

Disability History Association Podcast

Interview with Hannah Zaves-Greene

August 2022

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Caroline Lieffers: Hello, and welcome to another episode of the Disability History Association Podcast. I'm Caroline Lieffers and today it's my pleasure to be in conversation with Hannah Zaves-Greene. Hannah is a recent PhD graduate from New York University with a dissertation entitled "Able to Be American: American Jews and the Public Charge Provision in United States Immigration Policy, 1891-1934." Hannah, thank you so much for joining the podcast today.

Hannah Zaves-Greene: Thank you, Caroline.

Caroline: Well, congratulations, first of all, on finishing your PhD. That is huge. Can you just tell us a little bit about kind of your journey to becoming a scholar who works at the intersection of American, Jewish, and disability history?

Hannah: Sure, so I was already going for my doctorate in American Jewish history when the 2016 election happened, and I threw myself into political activism, particularly surrounding the Affordable Care Act and reproductive justice. And, at that point, my interest really shifted to healthcare policy both historically and in the present.

So, I began working on Lillian Wald, the founder of public health nursing and that was where I thought I was going with my project. Additionally, I'm also very interested in the idea of citizen as a verb rather than simply as a noun. As I saw more people take an active interest in the laws governing them during the Trump administration: going to protest, writing, and calling their senators and Congress people, and the like, they were enacting their citizenship in a way that, in my lifetime, I've never seen before. So, all three of these ideas merged together as I wanted to learn about how American Jews engaged politically and legally with questions of health and disability. How did they strive to take control of the narrative, how did they work to influence the laws governing them?

Then, as I was reading for my comprehensive exams, I encountered Douglas Bayton's book *Defectives in the Land*, which I wholeheartedly recommend. It's one of my favorite books ever. And that brought the issue of public charge to my attention. And that presented an ideal law for me to research because it embodied what I see as the American nationalist project of selecting and restricting the population according to ideas about and perceptions of illness and disability. So basically, if you were disabled or ill (according to a very broad set of criteria) you wouldn't know place in the United States. So, I wanted to know how American Jews engaged with public charge and the questions it sparks of who's in, who's out, and who gets to decide. Did they think that certain types of illness and disability were fundamentally preclusive of citizenship, or did they think that disability had no bearing on citizenship? How did they view illness and disability? And what do the American mainstream and American Jewish conceptions of illness and disability reveal about their respective philosophies of citizenship and the qualities of a citizen?

Caroline: Thank you so much, Hannah, for that answer. Tell me a little bit more about finding the appropriate archives for this, because your questions are fantastic and they're really fundamental to the history of a particular moment in time. But of course, as

historians, we have to then figure out where do we go looking for these answers. So, tell us a little bit about that journey.

Hannah: Sure, so initially I was looking more broadly at how American Jewish women fostered their own projects of citizenship by studying how they engage with immigration restriction and disability. And, as I was doing so, and I was looking up all of the keywords and code words having to do with disability— because of course archives are not organized according to disability, which makes it a real scavenger hunt to find the information I was looking for— I encountered public charge, which I had learned about from Douglas Baynton. And public charge functions as an ideal nexus of all of my questions. So, I shifted from looking at specifically American Jewish women to looking at how American Jews engaged with public charge. How did they marshal their limited resources to combat this restrictive immigration law?

And the notion of becoming a public charge also has particular resonance in American Jewish history because when American Jews, or when Jews, first landed in new Amsterdam in 1654, Peter Stuyvesant was like, “okay, you can stay, but only if you don't become public charges, if you don't make any use of public funds.” And the Jews were like, “Okay sure we'll do that.” And, and ever since then, one of the arguments they return to again, and again, and again in the materials that I found is that they said— erroneously but this is what the Community says to itself and to the broader public— no Jew has ever been a public charge in America, because we take care of our own. We have our own philanthropy, we have our own institutions, and so we have continued to uphold our end of the bargain. So public charge is irrelevant; it really doesn't apply to Jews at all. Nor should it because we have the resources to take care of them. So, American Jews really took pride in this fact. Additionally, they insisted that public charge didn't apply to Jewish immigrants, because Jewish immigrants were fundamentally able bodied, as they argued.

