

At Ellis Island

“The day of the emigrants’ arrival in New York was the nearest earthly likeness to the final Day of Judgment, when we have to prove our fitness to enter Heaven.” So remarked one of those admirable journalists who in the early 1900’s exposed themselves to the experience of the immigrants and came to share many of their feelings. No previous difficulties roused such overflowing anxiety, sometimes self-destructive panic, as the anticipated test

of Ellis Island.* Nervous chatter, foolish rumors spread through each cluster of immigrants:

"There is Ellis Island!" shouted an immigrant who had already been in the United States and knew of its alien laws. The name acted like magic. Faces grew taut, eyes narrowed. There, in those red buildings, fate awaited them. Were they ready to enter? Or were they to be sent back?

"Only God knows," shouted an elderly man, his withered hand gripping the railing.

Numbered and lettered before debarking, in groups corresponding to entries on the ship's manifest, the immigrants are herded onto the Customs Wharf. "Quick! Run! Hurry!" shout officials in half a dozen languages.

On Ellis Island they pile into the massive hall that occupies the entire width of the building. They break into dozens of lines, divided by metal railings, where they file past the first doctor. Men whose breathing is heavy, women trying to hide a limp or deformity behind a large bundle—these are marked with chalk, for later inspection. Children over the age of two must walk by themselves, since it turns out that not all can. (A veteran inspector recalls: "Whenever a case aroused suspicion, the alien was set aside in a cage apart from the rest . . . and his coat lapel or shirt marked with colored chalk, the color indicating why he had been isolated.") One out of five or six needs further medical checking—H chalked for heart, K for hernia, Sc for scalp, X for mental defects.

An interpreter asks each immigrant a question or two: can he respond with reasonable alertness? Is he dull-witted? A question also to each child: make sure he's not deaf or dumb. A check for TB, regarded as "the Jewish disease."

* Ellis Island was opened as an immigration center in 1892, shortly after the federal government took over the supervision of incoming aliens. Until 1890 the matter had been in the hands of the states, and in New York, starting in 1855, immigrants were received at Castle Garden, a massive structure built in 1807 as a fort on a small island close to the west side of the Battery (later attached to it through landfill). During the early 1850's Castle Garden had been used as a concert hall; Jenny Lind and Lola Montez performed there.

By the 1880's it became clear that Castle Garden could not possibly take care of the thousands of immigrants arriving each week. In the late 1880's several government investigations were held into conditions at Castle Garden, at which missionaries testified that immigrants were forced to sleep on hard floors, some were made to pay twice for shipment of their baggage, and others were cheated by money-changers who hung about the Battery like leeches. One of the New York state commissioners testified that the Castle Garden operation was "a perfect farce."

These scandals were compounded in regard to immigrants detained for medical examination, who were sent to Ward's Island in the East River. Here, writes Edward Corsi, a commissioner of immigration for the New York district at a later time, "riots occurred frequently. Many immigrants escaped by swimming to the Manhattan shore [an exaggeration—I.H.], asking to be arrested and confined in the New York jails, rather than remain there with the insane and, as some charged, in a state of starvation. An investigation on one occasion revealed the startling fact that the bodies of dead immigrants were being used for purposes of dissection."

Then a sharp turn to the right, where the second doctor waits, a specialist in "contagious and loathsome diseases." Leprosy? Venereal disease? Favus, "a contagious disease of the skin, especially of the scalp, due to a parasitic fungus, marked by the formation of yellow flattened scabs and baldness"?

Then to the third doctor, often feared the most. He

stands directly in the path of the immigrant, holding a little stick in his hand. By a quick movement and the force of his own compelling gaze, he catches the eyes of his subject and holds them. You will see the immigrant stop short, lift his head with a quick jerk, and open his eyes very wide. The inspector reaches with a swift movement, catches the eyelash with his thumb and finger, turns it back, and peers under it. If all is well, the immigrant is passed on. . . . Most of those detained by the physician are Jews.

The eye examination hurts a little. It terrifies the children. Nurses wait with towels and basins filled with disinfectant. They watch for trachoma, cause of more than half the medical detentions. It is a torment hard to understand, this first taste of America, with its poking of flesh and prying into private parts and mysterious chalking of clothes.*

Again into lines, this time according to nationality. They are led to stalls at which multilingual inspectors ask about character, anarchism, polygamy, insanity, crime, money, relatives, work. You have a job waiting? Who paid your passage? Anyone meeting you? Can you read and write? Ever in prison? Where's your money?

