

# A CONGRESS OF IMMIGRANTS

---

The Jewish people came from around the world to pursue the American dream, secure a better future for their families and join what was already a flourishing country of immigrants. As we come together as a nation to fix the broken immigration system, members of the Jewish community are compelled to contribute because of our own experiences as immigrants. This historic debate is happening in our country now, and Jewish organizations and communal leaders alike are mobilizing in support of comprehensive reform.

Members of Congress sharing a Jewish heritage have joined in the effort by completing a 10-question survey, offering a personal recounting of their immigrant experience and explaining the difficulty their families would have immigrating today. Through sharing their own families' immigration narrative, these members help to humanize the cause and build common ground for political compromise.

For instance, we learn that Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz (D-FL) feels a need to tell our own stories to "help remind people of their family's immigrant history, many of whom followed the American dream of freedom, prosperity, and a chance to better their family's future."

Rep. Adam Schiff (D-CA) sheds a light on his family's immigration narrative, which involves a family joining together in the United States to seek a better life. Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL) tells us about coming to the U.S. from Cuba at the age of eight with her mother and brother.

The survey also reveals that Rep. Jerry Nadler (D-NY) was one of the few students at his Crown Heights Yeshiva whose parents were not immigrants, and because of that, he feels a strong connection to immigrant communities; and that Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-IL) identifies as a first generation American.

In this document, we also learn through publicly available records that House Majority Leader Rep. Eric Cantor's (R-VA) maternal grandmother came with her siblings to the United States from Lithuania in the early 1900's.

The Jewish Social Justice Roundtable hopes that these members' responses inspire others in the House of Representatives to share their family immigration stories.

As a nation of immigrants, we share in the responsibility to create a path to citizenship for the 11 million aspiring citizens living in our country, so many of whom came here for the same reason our families did not all that long ago.

Special thanks go to PICO National Network, HIAS, National Council of Jewish Women, Jewish Council on Urban Affairs and Ruth Messinger for helping to make this possible. The United States is a nation of immigrants; this leaflet offers a glimpse into the ways that our members of Congress are immigrants, too.

---

---

## Adam Schiff

D-CA 28th District

“My family’s experience has certainly made me empathetic towards the struggles and dreams of other immigrants. We are all in search of a better life and I believe that our history – as a nation that welcomes immigrants – must continue.”

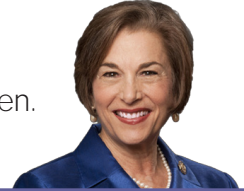


---

## Jan Schakowsky

D-IL 9th District

“My grandmother and grandfather were able to do just what they wanted which was to get a better life for themselves and their children. Those are the opportunities that I want for the immigrants today.”



---

## Debbie Wasserman Schultz

D-FL 23rd District

“My ancestors immigrated to this country in search of freedom and greater opportunities. I believe that those important principles are still alive today, and that is the reason why so many immigrants desire to come to this great nation.”



---

## Jerry Nadler

D-NY 10th District

“[My family] came for the same reasons as others – seeking freedom from persecution, and hope for work and a better life for themselves and their families.”



---

## Ileana Ros-Lehtinen

R-FL 27th District

“As a child, I found a safe haven in this country. It is my desire that every immigrant child finds the same comfort I did in this great nation.”



---

## Eric Cantor

R-VA 7th District

“My family’s story, like so many, began when my grandparents fled anti-Semitic persecution in Russia to come to America.”



---

“Congressman Cantor Participates In Bipartisan ‘Becoming America’ Tour,” July 29, 2013.

