##### JEWISH REFUGEES FROM THE GERMAN REICH, 1933-1939

##### [http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/online/stlouis/teach/supread.htm#two](http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/online/stlouis/teach/supread.htm%23two)

Between 1933 and 1939, Jews in Germany progressively were subjected to economic boycott; the loss of civil rights, citizenship, and jobs; incarceration in concentration camps; and random violence.

Forcibly segregated from German society, some Jews turned to and expanded their own institutions and social organizations, but many chose to flee Germany. At first, the German government encouraged Jews to emigrate and placed few restrictions on what possessions they could take. Gradually, however, the Nazis sought to deprive Jews fleeing Germany of their property by levying an increasingly heavy emigration tax and by restricting the amount of money that could be transferred abroad from German banks.

By March 1938, Germany had annexed Austria (*Anschluss*) incorporating it into the German Reich. Nazi treatment of Jews in Austria immediately following the *Anschluss* was particularly brutal, and an office soon was established to facilitate the swift emigration of Austria’s Jews.

Following *Kristallnacht* ("Night of Broken Glass"), the state-organized pogrom of November 9-11, 1938, the German government confiscated most of the remaining Jewish-owned property and entirely excluded Jews from the German economy. Emigration increased dramatically as most Jews decided that there was no longer a future for them in Germany; thus, individuals and entire families became refugees.

In 1933, close to 600,000 Jews were living in Germany and 185,000 were in Austria. By 1940, close to half of these Jews had fled to other countries. More than 100,000 German-Jewish émigrés traveled to western European countries, especially France, Belgium, and the Netherlands. Approximately 8,000 entered Switzerland and 48,000 went to Great Britain and other European countries.

About 90,000 German-Jewish refugees were able to immigrate to the United States and 60,000 to Palestine, which was then under British Mandate. An additional 84,000 German-Jewish refugees immigrated to Central and South America, and because the Japanese-controlled city of Shanghai in China did not require visas or certificates of good conduct from Jewish immigrants, 15,000-18,000 Jews found refuge there.

As the number of people fleeing Nazi persecution increased, more and more countries refused to accept refugees, and by 1939 the number of havens available to Jewish refugees dwindled. Switzerland feared that massive numbers of German Jews would cross their border, and the British government continued to restrict Jewish immigration to Palestine. Unfortunately, by 1940, emigration from Nazi Germany became virtually impossible, and in October 1941 it was officially forbidden by the German government.

##### THE UNITED STATES AND THE REFUGEE CRISIS

Between 1933 and 1939, more than 300,000 Germans, perhaps 90 percent of them Jews, had applied for immigration visas to the United States, and by 1940 about 90,000 German Jews had found sanctuary in America. Despite the sincere intent of some American activists to assist refugees fleeing Nazism, strict immigration quotas, public opposition to immigration during a time of economic depression, and anti-Semitism in the general public and among some key government officials were serious obstacles to any relaxation of U.S. immigration quotas.

Immigration Quotas

A strict quota system limited the immigration of German and Austrian nationals to the United States. The quota set specific limits on the number of people who could emigrate in any given year from any foreign country, and eligibility was based on one’s country of birth.

The quotas, which were set by the immigration laws of 1921 and 1924, were discriminatory and were aimed at reducing emigration from "undesirable" areas of Europe, especially eastern Europe and the Balkans. American policy makers wanted to prevent thousands of penniless Jews from southern and eastern Europe from entering the United States. While anti-Semitism was certainly a factor in formulating this aim, fear of communism and a general fear of poor people in a time of depression were equally influential.

The Immigration Act of 1924, which reduced the annual quota from 358,000 to 164,000, intensified an already severe anti-immigration law that was passed in 1921. In addition, the act reduced the immigration limit from 3 percent to 2 percent of each foreign-born group living in the United States in 1890. Using 1890 figures, rather than those from 1910 or 1920, the new wave of foreign-born from southern and eastern Europe were excluded from quotas truly proportionate to their true numbers in the population. Finally, the act provided for a future reduction of the total quota to 154,000, with visa allocation based on each nationality’s proportional representation in the 1920 U.S. population. In 1929, the new quota went into effect. Of the 154,000 people allowed into the United States each year, almost 84,000 were British and Irish, people who did not need to flee from the Nazis. While the new law cut the quota for northern and western European countries by 29 percent, it slashed the numbers for southern and eastern Europe by 87 percent. Italy’s quota, for example, was reduced from 42,057 to 3,845 persons.

The annual German quota to the United States was 25,957, but little of that was being used. The main obstacle was a 1930 U.S. State Department Regulation instructing consular officials abroad to adopt a new interpretation of regulations barring prospective immigrants that were likely to become public charges. Instead of judging an individual’s capacity to do useful work in the United States, the regulation was interpreted in such a way as to limit immigration because of the existing labor conditions in the United States. Anyone who needed to work to support himself or herself (i.e., anyone who was not independently wealthy) was considered likely to become a public charge and was rejected.

In 1936, consuls were told to soften their stance and change their criteria from whether candidates for immigration were *likely* to become a public charge to whether it was *probable* that they would. This was due to the quality of immigrants from Germany, the willingness of family in the United States to support immigrants, and the changed political atmosphere after the 1936 presidential elections. Immigration more than doubled between 1936 and 1937, but it was still less than half the permissible quota for Germany.

After Germany annexed Austria in March 1938 (*Anschluss*), President Roosevelt himself suggested liberalizing immigration procedures and combining the German and Austrian quotas to make it more likely for Jews in Austria to obtain visas to the United States. That quickly led to the full use of the quota. After the war began, however, State Department officials instructed consuls general not to admit anyone to the United States if there was any doubt about their political reliability. Fear of Axis spies entering the United States led to a significant reduction in the number of visas issued in 1940. In June 1941, Congress passed the Bloom-Van Nuys bill authorizing consuls to withhold any type of visa if they had reason to believe that the applicant might endanger public safety in the United States.

Neither the White House nor Congress was willing to increase the quota. With the exception of adding the Austrian quota to the German, quotas for immigration from Germany remained unchanged during the refugee crisis. Many German and Austrian Jews were prevented from qualifying for visas until 1938, the only year in the 1930s when the quota was filled. While Roosevelt made it easier to fill the quotas in 1938 and 1939, in 1940 the State Department made it more difficult again. Although most of the German quota was used in 1940, the majority of the visas were given to German Jews who were already outside of Germany; some even were in the Western Hemisphere. In June 1941, the State Department issued a regulation forbidding the granting of a visa to anyone who had relatives in Axis occupied territory. At that point it became virtually impossible to get a visa. American consulates in Germany were closed in July 1941, leaving visas to Latin America as the only legal way out of Germany. By autumn 1941, the Nazis had closed off emigration from German-controlled Europe. During World War II, all U.S. immigration was held to about 10 percent of the already small quotas.