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ON THE TRAIL OF THE IMMIGRANT

EDWARD A. STEINER *Professor in Iowa College, Grinnell,
Iowa* **ILLUSTRATED**

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*This book is affectionately dedicated to "The Man at the
Gate" ROBERT WATCHORN, United States Commissioner of
Immigration at the Port of New York:*

*Who, in the exercise of his office has been loyal to the interests of
his country, and has dealt humanely, justly and without prejudice,
with men of "Every kindred and tongue and people and nation."*

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CONTENTS

I.	By Way of Introduction	9
II.	The Beginning of the Trail	1 6
III.	The Fellowship of the Steerage	3 0
IV.	Land, Ho!	4 8
V.	At the Gateway	6 4
VI.	“The Man at the Gate”	7 8
VII.	The German in America	9 4
VIII.	The Scandinavian Immigrant	1 1 2
IX.	The Jew in His Old World Home	1 2 6
X.	The New Exodus	1 4 3
XI.	In the Ghettos of New York	1 5 4
XII.	The Slavs at Home	1 7 9
XIII.	The Slavic Invasion	1 9

		8
XIV.		2
	Drifting with the “Hunkies”	1
		3
XV.		2
	The Bohemian Immigrant	2
		5
XVI.		2
	Little Hungary	3
		8
XVII		2
.	The Italian at Home	5
		2
XVII		2
I.	The Italian in America	6
		2
XIX.		2
	Where Greek Meets Greek	8
		2
XX.		2
	The New American and the New Problem	9
		2
XXI.		3
	The New American and Old Problems	0
		9
XXII		3
.	Religion and Politics	2
		1
XXII		3
I.	Birds of Passage	3
		4
XXI		3
V.	In the Second Cabin	4
		7
XX	Au Revoir	3

V.	5
	9
	3
Appendix	6
	5
	3
Index	7
	1

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

	<i>Facing page</i>
	<i>Titl</i>
	<i>e</i>
At the Gate	
As Seen by My Lady of the First Cabin	10
The Beginning of the Trail	26
Will They Let Me In?	50
The Sheep and the Goats	66
Back To the Fatherland	92
Farewell to Home and Friends	11
	4
Israelites Indeed	14
	0
The Ghetto of the New World	15
	6
From the Black Mountain	18
	0
Without the Pale	20
	8
Ho for the Prairie!	24
	6
The Boss	27
	0
In an Evening School, New York	29

	4
A Slav of the Balkans	30
	2
On the Day of Atonement	33
	0

ON THE TRAIL OF THE IMMIGRANT

I BY WAY OF INTRODUCTION

My Dear Lady of the First Cabin:

ON the fourth morning out from Hamburg, after your maid had disentangled you from your soft wrappings of steamer rugs, and leaning upon her arm, you paced the deck for the first time, the sun smiled softly upon the smooth sea, and its broken reflections came back hot upon your pale cheeks. Then your gentle eyes wandered from the illimitable sea back to the steamer which carried you. You saw the four funnels out of which came pouring clouds of smoke trailing behind the ship in picturesque tracery; you watched the encircling gulls which had been your fellow travellers ever since we left the white cliffs of Albion; and then your eyes rested upon those mighty Teutons who stood on the bridge, and whose blue eyes searched the sea for danger, or rested upon the compass for direction.

From below came the sweet notes of music, gentle and wooing, one of the many ways in which the steamship company tried to make life pleasant for you, to bring back your “Bon appétit” to its tempting tables. Then suddenly, you stood transfixed, looking below you upon the deck from which came rather pronounced odours and confused noises. The notes of a jerky harmonica harshly struck your ears attuned to symphonies; and the song which accompanied it was guttural and unmusical.

The deck which you saw, was crowded by human beings; men, women and children lay there, many of them motionless, and the children, numerous as the sands of the sea,—unkempt and unwashed, were everywhere in evidence.

You felt great pity for the little ones, and you threw chocolate cakes among them, smiling as you saw them in their tangled struggle to get your sweet bounty.

