

# AMERICA



## THE GOLDEN LAND!

*For millions of immigrants, America meant the promise of a better future. What did they find here?*

### CAST

#### Narrators A-F

**Samuel Galewski**, a tailor

**Rose Galewski**, his wife

**Ruth**, 14

**Joseph**, 12

**Sophie**, 7

**David**, 5

} their children

**Guide**, a young man

**Morris Galewski**, Samuel's uncle

### ABOUT THIS PLAY

The United States has always been a nation of immigrants. Throughout our history, people from other countries have come to the U.S. in search of religious, political, or economic freedom.

From 1870 to 1924, millions of people immigrated to the U.S. from eastern and southern Europe. Many of them were Jews fleeing persecution and poverty in what were then the Russian Empire, Romania, and

the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

This play tells the story of the Galewskis, a family similar to many of the Jewish families that came to the U.S. to start a new life.

### SCENE ONE

**Narrator A:** It is April 1902. The sun is setting over a small town in the Ukraine, in southwestern Russia. Rose stands outside the family's small house, peering down the dusty street. At last she sees her husband appear. His face is grim.

**Rose:** Have you heard anything?

**Samuel:** Nothing but bad news. Russian soldiers are riding this way. They are telling all the Jews to leave if they don't want to be killed.

**Rose:** Where can we go? First they chase us from our villages, then they say we cannot live in the cities. Our village is filled with poor souls who were driven out of Moscow with

only the clothes on their backs.

**Samuel:** Rose, there is no future for us here. It gets harder and harder to make a few rubles. I haven't sold a pair of pants in days. Our children are hungry most of the time.

**Rose:** But what can we do?

**Samuel:** We must go to America. There, at least, there is work for everyone. Our children will have a chance to get an education. And we will not have to live in fear of the czar and his brutal soldiers.

### SCENE TWO

**Narrator B:** After selling their home and most of their belongings, the Galewskis start out. Because they have no passports, they must sneak across the Russian border.

Along with about 20 others, the Galewskis follow a hired guide through the countryside on a dark, moonless night. Everyone carries

suitcases and bundles of clothing and food. Suddenly, the guide motions them to stop.

**Guide:** After we cross this brook, we will be across the border.

**Ruth:** You didn't tell us we would have to go across a brook! Our food and clothing will be ruined. Besides, we don't know how to swim.

**Guide:** This raft will hold about 10 of you. The rest will have to walk across — it's not that deep. And remember: not a word, not a sound. There are armed guards along the border. If they hear anything, they will shoot.

**Narrator B:** Several people get on the raft. The rest wade into the brook, stifling gasps as the chilly water hits them. It is absolutely quiet, until suddenly there is a splash.

**David (loudly):** I lost my shoe!

**Narrator B:** Everyone freezes in horror, expecting gunfire. After a moment, when nothing happens, they continue to the other side.

**Rose (holding the child close to her):** Don't worry, David, you will have new shoes in America.

### SCENE THREE

**Narrator C:** After crossing safely into Austria-Hungary, the Galewskis take a train to Germany. In the port of Bremen, they board a ship that will take them across the Atlantic.

Like most other immigrants, the Galewskis could afford only steerage tickets. Their accommodations, in the bottom of the ship, are crowded, dark, and unsanitary. About a week into the journey . . .

**Sophie (moaning):** Mama, I want to get off this smelly ship.

**Rose:** Why don't you go with your father up on deck? The fresh air will feel good.

**Sophie:** I feel sick to my stomach.

**Rose (sharply):** Then, please go up on deck — now! We don't need any more of that down here.

**Narrator C:** Sophie's eyes fill with tears as she looks at her mother.

**Rose (her own eyes tearing, she hugs her daughter):** I'm sorry. This has been hard for all of us. But it will be worth it, you'll see, when we reach America. (Speaking almost to herself, longingly) The Golden



Lewis Wickes Hine/George Eastman House Collection

At Ellis Island, an immigrant woman rests after her grueling journey.

