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My grandfather was an illegal immigrant: Guest opinion

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By Daniel Pollack-Pelzner

Reading the news that the Trump administration is ending temporary protection for 200,000 Salvadoran immigrants who came to the United States without documentation, I remembered the time, a few years after my grandfather died, when my grandmother told me he was an illegal immigrant.

I'd heard about a quirk in his national origin: his mother fled pogroms in Russia and gave birth to him in Romania, en route to the U.S., in 1925. Because of a Jewish quota, they were turned away from Ellis Island and had to go to Quebec instead, where Grandpa lived until he was 12. But I didn't know how he ended up in America.

According to Grandma, his mother snuck him across the border from Montreal to visit his aunt, and they never returned. Today, we'd call him a Dreamer. There must have been thousands, maybe millions, like him. He didn't become a citizen until he joined the army in World War II, just after he married my grandmother. He had to return to his initial point of entry in order to change his status, she recalled, so they'd made a honeymoon of it in Niagara Falls. After he returned from service in Japan, he went to college on the GI Bill and became a psychologist.

It was strange to think of Grandpa, Yankees hat on his balding head, as someone illegal. The only time I could remember him bending the law was when I was 7 years old, visiting him in Manhattan from Oregon. He asked me to say I was 6 so that I could ride the cross-town bus with him for free, and then to say I was 8, so that I would be old enough to enter the Vermeer exhibit at the Frick Museum.

If he had been born a year earlier, he and his mother probably would have been able to enter the United States legally, part of the flood of Jews fleeing Europe in the early 20th Century. But in 1924, Congress rode a wave of nativism and racial eugenics to pass the Johnson-Reed Act, which severely limited immigration from Eastern European countries (and excluded Asian immigrants altogether). When Calvin Coolidge signed the act into law, he declared: "America must remain American." Many Jews who couldn't get to Canada ended up perishing in Hitler's camps. It wasn't until 1965 that the Immigration and Nationality Act eliminated the quotas.

I can only imagine how Grandpa would have felt if he'd heard Jeff Sessions invoke the Johnson-Reed Act in a 2015 interview with Steve Bannon about the threat that immigrants pose to our country. Sessions said: "In seven years we'll have the highest percentage of Americans, non-native born, since the founding of the Republic. Some people think we've always had these numbers, and it's not so, it's very unusual, it's a radical change. When the numbers reached about this high in 1924, the president and

Congress changed the policy, and it slowed down immigration significantly...and it was good for America."

As Attorney General, Sessions is now the person most responsible for defending President Trump's immigration policy. His view of American history celebrates the 1924 legislation that made my grandfather illegal and would now exclude the future doctors and army veterans and baseball fans who follow his path. Trump's travel ban, his promised wall, his threat to end DACA, and his revocation of protected status for Salvadorans are attempts to return our country to its 1920s outlook – this time with Haitians and Mexicans and Muslims, rather than Jews, as the maligned outsiders. It's tempting to think of the legality of someone's immigration as a choice or a fault, but so often it's an accident of timing and location. Xenophobic immigration policies produce undocumented immigrants. I can't see how that's good for America.

I think back to the first show my grandfather took me to see on Broadway: "The Merchant of Venice" in 1989, when I was 10. My grandmother insisted the play shouldn't be performed any more. It would only fuel America's lingering anti-Semitism. But my grandfather had since remarried and was excited to introduce me to Shakespeare. (He used to lecture on "The Tempest" and "Othello" in his psychology courses.) I was thrilled by the production, less by Dustin Hoffman's understated Shylock than by Geraldine James's sparkling Portia, who outwits Shylock's vengeful bond. Watching with my grandfather made me feel as though Shakespeare were part of my inheritance, and I loved his plays from that moment.

I wonder now, though, how it felt for Grandpa to see the spectacle of an inhumane Jew – the menace invoked in the 1920s to justify racial immigration quotas – seeking protection in the law of a Venetian state that regards him, in Portia's terms, as "an alien." Had he ever feared deportation as a child? Whatever uncertainty might have troubled him during the show, he must have taken comfort in the knowledge that the 1924 act was no longer the law of our land – at least, not yet.

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