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Personal Account of the Voyage to America

By: David Gordon

My Name is Isak Kaplan and I am a eight-year-old boy coming to America from Russia. My parents- Abram and Sofia- are coming with me to the United States. We are leaving Moscow, where our family has lived for many generations, because the Czar had stepped up persecution towards the Jews, including our family. My parents have been saving up for three years to pay \$30 per person for our voyage to America from St. Petersburg. Also, life in Russia is extremely difficult and we hope to have the promise of freedom in America. We are choosing to immigrate to America above another closer country because my older brother, Boris, has already completed the journey and has started to make a living. He has an apartment, and a job. He works at the ports in New York City.

From the start, the journey to America was difficult. First, we lived in a little house in Moscow. Since Moscow is a landlocked city, we had to travel by train to St. Petersburg to catch our boat- the *Kuguar*. That was easy because my dad was a train operator and I have been on the train ride several times to St. Petersburg. At the port, we easily found our vessel in the harbor. Once aboard, we were directed towards something known as “steerage”. I quickly found out what the term meant. Steerage was the cheapest class on the ship. Some ships packed around 2,000 people in steerage. The *Kuguar* was unfortunately one of those ships. I then realized that it was going to be a long three weeks in transit.

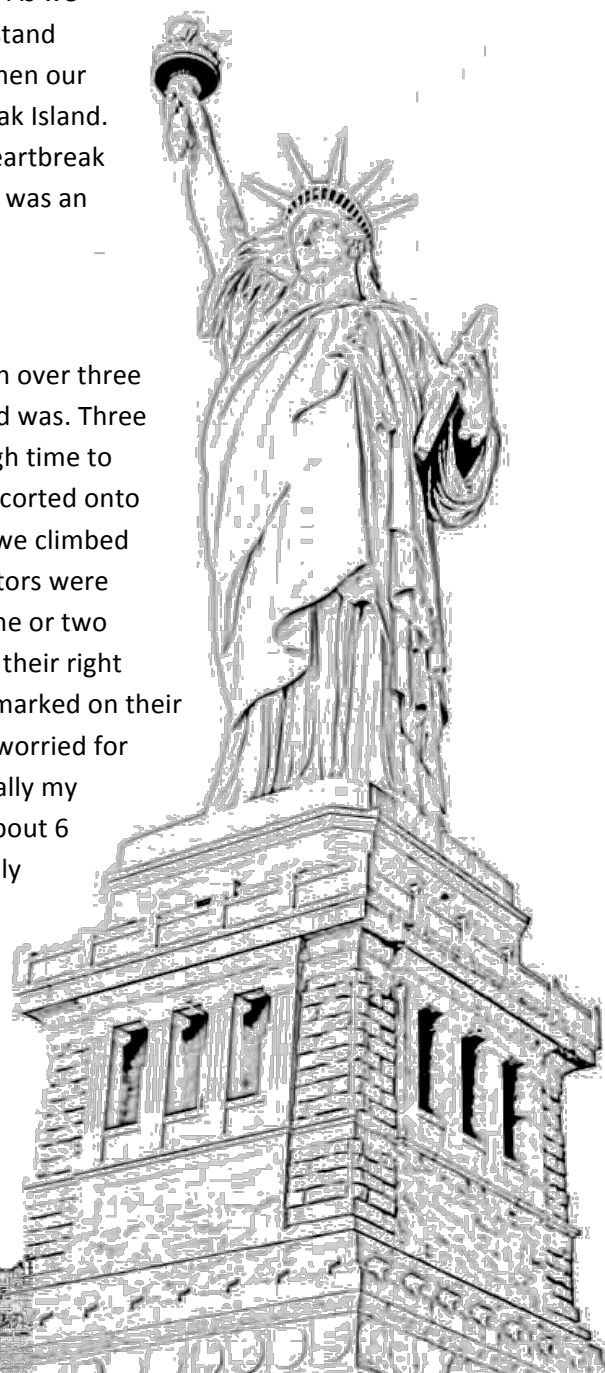


About one week into the voyage, an outbreak of the measles spread. The measles-a disease that you can only have once- was common in Russia, so most people already had it. However, about half of the people on the vessel weren't from Russia. They were from Belarus and Ukraine. The measles was a rarity there, so most of them never got it. Unfortunately, most of the people from these countries died because there were no medicines on the ship, including my new best friend. My feelings on the voyage changed from being excited about the trip and my new life in America to nothing but worry and fear from seeing every body who was infected being thrown overboard to avoid spreading the disease further. It was hardly civilized. I became more and more worried daily. Chatter started in Russian about what was to come. I overheard almost all of it. Some were talking about the inspections at Ellis Island while others were debating what life in New York was like.

