



# זְכֵרוֹנוֹת

## ZichronNote

### The Journal of the San Francisco Bay Area Jewish Genealogical Society

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#### Jewish Refugees in Upstate New York

The Oswego refugee center looked like a concentration camp, but it was one bright light within a dark and shameful presidential policy. See page 5.

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Fort Oswego Refugee Center  
(photo courtesy Safe Haven Museum)

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**President's Message**  
**Where I Stand**

Jeremy Frankel, SFBAJGS President

I tend to think of myself as a pretty laid-back kind of a guy. Very little makes me put pen to paper and complain about something that irks me. Life happens and for the most part really doesn't ruffle my feathers. But recently I received two e-mails which did make me sit up, take notice, and decide to put pen to paper, or rather my digits to the keyboard, and write in very strong terms about how I felt.

So what was it that shook me out of my cozy little life? It was two e-mails from Marlis Humphrey. Who, you might ask, is Marlis Humphrey? Marlis is the current president of the IAJGS, the International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies. This is the umbrella organization that we, the SFBAJGS, and some 75 other kindred Jewish organizations belong to.

The IAJGS performs many functions; perhaps the most visible one is that of coordinating the annual Jewish genealogy conferences that many of us attend. These are held in a major city each summer; this year it returns to Salt Lake City. There are other more "behind the scene" activities too, such as working in concert with other national genealogical societies regarding our continued access to genealogical records.

The two messages Marlis sent out were about two appointments she has recently made to the IAJGS board. One person is Quinton Atkinson, a board interim appointee; the other is Shipley Munson, who will be working in an "advisory" capacity. Atkinson is a 14-year employee of Ancestry.com, and Munson has worked for many years at FamilySearch. And both are Mormons.

My gripe is not so much about who they are or who they work for but the fact that the IAJGS board is composed of several people who work in businesses where it could be thought there might be a potential conflict of interest.

With respect to the IAJGS there certainly shouldn't be anyone on the board who works for a commercial genealogy company. I have no qualms with the IAJGS working with anyone who acts in an advisory role, but he shouldn't have any voting powers.

It's extremely important that the IAJGS board (and JGS boards) maintain impartiality and independence and feel free to compliment or criticize without fear of being beholden to anyone or any organization. We mustn't feel constrained when making organizational decisions because someone on the board is an

*Continued on page 12*

## SOCIETY NEWS

### New Members

Valery Bazarov ..... valbazso@gmail.com  
Lisa Geduldig ..... lisag@igc.org  
Bob Hyman ..... rchyman8456@gmail.com  
Michael Maidenberg ..... mberg701@aol.com  
Richard Rothman ..... rrothman@pacbell.net  
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In order to continue to receive the SFBAJGS e-zine and *ZichronNote*, please send e-mail updates to [newsletter@sfbajgs.org](mailto:newsletter@sfbajgs.org).

### Seeking Stories for *ZichronNote*

Have you had a breakthrough in your family research, solved a family mystery through painstaking research, discovered a better way to use resource materials, or walked where your ancestors walked as part of an interesting family history trip? Have you had success or made progress at the Genealogy Clinic with the Mavens?

We want to read about it in *ZichronNote*. Please submit materials to [newsletter@sfbajgs.org](mailto:newsletter@sfbajgs.org).

### We Need Volunteers for the Cemetery Project!

Members of the San Francisco Bay Area Jewish Genealogical Society have transcribed more than 35,000 cemetery records that have been added to the Jewish Online Worldwide Burial Registry (JOWBR) managed by JewishGen. While we applaud the volunteers who have done this tremendous amount of work, we now have new sets of burial records to transcribe. If you can help, send a message to [cemetery@sfbajgs.org](mailto:cemetery@sfbajgs.org).

### SFBAJGS on Social Media

SFBAJGS has a YouTube channel at <http://www.youtube.com/user/SFBAJGS>. This gives us an opportunity to share our activities, lectures, meetings, participation in events, Mavens, etc. If you have any videos of society or other genealogical events you would like to share online, contact membership director Avner Yonai at [membership@sfbajgs.org](mailto:membership@sfbajgs.org).

SFBAJGS also has a Facebook page: <http://www.facebook.com/pages/San-Francisco-Bay-Area-Jewish-Genealogical-Society/54214774804?ref=ts>. Friend us and visit often for updates between meetings.

### Member Discount on Fold3.com

Our discount for society members on Fold3.com subscriptions is still available. Fold3 has a significant online collection of original military and historical records, which can help with your research. For a limited time, you can receive a discount on an Annual All-Access Fold3 membership. If you already have a subscription, you can extend it for an additional year. Take advantage of this offer while it lasts! Go to [http://go.fold3.com/San%20Francisco%20Bay%20Area%20Jewish%20Genealogical%20Society\\_society/?xid=791](http://go.fold3.com/San%20Francisco%20Bay%20Area%20Jewish%20Genealogical%20Society_society/?xid=791).

### Meeting Times and Locations

Unless otherwise indicated, the SFBAJGS meeting schedule is as follows.

**San Francisco: Sunday. Doors open 1:00 p.m. Program begins at 1:30 p.m.**

Rhoda Goldman Plaza, 2180 Post Street.

Parking available in Rhoda Goldman Plaza garage with entrance on Sutter Street.

**Oakland: Sunday. Doors open 12:30 p.m. Program begins at 1:00 p.m.**

Oakland FamilySearch Center, 4766 Lincoln Avenue.

**Los Altos Hills: Monday. Doors open 7 p.m. Program begins at 7:30 p.m.**

Congregation Beth Am, 26790 Arastradero Road Room 5/6.

