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Immigration Journey

In his book, *A Nation of Immigrants*, John F. Kennedy writes, "There were probably as many reasons for coming to America as there were people who came. It was a highly individual decision." Historians agree that three social forces were the chief motivators for the mass migration to America: religious persecution, political oppression and economic hardship. It is, however, almost impossible to relate such a combination of overwhelming circumstances to the experience of one immigrant, or even of one family.

Although more than 12 million people passed through Ellis Island on their way to the promise of a better life in America, they walked through its gates one at a time, individual by individual. Once the decision to leave had been made, what was the journey like?

Step One: Leaving Home

For many, it was a family affair. Advice was sought and help was freely given by mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, aunts, uncles, friends and even entire villages. It was not unusual for an entire family to work to earn the money for a single family member who wanted to make the trip.

The practice of one member of a family going to America first and then saving to bring the others over was common. From 1900 to 1910, almost 95 percent of the immigrants arriving at Ellis Island were joining either family or friends. Sometimes the father would come alone — to see if the streets really were paved with the gold of opportunity — before sending for his wife and family. Sometimes the eldest son immigrated first and then sent for the next oldest, until the entire family was in America. Often those who arrived first would send a prepaid ticket back home to the next family member. It is believed that in 1890, between 25 and 50 percent of all immigrants arriving in America had prepaid tickets. In 1901, between 40 and 65 percent came either on prepaid tickets or with money sent to them from the United States.

Since all steerage tickets were sold without space reservations, obtaining a ticket was easy. Principal shipping lines had hundreds of agencies in the United States and freelance ticket agents traveled through parts of Europe, moving from village to village, selling tickets. After 1900, in addition to a ticket, however, an immigrant had to secure a passport from local officials and a United States visa from either the nearest American consular office or from the local consul at the port.

For many, simply getting to the port was the first major journey of their lives. They would travel by train, wagon, donkey or even by foot. Sometimes travelers would have to wait days, weeks and even months at the port, either for their paperwork to be completed or for their ship to arrive because train schedules were not coordinated with sailing dates. Assuming their paperwork was in order and tickets had been purchased, some provision was usually made for the care of the emigrants waiting for a ship. Steamship companies were required by the governments to watch over prospective passengers and, at most ports, the travelers were housed in private boardinghouses. Some port cities even boasted their own "emigrant hotels."

After the 1893 U.S. immigration law went into effect, each passenger had to answer a series of 29 questions (recorded on manifest lists) before boarding the ship. These questions included, among others: name, age, sex, marital status, occupation, nationality, ability to read or write, race, physical and mental health, last residence, and the name and address of the nearest relative or friend in the immigrant's country of origin. Immigrants were asked whether they had at least $30; whether they had ever been in prison, an alms house, or an institution; or if they were polygamists or anarchists.

Steamship lines were also held accountable for medical examinations of the immigrants before departing the port. Most seaport medical examinations were made by doctors employed by the steamship lines, but often the examination was just too rapid to disclose any but the most obvious diseases and defects. Disinfection (of both immigrants and baggage) and vaccination were routinely performed at the ports.

Finally, with questions answered, medical exams completed, vaccinations still stinging and disinfectant still stinking, the immigrants were led to their accommodations. Steerage passengers walked past the tiny deck space, squeezed past the ship's machinery and were directed down steep stairways into the enclosed lower decks. They were now in steerage, which was to be their prison for the rest of their ocean journey.

Step Two: On Board

There were three types of accommodations on the ships that brought immigrants to America: first class, second class and steerage. Only steerage passengers were processed at Ellis Island. First and second-class passengers were quickly and courteously "inspected" onboard the ship before being transferred to New York.

Steerage was enormously profitable for steamship companies. Even though the average cost of a ticket was only $30, larger ships could hold from 1,500 to 2,000

immigrants, netting a profit of $45,000 to $60,000 for a single, one-way voyage. The cost to feed a single immigrant was only about 60 cents a day!

