

The Shoulders of Giants

When analyzing the difficulties of life, it is easy enough to understand the broad strokes of opportunity against the canvas of necessity. What we need in life will always come to fruition. What we want in life is only ever left to the working hands of our own ambition, and the efforts of our own gumption.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, after not enough money in the world could account for even the most basic needs, and long after sending my children to sleep at midday to ease the pangs of hunger, I was introduced to this concept of gumption. I do not mean to imply that there was any amount of debate in my decision to leave Kiev. On the contrary, the decision seemed made for me by the conditions life itself presented me. The judgement that was the 5th line of my passport dictated that life in the Ukraine was simply impossible to live. It was impossible for my parents and my husband, it was impossible for me, and as a pregnant mother of two young children, it would be impossible for my posterity. The conditions of being Jewish in Kiev were omnipresent. My mother, a college graduate was only ever afforded the opportunity to earn wages as a factory worker. When I was a young girl we made just enough to survive, and I can still recall her covert trips to the synagogue at Passover to collect *matzah* bread when it was illegal to engage in such behavior. The cold creeping through my jacket to wrap its embrace around my entire body as we walked miles down a beaten road. Life was gray. It was so deeply gray in all regards. Through adolescence it was apparent that my life would meet the same fate of a shortage of opportunity and a wealth of discrimination. It was gumption and sheer force of will that lifted me up to the task of leaving my home. After generations of religious persecution, after

having been turned away from work, education, and pushed to the lowest class in the hierarchy of a nation in shambles, it was that same gumption that catalyzed action to achieve necessity.

Leaving what you know for something you do not is difficult. What is more difficult is simply knowing that whatever it may be, it will be better. In 1996 I earned my refugee status. After years of document preparation, medical examinations and regular visits to the immigration office I received my approval. A distant relative who had left for the United States years prior was ready to welcome my family and me to the so called, 'land of opportunity'. The journey to the United States was our first obstacle. Finding the energy to accomplish the process for myself, my ailing mother, my husband, my now three children, and our house cat was a task in and of itself. There were several late nights spent in airports, every step of the way explaining to young children why it was we were leaving home. From Kiev we flew to Helsinki, and from Helsinki to Frankfurt. After leaving Frankfurt our longest flight yet was to New York City. As the result of a delay my sister, who had expected us a day prior, had no idea what to think. She spent the 24 hours of her birthday at the airport for fear of missing our arrival, not knowing if we would arrive at all. Our arrival and reunion were an early happiness. Large glass windows throughout the airport gave view to an astonishing sight. I sat in awe at the city, peering over the shoulders of my children, who, after such a long journey found excitement in their new home and a friendly face. The happiness and excitement quickly faded as we realized the seriousness of our situation. Making our way through customs and immigration adjacent the beautiful view of the city provided a stark juxtaposition of the awesome potential against the prospective reality we were facing. The look of bewilderment on the face of the New York Association for New Americans representative when he realized that we had a mere \$3000 to support our family in this transition was one that I won't soon forget. While we waited for our white cards admitting us

into the United States, he searched our bags to ensure that we were not secretly hiding any funds away for fear of confiscation, as was a common practice. My mother was the primary cause for delay as she feared handing her passport to any person regardless their claims of authority. This was also a result of Stalin's Soviet Union. Despite our reservations and first impression, we were glad to be in America. Opportunity is what she boasted, and opportunity was what we yearned for. There was no inclination of mine or of my family's to find anything abroad other than the means to build a life for ourselves, with our own hands and our own work. As a result of both life under the Soviet Union and after its collapse, the world outside of its borders was completely unknown to me. Learning to navigate this alien world presented more difficulties than the opportunities we had hoped for.

