I. The Journey Across the Atlantic

- **Steamship Accommodations** To travel to the United States, most immigrants boarded a hulking, steel steamship. The steamship on which they traveled typically held from 1,200 to over 2,000 people and was their home from 8 to 14 days. While some ships offered both first and second class accommodations, most immigrants could not afford them. Instead, they traveled in the ship's steerage compartments, which were located under the ship's deck at the front and the back of the boat. The compartments typically had no windows, little ventilation, and were 6 to 8 feet high. Everywhere the steerage passengers looked, the ship's steel walls surrounded them, and rows upon rows of metal bunks filled each compartment. One Russian immigrant described his compartment as having "three tiers of cubicles for bunks...with just enough room in the center to move about before climbing in and out of our beds." At the foot of the bunks were narrow tables at which passengers usually ate their meals. Toilet facilities varied, from one toilet for every 47 passengers to one toilet for every 1,000 passengers. Men and women had separate living areas, although sometimes the only thing separating them was a blanket strung across the compartment.

- **Living Conditions in Steerage** The living conditions in steerage were uncomfortable at best, inhumane at worst. Ships often provided steerage passengers with a bare minimum of food, so most people brought on board whatever food they could. One Lithuanian woman recalled, "All you got on the boat was water, boiled water....Sometimes they gave you a watery soup, more like a mud puddle than soup." Passengers slept on straw-stuffed mattresses—sometimes called "donkeys' breakfasts"—which ship staff threw overboard at the end of the voyage. Steerage passengers spent most of their voyage deprived of sky, sunlight, and fresh air, and the smell was often unbearable. Some ships had steerage decks, but bad weather often forced immigrants to return to their quarters. An agent from the U.S. Immigration Commission noted, "During the 12 days in the steerage I lived in...surroundings that offended every sense. Only the fresh breeze from the sea overcame the sickening odors. Everything was dirty, sticky, and disagreeable to the touch." In addition, passengers were crammed against one another, and contagious diseases such as smallpox and typhoid spread quickly. By the end of the voyage, immigrants who had survived the journey were as overjoyed to leave steerage as they were to catch a first glimpse of their new home, America.

- **Cabin Class** In the early 1900s, some steamship companies removed the steerage areas and created a special third, or cabin, class for immigrant travel. While not nearly as luxurious as the higher classes, cabin class was a vast improvement for most immigrants. Cabin class accommodations consisted of cabins that held two, four, or six beds, providing passengers with more privacy. In addition, passengers had access to better and more toilet facilities, a dining room, and a lounge.

II. Arrival in America

- **Arriving in America** From 1892 to the early 1920s, approximately 75 percent of all immigrants entered the United States through the immigration processing center at Ellis Island, located in New York Harbor. Immigrant passengers were often seized with a feverish excitement as their steamship neared New York. The ship typically entered the harbor between the boroughs of Brooklyn and Staten Island, and passengers crowded the decks to view their new homeland. Boats of all kinds usually filled the harbor: tugboats,

  paddleboats, and steamships carrying thousands of other immigrants toward New York's shores. The towering skyscrapers of New York City rose in the northeast, and to the west, the most majestic sight of all: Liberty Island and its world-famous monument, the Statue of Liberty.

- For many immigrants, their first glimpse of Lady Liberty would be a moment they would remember all of their lives. One woman recalled, "The first time I saw the Statue of Liberty, all the people were rushing to the side of the boat. 'Look at her, look at her,' and in all kind of tongues. 'There she is, there she is,' like it was somebody who was greeting them." Another man remembered how he and his family "looked with wonder on this miraculous land of our dreams." For many immigrants, the long, hard journey across the Atlantic Ocean dimmed beside the radiance of America's promise, inscribed on the base of the Statue of Liberty: "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." Beyond the Statue of Liberty lay Ellis Island—or, as some immigrants referred to it, the Island of Tears—and the formidable, red-brick building where most immigrants would be inspected, questioned, and with any luck, cleared for entrance into the United States.

. Medical Inspections

- **First and Second Class Inspections** While all new immigrants faced some kind of U.S. inspection, first and second class passengers did not have to endure the lengthy inspection process that awaited the steerage passengers on Ellis Island. When a ship arrived in the harbor, a quarantine inspector boarded and checked that none of the passengers had highly contagious or life-threatening diseases, such as cholera, the plague, and typhoid. Next, the higher class passengers were briefly questioned and examined by U.S. immigrant inspectors, after which the ship docked at one of the many piers that ran along the west side of New York City. The first and second class passengers then disembarked; for them, the journey was over. The steerage class passengers, however, boarded flat-bottomed barges or tugboats that would take them to Ellis Island, where they would undergo a rigorous inspection process. One immigrant, observing the privileges afforded the first

  and second class passengers, commented, "And so there was this slight feeling among many of us that, isn't it strange that here we are coming to a country where there is complete equality, but not quite so for the newly arrived immigrants."

