

# German-Jewish Immigration in the 1930s

Imagine being afraid every day of your life. This is what it was like for Jewish people in Germany during the 1930s. The Jews were blamed for all of Germany's problems. They were accused of crimes they hadn't committed. Many Jews were sent to prison, and their property and businesses were taken away. Jews were even attacked and killed. Many Jewish people decided to leave Germany to seek safety in another country.

## The Jewish People

Jews are not a race of people. Jews are a religious group with people of many nationalities. Jewish communities can be found in many countries all over the world.

Jewish people have been in America since colonial times. But many Jews came to the United States between 1880 and 1924. During that time, two million Jews immigrated to the United States. Most came from Russia and East European countries.

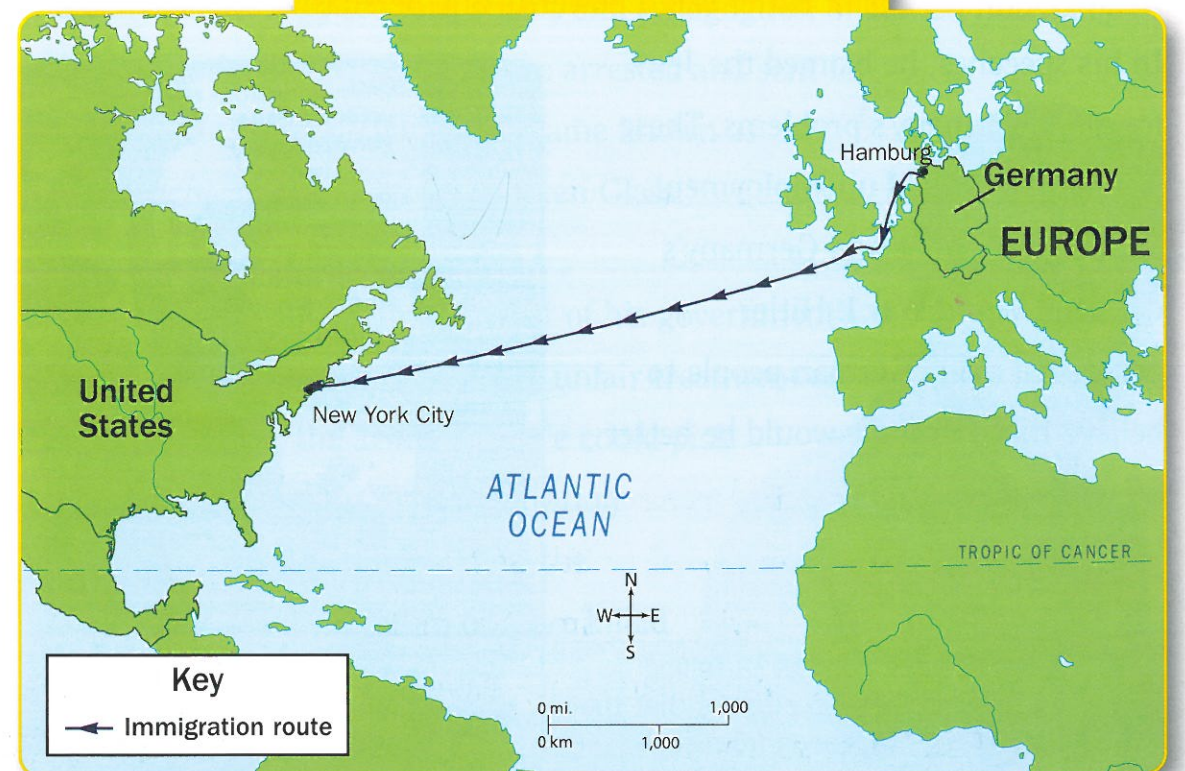


The Star of David is a Jewish religious symbol.

**Jews in Germany** In the 1930s, events in Germany forced thousands of German Jews to leave their homes. Many went to the United States. This was the period of the **Great Depression**, when businesses and banks failed in many countries. Millions of people lost their jobs, savings, and homes. This was also the time when Adolf Hitler was taking control of Germany. Hitler wanted to gain power by blaming one group of people, the Jews, for the troubles in Germany. Hitler told Germans that the Great Depression was caused by the Jews. German Jews were treated as unwelcome outsiders by people in their own country.

Look at the map below. It shows the route people traveled from Germany to the United States.

German-Jewish Immigration Route





 **Key Concept 1** People choose to immigrate for many different reasons.

## Leaving Germany to Escape Persecution

Jewish people in Germany had good reasons to leave their country and **immigrate** to other countries in the 1930s. When a country has one main religion or **ethnic group**, sometimes people of other religions or ethnic groups are singled out, treated badly, and made to feel inferior. This is called **persecution**. In the early 1930s, persecution of Jews in Germany intensified greatly.

