**Ellis Island: Isle of Hope, Isle of Tears**

From 1892 to 1924, Ellis Island in New York Harbor was America’s largest and most active immigration station, where over 12 million immigrants, mostly from Europe, were processed. The review process included a personal health inspection and proof of minimal funds. In exceptional cases, an immigrant would be sent home if he or she failed the inspection and could not be treated in the hospital for any medical problems.

Ten years after he left Selo, his small Bulgarian village, for the United States, Michael Gurkin returned to tell of the wonders he had seen, including “buildings that scratched the sky,” rooms in them that moved up and down, buttons that, pushed, lit a house or a street. Stoyan Christowe, thirteen, listened intently, caught up in the “Americamania,” as he called it, that swept through his village. Soon he was on his way to the new land, his pockets stuffed with walnuts because he was too young to drink the farewell toast.

Unknowingly, he had joined a flood of people who were making their way to the United States. Between 1880 and 1920, a period of just forty years, the remarkable total of 23.5 million immigrants arrived in the country. They came from around the world, though mostly from Europe, driven from their homelands by economic, religious, or other troubles, lured across the ocean by the chance for a better life. They entered the country through several ports, but by far the most—about seven out of every ten—landed in the city of New York.

Until 1892, they landed at a depot known as Castle Garden, a sprawling building on the tip of Manhattan Island. When it could no longer handle the flow, the entry site was moved to Ellis Island, close to the Statue of Liberty. Contractors erected a wooden structure, which opened in 1892 and burned down five years later. They then put up the current edifice, an imposing red brick building with triple-arch entrances and corner steeples. A small city, it had dormitories, a hospital, a post office, and showers that could bathe eight thousand people a day. It opened in 1900.

The change to Ellis Island represented more than just a shift in site. Entrance at Castle Garden had been fairly informal, since control over immigration still rested largely in the hands of the states. Officials merely registered newcomers, a process that took about thirty seconds.

In 1891, worried about the growing numbers of people who wanted in, Congress acted to bring immigration under federal control. Ellis Island was given tasks Castle Garden had never had, including mandates to keep out people some Americans considered undesirable. It became, one observer said, “the nearest earthly likeness to the Final Day of Judgement, when we have to prove our fitness to enter Heaven.”

Many of those who sailed into the harbor, it should be remembered, never passed through the island at all. Arriving in first or second class, they had a fast on-board examination and went ashore, monied enough, it was assumed, not to become wards of the state. But those in third class—“steerage,” as it was known—had a very different experience, and they faced it chock full of fear they would fail some test and be sent back home.

The day they docked, in 1910, Christowe and others washed thoroughly, hoping to look clean enough to pass inspection. Crowding the ship’s rails, they gazed in wonder at the statue in the harbor, its arm lifted in the air. It was a saint, some guessed; Christopher Columbus, others said. It was a monument to freedom, Christowe was told, with Emma Lazarus’s inviting poem at its base, “Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.”

Once on the island, those huddled masses were under scrutiny from the moment they landed. Officials watched them climb the stairs, looking for heart problems or lameness. Physicians administered the “six-second exam,” checking quickly for disabilities or contagious diseases. If anything seemed out of sort, they put a chalk mark on the immigrant’s coat calling for closer examination.

The next exam was the most feared: a doctor using a tailor’s buttonhook to pull back eyelids to look for signs of diseases such as trachoma, a highly contagious bacterial eye infection that could lead to blindness. Most immigrants had never heard of trachoma, nor even knew they had the disease, but it alone could strand them in the island’s hospital or put them on a boat back home.

No one who went through the exam ever forgot it, as an immigrant poet wrote:

A stranger receives us

Harshly and asks: “And your health?”

He examines us. His look

Assesses us like dogs.

He studies in depth

Eyes and mouth. No doubt

That if he’d probed our hearts

He would have seen the wound.

Immigrants with chalk marks were herded to the left, while most went to the right, filing by a matron who searched the faces of women for evidence of “loose character.” With so many languages among the arrivals, there were few written signs, and officials used metal barricades to guide people along, “like puppets on conveyor belts,” Christowe later recalled.

Last there were the inspectors, seated behind desks, asking name, age, occupation, among dozens of other questions. On a busy day, the inspectors had two minutes to decide the fate of a newcomer. Those who “failed” went before a feared Board of Special Inquiry for final decision. For most immigrants the whole process took less than five hours; many others, held for proof of funds or further examination, spent days in the dormitories or hospital. Despite the harsh rumors, no more than 3 percent in a given year were turned away.

Still, it was becoming harder to get in. People who feared the effect of immigrants on the nation clamored to keep them out. Some worried about the numbers of people who were arriving, others about disease or “radical” political views. Some did not like the shift in immigration after 1890 from largely Protestant northern and western Europe to Catholics, Jews, and others from southern and eastern Europe.

Reflecting such concerns, Congress passed laws to keep certain types of people out. In 1875, it prohibited the entrance of criminals and prostitutes. In 1882, it barred convicts and lunatics and excluded laborers from China, the first measure aimed directly at a racial group. In 1885, it banned the entry of laborers under contract, imported by industries to work at low wages; in 1891, polygamists and people with “loathsome” diseases; in 1903, anarchists. In 1917, it passed, over Woodrow Wilson’s veto, a literacy test that required immigrants to read a passage in their native tongue.

The great burst of immigration, halted during World War I, ended with the adoption of restrictive legislation in the 1920s. Ellis Island became a detention center for “radicals” and other people awaiting deportation. Once the gateway to the United States, the famous island had become an exit.

Ellis Island closed in 1954 and in 1965, recognizing its historic importance, the government made it a national monument. It reopened in 1990 as a museum of American immigration, attracting more than two million tourists a year, many of whom retrace the footsteps of their ancestors who had landed there. Stoyan Christowe’s name is in the records. Starting with a miserable job in a railroad yard in St. Louis, he went to college, served in military intelligence during World War II, wrote several books, and became a member of the Vermont legislature.

His experience on Ellis Island blended into the nation’s experience. More than one hundred million Americans—about four in every ten—trace their ancestry to those who found a new home through its gates.

**Questions for Discussion**

1. What arguments did Americans use to justify limiting immigration during this era?
2. How did the experience on arrival in the U.S. of those who traveled in first or second class differ from that of steerage passengers