



Dorothy Lehman Bernhard
(Courtesy William Lehman Bernhard)

Two Unsung Heroes: Dorothy Lehman Bernhard and Carolin Flexner and Their Assistance to Refugees

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The role of American Jews in responding to the rise of Nazism in Europe and the resulting international refugee crisis has been debated for decades. Did they respond sufficiently to the existential threat? Might they have done more to assist European Jews? More attention in recent years has been given to the valiant efforts of Americans who facilitated the immigration of refugees—in supplying funds, completing the maze of paperwork required to exit from European countries and enter the United States (or any country that would take them), arranging for transport, and liaising with refugee organizations. Less attention has been paid to the process of supporting and preparing refugees to meet the challenges of American life. This article examines the efforts of Dorothy Lehman Bernhard and Carolin Flexner, two American women whose work with refugees was notable yet is rarely acknowledged in historical analysis.

An introductory text panel to the exhibition *Against the Odds: American Jews and the Rescue of Europe's Refugees, 1933–1941* at the Museum of Jewish Heritage: A Living Memorial to the Holocaust succinctly outlines the historical context:

When the Nazis came to power in Germany in 1933 and began to persecute the Jews, they touched off an international refugee crisis that escalated through the 1930s.

Most countries refused to accept large numbers of Jewish refugees. Many German Jews hoped to come to the United States, but laws passed by Congress in the 1920s had ended the era of open immigration. The new policy set strict quotas that made no special allowances for refugees.

Jews in flight from the Nazi regime reached out to relatives, friends, and even strangers in America, whose sponsorship was essential if they hoped to secure US visas. *Against the Odds* tells the story of American Jews who answered their call for help. Working within the limits of American immigration law, they overcame obstacles to bring thousands of Jewish refugees to safety.¹

Bernhard and Flexner devoted their efforts not only to rescuing, but also to resettling refugees. Their work is documented in the Herbert H. Lehman Papers housed in the Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Columbia University Libraries. The collection includes private letters, documents, and regular reports of the Mayer Lehman Charity Fund, which were prepared and distributed by Bernhard to its donors.²

The two women's respective positions, networks, and influence, as well as the financial resources available to them—not to mention their considerable perseverance and dedication—allowed them to address the myriad needs of and issues facing incoming refugees. But their ability to navigate complicated governmental and social systems hinged upon and was amplified by their respective connections to New York State Governor Herbert H. Lehman.

Lehman was the youngest of eight children of Mayer Lehman, a founder of the company that would later become the investment firm Lehman Brothers. Herbert H. Lehman was a leader in refugee policy and assistance. Following his service in the United States Army in World War I, he worked at Lehman Brothers and assisted the Joint Distribution Committee in post-World War I reconstruction, working closely with

1 For further information on the exhibition, see "Against the Odds: American Jews and the Rescue of Europe's Refugees, 1933–1941," Museum of Jewish Heritage, <https://mjh-nyc.org/exhibitions/odds-american-jews-rescue-europes-refugees-1933-1941/>.

2 There were five formal reports of the Mayer Lehman Charity Fund. The First Report (numbers one and two were not numbered) was dated 1 April 1939, and reports followed regularly. The last formal report, the Fifth Report, covered the period of 1 June 1942–31 March 1947. A letter to Elinor Morgenthau dated 10 August 1949 documents continuing support to family members in need. In a three-page letter to Herbert H. Lehman dated 12 March 1952, Dorothy Bernhard writes about ongoing assistance to several families and updates their progress. See boxes 1195–1199, 1329–1330, Herbert H. Lehman Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.



Carolin Flexner
(Courtesy Hortense Flexner Papers, Archives and Special Collections, University of Louisville)

Felix Warburg and Louis Marshall. Lehman served as governor of New York State from 1933 to 1942. With high visibility as a Jew and a philanthropist, he was deluged with requests from relatives and others desperately attempting to flee Nazi Europe.