You pitied them all; the frowsy headed, ill clothed women, the men who looked so hungry and so greedy, and above all you pitied, you said so,—do you remember?—you said you pitied your own country for having to receive such a conglomerate of human beings, so near to the level of the beasts. I well recall it; for that day they did look like animals. It was the day after the storm and they had all been seasick; they had neither the spirit nor the appliances necessary for cleanliness. The toilet rooms were small and hard to reach, and sea water as you well know is not a good cleanser. They were wrapped in gray blankets which they had brought from their bunks, and you were right; they did look like animals, but not half so clean as the cattle which one sees so often on an outward journey; certainly not half so comfortable.

From stereograph copyright—1905, by Underwood & Underwood, N. Y. AS SEEN BY MY LADY OF THE FIRST CABIN. The fellowship of the steerage makes good comrades, where no barriers exist and introductions are neither possible nor necessary.

You were taken aback when I spoke to you. I took offense at your suspecting us to be beasts, for I was one of them; although all that separated you and me was a little iron bar, about fifteen or twenty rungs of an iron ladder, and perhaps as many dollars in the price of our tickets.

You were amazed at my temerity, and did not answer at once; then you begged my pardon, and I grudgingly forgave you. One likes to have a grudge against the first cabin when one is travelling steerage.

The next time you came to us, it was without your maid. You had quite recovered and so had we. The steerage deck was more

crowded than ever, but we were happy, comparatively speaking; happy in spite of the fact that the bread was so doughy that we voluntarily fed the fishes with it, and the meat was suspiciously flavoured.

Again you threw your sweetmeats among us, and asked me to carry a basket of fruit to the women and children. I did so; I think to your satisfaction. When I returned the empty basket, you wished to know all about us, and I proceeded to tell you many things—who the Slavs are, and I brought you fine specimens of Poles, Bohemians, Servians and Slovaks,—men, women and children: and they began to look to you like men, women and children, and not like beasts. I introduced to you, German, Austrian and Hungarian Jews, and you began to understand the difference. Do you remember the group of Italians, to whom you said good-morning in their own tongue, and how they smiled back upon you all the joy of their native land? And you learned to know the difference between a Sicilian and a Neapolitan, between a Piedmontese and a Calabrian. You met Lithuanians, Greeks, Magyars and Finns; you came in touch with twenty nationalities in an hour, and your sympathetic smile grew sweeter, and your loving bounty increased day by day.

You wondered how I happened to know these people so well; and I told you jokingly, that it was my Social nose which over and over again, had led me steerage way across the sea, back to the villages from which the immigrants come and onward with them into the new life in America.

You suspected that it was not a Social nose but a Social heart; that I was led by my sympathies and not by my scientific sense, and I did not dispute you. You urged me to write what I knew and what I felt, and now you see, I have written. I have tried to tell it in this book as I told it to you on board of ship. I told you much about the Jews and the Slavs because they are less known and come in larger numbers. When I had finished telling you just who these strangers are, and something of their life at home and among us, in the

strange land, you grew very sympathetic, without being less conscious how great is the problem which these strangers bring with them.

If I succeed in accomplishing this for my larger audience, the public, I shall be content.

You were loth to listen to figures; for you said that statistics were not to your liking and apt to be misleading; so I leave them from these pages and crowd them somewhere into the back of the book, where the curious may find them if they delight in them.

My telling deals only with life; all I attempt to do is to tell what I have lived among the immigrants, and not much of what I have counted. Here and there I have dropped a story which you said might be worth re-telling; and I tell it as I told it to you—not to earn the smile which may follow, but simply that it may win a little more sympathy for the immigrant.

If here and there I stop to moralize, it is largely from force of habit; and not because I am eager to play either preacher or prophet. If I point out some great problems, I do it because I love America with a love passing your own; because you are home-born and know not the lot of the stranger.

You may be incredulous if I tell you that I do not realize that I was not born and educated here; that I am not thrilled by the sight of my cradle home, nor moved by my country's flag.

I know no Fatherland but America; for after all, it matters less where one was born, than where one's ideals had their birth; and to me, America is not the land of mighty dollars, but the land of great ideals.

I am not yet convinced that the peril to these ideals lies in those who come to you, crude and unfinished; if I were, I would be the first one to call out: "Shut the gates," and not the last one to exile myself for your country's good.

I think that the peril lies more in the first cabin than in the steerage; more in the American colonies in Monte Carlo and Nice than in the

Italian colonies in New York and Chicago. Not the least of the peril lies in the fact that there is too great a gulf between you and the steerage passenger, whose virtues you will discover as soon as you learn to know him.

