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The Great Hall at Ellis Island: The Guastavino tiled vaults amplified crowd noise to a constant din.

Ellis Island Revisited

Museum of Tears

By Edward Ball

The city's most important shrine to the industrial era, Ellis Island, where the United States conscripted a working class, will now process millions of visitors who want to bask in the rosy-fingered dawn of the age of human dislocation. From 1892 to 1924, when a booming economy demanded unskilled labor, the U.S. opened its borders to Europeans, and 12 million passed interrogations and slapdash medical examinations in

the Main Building, rebaptized this month as the Ellis Island Museum of Immigration. Their descendants include over 40 per cent of all living Americans, or some 100 million people, which means either you or somebody near you at this moment.

Ellis Island was simultaneously a place of fear and promise, the latter oft-repeated in patriotic bal-lyhoo. The 27.5-acre clod of land-fill evokes the dream time when this country signified possibility, a chance of escape, and raised hori-

zons. At Ellis, Russian Jews and Italian tenant farmers squeezed out from beneath the heel of the czar or rising crop tariffs. They also faced rejection—in peak years 1000 people a month were sent back and returned home, humiliated and worse off than before. Yet the risk seemed worth it, because despite the privations of urban capitalism that awaited the mostly rural immigrants, here at least were jobs, if not succor.

At bottom, it is to sustain a heroic image of this "good" immi-

gration (remember the "good war"?), in a period of declining U.S. hegemony and increasing ethnic pain that the Museum of Immigration has been created. Like any new monument, Ellis has been asked to participate in a cultural offensive; in fact, its ultimate role was strategized long ago, in the turgid campaigns of the early Cold War, during the red scare of the 1950s. Then, the idea of an immigration museum was first raised by the American Sec-

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The Immigrant Wall of Honor: Like any new monument, Ellis has been asked to participate in a cultural offensive.



The dining hall in use: For many Americans, family memory begins on this lump of dirt.

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nic and Historic Preservation Society of New York. Ellis was explicitly to be a weapon in "the worldwide struggle for men's minds and aspirations." The project ran aground in Congress.

Fortunately, a place of such power as Ellis Island exceeds whatever mission it may be assigned. Following the most extensive rehabilitation of any public structure in the country, the museum invites visitors to retrace the steps of the huddled masses along paths that are now burnished and clean. Like religious pilgrims moving through acts of the Passion, *imitatione Christi*, tourists arrive at the boat slip and face the wedding cake Beaux Arts Main Building. The 1897 design by original architects Boring & Tilton bore an institutional grandeur that advertised the girdings of power, with four steeplelike copper towers that

suggest some temple of transport. Two architectural firms, Beyer Blinder Belle and Notter Finegold & Alexander Inc., have handled the rehabilitation with sensitivity and finesse, even a certain reverence. Asked to blend in a library, two cinemas, and exhibition galleries, they used the building's wings and edges for the additions, leaving its historical core intact. The idea was to make available, as much as possible, the experience of the immigrants.

Now, as then, the human stream passes beneath an exterior canopy, enters the ground-floor baggage room, migrates up a staircase, and emerges into the Great Hall. Few rooms have inspired so much dread in so many, only to be forgiven later and waxed wet with nostalgia. Here in this big two-story chamber, beneath the Guastavino tiled vaults that amplified crowd noise to a constant din, the interrogations took place. People inched along between wire

fences and iron-railed corridors that divided the floor into a rat's labyrinth, the better for bureaucratic trafficking. Those who fell afoul of the inquisitors landed in holding cells on the balcony level. One of these rooms has been preserved: tiled walls and a drain in the floor recall the humiliating wash-down of these prison dorms with disinfectant. In the vapors of bleach, the condemned waited for hearings in the Special Inquiry room (also restored), last appeal before deportation.

The temptation to despoil the Great Hall with exhibits, memorabilia, or other enlightening noise must have been great. But the National Park Service has wisely left it empty, save a few benches, so people can think about exactly what went on here. One who remembered was Fanny Kligerman. Fifty years after arriving in 1905, she told an oral historian, "It was like a prison. They threw us around, saying, 'Stay here. Stay

there.' You just didn't fight back. . . . Everybody was sad there. There was not a smile on anybody's face. Here they thought maybe they wouldn't go through. There they thought maybe my child won't go through. The people had such terrible sad faces. Such a sad place there."

Ellis is a monument to human separation. To abandon your mother tongue and forego the nurture of birthplace for the unknown was an alienation so sharp as to be inexpressible. For many Americans, cut off from their roots abroad, family memory begins on this lump of dirt. As immigrant lore seeped back to the single-ox farms and shtetls of Europe, Ellis became known as the Island of Tears.

To live in New York is still to stand square in the nation's immigrant stream. Today, people come from Central and South America, Asia, India, Africa—in addition to the more recent arrivals from Eastern Europe. And the temperature of America's simmering racial anxiety rises every year. Can it be a coincidence that people of color have little place in the Museum of Immigration? True, African Americans appear, somewhat en passant, in an exhibit on the slave trade. But center stage is the great European exodus. May we at least pause to remember that during this heroic period, Chinese people were all but barred from entering the country (between 1882 and 1943)? Is it too much hectoring to want an exhibit on Native Americans, who have experienced centuries of internal exile? Never was the U.S. some vague land of opportunity. The channels of passage were, and remain, obstructed by ethnic, economic, and political blocks. Indeed, finally Europeans were shut out when the protofascist science

of eugenics and rising anti-Bolshevik neurosis nearly closed the door, in 1924.

In part to deflect such nitpicking, the museum goes for the human drama. Exhibits present an image of the individual, full of desire, striding across the stage of history. Pieces of old luggage and rooms of heirlooms are elegiac relics once manhandled here. The ideology of the personal really flares up in the fascinating decision to preserve the vintage graffiti. Many walls bear I-am-somebody testaments dating from the turn of the century, uncovered beneath layers of paint and now embalmed under plexiglass. Diaspora has a human face.

But nothing arouses as much personal intrigue and ambivalence as the American Immigrant Wall of Honor. Because the restoration used no government money, fund-

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raisers brought out sophisticated techniques, including the privilege (sold for a contribution of \$100) of inscribing an ancestor's name on a plate lining the seawall around the island. Some 200,000 names have been etched, and more are being added because of clamorous demand. The Wall of Honor fills me with sadness. It seems to me a kind of voluntary version of the Vietnam War Memorial. Ellis, after all, was a place that no one could wait to leave. A ring of pathos around this old shrine, the wall is the bond that the living have to their lost past. It speaks for those who, if they can't be inscribed anywhere else in history, might at least find a home here in the shadow of weeping. ■