

### **Chapter 31: New immigrants in America (1994)**

July 1994. Kloten Airport Zurich. After a brief lay over in Schaffhausen, we were ready to board the *Swissair* flight to Chicago. "Wait, you can't board, you have one-way tickets, the US immigration would never let you in with tourist visas," said the ground hostess. This was unexpected, the stupid travel agent in Haifa, why didn't he tell us?

"How much for the return tickets?"

"Well," the blond lady consulted her computer, "five passengers, short notice, it would come to around five thousands Swiss Francs."

We were broke. Coming to Israel, where we had spent more than we earned, and leaving it, left us without any financial reserves. Our preliminary visit to Milwaukee, during which we had deposited a three-month rent for a small semi-detached house, drained us completely. Whatever money we still had was to be used to buy basic furniture in Milwaukee, as for the rest, we depended on my first US paycheck, which in turn depended on whether and when the H-1 visa would be issued to us. We didn't know then, that in order to get that visa we'd have to travel *out* of the USA.

But knowing that the Swiss tend to be more kind and humane to their own country men, I let Heidi continue the negotiation and eventually the *Swissair* lady came up with the following plan: "We'll issue you with return tickets, billed to your credit card, and as soon as you arrive in America please mail it back to us and your credit card will be immediately refunded." A kind lady indeed! This was the first and last time that I observed a Swiss official doing something out of protocol. "Good luck," the blond smiled at us, "you'll still need luck in Chicago, arriving on *tourist* visas with 17 pieces of luggage, a dog, and a cat. I hope they'll let you in."

One always remembers best the last and first day. And so I remember that steamy Chicago morning at the airport, waiting for the rented minivan to take us to Milwaukee: the boys exhausted, stretched out on the floor around

the mountains of luggage, the dog and cat howling in their small plastic cages.

An afternoon thunderstorm darkened the sky as we approached Milwaukee on the elevated lakeside highway. On our right Lake Michigan: foamy waves rushing to shore, an empty expanse of gloomy water from horizon to horizon—no sail or ship chimney to be seen. This is how we would see this lake from now on, during the freezing winter or scolding summer, sunny or foggy—always vast, endless and absolutely empty—lifeless.

Just before downtown Milwaukee we turned into highway I-94 West towards Madison, next taking the exit to the suburb of Brookfield: private houses on large plots, parks, trees, and flowers—a typical affluent Midwestern suburb. We parked the rented *Chevy Astro* van at the driveway of a semi-detached house and retrieved the keys from the mailbox. We had rented this house two months prior, during a brief scout visit from Israel. Our half of the house consisted of three tiny bedrooms, a small living room, a wood paneled kitchen, which included a cozy breakfast nook, a light deprived basement converted into a family room—here the wood burning stove was situated. A double car garage—without one, one cannot survive the Wisconsin's winters—opened directly to the basement. The backdoor led to a small patio and an expansive lawn, surrounded by tall oak trees. The next house was a third of a mile away—(there is a lot of cheap land in Wisconsin). The rent was \$ 950 per month—more than a third of what I was to be paid by the Medical College of Wisconsin.

After the storm, the night turned warm and muggy, and aggressive mosquitoes buzzed in the garden. We drove to a nearby supermarket to buy some food for dinner. We munched on it sitting in a circle on the carpet in the living room. The kids drank Coke and I opened a bottle of red wine. We fell asleep on the soft carpets. First night in America.

The next day we started to roam around, procuring the essentials: beds, mattresses, kitchen table and chairs, a TV—to keep the boys entertained, kitchen and dining tools—our house was empty and we had

arrived bare handed. Late in the afternoon, in some Department Store, Heidi suddenly collapsed onto a chair: "I can't walk, the whole world is spinning around me."

