

American historian shaped modern immigration law

Washingtonpost.com

September 23, 2011 Friday 8:11 PM EST

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washingtonpost.com

Section: Metro; Pg. B06

Length: 651 words

Byline: Emily Langer

Body

Oscar Handlin, a Harvard professor whose classic writings on **American immigration** made him a leading intellectual force behind legislation that eliminated the **immigration** quota system in the United States, died Sept. 20 at his home in Cambridge, Mass., after a heart attack. He was 95.

His death was confirmed by his son, David Handlin.

The son of Jewish immigrants, Dr. Handlin was considered the father of **modern immigration** studies. In his panoramic books, he chronicled the stories of Europeans, Jews, Puerto Ricans and African Americans and other populations that **shaped** the United States. His sweeping work "The Uprooted: The Epic Story of the Great Migrations That Made the **American** People" won the 1952 Pulitzer Prize in history.

"Once I thought to write a history of the immigrants in **America**," he wrote in perhaps the most noted passage of that book. "Then, I discovered that the immigrants **were** **American** history."

Dr. Handlin's credentials as a **historian**, the Harvard imprimatur and his frequent writings - in publications including the Atlantic Monthly and Commentary - made him an influential public intellectual in his time. **Historians** cite him as a crucial behind-the-scenes player in the landmark 1965 legislation that abolished the country-based quota systems that had regulated **immigration** since the 1920s.

He was "absolutely central to it," said Hasia Diner, a professor of **immigration** history at New York University.

Dr. Handlin found the quota systems, which favored Northern and Western European immigrants, racially discriminatory.

He considered it "something that not only discriminated against prospective immigrants," said Columbia University professor Mae Ngai, but also "a kind of stigma against those ethnic groups in the United States."

In his writings, Dr. Handlin never treated **American immigration** in dry, statistical terms. Critics described "The Uprooted," his most noted work, as a riveting and moving account of the entire **immigration** experience.

"The Uprooted concerns the personal human side of the flood of **immigration**," wrote a New York Herald Tribune reviewer. "Mr. Handlin wrote of the European settlements from which the immigrants came, then followed through the hardships of their crossing, in steerage, and life that followed in the United States."

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Oscar Handlin was born Sept. 29, 1915, in Brooklyn in a household where education was highly valued. When Dr. Handlin's son was born, his father, a Russian immigrant, suggested the name "Plato." Dr. Handlin and his wife decided against it.

Dr. Handlin grew up working as a delivery boy in his family's grocery store and often rested a book on top of his pushcart, reading as he made his way through the streets of Brooklyn.

He graduated from Brooklyn College in 1934 and then studied at Harvard, where he earned a master's degree in 1935 and a doctorate in history in 1940.

Among his mentors was Arthur M. Schlesinger Sr., who suggested the topic of his dissertation: 18th- and early 19th-century immigrants to Boston. The work was subsequently published under the title "Boston's Immigrants."

Dr. Handlin was himself the target of discrimination while at Harvard. His classmate John Hope Franklin, who became a revered scholar of African **American** history, wrote in a memoir that Dr. Handlin was turned away as an officer in the Henry Adams Club because he was Jewish.

Dr. Handlin began teaching at Harvard while pursuing his graduate degrees and would remain with the university for more than four decades.

His first wife, Mary Flug Handlin, with whom he often collaborated, died in 1976.

Survivors include his second wife, of 34 years, Lilian Bombach Handlin of Cambridge, also a co-author; three children from his first marriage, David Handlin of Lexington, Mass., Joanna Handlin Smith of Cambridge and Ruth Manley of Guilford, Conn.; one brother; four grandchildren; and one great-grandchild.

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Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Web Publication

Subject: **IMMIGRATION** (95%); DEATHS & OBITUARIES (90%); COLLEGE & UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS (90%); **IMMIGRATION LAW** (90%); HISTORY (90%); PREGNANCY & CHILDBIRTH (89%); ETHNIC GROUPS (78%); HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCE (78%); RACE & ETHNICITY (76%); DISCRIMINATION (76%); DEMOGRAPHIC GROUPS (75%); ENTERTAINMENT & ARTS AWARDS (74%); AFRICAN AMERICANS (73%); JEWS & JUDAISM (71%); RACISM & XENOPHOBIA (71%); GRADUATE & PROFESSIONAL SCHOOLS (69%)

Industry: COLLEGE & UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS (90%); ENTERTAINMENT & ARTS AWARDS (74%); GRADUATE & PROFESSIONAL SCHOOLS (69%)

Geographic: NEW YORK, NY, USA (93%); NEW YORK, USA (92%); MASSACHUSETTS, USA (79%); UNITED STATES (97%); EUROPE (92%); WESTERN EUROPE (72%)

Load-Date: September 23, 2011