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My Family's Journey to America

My family's immigration story begins with the story of my grandfather and the onset of World War II. People emigrate for many reasons, especially political and economic ones. My family emigrated from Poland to America as a result of the horrors and turmoil created by the war. Before the war, neither my grandfather nor anyone in his family would have ever imagined leaving Poland. They were a successful upper-class family, and their children had a bright future. But World War II affected the lives of millions, displaced and separated families, and caused unprecedented waves of immigration. The background, history, and events of World War II all influenced why my grandparents met, why my family emigrated, and why I am where I am today.

My grandfather grimly depicts his experience with the war in his unpublished memoirs, ironically describing his "war story": *"A reader of war stories probably expects tales of dangerous adventures, of heroic deeds. There are no heroes in my story only frightened, confused and helpless people trying to survive against heavy odds in the midst of a cataclysmic storm. There is no happy ending either, even for those who survived, since there never was a return to peaceful normality, never a celebration of happy reunion. That war was a great*

tragedy for everybody it touched, and no one escaped uninjured on body or soul"(Mahr, "Wartime Reminiscences" 1).

My grandfather was attending a physics lecture at the Technological University in Lwow when a dramatic announcement for general mobilization in Poland was made. It was the end of the summer of 1939, and at eighteen years old, he had just started a new phase of his life as a college student after leaving his parent's home in Kolomyja and attending one of the two universities in Poland at the time. As my grandfather recalls, "the words 'general mobilization' had an ominous significance of something from which there would be no return." He, and his classmates who surged out of the lecture hall now realized that war was imminent and inevitable (Mahr, "Wartime Reminiscences" 3).

This mobilization was a little too late and the Polish military offered little effective resistance to the armies about to invade it. In September, 1939, the Germans invaded Poland from the west, and the Soviet Union occupied the other half of Poland from the east. Poland remained in the control of both the Germans and the Soviets for well over a year, and a treaty was signed declaring that each power would respect the boundaries they had made. When Germany attacked the Soviet Union in 1941, Poland was entirely occupied by German forces.

These war years in Poland under the German Reich were filled with increasingly difficult demands and increasingly violent treatment. The Germans put pressure on the Polish countryside and in 1940 began creating quotas for grain as well as potatoes, sugar, cattle, and fats. In 1940-1941 the Germans did not strictly enforce these compulsory deliveries, so only 383,000 of the assigned 1,000,000 tons of grain (about 38%) for the quotas were actually met

(Gross 105). However, by 1943-1944 as German occupation and enforcement of policies became stronger, 1,500,000 of the imposed 1,600,000 tons of grain (about 90%) of the quotas were being met (106). As the war years in Poland under Germany continued, the number of Poles murdered by the regime grew exponentially. At the very beginning of their rule in 1940, about 700 murders occurred, and in 1943 alone over 7,500 murders in the countryside were carried out (107). During this time, my grandfather was living in the southeast Poland by the peaceful Romanian border, and although did not first-hand witness any of these murders in the early years of the war, the increase in the brutality of the Reich was impossible to ignore.

With all universities in Poland being closed during this time, my grandfather managed to escape from Lwow with his cousin to his parent's home in Kolomyja near the border of Romania in late 1939. This area remained one of the safest places in Poland throughout the war, and he stayed there until he was forcibly drafted (Mahr, "Wartime Reminiscences" 16). The German invasion of the Soviet Union was initially very successful and the German army nearly reached Moscow, but by 1943 the tide of the war began to turn. The German army suffered a major defeat at Stalingrad. The Soviet army then slowly began pushing the Germans back out of their country. Ironically, the Soviet Union continued to push west and began conquering the territory in Poland that had been occupied by the Germany (Keegan 183). By mid-1944, the German army was in a state of disarray and became desperate. In fear of losing all their control of Poland, although against code, they began to draft more non-Germans including my grandfather. In July of 1944, my grandfather received a shocking letter in the mail that he had been drafted and was to report to a particular base camp in a matter of days. Refusal to follow these orders was punished with certainty by the death penalty.

