

12-2000

Life's Work : The Accidental Career of Laura Margolis Jarblum

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THE ACCIDENTAL CAREER OF LAURA MARGOLIS JARBLUM

by

Julie L. Kerksen

A Thesis Submitted in
Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

History

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The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2000
Under the Supervision of Mark P. Bradley

Laura Margolis Jarblum has been largely overlooked by history, but her story is an important one. She worked for the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee throughout four decades, serving around the world in places including Europe, Israel, Cuba, and China. Her dedication to the welfare of her fellow Jews led her into chaotic and sometimes dangerous situations, even resulting in time spent in a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp. She is given credit for saving thousands of lives, both during and after the period of World War II. This paper uses letters, reports, oral histories, and other sources to reconstruct her life. It also speculates on how the late-twentieth-century American fascination with the Holocaust has influenced the way in which this extraordinary woman has been remembered.

Major Professor

Date

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My heartfelt thanks go out to:

- my advisor, Mark Bradley, for consistently being able to transform me from frazzled and confused to calm and focused within the space of an hour;
- Sherry Hyman of the JDC, who was unfailingly cheerful and patient with my many requests;
- Ted Feder, for sharing his memories;
- Louisa Rice, for listening to me prattle on about thesis and life for the last two years, and for her insightful comments on both;
- and my family, for their constant support and good humor.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

“If I’d been a man, I would have joined the Navy to see the world, but since I was a woman, I joined the JDC.” -- Laura Margolis Jarblum¹

The name of Laura Margolis Jarblum is not widely known, but to those whose lives were impacted by her work, she is hard to forget. From the 1930s to the 1970s she worked for the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee in areas including Latin America, Asia, Western Europe, and Israel. Although she consistently downplayed her personal importance and claimed she was only doing her job, her courageous and creative actions benefited thousands, most dramatically during the whirlwind years of World War II. This lifelong career was something of an accident, beginning as only a short leave of absence from her social work job. But her life continued to unfold in fascinating ways, taking her to chaotic situations and exotic locales. Later in life, she professed surprise at the adventures she had experienced, feeling she had been swept along by a force larger than herself.

If the idea of a social worker leading an adventurous life seems incongruous, consider the following. Margolis² flew over Nazi-occupied territory strapped in a parachute. She survived a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp. She secretly aided illegal

¹ Sara Kadosh, “Race Against Time: The Career of Laura Margolis Jarblum,” page 6, AR65/99, JDC Personnel, Laura Margolis Jarblum, American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) Archives.

² Although Laura took her husband’s last name (for the most part) upon her marriage in 1950, for simplicity’s sake I will refer to her in the text as “Margolis.” Any references to “Jarblum” should be understood as referring to her husband, Marc. She used different forms of her name intermittently throughout her married life, sometimes signing herself as “Laura Margolis-Jarblum” (both with and without a hyphen), sometimes simply “Laura Jarblum,” and occasionally “Laura Jarblum Margolis.”

immigration to Palestine. She entered Amsterdam 24 hours after the Germans evacuated the city. She is given almost sole credit for saving thousands of refugees from starvation. All the while, she was not seeking excitement, but only trying to do her job.

Nonetheless, she was not afraid of taking risks. Cut off from communicating with her employers, she made a decision to borrow thousands of dollars on their credit despite knowing she might later be fired for doing so. She “liberated” necessary equipment when she was unable to get it donated. She was not afraid to defend unpopular policies or make enemies. She stood up to powerful leaders in various communities where she worked, and got her way more often than not. But again, she did not seek out these risks. She was in volatile and sometimes dangerous situations simply because she felt that was where she could be of most use.

But while she was certainly dedicated to her work, it would be a mistake to see her as sacrificing herself for the sake of others. She truly thrived on the challenges she faced and found great satisfaction in solving difficult problems. She found she was not content to do the straightforward domestic casework for which her social work education had trained her, especially during the crisis years of the war when so many lives hung in the balance.

Although Margolis was not religious, she still felt strongly about Jewish welfare; apart from one year, her entire career was spent working for Jewish organizations. She was down-to-earth, ethical, and very professional. While loyal to the JDC, she was not afraid to challenge decisions she did not agree with, and never hesitated to say what she thought, even if it was not popular.³ One writer described her as “a formidable woman,

³ Ted Feder, interview by author, March 20, 2000.

direct, strong-willed, with a sense of humor, and unfailingly courteous.”⁴ Another wrote, “Behind her glasses, she has a sharp eye for the phony and pretentious. She knows her own mind and speaks it with crisp authority.”⁵ She was practical and unsentimental, qualities that were sometimes unexpected in females of her generation.

While she broke new ground for women within the JDC and international relief work in general, she did not feel that she had to fight for her opportunities. When asked how she managed in this “man’s world,” she replied, “I never had problems as a woman, maybe because I was never competitive. I didn’t do all those things . . . for more money, prestige or title.”⁶ Perhaps there is truth to the idea that she was not resented because she did not seek personal glory and was not ambitious for positions of power. She also may have been seen by her colleagues as “one of the guys.” Regardless, she did not set out to consciously break boundaries and gain ground for women. Although she did not feel she should be limited by her gender, it seems unlikely that she would have described herself as a feminist.

When looking back on her career, she often remarked on the fact she had never tried to map out her future. The six-month leave of absence to work for the JDC turned, year by year, into a lifelong job. Her constant search for challenges and her desire to learn new things led her to agree to work in distant locales and accept assignments that she knew little about. She called herself a gypsy, and laughed about the way

⁴ Kadosh, “Race Against Time,” page 6.

⁵ Lois Hackett, “Laura Jarblum: JDC’s ‘Leading Lady,’” February 1971, AR65/99, JDC Personnel, Laura Margolis Jarblum, JDC Archives.

⁶ Kadosh, “Race Against Time,” page 6.

circumstances seemed to keep her life exciting due to her uncanny tendency of being present whenever a crisis occurred.

Accidental as her career may have been, she was no less recognized for her accomplishments by both contemporaries and historians. In 1945, a JDC administrator wrote of her, “She is an unusual human being. She has wisdom, understanding and courage. She is an extraordinarily capable organizer and administrator -- in short, a rare person.”⁷ Another introduced her to a group in 1947 as “the personification of the JDC tradition of service.”⁸ Years later, historians described her as one of the Joint’s “truly remarkable characters,”⁹ and “one of its most reliable trouble-shooters.”¹⁰ Clearly, she was seen by her colleagues as a valuable and dedicated staff member, and scholars have noted her impact upon the communities within which she worked. So what kind of a person was she? What motivated her to work in difficult and sometimes dangerous situations around the globe while other women of her generation had largely remained within the constraints of the home?

Another set of questions arises around the ways in which she has been remembered. Memory serves to renarrativize past experience to make it intelligible and relevant to the present.¹¹ According to Maurice Halbwachs, what societies remember of the past is determined by present needs and concerns. This “collective memory” only

⁷ Robert Pilpel to Ann Petluck, 29 November 1945, AR45/64, file 3103, JDC Archives.

⁸ Speaker’s introduction for Laura Margolis, March 1947, AR45/64, file 3103, JDC Archives.

⁹ Herbert Agar, *The Saving Remnant: An Account of Jewish Survival* (New York: Viking Press, 1960), 115.

¹⁰ Yehuda Bauer, *Out of the Ashes: The Impact of American Jews on Post-Holocaust European Jewry* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1989), 254.

¹¹ Marita Sturken, “Personal Stories and National Meanings: Memory, Reenactment, and the Image,” in *The Seductions of Biography*, ed. Mary Rhiel and David Suchoff (New York: Routledge, 1996), 40.

allows individual recollections to exist if they fit within the boundaries defined by their community.¹² This conception of memory can be useful in thinking about how Margolis has been memorialized.

Although her work spanned decades, she is by far most noted for her efforts to help Jewish refugees during World War II. She is recalled as a “rescuer” above all else, and while she certainly deserves to be remembered for her war work, it is worth exploring why this has taken precedence over her other activities. The Holocaust has loomed large in American consciousness in recent years, with a consequent search for heroes. Why is this so? Is the label of “rescuer” or “hero” an appropriate and accurate one for Margolis’s life?

Admittedly, this work falls into a similar memorializing pattern, largely as a result of the available material. Far more sources exist that describe her wartime work than her career before or after that period, thus leading to what may be the same overemphasis on the era of the Holocaust that I am critiquing. Additionally, the sheer drama of this period makes it hard not to focus on it. But the very prevalence of wartime materials and the emotion the events kindle may further illustrate points made in this paper about the significance of Holocaust memory in contemporary American culture.

This work also joins the relatively new area of scholarship examining women’s activities in the international sphere. According to Leila Rupp, the growing interdependence of the world has led to an increase in studies that break the boundaries of

¹² see Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980); Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

nationalism and instead investigate transnational movements and organizations.¹³ However, apart from a very few publications, this work has not included much exploration of the role of women within these groups. The story of Margolis's career adds to this nascent field of study.

The vast majority of the sources from which Margolis's life has been reconstructed here come from the archives of the JDC. Materials included contemporary documents such as letters and reports along with later remembrances like oral histories and interviews. Other primary documents were found in the American Jewish Archives and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives. Personal papers unfortunately do not appear to have survived. Since Margolis is usually mentioned only briefly in secondary sources, these were largely used to supply context to the times and places in which she worked.

Biographical writing is always problematic: it is difficult, if not impossible, to give an accurate account of a complex personality based solely on the sometimes incomplete written record he or she leaves behind. As one writer put it, "Biographies grasp the exteriors of lives and give what account they can of their interiors. These can be wholly different realities."¹⁴ Some have described biography as having a "kaleidoscopic tendency" in that lives show different patterns depending on who is looking at them.¹⁵ Undoubtedly my own convictions and interpretations have affected the

¹³ Leila J. Rupp, *Worlds of Women: The Making of an International Women's Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 6.

¹⁴ Guy Davenport, "A Life in the Maze," *Harper's* 300 (June 2000): 176.

¹⁵ Liz Dearden, "Reviewing Women's Biography," in *All Sides of the Subject: Women and Biography*, ed. Teresa Iles, (New York: Teachers College Press, 1992), 144.

patterns visible in this portrait; however, I hope that I am ultimately true to her work and her spirit.

CHAPTER 2: “THIS IS WHAT I WANTED TO DO”

From the very beginning, Laura Margolis seemed destined for a life out of the ordinary. Growing up in unusual circumstances and immigrating at an early age, she appeared to have developed a life view that was rather different from that of her American peers. As she entered adulthood and began a career, she did not have intentions of being exceptional or adventurous. But the traditional world of social work was not big enough to contain her, and she soon grew beyond its boundaries, charting the outlines of a unique life in the process.

Margolis’s maternal grandfather, Solomon Schwartz, was an Austrian who served as personal physician to the Sultan of Turkey. Schwartz was the leader of Constantinople’s Ashkenazi community and had special concern for the city’s refugee population, made up of thousands of Jews fleeing pogroms in Romania, Russia, and Poland.¹ Hoping to patent some of his medicines, he was in contact with a professor in Berlin named Otto Warburg. Warburg learned of the local refugee problem through Schwartz; his passion for Zionism and concern for persecuted Eastern Europeans led him to begin thinking about what he could do to help.²

Meanwhile, Herman Margolis had become a student of Warburg’s in Berlin. Herman was born in Russia and had attended high school there, but anti-Semitic laws

¹ Stanford J. Shaw, *The Jews of the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic* (New York: New York University Press, 1991), 195.

² Isaiah Friedman, *Germany, Turkey, and Zionism, 1897-1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 125.

barred him from attending college. A fervent Zionist, he decided to try living in Palestine. While there he developed the desire to study agronomy, since he believed knowledge of this subject was necessary if the country was to thrive. He went to Germany to study under Warburg, and professor and student became very close.

Herman had planned to return to Palestine as soon as he finished his studies in Berlin. However, Warburg convinced him to instead go to Turkey, where he would use Warburg's money to train the refugees and prepare them for emigration to Palestine. Herman was told to see Dr. Schwartz in Constantinople; when he arrived at the house, Schwartz's daughter Cecelia answered the door, and romance bloomed. They were married in 1901 and spent their honeymoon in Asia Minor. Then they settled down in rather primitive rural conditions to prepare the Zionist refugees for life in Palestine. To give birth to Laura in 1903, Cecelia had to travel to Constantinople in an oxcart. Three years later she did the same for a son, Otto, named after Dr. Warburg.

