

THE LAMP BESIDE THE GOLDEN DOOR

*The Story of the
New York Association for New Americans*

THE FIRST FIFTY YEARS

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CHAPTER 3

Resettling the Displaced Persons

The New York Association for New Americans officially opened its doors and began helping to resettle Jewish DPs on July 5, 1949. During the spring of 1949, NYANA's board of directors had formed a number of committees that worked ceaselessly planning the details of the separation of USNA's New York and national services. The division was nearly complete when NYANA began operating in July. Nevertheless, during NYANA's first month, 18 members of its 481-person staff still remained on USNA's payroll, and both agencies leased space in the same office buildings at 15 Park Row, across from New York City Hall, and 350 Broadway.¹

Morris Zelditch, acting executive director of NYANA, announced the establishment of the new New York resettlement agency in a June 23, 1949 press release. Zelditch succinctly declared NYANA's mission: "[I]n its service to clientele the character of its activity is on a relief and rehabilitation basis, seeking to help integrate the immigrants as rapidly as possible into the community." He went on to say that NYANA had designed its services to achieve three essential objectives:

- A. To give voluntary financial aid, support and assistance and to furnish advice, information and guidance primarily to Jewish immigrants who reside in the City of New York and its immediate vicinity.

These services shall be provided only as long as necessary after arrival of the immigrant in this country, but the aid is intended for persons who have been in the country less than five years, after which they become normal members of the community. Occasional exceptions may be for individuals who are in the United States on temporary visas.

- B. To provide the services in a manner which most speedily effects the integration and adjustment of the immigrant in the American community.
- C. To assist the immigrants so that they may become self-maintaining as soon as possible.

Zelditch also reaffirmed that the new agency would operate only on an emergency basis, noting that NYANA's ultimate goal was to incorporate refugee resettlement services into the network of permanent public and private social welfare agencies in New York:

The Board looks forward to the day when NYANA will be able to discontinue its operations as a separate and independent agency and that the services required by immigrants will be provided in the same measure as services provided to other Americans by existing agencies. ²

REHABILITATING REFUGEES FROM NAZISM:

NYANA'S RESETTLEMENT PROGRAM

Some 3,735 Jewish immigrants arrived in the port of New York during July 1949.³ By the end of the year, 37,700 Jews had immigrated to the United States, including 20,571 who resettled in New York City.⁴ Most of these immigrants had lived in DP camps in Europe for as long as five years before journeying to the United States with the assistance of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS). Others settled in the United States only after first having found temporary haven in China, unoccupied Europe, Latin America or Palestine. Nearly 55 percent of all

Jews who immigrated to the United States between 1949 and 1951 settled in the New York area.⁵

Over 2,000 Jewish newcomers arriving in July 1949 came to NYANA for help.⁶ Most of these immigrants entered the United States under provisions of the Displaced Persons Act, though a smaller number obtained visas under the regular quota laws. Additional refugees gained admission with temporary, transit and student visas.

Newly arrived Jewish DPs approached both NYANA and USNA, which continued its work resettling Jewish refugees in communities across the country. NYANA had adopted USNA's June 1949 resolutions determining how clients should be distributed between the two agencies: NYANA would assist all Jewish immigrants who had sponsors or first-degree relatives living in New York, as well as any immigrants admitted with temporary, student, visitor and transit visas who were applying to change to permanent visa status.⁷ NYANA referred those immigrants settling outside of the New York area to USNA's National Reception Center at the Marseilles Hotel on the Upper West Side. The Marseilles Hotel contained a shelter that offered temporary housing to homeless Jewish refugees while they looked for permanent accommodations and employment.⁸ Jewish immigrants also resided at shelters operated by USNA at the Whitehall Hotel on Broadway and 100th Street and by HIAS at 425 Lafayette Street.⁹