Though unwilling, my grandfather was forced to serve on the eastern front. After being on the front for only three weeks, he was injured in battle while stationed in eastern Poland. A piece of shrapnel from the explosion of a distant bomb caused him to permanently lose vision in one eye. In August of 1944, he was sent to hospital to have the shrapnel removed and his eye treated, and following this operation he was ordered to return to the front. After staying at one hospital for nearly six months, he was transferred to another hospital to which he stayed for a few more months located near the German border, and close to territory in Germany that the Americans had almost occupied. Taking advantage of the chaos of the end of the war, upon leaving the hospital my grandfather and a friend both purposely took the “wrong train”, which was actually a train that led them behind American lines (Mahr).

When they arrived behind American lines in June of 1945, they immediately surrendered. Surrendering to the Americans was the most favorable outcome possible for an unwilling soldier of the German Reich. Seeing that my grandfather was not a willing soldier, instead of being considered a prisoner of war, he was labeled as a “Displaced Person” or DP and was put to live in a camp for displaced persons. Although he did not want to be permanently blinded in one eye, the injury made it possible for him to escape the dangers of the dangers of the eastern front and possibly saved his life, for he could easily have been killed fighting for the Germans or as a prisoner of war of the Soviets.

My grandfather arrived at the refugee camp of Augsburg, Germany, in the American sector of Germany in August of 1945 after the war’s end. Because Poland was now a Communist country under the Soviet Union and in chaos, many Poles, like my grandfather,

were unable to return home and thus stayed in the refugee camps for several years. Conditions in the refugee camps were better than anywhere else in Germany, so although these camps were overcrowded, the DP's were grateful. While in the camp, my grandfather learned English in his spare time. Although his English skills were actually quite limited, his enthusiasm and willingness to learn were recognized, and he got a much sought after job as a translator in the camp. He also met his future wife, my grandmother, during this time in the refugee camp.

Olga Wojtowich, my grandmother, had arrived in the refugee camp in Augsburg after the end of the war. In 1941, when she was sixteen she had been taken from her home near Lwow, Poland by the Germans and was forced to work for them. After being given an hour to pack all her belongings, she was sent on a two-week train ride to Augsburg, Germany, where she was forced to work at a restaurant for the next four years. As a Pole living in Germany, she was treated harshly as second rate citizen. Just as Jews had to wear the Star of David on their shirt, Poles had to wear a "P" at all times showing that they were Polish. In one specific incident, my grandmother had her "P" pinned on her shirt instead of sewn, and was hit by a military officer for this "offense." After the end of the war, when Germany was defeated, she was freed from her forced labor situation. Unable to return to Poland, because of the political chaos there, she was labeled as a "displaced person" as well and sent to the nearest refugee camp, which happened to be in Augsburg. My grandparents were married in this camp, and in 1949 my grandmother gave birth to my uncle, Christopher Mahr (Mahr).

Once the chaos of war ceased, the sector where a refugee had ended up usually determined where the refugee was able to emigrate because Germany was partitioned among

the victorious allied countries. Remaining in Germany was out of the question for any of the refugees, because after losing the war, Germany was in a state of economic disaster, and no one knew when recovery would be possible. Since my grandparents and newborn uncle were living in the American sector, they were likely to have the opportunity to immigrate to America. Following the war, it became clear that the widespread problem of millions of “displaced persons” across Europe was a crisis that needed to be solved. The United States government began to take the problem of political exiles and refugees more seriously and developed a series of laws to help ensure successful immigration of these refugees. The 1948 Displaced Persons Act authorized approximately 200,000 persons to enter the United States over a two year period. A 1950 amendment to this act, the “Act of June 16, 1950,” permitted 400,000 more refugees to enter the United States (Kanstroom 396-397). Because of this 1950 amendment, by 1951 my grandparents and their son were able to immigrate to America.

