

The Immigrant Experience

When the great steamships of the early 20th century sailed into New York Harbor, the faces of a thousand nations were on board. A broad, beaming, multicolored parade, these were the immigrants of the world: there were Russian Jews with fashioned beards, Irish farmers whose hands were weathered like the land they had left, Greeks in kilts and slippers, Italians with sharp moustaches, Cossacks with fierce swords, English in short knickers, and Arabs in long robes. The old world lay behind them. Ahead was a new life, huge and promising. Gone were the monarchies and kings, the systems of caste and peasantry, of famine and numbing poverty. But also left behind were friends and family, as well as tradition and customs generations old. As anchors slid into harbor silt, and whistles blew in rival chorus, this multitude clambered up from the steerage decks to fashion in their minds forever their first glimpse of America. The city skyline loomed over them like a great, blocky mountain range. Poet Walt Whitman described New York as the "City of the World (for all of races are here, all the lands of the earth make contributions here:) City of the sea! City of hurried and glittering tides! City whose gleeful tides continually rush and recede, whirling in and out with eddies and foam! City of wharves and stores-city of tall facades of marble and iron! Proud and passionate city-mettlesome, mad, extravagant, city!" Below, the harbor teemed with activity as tugboats churned river water and dockhands wrestled cargo at America's most populous port. Across the Hudson stood the mythic vision of America: salt-green and copper-clad, the Statue of Liberty offered a mute but powerful welcome. In the shadow of all the activity, on the New Jersey side of the river, were the red brick buildings of Ellis Island. The four towers of its largest building rose over 140 feet into the air, punctuating its already intimidating facade with ram-rod sternness. This was an official building, a place of rules and questions, of government and bureaucracy, where five thousand people a day were processed.

Men usually emigrated first, to find jobs and housing. Later they would send for their wives, children, and parents as part of the largest mass movement of people in world history. In all, close to 60 million people sought to find new

opportunities during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Some merely crossed borders in Europe but many headed for countries such as Australia, New Zealand, Brazil, Argentina, and Canada. The majority, however, headed to the United States where they heard promise of jobs, freedom, and a fortune to be made. In the hundred years previous to 1924, when the country's open-door abruptly shut, 34 million immigrants landed on America's soil. The earliest influx of new arrivals started in the mid 1840s when Europe felt the throes of a bitter famine. This First Wave of immigrants-primarily Northern Europeans from Ireland, England, Germany, and Scandinavia-fled starvation, feudal governments, and the social upheaval brought about by the Industrial Revolution. A Second Wave of immigrants streamed out of Southern and Eastern Europe from 1890-1924, accounting for the flood tide of new arrivals during America's peak immigration years. 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 by a series of pogroms, riots, and discriminatory laws enforced by the Czarist government. Similarly the Croats and the Serbs in Hungary, the Poles in Germany, and the Irish persecuted under English rule all saw America as a land of freedom, as well as opportunity.