## WHEN DID YOUR PARENTS' FAMILIES COME TO THE UNITED STATES?

ADAM SCHIFF <i>D-CA 28th District</i>	My mother's family arrived at the turn of the century. My father's family also arrived around the same time – in the 1890's.
JAN SCHAKOWSKY <i>D-IL 9th District</i>	My father came through Ellis Island when he was about 4 years old, and my mother came when she was about 2 years old.
DEBBIE WASSERMAN SCHULTZ <i>D-FL 23rd District</i>	Maternal Grandfather – 1918, Paternal Grandmother – 1920.
JERRY NADLER <i>D-NY 10th District</i>	My family came to this country largely in the 1910's during the mass influx of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe to the United States.
ILEANA ROS-LEHTINEN <i>R-FL 27th District</i>	My mother's parents were Turkish and migrated to Cuba. Both of my parents were born and raised in Cuba. My brother and I were also born in Cuba. In August 1960, when I was 8 years old, my Mom, brother and I arrived to the United States.

## WHAT COUNTRIES DID THEY COME FROM?

ADAM SCHIFF <i>D-CA 28th District</i>	My mother's family came from Bialystok, Belorussia (near the present-day Poland/Belarus border), and my father's family is from an area just outside of Vilnius, Lithuania.
JAN SCHAKOWSKY <i>D-IL 9th District</i>	My father came from what was at the time Lithuania, and what is now Russia. My mother came from what was Russia at the time and is now Ukraine, somewhere near Kiev.
DEBBIE WASSERMAN SCHULTZ <i>D-FL 23rd District</i>	They emigrated from Poland, Austria, Russia and Bulgaria.
JERRY NADLER <i>D-NY 10th District</i>	On my mother's side, my grandparents came from Lithuania; my grandfather was a butcher and struggled to create a life for his family in New York. My father's parents came from Galicia – in present-day Ukraine and Poland – and, starting out with absolutely nothing, my grandfather became a successful businessman and fur trader who supported a family of 12 in East New York.
ILEANA ROS-LEHTINEN <i>R-FL 27th District</i>	My mother's family was originally from Turkey, but both of my parents were Cuban nationals.

## WERE THEY ABLE TO COME DIRECTLY TO THE UNITED STATES?

ADAM SCHIFF <i>D-CA 28th District</i>	My mother's family came straight from Bialystok to Boston. My father's lived in London before coming to Boston.
JAN SCHAKOWSKY <i>D-IL 9th District</i>	My mother was born in Canada. My father came directly to the United States.
DEBBIE WASSERMAN SCHULTZ <i>D-FL 23rd District</i>	Directly.
JERRY NADLER <i>D-NY 10th District</i>	Yes.
ILEANA ROS-LEHTINEN <i>R-FL 27th District</i>	Our family was able to migrate directly from Cuba to the United States.

## WHY DID THEY COME HERE?

<p>ADAM SCHIFF <i>D-CA 28th District</i></p>	<p>It was a combination of factors including avoiding conscription in the Czar's army, pogroms, and to seek a better life.</p>
<p>JAN SCHAKOWSKY <i>D-IL 9th District</i></p>	<p>Life was very tough in Eastern Europe. They lived outside the major cities in shtetls. One relative was killed on the porch of her house and there were no prosecutions for the perpetrators. They were not allowed to live as total citizens, so life was very tough. It's tough to know that you're not going to see your family after immigrating to the United States.</p>
<p>DEBBIE WASSERMAN SCHULTZ <i>D-FL 23rd District</i></p>	<p>Eastern Europe was by no means a hospitable place to be Jewish in the first half of the 20th century, with numerous forms of institutionalized prejudice. The persecution of Jews by other citizens was not just tolerated but even encouraged. In Russia, there were pogroms: outrageous bursts of mob violence against Jewish people, their homes and their businesses, all sanctioned by a police force that neither investigated nor prosecuted these crimes. Like so many Eastern European Jewish families who came here, my family desperately needed a haven and immigrated to the United States.</p> <p>An example of this was my Polish grandfather was serving in the Polish Army in 1918 and was slapped in the face for being Jewish, and that was the last straw; he decided to go to America.</p>
<p>JERRY NADLER <i>D-NY 10th District</i></p>	<p>They came for the same reasons as others – seeking freedom from persecution, and hope for work and a better life for themselves and their families.</p>
<p>ILEANA ROS-LEHTINEN <i>R-FL 27th District</i></p>	<p>In 1959, when the communist regime took over Cuba, my parents knew they had to seek freedom and democracy. It was due to my parents' vision and sacrifice that my brother and I were awarded all the rewards of living in a free and democratic country.</p>

