

Steerage

If you were rich, then you could afford a first-class ticket. If you enjoyed a decent salary then you could purchase a family cabin (second-class) but for the hundreds of thousands of immigrants that came to America's shores, their mode of travel third-class which meant that they traveled as a "steerage" passenger.

The term steerage was used because where these immigrants sat, ate and slept was literally below-deck, at the back of the ship, next to the ship's steering equipment.

A typical steerage compartment had no portholes (windows) or ventilation. Most of the time the area was unpartitioned, about six to eight feet high and packed with two or more tiers of metal bunks. Men and women were separated, sometimes by being billeted on separate decks, other times by a divider of blankets and other miscellaneous objects. Children were the responsibility of their mother. There was little or no sanitation in the steerage areas. What toilet facilities there were proved to be inadequate.

During the day, steerage passengers were allowed on-deck for air. Many passengers were seasick for the entire journey across the Atlantic or Pacific oceans. Some people continually cried during their passage, and because of this, many were detained at Ellis Island as they were suspected of having trachoma, an eye infection. Most did not have trachoma, their eyes were simply red from crying every day.



Steerage passengers on-deck for fresh air

Many of the stories as steerage passengers were recorded and below are segments extracted from such memoirs.

Frank Santoni, and eight year old Italian boy:

“Oh I remember quite a few things. We were two little youngsters. My brother, who was seven years older than me, had me by the hand all the time...We were steerage. I didn't know of any other class at the time. I know now. At the time I didn't know but we were down in the hole. I was allowed to sleep with my mother, but my brother was not, so I was the head of the family. My mother was sick one night and she moaned all night, practically. Sometime in the wee hours of the morning she asked me to please go upstairs and get some water for her, as you had to go up perhaps ten or twelve steps, in order to get to the upper part of the boat, to get water, and that's what I did.

It was just about dawn, and as I got to the last step, somehow or another the latched doors opened. It seemed to me I was just about to meet the water, the boat was heaving on that side and it felt to me as if I was just about able to reach the water. I was only seasick twice, that was one of the times. I got sick, after that I don't remember whether I got the water.”

This is part of the story of Arnold Weiss, a young Polish boy reluctant to leave his native land. Arnold also had to care for his mother during the journey and again, he too had to search for water, a precious commodity on board, especially for those in steerage.

“We rode third class. I don't even recall the food I ate. Everything did not smell good to us because people were seasick. On the boat all the people were sick. Every one of them was sick, they used to throw their guts up. I wasn't sick, I used to see my mother - she was green. I used to bring them water; food they couldn't take. How did they live through it? They lived through it on water, actually, because in the meantime they were sick.

I used to go up on the deck and the storm on the sea used to almost wash me off. One time I almost went over because I did not weight too much, I was just a kid. But that was why I was able to sustain everything that took place. I used to take care of all of them, bring them this, bring them that. We slept in bunks. There were three or four in a bunk and one next to the other. Not many other children were traveling at that time.”

Fannie Kligerman and her family fled to America from Russia in order to escape the pogroms. The final part of her journey was also the last voyage for a leaky, disease ridden ship.

“Batavia. Batavia was the boat. It never went back again. You know, we got water in the boat on the way over. Water got in there, and they had to take out the water, and we had to eat where we slept, because we were that way in water. We left from Germany and we got water in the boat and all the children got measles.

Some of them died and they threw them into the water like cattle. It was a pathetic thing that they couldn't ride with the bodies, they had to throw them into the water. It was something that I will never forget. And you can imagine how the women carried on. They took a child away from them and they just tossed it in, nice and quiet. Into the water. It was terrible. And my mother hid the baby, I remember, in a big apron.... She wouldn't let anybody see the baby. Maybe the baby was going to catch it.

So she had the baby in her apron and the baby could hardly walk and was crying. We had to say, 'Sh, sh. Somebody's coming, sh.' All the time, and that's how we struggled.

On the boat they gave us food. They charged plenty - but we didn't go in for nothing, they charged us. I still have the herring taste in my mouth. Herring, herring, herring! And garlic, on bread. They say you don't vomit when you have garlic on bread.

But for Passover, we didn't go. We had bread, and you know what it is, we had to have matzohs. And instead of fish, we had herring. But we had food.

We didn't like it, it wasn't tasty like you do it at home. We had four boys among our children and they said 'Oh, Momma, it's bad, oh, Momma.'

She said 'I know. You're going to get food. Right away, right away.' Imagine how we traveled.”

So many people recollect their voyage across the Atlantic in terms of herring!

The shipping companies provided herring because it was cheap. Combined with bread and garlic, millions of steerage survived the ordeal of steerage.

For strict, religious Jews, herring was practically the only food they could eat. A few vessels had two kitchens, one Kosher. The Solomon family observed kosher strictness with an unwavering faith. This extract is from Leon Solomon, who became a rabbi.

