

Becoming American, Becoming Ethnic

College Students Explore Their Roots

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The Loss of My Family's Ethnic Ties and the Strengthening of Their American Identities

Reflecting on her childhood, my grandmother Julia Koch remembers fondly the time she spent in the Old Country and most of her experiences once she moved to the United States. Born on April 25, 1906, on the small island of Rhodes, my grandmother was the youngest of seven children in the Capuya family of Spanish Jews. Leaving her beautiful tourist island was sad for my grandmother, but she also looked forward to the opportunities and freedoms the United States had to offer. Her immigration experience followed the pattern of many other Jewish immigrants of that period. My grandmother, however, was more fortunate than most in that, comparatively speaking, her journey to America was very smooth because of her ability to adjust to American life.

Rhodes is a beautiful island located between Greece and Turkey, with a temperate climate and a tourist season in the summer months. Many of the Spanish Jews fled from Spain to Rhodes, Italy, Turkey, Holland, and Denmark at the time of the Spanish Inquisition. That is how my grandmother's family found themselves residing in Rhodes. At this time Rhodes was under control of the Turkish government. The Spanish Jews led a comfortable life in Rhodes mixed among the Turks and the Greeks. My grandmother's family did, however, resent the fact that the Turks never elected any of the Jews to political office. My grandmother felt they had a right to representation. Then, in 1912, the Italian government gained control of Rhodes and treated its people with more respect than the Turks had done.

The economy of Rhodes was good for most of the people living there.

My grandmother's family led a middle-class life and enjoyed a good position in society. Her father owned a small shoe business and had a few employees. Rhodes at this time had many small family businesses. There were many small shops that carried dry goods, leather, and basic necessities. The economic opportunities, however, dwindled as the number of families grew.

My great-grandfather's shoe business did well, but there were not many business options for his sons. My grandmother had three brothers, Joe, Albert, and Victor, and three sisters, Selma, Rachel, and Laura. They all attended French schools because my great-grandparents believed strongly in educating their children, especially the boys. Joe, Albert, and Victor also went to Paris to study so they could advance themselves in business. The sisters found some lower-skilled jobs after they completed their schooling, but it was more difficult for the brothers to start businesses because there was no need for any new ones. At this time the Jewish people believed strongly in the importance of males in the family and their ability to earn a living to support the family. That is why my great-grandparents became concerned about their sons' future job prospects if they were to remain in Rhodes. At this time the family started to reevaluate their position and the opportunities left for them on Rhodes.

Commonly in the early 1900s and 1910s people from Rhodes began to immigrate to Africa or the United States in search of economic opportunity. My great-grandfather thought a lot about these options while thinking of his sons' futures. They ruled out going to Africa because of the hot weather and the problems with tsetse flies and malaria. They did, however, hear many good things about the United States. It was a big country and they heard it was quite liberal and independent. They believed it would be a change for the better, living in a democratic society where Jews could run for political office if they wanted. Many people left Rhodes for America and wrote back about the unlimited economic opportunities it had to offer. They also wrote that although one had to work hard, one could earn a decent living. Others went as far as to say that people in America were so rich that one could find money on the streets.

Running out of options in Rhodes, my great-grandfather and two of his sons, Joe and Albert, left in 1910 to take up residence in the United States. They hoped to send for the rest of the family once they established themselves. They settled in Seattle, Washington, where Albert and Joe went to school and my great-grandfather opened a postcard store. Unfortunately, being a new immigrant and not speaking English, my great-grandfather misunderstood the American legalities of running a business. The man that sold the store to him did not explain that he had to have a lease to run

the store. My great-grandfather had invested a lot of his savings into the store and it was taken away from him because he did not have a lease. Broken-hearted, my great-grandfather packed his bags and returned home to Rhodes after only nine months in the United States and reopened his shoe business. My grandmother's brothers, Joe and Albert, remained in the United States to finish their education. They were able to attend school and work on the side to support themselves. Eventually they settled in New York. It was pointless for the brothers to return to Rhodes because there were no job opportunities there for them. Then, in 1916 my grandmother's other brother Victor joined Joe and Albert in the United States.

