RED STAR LINE MUSEUM

GALLERY TEXTS

ENG

GROUND FLOOR

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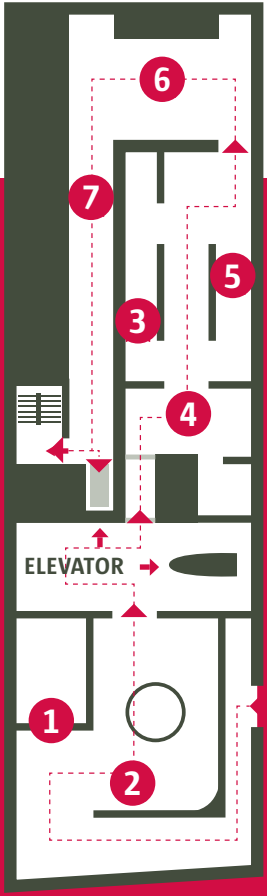
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GROUND FLOOR

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THE SHIPPING LINE

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1·1 THE HISTORY OF THE RED STAR LINE

Philadelphia

In 1871 Peter Wright & Sons, a company of Philadelphia-based shipbrokers, founded the International Navigation Company, with the aim of operating a transatlantic steam line under foreign flag. Ships and crews were quite expensive in the United States.

Peter Wright & Sons specialised in oil exports and it was their intention to export oil from the United States to Europe and to ferry migrants from Europe to America on the way back. Clement Acton Griscom, who was one of the partners at Peter Wright & Sons, was appointed president of the new company.

The Pennsylvania Railroad Company provided the funds given that the new shipping line also created new prospects for it as the company's trains would transport the passengers and cargo arriving in Philadelphia to other destinations in the US. The Pennsylvania Railroad Company built new docks and terminals in the port of Philadelphia, as well as a train station, a loading quay and grain silos.

Antwerp

In 1872 Griscom travelled to Antwerp, in search of a European port for his shipping line. Since the 1860s Antwerp was an important port for American oil exports. Peter Wright & Sons had good trade contacts there, including with the prominent ship owner, Jules-Bernard von der Becke and his brother-in-law, William-Edward Marsily. Griscom started negotiations with King Leopold II and the Antwerp town council, which led to the establishment of the "Société Anonyme de Navigation Belgo-Américaine" or SANBA, a subsidiary of the International Navigation Company, in September 1872. Von der Becke and Marsily were appointed as directors, receiving 10% of the shares. The ships sailed under the name Red Star Line.

In 1877 the Belgian state granted the monopoly on all mail transport to the United States to SANBA and the City of Antwerp exempted it from mooring and pilotage fees.

So the line had everything going for it, except one thing: the American government prohibited all combined transports of oil and passengers. As a result the Red Star Line never transported oil.

New York

Soon the Red Star Line also turned its sights on New York, the biggest port on the East Coast of

the United States. The Belgian Government granted a 100,000 dollar subsidy to anyone providing a fortnightly, regular connection between Antwerp and New York. On 12 March, 1874 the Red Star Line's first ship, Cybele, sailed for New York.

In the 1880s the shipping line annually transported about 25,000 steerage or third-class passengers to New York, a figure which would rise in the next few decades until 1913, when the Red Star Line transported no fewer than 117,000 passengers to and from America including about 70,000 passengers in second and third class.

From 1902 the Red Star Line became part of the International Mercantile Marine Company, an American trust. There were no longer any Belgian shareholders. The Red Star Line also made agreements with other trans-Atlantic lines about ticket pricing and the distribution of the migrants. The North Atlantic Shipping Conference, which had been established in 1908 by all the major British and continental shipping lines, allocated 9.71% of all immigrant traffic to the Red Star Line.
From 1903 onwards ships bound for Philadelphia also called at Boston and Baltimore (from 1904), where they mainly unloaded cargo.

Liverpool
The First World War started in 1914 and Germany promptly invaded Belgium leading to the

evacuation of the Red Star Line's fleet from Antwerp. Almost all of the line's ships now sailed under British flag and the European headquarters were moved to Liverpool. The ships were used as hospital ships or to transport Canadian and American troops, as well as cargo and emergency aid from America to Belgium, via the Netherlands. All migrant traffic from Antwerp had ground to a complete halt.

Antwerp

From the autumn of 1919 onwards the Red Star Line sailed from Antwerp again, reprising its activities at its pre-war level. In the early Twenties the shipping line tested new departure ports for migrants, including Libau in Russia, Danzig in Poland and Hamburg in Germany. Halifax in Canada was selected as a new destination on the other side of the ocean.

In 1921, however, the United States decided to cut down on immigration, leading to an immediate drop in the numbers of immigrants. Nevertheless, in 1923, the Red Star Line marked its fiftieth anniversary with several festivities. The new Belgenland, the fleet's biggest ship, made a triumphant entry into the port of Antwerp.

In order to counter the consequences of the reduced immigrant traffic the Red Star Line among others started to focus on tourism and

car transport from the United States but this did not prove to be as profitable as expected.

