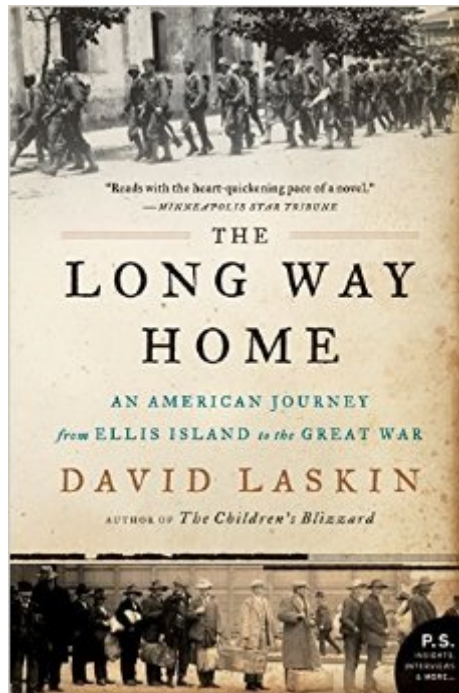


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The Long Way Home: An American Journey From Ellis Island To The Great War



Synopsis

“The Long Way Home is a riveting remembrance of the Great War by a master writer |. Deeply compelling.” — Douglas Brinkley “Moving, revealing, and lovingly researched, this book is a must read, and a great read, for any of us whose forebears came from overseas—meaning just about all of us.” — Erik Larson The author of the award-winning *The Children’s Blizzard*, David Laskin, returns with a remarkable true story of the immigrants who risked their lives fighting for America during the Great War.

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Customer Reviews

In the late 19th and early 20th century, millions of immigrants came to America, fleeing poverty, pogroms, and the draft. When the U.S. entered World War I, thousands of immigrant men enlisted or were drafted to serve in the military, returning to Europe in similar ocean liners to the ones that had brought them. David Laskin sees this military service as a critical step in the Americanization of the immigrants -- even though they returned to often virulent xenophobia during the Red Scare. As he did in *The Children’s Blizzard*, Laskin makes vivid a sweeping story by focusing on a small number of individuals (in this case, 12 men). He begins with the immigrants’ lives in Europe -- the Italian boy in a rocky farm, the Norwegian man who left the farm to work on a fishing boat, the Jewish scrap hauler in the Russian pale. And then he follows them on their journeys to America in the fetid barracks of steerage. On they go to their new homes: the copper mines in Butte, a blanket factory in New England, the Lower East Side. A couple of them enlisted long before World War I;

one was part of Pershing's force chasing Pancho Villa (earlier he'd been a mercenary selling arms to Pancho Villa). And then there's the military. The transition from civilian life was difficult. How could the Army train a crowd of recruits who spoke dozens of languages and were often malnourished and in terrible shape? How could the immigrants get past the ethnic slurs flung at them by the native-born soldiers? And what sort of soldiers would these immigrants make? Eventually, they shipped out, fully trained or not, and Laskin takes us to the trenches and the shattered forests of the Great War.

THE LONG WAY HOME by David Laskin is 386 pages long, printed on off-white paper, with 16 pages of glossy black and white photos. The photos show immigrants on ocean liners, crowded street scenes in New York City, and some of the actual characters of this book, e.g., Matej Kocak (Slovak), Tommaso Ottaviano (Italian), Meyer Epstein (Russian Jew from the Pale), Epifanio Affatato (Italian), Max Chieminski (Polish), and others. In this book, which concerns WWI, the author took the creative approach towards history, of providing standard history text dotted with anecdotes relating to twelve immigrants who later became U.S. soldiers. To view the big picture, these 12 immigrants left Europe to escape the draft, but were drafted into the U.S. military and returned to Europe.

THE PASSAGE. The book provides a context for Meyer Epstein, one of the 12 characters of the book. A region of Russia called "the Pale" was where 2 million Jews left between 1881-1914, where there was a tradition called tzedakah where poor Jews took care of poorer Jews. Meyer was from the Pale. An Italian, Rocco Pierro, left Italy in 1890 to put up telephone poles in America. He commuted home to Italy every year to make babies (pages 8-13). In Poland, "word has spread that in America wages were 8 times higher than in Poland. So what if they had to dig coal out of the hills or work 12 hours a day next to a blast furnace." (page 18). After disclosing fun facts about the motherland, the author details the passage. We learn that ships for immigrants had automatic flushing toilets, because it was expected that the immigrants were too ignorant to know what to do with a toilet handle (p. 32). We learn about eye exams where doctors used a buttonhook to lift up eyelids to seek diseased eyes.

At the turn of the century, a flood of Europeans crammed themselves cheek to steerage class jowl onto anything that would float them across the Atlantic to the Promised Land. And having arrived here, they did what immigrants always do: Looked at one another with distrust and dislike...and from a distance. They set up enclaves that mirrored the Old Country with no "foreigners" allowed. Polish neighborhoods had their White Eagle markets and Doms Narodovy, Italians nibbled sfogliatelle at

cafes just like those on the Via Vittorio Emanuele, and Jew lived with Jew. So how did we get to be Americans? Proximity, for the most part, and the gradual erosion of old country customs and mores. But World War I speeded up the process. Almost every family had someone making that reverse journey back Over There to fight the Kaiser. The military was then, as it is now, a great leveler. And war is a great distraction. Who has time to keep up neighborhood hostilities or wonder if you were born on the Buda or Pest side of the river when there's a guy in a pointy helmet heaving mustard gas at you. David Laskin uses the experiences of 12 men -- Italians, Poles, Slovaks, Jews, Irishmen and Scandinavian -- to show us how immigrants go from "them" to "us," milestone by milestone. The first milestone is the voyage to America. Laskin gives us such a in depth look at the crossing, full of interesting trivia, it gets the book off to a great start. Next we look on as they fan out across the country to find work digging for coal, building railroads, doing whatever backbreaking menial job they could. As each chapter unfolds, we witness a gradual Americanization, but the process is painfully slow.

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