Archives, of course, did present a challenge because, as I said, they're rarely organized with attention to disability, which itself points to an endemic problem in the research and writing of history, and the silencing of individuals with and the experience of disability. So basically, what I did was use the major repositories of American Jewish history. But, as I mentioned, I had to search for keywords and references to illness and disability throughout the wide swath of papers and, as I did so, I found out that the story was right there in the open, but because of the lack of attention to disability, it was still waiting to be told.

Caroline: I was really fortunate to be able to read a chapter of your dissertation. A chapter that centers on the work of a Jewish American attorney named Max Kohler. Can you tell us a little bit more about Kohler? And, if you want, perhaps you can add your journey to discovering this particular archive.

Hannah: Sure. Kohler was especially exciting archivally because he has an entire folder in his collection devoted to public charge, so I was like “Yes, jackpot! This is amazing!” So, Max Kohler, he was a child of Central European Jewish immigrants. He was the son of Kaufmann Kohler and the grandson of David Einhorn. And they're known as the father of American reform Judaism. So, from his childhood, Kohler's growing up in a very elite American Jewish circle. He grew up in New York City surrounded by Jewish communal notables who represented various fields: religiously, secularly, and the like. He attended Columbia School of Law in order to become an attorney, and at the age of 23, in 1894, he began as Assistant US Attorney for the Southern District of New York.

So, while he's the Assistant US Attorney, he works on numerous immigration cases, especially Chinese exclusion, and public charged cases. And his work, especially on cases of

Asians faced with exclusion and deportation, leads him to pursue very extensive pro bono work as an immigration lawyer alongside other notable American Jewish attorneys like Abram Elkus and Louis Marshall, which may be names the audience is familiar with. Simultaneously, he's also occupying a leadership position in a variety of major American Jewish organizations, including one called the Baron de Hirsch Fund, which made decisions about which projects and organizations to support. So, he's playing a critical role not only in helping immigrants, but in deciding how to allocate the funds of the Jewish community to help immigrants.

Simultaneously, and this is especially exciting to me, he was also a historian and a co-founder of the American Jewish historical society in 1892. And his scholarship and his legal work— they each have their own tracks, of course— but they also interconnect and mutually reinforce one another. So, both his Jewishness and his Americanness, at the end of the day, are very important to him. And he saw them as working in tandem, not at odds with each other.

So, a driving factor throughout his life is his interest in questions of justice and the rights of individuals. And in his work and in his scholarship, he continually sought to hold the United States to what he perceived as its founding ideals of equality and liberty. So, he's very animated and motivated by these questions of justice, of equality, and liberty, and the responsibility to extend them to all people.

Caroline: Well, what a fascinating figure. This question of intersecting identities and also these questions of intersecting theories of justice and citizenship are of great interest, and I think we're going to keep exploring these throughout our conversation. But in the meantime, I want to mention that when I was reading this chapter, one of the things I really appreciated was how it gives a lot more precision to the way that these disability clauses in US immigration legislation were working to exclude not just people with disabilities but also certain racialized or ethnic groups and, namely, of course, in your dissertation that's the Jewish community. So, can you just talk us through some of the history here like what is this legislation saying and how is the Jewish community being targeted by this?

Hannah: Sure. So, importantly, as you mentioned, public charge didn't target any single national or ethnic group. It rested largely in popular eugenic ideas that stated certain races, or nationalities, or ethnicities were predisposed to certain, so-called, defects which officials could diagnose based on physical appearance. For Jews, two of the major ones that came up time and time again were poor physique and insanity. Trachoma and favus are also major ones.

Coincidentally, or not so coincidentally, the undesirable so-called races, such as those from Southern and Eastern Europe or other races, also happened to have a predisposition to specific defects. So, race and defects are intimately intertwined, and certain races were allegedly more prone to certain defects than others. Critically, individuals from certain races might carry defective traits in what officials called their germplasm, meaning that they would pass it on to the next generation.

And they would pass it on more strongly, resulting in the proliferation of defects. So public charge was premised, in part, on the federal government's desire to curate the American population. By selecting and restricting who could and could not enter the country. So even if an individual immigrant didn't have a defect, their race or nationality might suggest to an immigration official that they could develop one or result in more intensive medical surveillance upon arrival.

