

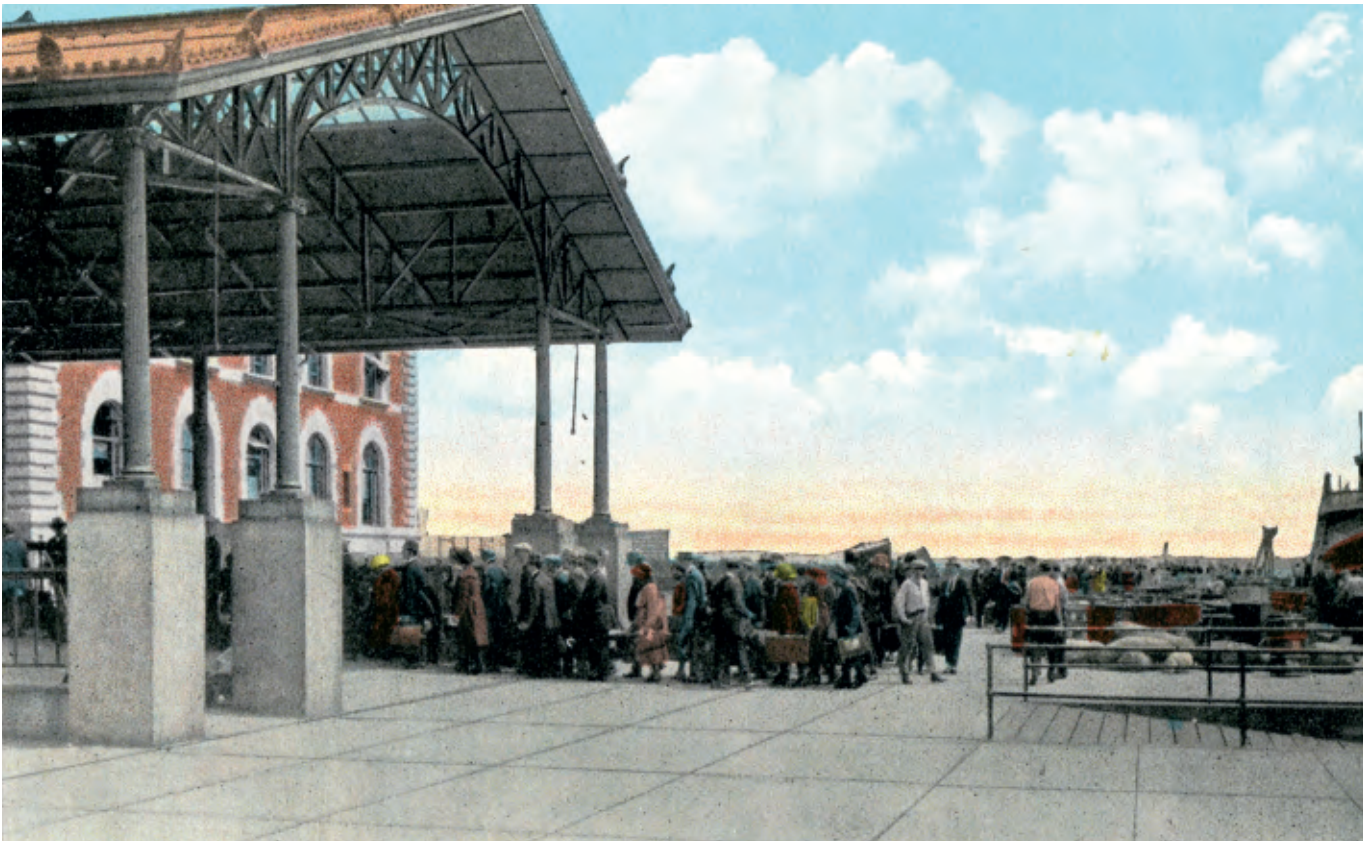


**Eugeen Van Mieghem** [1875–1930]

**AND THE JEWISH IMMIGRANTS  
OF RED STAR LINE**

ERWIN JOOS

PANDORA  PUBLISHERS



## Ellis Island – Hope and Tears

In order to cope with the large influx of migrants, a series of buildings was constructed on Ellis Island to register third class passengers and give them a medical examination. On opening day January 1, 1892 more than 2,000 people were registered and over 40 relief organizations were represented. Between 1892 and 1924 thousands of migrants arrived daily.