For most immigrants, especially early arrivals, the experience of steerage was like a nightmare (at one time, the average passenger mortality rate was 10 percent per voyage.) The conditions were so crowded, so dismally dark, so unsanitary and so foul smelling, that they were the single most important cause of America's early immigration laws. Unfortunately, the laws were almost impossible to enforce and steerage conditions remained deplorable, almost beyond belief. As late as 1911, in a report to President William H. Taft, the United States Immigration Commission said:

"The open deck space reserved for steerage passengers is usually very limited, and situated in the worst part of the ship, subject to the most violent motion, to the dirt from the stacks and the odors from the hold and galleys...the only provisions for eating are frequently shelves or benches along the sides or in the passages of sleeping compartments. Dining rooms are rare and, if found, are often shared with berths installed along the walls. Toilets and washrooms are completely inadequate; saltwater only is available.

"The ventilation is almost always inadequate, and the air soon becomes foul. The unattended vomit of the seasick, the odors of not too clean bodies, the reek of food and the awful stench of the nearby toilet rooms make the atmosphere of the steerage such that it is a marvel that human flesh can endure it. Most immigrants lie in their berths for most of the voyage, in a stupor caused by the foul air. The food often repels them. It is almost impossible to keep personally clean. All of these conditions are naturally aggravated by the crowding."

In spite of the miserable conditions, the immigrants had faith in the future. To pass the time — a crossing could take anywhere from 10 days to more than a month, depending on the ship and weather — they would play cards, sing, dance and talk...talk...talk...

Rumors about life in America, combined with stories about rejections and deportations at Ellis Island, circulated endlessly. There were rehearsals for answering the immigration inspectors' questions and hour upon hour was spent learning the strange new language.

By the time the tiring trip approached its long awaited end, most immigrants were in a state of shock: physically, mentally and emotionally. Yet, even with the shores of a new world looming before their eyes, and even with tears of relief streaming down their faces, their journey was not at an end.

Step Three: Inspection

Medical inspectors boarded incoming ships in the quarantine area at the entrance to the Lower Bay of New York Harbor. Ships were examined from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. Vessels arriving after 5 p.m. had to anchor for the night.

The quarantine examination was conducted aboard ship and reserved for first or second-class cabin passengers. U.S. citizens were exempt from the examination. Passengers were inspected for possible contagious diseases such as cholera, plague, smallpox, typhoid fever, yellow fever, scarlet fever, measles and diphtheria. Few cabin-class passengers were marked to be sent to Ellis Island for more complete examinations. For example, in 1905, of 100,000 cabin passengers arriving in New York, only 3,000 had to pass through Ellis Island for additional medical checks. During the same year, 800,000 steerage passengers were examined at the island.

After the visiting medical inspectors climbed down ladders to their waiting cutter, the ship would finally move north through the Narrows leading to Upper New York Bay and into the harbor. Slowly, the tip of Manhattan would come into view.

The first object to be seen, and the focus of every immigrant's attention, was the Statue of Liberty. Perhaps her overwhelming impact can best be described in the words of those who saw her in this way for the first time:

"I thought she was one of the seven wonders of the world," exclaimed a German nearing his 80th birthday.

A Polish man said: "The bigness of Mrs. Liberty overcame us. No one spoke a word for she was like a goddess and we know she represented the big, powerful country which was to be our future home."

Just beyond the statue, about a half-mile to the northwest, was Ellis Island.

After the ship had docked in Manhattan, while cabin passengers were being released to the freedom of New York, steerage passengers poured across the pier to a waiting area. Each wore a name tag with the individual's manifest number written in large figures. The immigrants were then assembled into groups of 30, according to manifest letters, and were packed on the top decks of barges while their baggage was piled on the lower decks.

