

Immigration

by Frank Pauc, April 25, 2010

The recent draconian law passed in Arizona has given me reason to write about the immigration issue. Immigration is something that I care about passionately (my wife, Karin, is a German citizen with a green card), and when I care about something, I write.

The immigration debate seems to revolve around whether the newcomers to our country are here lawfully or not. Passions run high regarding the legality of their presence among us. I think that we should be looking at the morality of the issue rather than strictly at the legal aspect of it. After all, man-made laws and morality are not necessarily the same things.

Instead of looking at recent immigrants as being legal or not, we should start out by recognizing the fact that every immigrant to the U.S. is a human being, worthy of respect and possessing an innate dignity. To those of us who are religious, we would say that every immigrant is a Child of God, created in His likeness and image. If we accept that this is true about newcomers to our country, then a certain behavior is demanded of us. It is made quite clear in the scriptures used by both Jews and Christians that you may not mistreat the alien in your midst. We are required to treat the strangers in our country with compassion and respect.

We have all been strangers. Certainly, unless we are Native Americans, all of our ancestors were strangers in this country at one time. I would argue that few of our ancestors came to this country on a whim. Most of them came because of necessity. Nobody leaves a comfortable home to live among people that speak a different language and have different customs. A person leaves the land of his birth because he or she believes that they must do so. Some of the reasons for leaving aren't always particularly noble or even legal. One of my great-grandfathers was an Austrian draft dodger and he came here just prior to the First World War. Our most recent immigrants to the U.S. are no different than our own forefathers; they have come because of a burning need.

My people came here about one hundred years ago from Austria-Hungary. They came at a time when the doors of this nation were wide open, and all that was required to enter this country was a strong back and the willingness to do difficult work for low wages. Those who come here now also have strong backs and are willing to work at the worst types of jobs. So, what has changed? We changed the rules; we changed our laws. Few of our ancestors would have been allowed into this country under the present rules. Are those who enter our country now illegally really criminals, or are our laws unjust? Do we treat the new immigrants fairly? Is the present debate really about our security or is it really about xenophobia?

How many people in this country have ever lived in a foreign country? How many have had to learn a foreign language to get along? I have. Back in the '80s I lived in Germany, courtesy of the U.S. Army. I lived in an apartment with a German landlord. I shopped at German stores. I had a safety net with regards to income; the Army was paying my way. Even though I didn't have to struggle to find a job in Germany, I still had to learn the language and the customs of the host nation. It was hard. I remember clearly the times when I felt confused, or utterly alone. However, my wife Karin's family accepted me with open arms. They didn't shun me or mock me for not being able to speak German well. They treated me like a friend, and eventually as part of their family. That experience changed my life. Karin's family didn't have to accept me, but they did anyway. I am forever grateful to them for that.

The U.S. does not have of sterling record with regards to welcoming the immigrant. Although we are almost all the descendants of immigrants, we often treat the newcomer with suspicion and disdain. It doesn't have to be this way. It should not be this way. We do not honor our fore-bearers by mistreating the immigrant. We honor our ancestors when we greet our new neighbor with an open hand and an open heart.

Peace,
Frank Pauc