

First Stop, Ellis Island!

Original Play by Michael Peros
Adapted by Jennifer Tanski

Characters

Statue of Liberty	Inspector 4
Greta Stein – a German Immigrant	Inspector 5
Antonio Salvaggio – an Italian Immigrant	Narrators - A.
Salvatore Salvaggio – Antonio's son	B.
Doctor 1	C.
Doctor 2	D.
Commissioner Curran	E.
Stefan Brodsky – a Polish American	F.
Ida Brodsky – Stefan's wife	G.
* Scene changer	
Inspector 1	
Inspector 2	
Inspector 3	

Narrator A: America is a nation of immigrants. From the first native settlers, to the huge wave of immigrants in the nineteenth century, to the refugees from troubled areas of the world, each group of immigrants has contributed in its own way to the rich fabric of American life.

Statue of Liberty: Immigrants have come to the United States through many different ports. They have come through New York, Boston, Philadelphia, New Orleans and San Francisco. But one port of entry has become the most famous immigration center for the United States. That place is Ellis Island.

Narrator B: Millions of people left Europe during the late 1800s. They fled their homes because of hunger, religious punishment, harsh governments, or the lack of jobs in their countries.

Narrator G: For these immigrants, America was a land of endless opportunity. Wages were higher and land was cheaper. From 1892 to 1954, Ellis Island was the first stop in America for many immigrants.

Narrator E: When Ellis Island officially opened on January 1, 1892, the first passenger who passed through was a 14 year old Irish girl named Annie Moore. She traveled to America with her two younger brothers, Anthony and Phillip. They were allowed into America on New Year's Day which was also Annie's 15th birthday!

Scene Changer: Act 1: Scene 1: 1912. In New York Harbor on the deck of a barge approaching Ellis Island.

Narrator C: Meet three new immigrants... Greta Stein and Antonio and Salvatore Salvaggio. The ships they were on stopped in the lower part of the bay. Then doctors boarded the ships and checked the passengers for illnesses such as yellow fever and smallpox. Each passenger was given a numbered tag. Now they're being taken by barge to Ellis Island.

Greta: The Statue of Liberty!... she's so beautiful! Can you see her there?

Antonio: Thank you, yes, I see her!

Salvatore (to his father): America! Everything will be fine now! Nothing bad will ever happen to us here!

Scene Changer: Scene 2: Later that day in the Great Hall of Ellis Island.

Narrator D: As the immigrants arrived, doctors studied the way they walked up the stairs to the Great Hall. This was known as the six second medical. Then the doctors would do a more thorough exam. After that, inspectors asked a series of questions.

Narrator E: Chances were, if you were a man in good health, with no criminal record and good prospects for employment, you'd be allowed to enter America within a few hours. The rules, however, were different for women who were traveling alone, like Greta.

Inspector 1: Your full name is Greta Stein?

Greta: Yes, sir, Greta Stein is my name. I am from Germany.

Inspector 1: The doctors tell me you are in good health. Are you single?

Greta: I'm engaged to Henrik Oben. He lives in Chicago now.

Inspector 2: And you're sure you know this Henrik Oben of Chicago?

Greta: Of course I know him! I grew up with him. He came here two years ago with his parents. He says he is ready for me to join him. Here, it says so in this letter.

Inspector 2: Do I look like I can read German? Is he meeting you here?

Greta: No, Chicago is too far away, and besides, he works.

Inspector 1: Really... since Chicago is too far away, how will you get there?

Greta: I have some money for a train ticket.

Inspector 2: Okay Miss Stein, only a few more questions. How much is five plus five?

Greta: Ten.

Inspector 1: How do you wash stairs? From the top or from the bottom?

Greta: With all due respect sir, I did not come to America to wash stairs!

Inspector 1: I see. Your Henrik is rich is he? You'll have someone washing the stairs for you? Is that what your Henrik has told you? You see Miss Stein, this is **exactly** why we don't like to let women in by themselves.

Greta: I've known Henrik all my life. I know exactly what my life here in America will be like. Do you want to know what my life was like in Germany? Do you care that I had no family there? No one to love me?

Inspector 2: Please calm down Miss Stein. We just don't want you falling into the wrong hands. But you seem like a woman who can take care of herself. Just be careful. You can change your money here for American dollars. You can buy your train ticket here as well.

Inspector 1 and 2: Next please!

Greta: Thank you, and by the way Inspector, you wash the stairs from top to bottom of course.

Scene Changer: Act 2: Same day in an inspector's office on Ellis Island.

