IRELAND - Emanuel “Manny” Steen - Born June 23, 1906 - Emigrated 1925, Age 19

Passage on the Caronia, Cunard Line

I bought a secondhand cardboard suitcase for two dollars, which I later donated to the Ellis Island Museum. All I had was a suit of clothes, an extra handkerchief, and a pair of socks. I also had my stamp collection in there, a crummy little collection of stamps, and a few family souvenirs. I didn’t fill the suitcase. We were required to have twenty dollars to show financial independence. Would you believe it? When I came through Ellis Island I had twenty dollars. I had it in my shoe so I shouldn’t lose it or, God forbid, lose it gambling on the ship.

1. **What do the items that Manny put in his suitcase tell us about his life?**

I left from the port of Liverpool with my sister Bertha. We had cousins in Liverpool, so we stayed overnight with them and boarded the Caronia the next day. The ship was jammed. We came third class. It was four bunk beds in a cabin. Two up and two down with a tiny washbasin. Toilet was down the hall, a shower, and they served three meals a day. The men and women were separate. My sister was with some other women in their cabin.

It was the first time I had ever been on a ship that size, know what I mean? There were no amenities, none. But you could hear the second-and first-class passengers having a great time up there. But we didn’t care, I mean, it was ten days. A ten day ride. I was a good sailor, so I had no trouble. But a lot of people were sick. As a matter of fact, I came down one day for breakfast—nobody. The whole dining room was me. The food was very plain. You didn’t have a choice. They gave you a menu but you didn’t have a choice. You just ate what was on the menu, and it was all right.

**2. How do Immigrants get to America Today? Describe the changes in their journey.**

I arrived in New York Harbor August 1. It was a Wednesday, Wednesday morning. I remember about six o’clock I heard the lookout say, “Land ahoy!” Everybody rushed up on deck to see land, the first sign of America. I remember rushing up. I couldn’t see a … thing. I mean the horizon was the sea. Then, as we sailed closer, New York slowly emerged, as though it were coming out of the sea. And the first thing I saw was the Woolworth building. That was the tallest building in the world at the time. So the first thing you saw sticking out of the water was the top of the Woolworth building. And as we proceeded, of course, the building came out of the water. [Laughs.]

Everybody was cheering, “America!” My God, everybody was yelling and crying and kissing, and who could remember? There must have been two thousand people on the ship. You weren’t aware that this was a historical moment, but it was. As we came in, of course, Manhattan Island started coming up, and the Statue of Liberty was. I mean, there it was. I didn’t understand too much about it. I knew about it in vague terms.

**3. Have you ever been part of a Historic Moment? What was it?**

The boat anchored mid-harbor, and then they tendered us from the ship to Ellis Island by the hundreds, suitcases in hand. The ferry had to go back and forth a few times, and we landed. Of course, the wharf and the whole area there was not like it is now. There was no grass or nothing. The main building was grimy on the outside. We got right off the ferry and went right into the main building. That day there must have been three, four ships. Maybe five, six thousand people. Jammed! And remember, it was August. Hot as a pistol and I’m wearing my long johns and a heavy Irish tweed suit. Got my overcoat on my arm. It was the beginning of fall back home, see. And I’m carrying my suitcase. I’m dying of the heat. During the day that hall became so hot and all they had was a couple of rotating fans, which did nothing except raise the dust. I just wanted to get the hell out of there.

Immigration officials slammed a tag on you with your name, address, country of origin, etc. Everybody was tagged. They didn’t ask you whether you spoke English or not. They took your papers, and they tagged you. They checked your bag. Then they pushed you and they’d point, because they didn’t know whether you spoke English or not. Understaffed. Overcrowded. Jammed. And the place was the noisiest, and the languages, and the smell. Foul, you know what I mean? But I was nineteen. You can stand a lot at nineteen. Then we had to go through the physical. I think, frankly, the worst memory I have of Ellis Island was the physical because the doctors were seated at a long table full of potassium chloride, and you had to stand in front f them, and they’d ask you to reveal yourself. Right there in front of everyone, I mean, it wasn’t private! You were standing there. And the women had to open their blouse. This was terrible.