After World War I, the rest of the Capuya family decided it was time to reunite the family and joined Joe, Albert, and Victor in the United States. They were luckier than most because they had the money to travel comfortably. Their journey over was much easier and more pleasant than that for many immigrant families. They boarded a ship, the *Patrea*, where they traveled in second class for ten days, not including stopovers, before they reached the United States. Their first stop was in Naples for one week to pick up passengers. My grandmother was in her early teens so she remained on board ship with her parents while her sisters took this opportunity to sightsee. They made a couple of other stops, and overall it was a nice trip. They had their own cabin, unlike many others cramped into steerage quarters, and they were fed well. Even with ship regulations, many immigrants were stuffed into crowded quarters and given stale, unappetizing food. Fortunately, my grandmother's family had no such problems.

My grandmother's brothers were settled in the United States and had jobs, making it much easier for my grandmother's family to enter. My grandmother's brother Joe had met and married a woman named Rose and was living in the Bronx. Albert and Victor were also living in the Bronx, boarding with people. Joe and Albert had papers prepared for the rest of the family and met them as they docked at Ellis Island. The government allowed them to enter without much hassle because they had working relatives in the United States and would not become a burden on society. They did, however, have to submit to the doctor's physical at Ellis Island to make sure they were not bringing over any contagious diseases.

The Capuya family eventually settled in a Spanish Jewish enclave in Brooklyn, New York. They found a beautiful nine-room house to live in. Albert and Victor still boarded with people separately, but Joe and his wife, Rose, and daughter, Claire, came to live with my grandmother's family. Living among their own people really helped them adjust to life in the United States because they did not yet know the English language. However, my

grandmother's family was well educated. They knew French, Spanish, and Italian, which helped make up for their inability to speak English.

My grandmother's brother Joe previously had written his family wonderful letters about life in America, but when they got there it was a big disappointment. My grandmother thought that when they arrived they were going to find successful brothers and a wonderful life. It would have been this way, but my grandmother's family hated Joe's wife, Rose, and Rose made them miserable. In following with Jewish customs and the belief in family, they had to be nice to Rose even when she did horrible things. My grandmother's family was very insulted when they first arrived in America and Rose greeted them in a bathrobe in a dirty house, with no supper prepared for them after a long journey. After what they were accustomed to in Rhodes, this was a big disappointment. My great-grandfather came to the United States with savings, and Rose took a lot of it and spent it foolishly, and there was nothing that could be done about it. Other than Rose's relationship with the family, my grandmother said they liked living in the United States.

The family then moved to Harlem in a six-room apartment and really found their niche in American society. Again my grandmother's family was surrounded by Spanish Jews, which made them very comfortable. Rachel and Laura found jobs, and together with my great-grandfather's savings and the money of my grandmother's brothers, Albert and Victor, the family was able to do well. My grandmother was then able to attend high school. My grandmother was fortunate because not many women at this time were able to attend school past the lower elementary grades. Her education was interrupted for one year, though, when she came down with tuberculosis and had to spend a year in the country mountains to recuperate. Then she went back to school and eventually graduated from high school.

Again the family moved, this time to the Bronx among more people of their ethnic background. Then the depression hit. Luckily they were able to find jobs. Victor found work with a shipping company, while Albert was employed by the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company. My grandmother's family was fortunate; they were not rich, but always made enough money for a decent living. They also felt very little oppression living among other Spanish Jews. My grandmother claims it was very safe when she was younger. There were no thefts or killings. She always felt safe using the subway, and streets where she lived were kept quite clean. She was always proud to call herself an American citizen.

In the 1930s my grandmother met and married the American-born son of Russian immigrants, Louis Koch. My grandparents established their



Julia Capuya, grandmother of Rachel Koch (left), and Mildred Birnbaum, New York City, 1935.



Julia Koch, with her brother Victor Capuya and her granddaughter Rachel Koch, 1991.

own home and were able to live a decent life. They still valued the importance of family, and really felt at home in American society. Things were looking up for my grandmother, and in 1941 my father, Robert Koch, was born. He was raised in the Jewish tradition, but living in the United States he was not as close to his mixed Russian and Spanish heritage as his parents were. Like so many second-generation Americans, my father became fully a part of American culture. In actuality, his parents no longer regarded themselves as Spanish or Russian; they thought of themselves as Americans, and they transmitted this belief to my father. Not that my grandparents did not remember or value their heritages, but their sense of being U.S. citizens far outweighed their loyalty to their old countries.

