

Moving Histories in Still Images: Teaching Lewis Hine's Ellis Island Photographs



A Re-Imagining Migration Study Guide

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Introduction

Photographs are remarkable documents. They capture a single moment, offering viewers an opportunity to look deeply, engage, and interpret what they see. Looking closely, there are times that we, the viewers, are almost certain that we know what is going on in the minds of those captured in the frame. It's easy to forget how much we don't know about the subject and how much we bring to the images ourselves. And, equally important, is we often don't know very much about the perspectives of the photographer who snapped the picture.

Indeed, interpreting photographs is a lesson in inquiry, observation, and perspective-taking. Using the evidence we can gather, observers do our best to develop an understanding of the images with the recognition that beyond any filter used by the photographer, we cannot help but see any of these images through our own lenses - lenses crafted by our experiences, cultures, communities, stereotypes (even positive ones), and biases. None of this is to say that photographs don't provide information about a particular subject or moment in time. The point is that when we teach with images, we should do our best to help our students recognize the differences between what they see, what they can know, and what they bring to the visual text.

I love working with Lewis Hine's Ellis Island photographs not simply because they humanize people in a particular period of history, but because they do that and offer a window into a universal moment, the moment in which people arrive somewhere new. We all have some understanding of what that feels like. We've been the newcomer, not always understanding what is going on or the rules of this new place where we have arrived.

Migration stories, whether they are stories of crossing borders from 1905 Ellis Island or from moving across town in 2021, share some essential characteristics: life before the move, the migration journey, and of course, adjusting to the new situation. There are also fundamental differences in the contexts of each migration story. Keep both in mind as you look and teach with these amazing images. The goal is not to flatten the experiences as if they are all the same, but instead, this allows us to recognize what we have in common as well as the differences in our experiences.

I encourage you to approach these images with the universal and the particular in mind, or to use a more current educational metaphor; consider how these photographs can serve as both windows and mirrors. The authors at We Are Teachers explain, ["The phrase "mirrors and windows" was initially introduced by Emily Style for the National SEED Project. A mirror is a story that reflects your own culture and helps you build your identity. A window is a resource that offers you a view into someone else's experience. It is critical to understand that students cannot truly learn about themselves unless they learn about others as well."](#)

Lewis Hine at Ellis Island

The Ellis Island Immigration Station opened in 1892 due to the shift in relationships between state and national control over immigration policy in the United States. Following the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, a federal bureaucracy was required to enforce this discriminatory legislation. Before sharing the photographs, you might want to familiarize yourself and your students with the particularities of the immigration inspection process developed at Ellis Island. Much of what passes as common knowledge about Ellis Island, for example, the idea that many newcomers' names were changed at Ellis Island, is more myth than fact. Therefore, do take the time to check your assumptions.

Inspectors at Ellis Island were charged with screening passengers. However, the goal was to create a formal immigration process and not to detain immigrants. That said, some immigrants were indeed detained because they did not pass the inspections or were sent to the hospital at Ellis Island until a medical condition appeared to clear up. This stands in stark contrast to the purposes of the immigration station at Angel Island in San Francisco Harbor, which was built to screen and keep out Chinese immigrants suspected of trying to violate the exclusion act and later the "Asiatic Exclusion Zone."

However, Lewis Hine's 1905 images from Ellis Island were taken when attitudes towards immigrants were hardening. It was common to hear people argue that the new immigrants were inferior to the immigrants that had arrived earlier. Xenophobic politicians and anti-immigrant activists were beginning to use the language of [Eugenics](#), spurred on by anti-immigrant groups such as the Immigration Restriction League. Eugenacists promoted the idea that some people were genetically different and better than others, and used that deeply flawed, and bigoted scientific argument, to try to pass new restrictions in favor of Western and Northern Europeans as compared to newcomers from Southern and Eastern Europe (Remember that Chinese immigration has already been restricted). With contemporary understandings of power and privilege, we might be surprised to read that Jews and Italians were explicitly labeled racially inferior. While ideas about white supremacy were underneath efforts to limit immigration in the early 20th century, ideas about who was and who was not white were, and still are, evolving to fit the social dynamics of the moment. While the science of Eugenics is nearly universally condemned as racist today, the way they sought to use science to justify xenophobia should stand as a warning that some will use whatever means they can find to justify their biases.

