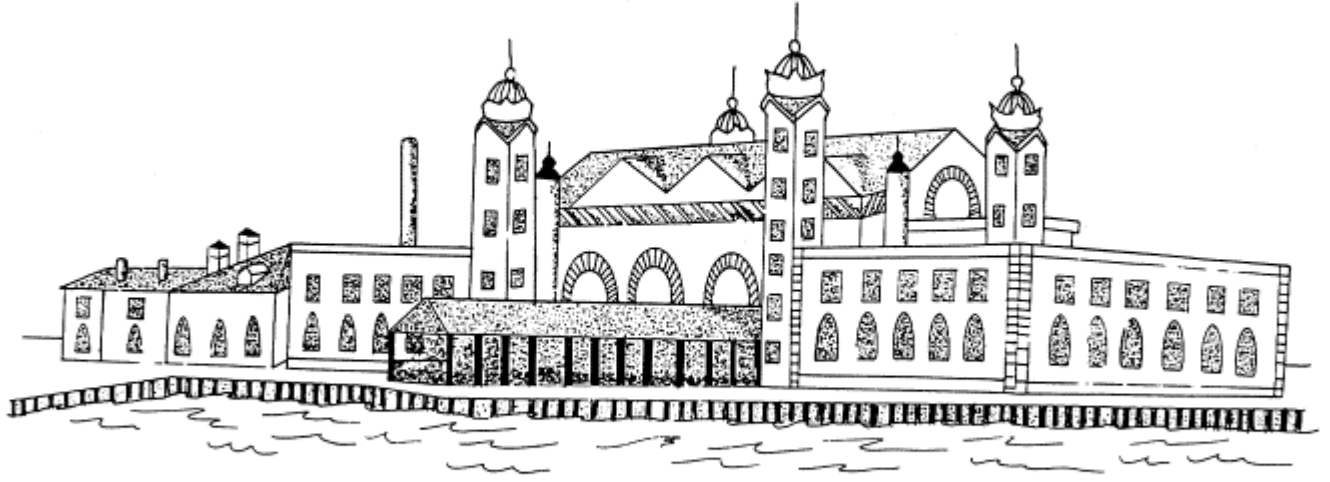


Ellis Island:



Doorway to America

by Bill Walter

For such an important place, Ellis Island did not start out as much. Named after Samuel Ellis, the 27-acre knot of an island barely stuck out of the water at high tide.

Ellis Island became important to millions of immigrants in 1892, however, when the U.S. government converted it to an immigration station. Between 1892 and 1954, the island became—for more than 17 million souls—the doorway to America.

As you will see in their own words below, America offered immigrants more than just opportunity. You also will see that the “the land of the free” was not so free to everyone, after all.

Escaping to America

The closing years of the 19th century were an oppressive time in many eastern and southern European nations. In such countries as Russia, Poland, and Armenia, millions of families were suffering. Wars, famines, and pogroms (organized massacres of Jews and other minorities) caused millions of people to flee.

Ida Mouradjian fled to America from Armenia to escape annihilation by the Turkish government:

They [the Turks] would displace every Armenian out of their own homes, out of their own towns and drive them into the Syrian Desert. The idea was to get every Armenian there and by the time they got there they would either die of hunger or exposure or pestilence.

But not all were running from the horrors of violence or poverty. Some, like Theodore Lubik from the Ukraine, wanted to avoid the military draft and simply saw the U.S. as a great opportunity:

A friend of mine, he had gone to America. He came to Europe once on a visit...He looked just like a governor—horses, wagon, dressed fine, giving his pocket change to us. He gave me ten cents or a quarter—that was big money.

Hard Time Traveling

In these times of turmoil, one could not easily move to the U.S. The trials of getting to Ellis Island were often life-threatening in themselves.

Along the way, many immigrants had to contend with border guards, thieves, and crooked immigration agents. But it was the trip across the Atlantic that immigrants tended to remember most.

Crammed into poorly ventilated sleeping areas or cabins below deck, immigrants—many of whom had never seen the sea before—often suffered rough crossings. Vera Gauditsa, pregnant during her crossing from Czechoslovakia, remembered the torture of seasickness:

I was pretty tough, but on the boat I was very sick. I thought the child wanted to be born right then.