Then my father met and married my mother, Joyce Silka, and it seemed as if there was no longer anything holding together our ethnic identity. My mother was Irish, German, Scottish, and English. Combined with my father's Spanish and Russian heritage, I really do not feel a part of a distinct culture other than American. We also faced a new problem; my mother was Protestant, while my father was Jewish. Living among the many different ethnic groups and religions in the United States for many years, my parents and their families felt no need for their differences to deter their marriage. As we were growing up, my sister and I were mildly exposed to (but not really educated in) both Protestantism and Judaism. Thus we never felt strongly about either one. As a result, we felt left out of a part of our heritage. Because of this sense of loss, I have decided to raise my own children when I get married under the religion of my husband. In American society today, since many of us have no ethnic identity other than American, I feel it is important to have a religion with which to identify.

In tracing my roots, I have discovered a lot about my family's beliefs and how important it is to keep in touch with our past. As the generations succeed each other, we need to remind our children about their roots so they too can feel a distinct part of society. My grandmother's story is not typical. She did not suffer much and had an easy time traveling to America and adapting to American society. My grandmother's family was typical, however, in that family members came to America separately, helping each other settle and adjust to American life. They also lived near people of their ethnic descent, valued the closeness of family, and considered it an honor and a privilege to call themselves Americans. I have learned a great deal from my grandmother and really regret not making an effort sooner to learn more about my family's past. From my parents' generation onward, though, I believe most of us will truly regard ourselves as Americans, an evolving ethnic group, something we can be proud of.

A Family History

Who are we? Where are we from? How did we come to be in this place? I believe questions such as these need to be asked by all of us. However, we should not search for the answers just to satisfy our curiosity. Our history should be more than just a name in a book or a date from a forgotten past. It should be a basis for our future. For only when we know ourselves can we begin to understand others. We cannot know where we are going until we have seen where we have been.

My heritage has never been kept a secret from me. I have long been exposed to both sides of my family and the people and customs that make it up. The two sides of my family are as different as the North and South Poles, therefore making what I consider an interesting combination.

My father's roots seem to come straight out of the notes from one of our history lectures. He was born in 1925 in the small farming community of Newman Grove, Nebraska, to an Irish mother and a Norwegian father. His mother was the grandchild of an Irish immigrant who came to this country sometime during the potato famine. Her grandfather labored the rest of his life in New York. He did, however, save enough of his money to send his two sons to the Nebraska frontier following the Civil War. My grandfather Jacob Vaage was also a descendant of European immigrants. His grandparents came from a small farming community in southern Norway and settled in Minnesota. Two of their seven sons saw an opportunity to acquire new land, and following the Civil War they moved to the Nebraska frontier. There my grandfather was born, along with eight other

brothers and sisters. In 1922 my Irish grandmother married an old Norwegian bachelor, my grandfather. In 1934 my grandfather lost his farm to the bank, and he and his family moved to California. From what I have seen, my grandmother's Irish heritage was buried upon her marriage to my grandfather. She was swallowed up in the Norwegian community. They raised their children in the Norwegian way. Although my grandmother never converted, her children were raised in the Lutheran Church. As for assimilation into American life, I don't believe it began for my father's family until his generation. Isolated in small farming towns in Minnesota and Nebraska, life remained much as it had been in the Old Country.

Long before Columbus reached the New World, several tribal groups made their homes in the Black Hills of what is now Wyoming and the Dakotas. It is to this origin that I can trace my mother's ancestors. The Shoshoni, Lakota, Yellow Hand, Crow, Blackfeet, and many smaller tribes lived in this area. For a thousand, perhaps two thousand, years these people were simple farmers and hunters. The arrival of white men in the New World changed their cultures greatly, even before they came into direct contact with them. In 1542 the Spanish conquistador Coronado swept north from Mexico in search of the seven cities of gold. Coronado remained less than a year, but he left something behind that was to change the natives' lives forever, the horse.

Through trading with tribes in the south, the people of the Black Hills obtained the horse. The tribes tamed and mastered the horse very swiftly, thereby obtaining the ability to follow the great buffalo herds down onto the plains of America. With the added mobility the horse gave them, tribes were separated by greater distances between the individual camps. In this manner came the formation of new tribes—among these the tribe that came to be known to the white man as the Comanche. Although they still spoke the same Shoshoni language, the Comanches had moved farther south of the main body of the Shoshoni over the course of one hundred years. The arrival of the white man in the 1800s pushed the Comanche even farther south into Arkansas, Oklahoma, Texas, and New Mexico. After nearly eighty years of war with the white man, and nearly two hundred with Mexicans, the Comanches signed a treaty at Medicine Lodge in 1867 and were placed on a reservation between the Red and Washita Rivers in southwest Oklahoma. Following eight years of starvation and bad treatment, the Comanches bolted the reservation and made one final stand with the Kiowas and Apaches in 1874. Following the massacre at Adobe Walls, they were returned to Oklahoma and were assigned to the Kiowa Reservation.

