

TEACHER'S GUIDE

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MISSION 4: "City of Immigrants"

Sylvia Bernstein on Arriving at Ellis Island

In 1914 Sylvia Bernstein left Austria to join her brother in New York City. In this interview, she recounts her experiences at Ellis Island, the main immigrant inspection station for New York City and the busiest in the United States. The term "white slavery" referred to the practice of forcing young girls into prostitution.

I had a brother that came here in 1911. He was a tailor in New York. So I wrote to my brother, he should send me money, a ticket, I'll be glad to pay him back. I was fourteen years old. But you must remember, at fourteen they wouldn't leave you in without parents. You have to be sixteen. I says, "I'll try to pass for sixteen."

So I come on the boat, I can't speak English. It's sas—you don't understand what they say, only by the faces.

In Ellis Island it was very exciting. There you can talk Jewish (Yiddish) and you can talk Polish and you can talk everything. I came on a Friday. They go into a big room, and they feed you and they watch you. They give you a room with another girl—after all, it wasn't a hotel, darling! But it was of comfort. You're constantly watched. They watch you. If you go out, there's a woman go after you. "Where do you want to go?" You should excuse me, you have to go to the bathroom, and you don't know . . . I come from a very small town. So they show you—and they were very nice.

But they're very strict; because that time was white slavery. An agent came over to me and says, "How old are you?"

I says, "I'm sixteen." And I had a big head of hair, so I made braids I should look taller.

He says, "You're sixteen? Where is your sixteen years? You're so little. You're going to a brother?"

"Yes, I'm going to a brother."

"How long you didn't see your brother?"

I says, "Two years."

"Would you recognize your brother, if you see him?"

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"Yes."

They bring in a man, they say, "Is this your brother?"

"No."

They know who my brother was—they did this more or less to see. They were very careful and very cautious, very nice.

Sunday my brother picked me up, Monday I got a job, and Tuesday I went to work in a dry-goods store, a haberdashery.

Source: Joan Morrison and Charlotte Fox Zabusky, *American Mosaic: The Immigrant Experience in the Words of Those Who Lived It*, 85-86.