letter to the Czar, protesting the slaughter of Jews in Odessa in 1905. By all accounts, he was a frequent visitor to TR's White House, educating the President about the plight of the Jewish people in the Pale and America and exploring solutions.

In addition to his advocacy activities, Schiff's contributions to Jewish philanthropic causes in the America and around the world were remarkable and included his leadership in the founding of the American Jewish Committee in 1906, originally to counter the actions of the Ku Klux Klan but later expanding its mission to address any violation of the rights of Jews. Especially noteworthy was Schiff's leadership role in the establishment in 1914 of the American Jewish Relief Committee, the forerunner of today's Joint Distribution Committee.

Among his numerous other contributions to philanthropic and civic causes, he had helped found the Educational Alliance in 1889. This organization, which still exists today, initially sought to promote the education and Americanization of Eastern European Jewish immigrants whose lower-class background, foreign customs and attire, and stubborn retention of the Yiddish language were seen by affluent and assimilated German Jews as major obstacles to success in America. These goals were eventually modified as Eastern European Jews rose to leadership positions. As settlement house pioneers like

Jane Addams and Lillian Wald were demonstrating, it was possible to be a good and successful American without giving up one's culture and language.

The Galveston Project has an intriguing genesis. Schiff is generally given credit for its initiation and there is no question that he operationalized and financed it. However, there is some evidence that the germ of the idea was originally floated by TR in one of their many *tete-a-tetes*. As Sacher states, in the course of a conversation with Schiff in 1905, TR "casually observed that dense urban ghettos like New York's could only serve as a major provocation to the restrictionists. Would not the dispersal of Jews throughout the American interior diffuse those misgivings?" It was not that this idea was completely original, given the efforts of the Industrial Removal Office and others of like mind, such as Baron de Hirsch. What was significant was that an American President would make such a comment to "American Jewry's elder statesman and its single most openhanded philanthropist." Regardless of the source of inspiration, the failure of the 1905 Revolution to overthrow the Czar and the atrocities that the Jews in the Pale continued to suffer spurred Schiff to action.

Based on Schiff's recommendation, Oscar Straus had been appointed to TR's Cabinet, as Secretary of Commerce and Labor, the office that oversaw immigration. Straus, among many other things, had been one of the founders and first President of the Jewish Historical Society, whose primary purpose was to document and publicize the patriotism of American Jews and to ensure that that they were regarded, in all respects, as equal citizens to all other Americans. In the face of mounting anti-Semitic sentiment and the

exclusionary pressures of such groups as the Immigration Restriction League at the turn of the last century, the Society compiled a list of all Jewish soldiers who had fought in American wars. “Once the list was completed,” Sorin notes, “Oscar Straus rushed off a copy to President Theodore Roosevelt. In a covering note, Straus added that, most recently, seventeen Jewish sailors had gone down with the *Maine*.” Given TR’s pride in his exploits in Cuba in response to the sinking of the *Maine*, this has to rank among the most politically astute communications on record.

With the support of a sympathetic President and a key member of his Cabinet, “Schiff was confident,” as Sachar notes, “that only money and planning were needed to revolutionize Jewish demography and he had both.” He established working agreements with Israel Zangwill’s Jewish Territorial Organization, based in London, and the Jewish Emigration Society to manage the process on the European side. “At its peak,” Marinbach notes, “the Jewish Emigration Society, based in Kiev, operated a network of eighty-two committees throughout the Russian Pale of Jewish Settlement. These committees distributed literature in Yiddish describing the opportunities waiting for immigrants in the American West.” In addition to publicizing the project and signing up participants, they issued tickets which covered the cost of the trip to Bremen, accommodation there, and the steamship passage to Galveston. The participants were also given “letters of introduction to the *Hilfverein der deutschen Juden* in Bremen and to the Jewish Immigrants’ Information Bureau in Galveston.”

