

Bram Beelaert

On the Way to the Last Best West: Antwerp as a Transit Port for Central and Eastern European Immigrants to Canada, 1870–1930

. . . O Dinska Bronska,
you leave for Canada:
the rusty steamer waits for you along the quay.
You read on an almanach
of the “Red Star Line”
that Canada has bigger apples,
oh, and higher and yellower grain than Plocka.
It must be much better in Canada!
Oh, Dinska Bronska,
with your very big fingers:
it is so difficult for you to write that letter. . . .

Traces of the past

There used to be a time in Antwerp when schoolchildren read the poem “Dinska Bronska” by Flemish poet Karel van den Oever about a Polish girl writing her last letter to her family before leaving Europe to start a new life in Canada. The lines reflected the feelings of many, as at the height of transatlantic migration between 1873 and 1934 nearly two million Europeans went to Antwerp to board a ship set to North America (Vervoort and Beelaert 18). As the Belgian-American Red Star Line catered to the continental market and Belgian overseas emigration was small in comparison to other countries, the overwhelming majority of the passengers came from Central and Eastern Europe, making Antwerp a key port of transit for these people. The emigrant departure halls of the shipping company still stand today housing the Red Star Line Museum that shares the story of transatlantic European emigration through the port of Antwerp.¹

For the most part of this period, the majority of the passengers embarked for the United States, and Canada was perceived as a less attractive destination. However, when in 1904 the Canadian Pacific established its first direct passenger service with the European continent in Antwerp, the Belgian port became a principal route to Canada for emigrants from Central and Eastern Europe. By the early 1920s the Red Star Line, which since 1873 had been shipping millions of passengers from Antwerp to New York and Philadelphia, operated a regular line between the Belgian Port and Halifax, also reflecting the changes in transatlantic migration patterns in the wake of the US quota system discussed in this volume as well.

¹ For more information see the website of the museum at www.redstarline.be.

Fueled by the activities of the Canadian Emigration Office, the railway and shipping companies, posters appeared in the Belgian streets, shops, and taverns, advertising Canada as a vast and rich land, ready to be cultivated. In that period, all third-class passengers on their way to Canada and passing through Antwerp were inspected in the departure halls of the Red Star Line, close to the Rhine Quay, where the ships departed for their transatlantic crossing. In this chapter I discuss the rise of Antwerp as an emigration port from the 1840s to the 1930s, with an emphasis on emigration to Canada. In the second part I provide insights into the experiences of emigrants from Central and Eastern Europe on their way to and in the port of Antwerp, highlighting the determining (but often overlooked) role of shipping companies and the transport industry during their journey to the sea, and even on their decision to leave.

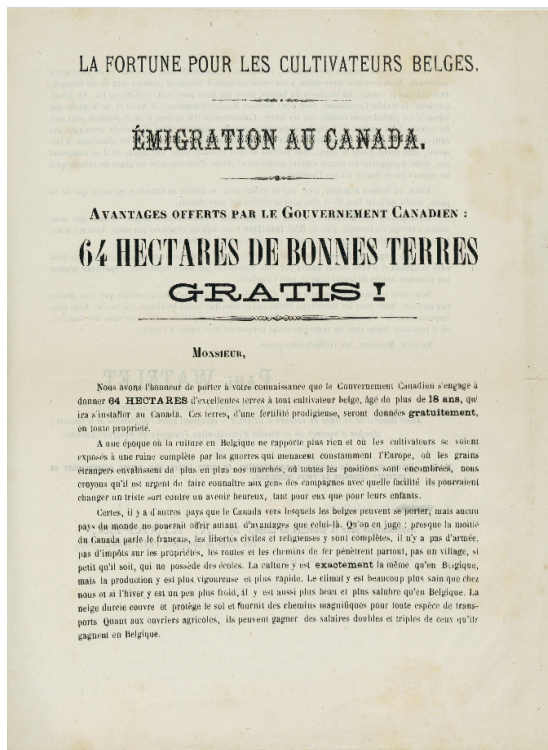


Figure 1: Information leaflet in French for Belgian emigrants to Canada²

² Collectie Stad Antwerpen, Red Star Line Museum. Available at: <https://dams.antwerpen.be/asset/Q2JOYMrThdLLWkYQsqK9bd#id>. The images used here fall into the public domain and, according to Collectie Stad Antwerpen/Red Star Line Museum, have been identified as being free of known restrictions under copyright law, including all related and neighboring rights. See the description of the rights on the links provided.



Figure 2: Postcard of the Red Star Line³

Antwerp as a port of transatlantic emigration

As one of the great Western European urban centers of the early Modern Ages, and after centuries of stagnation, Antwerp came to prominence as an Atlantic port in the middle of the nineteenth century. On an equal footing with Rotterdam in the Netherlands and Hamburg in Germany, it had a large hinterland with early and excellent rail connections and inland navigation channels that ran deep into northern and central Europe (see Beelaert, “Have You Been to the Doctor Yet?” and Everaert). In 1863 a longstanding toll for the use of the mouth of the river Scheldt, which connects the city to the North Sea but lies in Dutch territory, was lifted and Antwerp harbor began to flourish. Amongst other things, grain and petroleum were imported from North America; coffee, animal skins, nitrates, guano, and cotton from Latin America; rice from British Colonial India; and wool from Australia (Hancké).

