

FROM HOME TO HOME: EXHIBIT OFFERS IMAGES OF IMMIGRANTS' JOURNEY, LIFE;

AT JEWISH COMMUNITY CENTER, THROUGH FEB. 28

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Body

People who have left their native lands don't often like to talk about why they left, sometimes because they're too busy trying to adjust to their new home.

It's often left to a second, third or fourth generation to learn where their ancestors came from, why they left their homeland and what kind of people they were.

An exhibit called From Home to Home, aimed at helping young people understand their immigrant ancestors and what went into their decision to emigrate, is currently running through Feb. 28 at the Jewish Community Center, 2 Millstone Campus Drive off Lindbergh at Schuetz Road.

"It's not often you get to walk in your grandparents' shoes," said Patty Bloom, a board member of the sponsoring Central Agency for Jewish Education and chairman of the advisory committee for the exhibit. The co-sponsor is the Jewish Family Educators' Network.

The exhibit allows the viewers to come very close to walking in their ancestors' shoes. Plus, in creative and meaningful ways, the exhibit encourages children's participation in decisions that their ancestors' must have made: Why move? Where to go? What to take?

The idea is to help them understand both the wrenching decision to leave and the difficult task of adapting to a new land.

There's a scale where the participants literally weigh pros and cons of leaving, all of which are written on small wooden blocks; and there is a colorful exhibit that encourages children to pack their own small trunks, a realistic way to point up the hard choices that each family member had to make.

There's a shelf of grocery items with labels in strange hieroglyphics, representing how English must have appeared to the new arrivals.

Beautifully detailed dioramas show immigrant life in various cities in America, including St. Louis, and other dioramas show different aspects of Jewish life in several cities of Eastern Europe.

Using a scale model of a typical 400-square-foot apartment, children are invited to fit doll-house furniture, enough for 10 people, into the space. Photographs accompanying that exhibit show how people lived in such small spaces by sleeping five or six crosswise in one bed.

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Although the exhibit depicts the immigration experience from the Jewish point of view, Jews don't have a monopoly on it, says Bloom. Most families can trace their roots back to similar experiences, and many groups from Catholic and public schools have enjoyed the exhibit, she says.

Bloom's grandmother, Frieda Handelsman, 85, of Frontenac, looked at the exhibits and smiled at the pictures of the people sleeping crosswise. She remembers doing that once, on her wedding night, when more guests arrived than her family had beds for.

Pointing to the activity that asks children to fit things into trunks, she noted that her mother, Rebecca Weitzman, who died five years ago at the age of 100, had come to this country at the age of 15. "She had no mother and probably had nothing to bring," she said.

About all Handelsman knew of her own mother's early life was that her grandfather was a farmer in a small town somewhere in Russia.

Her grandmother had died in childbirth when her mother was almost 4. "All she told me about the trip here was that she ate a banana for the first time and thought it was marvelous," she said.

Bloom, 29, who lives in University City, wants to know more. Within the past three or four years, she's started writing a family history and has traveled to meet descendants of these immigrants of both her family and her husband's family.

She's learned how her great-great-grandfather would pay off government officials weekly in order to avoid the pogroms.

She knows that her great-grandfather's family probably decided to leave Russia because he had been drafted, and it was widely accepted that once a Jew was conscripted, he never returned home.

But there's so much more she wants to know. "Often that first generation didn't want to talk. But five generations later, it's important to know all the reasons they came here," she said.

"We want to learn about the values they had and how we can pass them on to our children," she said. Her own daughter, Rebecca Bloom, 18 months, is named for her great-great-grandmother, who came here.

Bloom, who teaches fourth-graders in religious school at Temple Israel, said, "I want to make sure our children have memories, so that 3,000 years of history is not forgotten - and that it doesn't end with them."

The exhibit was created by the Jewish Children's Learning Lab in coordination with the Board of Jewish Education of New York. St. Louis is the first city outside the New York area to display it. From here it will go to Kansas City.

The exhibit targets families with children ages 7 to 12, but it speaks to the "universal immigrant experience," said Joan Wolchansky, director of the department of family education for the Central Agency for Jewish Education and exhibit coordinator.

"Parents relate to the exhibit on a different level from their children, but everyone makes a personal connection," she said. "It's a really good way to get family interaction in terms of a family's own stories."

The exhibit

From Home to Home continues through Feb. 28 at the Jewish Community Center, 2 Millston Campus Drive. Hours are 1 to 5 p.m. Sunday; 11 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Monday, Tuesday and Thursday; noon to 8 p.m. Wednesday;

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and 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Friday. Admission is \$ 3 a person, \$ 1.50 for children accompanied by adults. For information and group reservations, call 432-0020, Ext. 3760.

Graphic

PHOTO Color Photo by TED DARGAN / POST-DISPATCH - Four generations of relatives of **Jewish immigrants** look at a display on immigration at the **Jewish Community Center** in west St. Louis County. The four (from left) are Rebecca Bloom, Alice Handelman, Patty Bloom and Frieda Handelman.

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