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Commemorating Immigration in the Immigrant Society: Narratives of Transformation at Ellis Island and the Lower East Side Tenement Museum

While the discussion about the creation of immigration museums is ongoing in several European countries, New York City has seen the opening of two such museums within the last two decades: the Ellis Island Immigration Museum and the Lower East Side Tenement Museum. Being at the same time one of the most diverse cities in the world and one of the cities with the largest number of museums, it seems only logical that histories of immigration have entered the museum world here earlier than elsewhere. Apart from the peculiarities of the city, however, it is indispensable to take the cultural context of the US into account when considering the phenomenon. Unlike European societies which in many cases perpetuate homogeneous national master narratives that neglect migrants and their transnational historical experiences, the US has long acknowledged its immigrant tradition and, in fact, built its own master narrative on this tradition. This has significant consequences for the commemoration of immigration. In general, presenting the history of immigration in the US means to talk about majorities, not minorities. The main issue is not or no longer, as is the case in the European debate, to include a principally marginalised history of immigrants and immigration in the national narrative¹, but to question whose immigration experiences are represented, how they are represented and to what end. It is, after all, a core aspect of US American national identity that is negotiated in these representations.

This paper attempts to identify distinct approaches to the representation of immigration history in the two museums. Moreover, it tries to draw attention to links between particular presentations of immigration history and narratives of the nation and, thus, touches on the farther-reaching questions about individual and collective identities. The study suggests that both the Ellis Island Immigration Museum and the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, albeit in different forms, tell immigration history in terms of »Becoming American«. To illuminate particular narratives of transformation is the main goal.

1 For the German case cf. Mathilde JAMIN, *Migrationsgeschichte im Museum. Erinnerungsorte von Arbeitsmigranten – kein Ort der Erinnerung?*, in: Jan MOTTE, Rainer OHLIGER (eds), *Geschichte und Gedächtnis in der Einwanderungsgesellschaft. Migration zwischen historischer Rekonstruktion und Erinnerungspolitik*, Essen 2004, pp. 145–157, pp. 148 and 155–157; Aytaç ERYILMAZ, *Deutschland braucht ein Migrationsmuseum. Plädoyer für einen Paradigmenwechsel in der Kulturpolitik*, in: *ibid.* pp. 305–319; for France: Philippe DEWITTE, *Un centre d'histoire de l'immigration: Pourquoi et comment?*, in: *Homme et Migration* Jan.–Feb. (2004) pp. 6–15; for the European dimension: Rainer OHLIGER, *Towards a European Migration Museum*. Paper given on the Conference on Migration, Work and Identity, Copenhagen Nov. 22–23, 2001, URL: <<http://www.worklab.dk/worklab5/migraConf2001.pdf>> (October 2005).

This article offers mainly a reading of the museums. It intends to trace dominant narratives by deciphering the order of objects, the implications of label texts, and the structure of the stories told. In doing so, I do not intend to give a comprehensive overview of the museums, nor do I claim to capture the motives of the exhibitors or the messages picked up by the visitors². Rather I will look at some well-defined parts of the presentations and interpret them in a specific way. And as much as exhibitions are not merely mirroring past or present realities, but rather help to construct them, such a reading can likewise not be a reflection of the »true« meaning of an exhibition. In contrast, it is a particular and positioned interpretive, i.e. creative, act that produces one distinct way of looking at its subject³.

I. THE ELLIS ISLAND IMMIGRATION MUSEUM

The Ellis Island Immigration Museum can be considered *the* immigration museum in the United States. Opened in 1990, it was the first large museum of its kind worldwide and despite ongoing efforts to diversify the field, it remains the most prominent place in the US where immigration history is narrated⁴. More than 3.5 million people annually visit the island in New York Harbor where the museum is located and tour the exhibitions that are shown in the renovated main building of the former immigration station.

