

Through the Open Door

What Is It Like to Be an Immigrant in America?

Virtually every American knows where he comes "from." There are native Americans, of course—Indians, Eskimos, Hawaiians—but most of us came here from someplace else.

The lore of American families typically includes an immigration experience—their own or that of a not-too-distant relative. For many of us, though, such memories are fading. Today, only about 6% of the population is foreign-born, compared with about 9% 50 years ago and nearly 15% a century ago.

On the eve of Independence Day, we asked 13 prominent naturalized Americans to write a few words about their experiences as immigrants. Here are their replies:

Madeleine Kunin Governor of Vermont

Born: Zurich, Switzerland—1933
Naturalized: New York City—1947



On June 10, 1940, when we stepped off the SS Manhattan in New York, we were greeted by our cousins, in all their American finery. I well remember Irene Kahn, in her red hat, red shoes and red handbag. I was dazzled. This is America.

Irene took one look at my straight bob and bangs, and declared in her heavily accented Bronx English: "Mudlin, this is America. You gotta have coils. In America, all the goils have coils."

To be just like everybody else, that was what I wanted most as an immigrant child. Cream cheese and jelly sandwiches, on white bread with the crusts neatly cut off, precisely like the sandwiches my friends' mothers made.

I remember being hushed in the subway when my brother and I spoke in the Swiss German dialect. It was wartime, and any sounds that resembled German provoked nasty looks, or worse yet, confrontation. To correct the misunderstanding that Swiss German was the same as German, my mother pinned Swiss flags on our lapels. I felt confident that with this insignia I would be secure.

My mother, who brought her two children to America alone, in fear that Hitler would invade Switzerland, made us impatient with her seemingly slow assimilation. I did not fully appreciate until later that she gave us the vision of the American dream.

Quite simply, she believed it: Anything was possible in America. Horatio Alger was not a folk tale. It was history, and it was expected that we would follow in his footsteps.

John Kenneth Galbraith Economist, Harvard professor emeritus

Born: Iona Station, Ontario, Canada—1908
Naturalized: Boston—1937



In the late spring of 1934 I arrived in Washington, newly endowed with a Ph.D., to view the New Deal. Economists, a blessed matter, were in short supply in those exciting days.

A University of California professor of mine, now high in the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, told me that I was greatly needed and must go to work at once. In the next day or two I emerged as an associate agricultural economist in the AAA at the then-munificent salary of \$3,200 annually. No one asked was I a citizen, which I was not. I was asked if I was a Democrat and this I strongly affirmed.

Thus the relation between a benign and civilized government and its immigrants.

Alex Kozinski Judge—Court of Appeals, Ninth Circuit

Born: Bucharest, Romania—1950
Naturalized: Los Angeles—1968



Learning English for everyday use was one thing; mastering its nuances was quite another. Matters were complicated by the fact that my primary connection to American culture was the TV and endless hours of "The Andy Griffith Show," "Father Knows Best," "The Donna Reed Show" and "Leave It to Beaver." Were real American families like that?

I got my chance to find out when a schoolmate, Andrew Reineke, invited me home for dinner. Was this my chance to meet Ward, June and Wally Cleaver? With some apprehension, I accepted. No little Jewish boy with a thick Romanian accent had ever shown up in Mayberry; there was no script for this episode. I would have to wing it.

Andrew and I found Mr. Reineke in the rec room. "Tell me, Alex," he asked, "why did your family come to America?"

I've heard that question a thousand times but I've never figured out how to answer it. How do you explain the obvious?

"Are you pushing my leg, sir?" I replied. "We came to America for the same reason as everyone—because we could."

At dinner, after grace, plates of food were passed around "American style," as I had seen on television. I was helping myself to mashed potatoes when Mrs. Reineke confronted me with a fateful question: "Would you like a glass of milk?"

"No, thank you, ma'am. I don't drink," I heard myself answering. Had I just claimed to be a teetotaler or a camel? I attempted a tactical retreat: "What I meant to say is that we have plenty of milk at home."

"So, what do you plan to do?" Mr. Reineke growled, "run home between courses?"

The rest of the dinner was uneventful. I said little, and managed to avoid more verbal snakepits.

The school year was over soon, and Andrew and I parted ways. I went back to my television and mused about how much easier life in America would be if we all had scripts to follow.

Mervyn Dymally Congressman (D., Calif.)

Born: Cedros, Trinidad, British West Indies—1926
Naturalized: Los Angeles—1957



Nothing makes me prouder to be an American than when I visit former British colonies in the Caribbean, Africa and Asia and say to those who once were my fellow British subjects. "Here I am, a former colonial, serving in the greatest deliberative body in the world, the United States Congress."

After the Watts riots, the State Department sent me (then a California state assemblyman) to the Caribbean to talk about how democracy was still alive in America. That assignment took me back to St. Benedict's (Secondary) College, where I had failed the senior exam.

