

Crossing the Atlantic

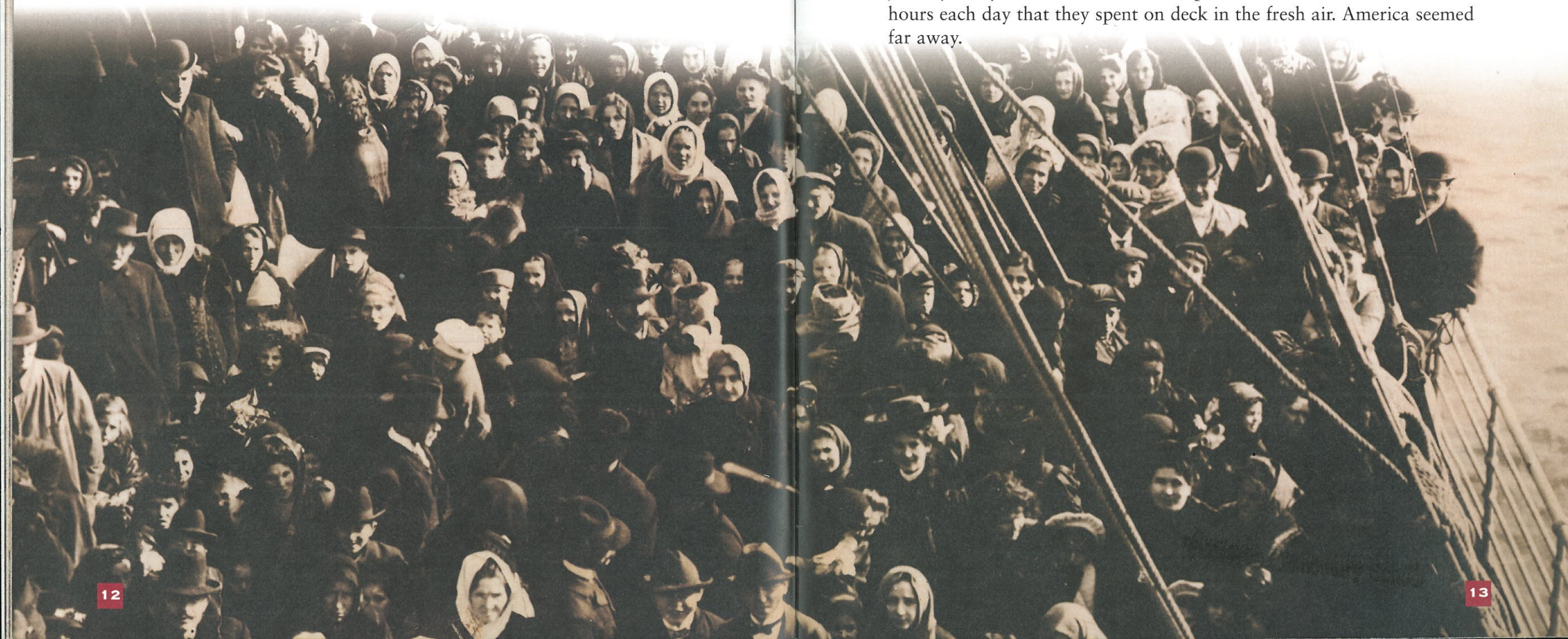
Hamburg, Germany, was a major port for the immigrants from Russia. Upon reaching Hamburg, they bought their tickets. Some of the immigrants arrived without money. Others had been cheated out of their money. They had paid for tickets that were not there. Many of the immigrants were helped by Jewish charity organizations. These organizations made sure the immigrants had tickets.

Often, the immigrants were women and children. Their husbands and fathers in America had sent for them. Others were single men hoping to make it in America. Many were tailors, grocers, or butchers.

The Markowitz family joined the other immigrants leaving for America. In America, they hoped to find a good life, too.

Russian Jews continued to stream into Hamburg. They barely had enough money for their boat tickets. Most had to travel steerage. The voyage took from one to two weeks. Hundreds of people were crammed into a very small space. Those who brought kosher food ran out of food quickly. They lived on bread, hard cheese, and tea. Families shared what little they had.

