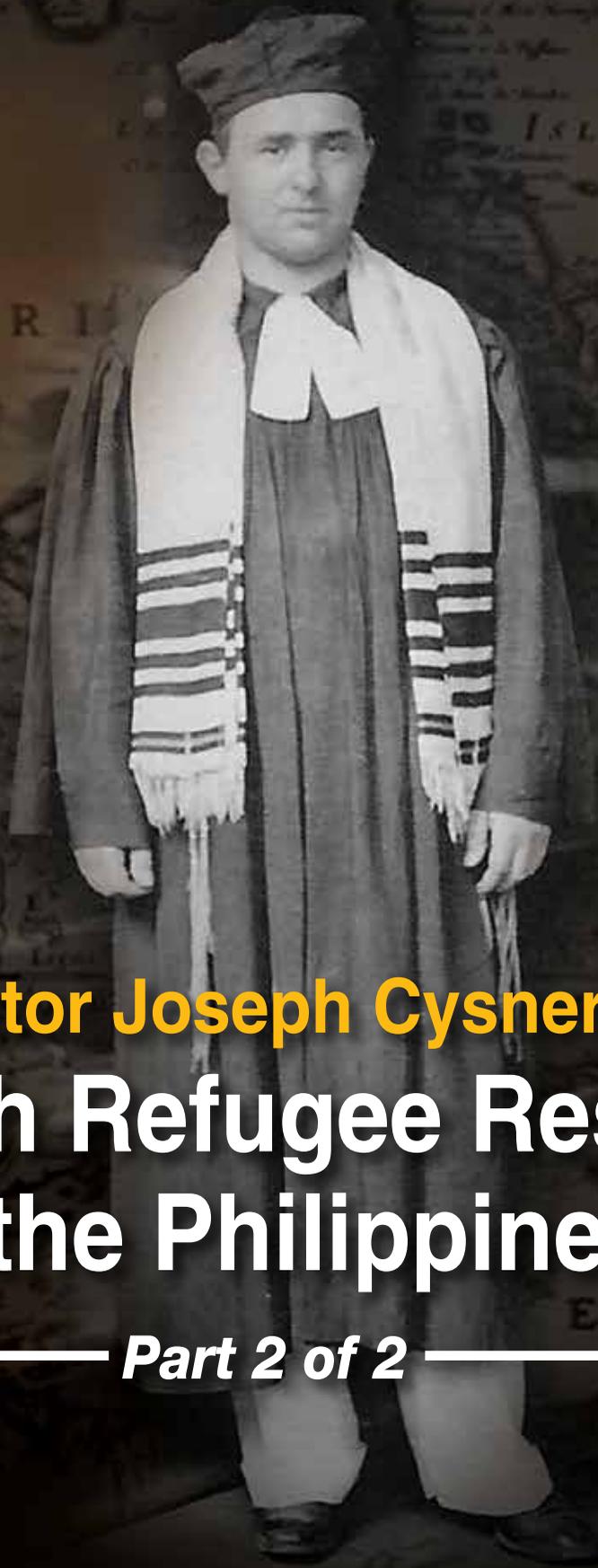


# Feature

by Bonnie M. Harris



## The Cantor Joseph Cysner Story Jewish Refugee Rescue in the Philippines

Part 2 of 2

Photo credit: Jewish Historical Society of San Diego

Cysner inside Emil

Joseph Cysner, a German-Jewish Cantor deported by the Nazis to Poland, came to Manila in 1939, escaping the horrors of the Holocaust. This was possible through a sponsorship program that had the potential to save hundreds, if not thousands more, were it not for the bombing and occupation of the Philippines by the Japanese, at which point rescue turned into incarceration again for some, such as Cysner, and a struggle for survival.

In Cysner's flight to the Philippines, he shared quarters on a 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 16,000 by the end of 1939. Many jumped ship in ports-of-call, disembarking in places such as Bombay, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Manila – especially Manila, since it was the only American-held port city in Asia at the time. When the already existing American-led Jewish community of Manila founded a refugee relief organization to assist their coreligionists in Shanghai, it started a series of events that ultimately rescued over 1,300 refugee Jews from almost certain death at the hands of the Nazis.