So, the law first comes into being in 1882 and it becomes increasingly strict until we finally reached the version in 1917 which has a very extensive list of exclusionary conditions, and it also extends the statute of limitations, during which an immigrant is still liable to deportation to five years.

Additionally, I'd like to share a quote from F.P. Sargent the Commissioner General of the Bureau of immigration in the 20th century. So F.P. Sargent said: "Of all causes for rejection outside of dangerous, loathsome, or contagious diseases, or for mental disease, that of 'poor physique' most often applied to Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, should receive the most weight." So, since these defects were considered to be hereditary and to worsen with each generation, admitting defective immigrants, according to this theory, would permanently damage American stock.

Caroline: Wow, talk about a smoking gun. I'm really grateful for this work, Hannah, because whenever I teach this particular element of US history, I'm always a bit, kind of, stymied by the slipperiness of it all, you know, and I think Max Kohler struggles with a lot of the same questions that historians and students of this do, which is, how did they actually define public charge or defective? Who's responsible for making these sorts of decisions? Is this actually being communicated to the immigration officials or are they just bringing in their own prejudices, right? Is it kind of working, you know, subconsciously or under the table? Do we have smoking guns that prove how certain communities were targeted by these, you know? Do we have the numbers to actually demonstrate it, right? And it's always a very challenging thing to try to pin down. Perhaps that was almost by design. But you found some really interesting stuff in Kohler's writings and correspondence, so can you talk us through some of that?

Hannah: Absolutely. I also want to talk a little bit more about public charge if that's okay to explain some of the terms that I'll be referring to throughout the rest of the podcast. Public charge itself referred to individuals who became dependent on taxpayers' dollars—which could either be through monetary aid or through recourse to a public institution like a hospital. So, it's effectively the pathologization of poverty and commodification of health. And defective here, which is another term I've already used and will continue to use, served as a catch-all term rooted in eugenics to mean illness, disability, neurodivergence, and so forth. Critically, as I mentioned before, disabilities or defects were permanent and biological. Parents will genetically transmit them to their children, according to this theory.

So, who got to define what constitutes a defect is a major question in my work and was also critical to Kohler himself. He complains about what he termed the elasticity of public charge— It's open endedness and the discretion is afforded to immigration officials. So theoretically speaking, Congress defines who is defective through the list of excludable conditions included in public charge, which were things like idiocy, imbecility, epilepsy, loathsome or dangerous contagious diseases, feeble-mindedness, and so forth. Practically speaking, while Congress came up with these lists of conditions, immigration officials are really the ones enforcing it on the ground, and they have tremendous discretion to interpret the law as they saw fit. Kohler did not take issue with the law itself as his papers revealed. Instead, he contended that immigration officials needed to enforce it, justly. The problem lay with the open endedness of the law and the discretion it afforded to immigration officials enforcing it.

So, Kohler approved of immigration regulation rather than immigration restriction. And he was fairly representative of American Jewish communal notables who argued, as I mentioned, that Jewish immigrants were able bodied and less public charge was irrelevant

to them. So even if they were poor, which was the other primary reason for exclusion, that was a temporary condition they said, and the Jewish community would take care of them so they shouldn't count as public charges either.

Caroline: One of the things that seems to be kind of haunting your work is, you know, as you just articulated with Kohler, he didn't necessarily object to the law as it was written and this idea that no Jew has ever become a public charge, right. It almost suggests that the Jewish community shared in some of the same ableist prejudices that much of the rest of American society would have had in this moment. And yet, you also mentioned the kind of voluntary or tight community that perhaps created a safety net that might not have been there for other members of the society. So, I think the question I'm really interested in is to what extent is the Jewish community also like I said carrying that same ableism but to what extent is it perhaps manifesting differently in them, compared to the rest of the society? Does that kind of make sense?