"You must be tired, the flight, and now all the running around," I said and took her home. But an hour later in a food store, between aisles loaded with cereals, suddenly everything started to gyrate around my head and I fell on the ground. I tried to stand up but again the floor seemed to be in the ceiling and all the boxes of cornflakes and *cheerios* appeared floating up side down and I collapsed again. By next morning both Heidi and me recovered our sense of balance, the acute loss of which, causing sustained vertigo, was probably a combination of a prolonged journey, intensive and constant movement and stress. Who said that immigrating to America is easy?

The next day I visited a car dealer; I had to get rid of the rented car that was eroding our budget. For a few thousand bucks I got myself a 1987 Dodge Lancer Hatchback; but for Heidi, to drive the kids around, and for out of town journeys, we desired a newer and safer car—a minivan. We lacked enough cash for an expensive car but we knew that in America it is no problem—here you can lease everything. Are you poor? Doesn't matter—enjoy and pay later. That the Plymouth Voyager is the best minivan had been known to us even in Israel, so we called the Brookfield Chrysler dealer who assured us that they would lease us a Voyager for as low as \$ 299 per month.

The clean-shaven, square faced, white-toothed young salesman —from the start we were pleasantly surprised by the jovial outgoingness of the Wisconsinites—took us on a test drive.

"Smooth, ah? Enjoy the ride? This is a Grand Voyager, the best selling mini van in the country! Your children will love it...have any pets, Doc?"

We returned to the sell room—not one of those shabby car shops like in Israel, but like an airport lounge—and sat opposite the car dealer. "Well, Doc, your lease, with the basic accessories will come up to \$ 370 per month."

I looked at Heidi and she looked at me: the house rent and now this lease, add to it the car insurances and half of my prospective salary is gone. But who cares—this is America, the highways are wide and endless and we have to move around comfortably. Otherwise—why did we come here? I read in Heidi's eyes something like 'it is too expensive, let's look for something more modest', but I ignored it and said: "OK. We'll take it." *After all, am I not an American surgeon?!*

"Great," said the smiling dealer, "your van will be ready on Monday, please sign here, and here, and initial here, thank you Sir, this is an application for a lease, and please bring with you on Monday your social security number, a letter of employment from your hospital, a letter from your bank...do you own a house? No? No problem, please bring your last electrical bill."

Alone with Heidi in the Lancer, driving home, I said: "We must find out about that stupid social security number?"

"Whatever it is, the question is whether we can obtain it, don't forget that we are here on tourist visas." Wives are always more cautious and skeptic.

Armed with all the necessary documentation—it proved out that anybody could get a social security number —we presented at the car dealership to pick up our brand new silver Voyager 1995. The radiant salesman intercepted us at the entrance: "How're ya doin Doc, Ma'm...please come this way, the manager is awaiting you." The manager, an older and heavier version of his junior, beamed at us above his reading glasses and shuffled through a mound of papers on his pine desk: "Folks, there's just a tiny problem. Unfortunately, our bank declined your lease, um, you see Doc, you have no credit history and no US based assets, but," —big smile — "fortunately we managed to locate another leasing bank which is ready to take the risk, um, and this of course would translate to a somewhat higher monthly payment, eh, it would come to \$ 465 per month for 39 months."

Heidi seemed devastated and ready to stand up and leave but I kept my cool—I brought her to America and I wanted her to drive the new shiny

minivan. "OK, no problem," I said dryly, "and how much would the total advance be?"

The manager started to punch vigorously on his calculator —the type with a roll of paper feeding into it. "Here you are Sir, sorry, Doc." He handed me the long slip, which amounted to \$ 3900. Heidi was silently shouting at me but I continued to ignore her. I signed and initialed and signed again and again and wrote the check and took the keys and we rode home—Heidi in the sparkling Voyager, me behind in the old Lancer.

