Jewish Refugee Rescue in the Philippines
The Cantor Joseph Cysner Story
(Part 1 of 2)
Though I have never met him, I feel as if I know more about Cantor Joseph Cysner than any other person alive – perhaps even more than his children. I spent the better part of a decade researching this remarkable Holocaust survivor story. While documenting and penning his incredible tale, I often times felt the human at the center of the story was getting lost. Writing this article has helped me to find him again.

Joseph Cysner, born in 1912 in Bamberg, was the 7th and last child of Jewish parents from Eastern Europe. Regardless of the fact that he was born, raised, and educated in Germany, he was still classified as a Polish Jew under Nazi Germany’s racial laws. He left Bamberg in 1929 to attend the Jewish Theological Seminary in Würzburg and graduated in 1933. Joseph began his career as a Cantor in Germany the same year that Hitler was appointed Chancellor. As Joseph labored in the Jewish communities of Hannover and Hildesheim between 1933 and 1937, he witnessed the rising flood of antisemitic legislation marginalizing the political, economic, and social positions of Jews in Germany. Nazi anti-Jewish measures in Germany accelerated with the enactment of the Nuremberg Laws in 1935, in which German Jews lost their citizenship rights. Joseph’s older brothers all emigrated in the early 1930s, one went to the United States and two others went to Palestine. His sisters both married and moved to Berlin. In 1937, Joseph received a lifetime contract as Cantor at the Verband Reform Synagogue in Hamburg, the same year his father died. Joseph shouldered the financial responsibility for his widowed mother for the rest of his life. He never saw his brothers that went to Palestine again, nor his sister Charlotte and her family, who all perished in Auschwitz.

The critical year of Joseph’s story is 1938. Poland passed legislation aimed at its Jewish citizens living abroad that virtually rescinded citizenship for all persons holding Polish passports who have lived outside of Poland for 5 years or longer. These series of new statutes essentially made nearly 60,000 Polish Jews living in Germany, and the newly annexed territories of Austria and the Sudetenland, stateless. This enraged Hitler, who demanded that Poland rescind the decrees. The Anschluss of Austria and annexation of Czech territories earlier in 1938 had sent thousands of Jews to consul offices trying to flee back to Poland, which Poland frantically tried to halt as a tidal wave of Polish Jews attempted to return. Hitler decided to trump Poland’s play, and on October 26, 1938 he ordered the arrests of all Polish Jews still residing in Germany and Austria in order to transport them en masse to the Polish border in the first massive deportation of denounced Jews by Nazi Germany. An estimated 17,000 Jews in Germany and Austria – men, women, children, elderly, cripple, whatever – were arrested on October 27, held overnight in centers, jails, parks, or other large facilities, trucked to train depots, locked into passenger cars, and transported to the Polish border on October 28th and 29th of 1938. Imagine trains from all over Greater Germany packed with thousands of frightened and disoriented people all headed in one direction – East.

Joseph was one of nearly 900 Jews deported that night from Hamburg. His mother, still in Bamberg, was spared. Cantor Cysner wrote a memoir of the event and the terrible scene of chaos, suffering, and terror at the border when masses of Jews were driven by bayoneted German soldiers across the border and Polish border guards fired rifles into the air to stop them. It was pandemonium.

These stateless Jews were sheltered all along the German-Polish border in makeshift tent camps until many were sent on to Warsaw. Joseph and about 8,000 others were detained at a Polish border town called Zbaszyn. His memoir tells of his experiences during the 6 months he was held there. An important fact of history should be noted – part of that transport of Jews that were taken to Zbaszyn included Jews from Hannover, where Joseph had once lived and worked. The Grynszpan family from Hannover also ended up in Zbaszyn. The refugees at Zbaszyn were able to send out telegrams and the Grynszpan family sent some to their son, Herschel, who was at school in Paris, telling him about their terrible expulsion from their home. In his despair, Herschel went to the German Embassy in Paris and shot and killed a consular official, Ernst vom Rath. This act triggered Kristallnacht, the infamous night of broken glass on November 9, 1938. After hearing about Kristallnacht while being held at Zbaszyn, Joseph knew he and all the other refugees at Zbaszyn would never again live in Germany.

While interned at Zbaszyn, Joseph received a telegram from his friend and colleague, Rabbi Josef Schwartz, who had immigrated to Manila from Hildesheim in September 1938. Schwartz had convinced the leaders of the Jewish Community in Manila to support the refugees there.
that the growing diverse ethnic community of Jewish refugees needed a Cantor to help unify it and when he sent the telegram to Joseph, he did not know that Joseph was no longer in Hamburg. But the telegram, through good German bureaucracy, found Joseph in Zbaszyn. Joseph answered yes to the job offer and was able to leave Zbaszyn in April 1939, arriving in Manila in May 1939. Joseph was met by other refugee Jews who had escaped Europe through the efforts of Philippine officials, Philippine President Manuel Luis Quezón y Molina and High Commissioner Paul V. McNutt, and a rescue committee led by wealthy American merchant Jews in Manila. Over the course of 3 to 4 years, 1300 refugee Jews from Europe found a safe haven from Nazi tyranny in the Far Eastern paradise of Manila.

