

Kristen Corey



Kristen Corey feels very close to her Slovakian roots because of her closeness to her great grandmother, Catherine Bednar Underwood. Her great-grandmother was a first generation immigrant who came from Czechoslovakia when she was eight years old. It was around 1920 when her great-grandmother immigrated. Kristen's great-great grandfather, Mihaly Bednar, came to the United States around 1912, approximately 8 years before his wife and daughter. He changed his name to Michael shortly after he arrived.

Michael came through Ellis Island and Kristen has his official documents. She isn't quite sure what her great-great grandfather was doing or where he was living from 1912-1917 because the next time there is documentation of what he is doing is in 1917 when he applied for citizenship in Fort Dodge, Iowa. Several years later, in

1922, Kristen has the document detailing when her great-great grandfather became a United States citizen. Kristen's great-great grandparents then had several other children shortly after arriving in the U.S.

Kristen doesn't know the exact reason her family immigrated to the United States, but thinks it is likely they immigrated due to the approach of World War I. This was a time of turmoil in Europe and a lot of people left to find better lives. Czechoslovakia, which was not formally a country when her great-great grandfather immigrated to the U.S., experienced significant change leading up to World War I and became a country at the end of World War I. In 1993, Czechoslovakia officially became two different countries – the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Kristen's great grandmother was a Slovak, in culture and traditions, so her ancestors were officially from present-day Slovakia.

Kristen identifies as a white American female, but feels close to her roots because she grew up particularly close to her great grandmother. Kristen said she actually called her great grandmother, "grandma" growing up because she spent as much time with her as she did her maternal grandparents. She heard many stories and learned about the struggles of the family when they first came to the United States. She remembers hearing about how the general public (at least from the outside) thought Kristen's great grandmother's family was 'normal' because they were white immigrants, but their culture was vastly different and they didn't speak English. Kristen said her mother remembers going to her great grandma's house as a child and hearing her grandmother speaking Czech on the phone to her mother. Throughout her great grandmother's life, her family experienced a lot of pressure to assimilate into the dominant culture so her great grandmother's children (second generation immigrants, including Kristen's grandfather) did not learn the Czech language.

One of the reasons Kristen identifies closely with her great grandmother is because of an annual Czech dinner her family attended every year in Fort Dodge. At this dinner they celebrated their heritage through different customs, food and music. There were always first generation immigrants at the dinner and they would play the traditional polka music of the home country, where they also ate traditional foods and spoke some of the Czech language.

Kristen feels lucky that she could be so connected to her great grandmother because it taught her about her heritage and where part of her family came from. If it weren't for her great grandmother, she probably wouldn't have these strong ties and the pride for her heritage that she does.