

An immigration story – Roald Hoffmann

I was born in 1937 in Złoczów, Poland, now Zolochiv, Ukraine, as Roald Safran. It was not a good time to be born just there in a happy Jewish family. Some of us survived the war, many did not -- my father and three of four grandparents were killed by the Nazis.

After the war, there was nothing left for us in Poland. We began a slow journey westward. There were relatives in the US (my mother's aunt) and in Palestine (eventually Israel, my father's brother and cousins). We also considered going wherever it was possible, meaning where visas in exchange for labor contracts were granted. Various South American countries and Australia came in that category. We (I was a child, so it was my mother) focused on the US.

We remained in Poland through 1945. My mother remarried, to Naftali Margulies, a fellow survivor. I became briefly Roald Margulies. We left Poland in early 1946 for, first, Czechoslovakia. On the way out my stepfather purchased the birth certificate of a deceased German soldier (there is a story behind that), Paul Hoffmann, and my birth certificate was deemed lost. I became (at age 8) Roald Hoffmann. The reason for assuming the German identity can be traced back to our knowledge of the US Immigration Act of 1924, which set larger quotas for Germans than Poles (being Jewish didn't matter).

We began a slow journey westward, through Displaced Persons camps in Austria and Germany, all the time trying to get a US visa, based on Affidavits from our US relatives. Refugee quotas were small; there were hopes and disappointments in that time, and we almost went elsewhere (some relatives wound up in Australia). In the end we arrived in Boston on Washington's Birthday in 1949. I was 11.

There were still hard times ahead, in my stepfather finding work. For me, as for other immigrant children, the road was clear. Even if in 1949 there was still antisemitism in college admissions to Harvard, Yale, Princeton, educational opportunities elsewhere were very much open to hard-working immigrant children. I went through New York City Public Schools (PS 93 Queens, PS 16 Brooklyn, Stuyvesant HS), on to a B.A. at Columbia and a PhD at Harvard. I became a naturalized US citizen at age 18.

The in principle illegal immigration of the family (based on false documents) was never discovered, nor was there any legal move to normalize the situation on our part. We remained Paul, Clara and Roald Hoffmann.

The reasons for our immigration to the US were, truthfully, as mixed as such reasons usually are. We were persecuted in Nazi times, of course, in constant fear for our lives. After the war, we did not want to live in a part of Poland (our town) that clearly was going to become part of the Soviet Union. We did not wish to remain in Poland, where antisemitism remained very much alive. We wanted to start a new life, and the USA had family and, as we saw, job opportunities for my parents (I was a child).

I believe that I have contributed much to the US, teaching literally thousands in large courses at Cornell, and many people through the literature. I have also done research that has enabled, freely given (I do not hold a single patent), major contributions by others to drug and catalyst development, and to the materials science of novel electronic materials, all advancing the US economy.

More detail of my work may be found on the web, or in my website, roaldhoffmann.com.