Meanwhile, Herman's father and brothers had emigrated to the United States and were living in Dayton, Ohio. Warburg's funding for the refugee project was running out, and the family began thinking of moving on. Cecelia, whom Margolis remembered as a beautiful musician, was growing tired of the farming life and encouraged Herman to visit his family and see how he liked America. He went to Ohio in 1908, and a few months later his wife and children joined him there. They were still hoping to emigrate to Palestine, but were discouraged from doing so because the region was then under the rule of the Ottoman Empire. The government had prohibited Jewish settlement in Palestine,

though for political reasons rather than because of anti-Semitism. Although this edict was not strictly enforced, Jews still knew they were not welcome there.³

Thus the Margolis family was convinced to stay in Ohio. Laura had arrived in the United States as a multilingual five-year-old, speaking French, Spanish, German, Turkish, Greek, and Yiddish. She began kindergarten in Dayton, where she learned English, and continued school in Lima, Ohio, where her father opened a shop and her mother continued her music. The family moved around the state during Margolis's early school years, eventually settling in Cleveland. Apart from one year back in Constantinople with her mother and brother spending time with her mother's family and attending a German school, Cleveland was her home for the rest of her childhood and adolescence.

Her best friend was a neighbor girl named Lillian whose mother was dedicated to community work. Margolis went along with Lillian on visits to needy Jews in the city, and spent a summer while in college at Ohio State doing casework at a family welfare service Lillian's mother had established. Early thoughts about attending medical school seemed impractical during the Depression; instead she eventually got a professional degree in social work from Western Reserve University.

At this time, there were not many professions available to women, but social work was one of the few in which a female would be unlikely to face overwhelming discrimination or social disapproval.⁴ It may have been seen as acceptable because it was centered on traditional female care-based activities, only in the public sphere instead of

³ Shaw, *The Jews of the Ottoman Empire*, 215.

⁴ Robyn Muncy, *Creating a Female Dominion in American Reform, 1890-1935* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), xiii.

the home.⁵ Graduate programs in social work had only begun to be established in the previous decade, although by 1929 there were at least 25 such programs in the U.S.⁶ She was joining a cohort of women seeking training in a helping profession. Though she later proved herself willing and able to cross gender barriers, she may not have been ready to do so at this stage in her life.

Margolis spent several years doing Jewish social work, including a year with the Jewish Social Service Bureau in Cleveland and several months with the Jewish Social Service Association in New York City. She also spent a year with Associated Charities in a Polish neighborhood in Cleveland to get some experience in a non-Jewish setting. Her first long-term job involved setting up the Jewish Big Sister Association in Cleveland, for which she recruited, trained, and supervised volunteers to be Big Sisters for at-risk Jewish girls. She spent several years in the early 1930s building this program. By 1934 it was running smoothly and Margolis felt ready to try something new. She later said, “This has been a pattern of mine, that once I meet the challenge of a new situation and overcome it so that it is functioning, I want to go on.”⁷

Margolis heard about a job heading the Jewish Welfare Society in Buffalo, New York, and was thinking seriously about applying. She asked two friends active in welfare work in New York what they thought about the position. They discouraged her from pursuing it, warning that the Buffalo community was conservative and reactionary, with

⁵ Penina Migdal Glazer and Miriam Slater, *Unequal Colleagues: The Entrance of Women into the Professions, 1890-1940* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 202.

⁶ Robert C. Reinders, *American Social Workers in the Years of the Locust, 1929-1933* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Catalyst, [197?]), 9.

⁷ Laura Margolis Jarblum, interview by Menahem Kaufman, 26 April 1976, transcript, page 4, AR33/44, file 130, JDC Archives.

the biggest financial contributors dictating the way the program was run. The Society itself had no independence and did not function according to standard professional social work practices. Her friends were afraid she was too young to handle what was bound to be a difficult situation.

However, she ended up taking the job anyway, thus leaving her parents' home for good. She found out quickly that all she had heard about the Jewish community in Buffalo was true, and saw that she had a difficult task in front of her. The Jews in the city were sharply divided between the wealthy families of Germanic origin who had been in Buffalo for several generations and the more recent immigrants from Eastern Europe, with the former firmly in control of the welfare program.

The older settlers made up the Jewish Federation of the city, which was a centralized body for fund raising and community services. The Federation in turn funded and oversaw the Jewish Welfare Society. The program was run as a charity, with Federation leaders dictating how and to whom money should be given. A field worker for a national Jewish organization described them as having "philanthropic paternalistic motives, with little capacity or willingness to [divide] responsibility with other groups and [modify] programs." Meanwhile the more recent arrivals refused to support the Federation's programs until they abandoned their 19th-century philanthropic ideas.⁸ This situation was rather different than what she had been used to in Cleveland. There, though there was still a division between older settlers and newer immigrants, the Eastern

⁸ Selig Adler and Thomas E. Connolly, *From Ararat to Suburbia: The History of the Jewish Community of Buffalo* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1960), 364, 358.

Europeans had been in the majority and the “old stock” was not able to wield as much power over them.⁹

Margolis found that only one staff member had some professional training. This was galling to her professionalism, as social work done by amateurs lessened the prestige and authority of trained professionals like herself.¹⁰ The situation was not unusual, however; Jewish social services across the country were just beginning a transition from pure philanthropy and volunteer help to social services by trained staff.¹¹ Margolis saw the professionalization of the agency as one of her main priorities.

The Federation leaders felt strongly that “Jews always take care of their own.” They apparently subscribed to the belief that “abandoning” destitute members of their community to public welfare departments would lead to hopelessness on the part of the clients and even less support for Federations from Eastern European Jews.¹² Therefore, even though the country was in the midst of the Depression, Buffalo’s Jews were not allowed to apply for relief from the county or city. While their relief rolls had increased by over 50% in one year, the city’s Jewish leaders had not yet given in to the nationwide reality that private agencies were no longer sufficient to meet the needs of the worsening

⁹ Lloyd P. Gartner, *History of the Jews of Cleveland*, 2nd ed. (Cleveland: Western Reserve Historical Society, 1987), 274.

¹⁰ Glazer and Slater, *Unequal Colleagues*, 204.

¹¹ Harry L. Lurie, *A Heritage Affirmed: The Jewish Federation Movement in America* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1961), 101.

¹² Maurice J. Karpf, “Wanted -- A Return to Basic Values,” in *Trends and Issues in Jewish Social Welfare in the United States, 1899-1952: The History of American Jewish Social Welfare, Seen Through the Proceedings and Reports of The National Conference of Jewish Communal Service*, ed. Robert Morris and Michael Freund (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1966), 310-312.

crisis.¹³ The organization also had a very limited view of what kind of assistance it could or should offer its clients, focusing mainly on financial help as opposed to social services. Margolis had to work hard to change the mindset of the Jewish leadership. As she later recalled, “It took a long time to break through both on the board and community level, and on the local staff level.”¹⁴

Margolis immediately started trying to distance her agency from the “clique” that ran the Federation. The Jewish Welfare Society did not have its own board when she arrived, so she set about creating one as part of her attempt to gain some independence for her organization. She found a brilliant young lawyer to lead the board who was not part of the Federation group and was willing to help her fight for her principles. The board did end up containing some members of the Federation, but they did not dominate the group, and the body was ultimately useful to Margolis in her battle for change.

Eventually she was able to professionalize the agency and separate it from the Federation. After she had been with the Society for two years, the University of Buffalo’s School of Social Work for the first time placed students with the organization for training. This was a recognition of its legitimacy as an agency doing actual social work instead of simply distributing dole money. One of the students who trained in her office was the daughter of the Federation president, a situation which Margolis described as “a bitter pill for him to swallow,” as he had been one of Margolis’s primary opponents.¹⁵ The student came down firmly on Margolis’s side in the ongoing battle for control of the

¹³ Adler and Connolly, *From Ararat to Suburbia*, 366; Gerald C. Rothman, *Philanthropists, Therapists and Activists: A Century of Ideological Conflict in Social Work* (Cambridge, Mass.: Schenkman Publishing, 1985), 14.

¹⁴ Margolis, interview by Menahem Kaufman, page 5.

agency. However, she was also helpful in explaining the organization's work to the wealthy contingent of the community, as she had been raised in its privileged society and still had status there.

Though Margolis was largely successful in making what she deemed the necessary changes to the welfare program, bad blood remained between her and the "old guard" that had been used to dictating the Society's activities. She remembered later that "they all had their vested interests -- and here was a revolution in the making, meaning that people in power begin to lose power."¹⁶ The "revolution" must have seemed like a David-and-Goliath battle against the powerful community leadership, and she likely found satisfaction in the fact that she appeared to have come out on top. Her friends' fears that she would not be able to hold her own against the Federation were being proven wrong.

Margolis had another fight on her hands with the issue of resettlement of German refugees. Jews were beginning to flee Nazi Germany in large numbers, and each Jewish community was asked to take in a certain number of immigrants. The Federation leadership in Buffalo opposed accepting these refugees, as the funds to help them would have to come from local sources. The national agency coordinating the resettlement efforts across the United States had structured the program so that approval of the refugees' arrival would have to come from the Jewish community of each city. Margolis had to battle to convince the Federation leaders to accept the Germans and also worked to overcome more general local resistance. Eventually she was successful: a local Jewish

¹⁵ Margolis, interview by Menahem Kaufman, page 6.

¹⁶ Margolis, interview by Menahem Kaufman, page 7.

leader estimated in 1941 that approximately 450 refugees had settled in the city since Hitler's rise to power.¹⁷

Margolis spent what she described as “a very intensive four years” in Buffalo.¹⁸ She had achieved a certain level of independence for the Society, made sure it had an assured budget, and established it as an organization doing true social work. She had been able to transfer some of the relief cases to the city and county where they belonged, and had hired a staff that was now mostly professionally trained. She had even developed amicable relations with some of her former enemies in the Federation. She liked the city and had many friends. It would have been easy to continue there, now that most of the difficult work of establishing independence and professional standards was complete.

But the same restlessness she had felt in Cleveland came over her again, and she started thinking about finding a new challenge. In 1938 a friend told her that the National Coordinating Committee -- later known as the National Refugee Service (NRS)¹⁹ -- was looking for someone who spoke Spanish to go to Havana in order to deal with the refugee situation there. The NRS had been formed earlier that year to centralize financing and programming to assist new immigrants in adjusting to the United States. A strong national organization was needed to oversee the resettlement of such a large number of people.²⁰ Millions of dollars were being spent on direct relief and other services that included loans, vocational training, and assistance to specialized workers like physicians in order to enable them to practice their professions in the U.S. The organization even

¹⁷ Adler and Connolly, *From Ararat to Suburbia*, 369.

¹⁸ Margolis, interview by Menahem Kaufman, page 7.

¹⁹ Although the organization did not become known as the National Refugee Service until the middle of 1939, for simplicity's sake I will hereafter refer to it by this later name.

worked with Quaker groups to establish hostels in the Midwest as temporary housing for refugees willing to move away from the immigrant-saturated East Coast.²¹ Apart from sheer humanitarian interest in the refugees, the NRS had another purpose in mind: it believed that helping the newcomers to quietly settle into American society would give less ammunition to restrictionists who wanted to further limit immigration.²²

While its focus was on domestic issues, the organization also wanted to help as many needy refugees come to America as possible. Cuba was an obvious place to offer assistance, as the country's liberal immigration policy had attracted thousands of Jews fleeing Europe. The vast majority of these refugees saw the country as a transit point to their ultimate destination, the United States. Some already had affidavits from American relatives, and others were trying to get them. However, with the large number of arriving immigrants, a bottleneck had formed, leaving refugees stranded while waiting to be allowed into the U.S. An NRS staff member had been sent to Havana to look into the situation, but the organization wanted to have someone there on a long-term basis. Margolis wrote a letter requesting an interview, but was ambivalent about pursuing the opportunity and left the letter lying on her desk. Her friend saw it there and put it in the mail. In late December 1938, Margolis received a telephone call from Cecilia Razovsky of the NRS asking to set up an interview.

Margolis accepted the job, although she later admitted feeling trepidation about it: "I really got scared because I had no idea what NRS was doing, and I had no idea what

²⁰ Robert Morris and Michael Freund, "Organization for Refugee Service," in *Trends and Issues*, 386.

²¹ David S. Wyman, *Paper Walls: America and the Refugee Crisis, 1938-1941* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1968), 26.

was going on in Cuba; and the only thing I did have was my knowledge of Spanish.”²³ She had very little information about what she was getting into, knowing only that many German refugees were fleeing to Havana. She was also afraid of breaking her ties with the Buffalo community of which she had become a part. But her curiosity and sense of adventure won out. This was the beginning of Margolis’s decades-long association with the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC).

