

## Sylvia P. Bryan – Writing Sample

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### And Justice for All – My Popa, Immigration and the American Dream

Being a refugee from political oppression and economic hardship, restrictive USA immigration quotas, denial of an immigration visa to enter the USA – yes, my family experienced all of this. Yet, here I am today, a proud, naturalized USA citizen.

As the harsh news headlines and national angst about immigration inundate us this summer, some may think my story doesn't count because it all happened more than 50 years ago. Then again, maybe it does matter. At the very least, my story is a Father's Day tribute to my Dad – we called Popa – and his quest to achieve "the American Dream" for our family. And maybe, just maybe, there is also some insight for today to be gleaned from this tale of my family's trek to America.



The brutal Nazi occupation of Holland in WWII shaped my parents and my family. Born in 1917 and 1920, my parents were both in their mid-20's when the German Nazi army forcefully took over their homeland, the Netherlands. Food was rationed and scarce, towns were bombed and burned, soldiers were everywhere, and men were literally rounded up off the streets and deported to the slave labor "work camps" of Germany – or worse – to the unknown death camps.

Not being Jewish meant my family and relatives escaped the death camps to which millions of "undesirables" were sent. However, my uncle was rounded up and forced on a train bound for a slave labor camp. He escaped by jumping off the train in route and spent the remainder of the war in the underground resistance, only to emerge to his family after the war – all thinking he was dead. My Popa also missed deportation to Germany but was rounded up several times and forced to labor for the Nazis inside occupied Holland – ordered under gunpoint to build coastal barricades against what the Nazis thought would be a sea invasion by the Allied Forces. Popa loved to tell stories to us kids how the Dutch men would try their best to slow the work, make it shoddy or designed to fail. "We didn't want to get killed, but we played dumb like we couldn't understand German instructions and did the worst work we could get away with," Popa said.

The liberation of Holland was slow in coming – it was one of the last countries to be freed, nearly 11 months after the D-Day invasion at Normandy. The war and Nazi occupation of Holland dragged on for five years. Living in the city of Rotterdam, my parents' families traded away most of their possessions for what little food they could get. My mom, a student nurse at the time, survived by working and living in a hospital, where she said they often would hide Jews or others marked for arrest in the tuberculosis ward to save them from the Nazi round ups. I'll never forget her thick Dutch accent as she told us the tale years later – "Those Nazis, the 'stups' (stupid) – they were afraid to go into the TB ward – all we had to do was put a TB infection sign on the ward door and they never went in."

My grandfather starved to death the last winter of the war. He was not able to survive when a Nazi blockade cut off food supplies to some cities and caused a Dutch famine called the “Hunger Winter” that killed an estimated 20,000 civilians. Blessedly, the Allied Forces did finally come. They did liberate Holland from Nazi oppression in May 1945. Among the first things the Allies did was to drop food and supplies to the starving Dutch people from plane flyovers. The memory of the salvation brought by those airdrops was so vivid to my mother that she kept a carefully rolled up pen and ink drawing of the historic event with her for more than 70 years. That print now hangs framed in my home.

After the war, housing and jobs were scarce in the bombed-out cities of Holland – even in the early 1950’s. So, my Popa hand-built a houseboat for his young family – my mom and my older sister. Unfortunately, dark political clouds were on the horizon as the Communists gobbled up country after country in Eastern Europe in the 1950’s. Thus, Popa decided he wanted to start a new life in a new land for his family. His words to my mom? “We’ve already survived the Nazis; I don’t want to live through the Communists too – let’s immigrate.”

Let’s escape from past and potential future political oppression. Let’s find a better job. Let’s make a better life for ourselves in the land of those who liberated us. The American Dream. But America had strict immigration quotas in the mid 1950’s. The USA was only letting in certain kinds of folks – those with skills the USA needed, and my parents didn’t qualify. Their requested immigration visa was denied.

