

# How Being an Immigrant Shaped My Life<sup>1</sup>

by Sonia Pressman Fuentes

My parents, Hinda and Zysia Pressman, were both born in the early 1890s in Poland in a village called Piltz by Jews although its official name was Pilica. It is an hour's drive from Cracow.

My father left Piltz as a teenager to seek his fortune in Germany. On a visit home, he met my mother, and, after their marriage in Poland in 1913, they moved to Germany. My brother, Hermann, was born in 1914, and I came along 14 years later.

By 1933, the family was well-to-do and living in Berlin, where my father rented and managed a men's clothing store, with a small factory in the rear. My mother and Hermann helped out in the store.

On January 30, 1933, President Paul von Hindenburg appointed Hitler Reich Chancellor of Germany. After various atrocities had been committed against Jews, some involving our family, at my brother's urging, my family left Germany for Antwerp, Belgium in the middle of 1933. We spent nine months in Antwerp, during which time I attended kindergarten and learned Flemish, and my father and Hermann attempted to get established in a number of businesses in a number of countries. None of the business ventures worked out. Furthermore, we were scheduled for deportation to Poland because we did not have the legal right to remain in Belgium. Accordingly, on April 20, 1934, we boarded the Red Star Line's S.S. *Westernland II* for the United States.

Neither of my parents had any education to speak of, and, except for Hermann, none of us knew a word of English. At the time, my mother was 42 years old, my father 40, Hermann was 19, and I was 5.

We landed in New York City on May 1, 1934, basically knowing no one except some cousins in Brooklyn. My father had hoped to go into business in the United States with one of those cousins, but that cousin died two weeks before our arrival. With the help of HIAS (Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society), we first settled in the Bronx. That's where I learned to speak English. Our apartment was in a building at 500 Southern Boulevard that was built in a semi-circle around a small garden. I would stand in the garden listening to the other children at play, and whenever I caught an English word, I'd run upstairs and repeat it to Hermann, who would give me the German equivalent. A month after our arrival, I turned six and started kindergarten that fall.

As newcomers, we had to make a life for ourselves--and that resulted in quite a few dislocations--beyond the dislocations we'd already experienced in moving from Germany to Belgium and then to the United States. When we lived in the Bronx, my father went into the men's clothing business in New York City with a partner. When that didn't work out, we moved to the Catskill Mountains of New York State, and my parents went into the summer resort business, a business they'd never been in before. Initially, they rented and ran a rooming house in the village of Woodridge. Then, we moved to the larger village of Monticello, where my father bought 50 acres of land and built and ran a bungalow colony consisting of 25 bungalows.

Because my parents weren't fluent in English, from childhood on, I was involved in their business dealings. I drafted the rental contracts for the rooming house and the bungalows and was an active participant in their business lives. That was no doubt a factor in my becoming a lawyer later on.

The dictionary says that to "immigrate" is "to come into a new country, region, or environment, especially in order to settle there." The operative word for me in that definition is *new*. To immigrate is to come to a *new* country and to have *new* experiences. And, like many things in life, to be an immigrant is both a blessing and a curse.

It's a blessing because it's challenging and exciting to do something new, something different, something everyone else isn't doing. It's a curse because it's scary to embark on any new activity. So, to be an immigrant is to be continually caught in the tension of the excitement of being an outsider in a society and the stigma of being different from those around you. To be an immigrant is to constantly reflect on who you are, where you came from, and how you are different from those around you. When you're an immigrant, you don't really belong anywhere--and you're never really at home anywhere.

An immigrant is like Philip Nolan, the fictional protagonist of a short story called "The Man Without a Country," by Edward Everett Hale, the grand-nephew of American patriot, Nathan Hale. In the story, first published in *The Atlantic* in December 1863, Nolan is a young U.S. Army lieutenant who becomes friendly with Aaron Burr. When Burr is tried for treason in 1807, Nolan is tried as an accomplice. During Nolan's testimony, he bitterly denounces the U.S., angrily shouting, "I wish I may never hear of the United States again!" The judge, in convicting him, icily grants him his wish: Nolan is sentenced to spend the rest of his life aboard U.S. Navy warships, in exile, with no right ever to set foot on American soil again and with explicit orders that no one shall ever mention his country to him again.<sup>2</sup>

In the story, Nolan is particularly affected when he hears part of the sixth canto of a poem called "The Lay of the Last Minstrel" by Sir Walter Scott. The feelings expressed in that poem are similar to those felt by immigrants everywhere. It starts like this:

Breathes there a man with soul so dead,  
Who never to himself hath said,

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<sup>1</sup> This article grew out of a suggestion made by the late Professor Jennie Farley to me for a speech I subsequently gave to one of her classes in the School of Industrial and Labor Relations at Cornell University, my alma mater, in April 2000.

