

Seattle Calls Itself a Sanctuary. Will We Live Up to It?

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One hundred thirteen years ago, a train screeched into Seattle's King Street Station in a cloud of steam. Out stepped a seventeen-year-old boy—alone, unable to speak English, clutching a stick of salami. Pinned to his shirt was a note he couldn't read, directing strangers where to send him. His name was Morris Bender — my grandfather. Seattle's response shaped my family for generations.

Morris came from Riga, a centuries-old port under Russian rule where Jewish life existed in the shadows of fear. He traded cobblestones and horse carts for a young city smelling of salt and sawdust, its streets rattling with streetcars. I imagine him stepping off that train, blinking into the Northwest light, wondering if this new world could be his.

His older brother and sister arrived years before. Morris' parents and eight siblings followed. By 1925 the whole family was here, crowded into rented homes in the Central District, near a synagogue that anchored them. They worked, learned English and pulled the next newcomer forward.

My grandfather opened Bender's Jewelry in the Coliseum Building on Fifth Avenue. For more than half a century, he repaired watches with a craftsman's precision and a neighbor's warmth. His brothers and sisters built businesses of their own — jewelry stores, clothing shops, groceries, furniture. They made Seafair costumes, expanded into banking and real estate, paid taxes, raised children, supported their synagogue, and made sure no one went without. That became our family's way of life.

Like many immigrant families, later generations became teachers, entrepreneurs, lawyers, accountants, nonprofit leaders. They fed the hungry, sheltered homeless, mentored youth, and stood up for justice — remembering how transformative it is to be welcomed.

Our story was possible because Seattle opened its doors. Housing was affordable. Jobs within reach. Neighbors looked at newcomers with curiosity instead of suspicion.

Today's immigrants arrive with the same hope my grandfather carried — yet the door is heavier. Skyrocketing rents, tangled visas and national conversation steeped in fear make belonging hard. Even here — one of America's most forward-looking cities — becoming part of the community takes more than determination. It takes us.

In 2023–2024, more than 64,000 immigrants came to the Seattle–Tacoma–Bellevue area ([Axios](#)). Each carried a story, a skill, a dream — trying to build a life in the city that embraced my family. And just last week, when federal officials demanded Washington roll back its sanctuary law, Governor Ferguson stood firm: “... Washington State will not be bullied or intimidated...” ([Cascade PBS](#)). That commitment matters — but policy alone is not enough.

Seattle calls itself a sanctuary city. Sanctuary is not a catchphrase — it's a pledge we live or break every day. It means defending protections, supporting immigrant-owned businesses, volunteering with groups like Refugee Women's Alliance. It means showing up at cultural festivals, learning neighbors' stories, and saying: “You belong.”

At my grandfather's retirement, people recalled more than his steady hands. They remembered strangers invited to High Holiday dinners, neighbors he quietly supported, countless small acts of kindness that wove him into the city's fabric. In his final days, he slipped watches from both arms and handed them to hospital staff — a simple gift of gratitude.

Seattle kept its promise to my grandfather. Whether we keep it for today's immigrants is up to us — and history will record our answer.

Looking back, when he first stepped onto the platform at King Street Station, clutching that salami and note he couldn't read, my grandfather had no way of knowing what waited. Seattle made a commitment — not in words, but in actions. Strangers pointed him forward. Neighbors opened their homes. Because of that welcome, a family took root, businesses thrived, children flourished, and generations learned success is measured not just by what you build, but by what you give back.

Now, a century later, that train is still arriving. Faces look different. Languages change. But the question remains: Will we open the door? Will we meet a frightened newcomer with the same grace Seattle once showed my grandfather? The future of today's immigrants — and the soul of our city — depends on whether we choose it again.