**immigrate**  
to come to a new country to live

Adolf Hitler was the leader of the Nazi Party. The Nazi Party was a group of people who believed that Hitler could lead Germany and make it a wealthy country again. Hitler was a powerful and persuasive speaker.

In his speeches, he blamed the Jews for all of Germany's problems. These problems included unemployment, a failing economy, and Germany's defeat in World War I. Hitler persuaded many German people to believe that Germany would be better off without Jews.



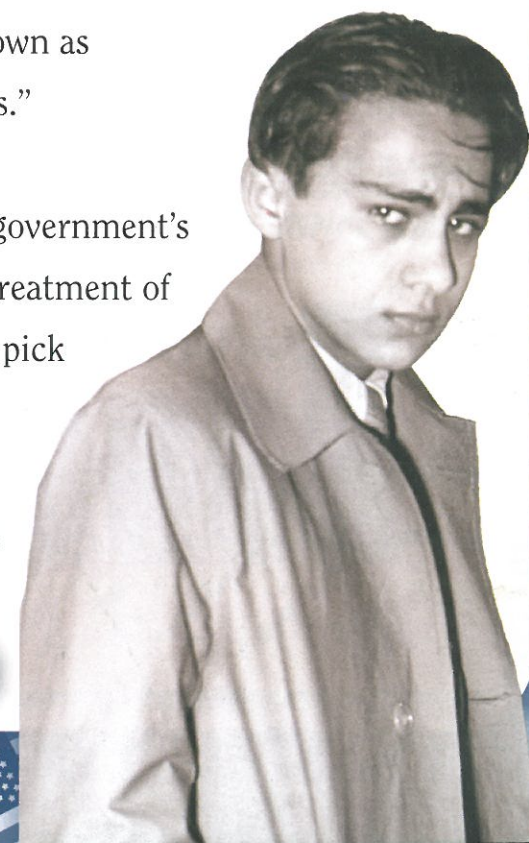
A Nazi poster from 1933 telling non-Jewish German citizens that they should not buy goods from Jews.

In 1933, the Nazi Party took over the government. Hitler became a **dictator**, or a ruler with total power. In 1935, laws were passed that took away German citizenship and basic civil rights from Jews. According to Hitler, Jews were not a religious group, but a race of people, and an inferior one. Thus, even people of Jewish descent who did not practice the religion were to be defined as Jews. Anyone with Jewish grandparents was regarded as Jewish. Hitler stirred up the emotions of many German people, who became angry and blamed Jews for all of Germany's problems.

Then, in 1938, Herschel Grynszpan, a Jewish youth, shot a German official in France. People blamed all Jews for the shooting. During the night of November 9–10, 1938, rioting mobs all over Germany and Austria attacked Jews. About 100 Jews were killed and hundreds injured. The mobs burned and damaged homes, schools, shops, and synagogues, or Jewish houses of worship. Thirty thousand Jews were arrested and sent to **concentration camps**. The riots became known as *Kristallnacht*, or the “Night of Broken Glass.”

Hitler had made **anti-Semitism** part of his government's policy. Anti-Semitism is hatred and unfair treatment of Jews. At any time, the army or police could pick up Jews and send them to concentration camps. Conditions were terrible at the camps, and many people died or were killed within months.

Herschel Grynszpan







**Key Concept 2** People who immigrate face many challenges.

## The Challenge of Immigration

It is never easy to immigrate to a new land.

The Jews faced **challenges** on the journey from Germany. They faced further challenges when they reached their new homes. One of the first challenges facing most Jews who wanted to leave Germany was finding a country that would let them in.

