

The Rude Birth of Immigration Reform

As America debates immigration reform, it is in danger of repeating the mistakes made a century ago when the flawed foundations of today's policies were established.

BY KATHERINE BENTON-COHEN

IN 1908, ANNA HERKNER DONNED THE TATTERED peasant clothing of a Bohemian immigrant and boarded a crowded steamer bound for the United States. She was shocked at what she found. In steerage, women weakened by seasickness were mauled by crew members, and some were reportedly raped. Nauseated passengers lay “in a sort of stupor” in their cramped berths. “Only the fresh breeze from the sea overcame the sickening odors. The vile language of the men, the screams of the women defending themselves, the crying of children, wretched because of their surroundings, and practically every sound that reached the ear, irritated beyond endurance. There was no sight before which the eye did not prefer to close. Everything was dirty, sticky, and disagreeable to the touch. Every impression was offensive.” Herkner’s 12-day voyage offered “abundant opportunity to weaken the body and implant there germs of disease to develop later. . . . Surely it is not the introduction to American institutions that will tend to make them respected.”

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The overcrowding on the ship would have been even worse had the financial panic of 1907 not sharply reduced immigrant crossings from the record 1.4 million of the previous year. Eighty percent of the new arrivals were, like many of Herkner’s fellow passengers, from southern and eastern Europe. But Herkner was not counted among them. She underwent her ordeal not because she was immigrating to the New World, but because she had been hired by a federal commission to study those who were. Iowa born, she held a degree in Slavic languages from the University of California, Berkeley, and had been a social worker in a Polish neighborhood in Baltimore. After three undercover journeys by sea, she wrote a report for the commission chronicling her experiences and those of nine other agents, and calling for better enforcement of American laws regulating transatlantic vessels.

The United States was in the midst of a surge of immigration that would drive the foreign-born share of the population to 14.7 percent, a level that has been rivaled, but not surpassed, only in recent times. The “new immigrants” of the early 20th century were primarily Italians, eastern European Jews, and Slavs. As a group they tended to be darker skinned, and poorer, than

