An Extract From:

National Archives Catalog

U.S. National Archives and Records Administration

Cut and Paste in Your Browser: https://catalog.archives.gov/id/602984

Cowen Report – European Investigation Entry No. 9; File No. 51411/056
National Archives Identifier: 602984
Local Identifier: 51411/056

Although only a small piece of Mr. Philip Cowen's 1906 Report, this 8 page extract covers the findings related to those who had the courage and the LUCK to pass through all the barriers on their way to America.

TOPIC 10 – BOUND FOR AMERICA

Information relating to passport requirements at Ellis Island can be found here:

Cut and Paste in Your Browser: https://tinyurl.com/PASSPORTS-AT-ELLIS-ISLAND

May 31, 2021 Howard Aronoff

10. **BOUND FOR AMERICA**

The receipt of a letter from one of the family in America is a day of great rejoicing in the home in Russia. The family hang breathlessly on every word that appears therein. The young hopeful that has gone abroad, or the head of the family, emphasizes all the good qualities of his new home and minimizes the things unpleasant. If the family at home cannot read, the local scrivener who serves as the epistolary go-between in the family, is inclined to give emphasis in his reading to those parts he thinks will most please his auditors, and those who listen and the others to whom the contents are conveyed, acquire a desire to go from home.

At last comes the letter bearing the news that the family are to go forward. The father writes that he had ordered a ticket and sends it to them. He tells them that they should go to the doctor to have their eyes examined, and order their passport. As soon as he has paid it all in, they will be notified by the Steamship Company what day to leave home. The ticket has imprinted in bold type the injunction not to leave home until notified. But in their eagerness they see nothing of that. In their hand they hold a paper from the Steamship Company for four persons from Hamburg to New York. That is all that is clear to them, and they at once prepare to leave. Reaching the control station at Eydtkuhnen, or Prostken, for instance, they are bathed, their garments and baggage disinfected, and they are told the sad truth that their ticket has not yet been fully prepaid. Past experience tells the shipping people that when this happens the buyer of the ticket can find a way to pay up the balance, when informed by cable, and so the family goes on to Hamburg meanwhile. Does the husband fail to make the payment the family must wend its way backward and find some way to maintain itself till the coming of better news. A friendly society may help. The Jews have committees who may in such cases advance the money if advised by cable that the husband is in a position to receive his family.

Before proceeding, however, the wife and mother must obtain a passport. But what does she know about the matter? She calls in the man who does, the steamship agent. If the passport is sought in the ordinary way, assuming that all the papers are correct, it will take three months before it gets through the police department. The ways can be greased of course, and

then it slips down with great celerity. But the woman has only one passport to get, while the agent has a number, so that he is in better shape to get it through quickly. He finds out how much money the woman has. Ordinarily a passport nowadays costs 15 s and expenses-- about 18 in all. If he can, he takes advantage of the woman's ignorance, and tells her that she needs a separate pass for each, or that the charge is for each individual set down therein. Knowing no better, she pays him all he asks. Thus I saw at Libau a woman who had paid 110 rubles for a passport for herself and four children, that cost the agent but 18 rubles.
It may be that a daughter was born into the family and not entered on the community roll, or a son eligible to military duty if he were alive, has died and not been stricken off. Then ensue complications. So long as the son eligible to duty is neither stricken off nor produced, the family can get no passport. If the local authority chooses to be ugly, he had the family under his thumb and they are at his mercy. 300 rubles is the fine for an absentee from military duty, and if the police official does not care to be satisfied with the proof of death, the money must be forthcoming or the family stay at home. If it is difficult to get the passport or one of the reasons given, or the woman knows too much to be fleeced, and the agent sees his way to make but a few paltry rubles as his pay for his pains, or there is some real or fancied obstacle to the passport, he will tell them there is but one alternative to staying home, which is to steal over the border, for the Russian officer at the railroad station will not permit them to go through without a pass. Here is another rich field for the agent, as will be told later on. Of course it is possible for the woman to get an emigrant's pass, which costs nothing; but this makes it impossible for any of the family to return, and if it happens that any of them are excluded from the United States, they become pariahs with no land to call their own.

But now the family is ready to take up the staff and begin its wandering to the long promised land of freedom. The lares and penates are disposed of in short order. In the one or two rooms-- seldom more-- there is little to dispose of.-- I am speaking of course of the great bulk of the people that come.--- As the Immigrant Inspectors at the ports of entry are aware, their bedding, clothing, pots and pans are done up in bundles, and much of it they will not even trust to be checked, but each member has his load to carry. The tables and chairs are disposed of or given away, and the family is drawn up in marching order. The agent meets them at the station and accompanies them till near the border. They are cautioned to speak to no one that approached them on the train, not to tell where they are going or to whom, and that upon their maintaining discreet silence depends their successful getting to America. The

advice, which is well drilled into them, makes it difficult to get at the people while on journey, and it is the advice that these agents give the people that causes them to lie when questioned at Ellis Island and elsewhere when they land here.

