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My mother's name is Noemi, an alternate version of the Hebrew "Naomi." She emigrated from a small village in the Tyrolean Alps (southern Austria) when she was 13 years old. In the 1920s, the Austrian hills were not alive with the sound of music. War, poverty, lack of work drove her father to leave his family and find a new life in America. After three years during which time his wife died of influenza, he was able to bring Noemi and her brother to Solvay, New York. This trip to America, stopping at Ellis Island, was difficult for a 13 year old girl who, two days after she arrived in Solvay, was sent to the public school where she was ridiculed because she did not speak English. There were no ESL teachers nor interpreters to assist immigrants in their transition to the new world; it was a "sink or swim" model of education.



Like her namesake, Naomi, my mother endured bereavement, dislocation and poverty. Devastated by the death of her mother, uprooted from her beloved mountains, and hired to do household tasks to sustain herself could have embittered her as such conditions embittered Naomi of the Bible. She nevertheless was determined to speak English fluently and to assimilate into American life. The many challenges faced by her immigrant status shaped her into a woman who was able to meet with equanimity many difficulties. She married, raised and educated three children, was widowed at age 74 and at age 96 died.

I loved and revered my mother. Like Ruth, Naomi's daughter-in-law, I stood with my mother as her daughter, friend and confidant. I was honored to witness her support for her husband and children and her respect for all of nature - concern for stray cats, no chemicals on her lawn, cakes for neighbors. I heard her pray each night, often to her own mother asking for help to be a good mother. I learned that faith, family and education are essentials in life. I watched her deteriorate mentally in the nursing home over three years - retreating to her mountains, her mother and her youth.

If I exhibit a trace of humility, nobility, concern for the dislocated immigrants of today, respect for other cultures and beliefs, then I say I have been formed by my immigrant mother, Noemi.

