



*“ 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. ”*

**SOURCE 1** The Statue of Liberty. Carved at the base of the statue was a poem by Emma Lazarus written in 1886

# 1 WHAT WAS LIFE LIKE IN THE LAND OF THE FREE?

## Coming to America

**B**ETWEEN 1850 AND 1914, over 40 million people (about 10 per cent of the population of Europe) left the Old World for America. It was a chance to start a new life in a country of golden opportunities. For most people, the two-week voyage to the USA was a hard one. They travelled in the cheapest class where the cramped conditions allowed little privacy. Rough weather, common on the Atlantic crossing, added to their misery.

So the IMMIGRANTS' first view of America, the Statue of Liberty, was a heartening one that marked the beginning of their new life. Or did it? First they had to pass through the immigration processing centre on Ellis Island – and there was no guarantee that they would get through.



**SOURCE 1** Emigrants aboard the SS *Westernland*, c. 1890

**SOURCE 3** Edward Corsi, *In the Shadow of Liberty*, 1935

“My first impressions of the New World will always be etched in my memory, particularly that hazy October morning (in 1907) . . . The steamer, Florida, fourteen days out of Naples, filled to capacity with sixteen hundred natives of Italy, had weathered one of the worst storms in our captain’s memory . . . My mother, my stepfather, my brother Giuseppe, and my two sisters, Liberta and Helvetia, all of us together, happy we had come through the storm safely, clustered on the foredeck for fear of separation and looked in wonder on this miraculous land of our dreams . . .

Passengers all about us were crowding against the rail. Jabbered conversations, sharp cries, laughs and cheers – a steadily rising din filled the air. Mothers and fathers lifted up their babies so that they too could see the Statue of Liberty . . . This symbol of America inspired awe in the hopeful immigrants. Many older persons among us, burdened with a thousand memories of what they were leaving behind, had been openly weeping . . .

Directly in front of the Florida, half visible in the faintly-coloured haze, rose a second and even greater challenge to the imagination.

‘Mountains!’ I cried to Giuseppe. ‘Look at them!’ ‘They’re strange,’ he said, ‘why don’t they have snow on them?’

He was craning his neck and standing on tiptoe to stare at the New York skyline.

Stepfather looked towards the skyscrapers, and, smiling, assured us that they were not mountains but buildings – ‘the highest buildings in the world!’ ”



**SOURCE 2** Engraving of Jewish REFUGEES from Russia passing the Statue of Liberty, *Harper’s Weekly*, 1892

## The Isle of Tears

After their ship had docked, the immigrants, carrying their few belongings, were put on the ferry to Ellis Island where they were registered. With mixed feelings of excitement, fear and apprehension they waited in long queues to face a series of tests which would decide whether they were to be admitted or not.

It was the medical tests they feared most. Doctors looked for mental or physical abnormalities, marking immigrants' clothes with chalk: 'X' for mental illness, 'H' for heart and so on. Then the doctors checked for contagious diseases, such as trachoma – they used button hooks to lift up eyelids to check for this blinding disease. Anybody who was thought to have any illness was detained for days or sometimes weeks.

For those who did get through the first stage there were still more questions – about occupations, whether they could read or write and about their financial situation. Names were a problem as officials often could not understand them. Many immigrants ended up getting new names on their

**SOURCE 5** The Great Hall at Ellis Island served as the main inspection hall



**SOURCE 4** A group of slavic immigrants being led upstairs to the Great Hall, 1905. Between 1900 and 1915, as many as 5000 immigrants arrived at Ellis Island every day



registration forms. One confused German Jew, when asked his name, said 'Ich vergesse' (I forget) and instantly became 'Ferguson' on his documents.

Many immigrants were detained for reasons other than illness. Young women on their own were held until relatives came for them. It was thought that a single woman might become destitute and turn to prostitution. Some immigrants had to wait for money from relatives before they were allowed to enter America.



**SOURCE 6** Public Health Service doctor examining an immigrant's eyes for trachoma at Ellis Island

Ellis Island was the end of the line for the old, ill and illiterate, and those who were seen as undesirable. They were sent back to Europe. In 1911 for instance, around two per cent were not allowed in. For them, Ellis Island was aptly named the 'Isle of Tears'.

But for the vast majority who passed the tests, it was down the grand staircase from the Great Hall, through the door marked 'Push to New York' and onto the ferry for Manhattan. There they could buy food and train tickets – railway agents could sell up to 25 tickets a minute on a busy day. Many immigrants still had long distances to travel before reaching their final destination in America. But their new life had begun.

**SOURCE 7** Angelo Pelligrini, Italian immigrant, talks about his family's stay on Ellis Island as they went through the tests for admission

*“ We lived there for three days – Mother and we five children, the youngest of whom was three years old. Because of the rigorous physical examination that we had to submit to, particularly of the eyes, there was terrible anxiety that one of us might be rejected. And if one of us was, what would the rest of the family do? My sister was indeed momentarily rejected; she had been so ill and had cried so much that her eyes were absolutely bloodshot, and Mother was told, ‘Well, we can't let her in.’ But fortunately Mother was an indomitable spirit and finally made them understand that if her child had a few hours' rest and a little bite to eat she would be all right. In the end we did get through. ”*



**SOURCE 8** Immigrants who have successfully passed the admission tests, waiting to go to Manhattan. Between 1892 and 1924, Ellis Island handled 90 per cent of all immigrants arriving in the USA. Some people spent days on the island; others only a few hours before being allowed to leave for Manhattan