In a way, that was Hine's motivation when he went out to Ellis Island. He was a sociologist who believed in the power of photography as a teaching tool. Between 1904 and 1909, he would take his students out to Ellis Island, where they would document the stories of those arriving in still pictures. A blog from Gemma Solomons at the Tenement Museum in New York explains:

He wanted to show immigrants as everyday people, just like “you and me,” trying to work hard and provide a better life for their families. His hope was for people to look upon his photos and feel, as Hine himself said, “the same regard for contemporary immigrants as they have for Pilgrims who landed at Plymouth Rock.”

When we look at Hine's photographs and read the captures he included, it is helpful to consider the context in which he was working. Consider how he framed each image and how each image framed the story of immigration. At the same time, it would be a mistake to assume that Hine's work would read with 21st-century progressive sensibilities. They don't. With your students, take note of the story he tells, including the visual and written language he uses to tell it. Consider in what ways his perspective overlaps with yours and note how it differs.

One final note. We have included a small selection of Hine's images taken in 1926, two years after the passage of the very restrictive immigration act of 1924, which imposed stringent quotas on members of many of the groups represented in the earlier photographs. What might he have wanted us to see in this second set of images? What do you know when you compare them?

Note: All of the images used in this teaching resource are in the public domain. Many of the files we used for the images come from the New York Public Library.

Teaching Lewis Hine's Ellis Island Images

There are many different ways to approach these images with students, from working together as a whole group, analyzing each image, creating a gallery of pictures across a classroom, allowing for silent written responses, and paired or small group inquiries. Below we offer a few suggested essential questions drawn from our [learning arc](#) and suggestions for [learning objectives](#) - these are tied to our learning framework as well.

Suggested Essential questions:

- What do people bring with them as they migrate from one place to another?
- What do people experience as they move from one place to another?
- In what ways are people's migration journeys similar and different from one another?

Suggested Learning Objectives

Learners will practice the following skills:

- Perspective-Taking
- Inquiry about migration and making purposeful comparisons
- Communication across difference
- Recognizing power and inequities

Students will learn and know:

- About the experience of immigrants arriving at Ellis Island between 1892-1926
- About continuities and changes in the experiences and treatment of immigrants arriving in the U.S.
- About the many reasons why people migrated to the United States in the late 19th and early 20th century.

Thinking Routines

There are many outstanding visual thinking strategies you might use with these images. Below are a few [Project Zero Thinking Routines](#) that we have tied to learning dispositions:

- Perspective-Taking
 - ◆ [What Makes You Say That?](#)
 - ◆ [Connect -Extend - Challenge](#)
- Inquiry and making purposeful connections
 - ◆ [See-Feel-Think-Wonder](#)
 - ◆ [Same-Different-Gain](#)
- Communication across difference
 - ◆ [Chalk Talk](#)
- Recognizing power and inequities
 - ◆ [By whom, about whom, for whom?](#)

Suggested Teaching Activities

Pre-Viewing

Consider introducing students to Ellis Island's role in the history of immigration to the United States. Although the film [Island of Hope, Island of Tears](#) was made over 20 years ago, it provides a strong overview of the stories of the immigrants who passed through Ellis Island during its peak years from 1892-1924. It also discusses how immigration reform impacted the experience of those arriving on Ellis Island.

You might also consider our lesson on [analyzing anti-immigrant attitudes through political cartoons](#) as a way to introduce students to the stereotypes of immigrants that were pervasive at the time Hine took many of these images.

Viewing

Focus on exploring the essential questions we identified above:

- What do people bring with them as they migrate from one place to another?
- What do people experience as they move from one place to another?
- In what ways are people's migration journeys similar and different from one another?