- **Arriving at Ellis Island** Upon arriving at Ellis Island, the new immigrants disembarked from the crowded boats onto the island's ferry docks. Immigration officials gave each person a tag to pin onto their outer clothes. The tag identified each person by a number that corresponded to a number assigned to them by the steamship on which they traveled. Interpreters shouted out the numbers in different languages—such as Hungarian, Italian, Russian, and Yiddish—to arrange the immigrants in groups of 30 for processing. As they made their way toward the inspection building, immigrants were flooded with various feelings: hope, fear, excitement, and uncertainty. One Ukrainian immigrant remembered it as a "great, great entry. It...it was the gate to Heaven, if you will." Another immigrant from Armenia recalled, "Ellis Island—you got thousands of people marching in, a little bit excited, a little bit scared."

- **Medical Inspections** While the United States essentially had an "open door" policy toward admitting immigrants into the country, government officials sought to weed out immigrants whom they believed would require public assistance, such as the mentally ill and the sick. Therefore, each immigrant underwent a series of medical examinations upon arriving at the inspection building. The first stop was the Baggage Room on the building's first floor. There, officials encouraged the immigrants to check their belongings. Some people checked their baggage, while others—afraid of theft—refused. Next, each group of immigrants climbed single file up the grand stairway toward the Registry Hall, also known as the Great Hall. Unbeknownst to most immigrants, U.S. public health officials performed a "six second exam" by watching them walk up the stairs. According to one doctor's report, the official observed the immigrant's "scalp, face, neck, hands, gait, and general condition" to detect any noticeable disabilities or debilitating conditions. Upon reaching the top of the stairs, the immigrants received an inspection card and underwent a more thorough medical examination.

- Many immigrants found the medical examinations the most traumatic part of the inspection process. One immigration inspector recalled, "The ordeal [the immigrants] went through was not with the [immigration] inspectors. It was with the doctors." The examination usually took about 45 minutes. Physicians closely examined the immigrants for disease and any perceived defects. They often asked immigrants to unbutton or remove items of clothing that might conceal physical problems. For example, one doctor recalled, "If the immigrant is wearing a high collar, the officer opens the collar...and sees whether a...tumor or other abnormality exists." Doctors examined the immigrant's scalp for contagious diseases such as *favus,* and checked the condition of his skin, hands, throat, and voice. One of the more painful procedures was the eye exam. The doctor would peel back the immigrant's eyelid with a small metal hook to search for symptoms of highly

contagious diseases such as conjunctivitis and trachoma. If the doctor found anything suspect during the medical examination, he drew a letter on the immigrant's right shoulder in chalk, indicating the nature of the immigrant's problem. For example, "B" stood for back problems, "H" for heart problems, "K" for hernia, "L" for lameness, and "X" for "mental defect." Officials then escorted the people with medical problems—typically about 20 percent of the immigrants—to holding rooms where they awaited an additional medical examination. One Greek woman recalled the diagnosis of her sister's fatal eye disease: "My youngest sister had something in her eyes. I didn't know what was going to happen....The doctor said, 'Your sister can't go out because we have to take her to the hospital....After forty days, my sister died." Immigrants who passed their medical examination entered the Registry Hall, where they would undergo a final inspection, the legal inspection.

I. Legal Inspections

- **The Registry Hall** After undergoing the medical examination, immigrants faced a final legal inspection in the Registry Hall. The hall was huge—200 feet long, 100 feet wide, and 56 feet tall—and could hold as many as 5,000 people. Light filtered into the room though large, arched windows located near the ceiling, and a third floor mezzanine encircled the hall. For many immigrants, the most striking feature of the Registry Hall was its formidable network of iron railings, designed to keep the immigrants in orderly lines as they waited to be questioned. Immigrants typically waited two to three hours to be questioned, although occasionally the wait was as long as a day. One 1905 journalist posing as an immigrant noted, "We pass into passageways made by iron railings, in which only lately, through the intervention of a humane official, benches have been placed, upon which closely crowded, we await our passing before the inspectors." (After 1911, many of the railings were removed.) At the head of the bench aisles sat a row of U.S. immigrant inspectors. Each inspector sat on a high chair in front of a desk that held each ship's passenger list. Accompanying the list was each immigrant's answers to the questionnaire previously administered by the ship's officials. It was the U.S. inspector's job to confirm the immigrant's answers face to face, and determine whether the immigrant should be allowed entrance to the United States. One Hungarian immigrant recalled the imposing figure cut by the inspector: "The immigration officer sat on a podium like a judge. And to a child looking up, you know, it looked like he was up in the sky."