I had a cabin, but in the cabin was nothing. You had to go through the whole boat to get to the showers and a toilet. So imagine when you are sick and you have to go to the bathroom and walk!

But upon seeing their destination, most immigrants—like Sarah Asher from Russia—forgot about sickness and thought only of a bright future:

About four or five o'clock in the morning we all got up. The sunshine started and what do we see? The Statue of Liberty!

Well, she was beautiful with the early-morning light. Everybody was crying. Beautiful colors, the greenish-like water—and so big. We could see New York already, with the big buildings and everything. . . There was a house where the boat stopped but only the Americans were able to go out, but we foreigners remained. Our boat moved further, and that was when we realized we were going to Ellis Island.

Stuck at the Door

Having to wait while first- and second-class passengers got off the boat, many immigrants began to realize that their troubles were not over.

After docking at Manhattan Island, immigrants in steerage were shipped by barge to Ellis Island, to go through examinations. On the island, the immigrants were guided into holding pens in the Great Hall. Irene Zambelli, from Greece, recalled the routine:

There were little gates, the same as you go [through] to the subways. . . The first gate we [Irene and her cousin] passed they asked what we were to one another. Then we came to the next gate and they asked us how much was two and two, and four and four. We answered and went to the next gate.

Cutting Back the Flow

The number of immigrants increased over the years, peaking at 1,285,349 in 1907. U.S. officials grew concerned. They saw the growing numbers as a threat to American workers. The officials were afraid the foreigners would take away wages and jobs. As a result, the entrance examinations were made tougher. They included a medical exam and a literacy test. An immigrant who failed one of these tests faced **deportation** (being sent back) to his or her native country.

Of all the examinations, the medical exam seemed to cause immigrants the most concern, recalled Catherine Bolinski, who came from Poland:

They turned your eye[lid] over—I had to blink a couple of times that way. I'll never forget it. They looked at your throat and to see if you had any rashes on your body. They found things wrong with some people. They sent them back, after they [had] sold everything to come here, so they were crying, they felt very bad.

The thought of being deported was terrifying. Fannie Kligerman, who escaped from Russia with her family, remembered the fear:

One of my brothers had something wrong with him. It was a sty. It left a funny thing and they put him aside. And they told us that if there was anything wrong with him, he'd have to go back to Europe. Oh, it was frightening. My father said, "I'm not going on without the children. We will all go back."

Charting America's Course

Only three percent of those who arrived at Ellis Island between 1892 and 1954 were turned away. By 1924, however, the government changed its policy. It slammed shut the "open door" that had allowed so many millions to flock to the U.S. The Immigration Act of 1924 set a quota of 164,000 immigrants per year. By 1954, Ellis Island had been shut down.

But for those who had passed through, America was truly a land of opportunity—despite often-severe hardships. Settling throughout the U.S., immigrants such as composer Irving Berlin, football coach Knute Rockne, and Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter added to America's strength.

Having escaped from Russia, Arnold Weiss voiced the determination and hope of the immigrants who passed through Ellis Island:

From the whole story of what I went through in all my years—and some of it wasn't very pleasant—I still love this country. I love this country in spite of everything.

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1. This passage is mostly about the

- A) hardships of ocean travel in the nineteenth century
- B) struggles of the early immigrants entering America
- C) many opportunities to make money in America
- D) effect of immigration on European countries

2. What most worried the immigrants about the medical examinations?

- A) They did not want to be sent to the hospital.
- B) They could not afford to pay the doctors.
- C) They did not want to be deported.
- D) They were too seasick to stand in line.

3. Ellis Island was called "the doorway to America" because it

- A) was the place most immigrants had to pass through before entering the United States
- B) had a large and famous entranceway that immigrants walked through
- C) was the only port in the United States where foreign ships could dock safely
- D) was actually a large ship that carried the immigrants to the United States

4. What did the immigrants dislike most about their trip to America?

- A) Seeing Ellis Island for the first time
- B) Leaving their native countries
- C) Living conditions aboard the boat
- D) Letting the Americans off the boat first

5. Why does the author say "the land of the free" was not so free to everyone, after all"?

6. If you could ask one of the immigrants a question, what else would you want to know about their experience on Ellis Island?