Lehman's niece, Dorothy Lehman Bernhard, took on the responsibility of assisting over one hundred relatives through a family foundation, the Mayer Lehman Charity Fund, at the governor's request. General pleas for assistance from both Jews and non-Jews throughout Europe were handled by Lehman's assistant, Carolin Flexner. The women worked closely together. The task was large, and the decisions they made meant the difference between life and death for hundreds of people. A note from Flexner to Governor Lehman and his response demonstrate their commitment to provide assistance to those fleeing Europe and resettle them in locations worldwide: "Governor, I'm being swamped with appeals on refugees. How much time do you want me to give to them?' 'Spend as much time as you can, because these people are in trouble, and they need help.'"³

On 12 September 1941, Bernhard welcomed Julie Sinn and her family to America's shores: "I want to tell you how glad I am... that you have arrived in the United States. I know you will find it a wonderful land of opportunity... I would like to see you and welcome you personally."⁴ The Sinn family was among the last to land in New York before the flow of refugees was halted, and with just four days left before their visas expired. They arrived on 1 September 1941. Bernhard had been working to get the family to the United States for many years. In the Fourth Report of the Mayer Lehman Charity Fund, she explained her exasperation that influenced her decision to spend \$2,004.35—at the time, a fantastically large sum—for their tickets to America.⁵ Bernhard

3 *The Reminiscences of Caroline [sic] Flexner*, 1958 308A Category 1C PRCZ, 2:14, Oral History Research Office, Columbia University.

4 Letter from Dorothy Bernhard to Julie Sinn, 12 September 1941, private collection.

5 "Ruth Gruber Finds Haven for 1,000 Holocaust Refugees," Jewish Women's Archive, <https://jwa.org/thisweek/aug/03/1944/ruth-gruber> and Ruth Gruber, *Haven: The Dramatic Story of 1,000 World War II Refugees and how they Came to America* (New York: Three Rivers, 2000).

wrote in the report: “The process of getting the above-mentioned seven people to the United States sounds most simple, but it has involved more labor and correspondence and worry in getting these few people here than for all the people who have previously arrived.”

Ludwig Heimann, a grateful recipient of Flexner’s efforts, wrote: “Now we are 15 months here and we are very happy to be in this nice country. We speak so often of Mr. Governor Lehman and you Dear Miss Flexner and we are heartest [*sic*] thankful that you saved my family from the hell.”⁶ Similarly, Felix Ungar wrote: “In all those 7 months, in those 43 days of jail, in the dreadful nights of that time I saw like a twinkling star your help, the affidavit, the possibility to get out Gretl and the children. And now it has come true.”⁷

Dorothy Lehman Bernhard

Bernhard had the familial connections, persistence, and a staff, which allowed her to deftly navigate governmental obstructions and social service bureaucracy in order to advocate on behalf of refugees. She was born into a family of privilege, within the social circle sometimes referred to as “Our Crowd.”⁸ The term, coined by Stephen Birmingham in his 1967 book of that name, refers to the prominent German Jewish families, many of whom lived in New York, who achieved great financial success in the late nineteenth century. Dorothy was the daughter of banker, philanthropist, and communal leader Arthur Lehman and Adele Lewisohn. Although her social and financial position might have allowed her more idle pursuits, she was a philanthropist and leader of communal organizations in her own right, as well as a passionate social reformer and advocate. She “dedicated her time, energy and family wealth to over

6 Letter from Ludwig Heimann to Herbert H. Lehman, September 1939, box 1196, Herbert H. Lehman Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

7 Letter from Felix Ungar to Herbert H. Lehman, 18 October 1939, box 1330, folder 9, Herbert H. Lehman Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

8 Stephen Birmingham, *Our Crowd: The Great Jewish Families of New York* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967).

thirty human service, public welfare, cultural and social organizations.”⁹

Bernhard also took on the overwhelming responsibility of overseeing the Mayer Lehman Charity Fund because her uncle Herbert H. Lehman asked her to. Under her direction, the fund and various family members provided affidavits guaranteeing the financial backing required to obtain visas to the United States for European refugees. She was able to implement the governor’s requests through her ability, with the assistance of her personal staff, to process paperwork efficiently, combined with her knowledge about which refugee service agency to address for further assistance and her connections to relatives who could provide additional connections and employment opportunities.

Carolyn Flexner

Flexner became the governor’s administrator for refugees, but she was an unlikely person to take on this role. Prior to becoming his assistant, she was a kindergarten teacher. Born in Louisville, Kentucky, in 1892, she was one of six children of Jacob Flexner and Rosa Maas. Her family was accomplished, distinguished, and engaged in community service. Her father was a physician and pharmacist. Her uncle Abraham Flexner was best known for his role in reforming medical and higher education in the United States and Canada. Another uncle, Bernhard Flexner, was an attorney active in Zionist causes and one of the founders of the Palestine Economic Corporation. A third uncle, Simon Flexner, was a professor of pathology at the University of Pennsylvania. Her sister Jennie Flexner was a prominent librarian and suffragist. It is no surprise, then, that Carolyn used her intellect and compassion to advance refugee causes and assist refugees.

