

# Awakening to the Story in My Bones

## Border Crossings, Detention, and Asylum

BY ARIEL VEGOSEN

**B**EFORE SEPTEMBER 11, it was easier to cross between El Paso and Juarez. People's families, jobs, and favorite stores existed on both sides of the border. It is closer to walk from Juarez in Mexico to El Paso in Texas than to walk from my high school to the house in which I grew up. For many there was no separation between El Paso and Juarez. You could spend all day in Juarez and return to El Paso for dinner and vice versa.

Now there is a border fence, long lines, infrared technology, sensors in the ground, and 600 new positions for Border Patrol agents in the El Paso sector alone.

I arrived in El Paso this past February carrying more than just my bags—I came carrying my identity as a third-generation Jew whose family escaped Eastern Europe during the pogroms. Traveling with a Fellowship of Reconciliation peace delegation, I came seeking to learn how the drug war, gun violence, and immigration are entwined. I came with stories of my great grandfather who left Latvia and landed in Latin America, working in the copper mines until he made his way up north. I came with stories of name changes, walking great distances, being turned away from societies, and trying to escape violence and start a better life. I came wondering how El Paso, the “number one safest city in the United States,” is a ten-minute walk from what was for many years deemed the most dangerous city in the world: Ciudad Juarez.

Somewhere in the curves and lines of my body—somewhere in a memory that is deep and rooted like the trees in my parents' backyard, from before I had all my basic needs

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ARIEL VEGOSEN is a writer, educator, dialogue facilitator, and activist who serves on the board of the Fellowship of Reconciliation. Ariel organizes programs and workshops about gender identity, food justice, interfaith community building, and nonviolent organizing. She can be reached at [arielmintwood@gmail.com](mailto:arielmintwood@gmail.com).

Owen Ross



Sidewalk art in the Juarez Valley raises a call for peace in a region riven with violence from the drug war.

met, before my family became white, and before we were privileged—there is this story of crossing borders illegally to find shelter from violence and give hope to the next generation.

The kind of violence that my family endured three generations ago is present and real and happening right now along the U.S.-Mexico border. Those of us who have been in the United States for generations need to remember that the fear and precariousness of migration is not just an ancient story left over in our bones—it is the condition of daily life for thousands of people.

### Similar Stories, Different Times

While in El Paso, I met a woman around my age, thirty-two, at Annunciation House, a shelter for undocumented immigrants. She had to flee Mexico with her three children because her life was in danger from violence due to the drug war. The first time she arrived at the border, U.S. border agents turned her away and sent her back into danger. When she tried the second time, they told her they would detain her and separate her from her children—including her youngest, who was four months old. So she went back into the danger she faced in Mexico. She said four armed men who are part of the Mexican Federal Police showed up at her house and killed two of her brothers. Another brother was kidnapped. When her mother and father began to face harassment in the street as well, she realized her choice was either be killed in Mexico or detained in America.

On her third try, she and her children managed to cross the bridge border from Juarez to El Paso. The United States has given her a court date in 2015. Until that time she is undocumented in this country. The U.S. system of internal checkpoints means she can't get out of El Paso without a coyote's help, so for now she is stuck trying to eke out a living

Ariel Vegosen gathers with other members of her peace delegation to Mexico. In the background, El Paso and Ciudad Juarez bleed indistinguishably into each other.



in a city filled with Border Patrol agents, wondering whether this unwelcoming country will deny her asylum and send her back into danger. She asked me not to share even her first name due to fears for her safety.

As I listened to this story, I thought of my ancestors who were forced out of Eastern Europe amid pogroms and raids. The police were corrupt. There was nowhere to turn, no one to help them. My ancestors were forced to run, to flee, to pack bags quickly in the night, to walk by foot from Latvia or Lithuania to Finland, then Norway, and to eventually find their way to the United States, some coming first into Latin America and writing diaries in Ladino. We were the displaced. Talking with the woman at Annunciation House, I realized the similarities between my ancestors' stories and hers.

## Recognizing My Complicity

There are 33,000 undocumented people in detention centers (i.e., prison) right now in our country. Their only crime was crossing the border. The first time a person crosses into the United States without papers, it is considered a misdemeanor, and the second time it is considered a felony. The charges are amplified if drugs are involved or if the person has any prior convictions, even if they have already served time for those convictions. The recommendation of punishment for "illegal re-entry" without a drug offense is up to ten years and \$250,000 in fines.

In the El Paso Criminal Court, I heard a man named José tell the judge that he had decided to cross for a second time illegally to see his dying wife who lives in El Paso. The judge gave him eight more months in prison before his deportation date.

Many people have an economic interest in perpetuating and expanding this cruel system of detention and deportation. Kristen Connor, a lawyer in El Paso, explained to me that the pursuit of undocumented immigrants supports the local economy by supplying jobs to judges, lawyers, Border Patrol agents, and those working in the detention centers. El Paso's courthouse is brand new, and the majority of trials

held there involve undocumented immigrants. Many of the detention centers are owned by private corporations that sign contracts with the U.S. government stating that the centers have to be at 90 percent capacity at all times. All of this creates an urgent demand for undocumented immigrants.

To change this system, people like me need to see the ways in which we inadvertently support it. Looking deeply at this situation, I see that I am complicit with a government that turns people away, with a country addicted to money and drugs at the expense of other people's lives. I am complicit in buying cheap goods without knowing where they come from, complicit in receiving the benefits of other people's suffering. My country's gun shops sell the majority of guns found at crime scenes in Juarez. I am complicit in the drug war, in the abuse of laborers, in the border system. My tax contribution helped build the fence. My tax contribution helped pay for the drones that loom over the border and the infrared vision that traps people late at night.

When I met with Ernie Vasquez, a Border Patrol agent, he told me that anyone who crosses the border illegally—even an eight-year-old child—is considered a threat. He informed me that Border Patrol agents are trained to shoot to stop a person who is considered a threat. When I asked what "shoot to stop" means, he said you aim for the chest area. To me, that sounds like shoot to kill.

My eyes have been covered for too long. It is amazing how easy it is to ignore a crisis of violence, a crisis of ethics, a crisis of racism, a crisis of lines and fences—of damming up the Rio Grande with concrete to create a static border. It is amazing how we can live our lives so close to the border and not know these stories of crossings, of detention, of death, of torture. I am awake now. There is no going back. There is only going deeper into this interconnection. It's time to bring an end to the violence, legalize drugs in the United States, change how our border is patrolled, bring an end to detention centers, help those who were tortured, demand that Congress enact better gun control laws, and start treating humans as priceless rather than worthless. ■