The remarkable feat of the rescue of refugee Jews from the warzone of Shanghai in 1937 inspired the inception of further rescue plans on a greater scale in Manila. The important players in that rescue, Philippine President Manuel Quezon, U.S. High Commissioner in the Philippines, Paul V. McNutt, the Frieders (a family of influential Jewish merchants) and the directors of the Jewish Relief Committee in Manila (JRC), along with directors of various international Jewish relief organizations successfully implemented a selection plan to facilitate effective European Jewish rescue in the Philippines. Once McNutt was assured of his discretionary power to facilitate such a rescue, he immediately put the necessary players together to begin the process.

McNutt then immediately requested that the JRC present him with “a list of those who might be absorbed” into the 1938 Philippine economy.<sup>1</sup> The leaders of the Jewish community in Manila composed a list of needed professionals totaling about one hundred families, who could readily assimilate into the economy and port city lifestyle of Manila. Once the JRC had completed its list and received approval from McNutt and Quezon, the list was immediately shared with the Refugee Economic Corporation (REC) in NYC and forwarded on June 1, 1938 to the Hilfsverein der Juden in Deutschland (Relief Association for Jews in Germany) in Berlin.<sup>2</sup> The list included physicians, dentists, nurses, engineers, mechanics, accountants, dressmakers, barbers, cigar makers, and one Conservative Rabbi. Applications forwarded by the Hilfsverein in Berlin began arriving by the end of July 1938. Before they

could even be reviewed and approved by the JRC, desperate refugees began independently arriving in the summer months of 1938, including a German Jewish Rabbi from Hildesheim named Josef Schwarz.

Preceding the first wave of immigrants designated by this McNutt-Frieder Selection Plan, German Rabbi Josef Schwarz and his wife arrived in the Philippines in September 1938. Schwarz, who had worked with Cysner in Hildesheim from 1933 to 1937, soon played a critical role in bringing Cysner to Manila. Schwarz's settlement in the Philippines marked a historic moment, for he was the first ordained rabbi ever to reside and serve in the Philippines.<sup>3</sup> He faced a significantly diverse community of ethnicities, languages, cultures, religious practices, and especially, economic status. To bring religious unity to this conglomerate of differences, Rabbi Schwarz urged the Board of Directors of Manila's Temple Emil to create a position for a cantor to officiate at religious services and who would also teach Sunday School, train choirs, and organize musical programs.<sup>4</sup>

Having obtained permission from the JRC, Rabbi Schwarz cabled his friend Cysner on November 22, 1938 at his last known place of employment, the Verband Reform Synagogue in Hamburg. Amazingly, the telegram made its way to Poland and found Cysner in his detainment at the Polish border-town of Zbaszyn. The English translation read: “Do you want to come? Modest Salary. Side jobs provided. Wire Manila today. Send response. Heartfelt greetings. Schwarz.”<sup>5</sup> Cysner responded in the affirmative – that simple short telegram became his passport to freedom.

Cysner's name made it on the third list of refugees selected in December 1938 by the JRC and approved by McNutt and Quezon for visas to the Philippines. A dozen other names, mostly from Germany, appeared on that list as well. Cysner's story helps illustrate the organization that went into effectuating the Philippine rescue of Jews from Europe. Once Cysner received his confirmation from the JRC in Manila, he worked to obtain the necessary papers to secure his release from Zbaszyn.

With the telegram from Schwarz and references from leaders of the refugee community in Zbaszyn, Cysner traveled to Warsaw to obtain a Polish passport and his visa from the American Consul General in Warsaw, John K. Davis. A few weeks later another communiqué from the State Department arrived on Davis's desk, informing him that:

The Commonwealth Government [Philippines] has granted authority to issue permanent visa to Joseph Cysner even

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though Polish Government will not permit him to return to Poland. Please issue instructions to American Consul in Warsaw authorizing him, to issue permanent visa for the Philippines to Cysner.<sup>6</sup>

Apparently Cysner needed to return to Germany to settle his affairs and Poland was not going to allow him to return. Obtaining the visa before he left Poland was imperative. Unbeknownst to the State Department as of their April 20th dispatch quoted above, Cysner had already obtained his visa and was preparing to sail for the Philippines.

