

Americans Can Take Lessons in Surviving the Economy from 1800s Immigrant

Written by Ginny Grimsley

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A Century Ago, Self-Reliance Wasn't an Option –
It Was a Requirement, Translator Says

While the current recession continues to hit millions hard, a researcher says the example of our ancestors should inspire us.

“We have become so accustomed to the fruits of our forefathers’ labor that many of us have forgotten just how tough they had it,” says Sigrid Wilshinsky, translator of “My Life in America Before, During and After the Civil War” (www.amazon.com). She translated numerous letters from German immigrant Louis Hensel, who wrote about life in the United States throughout the mid-1800s to his German granddaughter, Emma, whom he had never met.

“Reading Hensel’s letters is like peeking through a rip in the curtain of history and seeing through the eyes of one who had experienced so much,” Wilshinsky says.

That includes meeting Abraham Lincoln in the White House while pretending to be a translator to various Native American tribes; life in New York City in the mid 1800s; training the Union Cavalry as a master horseman; the adventures of a traveling opera company, and various intimate details of an America that was still untamed yet quickly ascending as a world powerhouse.

Today’s economic troubles are serious and we don’t know exactly where they are heading, Wilshinsky says, “but imagine losing a well-to-do business in France, thanks to a revolution,

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another in Long Island 10 years later, and yet another in Williamsburg (in Brooklyn) because of illness.”

Wilshinsky provides tips for surviving today’s economic woes via inspiration from Hensel’s example:

- **A jump-starter:** Hensel writes that many immigrants who landed in New York took a few weeks to settle in, sightsee, and get accustomed to city life in America before seeking work. Not him; he writes that after acquiring comfortable lodgings – procured by a friend -- he immediately walked the streets to find work, which he found at the end of his second day in the United States.
- **Capitalize on all your talents:** Before fleeing Paris, Hensel had a thriving engraving company. He was able to use this skill to immediately land a job. Hensel continually honed his knowledge in order to work in a variety of capacities, Wilshinsky says. He learned equine veterinary medicine in his spare time, made nightly runs to the fruit and vegetable market in New York for produce sales, joined local theater groups and was hired by the German Opera Company, with whom he traveled the United States during the winters.
- **An indefatigable work ethic:** For Hensel, not working was never an option. While writing his letters to Emma during his later years – he lived to be 91 – he discussed life as a music teacher to locals, which meant plenty of traveling. Always an active man, Hensel loathed physical inactivity, and work was a way of life for him.
- **A helping spirit:** Although Wilshinsky says Hensel may have “bragged a bit” about his deeds, he was nonetheless heroic in his aid to others during numerous incidents.
- **An open heart/open mind:** Hensel naturally gravitated toward well-educated people, and he learned from them. He valued honesty and integrity in his business dealings, which earned him trust, respect and a strong network of friends and colleagues.

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About Sigrid Wilshinsky

Born in Berlin, Germany in 1943, Sigrid Wilshinsky's family escaped into West Germany in 1952. She benefited from a world-class education in Berlin, where she focused on art, and immigrated to the United States in 1962. She has since traveled the world as a stewardess and eventually became a resident of the Pocono Mountains, where she has befriended the local wildlife. Like Louis Hensel, the German-born renaissance man of the 1800s whose letters she translated, Wilshinsky is a multitalented individual with many interests.