

Once Upon America

America—a nation built by immigrants full of hope
and yearning for a better life. . .

by Claire Boiko

Characters

OLD-COUNTRY WOMAN

BEN MOSCOWITZ

GRANDFATHER MOSCOWITZ

GRANDMOTHER MOSCOWITZ

ANNA SWENSON

INGRID

COUNTESS, offstage voice

MARCO ROSSELLI

LUIGI ROSSELLI

IMMIGRANT FAMILIES, chorus

THREE SAILORS

THIEF

TWO INSPECTORS

MEDICAL EXAMINER

SWEEPER

NORWEGIAN MOTHER

SCENE 1

TIME: 1910.

BEFORE RISE: IMMIGRANT FAMI-

LIES are seated before curtain, dressed in costumes of various European countries. OLD-COUNTRY WOMAN, in long dress and apron, enters, addresses audience thoughtfully.

OLD-COUNTRY WOMAN (*Shaking head ruefully*): Here it is, the year 1910. The first decade of the twentieth century, on the continent of Europe. We work hard. We struggle. And what for? It might as well be the Dark Ages.

FAMILIES (*Somberly*):
Too many people. Not enough land.
Not enough food. Not enough hope.

OLD-COUNTRY WOMAN: That's the worst thing about our lives. There's no hope. (*She crosses down center, sits on apron, burying head in hands. BEN MOSCOWITZ, carrying worn suitcase, enters right. He takes small book from pocket and reads aloud from it.*)

BEN: Good morning. How are you? May I have some breakfast, please? (*GRANDFATHER and GRANDMOTHER MOSCOWITZ hurry in left. GRANDMOTHER waves small package wrapped in kerchief.*)

GRANDMOTHER: Ben, wait! You forgot the bread. You won't get bread like this in America!

BEN (*To GRANDMOTHER*): Thank you, Grandmother. (*Takes package*)

GRANDFATHER: We really came to say goodbye again, even though we've said it a hundred times.

BEN (*Pleading*): Grandfather, please let me stay here in Russia with you.

GRANDFATHER: No, no, Ben. You must go to your uncle in New York. The Cossacks are rounding up young men. If you stay here, they'll take you away from us and put you in the army.

BEN: But I'm too young for the army.

GRANDMOTHER: Nobody is too young for them. They took a boy of eight last week to fetch and carry for the soldiers.

GRANDFATHER: And there's no future for you here in Russia. You have such a good mind, Ben. You speak English already. What could you do here? Sell pots and pans from town to town? You want to study for the law. (*Sound of train whistle is heard.*) That's your train. We must hurry to the station.

GRANDMOTHER: Come. We'll go with you to the depot.

BEN: But I don't want to leave you here alone. I'll worry about you. Please, let me stay.

GRANDFATHER: No! Don't worry. We'll be fine. And when you have enough money, you'll send for us, right?

BEN: I will. Oh, I will, Grandfather.

GRANDMOTHER (*Pointing to sky*): Look up there, Ben. That's the evening star. When you see that star in America, remember us.

GRANDFATHER: You keep your head high. America is a wonderful place. No

one will take your land or hurt your family in America. Here in Russia, dreams are like soap bubbles—they burst into nothing. But in America, dreams come true. (*Sound of train whistle grows louder.*)

GRANDMOTHER (*Taking BEN by the arm*): Come on, Benjamin Moscovitz—don't keep America waiting! (*They exit left. ANNA SWENSON, carrying battered suitcase, enters center, through curtain. She crosses down left, sets her suitcase down with a thump, then folds her arms and stamps her foot.*)

ANNA (*Defiantly*): I won't! I won't! I won't! I won't stay in Stockholm one more minute. I don't care if I have to walk across the whole Atlantic Ocean. I'm going to America. I am! I am! I am! (*INGRID runs on through curtain.*)

INGRID: Anna! Come quickly. The Countess is screaming for you. Oh, Anna, you are in such trouble.

ANNA: I don't care. I'm going away forever.

INGRID (*Shocked*): But where?

ANNA: To America. There are no countesses in America, because every girl is a countess. I have packed my suitcase. I have five kroner.

INGRID: Five kroner? But that won't even take you to the middle of Stockholm.

ANNA: Then, I'll—I'll walk to America. Oh, Ingrid, I'm so tired of being a servant girl.

INGRID (*Sighing heavily*): So am I. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad if we worked for a reasonable person. But the Countess is so difficult!

ANNA (*In imitation, shrieking unpleasantly*): Anna! Ingrid! Come here this

instant. My tea is cold. Go down and bring me fresh tea. Do you hear me? (*In her own voice*) What a dragon!

INGRID: Oh, Anna, don't go to America. If you stay, in a few years you could be a first parlormaid.

ANNA: I don't want to be *any* kind of maid. Why, I can read and write. A person who can read and write can do almost anything in America.

INGRID: But you can't speak English.

ANNA: Yes, I can. I listen at the keyhole when the Countess has her English lesson. And I bought this little book. (*Takes from pocket same language book BEN has*) Listen: Good morning. How are you? May I have some breakfast, please?

COUNTESS (*Shouting offstage*): Anna! Ingrid!

INGRID (*Shuddering*): Oh-h, she makes my head ache. Anna, where would you go in America?

ANNA: I wrote to my Uncle Nils and Aunt Christina. I begged them to let me come to their farm. I said I would do anything. Even milk cows. But I haven't heard from them.