Before disembarkation they were given a number and a letter linking them to their entry on the ship's passenger list. Once on Ellis Island, they gathered in a huge hall stretching the entire length of the building. Finally, they were ushered between crush barriers into lines approaching the first doctor, causing great panic and fear in some. Those who were not or did not seem to be fit were chalk marked on their coats: H for heart, K for slipped disk, E for eyes, X for mental conditions. One passenger in six was held for further examination, which could take up to two weeks. Despite strict examinations in the embarkation ports 2 percent of the passengers were sent back in the end. An eye or skin infection appears to have been sufficient grounds for refusal. A mental condition or possible criminal behavior certainly

was. If there was not too large a crowd, an immigrant might go through Ellis Island procedures in just one day. Day and night, ferries conveyed new arrivals to Battery Park and places in New Jersey.

In the years between 1860 and 1870 the Southern and Western United States required cheap labor to construct railroads. White immigrants were highly welcome and American lobby groups sent representatives to Europe to recruit migrants. Historians distinguish old from new immigrants, the first group originating mainly from Northern and Western Europe, the latter from Southern and Eastern Europe. As the first group's culture was consistent with America's Protestantism, the first group was able to integrate easily, presenting a lesser threat than the second group. Americans, from the earlier waves of immigration, were not at all thrilled with the massive influx of new immigrants.

The movement known as "nativism" protested loudly during the 1880s. So called "hordes of immigrants" had to be made to pay. Xenophobia and contempt for newcomers took on alarming proportions when in 1886 a bomb was thrown into a group of policemen following a demonstration in Chicago. After a short trial, six immigrants were sentenced to death.

← **QUAY ELLIS ISLAND  
IMMIGRATION STATION**  
postcard, New York, ca. 1923  
coll. of Eugeen Van Mieghem  
Museum, Antwerp

← **ELLIS ISLAND  
IMMIGRATION STATION**  
postcard, New York, ca. 1923  
coll. of Eugeen Van Mieghem  
Museum, Antwerp

→ **ARRIVAL AT  
ELLIS ISLAND**  
photograph, New York,  
ca. 1921  
coll. of Ellis Island Immi-  
gration Museum, New York





↖ **AT THE RED STAR  
LINE PREMISES**  
Eugeen Van Mieghem  
black chalk, 15.1 x 10.4 cm,  
January 1903  
private collection

↑ **JEWISH MIGRANT**  
Eugeen Van Mieghem  
black chalk, 20.7 x 14.2 cm,  
1904  
coll. of Eugeen Van Mieghem  
Museum, Antwerp

← **POLICEMAN**  
Eugeen Van Mieghem  
colored chalk, 13.4 x 9.4 cm,  
dated 1899  
private collection

→ **JEWISH MIGRANT  
WITH UMBRELLA**  
Eugeen Van Mieghem  
black chalk, 20.4 x 12.9 cm,  
ca. 1902  
private collection





← **MIGRANTS AT RIJNKAAI**  
Eugeen Van Mieghem  
black chalk, 12.7 x 18.5 cm,  
ca. 1902  
coll. of Plantin-Moretus  
Museum, Prentenkabinet,  
Antwerp

→ **WAITING FOR THE  
SOUP DISTRIBUTION**  
Eugeen Van Mieghem  
black chalk, 24 x 30 cm,  
ca. 1902  
private collection



← **WAITING FOR THE  
SOUP DISTRIBUTION**  
Eugeen Van Mieghem  
black chalk, 37.8 x 60.9 cm,  
ca. 1902  
coll. of Plantin-Moretus  
Museum, Prentenkabinet,  
Antwerp

→ **MIGRANTS  
ON RIJNKAAI**  
Eugeen Van Mieghem  
black and yellow chalk,  
8.5 x 18.3 cm, 1902  
coll. of New York  
Historical Society





↖ **BEGGAR WITH WOODEN LEG**  
Rembrandt van Rijn  
(1606-1669)  
etching, 11.4 x 6.6 cm, ca. 1630  
private collection

↑ **MIGRANT WITH WOODEN LEG**  
Eugeen Van Mieghem  
black chalk,  
20.8 x 13.1 cm, 1904  
private collection

← **MAN WITH WOODEN LEG**  
Eugeen Van Mieghem  
colored chalk, 45 x 27 cm, 1899  
private collection





↑ **BLIND MAN**

Eugeen Van Mieghem  
black and red chalk,  
19.3 x 10.5 cm, 1899  
coll. of Plantin-Moretus  
Museum, Prentenkabinet,  
Antwerp

↗ **JEWISH MIGRANT**

Eugeen Van Mieghem  
colored chalk, 22 x 17 cm,  
ca. 1899  
private collection

→ **JEWISH MIGRANT  
WITH WOODEN LEG**

Eugeen Van Mieghem  
black chalk, 32.7 x 29.5 cm,  
ca. 1899  
coll. of Plantin-Moretus  
Museum, Prentenkabinet,  
Antwerp



Labor riots in the entire country were attributed to foreign agitators. After World War I the American government took a stricter stance towards immigration. Congress voted a new immigration act in 1921, based on a quota system for each country of origin.