## DID YOUR FAMILY COME ALL AT ONCE OR DID SOMEONE COME FIRST?

<p>ADAM SCHIFF <i>D-CA 28th District</i></p>	<p>I'm not quite sure about my mother's side of the family, but on my father's side, the older siblings of my grandfather came to the United States first.</p>
<p>JAN SCHAKOWSKY <i>D-IL 9th District</i></p>	<p>My grandparents, two of them were born in the United States. I'm not sure in terms of my father's family immigration; there are tons of questions I would love to ask now.</p>
<p>DEBBIE WASSERMAN SCHULTZ <i>D-FL 23rd District</i></p>	<p>Different members of my family came to the United States a few years apart in the first quarter of the 1900's.</p> <p>My paternal great-grandfather came ahead of his wife and daughters to get established for a year or two before they came over.</p> <p>My maternal grandfather left Poland as a young, unmarried man, following his dad, my great grandfather, who had immigrated before him.</p>
<p>JERRY NADLER <i>D-NY 10th District</i></p>	<p>My grandparents all immigrated separately, and met here.</p>
<p>ILEANA ROS-LEHTINEN <i>R-FL 27th District</i></p>	<p>We were fortunate, and our immediate family (parents, brother and myself) were able to travel together to the United States. My father stayed behind in Cuba to continue the fight against communism, but he followed my mom, brother and me to the United States shortly after we arrived here.</p>

## DID THEY HAVE SOMEONE SPONSORING THEM IN THE UNITED STATES?

ADAM SCHIFF <i>D-CA 28th District</i>	My grandfather had 12 siblings, and I believe the eldest brother arrived first and sponsored his siblings.
JAN SCHAKOWSKY <i>D-IL 9th District</i>	The Salvation Army helped my mother and her family find a place to stay. I've always had a soft spot for Salvation Army for housing.
DEBBIE WASSERMAN SCHULTZ <i>D-FL 23rd District</i>	No.
JERRY NADLER <i>D-NY 10th District</i>	No, I don't think so.
ILEANA ROS-LEHTINEN <i>R-FL 27th District</i>	Escaping from Castro's totalitarian grip, we arrived in Miami, Florida, without a sponsor but with the help and support of a small community of exiles as well as many open-armed Americans, who welcomed our family to the land of the free.

## IF YOUR ANCESTORS WERE TRYING TO IMMIGRATE TODAY, DO YOU THINK THEY COULD?

ADAM SCHIFF <i>D-CA 28th District</i>	It might still be difficult to immigrate from Russia, Belarus and Lithuania, although for other reasons.  My family immigrated about 30 years prior to the Holocaust. Had they stayed, things would have been very different. In the areas where my family came from, Jews were completely wiped out.
JAN SCHAKOWSKY <i>D-IL 9th District</i>	I don't know. Today, under the current broken system, I think it would be very difficult for poor people--poor income-wise--to come to the United States and get permanent, legal status here. I think they'd have a very hard time getting here all together in the first place, and when they had tried to come to the United States, it's not easy to immigrate when you have no income. I deal with this all the time in my office as a congresswoman. The presumption when you apply for a visa is that you will stay, and that's the goal, but that's not actually the way it works.  There have been anti-immigration waves repeatedly throughout American history. There have been waves at every point, but I think for my family, it would have been harder to emigrate now.
DEBBIE WASSERMAN SCHULTZ <i>D-FL 23rd District</i>	My ancestors immigrated to this country in search of freedom and greater opportunities. I believe that those important principles are still alive today, and that is the reason why so many immigrants desire to come to this great nation. However, given today's strict immigration standards, I think it would be difficult for them to have the same success in immigrating to the United States today.
JERRY NADLER <i>D-NY 10th District</i>	If my own grandparents had waited 20 more years to immigrate, they probably would have been barred entry and, in all likelihood, killed in the Holocaust.
ILEANA ROS-LEHTINEN <i>R-FL 27th District</i>	Our immigration laws are not the same as they were in the 1960's when my family and I first arrived to the United States. We were very fortunate to be given the opportunity to find asylum and take advantage of the opportunities afforded by this great nation.