Hamburg

The crash of the stock market in New York dealt the final blow. In 1934 the Red Star Line transported a paltry 4,000 passengers. Under the protectionist policy of the President of the United States, Franklin D. Roosevelt, American shipping lines were forced to stop all foreign operations during the Great Depression. By the end of 1934 the International Mercantile Marine Company liquidated the Société Anonyme de Navigation Belgo-Américaine. A German ship owner, Arnold Bernstein, who was based in Hamburg, acquired the Red Star Line name as well as buying Pennland and Westernland and continuing to use the facilities in Rijnkaai.

Rotterdam

Arnold Bernstein was Jewish. As a result he was imprisoned in 1937 by the Nazis, who accused him of smuggling currency and forgery. During his absence the Red Star Line continued to amass arrears, leading to the seizure of all the line's assets by the bank. In June 1939 the German government sold the shipping line to the Holland-America Line, which was based in Rotterdam but which continued to operate a Red Star Line route between Antwerp and New York until the Fifties.

1·2 VADERLAND

On 20 January, 1873 the Vaderland departed on her maiden voyage from Antwerp, with Captain Theodore vander Heyden at the helm. The ship was bound for Philadelphia via Falmouth in Great Britain. The journey was quite difficult. As a result of the heavy storms in the Atlantic the ship ran out of coal earlier than expected and was forced to call at Halifax in Canada for more coal. On 17 February, 1873 the Vaderland finally sailed into the port of Philadelphia.

She was the Red Star Line's first ship and its first steam-powered oil tanker. The oil could be directly pumped into the hermetically sealed compartments. Up until then barrels were used for this, or larger free-standing tanks. The ship was easy to recognise: the engine room and chimney were at the back, near the prow.

Following the American ban on the combined transport of oil and passengers the ship ultimately only carried passengers and dry cargo.

1·3 RIJNKAAI

From the start the Red Star Line's moorings were in Rijnkaai (Rhine Quay). In 1873 Rijnkaai was still situated quite far out of the city centre, in the north of the port, near Rijn Station, which facilitated the loading of goods straight onto trains. The Red Star Line wanted to import flammable oil but the town decreed that the oil could only be unloaded here, far from the city centre, given that there already were two oil depots as well as plans for a pipeline.

The American authorities thought that the combined transport of oil and passengers was too dangerous, however, which is why they banned it. Nevertheless the Red Star Line ships continued to moor in Rijnkaai. During the renovations of Rijnkaai, from 1882 until 1885, the shipping line temporarily moved to Cockerillkaai (Cockerill Quay).

Rijnkaai was built up with cargo sheds and in 1893 the Red Star Line started to build its control station for migrants here, leading to a continuous flow of migrants as well as of seamen and dock workers. Dozens of pubs opened to cater to them.

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ALWAYS ON THE MOVE

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2·1

FOR KATTYNA SZYSZ

Something grand inside her stares
towards the end of the extended water.
A Canada awaits her there.

She has folded up her Poland,
it will clothe her there.
For there she will become a woman,

mother in a strange language,
gathered into two lives,
ever residing on the other side

and staring as it's getting later
in the rooms of Canada
something grand in her each day

towards the end of the extended water.

Bernard Dewulf

3
ELEVATOR

THE KEY WITNESSES

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THE 4 DEPARTURE

4·1

EN ROUTE TO CANADA

At the end of the nineteenth century a large part of Canada still remained undeveloped, with whole areas still uninhabited and unclaimed. The government implemented an active immigration policy, using "The Last Best West" as a key slogan. The slogan referred to the difference with the United States where the great migration wave to the West had ended by then. In some cases unclaimed Canadian land was simply given away to anyone wishing to settle on it.

Not all ethnic groups were equally welcome in Canada. The government's campaigns only targeted countries that were deemed suitable, including Belgium. The Belgians were Catholic, they were knowledgeable about agriculture and at least spoke a few words of French. In Antwerp an immigration agent of the Canadian government was in charge of the propaganda.

In 1904 the Canadian Pacific Line started operating a direct connection between Canada and Antwerp, the first such route on the European continent. From 1922 onwards the Red Star Line called at Halifax.

4·2 THE EMIGRATION AGENTS

The shipping lines had agents, even in the outposts of Europe. Often these agents were local bankers, shop owners or pub owners who earned some additional income on the side. Their office often was on their own premises or in other locations which attracted a lot of people.

In order to sell as many tickets as possible they made the journey as easy as possible, offering package deals, which included train tickets and hotels.

Unfortunately not all the agents were reliable. Several of them extorted money from travellers, which is why only officially certified agents were allowed to operate in some countries although they too in some cases tested the boundaries of what was legal.

The shipping lines paid a lot of attention to promotional materials such as brochures and posters highlighting the splendour of the ships. The Red Star Line enlisted the services of such famous designers as Henri Cassiers.

4·3

THE PRICE OF A RED STAR LINE TICKET

In 1902 a Red Star Line ticket to travel to America in steerage or third class cost 162.50 Belgian francs or 31 American dollars. This amounts to 1,000 euros in modern money. A labourer would have to work about 75 days to earn this. The price of a ticket varied over the years. From 1895 onwards price agreements were in place. A passage on the Red Star Line in steerage cost 83 francs at the time, or 550 euros in modern currency. In 1924 the same ticket cost 2,400 francs or 2,500 euros. Ticket prices varied depending on the season. Children under 10 or 12 years of age travelled for half price. Fraudulent migration agents often charged much more for the passage than the shipping line.

