

How did the vast number of Jewish immigrants from different regions of Eastern Europe form their American ethnic identity? In his answer to this question, Daniel Soyer examines how Jewish immigrant hometown associations (landsmanshaftn) transformed old-world communal ties into vehicles for integration into American society. Focusing on New York--where some 3,000 associations enrolled nearly half a million members--this study is one of the first to explore the organizations full range of activities, and to show how the newcomers exercised a high degree of agency in their growing identification with American society. The wide variety of landsmanshaftn--from politically radical and secular to Orthodox and from fraternal order to congregation--illustrates the diversity of influences on immigrant culture. But nearly all of these societies adopted the democratic benefits and practices that were seen as the most positive aspects of American civic culture. In contrast to the old-country hierarchical dispensers of charity, the newcomers associations relied on mutual aid for medical care, income support, burial, and other traditional forms of self-help. During World War I, the landsmanshaftn sent aid to their war-ravaged hometowns; by the 1930s, the common identity centered increasingly upon collective reminiscing and hometown nostalgia. The example of the Jewish landsmanshaftn suggests that many immigrants cultivated their own identification with American society to a far greater extent than is usually recognized. It also suggests that they selectively identified with those aspects of American culture that allowed them to retain emotional attachments to old-country landscapes and a sense of kinship with those who shared their heritage.

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Daniel Soyer. Jewish Immigrant Associations and American Identity in New York, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, pp. \$

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