

speakers say it every few minutes: "When I decided to apply for a job at Loiederman...."

Why, you may ask, is a public school named in honor of my brother?

Mario was a prominent civil engineer, an entrepreneur who started a consulting firm that grew into one of the most important in Maryland's Montgomery County. He was on the board of many artistic and service organizations, helped found and fund cultural and civic organizations, and was chairman of the Maryland State Arts Council. He was a Latin American and a Jew who was proud of his heritage and generous with both communities.

But I wonder, as I look at the students, whether they know that it was because of Mario that the U.S. government discovered that our family was here illegally; that it was because of him that the government wanted to deport us. And therein, as they say, lies a tale. But to tell it, we have to go back a few years.

My father, the son of Jewish immigrants from Lithuania, was born in Argentina in 1901, and from the early 1920s onward he worked as an arms expert for the Argentine War Ministry. In 1929, my father met my mother, whose family was also Jewish and had immigrated to Argentina from Odessa. My parents married a few months later, then spent several years in Europe, where my father continued to work for an Argentine mission buying weaponry.

My parents returned to Argentina in the mid-1930s, traveling from Europe on the Ile de France. The photos show a stylish couple, at ease aboard one of the world's finest ocean liners. Back in Buenos Aires, my father worked at the War Ministry while my mother gave birth to my brother Mario in 1934, and to me in 1940.

In the early 1940s we lived in a handsome, roomy apartment in the picturesque San Telmo district. My parents regularly went to the opera at the spectacular Teatro Colon, always wore the latest fashions, danced the tango in nightclubs. Our live-in maid would take me to the lovely park across the street every day. We weren't rich, but we lived well.

Then Peron came to power. In 1945 my father, who disliked Peron, either resigned his government position, or was forced out of it. For the next two years, while not employed, my father struggled to get a visa to the United States.

In 1947, when I was almost 7 and Mario 12, together with our parents we left Buenos Aires on a cargo ship. There were three other passengers on board the old, rusty banana boat -- a far cry from the Ile de France. The ship made a couple of long stops in northern Brazil to load coffee.

Thirty days after leaving Argentina we arrived at the Port of New York ... and there it was: the Statue of Liberty. As we got our passports stamped, an immigration official taught Mario and me our first English word: "smile."

We settled in Baltimore, and both my parents started working for my father's uncle, who owned a textile firm; my father handled the company's exports, and my mother was his assistant. My parents were sometimes bitter about working in jobs they felt were beneath their talents, but they were grateful to be earning enough to buy a small house and a car.

Although my parents had not practiced Judaism in Argentina, now that we lived in Forest Park -- the largely Jewish middle-class neighborhood depicted in several Barry Levinson films -- we were suddenly Jewish: the shul, the bar mitzvah, seders ... the whole megillah.

Friends and neighbors welcomed us and treated us kindly, but they didn't have a clue about Argentina. One kid asked me if people wore shoes in Buenos Aires. So our family devised a Cliff's Notes version of where we came from -- steak, tango, soccer -- avoiding any talk of Peronism and other hard-to-explain elements of Argentine life.

By 1954, our connection to Argentina had withered away. The gourd my parents once used for drinking yerba mate was now used to darn socks. Seven years after arriving in the United States, Mario and I couldn't have been more American. We spoke unaccented English and only our first names remained as a stubborn vestige of the past.

It was during that year, when Mario was a senior engineering student in college, that he decided he wanted to be a military officer and signed up for ROTC. The FBI, doing a routine check, discovered that we were in the country illegally. We received a hand-delivered notice from the Immigration and Naturalization Service, ordering us to leave the country immediately. We were being deported.

Deported? Us?

I don't know why our parents had never told us that we were in the United States without proper documents. They must have known that sooner or later we'd be found out. Maybe they wanted to shield us from worrying about it. Or maybe it was because they preferred to rewrite reality into something more palatable. Who knows? Maybe by not mentioning it, they retained a shred of that image of themselves in the old sepia photos: an elegant couple on temporary mission abroad.

In any case, our parents finally sat us down and explained. In 1947 -- while we were still in Argentina -- a family friend, owner of a candy factory, wrote a letter vouching that my father would represent his business in the United States. On the basis of that letter, the U.S. government issued my father a temporary business visa with restrictive terms: Only he could work, and only for that candy company, importing its products to the United States. My mother was not permitted to work, and neither were my brother and I.

Whether the letter was real, or whether it was written for the purpose of getting us into the United States (as is the case with many such letters), I don't know. In any case, my parents violated the terms of the visa right away and continued

doing so for eight years, until the government caught up to us. My parents hired an expensive lawyer, and he filed a petition that postponed our deportation. He also requested a hearing contesting the deportation order.

For the next year, our lives revolved around not getting deported. Our task was to prove that we deserved to remain in the country. We gathered supportive material, including our tax returns. Contrary to the jaded view that many have of illegal immigrants, my parents -- like others in similar circumstances that I interviewed for this story -- always paid their taxes on time, always paid more than necessary.

Even though my parents sold textiles to places abroad, during our first nine years in the United States they never traveled to any of those countries. As I look back, I realize why: They must have seen the likelihood that if they left the United States, they wouldn't get back in.

