



ANDERS GOLDFARB

## Readers Write IMMIGRANTS

**FROM THE TIME I WAS FOURTEEN, I** dreamed of leaving my home in Scotland and starting a new life in America. I saved every penny so I could pay for plane fare and have some money in my pocket when I arrived.

In 1958, at eighteen, I got off the plane in New York City. All the American passengers proceeded to customs, but I was directed to meet with an immigration officer. I sat down across from a rather intimidating man and handed him the sealed envelope of papers that I had been given by the U.S. consulate in Scotland. He opened the envelope and looked through the documents, one of which must have told how much money I had brought with me.

"Is four hundred dollars all you have?" he asked. "How long do you think you can live here on that?"

Terrified that he was going to send me back, I blurted out, in a thick Scottish brogue, "Och, I came tae America

tae make a fortune, not tae spend one."

"Welcome to the United States, young man," he said with a grin, "and good luck to you."

*Norman Nicolson  
Honolulu, Hawaii*

**I WAS TWENTY-THREE WHEN I DE-** cided to leave my native North Carolina for a one-year stint in AmeriCorps, the domestic Peace Corps. I was assigned to the San Antonio, Texas, office of a national nonprofit, where I would recruit, train, and manage student volunteers. Most of our clients lived in the housing project next door to the office. They came to us in search of better places to live, child care, and higher-paying jobs. More often than not, we could offer them only a sympathetic ear and a referral to yet another agency. Some of the clients spoke only Spanish and preferred to interact with a volunteer who spoke it too. Their clear favorite was Maria.

Maria was the first to arrive for the afternoon shift and the last to leave in the evening. For a college freshman, she possessed a preternatural sense of authority and responsibility. Though she belonged to several college clubs, helped tend to her younger brothers and sisters, worked part time waiting tables, and carried a heavy course load, she never missed a meeting or let down a client.

At the end of the semester, the organization's national office invited me to bring my two best volunteers to New York City for a convention and training summit. Naturally I chose Maria as one of the two. She had never left Texas, much less been to New York, and I was excited to show her more of the world. To my surprise, though, Maria didn't seem eager to attend the convention. At the day's close, she asked to speak to me privately.

"You know I'm Mexican, right?" she said with a nervous giggle. I nodded. "Well, I've been in this country for ten years, but

I've only ever lived here legally for a couple of months . . . on a tourist visa when we first arrived."

I was touched that she would trust me with her secret, but I didn't see the connection to the convention until she said, "Since I'm not legal, I don't have a government-issued ID, so I can't board a plane."

Dumbfounded, I pledged to figure out a way around the ID requirement. After some research we decided Maria's best bet was to show her university ID and say she didn't have a driver's license yet, which was true.

Our ploy worked. Maria made the trip, saw New York, and gave an outstanding presentation at the convention. At the end of my year of service, I told her how much I admired her. She graduated with honors but couldn't afford to go on to medical school, as she had wanted. As an undocumented immigrant, she couldn't legally work in the U.S. The last I heard from her, she was a waitress at the same restaurant where she'd worked during college, still getting paid under the table.

*Jodie Briggs  
New York, New York*

**MY GREAT-GRANDMOTHER FAIGL** and her ten-year-old daughter, Rukhl, immigrated to the United States from Russia in 1900. Yiddish was their first language, and Faigl, who was not happy in her adopted homeland, refused to learn a word of English. She supported herself and her young daughter by taking in boarders from the old country. Rukhl, who became known as "Ruth," attended school for a few years and then went to work as a seamstress in a lace factory. She married at twenty-seven and had three children, including my mother.

My grandmother Ruth learned English but never had much confidence in her ability to speak it. She sometimes mispronounced words and used Yiddish syntax. ("You want I should make you a bowl of soup?") Though no one had any problem understanding her, she insisted that she didn't "talk English too good."

When my widowed grandmother was ninety-eight years old and could no longer live on her own, she moved from her tiny Brooklyn apartment into a Jew-

ish nursing home. One day I went there to visit and found her surrounded by a group of women who were listening to a story she was telling. My grandmother waved her hands with great enthusiasm, shrugged her shoulders, and threw back her head and laughed. She was so animated and alive, completely different from the woman I had known all my life.