On November 29, 1954 federal authorities decided to shut down Ellis Island, allowing the premises to gradually become derelict. After thorough renovation, the Ellis Island Immigration Museum opened on September 10, 1990. No less than 12 million immigrants, 90 percent of whom originated from Europe, first set foot on American soil between 1892 and 1924 on Ellis Island. Approximately 40 percent of the present-day US population is considered to have ancestors who arrived in the United States via Ellis Island.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, thousands of Belgians tried their luck in Canada and the United States. They settled mainly in Michigan, Iowa, Ohio and Texas, sometimes in California. Most of them came from the Eastern Flanders countryside, where one farmer in two had to try to make ends meet on a small parcel

of land hardly larger than 2 acres. Crop failure took such small, self-sufficient agricultural businesses to the brink of famine.

Potato blight along with failed wheat harvests were disastrous in 1847-48. In addition, mechanization in the textile industry put an end to the remaining home industries. Widespread malnutrition led to outbreaks of cholera and typhoid epidemics. Finally, in 1909 the draft was introduced: twenty-year-old men were called for at least 15 months' military service. Extremely low pay and poor food made desertion and flight to foreign countries attractive, even though the men realized they would never be able to return to their homeland.

The best advertisements were made by migrants who were happy in the US, which they explained in great detail in their letters or during first visits to their former villages. Those with enough money to afford a second class ticket avoided Ellis Island. Among approximately 2 million passengers transported by the Red Star Line in the course of its existence were an estimated 150,000 Belgians.



← **ON BOARD A RED STAR LINE SHIP**  
photograph, ca. 1925  
coll. of Eugeen Van Mieghem  
Museum, Antwerp

↗ **RED STAR LINE FIRST-CLASS PASSENGERS**  
photograph, ca. 1925  
coll. of Eugeen Van Mieghem  
Museum, Antwerp

→ **BRESSELEERS FAMILY ON DECK**  
photograph, SS *Zeeland*,  
dated August 25, 1921  
coll. of Eugeen Van Mieghem  
Museum, Antwerp





← **RED STAR LINE  
GRAND STREET PIER**  
 photograph, New York,  
 ca. 1900  
 coll. of FelixArchief,  
 Antwerp

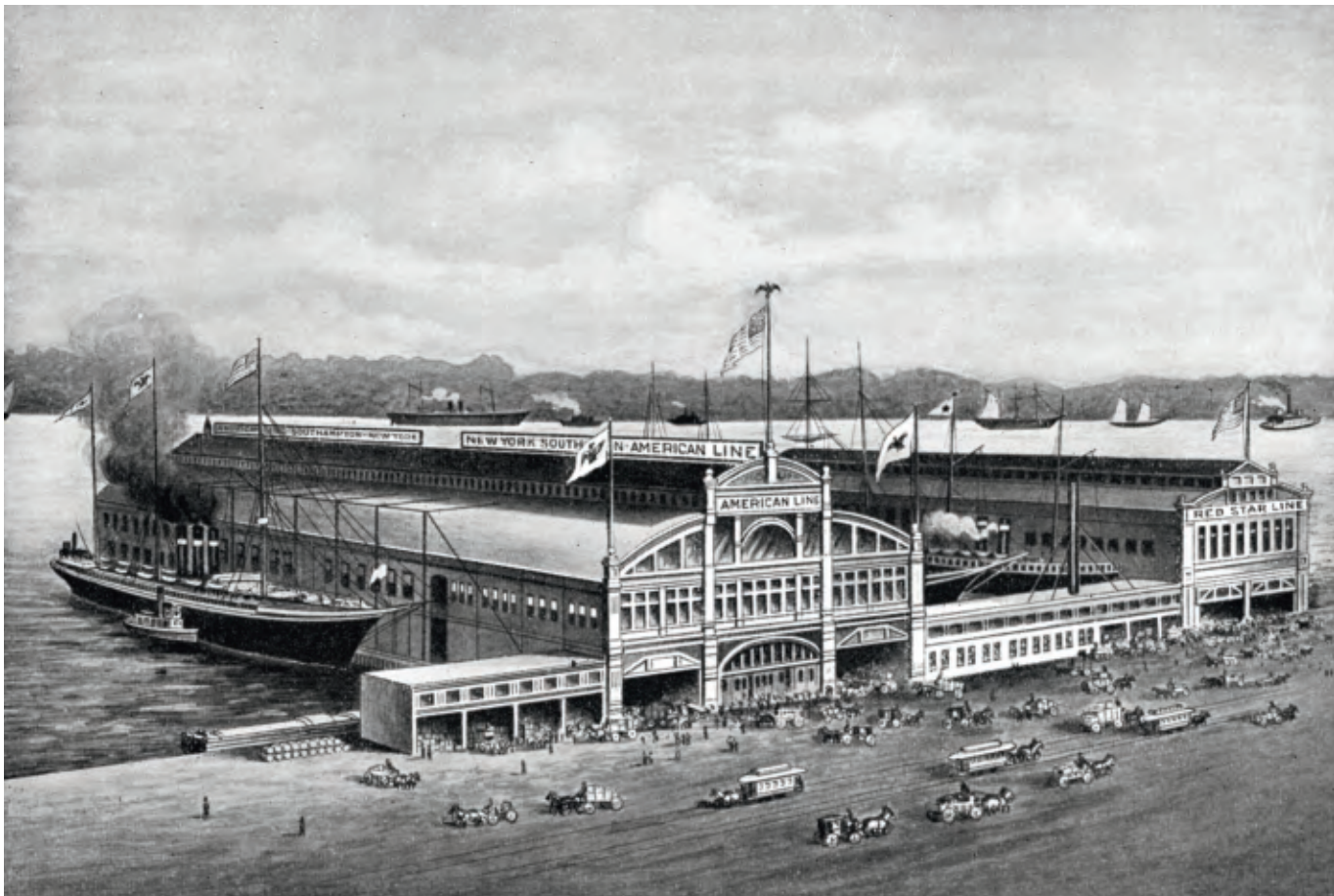
↓ **RED STAR LINE  
ADVERTISEMENT**  
 photograph, The Bowery,  
 New York, ca. 1900  
 coll. of Eugeen Van Mieghem  
 Museum, Antwerp