Hannah: It does, and that's a question I wrestled with quite a bit because, of course, I wanted to see that the Jews I studied did not hold ableist ideas. But they were products of their times and at that moment in time it wasn't really a question as to whether people with disabilities would be burdens on society. The difference primarily lay on the fact that the Jewish community, to the extent we can speak of a monolithic Jewish community, was much more willing to provide accommodations and treatments, and claim that even if somebody has whatever kind of defect, even if somebody has a limp, they can still do xyz profession. They can still work in a factory doing sewing or something like that. And so, they had a more broad idea of what constituted a burden. They did not argue that disability automatically made one a burden. Rather they looked at type of disability and they also looked at, first and foremost, what treatments and accommodations can we provide so that people can be useful members of society, which itself is ableist: the idea that to be a useful member of society, you need to either not have a disability or your disability has to be cured.

So, all of which is to say, it's hard to know the extent to which Jewish notables toe the line with regards to the law because they couldn't stick their necks out too much or else, they wouldn't accomplish any of their aims. So, they very intentionally never argue to repeal the law. At the same time, they have no power to do so since they're a minority, and so they really couldn't have repealed the law even if they tried. So that wasn't even on the table which doesn't exactly answer the question of what they thought. Their public facing presentation was that we don't take issue with the law, in fact, we support the law. The law makes sense. It just doesn't apply to Jews.

Caroline: What an interesting answer. Thank you, Hannah. I really appreciate the level of nuance and subtlety that you're bringing to the analysis. I was fascinated when I was reading your chapter about the advocacy work. And, especially since, as you note, you know, some members of the Jewish community in New York weren't necessarily eager to see more Jews coming to the United States. This was sometimes a kind of debated issue. And so, I'm really curious about the role that people like Kohler played in challenging or circumventing the legislation. Was that kind of a risky move to be taking? Did other members of the Jewish community disagree with that? And how did he even do this at all? So, talk us through that.

Hannah: Sure, so Kohler and his compatriots challenged the law through the courts, primarily. They argued for a more lenient interpretation of the law. And Kohler in particular emphasized the importance of due process and judicial review and that wherever it was in question, the law should be construed in favor of immigrants' liberty. He also accentuated,

and he shares this in common with his other contemporaries, the need for clear guidelines and parameters for immigration officials to follow alongside governmental supervision to ensure that immigrants received fair treatment and immigration officials didn't turn Ellis Island effectively into a mini despotic kingdom, as sometimes they did. He was one of several kinds of advocates who challenged or sought to circumvent the law. Other ways that Jews sought to do so was via education or social action, political lobbying, and the press. For instance, another one of my subjects Cecilia Razovsky wrote a pamphlet called "What Every Emigrant Should Know" which informed prospective immigrants about how to maneuver around public charge or honestly to stay home entirely if they couldn't pass the legal restrictions.

Caroline: Were there any particular cases that you thought were significant when you're going through these records? Just anything to kind of help illustrate the ways that this legislation could be challenged or circumvented.

Hannah: Sure, so one case, in particular, is that of Blume Shapiro who's a young teenage girl who was diagnosed as insane a couple of years after arrival. She was institutionalized in Manhattan State Hospital, where she was, among other things, force fed with a tube. She was declared a public charge, even though her parents had agreed to pay for her maintenance, and she received a positive prognosis from the doctor. Additionally, her diagnosis as insane was questionable to begin with because she had no history of insanity and it occurred after she accidentally dropped her baby sister and was naturally upset. So, she's hospitalized. She's declared a public charge. Her parents agree to pay for her maintenance. Meanwhile the New York State Commission in Lunacy refuses to accept payment from Blume's parents or a bond from the secretary of commerce and labor, Oscar Strauss, with whom they come to loggerheads previously. Instead, once again, they got into an argument with Strauss about who got to enforce public charge and who held responsibility for doing so. And they claimed, well, deportation proceedings are too far advanced for them to accept any money for Blume's care— basically demanding special treatment for New York State. And they insisted repeatedly on favoring citizens over immigrants for care and public institutions. So, Kohler comes in, because the other advocates who were trying to take a more social action type process to get Blume out were unsuccessful. And Kohler goes directly to the governor, and he writes to the governor saying he is sure that the Commission wanted to obey the law. They just probably didn't really know what the law was, so they need clarification as to what the law meant so could the governor please confirm that Kohler's understanding of the law is, in fact, correct and impart that to the Commission in Lunacy so that Blume can stay and is not a public charge. And Kohler succeeds in enabling Blume to remain with her family.

