

VOICES FROM ELLIS ISLAND

Study Guide

This Study Guide offers a few suggestions for study and activities for you and your students prior to attending Pippa White's production, **Voices from Ellis Island**.

History of Ellis Island

From across Upper New York Bay, Ellis Island lies in the shadow of the Statue of Liberty. Today its handsome buildings may be unfamiliar to some onlookers from shore; however, Ellis Island occupies a permanent place in America's history. More than half of the immigrants entering the United States between 1892 and 1924 passed through its gates. While mass examination of immigrants at Ellis Island ended in 1924, it continued to be used as a detention center for immigrants whose status in this country was questioned. In 1954, the island permanently closed as an active immigration station. In 1965, however, it was added by Presidential Proclamation to the Statue of Liberty National Monument and was opened for public tours in 1976. Following its closure in 1984 for a \$160,000,000 restoration, Ellis Island was reopened in 1990 with new exhibits, films, and visitor programs.

Suppose for a moment, that we could return to Ellis Island when it teemed with immigrants and share the experience of an immigrant's progress.

"When I first arrived in this country, I was filled with so many hopes, dreams and fears. One of the greatest fears was of a place known as Ellis Island, but called by us the 'Island of Tears.'

"In my village I had heard of this place to be inspected and maybe, it was said, sent home if you did not pass. 'Sent home to what? To where?' I worried. I tried to convince myself that America would never send me home once I had reached her doors.

"I will never forget the joy I felt when I saw the tall buildings of New York and the Statue of Liberty after so many dark days on board that crowded ship. There was the symbol of all my dreams—freedom to start out in a new life. Then came Ellis Island.

"When I landed the noise and commotion were unbelievable. There were so many languages being spoken. The shouting and pushing guards calling out the big numbers on the tags attached to our coats created more noise and confusion. Surely, I felt, the noise surrounding the Tower of Babel could not have been worse.

"We were told 'Keep moving' and 'Hurry up' as my group was pushed along one of the dozens of metal railings that divided the room into several passageways. Immigrants walked along these passageways until they reached the first medical inspector who looked at face, hair, neck, and hands. Interpreters asked, 'What is your age?' 'What work do you do?'

"I walked on to where a doctor inspected me for diseases. Again I move to another doctor, the "eye man" I had heard so many terrible rumors about. I passed inspection but the man in front was marked with an "E" in chalk on his coat and sent to another area. I had heard "E" meant deportation.

“For a long time I sat on a bench in the main part of the great hall waiting for the final test. I talked anxiously with those around me and rehearsed the answers to questions I might be asked about jobs, money, and relatives. Some people said it was best to answer as fully as possible; others said it was best to say just ‘Yes’ or ‘No.’

“Finally I went before some tired, stern-looking official who checked my name against the ship’s passenger list and quickly fired questions at me: ‘Can you read and write?’ ‘Do you have a job waiting for you?’ ‘Who paid your passage?’ ‘Have you ever been in prison?’ ‘How much money do you have?’ ‘Let me see it now?’ On and on went the questions until I got more and more confused.

“Suddenly I was handed a landing card. It was hard to believe the ordeal was over in an afternoon. My fears were unfounded; the statue in the harbor had not turned her back on me. America had accepted me.”

Source: Ellis Island Brochure, published by the U.S. Department of the Interior, National Parks service, administered by the Superintendent, Statue of Liberty National Monument, Liberty Island, NY 10004

Historical Timeline of Ellis Island

April 11, 1890	Designated an immigration station.
January 1, 1892	Opened as an immigration station.
June 14, 1897	Buildings destroyed by fire, but all persons safely evacuated.
December 17, 1900	Reopened as an immigration station, on a larger scale.
1917-1919	Served as a detention center for enemy aliens, a way station for Navy personnel, and a hospital for the Army.
1919-1954	Served as a deportation center as well as an immigration station.
1924	Mass immigration ended. Immigrants now were inspected in countries of origin.
1939-1946	Part of Ellis Island was used as a Coast Guard Station.
1941-1954	Part of Ellis Island served as a detention center for enemy aliens.
November 29, 1965	Ellis Island closed.
May 11, 1965	Added by Presidential Proclamation to the Statue of Liberty National Monument.
1976	Opened to the public for limited seasonal visitation.
1984	Closed for \$160,000,000 restoration.
September 10, 1990	Reopened with extensive new museum exhibits and facilities.

Discussions and Activities

—Brainstorm with your class. What do students know about immigration? When did their ancestors come to the United States? Did those ancestors share memories, either orally or in print?

—Read “One Immigrant’s Progress” (p. 1 and 2). Why do you think all these check-ups and tests were necessary? What might happen if you didn’t “pass” a medical or intelligence test? How would you feel? Ellis Island was called “The Golden Door,” the “Front Door to Freedom,” the “Gateway to America,” “Island of Hope, Island of Tears,” and “Heartbreak Island.” Why? What does this say about the immigrants? About their pasts? About the United States?