Ellis Island is in many respects a troubled museum. It is a popular tourist destination with more than 10 000 visitors per day, but despite its significance it is chronically underfinanced. It is a National Park with the explicit mission to interpret the history of its specific site and, by its prominence and the lack of comparable institutions, a de facto national museum of immigration. As such it appears to represent the whole history of immigration into the US, although its site and most of its exhibitions reflect a very particular form of immigration, the European migration from 1892 through 1924⁵. Finally, it can be described as a »multivocal and fragmented heritage landscape«⁶

- 2 For a semiotic approach, which inspired this account, cf. Mieke BAL, *Double Exposures. The Subject of Cultural Analysis*, New York 1996; Jana SCHOLZE, *Medium Ausstellung. Lektüren musealer Gestaltung in Oxford, Leipzig, Amsterdam und Berlin, Bielefeld 2004*. For a criticism of a one-dimensional semiotic approach cf. Sharon MACDONALD, Introduction, in: *Id.*, Gordon FYFE (eds), *Theorising Museums: Representing Identity and Diversity in a Changing World*, Oxford 1996, pp. 1–18, pp. 4–5. I have touched on the agendas behind the two museums elsewhere: Joachim BAUR, *Standpunkte und Standorte. »Points of Departure« in drei New Yorker Immigrationsmuseen*, in: Henrike HAMPE (ed.), *Migration und Museum. Neue Ansätze in der Museumspraxis*. 16. Tagung der Arbeitsgruppe für Sachkulturforschung und Museum in der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Volkskunde, Münster 2005, pp. 71–82.
- 3 MACDONALD, Introduction (see note 2), p. 5.
- 4 For a detailed account on the museum project cf. F. Ross HOLLAND, *Idealists, Scoundrels and the Lady. An Insider's View of the Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Project*, Chicago 1993. For the long history of the museum prior to its opening proper cf. Barbara BLUMBERG, *Celebrating the Immigrant. An Administrative History of the Statue of Liberty National Monument 1952–1982*, New York 1985. Currently, there are initiatives in Paso al Norte, TX, San Diego, CA, and San Francisco, CA, to bring up additional immigration museums in the US.
- 5 This contradiction is one of the main starting points for Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's harsh critique of the museum, Barbara KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT, *Destination Culture. Tourism, Museums, and Heritage*,

as its five separate permanent exhibits show a diverse variety of sometimes contradictory facets. The narrative perspective ranges from the presentation of some concrete individual family stories in »Treasures from Home« to a focus on (mostly) anonymous individuals in »Through America's Gate« to the mentioning of ethnic communities in »Peak Immigration Years« and, finally, statistics in »The Peopling of America«. It describes immigration as an event in »Through America's Gate« and tries to balance it by a broader scope in »Peak Immigration Years«. It stresses the agency of immigrants in a given (and unquestioned) situation in »Through America's Gate« and adds a discussion of the political and social context, namely the US policy on immigration and the reactions of the »natives«, in »Peak Immigration Years«. It is predominantly concerned with immigration in a historical context, although sporadic references are made to immigration as a contemporary issue.

Given the range, scope and diversity of its exhibitions, it is virtually impossible to reduce the Ellis Island Immigration Museum to a common denominator. Nonetheless I want to suggest that there is one particularly strong narrative that pervades the museum presentations. It is the notion of a successful transformation of a heterogeneous multitude of immigrants into an »imagined community« of Americans and, by and large, of Ellis Island as the site for this transformation. Three observations may illustrate this view.

The first case is the plot of the exhibition »Through America's Gate«, the exhibit that deals with the entire inspection process on Ellis Island. The exhibition is located in the original rooms where the inspections took place and the narrative follows the path of the immigrants through this process. The story focuses on the experience and agency of a multitude of individuals, a perspective reinforced by the many oral history accounts which appear as quotes on panels and in audio stations. However, by following the given itinerary the visitors automatically reenact the way and the fate of the successful immigrants. Although the panels mention the cases of people who were turned back or were detained for a variety of reasons, their stories appear merely as those of drop-outs along the unstoppable way of the »ordinary« immigrant towards the train ticket office and, more in general, to the land of opportunity⁷. This notion of immigra-

Berkeley, London 1998, pp. 177–187, here p. 180. Further critical, though more positive reviews: Michael WALLACE, *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory*, Philadelphia 1996, pp. 55–73; Judith SMITH, *Exhibition Review: Celebrating Immigration History at Ellis Island*, in: *American Quarterly* 1 (1992) pp. 82–100.