**See Back Cover for Calendar of Upcoming SFBAJGS Meetings**

## CALENDAR

### Genealogy Events

#### Local and Regional

Saturday, 14 June 2014. Janice M. Sellers, "The Flim-Flam Man: The Con Man Who Helped Discover the East Texas Oil Field." California Genealogical Society. 2201 Broadway Suite LL2, Oakland. <http://californiaancestors.org/>

Sunday, 15 June 2014. Steve Morse, "The Julian Calendar and Its Importance to Genealogists." Jewish Genealogical Society of Sacramento. Albert Einstein Residence Center, 1935 Wright Street, Sacramento. <http://www.jewishgen.org/jgs-sacramento/>

Tuesday, 17 June 2014. Richard Ferman, "Pennsylvania Research." San Ramon Valley Genealogical Society. Danville Family History Center, 2949 Stone Valley Road, Alamo. <http://srvgensoc.org/>

Tuesday, 17 June 2014. Patricia Burrow, "Legacy Planning: What Happens to Your Research after You Are Gone?" Santa Clara County Historical and Genealogical Society. Cedar Room, Santa Clara City Public Library, 2635 Homestead Road, Santa Clara. <http://www.scchgs.org/main/meeting.html>

Thursday, 19 June 2014. Kathryn Marshall, "American Migration Trails: Western United States." Napa Valley Genealogical Society. NVGS Library, 1701 Menlo Avenue, Napa. <http://www.napavalleygenealogy.org/programs.html>

Saturday, 21 June 2014. Grant Din, "Angel Island Immigration." San Mateo County Genealogical Society. Grace Lutheran Church, 2825 Alameda de las Pulgas, San Mateo. <http://www.smcgs.org/>

Saturday, 21 June 2014. Janice M. Sellers, "Where There's a Will: Probate Records Can Prove Family Connections." Oakland FamilySearch Library. 4766 Lincoln Avenue, Oakland. <http://oaklandfhc.org/>

Tuesday, 24 June 2014. Steve Morse, "Using One-Step Webpages to Turn Minimal Information into an Entire Genealogy." Sacramento German Genealogy Society. MacMurdo Hall, St. Marks Methodist Church, 2391 Saint Marks Way, Sacramento. <http://www.sacgergensoc.org/>

Wednesday, 25 June 2014. Marilyn Geary, "Writing Your Family History." Marin County Genealogical Society. Marin FamilySearch Center, 220 North San Pedro Road, San Rafael. <http://www.maringensoc.org/>

Wednesday, 9 July 2014. Janice M. Sellers, "Get Me to the Church on Time: Finding Religious Records." East Bay Genealogical Society. Oakland FamilySearch Library, 4766 Lincoln Avenue, Oakland. <http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/%7Ecaebaygs/>

Saturday, 19 July 2014. Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation Family History and Reunion Day. U.S. Immigration Station, Angel Island. <http://aiisf.org/about/upcoming-events>

Sunday, 20 July 2014. Steve Morse, "From DNA to Genetic Genealogy: Everything You Wanted to Know but Were Afraid to Ask." Berkeley Historical Society. 1931 Center Street, Berkeley. <http://www.berkeleyhistoricalsociety.org/>

Tuesday, 12 August 2014. Heidi Lyss, "The Heroic Journey: Writing Your Family History." Roseville Genealogical Society. Maidu Center, 1550 Maidu Drive, Roseville. <http://www.rgsca.org/>

Saturday, 18 October 2014. Digging for Your Roots Family History Seminar. Concord FamilySearch Center, 3700 Concord Boulevard, Concord. Jackie Hein, [lejaki1957@aol.com](mailto:lejaki1957@aol.com)

Saturday, 1 November 2014. All-day seminar with Judy Russell, the Legal Genealogist. San Mateo County Genealogical Society. Grace Lutheran Church, 2825 Alameda de las Pulgas, San Mateo. <http://www.smcgs.org/>

#### State and National

Sunday–Tuesday, 20–22 July 2014. 24th Annual Conference Society for Crypto-Judaic Studies. The genealogy workshop will be presented by Shelly Talalay Dardashti, Genie Milgrom, and Bennett Greenspan. Hilton Hotel Anatole, 2201 N. Stemmons Freeway, Dallas, Texas. <http://cryptojews.com/conference-2014-dallas-tx/>

Sunday–Friday, 27 July–1 August 2014. 34th IAJGS International Conference on Jewish Genealogy. Hilton Salt Lake City Center, Salt Lake City, Utah. <http://conference.iajgs.org/2014/>

Tuesday–Friday, 12–15 August 2014. FEEFHS Annual Eastern European Research Workshop. Plaza Hotel, Salt Lake City, Utah. <http://www.feefhs.org/conferences.html>

Wednesday–Saturday, 27–30 August 2014. Federation of Genealogical Societies Annual Conference: Gone to Texas. Henry B. Gonzalez Convention Center, 200 East Market Street, San Antonio, Texas. <https://www.fgsconference.org/>

#### International

25 October–22 Nov. 2014. International Jewish Genealogy Month. <http://www.iajgs.org/jgmonth.html>

Monday–Friday, 6–10 July 2015. 35th IAJGS International Conference on Jewish Genealogy. Jerusalem, Israel; <http://www.iajgs.org/2015.html>



## Barbed Wire Haven

Michal Eisikowitz

Michal Eisikowitz is a freelance writer and copywriter who lives with her family in the Judean Hills. In addition to her writing, she holds an M.S. in Communication Sciences. A version of this article originally appeared in *Mishpacha Magazine*. This version was published on Aish.com on 4 January 2014. The article is reprinted with permission.

The Oswego refugee camp looked like a concentration camp, but it was one bright light within a dark and shameful presidential policy.

The similarities were unnerving, but this was no concentration camp. Created in February 1944 in a landmark political decision, the Oswego refugee camp—housed in an abandoned army base called Fort Ontario—was a token gesture of rescue, a pressure-induced move approved in spite of President Roosevelt's State Department, infamous for its complete apathy during the bloodbath that was the Holocaust.

In a joint humanitarian decision made by President Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, and Charles de Gaulle, with purported politick from American pro-Jewish organizations, the U.S. committed to importing 1,000 refugees who had managed to enter southern Italy, which had already been liberated by U.S. troops.

In adherence to austere immigration policies, however, the refugees were not to be granted American citizenship—and upon the war's end, were instead to be ousted back to blood-soaked Europe. Listed as “U.S. Army Casual Baggage” upon arrival in New York, the dazed immigrants were forced to sign papers promising they wouldn't remain in the U.S. In the end, with the eventual intervention of President Harry Truman, other government activists, and Oswego's own locals, the decree was rescinded, closing a little-known chapter of valor in a book of apathy.

Known as the “Port City of Central New York” and originally a stronghold of the fierce Iroquois Indians, unremarkable Oswego—current population 18,142—rarely made headlines, save for some record-breaking 11-foot snowfalls. Yet with the establishment of the refugee camp in its midst, the upstate New York town earned an honorable place in history.

