



Jewish Heritage Center Spotlight

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“There is no Chance Left Save U.S.A.”: World War II Case Files from the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society of Boston

On December 6, 1940, Carl Cohen stood before three inspectors from the Board of Special Inquiry at the United States Immigration Station in East Boston. He had arrived in Boston the day before on the steamship *Nova Scotia* with his wife, Dorrith, and just fifty dollars between them. The Cohens, both teachers and writers, planned to travel to New York City, where Dorrith’s sister Lore Harris lived, and their sponsor, a cousin named Morris Cooper, practiced law. Upon disembarking, authorities detained them on the public charge clause: Dorrith was paralyzed from the waist down.

Originally from Germany, the Cohens, who were both Jewish, had been living in England for almost two years prior to making the journey to Boston. Carl was 38 years old and Dorrith, 27. On November 9, 1938—now known as *Kristallnacht*, or the “Night of Broken Glass”—Carl was arrested and sent to Buchenwald Concentration Camp, where he was imprisoned for six weeks.¹ Dorrith procured a visa for Carl, which allowed his release from Buchenwald. British authorities permitted the couple to immigrate to England on two conditions—that Carl would not accept employment

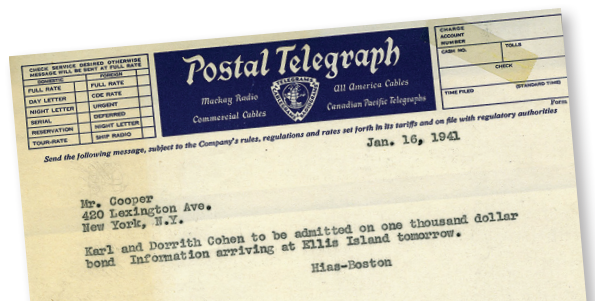
and that they had to leave the country as soon as possible.

In Boston, Carl and Dorrith faced the distinct and horrifying possibility of deportation back to Germany. Dorrith, however, had taught mathematics and was a historian specializing in medieval Scandinavian manuscripts; she was also fluent in Danish, Swedish, and Icelandic. Both Dorrith and Carl were fluent in English. During her hearing, when asked if she thought she could find work in her field in the U.S., Dorrith replied with confidence, “I think so; there is plenty of that sort of study being done here. There are several associations, etc.”² Immigration officials were impressed. They liked Dorrith, and wanted Dorrith and Carl to be allowed admission to the United States.³

The Boston office of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) was notified of the Cohens’ plight the day they arrived in Boston. Helen Alpert, then executive secretary of HIAS Boston, immediately contacted HIAS in New York and Washington, D.C. Both Morris Cooper and Lore Harris actively assisted HIAS to assure immigration officials that Dorrith would not become a public charge. Letters were sent to HIAS offices, hearings were held on the viability of the Cohens’ visas, and HIAS staff visited the Cohens, bringing them books and keeping them company.

The Cohens were detained for a month before Carl was released on parole on January 8, 1941. “I cannot stand this slow dying, the more so as the reason for our detention is exactly a reason that unables us to flee, even if we wanted to,” Carl wrote to Helen on January 6. Other detainees had the flu

Below: A 1941 telegram from the Boston HIAS office to Morris Cooper, sponsor of Carl and Dorrith Cohen; and an undated photograph of Helen Alpert (seated), executive secretary of HIAS Boston, with unidentified colleagues.



and he worried about Dorrith's health. He was not the only one. Immigration officials, concerned for Dorrith's well-being following Carl's parole in early January, contacted Helen for a status update on Dorrith's release. Finally, on January 16, both Cohens were admitted entry to the United States, and eventually settled in California.⁴

The Cohen's case was one of thousands that Helen Alpert (1902–1988) oversaw in her role as executive secretary (and later, executive director) of HIAS Boston. The daughter of one of its founders, Abraham Alpert, Helen made the never-ending work of HIAS her own life's mission. The Boston HIAS was chartered in 1904 in direct response to the Kishinev (Russia) pogrom of April 1903, during which 47 Jews were killed and over 500 injured as a result of well-coordinated riots.⁵ The Boston office of HIAS offered a variety of services to Jewish immigrants, including the provision of kosher meals, religious services for Shabbat and the High Holy Days, and assistance with locating family members, housing, schools, and employment opportunities for new arrivals.