After I gave that speech, I gave varying versions of it at other venues. In addition, my articles on this subject have appeared in: *120 HIAS Stories*, a book published to commemorate the 120<sup>th</sup> anniversary of HIAS (July 2002); *Women in Judaism*, an online Multidisciplinary Journal (April 2006); *The Jewish News of Sarasota-Manatee* (January 2007); the online Museum of Family History; and *Der Bay*, the newsletter of the International Association of Yiddish Clubs.

I found out a few years ago that I was actually a refugee to this country, not an immigrant. An immigrant is someone who chooses to resettle to another country. A refugee is someone who has been forced to flee his or her home country. In this article, however, I write of myself as an immigrant because that is how I thought of myself for most of my life.

<sup>2</sup> Wikipedia entry, "The Man Without a Country"

This is my own, my native land!  
Whose heart hath ne'er within him burn'd,  
As home his footsteps he hath turn'd,  
From wandering on a foreign strand!

It is a wrench to be torn from the country of your birth and the feeling of dislocation never leaves you.

I'm an American citizen--but I wasn't born here so I'm not totally an American. I'm certainly not a German either. To be an immigrant is to want to stay in the country you came to but to also long to return to the country you came from. Being an immigrant saved my life--and robbed me of my childhood.

When I see photographs or movies about Germany or hear German songs, I wonder who I would have been and who I would have become if Hitler and Nazism hadn't caused my family to leave the country of my birth. That is, of course, a speculation to which one can never have an answer. But, it is the kind of speculation that haunts immigrants.

Kati Marton, author of *The Great Escape: Nine Jews Who Fled Hitler and Changed the World* (2006), said the following when she spoke about the effects of uprootedness years ago when she was honored by the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research at the Center for Jewish History in New York City: "The moral is that exile is never compensation for who you once were, what you had and will never again have. . . . Though they triumphed, they never again found what had been stripped from them--a sense of belonging."

I became an immigrant at the age of five--and have remained one all my life.

What does this mean? It means that the fact that I left Germany, the country of my birth, and after a brief stay in Antwerp, Belgium, came to the United States, has colored everything I've been and done since then.

The effect of my being an immigrant has many facets. First of all, it made me different from most of those with whom I came in contact after I arrived here in 1934.

Actually, more than 40% of all living Americans--over 100 million people--can trace their roots to an ancestor who came through Ellis Island. The influx of immigrants to the United States between 1892 and 1954, during which time 12 million immigrants were processed at Ellis Island, was the largest human migration in modern history.

But I didn't know that when I was a child. What I knew was that I was different from my classmates. I had European parents and was European myself. My classmates in the Catskill Mountains were, by and large, born in this country, as were their parents. My parents spoke a foreign language at home, and they had ideas and customs that differed from those of the parents of my classmates.

My mother sent me to kindergarten wearing knee high hose; I longed to wear ankle socks like my American classmates. My parents were also older than the parents of my classmates; my mother was 36 when I was born.

I was different in other ways, too. I had no siblings at home for company because my brother, Hermann, married when I was 10 years old and left home. I had no close cousins with whom to play and no grandparents in this country. Three of my grandparents had died long ago and the fourth, my paternal grandmother, Udel Ulmer, lived in Poland. In addition, my parents and I went to Miami Beach, Florida every year for the winter. So, I would begin my class year in the Catskill Mountains (first in Woodridge, then in Monticello), then shift to a school in Miami Beach, and end the year back with my class in the Catskills, thereby making me an outsider in all these classes.

And, I was Jewish. When I was growing up in the 1930s and '40s, being Jewish wasn't what it is today. Today, it's chic to be Jewish or a member of another religious or ethnic minority. Back then, it was a mark of difference. It set you apart from the mainstream of the culture. I always remember feeling particularly excluded at Christmastime--the beautiful Christmas trees, the lights, the carols, the exchange of presents, the family gatherings--all that was not for me. I was a Jew.

