

No Room for Intolerance Where There Is Love

By Irv Sternberg

The year was 1921, and the time had come. After months of planning, my mother and her family finally left their home in Ukraine and fled that troubled land for America. They had endured much in the previous years when the Germans were fighting the Russians, and their village was caught in the crossfire.

My mother escaped death twice during the Great War—once when German soldiers failed to discover her in a hayloft where her father had hidden her, fearing she would be raped. A friend, hiding with her, was not so fortunate. A soldier thrust a pitchfork into the hay, instantly killing her. On another occasion, stray bullets left holes in her skirt but did not strike her body. Her younger brother, Albert, was less fortunate. A Russian bullet found its way to his wrist, shattering it and leaving him with a useless hand for the rest of his life.

But war was not the only danger. As Jews living amongst Gentiles, there was always the fear of violent anti-Semitic attacks from their neighbors, especially during Easter week. Jews were not permitted to hold jobs, so they were farmers, bakers, tailors, cobblers, blacksmiths and carpenters, among other trades. But life was a struggle.

Early in October of that fateful year, my grandparents and their four daughters and four sons, ranging in age from 10 to 20, started their journey to America. Their eldest daughter, Esther, had already left Europe and was now married and living in Brooklyn. It was her husband, Leonardo Cianci, a Roman Catholic born in Italy, who made it possible. At great personal expense, he took it upon himself to sponsor them in the U.S. and paid for their passage from Hamburg, Germany, to New York City. They arrived on Columbus Day.

Whenever I witness an act of bigotry or indifference, I think of my uncle Leonardo who, through his love for his wife, offered his Jewish in-laws, whom he'd never seen, the chance to begin a new life in a strange new place. My Aunt Esther and her husband were married more than 70 years, raised four daughters and a son. They lived until their 'nineties.

Their legacy was the lesson they taught their children, grandchildren, and all their nieces and nephews—that there is no room for intolerance where there is love.