

Crossing Borders: *Contemporary Immigrant Stories in Historical Context*

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There is no country on Earth more populated by immigrants than the United States. Most U.S. residents (99 percent) have ancestors who were immigrants to this continent, whether they came voluntarily as travelers, or involuntarily as slaves.¹ These immigrants have helped to shape the social and economic foundations of their adopted nation.

According to Hasia Diner, professor of history at New York University, the history of the United States could be described by waves of immigration, originating from different regions of the world, that fall into five distinct periods.²

I. Settlers of a “New World” (ca. 1600-1820)

In early years, immigrants came largely from Protestant Britain to the new colony on the east coast of America. However, some came from northern or western Europe and spoke German or French, and not all of these immigrants were Protestant, as some were Catholic and others Jewish. The earliest newcomers during this period were Spanish Catholic settlers who migrated to present day New Mexico.

Many of these immigrants were farmers attracted by the opportunity to purchase affordable land. They were in search of an economic opportunity quite unlike that found in their homeland. Others came for religious freedom as exemplified by the stories of the Pilgrims and Puritans. It was also common during this period for immigrants to come to America as indentured servants. These men and women would agree to a contract

of a number of years of service in exchange for passage to the New World. At the end of the agreed upon time of service these newcomers were free to acquire farms or to pursue opportunities as they pleased. Clearly, this freedom was not granted to the many thousands of Africans who were brought to America in slave ships. These involuntary immigrants numbered nearly one fifth of the population by the end of the Colonial era.³

II. Mass Migration (1820-1890)

The second wave of immigration was marked by both its large scale and the dominant social and economic factors of the age. In Europe, the Industrial Age created an economy that made it difficult for workers, especially young rural workers, to make a decent living. In addition, the rise of militaristic nationalism in some countries, especially in Eastern Europe, pushed many to seek life elsewhere. The demand for labor was high in the United States, and the pamphlets sent back to the “Old World” were advertising the opportunity of a new life (with lures of gold, free land, and freedom). Whole towns in the Midwest were being populated by immigrants from Germany and other countries of Central and Northern

Europe. The potato famine in Ireland caused large-scale emigration, and the need for west coast railroad workers encouraged Chinese laborers to emigrate. For the first time a major political movement targeting immigrants made the national stage—the anti-immigrant, anti-Catholic Know Nothing Party. The Chinese Exclusion Act was passed on 1882, the only Act of Congress in U.S. history that explicitly curtailed immigration for one specific race.⁴ Ironically, a year later, Emma Lazarus wrote the lines that found its way onto the base of the Statue of Liberty:

*Give me your tired, you 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!*⁵

It was also during this period that large numbers of Mexicans found themselves “immigrated” at the end of the Mexican American War with the annexation of formerly Mexican territory into the southwestern United States.

III. A Wave Becomes a Flood (1890-1918)

Industrialization of the late 19th century brought technological changes that had a profound impact on transportation and by implication on immigration. Travel by steamship and rail, along with the transatlantic telegraph, encouraged immigration like never before. Ernst Ravenstein, one of the preeminent geographers of the period, posited several laws of immigration that influence geographers to this day. One of his observations was that people seem more likely to emigrate primarily during a certain stage of life. By and large, the immigrants of this era were young and unmarried, unlike the many visual images of immigrant families that characterize the age.⁶

The percentage of Americans identifying themselves as foreign born was greater than at any time since the beginning of the census. Millions arrived from Southern and Eastern Europe, and several million of these were Jewish. Most of these newcomers settled in urban areas and contributed to the labor pool of the new industries of the day.

This third wave of immigrants also dispels the myth that immigration to this country was an east-to-west phenomenon. In the second half of the 19th century and into the 20th century, newcomers were entering the United States through Mexico, Canada, and Angel Island (in San Francisco Bay), as well as Ellis Island (in New York Bay). This change from

early immigration would have a profound impact on the general racial make-up of the U.S. population in the 21st century.

IV. Legislating Immigration (1918-1965)

After World War I, Congress began to change the basic policy of immigration to the United States. In 1921, the National Origins Act outlined a quota system for different regions of the world. This legislation largely eliminated immigration from Asia and severely restricted the numbers from southern and eastern Europe, giving preference to those from northern and western Europe. The Act did not restrict immigration from any country in the western hemisphere, and newcomers came freely from Mexico and the Caribbean. Many were recruited to fill positions as farm workers in the west and southwest. Partly due to the efforts of Cesar Chavez, the co-founder of the United Farm Workers Union, Congress began to look into reforms in immigration policy at the end of this period.

V. The Hart-Celler Act (1965-present)

During the Johnson administration as part of the Great Society legislation, Congress passed the Hart-Celler Act. This Act ended the racially based quota system and replaced it with preferences based on familial relationships and desirable occupations. After several decades of renewed immigration from the tradi-

tional European regions, a new and profound wave of immigration began from Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The percentage of U.S. citizens self-identifying as foreign-born has approached those seen in the early 1900s (Figure 1).