Herbert H. Lehman heard of Carolyn Flexner through his wife’s sister, Hilda Altschul Master. He reached out to Flexner in 1923 to represent him on a multitude of boards on which he served. At first, she was overwhelmed with the idea of working alongside prominent leaders in the Jewish community.¹⁰ Lehman patiently persuaded her that she was

9 “Dorothy Lehman Bernhard, April 22, 1903–March 6, 1969,” Jewish Women’s Archive, <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/bernhard-dorothy-lehman>.

10 *Reminiscences*, 2:14.

capable of serving in this capacity, and her help became invaluable to him. He could not attend every meeting, and she became his eyes and ears, providing analysis, as well as notes and observations on what had transpired. Her comments on a meeting early in her career are especially insightful, as they reveal a touch of humor that suggests ease in communicating with her boss:

Yesterday I tossed a coin to see whether I should spend the day being educated by the Palestine Development Council or play around in the country. Palestine won. It was most interesting as I had never met that particular group. Justice Brandeis, whom I had never before met or even heard speak was quite charming. I think his looks impressed me more than his speech for he reminded me a great deal of Abraham Lincoln. His speech dealt with the possibilities of getting Palestine on a sound economic basis, doing away with standards built on receipts of charity and encouraging standards based on stabilized business methods. I liked his personality, his straightforwardness and in spite of his training the idealistic outlook that he kept.

The most forceful and pregnant speech of the afternoon was given by Prof. Frankfurter [*sic*] who spoke on what the P.D.C. stood for. He said nothing particularly new but he said it in quite a different way. His plea was for scrapping the talk and sentimentalism of the past and carrying on the modern methods which the P.D.C. has started. The J.D.C. Reconstruction cooperation was talked of.¹¹

Flexner's role in refugee assistance took on a new dimension in the 1930s, when she assumed the role of coordinating cases for the governor's office. In numerous instances, she extended assistance beyond her official responsibilities. An example is the case of Dr. Theo and Grete Wild. In August 1938, newly-married Salo Theo Wild was tipped off that he was to be arrested, and he fled Austria to Switzerland. His wife, Grete, received a visa for the United States in January 1939 and came

11 Memo from Carolin Flexner to Herbert H. Lehman, 28 May 1923, box 1190, folder 5, Herbert H. Lehman Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

to New York. From Switzerland, Salo Theo fled to Chile and worked as a farmer. Flexner operated through the National Refugee Service and with several other individuals on his behalf. Flexner also provided a letter of credit. Within weeks of his arrival in the United States in November 1941, he paid back all the money that had been lent to him.

Grete contacted the governor in late 1939. She had been married for only two weeks before her husband fled Vienna to South America. By the time she wrote to the governor, they had been separated for months. Flexner personally provided a refugee affidavit to the United States for Theo using borrowed money—more than she had in the bank. In an interview housed at Columbia University, Flexner said:

Mrs. Lehman sent me a letter from a girl who had been married two weeks in Austria when Hitler came in. The husband's family had sent an affidavit to them, to come. It turned out that Theo Wild, who was the man—Dr. S. Theo Wild—had been born in a part of Austria which was not then Austria. So the little wife had to come, and he had to start on a trek around the world, and this girl was just devastated... I sent for her and she came to see me. She was then working in a factory. She had gone to see lots of people. She had gone to see Arthur Garfield Hays, and Mr. Hays had given her an affidavit for her husband.¹² I talked with Mr. Hays' secretary, and we worked on it for a long time. Every time anybody from the Joint Distribution Committee went to South America, to Chile, I made them go and talk to the consul to get this man a number, because what he needed was a number.

Then finally my secretary met a man downstairs, one of these rich youngsters, who said, "What's new?" She said, "I need a thousand dollars to send to a refugee in Chile, because the consul won't give him a number until he has a thousand dollars in his bank account." So he said, "All right, I'll give you a thousand dollars if Miss Flexner signs the note."

So Miss Flexner, without any thousand dollars in the bank, signed the note... Now he is the official doctor for the Colombian Government and

12 Arthur Garfield Hays was a prominent lawyer and a founder of the American Civil Liberties Union.

the U.N., and he just called me last week and said that he had been given the highest honor that the Colombian Government could give him.”¹³

Flexner took a personal interest in many of the refugees she assisted. She considered their emotional needs and not just their physical well-being. The compassion she displayed, and the financial assistance she gave, exceeded the requirements of her job.