### No Red Carpet

For many Americans, and particularly those who seethed at FDR's seeming heart of stone regarding the rescue of Europe's Jews, the 1944 turn-around decision to welcome 1,000 refugees onto American soil was startling.

Ruth Gruber, an ambitious young Jewish woman who served as special assistant to Interior Secretary Harold L. Ickes at the time, was so shocked when she

heard about the plan that she dropped her morning coffee to have a talk with her boss.

“Mr. Secretary, it's what we've been fighting for all these years! To open doors. Save lives. Circumvent the holy quotas. What's behind it?” Gruber, now 101 years old and living in Manhattan, wrote in *Haven*, the seminal book she authored on the topic.

Sure enough, the rationale wasn't completely altruistic. Yugoslavian refugees were streaming into Italy at the rate of 1,800 a week, getting in the way of a tired American military struggling to overcome the Fascists in a bloody series of battles. Someone had to deal with the “refugee problem” and get rid of the road-clogging, tank-obstructing nightmare.

Even after the president acquiesced to U.S. military pressure, agreeing to resettle the evacuees, he was still reluctant to roll out the red carpet, instead pushing to create offshore havens in Europe, Sicily, or North Africa.

“The two world leaders we loved, Roosevelt and Winston Churchill, made eloquent speeches about refugees even as they barred them,” Gruber wrote.

Later, Gruber discovered the primary prompter of the decision: A series of horrifying 1942 cables—suppressed by the State Department for more than two years—had finally reached the Treasury, then led by Henry Morgenthau, an assimilated but identified Jew. The cables described Hitler's atrocities in agonizing detail, including the systematic use of Zyklon B gas in eliminating European Jewry.

“I am physically ill,” Morgenthau remarked after reading the memorandum. On 16 January 1944, Morgenthau personally visited the White House.

“On this Sunday morning, he was no longer Henny-Penny,” wrote Gruber, referring to the president's affectionate nickname for Morgenthau. “He had become a committed, anguished, passionate Jew. The suppressed cables had touched ancient roots.”

Six days later, Roosevelt created the War Refugee Board, and several months later, the decision to create an emergency refugee shelter in New York became official.

Enthralled by the notion that the infuriating isolationist barriers were being pushed aside, even just a bit, an unstoppable 32-year-old Ruth resolved to be part of the action.

“These people coming here—they must be frightened, bewildered, coming to a strange land,” she told her boss, Interior Secretary Harold Ickes. “Somebody has to be with them on their journey. Somebody has to take their hand.”

With her fiery personality, knowledge of Yiddish, and impressive credentials—she had, in 1931, accepted a fellowship to pursue doctoral study in Cologne, Germany, becoming the world’s youngest Ph.D. at the time at age 20—an ecstatic Gruber eventually got the job. Her immigrant parents from Brooklyn, in contrast, weren’t quite as thrilled.

“Are you crazy?” Ruth remembers her mother—a *frum*, *shtetl*-born woman—screaming into the phone. “Every day I read how they sink ships and shoot down airplanes. And my daughter has to go to Europe to get her head shot off?”

### Dreaming of America

Even before Dr. Gruber landed in Italy, the selection process for the coveted 1,000 slots for shelter had begun. The president stipulated that the refugees should be those with no other haven available. Demand for the slots was so great that the American official charged with choosing “went to pieces,” reported Gruber.

“I can’t go on playing God; how can I choose who’s going to live and who’s going to die?” the official said.

While most of the refugees were already registered in displaced-persons’ camps at the time, food was scarce, sanitary conditions dreadful, and the Nazi Fascist reign loomed only several miles away.

Word of the president’s invitation spread like brushfire, and people knocked on the U.S. consulate doors day and night.

“Women and men weeping, people fainting from emotion, parents holding their children up in the air so we’d notice them,” Max Perlman, one of the team that had screened the refugees, later described to Ruth. “You can’t imagine the excitement. Some of the men made whole speeches telling me how many years they had been dreaming about going to America. Others just wept openly. ... I couldn’t tell them if they’d be accepted or not. These men were all alone; they had seen their entire families wiped out ... the pain in their faces is still with me.”

In a deliberate maneuver, only 874 of the 982 hand-picked refugees were Jewish: Roosevelt didn’t want the venture to be pegged a “Jewish rescue project.”

The fortunate recruits—525 males and 457 females—were assembled in an abandoned mental asylum in Aversa, Italy, each family arriving with its own shocking tale.



American military police help three little girls find their parents at the Fort Oswego Refugee Center (Photo credit: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland. Photographer: Hikaru Iwasaki)

“My father was a Belzer *hassid* from Belgium,” remembers Naftali Weinstein, who was 9 years old at the time. “He was caught and killed by the Nazis in Rome just days before it was liberated.”

The three youngest Weinstein children had managed to cross the Alps to Switzerland with their mother, while Naftali and five other siblings survived by being shuffled between kind Italian Gentiles and Roman Catholic convents after making their way across the border to Italy. Now brutally orphaned of their father, with the oldest brother only 18 years old, the six Weinstein children still in Italy were prime candidates for the Oswego operation.

Miriam C., a grandmother now living in New York who requested to be identified by first name only, and her family were similarly recruited after years in hiding. Her father, a young businessman and former community leader in Zagreb, Yugoslavia, had fled with his wife and two young children to Italy’s pastoral villages, where they attempted to blend into the Italian landscape.

“I was Maria; my father was Giuseppe,” remembers Miriam. “The Italians knew we were Jewish, but they kept quiet. Their motto was ‘live and let live.’”

Fifteen years old at the time, Abraham Dresdner’s childhood was more chaotic: Together with his Belgian parents and nine siblings, he’d been through three concentration camps before crossing the Italian border, after which he was immediately placed into a convent for safety. “We didn’t care if it was Palestine or America,” he says. “My father said ‘the first boat that will leave this hell, that’s the boat we’ll go on.’”

Mrs. Grace (Rothschild) Aschkenasy introduced rich Yekkeshe blood to the mix: Her parents, both German-born, had married and lived in Milan prewar. With the Nazi invasion of Italy, they moved to Rome—perhaps the only observant Jewish couple in the capital at the time—hoping that Pope Pius would protect “his” city. It was in vain: Mr. Rothschild was incarcerated there three times.