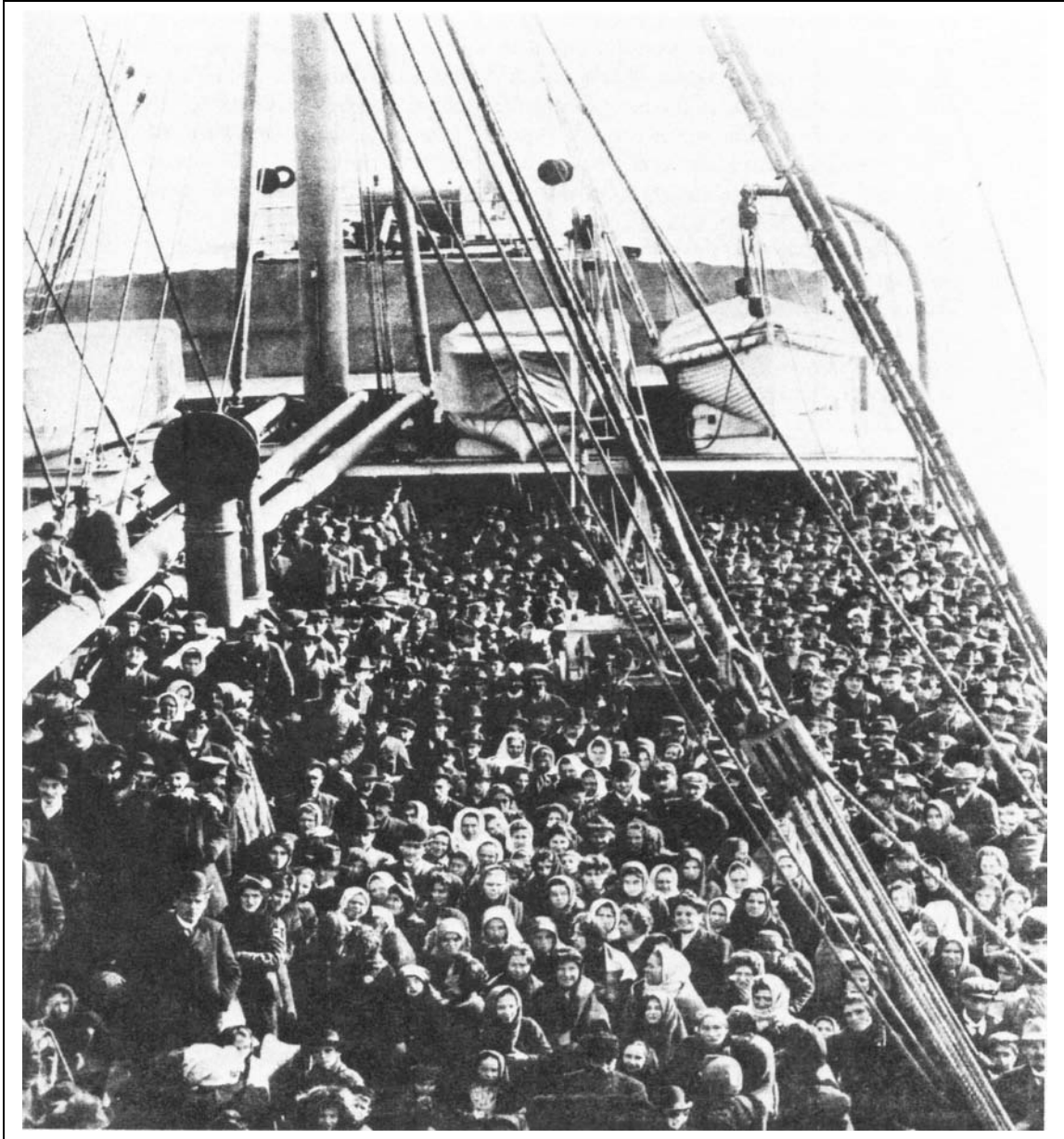
“The name of the ship was Kensington. That ship took ten days to cross the ocean and arrive in the United States. We traveled third-class, steerage in the bowels of the ship, and as religious Jews – especially my mother who was ultra pious – we could not partake of the food which the ship provided for us, except herring and potatoes, and hot water or tea. Otherwise we had to subsist on kosher food my mother prepared in advance, to supplement the food which the ocean-going steamer provided for us.

It was a long journey, we suffered from seasickness. I remember how we listened with fear to the steam siren of the ship when it let loose long, powerful blasts, not knowing what the blasts were intended to convey. Whether it was a signal to other ocean-going liners or a warning of some kind, at any rate it was powerful and terrifying.”

We in steerage didn’t meet any of the wealthy people. We only knew our fellow passengers in steerage, who suffered seasickness together with us, and met on board one of the decks together with us, and spoke Yiddish as we did. The wealthy ones – the first or second class – we didn’t rub elbows with them. We weren’t permitted to enter any cabins of people who weren’t our social equals. We had to confine ourselves to steerage.”

Finally, there is Paula Katz, a little girl who wanted some chicken soup.

“We were on the boat for eleven days and the only thing I could possible eat was sardines and rye bread. And that was just too much! By the eighth or ninth day I was just so fed up with the sardines that, when we were on deck walking around, I saw on the upper deck the steward running around calling people for afternoon tea. He had chicken soup! So I asked if I could buy some chicken soup. He chased me off the gangplank, off the steps. He said I couldn’t stay there. At all events, somehow or other I got some chicken soup.”



As the ship neared the coast of America, the waves died down and people were no longer seasick. Hundreds of passengers would come up on deck hoping to catch a glimpse of the Statue of Liberty and the shores of the United States.

Extracts and photographs were taken from:

Brownstone, David M, Franck, I.M., Brownstone, D.L. *Island of Hope, Island of Tears.*

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