6 Luke DESFORGES, Joanne MADDERN, *Front Doors to Freedom, Portal to the Past. History at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum*, New York, in: *Social and Cultural Geography* 3 (2004) pp. 437–457, p. 453.

7 It might be necessary to stress that this is not at all due to a manipulation of historical facts. It was indeed only a fraction of 2 percent of the immigrants that was turned back on Ellis Island. The problem lies in the general approach which registers those 2 percent as the unfortunate downside of the Immigration Control Station and not as its intrinsic meaning. The linearity of the narrative, in turn, is partly caused by the fact that the main building is the only interpreted structure on the island, the remaining almost 40 buildings, including the detention buildings, the hospital and the psychiatric hospital, in contrast, are not open to the public. For an analogous linearity on a different scale in the exhibition »Peak Immigration Years« cf. Gisela WELZ, *Inszenierungen kultureller Vielfalt*, Frankfurt a. M., New York City, Berlin 1996, pp. 182–184. For a general account on the role of the visitor performance in museums

tion as an individual success story is reinforced by a principle problem with the oral history accounts, which were recorded in the mid-1980s upon public request. Persons who answered the request, interested and willing to tell their story, were almost entirely people who had made it in the US. This basically positive lifetime experience is reflected throughout the interviews and contributes to a harmonised, if not romanticised picture of the Ellis Island Immigration Station and related US immigration policy.

The second observation illustrates more specifically the narrative of transformation. It relates to the obvious effort to show immigrants as individuals with a distinctive face (implying a distinctive story) in order to humanise the immigration experience and the history of immigration as such. For this reason there are countless large-scale photographs of immigrants all over the exhibitions, most notably in a gallery on the second floor. The people pictured there are indeed very diverse, but the only feature that seems to be of real importance – i.e. the only one that is stated on the label – is their nationality. In fact, it appears that the persons in the pictures are not »real« individuals, but rather representatives of nations. Thus, the gallery of individual immigrants turns into a generic »gallery of nations«⁸. The fact that the labels focus exclusively on the nationalities of the immigrants and do not state names, occupation, age, or the individual story of the person pictured, might well be due to the fact that often this information is just not known. My point, though, is not to blame the curators of the exhibition for excluding information that is simply lost. Nor is it to claim that the attempt to humanise the immigrant experience in this case fails and, in fact, re-de-humanises the immigrants as pure specimens of a certain type (i.e. in this case: a nation). Of greater relevance is the image of immigration presented in these installations. Not only are the immigrants viewed as mainly constituted by their nationality, but by privileging a national perspective the whole immigration process is implicitly reduced to the process of becoming American. The picture that is evoked is that of the funnel: a multitude of foreigners arrives at the doors of Ellis Island, and when they leave they are somehow transformed into Americans, making up one nation, an »imagined community« of immigrants.

The third observation, finally, relates to the presentation of objects in the exhibition »Treasures from Home«. Apart from the display of items from particular families, there are a number of installations showcasing particular topics like »Clothing and Ornament« or »Family Life«. The cases are packed with artifacts: traditional costumes from various countries, musical instruments, oddly shaped pipes, a horseshoe, a matchbox, a coconut. All of them have been carried by immigrants on their way to America and through Ellis Island and their presentation is, in the words of the introductory label, meant to »lend insight into how immigrants prepared for life in an unknown land, what they expected to find here, and what hopes they had for the future«. But

and particularly the importance of the itinerary on the production of knowledge cf. Tony BENNETT, *The Birth of the Museum. History, Theory, Politics*, London, New York 1995, p. 43 and pp. 179–186.