The large influx of refugees that arrived over the summer of 1949 initially overwhelmed NYANA's staff. By the end of September 1949, the association's open caseload swelled to 16,791 persons.¹⁰ Caseworkers had a hard time meeting with new arrivals quickly, and some families at the HIAS and USNA shelters waited as long as six weeks before seeing a caseworker at 15 Park Row. In order to speed up the process, NYANA sent small staff teams, dubbed Extension Units, to each of the shelters. The Extension Unit installed at the HIAS shelter on Lafayette Street included four case aides, a supervisor, and a housing consultant

who screened DPs and helped them start searching for housing and work while they waited for their first appointments at NYANA's downtown headquarters.¹¹

FAMILY SERVICES

NYANA's 1950 Statement of Services and Functions described the Family Service Department as "the core of the entire agency." NYANA operated primarily as a relief-giving agency, providing financial assistance to impoverished DPs who had no other resources to sustain themselves. The Family Service Department served nearly every case that received financial maintenance from NYANA.¹²

Caseworkers would meet individually with refugee families to determine their financial need. Using a series of schedules that itemized the prevailing prices of clothing, food, housing and household items, caseworkers would develop a case-specific budget for each family. Schedules for men, women, boys and girls detailed the estimated cost of everything from aprons (\$.98) to wool suits (\$27).¹³ In July 1949, the average family at NYANA received a monthly relief payment totaling \$109.42, an amount exceeding what public welfare agencies offered to needy native-born Americans. NYANA eventually streamlined the procedures for calculating relief payments so that families received standardized budget allowances based simply on family size and composition. But NYANA always made extra allowances when a family had special needs. Caseworkers offered pregnant women "layette kits" including everything from diapers and safety pins to bonnets, blankets and crib sheets for newborn babies and, during Passover, clients who could not afford the extra expense of celebrating the holiday and did not have relatives who could share the cost were given special financial assistance to prepare a Passover *seder*.¹⁴

NYANA's caseworkers encountered refugees struggling to reconcile their

present condition with their former lives; most were emotionally scarred from the war. As Isaac Bashevis Singer so vividly depicted in his fictional portrait of Jewish DPs in New York, *Enemies, A Love Story*, the personal lives of survivors bore a complex relationship to the past. Haunted by feelings of guilt for having survived their loved ones, many refugees experienced deep conflict about their current condition. Patricia Garland Morisey, a caseworker at NYANA from 1949 to 1950, recollected counseling a DP who was extremely unhappy with his recent marriage and longed for his family, killed in the Holocaust. New families formed in the years after the liberation were common, Morisey recalled: "The first thing you did when you found you were alive when the war was over – you grabbed someone and started making a family." Morisey tried to be attentive and compassionate during countless meetings and phone calls, but encouraged the man to take the steps necessary to start functioning again: "You just gave them a little bit of comfort," she said. "What I would try to do is point out, 'Look, you're alive, you have a new family, your kids are pretty, you know you don't want to be alone,' and try to help him forget the past and deal with what he had to deal with."¹⁵

Morisey, one of two African-American caseworkers who worked in NYANA's Family Service Department during the association's founding years, commented in 1950 on her work at NYANA:

My experience in social work has been varied and especially meaningful because of the growing acceptance of the concept that skilled help can be given regardless of race, color or creed. In the New York Association for New Americans, where I am working now, our task is to help our clients make their first step on the road to becoming new Americans, despite difference in language and in background and despite the deep scars from the war and concentration camps. This experience in interracial counseling is truly rewarding.¹⁶

Before she joined NYANA's staff, Morisey had personally witnessed the devastation of World War II on European Jewry. On a trip through post-war Europe, she

toured the remains of Poland and Czechoslovakia:

It was all very vivid to me what they had experienced, which I think some of the workers weren't as close to, and because I also had been involved in the lynchings and the problems with the blacks, I was very identified with those people and what they had gone through.

