

The American Dream in Antwerp

The Red Star Line Museum

At the beginning of the twentieth century Arthur Rousseau, a young building-trade worker from Deinze in the East of Belgium, went to seek a better life in America. He was one of my great-grandmother's brothers and ended up eventually in St. Clair Shores, 18 miles or so from Detroit. He set up a building business there. As with so many European migrants the story of his emigration began in Antwerp, from where he left Belgium on one of the ships of the Red Star Line. Between 1873 and 1934 this shipping company carried more than 2 million passengers from Antwerp to New York and a small number to Canada. Less than 10% of them were Belgians. The majority of the Red Star Line passengers came from Eastern Europe and a considerable proportion of them were Jews.

At the end of September 2013 a new museum was opened in the old buildings of the shipping company. It tells the stories of these millions of emigrants. They all had the same aim: they were seeking happiness and a better life. The stories start from the moment the migrants left their original dwelling-place. Poverty, war or racial hatred compelled them to leave. Very few left out of a sense of adventure. Usually one family member went ahead of the rest. That was often the father. This meant that families were often split up for years. Some travelled by train halfway across Europe to reach Antwerp. Most had bought their ticket somewhere near home and it specified their entire journey. The price included their train journey, accommodation in Antwerp, the boat ticket and frequently also the train journey to the final destination in America.

The throngs of emigrants added colour to Antwerp. At the height of the Red Star Line several thousand emigrants were arriving every week. Once they reached the station most of them were accompanied to the shipping company's premises, where they were subjected to rigorous inspection. Their clothing and luggage were disinfected and they themselves had to shower. Then there followed



Postcard issued by the Red Star Line, 1901

a thorough medical examination. Anyone who was not deemed healthy could not go on the voyage. The reasons for this stringent policy were simple. The American authorities were afraid the large numbers of immigrants might bring in all kinds of illnesses, and anyone who entered the country via Ellis Island had to undergo a further thorough check. Anyone who failed to pass the inspection was sent home at the expense of the shipping company, without further ado.

The stringent controls applied particularly to the third class passengers. Most of them only stayed for a short time in the Belgian port, but for those who failed to get through the controls the stay could be longer. They were often taken in by relief organizations or ended up in local hospitals. The Red Star Line Museum tells the tale, among others, of Ita Moel, a Russian girl who emigrated to America in 1921 with her mother and brothers, following their father, but she was turned back with an eye infection. She had to travel back on her own to Antwerp, where she was taken in by Ezra, a Jewish relief organization. It was not until 1927 that she was able to rejoin her family.

The migrants also inspired some artists. They were a source of inspiration for Eugene van Mieghem (1875-1930) especially. His parents had a

café directly opposite the entrance to the Red Star Line sheds. Van Mieghem was continually sketching and painting the emigrants who passed his door. His works have a pessimistic aura. For a few years now Van Mieghem has had his own museum in Antwerp, within walking distance of the Red Star Line Museum. The mass migration was also a theme in the work of Constantin Meunier and Eugène Laermans (1864-1940). The latter's imposing canvas *The Emigrants* also hangs in the museum.

Once all the checks had been gone through, the emigrants could board ship. Over the years the company had 23 ships. The flagship of the company was the *Belgenland II* which, moreover, had been built in the same shipyard as the *Titanic*. *The Belgenland II* could carry 500 passengers in first class, 500 in second and 1500 in third class. For the latter category the voyage was often no joke. They were kept strictly apart from the other passengers, deep in the bowels of the ship. Until late in the 19th century the travellers slept in narrow bunk beds, on straw mattresses. They ate in the same space. If weather permitted they were allowed up on deck. There they could see the promenade decks where the first and second-class passengers enjoyed luxury conditions. After 1889 the conditions for third-class travellers were slightly improved, for commercial reasons.

Sailing past the Statue of Liberty was a very emotional experience for the emigrants. The end of a long and arduous journey was in sight and they were about to be able to begin a new life. But first they had to go through yet another thorough check. In the case of the first and second-class passengers, this was only done if they appeared ill. All the rest were put through a rigorous medical and administrative check-up on Ellis Island. Between 1892 and 1924 around 12 million immigrants passed through it. Of these, 2% were sent back with no right of appeal, others ended up in the Ellis Island sick bay for some considerable time. The museum tells the tale of a Ukrainian girl, Basia Cohen, who had to wait a further 8 months on Ellis Island after her arrival because she had a fungal infection.

