

# Retracing the Journey to America

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**MY GRANDFATHER, SAMUEL** Zylber/Silber (changed to “Silver” in America), was born on April 5, 1897, in Tłumacz, Galicia, today’s Tlumach, Ukraine. In 1914, before his 17th birthday, he journeyed alone to the United States, where he hoped to make a new life for himself.

With the goal of retracing his journey, I have researched the route, the means of transportation, the conditions, and the obstacles that he likely experienced along his way. This article reflects the results of my research, which may be useful to others whose Galician ancestors traveled the same path to America in the early 20th century.

## Samuel Silver’s Origins

Samuel was the second child of Gershon Silber and Blima Chaya Sperber. He had an older brother, Avram, and a younger sister, Adele. His mother died after he left for America, and his father remarried and had two more sons. My grandfather never met his two half-brothers or the five children of his sister, Adele, and her husband, Mendel Lebzelter.

Samuel’s father, Gershon, had four siblings, two of whom played significant roles in my grandfather’s journey. According to family legend, my grandfather’s Uncle Hillel, who also lived in Tłumacz, helped him emigrate from Galicia in 1914, possibly without his parents’ permission and knowledge. My grandfather’s Aunt Bella and her husband,

Moses Haber, who had emigrated several years earlier, paid for my grandfather’s ticket to New York and welcomed him into their home.

Unfortunately, we have very limited information about Samuel’s family, in part because there are no known vital records from Tłumacz in the archives. What information we do have comes largely from family lore, from the records of other towns where my grandfather’s aunt and uncle had lived, and from the Yizkor book for Tłumacz.

According to the Yizkor book, there were 2,082 Jews living in Tłumacz in 1900, which represented 36 percent of its total population. In the book, former resident Munio Wurman wrote that “Tłumacz was regarded as one of the most beautiful towns in eastern Poland.”

Located in a valley with rich soil, Tłumacz was a source of agricultural products, particularly fruit from its many orchards. With the shuttering of a sugar factory, established in the town in the 1800s, there was little industry in Tłumacz. Since the town was located off the main road, commerce also existed only on a limited scale. An attempt was made to improve the economic situation with the opening of a small railway line in 1910. The Jews in Tłumacz were primarily merchants and artisans; some also worked in the timber and distillery trades.

I suspect that a combination of factors led to my grandfather’s decision to leave his hometown. First, as an ambitious person, he presumably saw that the prospects for advancement in Tłumacz were rather limited, and like many other Jews from Galician shtetls, he left in search of better economic opportunities.

Second, religion may have influenced his decision. Samuel was not an observant Jew, but it appears that his father, Gershon, was, based on the detailed description of Jewish mourning customs



*Postcard of a square in Tłumacz, published by Brück & Sohn, 1903*

that he wrote in a letter to Samuel after the death of Samuel's mother. Perhaps my grandfather's attitude toward religion was a source of tension within the family.

Third, antisemitism may have influenced my grandfather's decision to leave. It is clear from references in the Yizkor book that antisemitism was present in Tłumacz at the time, as it was in many other towns in the region.

Finally, I suspect that emigration may have been appealing to my grandfather because he was approaching the age of required military service. At the time of his departure, his older brother had either been or was about to be drafted into the army.

### **The Journey to the German Border**

In addition to handling the sea voyage, steamship companies, beginning in the late 1800s and early 1900s, usually arranged for the passengers' land

travel to the port of embarkation. Passengers originating in Tłumacz, like my grandfather, would probably have begun their journey on the two-passenger-car train that traveled twice a day to the nearby village of Palahicze. Passengers would then travel by other means to larger towns that had railroad stations, like Stanisławów (now, Ivano-Frankivsk, Ukraine), which is about 17 miles west/northwest of Tłumacz.

If the steamship company had arranged Samuel's land travel, it is likely that he would have been sent by train from Stanisławów to Oświęcim. Steamship companies chose Oświęcim as the terminal for their Galician passengers because it was at the center of railroad connection networks. The Nazis took advantage of this extensive rail system in establishing the Auschwitz concentration camp there.

Upon traveling from Oświęcim to Germany, emigrants would have to pass through a border

control station. A couple factors contributed to the establishment of these stations in the 1890s.

First, they provided a place to check for compliance with US immigration law. Beginning in 1882, US law rejected immigrants with mental disabilities, people with contagious diseases, and convicts. The law required steamship companies to be financially responsible for housing passengers held for additional inspection and for the cost of rejected passengers' return voyages. An 1893 US law made steamship lines inspect all passengers again at the port prior to embarkation to assure that they met US immigration restrictions.

