



# LWV® Immigration – Nora's Journey

## Nora Mason, Immigration Committee

I have been in the US since I was nine years old. And always when I tell someone that I am from another country, the assumption is that I am an immigrant. But I began as a refugee, and this is a story of how the refugees became immigrants after the Second World War and how different this process is today.

During WWII, 15,400, 400 American soldiers fought as part of the Allied Forces. Of those, 407,316 were killed and 671,846 were wounded. Eighty thousand Australian forces fought, 24,000 were killed, and 23,000 were wounded. Please stay with me on this point—these numbers are important to this story. Although many officers were killed or wounded, most of the men were enlisted men; men who worked on farms or in factories. And their work needed to be done, war or no war. At the end of the War, there was a severe labor shortage in every country, which to some extent explains why refugees were needed.

The history of the battle between Hitler and Stalin has been written and rewritten—no need to go into it here. But the results of that Battle—Operation Barbarossa—created a new map of many countries, created homeless refugees on a major scale, affected almost the entire planet and rewrote the cultural fiber of this country.

During this time many citizens of Ukraine (about 2-3 million) started leaving their country. When 1939 came

and this conflict escalated, peoples from the Eastern Bloc started escaping by any means possible. The destruction of the Jewish peoples was horrible—but it also affected anyone else who stood in the way. The Slavic people in Ukraine suffered greatly. The Battle of Kyiv, which was part of Operation Barbarossa, lost 615,000 men between the ages of 15 and 50. That is two generations of men. Only one battle. My father was killed in that battle—he was 23 years old—a child playing war games.

Between Hitler and Stalin, the common man could not and would not win. People started leaving the country any way they could. Some people managed to take trains across all of Russia to China and then to the US. That's a long haul. And many who did not manage to escape were exiled to the Far East—to Siberia, to Samarkand and to other isolated places.

As with many people of mixed nationalities our papers were suspect and by then Mom had remarried and my stepfather decided that time was critical and leaving was crucial. Immediately! I don't remember exactly the chain of events, but I do remember traveling in a cattle car and then as the train was bombed, running and hiding under the train until the bombing passed and we resumed our travels. I was amazed that when the train stopped all the passengers, men and women, children, would crouch under the trains to relieve

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themselves—a weird memory. We were on our way out of Ukraine and to Germany, which, at the time, was considered safe for entry.

We also hitchhiked with others; locals were kind enough to always help. I mean, the whole continent was at war with itself, so people did help each other. And the word “migration” has many emotions attached to it for me.

Since the whole continent was in upheaval, it was not unusual for people to wander from town to town, seeking safety. However, the bombings and the constant fleeing continued for all, everywhere. So many towns were absolutely wiped out. Destruction was everywhere. Death was everywhere. We forget how resilient we can be until we read history. Some people were successful in their quest and settled in Western Europe; others were caught and sent to the German slave labor camps. If one's papers were at all suspect (and Mom's were), he or she ended up either in the slave labor camps or in concentration camps. Granted, the concentration camps were predominantly made up of Jews, but other nationalities were also occupants and suffered the same fate. The slave labor camps, where we ended up after being caught by the German police, were in fact truly slavery. We lived behind barbed wire and it was an existence. The adults worked in the munitions factories because the German workers who used to work in these factories were now soldiers fighting in another country. The regular work done was by prisoners of war.

We ate in a communal kitchen and leaving camp did not happen—alive, that is. If one stopped working and did not recover one became compost. It was well known and public.

Several years ago, my mother and stepfather received money from the Swiss government for the German war crimes. As I said, it was truly slavery, and this was the compensation for their pain. It was not compensation; it was the pacification of someone's conscience.

As children in those camps, whatever we did and however we lived, we really did not suffer the way our parents did. None of us had a memory of better, richer, calmer times. All we knew was conflict, which we were used to; and although the constant bombings were scary, we grew into the mood and the feeling of war.