Immigration Process

Although the Lehmans enjoyed privileged positions, they did not have unlimited resources to support and assist immigrants. Adding to the challenge, State Department restrictions controlled the number of affidavits any single individual could provide. Accordingly, they reached out to others in their circle to support their efforts.

In order to sort and vet the dozens of people claiming to be relatives and requesting assistance, Bernhard enlisted her second cousin, Leo Thalheimer, who arrived in the United States in 1939. He helped to confirm these individuals' ties, describe their connections to the Lehmans, and attest to their character. His role was crucial, because the Lehmans had already been in America for almost a century. Mayer Lehman, Dorothy's grandfather, was born in 1830 and immigrated to the United States in 1850. He was the youngest of eight children born over twenty years. Herbert, born in New York in 1878, was the youngest of Mayer's children and had limited knowledge of his cousins in Germany. Having arrived more recently, Thalheimer knew much more about the family still living abroad. Some of the information was provided by his mother, Eva, born in 1856. In a letter Eva wrote to Herbert H. Lehman, she expressed concern for the character of a certain cousin requesting assistance, because there was a family feud dating back to a wedding in 1828. The groom was a Lehman, but she was not sure about the wife's

13 The correspondence in this case is extensive; see box 1330, folder 11, Herbert H. Lehman Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries. Additional documentation comes from Joan Long Salomon, "Salo Theodore Wild, M.D. and Grete Wild: A Case Study from the Lehman Family Rescue Activities Project," unpublished manuscript, 2012.

character, and she expressed doubts about this branch of the family.

Flexner and Bernhard went beyond facilitating the immigration of refugees. They endeavored to help refugees adjust to many aspects of American life. The Columbia University holdings document the myriad ways in which assistance was given and the work accomplished in cooperation with refugee agencies. In the Second Report, Bernhard explains:

I have handled a great many of these emigration problems with the assistance of the National Council of Jewish Women... our refugee connections have been literally destitute when they stepped off the ship. This causes an added burden of insecurity to these emotionally upset people. I don't need to go into what a tragic experience this is, or the difficulties involved in helping these connections to readjust themselves.

When I hear of a pending arrival of a relative, the method I have followed is to ask some close connection, usually another refugee, to meet the incoming individual, or family, on the dock and make all arrangements for their immediate needs.

Bernhard goes on to explain that she worked closely with Dorothy Levy of the National Refugee Service to coordinate assistance, while the fund supplied whatever financial resources were necessary.¹⁴

Reports and letters credit various immigration and social service organizations for their partnership. The Third Report identifies the Joint Distribution Committee and the Hilfsverein in Germany.¹⁵ The Fourth Report acknowledges a Mr. Negin of the Jewish Social Service Organization, Frances Dryfoos of the National Refugee Service, and various agencies and organizations outside of New York, such as the San Francisco Committee for Service to Emigres, the Jewish Family Welfare Association in Minneapolis, and branches of the National Council for Jewish Women.¹⁶

14 Second Report of the Mayer Lehman Charity Fund, pp. 2–3, box 1198, Herbert H. Lehman Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

15 Second Report of the Mayer Lehman Charity Fund, p. 2, box 1198, Herbert H. Lehman Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

16 Fourth Report of the Mayer Lehman Charity Fund, pp. 2, 7, box 1198, Herbert H. Lehman Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

Bernhard continued to network with cousins who could provide affidavits and support. Richard P. Limburg signed an affidavit for Eugen and Kate Rosenthal.¹⁷ (Eugen Rosenthal had already “been in a concentration camp for a very long time.”) Robert Lehman, president of Lehman Brothers, provided an affidavit for his father’s second cousin’s wife.¹⁸ The Bittenwiesers (Helen Bittenwieser was Bernhard’s sister) supported Julie Stern’s family in New York.¹⁹

Bernhard and Flexner were among those who met arriving refugees at New York’s piers. William Bernhard, Dorothy’s son, recalls his mother’s frequent excursions to greet arriving family members.²⁰ This was only the first of many personal interactions, the initial step in their ongoing individualized assistance.

Americanization

The responsibilities undertaken by both Flexner and Bernhard were extensive. Through refugee organizations, they not only distributed funds but arranged for transportation, education, and housing. They also directly provided support to meet a host of challenges faced by the new arrivals. The range of their activities is described below.