For Jewish immigrants, especially during the years before agencies like the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) could give them advice, these questions pose a dilemma: to be honest or to lie? Is it good to have money or not? Can you bribe these fellows, as back home, or is it a mistake to try? Some are so accustomed to bend and evade and slip a ruble into a waiting hand that they get themselves into trouble with needless lies. "Our Jews," writes a Yiddish paper,

love to get tangled up with dishonest answers, so that the officials have no choice but to send them to the detention area. A Jew who had money in his pocket decided to lie and said he didn't have a penny. . . . A woman with four children and pregnant with a fifth, said her husband had been in America

* Years later a scrupulous British ambassador, A. C. Geddes, visited Ellis Island and reported back to his government. By 1922, when he wrote, the high point of immigration had been passed, yet conditions struck him as bad:

"The line of male immigrants approached the first medical officer with their trousers open. The doctor examined their external genitalia for signs of venereal infection. Next he examined inguinal canals for hernia. The doctor wore rubber gloves. I saw him 'do' nine or ten men. His gloves were not cleansed between cases. I saw one nice, clean-looking Irish boy examined immediately after a very unpleasant-looking individual . . . I saw the boy shudder. I did not wonder. The doctor's rubber gloves were with hardly a second's interval in contact with his private parts after having been soiled, in the surgical sense at least, by contact with those of the unpleasant-looking individual."

fourteen years. . . . The HIAS man learned that her husband had recently arrived, but she thought fourteen years would make a better impression. The officials are sympathetic. They know the Jewish immigrants get "confused" and tell them to sit down and "remember." Then they let them in.

Especially bewildering is the idea that if you say you have a job waiting for you in the United States, you are liable to deportation—because an 1885 law prohibits the importation of contract labor. But doesn't it "look better" to say a job is waiting for you? No, the HIAS man patiently explains, it doesn't. Still, how can you be sure *he* knows what he's talking about? Just because he wears a little cap with those four letters embroidered on it?

Except when the flow of immigrants was simply beyond the staff's capacity to handle it, the average person passed through Ellis Island in about a day. Ferries ran twenty-four hours a day between the island and both the Battery and points in New Jersey. As for the unfortunates detained for medical or other reasons, they usually had to stay at Ellis Island for one or two weeks. Boards of special inquiry, as many as four at a time, would sit in permanent session, taking up cases where questions had been raised as to the admissibility of an immigrant, and it was here, in the legal infighting and appeals to sentiment, that HIAS proved especially valuable.

The number of those detained at the island or sent back to Europe during a given period of time varied according to the immigration laws then in effect (see pp. 53–54) and, more important, according to the strictness with which they were enforced. It is a sad irony, though familiar to students of democratic politics, that under relatively lax administrations at Ellis Island, which sometimes allowed rough handling of immigrants and even closed an eye to corruption, immigrants had a better chance of getting past the inspectors than when the commissioner was a public-spirited Yankee intent upon literal adherence to the law.

Two strands of opinion concerning Ellis Island have come down to us, among both historians and the immigrant masses themselves: first, that the newcomers were needlessly subjected to bad treatment, and second, that most of the men who worked there were scrupulous and fair, though often overwhelmed by the magnitude of their task.

The standard defense of Ellis Island is offered by an influential historian of immigration, Henry Pratt Fairchild:

During the year 1907 five thousand was fixed as the maximum number of immigrants who could be examined at Ellis Island in one day; yet during the spring of that year more than fifteen thousand immigrants arrived at the port of New York in a single day.

As to the physical handling of the immigrants, this is [caused] by the need for haste. . . . The conditions of the voyage are not calculated to land the immigrant in an alert and clear-headed state. The bustle, confusion, rush and size of Ellis Island complete the work, and leave the average alien in a state of stupor. . . . He is in no condition to understand a carefully-worded

explanation of what he must do, or why he must do it, even if the inspector had the time to give it. The one suggestion which is immediately comprehensible to him is a pull or a push; if this is not administered with actual violence, there is no unkindness in it.

Reasonable as it may seem, this analysis meshed Yankee elitism with a defense of the bureaucratic mind. Immigrants *were* disoriented by the time they reached Ellis Island, but they remained human beings with all the sensibilities of human beings; the problem of numbers *was* a real one, yet it was always better when interpreters offered a word of explanation than when they resorted to "a pull or a push." Against the view expressed by Fairchild, we must weigh the massive testimony of the immigrants themselves, the equally large body of material gathered by congressional investigations, and such admissions, all the more telling because casual in intent, as that of Commissioner Corsi: "Our immigration officials have not always been as humane as they might have been." The Ellis Island staff was often badly overworked, and day after day it had to put up with an atmosphere of fearful anxiety which required a certain deadening of response, if only by way of self-defense. But it is also true that many of the people who worked there were rather simple fellows who lacked the imagination to respect cultural styles radically different from their own.*

One interpreter who possessed that imagination richly was a young Italo-American named Fiorello La Guardia, later to become an insurgent mayor of New York. "I never managed during the years I worked there to become callous to the mental anguish, the disappointment and the despair I witnessed almost daily. . . . At best the work was an ordeal." For those who cared to see, and those able to feel, there could finally be no other verdict.