



# THE BIG POND

A US-GERMAN  
LISTENING SERIES

## The Things We Brought

by Katie Davis

**Katie Davis:** I'm Katie Davis. Two carpenters – well they were brothers, actually – were measuring a door-frame in my house. And they said they were from Xela, Guatemala. I showed them a photo of my son coaching a girls' team in Xela. The brothers leaned in to look at the photo, at the woven skirts the girls were wearing. Yes, that's Xela. See the pattern in the weaving of the skirts? That tells us.

There are things that hold history for each of us – a stitch, a book, a hat – things that were carried to a new country. Next up, we have three stories, and we call them 'The Things We Brought.'

**Sandra Castillo:** My name is Sandra Castillo. I left Cuba on July 20th, 1970 during the Johnson Administration's freedom flights. We were the second flight of the day, and we left out of Varadero, which is the airport they were using for the freedom flights.

I think that I was a weird child, I have a near-photographic memory, so a lot of those years, even though my mother said – I don't know how you could possibly remember those things – are very, very clear in my mind, like it's somehow photographs or a movie, something sort of unreal, if you know what I mean. During that time, each family that was leaving the country was assigned a number, and ours was 160,633, so people sort of kept up with, you know, what family was leaving and what number did they have, so that they would kind of be aware of when their number was going to be called.

So when the military gentlemen came to our house, we knew that the time had come. And, so, I kind of remember those things, again, like this sort of running movie. And mostly I remember the fear that I think I internalized when I was a kid. My sisters were 4; they still don't remember much ... To this day, they say they don't recall. But I think that I was old enough to hear the stories and the whispers. And there was a lot of fear and paranoia during that time. And so I think that I, you know, I sort of appropriated it, even though I didn't understand it. So the process of leaving was frightening, again not because we were leaving the country, because I don't think I don't think I understood when we left that we were never coming back.

We were simply told that my aunt had called us to the United States, and that, you know, we

were coming to America, which is how they told us. And that was pretty much it, we were only allowed to take the clothes on our backs and one change of clothing. I remember I had this little green dress, with a little ruffle at the bottom, which I actually still have, and that was all ... that was all that you could take. But my mother had crocheted our underpants for my sisters, for my cousin [Madeline], who came with us, and basically she created a little pocket in our panties, and she stuck gold, our childhood necklaces, our ID bracelets, and the little *azabaches* that we all wore as kids, which ... they're supposed to protect you from the Evil Eye.

So all those things were sort of divvied up and put in our underpants, and we carried those on the plane. And I remember that I was really really frightened, and my mom thought that it was that I was afraid to fly. And I just didn't want to say that I was afraid that they would find out that we were ultimately in violation, we were transporting things we weren't supposed to be carrying. I remember that distinctly.

**Katia Sipple:** My name is Katia Sipple. I was born in the U.K., in Dorset, because my dad's English, but my mother is Bavarian, from the Munich area. And when I first came here, I brought my diary that I had been keeping since I was 12 years old. I also brought my wedding dress.

**Katie Davis:** What do you remember about the diary?

**Katia Sipple:** What do I remember ... well in retrospect I guess it seems all a bit silly, typical preteen and teenage girl stuff about boys and music and ... but I also wrote about some of my aspirations. When I was 13, 14, I wanted to become a ballerina, a ballet-dancer, and I actually pursued that with great vigor and discipline. Like I did at an opera school, five days a week, three and a half hours every day. Then I had an accident, and I wrote about the devastation. But we also ... we have to deal with ups and downs in life. I guess I had to deal with mine a little bit earlier, at a younger age than some other people ...

**Katie Davis:** When will you pull it out? I mean, I have one of those diaries ...

**Katia Sipple:** When do I pull it out? That's a good question. It's in my bed-stand, and I haven't pulled it out in a long time. The last time I pulled it out was about two years ago when my daughter fell in love for the very first time and had her very first boyfriend and went through the very same emotions and I guess I wanted to show her that she's not the first person in the world to go through that. I don't know if it was very successful, because when you're in the midst of it, it always feels like you're the only one and the first one to experience these types of emotions and to such an extent and to such a depth. But I guess ... I am hoping that I was somehow able to help her and at least show her that there is life after the first heartbreak ...

**Katie Davis:** Did you show it to her?

**Katia Sipple:** I did. I gave it to her and I said, 'You can read it.' And I kept it for her.

**Cosmin Soare:** My name is Cosmin Soare and I came in the United States August the third 1990. I was thirty-six years old. So, I grew up in a communist system in Romania. And actually, the reason I left the country, I always believed during the communist ... that communism will be finished and, you know, everything will be ... it's supposed to get better. But when I realized it was a coup d'état ... basically they kill our dictator in the eve of ... Christmas Eve, that was 1989, which was a kind of curse for the country and for the people. Actually, Vlad the Impaler, which is Vlad Drăculea, Dracula, died in Christmas Eve in 1500.

You know I got so sick because of the political system, and I have to leave my country it's very painful, you know. When you leave as a child, you don't realize, but when you leave at 36 years old, it's very painful to leave your country. So basically, it was political reasons, and I came in this country with a suitcase and one hundred and seventy dollars in my pocket.

Regarding the things which I brought with me, more than half of the things were related to my future job because I used to be a fine-dining waiter in Romania so you know I brought things like white shirts, you know, black socks, you know, wine opener, black pants, hopefully you know to get a job for which I got, you know, a job in a restaurant in two weeks since I came to Michigan. So basically, in a suitcase, you know, I put a Bible, you know, I put a letter of recommendation for employment – I used to work for the Canadian Ambassador in Romania, so that letter brought me a good job in a fine-dining restaurant in downtown Detroit. So basically, was very limited items which I brought with me.

**Sandra Castillo:** We still have our necklaces with, you know, our little crosses and our little patron saints. And my mom had two boys before us, and sadly they died. One of them died at birth, but her other son, born before me actually lived 'til he was two years old and he passed away. And so, one of the things that we brought with us was his little necklace and his little ID bracelet that, you know, his little baby ID bracelet. And my mother told me recently that she still has that in her jewelry box.

I think the thing that you most miss is not the things that you owned, it's the country itself, you know, having no access to that life, to who you might have been, to people that you knew ... I had a best friend who lived next door to us ... I think about her and her family ... you know, how we might have, you know, still remained friends over the years. And I wonder if I would have been a different person, if I would have been myself, and how much of the country shaped and defined me even though I don't live there anymore, so I wish I had more access to the homeland, la tierra. It's that kind of not knowing, I think, that sort of pulls you back.

**Katie Davis:** We heard from Sandra Castillo, Katia Sipple, and Cosmin Soare. And I'm Katie Davis.

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