The [See-feel-think-wonder](#), [What makes you say that?](#), and [By whom, about whom, for whom? Project Zero thinking routines](#) provide structure for analyzing the images.

Consider how the Hine images connect, extend, and challenge your knowledge of immigration to the U.S. by incorporating the following routines into your teaching: [what makes you say that?](#), [same-different-gain](#), [connect-extend-challenge](#), and [chalk talk](#).

Post-View

Research contemporary [images of immigrants](#) and compare them to the photographs from Lewis Hine. What stories are contemporary photographers telling?

Create an exhibition for your school/community inspired by Hine's work to document the stories of newcomers to your community. You might use our [Moving Stories connecting guide](#) for inspiration.

Please encourage students to identify five things that they can do to welcome people who are new to their community to enhance their sense of belonging. Have them consider how they can make those action steps a reality along with ways to measure their progress.

1905 Images

Italian Immigrants at Ellis Island



4. ITALIAN IMMIGRANTS AT ELLIS
ISLAND - 1905

Lost baggage is the cause of their worried expressions. At the height of immigration the entire first floor of the administration building was used to store baggage.

Photo-study by Lewis W. Hine

ROOM 300 315G

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The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Photography Collection, The New York Public Library. "Mother and child, Italian Ellis Island, 1905" New York Public Library Digital Collections. Accessed September 25, 2021.
<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47d9-4e84-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>

Syrian Arab at Ellis Island



26. A SYRIAN ARAB AT ELLIS ISLAND
1926

Tattoo marks on her face and
hands, (a sign of marriage), did
not show in the photograph.

Photo-study by Lewis W. Hine

The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Photography Collection, The New York Public Library. "A Syrian Arab at Ellis Island, 1926" New York Public Library Digital Collections. Accessed September 25, 2021.
<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47d9-4e8d-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>

Italian Family En Route to Ellis Island



2. ITALIAN FAMILY EN ROUTE TO ELLIS ISLAND

This is the small boat of the Immigration Service which carried aliens from the pier to Ellis Island. Sometimes the number of immigrants waiting to be transferred was so great, that they waited for several days and nights before the little ferry boat could bring them to the island.

