

Coming to America: Now and Then

BY DEBORAH WEINSTEIN

In this issue of the magazine, attorney Judith Bernstein-Baker, executive director of Philadelphia's Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society and Council Migration Service (HIAS), tells the compelling story of a refugee family who flees from Burma/Myanmar to Malaysia due to the government's repression of its minority Chin population. The family is essentially "stateless," unable to return to Burma and without status in Malaysia. Obtaining permission for the family to legally enter and resettle in the United States will be challenging. Starting on page 18, you can read the riveting story of this refugee family and learn how attorney Bernstein-Baker and HIAS skillfully navigate the complex process of legal and administrative steps required to help refugees resettle here.

This is a powerful story and especially so for us. As attorneys, we have a heightened appreciation for the essential role that HIAS' legal representation plays for refugees and immigrants. I think most of us are proud that members of our profession are performing work so vital to our society. We value the critical role our country plays by opening its doors to thousands of refugees and immigrants who need to be rescued and protected, all the while desperately wanting to unite with their families. Indeed, many of us "Philadelphia lawyers" have not forgotten our immigrant origins and many of us enjoy affiliations with organizations of attorneys that share our roots such as the Justinian Society (Italian lawyers) and the Brehon Law Society (Irish ones).

After all, with the exception of Native Americans, all of us have immigrant origins. Ours is a country of immigrants. "Coming to America" is part of almost all of our families' stories — our common bonds.

And knowing about our families' immigration experiences often influences the way we see ourselves. It answers many essential questions. Where are you from? Who are my people? Why am I here? Was my family forced to flee their native land or was it a choice? Were they running from peril or

seeking opportunity? Did they suffer to immigrate to the United States? If they had not come here, would my life have been different?

And we are not alone. More and more of our fellow citizens are searching for answers to these questions. Interest in genealogy has recently experienced a tremendous renewal. People have become so fascinated with learning about their family histories that it has become a national pastime to dig for information to trace roots including, especially, the stories of our ancestors immigrating to America. The New York Times television critic Neil Genzlinger has described the current level of interest in these activities as a "craze" that is engaged in by a "happy cult."

There is even a new reality television show catering to the public's interest in this area. Described by Genzlinger as "an addictive little show," "Who Do You Think You Are?" premiered on NBC on March 5. This weekly series features a group of celebrities each shown reconstructing their family

history. There is no limit to the lengths to which they will go to track down clues to their past, and no expense is spared.

Full disclosure: I am not immune to this "craze" and did a little genealogical digging, only to discover HIAS's very likely role in my family's history.

Although today HIAS works with refugees of diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds, the organization was founded to assist Jewish immigrants fleeing Eastern Europe. After the assassination of Alexander II in 1881, a massive wave of anti-Jewish pogroms — mobs violently attacking Jewish people and destroying their homes, businesses and communities — swept across southern Russia, propelling mass Jewish emigration primarily to England and the United States. My paternal ancestors were among the Jews who fled Russia to escape this persecution.

When my family arrived in the United States, they were resettled in South Jersey in one of the many agricultural



Tommy Leonardi



Employees gather on the steps of the Salem Dress Co. in Salem, N.J.

colonies for Jewish refugees that had been established with subsidies from the Baron Maurice de Hirsch Fund. And who assisted the immigrants in resettling in this new land? The Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society.

But it did not stop there. Continuing support from these organizations was crucial. The early days of the colony were fraught with economic peril and anti-Jewish sentiment from their neighbors.

To supplement their meager income from farming, many settlers went to work in the local manufacturing sector. Native-born workers resented them because local industry was then under considerable financial strain. In 1891, workers in the nearby glass industry went on strike, refusing to work with Jews. Hundreds of strikers, armed with clubs, chased Jewish workers through the streets. When the factories locked out the strikers, they reportedly paraded through the streets singing “we won’t work with Jews.” Ultimately, the strikers’ demands were accepted and the Jews were fired because they were purportedly “unfit to work.”

But the story has a happy ending. Eventually the southern New Jersey colonies flourished, especially those in Salem and Cumberland counties where my ancestors lived. My family

set up their own business – a dress factory – and hired local workers from Carmel, Salem and other nearby Jewish colonies. In 1889, my great-grandparents, Moses Aaron and Bessie Chachkin, were married and in 1891, my grandmother, Elizabeth Aaron, was born. The rest is history – my family history!

Getting back to the story of our refugee family, it also has a happy ending. Thanks to HIAS’s skillful representation and intervention, the refugee family arrived in Philadelphia and was welcomed by the community of more than 200 other Burmese families that Philadelphia agencies have resettled here over the past two years.

They join the many thousands of us who have special appreciation for the work that HIAS does, and will always be thankful for its help. ■

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