Not all Jewish immigrants who passed through the Port of Boston required the aid of HIAS, but many—like the Cohens—did. In the years following World War I, particularly in the 1930s, and 1940s, HIAS was contacted by European Jews, in particular, who were attempting to find family members or friends in the United States to sponsor their visas. Often the American family members identified were cousins with little connection to their European roots. Many times, no family members could be located. Persistent road blocks such as immigration quotas and lack of sponsorship led some people to try other methods of entering the United States. One of these people was Martin Hopfner.⁶

Martin Hopfner, a 24-year-old stowaway, claimed to be a German Jewish refugee. On December 17, 1940, he entered the Port of Boston on the steamship *Industria* and was taken into custody by immigration officials. On the day of Martin's arrival, the HIAS office received an anonymous tip from a man who informed HIAS that a Jewish stowaway had arrived on that ship. The

concerned caller implored HIAS to take an interest in the case.

Then, the case took a dramatic turn. Immigration officials did not believe that Martin was Jewish—they suspected him of being a “true German.”⁷ Martin, who had been living in Buenos Aires for almost two years, told officials he hoped to contact an old family friend, James Moller. Moller, who had left Germany seventeen years earlier, supposedly owned a jewelry store in Chicago. HIAS's efforts to locate Moller were unsuccessful, but Helen Alpert maintained an interest in Martin's case. On December 23, the Washington, D.C. HIAS office sent a letter to HIAS Boston, bluntly stating that after looking at the facts of Martin's case, they were not entirely convinced of his status as a Jewish refugee. Further, they were concerned that he was a fifth-columnist.⁸ Finally, if Martin was deported, he would be returned to Argentina, where, the D.C. office staff thought, he would suffer “no great hardship.”

Existing records don't reveal whether the Boston HIAS staff believed Martin to be a Jewish refugee or a person with nefarious intent, but in any case Helen Alpert was compassionate, and sent Martin clothing, shoes, and cigarettes. On February 19, 1941, after receiving the shoes while at the penitentiary in Danbury, Connecticut, Martin expressed his gratitude, writing to Helen that, “my treatment here is the

From *Martin Hopfner* February 19, 1941
 Box No. P.M.B.-470 Danbury, Conn.
 To *Hiass* Boston, Mass.
Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society
 Mrs. Alpert, Secretary
 Dear Mrs. Alpert:
 Thank you for the shoes and your interest in my behalf here. Since you are thoroughly acquainted with the facts in my case it is unnecessary here to repeat except to tell you that a warrant has been issued for my deportation. Since but two months remain of my sentence please do whatever possible and relieve my mind as soon as you can. My treatment here is the best possible and my only anxiety is that I be permitted to remain in this country and become a citizen and help my folks back home. Again thanking you for your kindness and help, I remain
 Sincerely yours
 Martin Hopfner



Top: Martin Hopfner's 1941 letter to Helen Alpert, sent from the penitentiary in Danbury, Connecticut. Bottom: A photo of unidentified HIAS staffers with case files. Today, those same case files are housed in archival folders and boxes.

best possible and my only anxiety is that I be permitted to remain in this country and become a citizen and help my folks back home. Again thanking you for your kindness and help.”⁹ In April 1941, the Chicago HIAS office wrote to HIAS

Letter from Benjamin Bernhard de Levie to HIAS Boston, 1940; and a telegram sent by HIAS Boston to try to find the Mr. A. Goldberg who was a friend of Benjamin Bernhard de Levie.