The Industrial Removal Office already had attempted to disperse Eastern European immigrants out of America's urban ghettos to small towns and rural areas in the heartland. However, these efforts had been largely unsuccessful, due primarily to the reluctance of most immigrants to move on from the familiar Jewish enclaves in the Eastern Cities to the unknown and forbidding territory of the interior. Nevertheless, as Sachar notes, Schiff decided to use the ILO and "its well-developed B'nai B'rith contacts throughout the South and West to secure employment and housing for the newcomers." Morris Waldman, a dynamic young social worker, was appointed Director of the Project and, as Ande Manners writes in *Poor Cousins*, he and a cadre of his associates, "crisscrossed the West and Southwest preaching the gospel of *tzedaka* – being righteously charitable – as a means of 'selling Jews.' Here and there, he recalled, we had to overcome 'sales resistance' and the most effective weapon was to invoke the magic words 'Jacob Schiff.' Sending a long telegram over his name, advising a community of my advent, invariably found a delegation awaiting me at the depot."

The Galveston Project would not have been possible if there had not been established Jewish communities scattered about the American interior. Large or small, a sufficient number had B'nai B'rith lodges and business people who were able to offer a sheltering presence and employment for the new arrivals. They were made up of individuals, families, and groups who had moved from the East Coast and had worked themselves up from their original occupations to the ownership of stores, workshops, or factories, through hard work, thrift, an enterprising spirit, and *takhlis* which translates inadequately as a sense of having a worthy, firmly established purpose in life. "If success, *takhlis*, or a

blend of both came from Lower East Side strivings,” Manners writes, “the process was a slow, backbreaking, obstacle-strewn one. Therefore, for many, the road to success beyond the Hudson seemed a more romantic byway. And eventually *takhlis* appeared enticingly closer in Houston, Texas, than on Houston Street.”

The so-called Jewish magnet (family, associates, religion, language) was a powerful force in drawing succeeding waves of Eastern European Jewish immigrants to America and to specific locations on the East Coast, especially New York. It acted in a similar, although less potent fashion, in attracting individuals, families and groups to locations beyond the Eastern Cities. Enterprising individuals ventured forth, as Manners notes, “generally via peddling. Operating out of peddlers’ warehouses at key points in the South, Midwest and Far West, they would traverse their route, week after week, always eyeing their territory for a good business location where one could open a dry goods store and call it The Emporium, The Bon Ton or The New York Store.” Once an individual or family was established in a specific location, usually a small town or rural area, “a brother might join them or a nephew. His wife’s cousins might leave New York to settle in an adjoining town. In this way, a sprinkling of Jews became a part of small towns all over the country.” These were the folks who provided the initial jobs and accommodation for Galveston Project participants.

In selecting Galveston, rather than other ports of entry, such as San Francisco and New Orleans which were also considered, as Manners notes, Schiff wanted to be certain that this “small town on a sandbar in the Gulf had few things to commend it as a permanent

home.” However, it did have advantages that made it an ideal location, including rail links to cities and towns throughout the center of the country. It also had a significant and prosperous Jewish presence. By 1866, as Evans notes, “twenty-one of the twenty-six merchants were Jewish; two years later five out seven retailers listed in the directory in Galveston were Jews,” as were “three out of five wholesalers in dry goods.” This small but vibrant Jewish community fully supported the Galveston Project provided that it was understood that none of the new arrivals would remain there, a condition with which Schiff completely concurred. Participants had to agree in writing that they would move on immediately upon arrival, preferably the same day.

In addition to having a vibrant and supportive Jewish community in Galveston, another key link in the organizational chain was to have an organization, headed by a dependable rabbi, which, as Evans notes, “met every boatload” and sought to ensure “in sending a butcher to Kansas City, a locksmith to Omaha, a shoemaker to Shreveport, that there was an opening in each town to fit the skills of the immigrant.” Rabbi Henry Cohen more than met the requirements. As Manners writes with understandable hyperbole about him, “In addition to being a circuit-riding rabbi to some 12,000 Jews in Texas, ...he was teacher, advisor, social worker to virtually all Texas. When people were in trouble, white or black, Jew or Gentile, aristocrat or plebeian, it was ‘the Rabbi’ who was first consulted.” Stutter notwithstanding, Rabbi Cohen was a legend for his interdenominational work along the Gulf Coast and his tireless relief activities during and after the 1900 Galveston flood. He brought his limitless energy and resourcefulness to the Galveston Project.