## HOW HAS YOUR FAMILY'S PERSONAL STORY AFFECTED YOUR PERSPECTIVE ON IMMIGRATION?

**ADAM SCHIFF**  
*D-CA 28th District* : My family's experience has certainly made me empathetic towards the struggles and dreams of other immigrants. We are all in search of a better life, and I believe that our history – as a nation that welcomes immigrants – must continue.

**JAN SCHAKOWSKY**  
*D-IL 9th District* : Well, I certainly tell my story and identify myself as a first generation American. Telling stories is very important. I am from very modest stock and I am a congresswoman; I have been very involved in comprehensive immigration reform for a very long time. I think it is time to change legislation so that the 11 million undocumented people can come out of the shadows.

: My grandfather lived at 2606 W Walton Street. He sold vegetables in the alleys of Humboldt Park behind their house. There were four children. My grandmother didn't work; she sewed their clothes and was a homemaker. All four children got an advanced education. My grandmother and grandfather were able to do just what they wanted which was to get a better life for themselves and their children. Those are the opportunities that I want for the immigrants today.

**DEBBIE WASSERMAN SCHULTZ**  
*D-FL 23rd District* : As was the case for my ancestors, people come to America today with hope for making better lives, and we should greet them with hope for the possibilities of what we can achieve together. At the same time, we will continue to strive for rational, workable immigration policies, which include policing the borders and stopping people from entering the country illegally. America's immigration policies must be informed by common sense and an abiding respect for the lives of those who seek to join our democracy.

**JERRY NADLER**  
*D-NY 10th District* : At Crown Heights Yeshiva, I was one of the few kids whose parents were not immigrants. I didn't understand the distinction at the time; it always felt normal and enriching to live among families who had recently come over from the Old Country. These were hardworking people who felt eternally grateful for the opportunity to build a better life for their kids and grandkids.

: I have felt a kinship with immigrants as far back as I can remember. Even in high school, I remember reading articles about the explicitly racist and anti-Semitic National Origins quota system and thinking that it should be abolished. Some say that that terrible law, which was finally repealed in 1965, prevented perhaps 2 million Jews from emigrating from Europe before the Holocaust. Perhaps 2 million lives could have been saved.

**ILEANA ROS-LEHTINEN**  
*R-FL 27th District* : As a political refugee, I have a unique perspective of the greatness of the United States. Where I was born is not just a place listed on my passport but it has defined how I view the world -- through our American principles of freedom and human rights. To me, reforming our nation's immigration laws has to be consistent with those principles. We are a nation of laws, and we are also a nation based on opportunity and fairness for all.