Photo-study by Lewis W. Hine

Joys and Sorrows at Ellis Island, 1905

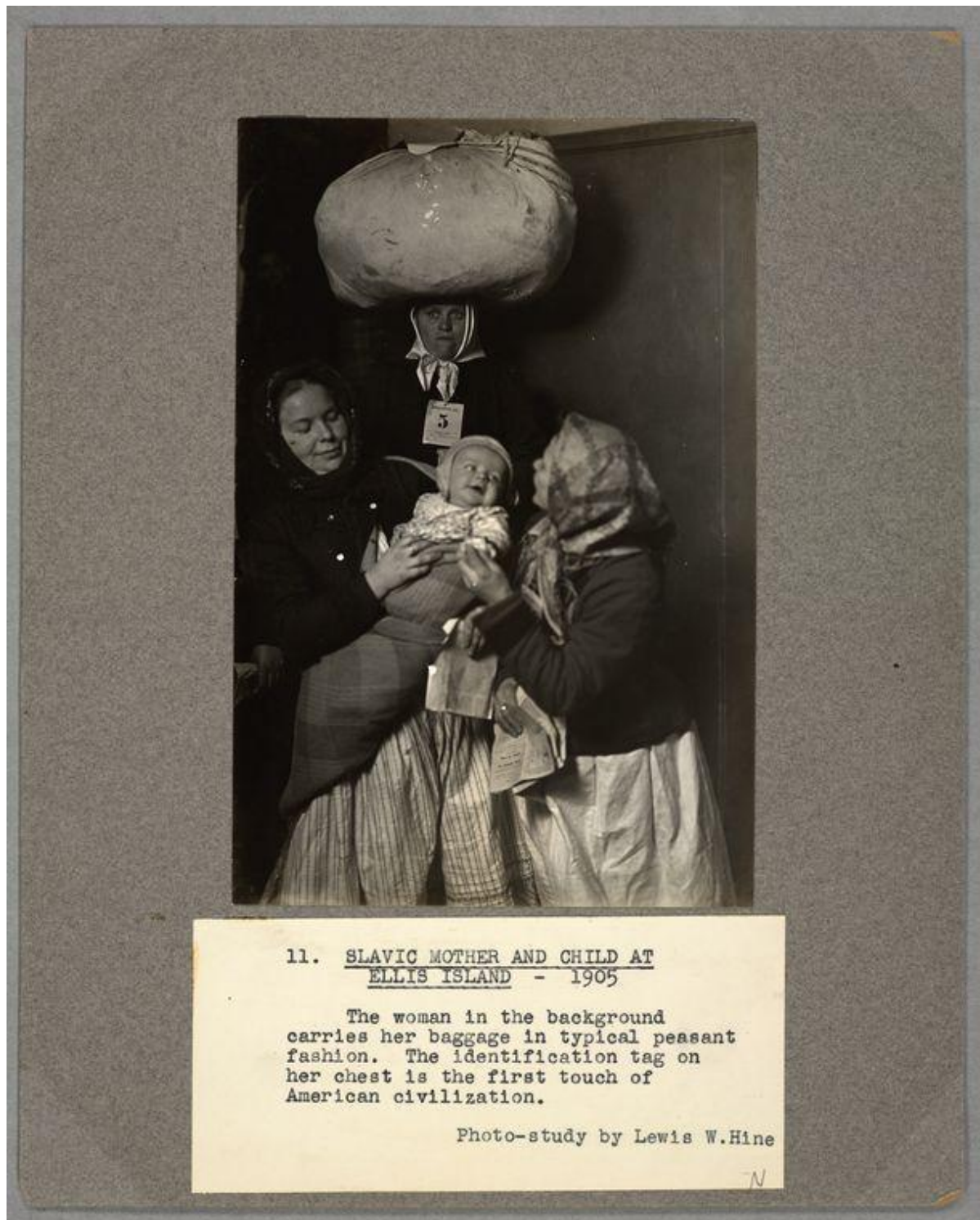


7. JOYS AND SORROWS AT ELLIS ISLAND
1905

A group of Slavic immigrants register many shades of emotion. The baby salutes his new home - quite a family group.

Photo-study by Lewis W. Hine

Slavic mother and child at Ellis Island, 1905



11. SLAVIC MOTHER AND CHILD AT
ELLIS ISLAND - 1905

The woman in the background carries her baggage in typical peasant fashion. The identification tag on her chest is the first touch of American civilization.

Photo-study by Lewis W.Hine

The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Photography Collection, The New York Public Library. "Slavic mother and child at Ellis Island, 1905" New York Public Library Digital Collections. Accessed September 25, 2021.
<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47d9-4e7e-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>

Young Russian Jewess at Ellis Island, 1905



18. YOUNG RUSSIAN JEWESS AT ELLIS
ISLAND - 1905

"Inquiring, tireless, seeking
what is yet unfound,
But where is what I started for so
long ago -
And why is it still unfound."

Whitman

Photo-study by Lewis W. Hine

The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Photography Collection, The New York Public Library. "Young Russian Jewess at Ellis Island, 1905" New York Public Library Digital Collections. Accessed September 25, 2021.

<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47d9-4e85-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>

Mona Lisa visits Ellis Island, 1905



13. MONA LISA VISITS ELLIS ISLAND
1905

The large window in the background becomes a halo for this Russian family, who might have been a suitable subject for a Renaissance painter.

Photo-study by Lewis W. Hine

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A Slovak Immigrant, Ellis Island, 1905



14. A SLOVAK IMMIGRANT - ELLIS ISLAND
1905

This young Slovak woman is one of the vast number of her people who started to come as early as the 18th century. Hungarian persecution started an extensive wave of migration by Slovaks to this country.