- **The Final Inspection** The legal inspection was essentially the same for each immigrant, and lasted approximately two to three minutes. First, a registry clerk called out the name of the immigrant when it was her turn to be questioned. The U.S. immigration inspector noted the tag pinned to her outer clothing, which identified her number on the ship's passenger list, and looked up her name and her answers to the ship's questionnaire. Assisted by a language interpreter, the inspector—who was usually a foreign-born citizen himself—asked the immigrant 32 questions to determine whether she, as one author explained, "was coming to this country for a legitimate reason, had a proper moral character, and was unlikely to become a ward of the state, or a violent revolutionary." The questions ran from the basic—such as "What is your name?" and "Are you married or single?"—to the more specific, such as "Do you have money with you? More than $30?

How much?" "Are you going to join a relative? What relative? Name and address?" "Have you ever been in prison, in a poorhouse, or supported by charity?" and "What is the condition of your health, mental and physical?" Many inspectors recorded immigrants' names incorrectly. One eastern European immigrant recalled, "My father's surname was Kapelovich. When we arrived at Ellis Island, the immigration people heard the name and spelled it Kaplowitz on our papers."

- Many immigrants remembered their experiences at Ellis Island as one of the worst times of their lives. One immigrant wrote on a wall at Ellis Island, "Why should I fear the fires of hell? I have been through Ellis Island." Fortunately for most immigrants, few were denied entrance to the United States before 1921. U.S. officials detained approximately 20 percent of all immigrants after the legal inspection, but only 2 percent were actually sent back to their homeland. Nevertheless, for the unfortunate 2 percent, the experience of being deported was gut wrenching. An immigration interpreter, Fiorello La Guardia—who would later become mayor of New York City—recalled, "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." Journalist Edward Steiner witnessed the painful decision of a Russian father who was asked by an inspector if he was willing to return to Russia while his son remained behind: "The father, used to self-denial through his life, says quietly, without pathos and yet tragically, 'Of course.' And the son says, after casting his eyes to the ground, ashamed to look his father in the face, 'Of course'...for this was their judgment day."

I. Ethnic Enclaves

- **Ethnic Enclaves** After arriving in the United States, about two thirds of immigrants settled in urban centers, such as New York City, Chicago, Boston, and Philadelphia. By 1920, 75 percent of foreign-born U.S. residents lived in cities. Many immigrants initially stayed with friends or relatives, a majority of whom lived in close-knit ethnic neighborhoods, or enclaves, in America's cities. These enclaves provided new immigrants with a sense of community and security, as the immigrants were surrounded by the familiar customs, food, language, and institutions of their homeland. Consequently, many new immigrants settled in the enclaves permanently. One Polish immigrant recalled, "There were Irish neighborhoods, German, Italian, and Chinese ones nearby also, but we tended to stay in our own area." Most enclaves were very crowded, and their streets teemed with local residents, peddlers and merchants, and horse and carriages. One eastern European immigrant observing a Jewish enclave in New York City commented, "It is one of the most densely populated spots on the face of the earth—a seething human sea fed by streams, streamlets, and rills [rivulets] of immigration flowing from all the Yiddish-speaking centers of Europe."

- The ethnic enclaves provided immigrants with many of the trappings of their country of origin: newspapers in their native language, grocery stores with familiar foods, people who wore the garb of their homeland, and churches whose congregants hailed primarily from their ethnic group. Immigrants often established businesses that catered to the needs of their compatriots, thereby strengthening their economic and social ties to the community. One Polish immigrant wrote in a letter home, "Here no one goes to bed on an empty stomach because one Pole will save another, if he can." A Greek immigrant echoed many immigrants' feelings about their native culture: "In spite of making a choice of living away from Greece, I personally cannot ignore those events or those customs, or whatever it may be....Having some Greeks around is a very important thing."