Emigrants started to arrive in Antwerp during the 1840s and 1850s, mostly from Germany and Switzerland. By that time, the first steamboats appeared on the Atlantic Ocean, making the crossing faster and more reliable. The authorities in Antwerp wanted to establish a passenger steam service with ships that departed regularly, but early attempts failed. Emigrants still had to cope with sail ships that were chartered by a shipping agent and departed irregularly. At the end of the 1850s

³ Collectie Stad Antwerpen, Red Star Line Museum. Available at: <https://dams.antwerpen.be/asset/K2RYOGVWbfeWVbaFeSRkOFUS/saehMOPiPRUIdVcmJ74Owxj>

and throughout the 1860s emigrant traffic slowed down as a result of the American Civil War among others (Evaraert). Meanwhile, the conduct of several high-profile shipping agents in Antwerp also gave the city a bad name. Emigrants made the long journey to Antwerp only to find that they were ripped off, or they were led astray by malignant hoteliers or bar holders in port (see Evaraert and Spelkens for more information). Belgium had insufficient regulations to deal with this. Scandals and sensational stories were smeared out in the German press that rooted for the competing German ports Hamburg and Bremerhaven. But as the 1870s came along, crucial events would lead to decades of busy emigrant traffic to North America through the port of Antwerp.

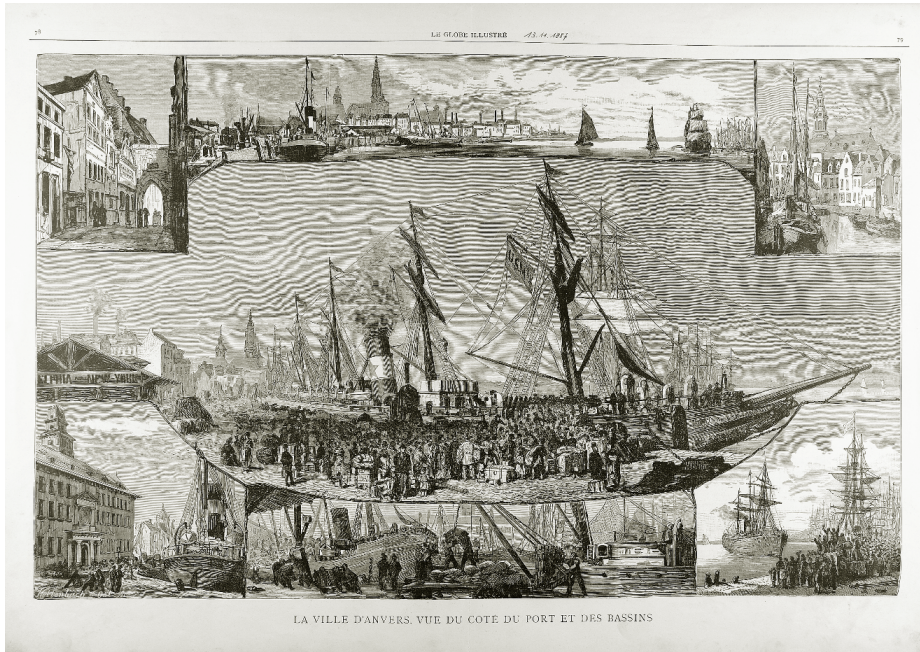


Figure 3: 1887 drawing of the Rhine Quay in Antwerp with a Red Star Line ship⁴

In 1872 the International Navigation Company from Philadelphia approached Jules von der Becke and Edouard Marsily, two Antwerp-based shipbrokers they knew through the Pennsylvanian oil export business (Vervoort and Beelaert 18-20). They wanted to bypass American protective maritime legislation and establish a European subsidiary that would allow them to build cheaper vessels on English wharves and

⁴ Collectie Stad Antwerpen, Vrienden van de Red Star Line vzw. Available at: <https://dams.antwerpen.be/asset/U2919bhVSwwQgTRD8XIZyPBjH#id>

hire cheaper crew overseas. Their plan was to export cargo on the eastbound journey and passengers on the westbound journey. The endeavor was bankrolled by the Pennsylvania Railroad Company that saw maritime trade and shipping routes as a natural extension of their railroad system on land (20).

Both the Belgian authorities and Antwerp City Government jumped at the opportunity. They exempted the new initiative from taxes and granted them the monopoly on the postal service to North America. At the end of 1872 the *Société Anonyme de Navigation Belgo-Américaine* (SANBA) was founded and its ships would sail under the name of Red Star Line. A red star against a white backdrop became the company flag. Its designers clearly drew inspiration from the emblem of the White Star Line (a white star against a red backdrop), which was at the time already a household name in the North Atlantic shipping trade. Weeks later, in January 1873, Red Star Line started its service to Philadelphia and one year later to New York (20).



Figure 4: Postcard showing passengers of the Red Star Line⁵

⁵ Collectie Stad Antwerpen, Red Star Line Museum. Available at: <https://dams.antwerpen.be/asset/Xj007gJ8YUQBECJLXR7CGQFi#id>



Figure 5: Stereophoto of Red Star Line hangar with people waiting for embarkation⁶

Meanwhile, the authorities took steps towards the better protection of the emigrants passing through the city. In 1873 the Ministry of Foreign Affairs set up the Emigration Department to oversee the emigration flow. Three years later the Belgian government adopted a new and comprehensive emigration law, imposing more stringent and protective measures on shipping lines and their agents for the protection of emigrants. Among others, minimum food supplies on board of ships were required, agents had to have an official accreditation, emigration lodgings had to meet minimal hygienic standards. A commissioner was appointed to the Emigration Department that had to watch over the correct implementation of the emigration laws, serve as an information point for emigrants, and mediate in conflicts between shipping lines and its passengers. Additionally, a convention between the authorities and the shipping lines in 1874 stipulated that the latter had to provide waiting facilities in warehouses that were adjacent to their quays (for more information see Beelaert, “The Red Star Line” 51 and Spelkens 60-61).