There are several different tribes within the Comanche tribe, including the Kwahadi, Penateka, Detsanayuka, Motsai, and Widyu. My mother is Kwahadi. My great-grandfather married my grandmother to a Spanish rancher whose family had been in New Mexico since its first settlement in the late sixteenth century. His reason for doing this was to allow my grandmother to escape the miseries of the reservation. They were married only ten years before he died. Their marriage produced only one child, my mother. Following my grandfather's death my grandmother moved to California instead of back to the reservation. After her graduation from UCLA with a teaching degree, my mother married my father in July 1944.

Being kept practically in solitary confinement on the prisons known as reservations, the Kwahadi Comanche, as well as most other American tribes, are in my view probably the least assimilated of all groups of people in this country.

Stemming from my family background I've been exposed to an interesting cross section of the people of this country: from the farm towns of Middle America, to the ghettos of South Central and East Los Angeles where my mother has taught, to the reservations of New Mexico and Oklahoma, to suburbia. I feel a growing sense of identity and pride among people today. I am disappointed in those of my generation who have gained the education and insight, yet failed to respond to the needs of society. It seems that many people are still chained by the same fears that arrived with the first white men to settle this country.

The Great King told me the path should never be crooked, but open to everyone to pass and repass. As we all live in one land, I hope we shall love as one people.

Little Carpenter

Getting to Know My Parents So That I May Know Who I Am

It's about 5:30 P.M., two days after Thanksgiving. I am at my father's house in Paterson, New Jersey, having my second Thanksgiving dinner. My parents are divorced so every year I celebrate two Thanksgivings, two Christmases, etc., etc.

I am the daughter of a black Peruvian and a white Puerto Rican. I choose to put the color of my parents' skin before their nationality because in this country that is how they are seen: first by the color of their skin and then by their country of origin. My essay focuses mostly on my father's life and his experience as an immigrant in this country since he was affected more by the ways of this country. I briefly discuss my mother's life and her experience as an immigrant.

My father, Jose Aguilar, was born in Lima, Peru, on October 22, 1948. His father, Francisco Aguilar, was a successful construction worker and foreman, and his mother, Katalina Margarita Cartajena de Aguilar, was a housewife. They had ten children, five girls and five boys. They were all born and raised in Lima, Peru. Lima is the capital of Peru and is located on the coast. It has approximately 3.5 million inhabitants.

My father's life in Peru was simple until his father died when he was thirteen years old. His father's occupation as a construction worker-foreman allowed them to live a middle-class life, but with him gone, my father had to work by day to help support the family and attend school at night. He worked in a clothing factory making underclothes.

My father, who was very good in school, became less interested when

he began to work. He began to fall behind, and before he knew it his younger brother, Alfredo, was catching up to him academically. My father felt that his younger brother was sure to pass him. This was a problem because my father's family stressed academic achievement and the children were expected to excel in school. My uncle's success made my father feel as if he had to prove himself to the family. By the eleventh grade, my father stopped going to school, and at the age of nineteen he decided to come to the United States. He left for two reasons: he wanted to help out more with the family income and he felt that at least his family would now be able to say, "Well, Alfredo is a doctor, and Jose, he lives abroad." All of his brothers and sisters did their best to convince him to change his mind but it was to no avail; my father was headstrong and stubborn. He looked to his older brother, Juan Francisco, who was an engineer, for financial help. Juan Francisco also made an effort to change my father's mind. He told my father about the racism that he might encounter in this country, but my father was determined to go, and so he did.

At the age of twenty he packed his bags and headed to the United States. The last thing his older brother told him before he left was, "Remember if you leave here with the head of a lion don't come back with the tail of a mouse."

When my father left Peru, Gen. Juan Velasco Alvarado was in power. Gen. Juan Velasco began to nationalize all of the big industries. With the nationalization of big industries came inflation and the loss of jobs, but still one could manage to subsist in Peru. Until 1975 Peru was still one of the best countries to live in as far as economics were concerned. My father said that his decision to leave Peru was not influenced by the political situation in his country at the time.

