

5b – We Built This Country

Beginning in the 1880s, the pattern of immigration into the Eastern U.S. shifted. Many Americans voiced alarm that the new wave of immigrants arriving from Italy, Poland, Russia and other countries of Southern and Eastern Europe would "mongrelize Nordic-American Stock." In 1924, Congress passed the National Origins Act, a quota system that greatly favored immigration from northwestern Europe. Both before and after the bill became law, immigrants from the targeted countries denounced it. Following is an excerpt from a letter sent by the Slovak League of America to the Senate Committee on Immigration protesting the quota system, which would remain in place until 1965.

The Slovaks entered the most hazardous vocations - coal mining and steel making - and they contributed their share toward the gigantic growth and development of these industries, which are so important to the life of this country. But they did more than merely work and enhance industrial and commercial values. They built churches and national halls; ... they organized fraternal beneficial societies. ... They have bought farms and cultivated them with such results that the secretaries of agriculture ... sing unstinted praise of the Slovak farmers, who, to use the phraseology of one such report, have practically coaxed crops out of rocks ... They built thereon their houses, and always have gardens and flowers. ...

They have given unmistakable proof of their love for this country in the days of the world war. ...

In view of the above, we ask: Is it consistent with the policies and principles of the United States to discriminate against such a fine type of people who seek this country because in it they can realize their dreams ... ? Is it in accord with those blazing ideas of democracy which were so forcefully expressed by the founders of this great republic and which have become an heirloom not only of America but of the whole civilized world?

*This article is reprinted by from the Teaching Tolerance curriculum kit
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