Now that it was nearing the end of November, the nights started to get cold. It wasn't as bad as Moscow though. In Moscow, the temperature in November is below freezing. Every day, when I went to bed on the floor, I thought about how my brother made this journey all alone, when he was only two years older than I am now. I sat awake hoping that the following day would be better. It wasn't. We received the same meager meal, as usual-soup. In fact, on the *Kuguar*, meals cost about 60 cents per person daily.

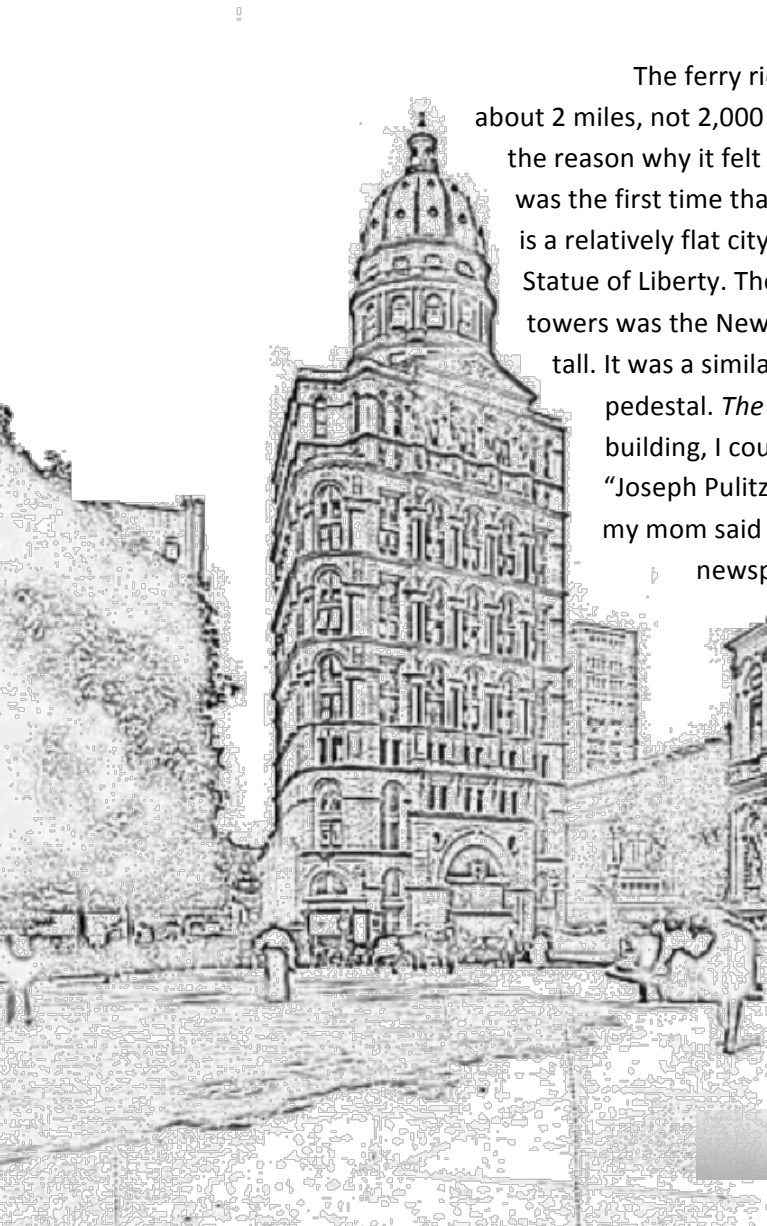
Finally, The *Kuguar* entered New York Harbor. I, with everyone else on the boat, rushed for the window. A new, different sense of excitement and adventure filled me as the worry and fear were carried away. Then, there was the Statue, glistening on the horizon. As we dominated the harbor-but only for a short time. I wish that I could stand underneath this majestic symbol of freedom and liberty forever. When our boat cruised passed Liberty Island, a new island appeared-Heartbreak Island. The official name though, was Ellis Island. We knew the Island as Heartbreak Island because not all immigrants were granted entry to America. It was an immigrant processing facility.