The earliest days in New York City, where I spoke only several words of the language proved most difficult. My husband quickly received work 'under the table' as a baker's apprentice. He was offered a meager \$4 an hour wage for the life of his month-long apprenticeship. Without any knowledge or experience in the labor force of the United States, my husband did not only take this job, we celebrated it. In our eyes this was the opportunity we had hoped for. The opportunity to learn a craft and move up in an industry gave us cause to begin planning for a future. This celebration was also short lived, as my husband was promptly fired after his apprenticeship, and the proprietor sought to repeat the process with another immigrant or refugee hopeful. The \$3000 we arrived with was soon gone and the only government assistance we ever received was a \$500 relocation fee. We six only managed to stay in an apartment that allowed no more than five occupants by passing my two daughters off as a single child. Fortunately, being born only a year apart, their golden hair and colored eyes meant they bore a striking resemblance to one another. It wasn't until years later that I learned the landlord

knew all along and was only one of the good Samaritans that helped us along the way. After working odd jobs and several repetitions of the first conditions of his employment, my husband became a day laborer and quickly learned skills that he never before needed in the Ukraine. In an ever-growing city the need for carpenters and electricians was also ever-growing. We saw this as our debt. The countless hours of labor while being underpaid was not so simply put as being taken advantage of, but rather an investment in our future. It was this experience that allowed him to become a self-taught electrician where he was subsequently able to provide for our family and, through bits of hard work, good fortune, and good friends we were able to find our way to where we are now. The earliest years were the hardest, but over time we saw the young buds of fortune bloom into not only a livable life, but also a prosperous one.

Our time in New York City was difficult, but as we found the combination of opportunity and preparedness and learned to navigate the United States at an exponential rate, we began to make plans to significantly increase our quality of life. Our next challenge would be leaving the city to move to a more financially practical part of the country. Our decision to move to Tucson, Arizona was predominately motivated by the work my husband was able to secure. Again, we explained to our children why we were pulling them from a home that they had only just begun to understand and moving them to the unknown. The small Russian community we found in the city was not going to be present in the west, and my children, who had become accustomed to the little bit of the cultural influences of home, would have to learn to survive in an area devoid of any such advantage. My husband and I were not able to find work immediately and yet again we found our growing family crammed into a tiny apartment with friends from home that also happened to be in the area. Despite our conditions we were still beneficiaries of the fruits of a good life. We were surrounded by love and laughter, we overcame obstacles as a family, and this

fact only made our bond stronger. Slowly we were able build something for ourselves. With our own hands we built this life. I often think back to the cold road to the synagogue, to the road of ice and snow that stood as a testament and an analogous to my life. While this world in its corners may be cold and gray, there is always a road to salvation, to prosperity, and ultimately, to opportunity.



This is not a recollection of my own, but rather that of my mother. It is a story that I have heard countless times. She has ensured that each of her children carries this story with them on a daily basis and we all know it by heart. It is just as much a part of us as it is a part of her. As a small child trekking the world there are memories of such a significant shift, but I must admit that they are predominately vague sensory images, sounds, and smells. How was a child supposed to understand the gravity of our decision? There was no robust analysis going on in my mind. At the time I was not concerned with understanding the ethics behind our condition, and to what I can attest, neither was my mother. It was simply necessary. While the story is not my own, it is a story I have grown up with, and while I was not concerned with the ethical ramifications of my origin and situation before, they have since found root in my character and in my worldview. The path of my people has been etched both in my personal history and a collective history so that we may find prosperity in both my present and our future. The extreme shift in culture not only from leaving the Ukraine to come to the United States, but also in

leaving the doorstep of my home to enter this still alien world has been an endeavor on a daily basis. This is not to say that I am foreign to witnessing ideas that do not reflect my own, simply that, it is my ethical belief that there is a threshold for all ideas that is their own burden to meet. How is it that a young girl in the Arizona public school system is to impart on her classmates the ever-present need to welcome refugees and immigrants with open arms? How can one hold their tongue in heated debates that diminish the lives of refugees and immigrants to simple numbers, or turn the argument from taxes unpaid to mouths unfed? While the Statue of Liberty stands resolute in her promise, giving voice to the words written so long ago by Emma Lazarus "...give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore, send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!" we are so quick to spurn the 'huddled masses' we have so ardently beckoned. What patriot who stands so deservedly in her shadow and bears her image in honor can concurrently fight so voraciously against her prime initiative? This is not patriotism. This concept of American exceptionalism that seeks so aggressively to turn away those in need.