Depending when in the time frame of the pre-WWII era in which refugees left, there were two different major routes that provided transport for refugee Jews from various points of departure in Europe to ports in southern and eastern Asia. From the early 1930s to the mid-1940s, the first route, by sea, carried fleeing refugees from ports mostly in Italy on to Alexandria, Egypt and then through the Suez Canal to ports-of-call in Bombay, Singapore, Hong Kong, Manila, Shanghai, and Kobe and Yokohama, Japan. Other vessels that left from seaports in northern Europe, such as Bremen or Hamburg, usually sailed around the Cape of Good Hope, extending the already four week voyage time to east Asia by another six weeks. Ships could be booked six months in advance and carry as many as one thousand Jewish refugees per voyage. The other major route of transportation to the Far East was the land route across Russia and Siberia via the Trans-Siberian Railway and Chinese Eastern Railroad that had once brought Russian Jews to Asia two decades earlier.

Jewish refugees escaping Nazi persecutions began arriving in Asian ports as early as 1933, following Hitler’s ascent to power. Some refugees en route to the open city of Shanghai jumped ship in Manila, seeking asylum in an American overseas colony rather than an Asian one. The number of refugees seeking asylum in Asian ports corresponded to the waves of increased antisemitic violence in the Third Reich under Nazism. In Joseph’s flight to the Philippines, he shared quarters on ship with many refugees bound for Shanghai. In one year’s time, the Jewish refugee numbers in Shanghai went from 1,500 near the end of 1938 to nearly 17,000 by the end of 1939. Stripped of their assets and property, these refugee Jews augmented the already destitute population of Hongkew with their similarly impoverished numbers. Large-scale relief plans implemented by the existing Jewish communities of Shanghai collected funds and provided affordable lodging and food distribution centers. Much needed aid also began to arrive from foreign offices of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, commonly known as the Joint or the JDC, and from the American Hebrew Immigration Aid Society (HIAS). But as time advanced and as more and more refugee locations around the world competed for funds from the JDC, HIAS and other Jewish relief organizations of the world, it became more difficult to fill the needs of the thousands of Jewish refugees in Shanghai, and by extension, to other Asian ports as well, Manila included.

Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi Germany arrived in the Philippines as early as 1933, but they were few in numbers and their escape almost entirely undocumented. However, the first significant influx of European refugee Jews to arrive in Manila did not come directly from Europe, but rather from the Jewish refugee community in Shanghai. With the renewal of hostilities between the Japanese and Chinese in 1937, which resulted in the occupation of Peking by Japanese forces, the four million inhabitants of Shanghai faced the dangers of war in an occupied territory and various civilian communities sought escape from Shanghai’s battle grounds. Germany’s shift of alliance from China to Japan at this time alarmed German Jews in Shanghai, who feared German pressure on Japan to adopt Nazi discriminatory policies against Shanghai’s German Jewish population. The Manila Jewish community shared that fear and organized the Jewish Refugee Committee of Manila (JRC) with the intention of rescuing German members of the Shanghai Jewish community. When the Sino-Japanese War broke out on July 7, 1937, the JRC received a telegram seeking assistance for Shanghai’s refugee Jews. The small Jewish community in Manila immediately raised $8,000, but the money was not
needed as the wealthier Sephardic Jews of Shanghai stepped up and cared for the needs of the Shanghai refugees on their own. The JRC in Manila decided to hold the funds in escrow for future needs, which came almost immediately.

One month later the German government sent a ship to Shanghai to evacuate all German nationals from the war zone to Manila. In the evacuation, they also took aboard about 30 German Jewish refugee families. The Jewish community in Mania took charge of the refugee Jewish families at the request of the German Consul in the Philippines. This spontaneous rescue of German refugee Jews from Shanghai became the impetus for the devised rescue plans that followed, bringing Joseph and 1,300 like him to a safe haven in the Pacific.

Refugee rescuers in the Philippines operated selection and sponsorship programs unlike any Jewish rescue operations executed anywhere else in the world during these years. The plans involved a collaboration of efforts from political dignitaries and businessmen in the Philippines, relief organizations in both the United States and in Germany, and even government officials in the often antisemitic-leaning U.S. State Department. While some programs proved most successful, others were thwarted, and ultimately, the few who were saved underwent further depravations under the invading Japanese. Joseph’s story helps bring to light the efforts of the many to rescue the few, or in Joseph’s case, the one.