Moved by what the DPs had gone through to come to the United States, Morisey was also struck by the challenges that they faced in a new country: "It was very difficult for us because we were all reacting to what we had heard and the horror of it, and then to be working with people who had gone through it. You just wondered how they could survive and make an adjustment in this country."¹⁷

VOCATIONAL SERVICES

A critical step in the rehabilitation process was helping refugees find jobs. NYANA's Vocational Services Department helped Jewish immigrants find employment so that they could start providing for themselves again. The major activities of the department were twofold: direct counseling to individual clients; and job promotion and job searches in New York.

Vocational counselors helped Jewish immigrants adapt to the New York job market. A 1950 departmental report bluntly described the objectives of job counseling: "Immigrants with their job handicaps constitute the 'raw material' that vocational services must fashion into a 'salable product'." Vocational Services Department clients attended group orientation sessions where they learned about American wages and working conditions, unions and legal requirements for employment in New York. Refugees also met individually with employment counselors who helped them develop a job plan, obtain training, and, when necessary, secure professional licenses and union membership. The department also organized specialized services for those who either had unique needs

or faced particular challenges in finding work, such as physicians, artists and musicians, youths, the aged, physically handicapped and emotionally disturbed clients, and Sabbath observers.¹⁸

The Vocational Services Department staff searched aggressively for job openings on behalf of Jewish refugees. The department considered job promotion to be “the chief sales agency for ‘selling’ immigrants to employers.” Using direct mail, field visits to employers and unions, telephone queries, radio advertisements and publicity materials directed at business and trade publications, the Vocational Services Department staff solicited job openings that could be filled by Jewish immigrants.¹⁹

The Vocational Services Department launched a massive jobs campaign on behalf of clients who were “hard to place” in January 1950. These were refugees who were handicapped in obtaining employment either because of physical disabilities or because they were religious Jews who observed the Sabbath. The United Jewish Appeal of Greater New York, the New York Federation of Jewish Philanthropies, and the United Israel Appeal joined NYANA president Adele Levy in an appeal to New York employers to hire unemployed Jewish refugees, imploring them, “Let’s Finish the Rescue with Jobs.”²⁰ A press release publicizing the United Job Finding Campaign urged employers to make jobs available to these newcomers despite their different appearance, disabilities or religious faith:

These men face a greater difficulty in finding employment than the average newcomer because of their age, physical handicaps, or their religious observances. But they are employable. Careful medical examinations certify to that, and so do the individual analyses of vocational experts. Further proof comes from the testimony of those employers who have hired them. The problem is to find more employers who will give them the opportunity to prove that they can produce.²¹

Many of these refugees had been hindered in obtaining employment either because of the requirements of their Orthodox faith or because they were

handicapped by injuries suffered in the Holocaust. "Mr. B.," a Sabbath observer tortured in Nazi camps, suffered handicaps in obtaining employment on both counts:

Mr. B. is a young man who is a strict observer of the Sabbath and wears a skull cap. He is 20 years of age, single, clean shaven and neat. He had no work experience in Europe, and arrived in the U.S. in December at the age of 16. He attended Yeshiva and evening high school. He studied typing and bookkeeping and can at present type 40 words per minute. He is good at figures and record keeping. From October 1949 to January 1950 he worked as a clerk in a Yeshiva. Due to mistreatment during the war, Mr. B. suffered amputation of all the toes on both feet. This is not readily observable since he walks without a cane. However, he must have work which enables him to sit most of the time. Mr. B. is willing to accept any type of work for which he is suited and which will enable him to observe the Sabbath. He is intelligent, cooperative and responsible and would be a valuable asset to any organization.