Points for Discussion

Once again, issues surrounding immigrants and their role in our society are on the national stage. Let's recall that most immigrants have legal status. According to the Pew Research Center, about seven out of every ten immigrants in the United States are legal. Those who are undocumented have entered without inspection or have overstayed a temporary visa. While undocumented immigration seems to be declining, recent estimates indicate that unauthorized immigrants make up four percent of the U.S. population.⁷

Immigration has remained a controversial topic throughout U.S. history. There are a number of points made by those who would prefer greater restrictions on immigration to the United States. Some argue that we are a nation of laws and our focus should be on addressing the status of "illegal" immigrants in this country; that is, we should enforce our existing laws, or make them stricter. Some believe that since our nation has moved from an industrial to a service economy, there no longer a need for an unlimited supply of labor. Others observe that many of our jobs have been outsourced, and new ones are not being generated in the currently weak U.S. economy. Moreover, there are costs of health, education, and other social services that may be provided to new arrivals—both documented and undocumented. In some communities, xenophobia and nativism have sprung up, where immigrants are seen negatively as "non-English speakers with large extended families—the different ones." There is also, for some, a concern over a perceived loss of a European cultural legacy in the United States.

For others, however, this wave of immigration is similar to previous eras. Every wave of immigration has inspired a corresponding wave of fear and suspicion that we ought not succumb to. Some argue

Figure 1. Immigration to the United States: An Overview, 1850-2007

Year	Number of Foreign Born	Percentage of U.S. population
1850	2,244,602	9.7
1880	6,679,943	13.3
1900	10,341,276	13.6
1930	14,204,149	11.6
1950	10,347,395	6.9
1980	14,079,906	6.2
2007	38,059,694	12.6

Sources: U.S. Census (www.census.gov) and Migration Policy Institute (www.migrationinformation.org/DataHub/usimmigration.cfm).

that many jobs are available to industrious newcomers, who in turn generate other new jobs. Segments of our economy depend upon the relatively cheap labor of those immigrants with basic skills, and restrictions on this labor pool would cripple our economy. On the other hand, current U.S. policies encourage the immigration of skilled or highly skilled people. Supporters of liberal immigration policies argue that these newcomers are a key part of America's standing as a dynamic, innovative nation. Certainly, the immigrants' contributions to American culture have been a central part of our history and identity.

Immigrant Stories

A discussion of immigration history and current policy can tend to focus on a cold statistics if we neglect the interesting and inspiring stories of these immigrants. To underscore that we are a "nation of immigrants" and to briefly note the circumstances that "push" people from their native countries, we offer three stories told to us by recent immigrants. These stories are probably not unlike stories that might be uncovered in the history of most American families. On the other hand, each immigrant story has its own unique and interesting details. Indeed, interviewing relatives or neighbors who are immigrants makes a great oral history project for elementary students.⁸

The Hernandez Family from Mexico

Rosa Hernandez emigrated from Guatemala with her mother and sister and arrived in ten years ago as undocumented immigrants. Rosa's father was kidnapped by rival political gangs a year before their departure and was never seen again. Rosa's mother become frightened and decided it was best to leave Mazatenango without proper documentation even though that meant that they would have little legal protection as they trekked through Mexico and found a "coyote" to take them into the United States.⁹

Remaining in Guatemala was not an option. The family's destination was

Bryan, Texas, where Rosa's father had a friend who ran a home cleaning business. Rosa's family and two others traveled as a group for company and safety. Nevertheless, the families were robbed outside of Merida, Mexico, and Rosa's older sister was physically abused in Northern Mexico.

Once in Texas, the families went their separate ways and Rosa and her mother and sister took a bus ride to Bryan. Rosa and her sister located their father's friend and were hired into the business. Within a year Rosa and her family had their own apartment and were establishing roots in this small city. Rosa and her family quickly began inquiring into establishing legal residence and beginning a home cleaning business of their own.

Today, Rosa and her sister own a

large home cleaning business that serves the twin cities of Bryan and College Station. Rosa is also engaged to a fellow Guatemalan and hopes to wed once she and her family are in a federal program that will lead to the family becoming documented residents. Her dream is to establish her roots in the area, raise a family, and become a citizen.

The Deniz Family from Egypt

In 2003 Yusef Deniz, the son of a wealthy business family, was given permission by the Egyptian government to come to the United States and enroll in a doctoral program at the University of Illinois. Yusef's areas of study are library science, technology and higher education. His dream is to become a librarian at a research university.

Glossary: Immigration to the United States

Immigrant: A person who has crossed an internal border and settled in another country. An immigrant has arrived in his or her new homeland.

Emigrant: A person who is leaving his or her old homeland to reside in another country.

Migrant: A person who moves from one region to another usually for social or economic reasons. The move may or may not be across an international border or intended to be permanent.