This was the beginning of our slide into poverty: during the next year and half in Milwaukee we would have to live and eat the remains of my South African pension fund and whatever my late mother had left to me. It was also our introduction to the concept of "credit history"; lacking one, as we did — the important thing is your US credit history, not the previous foreign one—you are simply a non-entity, forced to buy everything in cash or pay more. The Milwaukee Bank, noting my low income, limited our credit card to \$ 500. Thus, only two years later, in New York, I could afford to buy a personal computer; meanwhile I had too little cash and no computer store would let me take one on credit or monthly payments.

August in Milwaukee was hot, wet and steamy. Our container arrived from Haifa and we settled in the house and neighborhood. During the days we explored the lush green, lake country, surrounding Milwaukee; at night we sat around a small Cadac charcoal barbecue. I couldn't start working until my working visa arrived, but it did not arrive — "Doc, you have to be patient," I was told every few days by a junior administrator at the Medical College of Wisconsin, "we placed a petition for your H 1-B Visa (a working visa for skilled immigrants), we'll contact you as soon as we receive it from our legal office, they should get it shortly from the INS. And our dollar reserves were plummeting to the red line.

*September.* The mosquitoes disappeared and early yellow leaves were already gathering on the lawns. The boys started to attend school. Where is the visa? "Doctor, we're so sorry, but it appears that there's a backlog at the

INS," said the junior administrator. Heidi called her pensioner father in Switzerland: "Papa, we need some money." He sent a few thousands Swiss Francs. "Our tourist visas will soon expire, why don't you speak directly with the legal firm?" suggested Heidi. I did: "Oh, Doc, the INS approved your H1-B visa a month ago—didn't you get it?" I rushed to the College: "Sorry Doc, your file must've been misplaced, we found it. Your visa has been approved."

"When can I start working? Tomorrow?"

"No, Doc. According to the immigration laws you have to leave the country and get your visa stamped into your passport by a US Consulate in your country of origin."

"What?!"

But after a few phone calls we learned that any US consulate would do; we decided to try Canada. We left the boys at home under the command of their older brother Omri, who was already fourteen years old, and drove, to Toronto. When we woke up early morning, in a shabby roadside motel in upper Michigan, the windows of the Voyager were coated with ice—so early did the winter arrive that year.

We arrived at Toronto before midnight and found a semi deserted lakeside hotel. Over the street there was an all night Chinese food store that provided us with *chop sui* and a bottle of wine. "We'll have an early breakfast and then walk to the US consulate," said Heidi, looking at a Toronto City map, "it should be a few blocks away, business hours 8.30 a.m until 3 p.m."

The next morning, cold wind was blowing from Lake Ontario when we walked to the consulate, where, at 7.30, the line of visa applicants stretched from the gates well into the neighboring street. I positioned Heidi in the line and went on reconnaissance: there were at least two hundred people in line—Indians, Pakistani, Russians, Asians and East Europeans of questionable origin, and of course numerous Arabs: many were dressed as if exiled to Siberia, some sat on folding chairs, munching on some food and drinking from thermoses. At the head of the line I found a young Indian who was

friendly enough to communicate, wiggling his head: “Well, Sir, on the average, they’ll see a hundred applicants per day, I camped here tonight.”

I loitered a little at the gates—any chance to sneak in? In Israel it was always possible to bypass the queue, to seek for *protekzia*; but here—no chance. I returned to the tail of the line where Heidi was standing obediently—the Swiss would stand in a line until the *messiah* arrives.

“Come, let’s have a second breakfast, if we want a visa we’ll have to camp out tonight,” I said.

“You’ll camp out. It’s you who wanted to go to America.”

That night I didn’t go to sleep and at midnight, wrapped in whatever warm clothes I had and armed with a flat bottle of Johnny Walker, I took myself to the consulate to spend the night and morning standing between an Ukrainian and a Jordanian —I was number nine in the line. Heidi arrived at 6 am with coffee and doughnuts. At 10 a.m we had an H-1 V visa stamped in our passports. We were euphoric; in great spirits we embarked on the same 700 miles trip back to Milwaukee. Our saga of immigration was only beginning.