This all led to a significant increase in transatlantic emigration from Antwerp. From the 1890s onwards Eastern Europe replaced Central Europe as the principal departure region and by 1906 Red Star Line transported 100,000 third-class passengers to the US. The busiest years of the company’s existence were 1907 and 1913 with 119,000 and 117,000 passengers transported to and from North America, respectively. After a break during the German occupation of World War I, Red Star Line resumed its activities but never reached the numbers before the war. 1920 and 1921 averaged 60,000 passengers a year, but the next year the number was reduced

⁶ Collectie Stad Antwerpen, Red Star Line Museum. Available at: <https://dams.antwerpen.be/asset/K2RYOGVWbfeWVbaFeSRkOFUs/J16linEved9hUYXVhWQwyth4>

to half due to the American immigration quotas (for an overview of US immigration regulation see the chapter by Venkovits). The depression from 1929 onwards all but halted transatlantic traffic to North America until after World War II and meant the end of the Red Star Line Company, which was liquidated at the beginning of 1935 (Vervoort and Beelaert 26-29).

Canada: The Last Best West

The US served as the primary destination for the majority of passengers during the period of New Immigration, but not everybody leaving Antwerp was going to the US. Ships from the Norddeutscher Lloyd called on Antwerp on route from Bremerhaven to ports in South America, to take on additional passengers. And in 1870, the Canadian Government founded its first emigration office in Antwerp, diffusing propaganda about Canada as a destination country (Journée, “De Canadese uitdaging” 148-66; Journée, *Go West* 29-45; Jaumain 108-23). The US federal government refrained from immigrant recruitment and left all advertising in the hands of the shipping companies. They advertised with their ships, promising a safe and comfortable passage, also for third class. The Canadian government, however, was actively involved (although also working with railroad companies) and much of the publicity was about the land. The government propaganda, and sometimes subsidies, was aimed at emigrants from desired countries such as Great Britain and Belgium, but nevertheless, in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, where emigration to the US was high, a smaller but steady flow of passengers to Canada started. As opposed to the US, there was no direct connection yet from Antwerp. People going to Canada could buy their tickets from British companies such as the Allan Line and White Star Line but would have to take a smaller ship towards the UK before they could start their actual ocean crossing.

This changed in 1904 when the Canadian Pacific moved its European service from Bristol to London and Antwerp. The company now could pick up emigrants straight from the European continent, transport them overseas by ship, move them inland by rail, and sell them lands on the prairie (Musk 25). The ships of the company started their eastbound journey in Montréal. In steerage, livestock was transported to London, which was offloaded at the Deptfore cattle market on the banks of the River Thames. There, the stables were dismantled and the steerage compartments received a thorough cleaning. The next stop was Antwerp, where emigrants boarded the ships for the westbound journey back to Montréal (25).

Canadian Pacific made agreements with the German Hamburg America Line, diverting traffic to Canada from Hamburg to Antwerp, and the Red Star Line, which besides being a shipping company was also an emigrant agency accredited by the government that sold tickets for the transatlantic crossing. Red Star Line became the agent for Canadian Pacific, which meant that the latter had access to the vast network

of emigration agents that Red Star Line had built over the European continent throughout the years (Beelaert, “Have You Been to the Doctor Yet?”). These agencies were situated in the big cities and had subagents in the countryside. Business owners such as shopkeepers and hairdressers would sell tickets to supplement their income.



Figure 6: Canada Pacific Railway (Atlantic Steamship Lines poster)⁷

In 1908 Canadian Pacific received a concession in Austria-Hungary. Up until 1912, when the company opened a service in Trieste, it would ship its customers to the new world exclusively through the port of Antwerp. In 1913 Canadian Pacific had 36 agencies in Galicia and Bukovina alone, amongst others in Krakau, Lemberg, Brody,

⁷ Collectie Stad Antwerpen, Letterenhuis. Available at: <https://dams.antwerpen.be/asset/ggGwCnGLBStec8QYBsZnj7j3#id>

and Oświęcim (Kowalski 159-66). Canadian Pacific conducted fierce propaganda with brochures, pamphlets, and the screening of movies. They even sold tickets through Catholic and Orthodox priests. Between 1904 and 1914 Canadian Pacific transported 188,000 emigrants from Antwerp to Canada in the third class of one of its five operational ships. Not all passengers were immigrants to Canada. A lot of immigrants to the US came in via Canadian ports and went to the US border by train. A famous example is the late Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir, who took the ship from Antwerp to Quebec City with her family in 1908, only to travel on to Milwaukee in the US (see Meir and Verheyen 42). For Canadian Pacific, the summer port was Montréal, the winter port Saint John.