Undocumented, unauthorized, or illegal immigrant: A person lacking legal approval to reside in the United States.

Mixed status family: A family that has both documented and undocumented members.

First generation immigrant: People who have immigrated; those who were born abroad.

Second generation immigrant: People born in the United States with one or more parent who is foreign born.

Alien: A person who is not a citizen of the United States. (A legal term)

U.S. Citizen: Most people become U.S. citizens by:

BIRTH, either within the territory of the United States or to U.S. citizen parents, or **NATURALIZATION**, the process of obtaining U.S. citizenship.

ADOPTION. Any child under the age of 18 who is adopted by a U.S. citizen and immigrates to the United States will acquire immediate citizenship according to the Child Citizenship Act (CCA) passed by Congress in 2000. (www.uscis.gov)

Upon arriving to Champaign, Illinois and settling into a condominium that he rented with the assistance of his father, Yusef sent for his wife and son. Since the family was reasonably fluent in English, Yusef's wife had little difficulty getting about their community and their son, who was interested in business and mathematics, easily transitioned into the local high school. In the third year of his five-year doctoral program, Yusef's son graduated from high school and enrolled at Illinois State University in Normal.

As Yusef's graduation nears, he is having second thoughts about returning to Egypt. He and his family enjoy living in the United States. They are openly jealous of the freedoms Americans possess—the opportunity to move anywhere in the country, the right to express their political views, and the chance to make a better life for themselves. Today, Yusef is in contact with other Egyptian graduate students who hold views similar to his and is hoping to find an American lawyer who can help them remain in the United States upon graduation. Yusef is confident American immigration officials will take notice of his education and skills and find a way for him and his family to remain in this country.

The Grosha Family from Russia

Anatoly and Aklina Grosha and their young children, Marlen and Lilia, emigrated from Russia to escape the religious discrimination they experienced on a daily basis in St. Petersburg. Anatoly is a choreographer and his wife is a successful costume designer in the city's entertainment community. However, they found opportunities to advance their careers limiting and were openly discouraged when their children were not allowed to enroll in some of St. Petersburg's elite elementary schools because of "full enrollment." The Grosha family attributes these barriers to the forces of anti-Semitism, which seem to be strong in many Russian cities.

Economic instability in Russian was another factor that pushed the Grosha family toward a decision to immigrate to the United States. In 2000 they packed



Immigrant children playing on the roof garden of the Washington School, Boston, 1915.

Lewis Wickes Hine/Library of Congress

their bags and moved to Nevada. They chose Las Vegas because they had friends who were part of the Cirque du Soleil and were told that opportunities were available to individuals in the entertainment industry. In 2003, both parents were employed by Cirque du Soleil and living in one of the new subdivisions that dot the Las Vegas landscape. Marlen attended a local private Jewish high school and Lilia was enrolled in a high school noted for its curriculum in the performing arts. This year members of the Grosha family became American citizens.

Conclusion

All of these new arrivals showed resiliency, creativity, and doggedness as they overcame numerous obstacles to realize the American Dream for themselves and their families. Whether arriving to study at an institution of higher learning, to find better employment performing manual labor that sustains the "backbone of our economy," or to escape political instability or religious discrimination, the creative spirit these immigrants bring to this country is often seen in their children who enter our elementary classrooms. Let's keep that creative spirit alive. 🌍

Notes

1. U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000.
2. Hasia Diner, "Immigration and U.S. History," www.america.gov.

3. Roger Daniels, *Coming to America: A History of Immigration and Ethnicity in American Life* (New York: Harper Collins Press, 2002), 53.
4. The Know Nothing Party was the common name for the American Party, which became a national political party in 1845. Party members were called "Know Nothings" because, when asked about party secrets, they would commonly reply: "I know nothing." Party members became divided over the issue of slavery and no longer constituted a serious movement by 1860, when Abraham Lincoln, the upstart candidate for the Republican Party, won the presidential election. The idea of nativism, however, has remained a force in American political culture up to the present.
5. Emma Lazarus, *Selected Poems*. John Hollander, ed. (New York: Library of America, 2005), 58.
6. Roger Daniels, *Coming to America: A History of Immigration and Ethnicity in American Life* (New York: Harper Collins Press, 2002), 30. See also Daniel Kanstroom, *Deportation Nation: Outsiders in American History* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press), 2007.
7. Jeffery Passel, "Trends in Unauthorized Immigration," (Washington, DC: Pew Hispanic Center, 2008), pewhispanic.org/reports/report.php?ReportID=94; See also the timeline of legal and illegal immigration to the U.S. and other resources at immigration.procon.org.
8. Kathryn Walbert, "How To Do It: Oral History Projects," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 18, no. 2 (March/April 2004): P1-P8.
9. A "coyote" is someone hired to move undocumented immigrants across the Mexico/U.S. border. Today it might cost around \$600 to hire a coyote to transport a person from northern Mexico to the United States.

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