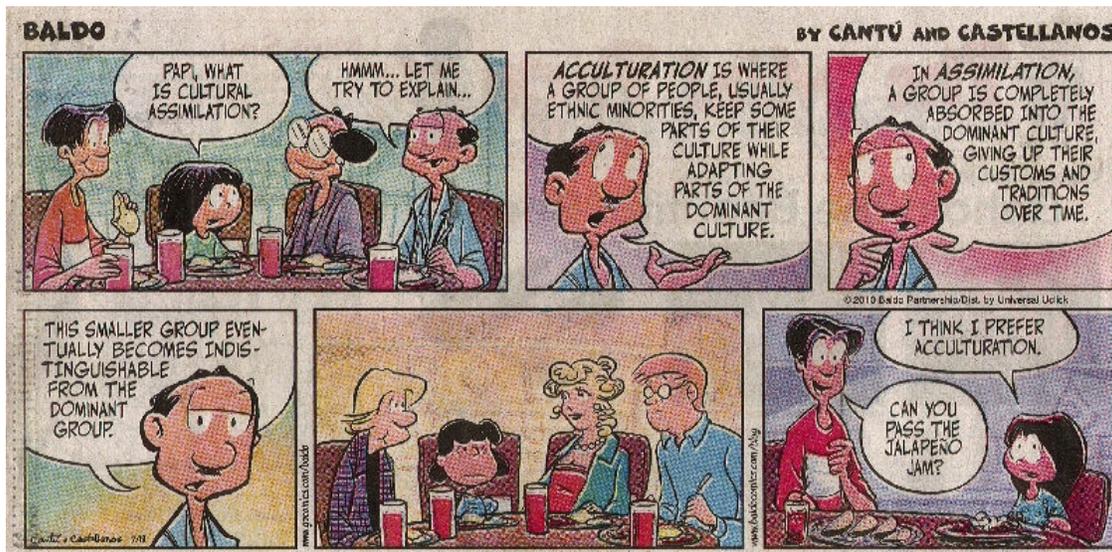


# IMMIGRATION ... ACCULTURATION ... ASSIMILATION.

by Vic Berecz



*Baldo* recently has had a few comic strips on family history ... which is what got me following it. A few weeks ago this strip in the Sunday “funnies” got me thinking about our own family history and what follows immigration. Is it more than acculturation and assimilation into the morass of a dominant culture? I believe it is ... and always has been here in America. There’s no evidence that anything’s changed. Recent immigrants ... whether from south of the border, the middle-east, or wherever else ... are no different than your ancestors and mine. They had the courage to jump into the melting pot which is America, in the belief that their children will have better lives. They were and are risk-takers ... so they exemplify the American dream.

There has been a process in place for well over 200 years. It is a natural process. Nobody created it or enacted it. Yes, our Constitution left the door wide open for it, but it actually began before the Constitution was drafted. Maybe it was God’s will. Maybe it was all the elements coincidentally coming together at the right time and place. Maybe it was just dumb luck. What I’m talking about is the typical American immigrant experience.

Here’s the pattern. Motivated people take a great risk, by voluntarily abandoning their roots, in the hope of creating better lives for themselves and their descendants. They come to America, usually without speaking the language or having the skills needed to be immediately successful here. They do the best they can, often by staying close to others of their countrymen who emigrated here also. They learn a little English, do whatever work they can get, and instill in their kids the importance not only of hard work, but of education too. The immigrant’s kids know the language and culture of the *old country* but learn English as their primary language. They likely marry someone from their community, but due to their education, can get better jobs or open small businesses. They earn more and have the mobility associated with their new circumstances. The immigrant’s grandkids rarely hear, and usually don’t learn the old language. They are by and large outside the immigrant community, they are in reality not hyphenated Americans, though they may still maintain a few “family traditions” ... *szalonna szütés* (roasting the bacon) is one such tradition our family periodically reenacts. That’s the typical immigrant experience and it’s been going on in America for two-and-a-half centuries, in a very big way.

In our case, my grand-parents were born in Hungary ... my in-laws were born in Germany. So, this immigrant experience has played out in our family in relatively recent years. But, in addition to Germany, Hungary and the United States, my grandchildren have documented ancestors born in: Colombia, Croatia, Cuba, England, France, Haiti, Ireland, Puerto Rico, Scotland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, and Switzerland. One such ancestor came to America as a child in 1749. In 1765 he became a “naturalized resident” of Maryland by swearing allegiance to King George III. In 1773 he moved to *Brüder Tal*, an all-German community on the frontier in Bedford County, PA. In 1778 he was commissioned a 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant in the First Pennsylvania Militia Battalion with which he served on the frontier during the remainder of the American Revolution. It was 1830 before the family Americanized their name, just about the time that his great-grandchildren were learning English in the newly established Pennsylvania public schools. That family have been farmers, entrepreneurs, soldiers, and business leaders in that geographical area ever since.

I hope I’ve shown that, while there are variations in the pattern, that this pattern of immigrant experience has been going on in the U.S. for a long time and continues today. It’s true that a similar immigrant experience existed in a piecemeal fashion around the world from time immemorial. But, the U.S. is unique in that from its beginnings essentially the entire nation was built upon this immigrant experience. Therefore, rather than forcing the few immigrants to assimilate into a static, pre-existing dominant culture, which was usually the case elsewhere ... the vast number of American immigrants were, after the initial trials and tribulations of acculturation, welcomed as a real part of our dynamic, evolving American culture.

I’m sure many of you are saying to yourselves, “Get real Vic!” OK. Yes, the above presents an idealistic scenario. America and all Americans haven’t always been that welcoming ... especially with respect to people who *looked different*. The Japanese-Americans of the west saw this all too graphically in 1942. But, just because there are still bigots running around, or group paranoia may momentarily take hold, doesn’t mean we should glorify and emulate those mistakes of our past. Let’s hold up the ideal as our goal, and move toward it one step at a time.