

Letter From Ellis Island

Once, Ellis Island was the gateway to America, a stepping stone to streets paved with gold. Now it is a museum, a shrine to an American dream wearing thin around the edges.

A museum wall papered with steamship tickets reads like an atlas of cautious dreams. More than 12 million immigrants entered the United States through Ellis Island, in upper New York Bay, between 1892 and 1924.

Journeys began in Poland, Russia, Italy and Ireland, through ports in Hamburg, Antwerp and Liverpool. People fled pogroms in Czarist Russia, massacres in Armenia, overpopulation and unemployment across Europe, rampant nationalism, numbing poverty. It was time to leave.

For steamship companies, immigrants were profitable, self-loading cargo. They travelled in steerage, the cramped lower decks where as many as 2,000 metal-frame berths were squeezed into low-ceilinged apartments.

Lives were stuffed into suitcases, trunks, baskets and cloth bags. Displayed in the museum's Treasures from Home are Sarah Barmashenko's sugar dish, Antonina Casaburi's candelabra, Ina Whitehorne's spice shaker and Charles Magill's donkey-shoe good-luck piece, a gift from his father when he left Carncastle.

Giovanni Stramesi kept the key to his home in Biella, in case he returned to the Italian village.

Mr, Stramesi, Ms. Barmashenko and Ms. Whitehorne all passed through Ellis Island's cavernous registry room, where as many as 5,000 immigrants a day were processed. Dropping their bags on the first floor, weary from their voyage, the new arrivals lined up along the staircase to the registry room to wait like cattle. Wooden benches gradually replaced the wire-cages and iron pipes that channeled the steady flow. Dull-eyed with quiet fear and guarded hope, they were scanned by doctors and prodded by registration clerks in a language they rarely understood. Your name? Your destination? How much money do you have?

At night, the dormitories on Ellis Island were filled with immigrants who were temporarily detained, the ones branded with a chalk X. One dormitory room has been preserved, with canvas mattresses hooked by chains to metal frames. Each month, 1,000 immigrants were turned away, usually because they lacked funds or railway tickets. Some took their lives instead of a boat back.

Immigrants arrived expecting streets of gold; no one told them they'd be doing the paving. Stark photographs document the dank working conditions they endured. From the subways and sweatshops of New York to the textile mills of New England, immigrants toiled at low wages. Children laboured for 12 hours a day in glass factories, farms, canneries and mines.

Communities were sometimes slow to roll out the welcome wagon. A 1902 poster announced an anti-Chinese mass meeting at the Lyceum Theatre in Tacoma, Wash. A Ku Klux Klan pamphlet warned of "The Menace of Modern Immigration." Political cartoons from the time punctured the double standards of restrictionists whose roots in America were hardly deep.

"Those who are loudest in their cry of America for America do not have to look very far back to find an ancestor who was immigrant," the New Immigrants' Protective League wrote in 1906.

Eighty-five years later, the league's words resonate. Today, 100 million Americans can trace their roots to this small island off the tip of Manhattan. Down in Florida, desperate Haitians in leaking boats are turned away before they reach the treasured shore. Mexicans are smuggled over the border in trucks and left to die of dehydration. Hostility to immigrants grows; recessions breed resentment.

"Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free," the Statue of Liberty proclaims, as she keeps a watchful eye on Ellis Island and the promised land. Times are tough, and she has only the clothes on her back. She'd have a hard time getting in.

Emil Sher

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