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New Americans Museum celebrates some of this country's richest blessings

By Donald H. Harrison



SAN DIEGO—When my friend Dan Schaffer and I set out to visit the recently-opened New Americans Museum in the Liberty Station area of San Diego, we thought we were going to visit just one museum. As it turned out, we visited three museums all occupying the same large building. What was remarkable was that the three experiences—plus a side trip to a new restaurant—all were interrelated. They all reflected how rich America has become because it is a land of immigrants.

The 4,000-square-foot New Americans Museum is the brainchild of Deborah Szekely, perhaps best known internationally as the founder of the Golden Door spas and the Rancho La Puerta health resort of Tecate, Mexico. The daughter of Jewish immigrant parents, Harry Shainman (also spelled Szainman) of Warsaw and the former Rebecca Sudman of Austria, Szekely was raised in the Far Rockaway Beach area of Brooklyn, near Coney Island, with the sound of her mother's German and father's Yiddish in her ears. Szekely also learned English as a child.

Her parents' marriage was of the Only-in-America type, her father having immigrated steerage class to America to avoid being conscripted as a poor youngster into what was then the Russian Army. Her mother, the child of wealthy fur traders, steamed in elegance to America's shores. Not one to put on airs, Rebecca worked as a nurse in New York, eventually meeting Harry. When the Depression came, Rebecca, able to draw on her parents' resources, prevailed on her husband to relocate the family to Tahiti.

Many years later, after returning to the United States and making her success in the spa movement, Szekely became president of the Inter-American Foundation, traveling extensively throughout the Western Hemisphere. During a telephone interview, she told me that it was the stories that she encountered in this U.S. diplomatic assignment—rather than her own immigrant background—that motivated her to create the non-profit New American Museum.

“Every place I went, whether the Caribbean or Latin America, I was chatting with the women,” she recalled. “They would point out their young kids, bright, and say ‘that is the one that we are going to send to America.’ People don’t realize that the children were these families’ investments in the future – like venture capitalists. The best of the best of the family is sent to America, and everyone in the family chips in... whether from Latin America, South Africa or Cambodia. And the kids repay their families’ investments with their successes.”

For example, said Szekely, Mexican immigrants to the United States send billions of dollars per year in remittances to their families. “They hold two jobs, one to repay the investments of their families to bring them here,” she said. As strong as the sense of gratitude is in the first generation of immigrants, it typically diminishes in the second generation, Szekely said. “The kids don’t send as much money back as the parents, who feel the obligation.”

There are benefits and drawbacks to such patterns of immigration, the museum founder said. “They come here full of high hopes and get treated as second-class citizens. Not speaking English doesn’t mean that you are not bright. How many of us (Americans) can speak Spanish? But people see things out of context. None of the kids came here because they were looking for a free ride.”

Referring to portraits now on exhibit of teenage immigrant children photographed for the Smithsonian Institution by Barbara Beirne—in which the subjects wrote their own captions—Szekely said: “Look at these kids: We are truly getting the best of the best, and this has to be recognized!”

In the exhibition, youngsters from throughout the world tell of their families’ reasons for coming to America. In many cases, it was to avoid warfare or political persecution in their countries of origin. In others, as alluded to by Szekely, they came because of the economic opportunity that America represented. Some of the youngsters also told of the adjustments their new lives’ required.

Szekely said it is unfortunate that immigrant children sometimes don’t realize how bright, and far-seeing, their parents have been. “Sometimes, the parents are looked down upon because they are poor. The children think if they are poor, they are not bright.”

The mistake the children make is to confuse material advantages with intellect. The parents may, in fact, be very bright, even if “they came from a place where they did their washing in a river, whereas now they have a washing machine, which they think is wonderful, or if the father is a gardener, who thinks it is wonderful to have his own truck and tools,” Szekely said. “Some kids think their parents don’t have the capacity, or the potential, and they do.”

The problem, she suggested, is that “stereotypes have been sold to the kids.” The New American Museum, even while in formation, fought against stereotypes. It sponsored essay contests in which immigrant children were encouraged to interview their parents about their lives in the old country and the circumstances of their immigration. “The kids have been astonished when they ask what their parents what it was like, and there has been a whole new bonding.”

Photographer Bierne said her project was inspired in 1999 by meeting teenage refugees from Kosovo, and deciding to seek teens from other countries. “I searched for places to meet these newcomers in the hope of being able to photograph them in their new surroundings. My first stop was Grand Street Settlement in New York City, a non-profit organization that has provided services to immigrants since 1916...” She offered the teenagers autonomy in selecting where to be photographed, what they would wear, and “the messages that would accompany the photographs.”

She then traveled throughout the United States from 2000 to 2006 meeting immigrants, refugees and American-born children of immigrant parents.

As Dan and I read the teenagers' comments, we could not help but remember the immigrant generations of our respective families. In my case, my paternal great grandparents arrived approximately in the 1880s from Rzezow in what is now Poland (then Austria-Hungary), and my maternal grandparents arrived early in the 1900s from Lithuania. Dan's parents were of a similar Eastern European background; his mother, the former Norma Diamond, was from Poland, and his father, Maurice, hailed from Lithuania. They met in Cleveland, where they were married in 1921.