challenges

things that make life more difficult



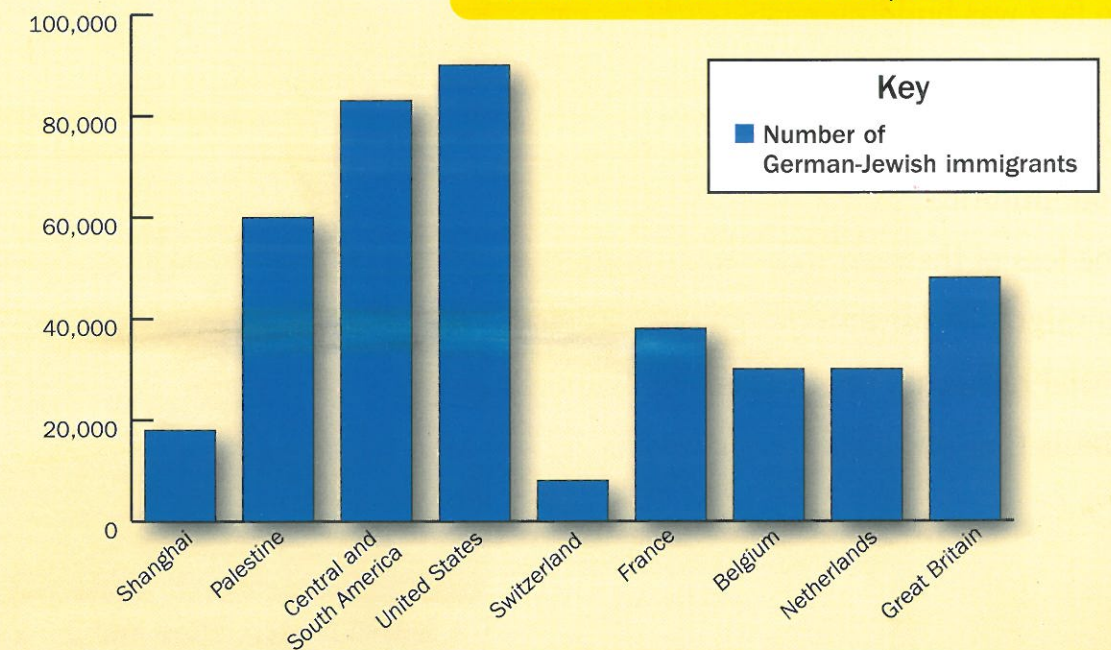
**The Journey from Germany** Thousands of Jewish **refugees** wanted to flee Germany. Most went to other European countries. Others made longer journeys, setting out by boat for countries in North and South America or for Palestine in the Middle East. Their journeys were often dangerous, and their efforts to escape the Nazis were not always successful. In 1933, an estimated 51,000 German Jews left Germany. Many of these refugees went from one country to another before settling anywhere.

While many Jews left Germany in the early 1930s, many others stayed. After *Kristallnacht* in 1938, the German government seized most Jewish-owned property. After that, many more German Jews made plans to leave Germany.

Not all escape attempts were successful. The cruise ship *SS St. Louis* left Hamburg, Germany, in 1939. The ship was heading for Havana, Cuba, carrying more than 900 Jews with papers to enter Cuba. When the ship got to Havana, however, the passengers were not allowed off the ship. The Cuban government had canceled permission for them to land, and ordered the *St. Louis* to leave. The Jewish refugees were also refused entry into the United States. Some of these passengers found refuge in other European countries.

As the numbers of people who wanted to escape Nazi persecution grew, fewer countries were willing to accept refugees. The United States, like many other countries, had immigration **quotas** in place, which restricted the numbers of people who could immigrate. Despite the difficulties, about half of Germany's Jews had fled to other countries by 1940.

**Where German Jews Went, 1933-1939**





**Challenges in a New Land** Between 1933 and 1940, about 90,000 German-Jewish refugees came to the United States as immigrants. The Jewish refugees met many challenges in the United States. Many could not speak English and found it hard to find work. Learning to speak English was an important step toward taking a full part in American life.

The people who had fled from the Nazis came from many walks of life. Many had worked as bankers, shopkeepers, professors, or scientists. Most of these new immigrants settled in or near New York City. Some Jews arriving in the United States already had relatives living there. These relatives were able to support them as they adjusted to their new lives. There were also Jewish support agencies, which could provide loans and other help to newly arrived immigrants. These agencies also found jobs for some immigrants.

Among the challenges immigrants had to face was building new lives in a new culture. They had to get used to new customs and practices in their new communities. They also had to adjust to the loss of their old lives. Many of the immigrants lost their possessions, their social relationships, and the professional status they once had in Germany.



A Jewish printer in New York

Unlike in Germany, the Jews found that they could practice their religion freely in the United States. However, it was not easy for immigrants to find work. The effects of the Great Depression were still being felt in the United States. Unemployment was high and work was nearly impossible to find. People feared that newcomers would take jobs from those people already in the United States. The few jobs available went mostly to non-Jews. In fact, there were job openings asking that only non-Jews apply.

Many Americans did not welcome the Jewish immigrants. **Prejudice** against foreigners was very common at this time. Anti-Semitism was widespread. New Jewish immigrants faced discrimination not only when seeking work. Some private colleges and universities would let in only a small number of Jewish students. In some neighborhoods, when Jews moved in, people who were not Jewish moved out.



Orchard Street in New York City, where many Jewish immigrants settled in the 1930s





**Key Concept 3** People who immigrate contribute to the life and culture of the society they join.

## Joining American Society

The United States is a country made up of immigrants. As with all immigrant groups, German Jews have contributed to American **society** and **culture**. Jewish scientists, scholars, and artists all have added to American society in significant ways.