With all of the pieces in place, the Galveston Project got off to a promising start. In July 1907, the S. S. *Cassel* arrived in Galveston with 54 Jewish passengers on board. Thanks to the efforts of Rabbi Cohen, they were greeted by a brass band and received a welcoming speech and handshakes from the city's mayor. The onward journey to awaiting jobs and housing in such locales as Oklahoma City, Houston and Kansas City went equally well. Additional boatloads, while small, also benefitted from the smooth operation of the Project.

Reports from Waldman and the other ILO field officers were generally favorable. One such report, cited by Manners, included the following information: "Alex Bogusin of Quincy, Illinois, sent there twelve months ago by the Galveston Bureau is working in a plumber shop. Despite his residence of but one year in this country he answered my questions in a faultless English (had attended Evening High School during the winter) and as evidence of his rapid Americanization he informed me that he is now a full fledged member of the Illinois Naval Reserve." By all accounts, the Project was progressing satisfactorily.

However, before the end of 1907, it was already encountering a series of setbacks that were beyond its control. The first was the "panic" of late 1907 – a serious downturn in the economy -- which dried up jobs nationally and job offers for the new arrivals.

Once the economy picked up again, it soon became evident that there were other forces at work that would make it impossible to deliver more than a fraction of the numbers that Schiff expected. By 1909, the Project was transporting less than ten percent of the 2,500

annually that had been hoped for. Especially damaging was a change of U. S. immigration policy in Galveston, initially under the Roosevelt Administration, but, more damagingly, when the Taft Administration took office in 1908. Immigrants started to be refused entry on various grounds, including health reasons or having insufficient funds, even though Schiff was underwriting the Project to the tune of half-a-million dollars and jobs and housing were guaranteed by the Jewish communities at the immigrants' final destinations.

Taft's Assistant Secretary for Commerce and Labor, Benjamin Cable, and his Commissioner General of Immigration, Daniel Keefe (formerly a leader of the American Federation of Labor) worked to have stricter immigration laws enacted and, when they were unsuccessful in this quest, they made sure that existing laws were administered in the most restrictive way possible. Schiff intervened directly with Taft, whom he had supported in his Presidential run, threatening to speak out publicly about the actions of Cable and Keefe, and withdraw his support for Taft's candidates for New York Governor and Congress in the midterm elections. He did have some success in cutting down deportations from Galveston for financial reasons but the refusals of entry on medical grounds continued at a rate way out of proportion to that experienced by immigrants in general. As Marinbach reports, "Deportation of the ostensibly carefully selected Jewish immigrants who arrived in Galveston was proportionately seven times higher than that at Boston, six times that of Philadelphia, and four times that of New York." Incongruently, the primary reason for medical exclusion in Galveston was inguinal hernia, a condition rarely recorded at Ellis Island where the risk of being diagnosed with trachoma was what

struck fear in the new arrivals. Despite Schiff's interventions with the Taft Administration, as Marinbach notes, "the deportations of 1910 presented the Galveston Project with the worst crisis of its existence, a setback from which it never fully recovered."

Compounding the problem were the conditions that immigrants had to suffer on the long journey from Bremen to Galveston on the slow North American-Lloyd Line steamships. Conditions on board were terrible, the food was inedible, and steerage passengers were repeatedly abused by the crew. Despite complaints by Rabbi Cohen in Galveston and Israel Zangwill, through his contacts in Bremen, nothing was done, since there was no competition for the Bremen-to-Galveston traffic. Eventually, because of the high rate of deportations, following a five thousand mile journey in horrendous conditions, most family members who were joining relatives who had come through Galveston were being advised to opt for other ports of entry.