After World War I Red Star Line also started to sail to Canada, using Halifax as its arrival port. Emigration to the US never fully picked up after the war and the American immigration quotas introduced in 1921 and 1924 dealt a firm blow to all revenue from transatlantic passenger traffic. Therefore, the company experimented with new markets such as the tourism and cruise markets and new routes such as the connection to Canada. From 1922 to 1934 Red Star Line transported 30,000 passengers to Canada, with an apex in 1928.⁸

A guided process

So how did emigrants make their way from Central and Eastern Europe to Antwerp? It is impossible to do justice to all the different experiences European emigrants at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth must have had, but we can try by using some telling and representative testimonies, thus reconstructing a typical route. That the so-called “push and pull factors” have played a crucial role in migration dynamics both in the past and present is widely known. But equally important in sustaining migration is the availability of migration routes that are perceived as reasonably easy to navigate and transportation means that are seen as reliable, safe, and relatively comfortable. By the end of the nineteenth century, when a railroad network connected all corners of continental Europe, and the bows of steamships plowed through the waves of the Atlantic with unparalleled speed, this applied to most European overseas emigration.

Transatlantic migration had become a guided process because of this transport revolution both on land and sea and because of the growth of a very competitive transatlantic passenger shipping industry which resulted in better amenities even for third-class passengers. Agents of the shipping lines were also active on land to guide their clientele as smoothly as possible from their departure zones to the ports of embarkation and onto the ships. In doing so they had to negotiate government

⁸ Gemeentearchief Rotterdam, collectie Holland America Lijn, 318.04. passage A, 579.

regulations both in Europe and North America. In countries such as Austria-Hungary and Russia, emigrants had to meet various requirements and were faced with a daunting bureaucracy. In transit countries, regulations were there to protect emigrants from maltreatment, but also to prevent them from straying too far from their transit route and ensure that they eventually left the countries they were passing through on the way to port. Lastly, immigration regulations of both the US and Canada became tighter towards the end of the nineteenth century and as the twentieth century progressed.

The shipping companies played a central role in implementing these regulations, as governments outsourced important aspects of their migration policies to them. From the 1890s onwards the United States government, followed by the Canadian authorities, made the shipping lines responsible for the deportation of those passengers who were denied access to those countries. As a result of this policy of “remote control” the shipping lines installed inspections of their third-class passengers in the ports of embarkation. They supplemented the inspections that were often already installed by the local authorities to prevent the outbreak of disease on the ships. This private-public cooperation extended throughout the European continent.

Leaving everything behind

As already mentioned, both Red Star Line and Canadian Pacific had agencies and subagents working for them throughout the Central European departure areas. They sustained and capitalized on the “emigration fever” that raged in the main emigration regions, as people were relatively well-informed by letters from friends and family who had already emigrated and by pamphlets being spread by emigrant aid societies. They tried to make the journey as easy as possible, selling door-to-door tickets with the train fare to the port of embarkation, from the arrival port to the final destination included. They also made a first selection. Clients had to fill in a questionnaire with the same questions they were to be asked upon arrival in America.

Figure 7: A completed Red Star Line questionnaire⁹

The testimony, recorded in 1971 of an unnamed emigrant from West-Galicia, district Brzesko, who left for Canada and spent the rest of his life in Saskatchewan, shows the extent to which emigrants could base their decisions on information from the grapevine. It ranged, it appears, from big decisions such as the final destination to smaller ones such as what food to eat before you get on the train.

In the meantime, our entire family was emigrating one by one to the US, so my mother and sister decided to send me to Canada, because they thought I could keep my faith there. In 1902, at the end of April, I went to the mayor to get a workbook because in America, I had heard, they would not let you in. Then I went to the district administration for the signature, which I also received on the same day. Then a travel agent gave me my ship card and a timetable when the steamboats left for Canada, and after several days I was ready for the trip.

My mother gave me a dozen hard-boiled eggs on the way and some bread in a bundle. That was my only travel luggage. I let a pair of high boots hang over my shoulder, took the bundle and left with my mother, who accompanied me to the edge of the village. We said goodbye to each other there and I still remember very well how I walked towards Biadolin after crying for a long time, constantly looking back to see if I could still see my mother and my village. Eventually I reached Biadolin, not without fear about how to get it all done. After all I had never been to a station and I had never traveled by train. I bought a ticket to Krakow and got on the train. Even before I reached Krakow, I got rid of my luggage by eating the bread and eggs right away. And the eggs were, as I said, hard-boiled, with the blissful consequence that I didn't have to look for a toilet. My mum had assured me that she had cooked the eggs specially because there was no toilet on the train. (Qtd. in *Pamiętniki emigrantów: Kanada* 283-84)

In that same year eleven-year-old Anastasia Turner left her native village Rozsec ad Kunstátem in Bohemia. Two of her half-brothers and one half-sister, children from a previous marriage of her father, had already emigrated and wrote home about nice

⁹ Collectie Stad Antwerpen, Red Star Line Museum. Available at: <https://dams.antwerpen.be/asset/L2SkmQEJfnCJRTUSTtW3tW9#id ASmGD2WITm#id>

living conditions and the richness of the natural resources in their new home, Tacoma in Washington, United States. Her father, Josef, was worried about the political situation in Europe at the time and decided to leave as well. They went to an agent in Brno, who sold them a ticket from the Brno station to Tacoma, including the train fares and an ocean passage from Antwerp on *de SS Vaderland* of the Red Star Line. Years later Anastasia, who became known as “Annie,” gave an interview to the Ellis Island National Immigration Museum about her experiences.

We had to sell everything. Some of it we gave to relatives because they wanted remembrance of us. . . . We all wrote it down on paper until we had enough. We had animals, a field, it was enough to come across. My father, mother, [older brother] Anton and [older sister] Agnes had to have a full ticket, the rest of us [small children] went on a half ticket. We didn't have to hire horses.¹⁰

Annie's father was well loved in the village. When the Mensik family left, the whole village came out to say goodbye.