After my lecture, a young man stood up and asked: "Mr. Dymally, are there any opportunities for blacks in America?"

I replied: "If a black American were to come to Trinidad, could he run for your Parliament and win?"

The young man paused and said: "Honestly, no."

I said: "Here I am a Trinidadian, a black man, who went to the United States, ran for the California state Legislature and won." I ended my speech.

Bob Hope
Comedian

Born: Eltham, England—1903
Naturalized: Cleveland—1910



I don't remember much about the trip from England to the United States. It's been a long time since I was four years old. And what I remember may really be the constant recollections of my mother and brothers. I do remember running

around the ship and that it was hot and noisy. (We occupied two steerage cabins directly above the main drive shaft.)

Mahm carried a souvenir of the trip for her entire life, thanks to me. When it was time for the customary vaccination of all the immigrants on board, Mahm lined us all up for our shots. When it came my turn I bolted and ran. They caught me and held me and amid howling and squirming I got the needle. Mahm reached down to comfort me and got some of the vaccine on her left thumb and for the remainder of her life she carried a cicatrix as a reminder of that incident.

My brothers used to tell me that on the train ride from Ellis Island to Cleveland all the Hope boys sang—and then embarrassed Mahm by passing the hat for coins. But she got even by washing our underclothes and hanging them out of the window to dry.

Michael Blumenthal
Chairman of Unisys;
Limited partner, Lazard Freres

Born: Oranienburg, Germany—1926
Naturalized: Trenton, N.J.—1952



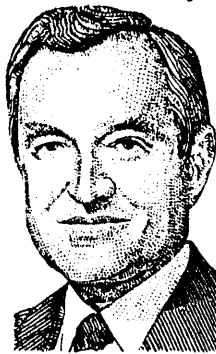
In one important respect, my immigrant experience parallels that of others who have come to these shores: the tradition of Americans accepting immigrants as individuals who are judged by what they can do, rather than by

their family or background or on the basis of where they came from. This was my experience when I arrived as a 21-year-old immigrant in San Francisco in 1947.

On my third day here, with no more than \$60 but lots of ambition and dreams, I went job hunting. The man who hired me told me at once that his own father had come here as a young man and worked his way up from the bottom while attending college at night. He said he'd give me a break so that I could try to do the same. Only 14 years after arriving here, and nine years after receiving my citizenship, I was appointed a deputy assistant secretary of state and, soon thereafter, sent abroad to represent my new country as a U.S. ambassador. What better proof that this remains an open society for immigrants?

Anthony Frank
Postmaster General

Born: Berlin—1931
Naturalized: Los Angeles—1943



I came here from Nazi Germany in 1937 at the age of six. My parents, both Ph.D.s, had arrived a year earlier, with my father having found employment as a messenger on Wall Street and my mother as a professor at Bryn Mawr College. I often ask my wealthy, highly educated friends if they could make such a transition in middle age. We soon resettled in Hollywood, Calif.

I remember my father, Dr. Lothar Frank, taking his exams for citizenship: "How many members of Congress are there?" "Five hundred forty-one," said my father. "Wrong," said the examiner, "there are only 535." My father said: "You have forgotten there are six ob-

servers from places such as the Virgin Islands and the District of Columbia." "I didn't know that," said the examiner.

I have attempted to fulfill my obligation to this country by a number of public service positions, culminating in my being the first immigrant to head the Postal Service. The Postal Service, which employs one out of every 150 employed Americans, is itself a melting pot and the gateway to the middle class for hundreds of thousands of native-born and immigrant Americans.

Ruth Westheimer
Sex therapist

Born: Wiesenfeld, Germany—1928
Naturalized: New York—1965



I was born in Germany, in 1928, was sent to an orphanage in Switzerland during the war, and emigrated to Palestine in 1945, where I was a member of the Haganah, fighting for Israel's independence. I later went to France to study

at the Sorbonne, and in the fall of 1956 I came to this country as a tourist. I ended up staying.

I arrived on the liner Liberty, traveling in fourth class. On the night before we came into New York harbor, I didn't sleep a wink, fearing I would miss seeing the Statue of Liberty. I took a room in Washington Heights, decided I wanted to see Times Square, more than 100 blocks south, and started to walk there. I had heard that Americans don't like to walk, so I wasn't surprised when a large man, whom I stopped to ask directions, tried to dissuade me, but it made me laugh when he asked this person who had arrived here with almost no money in her pocket why she didn't just drive there.

As I walked around New York in those first days, it was like being in a dream. Amazing sights were everywhere, but one I remember very vividly was of strikers picketing Macy's, smoking cigars. In Europe, cigars were only for the very rich, yet here even men who weren't collecting a paycheck could afford them.

One of my first major purchases was a second-hand sewing machine; I thought I could support myself with it if need be. I paid that machine off, a few dollars at a time, every week. I still have it, but part of my personal American Dream is the hope that I'll never have to use it again.

Ilena Ros-Lehtinen
Congresswoman (R., Fla.)