→ **RED STAR LINE**  
**GRAND STREET PIER**  
photograph, New York,  
ca. 1900  
coll. of FelixArchief, Antwerp



↓ **RED STAR LINE**  
**PIERS 14 & 15 ON HUDSON**  
**RIVER, NEW YORK**  
illustration, ca. 1890  
coll. of Eugeen Van Mieghem  
Museum, Antwerp





← **RED STAR LINE**  
passenger list SS *Finland*,  
September 17, 1904  
coll. of Eugeen Van Mieghem  
Museum, Antwerp

→ **RED STAR LINE**  
passenger list SS *Kroonland*,  
September 12, 1908  
coll. of Eugeen Van Mieghem  
Museum, Antwerp

RED STAR LINE

NEW-YORK



New York-DOVER - Antwerp

E. STOCKMANS & CO

RED STAR LINE

ANTWERP



Antwerp-DOVER - New York

E. STOCKMANS & CO

An exceptional travel observer was Flemish author Cyriel Buysse (1859-1932). Between 1886 and 1893 he made several voyages to the United States, where he stayed for an extended time. He wrote: "...In those days I used to live in Jersey City, close to the Western River (Hudson River), opposite an impressive harbor and the awesome high rises of New York beyond. From my room, high and clear, I could see the transatlantic liners arrive and depart, the ferries crossing to and fro, the barges, the tugboats, the sailing ships hovering and twirling like a swarm of insects above the ever surging, ever splashing, ever frothing water, never resting for a single moment. To any-

one who had time – but who has ever time in America? – this was a spectacle to be observed for hours.

To me, in my great loneliness, it seemed a wide, open gateway to the world through which news from my home country far away reached me; through which many things dear to me vanished from my captivated gaze. From the wide ocean I could see the great steamships approaching and through my binoculars from a great distance I could recognize their nationality from the color of their smokestacks: the red French, the yellow Germans, the red and black ringed Belgians. These were the ones whose

arrival I always looked forward to with emotion; for – I could rely on this – a few hours later I found letters, newspapers, all sorts of objects from my home country in my mailbox.”

Byusse also described an unforgettable arrival in 1891: “...Thousands and thousands of lights, some motionless on the river banks, others floating, appearing on and disappearing from the water, were now shining around us in the dark night, while far in the background a colossal, uniform glow lit up the horizon, the hazy glow of the big city, like a far-off giant conflagration or an already misty afterglow of a magnificent sunset.