We ran during bombings but so did everyone else; and we hid under railroad cars, but so did everyone else. Adults had different memories, of course, and so their pain was different. We played, as children do, in public places under the watchful eye of a guard with a rifle but certainly did not realize the potential danger or if they would shoot us. We did not know of cowboys and Indians at that time, so a rifle did not pose a threat to us.

When the war ended, the French Army entered our camp and liberated all of us. I don't remember if we were still in the slave labor camp or in the concentration camp. Some of the concentration camps, at the very end, were holding camps. No exterminations were going on at the end. Hitler was short on many things, including gas.

The United Armed Forces, of course, had their hands full as well. The war was over and, as victors, the results which included millions of refugees: people from every corner of the world moving amid rubble, bombed cities, harsh conditions. As hard as the slave labor camps were, there was order—we were fed, and we had beds. If my memory is correct, we remained in the camp during the transition from a slave to a free person. But we were free to move about and this was the first time I hiked in the forests and mountains of Germany. My godfather, an older distinguished professor, would take me on hikes, and I would sit by his side as he fished. Maybe that's when I fell in love with the outdoors—it is my happy place. To hike among the trees, on the shores of a lake, outdoors. To be one with nature. I was not yet five, but that joy stayed with me forever- it is my happy place.

When the war ended millions of Slavic-speaking people could not or would not go back to their native land. The threat of prison or execution under Stalin was always present. The deal made at Yalta between Roosevelt and Churchill guaranteed the Allies' assistance in finding and relocating the Slavic people back to Stalin, to Mother Russia. Unforgivable. There are no winners in political deals—that has been proven over and over.

At the end of WWII there were approximately 2-3 million Ukrainians, Poles and Russians in Europe—predominantly in Germany victims of forced labor, prisoners from the Soviet army and concentration camps, political refugees. Many were forcibly repatriated

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to the motherland, often with the “help” of the Allies. One of the horrors that came up during this time is that at the beginning of the peace, early 1946, American soldiers would raid the camps in the middle of the night, separating families, putting them in a truck, and taking them back to Ukraine. This was an agreement that Churchill and Roosevelt had with Stalin. He wanted his people back—to put to work, to punish, to make them suffer for deserting Motherland.

But most of us ended up in what were called DP camps – Displaced Persons camps. These camps were maps for what was to become the Marshall Plan.

We were placed in these camps by the American Army as a “holding” place. We moved between various camps and they were our home for six years. Amazing what one can get used to. we did not stay in one camp—we constantly were moved around between Munich, Regensburg, Schleissheim, Augsburg, Fussen, back to Regensburg and finally to Bremen, to sail away.

For us to return to Ukraine was not an option. Although at the end of the War my Grandmother (who had Polish papers), walked, took trains and hitchhiked for 100 days back to L'viv, Ukraine. She wanted to find her other daughter—the war was over and hope springs eternal. And she did find her.

Many young people were taken by the Germans during the War for work and many returned. When the war ended, so did their punishment/imprisonment, fate. Strangely, the roads were full of refugees who wanted to go back and did everything possible to return. Looking for family they left behind and just unable to continue going forward. Despite Stalin and the threat of anything and everything, people wanted to go back to the motherland to their homes and to their families. The method of finding families after the war, scattered like ashes across the wind, were incredibly clever and interesting and successful.

But that aside, life became normal because we were not constantly being bombed.

At the beginning of 1946, close to three million refugees remained in Germany, having formed local committees to protect themselves and to create a government in exile. On Nov. 1, 1945, the Central representation for

the Ukrainian Emigration united all the committees and organizations. We all managed to receive legal protection to live in the camps and to seek free passage to countries that would take us. The United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration—UNRRA and the International Refugee Organization—IRO recognized Ukrainians as a distinct national group and allowed them to form separate Ukrainian camps, of which there were roughly 80, chiefly in Bavaria.

