

Arthur Holitscher, Excerpt from *America Today and Tomorrow* (1912)

Abstract

In this excerpt from his best-known work *Amerika heute und morgen* [*America Today and Tomorrow*], the Hungarian-born German-language author Arthur Holitscher (1869-1941) describes the passengers of various social groups whom he encounters during his sea voyage to the USA. Since Holitscher was of Jewish descent, his books were banned and burned by the National Socialists in 1933. He fled into exile, first to Paris and later to Geneva, where he died in 1941.

Source

SOUTHAMPTON WATER

The tender brings us the passengers from England. A pair of fine examples of the Anglo-Saxon race come on board. A young girl is carrying an enormous bunch of sweet peas, which are all the fashion. I recognize all the lovely flower's hues, the many fine shades between purple and lilac, bronze-brown and orange, indigo and heliotrope. There is the lemon-yellow "Clara Curtis," the lavender-hued "Lady Hamilton," the wonderful dawn-red "Evelyn Hemus," with its edges shading into white. I recognize all of them in the bouquet that the young Englishwoman brings on board. [...]

The steerage passengers are truly coming to life in the sunshine now. In one corner someone plays the accordion. We have passed the *Needles* and are now heading over to Cherbourg. The accordion plays "Hail Columbia," a waltz from a Viennese operetta and a popular melody from Berlin. The person pulling it apart and squeezing it back together is clearly a man of the world. It is quite easy to tell whether someone from down there has already been "over there" or not. You can tell simply from the way he looks up at us on the promenade deck. The accordion man has a face that is no longer quite European but not yet American either. Suddenly an old Moravian peasant begins to sing. He has a round, stubbly priest's face, he stands behind the harmonica that accompanies his singing. He sings a song with the refrain: "Juchheirassa! Vallera." The old man with the priest's face sings one verse after the other, all the endless verses that end in "Juchheirassa! Vallera," with surprising seriousness. Some twenty voices sing along with him, each with an earnestness that would be hard to beat. I cannot understand a word, but the refrain suffices: it can't be a hymn if it ends in "Juchheirassa! Vallera," can it? But why so earnest? All of the people traveling in steerage on the "Kaiser Wilhelm der Große" are now sitting on deck, listening raptly. Only one small group is sitting off to the side and not mingling with the crowd. It is Mr. Itzig^[1] and family. (I won't mention his first name here, since it belongs in a satirical magazine).

Mr. Itzig and family sit on a bench with their backs to the singers. They have enough to do with themselves and their family affairs. Mrs. Itzig publicly combs her artificial braid in the afternoon sun; her spouse eagerly reads something aloud to her from a book with green covers. Now and then he nudges her in the ribs and explains a passage from the book with a clever face; it seems to be some kind of clever religious book, the Talmud or such. Moishele and Piffel tussle under the bench over an apple, which rolls ever closer to starboard. The mother shouts and keeps combing. A pewter samovar sits by the family at all hours of the day, sometimes on the floor, sometimes on the bench; a glass, too, filled with a pale yellow liquid, tea from the samovar. Before putting the glass to her mouth Mrs. I. takes a lump of sugar from her husband's pocket, bites off half, places the other half back in her husband's pocket, and pours the tea down her throat over the half lump of sugar, which she holds in her teeth.

From time to time, friend Itzig has to run to the galley with the empty samovar, where he holds the pewter vessel under the hot water urn; the fat stream shoots into the pewter like a cannonball, which must terrify the poor little tea leaves! Once Mr. I. returned to the deck screaming, What had happened? The stout peasant gave him a shove from behind, and he scalded his hand. Now Moishele runs back and forth with the samovar and for a few days Father Itzig has a dirty blue cloth wrapped around his hand. They pay not the slightest attention to their fellow passengers, neither today nor tomorrow nor for the entirety of the journey. They always sit in the same spot, turning their backs to everyone and devoting all their attention to their family affairs. I already observed this in Bremen, in the immigrant quarter: even if there is no atmosphere of ill-will towards them, the Jews keep apart and create their ghetto wherever they can. In the lovely, summery city of Bremen you could see the emigrants strolling in the Bürgerpark, along the River Weser, on the splendid old square before the town hall and the Roland [statue]. Waiting for their ship to sail, the children of a hundred peoples explored the city. The children and women were recognizable by the large brooches on their jackets bearing the portrait of Missler, the agent of North German Lloyd. The gigantic emigrant halls were virtually deserted in this fine weather, and yet at the time a few thousand lived there. Only in the hotel "Zur Stadt Warschau," where the Jewish steerage passengers stayed, was every spot occupied. There the children of this ancient people stood together in droves, on the stairs, in the hallways, the courtyard, the canteen, the "shul," Galician heads with skull-caps or wigs, in civilian dress, in caftans, the children nimble and lice-ridden, the women slack and wide, the men full of pathos with long cherry-wood pipes, the young ladies in high heels and ripped stockings, fashionable and festooned with astonishing amounts of costume jewelry. One of them, oh my word! Her fingers, neck and ears are filthy, but she wears a light-blue dress à la Poiret! When I get to America I intend to see how these people live their lives. They do not colonize. They do not go west. They sit in New York, preferring to huddle in dirt and misery rather than live in the fresh air where there is no ghetto yet. I suspect that they prefer to stay at the hotel "Zur Stadt Warschau" because otherwise they would have to wear the brooch with the agent's portrait - - -

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NOTES

[1] "Itzig" was a derogatory term for a Jew.

Source: *Amerika heute und morgen. Reiseberichte von Arthur Holitscher*. First published 1912. Berlin: S. Fischer, 1913, pp. 17-21.

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