Another case that particularly stood out is that of Pauline Fink because of the profound injustice it represented and because it represented how much leeway a given regime of immigration control possessed over immigrants. So, like Blume, Pauline's a young girl. She's in her early teens and she is diagnosed as feeble-minded on arrival in Ellis Island, when, in fact, she was deaf and mute because of typhus. So, the diagnosis, in the first place, was mistaken. I was tickled by the fact that the diagnosing doctors were Dr Slaughter and Dr Wildman. So, Pauline undergoes numerous rehearings but did not get a fair one because Dr Wildman keeps presiding over the different hearings. And he had originally misdiagnosed her by using an inapplicable test because, naturally, she couldn't hear the questions because she was deaf. And she couldn't respond to them because she was mute. And so instead of being diagnosed as deaf mute this doctor diagnosed her as feeble-minded.

So, Kohler argues that she's not a public charge because the deportation decision is based on this erroneous diagnosis of feeble-mindedness. So, he marshals medical specialists, teachers, Pauline's school principal, organizational leaders to prove that not only was Pauline not feeble-minded, she made exemplary progress in school. So, finally, after a very rigorous rigmarole at Ellis Island, Pauline has a medical rehearing in Washington, which vacates the question of feeble-mindedness—legally superseding the Ellis Island decisions. But then Ellis Island authorities decided to take matters into their own hands, even more so. They go ahead and slander the witnesses and they ignore the mandate from Washington that they rectify and explain their error and slowly consider Pauline's deaf mutism in regard to the public charge question. So, Kohler successfully brought the case ultimately up to the Supreme Court which admitted the original error and ultimately ruled that Pauline could remain in the country, thanks to Kohler's intervention.

Caroline: Those are really, really interesting examples. Is it right to say that Kohler was animated by legal principles, as well as, of course, by his fidelity to the Jewish community? Are those two things even—can they even be separated from one another? I'm just really interested to hear you kind of parse this out a bit, the different factors that informed his theories of justice and citizenship.

Hannah: Absolutely. So, Kohler viewed his Jewishness and his pursuit of justice as two sides of the same coin. It was vitally important to him that the United States adhere to its promises of democracy, liberty, and equality, and he was very motivated to ensure that immigration officials follow the law as written rather than take it into their own hands. So no, I don't think that one can separate out those two things. Because Jewishness was intimately intertwined with his approach to his legal work and his fidelity to the Jewish community, as you say.

Caroline: You also mentioned before, this idea of citizen as a verb. You mentioned that very early on in the conversation, and the way that Kohler himself had his really powerful ideas of what citizenship is. And I wonder to what extent that really manifests, not only in his own advocacy work, but perhaps also in what he expected from other members of his community. Right, we've been talking a lot about Kohler as almost kind of like the hero of the story, but I wonder if he really felt like this was something that all members of the Jewish American Community were sort of responsible for taking on together. I'd just love to hear you talk about that.

Hannah: Sure, I didn't get that sense from Kohler. He worked with a group of lawyers, so he wasn't working on his own. That said, I certainly did portray him as the hero of the story, in part because, personally speaking, I think he was even though I'm probably not supposed to say that. That said, no I don't think that he had particular views about what other Jews should and should not be doing. He was more focused on what he could do in his capacity as a lawyer, as an organizational leader, as a historian, and working with his colleagues to ensure that as many immigrants could receive justice as possible.

Caroline: Well, that's certainly admirable enough. This actually gets to my next question, which is that one of the things I found really interesting about your chapter is the way that someone like Kohler could be critical of the way US policy was being enforced without being anti-American, right. He's very, you know, rooted in what it means to be American. In fact, that animates him toward a certain kind of fight for justice. And I'm wondering if I can get a little bit more personal, did this resonate with you? And I say that because when I was reading your chapter you described Ellis Island, for example, not just as a gateway to freedom, but as a "perilous morass for immigrants, hoping to obtain entry into the country." And this is a re-writing of an American national mythology in many ways. And I

thought about this as perhaps a similar example of being critical of United States history, without being anti-American. So, can you just talk us through your approach to history more generally, right?

Hannah: Sure absolutely. I'm a strong believer that if we don't challenge our national mythologies, not only will we have an inaccurate understanding of our past and the harm that we have caused, we won't be able to confront continued inequities in the present that derive from past ones.