As an adult, I continued the pattern of being an outsider to my society. I became a lawyer in 1957 when 3% of the law school graduates in this country were women. I chose to have a career when most women opted for marriage and a family. I got married at the age of 42, 20 years after most of my contemporaries had gotten married. I gave birth to my daughter when I was 43½--when most of my friends' children were in college. And, even when I retired, I chose a different route--instead of relaxing, I embarked upon a career as a writer and public speaker.

Being an immigrant had something to do with all that. Because I had escaped from the Holocaust and been able to come to this country, I felt that I was not free as other women were to simply seek happiness through marriage and family. I felt I had been saved for a purpose, and that there was something I needed to do with my life to contribute to society.

These feelings led to my attending law school at the University of Miami (Florida) from 1954 to 1957, taking a job with the newly-created Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) in Washington, D.C., in 1965, and becoming a co-founder of the National Organization for Women (NOW) in 1966. I concluded that the contribution I could make to society was to fight employment discrimination based on race, color, religion, gender, and national origin. Minorities and women in this country were set apart, treated differently, and discriminated against--all conditions natural to immigrants.

As it turned out, I became an expert in the developing law of gender discrimination.

Shortly after we arrived in this country, my parents applied for citizenship papers. Five years later, when they became citizens, I automatically became a citizen on my father's citizenship papers. But I was never comfortable with the fact that I did not have my own papers. So, while I was a student at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, I applied for my own papers. Thereafter, at a ceremony just for me in the Ithaca courthouse, I was given my own citizenship papers. That was quite a thrill. I have always felt that I appreciate the privilege of living in this country more than those who were born here--and I have never, ever taken it for granted.

I made a wonderful discovery when I was doing research for my memoir, *Eat First--You Don't Know What They'll Give You: The Adventures of an Immigrant Family and Their Feminist Daughter*. It was my recollection that the ship on which we came to the U.S. was the Red Star Line's S.S. *Westernland II*. My parents had a small, male doll dressed in a navy blue, velvet uniform with a cap on his head; I remembered that the label on his cap read S.S. *Westernland*. But that doll got lost, and I wasn't sure my recollection was accurate. I asked Hermann, and he thought we came over on the Cunard Line. I wrote to the Cunard Line, but, for a long time, I got no answer.

Then, a friend told me that the manifests--passenger lists--of most ships that had arrived in the United States from foreign ports between about 1820 and 1982 were at the National Archives in Washington, D.C. I went to the Archives and was told that the information on the manifests was on microfiche. I got the microfiche for May 1934, inserted it into the viewing machine, and looked for the name Pressman--but I could not find it. I didn't know whether that was because the microfiche was unclear or because I didn't know the way the manifests were organized. I turned the machine this way and that, but nothing worked.

When I had come in to the Archives, I had noticed a tall man standing at the reception desk, but I couldn't figure out whether he worked there or was a visitor like me. I asked this man if he could help me. His name was Dan Law; he was a technician at the Archives; and he came over to help.

Dan told me that some of the microfiche was old, had deteriorated, and, therefore, was hard to see. He asked whether I'd mind if he sat down at the machine and gave it a try. Of course, I was delighted to have him do so. Then, he asked me for my brother's first name, explaining that the manifests were arranged in accordance with the passengers' first names. After I gave him Hermann's name, he asked if I knew how old he was in May of 1934 when we arrived. "Of course," I said. "He was 19."

"Here he is," said Dan.

The information in the microfiche allowed him to locate the manifest in a book of manifests. He showed it to me and said, "Would you like to have a copy?" *Would I?* Dan ran off a copy for me, and then I held in my hand a copy of the manifest of the *S.S. Westernland II* with my parents' names on it, Hermann's name, my name--and even that of my grandmother, Udel, who was not on the ship but on whom the ship had a record.

Sometime later, I received a letter from the Cunard Line's office in England. It turned out that Cunard had bought the Red Star Line and the company sent me several pictures of the *S.S. Westernland II* with text on some of the many immigrants the ship had brought to the United States.

When one thinks about immigration, the two symbols that come to mind are the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island. I visited the Statue of Liberty years ago; next to the flag, it is our country's most famous symbol for freedom.