I had to open my trousers and fly, and they checked me for venereal disease or hernia or whatever they were looking for. I was a young buck. I was in good shape, you know, but just the same I felt this was very demeaning, even then. I mean, it’s terrible with women, young girls, and everyone, you know. And we had to line up in front of them…Years later I just thought they didn’t have to d it that way. But this was the height of immigration. We were coming in by the thousands. And again, you’re not aware this is historic, and this is something you’re going to tell your grandchildren about…

**4. Why were medical inspections necessary?**

Afterwards, we had customs immigration and we had to show our financial security of twenty dollars. I didn’t realize until sometime later, but what happened was a lot of guys on the ship were gambling. Some of the guys lost their twenty dollars. But there was a little racket there, you see. There was a wire fence and you had to go through the customs officers there. Now in order to go through, you had to show your twenty dollars. But a little further back on the fence there were a couple of guys making money. They would loan you the twenty dollars. Cost you two bucks, follow me? And they would loan you a twenty dollar bill, and you’d go to the gate and come through the gate, and the guy would be there to take the twenty dollar bill back from you. Cost you two bucks. For two bucks you could show twenty. Whether the guy was splitting it with the guard I don’t know.

**5. Why did immigrants need to show that they had financial security?**

I almost died of thirst. Couldn’t find the fountains. Cold hardly find the restrooms…Finally, Bertha and I got through, and my brother Henry was supposed to claim us. Our claimant. You had to claimed by a responsible person. But Henry didn’t show up, so we’re waiting. They wouldn’t let us on the ferry until we were claimed, and it’s four o’clock and the island closed at five and the staff went home. So they shipped us over to the depot on the other side of the island, the ferry building, and we were held in a group pen for unclaimed, but okayed immigrants. I don’t know how many because you’re concerned about yourself. You couldn’t be less interested. Bertha and I were wondering what the hell we were going to do. We didn’t have Henry’s phone number. We didn’t know where he lived. Are they going to send us back?

**6. As an immigrant, first coming to America, what role would a claimant have in your life? What is his/her purpose?**

Now it’s five o’clock, and they’re closing up. So I explained all this to the guard who called up HIAS, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society. The idea was we would be turned over to HIAS, who would be responsible for us. About fifteen minutes later this little short, chap came in, and the funniest thing is, knowing we were Jewish, he insisted upon talking Yiddish. We didn’t speak Yiddish. We spoke English, a little Gaelic, but I did understand German from some college courses I took.

**7. Why do you think there was a need for Immigrant Aid societies, what role did they have?**

So we got along and he took us by the ferry to Battery Park, and we started walking to HIAS headquarters on Lafayette Street. Bertha and I were dying. It’s hot. We’ve had nothing to eat, just a little water, and we’re getting a little weak, and he’s in a hurry because it’s pushing seven o’clock, and this is a chore, and he wants to get home, follow me, follow me.

He takes us to the subway. I had never seen a subway. We knew there were such things as underground trains, and we go down the steps to the noise, the flashing lights. In those days there was no air conditioning. They had little fans in the trains. And I remember sitting in the subway car with my suitcase ad Bertha, and this guy who paid no attention to us whatsoever, and we’re dripping! I must have lost ten pounds that day. And those days I was only about 130 pounds.

**8. How would you feel as an Immigrant going through New York City for the First time?**

It was just one or two stops and we got off. It was one floor up. We could barely climb the stairs. And we came to the HIAS office, and he took off. There was a woman there. “Will sassem?” she asked. Do you want to eat? And she took us into the dining room with long wooden tables, nothing fancy, and brought out a big bowl of cold soup, a milky substance, with some green things floating in it. “Bertha,” I said, “what do you think this is?” “I don’t know, eat!” It turned out to be spinach soup. I’d never seen it before, but it was cold and it was wet and it was delicious, and she brought in a big pile of fresh pumpernickel and a big pile of butter and, Jesus, we ate everything.

When we got through, Henry comes in the door. I hadn’t seen him in four years. He had gone to the island, traced us back. “Where were you?” I asked. The boss wouldn’t let him off. Henry was a tailor. The boss said, “You want off? Don’t come back.”

We took the subway to a three-room apartment on the 118th Street and Third Avenue in East Harlem. In 1925, East Harlem was a mixture of Italian and Jewish. About fifty-fifty. No blacks. And it was a very friendly neighborhood. Everybody more or less knew each other. As soon as we arrived, Henry said to me, “Get those long johns off and throw the goddamned things out. They stink like hell,” and he loaned me a pair of BVDs Oh, boy! It was like getting out of jail.

**9. How are immigrants treated in America?**