I Living Conditions

- **City Tenement Buildings** Most cities were ill-equipped to handle the material needs of their increasing populations. City streets were often flooded with waste due to inadequate sewage systems. Decent housing was scarce, and some immigrants lived in alleyway shanties made of scrap wood. Most urban-dwelling immigrants lived in tenement buildings—run-down, low-rent apartment buildings clustered together in the poorest parts of town. Tenements typically had six or seven floors, each of which usually contained four four-room apartments. The buildings' first floors usually housed one or two shops with attached living quarters, in which the shopkeepers and their families lived. On the remaining floors, large families—and often paying boarders—crammed in notoriously overcrowded apartments, which typically cost $10 to $20 a month to rent. One New York City social worker counted 1,231 people living in just 120 rooms in one part of the city. An Italian immigrant living in Boston recalled, "[I lived in] a three-room apartment... [with] fourteen people. At night the floor of the kitchen and dining room were turned into beds." A journalist investigating the Little Italy section of New York reported, "In a room not thirteen feet either way slept twelve men and women, two or three in bunks set in a sort of alcove, the rest on the floor....Most of the men were lodgers, who slept there for five cents a spot."

- **The Perils of Tenement Living** Most tenement apartments were filthy, run-down, and had little ventilation, light, or conveniences. A Lithuanian immigrant described her family's apartment in New York City as "Two rooms. The bedroom had no windows. The toilets were in the yard. Just a coal stove for heat." One social worker could not locate a single bathtub in more than three city blocks of tenement buildings. A visitor to a tenement building wrote, "To be in it...is to inhale the stenches of the neglected street...had [a] foul fiend designed these great barricades they could not have been more villainously arranged to avoid any change of ventilation." Fires, disease, and death were common among immigrant tenement communities. One half of Manhattan's fires occurred in tenement buildings, which made up only one third of the borough's buildings. One historian noted that 40 percent of New York's immigrants were stricken with the contagious lung disease, tuberculosis, and 60 percent of immigrant babies died before their first birthdays.

- **Rural Living Conditions** Not all immigrants settled in cities. Some traveled west—and to a much lesser extent, south—to settle in small towns and more rural areas. For example, some Italian immigrants traveled to California, where they established agricultural businesses, such as fruit farms and wine vineyards. The largest Armenian population in the United States was in Fresno, California, where many families started farms. A portion of the Greek community settled in west Florida and took up sponge fishing. Polish immigrants—one third of whom lived in non-urban settings—lived in many of the Midwest's small towns and grew crops such as corn and wheat. Unlike their urban counterparts, most rural immigrants had adequate space and light and a relatively higher standard of living. However, the weather was often harsh—including blizzards, dust storms, and droughts—and sometimes the nearest neighbor was 40 miles away.

VII. Working Conditions

- **The Immigrant Workforce** The majority of immigrants worked in industrial jobs, for a variety of reasons. First, most American industries were rapidly growing and in continual need of workers. Industrial employers found in the new immigrants a plentiful and cheap source of labor. Most immigrants were desperate for work and willing to accept almost any kind of job, no matter how unattractive or low paying. Second, a substantial number of immigrants—particularly southern Italians, Slavs, and Greeks—had been farm laborers in Europe. They had no desire to resume agricultural work, which in their homelands had been back-breaking, low paying, and of low status. Instead, they sought better-paying industrial jobs. Finally, with the exception of Jewish immigrants, a majority of immigrants—about 80 percent—were either unskilled or semiskilled laborers. This meant that few immigrants had specialized skills on which they could rely to earn money, such as bookkeeping, carpentry, or tailoring clothes. Therefore, many immigrants sought industrial jobs, few of which required special skills or even a strong command of the English language. In 1901 the U.S. Industrial Commission pointedly remarked, "The fact that machinery and the division of labor opens a place for the unskilled immigrants makes it possible not only to get the advantages of machinery, but also to get the advantages of cheap labor."

- **Working Conditions** Immigrants were particularly vulnerable to worker exploitation, and many labored under intolerable conditions. For instance, few employers paid immigrants a living wage. Families typically needed about $16 a week to achieve a minimum standard of living, but most immigrants brought home far less. New England textile workers typically made $4 a week, and some garment workers made only $1.25 a week. The average worker's salary was about 10 cents an hour, and child workers often made half that. Many immigrant children needed to work to help support their poverty-stricken families, and industrialists frequently exploited them for their cheap labor. A law officer reported that a Greek boy's employer "made him work from half-past six in the morning until eleven at night, took away his tips, half starved him, and refused to pay even his meager wages of 35 cents per day until the end of the year." In addition, many employers demanded that their employees work from 12 to 16 hours per day. One statistic revealed that women garment workers typically worked a 108-hour week.