The Statue has been referred to as the most famous immigrant ever to come to this country. However, when the Statue was unveiled in October 1886 on Liberty Island, suffragists protested that an enormous female figure would stand in New York Harbor representing liberty when most American women had no liberty to vote. (Next year, we will celebrate the centennial of American women's securing suffrage.) It is generally believed that the Statue was a gift to the U.S. from France, but that was not the case. Actually, the fundraising was done by its French sculptor, Frédéric-Auguste Bartholdi, and Joseph Pulitzer, the American newspaper magnate. It is the most famous sculpture in the world.

When I visited the Statue, I read again the poem then mounted inside the pedestal, which today is in the Statue of Liberty Museum, in the base. This poem, entitled "The New Colossus," was written in 1883 by Emma Lazarus, a woman who grew up in New York City in a prominent fourth generation Jewish family. She was one of the most outspoken Americans on issues affecting Jews. Her poem, which was used to help raise funds for the construction of the Statue's pedestal in 1903, contained the following now-famous lines:

"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she  
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost, to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

American journalist and historian John T. Cunningham wrote: "The Statue of Liberty was not conceived and sculpted as a symbol of immigration, . . . However, it was Lazarus's poem that permanently stamped on Miss Liberty the role of unofficial greeter of incoming immigrants."<sup>3</sup>

The iconic language of "The New Colossus" hasn't always represented U.S. policy--but, to the extent possible, it should.

In October of 1996, I took the ferry at Battery Park for a visit to Ellis Island. From 1892 to 1924, Ellis Island was the principal federal immigration station in the United States. More than 12 million immigrants were processed there. My family didn't go to Ellis Island when we arrived in the United States in 1934 for two reasons. First, after 1924, Ellis Island, with some exceptions, was no longer the entry point for newly-arrived immigrants. Instead, by that time, the U.S. had established embassies all over the world, and prospective immigrants applied for their visas at American consulates in their own countries, where the paperwork and medical inspections were conducted. Secondly, we came in first class, and first- and second-class passengers who arrived in New York Harbor were not required to undergo the inspection process at Ellis Island. Instead, such passengers underwent a cursory inspection aboard ship. The theory was that if a person could afford to purchase a first- or second-class ticket, he or she was less likely to become a public charge in America due to medical or legal reasons.

The situation was very different for steerage or third-class passengers. Third-class was called steerage because those passengers were housed on the lower decks of the ships where the steering mechanism had once been housed. For third-class passengers, their first step on American soil was on Ellis Island. These immigrants traveled in crowded and often unsanitary conditions near the bottom of the steamship with few amenities, often spending up to two weeks seasick in their bunks during rough Atlantic Ocean crossings. They traveled in terror that during their examinations at Ellis Island they would be found to have a contagious disease or considered likely to become a public charge or an illegal contract laborer and they would be returned to their countries of origin.

Actually, only 2% of the immigrants who passed through Ellis Island were turned away--but that translated to over 250,000 people whose hopes and dreams turned to tears.

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<sup>3</sup> Cunningham, John T., *Ellis Island: Immigration's Shining Center*, pp. 46-48, South Carolina: Arcadia Publishing, 2003.

Most immigrants and refugees entered the United States through New York Harbor, but others sailed into other ports, such as Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, San Francisco, Savannah, Miami, and New Orleans. They came on steamship liners of companies like White Star, Red Star, Cunard, and Hamburg America.

For those coming into New York Harbor, the ship would dock at the Hudson or East River Pier. First- and second-class passengers would disembark, pass through customs at the piers, and be free to enter the United States. Third-class passengers were transported from the piers by ferry or barge to Ellis Island, where they were required to undergo medical and legal inspections.

Among the immigrants and refugees who came through Ellis Island and later attained fame in this country were songwriter Irving Berlin;<sup>4</sup> bandleader Xavier Cugat; Father Edward Flanagan of Boys Town; Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter; actors: Bela Lugosi, Claudette Colbert, Edward G. Robinson, and Rudolph Valentino; singer Al Jolson; African-American leader Marcus Garvey; entertainer Bob Hope; impresario Sol Hurok; co-founder of the Actors Studio Lee Strasberg; director Elia Kazan; football coach Knute Rockne; Admiral Hyman Rickover; and Baron von Trapp and his family, whose story later became *The Sound of Music*.

