

Travel and Adventure: Where they came from - Hamburg's Ellis Island

by Joan Scobey

On July 4, when fireworks light up the sky over New York Harbor and Ellis Island, similar festivities will be taking place in Germany at Hamburg Harbour to celebrate the opening of its own Ellis Island, a new museum known as BallinStadt, or to be precise, Port of Dreams - BallinStadt Emigrant World Hamburg. Actually, it's a mirror image of Ellis Island, telling the story of the 5 million Europeans who sailed from Hamburg to New York from 1850 to 1939, and the self-contained "emigration city" they passed through during the height of the mass migration.

GERMANY'S ELLIS ISLAND - BallinStadt, or Port of Dreams, in Hamburg Harbor, Germany, is a mirror image of Ellis Island. The museum will open on July 4 and will tell the story of the millions of Europeans who sailed from Hamburg to New York. CNS Photo by Joan Scobey. EN ROUTE TO A NEW LIFE - Emigrants board a ship in Hamburg bound for New York. Between 1850 and 1939, an estimated 5 million Europeans passed through the self-contained 'emigration city' in Hamburg. CNS Photo courtesy of BallinStadt. A PIECE OF HISTORY - The new museum in Hamburg will display manifests that include the names, age, occupation and destinations of passengers. Genuine articles from the period, such as this ticket holder, will be exhibited. CNS Photo courtesy of BallinStadt. STEAMSHIP VISIONARY - Albert Ballin played a major role in the mass migration of Europeans to America by ship. He also pioneered the leisure cruise industry. CNS Photo courtesy of BallinStadt. The new museum is named for Albert Ballin ("stadt" means town), a steamship visionary with marketing savvy who played a major role in bringing European emigrants to America and made Hamburg a leading passenger port. His rise was almost meteoric. The 13th and last child of a Jewish businessman, he took over his father's travel agency in 1874 at 17 and soon saw the potential in emigration. His first innovative idea - to put temporary berths in the holds of freighters for one-way emigrant passage westbound - immediately boosted business. Impressed, the city's major shipping company, Hamburg-America Line (Hapag), hired him in 1886 and three years later made him chief executive.

Ballin soon introduced regular express steamer service between Hamburg and New York, and Hapag's travel agents targeted emigrants in eastern and southeastern Europe. After a cholera epidemic killed 10,000 in Hamburg, emigrant health was a major issue; Ballin offered to set up medical examinations and guarantee the health of passengers.

To accommodate their growing number, in 1901 Ballin built a settlement on Veddel Island, in the middle of the Elbe River. From a few dormitories grew a complex of 30 buildings called Auswandererhallen (Emigrants' Halls) that included a hospital, synagogue, two churches, a kosher canteen and even its own rail link. Five thousand emigrants at a time were housed, fed and received medical care until they sailed, days or weeks later. Hapag (now Hapag-Lloyd) provided the services, which were included in the cost of passage. At times during its peak, 1901-1914, close to 200,000 people a year passed through, about 80 percent of them Jewish.

Much of the complex was demolished in 1939 for road and rail development, except for part of one dormitory. BallinStadt incorporated it into its new reception hall, one of the museum's three buildings, and equipped it with authentically manufactured period furnishings. All three buildings are on the site of Emigrants' Halls, and follow original construction plans.

BallinStadt re-creates the world of the emigrants. Who the people were who left their homes in eastern and middle Europe, and why. How they got to Hamburg. What life was like in this last stop before their trans-Atlantic adventure. What happened to them at Ellis Island. Where they went next and how they fared in the New World. Some historians estimate that 20 million Americans may be descended from these Hamburg emigrants.

Faded ship manifests, stained passports and a host of other documents tell part of the story. Visitors will discover more through interactive exhibits (the museum is keeping its technical innovations under wraps until the opening). According to BallinStadt's Jorge Birkner, who searches out these documents, there are love stories of emigrants who met onboard the ship and married, even the tale of a young woman who fell in love with one of the sailors and sailed back to Hamburg with him, and heartbreaking stories of emigrants sent back from Ellis Island because of medical problems.

Anyone whose ancestors came from Europe between 1850 and 1939 may want to head to BallinStadt's Family Research Center and its extraordinary database of more than 5 million passengers listed on Hamburg's ship manifests. During World War II most emigration ports were destroyed and their ship manifests lost, making these records particularly valuable.

As chairman of the Hamburg Maritim Foundation, which was instrumental in the museum's creation in 2004, Reinhard Wolf said, "These are the most complete emigration materials in the world. The Hamburg manifests were kept in the city's town hall, which was one of the very few buildings left standing. They are in remarkably good condition today and will be among the key displays in the BallinStadt Museum."

The passenger records include not only the name but also age, hometown, occupation and destination, details

not usually listed. The center's genealogists can also help access passenger lists from ports and destinations other than Hamburg and New York, and a host of other immigration records.

Around the turn of the century, Ballin, credited with developing the leisure cruise industry, began building successively larger luxury liners. First-class and steerage passengers were strictly kept apart. And just as he established Emigrants' Halls for poor passengers en route to America, he took equally good care of his luxury trade. He prodded investors to build a grand hotel to house them before boarding his new "floating palaces." As he launched the first of them, the *Imperator* in 1912, its 260 first-class passengers were waiting in luxe comfort at the recently built Atlantic Hotel, where Hapag had a branch of its travel agency.

Inevitably, Ballin's fortunes were tied to Germany and Kaiser Wilhelm II, with whom he had a close relationship. World War I decimated Hapag, and Ballin never recovered from it emotionally. He committed suicide on the day the German empire fell, the Weimar Republic was proclaimed and Kaiser Wilhelm II abdicated.

What emigration there is now has moved from the port to the airport, but Hamburg's cruise business is booming. The new Hamburg Cruise Center is part of a massive construction project called HafenCity that is rising at the port not far from BallinStadt. Passengers with a sense of history can spend a day or two at the still-luxurious Atlantic Hotel, about to celebrate its centennial, and visit the Port of Dreams to see what sailing out of Hamburg used to be like.

IF YOU GO

Port of Dreams - BallinStadt Emigrant World Hamburg is open daily 10 a.m.-7 p.m., with the last guided tour at 5 p.m. The entrance fee is about \$13; e-mail info@ballinstadt.de, Web site www.ballinstadt.de. From Hamburg's central train station take the S-bahn two stops to Veddel Station, a five-minute ride.

Kempinski Hotel Atlantic Hamburg, the city's grand historic hotel, overlooks the lovely outer Alster lake near the city center. It has 267 rooms and suites; double rooms from about \$260. An der Alster 72-79, phone

800-745-8883, Web site www.kempinski.atlantic.de.

Emirates recently launched a new daily nonstop service from New York to Hamburg. The eight-hour flight leaves JFK at 11:15 p.m., the return leaves Hamburg at 3:25 p.m. The award-winning airline offers a sophisticated 140-movie entertainment system in all three classes. Phone 800-777-3999, Web site www.emirates.com.

Â© Copley News Service

Travel and Adventure: Where they came from - Hamburg's Ellis Island by Joan Scobey