I send out this book in the hope that it will mediate between the first cabin and the steerage; between the hilltop and lower town; between the fashionable West side and the Ghetto.

Do you remember my Lady of the First Cabin, what those Slovaks said to you as you walked down the gangplank in Hoboken? What they said to you, I now say to my book: "Z'Boghem," "The Lord be with thee."

II THE BEGINNING OF THE TRAIL

SOME twenty years ago, while travelling from Vienna on the Northern Railway, I was locked into my compartment with three Slavic women, who entered at a way station, and who for the first time in their lives had ventured from their native home by way of the railroad. In fear and awe they looked out the window upon the moving landscape, while with each recurring jolt they held tightly to the wooden benches.

One of them volunteered the information that they were journeying a great distance, nearly twenty-five miles from their native village. I ventured to say that I was going much further than twenty-five miles, upon which I was asked my destination. I replied: "America," expecting much astonishment at the announcement; but all they said was: "Merica? where is that? is it really further than twenty-five miles?"

Until about the time mentioned, the people of Eastern and Southeastern Europe had remained stationary; just where they had been left by the slow and glacial like movement of the races and tribes to which they belonged. Scarcely any traces of their former migrations survive, except where some warlike tribe has exploited its history in song, describing its escape from the enemy, into some mountain fastness, which was of course deserted as soon as the fury of war had spent itself.

From the great movements which changed the destinies of other European nations, these people were separated by political and religious barriers; so that the discovery of America was as little felt as the discovery of the new religious and political world laid bare by the Reformation. Each tribe and even each smaller group developed according to its own native strength, or according to how closely it leaned towards Western Europe, which was passing through great evolutionary and revolutionary changes.

On the whole, it may be said that in many ways they remained stationary, certainly immobile. Old customs survived and became laws; slight differentiations in dress occurred and became the unalterable costume of certain regions; idioms grew into dialects and where the native genius manifested itself in literature, the dialect became a language. These artificial boundaries became impassable, especially where differences in religion occurred. Each group was locked in, often hating its nearest neighbours and closest kinsmen, and also having an aversion to anything which came from without. Social and economic causes played no little part, both in the isolation of these tribes and groups and in the necessity for migration. When the latter was necessary, they moved together to where there was less tyranny and more virgin soil. They went out peacefully most of the time, but could be bitter, relentless and brave when they encountered opposition.

But they did not go out with the conqueror's courage nor with the adventurer's lust for fame; they were no iconoclasts of a new civilization, nor the bearers of new tidings. They went where no one remained; where the Romans had thinned the ranks of the Germans, where Hun, Avar and Turk had left valleys soaked in blood and made ready for the Slav's crude plow; where Roman colonies were decaying and Roman cities were sinking into the dunes made by ocean's sands. They destroyed nothing nor did they build anything; they accepted little or nothing which they found on conquered soil, but lived the old life in the new home, whether it was under the shadow of the Turkish crescent, or where Roman

conquerors had left empty cities and decaying palaces.

In travelling through that most interesting Austrian province, Dalmatia, on the shores of the Adriatic, opposite Italy, I came upon the palace of Diocletian, in which the Slav has built a town, using the palace walls for the foundations of his dwellings. In spite of the fact that both strength and beauty lie imbedded in these foundations, the houses are as crude and simple as those built in an American mining camp. Upon the ruins of the ancient city of Salona, I found peasants breaking the Corinthian pillars into gravel for donkey paths. These people although surrounded by conquering nations were not amalgamated, and were enslaved but not changed. Art lived and died in their midst but bequeathed them little or no culture.

This is true not only of many of the Slavs but also of many of the Jews who live among them and who have remained unimpressed and unchanged for centuries; except as tyrannical governments played shuffle-board with them, pushing them hither and thither as policy or caprice dictated.

The Italian peasant began his wanderings earlier than the other nations, at least to other portions of Europe, where he was regarded as indispensable in the building of railroads. These movements, however, were spasmodic, and he soon returned to his native village to remain there, locked in by prejudice and superstition, and unbaptized by the spirit of progress.