4·4 NEWS FROM AMERICA

Most migrants only made the decision to leave after family members or fellow villagers had left before them. Over a third of the tickets of European immigrants were paid for by family members or acquaintances in America. Families often migrated in phases, meaning the husband was the first to leave to explore the country and establish himself after which the wife and children would follow, in some cases several years later.

Potential immigrants received letters from their relatives and heard the stories. They learnt about the opportunities in America and tried to imagine their new destination, which, in turn, gave them the courage to leave. They knew approximately what the journey entailed and where they could live in America.
But some immigrants were also disillusioned sending home bitter letters. In Belgium some members of the clergy started to speak out against migration, warning people about the corrupt lifestyle in the American cities.

Those migrants who considered the voyage did not believe everything they were told. In some cases, investors and agents did not always have their best interests at heart, often thinking about their own profit instead of the welfare of their clients.

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THE TRAIN JOURNEY

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5·1

THE TRAIN JOURNEY ACROSS EUROPE

Brody – Austrian border

Passports were checked at the border-crossing in Brody. Emigrants without a passport had to cross the border illegally. They did this by avoiding roads and crossing to the other side through open fields. Smugglers that knew the terrain well helped them cross. Russian border patrol officers could be bribed.

Myslovitz - German border

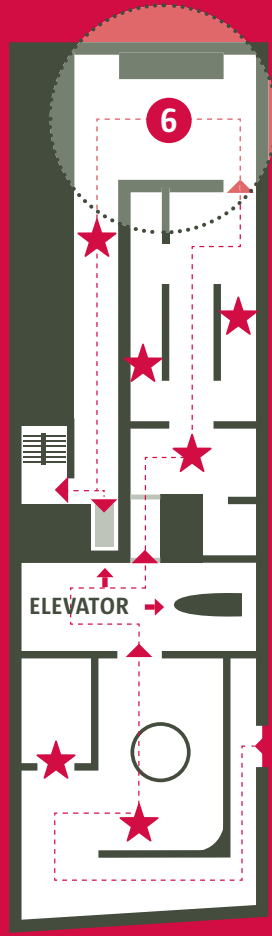
Emigrants had to show their ticket in Myslovitz. They were submitted to a first medical examination. Their baggage was disinfected. That was due to a cholera epidemic in Hamburg that resulted in more than 8000 deaths in 1892. The checkpoint in Myslovitz had a waiting room, without beds but it did have a canteen. According to eyewitnesses, there wasn't much food available; mainly alcoholic beverages.

Leipzig – Interior

Emigrants on the way to embarkation ports were transported through Germany in separate carriages. They were strictly separated from the other passengers. The train stopped in Leipzig. Emigrants were examined and registered once again. Those who had escaped previous examinations were intercepted in Leipzig.

Hamont-Achel – Belgian border

As of the 1890s, emigrants had to have a ticket for the ship in their pockets and enough money to cover their stay in Belgium. Extensive examinations did not occur at the border-crossing. The Belgian authorities counted on thorough inspections in Germany.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ELEVATOR

STAYING IN ANTWERP

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6·1

MIGRANTS IN THE CITY

In other ports, such as Hamburg and Bremen, the facilities for migrants tended to be concentrated on the outskirts of the city, whereas they were spread out throughout the city in Antwerp. The migrants were a familiar sight on Antwerp's streets. Their suitcases smelled of the disinfectant used in the border control stations and they stood out because of their sheepskin coats, colourful headscarves and high boots.

During a typical week in 1913 about 4,000 migrants passed through the city. Antwerpers remembered them well and authors even incorporated them in their books. According to Marnix Gijsen they gave the impression of being "in a great hurry, as if the angel of revenge was on their heels". Emmanuel de Bom describes them "as a herd of cattle, pressed closely together. They ambled on, like souls in distress, carrying their miserable belongings on their shoulders". Edmond Van Offel referred to these scenes as "processions of misery".

The migrants fuelled quite a debate among those Antwerpers who lived near the immigrant hotels who and complained about the noise at night, the stench and the filth.

6·2 CENTRAL STATION

From 1905 onwards the trains with foreign immigrants arrived in Antwerp's Central Station. Their first impression of Antwerp was thus the imposing station hall, with its platforms and the large glass dome.

Anyone with a ticket was met by personnel of the shipping line, of an agency or of the hotel. These people were easy to recognise because they wore a cap with their employer's name. Immigrants without a ticket or a residency contract had to beware of the bogus proposals by swindlers who hoped to earn some money at their expense.

From 1908 until 1914 Belgian doctors examined these immigrants in the station for infectious diseases. They also checked whether the migrants would be allowed into the United States. The city did not wish to foot the bill for stranded migrants. Some immigrants were already put back on the train before they had even set foot in Antwerp. The migrants' luggage was disinfected.

