

## THEME

**MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO):** Welcome to LBI Presents—a new podcast from the Leo Baeck Institute, New York. I'm Mark Oppenheimer. I'm the director of Open Learning at American Jewish University, and I've spent my career writing about Jewish history. On this series, we dive into LBI's archive, with key experts as our guides, to learn about the lives of German Jews throughout history...beyond the stories you already know.

Today, LBI presents...where to from here?

## THEME OUT

Let's talk about a common misconception. There's this idea out there—I think I believed it myself—that one reason so many Jews died in the Holocaust is because they just refused to believe it could ever get that bad. They held out hope that the antisemitism and the discrimination would all pass. And so they didn't get out while they had the chance. But countless historical documents—letters, diaries, official archives—all show us that this simply wasn't the case. LBI's archive contains many, many stories of people who had a very hard time emigrating. Because while Nazi Germany wanted Jews out, they also made it extremely difficult for Jews to leave. And it's not like the countries the Jews were trying to get into were making it any easier.

## THEME

**HASIA DINER:** In many of the memoirs, people talk about going to one embassy, waiting in line. Okay, it's not successful. The next day, they go to the next embassy and they try there and it's almost like they are kind of embassy hoppers.

**MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO):** Today we're talking to Hasia Diner. If you've ever take a college class in American Jewish History, especially immigration, you know her name. Hasia Diner is professor emerita at NYU and the author of several books on the subject. And I went to her with an impossible task: to provide an overview, in 30 minutes or less, of German Jewish immigration during the 1930s.

I mean, German Jews ended up almost everywhere. In North America. Parts of Europe. The Middle East. And in places that get a lot less attention in the history books. Places like South America, throughout Asia, and in Africa. Places where Jews fit differently into the racial hierarchy.

## THEME OUT

**MARK OPPENHEIMER:** So let's get into it. In the years before World War Two, 1938, 1939, let's say, how many people left Nazi Germany?

**HASIA DINER:** So in terms of the actual number who left Germany, it may have been about 100,000, perhaps a bit more than that. But remember that the place you're calling Germany kept changing, in as much as in 1938, Germany annexed Austria, okay? And then it annexed parts of Czechoslovakia. And so what counted for Germany, was a little dicey to actually figure out where you're talking about. And I do want to say, you said how many people. And I should say, a not inconsiderable number of Germans, non-Jews, also wanted to leave. People who were political dissidents, people who were unhappy with the Nazi regime. So there's a difference between, you know, the question of how many Jews left versus how many non-Jews left. And so I think we wanna be clear about who we're talking about.

**MARK OPPENHEIMER:** And do we have a sense of how many Jews left and how many non-Jews left?

**HASIA DINER:** Yeah. So I think the non-Jews is harder to quantify. But in terms of the Jews. Let me just give you a brief rundown. So between '33 and '35, about 40,000 Jews left. Okay. In 1938, another 35,000 left. Okay. And then in 1939 another 77,000 left. Okay. But again, that number isn't going to be including people who were nominally from Germany, but had been Austrians or were nominally German, but had been Czech, had been Czech Jews. And so as Germany expanded its borders and annexed these areas, those Jews also get caught up in the German number.

**MARK OPPENHEIMER:** During those years when Jews and non-Jews were leaving, who was able to leave? And were some people able to leave more easily than others?

**HASIA DINER:** Yes. So the criteria, you know, like who got to leave, who didn't. For one thing, age was really important. And the younger one was the more likely one contemplated, I could live someplace else. And I think it's really, you know, hard to imagine a 70-year-old saying, I can rebuild my life in a new place, learn a new language. And in that context, a young person who was an able bodied worker was more likely to be able to get a visa. One of the migrations we might talk a little bit about is the, there's a period after '38 where there's Jews going from the German-speaking lands to Dominican Republic to become farmers. Well, you know they don't want a 70-year old-being there, but, you know, a 30-year-old is able to start engaging in agricultural labor. The other criteria that helped determine if you could get out or not was, did you have contacts? Did you have somebody in another place who could vouch for you, write you an affidavit, could guarantee that you would not become a public charge? Did you have skills that are useful? A common laborer, which not many Jews were, but still somebody who was an unskilled laborer is not going to have that kind of cachet. But a college professor, okay? And...