Munich emerged as the center of Ukrainian political and cultural life. These camps were managed pretty much like a government in exile. There were schools, churches, scout groups, entertainment, you name it. A Central Committee was elected, and the Head of the Committee reported to the American Army general. I have a photo of me in kindergarten with General Ridgeway. These camps varied in size. Regensburg was the largest, with a population of 5000, and presented a microcosm of Ukrainian émigré life of the time. By that time, we were not in barracks but in a real suburb called Ganghofer Siedlung. Most refugees were from western Ukraine (Halychyna). I have a wonderful book about Regensburg (in Ukrainian, with pictures) and how it functioned, which it did for over five years.

Living in camps was wonderful compared to being in the middle of a War, but it was camps. Depending on the time, we lived in huge Army barracks, and the only thing separating one family from another was an Army blanket hanging on a communal rope. But there was a time when we had a private room with a bathroom down the hall and a communal kitchen, but a private room, nevertheless. I was a kid—but can you imagine young men and women, trying to survive. No privacy, no intimacy, no ability to vent—everyone will hear. I grew up processing “people will hear.” Becoming a part of a big thing—completely losing being a “self”—an individual—a private human being. All together moving at the same time to eat, to clean, to sleep. I'm sure many thoughts that at least there was noise during the war—this was perpetual purgatory. Peaceful on the outside.

Of course, we all had a common language and common experience of having survived. And many knew each other from various communities—and if

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they did not, they quickly became friends. No one knew that for many it would be five to six years of this kind of existence. They formed choruses and theater and schools and scouts—it was a life that transported itself when we came to United States. And we were free to go into town. Munich was and is a beautiful city, as is Augsburg.

I remember one episode when American soldiers came to our camp. I was a cute kid and received lots and lots of Hershey's chocolates—I promptly ate them all. (I was always hungry.) That night I, very loudly, threw up and threw up; and my stepfather had to take me out of the long barracks and down the hall to the bathroom to finish being sick and to clean me up. To this day I don't do Hersheys.

Our family, our extended family, did everything it could to create a normal life for the children. I remember a Christmas where we had a St. Nicholas and a tree with real candles and walnuts hanging on branches and gifts and I received a ribbon for my hair—my short hair. And an older girl said that it was from my Mother and not St. Nicholas—information that happened way too early in my life. That night I fell out of the top bunk—not sure if there was a coincidence.

One of the things that did occupy my parents' lives in the camps was the choir and theater. Many of the choristers from Lviv ended up in the same camp and the chorus came alive again. They rehearsed, they sang, they entertained American troops and they entertained other DPs. And they traveled, like gypsies, from camp to camp, doing this. And the music, ah the music—Ukrainian music, so happy, so sad, so minor.

We were strongly integrated in the DP way of life. The predominant areas of this DP life were: religious life, educational institutions at all levels, youth and sport organizations, cultural, professional and social organizations, medical services, etc. For the people who lived in Regensburg, (which was the largest of its kind), for any period of time it remained a symbol of a unified world with their childhood spent in a Ukrainian home, a Ukrainian school, and a Ukrainian environment without the split that would have been introduced by the necessity of assimilating to a foreign culture. It was a Ukrainian community as was any other large DP camp.

And eventually this way of life was brought with them to a new country, be it the US, Argentina, Australia or Canada. Residents usually did not stay in one camp for an extended period. They emigrated when they could. But friendships remained.

In almost six years we moved six or seven times, twice in and out of Regensburg and a couple of times in and out of Augsburg. But there was complete order. Children went to school and adults went to work, doing whatever was necessary for 5,000 people to co-exist and function. Things such as tailoring, woodworking, electrical—skills that were needed to help 5,000 people to go about their daily lives.

We were provided with everything we needed but all adults contributed in one fashion or another. Everyone had a job, a purpose—people became teachers that were not teachers before but most of the time skills aligned.

All residents were provided with medical care. It was a socialist government at its best. There were occasional packages from the Red Cross, with extra cans of food. Spam was a big favorite—it really was. At one time, all male residents received nails. That became a huge joke across the camp. No hammer, no wood, no reason, but nails nonetheless. This was our first acquaintance with Red Cross and much appreciated.

