

THE GOLDEN DOOR



The unveiling of the Statue of Liberty.

On a small island in New York harbor stands a giant statue of a robed woman. She looks out to sea, her right arm holding a torch high in the air. She is the Statue of Liberty, one of the best-known landmarks in the world. The Statue of Liberty was presented to the United States in 1886. It was given by the people of France to mark the hundredth anniversary of the War of Independence.

For millions of immigrants the Statue of Liberty has been their first sight of America. Carved on its base are words that for more than a hundred years now have offered them hope:

Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore
Send these, the homeless tempest-tossed to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door.

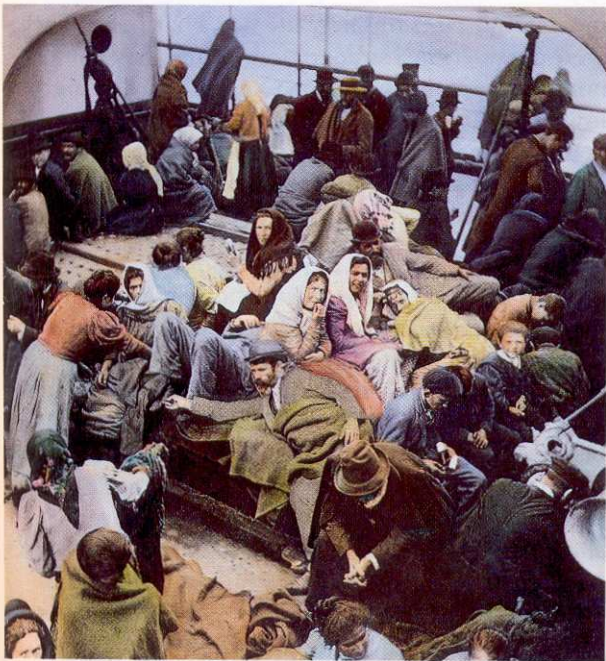
The story of the American people is a story of immigrants. More than 75 percent of all the people in history who have ever left their homelands to live in another country have moved to the United States. In the course of its history it has taken in more people from other lands than any other country in the world. Since the founding of Jamestown in 1607 more than fifty million people from other lands have made new homes there.

Between 1840 and 1860 more immigrants than ever before arrived. Most came from Europe. Poor crops, hunger and political unrest caused an estimated five million Europeans a year to leave the lands of their birth at this time. More of them went to the United States than to any other country.

Among these immigrants were many Irish people. The Irish depended for food upon their crops of potatoes. For five years after 1845 these became diseased and rotted in the fields. About 750,000 Irish people starved to death. Many of the survivors left Ireland and went to the United States. In 1847 alone more than 118,000 of them immigrated there. By 1860 one in every four of the people living in the city of New York had been born in Ireland. Today more than thirteen million Americans have Irish ancestors.

During the Civil War in the 1860s the federal government encouraged more emigration from Europe. It did this by offering land to immigrants who would serve as soldiers in the Union armies. By 1865 about one in five of the soldiers in the armies of the North was a wartime immigrant. Many had come from Germany. Today about one in three of all Americans have German ancestors.

Ireland is in the west of Europe. Germany is in the north. Until about 1880 most immigrants to the United States came from these regions. Then a big change took place. More emigrants from lands in the south and east of Europe began to arrive—Italians, Poles, Greeks, Russians, Hungarians, Czechs. By 1896 more than half of all the immigrants entering the United States were from eastern or southern Europe.



Immigrants sailing to America.

Many Jewish people came to the United States at this time. In the 1880s Jews were being killed all over eastern Europe in bloody massacres called “pogroms.” Many thousands escaped by leaving for the United States. Leon Stein was the son of one of them. Many years later he explained why his father, despite the hardship that he suffered in America, had wanted to live there:

“... the exploitation of labor was fearful and my father was having a terrible time. He was just getting by, making a living working twelve to fourteen hours a day. And he was suffering like a coal miner suffers, because in the sweat-shops [clothing factories], at that time, instead of coal dust what you got was lint ... Lint got down the throat and into the lungs and caused the same coughing, the same diseases, the same sickness as dust. And in the end it killed you. And in the end it probably was what killed him ...

But he still wanted to live in America. He never became rich, he never became successful—and he never became bitter ... Remember, he had come from a place where, if you were Jewish, you didn’t count as a human being and you had no rights at all. In America they gave my father the vote, they allowed him a place to live, and they let his children

grow up as Americans. Because of that he could never feel bitter ...”

Between 1880 and 1925 about two million Jews entered the United States. Today there are about 5.7 million Jewish Americans and they make up about 2.2 percent of the total population of the United States. In certain states along the Atlantic coast the percentage of Jews is higher. In the state of New York, for example, one person in ten is Jewish.

So many immigrants wanted to enter the United States in the late 1800s that the government found it difficult to keep check on them. To control the situation it opened a special place of entry in New York harbor. This place was called Ellis Island. All intending immigrants were examined there before they were allowed to enter the United States.

Ellis Island was opened in 1892. During its busiest times it dealt with almost 2,000 immigrants a day. Between its opening and 1954, when it closed its

Leaving home

Leon Stein’s mother was born in a small village in Lithuania. At the age of eighty-six she still remembered vividly the day in 1908 that she left her village and set off for America as an immigrant:

“I remember it clearly. The whole village turned out to wave us goodbye and we were all sitting in the cart with our little bundles on our laps and our shawls around our shoulders. I was excited a little bit, but mostly rather miserable and frightened. As the cart got to the end of the village street I could see the group of villagers who were waving us goodbye was getting smaller and smaller, but I kept my eyes fixed on my mother in the front of that little group. I didn’t take my eyes off her ... Then, just before the cart turned the corner and I lost sight of them, I saw my mother faint and fall to the ground crying and weeping, and I saw the rest of the group bend over her to pick her up, and I tried to get out of the cart and run back to her and stay with her. But the others with me in the cart stopped me and held onto me. And the cart turned the corner. And I was weeping and struggling and they were holding me. And I never saw my mother again.”