Everyone who's in this country without proper documents knows that it's risky to leave. Normally, those who are here illegally -- and who intend to stay here -- simply don't leave. In some cases they pay an emotional price for this. More than one person told me that one of the worst things about being undocumented is not being able to go back to your country of origin for the funeral of a parent or loved one.

Even traveling within the United States can be a problem. I talked with one couple who described the anxiety they felt when one of their children traveled out of state for a school activity. They were afraid that their child might draw unwanted attention, or inadvertently reveal the family's undocumented status to a teammate or coach. They didn't breathe easily until their child came back from the trip.

The run-up to our deportation hearing was a tense time. Forms had to be filled out for every member of the family -- again and again, because there was always something wrong or missing. Fees had to be paid to government agencies and to our lawyer. There were lost files, endless delays, waiting in lines.

It took more than a year, but in the end we won our case. Even better, we were given the least onerous option: Rather than being required to go back to Argentina and then return, we merely had to go to the closest border -- Canada -- then re-enter as permanent residents.

So in January 1956, when I was 15 and Mario 21, our family took a train from Baltimore to Buffalo, then a bus to Niagara Falls. We spent the night in a hotel close to the falls. The next morning, the air sharp and biting, the four of us walked halfway across Rainbow Bridge, where there's an international border post.

We entered Canadian territory for no more than a few seconds, then did a quick 180 degrees and came back, showing U.S. immigration authorities our documents. We were now legal residents of the United States. It was a celebratory day, but in the cold light of the following morning, there was a letdown: My parents felt as if their lives hadn't really changed. Others have described that same feeling: They now had a green card, but they were faced with having to go back to their daily routines, including their jobs. And their jobs were still not what they had been trained to do in their native land.

Changing careers in your 30s or 40s (or older) is not trivial. Most people who are here without proper documents quickly learn that they have to find a new way of making a living. They take whatever work they can find, often with a friend or relative. Psychologists become translators, journalists become salesmen, engineers become appliance repairmen, and so on. My father, an arms expert who spent much of his government career living and traveling outside of Argentina, became a textile salesman for the last 30 years of his working life. This wasn't so bad, of course. It's not as if my parents were doing backbreaking menial labor.

But there's more to it than that. In Latin America, a profession is the face you present to the world. There, it's not just medical doctors whose title becomes part of the name, it's also lawyers, architects, engineers and others. You're addressed by your profession, and that becomes who you are. If you had a glamorous position with the government, living for years in different parts of the world, that too becomes who you are, as it did with my parents. So if you're not working at your profession, you've lost part of your identity.

It's worth remembering that people who have stayed here in violation of the law have done so for good reasons: Escaping persecution, looking for a freer life, wanting to practice their religion openly. Nowadays, more often than not, it's for economic motives. It may damage your pride to lose your professional identity, but what good does it do to practice a profession when you can't make a decent living at it in your home country, or you get fired due to a change in government, as happens often in Latin America?

Immigrants, now as in the past, risk being in the United States illegally for another important reason: to give their children a chance to thrive. And children of illegal immigrants often make choices that honor their parents' sacrifice. I interviewed one Jewish family in which the children, having spent years with the threat of deportation, are pursuing careers intended to help undocumented immigrants.

My brother also honored our parents' sacrifice. He got his engineering degree at 20, became the youngest accredited professional engineer in the state of Maryland when he was 25, and eventually started his own company, which grew in size and importance. He loved doing all that, but on some level he felt that he owed it to our parents.

There was another aspect to Mario: his desire to help artists find venues to display their talent. In the last years of his life, this became his great passion. His support of the arts and his community activism -- he did that for his own satisfaction.

In December 2001, a few weeks shy of his 67th birthday, Mario died suddenly in his sleep from the effects of a heart condition. And last year, because of all he had done, a public school was named in his honor -- appropriately, an arts magnet school.

At the graduation ceremony, I look at the students at Loiederman Middle School, with its large Latin American population, and wonder how many are here, as my family once was, without proper documents. How many participated in recent marches? How many of them, at these demonstrations, waved flags of their native country?

In his own way, Mario also waved the flag of his native country, rooting for Argentina in international competitions, feeling deep empathy for Argentina's problems. But he was unquestionably a patriotic American. He saw no conflict in that. After all, it was his patriotism, his desire to be an officer in the U.S. Army, that led to our being caught. We were discovered precisely because Mario wanted to serve his community and his country.

Given the political climate in the United States these days -- the way that some politicians use the immigration issue to drum up votes -- it's easy to become cynical about the promise that America has always held out to immigrants, the promise embodied in the Statue of Liberty that Mario and I first saw that September day in 1947.

But Mario was never cynical about that. After all, cynics don't get public schools named after them.

Roberto Loiederman is a screenwriter and co-author of "The Eagle Mutiny" (Naval Institute Press, 2001).

© Copyright 2009 The Jewish Journal and JewishJournal.com

All rights reserved. JewishJournal.com is hosted by Nexcess.net. Homepage design by [Koret Communications](http://KoretCommunications).

Widgets by Mijits. Site construction by Hop Studios.