

Joseph Helinsi Digital Story Transcription

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The year was 1907 and a man named Joseph Helinski made a decision that would largely, yet subtly, change history. With his mother's encouragement, Joseph immigrated to the United States in order to avoid being drafted into the Russian Army. He came with only himself, leaving his entire family behind, never to be seen again. There is no record of Joseph coming into the United States through Ellis Island. According to his granddaughter, my grandmother, he jumped off the ship near shore and finished his journey to the United States by swimming. Because there is no paper trail of Joseph entering the country, the government resisted in giving him his citizenship years later. He only received a Certificate of Arrival from the US government on July 10, 1941, and he became a naturalized citizen on June 4, 1942. The only paper proof of his existence prior to those documentations, as a result of him choosing to skip Ellis Island, is his name on his daughter's birth certificate, which lists his birth place as Russia. But this certificate represents much more than Joseph's birth in Russia and life in the United States- it symbolizes significant characteristics of Joseph that still exist in his American descendants today. My grandmother says that if we got anything from the Helinskis, it was their sense of independence, stubbornness, and determination. The Helinskis living in Poland in 1907 did not want their son, Joseph, to get drafted into the Russian Army, due to his Russian birth, so they sent him to live in America. But Joseph, apparently, did not want to enter the country in the proper way, so he chose his own path. To this day, we are unsure why Joseph did not, or could not, enter the United States through Ellis Island, but regardless of the reason, he chose to take matters into his own hands. My grandmother has always told stories of him playing cards with Al Capone in Hurley,

WI, where my grandmother still lives. My great-grandmother's birth certificate, being the only paper record of him in the US, symbolizes these traits shown by the Helinski family in 1907 when sending their son to the United States. My family still, over a century later, takes pride in the fact that we are independent and determined to the point of sheer stubbornness. Reunions are still held in Hurley, WI, the town where my great-great-grandfather, Joseph Helinski, settled, and at every one my grandmother jokes that the Helinskis "do what they want."