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OPINION - *Commentary*

By Rabbi Andrew Straus

Immigration Stories

Her father had left their home at least seven years before.

He had gone to the United States so that he and his family could have a better life. Life at home was so hard; in the United States, there were jobs that paid a much better wage. In the United States, one could afford to live. Over the years he had sent letters and/or money when he could.

Finally, she, her mother and her young brother began the journey to join him. It was a long journey, much of it on foot.

To this day, she tells the story of coming to the river which served as the border. If the border guards on one side caught you illegally crossing, there was a good chance that they would shoot you. The guards on the other side would only throw you in jail. Fortunately, they were apprehended by the guards who only arrest you.

At long last, they were reunited with her father. But who was this man who wanted to hold her and kiss her; who was this man who wanted to touch her mother and sleep with her? She had not seen her father in seven years and did not remember him.

This is the immigration story of Betty Sobie, my wife's grandmother. Her father had left the family in Poland before World War I, and the family was not reunited until after the war.

In mid-February, I was reminded of this story and so many other of our families' stories of immigration while I spent 2 1/2 days with the Jewish Funds for Justice and Border Links, learning about border and immigration/emigration issues. We spent time both in Tucson and in Nogales, Mexico.

Upon my return, I was left with a number of impressions: 1) how little I knew before I went, and how much more I still have to learn; 2) how bad conditions are in Nogales, a part of Mexico that is relatively well-off; 3) how complicated the immigration/emigration issue is - there are no easy answers; and 4) this is as much an issue for Mexico as for the U.S.

In Tucson, an immigration lawyer named John Crow shared with us the history of immigration law in the U.S. One fact he shared stuck in my mind. An individual wanting to come from Mexico to the United States legally - not for family reunification and not

recruited by an American company because of a certain set of job skills - will wait approximately 20 years for a visa. Apply at age 20, and when you are about 40 you may get your visa.

We met a young woman who had tried to cross the border illegally and had just been returned by Homeland Security. She had left her home in southern Mexico two weeks earlier and had been walking and traveling ever since. She had left her 2-year-old daughter at home with her mother, knowing that if she successfully crossed the border, she would not see her again for several years. As she told her story, I thought of Betty Sobie and her experience.

We learned that the average salary of a person who works in a maquiladora, an American factory just over the border, is just \$70 a week. Living conditions are deplorable. Most neighborhoods do not have paved streets. Many homes are not much more than cardboard shacks, and hot running water is a rarity.

It would be easy to say that the United States must do more to solve Mexico's problems, but, as Delle McCormick, the executive director of BorderLinks Mexico, taught us, Mexico must do its part. Emigration is not a solution to Mexico's problems - it is at best a Band-Aid. Mexico must do more to invest in its infrastructure, its educational system and its economy.

And yet today there are approximately 12 million illegal immigrants in our nation. We are economically dependent on their labor and their contribution to our economy. As the U.S. Congress debates immigration policy, we are reminded that the beginning of the Jewish people's enslavement occurred when "a new king arose who knew not Joseph." We must not allow illegal immigrants to be oppressed, and we cannot just turn a blind eye to their status.

White supremacist and other hate groups are using the immigration issue as a recruiting tool. Such groups do not remember Joseph.

In our nation's Capitol and our state's Capitol, immigration reform is the big issue. Most major Jewish organizations support some form of comprehensive immigration reform policy similar to that proposed by President Bush and recently debated by the U.S. Congress. Within the organized Jewish community, many organizations would like to see "family reunification" included in a final immigration bill.

As a Jewish community, we must find our voice. The story of the immigrants is the story of our parents and grandparents. We know what it is like to be an immigrant - we know what it is like to be a stranger. Let us use our past to help shape our nation's future.

Rabbi Andrew Straus is the spiritual leader of Temple Emanuel of Tempe. The views expressed in this piece do not represent those of the congregation, its board or its members.