Ethnic Roots: From Luxembourg, Germany, and Poland to Chicago, IL

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AGR 201

Lab Y01

September 5, 2018

When discussing my family’s origins with my parents, I learned that my mother’s side arrived in America from Germany and Luxembourg so long ago that we don’t know much about their experiences as they were never really discussed and anyone who might know has unfortunately passed. On the other hand, my father was the first of his family to leave the United Kingdom when he moved to Chicago in 1992.

To try to fill in some of the gaps in my mother’s family history, I turned to a genealogy service called FamilySearch. My grandmother’s great-grandparents on her father’s side arrived in Iowa from Luxembourg between 1848 and1855. They made their living by working on the farm they owned. In 1885, my grandmother’s grandmother moved to Chicago from Germany, but not much is known about how her family made a living. My grandmother’s grandfather on her mother’s side came from Germany in 1865. Her great-grandparents on her mother’s side moved to Chicago from Germany in the 1850s.

Although the genealogy service could not provide personal reasons for my family’s immigration, I can gather from historical context that my ancestors from Luxembourg came for economic reasons. In the 1848, Luxembourg declared its independence which threw the country into a transitional economic and political state. As it was more agrarian and not as developed as its surrounding countries, it struggled economically, causing 20% of its population to move to the United States before the start of the 20th century (“Key dates”, 2018). Similarly, my ancestors from Germany probably came for political stability as the 1850s through the 1870s were filled with political unrest, from revolutions demanding a bill of rights to wars with Austria and France (“Germany”, 2003).

I could not find information on when my grandfather’s family immigrated to the United States, but I know that for the most part, they immigrated from Poland. My grandfather’s mother, Natalie Elia Beyer, lived in Green Bay, Wisconsin before moving to Chicago, Illinois while his father, Henry P. Studzinski, was born in Chicago. Just before my grandfather was born in 1930, his family moved to Rogers Park, a diverse neighborhood in Chicago and changed their Polish last name from Studzinski to the German last name Sherman, probably to fit in better with the population already there.

As far back as my mother can tell, her side of the family has always been religious, specifically Roman Catholic. Because of that, my family celebrates the religious aspect of Christmas and Easter above the commercial holiday that is more commonly celebrated. We bring together the whole family and attend mass before spending the rest of the day together eating our favorite foods. At family gatherings, we typically eat Chicago-Italian cuisine because my aunt, who married into the family, is very in touch with her Italian roots. We like Italian-inspired Chicago classics such as Italian beef and sausage because our family has lived in Chicago for so long. We also enjoy Polish food, specifically pierogi and Polish sausage, because of my grandfather’s Polish heritage.

Because of the importance that my family places on religion, I received some negative messages about people who do not practice a religion, or who only attend mass on holidays. My father did not typically go to church with my mother and sister and me, which my mother would complain about, joking that he wouldn’t make it to heaven with us. Additionally, when we attended church with our family on major Catholic holidays, my mother would make comments about those people who only come to church for Christmas and Easter, which we called “ChrEasters”. She claimed that they were not real Catholics as they did not make the effort to regularly attend mass and then take seats from “real” Catholics on the most important holidays of the year. Since coming to college, I have become less committed to going to church every week, though I still do my best to follow the teachings that I learned in my first eighteen years from the church. As such, I disagree with my mother’s messages, especially with the current events surrounding the Catholic church’s sexual abuse allegations. I feel that it shouldn’t matter how often you go to church as long as you have good in your heart and that even if you do go to church regularly, you may not be a good person.

Though I have not much discussed his influence on my identity, my father has been a personal mentor to me throughout my life. I have always looked up to him and tried to follow in his footsteps. My father inspired me to pursue a career in engineering like he did. He has always supported my career pursuits, especially in a typically male-dominant field. As long as I am willing to work hard, my father has taught me that my gender should not hold me back from anything. I hope to be as good of a parent as my father and inspire my children to pursue whatever they want, in spite of any stereotypes they may have to fight to do so.

My academic mentor is my research advisor that I met this summer, Dr. Jennifer Bhatnagar from Boston University. I learned so much from her about being a strong woman in scientific research without sacrificing her family values. She made her family a priority by staying home with her child on Mondays and mentoring me via Skype on those days. She also made the rare decision to change her last name when she got married. Additionally, she is very supportive of women in STEM majors and has a mostly female laboratory staff, which is rare in her field. I plan to be as supportive of any mentees I have in my future career but also I want to feel comfortable prioritizing myself and my family like she does.

**References**

"Germany". Political Chronology of Europe. (2003). Europa Publications. pp. 95+

Key dates in the history of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg. (2018). Retrieved from http://luxembourg.public.lu/en/le-grand-duche-se-presente/histoire/histoire-dates/index.html