

ON THE INAUGURATION

Tuesday, January 20, 2009

On the wall of my office in Washington, closest to my desk, I display the original immigration certificates of two of my grandparents: Myron Kusnitsky and Rae Volovitz. Their photos peer down on me, and in their eyes I see two things.

I see eyes filled with a history of dread and persecution; of grinding poverty and violent pogroms; of discrimination and despair and hopelessness. That was life in Russia.

I also see eyes wide open to the opportunity of the land to which they came: America.

Yesterday, sitting a few rows behind Barack Obama as he became President of the United States, I thought about those photos.



I thought about the peaceful transfer of power in a democracy as President Obama and President Bush embraced. None of the stark philosophical differences disappeared with that embrace; but the symbol of two opposing leaders hugging in a world where the transfer of power is too often bloody shouldn't be overlooked. It wouldn't have been overlooked by my grandparents.

I thought about what it would have meant to them if they knew that their grandson was twelve rows behind a new President taking his oath of office; surrounded by Senators and Members of Congress; Supreme Court Justices; military leaders and diplomats. Some might take that for granted, but it wouldn't have been overlooked by my grandparents.

I thought about what kind of country would allow the grandson of penniless Russian immigrants sit on a platform with a man "whose father less than sixty years ago might not have been served at a local restaurant can now stand before you to take a most sacred oath", as Obama said in his speech.

I thought about all of these things. Then I returned to my office and stared proudly at those certificates.