8 The introductory text of the section, which gives information on one of the photographers, also exemplifies this approach. One sentence reads: »His collection of over 135 images provides an extraordinary record of the many nationalities who came to the United States during the peak years of immigration.« For the tradition of the »gallery of nations« as organizing principle for books and later exhibitions and fairs cf. KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT, *Destination Culture* (see note 5), p. 37.

somehow the display appears strange; the stories of the individual immigrants do not materialise. The reason might be that the object labels, analogous to the above-mentioned portraits, again privilege a national perspective. They state the countries of origin in bold type as the first line of information, brushing aside significant regional or local, religious and other differences by reinforcing an abstract norm of the nation, while at the same time reducing the immigrants to representatives of these nations. The indefiniteness might also stem from the fact that one learns little about the objects from these text panels except for, as stated, their country of origin plus a title, the name of the owner and a date, sometimes supplemented by a one-sentence-description. Nothing about the cultural context in which these objects were originally used, let alone in which they were used in the US, if or how they kept, lost or changed their meaning in a new environment. Finally, it is the order in the cases that is bewildering. A violin next to a pillow beater, »Russia« next to »West Guyana«, »1880« next to »1924« – basically, a potpourri of oddities, isolated and exotic specimens from other worlds and times.

It is not until one steps back from the cases and contemplates them as a whole that the display begins to make sense and the message becomes clearer. It seems as if the individual object is actually not of interest, what really matters is the case. In this perspective, the peculiarities of the artifacts are not important and the lack of context not decisive. Put together in the case, the objects are sublated in a new context, collectively transformed into a larger whole where they all have their place: Unity in diversity, e pluribus unum – the cases are perfect metaphors for a neatly ordered and harmonious multicultural America.

The visitors' retracing of the path of the successful immigrants, the depiction of immigrants as representatives of nations with the implication of the funnel metaphor and the merging of disparate objects in a unifying context are all variations on the notion of a successful transformation of a multitude of immigrants into Americans, the story of »Becoming American«: a story of the American nation. This nation is conceived as multicultural, to be sure, and thereby counters older conceptions of Americanisation along the lines of Anglo-conformity, but it is nonetheless homogenizing by pressing this multiculturalism in an exclusively national framework.

Once aware of this narrative one discovers materialisations of it all over the museum. We find a playful version in »The Peopling of America«: the pictures of a multiplicity of individuals from different ethnic backgrounds and ages turn into the stars and stripes of the American flag as the visitor walks by, the smiles on the faces of the people suggesting their happy consent with being rendered invisible. A monumental version is the American Immigrant Wall of Honor outside the museum where visitors can have the names of ancestors inscribed. Here, an enormous number of people is symbolically welded together in a steel circle unmistakably representing the nation. The diversity of their backgrounds is still noticeable in the distinctness of the names, but they are equalised and homogenised by the uniformity of the design and the strict and arbitrary order of the alphabet. In its form maximal different, in its symbolical content equivalent, the most mundane version of the narrative's objectification can be found in the museum shop: a colorful pennant shows the flags of numerous countries tapering off in an American flag. And at the center of it is a picture of Ellis Island.

The narrative of transformation is further intensified by the very site of the museum. Although some of the presentations inside the museum try to convey a broader story of immigration, the former Immigration Station privileges a focus on the few hours of the formal processing of immigrants and implies a picture of immigration as event. It evokes the notion of a clear-cut and successful procedure with a definite before and after and tends to constitute this event as the decisive moment of »Becoming American«.

II. THE LOWER EAST SIDE TENEMENT MUSEUM

The Lower East Side Tenement Museum was opened in 1988 in a former tenement building at 97 Orchard Street in New York City's Lower East Side. Since its opening it has won nearly unanimous acclaim throughout the museum field. In the last years around 100 000 persons annually visit the museum⁹.

