

ANGEL ISLAND

IMMIGRATION STATION

RUSSIAN IMMIGRATION

From 1910 to 1940, Angel Island Immigration Station in San Francisco Bay was a major port of entry for many immigrants from the Pacific Rim and Central and South America.

Immigration from Russia to the United States in the Early Twentieth Century



Immigrants from Russia (who sometimes represented different ethnic groups) entered the United States on both the East and West coasts. Geography and politics determined the routes they took to come here. Economic conditions and religious repression in the Russian empire enticed some to leave, but World War I and the Bolshevik revolution produced refugees who lost their homes and their livelihood. When civil war broke out in 1918 well over one million people fled the country in fear for their lives. Immigrants and refugees who came to the West Coast often began their long journeys in European Russia, crossed the vast territory of Siberia (sometimes under difficult and perilous conditions), and entered Manchuria, where some worked for a period of time. They then made their way to Japan where they embarked for the United

States. The U.S. enacted laws in 1921 and 1924 to reduce the number of immigrants coming from southern and eastern Europe. Allowable Russian immigration dropped to a trickle of 2,248 per year.

At the Angel Island Immigration Station

Like other European groups, immigrants and refugees from Russia were not generally subjected to the complex questioning required to enforce the Chinese exclusion laws, unless during routine inspection immigration officials discovered potential problems. European immigrants could be excluded from entering the U.S. for over thirty different conditions, but most commonly during this period officials cited poverty ("likely to become public charge"), disease, ill health that might render one unable to work, and in the case of women, questionable morals. In 1917 immigrants were required to be able to read in their own language. Inspectors exercised a great deal of discretion in interpreting the laws. Refugees from Russia who had been politically active, left the country illegally, or otherwise aroused suspicions encountered a law and a bias against so-called "radicals." Gaining entry into the country required proof that one did not pose a threat to the American government and society. With few exceptions Russians could, and did, appeal their cases, often finding help from local immigrant aid organizations. During the inspection and appeal process immigrants from Russia stayed at the Immigration Station. The period of time varied considerably, ranging from a few days to four months.



An Individual's Story: CHAIA MINEWITCH

Three days after arriving in San Francisco on July 5, 1918, immigration officials ordered nineteen-year-old Chaia Minewitch to be deported as an illiterate. She had left European Russia during the war, which made conditions surrounding her town dreadful. Her sister, who lived in New York City had sent money for her ticket. Because Chaia had worked since the age of six, she had not learned to read and write. The local branch of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society together with their contacts in Washington, D.C. appealed her case, but it took four months to convince the immigration authorities that her long detention was undermining her health and that her case had merit, especially since as a baker, she had skills which would help the U.S. to win World War I. Chaia entered the country under parole, that is, someone had to guarantee that upon the government's request she would appear "so that her deportation to Russia could be accomplished" according to what is stated in her case file. She probably remained in the country because her case file contains reports on her activities for the years, 1919, 1920, and 1921. In the last one, the inspector wrote "the alien is able to read fluently, she earns over \$30 a week, and claims to have \$300 saved. She presents a very good appearance."

Activity

At various times throughout our history, arriving immigrants have been subjected to special scrutiny because of internal political concerns. Look through the newspaper to find articles about such concerns today. How have anxieties about terrorism affected travelers and immigrants to the United States?

Special thanks to Maria K. Sakovich for her help with writing this piece.

Teachers: Order no-cost newspapers for your class, call (415) 777-6828 or visit www.sfchron.com/nie.

For Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation info visit www.aiisf.org. Photos: California State Parks Design: Stephen Lowe