People didn't want us to go away. They wanted us to stay. And they donated a horse. The band played for us, everybody cried, but we were happy because we were going someplace, us kids. But father and mother weren't quite so enthused as the rest of us.

At the border

Agents of the shipping lines often operated on the border of the illegal. Archives of the Austrian emigration police in Galicia mention the Antwerp shipping agencies of Canon and Freudberg selling illegal tickets without a concession. Also, agents from the Red Star Line and the Canadian Pacific were not above selling tickets to potential customers who were not allowed to leave the country, such as conscripts. They assisted emigrants to leave the country illegally (Kowalski 62).

Between January 1911 and August 1913 3,319 men from 21 to 23 years were arrested at the Krakow Central station and forcibly sent back to their homes. They were en route to America, had no legitimate emigration documents, and were trying to leave the country while they were of conscription age.¹¹ To avoid detection, agents gave their clients directions to leave Austria-Hungary under the radar, such as in this letter, found in the archives of the emigration police:

¹⁰ Transcription of the interview with Annie Mensik Turner by Nancy Dallett of the Ellis Island National Immigration Museum, 14.4.1989, DP-22/TURNER.

¹¹ Report of the Krakow police to the governor of Galicia in Lemberg, 29.8.1913, Archiwum Państwowe w Krakowie. C. k. Starostwo Powiatowe w Chrzanowie, 124, nrs. 327-28, consulted and translated for the Red Star Line Museum by Dr. Vladimir Ronin, 2009.

During the journey through Galicia, until you arrive in Myslowitz, you must not confess to anyone that you are going to America or Canada. Do not start a conversation with anyone and if you are approached, do not answer! If someone asks you where you are going, you answer: I follow my nose! You must resolutely chase away all persons who would ask you if you are going to America or Canada—and bite them that it does not concern them. Be brave! Don't be frightened by some gentleman who threatens you or promises you something. Because such a person just wants to earn from you and he will make you fall into misery and lose money. And if someone from the authorities stops you and starts asking where you are going, then under no circumstances should you admit that you are on your way to America or Canada, but say you are going to Prussia to work, to Myslowitz, where you will sign a contract for some work in a job placement agency. If they ask for your passport, feel free to say that those who go to Prussia do not need a passport, but that you have a work or service booklet or a certificate from the village administration. According to the law, one of those documents is sufficient for those who go to Prussia or Saxony to work. If you do not state that you are going by sea, no one will be able to prove that if you do not have a ship card and a large sum of money with you—and they will have to let you go. Only after your arrival in Myslowitz, where you are already completely safe, you can and must tell where you are actually going.¹²

The fact that documents such as these can be found in the archives is the result of the fierce competition between the agents on the borders of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire. Notifying the authorities with well- or not-so-well-founded accusations of breaking the emigration law was a way to eliminating competition. Also, between January 1911 and August 1913, 117 emigrant agents in the vicinity of Oświęcim at the border of Austria-Hungary, Russia, and Germany were reported to the district government. 32 were reprimanded, amongst whom 7 agents were from the Canadian Pacific Railway and 4 employees of the popular Zofia Biesiadecka agency that forwarded clients to Antwerp.¹³

Into Germany

Transit migrants on their way through Germany had to present a certain amount of money and a ship ticket to prove that they could sustain themselves during their stay, and that they were effectively planning to leave the country. Also, in the 1890s the exploitation of the control and disinfection stations on the Eastern Prussian borders was outsourced to the German shipping lines. Stricter immigration procedures in the US had strengthened the tendency of the German government to control the transit

12 Letter from Piotr Kikla to Stanislaw Kowalski, Antwerp, 3.10.1912, intercepted by the Galician authorities, Archiwum Państwowe w Krakowie. C. k. Starostwo Powiatowe w Chrzanowie, 127, nr. 63/12, consulted and translated for the Red Star Line Museum by Dr. Vladimir Ronin, 2009.

13 Report of the Krakow police to the governor of Galicia in Lemberg, 29.8.1913, Archiwum Państwowe w Krakowie. C. k. Starostwo Powiatowe w Chrzanowie, 124, nrs. 327-28, consulted and translated for the Red Star Line Museum by Dr. Vladimir Ronin, 2009.

movement of Eastern European emigrants on their way to the Atlantic ports. German shipping lines such as the Norddeutscher Lloyd operating from Bremerhaven and HAPAG from Hamburg used their position as gatekeepers at the German border as leverage in disputes, for example, over ticket prices, with the other shipping lines. Emigrants that were able to leave Russia or Austria-Hungary had to pass the control stations at the German border as already mentioned. An unnamed female laborer who passed through them in 1907 with her older brothers, still remembered this ordeal when she wrote down her memories in 1977:

The treatment of the passengers completely outraged me. Like cattle, we were herded into one fenced place, except the women were kept separate. There we were forced to undress completely, they took our clothes to steam through and sent ourselves to a bathhouse. While we were still naked, we were examined by a doctor. I was 14 years old at the time and almost went through the ground with embarrassment. (*Pamiętniki emigrantów: Stany Zjednoczone 504-05*)

Jan Dziura, 26, a Polish farmer's son from West Galicia, bought his ticket to America from the travel agency of Ms. Biesiadecka in 1906. His account, written in 1977, gives an impression of the train journey that followed after the border controls.