The JDC, also known as the Joint, had been founded 25 years before as a temporary organization to aid Jewish sufferers of World War I. Unfortunately the need for the agency never diminished, and it was not able to dissolve as its founders had originally hoped. Since that time, it had evolved into the main American Jewish agency providing services overseas. The organization’s headquarters were in New York, but it had field offices across the globe with activities focusing on relief, rescue, and rehabilitation of needy Jews. It was steadfastly nonpolitical, and because of its reputation as a truly nonpartisan organization, it was able to gain entry into areas where other Jewish groups were prohibited.²⁴

The Jewish community was not completely united behind the JDC, however. The organization’s main clashes were with Zionist groups. The Joint’s philosophy was to help Jews become recognized citizens with full rights in the countries in which they

²² Eli Ginzberg, *Report to American Jews on Overseas Relief, Palestine and Refugees in the United States* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1942), 26-29.

²³ Margolis, interview by Menahem Kaufman, page 9.

²⁴ Yehuda Bauer, *My Brother’s Keeper: A History of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, 1929-1939* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1974), 24.

resided.²⁵ Zionist groups felt that efforts should instead be directed toward helping Jews emigrate to Palestine, and that assisting them to stay where they were was counterproductive. Disagreements also developed with Orthodox groups, who sometimes felt that the largely assimilated leadership of the JDC did not place enough priority on religious and educational issues.²⁶ This lack of unity among Jewish groups complicated relief efforts, especially during the crisis period of World War II.

JDC workers possessed uncommon dedication and concern for their fellow Jews.

Oscar Handlin wrote,

To its staff the Joint meant a life of service. Many of these workers were but a generation removed from the East European origins of those they helped. Increasingly, the field workers and administrators were professionals, trained to careers of social aid, and they regarded themselves as front-line fighters in a war against human deterioration . . . All were called upon to exercise diplomacy in relations with foreigners; financial skill in the management of other peoples' money; and tact in preserving the dignity of the people they aided.²⁷

This description might have been written specifically about Margolis. She had found an organization that would make good use of her professional skills and her dedication to helping others, in addition to giving her unique opportunities to assist those in need.

While Margolis was technically working for the NRS during her time in Cuba, the organization was closely linked to the JDC. Both groups received their funding through the same umbrella organization, the United Jewish Appeal, and were two complementary

²⁵ Yehuda Bauer, *American Jewry and the Holocaust: The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, 1939-1945* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1981), 183.

²⁶ see Efraim Zuroff, "Rescue Priority and Fund Raising as Issues During the Holocaust: A Case Study of the Relations Between the Vaad Ha-Hatzala and the Joint, 1939-1941," in *America, American Jews, and the Holocaust*, ed. Jeffrey S. Gurock (New York: Routledge, 1998), 405-426.

²⁷ Oscar Handlin, *A Continuing Task: The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, 1914-1964* (New York: Random House, 1964), 117.

parts of a larger program.²⁸ And since the NRS was primarily involved with domestic issues within the U.S., it is not surprising that Margolis's activities in Cuba were seen to fall more under the purview of the JDC. The Joint at that time sometimes accomplished its work through other organizations and chose not to use its own name. The Havana operation was called the Joint Relief Committee and had no obvious ties to the JDC. Margolis at first did not know she was working for anyone other than the NRS, but said she felt "greatly relieved" when she learned that the Joint was involved.²⁹ Eventually it was to JDC headquarters in New York where her appeals for funding or assistance were directed. She was the organization's first female field agent, a milestone that seems to have gone largely unremarked at the time.

The Joint knew it needed Margolis. Paul Baerwald, the chairman of the organization, had cabled Eugene Warner of the Buffalo Welfare Society asking that she be allowed to take the position. The telegram stated, "Inview [sic] emergencies many directions we asking our friends draft most suitable persons even if taken from normal duties. This is one of those situations. Am advised Laura Margolis executive director your Family Welfare Society would be especially helpful this situation . . . We hope she can be spared immediately as delays aggravate situation greatly."³⁰

Margolis saw the Havana job as a temporary one. Instead of resigning completely from the Jewish Welfare Society, she made arrangements to take a six-month leave of absence so as to retain her ties with the organization. In Buffalo, her departure was rumored to have been caused by her difficulties with the Federation, although this does

²⁸ see Ginzberg, *Report to American Jews*.

²⁹ Margolis, interview by Menahem Kaufman, page 11.

not appear to be the case.³¹ She put her furniture in storage, expecting that she would be back to retrieve it before long. In January 1939, she boarded a boat bound for Havana.

Upon arriving in Cuba, Margolis was met by the NRS staff member who had been there surveying the situation. She spent a week with Margolis explaining what she had observed and what needed to be done. She then returned to New York, leaving Margolis on her own. Her staff of about 100 was made up of mostly untrained Cuban Jews and refugees. She also had a local committee of Cuban and American Jews she could turn to. Things had looked simple from Buffalo but suddenly seemed more complex. Years later she remembered her optimistic attitude going in: “I had been helping Jews in Buffalo, now I would help them in Havana. I was in for some surprises.”³²

The situation facing Margolis was a daunting one. Because of Cuba’s generous immigration policies, boats full of Jewish refugees were arriving weekly, and she estimated that there were already about 5,000 of the new arrivals living in Cuba when she began her work there. Massive relief efforts were needed to supply them with food, shelter, and medical care. Apart from this welfare work, Margolis was also to assist refugees in their efforts to enter the United States. The Joint Relief Committee was expected to accomplish both these tasks with no regular funding and no budget. The NRS sent funds irregularly and only after “frantic phone calls.”³³

³⁰ Paul Baerwald to Eugene Warner, 9 January 1939, AR33/44, file 130, JDC Archives.

³¹ Adler and Connolly, *From Ararat to Suburbia*, 460.

³² Frances A. Koestler, “No Heroine She,” *The National Jewish Monthly* (February 1965), AR65/99, JDC Personnel, Laura Margolis Jarblum, Interviews, JDC Archives.

³³ Margolis, interview by Menahem Kaufman, page 10.

Meanwhile she began getting acquainted with the Jewish community. In 1938, approximately 13,000 Jews were living in Cuba, most of them in Havana.³⁴ Margolis found a social split between long-time Jewish residents and the new immigrants; the more established Jews had their own social organizations and clubs and were not willing to include the refugees. Tension also appeared when the Cuban Jews realized most of the refugees would be in Cuba for years and some permanently, rather than using the country only as a brief stopping point on their way to America. Margolis later described this strain as “the usual thing among Jews,” but said that at the time it was an “eye-opener.”³⁵

The settled Jews had established a comfortable lifestyle in the city. Four Jewish newspapers were in circulation, and several Jewish restaurants served European-style food like wiener schnitzel and Viennese pastries. Many in the community frequented theatres, films, concerts, and nightclubs. Their largely secular society was quite different from what many of the religious refugees were accustomed to. But there were sharp divisions even among the Cuban Jews: Zionists and non-Zionists, Sephardim and Ashkenazim, those who remained strongly Jewish-identified and those who assimilated or converted. By no means could one claim the Cuban Jewish community was unified.³⁶

The refugees themselves had come mainly from Germany and Austria, most of them in family units. They were generally able to live comfortably once they got settled in Cuba, many living in cheap hotels. Margolis later said this was when she first “fell in love” with the tropical climate: “It’s so much easier to be a refugee in the tropics than in

³⁴ Robert M. Levine, *Tropical Diaspora: The Jewish Experience in Cuba* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1993), 175.

³⁵ Laura Margolis Jarblum, interview by Margalit Bejerano, 1 February 1987, transcript 1, page 11, AR65/99, JDC Personnel, Laura Margolis Jarblum, Interviews, JDC Archives.

a northern, cold country.”³⁷ The problems of warm clothing and heating fuel did not have to be addressed, although the woolen garments most of the refugees had brought caused problems of their own in the form of heat rash. For the most part, their Cuban neighbors were free of the virulent anti-Semitism the refugees had found in their home countries.

However, culture shock was an issue -- the Spanish language, the presence of a large number of non-whites, and the highly visible Catholicism were constant reminders that they were in a place very unlike their homelands. Refugees also complained that life in the Caribbean was inefficient and uncivilized.³⁸ They were less likely to make an effort to adapt to the new culture, as they generally expected to remain in Cuba only temporarily. Thus they, like other refugees newly arrived in Latin America, tried as much as possible to model their new life on the old Austro-German Jewish bourgeois society they had left behind and that was in the process of being destroyed by the Nazis.³⁹

Margolis faced a large obstacle in beginning her work: she knew almost nothing about United States immigration laws and procedures. However, she quickly learned on the job, so much so that the Joint Relief Committee effectively became an arm of the American consulate in Havana. Margolis and her staff translated documents and helped refugees fill out the necessary forms. They were also allowed to give their recommendation to the consulate on whether or not the application should be accepted, as long as the quota was not filled. The Joint Relief Committee’s efforts helped ease the bottleneck and increased the flow of refugees leaving for the United States.

³⁶ Levine, *Tropical Diaspora*, 175.

³⁷ Margolis, interview by Margalit Bejerano, transcript 1, page 10.

³⁸ Levine, *Tropical Diaspora*, 39, 156.

But there was far too much work for the overburdened staff to handle. Margolis sent several frustrated messages back to New York trying to make clear the difficult circumstances under which they were attempting to work. One wonders if the JDC expected its first female field agent would be meek and timid. But far from being an unassuming woman who was afraid to speak up, Margolis was very clear about what she felt was necessary to do her job and was never shy about saying what she thought. In one letter, she discussed a promising plan for refugee housing, but said it was “absolutely impossible” for her to take on the project:

Until some plan is made to send additional help here, I don't think we can proceed. Please don't feel that it is a matter of not wanting to take on additional work. It is simply humanly impossible to do any more, and it would be too bad to do half a job on housing which would cost money and be a complete failure.⁴⁰

She requested that another staff person be assigned to Havana, even on a temporary basis, to start some necessary projects. (Eventually someone was sent to assist her.) Her own health was suffering from stress and overwork.

Illegal immigration was causing additional headaches. In order to legally enter the country, immigrants were to pay \$500 to Cuban authorities as a guarantee that they would not become dependent on the government. However, those who could not afford this bond instead paid \$165 when they embarked, which gave them a “permit.” This permit money was essentially a bribe to the official at the Cuban consulate. The passengers were not told that by paying the \$165 instead of the \$500, they would be considered illegal immigrants. Therefore, even some that could afford to pay the bond got the permit

³⁹ Leo Spitzer, *Hotel Bolivia: The Culture of Memory in a Refuge from Nazism* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998), x-xi.

⁴⁰ Laura Margolis to Cecilia Razovsky, 8 March 1939, AR33/44, file 506, JDC Archives.

instead, believing they were lucky to get a cheap way out and not realizing they were putting themselves in legal jeopardy.

Upon arrival, immigrants were sent to a camp outside Havana called Tiscornia that functioned as Cuba's Ellis Island. Those who had not paid the full bond were detained there. The graft and corruption of the process continued, as some refugees were able to buy their way out of internment by paying off officials. Outside the camp, Cuban agents were harassing and arresting refugees with incomplete bonds who had managed to avoid or leave Tiscornia. The only thing Margolis could recommend to these refugees was to continually change addresses to keep ahead of the authorities. Reflecting on this situation, she wrote: "The way some of our clients are moving to avoid arrests, and the fearfull [sic] way they walk down the street, for fear that a policeman will pick them up, makes me wonder what advantage there is to be in Havana as against Germany."⁴¹

In March 1939, Razovsky wrote to Margolis asking why 43 passengers from the ship *Iberia* were being held in Tiscornia. Margolis wrote back incredulously,

I apparently have not been successful in clarifying for you what the situation actually is. Mr. Benitez [the Cuban minister of immigration] is interested in one thing only, MONEY. Every other department in the government is powerless to control him . . . Benitez is not even asking these people to complete their bonds up to the \$500 legally required. If they can pay him a "fee," he will let them out.⁴²

She explained that the 43 being held either had no money to pay Benitez, or were refusing to do so. Reminding Razovsky that the organization's policy of not paying off bonds made Margolis and her staff powerless to help these people, she stated that she felt they might as well not go to Tiscornia and talk to them, since they could do nothing for them.

⁴¹ Margolis to Razovsky, 8 March 1939.

Showing her frustration, she wrote, “The most ridiculous part about this whole picture is that when these people do get out, thru fair means or foul, the JRC will pay hundreds of dollars in Tiscornia fees, all of which money could have been used to save these people a lot of heartache” -- in other words, to pay off their bonds and keep them out of Tiscornia in the first place.⁴³ She urged the organization to investigate whether some kind of arrangement could be reached with Benitez.

Her disgust with the corruption of the Cuban officials increased when one refugee who could not pay his bond appealed to Benitez and was told he would be given an extension if he brought in six people to purchase the \$165 permits -- in effect becoming an agent of the immigration minister. Margolis wrote, “Since we cannot do anything toward helping him financially with the completion of his bond, his only recourse is to comply with Benitez’s demands. This is actual blackmail and we have to stand by and watch it.”⁴⁴ It was believed that Benitez earned between \$500,000 and \$1,000,000 from immigration permits and other related schemes.⁴⁵

While well aware of the illegal immigration and the prevalence of graft, Margolis kept out of it as much as she could. She was representing the JDC, which was a non-political organization, and she knew that its reputation would be compromised if she was seen to be aiding the process in any way. She believed that “I had to keep my hands clean . . . the less you know, the better. You may know, but you don’t want to know.”⁴⁶ She

⁴² Laura Margolis to Cecilia Razovsky, 23 March 1939, AR33/44, file 506, JDC Archives.