A visit to the Lower East Side Tenement Museum begins on the street in front of the building. Visitors have to join one of the two available tours, »Piecing It Together: Immigrants in the Garment Industry« or »Getting By: Weathering the Great Depressions of 1873 and 1929«. From the very beginning the themes discussed transcend immigration history by including topics such as labour issues or women's history and visitors are constantly encouraged to engage in discussions and make connections to today. The main artifact of the museum is the building itself. On the stairs in the hall the guides give brief summaries of tenement housing, of the history of this specific building and the story of its »discovery« and restoration. The actual exhibitions spread over six apartments: five are meticulously recreated and illustrate the lives of particular families who once lived in the respective apartment. The sixth is left as a »ruin«, in the original condition as when the museum moved in.

The family histories cover different points in time, different ethnic groups and circumstances. One example shall suffice. Upon entering a recreated apartment on the third floor we stand in the midst of a dim, modestly furnished kitchen. On the table one finds dishes and bread. The tour guide begins to tell the story of the Gumpertz family: Julius Gumpertz and Nathalie Rheinsberg, both German Jews, left Prussia around the age of 22 and met and married in New York. By 1870, the couple had settled at 97 Orchard Street. Julius Gumpertz first worked as a shoemaker, than as a small-time merchant before the economic depression in the 1870s forced him back into the shoe trade. Registration documents from 1884 still mentioned Nathalie Gumpertz and her children as living in the building, but no longer Julius. Further documents sug-

9 Virtual tours can be taken on the museums website, URL: <<http://www.tenement.org>> (October 2005). The extensive programming of the museum, ranging from walking tours of the Lower East Side over the display of contemporary art in its windows to English language classes for recent immigrants cannot be discussed here, neither the ambitious initiative of the Tenement Museum to form an International Coalition of Historic Site Museums of Conscience, URL: <<http://www.sitesofconscience.org>> (October 2005); cf. Ruth J. ABRAM, *Harnessing the Power of History*, in: Richard SANDELL (ed.), *Museums, Society, Inequality*, London, New York 2002, pp. 125-141.

gested that he had left the house on the morning of 7 October 1874 and never returned. (The installation represents this exact date.) The guide opens a door, and the front room (recreated to 1878) shows the workplace of a seamstress. Nathalie Gumpertz had apparently opened her own business and thereby managed to pay the rent and even keep her daughters in school. Nine years after Julius' disappearance she went to court and had him declared dead in order to be entitled to inherit from his father. After she got the money she moved with her daughters to the new German neighborhood of Yorkville on the Upper East Side.

What is exemplary about this story for the construction of knowledge at the Tenement Museum? It is about immigrants, of course, German Jews, to be precise, and as such about members of a significant ethnic group on the Lower East Side at the time. It deals with the garment industry and the dependence of the immigrants upon economic cycles and crises. It tells about hardship, but also about overcoming it. By taking the living and working conditions of immigrants as a starting point and following an individual family over the course of several years it clearly depicts immigration as a process. The Lower East Side figures in this narrative as one stop on a much longer way. In its basic structure, it focuses on individuals, their stories and, importantly, their agency. Outside and macro structures (government policies, the law, reasons for emigration, to name only a few) are, by and large, left aside or are only addressed in close connection to the family story. In this case, and that is emblematic, it evolves around an ordinary, yet extraordinarily strong woman.

The clear narrative about individual persons in conjunction with an exhibition strategy that communicates an »authentic experience«¹⁰ allows for an ultimate closeness of the visitors to the presentation and a maximum of empathy with the protagonists and with immigrants in general. Moreover, by illustrating general and enduring issues of immigration through these stories and by encouraging the visitors to make connections to today the museum makes it possible to implicitly and even explicitly discuss current immigration issues through its exhibitions. As such the Tenement Museum is in and by its presentation doing »social work«, work on the conditions of society.