**Jewish Scientists** Many of the Jews who left Germany for the United States were scientists. They brought their knowledge and skills to the United States.

Many German-Jewish scientists have made important contributions to medicine and biology. Some have won Nobel Prizes for their work. For example, Otto Lowei won a Nobel Prize in 1936 for his work studying chemicals that transfer messages between nerves. Lowei immigrated to the United States in 1940. Hans Bethe, who immigrated to the United States in 1935, won a Nobel Prize in 1967. Bethe studied nuclear reactions that give energy to stars.

### society

people living together in a group or nation



### culture

the traditions, language, dress, ceremonies, and other ways of life that a group of people share

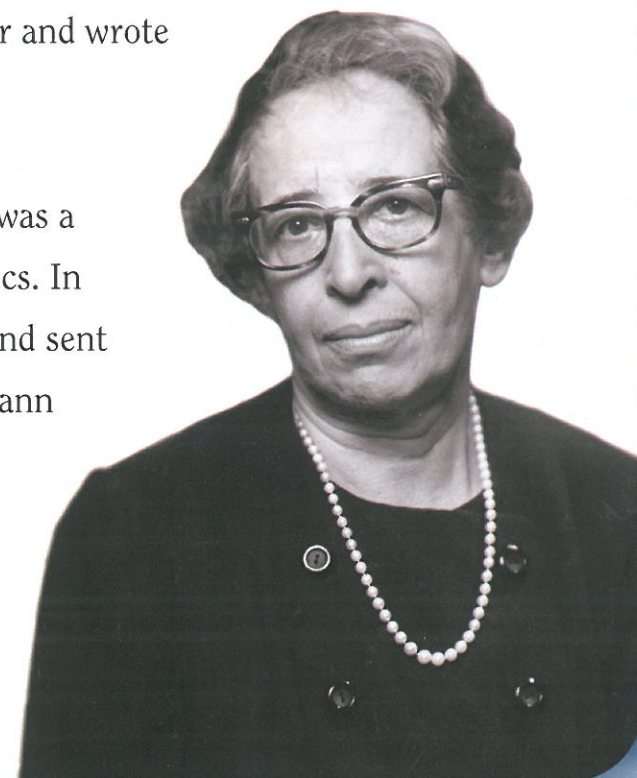


Hans Bethe

In the 1940s, Jewish scientists in the United States made an important contribution to their new country. Several scientists, including Hans Bethe, helped to develop the first atomic weapons. At this time, **World War II** was underway. Germany, Italy, and Japan were fighting against Britain, France, and many other countries. In 1941, the United States joined Britain and the other allied countries. The war was won after atomic bombs were dropped on Japan in 1945.

**Jewish Scholars** Jewish scholars have also contributed to American society. One well-known German-Jewish scholar was philosopher Hannah Arendt. Arendt studied political philosophy and worked to publicize the plight of victims of the Nazis. In 1933, she was arrested because of this work, but she was released and escaped to Paris. There, she helped support other Jewish refugees. In 1941, she fled to the United States, where she became a professor and wrote several books.

Henry Ehrmann, born in Germany, was a law professor who also studied politics. In 1933, the Nazi police arrested him and sent him to a concentration camp. Ehrmann escaped and eventually reached the United States, where he had a successful career. He wrote many books on politics.



Hannah Arendt



**Jews and the Entertainment Industry** Jewish immigrants have also contributed to the culture of the United States. German Jews have made a great impact on the United States entertainment industry, especially film. The entertainment industry attracted many great artists, including filmmakers, designers, writers, and composers.

One well-known German Jew who has contributed to the American film industry was Billy Wilder. Wilder left Nazi Germany in 1934 and arrived in Hollywood with no money. At that time, he could not speak English. Wilder began a long career as a writer and director in the United States. He won six Oscars and received many nominations for his films.



Actor Gina Lollobrigida presents an Oscar to Billy Wilder in 1961.

**Jewish Communities in the United States** The Jewish people formed close communities in the United States. These communities developed all over the country, but particularly in New York. This was because most immigrants entered the United States through New York, and many of them decided to stay. Today, the Jewish community in New York is the largest in the United States.

More than five million people who identify themselves as Jewish live in the United States today.



## Think About the **Key Concepts**

**Think about what you read. Think about the pictures and the graph. Use these to answer the questions. Share what you think with others.**

1. Why did the immigrants discussed in this book leave their country?
2. What were some challenges the immigrants faced when they arrived in the United States?
3. How did the immigrants overcome the challenges they faced?
4. How did the immigrants contribute to the culture of the United States?