Financial Assistance

The fund provided complete or partial monthly stipends until the refugees could support themselves. They forwarded additional funds either directly or through partner agencies on an emergency basis as needed. In addition to the relatives they themselves sponsored, the Lehmans also assumed responsibility for several families who received affidavits from others but not the financial support they desperately needed.

In one of her periodic reports, Bernhard described the situation of

17 Second Report of the Mayer Lehman Charity Fund, p. 12, box 1198, Herbert H. Lehman Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

18 Affidavit from Robert Lehman for Lea Lehman, box 1197, Herbert H. Lehman Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

19 Interview by author with Gary Menkel, husband of Julie Sinn Menkel, 4 August 2010, Queens, New York.

20 Interview by author with William Bernhard, 12 October 2022, New York City.

the Jakob Blum family. The Lehmans had not provided affidavits for the Blums because they were concerned that the family might not become self-supporting. The Blums eventually secured affidavits from the movie producer Carl Laemmle. (Jakob Blum had been a Hebrew teacher and cantor in Ichenhausen, Germany, where Laemmle had grown up decades earlier.) But Laemmle did not provide the financial support the Blums required once they were in the United States, so the Lehmans stepped up.

In time, Blum landed a job in the finance department of Klein's department store in New York. Later, rabbinic positions became available to him in Williamsport, Pennsylvania and Ogdensburg, New York. (It is not clear from Bernhard's report whether the fund took a role in securing these positions for him.) However, Blum turned down those offers. According to his son, Herbert, his father's position at Klein's was secure. He hesitated to accept a job that might be temporary or could be lost, and would leave his family destitute.²¹

The Lehmans not only provided financial support but also invested in refugees. Arthur Heimann and his wife desired to establish a candy-making business, and they launched the Mignon Chocolate Company from their apartment. In June 1939, Bernhard recognized the potential of the couple and brought in Mr. Negin of the Jewish Social Services Association (today the Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services) as an advisor to draw up a business plan. The Lehmans invested \$5,000 in the company—a significant sum at the time—and larger additional amounts later on.²²

Employment and Training

Many placements were made by refugee organizations with whom Bernhard and Flexner worked—and not only locally. They looked for positions for the new arrivals outside New York City, where more job opportunities were available, especially in medical and academic professions. Bernhard arranged for nineteen-year-old Ludwig Stern to participate in a National Youth Administration Project in Minnesota, and the

21 Interview by author with Herbert Blum, 8 October 2012, New York City.

22 Second Report of the Mayer Lehman Charity Fund, p. 6, box 1198, Herbert H. Lehman Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

fund paid for the program.²³ Bernhard gave Else Sinn a letter of recommendation for the designer house Hattie Carnegie, Inc. in order for her to learn dressmaking.²⁴ For some immigrants, they arranged programs to improve their English language skills and further job opportunities. They also provided information for those whose fields required recertification, such as doctors, to help them complete the required exams. Bernhard and Flexner also wrote inquiries and recommendations on behalf of the refugees. In some cases, family members had lost jobs or sought positions more suited to their abilities, at which point the two women went into action for a “second round” (or further rounds).

They drew on their networks to aid them in this work. Gunter Lehman was a distant relative who did not request assistance, yet, when Flexner learned of his efforts to sell stationery products, she reached out to possible purchasers including her relatives—the Buttenwiesers—and the firms Wertheim and Kuhn Loeb.²⁵ Lehman family connections were sometimes far removed. For example, Eric (alternately, Erich) and Lee Gerst were related only through marriage. Their father, Ernst, was a brother of Hans Gerst and husband of Irma Silberman, and a physician. Irma’s grandmother was a sister of Mayer Lehman’s wife, Babette Neugass. In 1937, Eric, age nineteen, was the first in his family to arrive in the United States; his mother Anni followed in 1938 with his sister Lee, a year younger than Eric.²⁶ Flexner attempted to assist Anni with the extension of her visitor’s visa, but without success.²⁷ Anni was forced to return to Germany, leaving her two children to fend for themselves. Flexner counseled the young adults in many ways. She wrote letters of

23 Third Report of the Mayer Lehman Charity Fund, section 1, p. 7, box 1198, Herbert H. Lehman Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

24 Second Report of the Mayer Lehman Charity Fund, p. 9, box 1198, Herbert H. Lehman Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

25 Box 1329 C-17-171, Herbert H. Lehman Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

26 Liselotte Gerst passenger record, arrival date 22 Dec 1939 in New York City, identifying her brother, Eric Girst [*sic*], as the relative she is joining in the United States. Access through Ancestry.com.