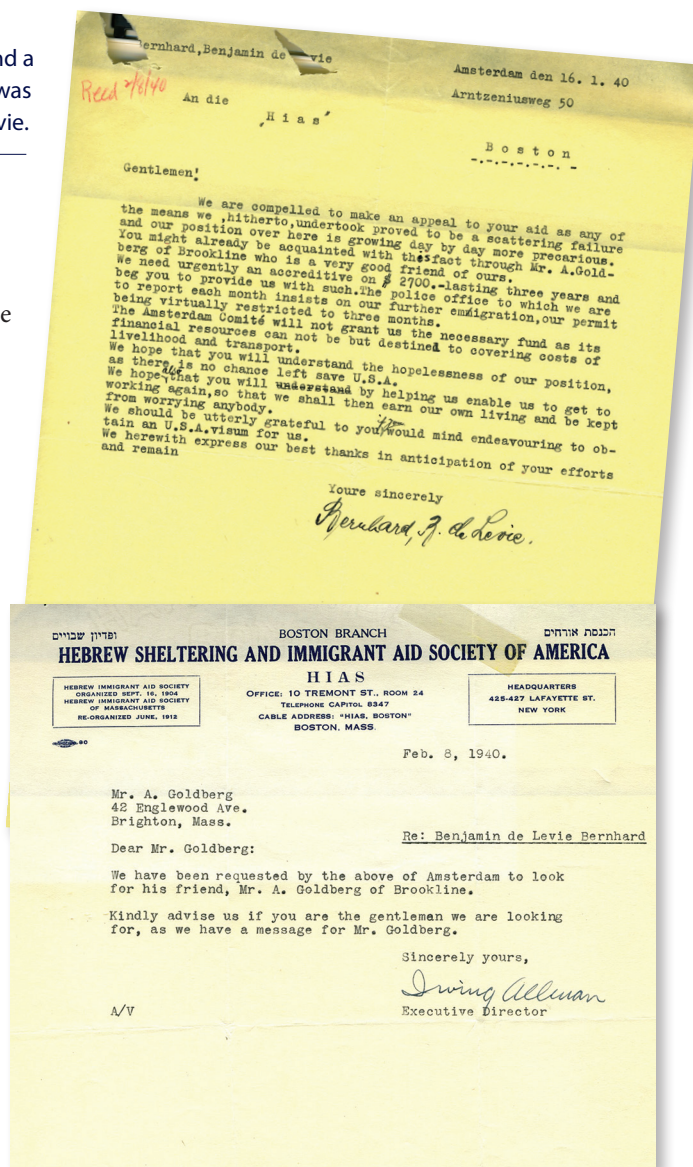
Boston expressing their interest in assisting Martin, who was still serving his three-month sentence on the charge of illegal entry to the United States. Martin was due to be released, and possibly sent to Ellis Island for deportation, on April 20. Although that certainly was not the end of Martin's story, that letter was apparently his last connection with HIAS Boston. Other records show that Martin did manage to stay in the United States. He served in the U.S. Army, enlisting on December 15, 1942, and again on January 6, 1944, and became a naturalized citizen. Eventually he and his American wife, Edythe (Mover), settled in California.¹⁰

For all the HIAS case files with a rich variety of material—correspondence, forms, telegrams, and transcripts—just as many contain only a few documents that barely hint at an individual's story and hardships. Benjamin Bernhard de Levie, who wrote from Amsterdam, is represented in one of those case files. In a January 16, 1940, letter Benjamin contacted HIAS Boston in an effort to find a "Mr. A. Goldberg" of Brookline, who he hoped would become his sponsor. Benjamin wrote, "We are compelled to make an appeal to your aid as any of the means we, hitherto, undertook proved to be a scattering failure and our position over here is growing day by day more precarious." Benjamin was under the impression that the HIAS staff had already been appraised of his particular situation: "You might already be acquainted with this fact through Mr. A. Goldberg of Brookline who is a very good friend of ours." Benjamin described his situation, noting he had to report to the police department every month, that his three-month permit¹¹ would soon be expiring, and that there was no money or work to be found. Despite the scant information provided in the letter, the HIAS office wrote to the Mr. A. Goldbergs they could locate in the area. Apparently none of them knew Benjamin, and the file contains no return letters. His HIAS case file was closed.¹² Benjamin Bernhard de Levie died August 17, 1942, in Auschwitz.

After helping to handle the influx of displaced persons following World War II, the HIAS Boston office began to diversify, assisting Jewish and non-Jewish immigrants from Iraq, China, and Europe. The staff and board of HIAS Boston remained vigilant advocates for immigrants arriving in Boston, or for those who required additional assistance to obtain U.S. citizenship. The Boston HIAS office closed in 1977.

Carl and Dorrith Cohen, Martin Hopfner, and Benjamin Bernhard de Levie are only a few of the individuals whose stories are contained within the collection of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society-Boston. Over 15,000 case files, accumulated between 1903 and 1977, document an important period in this country's history and its relationship with immigrants through the lens of complicated immigration laws, war, and xenophobia. To many, HIAS-Boston became their only bastion of hope, a fact recognized by Helen Alpert, who wrote in 1954, "HIAS always took the humanistic and humanitarian approach to all its work and to all the problems and tragedies which HIAS came to share through its petitioners."¹³

The Boston HIAS records, which include the case files, thousands of arrival cards, ship manifests, Displaced Persons tracers, scrapbooks, photographs and other administrative paperwork, were donated to the American Jewish Historical Society. Today,



the collection is one of our most widely used, accessed by both family historians and scholarly researchers. Most records are very fragile. To view the finding aid, visit digifindingaids.cjh.org/?pID=365459.