In order to emigrate from a refugee camp, a refugee needed to have a sponsor. This was somebody who had to be already living in the target country and who could provide temporary housing and find a job for the immigrant. Of course, these were technicalities required on paperwork, and many sponsors could not really provide jobs and long term housing. My grandfather had a Polish friend he’d met in Augsburg, who had emigrated a year earlier and who, like many Poles, currently lived in Detroit. This friend sponsored my family’s immigration to America.

In 1951, after spending six years in the refugee camp, my grandparents and their two-year old son boarded a cargo freighter named The General Stuart, which had been converted

into a “passenger ship”, with over 400 other immigrants. At the time, my grandmother was pregnant with my other uncle, Richard Mahr, and stayed in an isolated cabin with her two-year old son, while my grandfather had to stay in the hold of the ship with the majority of the passengers for the ten day voyage across the Atlantic. Because of the large scale of the immigration, all the complex paperwork and processing was done in Germany, and my grandparents arrived directly in New York Harbor, instead of Ellis Island, where immigrants traditionally arrived in New York until 1954. With almost no extra money to spare, they bought a one-way train ticket from New York’s Grand Central Station to Detroit, Michigan and found their sponsor. After getting situated and living with him for a few days, my family relocated to east Dearborn. My father was born in the house they moved to in 1957. My grandfather was left on his own to find a job, but managed to land one as a stocker at a drug store in Dearborn. He worked various odd jobs, eventually landing work as a draftsman in the booming post war economy, while he went to night school to earn a Bachelor’s Degree in engineering (Mahr). He worked successfully as an engineer in the machine tool industry until his retirement. My grandparents, both alive and well today, still reside in the Dearborn area.

My grandparents were part of a distinctly classified, “second wave of Polish immigrants to America.” The first wave of Polish immigrants, coming to the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century, tended to be poorly educated immigrants from rural Poland (Pula 117). The second wave, like my grandparents, was immigrated primarily as a result of World War II. They were much more highly educated (27% had completed university training), and 62% were from the upper or upper middle class. The second wave assimilated much more readily and was somewhat disdainful of the Polish American society that preceded them in the

United States (Mostwin 8). Assimilation was an important goal, because assimilation to American culture meant success. My grandfather reversed his first and middle names. His actual first name, Zbegniew, is a tongue twister in English and identified him immediately as an immigrant. So he went by his middle name, George (Mahr).

Assimilation was important to my grandfather's and family's success in America. At ninety-two years old, my grandfather has fully assimilated with American culture. However, his past is a large part of what makes him who he is. He still speaks Polish fluently, continues many Polish traditions, and the memories of his years during the war in Poland are something from which there is no return to normalcy. His children, including my father, have no accent and there would be no way for an outsider to know they were Polish. Although they no longer see themselves as immigrants, my father and uncles do speak Polish and have a great respect for their heritage. As a third generation immigrant, I am completely assimilated, but I realize how important my family history is. Through talking to my parents and grandparents, I can preserve their cultural heritage, and it will be a part of me that I will always respect and cherish.

As my grandfather's story shows, immigration occurs for a variety of reasons, planned and unplanned. The outbreak of World War II was a violent disruption in the life my grandfather had planned. Following the war, Poland was a Communist country under Soviet control. The Soviets were very suspicious of Germans and hostile towards them after the war. Although he served unwillingly in the German army, my grandfather would have been persecuted if he were to return to Poland. Poland was also in chaos with constant guerilla warfare and a very unstable economy. Because they were living in an American refugee camp,

immigration to America was the best and only readily available option for my grandparents and their two year old son. Understanding my grandparents' story makes me realize how the most carefully thought out plans can disappear in a moment. My grandfather suddenly had to build a life on his own, away from the protection and support of his parents. Against all odds, he succeeded.

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