Beyond this immediate concern, however, the Tenement Museum is at the same time doing »Work on Myth« (Hans Blumenberg). As a key concept it draws on the model of the pioneer in its presentation of history and, applied to the particular context, describes the immigrants as »urban pioneers«. The tenement, thus, becomes an »urban

10 There is not enough space here to discuss the Tenement Museum's display strategy in detail and its obsession with »historic truth« (ABRAM, *Harnessing the Power* ■(see note 11)■, pp. 130–132) and the »present-day myth« of authenticity (for a general critique see Richard HANDLER, Eric GABLE, *The New History in an Old Museum. Creating the Past at Colonial Williamsburg*, Durham 1997, pp. 222–224). It is only to say that the strong emphasis on authenticity in the museum's presentation is closely linked to its strategy of »using the past to shape the future«. If the past »only exist[ed] as we narrate it today« (ibid. p. 224) the museum's project would smell like propaganda. In contrast, the past has to be created as an independent entity, independent from its creators. It has to be authentic in order to be useful. Otherwise the museum would have to acknowledge that the past does not provide powerful lessons (Ruth J. ABRAM, *Using the Past to Shape the Future. New Concepts for a Historic Site*, in: *Museum International* 1 (2001) pp. 4–9, p. 9), but merely usable arguments.

log cabin« and the Lower East Side the »urban frontier«¹¹. The museum clearly opted for this interpretation in an effort to value the immigrant experience and to revise a traditional American founding myth. But this decision has some serious implications on the image of the individual that is conveyed. »(S)trong in mind, body and determination, ready to put up with hardship because they believed in themselves and their new country, and busting out with the daring needed to travel far from roots and the adventuresomeness to keep learning, learning«¹² – that's the way a reviewer of the museum characterised the »urban pioneers«, in explicit and excited denial of the »huddled masses« and »wretched refuse« imagery of Emma Lazarus¹³. It is no coincidence or simple reproduction of the museum's rhetoric that leads to such heroicising descriptions. Nor is it a misreading of the museum's exhibitions; such understanding is rather implied in the presentations themselves. Nathalie Gumpertz, for example, is portrayed as a woman who by her will and hard work manages to turn her miserable situation into an immigrant success story¹⁴. The narrative of the Levine family, evolving around the cramped conditions and hard work in their apartment/garment shop, peaks in their successfully moving to a better neighborhood in Brooklyn where they open a garment shop outside their apartment. And another family's failed upward mobility is recounted as the exceptional story of Fannie Rogarshevsky who became the buildings careful janitor and stayed on after all the tenants of 97 Orchard Street had been evicted.

The museum's apparent agenda to highlight the agency of immigrants, to challenge the image of them as disenfranchised victims, tends all too often to a glorification of their perseverance, their individualism and strengths. Weakness and failure, not to speak of wickedness or viciousness have no place in this version. The presentation basically reiterates »American« values from a new perspective and affirms the notion of the (urban) frontier as the »line of most rapid and effective Americanization« (Frederick Jackson Turner)¹⁵. The effort to revise traditional narratives of American histo-

