

BLESS THE HUDDLED MASSES

They came, they left, they stayed- many Americans didn't like them – and still don't - but America was blessed!

The best estimate is that between 2 and 4 million Jews from Eastern Europe immigrated to the United States between 1860 and 1920. Since many were classified by their country of origin rather than as “Hebrews”, the exact numbers cannot be known. At the same time, Ireland and Italy accounted for between 4 and 6 million immigrants each while, starting in 1850, close to 7 million Germans came here.

Much of America was not all that happy over the influx of Europeans – most of them with little education, strange customs and language, willing to work for lower wages and so, well, foreign.

The fear of being overrun by strangers resulted in the passage of the 1921 Immigration Restriction Act. It limited admission to a maximum of 3% of the people of that nationality living in the U.S. in 1910. Total yearly admissions were limited to 357,000 and if a nationality didn't fill its quota, the unused numbers could not be transferred to another nationality; the English usually didn't fill their quota while Eastern European and Italian quotas were overflowing.

In 1924, the National Origins Act replaced the 1921 Act. It lowered admissions to just 2% of residents counted in the 1890 census. Its intent was to severely limit the influx of Southern and Eastern Europeans who had begun to enter the U.S. in large numbers in the 1890s. It was effective: between 1900 and 1910, about 200,000 Italians immigrated annually; after 1924, only 4,000 per year were allowed in while the annual quota for Germany was over 57,000. Since the quotas were based on the 1890 census when most Americans were descendants of northern Europeans, 86% of the 165,000 permitted entries were from the British Isles, France, Germany, and other Northern European countries.

The 1965 Immigration Act finally eliminated restrictions based on countries of origin – prior to 1965, waiting times for Eastern European admissions, and this included most Holocaust survivors, could be 10, 15 or 20 years.

While most of us are somewhat familiar with what I have described here, there is an aspect of the immigration question that is seldom addressed. This is the assumption that those, who in spite of all the obstacles manage to come to America, will remain here. The surprising reality is different.

Numbers that were painstakingly collected for departures for the 1907-1908 years show that 61% of Southern Italians returned home, most of them permanently. This is almost double the return rate of Northern Italians and close to the return rates of Croatians, Slovaks, Slovenes and Hungarians. About one third of Poles and Finns went back to their home countries, while the English, Scandinavians and Germans averaged 10% to 15% returnees. The second lowest rate of return was among the Irish – 6.3% and the Jews – officially described as “Hebrews” – had the lowest rate of those who wanted to go back: just 5.1%!

Our unofficial national anthem is “God Bless America!”, written by a Jewish immigrant from Odessa. I like to think that it should be sung in the past tense – “God Blessed America!” I believe that God has already blessed America and that its blessing was the immigrants. Canada, our northern neighbor, is larger than the U.S., has as many natural resources, but a population that is just one tenth of ours. Canada is a very nice country but unlike the U.S. it doesn’t influence and guide humanity’s future, it isn’t a superpower, it doesn’t have the ambition or ability to become one; if Canada didn’t exist, nothing much would have changed in the world, for better or for worse.

I firmly believe that the difference is the overwhelming influx of immigrants to the U.S. and the generations of Americans they produced. I believe that there is a natural selection that works in America’s favor – only the smartest, the most energetic, the most capable are willing to leave behind all that is familiar and search for a better future for themselves and their families. Only the strong and the brave are willing to take a chance on a strange land where an unfamiliar language is spoken, where the customs are frighteningly different but where they too can become Americans like those who came before them. Not all will succeed. Some will decide to go back, to the old familiar, un-American places they left behind. More will stay and make us stronger, brighter, better.

This doesn't apply only to America. Immigrants everywhere, if given a chance, accomplish and succeed better than the native populations. Look at the Chinese in the Pacific Rim countries, the Indians in Africa, the Arabs in South America – these are success stories - but nowhere do immigrants have the opportunities and freedoms that are offered in the U.S. And they do succeed as each succeeding wave of foreigners comes here, hungry, eager, willing to work harder and force their children to study better and accomplish more.

And yes, it is a brain drain that works in our favor. If the smartest, bravest and strongest leave, those who are left behind are the somewhat less capable. This is true of Europe, Russia, Italy, India, China, Pakistan, Korea, Vietnam – all those places where the “huddled masses yearning to breathe free” come from.

And this is America's blessing.