In the crowded space, disease spread rapidly. Some died on the journey. They were buried at sea. People looked forward to the few hours each day that they spent on deck in the fresh air. America seemed far away.



June 7, 1893
S.S. Nightingale

Dear Bubbe and Grandfather,
I am writing to you from our ship! We made it. We can give letters to an officer to mail. I have not been sick. Sasha and Nathan have been ill. We have run out of the food we bought in Hamburg. Now all we have is stale bread and hard cheese.

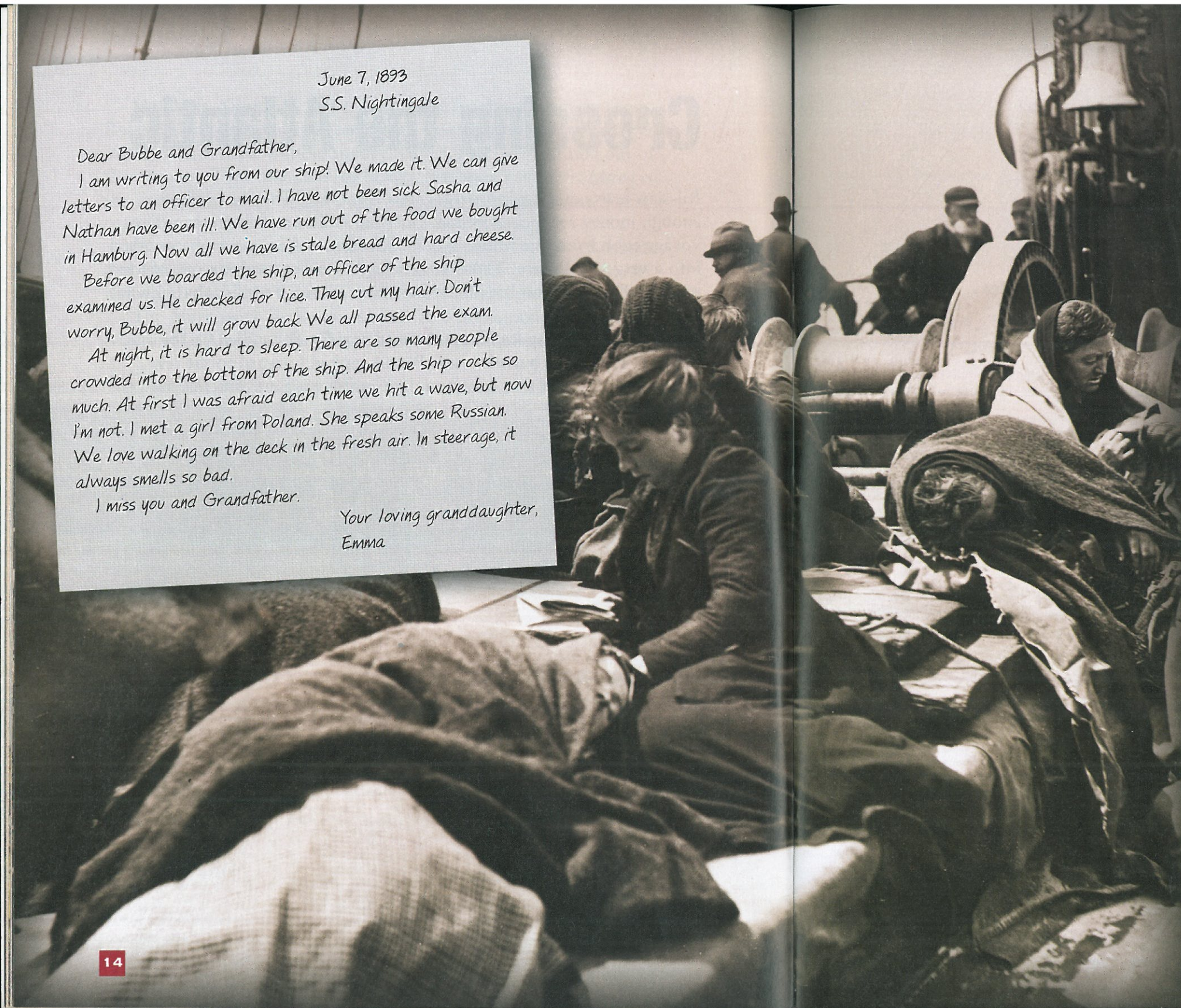
Before we boarded the ship, an officer of the ship examined us. He checked for lice. They cut my hair. Don't worry, Bubbe, it will grow back. We all passed the exam.

