

WEST of HESTER STREET

STUDY GUIDE FOR
WEST of HESTER STREET
A FILM BY ALLEN AND CYNTHIA MONDELL



Jewish immigrants often entered business. Here, Goldstein and Migel were the owners of a department store in Waco, Texas.

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A FILM BY ALLEN AND CYNTHIA MONDELL

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UNDER THE AUSPICES OF:

**Bureau of Jewish Education of
the Jewish Federation of Greater Houston**

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Major funding for the film was provided by the Texas Committee for the Humanities and the National Endowment for the Humanities.



Photo by Charles Haley

Medical inspection of newly arrived immigrants (Dramatic re-creation)

INTRODUCTION

WEST OF HESTER STREET chronicles a little-known episode in American history, the emigration of Jews from Eastern Europe to the American heartland. From 1907 until 1914, thousands of Jews left Europe to escape persecution and dire economic straits, entering the United States not through Ellis Island, but through the port of Galveston, Texas. From there, they were sent to various communities throughout the midwestern and southwestern sections of the country. This film is not strictly a history lesson; rather, it is a moving, sensitive, and at times, humorous account of one man's journey from a shtetl in Russia to a community in Texas. Combining archival film footage and voice-over narration with dramatic re-creations of historic events, **WEST OF HESTER STREET** vividly captures the story of

the "Galveston Plan". In a country that is a "nation of nations," the themes portrayed in this film are universal ones, encompassing the essence of the immigrant experience for all Americans.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Between 1881 and 1914, two million Jewish immigrants came to the United States, the vast majority settling in New York and other Eastern Seaboard cities. Jews left Eastern Europe, mainly Russia, to escape the terrible poverty of the shtetls (the small towns in which most Jews lived), as well as the official policy of anti-Semitic persecution. As Jews settled in New York, they crowded into predominantly Jewish neighborhoods, where disease and poverty were rampant. As a result of these conditions, the Galveston Immigration Movement

(Galveston Plan) was instituted in 1907, to disperse Jewish immigrants into the interior of the American heartland. With this change in immigration patterns, American Jewish leaders believed that the overcrowding of the ghettos could be alleviated. They also hoped that the anti-Semitism which had grown as a result of the large numbers of Jews in concentrated areas would be diminished.

Galveston, Texas was chosen as the port of entry for several basic reasons. First, Galveston had existing rail connections to major cities in the southwestern and midwestern sections of the country. Second, a German steamship line already made regular stops at the port. Finally and most important, Rabbi Henry Cohen, who had served the Galveston Jewish and civic community for 18 years, was considered one of the most prominent Jewish leaders in the

United States. In fact, Woodrow Wilson had called Cohen "the foremost citizen of Texas," and later, in 1930, Cohen was the only rabbi recognized on a list of great religious leaders in America.

Jacob Schiff, a noted New York philanthropist and banker, devised the Galveston Plan and donated \$500,000 for its implementation. He enlisted the aid of Israel Zangwill, the director of the Jewish Territorial Organization in Europe and a noted writer. Zangwill's original goal was to secure a large territory in which Jews from Eastern Europe could create an autonomous state. Ultimately, however, he was willing to compromise with Schiff: Zangwill would supply the immigrants while Schiff's organization would resettle them in areas in the southwestern and midwestern United States.

Once immigrants arrived in Galveston, they were aided by the Jewish Immigrant's Information Bureau. This organization worked with communities throughout the United States to find sponsors for immigrants who would settle in their area. Morris Waldman, the first manager of the Bureau, traveled around the United States, identifying communities that would secure jobs and housing in order to help the immigrants ease into the American way of life. The stay in Galveston lasted only 12 to 24 hours for most immigrants. During that time, immigrants would be welcomed, fed and questioned as to their preference for work locations. As soon as possible, immigrants would be placed on trains to be taken to their new homes.

The original goal of the Galveston Plan was to settle significant numbers of Jewish immigrants in the hinterlands, in the belief that countless other immigrants would ultimately be diverted from the East Coast. Restrictive federal immigration laws, changes in policies of the Russian government, American economic insecurity, the duration and difficulty of the voyage, and the outbreak of World War I all contributed to the demise of the plan. Though



only 10,000 men and women entered through Galveston, they formed the nuclei of Jewish communities throughout the southwestern and midwestern sections of the United States.