After we collected our ship charts in Oświęcim, they put us in fourth-class carriages and we took the train to the Belgian port of Antwerp. We were on the road for about two days and two nights. In the wagons the benches were only along the walls and the people were crammed in like herrings in a barrel. For most, there were no seats at all. People sat on the floor, on their trunks and bundles, in short, wherever and whenever they could. A number of women held small children in their arms. They had it the worst: they had nowhere to put their children, nor could they give them food or drink. Some, like me, did not take any food with them and on the second day hunger also began to torment us. (227-30)

Antwerp

When the trains arrived in the Antwerp Central Station after such an arduous trip, a lot of passengers were tired and confused. In the days of laissez-faire, they were beleaguered by all sorts of people from the moment they set foot on the platform. But since the emigration law of 1876 was in force, only accredited agents from the companies or the Belgian emigration service were allowed on the platform. They took the new arrivals under their wings immediately. First they had to pass a check of the Belgian emigration service in the station, and then they were transferred to their hotels.

These hotels were owned by the shipping companies and were exploited by people from and often named after the region where a lot of passengers came from. Based on the emigration law, they were also held to certain standards of cleanliness and to an occupation quota per facility. But in busy times, authorities turned a blind eye as they did not want to hinder business. This resulted in uncomfortable lodgings

for the emigrants and irritation with their Antwerpian neighbors for the nuisance in their street.



Figure 8: Reaching Antwerp: From a German-language Red Star Line brochure for third class crossings¹⁴

The hotels were dispersed throughout the city. Unlike Bremerhaven or Hamburg, Antwerp never had one central emigrant facility, despite efforts to build one. This means that the emigrants were highly visible. Any given week in 1913 there were 3,000 emigrants in the city. Antwerp writers and artists were inspired, in the depictions and descriptions a tone of compassion prevails, and a lot of attention goes to the exotic appearance of the strangers. Emmanuel de Bom wrote in 1918:

Suddenly, at the end of the street, a dull rumor rose. It was getting closer and closer. A considerable heap of people, pressed against each other like herds of cattle, came driven . . . Emigrants! There were over a hundred of them, mostly all bent under the load of packs. In front a man in a cap and uniform, surely a servant of the transatlantic steam company, who led them from the station to the harbor, where the boat was waiting. . . They rushed, like souls in distress, their wretched goods on their shoulders dragging. (qtd. in Verheyen, “Zeit gezoent” 131-32)

¹⁴ Collectie Stad Antwerpen, Red Star Line Museum. Available at: <https://dams.antwerpen.be/asset/y24EJPgfVaLBeLCXNRvNZo75#id>



Figure 9: Eugeen van Mieghem: *Embarkation for the New World, 1907-1917*¹⁵

In 1958, Belgian writer Marnix Gijsen remembered scenes from Antwerp a couple of decades earlier:

In my youth it was a strange and fascinating scene, to see emigrants passing through Antwerp on their way to the harbor, or lingering about timidly around their so called “hotels”. . . . They gave the impression of great haste, as if the angels of vengeance were at their heels They were also notable for their strange clothes, they wore heavy high boots and short sheepskin coats, and their manners were primitive rural. . . . They corresponded perfectly to the description Emma Lazarus gave of the emigrants in the sonnet on the Statue of Liberty in the New York harbor: “the wretched refuge of your teeming shores.” Hundreds of thousands of future Americans and Canadians have been washed through Antwerp. (qtd. in Verheyen, “Zeit gezoent” 131-32)

When word came from a departure country about dangerous epidemics such as cholera, quarantine hotels were installed. Emigrants who came from that country were taken to that hotel and were not allowed to leave it until they were disinfected

¹⁵ Collectie Stad Antwerpen, Museum Plantin-Moretus. Available at: <https://dams.antwerpen.be/asset/VTugIbLnXFCbd7mdbKu5cStT#id>

and physicians were certain that they were not contaminated. This sometimes lasted for weeks.

Before boarding the ship, emigrants had to shower, get their belongings disinfected and undergo a medical examination. These procedures were adopted under pressure from the American and Canadian governments. First, this happened on the quays, but after a lot of complaints, in 1893 Red Star Line built facilities for their passengers going to the US. When Canadian pacific started its service in 1904, they too held their checks on the quays where their ships were moored. Nonetheless, this also resulted in outrage. According to complaints in the archives of the Belgian emigration service, women were inspected in open air (Beelaert, “Have You Been to the Doctor Yet?” 17-19). The screen that was put up for their privacy was not high enough to prevent men wandering around in the harbor from looking over. Canadian Pacific started collaborating with Red Star Line and passengers for Canada were also checked in the latter’s facilities.



Figure 10: The SS Finland before departure¹⁶

¹⁶ Collectie Stad Antwerpen, Vrienden van de Red Star Line vzw. Available at: <https://dams.antwerpen.be/asset/G1RfHTTejEdUWljTcJXl6ZO#id>

Interbellum

As already mentioned, emigration through Antwerp picked up once again after the end of World War I. The ports of Hamburg and Bremerhaven stayed closed until 1921. English companies such as Cunard Line and White Star Line came to Antwerp in the wake of the Red Star Line and Canadian Pacific (Caestecker 61). But at the same time, partly as a consequence of the war, immigration rules in the United States became tighter. The US adopted its quota laws in 1921 and 1924, aimed to curtail the “new” immigration from Central and Eastern Europe. Canada’s very restrictive immigration policy from just after the war relaxed somewhat as the 1920s progressed, but here also immigrants from this region were regarded as non-preferred and needed a special permit to get into the country (Kelley and Trebilcock 186-92).