Soon we would find ourselves in an ocean of lights. They were all sorts of colors: red, blue, green, yellow, orange, some motionless, others continuously floating, their reflection on the water, while to the left, very high up, the majestic Statue of Liberty lifted her oversized, burning, electric torch to the sky. And a surging noise, an incessant wailing of steam whistles was gradually mixing into the orgy of brightness, which was now flowing into the bay as if accompanied by a flood of magical radiance. To the right, at about two miles’ distance, gloomy silhouettes of extremely tall buildings with innumerable lit windows: the first houses of New York arose.”



← INTERNATIONAL NAVIGATION COMPANY brochure, ca. 1900 coll. of MAS, Antwerp

→ RED STAR LINE postcard SS Finland, September 17, 1905 coll. of New York Historical Society





→ **SS PENNLAND**  
**WITH TUGBOAT**  
poster, ca. 1934  
coll. of Eugeen Van  
Mieghem Museum,  
Antwerp



## Lower East Side

In 1902 *The Spirit of the Ghetto* was published, a book in which Hutchins Hapgood described the living conditions in the Lower East Side, the Jewish quarter in New York. The publication was illustrated with life drawings by Jacob Epstein, who, like Van Miegheem, was influenced by Steinlen's work. About 1880 the Jewish district was still very small and the Lower East Side was inhabited mainly by Irish and German immigrants. Almost overnight, the neighborhood developed into the most crowded area in New York. In 1890 there were 515 people per acre, ten years later their number had risen to 691.

The numerous sweatshops created an around the clock bustling atmosphere. But these poorly ventilated, grimy places were also breeding grounds for tuberculosis. A typical case was Pig Market (between Hester and Ludlow Street), as the Jews ironically called the place, because anything and everything was for sale – except pigs. That is where new immigrants would offer their labor each morning. Due to massive immigration, wages dropped sharply at the beginning of the 1880s. 1893 turned out to be a year of crisis, with public soup kitchens providing for starving

workers. But immigration from Eastern Europe continued constantly: between 1900 and 1910 there were 1,037,000 new Jewish settlers, 449,082 of whom arrived between 1904 and 1907, with yet another 153,748 in the record year 1906. Newcomers still had to struggle for life in those days, but fortunately the worst abuses had been abolished. The Jewish community had been granted civil rights and many newcomers found relatives or friends from their former shtetls.

After a number of years, the neighborhood was also physically better connected to the outside world: Williamsburg Bridge was inaugurated in 1903, Manhattan Bridge in 1909. From then on people were able to travel to Brooklyn quickly. The subway to the Bronx was opened in 1905, to Brooklyn in 1908. About 1912, the East Side was still overcrowded but improved economically. The neighborhood looked more attractive; the authorities created small parks, recreation facilities on the water, schools and libraries. Today however, the Lower East Side has lost most of its cultural identity. But with tradition gradually dwindling new interest is growing and the Lower East Side Tenement Museum enjoys an increasing number of visitors.



← LOWER EAST SIDE INTERIOR  
Jacob Riis (1849-1914)  
photograph, New York,  
ca. 1904  
coll. of Museum of the  
City of New York

→ PASSENGERS ON DECK  
photograph, ca. 1900  
coll. of Ellis Island Immigra-  
tion Museum, New York





↖ **MIGRANT WEARING A HAT**  
Eugeen Van Mieghem  
black chalk, 15.1 x 9.4 cm,  
ca. 1903  
coll. of Jewish Museum,  
Amsterdam

↑ **MIGRANT WEARING A HAT**  
Eugeen Van Mieghem  
black chalk, 15.1 x 9.4 cm,  
ca. 1903  
coll. of New York  
Historical Society

← **TWO WEARY JEWISH MIGRANTS**  
Eugeen Van Mieghem  
black chalk, 20.5 x 14.2 cm,  
November 1907  
coll. of Plantin-Moretus  
Museum, Prentenkabinet,  
Antwerp

⇒ **TWO JEWISH MIGRANTS**  
Eugeen Van Mieghem  
black chalk, 27 x 13 cm,  
ca. 1904  
private collection







↑ **BLIND MAN**  
Eugeen Van Mieghem  
black chalk, 20.4 x 14.5 cm,  
1899  
private collection

← **JEWISH MIGRANTS IN  
FIRST AND THIRD CLASS**  
Eugeen Van Mieghem  
black chalk and pencil,  
30.7 x 24.1 cm, ca. 1900  
coll. of Plantin-Moretus  
Museum, Prentenkabinet,  
Antwerp

≠ **STUDY OF MIGRANTS**  
Eugeen Van Mieghem  
blue chalk, 18.5 x 12.8 cm,  
ca. 1911  
private collection

→ **MEN IN THE STREET**  
Eugeen Van Mieghem  
black chalk, 16.5 x 12 cm,  
ca. 1902  
private collection