“The Fascists were very respectful; they used to call him ‘holy person,’” says Grace. “They even gave him a mattress to sleep on, and my mother—endangering her life—managed to smuggle his *tefillin* and Gemaras into the prison so my father could spend his days learning.”

In an ingenious move, Mrs. Rothschild, whose maiden name was Lehmann, claimed to be related to Senator Herbert Lehmann of New York and threatened the Fascists to involve the senator if her husband wasn’t released.

The ploy worked, and upon his miraculous release, Mr. Rothschild and his family were offered refuge in Spain on condition they undergo baptism—but that was no option for the deeply religious, committed Jews. So when the Oswego recourse surfaced, Mr. Rothschild embraced the opportunity and packed up the family within several hours.

### **We Just Wanted Food**

On 20 July 1944, a U.S. naval convoy of sixteen troop and cargo ships escorted by thirteen warships set sail from Naples, with the almost 1,000 refugees and hundreds of wounded soldiers aboard the *Henry Gibbins*, one of the flotilla’s larger vessels. The journey was fraught with danger: Hidden German U-boats still heavily mottled the Atlantic, with Wehrmacht fighter planes flying constantly overhead. Indeed, several nights into the voyage, German planes were sighted.

“They told us all to come on deck and wear lifejackets,” remembers Naftali Weinstein. “We thought this was it.”

The captain of the *Henry Gibbins* released black smoke to act as camouflage, and the ship was not attacked.

On another occasion, the ship’s sonar detected a U-boat. The refugees were told to remain absolutely silent, the engines were turned off, and the U-Boat was unable to track the fleet.

Conditions on the ship were far from luxurious, with triple-tiered canvas hammocks for sleeping, overcrowded quarters, and far-from-gourmet food. But for most of the beleaguered refugees on board, it was more than satisfactory.

“Were the conditions good? It depends where you’re coming from,” says Abraham Dresdner. “After being hungry for four years, we just wanted food. And since many of the travelers were seasick, there were plenty of extra portions. I used to stand in line three times.”

“It was *yetzias metzrayim* (the Exodus from Egypt),” declares Naftali Weinstein. “That’s what it felt like.”

Unlikely shipmates, the American troops were kind to the refugees, plying them with gifts and sweets.

“One soldier gave me a piece of chewing gum, but I had never seen it before,” remembered Elfi Hendell, a Vienna-born woman now living in New York who was interviewed in a documentary. “I swallowed it, and he said, ‘Little girl, you’re not supposed to do that!’”

As the ship drew closer to American shores, anticipation mounted.

“I suppose I felt like a young Columbus, just waiting to see land,” Ivo Lederer told the documentary crew. At the time Lederer was a 15-year-old Yugoslavian Jewish teen who later became a diplomatic historian and taught at Princeton and several other universities. “If you’re coming from war-time, war-damaged Europe, to see this enormous sight—lower Manhattan and the Statue of Liberty—I don’t think there was a dry eye on deck.”

When it was time to disembark, the Rothschilds, with their young children, were allowed to take the lead. Photographers shoved cameras into the passengers’ faces; reporters bombarded them with questions. Incredibly, a photo of the alighting Rothschild family that splashed the front pages of most national newspapers the following day was the catalyst for a long-awaited family reunion.

“My mother’s brother, who’d been in America for years and completely lost touch with my mother, was sitting on a park bench in Washington Heights, and the fellow next to him was scanning the paper,” recounts Grace (Rothschild) Aschkenasy. “My uncle jumped when he saw the photo: ‘That’s my sister,’ he shouted!”

### **Welcome to Oswego**

For some of the refugees, the disembarking experience was traumatic, a seeming repeat of the horrors of Europe. Under the presence of armed guards, and without any explanation, the refugees—nearly 100 of whom had been in Buchenwald or Dachau—were immediately sprayed for delousing. Then they were told they’d be boarding a train. Several passengers began screaming.

“Of course we were scared,” says Abraham Dresdner. “After all, trains were not a popular thing for us in Europe.”



*The fenced-in camp (photo courtesy Safe Haven Museum)*

After a two-day train ride, their apprehension spiked upon sighting barbed wire fences. Dr. Gruber and her associates attempted to subdue the terrified passengers.

“How could you do this!?” Gruber remembered one refugee crying upon seeing the camp. “In the free America. It’s another concentration camp.”

“I remember being behind the fence and the people from Oswego came to look at us,” Rena Romano Block once told the *Chicago Tribune*. “Someone said, ‘What do they think we are? Monkeys in a cage?’”

But when smiling Oswego residents began passing milk and food through the fence, the refugees finally began to calm down: This was different from the reception in Buchenwald.

Food wasn’t the only item donated: Toys, clothing, and even bicycles were thrown over the fence. Ms. Block, now 78 and living in Baltimore, caught a doll. She remembers being thrilled—she’d lost her only doll in Italy before boarding.

Upon taking a tour of her assigned Oswego shack, one of the women in the group began to cry.

“Why are you crying?” a compassionate Dr. Gruber inquired. “I know it’s spartan, but at this time it’s the best we can do.”

“I’m crying because I haven’t seen bed sheets in five years,” the woman explained.

Both Dr. Gruber and the Oswego residents continued to extend kindness throughout the refugees’ 17-month stay. When Manya Breuer of Berlin became the first bride in the camp, Dr. Gruber lent her own mother’s wedding veil, and a benevolent local donated her wedding ring.

### **Censored but Safe**

For their first month in the camp, the refugees were quarantined, and even relatives who’d traveled hours to Oswego to greet their loved ones were refused entry. After that, the refugees could obtain passes allowing them to go into Oswego for up to six hours. Children were enrolled in public schools, but adults could not obtain jobs. Educated men who could speak seven languages were assigned such degrading tasks as shoveling coal. And because the refugees came from enemy countries, mail was censored and customs confiscated numerous packages. Uniformed military personnel stood guard at the gate.

In a tragic twist, one resident died in a freak coal mine accident, leaving a wife and four children. He’d survived the horrors of the Holocaust, only to meet his end in the forests of New York State.

