MY GRANDMOTHER Audrey’s mother was named Bluma Slapak.¹ Her grandchildren called her Nannie, and she was born and raised in Knyszyn, Poland, which was then a part of the Russian Empire. Like many Polish Jews, Nannie wanted to immigrate to the United States because she feared persecution and violence. Her parents and extended family helped her cobble together enough money to afford passage, and she left Poland on October 31, 1922, bound for New York via Antwerp. She embarked from Antwerp on November 22 on the Red Star Line ship, the S. S. Zeeland.

Nannie’s story reflects the experience of many Jewish immigrants of the day. She arrived in New York harbor, passed through Ellis Island (changing her name to Beatrice in the process), lived in the Bronx, worked in a garment factory, and eventually headed west, where she met my great-grandfather. They settled in Omaha, Nebraska, where my grandmother and her sister were born, moved to Des Moines, Iowa, in the 1940s, and the rest is history.

When Jews speak about those who made it out of Europe during this period, they tend to cite the horrors that their family members were running from: pogroms, fascism, indiscriminate violence, and so on. However, they almost always neglect the horrors that their family members ran toward: pervasive Jew hatred. Such hatred—typically known as anti-Semitism²—ran rampant throughout the United States during this period because it fit nicely within the “scientific” racist and eugenicist ideologies of the day, the goals of

¹. I am indebted to my cousin Suzy Weber for dutifully compiling our family’s genealogy. She keeps the family flame alive and is a top-class historian!

². With others, I use the term Jew hatred over antisemitism because Wilhelm Marr coined the latter in Germany in the 19th century to provide an air of legitimacy to discrimination toward Jews. “Earlier Germans were blunter: They called it Judenhaas, liberally Jew-Hatred. [Marr] sought a pseudo-scientific and therefore more palatable word. He knew the term ‘Semitic’ had historically referred to a family of languages that originated in the Middle East. So he refashioned the word to mean prejudice against Jews alone” (S. D. Smith 2020).
which were to prevent the pollution of American society with “feeblemindedness, insanity, criminality, and dependency.”

Many Americans thought Jews were “filthy, un-American, and often dangerous in their habits. . .lacking any conception of patriotism or national spirit.”

They were racial undesirables who would refuse to assimilate, corrupt society’s morals, and leech off the public purse.

This commonplace Jew hatred in part spurred the United States’ infamous Immigration Act of 1924, which Congress passed just two years after my great-grandmother arrived in New York. The act imposed strict immigration quotas that favored the “Nordic” races of northern and western Europe at the expense of the “undesirable” races of eastern and southern Europe. These restrictions combined with existing anti-Asian restrictions to maintain the US’s racial homogeneity. These laws were so successful at “safeguarding” its “Nordic character” that they received Adolf Hitler’s vehement praise in Mein Kampf and elsewhere as “the prime, and indeed only, example of völkisch citizenship legislation in the 1920s.”

Es gibt zur Zeit einen Staat, in dem wenigstens schwache Ansätze für eine bessere Auffassung bemerkbar sind. Natürlich ist dies nicht unsere vorbildliche deutsche Republik, sondern die amerikanische Union, in der man sich bemüht, wenigstens teilweise wieder die Vernunft zu Rate zu ziehen. Indem die amerikanische Union gesundheitlich schlechten Elementen die Einwanderung grundsätzlich verweigert, von der Einbürgerung aber bestimmte Rassen einfach ausschließt, bekennt sie sich in leisen Anfängen bereits zu einer Auffassung, die dem völkischen Staatsbegriff zu eigen ist.

There is currently one state in which one can observe at least weak beginnings of a better conception. This is of course not our exemplary German Republic, but the American Union, in which an effort is being made to consider the dictates of reason to at least some extent. The American Union categorically refuses the immigration of physically unhealthy elements, and simply excludes the immigration of certain races. In these

respects America already pays obeisance, at least in tentative first steps, to the characteristic \textit{völkisch} conception of the state.\textsuperscript{8}

This praise would become darkly ironic, and it epitomizes the deep alliance between the US’s intentions to use immigration law to ensure the racial desirability of its population and the twentieth century’s most insidious ideology of Jew hatred.\textsuperscript{9} Naturally, President Calvin Coolidge refused to veto the Immigration Act of 1924 because, “America must be kept American.”\textsuperscript{10}

Nannie was lucky; she left Poland at exactly the right time. She avoided the pogroms. She avoided the Immigration Act of 1924. She avoided being executed by the Nazi gestapo on the Knyszyn courthouse steps like her family that remained behind. But there was nothing special about her, and there is nothing special about my family. Nannie did not have to make it; in fact, many throughout the world would have preferred her story end differently. They assumed that Jewish immigrants were inferior and would make undesirable members of their political community. To use the jargon of social science, the Anglo-European world used racist, pseudoscientific reasoning to construct Jews as unfit for membership in American society because of their undesirable, immutable traits.

I begin with my great-grandmother’s story because nearly all research has an autobiographical quality. But also, the purpose of this book is to show that the exclusionary politics of international migration that plagued the lives of many of my ancestors and other “undesirable” groups remain in the present day. Many politicians and citizens throughout the world marshal the same arguments about desirability, danger, and fiscal cost to warrant increasingly restrictive immigration policies, much like the Congress that passed the Immigration Act of 1924. There are two principal differences between the two eras: 1) most laypersons presume that today’s restrictions are “objective” or “color-blind;”\textsuperscript{11} and 2) the majority of the world’s immigrants now come from...

\textsuperscript{8} Hitler 2016, 1117. This is James Q. Whitman’s translation of the German, cited in Whitman 2017, 45–46.
\textsuperscript{9} I describe how this ideology pervaded the rest of the Anglo-European world in chapters 2 and 3.
\textsuperscript{11} In this book, there are dozens of instances where I use language like “objectively” or “color-blind” or “undesirable.” In most, if not all, of these instances, the implication is that the people using this language are doing so under false pretenses, with mistaken confidence, or
formerly colonized regions of the global South. But many still perceive certain immigrants to be dangerous or undesirable on the basis of supposedly objective characteristics that actually are products of historical events and contexts that those immigrants cannot control. It bears repeating that Americans thought Jews would refuse to assimilate because they lived in shtetls and ghettos in Europe, but they ignored that this segregation was not by choice. Facts and nuance rarely emerge in public discourse about immigration.

To be sure, many will disagree with me and the arguments that I make in this book. They might even think these ideas are dangerous or naive. Be that as it may, I ask those who immediately recoil at mentions of race, racism, or immigration to read with an open mind and appreciate that there is a fine line between being a member of a “desirable” or an “undesirable” group. We cannot control who our ancestors were, but we can all control our appreciation of this fact.

some other problematic circumstance. To avoid visual and cognitive overload, I eschew the quotation marks in most cases.


13. Blood libels about Jews killing Christian children and other racist conspiracy theories also spurred European pogroms during this period (see, e.g. Bemporad 2019; Brustein 2003).