

# ELLIS ISLAND PAYS TRIBUTE TO IMMIGRANTS

RECENT RENOVATIONS  
DON'T WHITEWASH PAST

by ELLEN PERLMAN  
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The building looms larger and is increasingly formidable as the boat draws near. Even on a gray fall day on a boat filled with cocoa-sipping day-trippers from New Jersey, it's a daunting structure.

What must it have looked like to my grandmother, who approached this same immigration station on Ellis Island in 1921 on a ship filled with desperate immigrants? She was 16-year-old Ida Shustek and home had been Siedlec, Poland. Bolshevik soldiers periodically ransacked their home, and a younger sister had starved to death. After a miserable three-week journey from Danzig - complete with a contagious disease that swept through steerage and forced a 10-day quarantine - here finally was the gateway to the America she had dreamed of for so long.

But only if her family passed muster. All had heard stories of families turned away, of those who committed suicide rather than return to a life of poverty or oppression.

"We saw the Statue of Liberty, and we were screaming and hollering, 'America, America,'" my grandmother says in her Yiddish-tinged accent. She died in 1986, but I can still hear her voice.

So can visitors today. She's one of the recorded narrators of the Ellis Island experience that modern visitors can hear as they tour the restored immigration halls. For her, and for millions of other arriving Americans, those nervous steps up these concrete paths were the first steps of a new life.

I had heard the family stories. Now I was on my approach to Ellis Island, watching the French Renaissance building loom large. I felt a shiver, not only because I was imagining my grandmother's experience but also because I was afraid of what I would find inside.



*The author's grandmother, Ida Shustek, immigrated to the United States from Sidelec, Poland, when she was 16 years old. Pictured is her Polish passport.*

I had been to the island once before in the late '70s, when it was decrepit and hosted few visitors. Among the dirt and grime and peeling paint were authentic echoes of the past as my family walked through with a park ranger. Now I was loath to step into a building I imagined would be a gussied-up, Disneyfied version of history after undergoing a major renovation and reopening in 1990.

I shouldn't have worried. Black-and-white photos, voice recordings of immigrants and exhibits of their belongings, from suitcases to feather beds to drinking glasses, shed light on a fascinating piece of this country's past.

They told the story of the peak immigration years from 1892 to 1924, when more than 12 million people came through this port of entry.

Today visitors take a ferry from New York or New Jersey. I left from Liberty State Park in Jersey City, where parking is plentiful and lines are usually short. Parts of the 27-acre island actually fall within New Jersey's border, according to a 1998 Supreme Court ruling, although the museum is considered to be in New York.

In the old days, the boats docked and families checked their baggage while they were being processed. My relatives didn't have much to check. "I had a pair of stockings, that's all, and one dress my grandmother made me," my grandmother says on tape. "What we had? You shouldn't know what we had."

I rented an audio tour and, with Tom Brokaw's voice in my ear, walked up a set of stairs to the registry room. It's a beautiful, high-ceilinged space with windows facing New York City on one side and Lady Liberty on the other. I imagined immigrants looking longingly at both.

As new arrivals ascended the stairs, medical officers on the second floor looked over the rail, watching for signs of ill health. The inspectors then chalked the poor souls' clothing. A "C" for conjunctivitis, "L" for lameness, "S" for senility, a whole alphabet soup of condemnation.

I felt rage at the indignity of it. Here at Ellis Island, the grandmother I loved so much, the one who cooked chicken soup and baked cookies in her comfortable East Village apartment in New York, was a name on a list, an alien inspected like a suspicious package, a nobody who had to prove herself. To add further insult, first- and second-class passengers on her ship were dropped off directly in Manhattan. Only steerage passengers went through the Ellis Island ordeal.

I heard charming stories, too. People who had come from small villages were thrown in with others from so many different places. They saw skin colors and features they'd never seen before. On the audio tour, one woman describes her wonder at seeing a woman in stylish pointy-toed shoes. "What kind of place is this? Some people have pointy feet."



*The Registry Room at Ellis Island as it appeared circa 1900.*

During the hours they spent at Ellis Island, my grandmother's family was given some food, much of it unfamiliar. "They gave us a banana. I never saw a banana in my whole life," she says. "I tried to eat the banana with the skin, and everybody looked at me like (I was) crazy."

Today, the registry room's tile floors shine and light streams in from the windows. Back then, the room was packed with people shuffling along in lines, waiting to get to the inspection desks, where officials asked questions and compared their answers with the ship's paperwork to see if they were eligible to enter.

The inspectors asked my grandmother's reticent little brother, whose belly was distended from hunger, what was wrong with him. Finally he blurted, "I got a big belly," and they passed him. "They wanted to know if he knows how to talk, that's all," my grandmother explains.

They made it through. Waiting at the other end was her father, who had left Poland to find work when she was just 8 years old. When World War I broke out, he couldn't make it back as planned. Now, having sent them money for passage, he was there, ready to take the family to his Bronx home - in a taxi, no less. Not only had my grandmother never seen a taxi, she had never seen a car.

I, too, left New Jersey by car. I had bought it with some of the money my once-poor grandmother left each of her seven grandchildren when she died. She says on tape she would have given her life for this country where she had such opportunity.



*The Registry Room at Ellis Island as it looks today.*

The other night, I talked to my grandmother's kid sister on the phone, my 96-year-old great-aunt Frieda. Her voice sounded like my grandmother's. And at the end of our conversation, she said the same thing my grandmother said on that tape 16 years ago: "God bless America."