Although Schiff continued to fight with the immigration authorities, with varying degrees of success, the advent of World War I in 1914 and the heightened nativist sentiments that accompanied it finally put an end to the Galveston Project. In terms of its impact, it was almost as great a disappointment as the previous dispersal efforts. According to Sorin, "after seven years of operation, the Galveston movement had deflected no more than ten thousand immigrants (about 1.2 percent) from the ports of the Northeast."

Therefore, measured solely in numerical terms, the Galveston Project has tended to be judged a failure and it certainly fell short of Schiff's expectations. However, it is possible to view it in a different light, by analyzing it from a qualitative rather than quantitative standpoint. Not only did the participants benefit, with the great majority going on to prosper, but the widely dispersed network of relatively small Jewish communities beyond the Eastern cities was greatly strengthened by the influx of the Galveston people and their families and friends who followed. By the end of 1910, according to Marinbach, "the Galveston Jewish immigrants had been distributed among more than a hundred cities in some twenty-five states." This was an extraordinary organizational achievement.

Two years later, a significant percentage of the new arrivals were family members or associates joining those who had preceded them. This was taken as an indication that the Project was working as Schiff intended – the establishment of a continuing stream following the lead of the pioneers. As Marinbach notes, some of the early arrivals had already overcome their modest beginnings and "had by now become important members of local committees in charge of receiving new immigrants from Galveston."

Once they had found their feet, many moved on from their original destinations to work, ply their trade, or establish businesses in other locations -- some nearby, some distant. A few drifted towards the East, such as Lieb Haft who settled in Wilkes Barre, Pennsylvania, where he married the daughter of a *landsman* (someone from his own community in Eastern Europe) already living there. According to Marinbach, he

eventually became a member of the board of trustees of his synagogue and his two son followed his example once they reached adulthood.

Unlike Haft, most Galveston people remained west of the Mississippi, with large concentrations in Missouri, Minnesota, Iowa, and Texas. Charles Hoffman (Ephraim Zalman) and his family provide one of many possible Texas examples. Hoffman, along with his wife, Sarah, and their three children remained in Central Texas, initially in the Fort Worth area where, as Marinbach records, he eventually owned a grocery store. The family later moved to Comanche to take advantage of an opportunity to get into the dry goods business. Eventually, they retired to Austin where all three of their children entered the University of Texas School of Law.

Brief family histories such as these abound but they do not do full justice to the energy, resourcefulness, and contributions of those who entered the United States at Galveston. The following more detailed but necessarily abbreviated first-hand account, collected by Howard Simons, in *Jewish Times: Voices of the American Jewish Experience*, provides a fuller flavor of the typical life-course of Galveston Project people and their families. Age sixty-five at the time of the interview in the mid-1980s, Alex Singer was an independent gas and oil producer in Oklahoma. He tells how his uncle was one of the early Galveston Project participants who went to Wichita, Kansas, where he knew there were people from his community in Europe and employment had been arranged for him.

As soon as he was settled, “he sent for my father who was the next older brother. ...my aunt and my cousin, who was a young child, came next. And they worked, I guess, in a packing house first. There were some junk dealers there. They worked in the scrap business. ...every town through this part of the country that was on a railroad had a Jewish junk dealer. ...one of the big things in the junk business was you needed very, very little capital.”

According to Singer, a couple of hundred dollars would set you up in the junk or scrap business and, having moved to Oklahoma City in 1930 to cash in on the oil boom, his scrap business became a pipe business. The scrap that he and other dealers were buying in Oklahoma included oil field scrap. “At that time, oil men didn’t have machine shops to join pipe that had a thread busted on it. They just threw it in a scrap yard. Then the scrap dealers started recovering usable materials from the junk pile and...went more into the pipe business.” They then began buying leases for supposedly unproductive wells, some of which would still yield small amounts of oil. In those cases, they would do the work necessary to make a well produce. “They would do the work themselves and they would keep their costs down and it could still be done profitably.”

