

Interview with Evelyn Plotsker - 9/4/89

WH: When did you start working for HIAS and what was your job there ?

EP: On May 9, 1946 and worked there until November 15, 1984.

I was hired as a stenographer, taking cables.

WH: Were the caseworkers in the office volunteers ?

EP: No. they were paid. Some of the people who met the refugees at the pier were volunteers.

WH: Do you remember the first trip by the Marine Flasher ?

EP: Oh yes. They made a big to do about it. There was a synagogue in the building at 425 Lafayette. It was set up on that day with long tables filled with food, eggs, cheese, herring, rolls, really nice. I remember seeing a man sitting in the room with a little valise (her voice breaks), he must have been about thirty but he looked like he was 130. The expression on his face was: "What am I doing here ? Do I belong here ?" And I started to cry for him I felt so terrible. Many of the people looked bewildered.

WH: What was the procedure ?

EP: When they came into the building they went to the synagogue to be welcomed. In the building there were rooms for people with families. The building had been converted into a dormitory. Usually two beds to a room. The rooms were small with small closets. On the left side of the building were accounting and bookkeeping and the board room. Most of the offices were there. On the other side, just across the hallway, were more offices like fund-raising. Port

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I think, four floors. The residential rooms were primarily on the third and fourth floors. Originally they had been built to accomodate about 250 people. Later on they squeezed in more. At one time they had between 400 and 500 people there. People stayed in Hotel Marseille which was originally USNA. But people also stayed in hotels in the 20s, near HIAS headquarters. In the beginning, for six months, I was in the stenographic pool. Then I was promoted to be the secretary and complaint department to Mr. Albert Harris who was the Assistant to the Executive Director.

WH: What kinds of complaints were there ?

EP: They would call to delay appointments. There was damaged luggage, green card requests. In the beginning it was very chaotic, but the important thing was that when they hung up, they said thank you and had been pacified and made not to feel so fearful. After a year I worked directly with Ilya Dijour and Mr. Shoskes. I was sometimes asked by people to do things that weren't completely legal but I told them I couldn't do it because I worked for HIAS.

WH: Were there differences between those survivors who came first and those who arrived later ?

EP: From what I saw, the later ones who had to live longer with the support of the agencies and relatives were stonier and less caring. And I can understand it. When you have to live, knowing the blood of your relatives is under your feet, it has to have a psychological effect. The ones who came first were the best. They were already here. They hadn't had to wait.

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EP: No. Morning, afternoon, evening, they had services. All holidays were observed. They also gave English classes, citizenship classes. There were, however, problems with people who hung around during the day and didn't work. Many wanted to integrate, but not all.

WH: What was Ann Petluck like, USNA's Director of Migration Services ?

EP: A very tough lady but soft as butter in some ways. For example, if you admired something she wore, the next day you had it. Ann Petluck was brilliant regarding immigration law. She was sympathetic to the survivors but tough as nails regarding regulations and rules. Sometimes the inspectors opened up luggage at the dock and they found linen and other gorgeous items. One family had to pay \$3,000.00 in customs duties. But these were also mainly those who came later.

WH: Did you see any differences between the immigrants and, say, the Hungarian immigrants of 1956 or the Russian Jews who came later?

EP: Russians feel: "You owe me. Now that I'm out, you owe me. I was oppressed."

WH: Was the staff of HIAS religious ?

EP: For the most part they were not religious.

WH: Who paid for the passage ?

EP: If they had relatives who could pay, then they did. If not, we paid and they signed that they would pay back but they didn't

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sending five or ten dollars a month. In the beginning HIAS did social work and immigration. But after the merger, HIAS only did immigration. NYANA did the referrals for counseling. We also sent people to other communities, wherever they had relatives. We had one family that was supposed to go to Cleveland. Do you know how many times we shipped them out to Cleveland? They just didn't want to go. And they were religious people. They didn't want to leave N.Y. New York is the center of the world.

WH: Did HIAS handle Shanghai relatives?

EP: Yes they did.

WH: It seems to me that USNA handled most of them.

EP: Maybe. In any event, I was privileged to live through a special period in Jewish history. There were thousands of people standing by HIAS headquarters on Lafayette Street. The streets were thronged with people coming to look for their relatives, talking to anyone they could find: "From where did you come?"; "Maybe you heard of this person or that person." I was there. And when people met people from the same city, they kissed and hugged even if they didn't know each other. Gentile people would stand around and watch these scenes. To live through that.... And on the telephone: They would say in Yiddish or broken English: "I hear you have nice ladies and gentlemen. I want to meet someone." They used us as a shadchan agency. And they came! And they married! And (her voice breaks) you can't pay for that. We put on skits about the work we did, what happened in the office, and the people who came in.

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EP: Many did. It just wasn't Jewish enough for them. We knew because we would see the figures and we also heard about them.

WH: Wasn't there prejudice against the greener ?

EP: Of course. They were taking away the jobs. People said: "We also suffered." Oooh did we suffer! We had ration cards. We couldn't buy nylon stockings. Oh yes, we really suffered!

WH: What was the food like in the HIAS center?

EP: They had excellent food.