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The vast majority of international medical graduates (IMG) —a politically correct term invented in lieu of “foreigners” —practice surgery in the United States after having completed an accredited US surgical residency program. For many of them—fully qualified and experienced surgeons in their countries of origin— this represents a second, repeated surgical training. The graduates of US surgical residencies are considered “board eligible” (BE) —eligible to take the “board” examinations by the American Board of Surgery; those who pass, and most do, become “board certified” (BC). BC—this is the magic word to define well-trained specialists, and a term used to select prospective employees (“we look for a BE/BC surgeon”), or to guide patients (“be sure that your plastic surgeon is board certified”). However, a very small minority of surgeons who practice in America have managed to enter the system without having to go through, or repeat, a local residency. A selected few, internationally renowned experts in a specific

field, academic starts, are imported by university hospitals —“come and lead our hepatopancreatic service” or “we need you to establish our surgical molecular biology laboratory”. Another tiny bunch of IMG surgeons enter the US surgical system through the backdoor; and this is how I did it. Notably, without a US residency one cannot be BC or BE, period— one is simply not allowed to take the examination. The foreign surgical gurus sitting in one of the ivory towers are not bothered too much about not being BC but surgeons like me, who had entered through the back door and practice within the community, are often asked: “Hey Doc, how come you are not board certified? Couldn’t you pass the examinations?” Now go and explain them that you were not permitted to sit before the examiners. But let me tell you more about my backdoor to US surgery.

The backdoor was opened to me by a German surgeon—we’ll call him Wolfgang— who himself had entered through the back door some seven years before me. I had first met Wolfgang at the International Surgical Week in Stockholm, 1991. I approached him at the end of a session dedicated to *abdominal sepsis* —a topic in which both of us were interested. From his multiple publications I knew that he had previously worked in Hamburg and was now stationed in Milwaukee. He looked down at my nametag, and for an instant seemed to be attempting to retrieve my name from his memory: “*Ach, zo*, you are that Dr. Schein who writes so much, but we never see you, where vere you hiding all those years?” He spoke perfect English, with a pronounced German accent, which he tried to conceal with forced American cadence. He was a large and powerfully built man, graying blond hair, blue eyes, and small teeth—altogether handsome— about ten years older than me. He smiled pleasantly and placed a heavy hand on my shoulder, “Can I call you Moshe? Yes? I’m Wolfgang, let us forget those silly old European formalities, after all, I’m American now, *zo* tell me, what did you think about the session, silly, ah? They talk nonsense, what do they understand in abdominal infections, all those old concepts. Look, Moshe, we must get together, we have to cooperate, to do something together, but I have to

leave tonight, first to Hamburg, please come and visit me in Milwaukee. I mean it, you'll stay with us."

A year later I decided to use my university travel budget on an American tour, the first station of which was Manhattan, New York, where I attended an international breast symposium organized by the Long Island Jewish Hospital. The chairman of surgery at that hospital, one called Leslie Winestone, opened the symposium at the posh Waldorf Astoria Hotel. From my back seat I saw a short, chubby man, his pink cheeks hanging down to his chest—bypassing a short neck. He lectured in a heavy foreign accent—Hungarian? I could never guess then that in a few years this man would become my Boss in Brooklyn. From New York I traveled to Milwaukee; it was February and the town was immersed in dirty snow and ice, under a metallic, gray sky. Wolfgang and his wife Elfride picked me up at the airport —she was a stout blond woman, pleasant but proper in the German way—and took me to their new, imitation-Tudor-pseudo-mansion in Brookfield.