Land, they call it.

### SCENE FOUR

**Narrator D:** After another week, the long journey ends. The ship docks at Ellis Island, in New York Harbor.

The Galewskis, along with thousands of other immigrants, endure medical examinations and endless questions from officials. The whole process takes about a day. Finally, they are pronounced fit to enter the U.S. From Ellis Island, they take a ferry to Manhattan. Samuel's uncle has come to meet them.

As they leave the ferry, the family stops and stares in amazement.

**Joseph:** Papa, look at those buildings. They're so high!

**Sophie:** Uncle Morris, what is that?

**Morris (laughing):** Oh, that's a trolley car. You pay some money and it takes you where you need to go.

**Joseph:** Look how strange all the men look, with no beards.

**Morris:** After a while, you will get used to seeing these things.

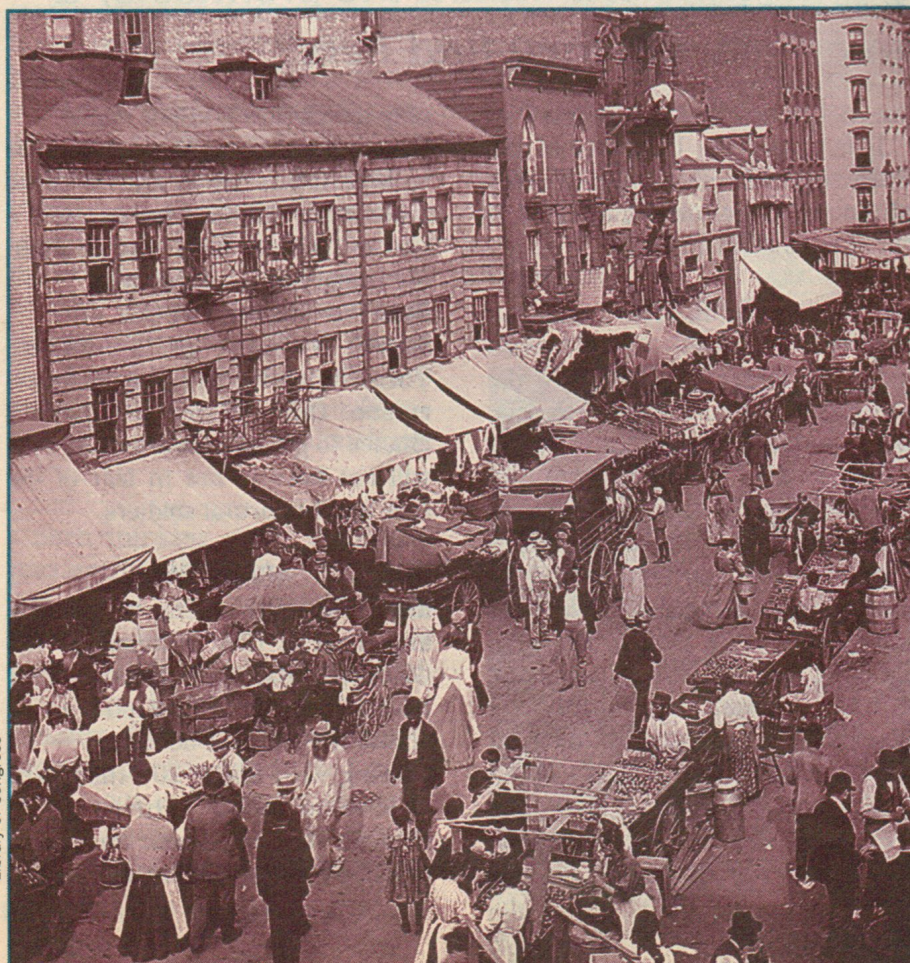
**Ruth:** Uncle Morris, where will we live?