**MARK OPPENHEIMER:** So is the problem finding a country that's willing to accept you? If a country was willing to take you, would Germany let you out?

**HASIA DINER:** Yes. And so the Germans, certainly for the first couple of years, actually really want the Jews to leave. Or at least theoretically, their goal was to just get them out.

They didn't necessarily begin with the plan to exterminate them. They just wanted them out. But in the process of letting them out, they kept levying heavier and heavier taxes. Flight tax, they called it. Meaning that you couldn't leave unless you paid the state, okay? And okay, well, if you're a poor person or a poorer person, you can't meet those criteria of the German government to pay to get out. But more importantly, it was really, who would let you in? Where could you go? Where did you have the kind of connections? And so, I mean, there is an interesting safety valve, for example, for rabbis. So the U.S. immigration laws did not cover rabbis. They were not covered by the quotas. Okay. And if, by the way, you had close family relatives, if you had children living in one of these places. Or parents. A spouse. That was much easier to navigate than if you were just a solo individual with little money to pay the tax and nobody able to vouch for you.

**MARK OPPENHEIMER:** But it's interesting because there were several years there when, in theory, Germany wanted all the Jews out, but it was making it harder by levying taxes. Their desire to get money out of the Jews eclipsed their desire to get rid of every last Jew.

**HASIA DINER:** Right. Yeah. So it's like a kind of calculus there. What's more important, getting rid of them or getting their assets? And again, many of the Jews in Germany, and certainly those who have the connections to get in elsewhere, were people who were very well-off. They owned apartments, they owned furniture, they had pianos, they had china, you know, they had valuable household goods, jewelry, furs. And the German state wants to get its hands on those things.

**MARK OPPENHEIMER:** So let's say that you could get out, in theory. Let's say that you're going to be able to pay the tax, that you could try to make connections somewhere, bribe people, find a job. How did you know who might take you? I know that many Jews went to Shanghai, others went to the Dominican Republic.

**HASIA DINER:** Mhm.

**MARK OPPENHEIMER:** But there's no Internet then.

**HASIA DINER:** Right!

**MARK OPPENHEIMER:** There's no website, you know, to search which countries are open to receiving Jewish immigration. Was it just word of mouth?

**HASIA DINER:** Yeah. So that's in a way, I think, a fascinating question because and really, you really hit on it. It's like, what were the channels of communication? And word of mouth was really important. The German-Jewish community was very active in helping people learn about opportunities and preparing them, and as well as various German-Jewish organizations. And the World Jewish Congress and the Joint Distribution Committee, which was based in New York, was also pumping information, okay, into the various German, sort of, sources of information in Germany. But people would, in many of the memoirs, people talk about going to one embassy, waiting in line. Okay, it's not successful.

The next day, they go to the next embassy and they try there and it's almost like they are kind of embassy hoppers trying to figure out where they can go and families sort of split up. You know, one person goes to one embassy, another person goes to another embassy to wait in line. And okay, by the time the day is over, you have already, you know, you're only the 500th person in line, you have to go back the next day. And so it was a real waiting game. And by 1933, '34. Actually, I should say that people who had family in England or in Palestine or in the United States were still getting mail and they were able to get information that way. And they had their relatives, particularly those in the United States, were very active in writing to their congressmen, writing to other public officials, trying to get them to sponsor private bills, to let in their aunt, their uncle, their cousin and so on. So these are not big policy matters, but it ultimately came down to one person, one family, after another, after another.

**MARK OPPENHEIMER:** You know, we have this sense that there were thousands of Jews whose children or cousins were saying leave, and they said, no, I'm a German citizen. I fought in World War One. I'm staying. This is my country. They'll never really turn against me. And I'm wondering now if that's overblown, if, in fact, the reason that thousands more didn't leave is because they couldn't find anyone to take them.