The rescue of the German Jews from Shanghai came to the attention of the Refugee Economic Corporation (REC), an affiliate of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) headquartered in New York City. Incorporated in 1934, the REC, originally called the Refugee Rehabilitation Committee, specialized in funding Jewish settlements in countries that agreed to take in refugee Jews. Exactly how the plan to initiate rescue in the Philippines was conceived has become shrouded in legend over the last seventy years. Stories credit President Quezon for initiating the offer, others claim High Commissioner McNutt devised the plan, and still others place members of the JRC at a poker table with General Eisenhower, President Quezon, and High Commissioner McNutt, where these gambling buddies hashed out a rescue plan while indulging in fine cigars rolled by S. Frieder & Sons Manufacturing. But according to the documentary record, once information spread to the REC that the Philippines could be a safe haven for further Jewish immigration, the notable correspondence between the real initiators began: Charles Liebman and Bruno Schachner of the REC in New York; Paul V. McNutt, the U.S. High Commissioner for the Philippine Islands; Philip Frieder and his brothers, of the successful Jewish merchant family in the Philippines and directors of the Jewish Refugee Committee in Manila; Manual Luis Quezon y Molina, President of the Commonwealth nation of the Philippines; and J. C. Hyman of the New York-based American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC).

According to correspondence between Liebman and McNutt in May and June of 1938, the REC initiated contact with McNutt through mutual acquaintances with two brothers, Julius and Jacob Weiss, the former an associate with the REC and the latter an Indiana State Senator and personal friend of McNutt. McNutt’s May 19, 1938 letter to Julius Weiss, brother of his friend and colleague Jacob Weiss, is the earliest official record discussing rescue in the Philippines in which McNutt refers back to a promise he made to Jacob’s brother that he, McNutt, would discuss a rescue program with leaders in Manila, confirming that he did and plans were in the works.

Jacob Weiss had sent a letter to McNutt in the Philippines perhaps as early as December 1937 on behalf of the REC, inquiring if it were possible to allow 100 German Jewish families a haven in the archipelago. McNutt replied that he would be in the USA in just a few weeks and that they could talk about it then. McNutt arrived in Washington D.C. on February 23, 1938 and did not return to the Philippines until April 1938. During that time, McNutt and Weiss attended a reception together and talked for about 10 minutes, making arrangements to talk again over breakfast in about 2 days’ time. McNutt indicated that he had several meetings to attend in the meantime with Pres. Roosevelt and the Secretary of State, to name a few. When they met up again, McNutt indicated to Weiss that “it was all...
arranged,” and that visas for refugee Jews would be approved and issued by him without U.S. State Department interference – “When I get back to Manila I’m going to arrange for the proper reception of these refugees.” 10 Communications then rapidly ensued between the Weiss brothers, Paul V. McNutt and Charles Liebman of the REC in New York City.

The REC advanced funds in conjunction with the JDC to meet stipulations voiced by McNutt that the refugees not become public charges. The importance of McNutt’s role in the selection plan, and the sponsorship that came later, cannot be overstated. Without his initiation of the dialog between the Philippine Government, the U.S. State Department, the Jewish Community in Manila, and the American Jewish relief organizations, it is doubtful the plans would have ever germinated. McNutt’s willingness to work with the many agencies involved in these rescue efforts was key to the success of the programs.

Suffice it to say, that when the Philippines was occupied by the Japanese in January 1942, all civilian aliens, who held a passport from a country at war with Japan or Germany, were arrested and interned for 3 years at Santo Tomas University, which had become a civilian prison over night. The irony is that the American and British Jews who were the benefactors of the Jewish refugees were now interned and the majority of the refugee Jews who were German and Austrians were not. But Joseph had a Polish passport and he too was arrested and interned at Santo Tomas. He survived Nazi arrest, expulsion, imprisonment and escape only to encounter the same things at the hands of the Japanese.

Exactly what were these programs and how did they operate? The case study of Joseph’s rescue is a good example. These questions and others will be explored in the second part to this article. 

To learn more about Dr. Harris’ extensive research on the Jews in the Philippines, please visit her site at http://www.bonniesbiz.com.

4. Frank Ephraim, Escape to Manila: From Nazi Tyranny to Japanese Terror (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 22. Frank Ephraim, a survivor of the Jewish refugee Community in Manila, presented a complete database of all the Jewish refugees who came to the Philippines to the JewishGen Family Geneology website, in which he identified 1301 names.
6. Ibid., 145.
9. Paul V. McNutt to Julius Weiss, May 19, 1938, American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee Archives, JDC Collection 33/44, File #784.