

The Industrial Removal Office

How a little-known program scattered Jews throughout the United States

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What was the Industrial Removal Office (IRO)?

The IRO was an organization in operation from about 1900 to 1922, created to help alleviate overcrowding in the Jewish areas of New York City. Its agents scoured the United States for businesses and towns that needed workers and matched them with immigrants in need of a job. After accepting an offer from the IRO, the immigrant would receive a one-way ticket to their new city.

What were the programs goals?

In a 1907 essay written by David M. Bressler, general manager of the IRO from 1903-1916, he described the IRO as a “philanthropic institution seeking to better the social and economic conditions of New York Jews.”¹ This mission would be achieved by:

- Assisting unemployed Jews in New York, who were willing to go West or South, to become self-supporting.
- Hoping that friends and family immigrating to the United States in the future would join the aforementioned workers in their new hometowns and bypass New York City.

How did the organization get its name?

Originally, the IRO was part of the Jewish Agricultural Society which was trying to tackle the same problem by encouraging light industry to move from New York City to more agricultural areas in the New York region, hence the name “Industrial Removal.” The name was never changed.²

What was the impact of the IRO?

In its two decades of existence, the IRO assisted almost 80,000 people to relocate to more than 1000 cities and towns.³ Bressler claimed that by 1914, the organization had influenced ¼ million people to leave NYC, probably due to chain migration.⁴

¹ David M. Bressler, “The Russian Jew in New York,” in *The Immigrant Jew in America* (New York: National Liberal Immigration League, 1907); image copy, “The Immigrant Jew in America,” The Museum of Family History (<https://www.museumoffamilyhistory.com/ija-ptXI-distribution.htm> : accessed 5 June 2021).

² Jack Glazier, *Dispersing the Ghetto – The Relocation of Jewish Immigrants across America*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 23.

³ Jack Glazier, *Dispersing the Ghetto*, 16.

⁴ Glazier, *Dispersing the Ghetto*, 20.

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How can I see if a family member was involved with the IRO?

Search the index to see if you had a family member “removed” by the IRO. The index is on the Center for Jewish History website at <https://genealogy.cjh.org/family-collections>. Even if your family was not “removed” by the IRO but they lived outside of New York City, the records may be helpful to you.

SEARCH THE INDEX:

1. Choose collection to search: Industrial Removal Office. Records, n.d., 1899-1922
 - a. NAME searches both surname and given name – cannot specify
 - i. Wildcards such as * and ? can be used in searches to represent multiple characters or one character, respectively.
 - b. LOCALE searches city
2. Note the Box, Page and Entry information (see below for how to find the record)

What information can I find in the records?

- If your family member was sent somewhere by the IRO, the records contain:
 - When they arrived in United States
 - Name used at time of relocation
 - Occupation
 - Age
 - Marital status
 - Address in New York City
 - Possibly names of other family members
- If your family lived outside the New York City area, you should look for:
 - Statistics on Jewish communities across the United States
 - Some historical documents such as town marketing materials and business cards
 - Names of community committee members for many towns

How do I search the records?

The IRO records are broken up into eleven Series. Some are much more helpful than others for genealogy research. The index only covers “Series II: Removal Records 1899-1922.”

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FIND A SPECIFIC RECORD:

The actual IRO records have been digitized and are available on *Ancestry* (paid site and sometimes available at local libraries).

“U.S., Industrial Removal Office Records, 1899-1922” – access through catalog or at this link:

<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/1613/>

1. Select Title: Series II: Removal Records 1899-1922)
2. Select Box Number
3. Navigate to Page
4. Find Entry Number

OTHER SERIES IN THE COLLECTION TO BROWSE:

- If you are looking for the name of immigrants, try:
 - “Series VI: Job Offers (1901-1921)” - Accepted job offers arranged by state
 - Often asking for feedback on recent client
 - “Series X: Correspondence of Immigrants (1901 – 1921)”
 - Mostly arranged by state, then city within state
 - Some correspondence written in Yiddish
- Information about Jewish communities
 - “Series III: Traveling Agents (Surveys of Towns for Possible Removal, 1905-1914)”
 - Arranged by year and state
 - Often includes names of committee members in receiving communities
 - “Series VI: Job Offers (1901-1921)”
 - Rejected job offers arranged by state
 - Usually employer requesting skilled worker be sent and IRO not having a current candidate
 - “Series XI: Surveys of Jewish Population and Living Conditions (1906-1909)”
 - Arranged alphabetically by state, then city within state
 - Mostly consists of completed forms sent to representative in each town