**HASIA DINER:** Absolutely. I think. It's, I think, a kind of statement made by people who haven't had to go through this process themselves. And it's really hard to imagine, you know, that, how disheartening it must have been day after day to be trying this, trying that. And now again, age was really important. You know, somebody at a certain point in the life cycle is likely to say look, I will never adapt. I mean I sometimes think what would happen right now to me if I had to go to a new place where I don't know the language? I might not know anybody. I moved from New York to Boston and it was traumatic! And you know, you can say, I think things might get better. You know, you know, it's not a ridiculous premise.

**MARK OPPENHEIMER:** Yeah. So what about the neighboring countries in Europe? I'm thinking of Belgium or France or Switzerland. How did they fare?

**HASIA DINER:** Okay, so Switzerland had very closed borders. Not that there were no Jews who who went into Switzerland, but it was a very difficult place to penetrate. But places like Belgium, the Netherlands, France. Many Jews went there. And many Jews had business contacts there. They may have owned a company that had a branch in Amsterdam or in Antwerp. And the problem was, obviously, that they couldn't know that there was going to be a World War and that Germany was going to go and invade these countries and they would be caught up by the same forces that had hounded them out of Germany, they'd be caught up with those same forces elsewhere. And obviously the case that's most dramatic to us, or the one we know best, is the case of Anne Frank. You know, she was not a Dutch Jew. She was German. They were a German-Jewish family and know. And they went to the Netherlands.

**MARK OPPENHEIMER:** And that bought them some time.

**HASIA DINER:** Bought them some time, but it didn't necessarily buy them life. And, you know, only Otto Frank survived. But again, we can't impute to people in the past, knowledge of what was going to happen that we know happened, just as we can't know what's going to happen in our world. And we essentially don't want people to look back and say, 'oh, how blind those people were in 2023 in the United States, they didn't see!' And it's often referred to as the handwriting on the wall. Well, there is no handwriting on the wall!

**MARK OPPENHEIMER:** Why was the United States such a lure for people?

**HASIA DINER:** Yeah, so the United States was such a lure for Jews and non-Jews because it was the United States and it was the greatest magnet for immigration from like the 1820s on. And while Europeans, Jews and others, did go to other places also, from the early part of the 19th century, it was the kind of brass ring in European imagination of where do you go to rebuild your life? Where do you go to be able to make a living for yourself? Live comfortably. For Europeans, Jews included, to live without persecution. And so it was the most attractive destination. For Jews, we might also say that they likely had some relatives in the United States. And also American Jewish organizations and American Jews with means were so incredibly active in trying to get their friends, families, and other Jews writ large out.

**MARK OPPENHEIMER:** But of course, that was difficult because the United States had gone from being basically an open immigration society, with some exceptions, to being one with very strict borders in the 1920s. So these Jews had just missed the window and all of a sudden there's this very restrictive immigration system. There were quotas. How did these work?

**HASIA DINER:** Right. So you know, the quota system comes into place in 1924, and. That's when the law is passed. It goes into effect later in the 1920s. And obviously, it's so ironic, right? That, you know, it's really only about 1927 that the immigration quotas actually begin to work. And so you're really talking about a very short period of time between that and the rise of the Nazi takeover. Very short, you know, it's basically like six, seven years. So, look, there are a couple of things. First, the issue of why Americans soured on immigration generally, okay. Not necessarily Jewish immigration. And there was so much discussion in the 1920s about—and this could sound familiar to us as Americans now—too much diversity, too many people coming who will never learn English, who are too different. We have something that is the essential character of the American people. And these newcomers, where they're coming from, are just never going to fit in. And it was a process through the teens and the twenties for this to become the dominant voice in public opinion. But what really seals their fate is, you know, the crash of the stock market in 1929 and the ensuing depression. And so when Roosevelt says, and he wasn't exaggerating, one third of the nation is ill housed, ill clothed and ill fed, it caused Americans—if they were, I don't want to say if they were or they weren't antisemites, or if they were or they weren't bigots—to say, we had such scarce resources.

**MARK OPPENHEIMER:** But it does sound like you'd bristle against the idea that the restrictions we've heard so much about, the turning away of the MS St Louis and the closed borders and the people who couldn't get their relatives in, that this really wasn't just antisemitism, that there was no special animus against the Jews. It was against immigrants of any kind.

