

Immigrating to America, 1905

The beginning of the 20th century witnessed a dramatic increase in the number of immigrants coming to America's shores. In the century's first decade over 9 million expectant new arrivals - almost three times the number of the previous decade - entered the United States. The majority came from Eastern and Southern Europe. The reason for their coming typically rested on the push of hardships at home - including a lack of economic opportunity, religious discrimination and political persecution - and the pull of the expectation of a better life in America, the "Promised Land" or the "Land of Opportunity."

Those who could not afford first or second class passage were processed through screening centers such as Ellis Island before being allowed to continue their journey. Although many made their way to the agricultural and mining lands of the West, the majority ended up in the urban areas of the East. Many were working at menial jobs and often exploited by their employer.



*"Huddled Masses"
New arrivals await on deck as their
ship arrives at Ellis Island, 1902*

Sadie Frowne was typical of this new wave of immigration. She was thirteen when she arrived in America with her mother. They had left their native Poland after the death of Sadie's father and the failure of the small grocery store that provided them a living. The two made their way to America with the help of Sadie's Aunt Fanny who lived in New York City.

Sadie's mother soon died and Sadie was left on her own, first finding a job in what she describes as a "sweatshop" in Manhattan's Garment District and then in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn.

Sadie told her story to a journalist just three years after her arrival in America. It was first published as a newspaper article and later with other autobiographies as a book.

"We saw the big woman with the big spikes on her head."

We begin Sadie's story as she and her mother enter New York Harbor at the end of a twelve-day journey in steerage aboard a steamship:

"We came by steerage on a steamship in a very dark place that smelt dreadfully. There were hundreds of other people packed in with us, men, women and children, and almost all of them were sick. It took us twelve days to cross the sea, and we thought we should die, but at last the voyage was over, and we came up and saw the beautiful bay and the big woman with the spikes on her head and the lamp that is lighted at night in her hand.

Aunt Fanny and her husband met us at the gate of this country and were very good to us, and soon I had a place to live out [Sadie is referring to becoming a live-in domestic servant] while my mother got work in a factory making white goods.

I was only a little over thirteen years of age... so I received \$9 a month and board and lodging, which I thought was doing well. Mother, who, as I have said, was very clever, made \$9 a week on white goods, which means all sorts of underclothing, and is high class work.

But mother had a very good disposition. She liked to go around and see everything, and friends took her about New York at night... she caught a bad cold and coughed and coughed. She... tried to keep on working, but it was no use. She had not the strength. Two doctors attended her, but they could do nothing, and at last she died and I was left alone. I had saved money while out at service, but mother's sickness and funeral swept it all away and now I had to begin all over again."

Changing Jobs...

Sadie got a job as a seamstress at a dress factory in Manhattan's Garment District and began to slowly improve her ability to write and speak English.

Adapted from: <http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/immigrating.htm>

References:

Sadie's account appears in: Holt, Hamilton, *The Life Stories of Undistinguished Americans as Told by Themselves* (1906); Kraut, Alan, *The Huddled Masses: The Immigrant in American Society, 1880-1921* (1982); Handlin, Oscar, *The Uprooted* (1951).