

Immigrant's First-Person Account



ABOUT THE READING This first-person account of a Lithuanian immigrant tells about the difficulties and rewards of life in the United States.



As you read pay attention to the speaker's hopes and expectations of life in the United States.

Were these hopes and expectations fulfilled?

What made life in America difficult? What did the speaker come to like about living in this country?

When I arrived at Castle Garden in New York, the authorities at first refused to let me in the country because my eyes were weak. I stayed there for two weeks and the day I was to be deported, it was arranged to let me enter. A friend of my father's put up a bond of \$5,000 for me. Those two weeks were the longest in my life; every morning I awoke with the idea that perhaps today they were going to send me back, and I didn't know that my father knew I had landed because the agent he had bought my passage from had told him. I didn't understand why they wouldn't let me into the country and so I sat, being afraid of everything.

I joined my father in Pennsylvania and he made arrangements for me to work in the coal mines. I soon found out that living in America was not much better than in the country I had left. We lived in a boardinghouse with 12 other miners. It was crowded and dirty.

VOCABULARY

greenhorns new or inexperienced people

confiscate take away by the power of a government or other authority

The state of New York opened its first immigrant processing center at Castle Garden in 1855.

The writer would have been sent back to his own country if a friend of his father's hadn't put up a bond of \$5,000.

Source: *From the Old Country: An Oral History of European Migration to America* by Bruce M. Stave (et al). Copyright © 1994, Twayne Publishers, New York

Working in the mine was hard and dangerous. Every day someone was getting hurt. During the three weeks I spent there I never saw the sunlight, because we went down in the mine before the sun came out and we finished work after the sun had set. I never saw any other part of the world around except the mine and the boardinghouse . . .

After three weeks I told my father that I didn't like that sort of life and asked him to go with me to some other place. He told me that there was no better place to work than in the mines for **greenhorns**, but if I wanted to go, I could. I left the mines and went to Grand Rapids, Michigan, where I had a cousin. There were several Lithuanian families in that city, and soon after I arrived a job was secured for me in one of the furniture factories. Compared to the mines that job was heaven. I carried around fresh pieces of lumber and helped the cabinetmakers. The sun came in the windows all day long and the pay was better than what I had in the mines. In the mines, my father and I worked two weeks to earn \$10 and in this furniture factory they paid me \$1.25 a day.

At this time of course I couldn't speak English, so that until I learned a few words it was hard for me to understand what people were asking me to do in the factory. When I wasn't working, I went out with my cousin to the dances that were given once in a while. We played cards with friends and visited with the Lithuanian families. Reading papers printed in Lithuanian, I gradually learned a little about the things that were happening in the world. Discussions that I listened to among the Lithuanians also helped me to see the differences in the government here and that in the old country.

I began to like living here better, as I gradually learned that you didn't have to have a passport to go from one section of the country to another and

Thousands of people died while working in U.S. coal mines at the turn of the century. In 1907, for example, over 3200 coal miners were killed.

Lithuania is a country in northeastern Europe, near Poland. As with many immigrants, this author relies on the help of others from his native land to find housing and a job.

you didn't have to be afraid of men in uniforms. I remember how scared I was of the conductor on the train that took me from New York to Pennsylvania. When he took my bundles and put them on the rack over my head, I was afraid that I couldn't take them with me, that he was **confiscating** them. I didn't know that he was just helping me out.

The writer was afraid of the train conductor because he wore a uniform.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. Who helped the young immigrant get into and get settled in the United States? Why did these people help him?

2. Based on the immigrant's fears about the government and men in uniforms, what can you infer about conditions in Lithuania at the time?

3. List some details from this account that describe life as a coal miner versus life as a factory worker.
