



RIDGEWOOD

PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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The Ridgewood News
Superintendent's Corner
February / March 2017
by
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What Is Your Story?

The following column appeared in The Ridgewood News on March 10, 2017.

The constant barrage of news on immigrants and immigration has made me think about my own family's immigration to our great country.

My story starts with my mother's family, who immigrated to the United States prior to the Great Depression. My mom's father Pop arrived here alone from Eastern Europe in the early 1900s, leaving behind a family that ran a dress shop in Poland.

When World War I started Pop and a friend enlisted in the Army with dubious credentials as chefs. As Army cooks they were responsible for preparing meals and transporting them to the combat front on foldable bicycles that were outfitted with shoulder straps so the men could haul them on their backs while crawling back and forth to avoid enemy fire.

My resourceful Pop, who had learned to sew at his family's store when he was a child in Europe, also made extra money on the front lines by sewing officers' and fellow soldiers' badges on their uniforms. He used his earnings from the war to start a successful garment business when he came home. Although my Pop took enunciation classes to lose his accent, he never finished high school. Along the way he met my grandmother, Nana, who immigrated here with her family

when she was two years old. Nana had to leave school in the eighth grade to help in the family store, but her brothers were able to finish high school.

Nana and Pop met while dancing, an activity they enjoyed together throughout their lives. They raised my mother and another daughter and helped many relatives move to the United States from Poland prior to and after World War II. While they made and lost a fortune, they finished living their lives comfortably as tailors.

On my father's side, my grandparents escaped the Russian Poland border area for a better life in France, where my grandmother's brother Charles was living in Paris. They lived there for a few years, working in Charles' store. In the 1920s my grandfather left my grandmother and a newborn child (my aunt) in Paris and came to the United States to pursue the American Dream. He had nothing but got a job cutting clothing patterns in the garment industry in New York City. A year later, he brought his wife and then two-year old daughter to the United States.

Over three decades ago, my cousins, siblings and I bought a commemorative brick at Ellis Island to celebrate my grandmother's birthday. At the party, all nine grandchildren gathered around their "Baba" to present the gift. She told us how great and thoughtful we were, then informed us that my grandfather actually had brought my grandmother and aunt over First Class and never went to Ellis Island...they landed in Manhattan. We all had a big laugh.

Back to the story...

My grandfather spent his adult life as a cutter in the garment district and saved money to rescue relatives from Europe. Their small two-bedroom apartment in the Bronx was filled with his children -- my dad and his two sisters -- and my grandparents, plus a constant flow of relatives transitioning to the United States, but Charles was not one of them. When the Nazi's invaded Paris and they started to round up Jewish people, it was too late for Charles to get out. In order to survive, Charles switched places with a Christian worker in his store, surviving in plain sight by disguising as the Christian employee while the Christian worker posed the "boss".

My grandmother was a homemaker whose gnarled and crooked fingers told the story of a lifetime of cooking huge meals in her tiny kitchen for many relatives, and while generous, she would use one tea bag for every pot of tea.

Many relatives owe their successful start in the United States to my grandparents on both sides. Obviously there is more to their stories, but space in this column necessitates brevity. Suffice to say that my mom and dad met and married and had four children.

Just as we are grounded and enriched by the stories of our ancestors, the Ridgewood community is enhanced by people who have emigrated here from numerous countries around the world. As their neighbors, we are fortunate for the many opportunities we are given to learn firsthand through them about other cultures and beliefs. Our neighbors inspire us to model respect for the dignity of every human being.

The Ridgewood Public Schools database shows that we are truly a “melting pot,” with children from the following countries:

Albania	Egypt	Malasia	Sri Lanka
Australia	El Salvador	Mexico	Sweden
Bahrain	Ethiopia	Monaco	Switzerland
Bangladesh	Finland	Netherlands	Syrian Arab Republic
Belarus	France	Northern Mariana Islands	Taiwan
Belgium	Germany	Pakistan	Turkey
Bermuda	Guatemala	Panama	Ukraine
Bolivia	Honduras	Peru	United Arab Emirates
Brazil	Hong Kong	Philippines	United Kingdom
Bulgaria	India	Poland	United States
Cambodia	Iran	Puerto Rico	Uruguay
Canada	Ireland	Romania	Uzbekistan
China	Israel	Russian Federation	Venezuela
Costa Rica	Italy	Saudi Arabia	Vietnam
Czech Republic	Japan	Singapore	
Denmark	Kazakhstan	South Africa	
Dominican Republic	Korea	Spain	

Something we all have in common is a family story of immigration to this great country. Wouldn't it be great to know them all?

So, send me your story, the good, the bad and the ugly. With your permission I will compile the stories into a collection that celebrates our differences by sharing our common bond as immigrants to America.

As always, please feel free to contact me with your questions or concerns.

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