Narrator F: Deciding to come to America was not an easy decision for immigrants. It usually involved spending all of their savings. It also meant separation from their family, friends, and home.

Narrator G: Once they arrived at Ellis Island, the journey was not over. About twenty percent of all immigrants were held for further questioning. About two percent of these were sent back to their home countries. People could be denied entry into the United States for a number of reasons: if they had criminal records, medical problems, or if they might not be able to support themselves.

Narrator F: Sometimes, families traveled all the way to America, only to be separated.

Inspector 3: Mr. Salvaggio, why have you come to the United States?

Antonio: We had to. It was very hard for us in Italy.

Salvatore: Inspector, we are Catholics. Last year, our family was forced by the government to move. My father found it harder to find work.

Inspector 4: What was your business Mr. Salvaggio.

Antonio: I was a tailor.

Inspector 3: How much did you earn?

Antonio: About ten to twelve lira.

Inspector 3: Hmm... that's about three dollars a week. Salvatore, what kind of work do you do?

Salvatore: I was a student, until the government said I couldn't go to school anymore.

Inspector 4: Antonio, do you have a job waiting for you?

Antonio: No, Inspector. We know that it is against the law to already have a job waiting for us. But, well, my brother Leo is here, he is a tailor also.

Inspector 3: And what does he earn?

Antonio: About twelve dollars a week.

Inspector 4: Does he have a family?

Antonio: A wife and four children. We will stay with them until can afford a place of our own.

Doctor: Hello Inspectors. Good day gentlemen. I'm here to examine this man. Your fingers are stiff and swollen. You look like your legs hurt. You probably have arthritis.

Antonio: No, no. It is nothing. It has been a very long day here and I am tired.

Doctor: I don't know inspectors, he doesn't seem very strong. I'm not sure he'll be able to work to support himself and his family.

Inspectors 3 and 4: Thank you Doctor.

Inspector 3: Salvatore – what are your plans here in America?

Salvatore: I am young and I am strong. I'm sure there are many things I can do here. My father will be well taken care of.

Inspector 4: You have \$23 between you. Look at your father's hands – the Doctor is right, he won't be able to work. And you – you have no job experience at all! Do you know how many strong, young men come into this country every day? I'm sorry. (put the letters SI on the shoulder of Antonio's coat)

Salvatore: SI, what does that stand for?

Inspector 3: Special Inquiry. It means that because he is sick, your father will probably be deported, sent back to Italy.

Salvatore: No, No! You can't send him back! They will kill him!

Antonio: Salvatore, do not say anything more.

Salvatore: Papa, I am not like you. I cannot say yes to everything. Inspectors, I will take care of him. I will earn enough money for both of us to live. You can't send him back!

Inspector 3: Maybe you can convince the Board of Special Inquiry. They deal with these kinds of cases. Explain your situation to the inspectors there. They'll give you a translator if you need one. Then, they will decide if your father can stay. Good luck to you both.

Inspector 3 and 4: Next!

Antonio: Well, my son, I am afraid we must say goodbye.

Salvatore: Papa – No!

Antonio: We have talked to so many people these past few days. I'm tired. And look at my hands, they're right, I can't work the way I used to.

Salvatore: Please Papa! We will fight this. Let me talk to them. We'll figure something out. I can't make it without you! You cannot go back to Italy.

Antonio: It is my home son, just as America will be yours. I believe in you. You'll be just fine. Leo will help you find work. My mind is made up. I must go.

Narrator A: Between 1901 and 1910, over seven million immigrants entered the United States through Ellis Island. The numbers dropped greatly during World War 1.

Narrator B: As soon as the war ended, the numbers started rising again. As a result, the first Quota Law was passed in 1921. This put a monthly limit on the number of immigrants who could enter the United States from any given country.

Scene Changer: Act 3: 1922 In the Great Hall of Ellis Island

Narrator C: Stefan Brodsky, a Polish-American man who immigrated to the United States two years earlier, is pacing in the Great Hall. Commissioner Curran, who is in charge of Ellis Island, approaches Stefan.

Curran: Good afternoon sir. Are you waiting for someone?

Stefan: Yes, my wife Ida, Ida Brodsky. She's coming in from Poland. Her ship is a day late.

Curran: How long have you been in America?

Stefan: Oh, we've both been here for two years. Ida only went back to visit her parents. Her mother is sick. I hope everything is all right.

Curran: No need to worry. I'm Commissioner Curran, and I can assure you that these little trips don't count against the Quota Law.

