

## Why They Left

### Why did the Jews Flee Eastern Europe for America?

The question: “Why Did They Leave?” can be applied to other groups. I have included a postcard from Fez, Morocco, made in 1912, of the Jewish community being sheltered by the Sultan in his menagerie, next to the lion cage. We are collecting written stories and video documentation from individuals who fled pogrom-like situations more recently (1970’s to the present era), and we are making short videos of individuals who fled South Sudan in the latter part of the 20th century, the Lost Boys and Girls of Sudan.

### What is a pogrom?

A pogrom is a terrifying anti-Jewish riot, including looting, rape, murder and arson. Many American Jews heard fragmentary stories of pogroms from our older relatives when we were children. The triggers varied: a church sermon accusing Jews of killing Christ (or killing Christian children for ritual purposes), a plague, economic woes, regional conflicts. The Jews were the scapegoats of the furious mob. These riots ebbed and flowed across Europe for centuries.

To academics, the word pogrom is more precise. It derives from the Russian word for thunder (grom), and describes anti-Jewish riots carried out by various groups – peasants, Cossacks, Communists, Anarchists and Christians – starting in the latter quarter of the 19th century and ending in about 1921. Pogroms occurred in Russia and in other territories controlled by Russia. To the victims, the anti-Jewish riots across Europe of previous centuries were probably indistinguishable from the violence carried out later under the heading “Pogrom”. However, modern anti-Jewish violence had more structure, and had coverage in, and sometimes the support of, the media and various factions of the government. Most American Jews are descendants of people who fled the pogroms in Eastern Europe.

The photographs of pogroms presented here were made between 1918-1921. They are all from the third and largest wave of pogroms, during the period of the Russian Civil War. All factions fighting in the Russian Civil War carried out the pogroms in these photographs, but the heaviest Jewish casualties were suffered at the hands of the Cossack White Army, the anti-Bolsheviks. The Cossacks had both the traditional religious hatred of Jews and the fixed belief that the Jews were Bolsheviks and responsible for the social upheaval they were fighting against. Some officers in the White Army were convinced that the Jews were Anti-Christ, while others, such as General KK Mamontov were focused on the alleged communist beliefs of the Jewish population. General Mamontov issued a proclamation, one of many similar statements by military personnel during the period: “Arm yourself and rise against the common enemy of our Russian land, against Jewish Bolshevik communists...The evil force which lives in the hearts of Jew-Communists will be eliminated.\*”

Most of these photographs come from small communities in Ukraine, part of the Pale of Settlement, or the region in which Jews were required to live. Jews were prohibited from leaving The Pale without special dispensation (and the common phrase, Beyond the Pale, derives from the ghetto areas where the Jewish population had been imprisoned since 1791). At the time of the third wave of pogroms (the first two waves were 1881-1884 and 1903-1906), approximately 1.6 million Jews lived in Ukraine and another 1 million lived in The Pale outside of Ukraine. The estimates vary from tens of thousands up to 200,000 Jews who were injured or murdered in pogroms in Ukraine during this period. Between 4% and 12% of the Ukrainian Jewish

population was either injured or murdered. This represents the largest destruction of a Jewish community at any time in history until the Holocaust just two decades later.

The photographs come from the book, *Evreiskie Pogromy*, edited by Zalman Solomonovich Ostrovskii and published by the Jewish Relief Society in Moscow in 1926. Sergei Kan provided the English translations of the captions. The book was a catalogue of a photography show illustrating the pogroms during the Russian Civil War. With the discovery and installation of these photographs, we are taking the project full-circle, making this history accessible to modern Americans.