6·3

LETTER OF COMPLAINT

On 6 October 1910 the residents of Loosstraat, subsequently renamed Van Schoonhovenstraat, Schaafstraat and Lange Winkelhaakstraat petitioned the mayor about the nuisance caused by the boarding houses in their neighbourhood. They complained about the litter, the smell and the noise nuisance at night caused by the immigrants:

"The residents of the aforementioned streets are obliged to walk down the middle of the street as the pavements are continuously obstructed by the migrants. Our roofs and gutters are cluttered with household refuse and other rubbish causing the rainwater to be unsuitable for use and detrimental to our health."

The locals suggested the closure of these boarding houses in the petition.

6·4 THE ACCOMMODATION

Migrants with a ticket were picked up in Antwerp's Central Station by a representative of the shipping line. They then were put up in cheap immigrant hotels, where they could sleep, eat and exchange currency. Most of the hotels were owned by the shipping lines or leased by them. The owners were usually foreigners. Hotel du Luxembourg was mainly frequented by Luxembourgers whereas the Hotel Frankfurt tended to attract Germans.

After the First World War the migrants would stay in so-called reception hotels until they had been disinfected and checked, after which they were sent to quarantine hotels.

The city's health department checked the ventilation, the size of the dormitories, the number of beds and the bed linens. All the hotels were disinfected weekly to contain the spread of diseases and improve the conditions for migrants.

In the years leading up to the First World War sometimes there were more migrants in the city than could be put up in official accommodations. At these times the emigration commissioner Eugène Venesoen would pressure the health department to apply the rules less rigorously.

6·5

THE JEWISH NEIGHBOURHOOD

From the 1880s onwards a lot of Eastern European Jews travelled to Antwerp. Until then the city's Jewish population was mainly made up of Dutch and German Jews. The Jewish neighbourhood near Central Station extended to Belgiëlei and the city's park. Thousands of Jews passed through Antwerp on their way to America.

In 1903 rich Eastern European Jews founded an aid organisation called Ezra, to provide assistance to migrants who run into problems en route. Ezra purchased tickets, assisted migrants who were ill, got in touch with family members in America and provided free accommodation and meals. The organisation was a typical example of the Jewish tradition of solidarity but was also designed to avoid poor and unkempt Jewish migrants from inspiring anti-Jewish sentiment.

Some Jews stayed on in Antwerp. Their departure date was still too far off, they met people or found a job, they ran out of money or were unable to travel for one reason or another. Others soon realised the potential that Antwerp and its diamond industry had to offer.

6·6 MEMORIAL VOLUME FOR HENRI SCHULSINGER, NOVEMBER 1936

In 1891 Henri Schulsinger, a Jewish-Polish diamond trader, moved to Antwerp. He was one of the founders and key figures of Ezra, a Jewish aid organisation for migrants. On 15 November 1936, on the occasion of his seventieth birthday, Schulsinger was fêted for the aid he provided to migrants. He also was a member of the "Centraal Beheer van Joodse Weldadigheid en Maatschappelijk Hulpbetoon", more commonly known as "De Centrale". From 1920 the Central Management of Jewish Charity and Social Assistance served as an umbrella organisation for most Jewish social organisations in Antwerp, including Ezra. Many members of the Jewish community attended this party, as well as employees of the Belgian immigration service and the Antwerp health services. A memorial volume was presented to Henri Schulsinger to mark the occasion.

6·7

MIGRATION IN ART

Although migration is not a major theme in Belgian art a number of artists were inspired by the phenomenon of migration. In the 1890s realism became popular, with portrayals of street urchins, peasants, workers and migrants by such artists as Louis van Engelen, Constantin Meunier, Edgard Farasijn and Eugène Laermans. The pessimistic representation by Meunier and Laermans is especially striking.

After the turn of the century Eugène Van Mieghem and Victor Hageman started to portray the many migrants in Antwerp's port. Their work expressed the same tragedy and the same compassion as the literature of this period. Eugène Van Mieghem's parents owned a pub opposite the entrance to the Red Star Line control station. In that sense Van Mieghem occupied a privileged "front-row" position as it were, depicting the migrants in dark and grim colours and focussing on the individual. In 1927 the expressionist Henri Van Stralen created a linocut of the waiting migrants.

6·8 EUGEEN VAN MIEGHEM: 1875-1930

Eugeen Van Mieghem was born on 1 October 1875. His parents owned a pub along Van Meterenkaai, in Antwerp's old port. When Van Mieghem was ten they opened a new tavern in Montevideostraat. In 1893 and 1894 the Red Star Line built its facilities for migrants on the opposite side of the street. And so Van Mieghem observed as the world passed by his door on a daily basis...

In 1892 Van Mieghem enrolled at the Academy of Antwerp, where he was introduced to the work of Théophile-Alexandre Steinlen, which greatly influenced his style. In 1896 he was expelled by Eugène Siberdt. Ten years earlier a clash with Siberdt also prompted Van Gogh to leave the Academy.