INGRID (*Suddenly*): Oh! I almost forgot. (*Reaches into pocket*) A letter came for you this morning. It's from Minnesota! (*Hands letter to ANNA, who opens it quickly*)

ANNA (*Reading letter to herself, her face registering incredulity and joy*): Oh! It's a miracle! (*She hugs INGRID, dances around with her.*) My American miracle, just in time.

INGRID (*Puzzled*): What is in that letter? A million kroner?

ANNA: Better than that. (*Holds up slip*

of paper) A steamship ticket to America. From Aunt Christina and Uncle Nils. And a railroad ticket to Minnesota. Beautiful, beautiful Minnesota!

COUNTESS (*Offstage*): Anna! Ingrid! Come here at once.

ANNA (*Shaking her head; smiling*): Not today, Countess. Not ever again.

INGRID (*Despondently*): I'll miss you so much, Anna. Promise you'll write.

ANNA: I promise.

INGRID: Go—quickly. Let me be the one to tell the Countess. (*ANNA picks up suitcase and exits center. INGRID calls off, triumphantly.*) Oh, Countess! Anna cannot come at once. Anna cannot come at all. Anna has gone to Minnesota. Beautiful, beautiful Minnesota! (*She exits joyously. MARCO ROSSELLI enters, carrying worn suitcase and reading from same language book as BEN and ANNA.*)

MARCO: Good morning. How are you? May I have some breakfast, please? (*He strikes a pose, flourishing the book, and begins to sing the words as if they were an operatic aria.*) Good morning! How are you-oo-oo! May I have some breakfast, please. . . (*LUIGI ROSSELLI enters, watches MARCO and shakes his head in disbelief.*)

LUIGI (*Pretending awe*): No. It can't be. It's the famous opera singer, Marco Rosselli, in his first American engagement. Oh-h-h, how exciting it is!

MARCO: Don't laugh, little brother. Anything can happen in America. The streets are lined with gold, and Italian tenors sing for the President. Best of all, there's room enough for everybody.

LUIGI: Dream on, Marco. But when you're shining shoes on those streets lined with gold, remember me. I'm

coming to America next year—if you earn enough money for my steamship passage.

MARCO (*Airily*): Of course I'll earn enough. How many shoeshine boys sing opera while they buff your toes? I'll earn enough to bring the rest of Italy to America. And I'll tell you what. When you get there, I'll even give you a free shoeshine.

LUIGI (*Sarcastically*): A free shoeshine. I've been waiting all my life for a free shoeshine. Now, when you get to America, which one of our brothers is meeting you?

MARCO: They're all meeting me. All seven. And our sisters. And Mama. And Papa. They're having a big party for me.

LUIGI (*Sighing*): Oh, Marco, tell the truth for once.

MARCO (*Crestfallen*): Well. . . just Anthony. Everybody else is too busy. Now, listen, Luigi. You be a good boy, hear? Mind Cousin Giuseppi, o-kay?

LUIGI: What is that—"o-kay"?

MARCO: It's what everybody says in America. You'd be surprised how much English I learned carrying luggage for the tourists. O-kay?

LUIGI: O-kay. (*Sound of boat whistle is heard.*)

MARCO: That's the boat to America. (*Hesitating*) Well. . .

LUIGI (*Looking at his feet*): Well. . .

MARCO: Time to go, Luigi. Oh— (*Takes battered opera score from his pocket*) This is for you.

LUIGI (*Awed, taking score*): But this is your music. The score to *Rigoletto*.

MARCO: You keep it. I know it by heart. Besides, I've heard you sing.

LUIGI: You have?

MARCO (*Offhandedly*): You're pretty good. (*Mussing LUIGI's hair*) You're almost as good as I am.

LUIGI (*Happily*): Thanks, Marco! (*Sound of boat whistle is heard again. MARCO picks up suitcase, crosses left, pauses, turns and waves to LUIGI.*)

MARCO: *Arrivederci*, little brother. Until we meet in America. (*He exits left.*)

LUIGI: *Arrivederci*, big brother. I'll see you in the White House. (*He exits left. OLD-COUNTRY WOMAN raises her head.*)

OLD-COUNTRY WOMAN: Did I say there was no hope? But there is hope. There is a place for us. (*She stands.*) America.

FAMILIES:
Plenty of land. Plenty of food.
And plenty of hope. America!

1ST SOLO: In America, nobody is "Your Majesty." Everybody is "mister." Even the President!

2ND SOLO: In America, you can say what you think. Even when what you think is not what the government thinks you should think.

3RD SOLO: In America, everyone has the same rights. Even the street sweepers. It's written down for everyone to see, in the Declaration of Independence.

FAMILIES (*In unison*): "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these

are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. . . .”

OLD-COUNTRY WOMAN: Where is this place? On the moon? Over the rainbow? Is it a dream?

4TH SOLO: America is a real place.

5TH SOLO: America has a real sky.

6TH SOLO: Real mountains.

7TH SOLO: Real forests.

8TH SOLO: And good rich earth—and jobs!

OLD-COUNTRY WOMAN: Then why are

we waiting? We’re coming, America!
(*Exits center*)

FAMILIES (*In unison*): We’re coming, America.

1ST, 2ND, 3RD, and 4TH SOLOS (*In unison*): By the hundreds. . .

5TH, 6TH, 7TH, and 8TH SOLOS (*In unison*): By the thousands. . .

FAMILIES (*In unison*): By the millions! We’re coming to America! (*All sing first verse of “America, the Beautiful.” When they finish, IMMIGRANT FAMILIES exit behind curtain as musical reprise is played.*)

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