Sixty-nine years later, some of the refugees look back at the arrangement with resentment.

“I’d known what prison was. I’d lived behind bars in Italy. But I’d never known freedom,” Walter Greenberg, who was 11 years old at the time, told the *New York Times*. “In America, I looked out at the rest of the world and I saw normal people with everyday lives, and I felt deceived.”

“It was a bittersweet mixture,” concurred Adam Munz, now 86, a Belgian native. “We were free, yes, but our freedom was restricted in many, many ways.”

Other survivors, however, deride the griping as contextually inappropriate.

“We were in a bubble of safety; we weren’t being chased to death at every moment,” Maurice Kamhi, who’d made his way from bombed-out Sarajevo to Italy, explained in a documentary. “What an amazing thing.”

“So what if you didn’t have a Cadillac?” Miriam C. from New York told *Mishpacha*. “All my parents kept on saying was, ‘Thank God, we’re alive.’”

“It was paradise,” affirms Abraham Dresdner. “The camp was clean; there was food.”

“Being confined didn’t bother me at all,” says Naftali Weinstein. “We were in school during the week; on Sundays we got to go around town. We had sports, we had food, we had shelter. We even had a house with steam.”



Naftali recalls that the Agudah sent a shipment of shoes and clothing to the refugees. "I still remember the winter coat I got; it was warm, with a hood. I also got proper leather shoes; until then, I'd been wearing paper shoes."

### **Naturalized**

Inasmuch as the refugees tried to create a community within the camp, their uncertain futures cast a shadow of dread. Almost no one wanted to return to Europe—their inevitable fate.

"I would ... find it impossible to live in a country where all my family have been killed," wrote Richard Arvey, an Austrian writer and filmmaker, in a 1944 document stating his desire to stay.

Pro-Jewish organizations lobbied intensively to procure citizenship status for the refugees, as did First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, who made a personal visit to the camp accompanied by Mrs. Henry Morgenthau. Still, FDR remained adamant that they be sent back.

In April 1945, Ruth Gruber compiled a report about the camp, concluding with her firm belief that its "nearly Americanized" residents should be allowed in as part of the country's regular quotas: "It is time we showed that this administration has a policy of decency, humanity, and conscience and the guts to carry that policy through," she wrote.

Then, in perhaps blatant divine intervention, the beloved President Roosevelt died on 12 April 1945, just days before the war's end. Yet even with the main impediment removed, the fate of the refugees still hung in the air. Rumor had it that they were scheduled for deportation on 30 June, and the despondency in the fort was palpable.

A committee that included Eleanor Roosevelt, Senator Robert A. Taft of Ohio, and Joseph Smart—the original director of Fort Ontario, who resigned from his position to better advocate for the residents he'd become attached to—worked tirelessly to win support for the refugees. Even the mayor of Oswego, along with 27 leading locals, sent a signed petition to President Harry Truman and to Congress, imploring them to grant the refugees citizenship.

But Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau, the Jewish politician credited by some as jumpstarting the Oswego operation altogether, couldn't reconcile himself with defying the dead president's orders. "You're asking that we change the instructions issued by the President. ... I can't go back on my promise. ... I couldn't sleep with my conscience," he told the delegation from several Jewish refugee committees that had come to plead on the Oswego group's behalf.

The breakthrough arrived when New York Congressman Samuel Dickstein, Chairman of the House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization, announced that he planned on investigating the camp. Before President Truman could act, a congressional delegation arrived at the camp and interviewed the residents.

Edmund Waterbury, publisher of the *Oswego Palladium-Times*, who accompanied the delegation, risked his career in Oswego when he testified, "There is more talent in this group than there is in all of Oswego together, and I am not discrediting my own hometown, but when you get painting, sculpture, music, acting, dancing, and playwriting, they would do credit to a city of five hundred thousand population."

The delegation voted unanimously to allow the refugees to stay, and with continued political pressure, on 22 December 1945—eight months after Germany's surrender—President Truman ordered the government to annul the refugees' status as displaced persons.

"In the circumstances, it would be inhumane and wasteful to require these people to go all the way back to Europe merely for the purpose of applying there for immigration visas," President Truman said in a speech announcing the directive.

By this time, 23 Oswego babies had been born, one couple had married, and at least two teenage boys had managed to sneak through some holes in the fence and hitchhike to Manhattan for a day of adventure.

To become legal immigrants, the soon-to-be citizens were bused to the Canadian side of Niagara Falls in Ontario, where they received visas and then returned across the Rainbow Bridge—finally free.

"Roosevelt died just in time," reflects Abraham Dresdner, now a great-grandfather many times over. "My father had signed the papers originally because 'to get out of hell, you sign whatever it takes.' He took a gamble, and thank God, it was worth it."

### **Too Little Too Late**

Nearly 70 years have passed since those first refugees stepped through the gates at Fort Ontario, and plans are underway for a 2014 reunion. Attendance will be sparse: As of June 2013, fewer than 100 are still alive.

Successful as it was in saving 1,000 lives, Dr. Schum of Oswego's Safe Haven Museum says modern historians actually view the rescue operation as an embarrassing chapter in American history. Had the Oswego shelter been replicated in other locations,

*Continued on page 13*

## Mietek's Story

Leslie Tenney

Leslie Tenney is an Oakland artist and singer who has been researching her family roots for many years. She sings Yiddish songs with her husband and recently sang in the West Coast premier of *The Megilleh of Itzik Manger*. In the 1970's she traveled through the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, and in 2012 went to Israel to meet relatives in Jerusalem whom she and her cousin had recently made contact with.

When my cousin Judy and I started doing research on Ancestry.com and other Web sites we had no idea that we were about to embark on an amazing adventure across time and continents. We thought it would be wonderful if we could add some information to our family tree and disseminate it to other family members. We weren't really expecting to find any living relatives.

Our grandmother Sabina had given me much of her correspondence, papers, and photographs in the 1970's, when I expressed interest in family history, so we had some photos and documents to guide us. In addition, she had shared many stories with us, so we knew there were relatives on her mother Michalina's side who had survived the war and remained in Poland, and that our grandmother had been corresponding with them as late as the mid-1950's. We also knew some relatives had moved to Israel, but we didn't know their names, and we had little idea about who they were and knew nothing of their family's story.

