

Scales Falling Off

by Cynthia Tschampl

I grew up in Iowa—white, German, Christian. My mother's family members, of German decent, have been farmers in Iowa for several generations. My father was born in Gottschee, part of modern-day Slovenia. My father's family got caught in the nightmare of World War II, suffering from multiple displacements, disenfranchisement, malnutrition, concentration camps, and finally life as refugees. He immigrated to the USA, received his green card the day he landed, and then continued to his final destination of Sioux City, Iowa.

I always knew that my father's pre-immigration story was incredible, but, after working with today's immigrants, I realized that his immigration story is even more amazing. I have met so many people, predominantly from Central America, who have been filling out forms, paying fees, working, paying taxes, and getting their fingerprints and photos taken for 15 years, and they still do not have a green card. This glaring disparity between my father's experience and that of my new friends made me ask, "Why?" Today's immigrants have paid more fees, suffered years of anxiety, and have filed more paperwork than my father—with seemingly no chance for a green card. What is the difference? The only one I can see is that they are people of color, and my father is white. As I learn more about our country's immigration laws, the racism percolates down through our history. Just a few examples will give you the idea:

1790—The federal government passed a two-year residency requirement on immigrants wanting to become U.S. citizens, but black slaves were not eligible.

1882—U.S. Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, claiming they take jobs from white Ameri-

cans and work at low "coolie wages."

1917—The U.S. banned all Asian Indians because their racial status was unclear.

1924—The Immigration Act barred entry of "aliens ineligible to citizenship." Since Japanese and other Asians were barred by the 1790 naturalization law stipulating that "whites only" could be naturalized, the 1924 act totally excluded them from immigration.

Now in 2006 I've heard the ugly voice of racism during the current debate on immigration reform, with people on radio, on the TV, in the streets, and even in the State House saying ugly and hateful things about people who only want to do what is best for their families.

It scares me, and it saddens me. I want to tell them that our standard of living is higher thanks to the contribution of immigrants. I want to tell them that five of my seven siblings served/are serving in the military along with over 60,000 non-citizen immigrants, including 10% of those fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq. I want to ask them what they think of Lance Cpl. Jose Gutierrez who was the first U.S. soldier to die in Iraq but who also entered the U.S. without documents. I want to ask why they feel so offended by people who live in this country without permission; why is that infraction so much worse than speeding, jay walking, or any other non-violent civil violation? I want to encourage them to a higher duty, a better patriotism. I want to urge them to leave no place for hate.

Cynthia Tschampl is a senior legislative organizer with the Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy Coalition in Boston, MA. She encourages international understanding and peace networking wherever possible.