—Most children came to the U.S. with their families, but some came alone to meet up with uncles, or cousins, or other family members. Discuss how a young person might feel at Ellis Island. Most immigrants did not speak English. Do you think immigrant children experienced prejudice? Why or why not? How much “culture shock” do you think they experienced? What support systems do you think they had? Do immigrants to the U.S. have more support systems now? How is immigration different now? How is it the same as in the Ellis Island years?

Projects

—Read about U.S. immigration at the turn of the last century in a non-fiction source. Prepare a short report to share what life was like for people at this time.

- one group might report on the life in Europe that people were leaving.
- one group might research the ships and what crossing the Atlantic was like.
- who designed those intelligence tests at Ellis Island?
- report on the medical tests from the doctor’s point of view.
- what problems did immigrants encounter at Ellis Island?
- see if you can find out what the first year in America was like for a new immigrant.

—Write a journal that a young immigrant might have written. Include the “old country” and the new.

—Check out oral histories in library books and on the Internet. Could this oral history serve as a monologue in a dramatic piece? Share with the class.

—Do your grandparents or great grandparents have memories to share about Ellis Island?

—Using the non-fiction sources and the oral histories, create a cast of characters and write a scene about the immigrant experience. Perform it.

Projects (cont.)

- Were your ancestors immigrants? Share any family heirlooms or journals or letters with the class.
- Write an article in which you interview an immigrant. Dramatize it.
- Research your family's immigration history, or your community's. Where were they from and why did they leave? Various reasons could be political, economic, religious. Are they much different from why people emigrate today?
- Use a map and mark where students' ancestors came from. Consider doing a family tree that stretches back to the Ellis Island era.

BOOKS

- America's Immigrants: Adventures in Eyewitness History Series, by Rhonda Hoff (New York: Henry Z. Walch, Inc., 1967)
- Coming to America: The Story of Immigration, by Betsy Maestro (New York: Scholastic, 1995)
- Discovering Our Heritage Series (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Dillon Press, 1982)
- Ellis Island, by Wilton Tiff (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1990)
- Ellis Island: an Illustrated History of the Immigrant Experience, by Ivan Chermayeff, designer, Fred Wasserman, editor, Mary J. Shapiro, writer (New York: Macmillan, 1991)
- Ellis Island: Doorway to Freedom, by Steven Kroll (New York, Holiday House, 1995)
- Ellis Island: Gateway to America, by Loretto Dennis Szucs (Salt Lake City: Ancestry, 1986)
- Ellis Island: Gateway to the American Dream, by Pamela Reeves (New York, Dorset Press, 1991)
- Ellis Island: Gateway to the New World, by Leonard Everett Fisher (New York, Holiday House, 1986)
- Ellis Island Interviews: In Their Own Words, by Peter Morton Coan (New York, Facts on File, 1997)

Ellis Island and the Peopling of America: The Official Guide, by Virginia Yans-McLaughlin and Marjorie Lightman, with the Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation (New York, New Press, 1997)

Gateway to Liberty: The Story of the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island, by Mary J. Shapiro (New York, Vintage Books, 1986)

The Immigrant Experience, by David M. Reimers (New York, Philadelphia, Chelsea House, 1989)

Immigrant Kids, by Russell Freedman (New York, Scholastic, Inc., 1980)

In a New Land, an Anthology of Immigrant Literature, Sari Grossman and Joan Brodsky Schur, (Chicago, National Textbook Company, 1995)

I Was Dreaming to Come to America: Memories From the Ellis Island Oral History Project, selected and illustrated by Veronica Lawlor; foreword by Rudolph W. Giuliani (New York, Viking, 1995)

The World of Our Mothers, the Lives of Jewish Immigrant Women, by Sidney Stahl Weinberg (New York, Schocken Books, 1988)

FICTION

Nell Dunne, Ellis Island, by Kathleen Duey (New York, Aladdin Paperbacks, 2000)

The Memory Coat, by Elvira Woodruff (New York, Scholastic, 1999)

The Orphan of Ellis Island: a time travel adventure, by Elvira Woodruff (New York, Scholastic, 1997)

An Ellis Island Christmas, by Maxinne Rhea Leighton, (New York, Viking, 1992)

WEBSITES

www.historychannel.com or www.historychannel.com/ellisland/index2.html

www.interact-simulations.com (Keyword "Gateway"—under free activities)

www.i-channel.com/education/ellis or www.internationalchannel.com/education/ellis

<http://teacher.scholastic.com/activities/immigration>

www.ellisland.com

www.nps.gov/stli/serv02.htm