

AMERICA: LAND OF ANTISEMITISM, REFUGE, AND OPPORTUNITY



ECHOES & REFLECTIONS

TEACHING THE HOLOCAUST. INSPIRING THE CLASSROOM.

ANTISEMITISM IN AMERICA

From the early days of independence, America's founders envisioned the United States as a land of religious tolerance. Article IV of the U.S. Constitution ensured that religious tests would not be used in elections. President Washington welcomed American Jews in a 1790 letter, promising that the U.S. "gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance." The Bill of Rights, approved in 1791, further protected religious freedom. However, individual states imposed limitations on religious minorities, including Jews, Catholics, atheists, Mormons, and Muslims.

Jewish history in America reflects ongoing tension between legal freedoms and persistent social prejudice. The first permanent Jewish settlers arrived in 1654 in New Amsterdam (now New York City) from Recife, Brazil. Despite initial resistance from Dutch governor Peter Stuyvesant, the Dutch West India Company chose tolerance due to the economic benefits of Jewish mercantile networks. By the Revolutionary War, five small

Jewish communities existed on the Atlantic seaboard.



Between 1830-1860, approximately 200,000 Jewish immigrants arrived from Central Europe, seeking economic opportunity and escaping antisemitic restrictions. Despite finding freedom and opportunity, Jews faced scapegoating and prejudice, especially during the Civil War when General Ulysses S. Grant issued General Order No. 11 to expel Jews from his command area. President Lincoln rescinded the order, condemning the targeting of an entire group.

The German-American Bund holds a rally at Camp Siegfried in Yaphank, Long Island, New York, on August 1, 1937. Bettmann Archive/Getty Images.

From 1881-1914, around 2,000,000 Eastern European Jews immigrated to America, fleeing poverty and antisemitic pogroms. Many settled in New York, but faced resentment and antisemitic accusations there as

well. The early 20th century saw significant antisemitic incidents, including the 1913 trial of Leo Frank, who was falsely convicted of murder and later kidnapped from prison and lynched by a mob.

Antisemitism increased in the 1920s and 1930s with the rise of the Ku Klux Klan, Henry Ford's antisemitic publications which imported *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and Jewish conspiracy theories into the U.S., and Father Charles Coughlin's radio broadcasts, which reached as many as 40 million devoted weekly listeners and accused the Jews, among other things, of spreading Communism and manipulating the economy. Anti-Jewish hatred was expressed in the discrimination faced by Jews on an everyday basis: Jewish people were not employed in certain industries, were prevented from living in certain areas, and were banned from attending certain universities and social clubs. Antisemitism also played a large role in the immigration restrictions legislated in 1921 and 1924 which severely limited Jewish immigration into the United States.

During World War II, antisemitism persisted in America, further influenced by the famous aviator Charles Lindbergh, a white supremacist and isolationist who accused the Jews of agitating for war in the period before the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 that led America to fight. Despite this, 550,000 American Jews served in the military.



A sign posted outside Meadowbrook, a privately owned swimming club in Baltimore, MD, ca. 1942-1944, Jewish Museum of Maryland.

In the post-World War II era, antisemitism in the U.S. declined significantly due to an awareness of the Holocaust. Catholic-Jewish relations improved and there was a shift towards a "Judeo-Christian" ethos in public discourse. The civil rights movement further reduced antisemitic discrimination, although white supremacist groups continued to target Jews and Black Americans.

In the 21st century, antisemitism has risen dramatically, fueled by social media and extremist groups. High-profile incidents, such as the 2018 Tree of Life Synagogue shooting and the 2019 Poway synagogue attack, highlight ongoing threats. Antisemitism has appeared across the political spectrum and across much of society, animated particularly by extreme Islamist, right-wing and left-wing groups.

Efforts to combat antisemitism continue, emphasizing the need to understand and counter antisemitic myths and prejudices.

AMERICA: A LAND OF REFUGE AND OPPORTUNITY

There's only one way for your first night in America to end, for all nights lead to darkness, but many ways for your first morning to begin. You might be lying in bed in the twilight of wakefulness, eavesdropping on the breaking day, your ears taking in the muffled voices of the neighbors. The unfamiliar echoes will first startle, then quickly sadden you.

Your eyes linger on the lump of keys to your old home. You packed them, not because they were necessary, but because you did not have the heart to leave them behind. You understand that the past is past, but you keep the keys because they can still open the gates of memory. Your old house might have been bombed, or sold, or razed altogether, but its key remains. In your Homeland you will soon be forgotten, but your keys are your history, evidence of your old existence.

These words by Roya Hakakian in her book, *A Beginner's Guide to America: For the Immigrant and the Curious*, reveal her feelings of fleeing her home of Tehran, Iran, in 1985 after the Islamic Revolution of 1979. As an Iranian-Jewish refugee, she immigrated to the United States in search of freedom, including freedom to practice her religion, and for greater opportunity: a long-standing hope and belief inherent in the American experience from the time of its founding as a British colony that continues today.

The United States has long been a destination for those fleeing persecution. It has often been a welcoming place for immigrants to be safe and rebuild their lives, and has also been a nation where anti-immigrant rhetoric and xenophobia has challenged the very foundation of America as a nation of immigrants.

After the Holocaust, including in other waves of antisemitic violence, pogroms, and ethnic cleansing, particularly in the Middle East, the United States has continued to be a safe place for Jews to immigrate to and rebuild their lives, affecting their past, their families, and their very identity of how they see themselves as American Jews.

Throughout the history of the United States, Jews have made an indelible mark on America, using their skills, talents, and knowledge in nearly every aspect of life.

Sources

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REGINA CLIPPER

BIOGRAPHICAL PROFILE



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Regina Clipper was born on February 1, 1924, in Radom, Kielce, Poland, to religious Jewish parents Rosa and Szaja Rozensweig. After the Nazis invaded her hometown, she was forced to move to the Radom Ghetto. Soon the ghetto was liquidated and she was deported to her first of many concentration camps. She was first sent to Pionki where she mentions meeting a friend named Hanka, then she was transferred to Auschwitz II-Birkenau, a concentration and death camp in Nazi-occupied Poland, Hindenburg, a concentration camp in Germany, and finally to Bergen-Belsen, another concentration camp in Germany. She was liberated from Bergen-Belson by British armed forces. She immigrated to the United States and started a family in New York with her husband Fred and children: Andrew and Ruby Clipper. This interview was conducted on May 17, 1995, in Long Beach, New York.