

It was hard for me to conceptualize what the Constitution meant to me for a long time. Sure, it is a document that has defined our nation since 1787, but why is it the factor that propels people to risk their lives by traveling overseas or crossing borders to reach our country? Why, with their blood, sweat, and tears, do aspiring immigrants work tirelessly to become citizens of our nation? The reason was clarified to me earlier this year after hearing of my grandmother's experience as an immigrant. In 1965, my grandmother was forced to make the harrowing decision to depart her home country of Poland to create a new life for herself and her future family in the United States. Here, because of the Constitutional rights that she would gain as a citizen, she would be granted freedoms that would create a better life for herself and for those who come after her. Due to her bravery, I have grown up as a third-generation American teenager and realize the privilege it is to reside in a country that values freedom above all else.

When my great grandparents decided to leave Poland, my grandmother was only 15 years old. She knew that her country was in a communist state, causing difficulty in their lives and the questioning of their safety. When it came to her knowledge of America, she only knew what she heard on the radio and what she received from her aunt, who had already taken the journey to the so-called land of opportunity. "The two things I remember receiving from my aunt from the United States were oranges and extra clothing that she could give us. The scents of these products stuck with me," my grandma tells me. The sweet scent of the oranges excited her, and the clothing was fresher than anything she ever had. This was her only perception of America as a teenager: a nation with new foods, shops, and freedoms.

The journey to America was the first time my grandmother had ever been on a plane. She was only able to take what she could carry, leaving everything behind. It was difficult knowing she would never return to her belongings, home, friends, or previous lifestyle. She explained to me the numbness she felt as she entered an unknown land with no understanding of English. Her tears that day were of sadness, but also of joy, knowing that she would be safe here and could begin a better life. It took five years before she was able to apply for citizenship. This process changed her entire perspective as she began to realize just what she would be given in this nation that Poland stripped her of. During her studies of U.S. history, the English language, and government processes, along with any other information needed to pass her citizenship test, she encountered the Constitution, and a few things stood out to her. The first amendment guarantees the right to speech, religion, press, assembly, and the right to petition the government. In Poland, these were actions that she could have been arrested for. Neighbors would turn each other in if they heard anything said that went against the government. My grandmother recalls the removal of people from their homes, houses being taken away, and other unimaginable outcomes of voicing your opinion. Any protesting of the government was prohibited and would have severe consequences. Additionally, she was ready to be given the chance to have a vote that would

count and could make a difference. Poland at this time, like other communist nations, had a leader that did not consult the people or think of their needs before making decisions. As Americans, we often overlook these liberties that we have known our whole lives. We live our lives without realizing these freedoms are not granted across the world. We have the right to speak against what we believe is wrong, stand up for what we believe is right, or protests issues that we feel the need to change. This ideology is one of the main reasons why my grandmother is so grateful to have been given the chance to come to this country and live a life where her natural rights are protected and documented.

When I think about the Constitution and how it was written by colonists who wanted to escape the unjustness of the British rule, I realize that our entire country was built by those who fought to gain the rights they deserved. Like the original colonists of our nation, my grandmother and her family came to the United States with no knowledge of what it would be like. They sacrificed everything and uprooted their lives for the chance of a better life in this country. Immigrants come from across the world because of the freedom and opportunities this nation promises. “Anyone can work hard and become successful in America,” is what my grandma told me, and it is completely true. We have the ability to create our lives how we see fit in this nation because of a document promising the “blessings of liberty, to ourselves and our posterity,” that cannot be taken away from us. The Constitution, to me, represents freedom and the start of a new life. Without the creation of the United States Constitution, my grandmother and her family would never have decided to come to this country. I would not be who I am today without this document and am forever grateful to have grown up in a nation that promises to protect and defend my Constitutional rights.