I stayed with Wolfgang a few days and between tours in his hospital, formal and informal dinners, I listened to his life story —more layers to it were to be added in the coming years: born in 1940 in Rhineland, he had been a "child of the War": Father sent to the front, mother moved to France with a Frenchman—never to re-unite with the father. Instead of going to high school, the young Wolfgang had been sent off to labor in a French flourmill where he lost some of his hearing. In his late teens he had returned to Germany to enlist into the new *Bundeswehr* where he also completed his secondary education. He had continued with medical studies and surgical training in northern Germany, and spent a few years on a surgical mission by the German government in Algeria. Finally he had become an *Oberarzt* at the Altona Hospital in Hamburg. Here Wolfgang got himself involved in clinical research on surgical infections. Unlike most of his German colleagues he was fluent in English—learned on long visits in England with an old Jewish German family friend—a fact which helped him to publish in international journals and to establish academic contacts abroad. A shrewd promoter and eloquent speaker Wolfgang had become closely associated with the

antibiotics industry, whose drugs he advocated, and from which he had learned to squeeze out funds. In 1988 he co-created the European Infection Surgical Society and had organized its first meeting in Hamburg. Among the invited guests was Professor REC, the chairman of surgery at the Medical College of Wisconsin. He was the one who had offered Wolfgang the back door entry to American Surgery—at that time Wolfgang relationship with his own Boss, Dr. Teichmann, was deteriorating, and he was accused of being too cozy with the drug industry, and in general too outspoken for one who was not as yet a *Chefartz*. In Milwaukee, Wolfgang had joined the section of trauma and emergency surgery, first as an associate professor but rapidly promoted to a 'full professorship'.

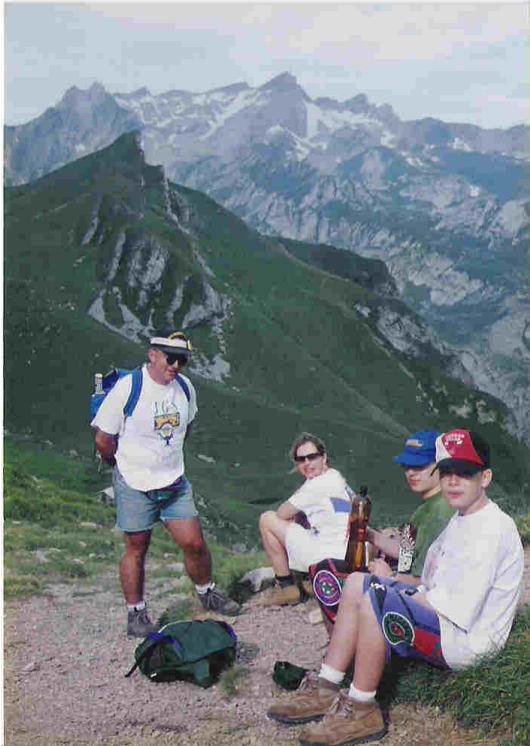
At the end of my first and brief visit in Milwaukee, I was relieved to be driven by Wolfgang back to the airport. The few days of semi imprisonment in his huge white-carpeted mansion, driving around frozen gray lakes and icy and empty streets, had a claustrophobic effect on me—I longed for the temperate Middle East. We bear-hugged at the airport: "Zo, Moshe, you could come and work here with us," Wolfgang said.

"Thanks, it is very kind of you, but we are very happy in Haifa." At that time the honeymoon between Professor Maccabi and me seemed everlasting.

A year later the situation changed and my mind as well. During the 1993 International Surgical Week in Hong Kong I had met Wolfgang again and discussed the prospects of a position in Milwaukee. His Boss, REC, had been there as well and he promised: "we'll see what we can do to accommodate you."

And so here I was, a year later, starting my job as a Surgical Care Fellow under the leadership of Professor Wolfgang who was nominated the Director of the Accredited Fellowship Program. The fellowship program was to last one year—"and what would I do later?" I had asked Wolfgang already in Hong Kong. He replied: "Don't worry, just come and prove yourself. REC is influential and well connected. He's a friend who will never let us down."

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In the Swiss Alps (on the way to the US) with: Heidi, Omri and Yariv



Dr. Wolfgang