TEEN VIEWPOINTS—Palestinian girl at left and Israeli girl at right are among the subjects of photo essay by Barbara Beirne now on display at the New Americans Museum

Both of us were particularly interested in the comments of teenagers from Israel and of Palestinian background that reflected the hurt on both sides of the conflict. Tahani Salah, 16, wrote under her photo: “My blood is P.L.O. My blood flows through the Ramallah roads. My skin one shade lighter than peach. The road home is just too weak. Why can't I speak the same Arabic? I'm a Muslim Palestinian that has never seemed real to me. Can't you see I have never been home? When will it ever be safe to go home?”

In contrast, Marina Krichevsky, 16, wrote: “We immigrated from Israel two years ago. Israel was a pretty scary place. There are terrorist attacks all the time and I do mean all the time. Some kids never leave their neighborhood. Other kids feel they might as well move around because they could be killed in their own backyard. If we still lived in Israel I would be in the military.”

A second exhibit was locally produced: “Contemporary Story: Perspectives by Immigrant and Refugee Artists,” in which refugee teens studying photography made studies of the lives and works of other immigrants involved in both the performing and creative arts. In most cases, the subjects were from different countries than the photographers.



EXHIBITS—At left, study of Yevgenia Nisman, a Jewish pianist who immigrated to San Diego from Ukraine, is photo subject for a student project by Ahmed, a Somali immigrant. At right, Chinese immigrants, circa 1850, are subject of a watercolor by former California Assemblyman Tom Hom.

A four-photo study was of classical piano teacher Yevgenia Nisman from Odessa, Ukraine, as seen by Ahmed (Last Name not given), 18, from Somalia. There were two different views of Nisman playing her piano; another, closer up, of her sitting at the piano, and finally, a study of her hands on the keys. Nisman is a member of our Jewish community.

The museum describes its mission as being “a catalyst to celebrate America’s past and promise” and providing “inspiring and compelling educational and cultural programs and activities of our diverse immigrant experience.”

The executive director of the museum is Gayle Hom, a third-generation Chinese American whose father, Tom Hom, once served on the San Diego City Council and later represented San Diego in the California State Assembly. Her late mother, Dorothy, was deeply involved in the creation of the Asian Pacific Thematic District in downtown San Diego.

Hom is married to a Jewish man, Sheldon Zemen. Their wedding incorporated Jewish and Chinese customs. Hom became a Jew-by-choice and both their children have become bar and bat mitzvah at Congregation Beth Am. Her story resonated with me because my own son David and his wife, Hui-Wen, similarly had a wedding that encompassed both their rich heritages.

An interesting side note about the museum is that its location at 2825 Dewey Road in “Liberty Station,” as the former Naval Training Center is now named, sits in the Roseville section of the Point Loma neighborhood of San Diego. Roseville was the town site laid out in 1869 by Louis Rose, the first Jewish settler in San Diego. As Rose was an immigrant from Neuhaus-an-der-Oste, Germany, it turns out that the museum honoring immigrants is itself located in an area laid out by an immigrant.

After visiting the New American Museum, Dan and I walked a few paces into the gallery operated by the San Diego Watercolor Society, which offers a new exhibit the first Friday of every month. The current one, in celebration of the opening of its neighboring New American Museum, is patriotically themed “red, white and blue and all the other colors too,” according to the society’s former president, Risë Parberry, who like other board members volunteers as a docent.

“1850... New Roots,” (pictured above) is an eye-catching painting depicting two Chinese in traditional dress against a background of the American flag. The painting is the work of Tom Hom, father of Gayle Hom.



Another work that drew my attention was “Entrance to the Garden of Eden” (at left) an abstract by Rachel Hasson utilizing acrylic paint on a Japanese plastic material known as yupo. Hasson had been born in Lvov, Poland, and avoided the Holocaust by immigrating to Palestine in 1939. She later studied medicine in the United States, becoming a professor of pathology and pediatrics at Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York. She took up painting in her retirement. Besides her work on display in San Diego, she currently has a one-woman show in the community of Laguna Woods, where she now resides.

Located on another end of the building is the Visions Art Quilt Gallery, where a touring exhibit cleverly called “Material Men” (a pun on Madonna’s signature song “Material Girl”) shows the works of male quilters. One of the volunteers at the gallery was Boatema Boateng (the ‘o’s in names are pronounced like ‘w’s), an expatriate from Ghana who is an assistant professor of communications at UCSD. Dan, who once had served as a teacher in Nigeria before settling down to a long career as a high school teacher in San Diego County, conversed with her about

pedagogical styles and educational techniques in the United States and in West Africa.

Eventually, Dan and I left the museum building to continue our tour of Liberty Station, an area that may well become another great cultural center of San Diego similar to Balboa Park. We wandered through a long arched walkway, soon finding Tender Greens, a new restaurant emphasizing local organic foods, which co-owner Rian Brandenburg (a former chef at the Lodge at Torrey Pines) told us is intended to bring cuisine that is both healthy and imaginative to casual diners. The young woman who seated us for a very tasty lunch was Dasha Bondurovska, a recent immigrant from Ukraine. Another member of the staff is Rachel Roos, a new arrival from Brazil.



Wherever we went that day, Dan and I encountered “New Americans” who are enriching our country’s cultural and economic lives. How *apropos* that we should now have a museum to celebrate our nation’s good fortune.

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