Photo-study by Lewis W. Hine

An Albanian woman from Italy at Ellis Island, 1905



12. AN ALBANIAN WOMAN FROM ITALY
AT ELLIS ISLAND - 1905

This woman is wearing her native costume. At times the Island looked like a costume ball with the multicolored, many-styled national costumes.

Photo-study by Lewis W. Hine

The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Photography Collection, The New York Public Library. "An Albanian woman from Italy at Ellis Island, 1905" New York Public Library Digital Collections. Accessed September 25, 2021.
<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47d9-4e7f-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>

A group of Italians in the railroad waiting room, Ellis Island, 1905



9. GROUP OF ITALIANS IN THE RAILROAD WAITING ROOM, ELLIS ISLAND - 1905

These are some of the Italians who became the barbers, waiters, chauffeurs and mayors of America. Some became the artists and sculptors of our national Capitol and of other public buildings.

Photo-study by Lewis W. Hine

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The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Photography Collection, The New York Public Library. "A group of Italians in the railroad waiting room, Ellis Island, 1905" New York Public Library Digital Collections. Accessed September 25, 2021.
<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47d9-4e7c-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>

Climbing into America



3. CLIMBING INTO AMERICA -
ELLIS ISLAND - 1905

Here is a Slavic group waiting to get through entrance gate. Many lines like these were prevalent in the early days. There was no room to keep personal belongings, so the immigrants had to carry their baggage with them all the time.

Photo-study by Lewis W. Hine

The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Photography Collection, The New York Public Library. "Climbing into America, Ellis Island, 1905" New York Public Library Digital Collections. Accessed September 25, 2021.
<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47d9-4e76-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>

1926 Images

A Finnish Stowaway at Ellis Island



22. A FINNISH STOWAWAY AT ELLIS ISLAND
1926

The desire to come to America must have been very strong for this young man to face all sorts of uncertainties.

Photo-study by Lewis W. Hine

The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Photography Collection, The New York Public Library. "A Finnish stowaway at Ellis Island, 1926" New York Public Library Digital Collections. Accessed September 25, 2021.
<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47d9-4e89-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>

A Group of Germans Having Lunch at Ellis Island



6. A GROUP OF GERMANS HAVING LUNCH
AT ELLIS ISLAND - 1926

Notice the variety of foods on the table; this is a considerable improvement over the earlier days. The room too is less crowded and more comfortable looking.

Photo-study by Lewis W. Hine

The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Photography Collection, The New York Public Library. "A group of Germans having lunch at Ellis Island, 1926" New York Public Library Digital Collections. Accessed September 25, 2021.
<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47d9-4e79-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>

