

The poem "Steerage," which was inspired by the accompanying photograph, imagines the feelings that European immigrants had as they took the journey by ship to America.

Steerage

The part of a passenger ship reserved for those traveling at the cheapest rate

by David Citino



A photograph can show us,
in color or in black and white,
what's wrong, what's right.

Look with me inside this ship.

- 5 We see, through the lens, a crowd
of families. It all looks loud,
though a photograph makes
noise only in our heads. Lives
are changing. Husbands, wives

10 and babies are sailing toward us,
who inhabit the future they desire,
free from poverty's dirty fire.

They sail in steerage, a mode
of going from dark to days
15 of light, to develop all the ways

of being themselves. The mast,¹
they hope, will grow into a leafy tree
and whisper, "Now you're free."

¹mast—a tall pole used to support the sails on a ship

Read the article "Voyage of Hope, Voyage of Tears," which describes the journey many immigrants made from Europe to America by ship.

Voyage of Hope, Voyage of Tears

by Mimi Boelter

- 1 Hope was the one guiding star that led millions of people to immigrate to America. But those people had to endure a lot even before they arrived on this country's shores. Their journey began when they said good-bye to their ancestral homes and set out—by train or wagon or on foot—for a seaside port and a ship that would take them to their new country.
- 2 By 1880, an Atlantic Ocean crossing on a steamship lasted eight to 14 days—not bad, compared with the one- to three-month expeditions of the earlier sailing ships. Shipping lines actually competed for emigrating passengers, who were considered highly profitable, self-loading cargo. Some ships, for example, could hold more than 2,000 emigrants in steerage. At 10 to 40 dollars per traveler, those ships could make a good profit carrying many people in the least expensive and least luxurious way.
- 3 When emigrants arrived at European port cities, such as Antwerp (Belgium), Liverpool (England), or Naples (Italy), to name just a few, they often had to wait up to two weeks for a ship that was departing for the United States. So, shipping companies made even more money by building hotels where travelers had to pay to stay while they waited. The Hamburg-Amerika Shipping Line maintained an entire village on the outskirts of Hamburg, Germany, that included two churches, a synagogue, a kosher¹ kitchen, and accommodations for 5,000 people.
- 4 Steamship companies required steerage passengers to take an antiseptic² bath, have their baggage fumigated,³ and be examined by doctors before boarding. The emigrants also answered questions—such as name, age, occupation, native country, and destination—for the ship's manifest. At the other end of the trip, Ellis Island officials would use such information to verify and group the immigrants.
- 5 Once the ship was underway, first- and second-class passengers ate meals in a dining hall and enjoyed private cabins through which fresh sea breezes could blow. Steerage passengers, on the other hand, had food brought to them, as they traveled in the dark bowels of the ship where there was no privacy. Keeping clean was difficult, as fresh water was often available only

¹kosher—food prepared in accordance with certain Jewish dietary laws

²antiseptic—germ-killing or cleaning

³fumigated—disinfected by smoke or fumes

on deck. "That hope to be in America was so great and so sunny, that it colored all the pain that we had during our trip," remembered Gertrude Yellin about her voyage in 1922.

- 6 Steerage passengers slept in narrow bunks, usually three beds across and two or three deep. Burlap-covered mattresses were filled with straw or seaweed. During fierce North Atlantic storms, all hatches⁴ were sealed to prevent water from getting in, making the already stuffy air below unbearable.



- 7 Many children died when contagious illnesses, such as measles, broke out onboard ship. Their lifeless bodies were taken from their mothers' arms and dropped into the ocean. Throughout their 1905 voyage, Fannie Kligerman's mother hid Fannie's infant sister in an apron, hoping the child would stay healthy. She did.
- 8 Outbreaks of seasickness also were present on every ship, keeping hundreds of passengers in their beds through most of the ocean crossing. And the lack of sanitation in steerage made cleaning up vomit impossible. As time went on, the stench of the unventilated cargo area would grow worse. Bertha Devlin, who immigrated in 1923, recalled a particularly bad Atlantic crossing: "One night I prayed to God that [the boat] would go down . . . I was that sick. . . . And everybody else was the same way."
- 9 Immigrants often crowded on the deck of the ship at the end of the trip when the Statue of Liberty was sighted in New York Harbor. Steamships made their first stop at a pier on the mainland. There, the first- and second-class passengers were free to leave the ship, with little or no

⁴hatches—coverings for the openings on the deck of a ship

medical examination. Afterward, steerage passengers were crowded onto a barge or ferry, often with standing room only, and taken to Ellis Island. On a busy day, immigrants might have to wait their turn to disembark,⁵ standing for several hours with no food or drink. The ordeal of the ocean voyage was over, but the unknowns of the Ellis Island examination process were just ahead.

"Emigrate" and "Immigrate"

The words **emigrate** and **immigrate** are both used of people involved in a permanent move, generally across a political boundary. *Emigrate* refers to the point of departure: *He emigrated from Germany* (that is, left Germany). By contrast, *immigrate* refers to the new location: *The promise of prosperity in the United States encouraged many people to immigrate* (that is, move to the United States).

⁵disembark—leave a ship

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