⁴³ Margolis to Razovsky, 23 March 1939.

⁴⁴ Laura Margolis to Cecilia Razovsky, 29 March 1939, AR33/44, file 506, JDC Archives.

⁴⁵ Richard Breitman and Alan M. Kraut, *American Refugee Policy and European Jewry, 1933-1945* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 70.

⁴⁶ Margolis, interview by Margalit Bejerano, transcript 1, page 21-22.

was also still apparently becoming accustomed to the ways in which government in Cuba functioned differently than it did in America; when receiving suggestions from various political factions, her usual response was to request a written memorandum on the topic. Robert Levine notes that she was “probably too inexperienced in Latin America to understand that this was not the Cuban way.”⁴⁷

Meanwhile, the Joint Relief Committee was acting “extralegally” itself. According to Cuba’s 1934 “Law of the 50 Percent,” half the workers in every company had to be Cuban citizens.⁴⁸ As the local relief office was almost entirely staffed by refugees, it was clearly not abiding by this regulation. The fact that the JDC had not legally established itself in Cuba made Margolis’s situation even more precarious. She wrote to Razovsky, “The situation here is so terribly serious that we do not dare to do anything that would bring our local refugee problem to the attention of the Cubans. I am even jittery about the hords [sic] which congregate in our building and in the elevator, where other Cubans are present.”⁴⁹

Less than two weeks later, agents from the Labor Department descended on the office and demanded to see all the personnel records. Margolis dictated a letter to Razovsky while the inspectors were busy in another part of the building. She had stalled them when they first arrived by pretending not to understand Spanish; she then called one of her contacts in the Cuban community to come and help with the situation. Meanwhile the agents had seen the large number of people working in the office.

⁴⁷ Levine, *Tropical Diaspora*, 109.

⁴⁸ Judith Laikin Elkin, *The Jews of Latin America*, rev. ed. (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1998), 89.

⁴⁹ Margolis to Razovsky, 8 March 1939.

The inspectors concluded that the organization was violating the law by employing too many refugees and not enough Cubans. They asked for a list of all the office's employees; Margolis listed some staff as volunteers in order to minimize the appearance of impropriety. A few workers were in Cuba illegally with incomplete bonds, and Margolis left them off the list entirely, as she was afraid immigration officials would then find them and send them to Tiscornia. Margolis expressed particular frustration with this aspect of the situation, reminding Razovsky that "their cases have been called to your attention several times but we have had no word from you regarding them. It certainly would be a beautiful mess here to have them all picked up and sent to Tiscornia, then we might just as well close the whole outfit."⁵⁰

Margolis heard through her community contacts that the Labor Department was anxious to find out exactly what the organization was doing in Havana, especially since they were not legally established there. Her frustration at the lack of response to her pleas to legalize the JDC's status is clear in her letters. She hoped to have the labor fine reduced or dismissed, but warned that officials would be keeping an eye on them, and if they continued to break the law, the penalty would surely be drastically increased.

Other dramatic incidents occurred in the midst of the day-to-day work. One involved a German Jewish girl who was working as a companion to a baroness who had come to Cuba. She was being maltreated and came to Margolis for help. Margolis spirited her away in the middle of the night and brought her to a farm run by the American Friends Society outside of Havana.

⁵⁰ Laura Margolis to Cecilia Razovsky, 17 March 1939, AR33/44, file 506, JDC Archives.

Meanwhile Margolis was conducting a “housecleaning” operation in the office, completely reorganizing the system for determining which refugees needed help. She found several staff members who had experience in relief work in their home countries and assigned them to specific tasks. When refugees came in asking for assistance, they first dealt with reception, who made an appointment for them and made sure there was no emergency need. The intake office then found out the details of the case and determined whether it should be sent to the investigation office, or if it could not wait and should instead go to the emergency plan office. The emergency plan office determined whether immediate relief was truly necessary, and if so, arranged for room and board pending the outcome of the work of the investigation office. The investigation office conducted home visits and asked questions about relatives and resources in other countries to determine whether or not relief was called for. Finally, the disposition office arranged the details of assistance where investigation had deemed it necessary.

The new system had many advantages. With this step-by-step process, Margolis told Razovsky, the refugees could no longer “create scenes or scare us into giving emergency relief.”⁵¹ The room and board arrangements made by the emergency plan office were orchestrated with local hotels and restaurants; many refugees, upon learning they would receive food and shelter but no cash, decided to refuse assistance. The staff was also reviewing old cases that had been put on the relief rolls before Margolis’s arrival, and she anticipated that many would be removed. She felt that the new system had greatly increased the efficiency of the relief operation while ensuring that all who truly needed help would receive it. Their efforts were sorely taxed, however, when

⁵¹ Laura Margolis to Cecilia Razovsky, 13 April 1939, AR33/44, file 506, JDC Archives.

between 800 and 1,000 new refugees arrived in Havana in one week shortly after the new plan was put in place. Relief allocations had to be sharply cut in order to give some help to everyone who needed it. In addition, some of the refugees resented the local office's investigations, complaining that they were being asked too many questions about what other resources they might have.

Margolis had differences of opinion with JDC headquarters on the subject of refugees who were relatively well off. She felt that if the emigrants were able to pay the \$500 bond and had relatives in America who were willing to help them financially, then they should essentially pay for the services they received in Havana. Margolis proposed that the refugees sign over their bonds to the Joint Relief Committee, but the JDC disagreed, resulting in many arguments over the telephone. Margolis also got angry when she was asked to give special treatment to a relative of a large JDC contributor. She later attributed her resistance to the wishes of headquarters to her rigid principles and "the naiveté of an American social worker who adhered to certain rules."⁵² But even if she later described this as naiveté, her strong sense of professional ethics did not dissipate and was a factor in her work for years to come.

By May 1939, the issue of illegal immigration to Havana was becoming critical. The bribe money being made off the refugees was not being divided to everyone's satisfaction within the Cuban government, and those disgruntled with their portion were about to break down the whole operation. Through her contacts on the board and in the Cuban community, Margolis knew things were coming to a head and alerted the NRS and JDC. She later remembered, "I warned both organizations that we'd soon reach a crisis,

⁵² Margolis, interview by Margalit Bejerano, transcript 1, page 7.

that legal and illegal immigration would stop, that three boats were en route to Cuba from Germany, and that they should be prepared to send official representation down to help us handle the situation.”⁵³

The crisis came as Margolis predicted. In May 1939 the *SS St. Louis* attempted to dock in Havana harbor with its 900 Jewish passengers. The refugees had hoped to disembark in Cuba. However, the Cuban government now decided to crack down on illegal immigration and only allowed the 22 passengers who had proper visas to come ashore. The majority of the passengers had only illegal permits and therefore now faced the likelihood of being sent back to Germany, where the Nazis planned to send them directly to the camps. According to Robert Levine, this was all part of a Nazi plan to prove that other countries did not want Jews any more than Germany did.⁵⁴ German agents had been stirring up anti-Semitic sentiment among the inhabitants of the island, and found a particularly enthusiastic audience for their propaganda among pro-Franco Spaniards living there.⁵⁵

Margolis saw that the skills needed in this situation were political, not those of a social worker, so she asked the JDC to send appropriate people to Havana to deal with the crisis. The Joint dispatched a New York lawyer, Lawrence Berenson, to negotiate with the Cuban government. He had served as the chair of the Cuban Chamber of Commerce in the United States and was friendly with Army Chief of Staff Fulgencio Batista, so the JDC hoped he could find a way to resolve the case. However, some were afraid he was too brash and did not have enough tact to handle the situation. Cecilia Razovsky also

⁵³ Margolis, interview by Menahem Kaufman, page 11.

⁵⁴ Levine, *Tropical Diaspora*, 105.

arrived to help, planning to arrange for housing and other services for the refugees when and if they were allowed to disembark. Many Cuban Jews thought she was not up to the task either, and Margolis felt she had “a reputation for forthrightness which might not suit the situation.”⁵⁶ Meanwhile Margolis worked overtime trying to do what she could. Her assistant, Milton Goldsmith, boarded the ship to inspect conditions while she coordinated work on shore, having decided to keep a low profile. She remembered later, “I don’t think we ever went to sleep.”⁵⁷

The four of them based their operations in a Havana hotel, sending several messages to the passengers each day detailing the efforts being made on their behalf. The anti-Nazi German captain of the boat -- described by Margolis as “marvelous” -- stayed in contact with the group and agreed to pass information along to the refugees.⁵⁸ The four were also supplying information to journalists, and the story was appearing prominently in American newspapers.

Berenson offered to post bond money as a guarantee that the refugees would not be employed in Cuba while waiting to be allowed into the United States, but Laredo Bru, the Cuban President, wanted the sum quadrupled. He was apparently also disappointed that the JDC’s offer did not include any “gifts” for Cuban officials.⁵⁹ He refused to give Berenson more time to work out a deal, and the *St. Louis* was ordered to leave Havana. The boat sailed as slowly as it could in hopes that it would be allowed to dock in the

⁵⁵ Irwin F. Gellman, “The *St. Louis* Tragedy,” in *America, American Jews, and the Holocaust*, 58.

⁵⁶ Gordon Thomas and Max Morgan Witts, *Voyage of the Damned* (New York: Stein and Day, 1974), 151.

⁵⁷ Laura Margolis Jarblum, interview, 11 July 1991, transcript, page 11, RG-50.030*0149, Record Group 50, Oral History, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) Collection.

⁵⁸ Margolis, interview by Margalit Bejerano, transcript 1, page 29.

⁵⁹ Breitman and Kraut, *American Refugee Policy and European Jewry*, 72.

United States, but the Coast Guard ordered it out of American waters. Meanwhile the JDC was negotiating with European countries, offering to pay board and lodging for the refugees in any country that would take them. It was the only American organization actively working to save the passengers from returning to almost certain death in Germany.⁶⁰ In the end, Belgium, Holland, Britain, and France agreed to accept the passengers. However, Margolis expressed “bitter disappointment” that the United States had not taken in these needy people on its doorstep.⁶¹ In addition, the Nazis won a propaganda victory with the world’s clear reluctance to accept the Jews inside their borders. And since the majority of the passengers resettled in countries that were later occupied by the Germans, they were by no means saved, even though, as Margolis said, “we did our best.”⁶²

Incidentally, Margolis was disappointed with *The Voyage of the Damned*, a well-known book about the incident which later became the basis for a film. She was never interviewed by the author, and objected in particular to one passage that mentioned her weeping.⁶³ She said, “[I] may have cried, but never when anybody saw.”⁶⁴ Her “low profile” -- or perhaps assumptions based on her gender -- also apparently led the authors to conclude Goldsmith was in charge and Margolis was his assistant.

The *St. Louis* incident marked the end of easy immigration into Cuba. Meanwhile, Margolis’s six-month leave of absence from the Jewish Welfare Society was

⁶⁰ Arthur D. Morse, *While Six Million Died: A Chronicle of American Apathy* (Woodstock, NY: The Overlook Press, 1967), 283.

⁶¹ Margolis, interview by Menahem Kaufman, page 11.

⁶² Margolis, interview, 11 July 1991, page 11.

⁶³ Thomas and Witts, *Voyage of the Damned*, 129.

⁶⁴ Margolis, interview by Margalit Bejerano, transcript 1, page 28.

ending, and she needed to make a decision about what to do next. She later said her experience in Havana had made it clear that she “could never go back to doing social work as it was taught in school,” so she cut her ties in Buffalo and resigned.⁶⁵ She then asked the JDC for more training in immigration and resettlement. She spent the last half of 1939 in New York learning more about these issues, and returned to Havana in January 1940. Meanwhile, Goldsmith, her assistant, was being transferred to South America, and Margolis asked that Manuel (“Manny”) Siegel, with whom she had worked in Buffalo, be sent as his replacement.

Margolis continued her refugee work in Havana. Some immigration had resumed, but the cost of the proper permits had risen dramatically, thus limiting the numbers able to enter the country. With fewer incoming refugees, the Joint Relief Committee was less overwhelmed with work, and was able to focus more on social work and immigration assistance for those who had arrived earlier. She did not feel the American consulate became any more liberal after the *St. Louis* incident, but said they had always been fair and easy to work with. She did not criticize consulate officials, even years later.

