

# PREFACE

## RESPECT AND REVERENCE

“Don’t forget to thank Mrs. Roosevelt, dear.” That is what my grandmother’s friend Marion told me when she learned I was writing a book about Ellis Island (as I had described the project in shorthand to my grandmother). Marion wanted me to thank Eleanor Roosevelt for getting her sister out of Siberia. In the 1920s, Marion told me, when her mother was a widow in Sanok, Poland, struggling to raise her five children, Marion’s grandmother emigrated with two of the children to the United States, partly to help ease her daughter’s burden. She brought the oldest and the middle child, having determined to take, of the second and third daughters, whichever one succeeded in getting up early enough to make the journey. Marion herself came over, after having been rejected three times for a visa, in 1933, by which time stringent U.S. quota laws put new obstacles before would-be migrants and she had to pretend to be her grandmother’s daughter in order to get the papers. The second daughter, however, by then married, stayed in the area of Sanok. When the Nazi occupation began there in 1939, she was living on the side of the river that fell under Russian rule when the control of Poland was split between German and Russian forces. She and her family were sent to Siberia. After the war ended, Marion said, the Jews in Siberia were forgotten deportees, and might be there still had it not been for the efforts of Eleanor Roosevelt. According to Marion, Roosevelt, as “ambassador to the United Nations,” worked with “a friend, a woman diplomat politician from England,” and together they were responsible for having deportees returned to Poland. The sister left Siberia in 1949 and came to the United States soon thereafter.<sup>1</sup>

For several reasons, I thought of Marion’s request often when writing this

book. First, her description of family history nicely illustrates the intricate interrelations among big-picture forces, small-scale peculiarities, and perceptions about both that inform so many Ellis Island narratives. The early bird catches the train: the lack of fit between the consequence and the criterion, more suitable, perhaps, for making a choice such as who gets a pretty hair ribbon, seemed even more glaring with hindsight. Yet just as interesting to me was that Marion didn't seem to consider this part of the story remarkable at all. Maybe by then the course of events had the taken-for-grantedness of old news, or maybe it is just the fact that family weirdness sometimes comes to seem ordinary from within. In any case, not even my own expression of incredulity—"your sister overslept coming to America and wound up in Siberia?!"—induced her to do any more than affirm that I had heard correctly. Our interchange did, however, get the attention of my sister, Cynthia, who was in the room at the time. A veteran of winding up in my explanatory anecdotes, she frequently alerts others when she spots a conversational moment that she perceives to be drawing my writerly interests. "Marion, that's going into the book," she said. Fulfilling Cynthia's prediction several years later also heightens my awareness about the extent to which the listener's habits of perception (mine apparently habitual enough to be predictable) contribute, in turn, to how narratives generate other narratives.

Second, Marion's request came to epitomize for me the gap that I imagine to exist between the tone and content of my project and the expectations that many may have for a book about Ellis Island. With my grandmother, it is a gap to which I contributed by deliberately failing to elaborate. In talking to her, I addressed only the questions that she brought up herself, primary among which was the issue of genre: couldn't I write a novel this time? I didn't introduce other topics. Even mentioning sex, one major topic, would have named it more explicitly than ever before in our conversations. We hadn't gotten any closer than an oblique acknowledgment of arrangements presumed sexual, like her willingness, when I brought a lover to visit, to treat butch gallantries extended to her (helping her on with her coat, driving us around) as the appropriate solicitations of an aspiring grandson-in-law. At the same time, for both my grandmother and Marion, that gap was partly filled by their own histories, and the history of others like them, whose survival depended on migration out of Poland. Many of those who didn't

leave, including people in both families, were killed in the Holocaust or barely survived the horrors they went through. What else would I be writing about regarding Ellis Island, and from what stance other than respect and reverence?