So, Kohler aspired for the United States to live up to its founding ideals of liberty and equality, which we have never successfully done, and we must reckon with that, but it shouldn't stop us from trying to do better. These mythologies that we hold, they're comforting, but by accepting them as fact we're living in an illusory world. I would point to the idea of American exceptionalism as a primary one. The United States, in reality, was hardly a welcoming place for immigrants and certainly not for people with disabilities by the late 19th century. Restrictive immigration law proliferates following the 1875 Page Act which targets Chinese women. Being of certain national origins, such as Chinese, functioned as a fundamentally disabling category. And the law gradually restricts more and more people. So instead of this image of America as a nation of open doors until the 1924 National Origins Act, really, the doors are inching shut gradually from 1875 onwards. By the early 20th century, the United States is recognized by multiple European countries as the world leader in racist legislation. Immigration officials, generally speaking, looked for reasons to exclude people, not welcome them. Immigrants have to pass through a rigorous examination to be permitted to enter in the first place, and even after entry, they can still be deported as a public charge by 1917 for up to five years. If immigrants left the country even briefly during that time, the clock begins all over again. So, it's critical, with all of this in mind, to take responsibility for past wrongs and examine how they continue to impact the present.

Caroline: I think that's very well put. Can you talk a little bit more about the ways that your historical work— Perhaps you feel that it has some resonance today? You started by saying that you were kind of inspired by the present, right to turn to these questions in the past, so do you see strong parallels here between past and present? And I know that you wrote a little bit about this in a piece for *AJS Perspectives*. So, everyone should obviously go and read that too, but please just tell us more about what you see as some of the parallels or resonances between past and present here?

Hannah: I wish the parallels are not quite so striking as they are. So, public charge, as I mentioned, was premised on the fundamental idea that certain people represented a burden on society and therefore had no place in it, especially people with certain disabilities, and medical conditions, and poor people. We still treat these people as drains on society today. Public charge still exists. During the Trump administration, the extension of the law denied green cards and visas to immigrants who use or were considered likely to use various aid programs, including Medicaid. There's a quote that happily summarizes this that I want to share. In 2019 Ken Cuccinelli, who is the acting director of the US citizenship and immigration services explicitly said, "give me your tired and your poor who can stand on their own two feet and who will not become a public charge." While many were horrified by this, it's not new. It replicates the consistent US attitude towards immigrants and towards people with disabilities. Even Kohler himself said something similar. Critically, my subjects never took issue with the law. Fundamentally, I don't think that they liked it, but they didn't push for appeal, they didn't combat the law's basic existence. The response instead was to claim non disabledness rather than questioning the justice of the law and its

assumption that disabled people would be burdens on society. I'd additionally point to Ronald Reagan's AIDS ban that wasn't lifted until Obama's presidency.

And finally, I would reference the health care debate, which I mentioned at the beginning of the podcast. And my question is, how can we hope to pass universal health care, while we, as a nation, still operate on the fundamental premise that ill and disabled people represent burdens, who have no place in the United States, to begin with?

Caroline: These are all really important questions, and I really appreciate what you're saying about how history can kind of sharpen our perspective on these in the present and recognize the ways that these are ongoing, foundational problems with the United States. Just in case it seems like we're perhaps being too hard on the United States, I can also mention that Canada actually has similar clauses in its immigration legislation. In 2018 they did make some changes to the threshold dollar amount considered to be an excessive burden on the Canadian health care system or on Canadian society. And they also made some changes to what services would count toward that dollar amount. But that doesn't necessarily change the foundational problem right, which is seeing people with disabilities as not being valuable members of society, people who can contribute to the Canadian mosaic, if you will. So yeah, I mean, these are not just American problems. I'll just put that out there for our audience that these are ongoing questions about ableism that permeate many societies.

Hannah: And I don't think that, personally, we're being too hard on the United States. The more you love something, the harder you are on it, because the more you want it to be perfect. We're still striving for that more perfect union, and in doing so, we have to be hard on ourselves because that's the only way we can improve.

