



The angel of Ellis Island

BY MICHAEL FELDBERG

In 1907, at just 20 years of age, Celia Greenstone was hired by the New York Section of the National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW) to serve as assistant immigrant arrival agent at Ellis Island. Greenstone was urgently needed there. Between 1892 and 1924, more than 15,000,000 immigrants – most of them from Eastern and Southern Europe, and many of them Jews – passed through Ellis Island. The New York Section of NCJW was concerned that thousands of single Jewish women might be “misled into immoral lives, and other girls [will be] subjected to great dangers because of the lack of some directing and protecting agency at Ellis Island.” To cope with this danger, the New York Section appointed pioneer social worker Bessie

Meirowitz as their Ellis Island agent. When Meirowitz’s workload became overwhelming, Celia Greenstone was hired in 1907 to serve as her assistant.

Although young, Celia Greenstone was well equipped for this work. At age 13, while still living in Bialystock, in Russian Poland, Celia’s father left her in charge of the family cigarette factory while he went off on business. In his absence, Greenstone learned to deal with suppliers, customers and corrupt state officials. At the same time, the idealistic Greenstone avidly read Karl Marx, joined a utopian socialist-Zionist movement and even unionized her father’s cigarette factory workers. A risk taker, she marched in socialist demonstrations that were brutally suppressed by the Russian police. In 1905, when Celia was 18, the family business failed and pogroms swept Bialystock, so the Greenstones emigrated to New York.

Vowing to teach herself English quickly, Celia Greenstone spent hours each day at the Astor Library in New York, voraciously reading books in English, Hebrew, German, Russian and Yiddish, which brought her to the attention of the head of the Hebrew Department. He asked Greenstone to serve as his volunteer assistant. After a few months, Greenstone asked the librarian for lunch and travel expenses and he berated her for being ungrateful. Greenstone protested her exploitation to the head librarian, who promised her a paid position. A few months later, he found Greenstone work as translator for Jacob Schiff, the leading Jewish banker and philanthropist. Impressed with Greenstone’s facility with languages, Schiff’s wife brought her to the attention of the New York Section of NCJW,



Activist Celia Greenstone devoted her life to fighting for immigrants’ rights. She is shown here, circa 1915.

which hired Greenstone to assist at Ellis Island.

Greenstone worked six long days a week for months on end, ushering single women, mothers and children through the Ellis Island intake process. Greenstone was particularly moved by those women who, rejected by the health inspectors, were scheduled for deportation back to the very *shtetls* where poverty and pogroms threatened their survival. Greenstone intervened on behalf of several frightened young girls labeled “retarded” by the inspectors

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simply because they could not understand the questions posed to them in English. She helped girls traveling alone to locate their families in other parts of the country or to obtain work and respectable lodgings after they left Ellis Island. Greenstone tended those detained on the island while being cured of temporary health problems. Importantly, Greenstone arranged for kosher food to be delivered to inmates of the island hospital and established *Shabbat* and holiday services.

“I remember clearly visiting an immigrant in his

new home one day. In the kitchen I see three cots, in which three men sleep. I learned that those cots were never empty. While three men slept, three men worked, and when those who were working came home, those who had been sleeping left for their own jobs. And in other rooms it was the same. And in every [immigrant] home the basic story was the same. Human beings lived only to work. Rest, recreation, culture and togetherness of families, everything was sacrificed to the need to work, to survive.

“To rescue human dignity from this nightmare –

that was the single thought my co-workers and I had. To show the immigrants that in all the hard sorrows of their lives, they did not stand alone, and that they did not have to succumb. To show them that if one person misused or betrayed them, another would not.”

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