Although I did not come through Ellis Island, it was a very meaningful place for me to visit. One of the outdoor exhibits on Ellis Island, The American Immigrant Wall of Honor, honors immigrants and refugees regardless of when they arrived or through which port they entered. Virtually every nationality is represented on the Wall from every inhabited continent on the face of the earth.

Among the people whose names are inscribed on the Wall are Colonel John Washington, George Washington's great-grandfather; Myles Standish, who landed at Plymouth Rock on the Mayflower in 1620; and the great-grandparents of President John F. Kennedy. It is the only place in the United States where an individual can honor his or her family heritage at a national monument. If you make a \$150 (formerly \$100) contribution to The Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation, you can have the name of an immigrant inscribed there. Many years ago, I made a contribution to the Foundation, and so when I visited, I could see my brother Hermann's name on the Wall. Thereafter, my daughter Zia made a contribution, and now the Zysia Pressman Family name is there, too. The Wall is currently inscribed with over 700,000 names.

Ellis Island did not close after it ceased to be the major entry point for new immigrants. After 1924, it remained open for many years and served a number of purposes. Immigrants were detained there if they had problems with their paperwork, as were war refugees, displaced persons, and, during World War II, enemy merchant seamen. The U.S. Coast Guard also used it as a training facility. Ellis Island was closed in 1954.

Valery Bazarov, who was then on the staff of HIAS, told me years ago that he had reason to believe that the last case on Ellis Island involved a Jewish family who were to be deported until HIAS won an appeal of the deportation decision against them.

There was a dedicated woman who worked at Ellis Island for years helping women immigrants and their children. Her name was Cecelia Greenstone, and she was known as the "Angel of Ellis Island." Cecelia was born in Bialystok, Russian Poland in 1887. She became a Socialist Zionist, and, when that brought her into conflict with the government and the police, her family fled to America in 1905. After arriving in New York City, she turned down job offers until she could speak English. She went to the library and taught herself not only English but also Hebrew, German, and Yiddish, eventually learning to speak seven languages. She was hired by the National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW) in 1907 and worked six days a week at Ellis Island, assisting single women, mothers, and children through the immigration process. In 1905 alone, the NCJW dealt with over 600,000 women and children, most of whom were helped by Cecelia Greenstone.

In 1990, Ellis Island became a museum; it gets two million visitors a year.

When I think of how being an immigrant affected my life and what it means to be an outsider, I am reminded of the writer Henry David Thoreau and the circumstances that led to his book *Walden*,<sup>5</sup> one of the world's great books. Thoreau, of course, was not an immigrant. He was as American as one can be. He was born in Concord, Massachusetts, in 1817, educated at Harvard, and started out as a teacher. What is interesting about Thoreau is that, in effect, he turned himself into an outsider to discover what life was all about. In 1845, he left the bustling town of Concord, built a cabin at Walden Pond, and lived there for two years. He set out deliberately to live away from the crowd, and he wrote about his thoughts while at Walden Pond in his book.

"I went to the woods," he wrote, "because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived." At the end of *Walden*, in writing about what he had learned, he wrote these famous lines, which I will paraphrase to be more inclusive. "Why should we be in such desperate haste to succeed and in such desperate enterprises? If a man or woman does not keep pace with their companions, perhaps it is because they hear a different drummer. Let them step to the music which they hear, however measured or far away."

I hope in that sense that each of us will be an immigrant--an outsider--so we can look at our society and see it from a vantage point that differs from that of those who are an integral part of it--and that we will each listen to our own drummer.

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<sup>4</sup> In September 2013, I spent almost a week as a guest of the city of Antwerp and the Red Star Line Museum at the Museum's opening festivities in Antwerp. That museum is dedicated to the Red Star Line and immigration. I was the only surviving passenger at the opening festivities. While there, I spent considerable time with Linda Emmet, Irving Berlin's middle daughter, who donated one of his pianos to the Museum on behalf of the Berlin family.

Irving Berlin wrote the music and lyrics for *Miss Liberty*, a 1949 Broadway musical about a fictional woman who served as the model for Bartholdi's Statue of Liberty. (In fact, Bartholdi used his mother as the model.) Although many of its songs became popular hits, the show was a failure.

<sup>5</sup> Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden, or, Life in the Woods*. London: J.M. Dent, 1908.