Caroline: Yeah, I think that's absolutely right. I actually want to ask you a question that has kind of been on my mind, and I think we have time for it, which is, I only got to read one chapter of your dissertation. [Laughs] And it was a great chapter. Thank you for letting me read it, but I'm curious about where, you know, this chapter, which I read that focuses on Max Kohler, fits into the bigger picture. Like what else is in your dissertation that you would like to share with us.

Hannah: Sure, so I look at two primary case studies of people who engaged with public charge. Cecilia Razovsky who I mentioned and Max Kohler. Cecilia Razovsky occupies a leadership role in the National Council of Jewish Women's department of immigrants' aid, while Kohler is an immigration attorney, but he's an attorney who works on immigration cases pro bono. I situated Razovsky and Kohler in the broader landscape, firstly, of American immigration law and public charge, and secondly, in the narrower American Jewish landscape of engaging with public charge. So, each of these people reveals different ways that American Jews in leadership roles responded to the law. So, for Razovsky it's more through education, social action, things like that. Whereas, for Kohler, it's through the courts, through immigration boards, and that kind of approach. So that I would say, in a nutshell, is the fundamental structure of my dissertation.

Caroline: That's great, I'm really looking forward to reading the whole thing.

Hannah: Thank you

Caroline: Yeah. Now you also mentioned that when you started your PhD you were thinking you were going to work largely on Lillian Wald. And that's probably a familiar name for a lot of our audience members because she's sort of a well-known progressive era

reformer and whatnot, but can you just say a little bit more about who she was and, in particular, what you had to say about her.

Hannah: Sure. So, Lillian Wald was an American Jewish woman. Although she identified more with universalist ideas and actually refused to be in a book on Jewish women in America, because she didn't want to identify as such. So, she has a strong relationship with the established Jewish community, particularly in terms of funding and also friendships, but she herself remained ambivalent about her Jewishness. Rather than pursuing the normative course for a middle-class woman of home and marriage: the domestic, she opted to become a nurse, viewing it as an extension of women's nurture and care within the home. She never married, but she had intimate same sex relationships. She is the founder of public health nursing and the founder of the Henry Street settlement house in the lower East side of Manhattan, which still stands today. Critically, Wald wanted to live among her clientele as a friend and a neighbor. So, she didn't want a top-down approach, she wanted a much more horizontal approach to health care. She felt that all people regardless of their class and their income should have access to good quality and comprehensive health care. Through her nursing service, Wald sought to provide private hospital level care with hospital level efficiency to patients outside of the hospital, whether because they couldn't afford to go to a private hospital, or they didn't want to go to a public hospital, or for whatever other reason. She had a bevy of highly trained and specialized nurses and she also operated, and this I particularly found interesting, on a sliding scale fee which enabled her clients to have the dignity of paying for their treatment, but at an affordable level for their income. She believed in treating the whole patient physically and psychologically. So, for instance, in addition to medical care, she also had a theater and musical time for children. She worked in a variety of social causes as well, like advocating for the legality of birth control, clean milk stations to prevent the spread of tuberculosis, she was one of the founders of the NAACP She supported socialism.

As regard to birth control, she was ambivalent about whether it should be generally available, but she didn't believe that married women should have access to it to control their families and for the sake of their health. And she did support Margaret Sanger's birth control movement as well, although she wasn't on the front lines. In fact, Margaret Sanger who may be another familiar name got her start and had her Epiphany in a story that is probably apocryphal while working for a Wald in her visiting nurse service.

Caroline: I want to pivot a little bit here and ask a bit about your experiences with conferences. So, you— congratulations, by the way— you won this spring's Disability History Association's conference award. And we encourage our audience Members who might be going to conferences and need a bit of funding to also apply for this award. This allowed you to travel to New Orleans for the American Jewish Historical Society meeting. So, I'm really curious about, you know, how that went. What did you do with the conference and what was your experience, in particular, of bringing a disability lens to the field of Jewish history like? Is this a new thing? Talk us through that.