At night, it is hard to sleep. There are so many people crowded into the bottom of the ship. And the ship rocks so much. At first I was afraid each time we hit a wave, but now I'm not. I met a girl from Poland. She speaks some Russian. We love walking on the deck in the fresh air. In steerage, it always smells so bad.

I miss you and Grandfather.

Your loving granddaughter,
Emma

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Sasha Markowitz

June 8, 1893

I hate this ship. It smells awful. This is worse than the army, but it is only for one week. Emma has not been sick. I have been sick almost every day. I spend all my time sleeping or throwing up. It is so crowded I sleep standing up. I can't sleep at night, so I count the bugs crawling up the wall. I want to scratch all the time. I think we will never get there.

Emma Markowitz

June 9, 1893

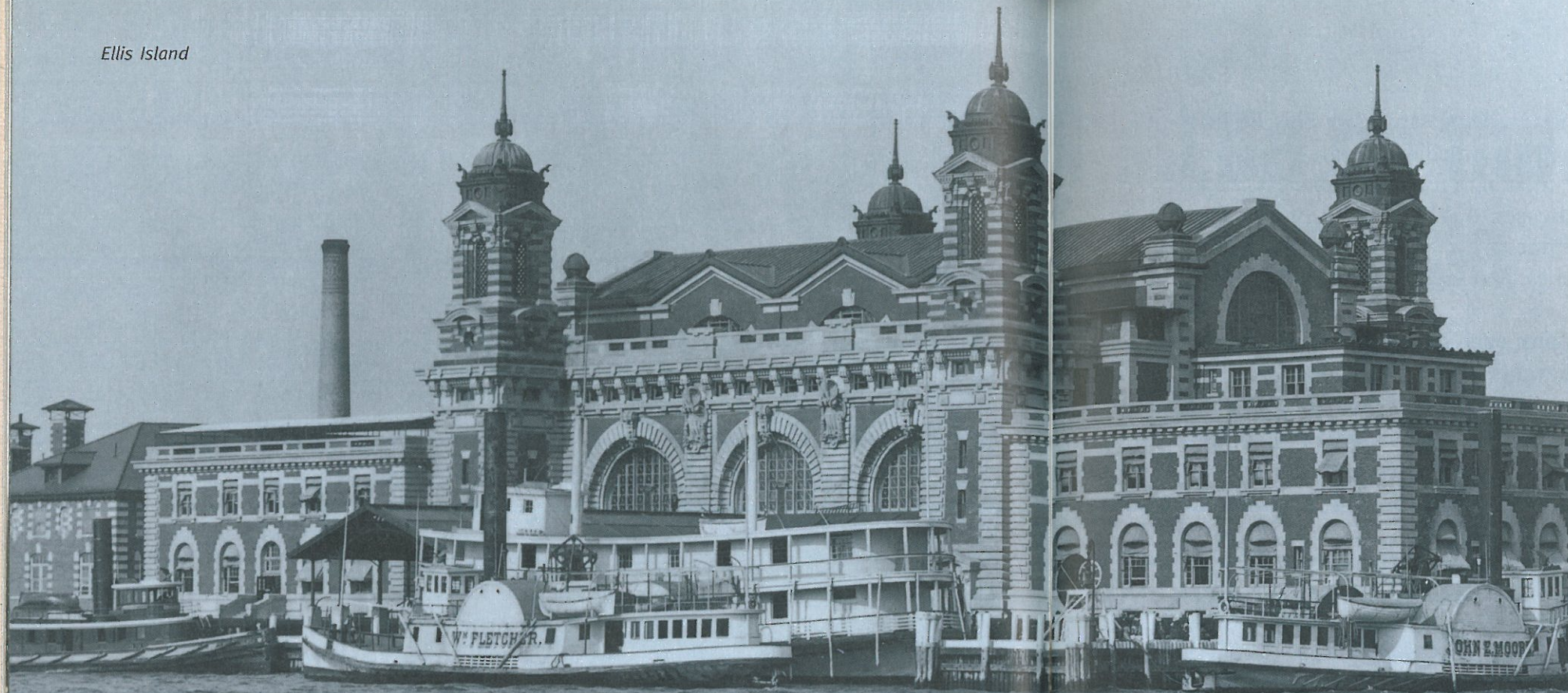
My friend Pauline's sister died last night. It was so sad. There was nothing we could do. Pauline's mother just held her. Today her parents buried her. It was horrible. They tied her body in a sheet. Then they put her overboard into the water. We said prayers, but it was not the same. Poor Pauline. All she does now is cry. I hope she does not get sick. Mother is worried about Nathan. His eyes are red and puffy.