As I came closer, I realized my grandmother was speaking Yiddish, and her audience was all European immigrants like her.

The great Polish poet Czesław Miłosz said, "Language is the only homeland." After having been away for almost ninety years, my grandmother had finally come home.

*Lesléa Newman  
Northampton, Massachusetts*

**I WAS ELEVEN YEARS OLD ON APRIL 1, 1933**, when my parents, my brother Konrad, and I crossed the border from Germany into Switzerland. The new Nazi

government in Germany had declared a boycott against Jewish businesses beginning at 1 P.M. that day. We left at 12:50.

Three months later we were in the south of France, where my father was trying to negotiate a lease on a house and vineyard. Though the negotiations were not yet complete, we moved into the home owned by our new landlord, M. Rothstein.

The French public education system included boarding school, so my parents sent Konrad and me away while they wrestled with the problems posed by the Nazis' refusal to release the money we had in German bank accounts. Desperate to pay his own way, my father began to work in our landlord's vineyard, but his training as a lawyer had hardly prepared him for such heavy labor.

At boarding school I lived in a dormitory with children whose language I hardly spoke and whose customs were, to say the least, different. The other students were intrigued by Konrad and me

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Because of space limitations, we're unable to print all the submissions we receive. We edit pieces, often quite heavily, but contributors have the opportunity to approve or disapprove of editorial changes prior to publication. (If you don't want to be contacted regarding the editing of your work, please let us know.)

We publish only nonfiction in *Readers Write*. Feel free to submit your work under "Name Withheld" if it allows you to be more honest, but be sure to include your mailing address so we can give you a complimentary one-year subscription if we use your work, as a way of saying thanks. Occasionally we will choose not to publish an author's name, or will use only a first name and last initial. While we don't question the truthfulness of the writing, we must be sensitive to considerations of libel or invasion of privacy. If you've already changed the names of the people involved, please say so.

Send your typed, double-spaced submissions to *Readers Write*, The Sun, 107 North Roberson Street, Chapel Hill, NC 27516. Please include your e-mail address and phone number. If you cannot type, please print clearly. We're sorry, but we can't respond to or return your work, so don't send your only copy unless you don't want it back. Because we must wait until the last minute to make our final selections, we are unable to answer questions regarding the status of submissions. If your work is going to appear, you'll hear from us prior to publication.

UPCOMING TOPICS	DEADLINE	PUBLICATION DATE
Crushes	December 1	June 2009
Choosing Sides	January 1	July 2009
Fences	February 1	August 2009
The Middle of Nowhere	March 1	September 2009
Rain	April 1	October 2009
Selling Out	May 1	November 2009

and would gather around and try to play tricks on us. Pointing to their eyes, they'd say, "These are called 'balls.' Say that to the teacher. He'll like it," but we knew they were trying to get us in trouble and didn't fall for the prank.

After we'd been at school a few weeks, our mother called and told us our father was in the hospital. His right arm had become infected from an injury at work in the vineyards. We came back from school and found him pale and heavily sedated. A few days later he died.

My mother's family in Germany managed to send her money so that we could stay in France. I learned to speak enough French to follow my courses in school. Though our schoolmates accepted Konrad and me, some of the kids would still refer to us using slurs for Germans. But we no longer felt German. We were refugees *from* the Germans. We were immigrants.

*Oliver French  
Ithaca, New York*

**IN MY EXPERIENCE, IMMIGRANTS** help each other whenever we can. We have all learned the hard way that, as Diogenes said, there is no greater loss than the loss of one's homeland.

For my first visit to the U.S., I accidentally packed my visa in my checked luggage instead of in my carry-on briefcase. When I changed planes in Paris, the French authorities told me that I could not board the flight to the U.S. without the visa. Luckily the gendarme was a Senegalese immigrant. He led me to the baggage room, and I retrieved the precious document.

Another time I flew to attend a close friend's wedding in a small town near Berlin, but on arrival I found there was no room at the only hotel in town. The only option was an expensive hotel miles away. A Bangladeshi bellboy was willing to listen to my woes and told me to have a drink in the bar. Ten minutes later he returned with the key to a top-floor room.

