



Julie Smolyansky is president and CEO of Lifeway Foods. (Keri Wiginton, Chicago Tribune / September 15, 2011)

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On a steamy summer afternoon in 1976, my parents landed at O'Hare with their 1-year-old daughter following an exhausting four-month journey. Ludmila and Michael Smolyansky left through an early slit in the Iron Curtain, one of 48 families allowed to settle in Chicago.

The 1-year-old baby girl? That was me. When we landed in Chicago, my father had \$116 in his pocket. My mother had brought only three outfits and a small pot so that she could prepare farina and bullion for me.

Food was integral in my family, as it is for most Jewish families. As we settled into our home in West Rogers Park, my mom realized that American food was different from her beloved

Russian cuisine. Watching the exodus of Soviet citizens to the states, she saw an opportunity to start her own business.

She opened Chicago's first Russian delicatessen, which became Globus Deli, 2909 W. Devon Ave. At the time, she had no idea what the "feminist movement" was ... she simply did what she had to do to survive in a new country and feed her family.

Eventually, her one deli blossomed to five, and she became an importer and distributor of Eastern European delicacies to grocers around the U.S. Her deli became ground zero for Soviet Jews arriving in Chicago who wanted to meet fellow immigrants and get advice on the ways of American life.

In 1985, when I was 10, my parents attended a trade show in Germany. My father went into a grocery store and bought three bottles of kefir, a yogurtlike drink with medicinal and preventive health benefits — a staple of Eastern Europe and his childhood.

He said to my mom: "In America, we have everything ... but we don't have kefir." Her response: "You are an engineer, you know how to build plants and machinery. I am in the food business. You make the kefir and I will sell it."

Six months later, my parents put that idea into action and Lifeway Foods was incorporated. Only two years later, Lifeway became the first Russian immigrant-owned company to publicly trade on the Nasdaq exchange.

Immigrants buy groceries, homes and cars. They pay taxes, stimulate the economy and send their children to college. Immigrant-owned businesses generate \$775 billion in annual revenue. They — we! — are hard workers, bringing skills and ideas and a hunger to live the American Dream — one often taken for granted by U.S. citizens.

Forty percent of Fortune 500 companies were started by immigrants or children of immigrants. Half of all new engineering and tech companies in Silicon Valley have at least one foreign-born founder. If Sergey Brin's parents were not allowed to settle in the U.S., Google would likely be a foreign company.

Individuals who have spent most of their lives in our communities, often under stress and fearing deportation, are American in every way, except on paper. Our policies on

immigration should reflect our morals and the belief that the American Dream is possible, no matter where you came from.

I support the immigration bill that passed the Senate, legislation that would give a path to citizenship to 11 million people here illegally.

Reform is to our nation's fiscal advantage. Under the Senate bill, more than 10 million people would begin paying taxes, resulting in \$459 billion in new revenue in the first decade alone, increasing the real GDP by 5.4 percent by 2033.

Our policy seems guided by a knee-jerk reaction to fear: fear of terrorism, fear of losing our English language, fear of having to financially support those not born in the U.S. However, strong societies are marked by the blending of different perspectives and abilities. Let's move a comprehensive bill that supports individuals, unites families and stimulates innovation.

I was talking to my almost-5-year-old about what she wants to be when she grows up. Her reply: "A ballerina, a mommy, and the first girl president of the United States." I will forever be in debt to this country for giving an immigrant's daughter the idea that, one day, she can be the leader of the free world.

Smolyansky is chief executive of Lifeway Foods, based in Morton Grove and a Board Member of HIAS Chicago.