But all this is different now; and the change came through that word quite unknown in those regions twenty-five years ago—the word America. Having exhausted the labour supply of northern Europe which, as for instance in Germany, needed all its strength for the up-building of its own industries, American capitalists deemed it necessary to find new human forces to increase their wealth by developing the vast, untouched natural resources. Just how systematically the recruiting was carried on is hard to tell, but it is sure that it did not require much effort, and that the only thing necessary was to make a beginning.

In nearly all the countries from which new forces were to be drawn there was chronic, economic distress, which had lasted long, and which grew more painful as new and higher needs disclosed themselves to the lower classes of society. Most of the land as a rule, was held by a privileged class, and labour was illy paid. The average earning of a Slovak peasant during the harvest season was about twenty-five cents a day, which sank to half that sum the rest of the time, with work as scarce as wages were low.

If a load of wood was brought to town, it was besieged by a small army of labourers ready to do the necessary sawing; other work than wood sawing there practically was none, and consequently in the winter time much distress prevailed.

The labour of women was still more poorly paid. A muscular servant girl, who would wash, scrub, attend to the garden and cattle and help with the harvesting, received about ten dollars a year, with a huge cake and perhaps a pair of boots no less huge as a premium. These wages were paid only in the most prosperous portion of the Slavic world, being much lower in other regions, while in the mountains neither work nor wages were obtainable.

The hard rye bread, scantily cut and rarely unadulterated, with an onion, was the daily portion, while meat to many of the people was a luxury obtainable only on special holidays. I remember vividly the untimely passing away of a pig, which belonged to a titled estate. According to the law, which reached with its mighty arm to this small village, the pig must be decently buried and covered by—not balsam and spices, but quick lime and coal oil. Hardly had these rites been performed when the carcass mysteriously disappeared—but meat was scarce, and the peasants were hungry.

During this same period, the Jewish people who were scattered through Eastern Europe, began to feel not only economic distress, but existence itself was often made unbearable by the newly awakened national feeling, which reacted against the Jews in waves of cruel persecution. Such trade as could be diverted into other channels was taken from them and they grew daily poorer,

living became precarious and life insecure. It did not take much agitation to induce any of these people to emigrate, and when the first venturesome travellers returned with money in the bank, silver watches in their pockets, "store clothes" on their backs, and a feeling of "I am as good as anybody" in their minds, each one of them became an agent and an agitator, and if paid agents ever existed, they might have been immediately dispensed with.

Now one can stand in any district town of Hungary, Poland or Italy and see, coming down the mountains or passing along the highways and byways of the plains, larger or smaller groups of peasants, not all picturesquely clad, passing in a never ending stream, on, towards this new world. The stream is growing larger each day, and the source seems inexhaustible.

Sombre Jews come, on whose faces fear and care have plowed deep furrows, whose backs are bent beneath the burden of law and lawlessness. They come, thousands at a time, at least 5,000,000 more may be expected; and he does not know what misery is, who has not seen them on that march which has lasted nearly 2,000 years beneath the burden heaped by hate and prejudice. Both peasant and Jew come from Russian, Austrian or Magyar rule, under which they have had few of the privileges of citizenship but many of its burdens. From valleys in the crescent shaped Carpathians, from the sunny but barren slopes of the Alps and from the Russian-Polish plains they are coming as once they went forth from earlier homes; peaceful toilers, who seek a field for their surplus labour or as traders to use their wits, and it is a longer journey than any of their timid forbears ever undertook.

The most venturesome of the Slavs, the Bohemians, in whom the love of wandering was always alive, started this stream of emigration as early as the seventeenth century, sending us the noblest of their sons and daughters, the heroes and heroines of the reformatory wars; idealists, who like the Pilgrim Fathers, came for "Freedom to worship God." Their descendants have long ago been blended into the common life of the people of America, scarcely

conscious of the fact that they might have the same pride in ancestry which the descendants of the Pilgrims delight to exhibit. Not until the latter part of the nineteenth century, in the 70s, did the Bohemian immigrants come in large numbers and in a steady stream, bringing with them the Czechs of Moravia, a neighbouring province. Together they make some 200,000 of our population, fairly distributed throughout the country, and about equally divided between tillers of the soil and those following industrial pursuits. Nearly all Bohemian immigrants come to stay, and adjust themselves more or less easily to their environment. The economic distress which has brought them here, while never acute, threatens to become so now from the over accentuated language struggle which diverts the energies of the people and makes proper legislation impossible. The building of railroads and other governmental enterprises have been retarded by parliamentary obstructionists, to whom language is more than bread and butter. Business relations with the Germanic portions of Austria have come almost to a standstill; conditions which are bound to increase emigration from Bohemia's industrial centres.