In our DP camps we were free to come and go but only within the confines of the camp. We could go into town (Munich, for example) but had to have all “papers” on us at all times. Towns that served as DP camps included Regensburg, Mittenwald, Fuessen, Aschaffenburg, Freiman, Schleissheim, and Amberg.

Thanks to the Marshall Plan, people lived in these camps for years; but the plan was to ultimately close them down and relocate the people to permanent homes. But that aside, life was normal.

A formal plan began in early 1949 to find permanent homes for these refugees. Keep in mind that the refugees were mostly people from Eastern Europe. The process was this: you had to have all your papers in order, you had to have a “sponsor” (more on that later), you had to be healthy, and you had to be able to work. It was like an H-1B visa, more elaborate in one sense and simpler in others.

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Mom who had five fingers on her right hand but five very short digits on her left hand, almost an enlarged stump, encountered difficulty in getting her papers. The thought was how could a person with only one good hand survive. If only they could see what she accomplished in her life with that one hand and stump. My stepfather had to go through a grueling process to adopt me in order for us to emigrate to the US as a family. Showing papers, proving you were who you were. We were vetted. Our close friends didn't make it and remained in Germany—he was almost blind, and she walked with a limp and they remained in Germany for the rest of their lives.

Back to the sponsors. With all these men who went off to war and did not come back or came back wounded the effect on the work and farms they left behind was huge. Keep in mind that the period from the end of World War II to the early 1970s was one of the greatest eras of economic expansion in world history.

In the US the Gross Domestic Product increased from 228 billion in 1945 to under 1.7 trillion in 1975. Work was obvious there—everywhere—and the whole world was being rebuilt. Australia, the land of sheep farming needed men. Canada needed men. South America graciously accepted refugees—poor countries but with open arms. And we, as refugees, went to America.

The sponsors came in various forms: rich people who needed workers on their estates, factories that needed people to work, and churches sponsored. All these sponsors filled out all the paperwork and we hoped for the best. For years Ukrainians lived in the local church halls until actual life happened.

My family—the three of us—left Bremerhaven, Germany, on December 30th, 1949, on a troop transport ship, the USS General Stuart Heintzelman. When Mom saw the ship, she was aghast. She said she went sailing on the Dnieper River in Kyiv on a bigger ship. It took us two weeks to cross the Atlantic in the dead of the winter and to arrive in New York.

Because of huge storms in the Atlantic the captain tried unsuccessfully to change course in this storm. This is winter on the Atlantic. We were mostly in our rooms, sitting on our bunk beds. The kitchen was flooded, and we all ate peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. The storm

was so bad that if one went outside of one's room, one had to be tethered to others or to something. The men took turns helping to keep the ship from sinking. I was convinced that the ship would die after our voyage. But my friend came over on the same ship three months later and today the ship is in Texas in a "mothball fleet." But the journey was and is unforgettable. I've never seen so much water in my life—no one had. And the waves were higher than the ship constantly. We asked ourselves does one go from Stalin to war to camps to drown? Men and women were housed separately, and lots of throwing up went on. My parents and I were hardy—we didn't suffer from sailing. Being hardy meant you cleaned up after others.

Our sponsor was a kind man who lived in Chicago, did not know us, but filled out papers anyway. A sponsor guaranteed that the sponsees would not be a burden on the US government or society. He would make sure they had housing and food and would help them find work. And so, we received papers from a "sponsor" and that was our ticket to the US, to land (in theory) in Chicago.

His intentions were admirable, but he could not do what he said he would (provide for us), but he let people in Philadelphia know and they were friends from the camps, so they came to New York and brought us to Philadelphia. Upon disembarking we each received \$1.00. And huge embraces from our friends.

Our arrival in the US was not last minute—letters went back and forth and documents so we were not a surprise to our friends in Philadelphia—we were expected and anticipated and welcomed—so welcomed.

We arrived in Philadelphia January 13—New Year's Eve for Ukrainians. And we were welcomed into a three-story brownstone—big and imposing. That night the adults went out to celebrate; and Mom tucked me in bed, kissed me goodnight and went out. I was not even nine years old, but I was considered resilient or something. I closed my eyes, hoped for the best and stayed until they came home hours later. And I did not die. Talk about Welcome to America, but they were young and needed to have some fun, and I was and am resilient.

