

Students 'come to America'

Ellis Island recreated at BJE

by Marcia Kay
Assistant Editor

Alyson Szymanski, 11, from Beth Beth El Hebrew Congregation in Alexandria, Va., and several hundred other sixth grade students from area religious schools, stepped back in time on Sunday when they participated in "The Immigrant in Each of Us," a program organized and coordinated by the Board of Jewish Education's Department of Experiential Education.

Those who participated donned clothes similar to those worn by Eastern European Jews as they crossed the Atlantic Ocean in the late 1800's and early 1900's en route to America. Some encountered less than friendly immigration officials speaking an unintelligible language. But eventually, most took the oath and became American citizens.

"The Immigrant in Each of Us," held at the Lehrman Building in Rockville, Md., included a total of more than 900 students on one Sunday in February and two in March. The program is one of several age-appropriate activities sponsored by the BJE and its department of experiential education.

On March 16, students from Virginia Conservative congregations Agudas Achim, also in Alexandria, Beth Emeth in Reston and Olam Tikvah in Fairfax and the Reform Northern Virginia Hebrew Congregation in Reston and Beth El Hebrew Congregation in Alexandria participated in the program.

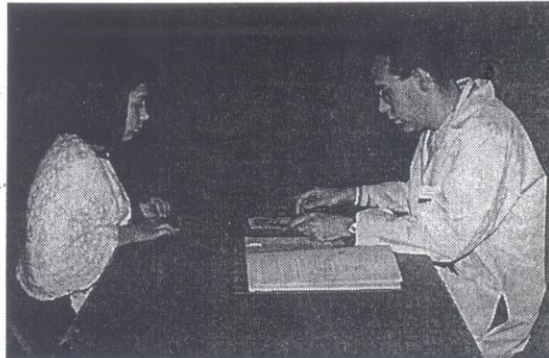
Students from Reform synagogues Temple Micah and Temple Sinai in Washington, D.C., Maryland congregations Or Chadash in Germantown, the Bethesda Chevy Chase Jewish Community Group in Bethesda, the Karp Family School at Reconstructionist Temple Mishkan Torah and Conservative Congregation Shaare Tefila in Silver Spring, Md. also dressed in their ancestors clothing and experienced "Ellis Island."

family tree and his or her journey to America. Ideally, that person is someone in the student's own family.

Between 1881 and 1925, approximately two and one-half million Jews came to America. If a student's ancestors did not come to America during that time, they traveled as a part of another classmate's family or were assigned a historical identity based on biogra-

it was like for the immigrants, she said. Rapp was "rejected" by inspectors and, she said, "wasn't told why." In fact, said Lerman, a language barrier kept her from understanding what the inspector was saying.

Many of the volunteers who participated as officials in "The Immigrant in Each of Us" speak foreign languages and were encouraged to do so during the inspec-



REJECTED — Stephanie Rapp, 11, from Northern Virginia Hebrew Congregation in Reston, Va. is questioned by Jordan Rosenfeld, an 'inspector' at Ellis Island.

Photo by Marcia Kay

phies in *This Land of Liberty*.

Before attending the program, students were taught what happened to the Jews who lived in Eastern Europe during the late 1800s and early 1900s. "Most Jews have roots to Jews [who were from] Eastern Europe," Lerman said. There was also a small Sephardic [Jews originally from Spain or Near Eastern countries] migration during that period.

Lerman estimated that four to five hours of classroom time is spent on preparation for the program.

The program also incorporated parents, who were asked to share a family heirloom and whatever information they may have about an ancestor who immigrated to America.

Before taking on an immigrant's persona, students were asked questions about their ancestors including: where they came from, what

tion process.

When students arrived at "Ellis Island" they had to wear an identification card and have in their possession an immigrant role sheet and an extra copy of the ship's manifest. The manifest was used by the Department of Labor to register aliens entering the country in the first decades of the 20th century. The manifest includes information on occupation of the immigrant, nationality, final destination and the person's state of health.

It was not uncommon for an individual who was diagnosed with a malady to be sent back to his or her country of origin.

Eric Likstein, 12, was dressed in a fur stole and carrying a baby, as had the Polish ancestor he was imitating. Immigrant Likstein was "rejected because I wouldn't show them my money. I was afraid they would take it."