

## Viktoriya's Transcript

I'm Victoria Babenko, and I am a Ph.D. candidate at the University of California, Santa Barbara. I study cognitive neuroscience, specifically how stress is bad for us. I am originally from the San Fernando Valley, Los Angeles area. That's where my family immigrated to from Ukraine as Jewish refugees. My family, before the fall of the USSR government which happened around 1991, was doing pretty okay. There was Jewish discrimination happening, but it's more of their story. Before the fall, my grandfather was a chief structural engineer at a government research facility in Ukraine. And my grandmother was a radio engineer at a different government research facility.

They were doing pretty well, and then after the fall, there was chaos in Ukraine. For example, crime rates went up really high. And before the fall of the USSR there was no crime, so it was a drastic change.

Inflation hit them really, really hard because what was a life savings in your bank account turned into practically nothing overnight. And, they all lost their jobs because everything was government owned. So, they lost their jobs because the facilities also collapsed with the government. My grandfather had to become a plumber I believe, and my grandmother was like repairing medical equipment. And at that point, things weren't going very great anymore.

My uncle had earlier put their names down on an application for refugee status to America. We really didn't think we would get it. It was pretty much a lottery choosing to get it or not. But, a few years after the fall we got contacted for this refugee program, and we ended up getting our Jewish refugee status and being able to move to America. That move was really difficult for my family. They had to pack up everything that they could which, from what I asked, it was pillows and blankets and like silverware and some plates and a lot of books. That's what I heard the main thing was. A lot of books and photo albums, and that's it essentially. They had to say goodbye to all their neighbors and extended family that they had known their whole lives and move to this country where they didn't really know anyone and didn't speak the language and didn't really have anything to go there with. But, we flew there in 1995 when I was three years old, and my mom, a single mother at the time, was 22. Then, we landed in America, in Los Angeles. We had kind of a friend of a friend in Los Angeles and it is a big population of Ukrainian and Russian people.

The apartment building that we moved into had a lot of Ukrainian and Russian speaking people. And a lot of them kind of helped each other out with moving here.

I think the government, as refugees, supplied us with 10 months of welfare of like a small, monthly welfare check, just to put food on the table. My grandparents who were both engineers, they didn't speak the language. So, they just had to get jobs to be able to support my mom going to college, because that was the priority—to get an education right away and start our lives. So, my grandfather was a caregiver, and my grandmother was a babysitter. My mom went to full-time college and then eventually she got her license, et cetera. And she's now a partner at her accounting firm. My uncle is a lead engineer at his company, and I'm a

Ph.D. candidate at UCSB. And, my stepdad, who also is a Ukrainian immigrant that moved here shortly after us, is an architect.

I was three years old and funnily enough, I think my first memory is on the plane to America.

I was too young to really know what was happening. I know for my mom, it was very difficult for her to leave her friends and her life behind because she was 22 and had this community that she built and everything she ever knew in Kyiv, in this capital city there.

She didn't want to go, didn't want to have to change it all to this country where she didn't know anyone or anything about it. I know that was a very, very difficult change for her. For my grandparents I'm sure it was very difficult going from being engineers in their country and from that kind of expertise to a country where you don't know the language and you're already older and all you can do is really pick up babysitting gigs and whatever to just support your family. So it was a huge sacrifice on their end, just for my mom and I, and my uncle.

I moved straight to an English speaking preschool and I was just very confused apparently.

All I knew was Russian, and I didn't know any English at that point. And so I just totally stopped speaking for like, I don't know, months. And, then I only started speaking English and then my parents had to like reel back in some Russian. There was definitely some confusion, being a child at that age.

I essentially grew up here and I should feel pretty American and be pretty integrated, but sometimes I feel a bit disconnected from it because I just grew up very culturally Russian with the food I ate and just the culture I was in.

And my family brought a lot of Russian and Ukrainian culture into our lives. I remember I learned that grilled cheese sandwiches and tomato soup were a thing in like senior year of college. And my roommates were like, "What? Like how do you not know that?" And stuff like that happens all the time.

It'll go over my head these obviously American cultures and traditions. And I'll just... I don't know. I'm always like, so what do you do on like Christmas? Like what do you do on, I don't know. I just get really confused about it sometimes, which is interesting since I grew up here.

The most rewarding part is just kind of noticing what we have now, and what we've built. I think it came with a lot of hard work and a lot of sacrifice, and a lot of luck, to be honest, as well. But it feels really rewarding to see how far we've come, from no money here and welfare to my mom being a partner at her firm and me being here in Santa Barbara, which is a really beautiful city.