Last month my cousin died in Minneapolis, Minnesota. On my way there, my connecting flight to Rochester, New York, was canceled because of bad weather, and I couldn't get another. As I told my sob

story to an airline official, a Salvadoran overheard and offered to give me a lift to Rochester. He drove through bad weather and went out of his way to get me to my destination. He wouldn't even accept a cent for gas. He said he was "glad to help a brother."

*Manish Nandy  
Reston, Virginia*

**THE MORNING THE U.S. MARSHALS** rang our doorbell at 5 A.M., I answered in my green frog pajamas. When I saw the police cars and flashing lights, I figured our downstairs neighbors had had another domestic dispute, but then a female officer asked for my husband. The marshals followed me upstairs and arrested my groggy spouse. I begged them please not to wake our children; the last thing I wanted them to see was their daddy in handcuffs.

The marshals asked for my husband's passport, and — not knowing we could refuse — we gave it to them. (This would speed the deportation proceedings.) I watched from the living-room window in shock as my hardworking husband of thirteen years was taken away. This shy, sweet man who'd painted my mother's front steps and filled her empty refrigerator with food, who'd played Uno with our kids and washed our daughter's hair every Saturday night, was gone. With him went our security, both financial and emotional.

It is now four years later, and I'm struggling to make mortgage payments and maintain a long-distance marriage. My husband and I made the tough decision that the children should live overseas with him. I still live in the U.S., in a one-room studio, and support both households on a single income.

Some mornings I wake up in my queen-size bed and reach for my husband. Then I remember that I am alone, and I wonder how I got here.

*Name Withheld*

**I TEACH ONLINE FRESHMAN COMPOSITION** courses, and at least a half dozen of my students in every class — usually middle-aged men and women getting their diplomas late in life — write their argument papers about immigration pol-

icy in the U.S. It's rapidly outpacing in popularity the topics of capital punishment and abortion.

Now, if I were a student, and my instructor had a Spanish surname like mine, I'm not sure I would have the audacity to talk about immigrants the way my students do. I often tell them I'm married to a man from Mexico to give them the chance to save face, but they continue on: Mexicans (for that's whom they are really talking about) are not paying taxes; they bring their unwanted culture with them; and they have the nerve to speak Spanish instead of English. They fill our streets with crime and our hospitals with babies.

I try hard not to take any of this personally. When I'm grading papers with a glass of wine in hand, I even have fun arguing with them. I make margin notes describing my husband's family on his father's side, which includes lawyers, dentists, accountants, and businesspeople both in the U.S. and in Mexico. I describe my own third-generation Mexican American family, my LA cousins who own their own homes and go to state colleges.

I don't mention my cousin who spent his teenage years incarcerated. I don't mention my grandfather, who is still mowing lawns at eighty-four and believes "Mexicans don't retire; they just die." I don't mention my husband's other siblings: the gangbanger and the welfare mom — the only two who were born in the U.S. I don't mention that the successful ones in my husband's family are here in the U.S. illegally — including my husband. (No one suspects him because he grew up in Hollywood and does not speak with an accent.) I don't mention that I'd do anything to keep him here in the U.S.

Mostly I just let my students rant. It's safer that way.

*M.G.  
Whittier, California*

**I ONCE WORKED AS A COUNSELOR** in a residential substance-abuse treatment facility for adolescent boys in Colorado. When state budget cuts left us with empty beds, we began housing undocumented immigrant teens at the request of immigration authorities, because minors

couldn't be placed in adult detention centers. Typically we would receive one or two Mexican boys and hold them for a night or two until they were deported. It must have been confusing, if not terrifying, for them to live among boys with emotional and substance-abuse problems. I was the only one on staff who spoke any Spanish.

One day we received six Salvadoran boys who were a special case: they weren't being deported but had to stay with us until some red tape regarding their parents' citizenship was sorted out. That first night they called Virginia, Maryland, and New York to tell their relatives that they were alive but stuck. I listened to them sound out the name of our town and realized they had no idea where it was.