Second, after an 1892 outbreak of cholera in Hamburg, which killed over 8,500 people, Germany wanted border control stations to ensure that immigrants wouldn't bring infectious diseases into the country and that they would emigrate to the US and not stay in Germany. Officials at the border control stations would make sure that immigrants had the necessary tickets to America, complied with US restrictions, and did not pose a sanitary threat to Germans.

By the early 20th century, most eastern European Jews had prepaid tickets sent by friends or relatives who had already emigrated. Since Samuel had a ticket on a German shipping line, which was prepaid by his uncle, Moses Haber, he should not have encountered any ticket problems at the border control station. He also would not have needed a passport because passports were not required to travel from Austria to Germany. In fact, until World War I, none of the destination countries, including the US, required a passport.

When a train arrived at a border control railway station, the police cleared the train of passengers and turned them over to a representative, who took them on foot to the border control station. After the medical exam was completed, passengers were required to remain there, where conditions

were often difficult. This whole process could take several days. Most passengers waited with their luggage until officials were ready to move them to their next train.

The Germans established a border control station at Ruhleben, near Berlin, in November 1891. A significant number of the roughly two million Jews who left eastern Europe for America between 1880 and 1914 passed through Berlin but were not permitted to enter the city. The Germans, however, did not attempt to interfere with the transit of emigrants because it was a highly lucrative business for German rail and steamship companies.

## Traveling to the Port

Other than getting through the border control station, it was a straightforward trip from Oświęcim to the North Sea embarkation points in Germany, but not necessarily a pleasant trip. Most emigrants boarded special railroad cars set aside for them. Conditions were uncomfortable and overcrowded. At some stations where the trains stopped, members of philanthropic organizations passed food through the windows of the train cars.

In most cases, passengers arrived at their embarkation port a few days before departure. During this time, they equipped themselves for the journey ahead and prepared for additional medical exams before boarding the ship. The shipping company was required to provide housing for the passengers until the start of the sea voyage.

In 1902, a new emigrant hall was opened by the Hamburg-America shipping line. This facility was located just outside the huge Hamburg port, which is several miles away from the city. Trains delivered passengers, who had to pass another medical inspection and, if necessary, go through disinfection. The shipping line fed and housed the passengers, who were not permitted to leave the facility. Jewish migrants had access to Jewish aid workers and received kosher food.



The hall was divided into three areas. In the first section, passengers were disinfected. The second section housed the sleeping quarters and the medical examination area. The third section was where the passengers who were found to be ill were transferred for medical care. Passengers were usually divided by ethnicity and religion. Translators were provided, and living conditions were considered adequate.

At the port, passengers were examined twice: first, on their arrival at the emigrant hall and second, on the day of departure. They were also vaccinated against smallpox. The medical examination at the port was comprehensive and more thorough than the one at the border control stations. Those who passed this examination were sorted by destination country in preparation to board the ships.

Interestingly, Samuel's immigration record identifies Hamburg as his departure point, but the ship manifest (passenger list) says he left from the German town of Cuxhaven. The apparent explanation for this inconsistency is that Samuel went through the departure station in Hamburg and was then transported by the shipping company to Cuxhaven. At the turn of the century, a new port was constructed in Cuxhaven to manage increased transatlantic travel. When the Hamburg-America line began using this port, it built a new terminal there to accommodate its passengers.

## Crossing the Ocean

Samuel traveled to America on the steamship the *President Lincoln*, which left Cuxhaven, Germany, on February 11, 1914. His trip took two weeks, as opposed to the months-long journey on a sailing vessel. He arrived at Ellis Island in New York on February 25, 1914. His timing was fortuitous: the summer after he left for America, World War I broke out, and Germany sealed its borders, effectively ending emigration for the balance of the war.

There are many reports of the atrocious treatment of passengers in steerage, which is the lowest class of travel on board a ship. Through legislation, the US tried to improve health and safety conditions for immigrant travel, with uneven success.

Fortunately for my grandfather, at the turn of the century, there was shipping line competition for Jewish passengers. Some lines made special accommodations, including providing kosher kitchens and grouping Jews together for prayer and meals. It was also possible to purchase prepaid tickets that included kosher food.

In addition, some of the lines established a new "third class" to improve the traditional steerage treatment. Crews were trained to behave respectfully toward the passengers in this class. Also, unlike the dirty conditions in traditional steerage, all public and private areas were cleaned daily. Improvements were made to the ventilation, and there was new electric lighting. There were towels and soap in the washroom areas, and passengers could pay for baths and showers.

