Refugee Resettlement Team

Title: Did My Family Really Come Legally?

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Many in the U.S. support immigration, but also believe that immigrants should "get in line" or "immigrate the right way – legally." They might suspect that some of those coming across our borders today are not following the law – unlike their ancestors who surely did.

At various times over its nearly 250-year history, the U.S. has had no immigration law, strict exclusionary laws, quota systems that favored some races or ethnicities over others, and more. As a result, what was "legal" 200 years ago might have been *illegal* 100 years later, but might be legal again today.

In addition to oft-changing laws, the history of U.S. immigration is full of "amnesties," reflecting the fact that millions of people relocated to the U.S. without following the law as it existed at the time – "illegally." One example: Spurred by fears of increased immigration after the end of World War One, a race and nationality-based quota system for immigration was enacted by laws in 1921 (the Emergency Quota Act) and 1924. Prospective immigrants were required to apply in their home countries and then to wait for approval. Europeans had the lion-share of the quota, but unevenly so (e.g., FY 1929 quota: Great Brittain and Northern Ireland – 65,721; Greece – 307). In 1929, an amnesty was provided to those who could prove that they had lived in the US since 1921 and were of good moral character.

Reasonable minds can differ about how the U.S. should regulate immigration. But the historic fact that U.S. immigration law has been so different over time might prompt us to consider whether our dear ancestor who emigrated from abroad a century (or so) ago actually did so legally – if not, whether that was fair or discriminatory – and ultimately whether it matters at all. As we did last week, we again offer this: when you consider today's immigrants, you might also think about a family member who once did the same thing.

If you would like to join the Refugee Resettlement Team or to get additional information, please contact Bob Wohlsen at bob.wohlsen@gmail.com.