PLOT SUMMARY

The film has two distinct plot lines, one personal and one historical. At a contemporary Passover Seder, the film's narrator, observing Soviet Jews at his table, is

reminded of his own immigration experience 75 years earlier. Having faced pogroms in Russia in the early 1900's, he and his father leave the rest of the family to escape a futureless shtetl existence and to start a new life. Instead of heading for New York City, the two decide to book passage to Galveston, Texas because they have heard that Texas is a land of opportunity. Jacob Schiff and Israel Zangwill have implemented a plan to divert Jewish immigration away from crowded New York to Galveston and ultimately to the southwestern and



Photo by Charles Haley

Conversation between Rabbi Cohen, the Mayor of Galveston and a newly arrived immigrant (Dramatic re-creation)

midwestern sections of the United States.

After traveling in steerage from Bremen - a long, terrible voyage under crowded and unsanitary conditions - the father and son arrive in Galveston. They are met at the boat by Rabbi Henry Cohen and the Mayor of Galveston, whose presence bespeak the democratic ideals in which these immigrants have placed their faith. They are sent to a small town in Texas and placed in jobs, the father as a tailor, the son as a traveling peddler for a local store. The son's encounters with this new world are the stories of generations of American immigrants: new foods and ignorance as to how to eat them, problems with the language, perceptions of a new and varied American culture and economy, and pressures to reconcile one's religious practices and customs with the American scene. Yet the son does become an

American, learning what it means to be a part of American society. He learns English, opens his own store, and prospers. He meets another Jewish immigrant whom he eventually marries, has children and then grandchildren.

As the film returns to the Passover Seder, the narrator realizes that America has been good to him. He has found happiness in this land of opportunity. He has been allowed to maintain his heritage and traditions and has lived to see Jewish communities established throughout the Southwest and Midwest in the United States.

The second plot deals with the historical movement known as the "Galveston Plan". Through historical scenes re-created throughout the film, we view the inception of the Galveston Plan, the compromise arranged between Jacob Schiff and Israel Zangwill to create a flow of

Jewish immigrants to Galveston, and Morris Waldman's search for jobs and sponsors for Jewish immigrants in various American communities. We learn of the resistance within the Jewish community over the launching of the plan and the embarrassment of some German Jewish immigrants who were already established in the United States about the newly arrived Eastern Europeans with their different language and customs. We see the sponsoring communities, who at first welcomed immigrants, beginning to fear the competition from these resourceful men and women who were soon making successful lives for themselves. Also shown is Rabbi Henry Cohen's central role in the plan, including his work in creating an atmosphere of security and warmth for the newly arrived immigrants, coupled with his personal dealings with immigration officials to insure

fairness in deportations. Finally, we learn of the historical reasons for the decline of the movement.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

WEST OF HESTER STREET deals with numerous issues that are appropriate for classroom discussion of the immigrant experience in America in the period 1880-1920. For purposes of instruction, the major themes of the film have been classified into three basic areas. Depending upon the class and the objectives in showing the film, emphasis might be placed on one or more of the following areas:

1. The Immigrant Experience
2. A Matter of Values
3. The American Dream

PRE-VIEWING

Before viewing the film with your class, have students consider the following general questions. Each question is designed to focus on one of the major themes examined in the film. You might want your students to respond in writing to some of these questions before viewing and again after they have seen the movie.

1. What values do you hold most important in your life? What would be significant enough to you to make you leave your homeland, family, and familiar way of life?
2. How do you generally react in a new situation? What problems do you think you would encounter if your family moved to a new country with different customs and language?
3. How can groups maintain their ethnic, cultural, and religious identities in the United States? Should they?
4. Does one person have the ability to control his or her own destiny, or do outside forces have more control?
5. How do you define the

American dream? Does the American dream still exist?

6. What are your roots? How did your family get to the United States?
7. Are we responsible for other people or only for ourselves?

After viewing, consider one or more of the following themes:

THE IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE

1. How is the immigrant experience portrayed in the film different from the experience of other immigrants you have studied?
2. What generalizations can be made about the immigrant experience?
3. What problems with assimilation do the immigrants in this film have to confront?
4. Must immigrants to the United States give up their ethnic, cultural, and religious beliefs to survive in American culture?
5. What are the benefits of a pluralistic society? What are the problems?
6. What can we in the United States do to ease the transition to American life for newly arrived immigrants?

A MATTER OF VALUES

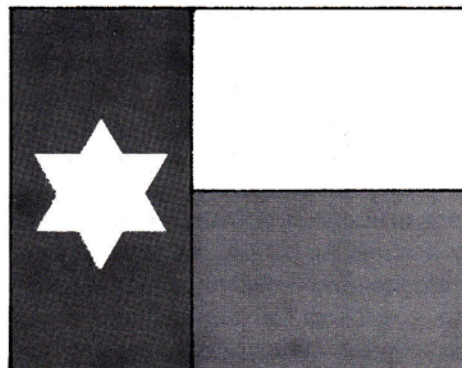
1. The family plays a vital role in the lives of the immigrants in this story.