Now the people are under way, but before starting the agent has sold a couple of tickets to some boys, who are strangers to each other, and to make a little more money he has them put on the same pass at the women. He tells her it will help her to get in. (Since my return I saw at Ellis Island six persons, no two of them related, who were set down in one passport as father and children. On inquiry I found they had each paid for separate passport to one Platzkowsky in Homel, who had put them on one book, clearing 76 rubles.)

Coming within ten miles or so of the border, the people all disembark and go quietly to a lodging house, and there they remain for a few days until there is a sufficient number to make it worth while to bribe the officials at the border. They are relieved of their baggage so as to be unencumbered during the passage over the border. When a sufficient number are gathered to make it convenient for the Russian officials to be temporarily off post, at their meals perhaps or asleep, the party, which may number from ten to thirty, is taken over the line. At a few points, such as Brody, on the Austrian frontier, at Bayoren at the extreme north of Germany, and at Eydtkuhnen, there are bridges that admit of easy passage. At other place there are roadways running from Russia to Germany, Austria or Romania, but at all these there are too many officers on duty constantly to make smuggling safe. So the night is chosen as a rule and the people are taken through the woods, or wade through the streams separating the countries. In the employ of these smugglers are sturdy Poles, who carry the women and children across, and also the men where is becomes necessary to do so. The proceeding is not without attendant risks as can be understood, and it is difficult to obtain information when anything does happen. I was told at Eydtkuhnen of Fanny Grodzovski and two sisters who had been deported, and who for lack of a pass were smuggled over the border at that place, of whose safe arrival the people who had arranged for this have not been able to get information. It is also not uncommon, I was told, for a floating body to tell the story of a drowned man or an observant guardsman. As I stated in another part of this report, a man was shot at Eydtkuhnen while attempting to cross the stream the night before I was there. Crossing the border thus taken from 12 to 15 hours. But I cannot believe that these are frequent happenings, or the news of them would prove a deterrent to the great number who

go that way. I wanted to see how the people got across the border, but found it impossible because of the uncertainty of when people would cross and at what point they would come out. I had arranged with a merchant of Kamenetz Podolsk to be enabled to join some group centering there to go over the Austrian border, but could not spare the week or ten days that would be involved But what I have set down here represents the actual experiences of people I have met in New York or on my travels.

Once on German or Austrian territory, the people are taken to a railroad station, where they find their baggage, that has been brought over in wagons, and proceed to the control station and seaport. The price that the immigrant pays for his ticket from home to the United States includes all the charges for lodging by the way and getting over the border. For this service, I was told, the guards get usually five rubles a head; what the agent gets out of the emigrant, is hard to get at. The type of man whose business it is systematically to bribe public officials is not a lovely one, and often he is a pronounced scoundrel. Nachman Brzaza, who conducts a boarding house for emigrants in Hamburg, told me that when he brought his family over he agreed to pay 7 rubles a head, but before they got across their guide set them down in the woods and demanded more money. He demurred and threatened all sorts of things, till the man said to him "A chochem sennen Sie, ubber an die Grenze miz ma nischt a chochem sein", "You are a wise man, but you don't want to be so wise when you are crossing the border". He concluded to pay his price and make sure of getting over the line.

It is because of the large opportunities for making money on account of present passport conditions that the agents look to this business rather than to merely selling tickets, for after all, but ten per cent of the people leaving Russia buy their tickets there, and the margin of profit there is small. The Russian emigrant who goes through Germany must be provided with a ticket out of the country, but it must be over a German line, or over one of the lines that had been concessioned by the German government. These are the Red Star, Holland American, White Star, American, Cunard and French lines. Persons sending prepaids by other lines should advise their people to avoid Germany, either going via Austria and Switzerland, or via Hango. Those holding them must buy other tickets at the control station or be returned to Russia. Where people have smuggled over the border, this is a delicate position to be in. They may then be allowed to proceed to Berlin or Hamburg while sending for funds. The Jewish committees in those cities have found this a serious matter. In 118 cases,

mainly where husbands have sent for wives and children, they have advanced the money for other tickets and retained the temporarily worthless ones. Some portion of the passage money was subsequently recovered on many of these, but not on quite a number because of some technical defect. I saw many of these - about 40 - in Berlin. The various points by railroad out of Russia are as follows: Into Germany: Wirballen, into Eydtkuhnen; Graewo, into Prostken; Mlawa into Illowo; Alexandrowo, into Ottlotschin (Thorn); Sosnowitz, into Myslowitz; Graniza, into Austria; Radziwillow,into Brody; Wolodschisk, into Podwohodschiska. At Hamburg the emigrant from Russia is compelled to live in the Auswanderer Halle until his ship sails. This is an emigrant station maintained on the outskirts of Hamburg where the foreign shipping is centered. This station is well planned and maintained. A tax of six marks is levied on every emigrant to meet the cost of maintenance which is supposed to be for an average of four days. The place is well kept, there are comfortable beds, good food, smoking, dining and reading rooms, a church and synagogue, music is furnished daily, a small store supplies special needs, and people are constantly under medical supervision. Those who have not been bathed go through here the process of purification and disinfection of baggage.