We began searching online and adding the information that we found into our tree. Initially, we located some information about Michalina and her husband Joseph's families in Poland going back to the mid-nineteenth century. Then, one day in 2012, Judy decided to search our grandmother's maiden name (Joseph's surname) on Facebook and found Rafi, someone with the same last name, living in California. So she sent him a message, asking if he had ever heard of anyone in his family by the name of Sabina. He wrote back that the name sounded familiar, and that he would call his father in Israel to ask him. His father, Mietek, was beside himself with excitement when Rafi told him about Judy's message. It turned out that Mietek's family was the branch we had heard of that had emigrated from Poland to Israel, and he had been searching for our family for many years. After a flurry of e-mails, Mietek and I started having Skype conversations. He proved to be an articulate, caring person with a sharp memory, who was thrilled to share his family stories. And so we started to piece together our family relationships.

When my grandmother gave me her photos we went over them together, and I had taken notes. One of the photos was of a man named Gabriel, and another was the same man with a woman who was obviously his

wife. On the back of the photos I had written that he was a brother of my great-grandfather Joseph. We soon established that this man was Mietek's father. I was so excited to find a living relative of the person in this century-old photo.

My grandmother was born in Warsaw in 1895 and came to the U.S. in 1907 with her whole family, as a girl of 12. She died in 1985, but in spite of the difference in their ages, Mietek was her first cousin. He was the youngest child in his family, and his father was the youngest brother of my grandmother's father. My grandmother had never met Mietek or most of his siblings, who were born after she left Poland, but as a young girl in Brooklyn, she continued to read and write in Polish and kept up a correspondence with various family members still living in Poland.

I don't know when she started corresponding with Mietek's older sister Hela, since Hela wasn't born until 1912, but somehow they began writing to each other. Hela and her husband Shimon fled to the Soviet Union shortly after the Nazis invaded Poland, and she was the only other member of Mietek's immediate large family who survived the war. Mietek himself remained in Warsaw and survived Auschwitz (a story I will tell below). His parents and all his other brothers and sisters perished in the camps or the Łódź and Warsaw ghettos. Mietek and his wife, Mira, as well as his sister Hela and her family, immigrated to Israel from Poland in the mid-1950's.

We found out that Mietek had done some family research of his own and had obtained information about our common ancestors in Poland by writing to Polish towns for records. The family tree that Judy and I had been working on was greatly expanded by the material we received from him, as he had information going back to the late 1700's.

After months of exchanging information and talking on Skype, we decided it was time to travel to Israel to meet these newly found relatives. At that time (late 2012) Judy was unable to make the trip, as her elderly father was ill and she couldn't travel. So I went with my husband, Gerry, and my brother Joe and his wife, Vera. I had decided to bring Mietek the original photos of his parents, Gabriel and Ruchl, that had been sent to my family from Poland about 100 years ago. It was a great honor to give them to the only surviving son of the people in the photos who,



*The photo of Mietek's parents,  
Gabriel and Ruchl Litmanovitz*

until recently, I had only wondered about. Mietek had lost all his family photos in the war, except for a few wrinkled and stained snapshots he had found in the rubble of his apartment building when he came back from Auschwitz to Łódź. We were all tearful when I handed him the photos.

Before we left for the trip, Gerry and I had met Mietek's son Rafi and his wife, Dana, in California. While we were in Israel, Mietek's other son, Gabi, and his nephews, Hela's sons Yossi and Gabi (yes, the family includes two Gabis, and they are cousins, both named after Mietek and Hela's father, Gabriel) came to Mietek and Mira's home to meet us. It was also a thrill for my brother Joe, and Mietek's nephew Yossi, who we discovered were both named after our great-grandfather Joseph, to meet each other. We all felt instantly connected, as if we had always known each other. We told stories, laughed, sang Yiddish songs, and discussed many topics, from religion to culture to politics. I was concerned that we would have language difficulties—my brother's wife's first language is Portuguese, and only Gerry among our

American family speaks fluent Yiddish, but between English, Yiddish, Hebrew, and the universal language of music, we managed to communicate quite well.

On Simchas Torah Mietek and Mira invited us to their house for a special celebration. Mietek's son Gabi, his wife, Ita, and their daughter Noa and her boyfriend were there as well. After a delicious dinner, Mietek told a story that had been alluded to several times in the preceding days, each time with Mietek saying, "No, not yet." Finally, he was ready to tell it. It was the harrowing tale of how he had escaped being killed at Auschwitz. The inmate crematorium workers led an uprising (the only such uprising during the war), exactly on the day that Mietek and one of his brothers had been "selected" to go to the gas chamber. The workers had sent some of the SS men into the chamber and the ovens instead of the selected Jews. Because of this revolt, which took place on Simchas Torah, the gas chamber was shut down for several days. After the weekend passed, Joseph Mengele himself came to make another selection, and some young healthy Hungarians who had just arrived gestured to Mietek to join them. By virtue of being with the group of Hungarians, on this day he was selected to work instead of going to the gas chamber. Mietek's family celebrates this holiday every year with special thanks that his life was spared all those years ago.

It was an amazing evening. It is no understatement to say that this was the trip of a lifetime. Our families are now forever connected after being separated by distance, war, and time.

Yet more stories came after we returned to the United States and kept up our Skype communication. Mietek described how after he was liberated from Auschwitz-Birkenau, he and two other young men were making their way back to Łódź and were arrested. They spent three days in jail with some SS men, because the Soviets thought they were Germans. They finally convinced the Soviets that they were Jews and were released. When they arrived in Łódź, they found shelter in one of many houses where refugees crowded all together. Shimon, Hela's husband, who was an officer in the Polish Army in exile, was traveling by train through Poland. On a whim, he got off the train in Łódź, thinking maybe he could find some relatives who might have survived the war. He happened to meet an old friend who had run into Mietek a few days before. So Shimon went looking for Mietek, knocking on doors of houses where refugees were staying, and found him. (Yossi told us that his father's version of the story was that he went from house to house loudly yelling the family name.) Only then, meeting up with Shimon, did Mietek learn that his sister Hela had survived

the war; in all that time from 1939 to 1945, he didn't know that she and Shimon were alive, or that they had a child.