Immigrant children being examined by a health officer at Ellis Island.

doors, more than twenty million people waited anxiously in its halls and corridors. Immigration officers asked these people questions to find out if they were criminals or mentally abnormal. Doctors examined them for disease. A letter chalked on their clothing – H for heart disease or E for eye disease – could end their hopes of a new life in America.

But most passed the examinations. Almost half of all present-day Americans have ancestors who entered the United States by way of Ellis Island. Listen to Leon Stein again. One day in the 1970s he stood in Ellis Island's echoing, empty Great Hall and spoke quietly of the way that it made him feel:

"My parents came through this place at the turn of the century. How can I stand here and not be moved? I feel it is haunted. I think if you become really quiet you can actually hear all the crying, all the feeling, all the impatience, all the misunderstanding that went on in this hall. Being born again is not an easy thing and the people who came through here were being born again. This was their gateway to hope, to a new life."

The immigrants found work in busy cities like New York, Chicago and Pittsburgh – stitching garments, feeding furnaces, laboring on factory assembly lines, hacking out coal. They worked hard because they wanted to make a success of their new life. Yet for

most immigrants this new life was a hard one. They were outsiders in a strange land. Often they could not even speak its language. Only the hardest and lowest paid jobs were open to them. Like Leon Stein's father, they had to work for long hours in dangerous conditions and to live in overcrowded slums that were breeding places of disease and misery.

Yet bad as conditions were, they often seemed preferable to those the immigrants had left behind in Europe. In the United States they were free from religious and political persecution. They were often better dressed and better fed than they had ever been before. They marveled at such wonders as free schools for their children, at the lamps glowing along the city streets at nights, and at the fact that soap was cheap enough to be used by everyone! So the immigrants continued to pour in. By 1910 it was estimated that 14.5 percent of the people then living in the United States had been born in other countries.

This flood of immigrants worried many Americans. They accused immigrants of taking jobs away from American-born workers, of lowering standards of health and education, and of threatening the country's traditions and way of life by bringing in "un-American" political ideas like anarchism and communism.



The Cliff Dwellers – a painting that shows the slum conditions in which many immigrants lived.

Melting pot or salad bowl?

In 1908 Israel Zangwill wrote a play, *The Melting Pot*. The hero, a refugee from persecution in Czarist Russia, escapes to the United States. In the final scene he speaks with enthusiasm about the mixture of peoples in his new homeland:

"America is God's Crucible, the great Melting Pot where all the races of Europe are melting and reforming! . . . Here you stand in your fifty groups with your fifty languages and histories, and your fifty blood hatreds and rivalries, but you won't be like that for long, brothers, for these are the fires of God you've come to—these are the fires of God. . . . German and Frenchman, Irishman and Englishman, Jews and Russians—into the Crucible with you all! God is making the American . . . He will be the fusion of all races, the coming superman."

Zangwill's play was a great success. This was perhaps because many in the audiences who came to see it found its message reassuring. At a time when poor and uneducated immigrants from Europe were flooding into the United States in millions, it was comforting for Americans to be told that their country could turn the newcomers into Americans like themselves.

In fact this never really happened, at least not completely. The United States turned out to be more of a salad bowl than a melting pot. Groups from similar national and ethnic backgrounds often stayed together, keeping alive their old identities and many of their old customs. They lived in "Chinatowns" or "Little Italys," areas populated almost entirely by Americans of similar ethnic origins. Such districts can still be found in many large American cities.

Americans from different immigrant backgrounds do mix together in time. It has been estimated, for example, that about 80 percent of the great-grandchildren of early-twentieth-century European immigrants marry outside their own ethnic groups. Yet such third generation Americans often cling with pride to important elements of their ethnic heritage. So do many Americans whose immigrant origins are even further in the past.

Such accusations were not new. In the 1860s, Chinese workers had been brought to California to build the railroads. The fact that Chinese laborers were willing to work for less pay caused American workers to dislike them. They felt threatened by these people with a different language and a different racial appearance. Chinese communities in the West were attacked and their buildings were burned down. Henry Sienkiewicz, a visitor from Poland, described a scene he witnessed in 1876:

"I was in San Francisco the night a massacre of the Chinese was expected. By the light streaming from burning buildings along the coast marched huge, menacing crowds of workers, carrying banners bearing such inscriptions as the following: 'Self preservation is the first law of nature.' . . . Order was at last restored, but only after the railroads, which had provoked the disturbances by reducing the wages of white men, agreed not to reduce wages and to dismiss their Chinese employees."

In 1882 the strength of anti-Chinese feeling caused Congress to ban most Chinese immigration. Japanese and other Asian immigrants were refused entry as well and by 1924 no Asian immigrants were permitted into the United States. The ban lasted until after the Second World War.

In the 1920s Congress passed laws to limit all kinds of immigration. The one which had most effect was the Reed-Johnson Immigration Act of 1924. This law was an answer to the fears and the prejudices of Americans who were descendants of earlier north European immigrants. It said that in the future no more than 150,000 immigrants a year would be let into the United States. Each country which sent immigrants was given a "quota" which was based on the number of its people already living in the United States. The more it had there already, the more new immigrants it would be allowed to send.

The 1924 system was designed mainly to reduce immigration from southern and eastern Europe. Once it began, 87 percent of the immigration permits went to immigrants from Britain, Ireland, Germany and Scandinavia—the countries from which the ancestors of most 1920s Americans had come.

The 1924 Immigration Act marked the end of one of the most important population movements in the history of the world.