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## The Founder Of Pfizer Was An Immigrant, Too

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In a recent speech, Vice President Mike Pence said, “Only in America could you see the kind of innovation that’s resulted in the development of a vaccine in record time.” The reason for this innovation, it turns out, is America historically has not followed the type of immigration policies in place over the past four years. Moderna’s leaders, two cofounders and critical scientific personnel are immigrants, as are the chief executive of Pfizer and a key scientist (Katalin Karikó) who made a crucial breakthrough on messenger RNA. One immigration detail has gone unnoticed in the press coverage of the Moderna and Pfizer vaccines – the founder of Pfizer was an immigrant, too.

Charles Pfizer, born in Germany, immigrated to America in 1849. “According to his daughter Alice, his motivations for immigrating to America were similar to those that prompted many ambitious young men to make the voyage: a greater opportunity to advance faster and further in his profession and a desire to live in a land of freedom and liberty,” writes William H. Stevenson III for the German Historical Society.

“To my father, young and enthusiastic, brimful of ideals which were moving the souls of his contemporaries, nothing in Europe seemed worthy of the tremendous efforts required to reform and renew, and upbuild the land of his birth,” wrote Alice Pfizer. “But there, on the other side of that great Atlantic Ocean, was a new country not only full of countless opportunities but also opening its arms to all those who would come and help upbuild it. . . . Was it not therefore natural . . . that the thought of making a new life for himself, in which he might gain everything he admired and cared for, would become an obsession?”

Charles Pfizer founded his company with another immigrant, his cousin, Charles Erhart. The business started in a building in Brooklyn that served as both a manufacturing plant and a location for research and development. Charles Pfizer displayed a flair for innovation from the start. “The first product was a preparation of santonin, a drug used to eliminate intestinal worms, a common ailment in the nineteenth century,” writes Stevenson. “Since the compound was bitter and a typical treatment regimen called for three doses a day for several days, Pfizer combined his chemical talents with those of his confectioner brother to devise a palatable means of administering it: dispersing the drug in a toffee-flavored sugar-cream cone. Their santonin cones were an immediate success.”

Charles Pfizer also brought his sister over to America, a practice today opposed by Trump administration officials, even though two notable examples of individuals immigrating to join family members are Donald Trump’s mother and grandfather.

Charles Pfizer decided the way to grow the company was to differentiate itself by emphasizing the quality of what it sold. “The growth of Pfizer was made possible by the company’s obsession with the quality and purity of its products, making ‘Pfizer quality’ a by-word as early as the 1860s,” according to Stevenson. “As a company, Pfizer’s specialty was taking a crude product and refining it to a high purity product, sometimes on a considerable scale, as in the case of tartrates and camphor.”

In addition to being a successful company, Pfizer was considered a good place to work. It established a fund to help out employees in financial difficulty as well as a profit-sharing plan.

“Through careful planning and hard work, Pfizer founded a company that became one of the largest manufacturers of fine chemicals in the United States,” notes Stevenson. “The company’s heroic days would come after its founder’s death — the production of citric acid through fermentation (freeing Pfizer from dependence on the citrus market), which led to its production of penicillin during World War II and thus to the transition of Pfizer from a fine chemical maker to a pharmaceutical company.”

In 1899, Charles Pfizer said, “Our goal has been and always continues to be the same: to find a way to produce the highest quality products, and to perfect the most efficient way to accomplish this, in order to best serve our customers.”

When Charles Pfizer immigrated in 1849, no restrictions on immigration existed in the United States. That changed with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Immigration laws in 1921 and 1924, based largely on eugenics theories at the time, reduced the number of immigrants admitted annually by up to 90%, with a focus on keeping out Italians, Greeks and Eastern Europeans, particularly Jews.

Analysts agree Trump administration policies have concentrated on blocking from the U.S. as many foreign-born individuals as possible, regardless of skill level. Two proclamations issued in 2020 banned the entry of individuals in nearly all categories of family and employment-based immigrants, as well as H-1B and L-1 visa holders. Denials of skilled work visas rose significantly, and the administration published regulations on H-1B visas that companies have declared in court filings would make it virtually impossible for many existing employees and foreign-born graduate students to work in America. The administration also has put forward new restrictions on international students. An administration ally has proposed a “permanent pause” on immigration to the United States, essentially asking to continue the administration’s current proclamations.

It is ironic, but not surprising, for the Trump administration to hail the deeds accomplished by immigrant-founded and immigrant-led Pfizer and Moderna without acknowledging its own policies would have made it impossible for these companies to have been established and excel in America.

In addition to making the case for liberalized immigration policies, the vaccines also show the benefits of global free trade and governments refraining from dictating supply chains. “The vaccines are some of the greatest examples of the intangible benefits of globalization, says Scott

Lincicome, a senior fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute and former trade attorney,” write Eric Boehm of *Reason*. “While critics of globalization like to focus on things like cheap T-shirts and other consumer goods, he says, it is the very networks developed for the delivery of those goods that will now speed vaccines to every corner of the globe.”

Boehm notes, “We will have Covid-19 vaccines in spite of the nationalists, not because of them.”

Americans should be proud of the vaccines to protect people from Covid-19. By opening its doors to Charles Pfizer, Noubar Afeyan (cofounder and chairman of Moderna), Stéphane Bancel (Moderna’s chief executive), scientist Katalin Karikó, Albert Bourla (Pfizer’s chief executive) and others, the United States will help save lives around the world. The next time an elected official proposes new immigration restrictions, he or she should be reminded of the story of Moderna and the company started by a German immigrant to America named Charles Pfizer.