Children on the Playground at Ellis Island

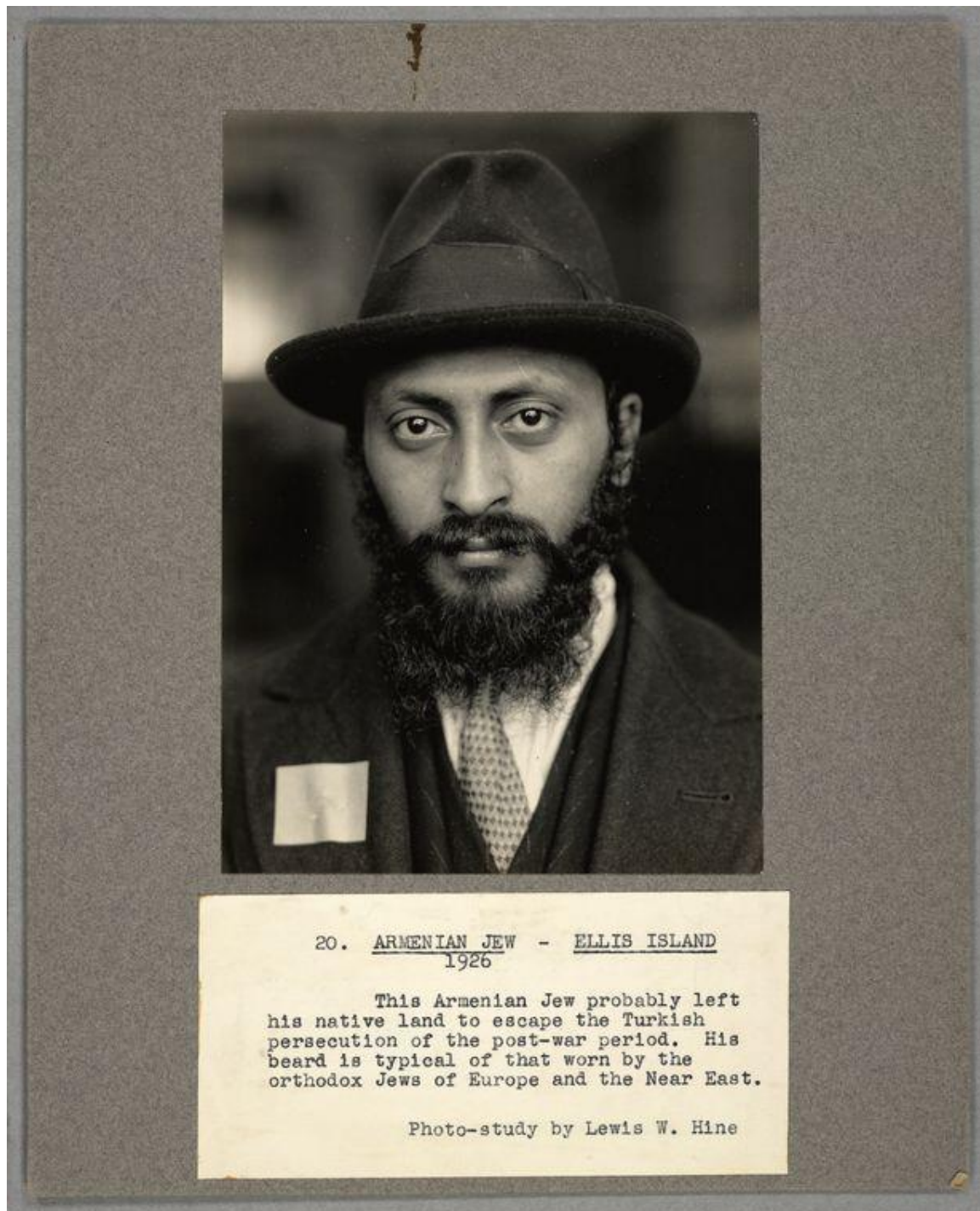


31. CHILDREN ON THE PLAYGROUND
AT ELLIS ISLAND - 1926

This enclosure is part of the improved conditions on the Island. Here the elders too could play baseball, box, or play some of their native games. In the background New York skyline can be seen.

Photo-study by Lewis W. Hine

Armenian Jew, Ellis Island, 1926



20. ARMENIAN JEW - ELLIS ISLAND
1926

This Armenian Jew probably left his native land to escape the Turkish persecution of the post-war period. His beard is typical of that worn by the orthodox Jews of Europe and the Near East.

Photo-study by Lewis W. Hine

The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Photography Collection, The New York Public Library. "Armenian Jew, Ellis Island, 1926" New York Public Library Digital Collections. Accessed September 25, 2021.
<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47d9-4e87-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>

A social worker at Ellis Island, 1926



29. A SOCIAL WORKER AT ELLIS
ISLAND - 1926

A social worker explains to
a group of immigrants some of the
technicalities of becoming an
American.

Photo-study by Lewis W. Hine

The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Photography Collection, The New York Public Library. "A social worker at Ellis Island, 1926." New York Public Library Digital Collections. Accessed September 25, 2021.
<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47d9-4e90-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>

Handwork under the auspices of the D.A.R., 1926, Ellis Island



30. HANDWORK UNDER THE AUSPICES
OF THE D.A.R. - 1926
ELLIS ISLAND

Men as well as women were given instruction in making pillow cases, shirts and hand embroidery. Some of the more skillful of the men were able to complete whole suits of clothing during their detention on the Island.

Photo-study by Lewis W. Hine