

I watched the balls of yarn slowly unravel and then run out. Finally, the people on the dock had to let go. The long strands of yarn were airborne. The women on the ship still gripped their end, but the far ends fluttered in the wind. It seemed to me that the strands of yarn waved final goodbyes from the people on the ship. The ocean breeze responded by carrying the hopeful prayers of the people left behind—prayers that the ancient Italian proverb would be proven true: “Chi esce riesce [He who leaves, succeeds].”

That is the only good memory I have of the fourteen-day voyage by steamship across the Atlantic Ocean in 1907. The rest of the trip was awful. Like most of the immigrants on board the *SS Konig Albert*, I spent a lot of the trip trapped three decks below sea level in the steerage compartment—hungry, thirsty, dirty, tired, seasick, and throwing up.

It was almost impossible to breathe in the steerage compartment: The air was foul—engine fumes and smoke; sweaty, filthy bodies; and the stink of an outhouse. I couldn’t sleep much: The beds in steerage were lumpy sacks of straw that poked me. Underneath them were hard and narrow wooden shelves. I was always thirsty. We almost never had fresh water in steerage. When we had water, it was cloudy and had a metallic odor. I just couldn’t drink it. And I was always hungry, because I was afraid to eat the food for third-class passengers: The meat, bread, and cheese usually had bits of green mold on them. The pickled fish wasn’t rotten, but it tasted terrible.

The only way to escape the miserable environment of the ship’s steerage compartment was to go up to the top deck and sit outside. But that’s what everyone did, so there wasn’t always a lot of room up there. It could get crowded on the top deck. I went topside whenever I could, though, even in pouring rain and freezing cold. I would roll myself up in a ball under an old blanket and put up with the unpleasant weather. At least while I was on the top deck, I could breathe.<sup>2</sup>

As bad as the steerage conditions were, most of the passengers didn’t complain. They were too busy worrying that the ship would sink. It was easy to see why they worried. In good weather, the ship rocked from side to side so much that the wood planks in the deck creaked and made popping sounds, and it was hard to walk without falling down or bumping into something. In bad weather, the ship leaned over so far that the deck railings touched the waves, and water washed over the upper decks. During a storm, the only thing you could do was to sit on the crowded and dirty floor in steerage, hold on to the other passengers for balance, and pray that freezing cold ocean water wasn’t on its way down the stairwells to drown you. Of course, drowning would at least have been an end to the

torture of traveling in steerage. It was no wonder that the Italians referred to traveling to America by steamship as “via dolorosa [the sorrowful way].”

The Italian immigrants in steerage sang a sad song during the worst times on the ship. The song was about a young girl who asks her mother for a hundred lire [dollars], so she can go to America. Her mother doesn’t want her to go to America, because she is afraid of what might happen to her daughter in the strange and distant land. But the girl goes anyway, and then dies when her boat sinks in the Atlantic Ocean and a large fish eats her. The song was called *To America I Will Go*, and it went like this:

Mamma mia dammi cento lire,  
che in America voglio andar!  
Cento lire io te le do,  
ma in America. No! No! No!

[Momma, give me a hundred lire,  
And to America I will go!  
Daughter, I will give you a hundred lire,  
But to America you will go? No! No! No!]

The sad atmosphere on board the *SS Konig Albert* ended on the morning of September 5. That morning, I woke up to the sound of excited voices. It felt like there was electricity in the air!

“L’America!” I heard people say as if it were a magic word. “L’America!”

First, they whispered it, and soon after, they shouted it. Then suddenly, everyone around me got up at once and rushed for the stairs. I was swept up by the mob and carried all the way to the upper deck of the ship—I don’t think my feet ever touched the floor!

Topside, it was very foggy. The sun was a pale disk floating above the ship in a spooky gray mist. The fog was so thick that, other than the sun, I couldn’t see anything beyond the railing of the ship, not even the water. But I squinted as hard as I could into the fog—in the direction that everyone else was looking—and I waited. And I waited. The fog broke. And then, finally, I saw what everyone had been waiting to see, slowly appear out of the gloom—first, a torch, and then, a crown.

RIGHT:  
IMMIGRANTS CATCH THEIR FIRST GLIMPSE OF THE STATUE OF LIBERTY AS  
THEIR STEAMSHIP ENTERS NEW YORK HARBOR. Date: 1915.  
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