"Mr. R.," another "hard to place" client, lost his arm in the war, but was eager to secure an income to support his young family:

Mr. R. is a young man of 25, who is married and has a young daughter. He is 5'11" and weighs 160 lbs. and makes a good appearance. From 1946 to 1947 he worked as a bookkeeper with UNRRA [United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration] in Germany. Upon his arrival in the U.S. he was trained as a bookkeeper at a business school in New York City and is able to handle a job as a beginning bookkeeper or as an assistant. Despite the loss of his right arm, at the hands of the Nazis, during the war, he does not limit himself to this type of work. He is willing to take any kind of work which he can do with his normal arm and a prosthetic right arm.²²

NYANA enlisted the support of the Rabbinical Council of Greater New York in the campaign to find employment for Sabbath observers. The agency placed advertisements on the radio station WEVD and asked rabbis throughout New York to devote sermons to the need to employ Jewish newcomers discriminated against because of their Orthodox faith.²³

The Yiddish press supported the plight of jobless religious Jewish refugees and backed the United Job Finding Campaign. The October 22, 1950

Jewish Morning Journal featured an editorial promoting the United Job Finding Campaign that called upon employers to hire the Sabbath observers. The editorial decried discrimination against Orthodox Jewish refugees, arguing that finding them jobs “will not only help the refugees, but they will also do their share in helping to alleviate the burden of NYANA.”²⁴ In addition, the *Jewish Day* denounced discrimination against Jewish refugees by Jewish employers, complaining of

the tendency with some Jewish employers, who are themselves immigrants or children of immigrants, that when they are in need of a worker or employee, they intentionally look for a non-Jew, and when a Jewish applicant comes to them he finds a closed door.²⁵

The campaign was so successful that NYANA was unable to fill the 1,500 job requests that came in during August 1950.²⁶

HOUSING SERVICES

NYANA's Housing Division helped clients move out of the shelters and temporary housing provided by friends and relatives and into their own apartments. The division gave caseworkers up-to-date information on the availability of rental apartments in the New York area. The Housing Division's staff obtained the latest information on apartment availability by canvassing New York neighborhoods by car and by foot to find apartments and houses that could be leased by Jewish immigrants. But New Yorkers were not always receptive to NYANA's inquiries. In an April 1950 report, Housing Director James Berger explained to Executive Director Louis Bennett that locating housing was a challenge:

Superintendents are almost universally hostile to anyone asking for apartments. Quite often when Jewish stores are visited to give us leads, or people of the community are approached, the general reaction is one of regarding the canvasser as if he was someone from Mars.²⁷

The Housing Division also sought vacancies by placing advertisements in Yiddish, German and English-language New York City newspapers, as well as on the New York radio stations WHOM, WLIB and WEVD. A typical English-language newspaper advertisement implored landlords to make housing available as part of the rescue effort:

PROVIDE A HOME FOR THE HOMELESS

America is generously offering a haven to Jewish Refugees. For years they have been compelled to flee across the face of a devastated continent, knowing no place which they could call home.

YOU CAN HELP THEM FIND HOMES – AT LAST, where they can begin to lead normal lives again.

IF YOU HAVE AN APARTMENT–HEATED OR UNHEATED, BASEMENT, ATTIC, OR OTHER ACCOMMODATIONS FOR JEWISH REFUGEE FAMILIES, PLEASE COMMUNICATE AT ONCE WITH:

MR. JAMES H. BERGER

New York Association for New Americans.²⁸

While these advertisements appealed to landlords who might be sympathetic to the plight of Jewish DPs, other advertisements diminished the ethnic identity of NYANA's clients and the fact that they were immigrants. In the classified sections of the *Brooklyn Eagle*, *Bronx Post Home News*, *Long Island Daily Press*, and *Staten Island Advance*, NYANA simply requested information about available housing. The "name of our organization is not named anywhere, only our telephone number," Berger reaffirmed in a departmental report.²⁹ The Division was highly successful. During NYANA's first month, the Housing Division obtained information about over 600 vacancies and placed 111 DP families in housing.³⁰

The Housing Division also negotiated with New York landlords on behalf

of Jewish refugees to renovate their properties and lease apartments to families served by NYANA. Negotiations with the Boyd Development Corporation led to the renovation of 20 three- and four-room apartments in a building at 177 Chrystie Street on the Lower East Side. In March 1950, 76 DPs moved into the renovated apartments, which now had steam heat, private bathrooms and new kitchens with refrigerators.³¹