## ARE THERE SPECIFIC AREAS OF LEGISLATION THAT RESONATE FOR YOU AND YOUR FAMILY'S STORY?

<p>ADAM SCHIFF <i>D-CA 28th District</i></p>	<p>Comprehensive immigration reform as well as genocide legislation.</p>
<p>JAN SCHAKOWSKY <i>D-IL 9th District</i></p>	<p>The Senate bill says that legal immigrants can no longer petition for parents or adult siblings to come into the country. It tilts the immigration process to people with more skills which means a better education and probably more wealth. This does mean that people who are poor will have a hard time getting into the United States. However, I am optimistic that we're going to pass immigration reform.</p>
<p>DEBBIE WASSERMAN SCHULTZ <i>D-FL 23rd District</i></p>	<p>As the sons and daughters, grandkids or great grandkids of immigrants ourselves, we owe it to our ancestors to fix our nation's broken immigration system. We have a moral obligation to change a system where we tacitly accept the economic benefits of cheaper labor while turning our back on abuses of those workers. We cannot continue a system that deports those who've known no other home other than America. And we cannot ignore that immigration continues to help strengthen America when immigrants helped start companies such as Google, Yahoo and Apple.</p> <p>It is my sincere hope that Democrats and Republicans will come together to find a comprehensive solution to our nation's immigration problems. In a modern era, this is our way to pay tribute to our ancestors. Whether they migrated here on the Mayflower, through Ellis Island or El Paso, Texas, they all form the foundation for what has made this country great.</p>
<p>JERRY NADLER <i>D-NY 10th District</i></p>	<p>The fundamental takeaway on immigration reform legislation should be – how do we treat people, our fellow human beings? Do we respect the unity of families (including LGBT families)? Do we treat immigrants like criminals and put them into detention centers? Do we punish innocent kids who are thoroughly American but happened to be born in another nation? And, do we recognize our own immigrant heritage while we look upon the newest newcomers around us? These are some of the questions we need to grapple with as a nation.</p>
<p>ILEANA ROS-LEHTINEN <i>R-FL 27th District</i></p>	<p>I came to the United States when I was 8 years old. As a child, I found a safe haven in this country. It is my desire that every immigrant child finds the same comfort I did in this great nation. For many years, I have been a staunch supporter of the DREAM Act, which will allow many bright, talented and patriotic young men and women the opportunity to continue their education or service in our proud military and become citizens of the United States.</p>

## HOW SHOULD PERSONAL NARRATIVES PLAY A ROLE IN THE IMMIGRATION DEBATE?

<p>ADAM SCHIFF <i>D-CA 28th District</i></p>	<p>Personal narratives help inform the debate and provide a human face on these critical issues.</p>
<p>JAN SCHAKOWSKY <i>D-IL 9th District</i></p>	<p>I spend a lot of my time going to different festivals where different communities celebrate their cultures. I think it's better to celebrate their diversity instead of trying to homogenize. There is a story from someone in my district whose name was Geraldo and one day he came home and told his parents that the teacher said that his name is now Gerald and he was upset about that. I think that probably it was viewed as okay to do that at one point, like when my parents immigrated, but not today.</p>
<p>DEBBIE WASSERMAN SCHULTZ <i>D-FL 23rd District</i></p>	<p>Whether you are a first or a fifth generation American or Native American, you have family members and friends who immigrated to this country. I believe that as a nation, we lose sight of this fact, or that the national debate is sometimes colored by racial undertones that immigrants from certain parts of the globe are more desirable than others. We need to tell our own stories to help remind people of their family's immigrant history, many of whom followed the American dream of freedom, prosperity and a chance to better their family's future.</p>
<p>JERRY NADLER <i>D-NY 10th District</i></p>	<p>We are – and always have been – a nation of immigrants, and this has always been a phenomenal asset, not a burden.</p>
<p>ILEANA ROS-LEHTINEN <i>R-FL 27th District</i></p>	<p>Immigrants are as important to America's future as they were at America's founding. Immigrants can create jobs and contribute to our economy.</p> <p>Like me, immigrants living in our country today were not born in the United States but have a great love and appreciation for our country and its principles of freedom and democracy. We want to welcome people who pledge allegiance to America, who will make this country stronger.</p>





**JEWISH  
SOCIAL  
JUSTICE**  
ROUNDTABLE

---

202 263 4544 | 1825 K STREET, NW SUITE 210 | WASHINGTON, DC 20006

[JEWISHSOCIALJUSTICE.ORG](http://JEWISHSOCIALJUSTICE.ORG)

[@JSJ\\_ROUNDTABLE](https://twitter.com/JSJ_ROUNDTABLE)