- 11 Dara HORN, The Tenement Museum, in: *American Heritage* 2 (2000) p. 58; Lower East Side Tenement Museum, *A Tenement Story. The History of 97 Orchard Street and the Lower East Side Tenement Museum*, New York 2004, p. 11. The introductory sign at the museum entrance states with regard to the immigrants: »We salute them as our urban pioneers on the municipal frontier.« The term »urban frontier« was repeatedly used by the guides on the tours I took in May and June 2004. The terminology also resonates in some of the reviews, e.g. J. B. BROWN, *Urban Log Cabin*, in: *Historic Preservation* Jan.–Feb. (1994) pp. 22–25, 85. For a critique of the model of the »urban pioneer«, albeit in another context, cf. Neil SMITH, *The New Urban Frontier. Gentrification and the Revanchist City*, London, New York 1996, esp. p. 33. To what extent the Tenement Museum plays a role in the process of gentrification of the Lower East Side (which is Smith's actual topic) cannot be discussed in this context.
- 12 A. M. ROSENTHAL, *Log Cabin in New York*, in: *New York Times*, 3 December 1996, p. A25.
- 13 Emma Lazarus' famous poem »The New Colossus« helped turn the Statue of Liberty into the »Mother of Exiles«, an icon of the land of opportunity for poor and in their countries persecuted immigrants, and is still well-known and often-cited.
- 14 In the reading of one reviewer the heroine of the story clearly distinguished herself from others. After describing the efforts of some women in a similar situation to find their missing husbands, she declares: »Natalie [sic!] Gumpertz, however, didn't bother with any of that. Instead she looked adversity in the face and went into business for herself«, HORN, *Tenement Museum* (see note 13), p. 54.
- 15 Volker BISCHOFF, Marino MANIA, *Melting Pot-Mythen als Szenarien amerikanischer Identität zur Zeit der New Immigration*, in: Bernhard GIESEN (ed.), *Nationale und kulturelle Identität. Studien zur Entwicklung des kollektiven Bewußtseins in der Neuzeit*, Frankfurt a. M. 1991, pp. 513–536, p. 526.

ry, thus, helps to revitalise an American founding myth by introducing a new protagonist, the ordinary immigrant.¹⁶

III. ELLIS ISLAND AND THE TENEMENT MUSEUM – CONSTRUCTING »GATEWAYS TO AMERICA«

The Ellis Island Immigration Museum and the Lower East Side Tenement Museum are clearly related. They both deal with immigration to New York City and, more generally, the US. They both focus, by and large, on the time period of 1880–1930 and on immigration from Europe. They both tell powerful stories about a past that not long ago has been largely disregarded by historiography and museums alike. And they both are clearly sympathetic to the experience of the immigrants. They are, metaphorically speaking, less like distant relatives than unequal siblings.

As for these, there are a whole lot of differences one discovers after breaking through the first layer of similarities. The two museums follow separate paths, alternative approaches in re-presenting immigration history. The perspectives on immigrants, for instance, differ fundamentally in the two museums: whereas the Tenement Museum focuses on a very limited number of individual persons or families and tells relatively detailed stories about their lives, the Ellis Island Immigration Museum predominantly privileges a macro view on the totality of immigrants. Where individual voices are included (as in the oral history accounts) they merely illustrate a given plot rather than constitute it and the depiction of particular immigrants (e.g. in the mentioned photographs), in fact, only reveals a generic perspective on them as representatives of (national) macro groups¹⁷. Also, I have argued, they differ in the overall conceptualisation of their topic: the Ellis Island Immigration Museum conveys a notion of immigration as event, whereas the Lower East Side Tenement Museum shows immigration as process.

It might not particularly come as a surprise that different museums choose alternative approaches for similar topics and that as a result their respective presentations differ substantially. What might be remarkable, though, is that despite or apart from the described differences there is some significant common ground between the Ellis Island Immigration Museum and the Lower East Side Tenement Museum: both are, after all, essentially concerned with American identity and frame immigration history in terms of »Becoming American«. I have already pointed to the reiteration and revitalisation of founding myths: the »funnel myth« in the case of Ellis Island and the myth of the »urban pioneers« and their set of »American« values at the Tenement Museum. To wrap up these observations I would like to point to another element that plays a

16 For the synergy between the pioneer and the immigrant in American mythology cf. John HIGHAM, *Immigration and American Mythology*, in: *Id.*, *Hanging Together. Unity and Diversity in American Culture* (ed. by Carl J. GUARNERI), New Haven, London 2001, pp. 101–109, p. 105.

17 On a more principal level the Lower East Side Tenement Museum also follows a metonymic approach: the individual families and their stories are merely parts of a larger and more complex immigration history, but they are, beyond their peculiarity, meant to represent this larger history.

prominent role in both museums and which might be suitable in clarifying the two museums' versions of the »Becoming American« theme: the metaphor of the »gateway«.