**HASIA DINER:** Well, I want to play it both ways, because there was animus against immigrants. If you were a Polish Christian, you had as much chance or as little chance of getting a visa as if you were a Polish Jew. And yes, there was antisemitism. I don't want to say it wasn't there.

## THEME

**MARK OPPENHEIMER:** So with the immigration restrictions in the United States so strong and so unyielding in the Depression, a lot of Jews in Europe were able to get into countries in the Far East or the global South. I'm thinking about the stories from Shanghai, India, Kenya, the Dominican Republic. We don't hear as much about these stories. Is that just a European bias in how history is taught, or is it just that the numbers were so much smaller?

**HASIA DINER:** So let's also remember that England took a substantial number also. And so that was not a global South place. But the reason we don't hear about those other places to the extent of the United States is first, the numbers who went there were so small. These were tiny enclaves. They were places that had either no or an even smaller preexisting Jewish population. And most of the Jews, most of the Jewish refugees who went to those places, as soon as they could, left. So they didn't leave a kind of institutional generational legacy. And so of the German Jews who come to the United States, you know, their children stayed on and their children had the legacy of being the descendants of German-Jewish refugees. The ones who come to the United States, they create newspapers, they create organizations, they create cultural institutions. And even. There's even a German Jewish press, the Aufbau. And so it's a substantial, not only sort of set of practices at the time, but they live on. And that's not true of Kenya. It's not true of even the Dominican Republic, which was fascinating. But they don't stay.

**MARK OPPENHEIMER:** Let's talk for a minute about the Dominican Republic, because, as you say, they don't stay. I think there are several hundred Jews who are descendants of German refugees still living in the Dominican Republic. Almost everybody left. But Trujillo, the dictator, he wanted them because he saw them as white, which wasn't necessarily the way they were seen in the United States or other countries. So it was interesting. The Dominican Republic was hoping that they would come and whiten the country.

**HASIA DINER:** Right. So Trujillo wanted them. The number who were able to come in or did come in was way smaller than the number promised. And, yes, you know, he was. The Dominican Republic was attempting to westernize. It was attempting to move up the economic ladder of development. And so, yes, the Jews are people coming in with skills.

They're coming in with education. And yeah, they were white. The Jews are still viewed as white in the United States. And I think it's really one of the overstatements, because, you know, if you were Black, you couldn't get in at all! And even when we think about the quotas of 1924, remember, those were quotas that were, that were shocking, as it were, because of Europeans, not because of anyone else. The Chinese had been restricted in 1882. In 1917, there was an immigration law which created something called the Asiatic barred zone, okay. So no one from the Asian continent could come to the United States as an immigrant. And that's really dramatic. So Jews were always white in terms of citizenship, civil rights. It doesn't mean they didn't experience discrimination. Again, there was antisemitism. There were Americans who were concerned about too many Jews and Jews were this and Jews were that. But for the most part, the Jews who come in are able to immediately begin the process of naturalization and citizenship.

**MARK OPPENHEIMER:** So if they went to a country that was under colonial rule, if they were going to India, for example, did that change their status in any way? Were they seen as a kind of middle ground between the historical British colonizers and the natives? Or was it so temporary that actually they never really had a particular ethnic identity or status?

**HASIA DINER:** That's a great question. And so for them, obviously, when they get there, they have no idea how long they're going to be there. And so it may not be. We know it was temporary, but it might not have been. It might have been another ten years. But, yes, I mean, they just didn't fit the categories of analysis. And so, in India, you know, they were neither Muslim nor Hindu or any of the other religions. They weren't Sikhs. But these were the sort of known categories of what it meant to be an Indian. And they're not British either. And so in many of these places, the Jews, the German Jews and Austrian, Czech Jews who come in are. They're in this middle ground between the two. But their allegiances and their alliances and their aspirations were always to the colonial rulers. You know, they don't go to learn Gujarati and Farsi. They become English speakers. Their children go to the English schools and they capitalize on their Western European skills and education.

**MARK OPPENHEIMER:** Well, speaking of places under British rule, let's talk about Palestine. Were things different there? Was it difficult to get a visa to go to Palestine? How were they getting to Palestine? What was the deal about getting into that land back then?

