

Remarks by Lydia Kleiner -- Refugee Rally at the Capitol, June 6, 2017

I was 4 and a half years old when my parents and I left Austria to board an Army ship and cross the sea to "America." We were the lucky ones !

The night before we left, I had a dream that I would swim alongside the ship.. swim my way to the new land -- the "goldene Medina" -- America! But it was December, dark ice in the water, and we refugees of the Holocaust gathered inside, against the wind, for most of the long voyage.

My parents had gone through much more in their homeland, Poland -- as slave laborers during World War II in the Lodz Ghetto...then, sole survivors of large families. After liberation, they left for Austria, where a DP camp -- a Displaced Persons camp -- awaited them. And I was born.

But now, finally, after years of waiting -- American visas came through! What dreams, if any, they had the night before we left, I don't know. Their sleep was interrupted often by memories -- nightmares -- of the War.

We arrived at last -- New York, then New Jersey....and HIAS was ready for us. I could still draw you a picture of the apartment they found for us -- a bedroom for me, and my parents in the living room on a pull-out couch that lasted decades! There were dishes, silverware, everything to begin life here. Our apartment was walking distance from school, and I began right away. HIAS found jobs for both of my parents (in local factories) and more -- a pediatrician when I got sick, help in learning the bus routes... They showed them how to enroll in classes to learn English, called then "How to Become an American", where my parents met Herman and Clara Leaf, and their children -- a friendship that lasted their entire lives.. and continues into my generation.

My mother later described how proud she was to give back to HIAS and the Joint as soon as they "got on their feet" so those organizations could continue helping other newly arriving refugees, or, in Yiddish, "Greene" Greenhorns.....

That HIAS has taken on an expanded role internationally would have made my parents very pleased. They were at the Holocaust Museum to hear Elie Wiesel denounce the lack of U.S. support for Bosnian victims...and they applauded his outreach.

The legacy of welcoming the stranger is one that we -- as Jewish refugees ourselves -- understand so well, and are grateful to all those eager to nurture it --- especially at a time when ships and boats are being turned back again.