

Ellis Island and American Immigration

Margaret Yocom

Along one wall of the Nation of Nations exhibit at the National Museum of History and Technology rests a narrow, straight-backed bench, a seemingly too plain and common item for a museum to preserve. However, it is not the bench itself that the Smithsonian seeks to celebrate, but rather the masses of people who, from 1892 to 1954, took refuge on it and others like it as they waited to hear if they would be allowed to enter the United States through the major port for immigration: New York City's Ellis Island. There, under the shadow of the Statue of Liberty, passed Austrians, Italians, Russians, Chinese, Japanese, Canadians, West Indians, Africans, and Australians: people from all the continents of the world. As immigrants at Ellis Island, however, they were only some of the 27,572,583 people who streamed through immigration centers across the United States from 1881 to 1930, five decades often referred to as the third wave of American immigration. They came as factory workers, railroad laborers, masons, stonemasons, and ditchdiggers, and were quickly absorbed by a country undergoing industrial expansion.

Two previous waves of immigration had already changed the face of the land that had long been in the care of the descendants of those men and women who crossed the Bering Sea to North America. The first immigrants, French and Spanish, English, Dutch, and Swedish settlers, left their names early on the land as LaSalle, St. Augustine, Jamestown, Hudson, and Swedesford prospered. With the help of Polish and Italian craftsmen, the multiple talents of the Germans, Swiss, French Huguenots, Scotch,



In the Museum of History and Technology's Nation of Nations exhibit, 1977 Festival-goers listen to former immigrants from Ellis Island talk about their experiences of passing through that immigration port at the turn of the century. Photo by Nicholas Bocher © 1978.

Irish, and the involuntary immigration of Africans, the colonies grew.

The post-revolutionary years of 1815-60 saw the second great wave of immigration. Overpopulation in many countries like Norway and China, potato famine in Ireland, and crop failures in Germany and Holland pushed farmers and artisans first toward the sailing ships, then to the steamships that headed toward the United States. Political refugees swelled the tide as revolution swept through Europe. Many university-educated men and women fled to America from Poland in 1830 and Germany in 1848 in hopes of safety.

Immigration continues to be an important part of American history. In 1978, 24 years after Ellis Island closed its gates, approximately 400,000 people will immigrate to the United States. Who are the new immigrants, and why have they come?

The rise of Adolf Hitler and the worldwide struggle that erupted in 1939 set in motion many events that resulted in the immigration of groups of Jewish refugees, foreign-born war

brides, and displaced persons and orphans. After World War II ended, thousands fled Communist takeovers in Czechoslovakia (1948), Hungary (1956), and Cuba (1960). Another battle, this time against poverty, brought Puerto Ricans, already American citizens, to the mainland beginning in 1945.

In 1965, new immigration legislation initiated by John F. Kennedy and enacted by Lyndon B. Johnson, changed the nature of immigration to the United States. Since 1924, immigration had been based on an annual quota system; only 2% of the number of foreign-born persons from a given country living in the United States as of 1920 were allowed to enter. Because the American population in 1920 was predominantly from northern Europe, the 1924 statute severely limited immigration from other parts of the world. Thus, while 65,361 Britons could immigrate annually, only 308 Greeks could.

The 1965 Act offered a system based on hemispheric ceilings. The Eastern Hemisphere received an annual ceiling of 170,000 immigrants with a limit of 22,000 persons per independent country, while the Western Hemisphere received a 120,000 ceiling without quotas for independent nations. The Act also established a set of occupational preferences and freed close relatives of United States citizens from the quota system altogether.

The majority of post-1965 immigrants come from North and South America and Asia, with the largest number from Mexico, the Philippines and Korea. Because of the occupational preference provisions, the total number of immigrants classified as "professional, technical, and kindred workers" increased significantly in the 1970s.

Along with engineers, scientists, and businessmen come the victims of

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Vladimir Obrican, shown here with photographs of his family, some of whom are still in Czechoslovakia, came to the United States in 1947 to study for a few years. But he made friends in America and married a Slovakian-American woman. The separation from his Czechoslovak family has not been easy; he flies to Europe each Christmas to see them.

Photo by Margaret Yocom for the Smithsonian.



Through businesses like the Carlos Gardel Argentinian Restaurant and Metaxia and Panos Dousikos' Apollo Greek Food Store, immigrants to the United States serve both their new and their old countries. They teach their fellow Americans about world food customs, and they provide a bit of home for their compatriots.

Photos by Margaret Yocom for the Smithsonian.



unemployment, overpopulation, and war. The mechanization of farms brought Colombians to the United States and the end of the revolution in Iraq brought Kurds as well. In 1975, after more than ten years of American involvement in Vietnam, the collapse of Saigon propelled hundreds of thousands of homeless Vietnamese, Laotians, and Cambodians toward America. And today, over 100,000 small-boat refugees from Southeast Asia wait in Thailand for a new country.

It is easy to learn from facts and figures where the new immigrants to America came from; it is not as easy to discover why they came, what personal factors pushed them away from the only country and culture they knew and pulled them toward the United States. But during the Festival of American Folklife's daily workshops on immigration, visitors will be able to listen to and speak with Festival participants who came to the United States after 1945 from Czechoslovakia, Greece, Hungary, Mexico, the Middle East, and Vietnam. As these participants sit on that narrow, straight-backed bench in the museum and talk about life in their homeland,

their journey to the United States, and their years as Americans, visitors will hear the personal histories of people who contribute not to a "melting pot," but to a nation of nations. Their narratives will remind us—whether our ancestors walked across the Bering Sea land bridge, sailed on the Mayflower, survived in steerage or in the bellies of slave ships, or flew across an ocean—that all of us belong to a community of immigrants.

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The murals that brighten the buildings near Columbia Rd. and 18th St., N.W., were executed not only by Hispanic-Americans, but also by Giorgio DiPietri, an Italian immigrant from Florence who, like his father and his grandfather before him, brings color to the open spaces of our cities.

Photo by Margaret Yocom for the Smithsonian.