

# By Way of Vera Cruz, Mexico

Not everyone followed the beaten path. Although most twentieth-century European immigrants to the United States arrived by ship at East Coast ports like New York, Boston, or Baltimore, others arrived by ship on the Gulf Coast at ports like New Orleans or Galveston.

And, of course, there were some who really took “the road less traveled.” They sailed by steamship to Mexico, and then crossed the U.S.-Mexican land border at various land border ports of entry in Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, or California. The earliest records began to be kept in 1903 and, although Mexicans comprise the bulk of the persons entering the U.S. southern border, there are also quite a few Europeans, Chinese, Japanese, Syrians, and others. For information about available

microfilmed records, see “Mexican Border Crossing Records” at [http://www.archives.gov/research\\_room/genealogy/immigrant\\_arrivals/mexican\\_border\\_crossings.html](http://www.archives.gov/research_room/genealogy/immigrant_arrivals/mexican_border_crossings.html) on the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) website.

## Immigration quotas

Devastation of Europe during World War I resulted in substantial increases in immigration to the U.S. in 1919 and 1920, particularly from

Eastern Europe. As a result, the Quota Act of 1921 became law, which established the principle of national numerical limits in American immigration law, using a formula based on the 1910 census. However many persons of a certain nationality were in the U.S. in 1910, just 3 percent of that number could hence-



forth enter yearly from that country. The Immigration Act of 1924 made the quota system permanent, but set the formula based on the 1890 census, a time when the U.S. population was more homogeneous and there were fewer of the “new” immigrants. The 1924 law also required each immigrant to obtain a visa, in advance, from the U.S. embassy in their country of origin. For more information about U.S. immigration laws in

history, see “An Immigrant Nation: United States Regulation of Immigration, 1798-1991” at <http://uscis.gov/graphics/aboutus/history/cover.htm> on the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services website.

## Desperate Europeans

Now for the interesting part. Really desperate Europeans went by ship to Vera Cruz, Mexico, with the intent to enter the U.S. at the Mexican border—legally if possible, and illegally, if not. Legal entry into the U.S. could apparently be obtained after two years’ residence in Mexico. Quite a few entered illegally or were even smuggled across. The U.S. Consul at Vera Cruz, Paul H. Foster, wrote on 31 March 1921, that “The feature of this immigration movement through the Port of Veracruz is that a very large proportion of the incoming passengers from

European countries consist of persons who are unable or who did not obtain visas in the country of origin. A great majority of these ... go to the frontier and attempt to pass illegally at points some distance from the regular ports of entry.” Illegal immigrants were subject to arrest and deportation. From January to April 1921, 133 were arrested, of which Hebrews (49), Germans (28), Spanish (13), and Southern Italians (12)

Report on the arrival of European Aliens at the port of Veracruz, Mexico, March 15, 1922

American Vice Consul  
Veracruz, Mexico

*Mary Allinger*  
March 16, 1922

Name	Nationality	Age	Occupation
Schnaiter, Fritz	German	33	Merchant
Eugen Fischer	"	28	"
Clara Schroder	"	32	"
Israel Magliker	Lithuanian	18	"
Leib, Frense	Russian	18	"
Volko Pintschuk	"	24	Steel worker
Jana Neuhaus	German	31	Clerk
Richard Fauer	"	22	Merchant
Golda Bresler	Ukrainian	26	Labourer
Anna Bresler	"	24	sin
Hennock Rosenstein	German	26	Labourer
Ludwig Rudiger	"	17	"
Marcelle Dailly	French	26	sin

Arrived at Veracruz March 15, 1922 on Dutch S.S. Maasdam.

were the largest portion.

The Holland America Line of Rotterdam had three steamships, the *Maasdam*, *Edam*, and *Leerdam*, sailing from Antwerp to Vera Cruz by way of Havana, Cuba. The Pacific Steam Navigation Company operated the steamships *Orcoma* and *Orita* from Liverpool, England; *La Rochelle*, France; and *Vigo*, Spain, to Vera Cruz, also via Havana. And finally, the *Compagnie Generale Transatlantique* operated the steamships *La Fayette*, *Espagne*, and *Flanders*, between St. Nazaire, France, and Vera Cruz, by way of Havana. The *Compagnie Generale Transatlantique* advertised that Mexico had favorable conditions and a "plentiful supply of work for emigrants" which increased the number of Europeans going there. U.S. officials, however, noted that the passengers, such as Syrians, Poles, Italians, Greeks, Turks, etc., were "from nations whose quotas are usually exhausted at a very early stage of the month, or the year."

### Vera Cruz lists

To assist U.S. immigration officials in apprehending the illegals, the U.S. Consul at Vera Cruz from 1921 to 1922 regularly obtained lists of Europeans arriving by steamship there. These efforts sometimes bore fruit. On 11 June 1921, E. J. Henning, assistant secretary of the Department

of Labor, informed the State Department that a Polish man who "sailed from Amsterdam without properly visaed passport, landed at Vera Cruz, proceeded directly to the United States-Mexican border, there engaged the services of professional smugglers, was brought clandestinely into the United States, and was, shortly thereafter, apprehended by Immigration officers, the alien stoutly maintaining that he had resided in Mexico for three years prior to his clandestine entry." He recanted his story after immigration officials found his name in the Vera Cruz passenger lists. The smuggling of Europeans across the border diminished after a few years, and was "practically nil" by 1931.

Vera Cruz passenger lists kept in the files of the Immigration and Naturalization Service's Washington, DC, office, have been reproduced in NARA microfilm publication M2032, *Passenger Lists of European Immigrants Arriving at Vera Cruz, Mexico, 1921-1923, and Related Correspondence, 1921-1931* (1 roll). Although the number of passenger lists is relatively small, it provides

an interesting snapshot of immigrants choosing this route. For example, the passenger list of the *Maasdam*, arriving on 15 March 1922, includes German, Lithuanian, Russian, Ukrainian, and French passengers. The

*Espagne*, arriving on 12 March 1922, included Italians, Israelites (Jews), Syrians, Swiss, Poles, Greeks, Palestinians, Hungarians, Czechoslovakians, Russians, Austrians, Turks, and others. The *Edam*, arriving on 20 June 1922, included Germans, Poles, Russians, Italians, Greeks, and others. These passenger lists include the person's name, nationality, age, and sometimes their occupation.

Information about M2032 is available online at <[http://www.archives.gov/research\\_room/genealogy/immigrant\\_arrivals/vera\\_cruz\\_mexico\\_port.html](http://www.archives.gov/research_room/genealogy/immigrant_arrivals/vera_cruz_mexico_port.html)>. M2032 is available for public viewing at NARA facilities in Washington, DC; Denver, CO; Fort Worth, TX; and Laguna Niguel, CA. Data included in this article is from M2032.

*Claire Prechtel-Klusens, a microfilm projects archivist at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), Washington, DC, served as NGS registrar (1996-98) and director (1998-2000). She can be reached by e-mail at [claire.klusens@nara.gov](mailto:claire.klusens@nara.gov).*