**HASIA DINER:** Yeah. So Palestine was under British rule. The British had begun to impose quotas on Jewish immigration starting in the twenties. And they were responding to the fact that Jews weren't the only people living there. But there's an Arab population that was increasingly concerned about the influx of Jews and concerned about the fact that they were, that what was essentially an Arab land, okay? Under British rule, but still a land of a Palestinian rule was being taken away, that the Jews were coming in, in such large number that they, the rightful dwellers of the place, were going to be overwhelmed and outnumbered. And the Zionists are very clear. They want this as the basis for a Jewish state. Okay, they don't, you know, well, there's a very small number, including, by the way, some German-Jewish refugees, who are talking about a binational state. A handful of these German-Jewish refugees come in and they say, no, we don't want a Jewish state.

We want a state where everybody who lives here can be equal citizens. They're obviously a very small minority. But the British are, you know, many of the Zionists and Jewish historians see them as having bent over backwards to satisfy the Arabs, and they would have said, no, we're being fair because these people have lived here. So the British put quotas on Jewish immigration, and most profoundly, they issue a white paper which really drastically curtails Jewish immigration into Palestine. So you had to have a certificate to get in. And it was not just open borders coming in, settling. You had to have a certificate that allowed you to disembark and settle.

**MARK OPPENHEIMER:** So were there Jews sneaking in or being smuggled in as well?

**HASIA DINER:** Certainly there was illegal immigration. There were subterfuges that people, that Jews relied upon to be able to get in. But the British were pretty thorough in stymieing this. Much of the illegal Jewish immigration actually takes place after the war is over. And there are Jews in the displaced persons camps. And the organized illegal immigration is a postwar phenomenon, not so much a pre-war.

**MARK OPPENHEIMER:** We've already heard how life was a little bit temporary or provisional in a place like India or the Dominican Republic. Even though they might have stayed forever, they weren't hoping to put down roots in the same way that they were in, say, the United States or England. So I'm curious if you can contrast a little bit what an immigrant's life would have been like in the United States or England versus, say, India or the Dominican Republic? How would they have been associating differently? How would their religious life have been different? How would their children's education have been different?

**HASIA DINER:** Okay. So I mean, that's a great question. And by the way, we could also make some distinctions between the United States and Great Britain, because, again, the United States was the single largest Jewish population outside of Europe. And so it had so many institutions and had so many resources to expand upon the new immigrants, the German-Jewish refugees. And they were so active in finding them work, places to live, connecting them to service organizations. So groups like National Council of Jewish Women, they were actually alerted every time there was a ship coming in with German-Jewish refugees. They'd be waiting on the docks. And they would set up apartments for them and show them, what does an American supermarket look like? There are organizations that are involved in finding jobs and guaranteeing work for them and supporting them. And also in the United States, there's such a long tradition of immigrants, again, regardless of who, creating independent institutions on their own. Social clubs, religious institutions, press. And England had a very different kind of, sort of institutional infrastructure for the refugees. But still, they were free. They were. Well, yes and no, because remember, it's. Again, their story is interesting because when England goes to war in 1939, all Germans living in England are subjected to essentially being put in internment camps because there was a fear of sabotage and a fear of spies. And they're unable to do. Either they're unable or they claim to be unable to distinguish between Jews and other Germans. And so many of the Jews end up, you know, in internment camps for



the first two years of the war. And that doesn't happen in the United States. Obviously, we know in the United States, the only thing that gets you into an internment camp is if you're Japanese. And so, again, it's a kind of interesting difference. These other places, Kenya and Iran and India, they didn't have very much in the way of either Jewish communities on the ground. There were small, tiny little communities. They had very little in the way of wealthy donors or wealthy philanthropists to support people. A Jew coming to Kenya, more likely than not, does not have an uncle living there. A Jew coming to Milwaukee probably has a cousin and an uncle and aunt, and they get drawn into the family circle. And, you know, however complicated it may have been in language differences. There was personal and communal infrastructure. That wasn't true in India.