The *Kuguar* finally docked on Ellis Island. For the first time in over three weeks, I stepped onto land. I almost forgot just how comforting land was. Three weeks in steerage can do a lot to a person. I didn't even have enough time to think: I am in America because everyone on the boat was quickly escorted onto the island. We were greeted by our first obstacle-a set of stairs. As we climbed the stairs, I started to receive a slightly anxious feeling because doctors were quickly examining people and marking a symbol on their clothes. One or two people were pulled aside and had an "X" marked on their right shoulder. Those with the X-or any other symbol-marked on their clothes were sent into a private room. I wasn't worried for myself. I was worried about my parents-especially my mother because she had injured her ankle about 6 months ago. I wasn't sure that it was totally better. My worst fears hadn't come true at the top of the stairs. My family was still together. At the top of the stairs was the medical exam. We had made it this far. Within three hours,



it hopefully would all be over and we would be American. Life would be so much better. I could finally be able to see my brother once again.

The lines were starting to move faster. Then, the first person on our boat was sent to the island's hospital because he still had the measles. My parents and I passed through the exam. Next was the Great Hall-the only thing that separated me from the United States. The Great Hall was the location where the interviews took place. I was asked my name, birth date, my criminal record and where I came from. I also had to present papers showing that I legally could enter America. Some people on our boat even had their names changed because they were hard to spell. If the officer tried to spell them, it would slow down the pace of the lines. There were thousands of immigrants each day that needed to be processed. Isak Kaplan was a considered a simple name to the inspectors. After exchanging our Russian money into American Dollars, we proceeded for the exit. It was finally all over as we walked out of the exit. The only difference was that we were Americans. I survived the crossing and I was in America. All I had to do was take the ferry to Manhattan and I would be at home-my new home.



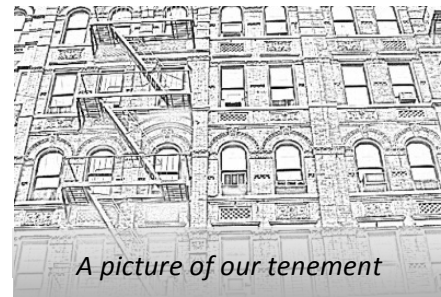
The ferry ride was magnificent. Although this voyage was only about 2 miles, not 2,000 it felt longer than my three weeks in steerage. I think the reason why it felt so long was because I was taking in the moment. This was the first time that I was seeing any building over 5 stories tall. Moscow is a relatively flat city. All of the skyscrapers were almost as nice as the Statue of Liberty. The structures stretched as far as I could see. One of the towers was the New York World Building. It was a remarkable 20 stories tall. It was a similar height to the Statue of Liberty including the gigantic pedestal. *The World* was a newspaper. From the architecture of the building, I could tell the *The World* made an abundance of profit. "Joseph Pulitzer, an immigrant from Hungary started the paper," my mom said when I asked her. It was the first mass-circulated newspaper. I was intrigued by the architecture of the building.

When the ferry docked, we were in an area of New York City known as Lower Manhattan, we went to discover our new home. We were moving into a neighborhood with other Russian immigrants. That neighborhood was 20 blocks away. Instead of walking, we decided to ask someone if there was a faster way. There was only one problem. We didn't speak English. We only spoke Russian. After about

The New York World Building (←)

thirty attempts to communicate with someone, we found nothing except that if we wanted to assimilate into American Culture, we would have to learn English. I decided just to walk. One myth about the greatness of the United States was that the streets were paved with gold. Actually, most of the streets were hardly paved! Walking through New York felt like walking through a canyon because there were skyscrapers on either side of the street, apparently going on for miles.