What is the most important value in your life? How would you feel about leaving your family behind to start a new life in another country?

2. What does living in the United States mean to you? How would your life be different if you lived in a country with a totalitarian or despotic government?
3. Are you a risk taker? When was a time in your life when you were willing to take a risk? How would your life have been different if you had been unwilling to take that risk?
4. What are the pressures that exist in this country to conform? Is it important to maintain independent identities?
5. Differing individuals and groups accepted responsibility for Jewish immigrants coming into the United States (as portrayed in the film). What responsibility do we as citizens have for newly arrived immigrants? What specifically can we do to help them?

THE AMERICAN DREAM

1. For the immigrant portrayed in this film, the American dream was an attainable goal of achieving the success denied him and his family in Eastern Europe. What is the American dream



in the 1980's? Does it still exist? Is the American dream attainable for newly arrived immigrants?

2. How do you envision your future in twenty years? Will you be more or less successful than your parents? What do you perceive as the obstacles you will have to confront in pursuing your dream?
3. Upton Sinclair in *THE JUNGLE*, a novel about a Lithuanian immigrant's experiences in the meat-packing plants of Chicago in the early 1900's, described the illusion and reality of the immigrant experience. Whereas there were promises of a Horatio Alger rags-to-riches story, the reality was often very different. What was the promise of America as portrayed in this film? In what ways was the promise fulfilled? In what ways was the promise unfulfilled?
4. Where is there evidence of prejudice in this film? What can we as a society do to end racial and religious prejudice?
5. Rabbi Henry Cohen is portrayed as a single man with formidable responsibility and influence. Can one person make a difference in a project, organization or goal? Give examples where individuals have shaped history by their own personal efforts.

FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES

This film can be used as the focal point for individual or group projects. The following are topics that might be explored.

1. Record the oral history of a relative who emigrated to the United States, or of a relative who knows the



Typical business storefront

Courtesy of Sadovnick family

- story well. Play the recording for your class. (If a tape recorder is not available, you can still interview the relative.)
2. Interview a recently arrived immigrant. Find out why the person left his or her country, why they came to the United States, their view of the American dream, and what they hope to accomplish in this country. Write up his reflections, and as a class, bind together all of the stories as a collection of **STORIES BY NEW AMERICANS**.
3. Following the lead of *WEST OF HESTER STREET*, record your family's roots in slide/tape format. Find out about your family's immigration history. How did your family come to the United States? Why did they leave their original homes? What was life like for them when they first arrived? Play your slide/tape show for the class.
4. Write a collection of fictional diary entries, to chronicle the following:
 - a. a day in the life of a European shtetl
 - b. a day aboard the ship bringing you to the United States
 - c. The day you first see the United States
 - d. an encounter with immigration officials at your port of entry
 - e. your first day of work in the United States
 - f. your reflections on attaining American citizenship
5. Create an advertising campaign, as if you were working for the Immigration Bureau. Just as Israel Zangwill created publicity that encouraged people to enter through Galveston, Texas, create a campaign with billboards, slogans, and a radio or television advertisement that would encourage people to come to the United States.
6. The use of Yiddish recurs throughout *WEST OF HESTER STREET*. Research the origins of the language. Find out what various Yiddish words in *WEST OF*



Jewish banana peddler in the early 1900's

HESTER STREET mean. What Yiddish words are in common use in the United States today?

7. Research the agencies in your city that work with newly arrived immigrants. Volunteer to work with one of these organizations. Report on your activities to the class.
8. Research the current immigration laws in the United States. What changes have recently been made? Why? Which countries are most represented in current immigration figures?
9. Do research on Galveston, Texas, in the early 1900's. Report on its history, why Galveston never became as large a city as Houston, and what made Galveston the logical choice of Jacob

Schiff for implementation of the Galveston Plan.

10. Read another popular or historical work about immigration to the United States. Compare the immigrant experience in the work you chose to that in WEST OF HESTER STREET.

FOR FURTHER READING

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Harper and Row, 1917.

4. Cohen, Anne Nathan and Cohen, Harry I. *The Man Who Stayed in Texas*. New York: Whittlesey House, 1941.
5. Feingold, Henry L. *Zion in America*. New York: Hippocrene Books, 1974.
6. Handlin, Oscar. *The Uprooted*. New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1951.
7. Marinbach, Bernard. *Galveston: Ellis Island of the West*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983.

A FINAL NOTE

WEST OF HESTER STREET is directed toward an adult and youngadult audience, though children 10 and older will certainly enjoy it. This study guide can be adapted to fit the needs of any particular age group.