I have respect and reverence. But I am interested here especially in making respect and reverence an object of study rather than simply a position to enact. It is significant that Marion wanted me to tell the story of a sister who surely didn't pass through Ellis Island, since she arrived after it had ceased its storied function, begun in 1892, of processing new arrivals. Marion's notion that the story belongs nonetheless testifies to the way that the site, for many people, has come to stand more generally for immigrant journeys to the United States. Evidence appears also every time Ellis Island is used as a shorthand—when, for instance, a local newspaper quotes a comment that calls Omaha's Union Station, "sort of the Ellis Island of Nebraska," without providing any explanation of the historical reference.<sup>2</sup>

How did Ellis Island become the place, the experience, and the symbol that seems to need no explication? Since its recognizability rose dramatically after a big fund-raising campaign for its restoration in the 1980s, and since along with the federal government big corporations (like American Express) and big names (like Lee Iacocca) have contributed to the project of supplying resources and publicity, the question of Ellis Island's fame needs also to be a question about whose heritage does and doesn't get that kind of support. For numerous reasons, this question in turn involves matters of race. These reasons include the predominance, among migrants through Ellis Island, of people coming from Europe whose descendants today, sometimes unlike them, are largely considered white, as well as the use of mythic stories of their bootstrap individualism to dismiss how systemic inequalities, like disparate education funding, contribute to the struggles of people of color in the United States.

The question about whose heritage gets honored also involves matters concerning sexuality. Marion's story, like most Ellis Island narratives that I encountered, refers only, and only implicitly, to sexual relations understood to be involved in procreation and legitimized in heterosexual marriage. Marion has a mother, a grandmother, and sisters, who are married, unmarried, or widowed, implicitly in relation to men. Eleanor Roosevelt has a (deceased) husband, who made her "Mrs." Roosevelt, and a female

friend. Do these relations gesture to all of those types that made meanings in the lives of the women mentioned? With Roosevelt, we know that they don't. I am not suggesting here that Roosevelt's friend was a lover as well as an activist colleague or that any information about Roosevelt's love for women belongs in this story. Nor do I presume that Marion knows nothing of this matter. Whatever she knows, however, "Mrs." is both Marion's only reference to Roosevelt's personal life and, importantly, the term she used to convey respect.

What might look different if habits of popular knowledge and the accordance of respect were such that Roosevelt's intimate affection for Lorena Hickok could reside as easily on the surface of Marion's picture of Roosevelt as does the relationship indicated by the designation "Mrs.?"<sup>3</sup> How might gratitude toward "Mrs. Roosevelt" be reshaped, or what views might that gratitude toward a beloved "first lady" reshape? How might views toward sexuality and contemporary migrants be reshaped if the enshrined Ellis Island ancestors who came through Ellis Island were broadly understood to have desires and practices as varied and nuanced as they must have been? (This is not to suggest that we transpose contemporary identities to the past but rather to advocate against oversimplification; Freud's patients cannot have been the only complex early-twentieth-century Europeans.) How might laws and policies be reshaped, including those favoring heterosexual marriage bonds as a primary justification for migration—to the exclusion of many adults involved in differently linked relations and to the detriment of others forced by migration criteria to remain in harmful legal unions?

These are questions regarding justice, pleasure, knowledge, and the connections among them. Part of my argument in this book is that certain trappings of respect and reverence may function to obstruct all three, not only by disembodiment of the past and by failing to specify the beneficiaries of honor toward it, but also by missing or obfuscating seemingly crass or trivial dimensions of encounters with Ellis Island, past and present, that equally merit attention. One way that I attempt in this book to dislodge the naturalness of certain discretions and silences is by venturing sometimes into the realm of the unserious and the impolite; turning next, for instance, to my own far from reverent first encounter with Ellis Island. Revolving around a date, a snow globe, and a debate about requisite solemnity, my tale suggests the stakes, the gaps, and the contradictions in making reverence

the primary pose. In pointing these out, however, regarding that narrative and throughout the book, I do not mean thereby to disrespect the histories of people who link themselves to Ellis Island. I hope, instead, by studying the production of respect, to contribute to the project of spreading it around.

