

Our Immigration Story
Beth Haverim Shir Shalom
Yom Kippur Afternoon 5774

'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!'

So wrote Emma Lazarus, these words made famous when they were affixed to the Statue of Liberty in 1903. Words that, dare I say aloud, only a Jew could have written. I don't say that to sound arrogant. I say that to remind ourselves –We are the world's first immigrants. And we are still immigrants today.

Immigration is a story we cannot afford to forget. It is, in many ways, THE story of the Jewish people.

This afternoon, we will hear 3 immigration stories, and use them, I hope, as mirrors that will help us see clearly the current debate. I will share a story, and I've invited 2 other congregants to share their stories as well.

My story is about a man named Henry.

Henry was born in 1920 in Darmstadt, Germany, the only child to his parents Gerson and Elena.

Gerson died when Henry was only 10 years old. In 1933, the year the Nazis came to power, Henry became a Bar Mitzvah in one of the world's first Reform synagogues. Gerson's wife Elena was a dressmaker who opened her own shop after Gerson died. A young woman named Alice Bendorf—came to apprentice in Elena's shop; she would later become Henry's wife.

When Henry was 14 years old, Elena pulled him out of school. She sensed that, sooner or later, they'd have to flee Germany, and that it would be easier to leave if Henry had a trade. He left school and became an apprentice cabinetmaker to a fine furniture manufacturer.

After 5 years of anti-Semitism under Nazi rule, and shortly before Kristallnacht in 1938, Elena decided it was time for her son Henry to leave. It was an impossibly difficult decision; neither Henry nor Elena could be sure if they'd ever see each other again. Fortunately, Henry left when he did; shortly afterwards, the Nazis rounded up all the men in Darmstadt to send them to concentration camps. They came knocking on Elena's door, but Henry was already gone.

Henry's family acquired papers of mysterious origin that allowed him to escape with 5 dollars and the clothes on his back with his cousin Kurt to Holland to a resettlement camp that was run by the Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. Ultimately, 80% of the young people there ended up in a concentration camp, but Henry and Kurt were lucky to be able get boat tickets to go to Cuba on the next voyage of the USS St. Louis—yes, the famous ship the St. Louis that was turned back from Cuba and the United States.

Desperate to leave Europe, they were able to get an affidavit from a wealthy cousin of Elena's mother in New York who vouched for them. They left from Rotterdam on the second to last ship to escape Holland before the Nazis came there. A long the way, there were more stories of narrow escapes, money exchanging hands, sneaking across borders, and a dangerous 3 week voyage across the Atlantic dodging U-Boats.

Alice Bendorf eventually got out of Germany on a kindertransport to London, where she stayed for 2 years doing housework. Henry arrived in the United States in 1940, and a few months later picked up his girlfriend Alice at the shipyards in Hoboken, NJ. She made her way to Chicago where she had family.

Henry and Alice made a life for themselves and raised 3 boys. Henry worked his whole life in the woodworking business. They survived the holocaust, and thrived in America.

But this isn't a sermon about Holocaust remembrance. What, I hope it is, is an opportunity to recall one of the guiding principles of Jewish life; the Jewish code that has served as the moral compass of our people from the minute we crossed the Red Sea fleeing Egyptians chariots until today. The words of Exodus 13: "In every generation we are obligated to see ourselves as though we personally went out from Egypt."

Henry Mosbacher—yes, Henry was my grandfather-- Henry Mosbacher was proud to be an American; he worked hard and built a life for his family. And while he never spoke of his immigration story when I was growing up, in later years after my grandmother died, he proudly told the harrowing story of his departure from Nazi Germany; he spoke with quiet pride of his family doing whatever it took to get him out of Germany, whatever it took to get him in to America.

This story of Henry's—it belongs to my family, but it also belongs to all of us.

This is the story of the biblical *Avraham*, who left the home of his birth, so he could have the freedom to worship the One God-- of Jacob and his sons, who left their home for the abundance of Egypt in search of food, and of their descendants who left Egypt 20 generations later to escape slavery--of Maimonides and so many others who escaped persecution at the hands of the Almohads in Spain. This is the story of the first Jewish immigrants to America, who came from Brazil, trying to find a place where they could escape persecution and find economic security.

This is the story of my good friend from Costa Rica who left home to make money in the States to help his family; who works hard in this country but overstayed his visa and so couldn't go to his ancestral home for his mother's funeral, for fear that he wouldn't be able to come back to his adopted home.

This is the story of every single person in this sanctuary who is not a Native American.

I pray that we will remember Henry's story when we consider our views on the current debate on immigration reform.

We Jews are the world's first immigrants, the original strangers and aliens. But my big fear today is that we are forgetting our story. We cannot afford to.