

Chai~Lights



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HIAS – The Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society

A Long Tradition of Advocating for Refugees

by Linda Kaplan, Esq.

There is so much that can be said about HIAS, and though it's a legend in the Jewish world, many people know nothing about it at all. It is the only Jewish organization whose mission is to assist refugees. It is the oldest resettlement organization in the world. It is also the only Jewish organization designated by the U.S. government to assist with refugee resettlement.

There is a good chance that some KJCC members have received assistance from HIAS in Manhattan and/or on Ellis Island. If you were not directly assisted by HIAS, it is likely that previous generations of your family received assistance from HIAS when they first came to this country. For those researching your family trees, HIAS archives dated from 1909 may be of interest to you if they were part of your family's history. They offer location and family history search, Immigrant Record Search, Location Service Search and Genealogy search. To access the HIAS archives you may go to HIAS.org for a records search.

The Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) was founded in 1881, in a storefront on the Lower East Side of Manhattan by American Jews who organized to assist other Jews fleeing pogroms in Russia and eastern Europe. At that time the world did not yet have a legal concept for people being killed in their homelands just because of who they were.

HIAS was established before the U.S. (or the world) even had a legal concept of the term "refugee." This lack of a definition or a legal right of asylum did not stop HIAS from assisting Jews and other groups of people whose lives were at risk. They were guided not by international law but by our Jewish values, our history and the Torah, which says 36 times in 36 different ways that we must "welcome the stranger." HIAS took our Torah

teachings to heart. From its early days it provided, in addition to legal aid, dormitory space, a soup kitchen, clothing, civics education, job training, and assistance with finding jobs. Here's a description, directly from the HIAS web site, discussing their work on Ellis Island:

"HIAS established a bureau on Ellis Island in 1904, providing translation services, guiding immigrants through medical screenings, arguing before the Boards of Special Enquiry to prevent deportations, and obtaining bonds to guarantee employable status. We lent some the \$25 landing fee and sold railroad tickets at reduced rates to those headed for other cities. We even installed a kosher kitchen, which provided more than half a million meals to new arrivals on Ellis Island.

HIAS also found relatives of detained immigrants. Six hundred immigrants were detained during just one month in 1917 because they had neither money nor friends to claim them. HIAS was able to locate relatives for the vast majority, who were then released from Ellis Island."

The work of HIAS in assisting Jews fleeing persecution in Europe was substantially hampered by xenophobic fears of many in the U.S. There were fears that foreigners migrating to the U.S. would undermine American values and take jobs from Americans. In 1909, Henry Cabot Lodge, then a Senator from Massachusetts, was the first to propose a limitation on immigration from southern and eastern Europe. The recession that followed World War I only heightened fears that immigrants from other countries would increase the unemployment rate among Americans.

The Immigration Act of 1924 specifically aimed to restrict migration of southern and eastern Europeans. Proponents of the act wanted to favor native-born Americans over Jews, Southern and Eastern Europeans (in order to "maintain the racial preponderance

of the basic strain of our people and thereby to stabilize the ethnic composition of the population."

It was believed that southern/eastern Europeans and Jews arrived sick and starving and therefore were less capable of contributing to the American economy and unable to adapt to American culture. Using the 1890 census, The National Origins Act instituted admission quotas to determine the population of a particular nationality group and then only allowed two percent of that nationality into the U.S. Annual quotas of immigration were lowered and 86.5 percent of the visas were allocated to those from northwest Europe and Scandinavia, 11.2 percent to eastern and southern Europeans, and the remaining 2.3 percent were allocated to all other countries.

Even those aware of the refugee resettlement accomplishments of HIAS might not know its history of advocacy and role in promoting laws in the U.S and internationally that protect the human rights of refugees. Sixty-seven years after HIAS was formed, following Jewish law and traditional teachings, The Universal Declaration of Human Rights set out, for the first time, fundamental human rights to be universally protected. The 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees established the definition of a refugee as "*an individual who is outside his or her country of nationality or habitual residence who is unable or unwilling to return due to a well-founded fear of persecution based on his or her race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group.*" (Italics mine.) Due in part to the aggressive advocacy of HIAS, the National Origins Act quotas were replaced by a new law passed in 1965. This established our current regime of allocating immigrant visas to those sponsored by close family members or beneficiaries of employment-based petitions.

The U.S Refugee Act of 1980 amended

this law by creating a procedure for the admission of refugees of humanitarian concern and provided for the resettlement of those refugees. At this time, we are seeing in the U.S. many of the same anti-refugee sentiments which resulted in the exclusion of Jews. A Twitter post on Nov. 19, 2015 by

Beenish Ahmed, titled "America Turned Away Jewish Refugees because some were feared to be Nazi Agents," discusses this aspect of our current political climate. He discussed the work of American University professor Max Paul Freedman, who compared the concern of some that allowing Syrian refugees in to the U.S. would allow Isis fighters to slip in, to that fear of admitting Jewish refugees. Freedman said, "We have a very long tradition of exaggerating the threat that refugees might pose. Just as we didn't have a single case of a Nazi posing as a Jew being admitted to the U.S., it would be very difficult for a Syrian sleeper agent for Isis, making it through a two year process and being interviewed and having to explain themselves."

I recently participated in a HIAS Briefing Teleconference on Refugee Resettlement. At the end of the teleconference they discussed ways to deal with community backlash against refugee resettlement, reminding us that we had once been the ones shunned and kept out. The first suggestion was to provide the facts. To this end HIAS has prepared an information sheet entitled "Myths and facts about Refugee Resettlement." Anyone interested can download the HIAS report at: http://www.hias.org/sites/default/files/myths_and_facts_about_syrian_refugee_resettlement.pdf.

In the HIAS teleconference we were reminded that the Torah instructs us to "welcome the stranger," not merely your friends or those who are like you. Prominently posted on the HIAS website are the words: "We do not help them because they are Jewish, we help them because we are Jewish." ◇

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