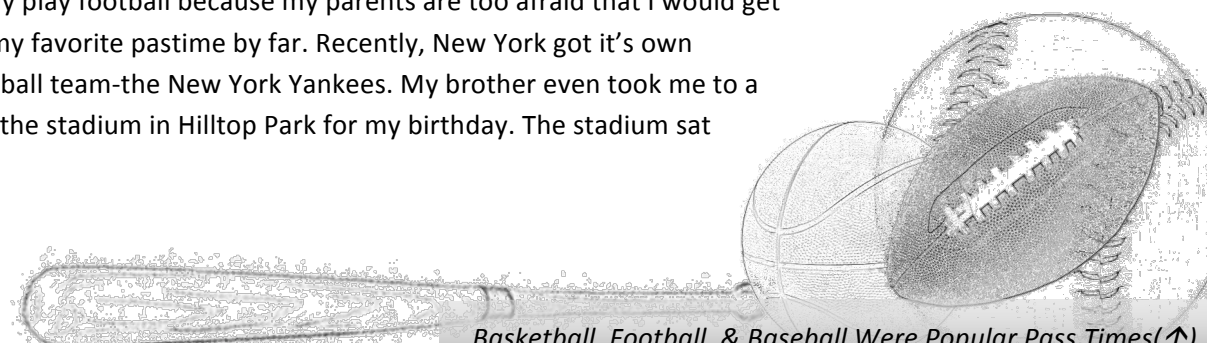
Finally, after about an hour, the walking was over. We were at our building. Unfortunately, the apartment was a tenement. It was roughly 300 square feet. Our house in Moscow was at least twice the size. It didn't matter to me though because I was in America. The conditions were mediocre. The tenement consisted of a bedroom, and a small kitchen. The bathroom was in the hallway and was shared between 5 other tenements. There was one bed. It was "reserved" for my parents. I had to sleep on orange crates on the kitchen floor. It wasn't the most comfortable thing but I survived. Some people were lucky if they had a rug to sleep on.



My brother, Boris, quickly found us. It was so nice to see him again after four long years. It turned out that his tenement was in our building because after all, almost all of the Russian Immigrants lived within a block from us. I can see him everyday now. My family separated over continents by the Atlantic was now completed. I couldn't be much happier.

Now that I am here, life isn't all easy. America has compulsory education laws. They mandate that all children attend school-and attending school means homework. The compulsory education laws ended around sixth grade. The rest was optional. For me, I am pretty sure that my parents will force me to continue whether I like school or not. In school, I am mainly being taught English as well as reading, writing, and arithmetic in school as well. *Our class uses a textbook called McGuffey's Eclectic Reader.* School affects me because I have less time to have fun during the day.

America is a land of opportunities. For example, I discovered new pass times such as Football, Baseball, and Basketball that I am learning how to play with some of my new friends. Football is basically when a player tries to send a ball from one side of a field to the opposite without getting tackled. It is a dangerous. I rarely play football because my parents are too afraid that I would get hurt. Baseball is my favorite pastime by far. Recently, New York got it's own professional baseball team-the New York Yankees. My brother even took me to a Yankees game at the stadium in Hilltop Park for my birthday. The stadium sat



16,000. I tried to play baseball as often as possible. But having spare time was a rarity.

Since the tenement rent was so expensive, I had to work afterschool most days. When I needed a job, I remembered the majestic New York World building that I spotted on the ferry. I ended up getting a job selling newspapers on the streets shouting “extra, extra, read all about it”. My dad was able to get a new job in the subway system and my mother started a dressmaking business. All of these jobs have long hours and don’t pay much but hopefully they will improve soon. Someone has to sell the news. Someone has to operate the trains and make the dresses. Life isn’t all fun and games (although I wish it was)!



Overall, my parents deciding to bring our family to America has been the best thing that has ever happened to me. I couldn’t imagine still living in Russia. The two lifestyles can hardly even compare! I am sure that future generations will appreciate America’s beauty as much as me, if not more. 🌸