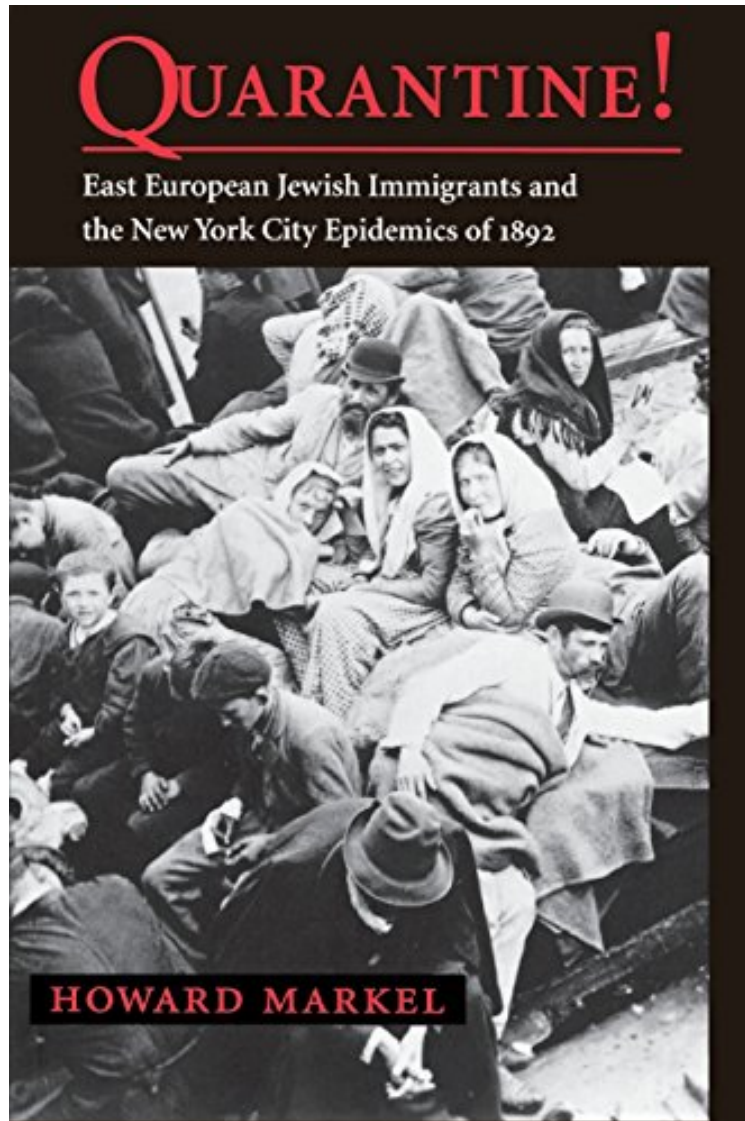


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Quarantine!: East European Jewish Immigrants and the New York City Epidemics of 1892

Howard Markel

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couldn't even get past the first 50 pages.. dull...I need some chicken soup after this one.0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. The New Republic's Review of Quarantine!By A CustomerExcerpts From THE NEW REPUBLIC, May 26, 1997, pp. 32-37. REVIEW of QUARANTINE! EAST EUROPEAN JEWISH IMMIGRANTS AND THE NEW YORK CIY EPIDEMICS OF 1892 BY HOWARD MARKEL. BOOK REVIEW by Sherwin B. Nuland "Hate in the Time of Cholera" "Remarkable...Engrossing....QUARANTINE! unites the best of the two worlds of social history and clinical history. And it is written in a narrative style so personal and gripping that a reader forgets that the book is meant primarily to be a scholarly text. A wide variety of personalities appear in Markel's detailed study of this slice of American urban culture taken through the length of a well-defined period in our nation's history. Not only the patients and the public health authorities are brought vividly to life, but so are newspapermen, police, political figures, and leaders of the various Jewish American groups, be they representative of the well-settled Germans or the newly arrived Eastern Europeans. Events and the people who took part in them are presented with an immediacy uncommon in the current climate of specialization and relativism that has lately overtaken the community of historians. Markel is as much spinning a complex yarn as he is writing a scrupulously researched chronicle. Being one of our few card-carrying historians who is also a highly skilled clinical physician, he brings perspectives that would certainly elude his more sociologically minded colleagues. His work is a refreshing zephyr in a field that is nowadays frequently more windy than enlightening. Markel resists the temptation to make sweeping statements about philosophy, character and psychology, the sort of empty generalizations that would make him friends in the precincts of multicultural relevance. He restricts himself to creating an accurate picture of a specific series of events that occurred among specific participants in a specific place at a specific time. He has presented his work in a narrative fashion that should be the envy of his colleagues in a discipline that has surrendered more and more to the "cholera" of a formalized and recondite practice..."

In Quarantine! Howard Markel traces the course of the typhus and cholera epidemics that swept through New York City in 1892. The story is told from the point of view of those involvedthe public health doctors who diagnosed and treated the victims, the newspaper reporters who covered the stories, the government officials who established and enforced policy, and, most importantly, the immigrants themselves. Drawing on rarely cited stories from the Yiddish American press, immigrant diaries and letters, and official accounts, Markel follows the immigrants on their journey from a squalid and precarious existence in Russia's Pale of Settlement, to their passage in steerage, to New York's Lower East Side, to the city's quarantine islands. At a time of renewed anti-immigrant sentiment and newly emerging infectious diseases, Quarantine! provides a historical context for considering some of the significant problems that face American society today.