Cysner left Poland in April 1939, reversing the path that had brought him to the border-town of Zbaszyn in the first place. After boarding the train that carried him from Warsaw, past Zbaszyn, to Berlin and onto Hamburg, Cysner set his affairs in order, obtained travel money from friends and colleagues, and secured passage on the *Scharnhorst*, one of the new "East Asia Express Steamers," sailing out of Genoa, Italy in April 1939. He docked in Singapore on May 11 and arrived in Manila on May 15. Cysner was just one of thousands of European refugees boarding passenger liners from Baltic and Mediterranean ports en route to Asian destinations.

Cysner's odyssey illustrates the obstacles thousands of others endured in their quests to flee Europe and find safety in Asia. Having already suffered the loss of his citizenship rights,

leaving him and over half a million other Jews in Germany and Austria with no legal recourse, Cysner and others endured the confiscation of their property and assets, termination of their jobs, expulsions from schools, random acts of violence, brutal arrests, forced deportations and/or incarcerations, starvation, and depravations. If one was able to survive these and amass the small fortune sometimes necessary to secure travel papers and passenger tickets, the actual journeys themselves could take anywhere from four to ten weeks. For several years, when international immigration quotas drastically inhibited refugees' chances in obtaining visas and other necessary travel permits to western countries, many refugees opted for more immediate travel opportunities to uncertain destinations in the Far East. Ships were often booked six months in advance and carried upwards of a thousand Jewish refugees per voyage. Cysner was one of these lucky few to escape Europe before all sea routes were closed to commercial and passenger shipping.

In 1940, when Denmark and Norway fell to the Germans in April and Italy entered the war in June, the Baltic and Mediterranean Sea ports closed to commercial shipping, so that refugees fleeing to the Far East now had only a land route by which to escape and this was a far more difficult journey.<sup>7</sup> Thousands of Polish Jews as well as Jews from western Europe labored to secure travel documents and train tickets to Moscow, where many boarded the Trans-Siberian rail for a 6,000 mile journey to Harbin in Manchuria, and then onto either the port city of

Dairen or Vladivostok, where they hoped to secure papers to final destinations anywhere within the Pacific Rim. Jewish refugees disembarked at nearly every East Asian port – such as Bangkok, Singapore, and Manila – where already existing Jewish communities hosted the new arrivals as best they could. As refugees arrived and readily assimilated into the economic environment of Manila and other Philippine neighborhoods, rescuers increased their quotas to five hundred.

When Cysner arrived in Manila in May 1939, the Philippine Jewish Community had already been augmented by several hundred refugees, bringing the total Jewish population, residents and refugees, to nearly 1,000, the largest number of Jews in Manila as yet ever assembled. Cysner's unique talents and abilities enhanced the religious life of the Jewish Community in Manila in many ways, from conducting religious services, to forming and training choirs, teaching religion classes, and training young Jews for their bar mitzvahs. Under the tutelage of Rabbi Schwarz and Cantor Joseph Cysner -

Jewish life in Manila flourished [ . . . ] the Sunday school was revived, a Chevra Kadisha (funeral and grave committee) was founded, a Jewish debating club brought those interested in discussing Jewish art and science together, a Youth Club was founded, regular performances were given by a Musical Club and a Dramatic Club, and a Woman's Auxiliary was formed to assist in Jewish welfare work. In addition, a community home was founded in Marikina for the aged and indigent. Numerous social gatherings served to bring the Community together.<sup>8</sup>

The Jewish Refugee Committee of Manila, led by the Frieder Brothers, had composed three different lists of approved immigrants before the end of 1938, always receiving more applications than could possibly be approved. The JRC endorsed additional lists of immigrants in every month of the first half of 1939, which became progressively shorter as fewer funds were available until rescue by selection faced suspension in June 1939. By this date, 750 refugee Jews had arrived in the Philippines and two-thirds had successfully been placed in jobs. The Jewish community of Manila continued to raise \$2,000 a month to support the indigent refugees. As 1939 wore on, the ability to procure employment for refugees declined, and the Frieder Brothers along with others of the JRC, devised recommendations for a revised future immigration program if rescue in the Philippines were to continue.

