

Hinckley Native Tells the Story of His Grandpa's Arrival at Ellis Island in 1952

By Wally Huskonen

My paternal grandmother arrived from Finland at Ellis Island on 12 Aug 1903 with her four children after a ten-day voyage on the *S.S. Aurania*. I have visited Ellis Island and have tried to imagine what their arrival experience might have been. But I never got a chance for a first-hand description of that experience.



Brian Elles, a native of Hinckley in Medina County, Ohio, was able to interview his grandfather Wilhelm Piller extensively about his arrival in America from Germany in 1952. That account is included in a new book published by Elles on 23 Apr 2025. The book's title is *Dandelion Soup*. As you might guess, there is much more to the book, in fact it is mainly about Wilhelm's life growing up in Germany and elsewhere in Europe during and immediately after WWII. We will explain the title in a bit.

Wilhelm arrived in New York with his father Jakob and mother Elizabeth and sister Erika on the USNS General C. H. Muir, a converted troop ship.

12	1730 S. Desplaines Ave. Chicago 16, Ill.	Lithuanian
13	PILLER Jakob 48 Ma Md I-1279427	Yugoslavian
14	PILLER Elisabeth 44 F Md I-1279428	Yugoslavian
15	PILLER Wilhelm 14 Ma S I-1279429	Yugoslavian
16	PILLER Erika 6 F S I-1279493	Yugoslavian

Elles writes in detail about what Wilhelm told him about the arrival experience. They were headed for Cleveland, Ohio, where they would live with Wilhelm's Uncle Tony.

Wilhelm told his grandson that his family was part of a small ethnic group of Germans called the Danube Swabians (Donauschwabern). The family found life to be very difficult during WWII when Wilhelm was very young. They often had to move to try to make a living. That's why the passenger list above lists their ethnicity as Yugoslavian.

At one point, the family had very little to eat. Wilhelm was often sent out into the fields to find and collect dandelion leaves. His grandmother then would process this into dandelion soup, hence the book's name: *Dandelion Soup*.



Wilhelm Piller (left) with his oldest grandson, author Brian Elles (right), inside Our Lady of Grace Church in Hinckley, Ohio. Wilhelm played a key role in the church's construction, particularly the carpentry work surrounding its large stained-glass windows.

Elles concludes the book with the following thoughts from his grandfather:

"I know I will be singled out for being German, yet I won't be restricted from having the best life possible. I have Piller blood in me and like my father and his father before him, I chose to work hard to provide a fruitful life for my family. A life filled with love, not war. A life filled with prosperity, not poverty. A life filled with acceptance, not persecution. We travel to America for a better life not only for today but for future generations, as they are the ones who must build from this story." -- Wilhelm Rudolf Piller 11 Nov 1936 -31 Dec 2015.

Incidentally, it's worth noting that Ellis Island closed for immigration on 12 Nov 1954, after processing over 12 million immigrants since its opening in 1892. This marked the end of its operation as a major immigration station in the United States. It also marked the end of easy access to passenger lists for immigrant research.

Finally I would be remiss if I didn't mention that I learned about *Dandelion Soup* in an article published in the September 2025 issue of *Brecksville Magazine* published by ScripType Publishing, with monthly magazines serving eight thriving communities of the Western Reserve:

Richfield, Hinckley, Brecksville, Broadview Heights, Hudson, Bath, Independence, and Sagamore Hills.

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