

TRANSCRIPT Radio Curious , Part C

The questions "are you a criminal? are you an idiot?" how did they put those questions to people and what kinds of answers were given, considering the many, many languages that were spoken ?

Well, people when they arrived in Ellis Island were first given a medical inspection and then were given a larger, a larger, a more important inspection in which they were asked a variety of questions, and questions which were supposed to match questions which they had already answered at their port of embarkation in Europe. If you had left from Hamburg with a shipping company, the shipping company, they asked you a variety of questions, political, ideology, "Are you an anarchist?" for example. They also asked you questions about your ability perhaps to get a job: "are you a skilled labourer? Are you unskilled? Has anyone promised you a job in the United States? Are you married? How old are you? Where are you going? Do you have money? Do you have tickets to get to where you're going? Do you have friends and family? Where are you going?" And so as you walked to the Great Hall and you approached a bench, a long row of benches where lines of immigrants were waiting standing patiently, some impatiently, waiting to meet the immigration inspectors, they approached the immigration inspector who would meet them with a translator, with an interpreter, and there were interpreters there who spoke any of the forty or the

fifty languages that people spoke who came through Ellis Island. Fiorello La Guardia, the soon to be mayor of New York City served for several years as an interpreter at Ellis Island, it was one of the formidable experiences of his life, asking people these questions, asking them, translating for them, looking into their faces and seeing people terrified, afraid to answer wrong. They asked the question, the most important question, one of the most important questions for example was: "Do you have a job promised to you?". If you answered that question wrong you could be excluded, sent back. I mentioned the 1895 Foreign Act which said you couldn't be a contract labourer, you couldn't be brought to the United States with a job promised to you already, so you had to answer the question "Well no, I don't have a job promised to me, but I can get a job", because it was equally dangerous to be considered a public charge or someone likely to become a public charge. The United States did not want to pay for the welfare of the poor, of the criminal, of the insane, I mean to the United States. And thus you had to navigate in a very terrifying situation, navigate through various little, little linguistic tricks of this nature in order to pass.

Radio Curious, a radio program about Ellis Island, part C