## **Do you consider yourself an American, an immigrant, both, or neither?**

I have always felt a little confused between it all. I think when I first moved here, I was a little too young to really remember feeling different. I'm sure I did. Hence, when I just stopped talking for a while. But I know my parents always put in a lot of effort into not making me feel like an immigrant or like a struggling immigrant or anything.

Like When I look back, I don't remember any struggle or anything. Mainly that's because they took all the struggle, and I was just a child. A lot of our stories have been passed down to me, and I've always felt really, really connected to them. I've felt really connected to our stories from Ukraine and from struggles of World War II and all these things that I have felt very connected to my culturally Jewish and Ukrainian heritage. And, I've never felt like super American, which to this day, I can't really explain why.

I recently told that to my mom, and she was confused. She was like, "What? All you've ever known really as being like an American." But I don't. I can't even explain it, but I've always felt kind of in the middle.

I've always felt a little bit in between the two. I've never felt that kind of like visceral, American connection. It's always just been kind of stuck between countries and just being like, "I don't know, they're just countries, whatever."

## **Do people ever assume you aren't an immigrant?**

It is why I believe that my story might be really different from a lot of other immigrant stories. Because I pass for a Caucasian American, and my family passes. The kind of discrimination that you would get for having Russian accents, like my family does – which they do – they get discrimination for being like Communists and stuff like that. But it's not quite as bad as the really blatant discrimination that a lot of other cultures have to face. And, I think that's definitely assisted us in our luck and how we've gotten to where we are.

## **How do you interpret the American Dream?**

It's hard to say. Cause I feel like it means something different to every person and every culture.

For me, I would think an American dream would mean that you moved to America with nothing and maybe started with welfare and then minimum jobs and worked really hard and got an education, got some job. And now you're part of the general population of Americans, which is funny, cause that pretty much sounds like my story.

We moved here with very little and worked really hard, and I think it's like harder than people think the American dream will be. So, I don't think it was quite as like blissful as some people might think the American dream would be because it takes just a lot of work. We

pretty much achieved it for my mom and uncle and my dad and myself, but I think it was at a great sacrifice to my grandparents and having to leave everything behind and move here.

I think that there are opportunities in America that you can take to achieve the American dream, but I wouldn't say that they are available for everyone.

If there are programs and assistance set in place by the government to help it be an equal playing field for everyone, it would be achievable. But, I don't believe that everyone is on an equal playing field when they move here. Even just being refugee status, started us off with that, like 10 month welfare.

And if we didn't have that refugee status, I don't know how it would have worked. I don't know if we didn't have that welfare, that we would be where we are today. It's just, it's hard to say. So I don't think it's easily achievable for everyone.

There's a lot of discrimination in the world and in America, and that definitely plays its part with the opportunities that we're given. In job opportunities, in even housing opportunities, like just in every aspect of life.

There's also just a lot of different ideas of what the American dream might be for people. For some people it might not be to have to get an education, and that's totally valid.

Like maybe it's just to be able to not struggle for food, and that is a very valid American dream.

## **Do you have any advice to immigrants today?**

I would say that it's really difficult and it's gonna be really, really hard. And, I would just to be honest let them know that there are opportunities, and they're supposedly available for everyone, but there's really, it's not really equally equal access to those opportunities. They might face a lot of discrimination in different ways, and it might be difficult to assimilate. And try to also keep a hold of your culture.

It's hit me recently just how impressive it is for people to make that leap and to make that decision to leave everything they know to move to a country, for some, with nothing.

And, I think that that already shows a lot of strength and perseverance and bravery. I think that that quality in itself is already really impressive. And that is already setting you up to probably be like that when you're here.

What some Americans don't immediately think of or notice with immigrants is that these are people who decided to leave everything they knew, and that's like already taking some of the strongest people of a society and putting them into your country.

So I think it's really impressive to have that strength and stubbornness and perseverance. I think that that alone will get you pretty far. But not always, because like I said, there's not equal opportunities.

And it's not this like magical, you move here and then all of a sudden you own a house and a golden retriever and everything you wanted.

Let's see if I can do it without getting emotional. I'm just like, just so, so grateful for my family, my grandparents and my mom for everything that they sacrificed. Oh, gosh, for me to be here and, yeah, especially, you know, like I just. I can't imagine having been in like my grandparents shoes, and I can't say with certainty, if I would have had the strength to do the same thing.

My mom, like she worked a lot while getting her degree and somehow managed to do all the above and be like just the best mom.

I think this is a really interesting project, and I think it's really important for the world and for Americans to hear different immigrant stories.

I think that there is a lot more variety in their stories than kind of comes to mind to most Americans right away. I think that it's really important to emphasize that the bravery and strength of these people to leave everything they knew and to come here knowing that it's not going to be easy and it's going to be really difficult, but a lot of it is self-sacrifice for their children and for their grandchildren. It's really admirable.