

## Immigrating to America – A Young Girl's Journey



Immigrants arriving at Ellis Island

During the late 1800's and early 1900's immigration to America increased dramatically. People around the world left their homes and traveled to the United States with expectations of a better life. Many of those immigrants hoped for better opportunities, such as religious freedom and escape from oppressive government.

Despite their optimism, most immigrants faced numerous hardships. The journey alone was often treacherous. Many immigrants had to endure up to two or three weeks of traveling in cramped, diseased quarters on the lowest decks of the ship. If they survived the trip and passed examination at a government center such as Ellis Island, the next challenge was often the toughest – finding a job. Most immigrants had to accept low paying jobs that required long hours in crowded, unsafe conditions.

Sadie Frowne immigrated to America in 1905, at the age of thirteen. Following the death of Sadie's father and the failure of the family grocery store that provided them a living, Sadie and her mother left their native Poland and made their way to America with the help of Sadie's aunt who lived in New York City. Shortly after arriving in America Sadie's mother passed away, leaving Sadie on her own.

Sadie's story was published in several articles and books after she shared her story with journalists. We join Sadie's story as she and her mother enter New York Harbor aboard a steamship:

"We came on a steamship in a very dark place that smelt dreadfully. There were hundreds of other people packed in with us, men, women and children, and almost all of them were sick. It took us twelve days to cross the sea, and we thought we should die, but at last the voyage was over, and we came up and saw the beautiful bay and the big woman with the spikes on her head and the lamp that is lighted at night in her hand.

Aunt Fanny and her husband met us at the gate of this country and were very good to us, and soon I had a place to live out [Sadie is referring to becoming a live-in domestic servant] while my mother got work in a factory making white goods. Mother caught a bad cold and coughed and coughed. She tried to keep on working, but it was no use. She had not the strength. Two doctors attended her, but they could do nothing, and at last she died and I was left alone. I had saved money while out at service, but mother's sickness and funeral swept it all away and now I had to begin all over again."

Following the death of her mother, Sadie began working as a sweatshop seamstress, making items of clothing. She describes her work: "I get up at half-past five o'clock every morning and make myself a cup of coffee. I eat a bit of bread and perhaps some fruit and then go to work. Often I get there soon after six o'clock so as to be in good time, though the factory does not open till seven. I have heard that there is a sort of clock that calls you at the very time you want to get up, but I can't believe that because I don't see how the clock would know. At seven o'clock we all sit down to our machines and the boss brings to each one the pile of work that he or she is to finish during the day. This pile is put down beside the machine and as soon as a skirt is done it is laid on the other side of the machine. Sometimes the work is not all finished by six o'clock and then the one who is behind must work overtime. The machines go like mad all day, because the faster you work the more money you get. Sometimes in my haste I get my finger caught and the needle goes right through it. It goes so quick, though, that it does not hurt much. I bind the finger up with a piece of cotton and go on working. We all have accidents like that. Where the needle goes through the nail it makes a sore finger, or where it splinters a bone it does much harm. Sometimes a finger has to come off.

All the time we are working the boss walks about examining the finished garments and making us do them over again if they are not just right. So we have to be careful as well as swift. But I am getting so good at the work that within a year I will be making \$7 a week, and then I can save at least \$3.50 a week. I have over \$200 saved now.

The machines are all run by foot-power, and at the end of the day one feels so weak that there is a great temptation to lie right down and sleep. But you must go out and get air, and have some pleasure. For the last two winters I have been going to night school. I have learned reading, writing and arithmetic. I can read quite well in English now and I look at the newspapers every day. I read English books, too, sometimes."

**Source:** Kraut, Alan, *The Huddled Masses: The Immigrant in American Society, 1880-1921* (1982)



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1. Circle statements that are correct. Mark an X over statements that are NOT correct.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Both of Sadie’s parents died in Poland.	Sadie and her mother purchased 1 <sup>st</sup> class steamboat tickets, allowing them to travel comfortably.
Sadie was paid by the amount of clothing she completed a day, not by the number of hours she worked.	Sadie spent all her savings to pay for her mother’s medical expenses and funeral.



2. What challenges did immigrants face when moving to America?

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3. Why did Sadie move to America?

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4. Describe Sadie’s experience traveling by steamship to the United States.

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5. What workplace hazard does Sadie describe? Does she seem concerned about the hazard?

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6. In your opinion, why did immigrants have to accept low paying jobs that were often unsafe?

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