The stricter immigration procedures in North America after World War I resulted in more elaborate procedures in Antwerp as more and more immigrants were deported back to the city. These stranded emigrants had several options. They could go to one of the emigrant aid organizations that were active in Antwerp, including the Jewish aid organization Ezra or the Catholic St. Raphaels Verein. These could sponsor a return to where they came from, or provide shelter if people wanted to attempt the voyage later. If emigrants had a curable disease, they would search for treatment in one of the institutions of the city (for more information see Caestecker; Vloeberghs, and De Vroey). They could also appeal to the Belgian Emigration commissioner if they felt that they were treated unfairly, or if they could prove that the shipping agent had sold them a ticket knowing that they were not eligible to get into the US or Canada. Especially in the 1920s, the archives of the Belgian Emigration service house some telling files of Central European emigrants who filed a complaint. They provide insights into how emigrants could get lost in the regulations, procedures, and administrative burden that accompanied international migration more and more as the twentieth century progressed. Also, they reveal a tense relationship between the Belgian government, which was afraid of too many emigrants getting stuck in Antwerp and thus becoming a public charge; American and Canadian authorities, who enforced their policy of “remote control”; and the shipping lines, who wanted everything to go as smoothly as possible for their clients (Beelaert, “The Red Star Line”).

For example, On February 15, 1921 two Polish emigrants named Katana and Rozek procured their passports in Cologne, Germany. As a result, they were also allowed to buy their tickets for a ship of the Canadian Pacific Railway Company departing from Antwerp. But in Antwerp, officers of the Canadian Pacific prevented them from boarding their vessel because they needed passports from their country of origin, not Germany. Katana and Rozek wanted their money back, and the Belgian emigration commissariat found them to be in the right. Canadian Pacific was forced to reimburse Katana and Rozek, but they referred the Polish passengers back to their office in Cologne where the tickets were bought. The wife of Rozek traveled back to Cologne

to collect the money they were owed, but to no avail. The affair dragged on until May, and in the meantime the families Rozek and Katana were stuck in Antwerp.¹⁷

At the end of 1921 Belgian emigration commissioner Venesoen complained about the high number of refusals of emigrants by the Canadian authorities, in his view without consistent argument, who were sent back to Antwerp from the Canadian Pacific Railway Steamer *SS Scandinavian*.¹⁸ These people included Nuchim Febrak and his wife, who were Romanian. According to the commissioner, they had passports from the Canadian Immigration services. Dionisios Formos, travelling with a prepaid ticket after receiving permission from the Canadian Immigration Service to leave for Canada, was rejected in Quebec. Jozef Profis, from Romania, also had permission but was eventually denied because he had come to the country on a non-continuous journey.

When Jozef Miasnik, travelling on an unknown ship, was also rejected, the commissioner questioned Mr. Percy Reid, Inspector of the Canadian Immigration Service in Antwerp and at the same time director of the Cunard Line in that city. He claimed never to have blocked the departure of Miasnik, but apparently there were differences of opinions between the Belgian and Canadian branches of the Immigration Service. Lastly, some Romanian passengers from the *SS Corsican* were mentioned: Paul Staub with wife and three children as well as Heinrich Schwager and wife. They left Antwerp on November 8, 1921 with approved visa, yet their entrance was eventually denied.¹⁹

¹⁷ Correspondence between Emigration commissioner Venesoen, the Provincial Governor of Antwerp, Canadian Pacific Railway Services, and the Belgian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Archives of the Emigration service, bundle 59, Provincial Archives Antwerp, consulted for the Red Star Line Museum by Erica De Coster.

¹⁸ Report of the judicial attaché of the Emigration service to commissioner Venesoen, 13.1.1922, Archives of the Emigration service, bundle 94, Provincial Archives Antwerp, consulted for the Red Star Line Museum by Erica De Coster.

¹⁹ Ibid.



Figure 11: The Red Star Line buildings²⁰

Red Star Line

In 1921 the Red Star Line added a two-story wing to their buildings, still believing that transatlantic passenger transport was worth investing in. Third-class passengers from all shipping lines offering voyages to North America (both US and Canada) were inspected and bathed. Emigrants could leave their luggage to be disinfected under steam in giant autoclaves when they themselves had to take a shower. When they were in the shower their clothes were taken away to be disinfected along with the luggage. After an hour they got their clothes back in a sterile central zone in the building. Next, they went to the first floor where several doctors awaited them. There were doctors from the destination countries (US and Canada), a doctor from the Belgian emigration service, and sometimes officials from the consulates of the departure countries such as Poland. Their physical condition was checked, as well as their mental state, and it was determined if they had any contagious diseases (Beelaert, “Have You Been to the Doctor Yet?” 17-19; Beelaert, “The Red Star Line” 58-59).

²⁰ Collectie Stad Antwerpen, Vrienden van de Red Star Line vzw. Available at: <https://dams.antwerpen.be/asset/j2UjobEU9rPpdhrOlyrtQoBV#id>.



Figure 12: Bathing rooms for women²¹

These procedures were not without controversy. Already in November 1920, when checks were held in makeshift facilities of the new Red Star Line building, the Polish consulate organized an investigation into the emigrant procedures in Antwerp. There had been several complaints from young female Polish passengers who felt violated during the procedures.²² This was an especially sensitive matter, as women and children constituted the lion share of emigrants passing through Antwerp as transatlantic emigration had become largely a follow-on migration. Of the estimated 75,000 Jewish immigrants to the US in 1920, 92% were on their way to join immediate family. Women and children made up 75% of those immigrants (Caestecker 61). Representative K. Downarowitz visited the facilities of the Red Star Line before departure and interviewed several officials from both the involved governments and

²¹ Collectie Stad Antwerpen, Vrienden van de Red Star Line vzw. Available at: <https://dams.antwerpen.be/asset/K2RYOGVWbfeWVbaFeSRkOFUs/EDhPKdSfOhNV6WPMUewd8Zue>.