Sleeping conditions were also improved. Instead of multiple beds in one large room, the new third class provided semi-private staterooms, which accommodated two to eight passengers. Compartments had space for luggage, a mirror, a washstand, and a place to sit. Ship stewards served meals in dining rooms with multiple seatings.

My grandfather, Samuel, would have benefited from these improved conditions because, according to the ship manifest, he traveled in the new third class. Since the *President Lincoln* was built after the turn of the century, it had been furnished with the above-mentioned improvements. Also, since Samuel's ticket was purchased by his Uncle Moses, who was not only a religious Jew, but also a kosher butcher, it almost certainly would have covered payment for kosher food on the ship.



1920 painting by Fred Dana Marsh of the sinking of the USS *President Lincoln* by German torpedoes; NH 86494-KN, the Naval History & Heritage Command and the US Navy Art Collection

Built in Belfast, Ireland, this ship was acquired in 1907 by the Hamburg-America shipping line and ultimately named the *President Lincoln*. It transported passengers until the beginning of World War I. After the US entered the war, the ship was commissioned by the US government, becoming the USS *President Lincoln*. On May 31, 1918, it sank off the coast of France after being hit by German torpedoes, killing 26 men on board.

### Arriving in New York City

The processing of immigrants in New York was routinized. When a ship from Europe arrived in New York Harbor, it was boarded by state quarantine inspectors and by immigration inspectors and surgeons of the US Public Health Service. Third-class passengers were taken with their baggage onto barges and transported to Ellis Island, where they passed in single file before two surgeons, one who inspected them quickly for general health, and the other who checked them for trachoma, a contagious bacterial infection of the eye, which can result in blindness.

While still on the ship, the third-class passengers received cards with their name and a number or letter corresponding to the ship manifest on which their name appeared. The passengers were separated into lines at Ellis Island according to ship manifest. At the end of each line, there was a desk with an inspector, who verified that each immigrant was on the correct list. The immigrants were then asked the same questions that they had already answered when the ship manifest was initially prepared. The inspectors marked any discrepancies in red ink and signed off on those immigrants who seemed to answer the questions truthfully, were in good physical condition, appeared able to work, and could support themselves until they could find employment.

The immigrants were then moved into another room, where they could exchange their money for US currency, buy tickets to their destination, and obtain other information. Charitable societies were available to offer assistance. The immigrants would then board a ferry that ran every hour,

landing at Battery Park, which is at the southern tip of Manhattan and is today called The Battery.

According to the ship manifest, my grandfather, Samuel, arrived in the US with the equivalent of \$28 and with plans to stay with his Aunt Bella and Uncle Moses at 597 Gates Avenue in Brooklyn. (I confirmed this address on the World War I draft registration cards of both my grandfather and his Uncle Moses.) After completing the Ellis Island processing, my grandfather would have then taken the ferry to Battery Park in southern Manhattan and made his way to the Habers' rented apartment in Brooklyn, where he spent his first years in America.

## Life in America

By the time of the 1920 census, my grandfather was no longer living with his aunt and uncle. On March 13, 1920, he married my grandmother, Lillian Cohen, in Manhattan.

My grandfather's documents and US census information provide a record of his occupational advancement. His 1917 Declaration of Intention for Naturalization lists his occupation as a cutter, presumably in the fur industry. His 1918 World War I draft registration identifies his employer as the Diamond Brothers, which was a fur business. In his 1923 naturalization petition, he finally refers to himself as a furrier. In fact, one of the witnesses listed on the petition is a Haber family member who is also identified as a furrier, suggesting the possibility that someone in the Haber family taught Samuel the fur trade.

In the 1940 census, Samuel is listed as a furrier "working on own account," meaning that he had his own business. The 1940 census also indicates that he made \$3,800 a year, which was four times the median income for a man in the US in 1940. My grandfather had clearly become a successful businessman, and his family lived comfortably, even during the Depression.



*Lillian and Samuel Silver, New York, 1948*

Samuel Silver was part of a wave of Jewish immigrants from eastern Europe who changed their lives and their fate. His decision to leave his home, his family, and his life in Galicia to go to a new world, where he didn't speak the language and knew no one other than his aunt and uncle, took great courage. He clearly was a man who had ambitions for a different and more worldly life than the one he left behind in Tlumacz. Because of his courage, his descendants have been able to enjoy America's freedom and prosperity, rather than suffer the fate of most of his relatives, who were killed in the Shoah.