27 Letter from Carolin Flexner to Eric Gerst, 23 December 1938, box 1195, Herbert H. Lehman Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

introduction for Lee, who in time secured a position in the laboratory of Beth Israel Hospital. She also helped find Lee clothing suitable for her position, even providing her with a purse. In addition, she sent introductions for Eric, who thanked her for “taking care of her [his sister] like a mother.”²⁸ When their father arrived in 1941, together with Anni, she reached out to find a position for him in the medical field.²⁹

Requests on Behalf of Family Members

Once in America, many refugees immediately initiated efforts to assist other family members in their efforts to emigrate. Often, requests came for relatives of spouses of Lehmans, for in-laws of refugees, or for their nieces or nephews who were not directly related to the Lehman family. Before *Kristallnacht* in November 1938, the family was open to taking on responsibilities on behalf of these more distant connections. As the number of requests increased dramatically in the aftermath of the pogrom, however, they declined them, reserving their limited opportunities in order to assist direct blood relatives. With each affidavit issued, the Lehmans took on financial responsibility. By 1938, they were already providing significant funds for many relatives unable to support themselves in the United States. Dr. Erich Kaufman arrived with an affidavit from the Lehmans in March 1938. He was a nephew of a cousin’s spouse, not directly related by blood. He became a physician at Mount Sinai Hospital. Shortly after his arrival, he requested affidavits for his parents, who would have been elderly, and Bernhard refused his request.³⁰

28 Letter from Eric Gerst to Carolin Flexner, 17 January 1940, box 129, folder 1, Herbert H. Lehman Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

29 Dr. Ernst Gerst was sixty-two when he arrived in the United States. Obtaining a medical license would have been difficult, and Flexner was inquiring about a position as a companion or assistant. Letter from Carolin Flexner to Fanny Lissauer Mendelsohn at Mount Sinai Hospital, 27 October 1941, box 1195, Herbert H. Lehman Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

30 Third Report of the Mayer Lehman Charity Fund, p. 5, box 1198, Herbert H. Lehman Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

Maintaining Dignity

Many of the newly arrived relatives had shipped their worldly possessions from Europe in “lifts,” or large shipping containers. In America, their new homes were modest at best, and their belongings had to be placed in storage, but few refugees had an income or savings that could cover this expense. Flexner not only saw to it that the expense was covered but also managed the logistics. As another illustration of her sensitivity to the wide-ranging emotional needs of the refugees, Flexner arranged a car for the funeral of Emma Stein’s brother-in-law.³¹

Flexner also arranged for food to be sent to Dora Edinger. An academic who had served as editor of *Die Logenschwester* in Germany prior to the war, she had difficulty supporting herself after arriving in the United States in the mid-1930s. In a letter to the Community Service Society of New York, Flexner thanked the organization for its shipment of food to Edinger. She explained that “[Edinger] would be devastated to know that the basket came from a charitable organization.” Flexner had signed the receipt for the package and sent it on to Edinger anonymously with a note wishing her: “Merry Christmas.”³²

Education

Finding appropriate educational opportunities for the refugees proved challenging, but in some cases, there were job training options, as with Ernst Silberman, who trained at the Modern Bake and Pastry School. In 1937, the fund paid for an accounting course for Justin Selig; after completing the course, he was able to find employment and became

31 Letter from Emma Stein thanking Carolin Flexner for arranging the car, 30 March 1942, box 1197, Herbert H. Lehman Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

32 Box 1199 C-17 150, Herbert H. Lehman Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries. See also Dora Edinger Collection at the Leo Baeck Institute, Center for Jewish History, <https://archives.cjh.org//repositories/5/resources/15124>. Edinger was a well-known intellectual. There is a recommendation by Rabbi Leo Baeck for her in the Leo Baeck Institute collection, as well as a letter from Martin Buber, and one by Eric M. Warburg to her acknowledging the value of her book on Bertha Pappenheim.

self-supporting.³³ The governor provided tuition support to Marlene Ungar, a relative of his wife, Edith Altschul, shortly after her arrival in the United States, albeit through personal funding, not the Mayer Lehman Charity Fund. At the time, she was attending the Horace Mann School for Girls. This support was unknown to Ungar.³⁴

Medical and Continuing Expenses

The Lehmans continued to support some of their relatives decades after their arrival in America. According to Bernhard in her Fifth Report to the family from 1947, Hedwig Haas, a distant cousin, arrived in America via China and settled in Seattle, Washington.³⁵ For some years, Haas worked in the medical department of the Boeing Company, but a hemorrhage in an eye left her with serious vision impairment. Bernhard sent her an unsolicited gift of \$200 to cover some of her expenses.