I must admit, throughout my lifetime the argument that is the validity of the United States' program to assist refugees has hardly ever been questioned. While we may have had different views on what capacity and what level of assistance to provide, it has always been an idea of necessity, not an idea of choice. In my younger years I quickly became acquainted with the arguments made against illegal immigration. The tired tropes of chain migration and tax evasion that have been disproven time and time again continue to be exploited by individuals to carry out the same discriminatory agenda that has always existed in this country. The constant beseechment of individuals fleeing violent countries to just 'do it the right way' has been a guise that recent years have shown to only ever have been a false contingency to admittance. This

discrimination is something that I have always lived with. The distinction between illegal immigration and assistance to refugees has always been clear. It was not until the most recent administration that the attack against our moral imperative has gained any semblance of strength. Never in my youth did I consider the battle to fight for every individual fleeing persecution, violence, or war and seeking a new life would ever meet the front that it has currently advanced to. At present, the 'powers that be' have sought to undermine the efforts of the international community and the inherent responsibility of that same entity to our fellow man. The ethical obligation to act morally, to ensure that every citizen of the world and creature that shares our space is afforded the decency earned by first breath are paramount. Not for the protection of borders, not for the hoarding of wealth or the waging of war, but simply to maintain our humanity. To ensure that no matter how we live, we never lose sight of why it is that we live.

Tucson, Arizona is hot. Anyone that has ever visited or lived in the area will likely regale you with stories of scorching heat and unbearable summers. It was on one such summer day that my brother Ariel, my sister Rina, and I arrived at the Evo A. DeConcini U.S. Courthouse to take part in a swearing in ceremony for naturalization. I always knew my story was unique. I knew that my classmates and friends could not possibly understand the years and experiences that had brought me to the point I was at in my life as a 17-year-old girl in a city so foreign, but what I did not know, or even expect, was the sea of faces we were met with at this ceremony. Not only the faces of the individuals that were present to take the Naturalization Oath of Allegiance to the United States of America, but also the individuals present to witness our ceremony. The outpouring of support from our local community and its leaders showed me that even though the four walls of a classroom might not comprehend the parameters or perspective of my origin, there is still yet a beating heart at the core of the United States that not only understands but

works constantly and fervently to bring assistance to future Americans from all walks of life. The oath we all took that day brought our collective differences together and aligned the people in that room under a common goal. A goal that provides for the support of the constitution, a support for the United States of America, and a goal that ultimately made us all into Americans. As I stood by the other future citizens, reciting every word of the oath with more and more conviction, I could not help but think back to my mother. She dragged one *babushka*, a husband, two toddlers, a newborn, and an orange and white tabby cat across 3 continents (the cat only ever made it to Frankfurt) all so that we may stand in this room one day, so that we may stand not as refugees seeking a better life, but as Americans with the means to build one.

I have been an American citizen for just over 13 years now, but what is it that makes an American? Is it the land we inhabit? Is it the soil underneath our feet that feeds our soul? I would be inclined to argue that the idea of American exceptionalism that rests solely on the concept of its imaginary borders is not where our true exceptionalism comes from. In the years I have lived in this country, in the many people I have come to know and love, I have seen characteristics that embody American exceptionalism. Hard work, perseverance, innovation, the will to not only fight, but to fight for what is right and just, to work together towards a common goal, and to live a life this is not centralized around the individual but to rise to the task of a collective greatness, this is exceptional. By these standards, not only have I always been an American, but my father and mother before me, my children, and theirs. As the children of immigrants and refugees we have been so graciously provided a view of the mountaintop. We are held up by war-torn hands, stand on the shoulders of giants. All of what I have stated is simply a component of what it means to me to be an American. Yet, it is much simpler to define what America is. America *is* the land of opportunity. A blank slate for many and an entitled inheritance for some, America,

despite the outcries of the few, stands simply to offer her heart to our working hands. This opportunity is ours and, just as my family before me, I yearn for it, the opportunity to live a good life, the opportunity to build an amazing future, and, through this scholarship, the opportunity to aspire to greatness.