



When immigrants arrived at Ellis Island, they faced the dreaded medical inspection. Those judged to be in poor health had to stay on Ellis Island until they were well. Those who never improved were sent home.

pogroms: Organized and often violent persecutions of minority groups. The word *pogrom* comes from Russian words meaning “like thunder.”

25.4 Jewish Immigrants from Eastern Europe

Maryusha Antonovksy was no more. In her place stood Mary Antin, the same immigrant Jewish girl but with a new, “American,” name. Mary had also bought “real American machine-made garments” to replace her “hateful” homemade European-style clothes. “I long to forget,” she said. “It is painful to be conscious of two worlds.”

Fleeing Persecution Mary Antin’s first world had been a Jewish village in Russia. For centuries, Russians had resented Jews, who dressed, worshiped, and ate differently from their Christian neighbors. By the 1800s, Russia had hundreds of anti-Jewish laws. Jews could live only in certain areas. They couldn’t live in big cities or own land.

In 1881, assassins killed the Russian monarch Czar Alexander II. Nervous government leaders blamed

Jews for his murder, even though the assassin wasn’t Jewish. Angry Russians raged through Jewish villages, burning, looting, and killing. These attacks, called **pogroms**, happened repeatedly for more than 30 years.

Many Jews fled these terrors, hoping to find refuge in America. Between 1881 and 1924, some 2.4 million Jews came to the United States from Russia and other countries in eastern Europe. Mary Antin’s father was one of them.

Mary’s father left for America in 1891, hoping to earn enough money to send for his family. In his first letter home, Mary sensed “an elation [joy], a hint of triumph.... My father was inspired by a vision. He saw something—he promised us something. It was this ‘America.’”

When Antin sent a steamship ticket for his family to join him, the people in Mary’s village gathered, filled with longing. “They wanted to handle the ticket,” Mary remembered, “and mother must read them what is written on it.”

After long rides in overcrowded trains and weeks of delay, Mary’s family finally boarded a ship in Hamburg, Germany. Although richer immigrants enjoyed comfortable cabins, the Antins were crowded together with hundreds of other passengers deep down in the ship. Seasick at first, they frequently came up on deck for fresh air, where “sailors and girls had a good many dances.”

Like most European immigrants, the Antins entered the United States via New York Harbor. Wealthier passengers in first-class and second-class cabins were questioned briefly before being admitted to their new country. But the majority of arrivals were taken on crowded barges to the immigration station on Ellis Island. Often they had to wait for hours while inspectors and doctors examined each person. Fortunately, most new arrivals spent less than a day on the island before proceeding to shore and the beginning of their new life in America.

Jewish Life in America From Ellis Island, Jews headed for New York City’s Lower East Side neighborhood. There they established shops, newspapers, religious schools, and synagogues (community centers and places of worship). The Lower East Side became the most densely populated neighborhood in the city. People lived packed into cheap tenements, often sleeping three or four to a room.

Some Jews worked as street vendors, using a pushcart to sell everything from coal to second-hand clothes. Pushcart vendors saved their money to buy horse-drawn carts and then little stores. Although most Jews were poor, they arrived in America with a wide range of skills. Jews worked as cobblers, butchers, carpenters, and watchmakers. Almost half found jobs in the city’s garment factories.

Jewish immigrants did whatever they could to keep their children in school. In Europe, Jews had honored educated people, but schooling had cost money. As a result, many Jews had never learned to read and write. In America, Mary Antin wrote, “Education was free.... It was the one thing that [my father] was able to promise us when he sent for us: surer, safer than bread or shelter.”

Parents who made a little money often sent their sons, and sometimes their daughters, to the city’s inexpensive public colleges. By 1910, more Jewish youths over 16 were still in school than were young people of any other ethnic group.

Like other immigrant groups, Jews faced prejudice and discrimination. Most private schools and clubs refused to accept Jews. Hospitals would not hire Jewish doctors; the New York Bar Association would not admit Jews (as lawyers). Many ads for jobs stated simply, “Christians only.”

Still, eastern European Jews were grateful to be in their new country. One immigrant recalled, “There were markets groaning with food and clothes.... There was no military on horseback and no whips.”



Immigrants were often forced to take jobs in sweatshops, such as the one shown here, where most of the work was done by women and children. Workers were usually paid 25 to 40 cents a day.