Hannah: Yeah, so it is a new thing, especially in American Jewish history. So, the theme of the conference was building bridges. So, I'll talk a little bit about what I presented on. I presented on another case I explore in my dissertation, that of Esther Kaplan. Also, a teenage girl. Also, diagnosed as feebleminded. And she's subjected to illegal medical examinations and threatened with imminent deportation over the course of 11 years. Even though during that time she had become a citizen thanks to her father's naturalization, and, for that matter, she exceeded the statute of limitation for deportation. And her diagnosis was questionable in the first case, as in the cases I viewed was often the reality. So, another American Jewish attorney, Louis Marshall, whom I mentioned briefly,

represented her all the way up to the Supreme Court. And he argued that since Esther was a citizen, as she lived with her father at the time of his naturalization, she couldn't be deported as a public charge. And the argument from the Ellis Island authorities that she had never actually entered the country because of her certification of feeble-mindedness was, in fact, ludicrous.

So, he succeeded in overturning her deportation order and enabling her to remain with our family in the United States. The paper was, I think, I hope, well received. And I found that it was illuminating to apply disability to Jewish history, because not only does it broaden the narrative and make it more accurate, it provides nuance and it incorporates marginalized or even silenced voices and experiences. By looking at disability and how it literally disabled people from becoming American citizens and how American Jews responded to it, I could explore their philosophies of citizenship, and national belonging, and their attitudes toward disability. And the fact that they emphasize the able-bodiedness of Jewish immigrants as such, takes on a much deeper meaning. Jewish immigrants, they argued, would be productive Americans who would contribute to the country and not depend on public welfare. And by looking at disability in the context of American Jewish history, I began to question the standard periodization of American immigration history.

Right now, the dominant narrative dates the turning point in American Jewish history to 1924 with the National Origins Act. I would argue it's 1917 with the 1917 Immigration Act, which dramatically expanded the list of excluded classes under public charge. Individuals at the time recognized it as a real step forward in immigration restriction and they also recognized it as the precedent for the later national origins-based exclusions. Additionally, public charge continues to be a primary reason to exclude immigrants later on, and I don't think that it's received enough attention. For instance, in 1930, President Hoover ordered his consuls overseas to implement public charge much more rigorously to prevent more people from entering the country. And then later on, during the Hitler years, public charge functions as the primary reason more German Jews aren't able to get into the country, because the quotas for that time never filled. And so, this is why more Jews from Germany were not able to enter. So, without considering disability and thus noticing the significance and influence of the law, the 1917 immigration act wouldn't seem to be as major in American history as it was and as contemporaries recognized it to be.

Caroline: That is really, really interesting, Hannah. One of the things that I so appreciate about what you're saying is that, I think, disability history as a field is in a really exciting place right now, and actually has been, arguably, for the last 20 years or so. We're obviously deeply devoted to restoring the stories and lives of people with disabilities in the past and honoring them, and recognizing them and their contributions, and the exploitation or discrimination they faced. And at the same time, we're also pursuing a deep intellectual project of looking at what disability even is as a concept. And in so doing, we are using disability as a kind of analytic that can help us see other aspects of history more clearly. And so, I really appreciate everything that you've said in your answer because it's sort of validating the many different ways that one can approach disability history and the richness that can inhere there.

My last question for you Hannah is what's coming up next for you? So, you're done with your PhD— again massive congratulations. What are you up to now?

Hannah: Yeah, sure, so, working on my book project— turning my dissertation into a book. I will be, starting in the fall, a visiting professor at Sarah Lawrence college, so that's very exciting. I'll be teaching Jewish studies. Additionally, I have some conference presentations lined up. One at the American society for legal history, another at the

Association for Jewish studies. And I'm also working on some articles that deal with the issue of health and disability in Jewish history. Simultaneously I'm pursuing research into Max Kohler's private life and legal work, and the relationship between those two parts of his existence.

Caroline: Oh, that all sounds wonderful, Hannah. I'm just looking forward to reading all the things that you're going to be publishing in the next few years. And congratulations on the visiting assistant professor position at Sarah Lawrence, that's excellent. Am I correct that that's where you did your undergrad? Is that right?

Hannah: I did, so I was there as an undergrad and I'm returning as a visiting professor and it's very full circle.

Caroline: Absolutely. Well, I hope you have a really wonderful time there— sounds like a great opportunity.

Hannah: Thank you.

Caroline: Well, thank you so much for your time. I've really enjoyed this conversation. So grateful to get to know you.

Hannah: Me too, thank you so much.

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Caroline: Thanks to everyone out there for listening or reading the transcript. Please join us again next time. Bye bye!