When they finally landed, with the ground still swaying like waves beneath their feet and the shrill shouts of a dozen different languages assaulting their ears, they met their first

American, a nameless interpreter. In retrospect, it may be that these interpreters were the unsung heroes of the entire immigration screening process. Their patience and skill frequently helped save an immigrant from deportation.

The average number of languages spoken by an interpreter was six, but a dozen languages (including dialects) was not uncommon. The record for a single interpreter was 15 languages.

Interpreters led groups through the main doorway and directed them up a steep stairway to the Registry Room. Although they did not realize it, the immigrants were already taking their first test: A doctor stood at the top of the stairs watching for signs of lameness, heavy breathing that might indicate a heart condition or "bewildered gazes" that might be symptomatic of a mental condition.

As each immigrant passed, a doctor, with an interpreter at his side, would examine the immigrant's face, hair, neck and hands. The doctor held a piece of chalk. On about two out of every 10 or 11 immigrants who passed, he would scrawl a large white letter; that letter indicated whether or not that immigrant was to be detained for further medical inspection.

Should an immigrant be suspected of mental defects, an X was marked high on the front of the right shoulder; a plain X lower on the right shoulder indicated the suspicion of a deformity or disease; an X within a circle meant some definite symptom had been detected. And the "shorthand" continued: B indicated possible back problems; Pg, pregnancy; and so on. If an immigrant was marked, he or she continued with the process and then was directed to rooms set aside for further examination.

Sometimes whole groups would be made to bathe with disinfectant solutions before being cleared — not too surprising, considering how many were unable to bathe during the crossing. Again the line moved on. The next group of doctors were the dreaded "eye men." They were looking for symptoms of trachoma, an eye disease that caused blindness and even death. (This disease was the reason for more than half of the medical detentions and its discovery meant certain deportation.)

If immigrants had any of the diseases proscribed by the immigration laws, or were too ill or feeble-minded to earn a living, they would be deported. Sick children age 12 or older were sent back to Europe alone and were released in the port from which they had come. Children younger than 12 had to be accompanied by a parent. There were many tearful scenes as families with a sick child decided who would go and who would stay.

Immigrants who passed their medical exams were now ready to take the final test from the "primary line" inspector who was seated on a high stool with the ship's manifest on a desk in front of him and an interpreter at his side. This questioning process was designed to verify the 29 items of information contained on the manifest. Since each "primary line" inspector had only about two minutes in which to decide whether each immigrant was "clearly and beyond a doubt entitled to land," nearly all of the immigrants received curt nods of approval and were handed landing cards. Most passed the test; only two percent of the immigrants seeking refuge in America would fail to be admitted. After only a few more hours on Ellis Island, they were free to go. Their journey was nearly complete.

Step Four: Beyond Ellis Island

Those with landing cards in hand next moved to the Money Exchange. Here six cashiers exchanged gold, silver and paper money, from countries all over Europe, for American dollars, based on the day's official rates which were posted on a blackboard.

For immigrants traveling to cities or towns beyond New York City, the next stop was the railroad ticket office. There, a dozen agents collectively sold as many as 25 tickets per minute on the busiest days. Immigrants could wait in areas marked for each independent railroad line in the ferry terminal. When it was reasonably near the time for their train's departure, they would be ferried on barges to the train terminals in Jersey City or Hoboken. Immigrants going to New England went on the ferry to Manhattan.

All that remained was to make arrangements for their trunks, which were stored in the Baggage Room, to be sent on to their final destinations.

Finally! With admittance cards, railroad or ferry passes and box lunches in hand, the immigrants' journey to and through Ellis Island was complete. For many it had begun months or even years before. Some, of course, still had more traveling ahead of them — to the rocky shores of New England, to the great plains of the Midwest or to the orange groves of California.

But whatever lay ahead, in their hearts they could read the invisible sign that proclaimed, "Welcome to America."

For information on Ellis Island immigration records, please contact the National Archives, Northeast Region, 201 Varick Street, 12th Floor, New York, NY 10014; (212) 337-1300; or visit online at www.nara.gov.