Born: Havana, Cuba—1952
Naturalized: Miami—1972



One of my sharpest memories about being a "Cuban refugee" was standing in line in downtown Miami's Freedom Tower with my family and hundreds of other newly arrived Cubans waiting to receive U.S. government-issued

boxes of powdered milk, cheese and processed meat.

Those were confusing times for all Cuban families who came to this country fleeing Fidel Castro and his communist thugs. Many of us came with round-trip tickets, always thinking that our stay in Miami would be momentary, merely a matter of days or weeks. The weeks turned into months and the months into years and now, 30 years later, we look through our dusty closets searching to see if we still have the other part of the round-trip ticket and wondering if we will ever get the chance to use it.

Although I have come a long distance from that line for giveaway food, part of me is still there. The lines are now filled with Haitian and Nicaraguan faces, but on several occasions I would swear I've seen a little girl who looks just like me. May her 30 years in exile be as fulfilling as they have been for me. And may she become the first Haitian or Nicaraguan woman in Congress. The opportunity is there.

Henry Kaufman
Economist

Born: Wenings, Germany—1927
Naturalized: New York—1942



I came to America when I was 10 years old. The question before my family had been whether to leave our comfortable, middle-class existence and cross the ocean to the unknown. The decision was made for us one night when, following a torchlight parade, the Nazis broke into our house.

Shortly after our arrival, I went to the local public school. The principal tried to evaluate my English-language skills. He pointed to his hand, fingers and nose and I responded by saying the correct words because they were the same in German. Of course, he quickly realized that I did not know any English at all. I was put in the first grade, where I was the oldest and the tallest child.

Going to college was assumed as a matter of course by my parents. Because of the burden this would pose for them, I pushed hard to complete my undergraduate work in 2½ years and then took just one year to qualify for a master's degree. I earned my Ph.D. at night over seven years while I held a full-time job. Later, I was fortunate that Charles Simon, a partner at Salomon Brothers, recognized my work. He introduced me to Sidney Homer, of the bond market research department, who gave me my first job there.

This country gave me the opportunity first to survive and then to succeed by obtaining an education that enabled me to move along with the help of professors and business associates. This is typical of what America provides immigrants.

Saul Bellow **Novelist**

Born: Lachien, Quebec, Canada—1915
Naturalized: 1941



I was born in Canada in 1915, was brought to Chicago by my parents in 1924 and became a citizen in 1941. My father simply forgot to tell me that I had never been naturalized and after Pearl Harbor I was astonished to learn that I was still a Canadian, so I turned myself in to the immigration service, filled in the necessary papers and was sworn in together with 40-50 other greenhorns.

Rudy Boschwitz **Senator (R., Minn.)**

Born: Berlin, Germany—1930.
Naturalized: New York—1942



We arrived in the U.S. on the last trip of the SS Majestic on Dec. 23, 1935, and were scheduled to become U.S. citizens on Dec. 9, 1941, two days after the U.S. entry into World War II. Instead, the day before, we became enemy aliens, and not long after the FBI came to check us out. I shared a room with two brothers who were in their 20s and was already in bed when the FBI arrived. They went through our home very carefully and found one of my brothers' address books and began reading off the names of young women; I gave them a running commentary and evaluation.

We were never allowed to forget our immigrant status, and it has not been a deterrent. It made us work harder, perform better, never quit and when combined with some pretty tough times, it enhanced what my family has contributed to society and our country.

Stan Stephens **Governor of Montana**

Born: Calgary, Alberta, Canada—1929
Naturalized: Havre, Mont.—1954



My experience as a Canadian immigrant varied considerably from that of immigrants who must master a new language and adapt to a different culture. There's very little difference between life in Calgary, Alberta, and life in most

Western American communities.

When I settled into a career in broadcasting in Havre, Mont., in the late '40s, most of my new friends were either unaware, or found nothing extraordinary in my having been born and reared in Canada. The U.S. Army, too, paid little attention to the fact that I was a Canadian, because in 1951 it sent me a draft notice. I could have refused on the grounds of being a foreign citizen. But because I had already decided to apply for citizenship, I felt the same obligation as any other American when called upon to serve.

Following service in Korea, I applied for citizenship. This was granted by Montana District Judge C.B. Elwell in May 1954. On the appointed day, I appeared in court with the other candidates. Judge Elwell, whom I knew quite well, assumed I was there in my capacity as a radio newsmen to cover the proceedings. When I told him I was one of the candidates for naturalization, his somewhat amazed response was, "Well, Stan, I guess you'd better get in line with the other foreigners."

One can always reflect on what might have been. In jest, I have told my good friend, Al Shaver, sportscaster for the Minnesota North Stars hockey team and with whom I started broadcasting in Canada in 1948, that had I remained in Canada I probably would be announcing the play-by-plays for the Minnesota North Stars. To which Al has replied: "And had I immigrated to the States, no doubt today I would be governor of Montana."