
National Council of Jewish Women Kitchen Class for Immigrants, 1911

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| TYPE: | Photograph | TOPICS: | Health, Education & Welfare |
| TIME: | 1900-1949 | | Jewish Values & Practices |
| LEVEL: | Middle School and above | | Immigration |



HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Close to 20 million immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe – including over 2 million Jews – came to the United States between 1880 and 1920. The 250,000 American Jews who had arrived prior to 1880 faced a paradox. They wanted to help these new arrivals, but they were also concerned with maintaining their own hard-won success. The established Jewish community created many social welfare organizations to help their Jewish brothers and sisters adjust to life in the United States. The National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW) focused its attention on female immigrants, assisting them from port of arrival to establishment in their new surroundings.

Drawing on the Jewish principle of *hachnosis orchim*, or welcoming strangers, the middle-class American-born volunteers of the NCJW worked hard to introduce immigrants to the culture and norms of their new home. A large portion of these efforts involved showing immigrants the “proper” – i.e. American – way regarding such everyday activities as diet, dress, and home décor. This photograph, for example, shows immigrant women being instructed in food preparation. Immigrants had a mixed response to these initiatives. Although they were eager to Americanize, they frequently preferred the assistance of organizations they had established for themselves. Many used their own culture and traditions as a resource as they adjusted to their new homes and did not appreciate the efforts of those who encouraged them to change.

For more on the activities of the NCJW, go to JWA’s *Women of Valor* exhibit at <http://www.jwa.org/exhibits/wov/solomon/>.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What do you imagine the women in the photograph are being taught?
2. Describe the way the women in the photograph are dressed. What conclusions do you draw from their dress?
3. Who are the “students” in this class? How might they feel about being instructed in matters of diet and food preparation?