



Carmine Voices

Paul Polansky

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I AM AN IMMIGRANT In 1963 when I was 21 years old I left the USA, my homeland, and became an immigrant. At the time I thought I was leaving because of the war in Vietnam. After I received my draft notice, I appealed to study abroad and was given a one-year deferment. But on the ship (an old Bilbao freighter going from New Orleans to Tarragona, Spain) I knew I would never return to America to serve or to live. Today I am not so sure Vietnam was the sole reason I left America. By the age of 16, I had already started the “hobby” of hitchhiking all over the United States. My first trip was during an Easter break. After Friday classes I hitchhiked 800 miles within 24 hours to visit a married sister in Colorado. By Monday morning I was back home ready for my first class. But from that time on, whenever I had a break in the school year, I was thumbing all over the country, racking up tens of thousands of miles every year. Forty years later, after spending more than 20 years doing my own family genealogy, I found records on hundreds of my ancestors who never died in the country where they had been born. In fact, on my mother’s side of the family not one of her direct Schneller ancestors from the 16th century to the present day had ever been buried in the country where they were born. So did I become an immigrant like my maternal great-grandfather who escaped to Nebraska from his Germany colony in Ukraine in the 1880s because he refused conscription into the Czar’s army, or was it a genetic thing? Why do people become immigrants? Are they running away from something, or running to something better? Much of my life has been dedicated to collecting oral histories from people: the homeless in America, WWII vets, Holocaust survivors, Gypsies in 19 countries in Europe, victims of the Italian mafia, and now immigrants in the north Italian city of Brescia. Of course, from my own experiences I have always felt empathy for immigrants. When I ended up in Madrid in 1963, I faced the same problems most immigrants have to confront today: finding a place to live, finding food, finding a job, and seeking security and friends. My first year in Spain I lost 20 pounds from going hungry more often than not. Sometimes I had to resort to things I didn’t want to do, just to eat. This is a poem I wrote about my early days in Spain as an immigrant.

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