Looking back, she said these were “great years, really great.”⁶⁶ She was not restless, and felt that she was doing important work. She was also on good terms with the refugees she was sent to assist. Many people who did not need the organization’s help still came to the office to introduce themselves and chat. She became friendly with some of them, and they became her companions in the cafes in the evenings. In addition, she felt good about her growing competence:

⁶⁵ Margolis, interview by Menahem Kaufman, page 12.

⁶⁶ Laura Margolis Jarblum, interview, 7 October 1987, transcript, page 3, AR33/44, file 130, JDC Archives.

I was more secure with my knowledge of immigration, and I was much more helpful than in the beginning because I was better equipped. I learned a completely new kind of work and also got rid of some of my very orthodox and rigid social work ideas. I was working in a life-saving emergency situation and I had to have an entirely different approach. I realized myself that something had changed.⁶⁷

Working in Havana had resulted in something of a transformation for Margolis, both in her work and in her thirst for adventure. In school she had learned that social work was methodical -- “investigation, diagnosis, plan and treatment” -- but found this system to be of limited use in a chaotic situation like the one she faced in Cuba.⁶⁸ She learned to let go of the orderly casework model and instead rely on improvisation and creativity.

She also found that she thrived on the challenge involved. Though upon receiving her social work degree she had envisioned herself working in Jewish communities in America continuing the activities she had seen her friend Lillian’s mother engaged in, she now had grown beyond this limited world and could not envision going back. As she later said of her experience in Cuba, “I realized then that this is what I wanted to do.”⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Margolis, interview by Menahem Kaufman, page 12.

⁶⁸ Reinders, *American Social Workers*, 12.

⁶⁹ Margolis, interview, 7 October 1987, page 3.

CHAPTER 3: “A GREAT EXPERIENCE NOW THAT IT’S OVER”

Margolis was happy in Havana and had no intention of leaving. She remembered later, “I liked Cuba. I liked the climate, I liked the people.”¹ But another challenge was waiting for her, one that would require strong leadership in a completely strange environment. The war was heating up worldwide, and Margolis was about to go directly to one of the hot spots, where eventually circumstances would leave her without JDC assistance or instructions. Before she came home again, she would be labeled as an enemy and become acquainted with the inside of a barbed wire fence. The experience would be physically and emotionally draining, but did not seem to dampen her dedication to her chosen profession.

She was contentedly continuing her work in Cuba when she received a telephone call from the JDC’s Moe Leavitt in April 1941 asking if she would go to Shanghai. Her mischievous side came out and she answered, “Yes, I’d like to go. But where is it?”² She did of course know it was in China, but did not find out why she was needed there until she went to New York to meet with Leavitt.

There she learned her assignment was being given at the request of the U.S. State Department. The head of the Visa Division, Avra Warren, had spent time in Havana and had seen how Margolis was able to open up the bottleneck and get immigration flowing. He was impressed with her work, and suggested to the JDC that she be sent to Shanghai

¹ Margolis, interview, 11 July 1991, page 12.

² Margolis, interview by Menahem Kaufman, page 13.

to try to do the same there. Since it was an open port that required no visas, European refugees stymied by immigration restrictions elsewhere had been flocking to the city and were waiting there to be allowed into the United States or other countries. Margolis later said, “I have the State Department to thank that I was sent to China. I don’t know if I should thank them . . . In retrospect, I should . . . because it was a great experience now that it’s over.”³

She was told her primary assignment would be immigration work similar to what she had been doing in Havana, this time working under the auspices of the American consulate. Leavitt also told her that the JDC was sending money to a local committee that was overseeing relief efforts for 8,000 refugees. He said she could look into the welfare situation if she chose, but that she should concentrate her efforts on getting refugees out of the country.

Margolis went back to Havana to pack her belongings, and then went to Cleveland to spend time with her family before going overseas. Her parents were very unhappy about her decision to take this dangerous assignment. She said later, “I was warned by everybody that the war was coming, that something was going to happen in the Far East and that I shouldn’t go. But I went . . . I knew this was to be my life from now on, not routine social work in the U.S. That didn’t interest me at all.”⁴ It seems to have been less a thirst for adventure for its own sake than a desire to do important and lifesaving work that drove her.

³ Margolis, interview by Margalit Bejerano, transcript 2, page 7.

⁴ Margolis, interview by Menahem Kaufman, page 14.

In April 1941, she set sail from San Francisco to Hawaii. From there she flew over the rest of the Pacific to Hong Kong in five days, flying during the day and stopping on a different island each night, a trip she described as a great adventure. Later in her life, she recalled it as being “very much more civilized than the way we travel now.”⁵ She stayed in Hong Kong for a week until she could get a berth on a Dutch ship to Shanghai, as she refused to sail on the more frequent Japanese ships.

She made good use of her stay in Hong Kong. While walking through the city, she saw the office of the China Defense League, a relief program for which she had helped raise funds in Buffalo. She stopped in looking for books or pamphlets that might help her learn more about the country she would soon be living in, and a staff member asked her name and where she was staying in Hong Kong. Upon arriving back at her hotel, she found an invitation to a dinner party that night at the home of Soong Ching Ling, Sun Yat Sen’s widow.⁶ The party had both Chinese and foreign guests, and Margolis enjoyed herself immensely. At one point in the evening, Soong pulled her aside and asked her if she would come again the next evening.

Soong had led an unusual life. She had been educated in the United States, giving her some cultural common ground with Margolis, and later married against the wishes of her family. After Sun’s death, she became quite active in Chinese politics in an attempt to keep the revolutionary movement true to her late husband’s ideals.⁷ In 1938, Soong founded the China Defense League to carry out medical relief and child welfare work

⁵ Margolis, interview, 11 July 1991, page 14.

⁶ This paper will use the Wade-Giles transliteration system, as this was the convention during Margolis’s time in China.

⁷ see Sterling Seagrave, *The Soong Dynasty* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985).

during the war.⁸ She could have lived in comparative luxury in exile, but instead devoted herself to China, often at great personal risk.

Their second meeting was just between the two of them. Soong had many questions about the situation in Shanghai and what Margolis would be doing there, and they talked for quite a long time. It is not surprising that the two women found each other to be kindred spirits of a sort. They shared a concern for helping others, were both extremely dedicated to their causes, and had both led rather unusual lives. Margolis remembered being thrilled by the fact that two people from completely different backgrounds had so much to talk about; she later called it one of the most exciting evenings of her life.

At the end of their visit, Soong gave her a list of people in Shanghai who could be helpful to her in her work. Margolis later said the list “was of inestimable value; my life and work in China would have been much more difficult without the help of these friends.”⁹ The two women met again in 1979 when Margolis visited China; at that time Soong was Vice Chairman of the People’s Republic, a symbolic position that denoted the respect she was still given in Chinese society. She had continued her relief work, founding the China Welfare Institute to promote health and education for women and children.¹⁰ General Morris Cohen, Sun Yat Sen’s former bodyguard, also became a good friend to Margolis, escorting her around Hong Kong throughout her stay.

⁸ Howard L. Boorman, *Biographical Dictionary of Republican China*, vol. 3 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), 145.

⁹ Laura Margolis Jarblum, “Remembering Soong Ching Ling,” September 1986, AR65/99, JDC Personnel, Laura Margolis Jarblum, JDC Archives.

¹⁰ Sylvia Wu, *Memories of Madame Sun* (Santa Monica; Dennis-Landman, 1982), 16.

May 15, 1941, found Margolis in Shanghai at last. She had had a romantic conception of the country and its ancient culture based on exotic stories she had heard and Shanghai's reputation as "the Paris of Asia." However, she was startled by the reality she now saw. One of the first things that struck her was the colonial luxury of a kind she had never witnessed, side by side with large-scale misery and poverty. When asked years later about her first impression of the city, she said, "I hated it . . . because it was glittery, it was crowded, it was Chinese dead on the street in the cold."¹¹

She had a hard time understanding the colonial mentality. The wealthy people there felt they were the invincible lords of the Far East -- that "nothing can ever touch them; nothing can ever happen to them."¹² She later laughed at her naiveté in arriving with low-heeled shoes and comfortable clothes, as she soon learned that to meet people and find out what was going on in the city, she had to be part of the social scene:

Life became one round of partying and social activities. I had flown out with a minimum of luggage and work clothes, but there I couldn't function unless I had a different evening dress every night. I played the game and hated every minute of it.¹³

She told an interviewer, "I went out to do a job and found myself dancing."¹⁴

Meanwhile she also began her work. She was the first and only JDC representative there and did not have an office, so she operated out of her elegant room at the Cathay Hotel. She met with the officials at the American consulate and found that there had previously been little immigration activity from Shanghai; thus they were rather

¹¹ Margolis, interview, 7 October 1987, page 25.

¹² Margolis, interview, 7 October 1987, page 5-6.

¹³ Margolis, interview by Menahem Kaufman, page 15.

¹⁴ James R. Ross, *Escape to Shanghai: A Jewish Community in China* (New York: Free Press, 1994), 114.

overwhelmed by the current flood of refugees. She helped them set up a new filing system and told them all she had learned in Havana about immigration and refugees. Since she spoke German, Margolis served as an interpreter, and also began interviewing applicants. She quickly developed a working relationship with consulate staff which she judged was as good as the one she had had in Havana.

Some of the refugees already had affidavits and visas, but still were not able to leave China for America. She found that the bottleneck was caused by several factors. None of the consulate staff knew German, which slowed down the process considerably. “Fifth column” fears were also prevalent at the time, concern that spies disguised as refugees would be allowed into the United States. The main problem, however, was lack of staff in the consulate. Margolis wrote to Avra Warren in the State Department asking if it would be possible to send more workers to Shanghai; apparently the answer was no.

Emigration to America was a slow process, as Washington was placing more restrictions on who could enter the country. In June 1941, it became even more difficult, largely because of fears of spies and subversives gaining admission. A 1940 Roper poll showed 71 percent of respondents believing that Germany was actively attempting to infiltrate spies into the U.S., and immigration policy was being tightened accordingly.¹⁵ Refugees who had close relatives remaining in enemy territory were placed under suspicion; additional documentation had to be submitted with guarantees of financial independence and “political-moral” sponsorship; all paperwork had to be begun again using forms supplied by Washington; and applications now had to be reviewed in the U.S. by government officials, including representatives of the FBI, instead of only by

¹⁵ Howard M. Sachar, *A History of the Jews in America*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 533.

overseas consulate staff.¹⁶ Jewish organizations were put in a difficult position: if they protested these regulations as overly stringent, they might appear unpatriotic. They feared giving the impression that rescuing their co-religionists was more important to them than American security.¹⁷

Margolis regretted that she had arrived in Shanghai just as more restrictions were being placed on entering America: “It’s just a shame that I’m a year too late; but we still hope that with the good will of the State Department and the grace of God, we may clear some people out of here.”¹⁸ She found her work with the consulate to be satisfying, and felt that the staff there were sincerely interested in helping the refugees. Apparently there had been some question about whether officials were deliberately obstructing immigration, but she gladly reported that “every rumor is absolutely unfounded.”¹⁹

When she was not working, she looked around and got a feel for the local Jewish community. It was made up of three distinct groups. One consisted of wealthy Sephardic Jews, mostly British subjects, who had lived in the city for several generations. White Russians who had come to China at the time of the Bolshevik Revolution made up the second faction.²⁰ Both of these groups were fairly well off and established in the community, but their lives were lived in almost complete separation from each other.²¹

¹⁶ Wyman, *Paper Walls*, 196.

¹⁷ Henry L. Feingold, *The Politics of Rescue: The Roosevelt Administration and the Holocaust, 1938-1945* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1970), 131.

¹⁸ Laura Margolis to Moses A. Leavitt, 29 July 1941, AR33/44, file 488, JDC Archives.

¹⁹ Laura Margolis to Robert Pilpel, 28 May 1941, AR33/44, file 461, JDC Archives.

²⁰ Bauer, *My Brother's Keeper*, 290.

²¹ Yaacov Liberman, *My China: Jewish Life in the Orient, 1900-1950* (Jerusalem: Gefen Publishing, 1998), 118.

Lastly there were the recent immigrants, most of them from Germany and Austria. While some had been wealthy in their home countries, the circumstances of the war and the expenses of their journey had left them destitute in Shanghai, and the occupation and war gave them little opportunity to earn a living. As one writer put it, “Thousands of refugees already there had exactly the same skills you possessed whatever they might be; and the Chinese glutted the manual-labor market, accepting wages one tenth of European standards for comparable work.”²² By 1939 when the refugees began to arrive, the city was declining economically and foreign interests were pulling out. Margolis said that “it certainly could not absorb another 20,000 souls into its economic structure.”²³ Eight thousand of the refugees were dependent on JDC-financed relief.