Two days later a small woman with dark eyes and worn but immaculate clothes knocked at our door and asked for one of the Salvadoran boys. She had hung up the phone in New York and bought a bus ticket to Colorado. She was shaking as she told me her son's name. I went and retrieved a boy of about thirteen. He had been loaned too-big clothes, as the ones he'd arrived in had grown putrid from the hours he'd spent in the back of a barely ventilated truck with twenty other people.

When the boy saw his mother, his brave face twisted like a small child's, and they clung to one another as if they were in danger of falling. She said over and over, "Mi hijo" (My son). He blubbered, and she squeezed his face and arms and belly, as if to prove to herself that he was flesh and blood in her arms.

She told me she had not seen her son in eleven years. *Eleven years.* When she'd left for the U.S., he'd been a little boy wobbling on uncertain legs. Now the teenager sitting beside her was wobbling from two nights spent walking across the Arizona desert. I wondered how a mother could have left her son. I wondered how bad her situation had been.

By coincidence I would soon travel to El Salvador, and when I got there, I would see. Devastating poverty and violent repression by an indifferent aristocratic government continue to drive many Salvadorans north to the U.S.

Four years later I live in El Salvador

and work toward a day when mothers don't have to leave their children.

*Kelley Burns  
San Salvador, El Salvador*

**I RECENTLY TRAVELED TO JAPAN WITH** my son and daughter-in-law to visit her family on the island of Kyushu, at the southernmost tip of the country. Because so few tourists go there, I met only two people who spoke English during my stay. I was amazed at my feelings of isolation and anxiety and my longing to communicate. On the other hand, I was charmed by Japanese culture: the low tables with floor cushions, the narrow streets, the tiny cars, the food, the language, the indecipherable alphabet.

By the time I arrived back home in the States, I was eager to have a slice of pizza and a pint of dark beer at a pub. But I was also determined to enroll in a Japanese-language class in preparation for my next visit to Japan.

On my way home from the airport, I was struck by the number of stores with foreign writing on their signs; the majority of the markets in my neighborhood now catered to immigrants from either China or India. While walking to the park the following morning, I smiled and said good morning to the neighbors I passed, as usual, but this time I noticed how few of them spoke in return. Many just smiled and nodded. When I stopped to comment on a beautiful garden, the owner couldn't understand my words, but he grinned, delighted that I liked his plants.

I realized that I couldn't communicate with my own neighbors any more than I had with people in Japan. I wondered why I would bother to learn a language that I might use only once or twice in my lifetime and not a language that my neighbors spoke. More important, while in Japan I'd thought that everything "foreign" was wonderful, but here at home I'd sometimes become annoyed that I couldn't read the signs or restaurant menu, and I'd think, *What's happened to my community?* When I'd flown across the ocean to meet people from another country, I'd found their customs interesting, their music enchanting, and their food challenging. When those same peo-

ple came to my neighborhood, however, I saw it as an invasion.

They say travel broadens our horizons. I've decided I can broaden my horizons by staying at home and getting to know my neighbors.

*Rebecca Wecks  
Cupertino, California*

**MY FAMILY IMMIGRATED TO THE U.S.** from Hong Kong in 1972 when I was two, and I grew up in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Everyone at my school was white. Everyone on my block was white. Everyone on TV was white. Blond-haired, blue-eyed supermodels Cheryl Tiegs and Christie Brinkley adorned magazine covers. Sometimes I would forget what I looked like and be startled when I caught a glimpse of my foreign-looking face in a mirror. I found my Asian features alien and ugly.

Because my parents couldn't speak English, I grew up as their translator. I read mail and bills. I wrote my father's checks. I impersonated my mother on the phone. I went with them to doctor appointments. I forged sick notes to teachers. I sat with the life-insurance salesman and slowly deciphered the details of whole versus term life.

Sometimes strangers would ask where I was from, and when I answered, "Philly," they'd look confused. I'd have to tell them that I was originally from China.

I'm now thirty-eight, and for the past six years I have lived in rural Virginia, where I see even fewer Asian faces than I did growing up in Philadelphia. But I'm beginning to realize that "home" may not be a place but a state of mind. I've found myself unconsciously adopting a Southern drawl and forgetting that I look different from my neighbors. And there are days when my neighbors forget that I look "foreign," and I become just another person, colleague, friend.

*Judy Chow  
Strasburg, Virginia*

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