

Name \_\_\_\_\_



Date \_\_\_\_\_

## If You Were An Immigrant in 1893

Written by Joyce Furstenu

When nine-year-old Evgeniya Alekseev climbed aboard the immigrant steamship *The Odyssey*, she was wearing several layers of clothing. There was no room for extra dresses in the wooden trunk her mother brought. Tearful goodbyes were exchanged as her grandparents waved to them from the dock. Evgeniya, called "Evie" by her family, and Valentin, her little brother, knew the journey to America was going to take anywhere from six to thirty days depending upon the weather. They also knew they would be reunited with their father. He had come to America three years earlier seeking a better life for himself and his family. Evie was six when her father left.

He left Russia because of the pogroms, the awful riots that occurred in the years following the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881. The pogroms were directed at Jews. Evie's father came to America in 1890 and found work in a Russian bakery in New York City. He worked until he had saved enough money to bring his family to America.

Evgeniya's mother used all but sixteen dollars of the money he sent her to buy passage on *The Odyssey* for herself and the two children. Fear of losing all their money prompted her mother to sew a secret pocket on the inside of Evie's coat. The immigration laws stated that everyone entering the country had to have ten dollars and money for a railroad ticket. She hid half of the money in Evgeniya's hidden coat pocket. The other half went into a pouch sewn to the inside of the waistband of her own skirt.

Boarding the ship, each passenger was inspected for disease and interviewed to make certain there would be no problems upon their arrival in America. Each passenger was given a number and directed to the steerage deck where they would sleep. The steerage deck was at the lowest level of the ship. Passengers were crammed into the area filled with rows and rows of narrow bunk beds. There was no fresh air. There was only one bath area for the thousands of passengers to use during the voyage. When Evgeniya's mother saw how her family would be living for the next few weeks, she prayed for good weather so the trip would be as short as possible.

Their first night aboard ship was a nightmare. There was no privacy. The fifty or so Russian immigrants aboard ship tried to stick together as they could not understand any of the dozens of different languages spoken by other immigrants. Evgeniya and her brother slept in the same bunk -he at one end and she at the other. "For your own safety," her mother assured her.

Sometime that night, Evgeniya became too hot. She tossed and turned in her bunk. Sometime during the night, Evgeniya took off her coat and it fell to the floor. Evgeniya woke up early as someone brushed by her bunk. Her mother was already awake. Evgeniya could see her mother was tired. She stretched and stood up. Her mother was staring at her. "What's wrong, Mother?" asked Evgeniya.

"Where is your coat?" she asked in a faltering voice. Evie looked down at herself. What had she done with her coat? She scrambled to the floor to look underneath her bunk. She moved her still sleeping brother to see if it was under him. No coat. Evie looked across the sea of sleeping passengers. No coat. What would they do? Immigration laws stated that if they did not have at least ten dollars, they would not be allowed to enter at Ellis Island. What would you do?

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**How would you react?**

1. Why do you think Evgeniya had to wear several layers of clothing rather than bring her own suitcase?

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2. Evie was six when her father left for America. Do you remember what you were doing when you were six? Describe anything important that you remember about that year. Were you in school? Where?

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3. Describe how you think Evie must have felt that first night aboard the ship as she prepared to sleep in the tiny bunk she shared with her brother.

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4. According to law, ship companies had to pay the return fare for any passenger who was rejected at the immigration office at Ellis Island. Why do you think each passenger needed to be checked by a doctor before coming aboard?

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5. Why do you think Evie slept with her coat on? Do you think she realized what she was doing when she removed her coat that night? What do you think she should have done differently?

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6. What difficulties do you think Evie faced on this trip because she could only speak Russian? Why do you think the language barriers will make finding the coat a bigger problem for Evgeniya?

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7. Why was it important to Evie to find the coat? What do you think could have happened to it? What do you think she should do next?

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8. How do you think this story turns out? Do you think Evgeniya was able to find her coat with the money inside? How did she find it? If not, what do you think happened to Evie and her family because they did not have enough money to pass through immigration?

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