

IN THEIR OWN WORDS: IMMIGRANT DESCRIPTIONS

Scholars have long sought to describe and explain the human experience of migration. Yet, we can do no better by way of understanding than to read the words that these intrepid people left behind. Fortunately, letters and other sources abound that describe nearly every phase of the migration process, both for individuals and discreet groups of people. The documents in Part I, arranged in chronological order, fall into four categories, descriptions of: the Atlantic crossing, the individual experience, the immigrant communities, and their protests of anti-immigrant thought and action.

A *Voyage to America* provides a description of some of the hazards of the Atlantic crossing during the early nineteenth century when sailing ships took weeks to make the perilous voyage and the lack of government regulation allowed unscrupulous ship captains and others to prey upon the unwary and helpless. Andreas Geyer, Jr., sent by the German Society of Philadelphia to investigate the conditions under which Germans made the crossing, details in his report some of the more flagrant abuses to which people might be subject by corrupt shipping agents and government officials.

Once in North America, immigrants had to adjust to their new surroundings to create for themselves the new life they sought when they decided to leave their native lands. A *Description of New-Netherland*, Kleindeutschland in the 1850s, and *How the Other Half Lives* detail different aspects of the integration of immigrants into their adopted society. In the first, Adriaen van der Donck, an agent for the Dutch West India Company, describes in a letter the nature of the new colony of New Netherland, its economy, and its potential. As a company employee, his letter represents not only a description of the early Dutch colony but an exceptionally

early example of public relations; that is, an effort to promote further emigration from the Dutch Republic to its North American colony through positive descriptions of the climate, resources, and abundant opportunities. Documents such as this could be found throughout American history, with more marketing expertise, and perhaps less honesty, as time passed.

Over time, as the population of North America increased and urban areas developed, immigrants began to settle in specific areas within the cities to create ethnic neighborhoods. In *Kleindeutschland*, Theodor Griesinger describes the German settlement in New York City in the 1860s. A neighborhood that could easily pass for a German city, what was often referred to as “*Kleindeutschland*” contained German restaurants, stores, churches, theaters, newspapers, and all of the other distinctive cultural elements one might find in Munich, Heidelberg, or Berlin. It was an area where one could live comfortably with little or no English, secure in the knowledge that your immediate needs could be taken care of in your native language. Although Griesinger’s descriptions were of a German settlement, they could easily apply to any such ethnic enclave. Yet all was not necessarily positive in these miniature European villages within the American urban landscape. In *How the Other Half Lives*, Jacob Riis records the abject poverty and hopelessness often found in some of these same communities by the end of the nineteenth century when overcrowding and neglect from building owners and local governments combined to produce urban ghettos. Taken from his highly regarded work of pioneering photojournalism, this excerpt from *How the Other Half Lives* balances Griesinger’s more positive account with what can happen to poor immigrants strug-