The non-Russian emigrants are permitted to live in the City in boarding houses licensed by the police, and under their supervision. Thus far the people have been examined in their homes for their eyes, at the request of the relative inviting home, then again by the steamship agent in their city, then at the control station on the border and again at the Auswanderer Halle. They walk thence for 35 minutes to the immigrant station in Hamburg proper. There they are again examined by the ship's doctor and government doctor, after which they go on a tender and are taken to the steamer, that is to convey them to America. Are they going via England, they trudge along for another twenty minutes to the freight boat that is to take them to Eng land, whence they embark for their ultimate home in the United States.

That the examination abroad for the eyes must be closer than it had been, is clearly shown by the official records of Bremen, which state that while but 12 emigrants were reported in 1905 from January 1 to Sept. 9 as suffering from eye trouble, 781 were so reported for the same period in 1906. If the immigrant is going to the United States via Russia, he takes the train from his home direct to Riga, Libau, or Odessa, or via St Petersburg to Hango, if he is going by way of Finland. The only direct routes to the United States are the Volunteer Fleet, semi monthly from Libau, and the steamship Gregory Merk from Odessa. The latter may be

eliminated, as the announcement is already made that its January trip from Odessa will be the last. There was another direct line from Libau, the Russian East Asiatic Company, but it appears to have been unable to come to terms with the government or found the business unsatisfactory, for the trip of the "Grodno", begun while I was in Libau, appears to have been the last. I understood however that there is a strong probability of this line continuing as a feeder for German lines, carrying the people from Libau to Hamburg. Even this would be better than the present long railroad trip through Germany, or through Austria and Switzerland. The emigrant had smoother sailing; he is not harassed so much by examinations that are not final, and comes to the United States in better shape. Of course only those can go this way whose passes are in good order; but that is really no barrier, for in Russia you can get a pass in any name you choose if you only pay for it, and so it is that many come here via Russian ports under false names.

A day or two before sailing say is a busy one at the railroad stations at the port of sailing. Thus 350 people reached Libau on the same train as I did. With them were the sub-agents who had sold them tickets or got them passports and come on from long distances for "deliver their goods." They had coached their people so thoroughly that it was impossible to converse with them on the train, or while at Libau when the sub-agents were about. The general agents of the various lines which were to send them forward acted quite indifferently, but only after the sub-agents left was it possible to speak with them.

The wrongs inflicted upon the emigrant on the ocean have not been touched on, for I did not obtain enough information from emigrants themselves to justify going into them. Of the trip across the Atlantic, the stories told of their treatment by immigrants coming on the same vessel vary so largely that I would not care to speak except from personal observation, which is limited to my few days on board of the "Umbria" on my return. I took passage in the steerage. Getting down to the dock, all my baggage was labeled "Inspected" while my back was turned, the keys in my pocket, and no questions asked.

I attach one of the labels hereto.

[Following lines are placed on a red background in the center of the page]

THIRD CLASS BAGGAGE INSPECTED

s.s. "Umbria"

PORT OF LIVERPOOL.

Not valid without U.S. Consular Stamp.

[An American Consulate Stamp is affixed to the center of the red tag]

Going aboard the steamer I joined the procession and passed in front of the doctor, walking with a halted gait and stooping to attract his attention, but the doctor simply examined my eyes and passed me on. The consular stamp was put on my doctor's card by a representative of the American Consul without even glancing at it and I could see how easy it was for anyone to ship a child by arrangement with an officer of the vessel who could pass her in unobserved with ease while the people were going aboard. I remained but two days in the steerage, then going into the cabin and paying visits whenever I was permitted to enter.

Before the ship sailed an officer of the Cunard Company went through the steerage, looking to the water supplies, the general arrangement and inquiring if the various races were separated. The floors, tables and chairs were tidy as could be wished all the time. The tables had no seats or settles with backs, so that they were uncomfortable. There were enough of them however. The food was clean, well prepared, wholesome and plentiful, but the cabins that were divided off for the English emigrants were below the 100 cubic-foot mark. There was, however, no modern accommodation; no reading room or opportunity for the emigrant to sit elsewhere than on his bed or the backless settees, except on deck when the weather permitted, which was very seldom. But it would not be right to form any judgment of emigrant accommodations in general from this single ship.

Complaints made from time to time by incoming people indicate that there is much to be desired in the treatment of these people. It would prove interesting to make a trip on the various lines carrying immigrants for the purpose of observing each individually. In no other way could an intelligent idea be formed of the manner in which the immigrant business is carried on.