My father arrived in this country with only fifty dollars in his pocket. He would soon learn that what his older brother told him was true. But there was a tradition among his friends that helped him in his adjustment. After he was in the United States two weeks, his friends sent his return plane ticket back to Peru, because they knew that after two months in this country he would probably want to go back. Without that ticket, my father was forced to cope with his experiences here.

After his arrival, my father stayed with a friend in New Jersey and took a job cleaning jewelry. Within months of being in the United States my father was able to afford to live in a room of his own. His friend knew of an Italian family that was renting a room. My father's friend spoke to the family and made arrangements for my dad to see the room. When they arrived, my father's friend introduced my father to the wife. When she saw that my fa-

ther was black she immediately said that the room was rented out and slammed the door in his face. This was my father's first racist experience, but it was not the last. He realized that in this country to be black, whether you were African American or South American, was to be without opportunities. Knowing this, he married my mother who was a white Puerto Rican.

My mother, Antonia Aguilar, was born in Cebradilla, Puerto Rico, but her birth certificate states that she was born in Isabella, Puerto Rico. Her mother is Matilde Perez and her father Rafael Gonzalez. Like many Puerto Ricans they left Puerto Rico because their economic situation was at poverty level. My grandmother was a housewife and my grandfather was a self-employed mechanic. Because my grandfather was self-employed, my mother grew up moving around a great deal until she was eleven years old. Finally, her family settled down in San Tulce, Puerto Rico. She lived in the projects of San Tulce from the age of thirteen.

Her parents immigrated in 1964, thinking that there would be more job opportunities in the United States. Instead, they found themselves living under conditions similar to those in Puerto Rico. Since both of my grandparents were uneducated, the family received public assistance. My mother, who was sixteen years old at the time her parents moved to the United States, was forced to terminate her education in the middle of her senior year of high school and go to work. My mother and her older sister, Ana, were sent to work in a sewing factory. My mother was never able to finish her education because she started a family very early.

When I spoke to my mother about her migration experience she didn't seem to have been too affected by the different society that she now lives in. This was probably due to two reasons. First, my mother looks white and probably did not encounter any racism from white Americans. (However, my mother has mentioned that she encountered prejudice from African Americans.) Second, she had a very difficult family life and tries to forget a lot concerning those years that she lived with her parents.

My father, however, had a different story. In the United States he dealt with racism for the first time. While doing the interview, I remembered something that my father had said to me when I was fifteen. He had just discovered that I had a boyfriend and was quite upset. He was upset, first, because I had a boyfriend, and second, because he was black. When my father told me he didn't want me with a black person I couldn't comprehend. I couldn't understand why someone who is black himself could not like someone else because they were black. So I asked him why he felt this way and he proceeded to answer. He said that it wasn't that he hated black people but instead that he didn't want me to have children with a black



Lizette Aguilar and her mother, Antonia, ca. 1977, Bronx, New York.

person because "unfortunately, in this country, black people have no opportunities. It is not that I hate them because as you can see my whole family in Peru is black, but in Peru things are different. You do not get treated differently for being black. Don't get me wrong, racism and prejudice exist everywhere, but in Peru it is not to the extent that it occurs in the U.S." He went on to tell me that it wasn't until he came to this country that he realized that he was black. This was the reason he married my mother. He felt that if his children were lighter than he then they would have a better chance at succeeding.

From interviewing my parents, I realize that they only integrated into American society because they needed to survive in this country. In my eyes, my mother didn't assimilate because she has taught us her culture and stresses that we never forget it. My father rejects assimilation because he feels that American culture is too superficial, too fast, and doesn't have a strong moral foundation. He feels that it is superficial because people are ruled by the dollar to the point passed by necessity. He feels it is too fast because children are exposed to adult issues and adult situations early in life. And he feels it has a weak moral foundation because of the crime rate, the teenage pregnancy rate, and the overwhelmingly high divorce rate.

For me the word assimilation has a negative meaning. For me it means to sell out to a culture that is not your own and so to deny your true family heritage. I am very proud that my parents did not assimilate into American culture because then I wouldn't be the person I am today. I wouldn't have the strong cultural base that I benefit from today. By knowing where my parents came from, I am able to point the way to where I am going because I have role models and tangible evidence that I can be somebody. I feel that many Latinos do not succeed because of that lack of exposure to role models they can relate to. It makes me sad when I see that someone is Latino but fails to acknowledge that because they, or their parents, want them to assimilate into American culture.