CHALLENGES OF ESCAPE, 1938–1941
Steps to Immigrate to the United States
Steps to Immigrate to the United States

In the late 1930s, hundreds of thousands of European Jews applied to immigrate to the United States.

Unlike today, there were no special provisions for people fleeing persecution (“refugees”). European Jews had to follow the difficult United States immigration process, which required a lot of time and paperwork.

Jewish refugees wait outside the United States consulate in Marseilles, France, 1941.
US Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Eric Saul
In the 1920s, Congress passed racist laws that set a yearly limit on the people born in each country who could immigrate to the United States. These laws prioritized immigration from countries with large, white Protestant populations.
Step 2: Collect Documents

While on the waiting list, potential immigrants collected many documents that they would need to show American officials.

Sample immigration documents from the *Americans and the Holocaust* exhibition. *US Holocaust Memorial Museum*

Challenges of Escape, 1938–1941

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
This document provided American officials with basic information about the applicant—name, birthdate, parents’ names, and address.

It helped American officials learn about the potential immigrant’s identity and background.
Step 2: Collect Documents

Example B: Medical Clearance

Potential immigrants had to be examined by a US government-approved doctor. Officials feared that people with certain diseases or disabilities would spread disease or not be able to support themselves in the United States.
United States immigration officials required a certificate from the German police stating that the potential immigrant was not a criminal.

US Holocaust Memorial Museum, gift of Annelise Hoffman

Challenges of Escape, 1938–1941
Step 3: Find an American Sponsor

During the Great Depression, the United States required proof that a potential immigrant would not become “a public charge” (that he or she would not need financial support after arriving in the United States).

Most Jews did not have enough money to prove they would not become a “public charge” and needed to find an American relative, friend, or stranger to sponsor them.
Step 3: Find an American Sponsor

Each American sponsor had to submit an application, tax returns, and recommendation letters.

American officials demanded proof that the sponsor was willing and financially able to care for the immigrant if necessary.
Step 4: Buy a Ship Ticket

In the late 1930s, most people traveled across the ocean by ship.

After World War II began in September 1939, American officials required proof that potential immigrants had already purchased a ship ticket (which could be quite expensive) and would be physically able to leave Europe.
Step 5: Collect Transit Visas

Potential immigrants needed permission to enter all countries they would travel through to reach the ship they would take to the United States. Foreign officials carefully monitored anyone who would be entering their country due to national security concerns. These officials also did not want Jewish immigrants to somehow get trapped there and need financial support.
Step 6: Interview at a United States Consulate

When it was their turn on the waiting list, potential immigrants received appointments at a United States consulate for an interview with a State Department official.

The American official examined all the potential immigrant’s paperwork, the paperwork submitted by the American sponsor, and interviewed him or her.

Potential immigrants could be rejected for health reasons, financial reasons, or if the official thought the person might be a security threat.
Receive a United States Immigration Visa

Potential immigrants who successfully gathered all the required paperwork and passed their interview were granted United States immigration visas.