In 1949 Bernhard wrote to her cousin Elinor Morgenthau about the families who had been self-supporting but for various reasons required additional financing. Until that time, funds had been distributed through social service agencies such as the Jewish Family Service (formerly the Jewish Social Service Association). By the end of the 1940s, these organizations had refocused their missions and turned over relief efforts to the Department of Welfare. The Lehmans were hesitant to send family connections for public assistance. They hired a social worker privately to address the needs of a handful of relatives.³⁶

Hans Gerst (uncle of Eric and Lee, discussed above) and his wife Irma (daughter of Herbert H. Lehman's first cousin Pauline Steinheimer Silberman) were very close to their American cousins. In fact, Bernhard

33 First report of the Mayer Lehman Charity Fund, p. 8, box 1198, Herbert H. Lehman Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

34 Email from Marlene Griffith Bagdikian to the author, 20 December 2010. Marlene was later married to Ben Bagdikian, known for his role in bringing the Watergate scandal and the Pentagon Papers to public attention.

35 Fifth Report of the Mayer Lehman Charity Fund, p. 1, box 1198, Herbert H. Lehman Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

36 Letter from Bernhard to Elinor Morgenthau, 10 August 1949, collection of Joan Morgenthau Hirschhorn.

writes in the Fifth Report that these cousins had received support even prior to their immigration.³⁷ In October 1945, the Gersts were hit by a car and Irma spent many months in a hospital. The Lehmans covered their medical bills.

The Gersts' daughter, Thea-Marie, who was brought over as a child, died of cancer in 1974 at the age of forty-four, leaving behind two young children. The Lehmans supported Thea's family after her death. In 1972, Edith Altschul Lehman, Herbert H. Lehman's widow, wrote a touching letter to Helen Buttenwieser, who had taken over responsibility for the Mayer Lehman Charity Fund following her sister Dorothy's death in 1969. Edith urged Helen to continue support for this family, writing: "She [Thea-Marie] worries about the future if anything should happen to her... You will make note of this, I know, just in case I am not here, or Thea should not be here." Edith herself died three years later.³⁸

Conclusion

The Herbert H. Lehman Papers at Columbia University Libraries provide a unique lens into the complexity of immigration and resettlement processes. Flexner and Bernhard relied upon a vast array of social service organizations, as well as a network of family and business associates, to secure financial support, sponsorship, jobs, advice, and business and personal connections. These two women went further to build personal relationships with refugees, and find ways to help them secure employment, housing, social services, and medical care, and in some cases even establish businesses. They supported Americanization in a difficult environment.

Flexner and Bernhard knew that this work would gnaw at their souls. Both participated in the decision-making regarding who would be selected to receive an affidavit—a ticket to freedom, whose connections to the family were too remote, whose character did not portend a successful integration into American life, and even those for whom their efforts would be

37 Fifth Report of the Mayer Lehman Charity Fund, p. 5, box 1198, Herbert H. Lehman Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

38 Letter from Edith Altschul Lehman to Helen Buttenwieser, box 1199, folder 1, Herbert H. Lehman Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

too late. The personal toll on the lives of Flexner and Bernhard cannot be known in any definitive way. Surely, they must have felt some satisfaction in their successes but also deep pain from their inability to help everyone in need. Flexner ends a letter to Governor Lehman dated 4 October 1937: "I had no idea that you would consider doing this and I must admit that your letter gave me a real thrill of joy. I was so low in my mind after I had to tell Mrs. Gumbrich about my being unable to help her and then your grand letter came along and put hope into the whole situation."³⁹

As part of her oral history at Columbia University, Flexner was asked: "As far as you know, did all the Lehman family get out of Germany?" Her response was, "I think so, yes. I don't think they have ever heard of any people who were killed."⁴⁰ Perhaps she misunderstood the question or had another reason for responding in this way, for, while it is true that no close relations by the name of Lehman were murdered, the governor's first cousin, Eva Lehman Thalheimer, died in Theresienstadt. She was the mother of Leo Thalheimer, Lehman's adviser on family members in Germany before and during the war.⁴¹