From Library JournalA Ph.D. in the history of science, medicine, and technology, Markel is director of the Historical Center for the Health Sciences at the University of Michigan. Here he skillfully explores the social, cultural, medical, and political issues surrounding the quarantine of East European Jewish immigrants during the typhus and cholera epidemics in 1892 New York City. He cites an impressive array of primary and secondary sources, including Yiddish American newspapers, congressional records, public health records, and the personal correspondence of public health officials and of the immigrants themselves. Using these materials, Markel supports very effectively his assertion that although the epidemics were indeed public health threats, the quarantine of the Jewish immigrants had more to do with prejudice, class distinctions, and political scapegoating than with the consistent employment of the scientific method. Highly recommended for medical history collections, this book would be an excellent companion to Alan M. Kraut's broader Silent Travelers: Germs, Genes, and the Immigrant Menace (LJ 1/94).?Ximena Chrisagis, Wright State Univ., Dayton, OhioCopyright 1997 Reed Business Information, Inc.From The New England Journal of MedicineEpidemic diseases have inspired many fine works of historical scholarship, including Charles Rosenberg's The Cholera Years (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962) and Richard Evans's Death in Hamburg (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987). Howard Markel's excellent study of two 1892 epidemics in New York City is a welcome addition to this genre of medical history. Beautifully written and thoroughly researched, Quarantine! will appeal to both general readers and specialists in the field. Markel tells a compelling story of two epidemics that became tragically linked to one particular immigrant group -- the Eastern European Jews. Fleeing from the starvation and violence of czarist Russia, they encountered a hostile new world in Gilded Age New York. The first part of Markel's book recounts an outbreak of typhus fever in February 1892, which was traced to Jewish immigrants arriving on the SS Massilia. The New York City Department of Public Health ordered a dragnet of the Lower East Side to round up all the ship's passengers, healthy as well as sick, and quarantined them under unsanitary conditions at the city lazaretto on North Brother Island. More than a decade before "Typhoid Mary" Mallon gained infamy as a disease carrier, the Massilia Jews became the symbol of the public health dangers of unregulated immigration. As an 1892 editorial in the Journal commented, "We open our doors to squalor and filth and misery -- which mean typhus fever." The second part of the book examines the cholera epidemic that hit New York City only a few months later. It was also blamed on the Eastern European Jews. Although public health authorities professed their allegiance to bacteriologic principles,

Markel argues that the measures adopted to control cholera amounted to little more than quarantine by ethnicity and class. For example, when steamships arrived in New York Harbor with cholera-stricken passengers aboard, those traveling first or second class were allowed to debark, while those in steerage, healthy as well as ill, were placed in quarantine. In the last section of the book, Markel looks at how the 1892 epidemics contributed to passage of the National Quarantine Act of 1893, which set up a more rigorous system of medical inspection and isolation of immigrants. Markel finds that physicians were deeply divided over quarantine and immigration policy; their lines of debate followed not their differing allegiances to the germ theory of disease, but rather their views on the desirability of immigration itself. As a practicing physician, Markel takes seriously the need for disease control based on sound scientific principles. Yet he warns against the dangers of a "quarantine mentality," in which "not only does the infectious disease become the 'enemy' but, so, too, do the human beings (and their contacts) who have encountered the microbe in question." When a contagious disease becomes linked to a specific group of people, Markel argues, public health authorities must be doubly vigilant to guard those people's individual rights and to combat their stigmatization. As he concludes, "The burden of illness is wearing enough for those stricken with contagious disease without the added social layers of separation." This is a fine piece of history with a timely and thoughtful message; it deserves a wide readership among both health care professionals and professional historians. ed by Nancy Tomes, Ph.D. Copyright 1998 Massachusetts Medical Society. All rights reserved. The New England Journal of Medicine is a registered trademark of the MMS. From Kirkus sA revealing cultural and medical history that demonstrates how eastern European Jews, already subject to a kind of social quarantine, became the scapegoats when typhus and cholera struck New York City in 1892. Markel, a clinical historian who now directs the Historical Center for Health Sciences at the University of Michigan Medical School, documents the quarantine year through immigrant diaries and letters, Jewish social-agency reports, government files, and the press--both Yiddish and American. Liberal use of photographs, maps, cartoons, diagrams, and drawings add to the impact of Markel's powerful narrative. When an outbreak of typhus fever in January 1892 was traced to the SS Massilia, which carried 268 Russian Jewish immigrants, every single one, sick and healthy alike, along with several thousand healthy Jews with whom they had been in contact, were quarantined on North Brother Island in the East River. The focus was not on treatment of the ill but on isolation of the suspect group and protection of the native-born. Later that year, when cholera struck, Russian Jewish immigrants were again targeted. Whereas the typhus epidemic had been managed by the New York City Health Department, the cholera outbreak brought federal and state authorities into contentious play. Markel reveals how prejudice, fear, and anti-immigrant sentiment shaped both public reaction and official policy. He points out that the intertwining of immigration policy with fear of imported disease and social scapegoating that marked this episode in our history continues to the present day, and he notes that responses to future public health crises will be as much a measure of society's perceptions of health, disease, and individual rights as they are of medical and scientific understanding. A valuable contribution to the history of public health in America, to New York City history, and to American Jewish history. -- Copyright 1997, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.