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How a Quilting Circle Helped Me Discover My Immigrant Heritage

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Image description: Author Marina's family with her Memories of Migration story quilt

In 1960, my father was born in the fishing village of El Palo in the south of Spain. At the moment of birth, in a small house where his parents had a room, my *abuelo* (grandfather) was away at sea as a fisherman. When he heard the joyous news of his firstborn son, he immediately got sick from excitement. Growing up on the rocky beach, my father attended a one room school house with a teacher (at times drunk) who taught all the grades at once, tended to a pack of stray dogs as a child, and explored the natural landscape as he climbed the mountains alongside the Mediterranean coast. As a teenager he went to vocational school, and on the weekends ventured into the city center to dance his heart out at discos.

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Marina's father as a young man in Spain

In 1980, my mother visited Spain. An American college student from New York, she spent the summer in Malaga attending classes at the city's university. She also spent a lot of her time enjoying her freedom on the beach, and serendipitously caught a glimpse of my father at a *peña*, a make-shift restaurant on the sand. A summer fling turned into a two-year long-distance relationship, that ultimately led to my mother moving back to Spain after college graduation in 1982. While my mother was fully content with living her life in Malaga, it was actually my father who decided that perhaps moving to the United States was the right choice for them. Spain, recently freed from Francisco Franco's fascist rule, was in recovery. My father had very few prospects in his native land, and with some initial training in computer programming he believed that there was hope in life in America, in "the American Dream". On December 5, 1984 – nine years to the day before I was born – my parents packed their few belongings in Spain and flew into John F. Kennedy Airport to start their lives together in New York.

While I've known this story my entire life, it wasn't until recently that I contemplated my own connection to the experiences of immigrants, migrants, and refugees that we share here at the Tenement Museum. As an educator, I lead daily tours for the public and school children, taking them through recreated apartments to discuss the stories of the people that lived within our tenements' walls. I have found that having open conversations with visitors of varying backgrounds has helped me illuminate parts of my own identity. Since my first week on the job, I have seen the look of wonder and gratitude in the eyes of people on my tours as they uncover hidden histories of their own families' immigration and realize how previous gaps in their stories could be filled here at the Museum. Their reactions constantly remind me that there is always more to learn about oneself.

With this realization, I began to weave in parts of my story with the ones I tell in these old apartments. On our [Hard Times tour](#), as I speak about family struggles through financial difficulties and immigration laws, I highlight

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While home-sickness is ever present for my father, spending over half his life in New York has made this his home, too. On our newest apartment tour, [Under One Roof](#), which brings together three families living in the Lower East Side during the late 20th century, oral history plays an integral role as many of our former tenants are still alive to tell their story. As Jose Velez, one tenant featured on this tour, ends his video interview stating, “like today, you have a lot of kids in New York who don’t speak Spanish,” I can relate and discuss my own childhood growing up unable to speak my father-tongue and how it impacted my family and cultural connections. And while I bring to life the sounds of humming sewing machines for my visitors during my stories of the Levines and Rogarshevskys – two Eastern European Jewish families on our [Sweatshop Workers tour](#) – and the Wongs, a Chinese family highlighted on Under One Roof, I remember the string that ties their garment work to my own family history. Over time I have learned that my some of mother’s immigrant grandparents and great-grandparents worked in the garment industry and lived in the Lower East Side in the early 1900s. Across the ocean in Spain, my *abuelo* also worked in a clothing factory once he left the fishing boats, and my *abuela* (grandmother) was a seamstress who even sewed and knit beautiful clothing for me when I was a baby.

This is perhaps why I have always been fascinated by textile and fiber craft, both as a fun hobby and as a professional skill. While studying and teaching about the garment industry has illuminated my understanding of the lives entwined within it, I believe that hands-on experience deepens that knowledge. In the autumn of 2017, I joined a small group of Queens, NY residents to partake in a sewing program titled *Memories of Migration*.

This 6-week interactive workshop was led by [Queens Memory Project](#), an organization whose mission it is to record and archive the ordinary stories of New York City residents and their connections to the borough. We shared and recorded our migration experiences, and learned basic sewing techniques so that we could turn our humble stories into beautiful story quilts. The final touch on the project was to incorporate technology so that viewers could hear our interviews while appreciating the visual stories we sewed.

Initially I felt like the “odd-one-out” being the youngest member of the group and the only non-immigrant. I thought, perhaps, these people crafting beside me who came from China, Haiti, and Columbia looked at me questioning how I could possibly relate to their immigrant experience. But, as the weeks progressed, I found comfort and connectedness in our artistic journeys. I felt commonality in our stories, specifically as many of us began discussing our foodways. One member discussed the food traditions of Haiti, and celebrating the New Year by eating pumpkin soup. She is also a very passionate baker, and discussed the difficulty of finding the right ingredients in the United States to create the same flavors and textures she was familiar with back home. Another member recounted her experiencing trying salad for the first time upon arriving here. She said, “the first time I ate a salad, they asked me “which dressing?” I had no idea what is dressing. Dressing to us is clothes!”

At the conclusion of our 6-week program, we gathered together for a celebratory family potluck where we not only shared in these stories represented within our quilts, but could taste each other’s traditions as well! I brought in my father’s delicious *tortilla española* (Spanish potato omelet) for everyone to devour. Our quilts were on view at the Fresh Meadows Queens Public Library, as well as the Queens Museum as part of the larger exhibition [Making Community Story Quilts](#).

Many of us later participated in a second quilting program titled *Common Threads*, which was additionally on show at the American Folk Art Museum’s Long Island City Gallery, the Walls-Ortiz Gallery in Harlem, and Flushing Main Street Library.



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The Common Threads Community Story Quilt at the Flushing Main Street Library (Marina's square: top row, second from right; and second row, fourth from left)

I believe the Tenement Museum, like a quilting circle, can create a powerful sense of community. In sharing a space with friends, families, and strangers from around the world, visitors and educators alike are asked to confront their own stories and experiences. Through conversation, inquiry, and respectful listening, visitors may learn about laws they've never heard of, or encounter communities they've never met. In this short time together, maybe we can all peel back a layer of ourselves that up until now has been hidden away while also discovering our commonalities

by Tenement Museum Educator Marina Bardash Nebro

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