We are currently exploring how to digitize the collection and make case files available online. If you are interested in learning more about this project, please email reference@ajhsboston.org. ♦

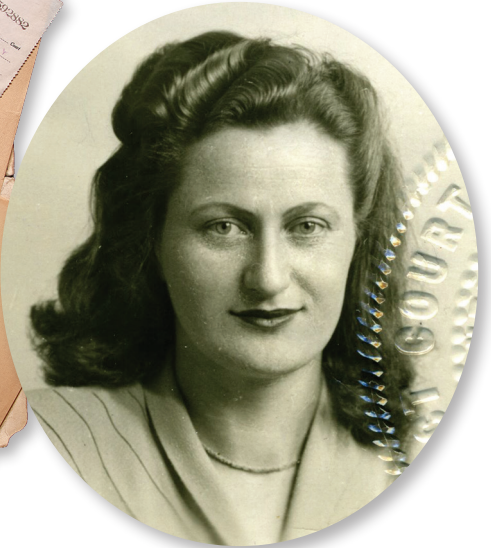
Notes

- ¹ In his testimony, Carl refers to this date as "Pogrom Day." *Kristallnacht* was a two-day riot planned by Joseph Goebbels and German Nazi officials. Over 30,000 German Jewish men were arrested and sent to concentration camps.
- ² From Dorrith Cohen's testimony, Records of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society; I-96; Box 9, Folder 3; Jewish Heritage Center at NEHGS.

Frances Kastrovitzky's HIAS case file is more detailed than most. A Romanian Jewish woman who posed as a dead German woman to immigrate under the more lenient German quota, Kastrovitzky contacted HIAS Boston when she wanted to reclaim her own identity.

Her story is at ajhsboston.org/2011/12/16/the-tale-of-frances-kastrovitzky/. A year after her story was posted on our website,

Frances's family found it; they reported that Frances had three daughters, eight grandchildren, and sixteen great-grandchildren.



- ³ In a letter to Morris Cooper, HIAS Executive Secretary Helen Alpert wrote, "Just before writing this letter, we spoke to the Immigration Officials and they are very much impressed with Dorrith Cohen. They feel very sympathetic towards her case, as she is a person of great intelligence with a very sweet disposition. They also urged our office to do everything possible to see that she is admitted into the country . . . you will also be impressed with her, as well as with her husband, who seems to be a splendid young man." Letter dated December 6, 1940. Records of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society; I-96; Box 9, Folder 3; Jewish Heritage Center at NEHGS.
- ⁴ Carl Cohen was naturalized on May 6, 1946, and Dorrith Cohen was naturalized on December 29, 1947. (National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.; *Index to Naturalization Petitions and Records of the U.S. District Court, 1906–1966, and the U.S. Circuit Court, 1906–1911, for the District of Massachusetts*; microfilm serial M1545; microfilm roll 40.)
- ⁵ More information on the founding of Boston HIAS can be found in Helen Alpert, "HIAS in Boston: 50 Years of Aid to Immigrants," *The*

- Jewish Advocate*, April 29, 1954, p. 1. Viewed on ProQuest Historical Newspapers.
- ⁶ Benjamin Owen, former intern at the Jewish Heritage Center, wrote about Hopfner during the HIAS reprocessing project in 2011: see ajhsboston.org/2011/10/31/martin-hopfners-story.
- ⁷ From a December 18, 1940, letter from Helen Alpert to Mr. Hershfield: "They believe he is posing as a German refugee but that he is a true German." Records of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society; I-96; Box 53, Folder 48; Jewish Heritage Center at NEHGS.
- ⁸ During World War II, the American government was concerned that fifth-columnists sympathetic to Germany could be in the U.S. to lead sabotage efforts from within.
- ⁹ Letter from Martin Hopfner to Helen Alpert, February 19, 1941. Records of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society; I-96; Box 53, Folder 48; Jewish Heritage Center at NEHGS.
- ¹⁰ Martin Hopfner's service record: viewed on Ancestry.com; U.S., Department of Veterans Affairs BIRLS Death File, 1850–2010 database; naturalization record: National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.; *Soundex Index to Naturalization Petitions*

- for the United States District and Circuit Courts, Northern District of Illinois and Immigration and Naturalization Service District 9, 1840–1950 (M1285)*; microfilm serial M1285; microfilm roll 74; and wife's name viewed on Ancestry.com, U.S., Social Security Applications and Claims Index, 1936–2007 database.
- ¹¹ It is unclear what "permit" Benjamin Bernhard de Levie, a Dutch citizen, was referring to. The Nazis did not invade the Netherlands until May 1940; afterwards, all Dutch Jews were required to register.
- ¹² Further research on Benjamin Bernhard de Levie led to a listing on Yad Vashem's Central Database of Shoah Victims' Names: yvng.yadvashem.org/nameDetails.html?language=en&s_lastName=&s_firstName=&s_place=&itemId=4265959&ind=11&winId=-230809603787282088.
- ¹³ From "HIAS in Boston" [note 5].