Van Mieghem became a shipping agent but continued to draw. He discovered the work of Edvard Munch and in 1899 created his first series of drawings of migrants as well as exploring literary anarchism. Critics first noticed and praised his work in 1901, during the salon of La Libre Esthétique in Brussels. Three years later the London literary magazine Pall Mall wrote an article about Van Mieghem, branding him "an artist of the people". That year Van Mieghem spent some time in Amsterdam studying Rembrandt's work.

In 1905 his wife Augustine Pautre died after only three years of marriage. Van Mieghem did not show his work until 1910. In 1912 the Antwerp Royal Art Federation organised the first individual exhibition of his work.

During the First World War Van Mieghem decided to stay in occupied Antwerp. After the Armistice he exhibited his war paintings in Antwerp and Scheveningen (the Netherlands). Art critics compared his work with that of Steinlen and Jean-Louis Forain. In the 1920s Van Mieghem, who was employed as a teacher at the Academy, participated in various Belgian and foreign exhibitions. He died of a heart attack on 24 March 1930. Currently 613 of his works are preserved in the prints room of Museum Plantin-Moretus.

6·9 THE PORT

From the mid-nineteenth century onwards migrant transport became important for the Antwerp port. Initially the migrants travelled on sailing ships but a first attempt to a steam link with New York became operational as early as 1842. In the 1850s migrant traffic declined, among others because of the growth of the German ports. In 1854 about 24,000 migrants took the boat to America, by 1871 none at all.

From 1873 the Red Star Line provided a regular steam ship service to North America leading to a revival of migration from Antwerp, which culminated in 1913 when over 100,000 migrants left for various continents with different shipping lines. Until the 1890s they were mostly of German origin. By 1913 they were mainly Eastern Europeans. Relatively few Belgians left, about 7,000 in 1913.

In those days loading a ship meant working days upon end. Rijnkaai was teeming with coal carriers and dockhands. There were railway carriages and bogies everywhere, as well as hay bales and carts with food. The stevedoring company Hessenatie was in charge of loading and unloading the ships. In 1906 the Red Star Line spent about 7.5 million Belgian francs on supplies, wages, repairs, administration and mooring fees in Antwerp, or the present-day equivalent of 60 million euros.

6·10 EUGEEN VAN MIEGHEM AND THE PORT

The Scheldt and the port have certainly influenced Antwerp's history. They have coloured many Antwerpers' perception of their city and the city's port and waterfront have also been featured in numerous drawings, paintings and photos. Eugeen Van Mieghem (1875-1930) was a painter during the Red Star Line years. His parents owned a pub opposite the Red Star Line control station, which led him to often include migrants in his paintings of the port activities.

7
ELEVATOR

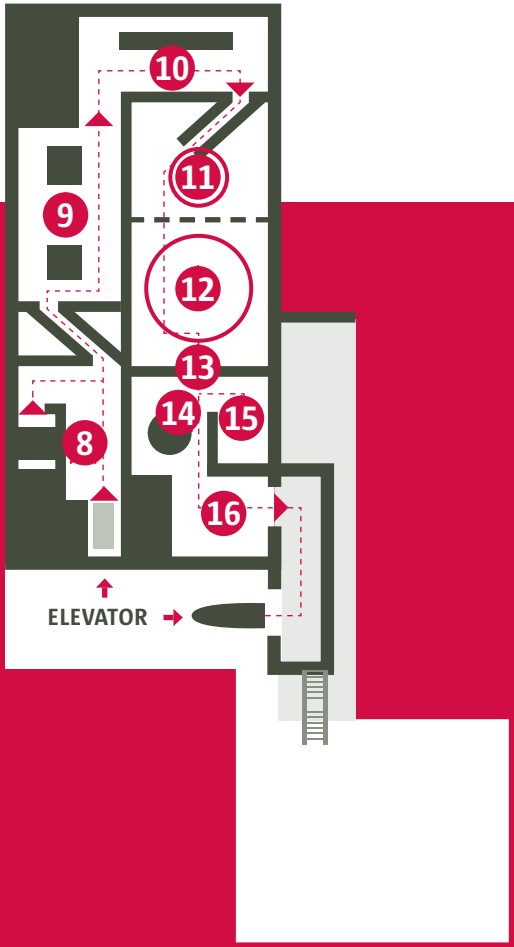
SHOWERS AND DISINFECTION 7

7·1

THE SMELL OF DISINFECTANT

The literary descriptions and testimonials are quite clear on this point: the migrants had a specific smell. Their suitcases and clothes had been disinfected during the train trip to Antwerp and in the city itself, meaning they carried the pungent smell of disinfectant with them everywhere they went. Everything reeked of it: the hotels, the spaces below deck in steerage, the immigrant halls in the ports of arrival.

Just after the First World War, before the Red Star Line had its own large shower room, migrants were disinfected in a special way. They had to rub hot vinegar and benzene, a by-product of oil refining, into their skin and wash their hair with it. The benzene dissolved the hard outer carapace of the lice, while the vinegar killed them.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FIRST FLOOR


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ELEVATOR

THE DOCTOR'S VISIT

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8·1

THE TRAVEL DOCUMENTS OF THE VAN LANCKER FAMILY

In 1920 Léon Van Lancker and his wife, Leonora migrated to the United States. Léon hoped to find a job in the car factories of Detroit. They sailed on the Red Star Line's Kroonland.