The Poles were the next of the Western Slavs to be drawn out of the seclusion of their villages; those from Eastern Prussia being the earliest, and those from Russian Poland the latest who have swelled the stream of emigration.

The largest number of the Polish immigrants is composed of unskilled labourers, most of them coming from villages where they worked in the fields during the summer time, and in winter went to the cities where they did the cruder work in the factories. The Poles from Germany's part of the divided kingdom have furnished nearly their quota of immigrants, and those remaining upon their native acres will continue to remain there, if only to spite the Germans who are grievously disappointed not to see them grow less under the repressive measures of the government. They are the thorn in the Emperor's flesh, and with social Democrats make enough trouble, to verify the saying: "Uneasy lies the head that

wears a crown," true! even with regard to that most imperial of emperors.

The Austrian Poles who have retained many of their liberties and have also gained new privileges, have had a national and intellectual revival, under the impulse of which the peasantry has been lifted to a higher level which has reacted upon their economic condition; and although that condition is rather low in Galicia, as that portion of Poland is called, immigration from there has reached its high water mark. The largest increase in immigration among the Poles is to be looked for from Russian Poland where industrial and political conditions are growing worse, and where it will take a long time to establish any kind of equilibrium which will pacify the people and hold them to the soil.

The Slovaks, who were relatively the best off, and further away from the main arteries of travel, are, comparatively speaking, newcomers and furnish at present the largest element in the Western Slavic immigration. They have retained most staunchly many of their Slavic characteristics, are the least impressionable among the Western Slavs, and usually come, lured by the increased wages. They are most liable to return to the land of their fathers after saving money enough materially to improve their lot in life.

From the Austrian provinces, Carinthia and Styria, come increasingly large numbers of Slovenes who are really the link between the Eastern and Western Slavs. They belong to the highest type of that race, but represent only a small portion of the large Slavic family. Of the Eastern Slavs, only the Southern group has moved towards America, the Russian peasant being bound to the soil, and unable to free himself from the obligation of paying the heavy taxes, by removal to a foreign country. With the larger freedom which is bound to come to him, will also come economic relief so that the emigration of the Russian peasant in large numbers is not a likelihood.

Lured by promises of higher wages in our industrial centres, Croatians and Slovenians come in increasingly large numbers,

while in smaller numbers come Servians and Bulgarians.

The only Slavs who are thorough seamen and who are coming to our coasts in increasingly large numbers as sailors and fishermen, are the Dalmatians; and last but most heroic of all the Slavs, is the Montenegrin, who has held his mountain fastnesses against the Turk and who has been the living wall, resisting the victories of Islam. His little country is blessed by but a few crumbs of soil between huge mountains and boulders, and in the measure in which peace reigns in the Balkans, he is without occupation and sustenance; so that he is compelled to seek these more fertile shores, where he will for the first time in history and quite unconsciously, "Turn the sword into a plowshare and the spear into a pruning hook."

THE BEGINNING OF THE TRAIL. The Wanderlust of the olden time still gets its grip on the peasants of the great plains of Eastern Europe.

Tennyson does not over-idealize this Montenegrin in his admirable sonnet:

They rose to where their sovran eagle sails,
They kept their faith, their freedom, on the height,
Chaste, frugal, savage, arm'd by day and night
Against the Turk; whose inroad nowhere scales
Their headlong passes, but his footstep fails,
And red with blood the Crescent reels from fight
Before their dauntless hundreds, in prone flight
By thousands down the crags and thro' the vales.
O smallest among peoples! rough rock-throne
Of Freedom! warriors beating back the swarm
Of Turkish Islam for five hundred years.
Great Tsernogora! never since thine own
Black ridges drew the cloud and brake the storm
Has breathed a race of mightier mountaineers.

From Lithuania, a province of Russia, come smaller groups of non-Slavic emigrants; people with an old civilization of which little remains, and with a language which leans closest to Sanscrit, yet

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