Flexner was quite familiar with the Thalheimer case, as well as with many others. She had personally drafted dozens of letters to relatives whom the governor was unable to assist. Many had to be refused after the State Department began limiting the number of affidavits that could be issued by any one individual. In addition, as conditions deteriorated in the late 1930s and early 1940s, Flexner drafted letters to hundreds of unrelated individuals desperate to flee countries throughout Europe. Their appeals were heartrending. In one such case, a friend of the family stated that, although there was no blood relation, "my grandfather was buried next to your grandfather" in the Jewish cemetery of Rimpar. It could well have been the case that, despite the large number of refugees

39 Benno Gumbrich was not directly related to the Lehmans, and they did not provide an affidavit. Gumbrich did, however, get to the United States with the assistance of other relatives; see box 1329, file 161-59, Herbert H. Lehman Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

40 *Reminiscences*, 2:14.

41 First Report of the Mayer Lehman Charity Fund, p. 7, box 1198, Herbert H. Lehman Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

she aided, it was too emotionally fraught for Flexner to accept the fates of those whom she was unable to rescue.

Through the fund, family support to the relatives they brought to America continued, in some cases through the 1970s. Otto Stern, who had been given an affidavit by Arthur Lehman in 1935, became an invalid from multiple sclerosis. In 1970, after the death of Stern's wife, Helen Bittenwieser coordinated his care through the Jewish Family Services.⁴²

Refugees expressed gratitude in beautiful letters, such as one from Hugo and Else Ehrmann, who wrote regarding the affidavits given to their family: "By your noble deed you have done us a benefit that can be esteemed only by persons in our condition, who must leave their country and don't know where to find a new home."⁴³ Philipp Selig wrote: "Only those that have lived as we have, all alone for years in a small town can understand what the words 'affidavit mailed' mean to me. ... Be assured that I shall always try to live up to your expectations... May God reward you and your dear ones for your help."⁴⁴

Descriptions of gifts noted in the reports also point to their gratitude. The Fifth Report indicates that the Rosenthals sent a box of candied fruit every Christmas, the Blums sent cakes and candies, and Justin Selig sent a box of pears. I asked Robert Bernhard, Dorothy's elder son, if he remembered eating the bounty each December. He replied: "My mother was the original re-gifter."⁴⁵ William Bernhard, Robert's younger brother, was too young to remember the gifts, but he said that, until recently, he had never understood the extent of his mother's dedication to her extended family. His involvement in this ongoing research has broadened his understanding of his mother's work.

42 Letter from Helen L. Bittenwieser to Frances L. Beatman, Jewish Family Services with regard to Otto Stern, 22 December 1970, box 1197, Herbert H. Lehman Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

43 Letter from Hugo Ehrmann and Else Ehrmann to Dorothy Bernhard, 5 March 1939, box 1195, Herbert H. Lehman Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

44 Letter from Philipp Selig to Dorothy Bernhard from Gerolzhofen/Mainfranken, 28 December 1938, box 1329, C17-173, Herbert H. Lehman Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

45 Interview by author with Robert Bernhard, November 18, 2012, New York City.

Flexner's work in this capacity has never been properly acknowledged. Her career with refugees continued even after Lehman's tenure as governor ended. In the few articles that refer to her, her name is misspelled, including a *New York Times* article in 1944, which noted that she served as Lehman's representative on various committees and undertook extensive work for UNRRA, the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration.⁴⁶ The 1958 oral history at Columbia also spells her name incorrectly, as does a Jewish Virtual Library page.⁴⁷ At least a 1945 article in the *Courier-Journal* of Louisville, Kentucky, does spell it correctly. That publication notes her work as the deputy director of camps for UNRRA.⁴⁸ There is no biography of her in the Jewish Women's Archive. Few photographs of her could be found. The efforts of Bernhard and Flexner to save and improve the lives of hundreds were remarkable. Their efforts received little public recognition in their own lifetimes or in the decades since. This article should draw further attention to their legacy.

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Assistance for this article was provided by Esther Brumberg, former Senior Curator of Collections, Museum of Jewish Heritage: A Living Memorial to the Holocaust.

46 "Caroline Flexner Long Lehman Aide," *New York Times* (3 January 1944): 18.

47 "Jennie Maas Flexner, 1882–1944," Jewish Virtual Library, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jennie-maas-flexner>.

48 Donie Carmack, "Back from Balkans, Neville Miller Warns That Relief Must Not Lag," *Courier-Journal* (Louisville) (6 May 1945): section 3, p. 3.