How Being an Immigrant Shaped My Life

by Sonia Pressman Fuentes, Sarasota, Florida

My parents, Hinda and Zysia Pressman, were both born in the late 1890s in a *shtetl* in Poland an hour's ride from Cracow called Piltz by its Jewish inhabitants and Pilica by its non-Jewish Polish residents.

My father left Piltz as a teenager to seek his fortune in Germany. On a return visit home, he was introduced to my mother, and after their marriage in Poland in 1913, they moved to Germany. My brother, Hermann, was born in Neu Isenburg, a town near Frankfurt am Main, in 1914 and I was born in Berlin 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 and factory. My mother and Hermann helped out in the store.

On January 30, 1933, President von Hindenburg appointed Hitler Reichschancellor of Germany. After various atrocities had been committed against Jews, some involving our family, at the urging of my brother, my family left Germany for Antwerp, Belgium, in the middle of 1933. We spent nine months in Antwerp, during which time I attended school and learned Flemish, and my father and Hermann attempted to get established in a number of businesses in a number of countries. None of these business ventures worked out. As a result, on our Polish visas, on April 20, 1934, we boarded the Red Star Line's *S.S. Westernland* 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. We first settled in the Bronx. That's where I learned to speak English. Our apartment was in a building 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 unfamiliar word, I'd run upstairs and repeat it to Hermann and he'd give me the German equivalent. A month after our arrival, I turned six and started kindergarten. 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 to the United States. Initially, my father went into the men's clothing business in New York City. When that didn't work out, we moved to the Catskill Mountains of New York State and went into the summer resort business. There, my parents rented and ran a rooming house in a village called Woodridge, and five years later, we moved to the larger nearby town of Monticello, where my father built and ran a bungalow colony.

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.

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 everything worthwhile 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 to 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 come 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 man without a country in the short story of that name by Edward Everett Hale, the grand-nephew of American patriot, Nathan Hale. In that story, Nolan, a former lieutenant in the U.S. Army, who had the bad fortune to get mixed up with Aaron Burr, was forced to spend fifty years roaming the seas on various federal ships in punishment at his court martial for damning the United States and saying that he wished never to hear of it again.

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,
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. I returned to Germany in 1978 as a speaker on women's rights for the United States Information Agency—because 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 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. I became an immigrant at the age of five—and have remained one all my life. What does that 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 effects of my being an immigrant had 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 parents were older than the parents of my classmates because my mother was 36 when I was born. My classmates were all born in this country, as were their parents, by and large. My parents spoke a foreign language at home and they had ideas and customs that differed from those of the parents of my classmates.

I was different in other ways, too. I had no close cousins with whom to play and no grandparents in this country.

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 to be a member of another 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 Christmas time—the beautiful Christmas trees, the lights, the carols, the exchange of presents, the family gatherings—all that was not for me. I was the outsider. That's what immigrants are. They are outsiders—aliens to the culture. Ultimately, I became a writer. Writers, too, tend to be outsiders. So they can look at the culture and see it from a vantage point that differs from those who are an integral part of it.

I didn't follow cultural norms in other ways too. 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 and gave birth to my daughter when I was 43, decades after most of my contemporaries had gotten married and had children. 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 escaped from the Holocaust and was able to come to this country, I felt that I was not free as other girls and 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 in 1954, taking a job with the newly-created Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) in Washington, D.C,. in 1965, and becoming a 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, religion, color, sex, 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 sex discrimination.

Shortly after we arrived in this country, my parents applied for their citizenship papers and five years later, when they became citizens,
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I automatically became a citizen on my father's papers. But I was never comfortable with the fact that I did not have my own citizenship papers. So while I was a student at Cornell University in the '50s, I applied for my own papers. Thereafter, in Ithaca, New York, there was a ceremony just for me where 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 researching 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*. My parents used to have a little male doll in a navy blue uniform and white cap and I remembered that the label on his cap said, "*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 company inquiring about this, but for a long time, I got no answer.

Then a friend told me that the manifests of most ships that arrived in the United States 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 did not know whether that was because the microfiche was so 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 first entered the microfiche room, I had noticed a tall man standing at the reception desk, but I didn't know 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 an archives technician, 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, and, 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 organized in terms of the passengers' first names. After I gave him Hermann's name, he asked if I knew how old he was in May of 1934. "Of course," I said. "He was 19."

"Here he is," said Dan.

The information on 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* 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.

Some time later I received a letter from the Cunard Line's office in England. It turned out that the company had thought about buying the Red Star Line, but had decided against it. They sent me several pictures of the *S.S. Westernland* with text on 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 and has been referred to as the most famous immigrant ever to come to this country. It was a gift to the U.S. from the people of France in recognition of the bonds formed between our two countries during the Revolutionary War, as a lasting memorial to independence, and to show that France was also dedicated to the idea of human liberty. For many immigrants, the Statue was their first sight of America.

Before I visited the Statue, I read again the poem graven on a tablet within the pedestal on which the Statue stands, the poem that is almost as famous as the Statue itself. That poem, entitled "The New Colossus," was written in 1883 by Emma Lazarus, a fourth-generation American of Sephardic Jewish descent who grew up in New York City. Her poem, which was used to help raise funds for construction of the Statue's pedestal in 1903, includes the following:

"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-tossed, to me:
I lift my lamp beside the golden door."

Those sentiments haven't always represented U.S. policy—but, to the extent possible, they should remain our goal.

In October 1996, during a trip to New York City, I

took the ferry at Battery Park to Ellis Island. From 1892 to 1924, Ellis Island had been 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 was no longer the entry point for newly-arrived immigrants. Instead, by 1924 the U.S. had established embassies all over the world. Prospective immigrants applied for their visas at American consulates in their countries and the paperwork and medical inspections were conducted there. After 1924, Ellis Island was used more for assembling, detaining, and deporting aliens.

Second, my family traveled 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, they 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 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.

Thus, upon arrival in New York City, ships would dock at the Hudson or East River piers. First- and second-class passengers would disembark, pass through customs at the piers and be free to enter the United States. The steerage or third-class passengers were transported from the pier by ferry or barge to Ellis Island where they were required to undergo a medical and legal inspection.

Among the immigrants who came through Ellis Island and later attained fame in this country were songwriter Irving Berlin; 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 at Ellis Island, the American Immigrant Wall of Honor, honors America's immigrants regardless of when they immigrated or through which port they entered. If one makes a contribution to the Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation, one can have the name of an immigrant inscribed there. Some years earlier, I had made a contribution to the foundation so my brother's name would be included, and subsequently my daughter made a contribution so that the Zysia Pressman family name is there, too. The wall is currently inscribed with over 600,000 names. That wall and those names are accessible on the Internet.

It has been 75 years since I arrived in this country as an immigrant. My coming from Germany to this country has shaped all those years as has my having been able to leave Germany and find a haven in these United States.

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Note: In the spring of 2012, a museum about the Red Star Line is scheduled to open in Antwerp, Belgium.

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The writer may be reached at: spfuentes@comcast.net

Her web site is erraticimpact.com/fuentes.