

## An Immigrant Discovers America

During the late 1800's, industrial America needed many laborers to build railroads, mine minerals, and work in factories. It needed people willing to do hard and dirty work. America needed immigrants.

In the 1800's life was not easy in Europe or in Asia. War, famine, drought, prejudice, and poverty made life difficult for millions of people. Many were hungry and homeless.

The governments of many countries were cruel and harsh. For example, some European governments passed laws to *segregate* Jews. Those laws forced them to live in certain neighborhoods only, apart from others. They were denied the rights that others had.

In many countries people were put in prison, tortured, or murdered because of their political beliefs.

Millions of people left Europe and Asia to seek a better life in the United States. Some came looking for land or jobs. Many came to find political or religious freedom.

Between 1860 and 1900, some 14 million immigrants poured into the United States. The nation's population more than doubled, reaching 76 million. Immigrants contributed greatly to that growth. Most of the newcomers were Europeans, but a number came from China and Japan. Chinese workers helped to build the transcontinental railroads. Japanese labor harvested fruits and vegetables on the West Coast.

During the 1840's, a large wave of immigrants arrived on America's east coast. These immigrants who came before 1870 were called "**old**" immigrants. They were usually from northern or western European countries, and many could read, write and speak English. A large number of immigrants from Asia, mostly from China and Japan, arrived on the west coast.

Beginning in the 1870's, a second large wave of immigrants arrived in the U.S. Many of them came from southern and eastern Europe. The largest group of these "new" immigrants came from Italy. The next largest group were Jews who had fled Russia and eastern Europe to find religious freedom and jobs.

These "**new immigrants**" were often unskilled and illiterate. They crowded into "slum" (run-down and overcrowded) sections of cities. They took whatever jobs they could get. They worked long hours for low pay.

Many Americans looked down upon these newcomers. They blamed "new" immigrants for high crime rates, filthy streets, and even political corruption. It wasn't long before laws were passed to keep "unwelcome" newcomers out.

In 1882 Congress passed a Chinese Exclusion Act halting immigration from China for ten years. In 1907 the Japanese government agreed to prevent its laborers from going to America. The Emergency Quota Act of 1921 and the Immigration Act of 1924 stopped almost all immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe.

Why did immigrants come to America? What were they looking for? What did America mean to them?

## New York City, 1896

Benjamin tossed restlessly in his bed. In a few hours he would be reunited with his wife and children. He had not seen them for five years.

Thinking about his family brought back memories of the old country, of Russian Poland. He remembered the poverty, hunger, and illness. He thought about the people who said awful things to him and sometimes struck him with their fists just because he didn't believe in their religion. It hadn't been easy being a Jew in the old country. No matter how hard he had worked, he still had not been able to feed and clothe his family properly. He thought back to the many nights he and his wife went to bed hungry so that the little ones could have a bit more to eat.

Life in the old country became so difficult that Benjamin decided to leave. He borrowed money from his family and friends and set out for America. He had to leave his family behind until he was settled in the new country.

Benjamin arrived in America with very little money. He knew little about the country. He could neither speak nor write the English language. All he possessed was a willingness to work hard—that and a dream. His dream was that his children would grow strong in this new country. Here, he hoped, they would at least have a chance to make something of their lives.

Benjamin rented the cheapest room he could find in a neighborhood that housed others of the Jewish faith. With the guidance of some of his neighbors, he was able to find work right away. He did not care what sort of work he did. He swept floors, washed dishes, emptied trash cans, and did anything else that was asked of him. Benjamin also toiled at a sewing machine in a factory.

He took jobs other people did not want because the work was hard and the pay low. There were immigrants like him all over America. They were building railroads, digging canals, drilling for oil, planting and farming, working in mines and factories.

As in the old country, Benjamin worked long hours for little pay. For working 10 to 14 hours a day, 6 days a week, he earned \$8 or \$9. Saving money was difficult, but Benjamin was determined to save enough to bring his family over. He took a cheap room in a tenement in a slum. His room had no window and no heat, so he roasted in the summer and froze in the winter. On summer nights he escaped to the roof or to the streets for some fresh air. Often Benjamin ate no more than a buttered roll for his main meal. His nights were lonely. He missed his family terribly.

America was different from the old country, Benjamin felt. Here a person could improve his life. Benjamin enrolled in night school and learned to speak, read, and write English. He began to make plans for himself. Even after his family came to America, he would continue to save money. With these savings he would buy a little shop. He wanted to earn enough money so that he would never have to work for someone else again. In America, even a poor immigrant like Benjamin could have dreams like this.

Still Benjamin thought that in some ways America was like the old country. There were people here who snubbed him because he was not of their faith or because he looked "different." Others worried that he would take their jobs. Some said that immigrants like Benjamin were criminals who made the streets unsafe.

Benjamin was puzzled by people like this. Didn't they see that most of the "Benjamins" of America worked hard and went to school to learn how to become good citizens in their adopted country? That they respected America's laws and taught their children these same values?

Benjamin had great plans for his children. He wanted them to get a good education. He believed that in America, a person could become whatever he or she wanted to be. His children would have good jobs. They might become doctors, lawyers, teachers, engineers, or business people. He, Benjamin, would help them succeed.

America had given Benjamin a new home and an opportunity to succeed. Benjamin would repay his adopted land by giving it his loyalty, his children, and the sweat of his brow.

With a feeling of joy, Benjamin leaped out of bed. He would put on his best suit. Today his family was starting a new life with him in America.

Immigrants have brought much with them to America, and America is richer because of them. They have brought their music, dance, customs, foods, and ideas. Immigrants have also made great contributions in science, medicine, mathematics, literature, and art. Without their contributions, it is unlikely that the United States would be the great country it is today.

There are still oppressed people in the world. Most nourish the dream that their children will grow up in a free society with opportunities for jobs and a good life. For many such people, America continues to be a haven and a land of opportunity.