Stefan: Thank you Mr. Curran, but you don't understand – Ida is expecting a---

Curran: You see, if your wife has already been admitted to the United States and then she goes back to her homeland, she will be allowed back in. The Quota Law will not apply to her.

(Ida, carrying a small bundle, enters the Great Hall. She is accompanied by Doctor 2 and an inspector)

Stefan: I realize that but you don't underst---

Ida: Stefan!

Stefan: Ida!

Curran: What's that she's carrying?

Stefan: I believe that's our baby. Excuse me Commissioner. (hurry to Ida)

Ida: Stefan – look – he has your eyes!

Doctor 2: Mrs. Brodsky needs to stay here in the hospital tonight so I can examine her and the child. The baby was born just last night.

Ida: Stefan – there's a problem.

Stefan: What? What is it? Are you all right? Is it the baby?

Ida: No, nothing like that.

Inspector 5: I'm sorry folks, but the Polish quota for this month has been reached. To put it bluntly, the mother can stay, but the baby must leave.

Ida: Not my baby! I won't let it happen. Stefan, if our baby can't stay, I will return to Poland with him.

Stefan: Commissioner, please help us sir!

Curran: Calm down Stefan. I'm sure we can work something out. Doctor, where was the baby born?

Doctor 2: On board the ship sir. I believe it was the Lapland, of the British Seaways Line. I have other patients who need me right now. Mrs. Brodsky, I'll see you and the baby in the hospital downstairs, later this evening.

Curran and Inspector 5: Thank you Doctor!

Curran: Of course! The Lapland! There you are. The baby wasn't born in Poland, but on a British ship. The deck of a British ship, no matter where in the world it is, is the same as British soil. Inspector, include the baby in the British quota.

Inspector 5: Commissioner. The British quota was reached yesterday.

Ida: Our baby can't come in?

Curran: Wait, wait a minute now... the doctor says the baby was born on the Lapland right? That ship's home port is in Belgium. There! The baby is Belgian!

Stefan: My baby is what?

Inspector 5: I'm sorry sir, but the Belgian quota is also full.

Curran: Inspector, what are you trying to do here?

Inspector 5: My job, Commissioner!

Curran: Listen, I think I've got it. It's clear enough that Ida was hurrying back so that the baby would be born in America. And the baby had the same intention – he wanted to be born in America. But, the ship was a day late and that upset everything. So, under the law, this baby was born in America. This baby is American!

Inspector 5: All right. I'll fill out the form. What is this baby's name?

Ida: Commissioner, what is your first name?

Curran: Kevin ma'am. Kevin Curran.

Ida: Kevin, Inspector. Our baby's name is Kevin Brodsky.

Ida and Stefan: Thank you ever so much for saving our baby.

Narrator D: For centuries, people have been coming to America to make new lives for themselves and their children. They have come for many reasons – economic, social, and political. Many thought that they would find the streets of America literally paved with gold.

Narrator E: Many of the immigrants' adventures were filled with pain. They faced the trauma of leaving their loved ones, the long and difficult journey, and many hardships as they began their new lives here in America. They often faced poverty and discrimination in their new homes.

Narrator F: Between 1892 and 1924, 16 million people passed through the immigration station at Ellis Island. After waiting in long lines, the questioning was fast. Immigrants were asked approximately 25 questions in a two minute period.

Narrator G: About 30 different languages were spoken by the staff and officials of Ellis Island. In 1897, a fire destroyed the five year old immigration center and in 1900, a new, fireproof center opened.

Narrator D: By 1914, the immigration station had almost become a city unto itself. It had 33 buildings, including a church, hospital, laundry room, waiting room, dormitory, money exchange, and post office.

Narrator C: In 1954, Ellis Island closed. Today, it functions as a tourist sight. Over 100 million Americans can trace their roots to a relative who passed through the immigration station.

Narrator B: Many immigrants still come to America. Before they become US citizens they must fill out forms to see if they qualify. They get fingerprinted, interviewed, and take tests. Many go through this process knowing very little English. At the end of the qualifications, new citizens take an oath of allegiance at a court hearing.

Narrator A: Several children become citizens automatically when they are adopted by American families. They are not required to take the tests or go through the formal citizenship interview process.

Statue of Liberty: One of the most important things we have learned about immigration is that no matter where our ancestors came from, they came to America in search of a better life. Today, we come together to celebrate the customs that our ancestors have passed on to us throughout the years. That original desire for a new and better life has been instilled in all of us. Every family tries to improve life for its future generations. We are proud of our ethnic heritage and appreciate your guidance and support as we continue to learn who we are.

Scene Changer: The End!