Sasha Markowitz

June 10, 1893

At last, one day without being sick! Nathan is a little better, too. Only one eye now looks strange. I call him Cyclops, the one-eyed monster. We are allowed on the deck for short periods of time. The other people stare at us. I think I look like a scarecrow. Even the birds do not come near me. I want a bath and good food.

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June 13, 1893
S.S. Nightingale

Dear Bubbe and Grandfather,
We are almost there. I am on deck. It is sunny. That is a good sign. In the distance we can see a statue. It is tall. It looks like a lady with a torch. She is wearing a crown, too. I think I hear her calling us. It is just the birds. But she is an amazing sight.

When the ship docks, we will have to go to Ellis Island. There doctors will check us. We are worried about Nathan. One of his eyes is still pink. If he is sick, will Mother have to go back with him?

A man noticed Father's coat. He asked if Father was a tailor. The man said that being a tailor is a good job. Father can make lots of money. The man's cousin has three people who work for him! He must live in a fine house and be rich. I am learning English. "How do you do?"

Your loving granddaughter,
Emma

Sasha Markowitz

June 13, 1893

We are getting closer. Everyone is nervous. People are worried that they will be sent home. There was a fight on deck. One man said another stole food from him. People are angry. We have been stuck in this hole for a week. So many people are sick. Others have died. Above us we can hear music. How can people laugh and have fun when we are suffering so down here? I wonder if this is what America will be like?

Jacob Markowitz

June 16, 1893

We are at Ellis Island waiting for the ferry to take us to New York. Nathan gave us a scare. One doctor said his eye was bad. He put a big E on him. Sofia started crying. Then another doctor came over. He asked Nathan to run around the building five times. Nathan did. He was not even tired. The doctor removed the E. We are now the Marks family. The officer could not understand or spell our name, so he wrote down "Marks."



At last the immigrants were in America. They arrived at Ellis Island. There they were inspected. They were given a medical exam. They were tested for eye disease, heart problems, mental defects, or lameness. Most immigrants were worried about eye diseases. About two out of every hundred people were sent back. Sometimes whole families went back because a child did not pass. Other times, just a parent went back. Most tried to return later.

The final test was to answer questions, such as “Married? Name? Occupation?” Since many of the immigrants did not speak English, family names were often changed. Examiners wrote down what they heard or how they thought a name was spelled. But the tests didn’t matter to most immigrants. They had arrived in America at last.



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Life on the Lower East Side

The immigrants took the ferry to New York City. In New York City, most immigrants went to the Lower East Side. There, they lived in **tenements**, old and rundown buildings divided into small, dark rooms. Families crowded into one or two rooms, sharing a bathroom with several other families.

For many newcomers, the Lower East Side was a shock. It was noisy. It was dirty. It was filled with people speaking many different languages. Inside the tenements, you could hear the whirring of sewing machines. Many immigrants worked in the **garment**, or clothing, industry. Many worked at home. Others worked in shops, called **sweatshops**. Hours were long and working conditions were unhealthy and dangerous.

Six months passed. The Markowitz family, now the Marks, live on the Lower East Side. They found rooms in a tenement. Everyone in the family is working.