At Ellis Island the metaphor is omnipresent. The main introductory panel sports the headline »Ellis Island: From Gateway to Museum«, and in the text the island is dubbed »the nation's chief gateway during the years 1892 to 1924«. »Through America's Gate« is the title of one of the core exhibitions and countless publications make use of the image¹⁸. Finally, even one of the boats that take visitors to the island is named »Miss Gateway«. At the Tenement Museum the metaphor is less ubiquitous, however, it figures prominently in the museum's mission where Manhattan's Lower East Side is called »a gateway to America«.

How does this relate to the narrative of »Becoming American« and what does it tell about the conceptualisation of immigration in the respective museums? »Gateway« is a metaphor of transition. It implies two separate and distinct places, but it simultaneously emblematises their connectedness and the permeability of the line between them. In fact, the »gateway« describes the status of »in between«, or rather, of »not yet«; despite all the precariousness it symbolically contains, it holds the promise of arrival, in a new place, a new land. It is evident that the meaning of this arrival and transition goes beyond mere geography although the image surely plays with this notion¹⁹. »Stepping through the gateway« implies not only entering another country, but entering into a new life, adopting a new identity. It captures in one word the idea of transformation.

Relating to the alternative conceptualisations of immigration – as an event at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum and as a process at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum – this transformation takes different forms. At Ellis Island the »gateway« is really a »gate«, a liminal space that is to be crossed in very short time. »Becoming American« here is mainly a matter of a formal act. The presentation at the Tenement Museum, in contrast, stresses the second part of the metaphor, the »way«. The »gate« becomes a »tunnel«, so to speak, not the formal act of immigration is decisive, but the continued actions as newly arrived immigrants. The (successful) struggle for a better life becomes the practical test and the affirmation of values the basis for the inclusion in the grand narrative of the pioneer. »Becoming American« at the Tenement Museum is constructed as a »matter of the spirit and of the soul« (Theodore Roosevelt)²⁰.

The important differences in the concepts of the two museums notwithstanding, they share a basic message and construct a »centering« version of immigration history²¹. The »gateways«, Ellis Island and the Lower East Side, are the sites for rites of pas-

18 As a few examples: Mary J. SHAPIRO, *Gateway to Liberty. The Story of the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island*. New York 1986; Susan JONAS (ed.), *Ellis Island: Echoes from a Nation's Past. The Celebration of the Gateway to America*, New York 1989; Pamela REEVES, *Ellis Island. Gateway to the American Dream*, New York 1991.

19 In terms of geography the popular use of the term does not really make sense. In this respect Ellis Island and the Lower East Side simply are located *in* and are not »gateways to« America.

20 BISCHOFF, MANIA, *Melting Pot-Mythen* (see note 17), p. 524.

21 For multiculturalism as a »centering operation« cf. Barbara KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT, *Common Coin*, in: *Midwest (New Zealand)* 3 (1993) pp. 9–11, p. 11.

sage and they epitomize the successful initiation of millions of immigrants into American society²².

22 For a paradigmatic shift of the immigration narrative from »Becoming American« to »Being in America« see the presentations at the Museum of Chinese in the Americas in New York City. Here, the mere and undisputable fact of the presence of immigrants in a particular place – America – gives rise to the multifaceted question as to what this presence means for particular individuals, for families or for a whole community. The exhibitions center a notion of »cultural betwixt-and between-ness« and the problematizing of fixed individual and collective identities is the prevalent theme throughout the museum. Cf. John Kuo Wei TCHEN, *Creating a Dialogic Museum. The Chinatown History Museum Experiment*, in: Ivan KARP et al. (eds), *Museums and Communities. The Politics of Public Culture*, Washington, London 1992, pp. 285–326; WELZ, *Inszenierungen* (see note 7), pp. 223–230; BAUR, *Standpunkte* (see note 2).