The McNutt-Frieder selection plan morphed into a sponsorship program to further immigration to the Philippines in response to the escalating economic trials in sustaining an increase in refugee population. The program involved securing “substantial affidavit[s]” guaranteeing ample support for the applicants; a cash deposit in the committee trust fund to

sustain every applicant for a minimum one year's support; and more careful scrutiny of applicants' qualifications ensuring their ability to become self-supporting.”<sup>9</sup> By the summer of 1940, sponsorship became the practiced extension of the selection program. Maintenance for a family of three for one year amounted to \$1,800, plus an additional \$100 per person also needed to be deposited for the administrative expenses of their rescue.<sup>10</sup> By October 1940, sponsorship procedures were well established. Under the sponsorship program, more refugees found haven in the Philippines, as funds were continually made available for rescue in the Philippines by the JDC in New York. Rescue in the Philippines became a template for other sites of rescue being sponsored by these relief organizations abroad.

Cysner's personal odyssey of rescue highlights the remarkable story of how one small nation in the Far East managed to do what so many more capable nations of the world were reluctant to do – save Jewish lives. It is remarkable because they managed to circumvent US State Department obstructionism to Jewish rescue and more than quadruple the population of the local Jewish community. By rescuing 1,300 refugees, plus Cysner, this US Commonwealth saved them from the fate of the six million Jews who were murdered in the Holocaust. While 1,300 refugees, when compared to twelve million victims of Nazi atrocities, are not so many, to those hundreds who found a haven in Manila, each individual life was significant, as was Cysner's. ¶

To learn more about Dr. Harris' research, please visit her site at <http://www.bonniesbiz.com>.

Thank you to the Jewish Historical Society of San Diego for the use of their photographs.

<sup>1</sup> Paul V. McNutt to Julius Weiss, May 19, 1938, American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee Archives, JDC Collection 33/44, File #784. See also "Memorandum . . . November 28th [1938] at 3:30 P.M.," JDC Collection 33/44, File #784.

<sup>2</sup> "Memorandum of Conversation Between Mr. Hyman and Morris Frieder of Cincinnati, Ohio on November 28th [1938] at 3:30 P.M.," American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee Archives, JDC Collection 33/44, File #784

<sup>3</sup> Frank Ephraim, *Escape to Manila: From Nazi Tyranny to Japanese Terror* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 31. 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 Genealogy website, in which he identified 1301 names.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>5</sup> Telegram, Schwarz to Cysner, November 22, 1938, JHSSD Archives, Cantor Joseph Cysner Collection, CJC02.01.

<sup>6</sup> State Department to American Consular Officer in Charge, Warsaw, Poland, April 20, 1939, NARA I, Record Group 59, General Records of the Department of State, Visa Division, Entry 704, Box 246, 811B.55, J/160.

<sup>7</sup> Susan Bachrach and Anita Kassof, *Flight and Rescue* (Washington DC: United States Memorial Museum, 2001), xviii.

<sup>8</sup> Griese, John W. "The Jewish Community in Manila." Master's Thesis. University of the Philippines, April 11, 1954, 27.

<sup>9</sup> Alex Frieder, "Jewish Refugee Committee," May 7, 1940, p. 19, American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee Archives, JDC Collection 33/44, File #784.

<sup>10</sup> Emery Komlos, REC to James Becker, Chicago, July 3, 1940, American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee Archives, JDC Collection 33/44, File #784.