



**Title: The world in me**  
**Interviewee: Joseph Berger**  
**Duration: 6 minutes, 18 seconds**

**Introduction:**

Despite its terrible experiments with slavery and imperial war, America remains the Promised Land for millions of people all over the world.

In this episode of Bookpod, *New York Times* reporter Joseph Berger talks about his own experience as an immigrant – and the effect that immigration has had on his work as the chronicler of ethnic communities throughout New York City.

**Presentation:**

I'm an immigrant myself. I grew up in an immigrant community. My parents were refugees of World War Two. They came here in 1950 when I was five and worked in the Garment Center. Oh, my mother worked in the Garment Center. My father worked in Jersey making ironing board covers.

As the first person to master English at six or seven years old, I wielded enormous power! You know, because my parents didn't speak English until much later. So they often would rely on me to interpret documents from the various federal agencies that immigrants have to deal with, and Con Edison.

I remember when I was, I don't know, ten, eleven, twelve years old, my parents used to take me around to look at Laundromats and candy stores. They had a little bit of money. They were thinking maybe they ought to try buying up a small business, which immigrants typically do. You know, and they would ask me what I thought. What the hell did I know about a Laundromat?

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One of the stories that is in my first book, *Displaced Persons*, which is a memoir, concerns my mother and her unfamiliarity with this country.

In the second grade, I was asked to play George Washington.



I was very pleased. I came home. I was very excited. I said, "Ma, I'm going to be playing George Washington in a play." And she says to me, essentially, "Who's George Washington?" You know, she'd been in this country two years.

I said, "He was a general."

She says, "General?" What does you school want from me? A general?"

I said, "I need a costume."

She says, "What? I'm going to get you a general's outfit?"

She went down to a used clothing store, found a pair of GI khakis and cut it down to my size because she was a good seamstress. And I played George Washington chopping down a cherry tree in GI khakis. My teacher was a little puzzled by the idea, but she went along.

I like that story because it illustrates two things.

It shows how immigrants will do anything they can for their kids, even if it's slightly misguided and bungled.

And their ability to understand the world around them is hampered by their lack of English, by their lack of familiarity with American traditions and lore and ... But that kind of intensity and dedication to their kids runs through so many immigrants' families.

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My mother had one aunt who survived the war. The only way they communicated was by airmail letter. First of all, my mother would never have, even if she had a bunch of relatives back there, it was expensive to go back. People didn't fly as often. They often went by boat. Jets were just coming in, in the early fifties. Let alone which employer was going to give her three or four weeks to take off to conduct such a visit.



Anyway, these airmail letters. Sometimes there was a request for money and my mother would put a ten-dollar bill or a money order in the envelope to send to her aunt.

And I remember one day a letter came with the word "DECEASED" stamped on it. I had to tell her that her aunt had died. That's how they communicated in those days.

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I think in the debate over immigration, it is important to remember how hard-working most immigrants are. Most come over because they're looking to better their lives. They're willing to take all those risks. They are by their very nature very hard-working.

You know, I live in a suburb of New York. Nobody that I know of mows his or her own lawn anymore. They pay a gardening company to come over and do their lawns once a week. The gardening company is usually an Italian immigrant who came over a long time ago, and his crew are all Hispanic immigrants from Latin America, the Dominican Republic. Who knows what they're getting paid? It's all off the books.

Think about all the women who get their nails done. When I was growing up, only very wealthy women would go to manicurists. Now everybody goes to a manicurist once a week and they get their hands and feet done, and they're all done by immigrants!

Construction. So many construction workers, particularly outside the union jobs, are illegal immigrants.

All those people in the city and the suburbs are getting their kitchens renovated. The workers who are doing most of the renovation are illegal immigrants who are working for *babkes*, as we say.

One of the reasons we know there are so many immigrants in Iowa and Kansas and South Dakota is because, whenever there is an immigration raid of a meat-packing plant, they round up hundreds of immigrants. Well, meat-packing is a very



dangerous occupation, and guess what? Americans don't want to do it anymore. Immigrants will do it.

Our lives are made possible by immigrants and we've got to be aware of this as we participate in this debate over immigration.

**Valedictory:**

You can read about Joseph Berger's grateful encounter with a wide variety of immigrant communities in *The World in a City: Traveling the Globe Through the Neighborhoods of the New New York*.

Bookpod producer is Barbara Finkelstein. Music is by Kevin MacLeod.

See you next time on Bookpod, home to writers of lasting value.