

Family Folklore - Keeping the Stories Alive/Benefits of the Lessons Learned

I am glad to know some of my family's folklore - stories of their experiences as they emigrated from different parts of Eastern Europe and came to the US in the early 1900's. What I admire most is the ability of my immigrant ancestors to leave their old lives behind and come to a place where they didn't speak the language, didn't know what they would do for work or housing, yet they were able to start over, make a living for themselves and grow to prosper in this new country they adopted. I have visited Ellis Island and have seen the names of my family members on the wall commemorating them. I stood in Ellis Island's large main room and as I looked around, I imagined what it must have been like for them to stand there waiting to be admitted to America. These stories of risk and courage and determination are inspiration for me as I continue on my journey. I am grateful to these people who came before me, and for the lessons taught by the stories that are applicable to my life today.

My maternal grandfather was a great storyteller, and I especially enjoyed hearing the stories about his adventures from childhood. The one I remember best is the story of how he came through Ellis Island not once, but twice. My grandfather was the oldest of nine children. His father had already come to the US two years prior, found work, and my great-grandmother and the children were coming to join him. As the family traveled by train from their home city of Lublin, Poland to Antwerp, Belgium to get the boat to America, my grandfather's younger brother Louis fell off the train. I have no idea how a child falls off a train, but somehow he did. What's really amazing is he managed to get back on the train, miraculously unhurt, and the family continued their journey. But when Louis fell, some cinders got stuck in his scalp. Again, why the cinders weren't wiped off, I don't know, but they remained stuck in his head, and when the family arrived in Ellis Island, Louis was not allowed to come into the US, because the doctors examining him saw the cinders and thought he had ringworm. So Louis was sent back by boat by himself to Lublin, Poland to stay with an uncle. How a mother could allow a child to go back on his own, by himself, I don't know, but that's how the story was told to me. Someone must have taken care of Louis on the boat, and someone must have put Louis on the train for Poland. Of course there was no way to communicate to find out about Louis, to find out if he was all right. We're talking early 1900's here - no computers, no phones, no cell phones, letters traveled slowly by boat. And can you imagine my great-grandmother's anguish, not having all of her children with her? So it was decided that my grandfather, who was maybe 15 years old at the time, would be sent back to Europe to get Louis and bring him to America.

My grandfather got on the boat by himself, got back to Lublin, he and Louis took the train to Antwerp to get passage on a ship to America. While in Antwerp, they stayed in a rooming house and my grandfather worked as an errand boy for a diamond merchant to pay for their expenses. His job was to deliver diamonds to customers and take the money back to the merchant. His other 'job' was to deliver Louis safely back to his mother, so he took his brother everywhere with him. It wasn't always a calm and quiet existence though, because periodically the Belgian government authorities would decide to round up all of the immigrants out of the boarding houses and force them to go back to wherever they were from. On one occasion, my grandfather and Louis were among those rounded up to be deported back to Poland. My grandfather had no

intention of being sent back to Poland, so he grabbed Louis's hand and they ran down an alley and hid until he was sure it was safe to come out and go back to the boarding house. Fortunately this only happened once, and soon after their sailing date arrived and they came to America safely.

Recently I had the opportunity to pass along the story I just told you to my 13 year old nephew. He was telling me about his project on family lineage and I told him the story you just read. My nephew asked how old his great-grandfather was when this story took place, and when I said he was around his own age, he was astounded! He couldn't fathom how a kid his age was able to do all that. I heard from my sister-in-law that my nephew shared the story with her, and I felt proud of my grandfather all over again, not only for his accomplishments, but also for the gift of this story to pass along to generations coming after him.

Each of us has family folklore, stories handed down through generations. They are part of our heritage to share with our children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren. They are part of who we are, part of what makes each family unique. The family told these stories when we sat around the dining room table for hours after a holiday meal. They are a source of pride in the achievements and accomplishments of the people who, by coming to this country, gave us the opportunities we now have. We have the responsibility of passing along these stories to the generations standing in line behind us. I am glad to have had the chance to share that special story with my nephew. As he and his siblings learn about immigrants in school, we can bring stories of their own immigrant forebears out of our memory vaults and bring the personal aspect to the school lessons.

Take the time to share the folklore of your family with your own next generations. By doing so, you give them the precious gift of preserving the legacy of your personal history. In this way we celebrate and honor our origins. It helps us know ourselves in a different way. We live our lives in the here and now, pointing in our forward direction. Pause for a moment to look back over your shoulder and thank those who came before you for the ambition and courage to leave the old for the new. I appreciate the benefits of the lessons these stories provided for me. Stories of survival, resilience, courage, risk-taking - all of them have significance for me as I continue forward, motivated by those who came before me, and knowing I have it in me to do the same. Having the opportunity to share them with those who follow along behind me - priceless!