A week later was my birthday—I was turning nine. All our friends gave me presents, and my stepfather

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gave me twelve oranges (don't know how he managed to do this)—I had an orange on the ship and loved it. And then a week later my Mom went to live with one family and my stepfather with another, and I was sent to Maryland to live with a family I knew from the camps.

A little side story: The family who owned the estate was named Bellanca—it was the Bellanca Estate and was well known and at one time President Truman came to visit. A beautiful place with a private lake and a boat house—paradise. They had a son, August, who was in college and on weekends when he came home, I would get a ride on the handlebars of his bicycle.

Years later I visited Ellis Island and there on the wall in the museum is a huge portrait of Augusto Bellanca, an Italian immigrant, who came to the US and made good. The story for me was complete.

In Maryland, where I was exiled on my ninth birthday, our friends lived and took care of an estate—he fixed everything (he had golden hands, we say in Ukraine) and she cleaned and cooked. They had a son close to my age and we played together, I learned English, and I ATE. I was hungry for nine years—and now I ate.

My parents had to find work—and literally, they went door to door from establishment to establishment, asking for work to do anything. My stepdad, fluent in five languages, found a job washing floors. My mom, an accomplished musician, worked in a factory putting together batons for parades. And they found a little apartment; when other refugees needed a place to stay, they stayed with us. Everyone stayed with everyone else—a community. And Mom went to school to learn English. My stepfather, at the age of 37, resisted for years. But when he died in 2001, he was fluent.

The green card was good but not forever; after five years they managed to buy a tiny home, with no down payment, and became citizens. By then my father was elevated to be a security guard (where he stayed for 35 years) and Mom learned enough English and typing to work in the office. Their work was work—it was not their life. And today when I see ethnic communities speak their own language and wear their costumes and eat their food I totally

understand—that was us. And that was the Polish people. And on and on.

In Philadelphia there was a shopping center, called Marshall Street, literally on Marshall St. Vendors by the dozens of all nationalities. Saturdays were devoted to buying Polish sausage, a herring from a barrel from a Jewish grocery store, and Ukrainian food from Ukrainians. Side by side. Seeing this one wonders how there could have been a war between such an amiable community.

And so, the life that began in the camps resumed in the US. Philadelphia, New York, and Chicago all had a huge Ukrainian population. Churches and communal buildings sprang up, and that was the source of information for Ukrainians in exile, and it still exists today. Someone always knew someone, and the Ukrainian papers were full of ads of people looking for each other. The church and the cultural club were the center of émigré's life in that US, and it still is today. Schools were founded, as were churches, newspapers, and colleges. One could go from birth to death and never learn English. That's how integrated the Ukrainians were.

Single mothers did not fare very well. It was assumed that a single parent could not care for her children, so the kids were put in an orphanage until the mother got a job and got on her feet.

Today the government and the Ukrainian community in exile still exist and are consolidated in the Ukrainian Congressional Committee in America (UCCA), based in New York and in Washington. UCCA is very involved and active in the lives of the Ukrainians living here and has a solid line connecting to Ukraine. The lives of the citizens began in Ukraine, resumed in the DP camps in exile, and continued in the US. Today we still have very active Ukrainian communities, with church and school and social clubs. As all nationalities, we stick together—we are comfortable with each other. Something of home in each one of us, and we keep our language alive.

Many immigrants were brave and able to become entrepreneurs; others washed floors by day and read

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Socrates in the original Greek at night. Education had nothing to do with it. Courage was necessary to get started. Many began learning English in earnest with the hope of passing exams and becoming citizens. The citizenship tests then were in English only. My parents studied hard to become citizens and after five years

received their naturalization papers. They never applied for mine and years later I found out that I was stateless. I asked Mom why this happened, and she just said that at the time it was not important.

This was my life and the life of the refugees from Eastern Europe after World War II.