A group of wealthy Jews had set up the welfare committee to which the Joint was sending money. It was known as the Speelman Committee after its chairman, Michel Speelman, a man of Dutch descent. No fund-raising efforts were undertaken locally; all money for relief came from the JDC in New York. The committee had one paid staff member, a Captain Herzberg, who had previously supervised Chinese day laborers (or “coolies” in the parlance of the day) on the wharves. He told Margolis how he had had to beat the “coolies” in order to make them work; she felt he had about the same level of respect for the refugees. While he had improved the program somewhat and started keeping some financial records, Margolis was extremely uncomfortable with the way he treated the relief recipients. His assistants followed his lead in ordering people about,

²² Marvin Tokayer and Mary Swartz, *The Fugu Plan: The Untold Story of the Japanese and the Jews During World War II* (New York: Paddington Press, 1979), 191.

²³ Laura Margolis, “Remarks at Annual Meeting of Members and Directors of NRS,” 15 January 1944, page 2, AR33/44, file 463, JDC Archives.

causing Margolis to remark, “One has the constant feeling of being in the German army.”²⁴

As for the other members of the committee, the situation was not much better. Margolis felt that Speelman was basically a kind man, but that he was becoming senile and also had a tendency to give in to stronger personalities even when he felt their positions were clearly wrong. Margolis reserved some special words of dislike for Ellis Hayim, who was the Vice-Chairman of the committee but held most of the power. She wrote to JDC headquarters, “The man is actually a sadist, who has done unheard of cruel things to refugees; then on the other hand, in a streak of generosity (probably guilt) he will grant an unheard of request to someone who doesn’t need the help. Decisions are entirely a matter of mood; and no one contradicts him.”²⁵ She felt that all of the committee was nervous upon her arrival, and that Herzberg in particular was very sensitive to criticism. She wrote to New York, “I don’t think they’d like hearing the truth from me, and I’ll put off giving it as long as I can. But I make no promises.”²⁶

Despite the efforts of the committee, the Jewish refugees’ plight was still miserable -- worse than any Margolis had seen in her previous work. The housing situation was a “terrific shock” to her -- 2,500 people in five “camps” located in old schools and warehouses.²⁷ Since the refugees were expected to be in Shanghai only temporarily, little effort had been made to improve conditions. The sanitary facilities

²⁴ Margolis to Pilpel, 28 May 1941.

²⁵ Laura Margolis to Robert Pilpel, 11 August 1941, AR33/44, file 462, JDC Archives.

²⁶ Laura Margolis to Robert Pilpel, 18 June 1941, AR33/44, file 461, JDC Archives.

²⁷ Margolis to Pilpel, 28 May 1941.

were completely inadequate -- one camp had two toilets for four hundred people -- and there was a total lack of privacy. Margolis described the camps to the JDC:

There was no place to hang one's clothes, no place to put a towel. There was just a horde of human beings all put into large dormitories with double decker beds for convenience. If I hadn't seen this myself I could never have believed it. It was unbelievable that white human beings could live as these people were living.²⁸

Her emphasis on the refugees' color is notable. Though she professed to have no race prejudice, and indeed was sickened by the treatment of the Chinese, she did seem to believe different standards applied for whites than for non-whites.

Margolis saw little concern for the refugees among the members of the committee, claiming that "they probably wouldn't care too much if several thousand were bayoneted into the Whangpoo. So much less for them to worry about."²⁹ Years later, she tried to explain the situation:

Now, don't forget the mentality there in the Far East. This was a committee of millionaires accustomed to seeing the Chinese dead in the streets. To them, the refugees were just another bunch of poor people who had to do what the committee wanted them to do. It was terrible; I remember how shocked and horrified I felt.³⁰

The power structure was reminiscent of what she had faced in Buffalo: older settlers were running the relief program for newer arrivals, often without much tact or professionalism.

The committee's attitude led to open antagonism and hostility with the refugees. She even documented cases where the committee had arbitrarily prevented would-be emigrants from receiving visas. In the beginning when refugees came to her with

²⁸ Margolis, "Remarks at Annual Meeting," page 3.

²⁹ Margolis to Pilpel, 11 August 1941.

problems, she would suggest they take them up with the committee, at which point she could

actually see the look of fear and hopelessness on their faces. At first, I really thought the refugee was exaggerating, and trying to use me as a go-between to get something extra. Now I know why he hesitates to go to the committee. I hate to go there myself.³¹

As she gained more understanding of the situation, she became increasingly sympathetic to the relief recipients. Any refugee who came to the committee with a complaint was likely to be labeled a “troublemaker” and have his or her aid taken away. (She described Herzberg’s attitude as “the customer is never right.”³²) Not surprisingly, this resulted in extremely poor morale in the community.

The refugees wrote to both relatives and the JDC to complain about their situation. One refugee’s letter to friends described the poor conditions of the camps: bad food, overcrowding, dirt, disease. He wrote, “There is coughing and spitting from every bed through all the night, so that even if otherwise one would be able to sleep one is kept awake through practically all the night.”³³ Another refugee wrote a despairing letter telling of his new life in Shanghai and begging the recipient not to tell his wife how he was living as it would “break her heart.” He added, “I somehow try to buck up but usually fail as I cannot believe in the future.”³⁴

Even though Margolis’s job officially did not involve the relief situation, once the refugees heard there was a JDC worker in the city, they came to her in delegations to

³⁰ Margolis, interview by Menahem Kaufman, page 16-17.

³¹ Margolis to Pilpel, 11 August 1941.

³² Margolis to Pilpel, 18 June 1941.

³³ Erich Pechel letter, 1 June 1939, AR33/44, file 468, JDC Archives.

³⁴ Tobias Farb letter, 28 April 1939, AR33/44, file 457, JDC Archives.

complain about the conditions they were living in and the treatment they were receiving from the committee. She also received piles of letters which her office assistant referred to as her “fan mail.” She found that everyone expected her to “have rabbits to pull out of my sleeves” and magically transform the situation.³⁵

She became increasingly frustrated at not being able to help the refugees. She reminded JDC headquarters that she had proven herself able to be firm on unpopular policies in Cuba. But, she added, “I must admit that I cannot take the pressure from thousands of refugees, who regardless of anything I say about my reason for coming to Shanghai, still look upon a representative of the JDC as someone who will help them.” She tried to make her dilemma perfectly clear:

I do hope you can appreciate what an embarrassing position I’m in. To the refugees I came here to help them. I can’t tell them that we the JDC are perfectly satisfied with the way everything is going on here. I don’t think you’d want me to say that if you could see this for yourself. And yet I can’t do a thing to really help them; whereas if I had your approval something really could be done. And my passivity as far as the local [committee] is concerned has given them the feeling until very recently that either I approved entirely; or else I had no authority to act . . . While writing this letter I’ve felt like a real sentimental volunteer, weeping over the “poor refugees”; but try as I might I can’t help but wince at what is going on here. And I can’t stand by and watch it.³⁶

Eventually she gave the JDC an ultimatum, saying that she preferred not to remain in Shanghai if she was not allowed to do anything about the relief problem. She said she was willing to take any other assignment regardless of war danger, but that she could not continue in China with her current sense of futility. If the JDC did indeed choose to allow her to take over the relief operation, she asked that someone be sent to help her, as

³⁵ Laura Margolis to Paul Baerwald, 20 May 1941, AR33/44, file 461, JDC Archives.

³⁶ Margolis to Pilpel, 11 August 1941.

it would be too much for one person to handle. She wrote to Moe Leavitt, “There will be so many spots to watch at one time, and so much local hostility, that no one person can take it alone. At least I must be frank and admit that I can’t.”³⁷

Meanwhile, though she was not officially involved in the relief program, she could not help giving advice to the committee. Apparently she ruffled some feathers. She wrote a letter to Speelman in August 1941 with the dual intention of easing hurt feelings and outlining several changes she deemed necessary. She was clear in saying the relief operation was “inefficient and unbusinesslike” according to the American standard. However, she was careful not to assign blame, stating, “I see no reason why this should be a reflection on anyone at present in charge . . . I simply don’t understand why any statement I might make in criticism of the local relief set-up should be taken as a personal affront.”³⁸

In soothing their feelings, she masked some of her own thoughts about the relief operation, telling them they had done a “magnificent” job in dealing with the crisis caused by the huge influx of refugees. But she reiterated that she was an expert in these matters and that her experience dictated things should be done in a certain way. She was not afraid to say that certain current procedures were “absolutely incorrect.” And she made clear that she was not looking for personal power or recognition, stating that she had

absolutely no desire to use this coveted thing called “authority.” My only desire is to see that the refugees get one hundred per cent of every dollar spent; and to help you see that they get it . . . My only interest is to be helpful, if you want that help. But, you must appreciate the fact that I must

³⁷ Laura Margolis to Moses Leavitt, 14 September 1941, AR33/44, file 462, JDC Archives.

³⁸ Laura Margolis to M. Speelman, 4 August 1941, AR33/44, file 462, JDC Archives.

be honest with you at least when I'm asked my opinion regarding the general state of things.³⁹

As for the refugees themselves, they were generally impressed with Margolis. Ernest Heppner was a German teenager whose mother had a job in the relief program. Heppner remembered, "One day my mother came home and told me about meeting an extraordinary woman whom she admiringly called 'the American lady.' She readily recognized Margolis's skills and her sensitivity to the refugees' plight . . . She considered it a great tragedy that Margolis had not been on the scene in 1939."⁴⁰ For the most part, the other refugees seemed to have shared these sentiments.

Margolis was working hard, but she did not enjoy her surroundings. She wrote to Avra Warren in the State Department, "Here's hoping that the next time you and the Joint Distribution Committee think of a job for me to do it will be in the Western Hemisphere."⁴¹ She said later, "I hated it every moment there . . . When I used to get through a day's work I would go to my hotel, put down the blinds, go to bed, just to get all of the horror out of my head."⁴² It was indeed a difficult place to live. The city was notorious for the thousands of corpses regularly picked up by police during famine years.⁴³ Scars from the 1937 bombing of the city were still very visible, and the Jewish refugees' plight raised no sympathy among the city's other inhabitants, as all were

³⁹ Margolis to Speelman, 4 August 1941.

⁴⁰ Ernest G. Heppner, *Shanghai Refuge: A Memoir of the World War II Jewish Ghetto* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 93.

⁴¹ Laura Margolis to Avra Warren, 3 June 1941, AR33/44, file 461, JDC Archives.

⁴² Margolis, interview, 7 October 1987, page 25.

⁴³ Hanchao Lu, *Beyond the Neon Lights: Everyday Shanghai in the Early Twentieth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 7.

engaged in a struggle to survive. Even the climate was oppressive -- tropical heat in the summer, cold rain and floods in the winter.⁴⁴

Margolis also still had great difficulty accepting the colonial mindset and did not enjoy the constant partying. She described a scene: “You come out of a dinner party like *A Thousand and One Nights* . . . and the palace that you’re coming from is surrounded by a high stone wall, and the doors open and you step on dead Chinese in the cold and people just go on.”⁴⁵ She also remembered whites pushing Chinese off the sidewalks and kicking them. She had not seen this kind of cruelty before, and it greatly disturbed her. Westerners in the city, even those not in the wealthy class, generally only had contact with Chinese in business dealings with shopkeepers and servants; this lack of social relations may have contributed to the natives’ dehumanization in the minds of the whites.⁴⁶

Meanwhile war tensions were running high. In late July 1941 Margolis received a telegram from JDC headquarters ordering her to ship out to Manila and await further instructions. The U.S. government was evacuating its own personnel, including the Marines, and the officials at the consulate were also urging her to leave. It took her weeks to find a place on a boat, but with the help of the American embassy she finally secured a bunk on a troop ship in mid-August. To avoid creating panic among the refugees, she did not say she was being evacuated for safety reasons, instead telling them she had a temporary assignment for the JDC in the Philippines. The boat stopped at

⁴⁴ Tokayer and Swartz, *The Fugu Plan*, 200, 209.

⁴⁵ Margolis, interview, 7 October 1987, page 25.

⁴⁶ Rena Krasno, *Strangers Always: A Jewish Family in Wartime Shanghai* (Berkeley: Pacific View Press, 1992), xiii.

Hong Kong on its way to Manila; no one was supposed to disembark, but Margolis had notified General Cohen that she was coming, so he came on board and got her off the ship. She spent two days in Hong Kong with him and Soong Ching Ling before resuming her journey.

Margolis was in Manila for two months, not knowing whether she would be returning to China. She received periodic letters from the JDC telling her that they were in touch with the State Department and were deciding what she should do, but that meanwhile she should stay put. While waiting, she took a trip to Borneo and nearby islands. She also spent time with European refugees who had made it as far as Manila and were waiting to be allowed into the United States. JDC chairman Paul Baerwald's relatives were among those biding their time in the Philippines.

