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Two mandarin oranges

by Joe Ferullo

NCR Today

I attended a wedding this weekend north of San Francisco; it gave me a different understanding of our national debt crisis.

The last few weeks have not been a pretty time for our democratic experiment; the wailing and breast-beating since the debt deal was announced has been just as hysterical. This moment, we are told early and often, marks the beginning of the end for America's golden place among the nations of our globe. We now find ourselves, inexorably, in steep decline.

But far outside the beltway, in a small Marin County town surrounded by hills and range, a very different American debt was paid in full: two young people got married. Nothing exceptional about that, of course, except for the story of their family. Bride and groom were Jewish, and it's safe to say at least one set of parents were fully astounded as they watched the day unfold.

The bride's parents had both left the Soviet Union as young adults in the mid-70s: detente with the U.S. placed pressure on Moscow to let oppressed Soviet Jews leave the country. The mother told me word came late; there was little time to pack. She simply picked up her life, tossed what she could fit of it into two small suitcases, and left. Though unmarried and with no prospects at the time, she still felt her ancestral home was no place to meet a husband and raise a family.

Once in California, she met another Soviet émigré, a dashing man with a well-trimmed beard, who had also just arrived. A few years later, they married eons away from the harassment of the Soviet authorities; they lived and prospered and survived to see their daughter's wedding. As they watched a traditional Jewish ceremony -- complete with a band playing the Klezmer music of Eastern Europe -- unfold before the lush hills of Marin, the rabbi spoke of yet another remarkable day from the family's history.

The parents of the bride's father married in 1946, in a Moscow barely crawling out of the destruction of World War II. There was no family in attendance; there was no family left. The wedding party was merely the couple, a rabbi, and two small mandarin oranges -- the only sign of life and hope they could find in a broken city. The couple promised that, for their children, for the family they would rebuild, life would be different.

That was the debt America repaid this weekend north of San Francisco. As a nation, as our best selves, we ask people to come here, give us the best they've got -- we take a chance on them, and they take a chance on us. They withdraw credit upon the faith that the U.S. will give them a fair shot and let them create new lives.

The acrimony in Washington is mere farce played on a second-rate stage compared to the real American scene: a young couple smiling under the wedding chuppah, immigrant parents looking at a son and daughter filled with love and confidence, holding high over their heads a simple reminder of the past: two mandarin oranges. A debt repaid in full.

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