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Becoming American

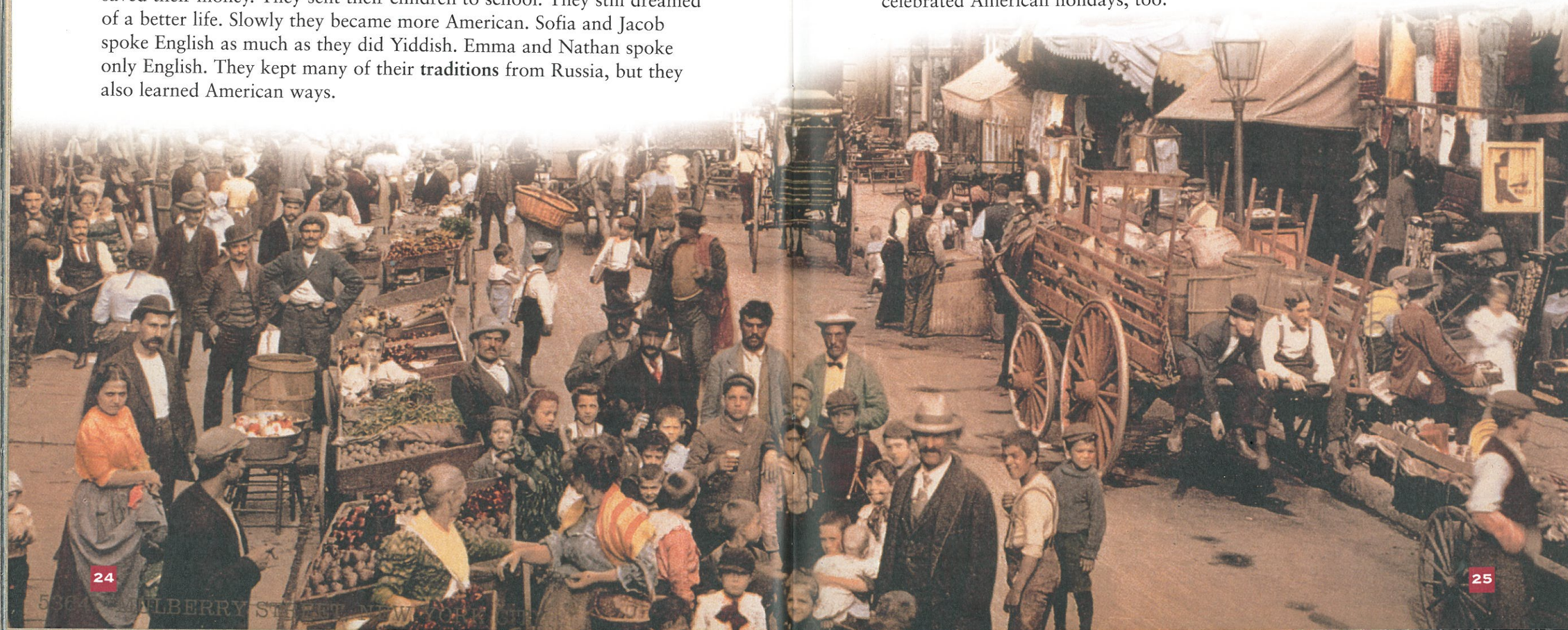
The immigrants learned to **adapt**, or change, to fit in their new country. Many learned to speak English. Others learned American ways of doing things. Many immigrants took advantage of the free libraries and schools. They wanted their children to succeed.

Two years in America had passed. The Marks family adapted. They also kept many of their traditions. They kept **kosher**, observed the Sabbath, and celebrated the Jewish holidays. Emma and Nathan had friends who were not Jewish. They played American games. They celebrated American holidays, too.

In 1885 there were over 200 garment factories in New York City. Most were on the Lower East Side. Factory work was hard. Conditions were dangerous. Many workers were injured on the job. There were no safety rules.

Over time, workers formed **unions**. Unions tried to help the workers. They tried to get them more money for their work. They tried to make the workplace safer. The United Hebrew Trades was formed in 1888 to help Jewish workers.

The Marks family continued to work in the garment industry. They saved their money. They sent their children to school. They still dreamed of a better life. Slowly they became more American. Sofia and Jacob spoke English as much as they did Yiddish. Emma and Nathan spoke only English. They kept many of their **traditions** from Russia, but they also learned American ways.





