This story begins with a man named Solomon Goodman. In the early 1900s, he left Lithuania to seek opportunity in the “new world” - a chance to make a better life for himself and his wife and two children. He was also fleeing, escaping the oppression and fear facing Jews in Eastern Europe. Solomon came to America, and found that he could make a life for himself here. After a few years of working, Solomon sent for his family. They left Europe in July 1914, on one of the last ships that departed Europe before World War I began. Solomon and his family settled in Chicago, where there were many other Jewish immigrants from Lithuania. In April 1916, Solomon and Zlata had their third child, a daughter named Bella. Bella Goodman was my grandmother. Bella grew up translating life in the United States (both literally and figuratively) for her family members. She spoke Yiddish and English fluently, and loved singing and school. But life was not perfect for the Goodmans, Zlata died when Bella was young and Bella and her family struggled along with the rest of the country through the Depression.

In 1940, Bella married my grandfather, Haskell Friedman, whose relatives were also Jewish immigrants from Lithuania. Bella and Haskell built a life for themselves, moving from Chicago to southern Wisconsin. They had a family of their own and made a place for themselves among the mostly Norwegian immigrants who populated their small town, even wearing Norwegian clothing for town festivals. They owned the town’s general store for 35 years, and it was through the store that they met the members of their community, and wove themselves deep into its fabric. They decorated the store’s windows for Christmas, and Bella learned how to bake Norwegian cookies and do Norwegian needlework. However, they also drove to the nearest synagogue on a weekly basis to ensure that their children got a Jewish education, and stayed connected to their culture and religion through a network of Jewish friends and relatives in Wisconsin and Illinois.

When I read about efforts to block immigrants from majority Muslim countries from coming to the United States, I think about my family. 100 years ago, Jewish immigrants were viewed in very much the same way the Muslim immigrants are today: with suspicion and even with fear. If my great-grandparents hadn’t been allowed to enter the U.S., it’s probable that they wouldn’t have survived the Holocaust. In fact, in 1939, the U.S. turned away a ship full of Jewish refugees. The ship was returned to Europe, where only half of the passengers ultimately survived the Holocaust. Today, the U.S. is once again turning people away based on fear and distrust of the “other.”

Listen to my family’s story, one of individuals who came to the U.S., who worked hard and found a place where they could practice their religion without fear, and contribute to society. Over a couple of generations this family of immigrants became a “typical” American family. The individuals and families seeking to come to the U.S. today want the same thing: a chance to live a quiet, peaceful life. Let us give them that chance.