Finally the JDC decided to send Margolis back into Shanghai. Minutes from a September 1941 meeting in New York show deliberations at headquarters about the wisdom of having her return to the volatile situation, but they determined her work there was necessary and noted that she had indicated she was willing to take the risk of being in a region threatened by war. They decided not to give her any definite instructions, instead allowing her to choose how to proceed "on the basis of her experience and intelligence."⁴⁷ Moe Leavitt told Margolis by telephone that he had been assured by the State Department there would be no war in the Far East.

She was also informed that she now had permission to reorganize the Speelman Committee and take charge of the relief program. She believed Paul Baerwald was behind this change in instructions; she received a letter from him in which she recalled

⁴⁷ Meeting Minutes, 8 September 1941, AR33/44, file 462, JDC Archives.

him saying that “it was silly to send a woman to Shanghai and tell her to keep her hands folded when there are so many problems.”⁴⁸ Since the task would be such a large one, Manny Siegel, her coworker from Buffalo and Havana, was being sent to assist her. Margolis returned to Shanghai in early October 1941 with a new mission and fresh determination.

She began setting up a JDC office in the Hongkew area, a sign that she was establishing an official presence in the city instead of simply working under the auspices of the American consulate. Funds from the Joint were now being sent directly to Margolis rather than to the committee. She still worked on immigration with the consulate, but her heart was more in trying to relieve the suffering of the thousands of refugees living around her. Manny Siegel arrived in November and the two of them started working together to set up a more efficient relief operation. They had a large task in front of them. She wrote later,

The whole situation was the result of an influx of people for whom no plan had been made; the belief that Shanghai was only a “way station” for them; the large proportion of destitute refugees in need of housing, food, clothes and medical care; the handling of the relief program by kindly disposed but inexperienced volunteers; last but not least, the waning economy of Shanghai itself.⁴⁹

The situation had not been handled well at the beginning, and had been allowed to spiral out of control. Margolis and Siegel began applying themselves to sorting it out a bit at a time.

The Speelman Committee had by this time received a letter from the JDC informing them that Margolis would now be dealing with relief efforts and that she had

⁴⁸ Margolis, interview by Menahem Kaufman, page 18.

the authority to reorganize the committee. They did not resist this change; she said later that “they were glad to get rid of the job; they’d never really been interested.”⁵⁰ However, there was still some tension involved with the transition, which finally erupted in an incident with Captain Herzberg. He wrote her a rather rude letter objecting to her secretary’s attempt to obtain information about employees at the relief hospitals, and Margolis decided to make an issue of it. She wrote to him reminding him that as the JDC’s representative in Shanghai, she had every right to learn exactly how the organization’s money was being spent. She added, “If the way you work with me is any example of the kind of co-operation you give to groups who are ‘dependent’ upon you; then it is easy to understand many things about the local situation.”⁵¹

She thereafter did not attempt to hide her dislike for the man. Shortly after the incident of the letter, she refused to attend a meeting because he would be there. When Speelman sent her a note defending Herzberg, she wrote back to explain how she saw the situation. She told him she had been hinting that things were not right with Herzberg, but now was coming right out and saying so. She added,

He has worked both hard and earnestly, but he is totally incompetent and limited; and unlike any other human being I have ever met; he can never be wrong and can never make a mistake. His idea of “co-operation” is to give orders for the other fellow to follow. And when they won’t take the orders they are immediately labeled as “uncooperative.” The result of this has been that your entire refugee staff consists of people who “yes” the Captain to keep their jobs; and the only people who get relief are those who haven’t enough “guts” left in their beings to contradict. Sorry to have to put it so strongly; but I’ve tried to get you to see this in a more subtle way.⁵²

⁴⁹ Laura L. Margolis, “Race Against Time in Shanghai,” *Survey Graphic* 33 (March 1944): 169.

⁵⁰ Margolis, interview by Menahem Kaufman, page 19.

⁵¹ Laura Margolis to Captain Herzberg, 15 October 1941, AR33/44, file 462, JDC Archives.

⁵² Laura Margolis to Michel Speelman, 17 October 1941, AR33/44, file 462, JDC Archives.

Herzberg wrote Margolis an apology, but she dismissed it as insincere, believing he did it under orders. He seemed to be slowly understanding that he no longer had the final say in how the refugee program was run. Margolis believed he would not stay long in a situation where he did not have ultimate authority; meanwhile she planned to have him deal only with administrative tasks -- like ordering food and supplies -- so that he would have minimal contact with the refugees. Her dislike for Herzberg was certainly understandable; however, she seemed a bit stubborn and vindictive in her dealings with him once she had the upper hand.

While she did not want Herzberg in charge, she was also reluctant to get too involved herself. She told New York that taking over the program “would be the last excuse which the local people have for asking JDC to do the whole job. They feel absolutely no responsibility themselves.”⁵³ She hoped to give adequate supervision to help the operation run smoothly while still making the Shanghai Jewish community self-sufficient. She also tried to convince the Speelman Committee of the importance of local fund raising, reminding them that this was a task she was not allowed to undertake. She told them,

You know there is no guarantee of continued subsidy from N.Y.; and no guarantee as to the amount. If and when we are faced either with complete curtailment or a cut in the subsidy; it will then be too late to begin planning. It seems to me that it is the moral responsibility of any committee into whose custody 13,000 human beings have placed their welfare to look ahead.⁵⁴

⁵³ Laura Margolis to Robert Pilpel, 5 November 1941, AR33/44, file 462, JDC Archives.

⁵⁴ Laura Margolis, memorandum to Speelman Committee, 9 November 1941, AR33/44, file 462, JDC Archives.

She emphasized to the committee that she and Siegel were only there temporarily and could not be counted on to carry the weight of the program. To New York she wrote, “We the JDC have spoiled these people. They expect us to continue meeting every deficit and every need without the slightest thought as to their own responsibility.”⁵⁵ Later she claimed that the greatest difficulties she faced in Shanghai were the apathy and lack of quality leadership in the local Jewish community. She contrasted this with the helpfulness and sympathy among the Christian staff of the American consulate.

Meanwhile Margolis was still rather upset at the delay in granting her authority over the relief program. She wrote to New York,

I can't help but state that I wish I had had the authority to proceed with this relief show when I first came out. I'm sure you can see by this time that I wouldn't have abused that authority; and that JDC's interest would have been adequately protected. We could have saved a lot of time and money. But let it never be said I didn't obey orders.⁵⁶

She seemed to interpret the initial orders to stay out of the “relief show” as a lack of trust in her abilities, which was probably not the case. Regardless, she once again showed her willingness to say exactly what she was thinking. One can see why Yehuda Bauer characterized her relationship with the JDC as one of “loyalty tempered by independence.”⁵⁷

Another difficult issue arose when a group of about 1,000 Polish refugees arrived in Shanghai in the fall of 1941. A large portion of the group was made up of rabbis and yeshiva students. They insisted on receiving kosher food, which was more expensive, and the JDC eventually agreed to give them a food allowance nearly twice that of the

⁵⁵ Laura Margolis to Robert Pilpel, 9 November 1941, AR33/44, file 462, JDC Archives.

⁵⁶ Margolis to Pilpel, 9 November 1941.

other refugees. Margolis thought this arrangement was unfair, saying “my own conscience hurts . . . the housing and feeding standard of the Polish refugees, and more so the religious group, is far superior to that of the Germans and Austrians.”⁵⁸ She was also bothered by the scholars’ self-absorption, writing to New York that they “of course think only of their own problem . . . They haven’t the slightest idea of what others generally are facing.”⁵⁹

However, the Orthodox community in America became very upset at any suggestion that the yeshiva’s portion of funding be reduced. While the JDC believed all refugees should be treated equally, Orthodox groups believed scholars were more important and their lives were more valuable than those of the other refugees. The religious group represented “the lifeblood of the nation” as they would preserve the future of Judaism.⁶⁰ Orthodox leaders believed that mixing the scholars in with the other refugees would “physically and morally undermine” them and lead to their “moral breakdown” and loss of self-respect.⁶¹ The Orthodox community protested vigorously when the JDC seemed reluctant to place the yeshiva’s needs above everyone else’s, and even threatened to start fund raising on their own, thus entering into competition with the JDC and confusing donors about the role of the Joint.⁶² JDC leaders eventually compromised: the yeshiva students would continue to receive extra funding, while the

⁵⁷ Bauer, *American Jewry and the Holocaust*, 180.

⁵⁸ Margolis to Pilpel, 5 November 1941.

⁵⁹ Margolis to Pilpel, 9 November 1941.

⁶⁰ David Kranzler, *Thy Brother’s Blood: The Orthodox Jewish Response During the Holocaust* (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 1987), 150.

⁶¹ Petition from Orthodox leaders, n.d. [1941], AR33/44, file 462, JDC Archives.

⁶² Zuroff, “Rescue Priority and Fund Raising,” 409-410.

Orthodox groups continued to contribute to their welfare through the JDC. The scholars were apparently unaware of the political machinations on their behalf: one survivor from the group wrote wonderingly about the “Divine concern” and “Heavenly guidance” that miraculously allowed them to continue studying and to live with more comfort than the other refugees.⁶³

Then in December, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. Margolis later remembered:

The shooting started at four o'clock in the morning on Monday, December 8th, 1941. We were awakened with the ships burning in the harbor, and by the time the sun rose and we were looking down from our hotel window, the Japanese army was moving into Shanghai. The lobby of the Cathay Hotel was occupied by Japanese with bayonets; we were told to stay in our rooms . . . None of us knew what was coming next.⁶⁴

Her first thought was, “Now I’m trapped, too. I’ll be no use to myself or to the refugees.”⁶⁵ Margolis and Siegel, now enemy aliens, tore up their papers and flushed them down the toilet, then spent the rest of the day listening to the radio. By evening they were told they were free to leave their rooms and move about the city. They took all the cash and jewelry they had in their hotel and brought it to friends who were German-Jewish refugees, as they were not considered enemy nationals. They then went out for a good Chinese dinner. On December 9, they were able to cable New York, “Both safe and well notify families.”⁶⁶

⁶³ Yecheskel Leitner, *Operation Torah Rescue: The Escape of the Mirrer Yeshiva from War-Torn Poland to Shanghai, China* (Jerusalem: Feldheim Publishers, 1987), 101, 124.

⁶⁴ Margolis, interview by Menahem Kaufman, page 20.

⁶⁵ Margolis, “Race Against Time in Shanghai,” 169.

⁶⁶ Robert Pilpel to Philip Lilienthal, 10 December 1941, AR33/44, file 130, JDC Archives.

Meanwhile, in the United States, the JDC issued a press release about the two relief workers trapped in enemy territory. Robert Pilpel also wrote to Otto Margolis giving the little news they had about his sister. Some discussion took place among interested parties about whether she and Siegel might have been able to escape into the interior of China. Philip Lilienthal, who had met Margolis in Shanghai, thought this unlikely, as the Japanese were surely guarding all escape routes. But, he added, “if anyone can swing it, that would be Laura, I should think.”⁶⁷

JDC headquarters also received a letter from a man from Los Angeles who had been traveling in the Far East and had met Margolis. He indicated his high opinion of her and expressed concern about her well-being now that the war had begun. Joseph Hyman, the JDC’s Executive Vice-Chairman, wrote back,

What you tell us as to your impression of Miss Margolis confirms our own very excellent opinion of her. It was because we entertained so real a regard for her ability that we transferred her from an important post in Cuba to this more difficult and complicated task in Shanghai . . . We have, of course, been greatly concerned, not only about her safety, but about the possibilities of getting her funds for her own personal needs, as well as for the needs of Mr. Siegel, and also about the requirements of the refugee community.⁶⁸

He went on to describe how they had been in touch with both the Red Cross and the State Department in hopes that they could help.

In Shanghai, Margolis and Siegel had to determine how to keep the relief program functioning. Now that America was officially at war with Shanghai’s occupying power, JDC assistance could no longer be expected. Most members of the Speelman Committee were also enemy nationals, so their activities would be as restricted as those of the JDC

⁶⁷ Philip Lilienthal to Robert Pilpel, 12 December 1941, AR33/44, file 130, JDC Archives.

representatives. And the day of Pearl Harbor, there was already a deputation of refugees in the hotel lobby asking what was going to happen to them. But Margolis had one asset she could use. Before she had evacuated to Manila, Moe Leavitt had sent her a cable telling her that in the event of war and cut communications, she had the authority to borrow up to \$180,000 (U.S.) in the community to be repaid by the JDC after the war ended. She now had to find a way to put this plan into action.

