

Asher

1/9/2017

Interview Excerpt

So, what would you say your expectations were for America?

I hadn't really thought about immigrating to America for a long time, very much earlier than I actually came. In fact, it took me a year to get a visa to be able to come here. And I got it the day before I came. So there was a part of my brain that said, Well, when I come to America, it's a free country, I'll be able to do whatever I want to do which is to study Jewish music, it's going to be great. Some people will help me get started, and that's it, I'm a good student now, I'll just continue being a good student there, and that's all I need to do. And there was another part of my brain that said, it will never happen, because I'll never get a visa to leave. So I never really planned it out. I was hoping, I was dreaming, and then one day I got a visa and the next day I had a ticket to fly.

So, when I came, I think it took me a couple of weeks, or maybe months, to get over the shock that it actually happened and I actually came. I applied for a Green Card, I did the right thing, but in the meantime, I had to make a living. Instead of right away going to a music conservatory, and saying, I want to study Jewish music, take me as a student, and I'll be just as good as I would be in Kiev, I had to become a live-in babysitter and clean houses, and take care of little kids. And that was the only way I could support myself in a new country. That was the part I didn't quite anticipate. It was difficult, and it was ... but it was necessary. So I guess it felt like part of the great adventure. I just had to do what I needed to do.

I also thought that I knew English. because I had studied it in school. And I had a pretty good grasp of grammar, and a pretty good vocabulary. But the surprise was, how hard it was to understand people because they were speaking so fast, and their accent was so different, so it was really hard to understand them.

Another big surprise was when I finally went to the local university, which was the University of Maryland, and I went to the Musicology Department and I said, I had been studying Musicology in Kiev, and I wanted to study Jewish music, and they were anti-Semitic, so I couldn't study it there, so can I study with you?

And they said, that's very nice, but no you can't. And I said, Why, you are American, you are a free country, you don't mind if I study Jewish music. And they said, Yes, but we don't have anyone specializing in Jewish music, it's a very narrow specialty, nobody here in the university can help you. So you can try to become a student here, but you wouldn't be able to study Jewish music, there is no advisor here for you to work with. So that was a shock.

So does that answer your question in terms of surprises and expectations?

The main reason I chose this quote was because I believe that it shows a very accurate contrast between the American Dream and the American reality. Most immigrants had large over-expectations of what they would find in the U.S. and didn't really have a plan for what they were going to do. They believed that in America, they could do whatever they wanted and that no obstacle would ever cross their path, no matter how obvious or likely. Therefore, on top of having only a vague idea of a plan (for example, someone might think “Oh, I'm gonna go to America, and I'm gonna live in my uncle's house for a week, and then I'll go fulfill my life goal and become baker, and get really rich and live in a mansion”), they also had no backup plan. If their “plan” didn't work out, most of them ended up unemployed, and after a while, their relatives threw them out. This is why a lot of immigrants ended up homeless. In my opinion, Natasha (My interviewee) was one of the lucky ones.