Imagine waking up one day knowing you have to pick up all your things and leave everything you have ever known behind. Imagine spending months on a small ship with strangers from all over the world having no privacy but all wanting the same thing: freedom. During the 1920s, America was known as the land of hope and opportunity for those who never had it. I was born in Buffalo, New York, about 6 and a half hours away from Ellis Island, through which my great grandmothers had to travel to get into America. Although it was not an easy process to get to America, traveling through the island was torturous and left a lasting negative effect on immigrants. Immigrants were made to feel worthless and vulnerable, since they did not have the birthright of American citizenship. The struggles did not end on the island. In New York, racism and prejudice was at an all-time high. I consider Ellis Island a significant part of my heritage because it has shaped who I am today.

History of Ellis Island

Ellis Island was the site of the country’s oldest and largest immigration station. For almost half a century, a vast number of people passed through “a place where melodrama is routine tragedy [where] comedy and farce play a continuous bill across the stage of the island” (Thruelsen). Before the American Revolution, the island had been
known as Gull Island and was owned by a group of Native Americans known as the Mohegan Indians. “The island acquired its present name from Samuel Ellis, a New Yorker who in 1785 offered it for sale” (Thruelsen). Thruelsen notes that during the war of 1812, the island was taken over by the Army as a bivouac area for troops, Fort Gibson, and for a short period of time the Navy also used it as an ammunition storehouse.

“In 1890 the Federal Bureau of Immigration, then based at Castle Garden, on the lower tip of Manhattan, surveyed the island and two years later the partially completed station was opened to process immigrants” (Thruelsen). Immigration was unrestricted, and any normal and fairly healthy alien could enter the United States. Visas and passports were not needed. According to Thurelsen, all that was required was a source of identification and enough money to pay through. The process was used like an assembly line with first and second class being examined by health and immigration officials, and third class, the majority, taken up to the Island. Once they arrived, the immigrants were put into two large lines and stood at a point where the doctors could see their front, side, and rear views (Thruelsen). They would then conduct a medical inspection that weeded out the weak. The examination “consisted of 38 questions and took approximately two minutes per alien. Immigrants who could not satisfy the inspectors were held for a more detailed hearing before boards of special inquiry; the 99 per cent who could give acceptable answers concerning their age, place of birth, marital status and destination were tagged with numbered place cards indicating the railroad line which would take them to their new home” (Thruelsen).
Personal Connection to the Island

My personal connection to Ellis Island is that both of my great grandmothers on my mother’s side traveled through the infamous island. I interviewed my mother, Maria Niemeyer, about our family history. My great grandmother, Sadie, traveled through Ellis Island to start her life in New York City when she was only fourteen. Her family heard she could have a better life here, and other family members had already emigrated from Sicily, so she joined them. Sadie “never really talked about her experience at Ellis Island being that it was very traumatic and hard time in her life” (Niemeyer). This was because of the racism and social inequalities many Italians faced when traveling through the island, and after they settled in the States. At the time, Italians were considered second class citizens. According to Sadie, “she was not treated the same as people of other nationalities” (Niemeyer). Once she had settled into New York, she had to lie about her age to get a job because she was so young that no one would have hired her if they knew her real age. She worked a sewing machine in the garment district and ran the elevator in a clothing store; she said that people were constantly rude to her.

Unlike my great grandmother, Sadie, my great grandmother, Maria, recounted her time on the island in more detail. Before even reaching the island, while traveling on the boat, she was able to learn English with the help of some fellow passengers. They spent hours teaching each other any English they knew. She also noted how unsanitary it was on the ship, “with the crowds, disease, smell, and lack of food, just enough to stay alive” (Niemeyer). Once she reached the island, officials began by chalking her clothing with markings noting her health condition, and that of her traveling companion. Lucky for her, she had no health risks and was able to pass through; however, her partner was not so
lucky and was sent to quarantine. She stayed in New York City long enough for her companion to be released, and then they took a train to Rochester, New York.

They were able to settle in Rochester, and Maria began working in her family’s grocery store, and faced as much racism as Sadie did. The grocery store was only patronized by other Italians because other ethnicities did not want to associate with them. After a time, Maria fell for a young man, but his family, however, did not allow them to be together being she was a “greasy Italian” — a rude comment constantly made toward Italians at that time. Throughout my life, I have been proud to call myself an Italian woman and am very grateful that I was born in an age where that is possible. My mother has shared many amazing stories with me, none of which would have happened without my grandmothers being brave enough to travel to this country.

Racism

Racism toward Italians was very common in the early decades of the twentieth century in this country, and unfortunately, such racism was a major part of not only my family’s life but the lives of many other Italians’ as well. For a long time Italian Americans would try to be seen as non-ethnic to avoid discrimination. “Italian Americans are invisible people. Not because people refuse to see them, but because, for the most part, they refuse to be seen. Italian Americans became invisible the moment they could pass themselves off as being white” (Gardaphe). The history of racism for Italian Americans is almost hard for me to believe. Not only were they harassed emotionally but were physically assaulted which often resulted in deaths and arrests. “They were lynched, burned out of homes, chased, captured, and killed by vigilantes and the KKK. They were discriminated against by political, social, economic, and religious institutions”
They were targeted because other races saw them as unintelligent and thought they were only looking to steal the jobs other Americans rightfully deserved. Italian Americans would work for longer hours and lower wages causing the employers to choose them for work.

As a result of this prejudice, many Italians were accused of crimes they had never committed. A prime example of this is the case of Ferdinando Nicola Sacco and Bartolommeo Vanzetti, two Italian anarchists. On April 15, 1920, a New York City shop was robbed and the paymaster and the guard were shot to death. Witnesses to the crime described the shooters as looking like Italians (Hinton). A month later the local police arrested Nicola Sacco and Bartolommeo Vanzetti, Italian immigrants who were both known as anarchists, had been armed, and had lied upon arrest (Hinton). During their trial, many prejudicial factors influenced the jury, and unfortunately for the defendants, the judge was a conservative “who opposed widespread immigration and despised radical members of society such as socialists and anarchists. Although both men had alibis that were confirmed by multiple witnesses, they were found guilty of murder and sentenced to death” (Hinton).

Conclusion

Before completing this essay I had never really thought about how hard it was for my relatives to gain citizenship and social, economic, and political standing. Even after traveling through the island and dealing with all the terrible traveling conditions, they had to face struggles of racism and discrimination in their everyday lives. This research has been an eye opening experience about the culture, my family history, and the ongoing
plight of new immigrants in America. I cannot wait to share these stories with my children one day.

Works Cited

Gardaphe, Fred. “Invisible People: Shadows and Light in Italian American Writing.”


Niemeyer, Maria. Personal interview. 1 Nov. 2014.