In those days everyone was required to have a passport and a ticket. Upon their departure Léon and Leonora also had papers with them, stating that their uncle, Clement Lega, who already lived in Detroit, would be their sponsor and in which he officially declared that he would provide for them in the United States. The Van Lanckers would not be a burden on society in other words.

Léon also took his diploma as a car mechanic with him to find a job easier, and he soon succeeded in finding employment in the Ford plant in Detroit. His wife sewed for the neighbours. Their son, Clément was born in the United States. But Léon found it hard to get used to life in the United States and had a difficult time settling there. He felt homesick. The family returned to Europe in 1924, requiring a visa for this trip too.


9
ELEVATOR

TRAVELLING STEERAGE 9

9·1

THE RED STAR LINE FLEET

Over the years the Red Star Line acquired 23 ships. They were steam-powered but in the early days they also had masts to save energy. The Red Star Line built ships in Glasgow, Philadelphia and Belfast. But the shipping line also bought or chartered ships from other shipping lines, usually from a sister company. From 1895 until 1903 the S/S Kensington, an American Line ship, regularly sailed for the Red Star Line.

In the early twentieth century the ships became faster and more expensive. In the 1920s migration declined and the shipping lines were left with expensive ships which they could no longer use to their maximum capacity. This heralded the end of the era of the big passenger ships.

9·2 RMS OLYMPIC

Olympic was a White Star Line ship with a career which spanned from 1911 until 1935. She was one of the shipping line's three illustrious Olympic-class liners, along with Titanic and Britannic. Unlike her sister ships – Titanic sank in 1912 and Britannic was struck by a torpedo in 1916 – Olympic had a long service life on the trans-Atlantic route. She sailed from Southampton and Cherbourg to New York and several Belgian migrants made the crossing to America on this liner.

Titanic, Olympic and Britannic were constructed by the Belfast shipbuilders Harland & Wolff, who also built Belgenland, Lapland, Westernland and Pennland for the Red Star Line. White Star Line and Red Star Line were both subsidaries of the International Mercantile Marine Company. The ships were quite similar.

9·3

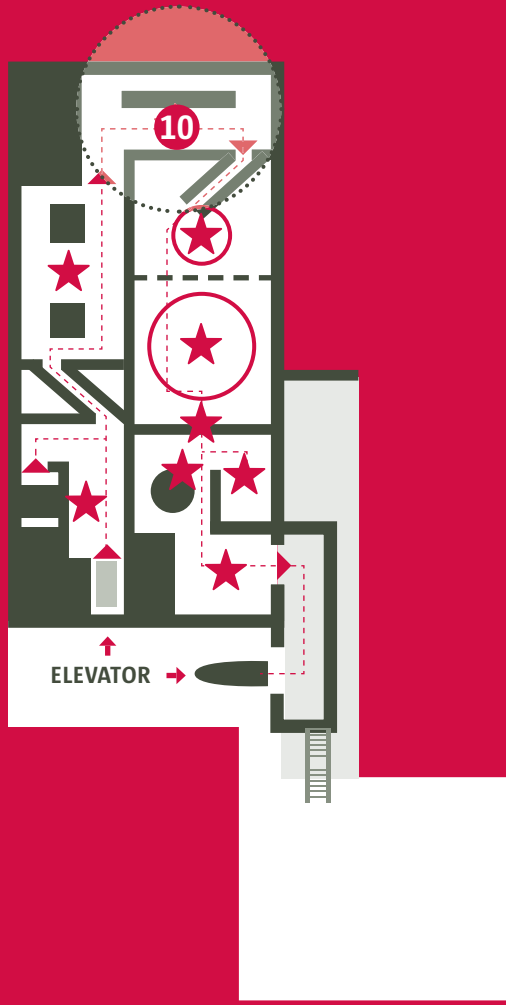
TRAVELLING AS A TOURIST

In the 1890s the first-class cabins on German and English shipping lines became even more luxurious. The Red Star Line also started to target the tourist market, more specifically Americans who wanted to explore European cities or Europeans travelling to the United States or Canada.

After the First World War more and more people were able to afford the journey, especially in America but also in Western Europe. The Red Star Line decided to capitalise on this development by launching a tourist class as well as organising "booze cruises" to the Bermuda Islands, allowing Americans to evade the prohibition.

In the 1920s the U.S. Government imposed immigration restrictions, leading to a collapse of migrant transport. The Red Star Line started to use part of its fleet as luxury liners. A large number of the cabins in steerage were refurbished. Lapland took tourists from New York on cruises to the Mediterranean, Latin America and the East and Southern coasts of Africa.

The Belgenland II made its first trip around the world in 1924, which took 133 days, sailing to the Caribbean, Japan and India. There was a crew of about 600 on board for 384 passengers.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ELEVATOR

LIFE ON BOARD 10

10·1 WASHING AT SEA

The sinks on board Belgenland were designed in such a way that passengers could drain the dirty water after wishing without requiring a drain.

The sink itself was mounted on foldable shelf. Once the user flipped it shut after washing the water dropped down into a collecting basin.