After their arrival in New York, the majority of the emigrants travelled on immediately to their final destination in America, where they were for the most part awaited by family members or compatriots who had gone before them. This is how real immigrant communities were formed, of which traces can still be seen to this very day. The Belgians had their own communities too, with their own clubs and periodicals. Whether all those emigrants fulfilled their American Dream remains uncertain. Some of them returned after a few years – from homesickness, to find a partner, or simply because they had not found what they hoped to find on the other side of the ocean.

The decline of the Red Star Line began in the twenties, when the American government tightened the laws around migration. The shipping company tried to turn its fortunes round with tourist travel, cruises and car transport, but in 1934 it went into permanent liquidation. The buildings were assigned another use and the Red Star Line slowly faded from the memories of the people of Antwerp. But not from the memory of dockworker Robert Vervoort who had begun to collect everything to do with the Red Star Line. He managed to acquire over 5000 items, including the original foundation charter. It was his mania for collecting that provided the basis for the new museum that is now housed in the original buildings. The American architectural firm Beyer Blinder Belle Architects and Planners, which also redeveloped Ellis Island, built this new museum. The showpiece of the building is a brand new tower from which visitors have a beautiful view over the Schelde and Antwerp. In the museum itself a circuit has been set out in which visitors follow the route the emigrants had to take, through the control area, the showers, over the pedestrian bridge to the bowels of the ship, until they reach Ellis Island. Everywhere the voices of real migrants are to be heard, because there are stories being told here, it's not just a display of artefacts. You become acquainted with unknown travellers, but also with people who are famous the world over, such as A. Einstein who sailed with the Red Star Line



Ellis Island, 1930 © Library of Congress

on various occasions, and Irving Berlin, the well-known composer of *White Christmas* and *There's no Business Like Show Business*, who emigrated from White Russia as a five-year old and sailed to America on the *SS Rhyndland*. His family donated one of his pianos to the museum. He is an example of one of those emigrants who did make their American Dream come true via Antwerp. But the museum also looks at migration in general and shows that this is a story from all times and all places.

Whether Arthur Rousseau made his American Dream come true, I know not. I only have twenty or so of his letters that bear witness to his life in America in increasingly deteriorating Dutch. Maybe I should donate them to the Red Star Line Museum. Then his tale will become part of the extensive collection of stories that the museum staff have been able to assemble in recent years.

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Americans in Occupied Belgium 1914-1918

Americans in Belgium witnessed the German invasion, occupation and retreat. They described what they saw in letters, memoirs, newspaper reports and magazine articles. Prior to America's entry into the war, these accounts from Belgium were of wide interest in the United States. However, once America joined the war on April 7, 1917, interest in Belgium waned. Battles fought by the American Army in France became the primary focus, which is understandable. Today, the experiences of Americans in Belgium during the war warrant barely a mention in histories of the First World War. We sought to correct that omission in *Americans in Occupied Belgium 1914-1918*. As the following excerpts illustrate, Americans were in Belgium from the first hours of the invasion until the final liberation.

On August 4, 1914, the Imperial German Army crossed the German border and invaded Belgium, a country about the size of the state of Vermont. The Army's first major objective was the Belgian city of Liège. A major railway hub, Liège was the key to the Belgian rail system. Miss Glenna Lindsley Bigelow from New Haven, Connecticut, was a guest at Château Nagelmackers near Liège, literally in the path of the invading army. Monsieur Nagelmackers was very well connected; his cousin was the wife of a member of the Kaiser's Imperial Court. Consequently, General von Moltke, the Chief of the General Staff, issued written orders protecting the château and its owners during the invasion and occupation. In her memoir, Glenna Bigelow described tending Belgian wounded in a nearby church: 'August 13 . . . charred bodies with no suggestion of faces - just a flat, swollen, black surface, with no eyes, nose nor mouth. Some of the wounded lay on beds, others in the middle of the floor or wherever there was space, and each was holding up hands burned to the bone'^[1]. That evening Glenna met the invaders. After nursing the wounded all