April 16, 1896
New York City

Dear Bubbe and Grandfather,

Another year here in America. I hardly remember what our old village looks like. I am sorry that Grandfather's store was attacked again. You have to come here. You are not safe there.

Mother and Father have saved and saved. We will be able to rent a larger apartment soon. There will be room for you.

Next week is Passover. We have been cleaning for over a week. We have new dishes, too. Nathan is studying with the rabbi. He will be 13 soon. It is hard to believe he will be a man. His Bar Mitzvah will be soon. He is learning Hebrew so he can read the Torah.

Sasha will be here for Passover. He lives by himself now. He is working for a union. The workers are getting ready to strike. At night, he studies law. He will become a union lawyer.

I am taking cooking classes at the Educational Alliance. I want to go to City College, but just in case, I can be a cook. Mother asks why should she do all the cooking. I'm not very good, but I will get better.

Your loving granddaughter,
Emma

Jacob Marks

April 27, 1896

We had much to be thankful for at Passover. Sasha was with us. He said prayers and gave thanks. Sofia and Emma are still sewing. Nathan is almost a man. He has three jobs. Selling newspapers is his favorite. I have been very lucky. I met Isidor Straus. He was president of the Educational Alliance. He and his brother own the large department store, Macy's. He asked me to work for him. I will sell men's clothes. No more factory work for me. It is a wonderful thing. Sofia is proud.

Emma Marks

May 2, 1896

All Nathan talks about is his Bar Mitzvah. Next year, I go to high school. Most girls stop school then. Father has said I can go!

Emma Marks

May 15, 1896

I took tests for high school. I did very well. Mother was proud. I did better than Marie, our neighbor's child. She is not going to high school. She is going to work. Her mother says she will get married first. I hope she does. I want to go to college, not get married. Yesterday I was combing Mother's hair. It is so thick and beautiful. I told her to wear it down. When I came home, she had her hair down. Not hidden in a scarf! She had the scarf around her neck. She is beautiful! She looks like a real American.

Sasha Marks

May 27, 1896

Yesterday the Board of Health, Police, and Fire Department were all on Hester Street. They made all the peddlers move their pushcarts. Some locked their carts and claimed they couldn't move. The police said they would be arrested! Finally, everyone moved. Then they cleaned the street. Gone were the smells of fish and bread. Today, everyone was back. So were the smells.

Emma Marks

June 2, 1896

We are going to the theater! It is a Yiddish play. It stars Jacob and Sarah Adler. They are famous actors! I can't wait. I hope that I can still understand enough Yiddish. I am wearing my best clothes. Mother has mentioned several times that the boy from down the hall is going, too. I just laugh. He is nice, but I am going to college. I am not getting married.



Living the American Dream

As the Jewish people became more successful, some people resented their success. **Anti-semitism**, or dislike of Jewish people, grew.

Some Jewish people found that they could not stay at certain hotels. Others found that they could not live just anywhere. They had to live where Jewish people were allowed. Jewish people were not allowed to join certain clubs or organizations. However, Jewish people continued to succeed. The Marks family was becoming successful. Jacob had a good job at Macy's. Sofia no longer had to work sewing. Emma and Nathan could go to school full-time. The family moved from the Lower East Side to Harlem. To many of their friends, the Marks family was living the American Dream.

As time passed, the immigrants did many of the same things that other Americans did. The immigrants became more social. They went to the theater. They saw plays in Yiddish theaters that told about life in the old country. They also saw plays on Broadway about American life. Theaters were places where **matchmakers** arranged for single men and women to meet. The immigrants began to do more than just work. They began to plan their futures.



A scene from a show at the Yiddish theater

Many immigrants found new and better jobs. Some opened up shops. Others went to night school. They became teachers or lawyers. Still others went to medical school to become doctors.

As they became successful, the immigrants left the tenements. They moved to places like Harlem, the Bronx, and Brooklyn. For many, the Lower East Side would always be home. They still shopped there. They went out to eat there. Their clubs were there. Like others, the Marks family moved away from the Lower East Side, but they returned often.

