Oral Histories: Immigration from Central Europe

Beginning in the mid-1800s, Jews from Germany and other Central European countries began immigrating to the United States in search of opportunity. Louis Heller relates his family story.

Louis was born in Milwaukee in 1852. His parents were Bernard and Sarah Levy Heller, who lived in the little town of Czitau a couple of hours from Prague. Louis describes their reasons for leaving:

In 1848 Frederic the Great, King of Prussia, started a campaign to enlarge his country, causing a disturbance among the other provinces of which Bohemia, a province of Austria was one. My parents, who had a very hard life, by being taxed by the government for every blade of grass they grew, which was of use to them. Father and Mother had been living a very close life and had saved up sufficient money for the emigration to America having heard that there were innumerable opportunities for a happy life in this country...There were five children [Louis, along with one other sibling, was born in America]. Not needing passports at that time, it was an easy matter for them to leave the country, having engaged a wagon and horses to take them to Hamburg, where they took passage on a sailing boat for New York.

Traveling through the Erie Canal and across the Great Lakes to Milwaukee, Louis’ family landed at the Hudson Street pier with 25 cents in his father’s pocket. Says Louis:

[My father] left his family sitting on the pier, walked up Spring Street and approached a stranger asking him if he could speak German, and to advise him where to go to find work, which it was imperative that he should have at once. He was referred to a party who immediately employed him at 50 cents a day using pick and shovel building a street. In the evening he found where he could employ his time working at his own trade making sausage for a Mr. Hesselman whose market was located on State Street between Fourth and Fifth in a cottage...He found a shack for his family to live in that was located on what is now Seventh and Cherry Streets. The shack was built against a bluff, one room with boxes for furniture...

The real work of the family started when they moved into the shack. Mr. Hesselman took kindly to Mr. Heller [Louis’ father] and took him with him to the slaughter houses. He taught him how he could take the entrails of the cows and make liver sausage of them. Father took them home chopped them with hand meat cleavers, Mother boiled the meat and helped make it into sausage. Then, early in the morning before going to his regular job, he went out to sell the sausages. It wasn’t long before he had saved five dollars—a real savings in those days. With this five dollars, he started into business for himself. He walked out into the country and bought two calves which he brought back with him, carrying them when they got too tired to walk. He dressed and sold the calves and continued this as his regular business until he had saved up ten dollars. With that he bought a wagon...As time went on, equipped now with horse and wagon it did not take long to accumulate the reward of hard labor. His earnings now were sufficient to safely buy him forty feet frontage on Third Street and extending back to the Milwaukee River. There was a story and a half house with business. Mother was proud of the home and its comforts. There was a kitchen back of the market and living rooms upstairs. They had real beds to sleep in and a feather bed.

Louis’ mother worked no less hard than his Father. Louis writes:

Mother was a wonderful wife and mother. She cooked, she cleaned, did the washing and ironing for the five children and had time to do mending and patching of clothes besides being of great help to Father in the market. Her ambitions were to help to the needy, in which she was very much successful. She was one of the organizers of Die Treue Schwestern [“True Sisters,” a benevolent society established by Rabbi Kalisch in the 1850s].
While his parents worked, Louis remembers attending school as a child:

At the age of six I started in school. For about six months I attended the Public school at Sixth and Juneau, in the very same building now occupied by the offices of the Pabst Brewing Company. Not being satisfied with the school, I was sent to a private school sponsored by the German element, to see that German was taught to their children. The school was run by Mr. Peter Engelman who taught the higher studies—Chemistry, Algebra, Geometry, French, English and German were taught besides the regular studies of the A B C’s, history and arithmetic. A fine artist taught drawing, and singing was also included in the curriculum. School hours ran from 8:30 until 12:00 and from 1:00 until 3:00 for ten months of the year. Manners were particularly stressed...I continued going to school. The games we played were very like those that boys and girls play now—hide and seek, cracking the whip, baseball, pompon pull away.

After school, Louis had a few jobs in different parts of the country before settling down in Milwaukee as a sales manager at Weisel & Co., a sausage manufacturer. He still made time for his hobbies, though. These included building ship models, aided by the knowledge he'd gained playing on the docked boats in his backyard as a child and later as a sailor. As he says, "Keep your hands busy with a hobby; keep your mind alert, and life will take care of itself" (Wisconsin News, August 21, 1937).

**Vocabulary**

**Frontage** (noun): the front of a building.

**Pompon Pull Away** (noun): a game of tag, in which there is a designated area and one child stands in the middle (he or she is the tagger), while the rest stand at the edge of the field. The "tagger" yells pompon pull away and all the children run across the space—anyone who is tagged joins the tagger. The last person standing becomes the first tagger in the next game.

**Discussion Questions and Activities**

1) Discuss the ways in which Louis’ family earned money when they first came to this country.
2) In what ways was Louis’ school the same as yours? How is your school different?
3) What do you think you might like or dislike about Louis’ school? Which games do you still play?
4) Create a game day, in which you play the games that Louis talks about. (Try playing baseball according the 1860 rules--[http://www.sev.org/gbsfrogs/rules.html](http://www.sev.org/gbsfrogs/rules.html))

(Personal history accounts and photographs obtained from the Jewish Museum Milwaukee archives.)