**MARK OPPENHEIMER:** So on the one hand, there's a lot to be said for the United States. When we did take refugees, we gave them lives in a way that most other countries didn't. On the other hand, we didn't take as many as we could have. And I wonder with historical memory, knowing now what we didn't know then, do you think it would be different today? Do you think that today's, you know, 35- and 45-year-olds with young children would say, sure, a refugee family can move into my neighborhood, especially during a Depression or a time of rising inflation. Would America's sort of big, broad, middle class be more responsive to a refugee crisis?

**HASIA DINER:** Yeah. So I think probably. I think the World War Two experience was shattering and I think it really impacted many Americans. And it's not surprising that after the war, we see, for the first time, the passage of refugee legislation. There were no refugee laws. There were no exemptions for refugees in the immigration policy. And so the passage of the Displaced Persons Act immediately after the war, like late '40s, early '50s. And then in the mid-'50s, as a lot of control over immigration shifted to the Presidency, the paroling of Hungarian refugees, okay? And then Cuban and then Vietnamese. Now this was all done under the impact of anti-communism, but I think that the... Now, I don't want anybody to think that I think what we're doing right now in terms of refugees and asylum seekers is good. I think that we are still seeing many echoes of what happened in the 1930s in the building of a wall and the kind of policy at the border of really quite inhumane policy, but mostly, I'd say. Or many cases when refugees have come to the United States and been, again, dumped by the governors of Florida and Texas, put on planes or buses and sent to New York or to Cape Cod or wherever. The way in which communities have rallied to them? Churches, synagogues, other kinds of humanitarian NGOs, collecting food and clothes and helping them find jobs is something that I think is one of the legacies of the years when the doors were closed and Jews were trapped and subjected to a fate that we can barely imagine.

**MARK OPPENHEIMER:** Do we have enough immigrant visas now?

**HASIA DINER:** Do we have enough? No! But, you know, many people would say we have too many. And, you know, am I the governor of Florida? No. Am I the governor of Texas? I think my view is that people should be allowed to immigrate. And nobody's going to come if they can't work. Nobody's coming for the rich bounty of the American social welfare

infrastructure. People, immigrants come to a town, to a neighborhood, to a region, and they absolutely transform it economically. And, you know, the immigrants have come in from like Central America, and they've just thrived in building businesses and creating a kind of civic life that has been to the advantage of all the people who were there before. And the statistics are also really amazing in terms of the educational progress of their children. And so many of the public colleges and universities around the country are made up of first generation, or they, sometimes they call them "one-and-a-half generations." And these are the children of refugees and of immigrants, people who came in without English and their children are now going to college. And places like the City College of New York, which was once a refuge for the children of East European Jewish immigrants during the teens and twenties, now is the kind of home for, again, the children of refugees, and they are creating a new kind of spark in our culture and in our economy. So I don't think there are enough slots. I think there should be more. But again, I'm not, I don't know if I'm in the majority in this country. And we certainly have politicians out there who try to whip up public opinion by saying that all the people who are coming in are rapists and murderers and are dangerous and they'll never become American. And obviously, some percentage of the American public has agreed with them.

**MARK OPPENHEIMER:** All right. Well, Hasia Diner, thank you so much. This is terrific.

**HASIA DINER:** Oh, my pleasure!

## THEME

**MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO):** That was Hasia Diner. I'm Mark Oppenheimer. And this is LBI Presents. Till next time.

**PRODUCER:** For more information and to visit LBI's digitized archive, go to [lbi.org](http://lbi.org).

On the next episode of *LBI Presents*...LBI's archive is bursting at the seams with treasures of the past. So it's time for us to go on a field trip.

**MICHAEL SIMONSON:** So we're heading into the Leo Baeck archives. Here we go.

**MARKUS KRAH:** Original documents, the sources, they have a way of speaking to people if they're willing to listen.

**PRODUCER:** History in a box. Coming up on LBI Presents.

LBI Presents is a production of the Leo Baeck Institute, New York and Antica Productions. It's hosted by Mark Oppenheimer. Our executive producers are Laura Regehr, Stuart Coxe, and Bernie Blum. Our senior producer is Debbie Pacheco. Our associate producer is Emily Morantz. Our intern is Maizie Solomon. Our associate sound editor is Cameron McIver. Sound design and audio mix by Philip Wilson.