**Morris:** I've found a place for you, right near mine. It's on the East Side, where the Jewish people live.

**Ruth:** How far away is it?

**Morris:** It's not too far. We can walk

On bustling Hester Street, buying and selling was the main activity.



Library of Congress

there from here.

**Narrator D:** They keep walking until they reach Hester Street. The street is crowded with merchants selling their wares — everything from shoes to bananas to eyeglasses — from open-air stalls and pushcarts. Shopkeepers and customers argue over prices. Horse-drawn carts move down the street through the crowd of people. Ragged children run by, shrieking and laughing. Above the shops are rundown tenements, one right next to the other.

**Sophie:** Mama, listen! They are speaking in Yiddish, like us!

**Rose (absently):** Yes, darling. (*Turning to Samuel*) It seems so crowded and so — so poor. I thought there would be trees and open space.

**Samuel:** You'll see, it will be better for us here, in time.

### SCENE FIVE

**Narrator E:** Six months have gone by. The Galewskis are living in a three-room tenement apartment, five flights up. One evening, Joseph comes running up the stairs, laughing, as Ruth runs after him.

**Joseph (in a singsong):** I'm going to tell on you.

**Ruth:** You better not! It's not true, anyway.

**Narrator E:** The children burst into the kitchen.

**Rose (smiling):** Now what's all this?

**Joseph:** Ruthie has a boyfriend.

**Narrator E:** Rose stops smiling and looks quickly over at Samuel.

**Samuel (sternly):** Ruth, is this true?

**Ruth (looking down):** He is just a boy that I know from school. I go walking with him, that's all.

**Samuel:** If a boy is going walking with you, then your family should meet him. Is that understood?

**Ruth:** Yes, Papa.

**Narrator E:** Ruth turns to leave the room, followed by Joseph.

**Samuel:** Joseph!

**Joseph (turning around):** Yes, Papa?

**Samuel:** I don't want you wasting your time playing that foolish game of baseball. Baseball will not help you in the future. Studying will.

**Joseph (sighing):** All right, Papa.

### SCENE SIX

**Narrator F:** Later that night, Samuel and Rose talk quietly.

**Samuel:** I worry that our children are becoming too American.

**Rose:** They are good children. They can't help learning some of the ways of this country.

**Samuel:** I wish that I was here more to watch over them. I work in that shop sewing buttons for 15 hours a day just to make four or five dollars a week. That's not even enough to pay for our rent and food.

The worst of it is that I never have a minute to say a prayer or look at a holy book. And to work on the Sabbath! In this country, people care only for money.

**Rose:** I could go out to work. I would make more money sewing in a factory than doing the work at home.

**Samuel (shaking his head):** No, Rose. Who would look after David and Sophie? We can't ask Ruth to leave school, not when she is doing so well. It's bad enough that Ruth and Joseph work so many hours.

**Rose:** Then we will manage as we are. If we have to, we will take in some boarders. They can sleep in the kitchen.

**Narrator F:** The next morning, Ruth comes looking for her mother in the kitchen. It is 7:00 a.m., and her fa-

ther has left for work.

**Ruth (looking very pale):** Mama, I heard everything you and Papa were saying last night. I have decided to leave school and go to work full-time. I am old enough to help.

**Rose:** No, Ruth, you must not leave school. It would break your father's heart. We came here so you children could have a future, not so you would suffer like in the old country. For us the hard work is all right. The best gift you could give us is to get your education.

**Ruth (hugging her mother):** I'll try, Mama, I'll try.

### AFTERWORD

For immigrant families, poverty remained hard to escape, especially for the older generation. But the children in many cases went on to achieve the dreams of their parents: becoming doctors, lawyers, educators, and artists. In the process, they enriched our nation with their cultures and traditions. ☆

### YOUR TURN

#### Discussion Questions

1. What did the Galewskis expect to find in America? What did they find? Did they make the right choice in coming to America?
2. What were some of the hardships that new immigrants faced in U.S. cities?

*For immigrant children, the city streets and alleys provided a playground.*



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