Singer summarized his family’s history in the following terms, making clear that it was by no means atypical. “And so there was a progression from the scrap business to the pipe business to the oil business, and it was repeated many, many, many times all over this area.” He concluded the interview but noting that, while the family was still in the oil

business after fifty years, “the next generation are being raised as engineers and geologists, and some with Harvard law degrees.”

The stories of Galveston people and their families who started off modestly in the cities, towns, and rural areas where they initially settled and, within a generation or two, had progressed to positions of commercial, professional or educational prominence are legion – so numerous as to be almost commonplace. Their contributions to their communities, American Jewry, and the country as a whole should not be overlooked. In addition to these prototypical success stories, some special cases are worth noting since they have enriched their new country in important ways. Leaving aside Calvin Trillin – a wonderful writer and proud descendent of Galveston people despite his ingratitude towards Jacob Schiff -- two very different examples are worth mentioning.

The first is Rabbi Alexander Ziskind Gurwitz’s literary account of his flight from Czarist Russia to San Antonio, via Galveston, which provides a rare unmediated testimony of a first generation participant in the Project. Written in Hebrew and Yiddish, *Memoirs of Two Generations* is, as Seth Moritz notes in “Bifocality in Jewish Identity in the Texas-Jewish Experience,” comprised of two books. “The first reflects the traditional life of a Lithuanian Jewish rabbinical student and his adulthood in Russia. The second book records the years in Texas with an ironic eye, which twenty years of hindsight in San Antonio has given him.” Adopting the “literary persona of the quintessential inept Talmud *khokhem* (wise man) gazing humorously at himself, his peer group, and their accommodation to the Gentile world of Texans.” This literary work deserves a special

place in the archives of the Galveston Project and the history of the Jewish experience in Texas.

The other noteworthy and better-known literary work that documents the experience of a Galveston participant is Mark Harelik's play, *The Immigrant*, in which he depicts his grandfather's story after his flight from Czarist Russia. It recounts, in dramatic form, his grandfather's early struggles for survival, the accommodations he had to make in his passage towards Americanization, and his eventual success in his Texas home. This play, which has been performed to appreciative audiences across the country, has become an established part of the repertoire of several theater companies. What makes it resonate so well is the universality of the immigrant experience that it depicts. And, it is a direct cultural artifact of the Galveston Project.

In summary, if the Galveston Project fell short of expectations, it was not because it was a bad idea. It worked well for those immigrants and their families who were among the fortunate few who were served by it, as well as the extraordinary number of communities – Jewish and Gentile alike – west of the Hudson River that were enriched by the contributions of the new arrivals -- commercially, culturally, and in countless other ways. The problem did not lie in the concept but rather in the obstacles (over which it had no control) that confronted the Project throughout its years of operation and that eventually brought it to a close.

It is also important to bear in mind that the Galveston Project was never intended to disperse enormous numbers of Jewish immigrants from Russia to the American interior.

Its purpose was to redirect sufficient numbers from New York and other Eastern cities in order allow the flow to continue. As it happened, the restrictionist forces did not prevail during the life of the Project. The degree to which the Project can be credited with achieving this important policy outcome can only be a matter of speculation but it almost certainly did not hurt the cause. That Schiff had mixed motives in initiating the Galveston Project is indisputable but, in general, it was well-conceived and well-intended and deserves to be remembered, along with its architect, as a constructive attempt to defuse a volatile immigration issue of its day.

Trillin tells the story of the immigrant father of a friend who would invariably offer his own version of the prayer traditionally spoken at the end of the Passover *seder*. Instead of “Next Year in Jerusalem,” he would say “*Iber a yor nischt erger*” – “Next year no worse.” Would that those who seek to resolve our country’s current immigration problems would be as constructive as the Galveston Project tried to be and, at the very least, make matters no worse than they are.

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