

Laura,

Some thoughts. . .

You're right, of course, that most eastern European Jewish immigration to the U.S. and western Europe (and Palestine) happened in response to the pogroms that began in earnest after 1881. But that doesn't mean there was *no* Russian immigration before that. There was a lot, and it went all over the U.S.

Although things got much worse after 1881, the czars were always repressive to the Jews – the Pale of Settlement was created in the 1790s by Catherine the Great – and there were always reasons to leave. Plenty did.

I take it your great-grandmother was a child traveling with her parents in 1879? If so, it's possible that her father or a brother were trying to escape the czar's military conscription, which was a big reason many left. They rounded up and forcibly conscripted Jewish boys as young as twelve, and service could last twenty years or more. It also was used as a means of breaking down Jewish identity, as recruits were forced to speak Russian rather than Yiddish, to eat trefe, and join in Christian worship. Many young men and even entire families fled to avoid it. This would be my first guess as to a motive to leave.

Another possibility is, of course, the old vaunted "economic opportunity." Lots of Russian Jews came to the U.S. for the same reasons everyone always always has. The Galveston Movement immigrants as an example, even though they were later than your family, weren't fleeing pogroms and weren't refugees—they were job-seekers. Lots of people came for that reason alone, as economic conditions for Jews in Russia were never good, families were large, etc. Gurwitz came in 1910 not just for physical security (he feared pogroms and epidemics, which were rampant, especially cholera) but for religious freedom. Religious restrictions were always severe under the czars despite how American Jews today tend to imagine eastern Europe as a haven for Orthodox tradition.

OK, why Houston? I can't tell from your message if she came directly to Houston/Galveston or entered the U.S. somewhere else and traveled. In any case, I'd guess that any Jewish family or single woman traveling to Houston at that time, especially if it was direct travel from Europe, was rejoining someone already there. Maybe a family member had settled there earlier, or they knew someone from their town who could support them. This was exactly when lots of Texas cities were establishing Jewish communities, and lots of single men were coming to peddle or start businesses. The railroad was spreading too, which brought entrepreneurial types to lots of cities and towns they wouldn't have thought to visit otherwise. Once they were established, it was common to send for families and landsmen to join them.

It would be unusual for a Russian family to choose Houston out of the blue, and less common for a single woman traveling alone to land there without people already in place there. I'd guess they knew someone in Houston before they came.

Always good to hear from you, and I hope this helps!

Bryan