Did they then try to get into the USA illegally? No, they didn’t. They sought and obtained a Canadian visa instead. They travelled with everything they owned in a crate nestled in the bowels of a boat named “The Great Bear” and sailed to the unknown. Leaving behind all family and friends, they crossed the Atlantic to Nova Scotia. For five years they made a life for themselves in Canada. They had two more children – including me. They followed the rules to become Canadian citizens. And then, they re-applied for a visa to immigrate to America. The rules from the USA Immigration Office this time around? “OK you’re approved for an immigration visa, but you have to prove you can support yourselves and you can’t apply for welfare in the USA.”

So, they came – with a small home-made trailer holding all their worldly goods towed behind an old Buick with three young kids in the back seat. They came with no job prospects and my Popa’s limited employment skills as a shopkeeper and a sign painter. They came because of the American dream of a better life. And, when they finally got to Florida in October of 1962, after weeks on the road and tent camping at roadside parks along the way, they were stopped by American soldiers and a barricade across the road.

“Don’t you know there’s about to be a war?!?” the soldier shouted at my Popa when he denied us entry to proceed into the sunshine state. Not knowing about the Cuban Missile Crisis that was at its height at that very moment, my Popa calmly responded, “Oh, we’ve been through the Nazis, we’ll just stay right here till you open the road and move the barricade.” And we did, enjoying the deserted gulf beaches (see photo) until the crisis was over.

The American dream? Yes, we lived it. My parents took citizenship classes and became naturalized citizens the minute our five-year USA residency requirement was up. Popa even slightly changed the spelling of our last name because no American could pronounce it with the Dutch spelling. He worked to assimilate with our neighbors and never applied for government assistance even though we clearly qualified with my parents’ lower working-class wages.

Our home in Orlando? A modest cinderblock house. And, just like in Holland, Popa worked on the house by hand to expand it and make it better for his family – laying more cinderblock and making the kitchen cabinets himself after his shift as an hourly clerk at the local 7–11 convenience store. Our clothes? Almost always bought from the second-hand store. I have a distinct memory of my first new store-bought dress – a K-Mart deep discount frock that I proudly wore when I was about 12 years old. College? Yes, because hard work and good grades earned us scholarships based on our merit as well as our income.

That cinderblock house? My brother still lives there. My Popa? He studied after working as a clerk all day to earn his real estate broker's license. Unfortunately, he couldn't make a living at real estate when the housing market deeply slumped in the 1970's. So, he went back to work as a clerk at a corner gas station but was fired after his store was robbed several times at gunpoint and he was locked in the store's cooler by the thieves. I guess management thought a balding, 5 foot 3" "foreigner" with a thick accent wasn't enough of a deterrent for robberies. As fate would have it, the quintessential American company, Walt Disney World was then hiring for their budding new park in Orlando – so Popa landed in the perfect place. He worked many years at Disney at the park's campground store – known to co-workers fondly as "Mr. Ted", the affable older clerk with the funny last name. And, the clerk who used his limited vacation time to take several mission trips to poor central American countries, learning Spanish in his "spare" time so he could help build churches and schools.

Momma? She spent 25 years as a Wheels-on-Wheels volunteer **after** she retired from working as a school clerk and hospital aide – delivering meals to the elderly well into her 80's. That thick Dutch accent? It didn't stop her from also volunteering for years as a phone counselor on a Crisis Line.

Theodorous "Ted" and Wilhelmina "Willie" van Rynsoever loved America and being Americans. They always voted, religiously followed the law, and never got into debt by scrupulously saving and always paying cash for the things our family needed. They also performed tons of volunteer service at their church and in the community. Most of all, they were so very grateful not only for the Americans who liberated them from the oppression of their homeland, but also for being able to become Americans themselves.

This country and every country have laws. We are no less compassionate when we insist that all follow the laws and do things like immigration, citizenship, and entry visas by proper due process. Yes, we are a country of immigrants -- we all came from somewhere else and we thus welcome the poor, the homeless, the huddled masses yearning to be free. It's the American way – equal justice for all. I know, my Popa led my family to live it . . . the American Dream .... more than 50 years ago.

Happy Father's Day in Heaven dearest Popa.