

The Ellis Island Experience

Underline, star, or highlight important information. Circle anything you don't understand.

A second wave of immigrants streamed out of Southern and Eastern Europe from 1890-1924. Along with fleeing the burden of high taxes, poverty, and overpopulation, these "new" immigrants were also victims of oppression and religious persecution. Jews living in Romania, Russia, and Poland were being driven from their homes. Similarly the Croats and Serbs in Hungary, the Poles in Germany, and the Irish persecuted under English rule, all saw America as a land of freedom and opportunity.

By the 1890's steam-powered ships replaced sailing vessels and cut the time of an Atlantic crossing from three months to two weeks. The steamships could accommodate as many as 2,000 passengers in steerage. Jammed with metal-framed berths three bunks high, the air in steerage became rank with the heavy odor of spoiled food, sea-sickness, and unwashed bodies. There was little privacy, and the lack of adequate toilet facilities made it difficult to keep clean. A Russian Jew recalled that "the atmosphere was so thick and dense with smoke and bodily odors that your head itched, and when you scratched your head – you got lice on your hands."

By the time the steamships sailed into New York, the first and second class passengers had already been inspected and cleared to land by immigration officials who came aboard. However, steerage passengers were not afforded such privileges and their first steps on the mainland were brief. They were directed helter-skelter onto ferries which shuttled them to Ellis Island. On busy days the immigrants were imprisoned on [their ships] for hours while they waited to disembark and be ferried to Ellis Island. Sometimes new arrivals had to wait in steerage for days, prolonging the miserable journey.

When they landed, the immigrants had numbered tags pinned on their clothes which indicated the manifest page and line number on which their names appeared. Greeted with pointing fingers and unintelligible commands, the new arrivals formed a line which stretched from the Ellis Island dock into the Baggage Room of the main building, winding its way up to the second floor where the immigrants were met by a team of doctors and inspectors who would decide which way the Golden Door would swing. [Standing three wide], the immigrants made their way up a steep flight of stairs and into the great hall of the Registry Room. The inspection process had begun, although many did not know it.

Scanning the moving line for signs of illness, Public Health doctors looked to see if anyone wheezed, coughed, shuffled, or limped as they climbed the steep stairs. Children were asked their name to make sure they weren't deaf or dumb, and those that looked over two-years-old were taken from their mothers' arms and made to walk. As the line moved forward, doctors had only a few seconds to examine each immigrant, checking for sixty

symptoms, from anemia to varicose veins, which might indicate a wide variety of diseases, disabilities and physical conditions. Of primary concern were cholera, scalp and nail fungus, insanity, and mental impairments. In 1907, legislation further barred immigrants suffering from tuberculosis, epilepsy, and the physically disabled. The disease which resulted in the most exclusions was trachoma, a highly contagious eye infection that could cause blindness and death. At that time, the disease was common in Southern and Eastern Europe, but almost unknown in the U.S. Doctors checked for trachoma by turning the eyelid inside out with their fingers, a hairpin, or a button-hook to look for inflammation on the inner eyelid - an extremely painful experience. The "button-hook men" were the most dreaded officials on Ellis Island.

During inspection, those immigrants who appeared sick or were suffering from a contagious disease were marked with blue chalk and detained for further medical examination. The sick were taken to Ellis Island hospital for observation and care, and once recovered, could proceed with their legal inspection. Those with incurable or disabling ailments were excluded and returned to their port of departure at the expense of the steamship line on which they arrived.

Medical inspectors developed a letter code to indicate further examination, and roughly every two out of ten immigrants received mystifying chalk marks. This alphabet of ailments ranged from "Pg" for pregnant to "K" for hernia and "Ft" for feet. Those suspected of having feeble minds were chalked with an X, and along with those marked for physical ailments, about nine out of every hundred immigrants were detained for mental examination and further questioning. Usually this consisted of standard intelligence tests in which immigrants were asked to solve simple arithmetic problems, count backwards from twenty, or complete a puzzle. In an attempt to deal with immigrants' cultural differences, Ellis Island's doctors developed their own tests which allowed them to base their decision on problem solving, behavior, attitude, and the immigrant's ability to acquire knowledge. Requiring immigrants to copy geometric shapes, for instance, was only useful for testing those who had some schooling and were used to holding a pencil.

After passing the line inspection immigrants were waved forward toward the main part of the Registry Room. There they entered a maze of open passageways and metal railings which divided the entire floor. As crowded as a country town on market day, the Great Hall was "a place of Babel" where all languages of the world seemed to cry out at once. At the far end of Registry Hall the legal inspectors stood behind tall desks, assisted by interpreters fluent in major languages and any number of obscure dialects. Although the interrogation that immigrants were to face lasted only a matter of minutes, it took an average of five hours to pass through the inspection process at Ellis Island.

Wearing starched collars and heavy serge jackets, the inspectors verified the 29 bits of information already contained on the manifest sheet. Family names were recorded with care – especially if they were spelled Andruljawierjus, Grzyszcyszn or Soutsoghianopoulos. Firing questions at the immigrants, the inspector asked them their age, occupation, marital status, and destination in an attempt to determine their social, economic and moral fitness.