The Red Star Line's personnel then removed the dirty water.

Not all the cabins had hot water. Some passengers were forced to wash with cold water.

10·2 MORE COMFORT IN STEERAGE

Most migrants lived between decks, in steerage until well into the nineteenth century. This was situated below the main deck, but above the cargo hold. There was separate accommodation for families, as well as for men or women travelling alone. The passengers slept on straw mattresses in narrow bunk beds and also ate in the same space. They were required to bring their own bed linens and cutlery.

The shipping line provided the statutory amounts of food. The Belgian emigration regulations of 1876 provided for a weekly supply for every migrant of 2.5 kg of potatoes, 500 g of bacon, and two herrings among others. All the same many third-class passengers complained about the food.
In order to compete the shipping lines gradually started to pay more attention to the comfort in steerage. In 1889 the S/S Belgenland I was equipped with a ventilation system between decks.

From the 1890s onwards the Red Star Line had dormitories for 12 to 24 passengers and soon they added rooms for two to four passengers as well as shared showers and separate dining and leisure rooms.

10·3 LIFE ON BOARD

We stay on the tweendeck. It is the lowest deck. Some days it feels as though you can touch the ocean when you extend your hand.
ETHEL HOROWITZ, *the Lapland*, 1921

★

We spend a lot of time praying. We sleep in, wash and dress ourselves. We look at each other, we talk and we listen to our fellow passengers. We don't speak any English but we try to understand what they are saying.
ANASTASIA MENSIK, *the Vaderland*, 1902

I use the drinking water they gave us yesterday to wash, on the foredeck. The water is always distributed around 3 in the afternoon. It has a very unpleasant aftertaste. We only drink it if our thirst becomes unbearable, saving the rest to wash ourselves.
REINHOLD LIEBAU, *the Belgenland*, 1887

A heavy storm breaks. We have to get into the lifeboats. It looks as if we will have to leave the ship. This is real, it's a potential disaster. Suddenly the sea calms down. We are let off the lifeboats and given permission to return to our quarters.
ELIEZA MEINWALD, *the Zeeland*, 1920

We only eat kosher food. We try to stuff as much food as possible into our luggage. We take a large jar of steeped cherries with us. We have been told they are a good remedy for seasickness.
SORE JACOBS, *the Zeeland*, 1912

The boat is teeming with people. There are a lot of staff and the passengers sing and dance. There are many Russians, at least I think they are Russian. I can sense the excitement. I have never seen a ship before and this is my first time on the ocean. The ship dances on the waves.
FRANC RIEDER, *the Kroonland*, 1908

Now and then, we head to the upstairs deck where we try to find some food. If we are lucky, the passengers on the upper decks throw food down to us. We take it downstairs to the tween-deck.
MARTHA LEVASHESKY GARDNER, *name of ship unknown*, 1921

The beds are lined up in rows of five, two high. There are narrow aisles in between and lamps are suspended from the bed frames. It is always twilight here. Migrants are required to bring their own bed linens. The tables are positioned between the beds. Every passenger has a straw mattress and two pewter pitchers. One for drinks, another for food.

AUGUST DE PAPE, *Lac Huron,* 1893

10·4 THE CREW

In the early twentieth century one big Red Star Line ship would have a crew of about 500 divided among three departments: the deck department, the engineering department and the steward department.

The deck department was responsible for navigation and safety. The captain was the highest in rank, having final responsibility for the entire ship.

The engineering department employed technicians and machinists who ensured that the ship's engines continued to run. They were under the supervision of a chief engineer and several general and specialised engineers.

Finally, the steward department was responsible for the passengers. Waiters, cook, hairdressers, stewards, nannies, and barmen did everything they could to cater to the needs of the first-class passengers in particular.

There were also specialised employees such as ship doctors, joiners, musicians and radio operators.

The staff observed a strict discipline. Eye contact with the passengers was not allowed. In the 1920s any staff members who did not speak English on a cruise were immediately penalised.


11
ELEVATOR

ARRIVING IN AMERICA

11

11·1 ON ELLIS ISLAND

Not everyone is permitted to enter the United States. Immigration from China is banned in 1882. What's more, only immigrants who can support themselves are allowed in. There are restrictions on the disabled, people with a criminal record, pregnant women travelling alone, prostitutes, polygamists, anarchists, people with a contagious disease and others besides.

Provided they show no signs of sickness, first and second-class passengers are allowed to disembark straight away. All third-class passengers have to go through Ellis Island first to complete the administrative and medical checks.

Around ten percent of them are taken aside for additional medical testing. They then have to appear before the Board of Special Inquiry, which has the final say on who is allowed to enter. There is a secure reception area for immigrants refused entry and people awaiting a decision. The sick are taken to hospital. Their family often have to pay the costs.

Those permitted to continue their journey can buy train tickets and exchange currency at Ellis Island. There is a telegram service too.

From 1925 onwards, immigration formalities are carried out at the European ports of departure. From then on, Ellis Island is mainly a deportation centre. Immigrants without citizenship can still be expelled from the country if they breach their conditions of residence.