²² Report of the Polish repatriation bureau to the Consul-General of Poland in Antwerp, 12.12.1920, Archiwum Akt Nowych w Warszawie. Ministerstwo Spraw Zagranicznych, 12538.

emigrant aid organizations. In his report, Downarowitz cited at length the testimony of Mrs. Wilkin of the local branch of the YMCA, lauding her as one of the most authoritative voices in the matter:

Mrs. Wilkin told us the following details. During the check, apart from the doctors, all the male staff were removed; this regulation is strictly adhered to. The female emigrants are examined by different doctors: they are usually a number of Belgian doctors, a doctor appointed by the American government and possibly also two Canadian ones. Nurses are present during the investigation, while the formalities associated with travel documents are completed by a female employee of the shipping company. As a rule, Mrs. Wilkin is also present at the check. In view of the composition of the group present in the room and the presence in the next room of the Belgian authorities in the person of the Commissioner for Emigration and his assistants, any offense against the decency of the women must have caused immediate intervention.

Another thing is, emphasizes Mrs. Wilkin, that such a check is in itself an extremely unpleasant experience for the women, which indeed makes them very nervous and often cry. Mrs. Wilkin even stated that if it were herself, she probably would have refrained from going to America if she had to undergo that kind of scrutiny. However, it is not an abuse by the shipping company, but a requirement of the American sanitary authorities²³

In other words, according to Downarowitz's report, the shipping companies implemented the procedures correctly and as humanely as possible. However, the procedures as imposed by the destination countries in themselves were very stressful, echoing those on the German Border before the world war. Also, the fact that some emigrants were not allowed to go on board caused anxiety and resentment amongst everyone.²⁴

A declaration from 1928, made by an interpreter who was present during the interrogations in the Red Star Line building, gives a detailed depiction of the inspection the Canadian doctor, also mentioning the tensions that often arose between the concerned parties.²⁵ Men had to undress above the waist, and do some physical exercises. They were weighed and their measurements were taken. After that, a majority had to drop their pants as well and were checked for venereal diseases, among others. This could take up to 20 minutes or more. Those who looked nervous (according to the report, around 50%) had to go to another room to pass a second examination of about the same length. Heart, lungs, and stomach were examined again. According to the interpreter, the Canadian doctor was notoriously strict with women. They also had to undress above the waist and undergo the same procedures

²³ Report of the Polish repatriation bureau to the Consul-General of Poland in Antwerp, 12.12.1920, Archiwum Akt Nowych w Warszawie. Ministerstwo Spraw Zagranicznych, 12538, 3-6.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Report to emigration commissioner De Coster, 27.1.1928, 2.669 bis X Emigration – Questions Sanitaires et Service Médical, 2953 I-V: rapports – propagande – engagements, Archives of the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

more rigorously, which could take up to one and a half hours. A woman was told she had bad sight and was forced to buy glasses in order to be able to travel on to Canada, while there was good reason to believe that she was not able to read. The Canadian Railway Company forwarded the declaration to the Belgian Emigration Commissioner De Coster, complaining that the behavior of the doctor caused unnecessary delays and difficulties.²⁶

However, a lot of passengers experienced little of all this and made it on their ship without incident. After a short but tense stay from a couple of hours to a couple of days in Antwerp, it would take them on the Atlantic towards a new future. When they saw the city of Antwerp disappear on the horizon, they had only been on the ship for a few moments. But they had been under the care, guidance, and sometimes perhaps coercion of the shipping companies who had to navigate continuously between their business interests and the laws and regulations of both the departure and destination countries, from the moment the travelers had bought their tickets in Galicia or other regions of Central and Eastern Europe.

Conclusion

Transatlantic passenger traffic through Antwerp steadily declined throughout the 1920s and during the depression era. Red Star Line was liquidated in 1935, never to be replaced again by a major transatlantic passenger service out of Antwerp. The millions of emigrants who passed through Antwerp on their way to a new life left their mark on the city and found their way into the collective memory of Antwerpians today. The Red Star Line Museum revives their experiences in the original departure halls of the Red Star Line company at the quays where their ships left for the US and Canada. Yet, when reading immigrant biographies and memoirs, or interviewing the last witnesses, places of transit such as the port of Antwerp are barely mentioned. Key topics in those testimonies usually involve nostalgia and sometimes mourning for the lost life in the country of origin, traumas experienced before, during or after the journey, the ocean crossing, and the arrival in and first impressions of the new country.

However, as I argue in this essay focusing on the European part of the immigrant experience, the shipping business also had a crucial role in the migration process. From the moment their passengers bought their shipping tickets in their hometown, up until the arrival in the new country, shipping companies and their agents shaped the migrant experience. By the end of the nineteenth century, it facilitated a relatively easy and reliable journey in comparison with a few decades earlier. But at the same time it played a crucial role in the selection process between wanted and unwanted

26 Ibid.

newcomers, as destination countries such as Canada adopted a policy of “remote control” and strove to organize the selection process as far from their borders as possible.

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