Ellis Island is the nations' gateway to the promised land. In a single day it has handled seven thousand immigrants. "How much you got?" shouts the inspector at the head of the long file moving up from the quay between iron rails, and, remembering, in the same breath shrieks out, "Quanto monèta?" with a gesture that brings up from the depths of Pietro's pocket a pitiful handful of paper money. Before he has half of it out, the interpreter has him by the wrist, and with a quick movement shakes the bills out upon the desk as a dice-thrower "chucks" the ivories. Ten, twenty, forty lire. He shakes his head. Not much, but – he glances at the ship's manifest – is he going to friends? "Si, si! signor," says Pietro, eagerly; his brother of the vineyard – oh, a fine vineyard! And he holds up a bundle of grapesticks as evidence. He has brought them all the way from the village at home to set them out in this brother's field. "Ugh," grunts the inspector as he stuffs the money back in the man's pocket, shoves him on, and yells, "Wie viel geld?" at a hapless German next in line. "They won't grow. They never do. Bring 'em just the same." – Jacob A. Riis, 1903

Influenced by American welfare agencies that claimed to be overwhelmed by requests for aid from impoverished immigrants, the exclusion of those "liable to become a public charge" became a cornerstone of immigration policy as early as 1882. The Alien Contract Labor Law of 1885 also excluded all immigrants who took a job in exchange for passage. These laws presented the immigrant with a delicate task of convincing the legal inspectors that they were strong, intelligent and resourceful enough to find work easily, without admitting that a relative had a job waiting for them.

In 1917 anti-immigration forces succeeded in pressuring the government to impose a literacy test as a further means of restricting immigration. The law required all immigrants sixteen years or older to read a forty-word passage in their native language. Most immigrants had to read biblical translations. Those who failed to prove they were "clearly and beyond a doubt entitled to land" were detained for a hearing before the Board of Special Inquiry.

They also questioned people on literacy. My uncle called me aside, when he came to take us off. He said, "Your mother doesn't know how to read." I said, "That's all right." For the reading you faced what they called the commissioners, like judges on a bench. I was surrounded by my aunt and uncle and another uncle who's a pharmacist – my mother was in the center. They said she would have to take a test for reading. So one man said, "She can't speak English." Another man said, "We know that. We will give her a siddur." You know what a siddur is? It's a Jewish book. The night they said this, I knew that she couldn't do that and we would be in trouble. Well, they opened the siddur. There was a certain passage they had you read. I looked at it and I saw right away what it was. I quickly studied it – I knew the whole paragraph. Then I got underneath the two of them there – I was very small – and I told her the words in Yiddish very softly. I had memorized the lines and I said them quietly and she said them louder so the commissioner could [hear] it. She looked at it and it sounded as if she was reading it, but I was doing the talking underneath. I was Charlie McCarthy! – Arnold Weiss, Russian, at Ellis Island in 1921, age 13

Along with medical detentions and immigrants facing a hearing from the Board, unescorted women and children were detained until their safety was assured through the arrival of a telegram, letter, or a pre-paid ticket from a waiting relative. Immigration officials refused to send single women into the streets alone, nor could they leave with a man not related to them. Fiancées, reunited with their intended husbands, often married on the spot.

A handsome, clear-eyed Russian girl of about twenty-years, the daughter of a farmer comes in and sits down before us. She is clean and intelligent looking. She nervously clasps and unclasps her hands and the tears are welling in her eyes. "That girl over there," says the commissioner, "is an interesting and puzzling case. Her father is a farmer in moderate circumstances. A young man with whom she grew up, the son of a neighbor, came here two years ago, and last year wrote to her father that of the girl would come over he would marry her. So she came, alone. But the prospective bridegroom didn't show up. I wrote him – he lives somewhere in New Jersey – and last week he appeared and looked her over. Finally he said he wasn't sure whether he wanted to marry her or not. Naturally her pride was somewhat wounded, and she decided that she had doubts herself. So everything is at a standstill. The girl says she doesn't want to go back, to be laughed at; and I can't let her land. You don't know any lady who wants a servant, do you? She could work! Look at her arms. A nice girl, too. No? Well, I don't know what to do. Are you willing to marry Peter if he comes again?" The girl nods, the tears brimming over. "Well, I'll write to that fellow again and tell him he's a fool. He'll never have such a chance again." – Commissioner William, *William Papers*, March 1910

After inspection, immigrants descended from the Registry Room down the "Stairs of Separation," so-called because they marked the parting of the way for many family and friends with different destinations. Immigrants were directed toward the railroad ticket office and trains to points west, or to the island's hospital and detention rooms. While doctors, nurses, inspectors, interpreters, matrons, and other staff employed during the station's peak years generally followed the directive to treat immigrants with "kindness and consideration," the process of inspection and detention – and the frightening prospect of exclusion – remained overwhelming.

The questions, asked through an interpreter, are pertinent and much the same as those already asked by the court which has decided upon their deportation. [...] A Russian Jew and his son are called next. The father is a pitiable-looking object; his large head rests upon a small, emaciated body; the eyes speak of premature loss of power, and are listless, worn out by the study of the Talmud, the graveyard of Israel's history. Beside him stands a stalwart son, neatly attired in the uniform of a Russian college student. His face is Russian rather than Jewish, intelligent rather than shrewd, materialistic rather than spiritual. "Ask them why they came," the commissioner says rather abruptly. The answer is: "We had to." "What was his business in Russia?" "A tailor." "How much does he earn a week?" "Ten to twelve rubles." "What did the son do?" "He went to school." "Who supported him?" "The father." "What do they expect to do in America?" "Work." "Have they any relatives?" "Yes, a son and a brother." "What does he do?" "He is a tailor." "How much does he earn?" "Twelve dollars a week." "Has he a family?" "Wife and four children." "Ask them whether they are willing to be separated; the father to go back and the son to remain here?" They look at each other; no emotion yet visible, the question came [too] suddenly. Then something in the background of their feelings move, and the father, used to self-denial through his life, says quietly, without pathos and yet tragically, "Of course." And the son says, after casting his eyes to the ground, ashamed to look his father in the face, "Of course." And, "This one shall be taken and the other left," for this was their judgment day. – Edward Steiner