11·2

BLOCK GAME

Test yourself! This block game is based on an intelligence test at Ellis Island. Immigrants with a mental disability were not allowed to enter the country. Would you pass the test?


12
ELEVATOR

THE AMERICAN DREAM 12

12·1

IMMIGRANT COMMUNITIES

Having arrived in America, immigrants follow in the footsteps of people from their native region and country. They end up in the factories and mines around the industrial cities. In the countryside aspiring farmers look for a piece of land of their own.

Countless immigrant communities spring up. The culture of the old country is kept alive in social clubs, choirs, brass bands and orchestras. Newspapers in the mother tongue bring local news and messages from the native country.

Scandinavian and German migrants chiefly settle in the Midwest. Chicago is home to a substantial Polish community. There are quite a few Belgians here too. Many of them find work as janitors in the skyscrapers. Detroit's automobile plants are another major draw for people from Belgium.

New York is an ethnic patchwork of Irish, Italians, Germans and Russians. The Lower East Side becomes a Jewish quarter. Many people work at home and make clothes. Yiddish features among the store signs. Jewish theatre flourishes.

After a while many immigrants start to move further afield. On the West Coast, for instance, a Jewish community begins to form in Los Angeles in the 1920s.

12·2 ALL AMERICANS

Around 1900 American industry is crying out for cheap labour. Few are opposed to immigration on principle, but virtually no one is in favour of access for all. Workers fear competition from immigrants. And some newcomers are more desirable than others.

People tend to look down in particular on Catholic, Southern European and Eastern European immigrants. Many consider them to be biologically, morally and culturally inferior. They supposedly know nothing of democracy and have reprehensible habits and poor hygiene. They are seen as a threat to race and society.

Since most of the newcomers hail from those regions, 'nativists' call for immigration to be curbed. Businesses, shipping lines and immigrant organizations, meanwhile, lobby for a more open policy.

The sense of an American identity is also growing stronger. Immigrants are expected to adapt. They are told they had better learn English. During the First World War everyone is expected to show unconditional loyalty to the United States. Military service and shared battlefield experiences advance the integration of second-generation European immigrants.

All the same, immigration quotas per country of origin are eventually introduced in 1921 and 1924. They are aimed at Southern and Eastern Europe. Only a limited number of immigrants from each country of origin are now permitted to enter the United States.

POLICE REPORT

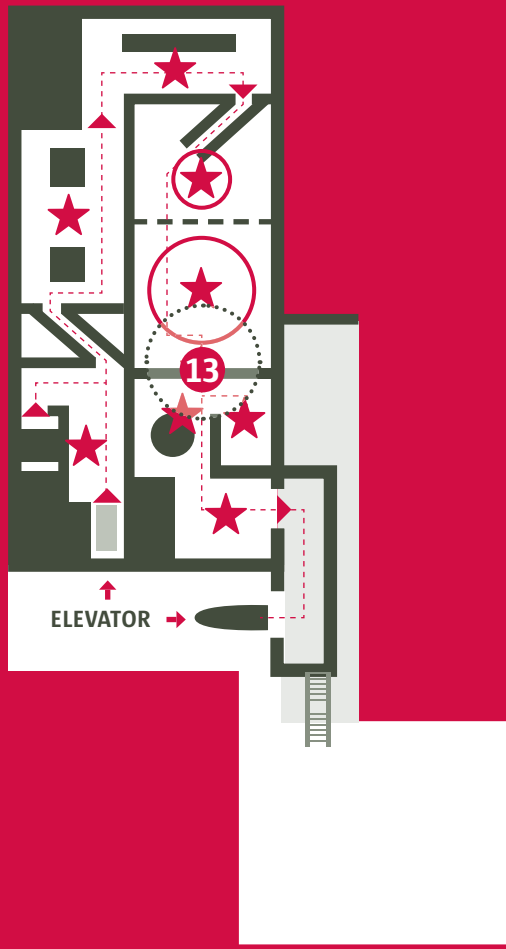
Because of the quotas immigrants try to enter America illegally across the Canadian and Mexican borders. In 1924 Achiel Moerman from Kortrijk stows away on a train bound for Detroit. Will he make it? Read his exciting account here!

When the train stopped, an electric searchlight lit up the car and a detective with a revolver in his fist found us and called out: 'Hands up – come on, smuggle boys!'

12·4

IMMIGRANT PRESS

Immigrants too are keen to keep up with the news from the old country. The United States and Canada have a free press and freedom of speech. This is new to many of them. Browse through a few original newspapers produced for immigrants in their native language.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ELEVATOR

AN OPEN ENDING 13


14
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ANTWERP TODAY 14


15
ELEVATOR

DANCE 15


16
ELEVATOR

AN OPEN HOUSE

16·1

SHARE YOUR STORY

Share your migration story, past or present, with the Red Star Line Museum. We're collecting all the time, together with the public. Do you have an interesting photo, object or letter? Have a word with someone from the museum and they'll show you what to do next.

17

PASSENGER LISTS 17

17·1

PASSENGER LISTS

Search the ships' passenger lists. Discover whether you have relatives in America.

THE TOWER