I realized only after we returned that I had postcards and a telegram sent by Hela to Sabina during the war, describing their journey to L'vov and then to Semipalatinsk (now Semey), Kazakhstan (where Yossi was born). The telegram announced Yossi's birth, saying that "his name is Joseph, like your father." While we were in Israel, Mietek had explained that since Joseph had died in 1935, Hela and Shimon knew that it would be proper to name a son after him, while they had no knowledge of who else in the family was dead or alive until after the war. From the messages from Hela, my grandmother knew that she and Shimon were alive, but Mietek had no idea what had happened to them for six years. Of course, I sent them all copies of the telegram, which none of them, including Yossi, had ever seen.

Mietek also told us that when Shimon found Mietek in Łódź, Hela and Yossi were still in Semipalatinsk, and the Soviets wouldn't allow them to leave until 1946. When Hela had fled Poland in 1939, Mietek was only 13, and he had gone with her to the bus station. That was the last time he saw her until 1946, when Hela returned to Poland with Yossi. Mietek met her at the station (I don't know if it was the same station she had left in 1939). Needless to say it was a very emotional reunion. From 1946 on, they petitioned to leave Poland and go to Israel, but it was only in 1956 that they finally received permission, and the whole family, including all of Mira's relatives, left together. While they were waiting in Poland all those years, Hela had encouraged Mietek to continue with his schooling, so he finished high school and university and earned a degree in engineering, which provided him with useful skills so that when he and Mira arrived in Israel he was able to find work.

Meeting and corresponding with this family has been an incredible journey. Now we are gearing up for meeting yet another branch of the family that Judy has located in Sweden, the descendants of our great-grandmother Michalina's sister, who remained in Poland when Michalina and her family came to the U.S. in 1907. Perhaps I will write about that in another installment.

Epilog: Mietek, who was born 5 June 1926, passed away this year during Passover, on 15 April 2014. We are very sad but so grateful that we were able to visit and correspond with him and hear all his amazing stories.



*President's Message, continued from page 2*

employee of a commercial genealogy company. In today's world the buzzword is "transparency", and we not only have to take steps to be transparent, but the world must be able to see that we operate in this fashion.

I am further concerned how other board members feel they can do their job when it is known one or more board members are also employees of an allied business. Can the board truly have a free and frank discussion knowing that some board members could use any information or decision for their companies' financial advantage? (I think some would call that insider trading, which we know to be illegal.) I am also worried how other genealogists on the "outside" looking in will view this development.

I have already mentioned the word "Mormon." It's pretty well known that when Mormons research their family history it is very much intertwined with their religion. If you would like to see this "in action" then watch this short YouTube video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P3EnneNVL7I>. It features Shipley Munson, who introduces the video he made with the LDS Church.

I have absolutely no qualms about how they wish to pursue both their family history research and their religion—it's just not something we do.

In fact, I don't know about you, but while we in the SFBAJGS go out of our way to encourage people to research their family history, we don't make pursuing the Jewish religion a critical element of it. It's nice if people feel moved to get closer to Judaism and the practice of it, but it's a personal decision, not one for us to champion.

Both appointees' terms of service expire in August, when a new slate of officers will be presented at the IAJGS annual meeting. This meeting is always held on the Wednesday during the conference. I pray that the Nominating Committee will do the right thing. I will be there and will vote accordingly.



## Financial Report for 2013

Jeff Lewy, SFBAJGS Treasurer

Our financial performance represents the mission of the San Francisco Bay Area Jewish Genealogical Society only indirectly, but certainly helps make our work possible. SFBAJGS had another good financial year in 2013. Included in this article are simple pie charts showing the major categories of our income and expenses. We recognize that our financial position does not include the volunteer efforts by the Board of Directors and others who provide substantial numbers of hours managing the activities of SFBAJGS. We thank the Board and our volunteers for their valuable contributions of time and expertise.

Our revenue was almost \$8,000, the bulk of it as dues from a total of 214 members. In addition, our members donated more than \$2,800, or 36% of the total revenue, to support our activities. We are very grateful for these donations, as they allow us to support projects by us and other groups to document and remember our Jewish past.

Our major categories of expenses were:

- about \$1,300 to present almost 20 meetings, including room rentals, honoraria for speakers, and handouts

- about \$1,150 to create, print, and mail four issues of the *ZichronNote* newsletter to our members and to organizations which have expressed interest in our work, including more than 120 other Jewish genealogical societies worldwide and about 40 local congregations and libraries

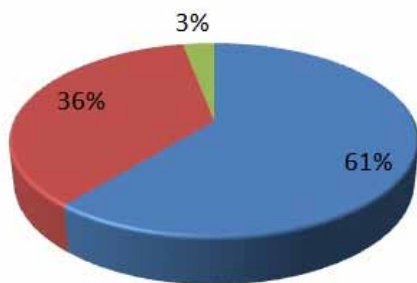
- other administrative costs, largely for publicity, insurance, Web site maintenance, and member renewal mailings

- grants to other organizations working to document, digitize, and make available online Jewish birth, marriage, and death records, and documentation and memorials for Jewish cemeteries and *shtetlach*, many of which no longer exist. These grants were described in the February 2014 issue of *ZichronNote*. Each year we evaluate our financial position to see whether we can make grants to other groups. In 2013 we decided to spend \$5,300, or almost \$2,000 more than our current year revenue, in a conscious effort to make good use of some of our surplus over the last few years.

Thank you for your support of SFBAJGS! Please let us know if you have any questions or comments. Also, let us know how we can most effectively help you with your genealogical research.

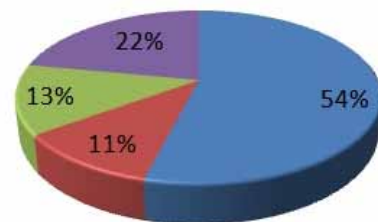
SFBAJGS Revenue - 2013

■ Dues ■ Donations ■ Interest and other



SFBAJGS Expense - 2013

■ Grants to others ■ Newsletters ■ Meetings ■ Admin



**Barbed Wire Haven**, continued from page 5

they argue, as many as 100,000 Jews could have been saved, even at the late date of 1944. Perhaps the most ignominious example of America's refusal to intervene was the turning away in 1939 of the MS *St. Louis*, a German ocean liner captained by Gustav Schroeder and packed with 937 desperate Jews, about a quarter of whom were eventually gassed.

"The good part about Oswego is that 1,000 innocent men and women went on to lead meaningful, productive lives," says Dr. Schum. "The bad part is that this is all we did."

Most of the original Oswego residents ultimately became successful doctors, lawyers, and businessmen. One was part of the team that developed the world's first CAT scan. Another worked in espionage, helping dismantle atomic bombs in Russia. Almost all went on to raise families.

"The Oswego refugees made their mark on this country," says Dr. Schum, who has developed close ties with some of the former residents. "Who knows what we could have done had we opened our gates to more."



## SFBAJGS Family Finder Update

The surnames and towns being researched by our newest members are listed below. This database is maintained for the benefit of our membership. If you have a correction or update, please write to SFBAJGS at P.O. Box 318214, San Francisco, CA 94131-8214.

<u>Surname</u>	<u>Town, Country</u>	<u>Member</u>
Abend	San Francisco	Richard Rothman
Chait/Chiat	Johannesburg, South Africa	Bob Hyman
Davis		Stephen Wiel
Frank	Vilna	Lisa Geduldig
Geduldig	Podvolochisk	Lisa Geduldig
Glucksohn	Prussia	Marian Scheuer Sofaer
Goldstein	Poland	Marian Scheuer Sofaer
Haas	Bavaria	Marian Scheuer Sofaer
Hecht		Stephen Wiel
Hyman	Lithuania; Richmond, VA	Bob Hyman
Kahn		Stephen Wiel
Katcher		Lisa Geduldig
Kostetsky		Irene Swedroe
Krevner	Lithuania	Bob Hyman
Levinski	Prussia, Krojanka?	Marian Scheuer Sofaer
Maidenberg	Dzigivka, Ukraine	Michael Maidenberg
Metzger		Stephen Wiel
Milstein	Kiev	Lisa Geduldig
Osher	Lithuania	Bob Hyman
Plitnick		Irene Swedroe
Pudkov(f)sky		Irene Swedroe
Reich	Galicia	Nancy Schlegel
Rittenberg	Vilkija	Marian Scheuer Sofaer
Rothman	San Francisco	Richard Rothman
Sarvetnick	Shums'k, Russia; Philadelphia	Irene Swedroe
Scheuer	Alsace	Marian Scheuer Sofaer
Schwartz	Galicia	Nancy Schlegel
Solomon	Gorlice, Galicia	Nancy Schlegel
Storch	Gorlice, Galicia	Nancy Schlegel
Strauss		Stephen Wiel
Swedlofsky		Irene Swedroe
Weiner	Kiev	Lisa Geduldig
Wiel		Stephen Wiel

### ***The Galitzianer*** **Request for Submissions**

*The Galitzianer* is the quarterly journal of Geshher Galicia. Submissions may be articles and/or graphics, both original and previously published, relevant to Jewish genealogical research in Galicia: articles about recent trips to Galicia, reports on your own research, research techniques, historical and recent pictures relevant to these matters, lists, book reviews, etc.

Electronic submissions are preferred, though not required. Submissions are accepted from both members and nonmembers of Geshher Galicia.

Though submissions are accepted year-round, the deadline for the September 2014 issue is **15 August 2014**. To send a submission, or if you have any questions, contact editor Janice Sellers at [janicemsj@gmail.com](mailto:janicemsj@gmail.com). For more information see <http://www.geshhergalicia.org/newsletter.html>.

## Resources at the PFSA Library

Pierre M. Hahn, SFBAJGS Board Member

In the recent past I was invited to give a short talk at the Portuguese Fraternal Society of America (PFSA) on my connection with Aristides de Sousa Mendes, the Portuguese Consul in Bordeaux, France, in 1940. The director of the PFSA gave me a tour of the facilities, which include among other things a museum and a library.

From a genealogical viewpoint the library has a treasure trove of information on families from the mainland (Portugal) and the many islands (Azores, Madeira), some of it dating back to the Inquisition. It also has manifests of ships going via Cape Horn

to Hawaii. I only had a short time to peruse some of these books but want to alert our readers that this library has an amazing amount of information.

The J. A. Freitas Library is a special collections library privately owned and operated by the Supreme Council of PFSA with funds from a grant from the Louise Freitas estate. It is located in San Leandro. More information can be found at <http://www.mypfsa.org/library/>. Books can be requested from anywhere in California through the interlibrary loan service provided by most public libraries.



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## The Journal of the San Francisco Bay Area Jewish Genealogical Society

Volume XXXIV, Number 2

May 2014

### Calendar of Upcoming SFBAJGS Events

**Sunday, 8 June, Oakland:** *Chasing Portraits: A Great-granddaughter's Search for Her Lost Art Legacy.* Elizabeth Rynecki will discuss her great-grandfather's art and the subject of Holocaust art restitution.

**Monday, 16 June, Los Altos Hills:** *What Happens to Your Research after You're Gone?* Patricia Burrow will share some ideas on what you can do to ensure your family history research is preserved for future generations.

**Sunday, 20 July, San Francisco:** *Legacy of Rescue: Recovering a Story of Courage during the Holocaust.* Marta Fuchs will talk about the research she did for her memoir of her father and the man who saved him and more than 100 other Hungarian Jewish men during the Holocaust.

**Sunday, 17 August, Oakland:** *Bring Your Own Brick Wall.* A panel of experienced SFBAJGS researchers will offer suggestions and research strategies to help you tear down your brick walls. Bring your questions and copies of your documents.

**Monday, 18 August, Los Altos Hills:** *Using Probate Materials in Genealogical Research.* Marc Seidenfeld, a probate attorney, will talk about the wealth of information to be found in probate materials and how they can help your research.

**Sunday, 14 September, San Francisco:** *Discovering My German-Jewish Heritage.* Diane Ober will talk about her discovery of how her family fared under Nazi rule, from deportation to escape to the Shanghai ghetto and to life in America.

**Sunday, 19 October, Oakland:** *A Very Short Course in Hebrew for Family History Researchers.* Vivian Kahn will provide a brief introduction to the Hebrew alphabet and the words and terms that most commonly appear in inscriptions and other family documents.

Also see pages 3 and 4. For more program information visit <http://www.sfbajgs.org/>.

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