She learned that the Japanese officer who had been put in charge of Jewish affairs was a Captain Koreshige Inuzuka who was living upstairs in the penthouse of her hotel. She had met him socially, so felt able to telephone him and ask if he would see her. She was graciously received two hours after requesting the interview. She later remembered, “Here we were -- he a Japanese and I an American, our two countries at war -- and I’m sitting there sipping tea and going through the whole ceremony with a telegram in my pocket that I needed his help with.”⁶⁹

After the formalities were concluded, she put the situation before him plainly. Even though they represented two nations at war, their interests in this situation were the same. It was important to him to keep the refugees from starving and thus avoid hunger riots. She had the means to keep them fed if he would give her permission to borrow money within the community. She later pointed out to an interviewer that this persuasive speechmaking was not something she learned in her school of social work.

By making it clear that his own self-interest was the same as hers, she gave him a pressing reason to grant her request. He granted her permission to borrow the money, but

⁶⁸ J.C. Hyman to J. Hollzer, 19 January 1942, AR33/44, file 130, JDC Archives.

⁶⁹ Margolis, interview by Menahem Kaufman, page 20.

only if she disclosed to him the names of the contributors, who could only be non-enemy nationals. She had no choice but to accept this condition, although she did not like it -- there was quite a bit of black market money in the city, and those who had it would not want their names given to the Japanese.

Inuzuka's other requirement was that Margolis and Siegel take over the operation of the relief effort. He was very antagonistic toward the Speelman Committee, as its members had been quite hostile toward him before the war. He particularly disliked Herzberg and insisted that he should be fired. Again, there was little choice but to accede to his demands. One might guess, however, that Margolis felt secretly relieved to have an excuse for taking the committee out of the picture for good, given her strong feelings about how they had been running the relief operation.

Margolis developed quite a good working relationship with Inuzuka. She said she never felt uncomfortable with him, as she could tell he was a pragmatist who would do what was best for Japan. At one point, the American Red Cross had arranged to give 5,000 bags of cracked wheat to the relief effort on the condition that the Japanese would approve the transaction; Inuzuka indeed authorized the release of the wheat. In addition, he freed up the JDC's frozen funds. Margolis said he was practical, patient, and sympathetic, and she had no difficulties in working with him. She was very surprised to learn years later that he had written articles about the worldwide "Jewish conspiracy" for a Japanese anti-Semitic periodical that was funded in part by the German embassy.⁷⁰ The woman who was his secretary during the war eventually became his wife; she tracked Margolis down in Israel years later, and the two women became friends.

⁷⁰ Tokayer and Swartz, *The Fugu Plan*, 141.

After receiving Inuzuka's approval, Margolis set about publicizing the JDC credit. Loans started trickling in, but they were only enough to keep the relief program running day by day, and meanwhile Margolis and Siegel were fighting off creditors. Many of the wealthy Shanghai Jews were British subjects who had their bank accounts frozen, so they were of no help. By January 10, the situation was serious. The JDC representatives calculated that they could feed eight thousand people for four days, or four thousand people for eight days, but felt that the refugees had to be the ones who decided which choice to make. In a meeting the relief recipients elected the eight-day option, buying Margolis some time to try to come up with more funds. Children, the elderly, and the sick were kept on relief, while most others had to find another way to feed themselves, often selling what few possessions they had left. Even these emergency measures were not enough to motivate the community to come forward with money.

Finally, Margolis and Siegel realized that they would have to take a dramatic step "in order to stir the community out of its lethargy."⁷¹ Up until this point they had avoided the press, knowing that publicizing their plight in the newspapers would anger the Japanese. But when a reporter for the *Shanghai Times* came by on January 15, they felt they had little choice but to explain the situation -- "misery, hunger, children, pregnant women, you know, the deal of journalism" -- an action which carried great personal risk to them.⁷² Their story was printed in the newspaper under the headline "Hungry Starving Refugees in Hongkew," and was also broadcast on a local radio station. Soon afterward, through the city's rumor mill -- what Margolis termed the "bamboo wireless" -- they

⁷¹ Laura Margolis, "Report of Activities in Shanghai, China, from December 8, 1941, to September 1943," page 5, AR33/44, file 463, JDC Archives.

⁷² Margolis, interview, 7 October 1987, page 9.

heard they were to be arrested.⁷³ Only through their connections in the community were they able to avoid prison. But they still had to face the anger of the Japanese at the publicity given to the refugees' living conditions. Inuzuka made a furious phone call to Margolis, and she and Siegel were also called to the Japanese consulate to explain themselves to officials there. However, all their trouble gained the desired effect -- money began flowing in, and they were able to continue the relief program.

Life under occupation eventually became business as usual, although there were some changes for Margolis and Siegel. They knew by December 15 that they would not be interned right away, although they did not doubt that day would come. They had to register with the Japanese as enemy nationals, and wore red numbered armbands to identify themselves as such when they were out in the streets. Margolis's band read "A103," the "A" signifying that she was American. As enemies, they were not allowed into certain businesses and public places.⁷⁴ They had no access to their personal funds, and by mid-January could no longer pay the bills at the Cathay Hotel. They found two unheated rooms with a White Russian family; the location required two hours of travel each way by tram, rickshaw, bus, and foot to reach the refugee community. Later they found other rooms which were still miserable, but closer to their work. Eventually they received some money for personal maintenance from the Swiss, who had taken over the protection of Americans in the city. They were free to continue their activities, but felt

⁷³ Margolis, interview, 7 October 1987, page 8.

⁷⁴ Krasno, *Strangers Always*, 79.

certain they would not remain so indefinitely. The parading of captured American marines in the streets can hardly have lifted their spirits.⁷⁵

The issue of the Polish refugees once again became a problem during this time. Now that circumstances were worse all around, Margolis felt strongly that the yeshiva group should no longer have special privileges and should receive the same relief allotment as the other refugees. However, the Russian Jewish community in Shanghai argued fervently that the scholars should continue to be given special treatment. Margolis faced the same financial problem as the JDC had: the local Russians threatened to start separate fund raising specifically for the Poles unless the group was given the same percentage of JDC funds as they had previously received. Margolis recalled that “it was only after a bitter struggle that we gave in and compromised.”⁷⁶ Thus one-sixth of the relief funds went to the 1,000 Polish refugees, while the rest went to the 18,000 Germans and Austrians. In return, Margolis received crucial fund raising assistance from the Russian community.

Difficult issues arose within the structure of the relief program as well. One pressing problem was the fact that they were extremely overstaffed. Five hundred refugees were working in the kitchen, the hospitals, and the administrative office. It was obvious the operation could not continue to pay this many people, especially as only a fraction of them were truly needed to keep the program functioning. In early February, Margolis and Siegel called a meeting at which they encouraged their staff to look for other employment:

⁷⁵ Leitner, *Operation Torah Rescue*, 101.

⁷⁶ Margolis, “Report of Activities,” page 11.

We showed by plain arithmetic that it was impossible both to give relief and pay salaries. Further, we set forth what they all knew, that the program was overstaffed. Even if we succeeded in getting funds, efficiency required that the operating force be drastically cut . . . We could hold out no promise either of pay now or future jobs.⁷⁷

Despite this sobering announcement, all but one of the refugees reported for work the next day. Eventually Margolis and Siegel decided they had to close the two hospitals. This was the main cause of the dramatic reduction in employees to 100 by June 1942. With a smaller payroll, they were able to work out with the staff a pay scale that all deemed fair. Although salaries were still low, they were the best that could be managed with the resources at hand.

Staff members were not much better off than the clients they were supposed to be helping. For example, a kitchen worker earned only about \$1 (U.S.) per month. Margolis remembered intake staff

interviewing other men and women applying for relief and trying to evaluate which one was hungrier, the worker or the client . . . Our staff was ragged and their shoes were torn, and they were the ones who had to distribute the little clothes we had to those who were more tattered and more torn. Our staff came to [work] daily with notices of eviction, and yet they were the ones handling the applications for the thousands that were trying to get into our camps.⁷⁸

But as small as the salary was, their jobs with the relief organization often made the difference between self-sufficiency and relying on relief themselves.

The Speelman Committee had been dissolved as most of the members were enemy nationals and some were imprisoned. Margolis and Siegel therefore began setting up a new committee made up of a mixture of long-time Shanghai residents and recent

⁷⁷ Margolis, "Race Against Time in Shanghai," 171.

⁷⁸ Margolis, "Remarks at Annual Meeting," page 5.

arrivals, all of them from countries not at war with Japan. It was headed by Joseph Bitker, a Polish Jew. Since Captain Inuzuka had been so antagonistic toward the Speelman Committee, the JDC workers made sure he approved of the membership of this new group. They also tried to make the committee as representative of the Jewish community as possible, including leaders from all the various factions. Subcommittees were organized for such areas as housing, fund raising, and rehabilitation.

At the first meeting of the Bitker Committee, Margolis and Siegel again emphasized that their leadership of the relief efforts was only temporary. Apart from the fact that they could be interned at any time, the JDC's philosophy also prevented them from taking long-term responsibility for the situation in Shanghai. The Joint's policy has always been to help a community help itself, never to actually take over the program -- what Margolis described as giving a "hand, not a handout."⁷⁹ Margolis explained to the committee that "it was our sincere desire to step out as quickly as local leadership was ready to take over."⁸⁰

One problem they faced was the primitive kitchen in which meals were prepared for refugees. The kitchen required one hundred employees to operate it, and each meal prepared there cost sixty cents in Chinese money. Fifty cents of the cost went for coal, and only ten cents for the food itself, an obviously inefficient use of very limited funds. A Polish engineer named Avraham Levenspiel encouraged them to build a new steam kitchen that would better serve their needs. (He had been trying to put forth this plan for many months, but the Speelman Committee would not listen to him.) He told Margolis

⁷⁹ Hackett, "JDC's Laura Jarblum Gives 'A Hand, Not a Handout.'" February 1971, AR65/99, JDC Personnel, Laura Margolis Jarblum, JDC Archives.

⁸⁰ Margolis, "Report of Activities," page 10.

that new boilers, perfect for such a kitchen, were sitting unused in a warehouse owned by a British firm.

Margolis approached a representative of the company to ask if the boilers could be used in the soup kitchen. She recalled,

He refused to loan us the boilers, holding that if they were so much as mentioned they might be confiscated by the Japanese. This was to overlook the fact that the four boilers were lying out in full view! We pointed out what those boilers meant to hungry thousands. Further, we argued, our use of two of them for the duration probably would save them for the realty company. Our friend was not persuaded. Finally, we were so sure we were right that we just went ahead.⁸¹

Margolis spoke to a Japanese friend who got them a permit to move the equipment.

Margolis and Siegel hired Chinese day laborers to go with them to the warehouse late at night and “liberate” the boilers. They then gave their “indignant British friend” a signed document stating that they were borrowing the equipment for the duration of the war.⁸²

Levenspiel then proceeded to build a new kitchen around them. This new facility allowed them to make meals very economically, needing only ten to fifteen employees and able to serve 10,000 meals per day at only two cents per meal for fuel. Margolis credited the new kitchen with saving many people from starvation because of the more efficient use of funds.

The Polish engineer was only one of the people who helped them. Margolis took time to find out what the refugees’ professions had been, and learned that among the group there were doctors, nutritionists, lawyers, and many other specialists. She later felt that the success of the relief operation was in part due to the fact that it utilized the skills

⁸¹ Margolis, “Race Against Time in Shanghai,” 171.

⁸² Margolis, “Race Against Time in Shanghai,” 171.

of the refugees in areas where she and Siegel were not themselves experts. The refugees also felt better when they were contributing to the common good. The Speelman Committee had generally treated them as just another mouth to feed, which did not do much to boost morale.

Next, Margolis studied the accounting practices. She found them to be completely useless and decided to overhaul the way the books were done. She found a refugee who was an experienced accountant and put him in charge of making sense of the finances. She also began cutting unnecessary expenses. She learned that the Speelman Committee had been paying full rent for three relief camps which were located on municipal property. Charitable institutions on public land were not to be charged rent, but the committee had never applied to have it waived. Margolis managed to get free rental, meaning they were now only responsible for taxes. Closing the two hospitals was another attempt to reduce costs; Margolis saw them as superfluous, as the city's other hospitals had better staff and equipment. In addition, she changed the method of determining who needed relief, as she was disturbed by the number of people inside the camps who were better off than those outside.

She and Siegel also set about organizing some kind of democratic practices in the camps. Margolis showed the effects of her upbringing, stating, "I suppose Americans can never be convinced that the democratic way is not the best way to work with human beings."⁸³ She believed that the lethargy and lack of interest the refugees showed in the camps was due to lack of representative governance, so she set about changing their management. She and Siegel called meetings of the five camps, asking that a committee

⁸³ Margolis, "Race Against Time in Shanghai," 171.

be elected in each to oversee administration. The committee would work with a camp director, the one staff member (also a refugee) remaining in each camp.

Margolis delighted in the enthusiasm the process roused in the refugees. After speeches and meetings, elections were held and committees were organized. Her hopes for democratic organization were realized. She remembered,

We met with the representatives of each camp as frequently as our time permitted. Nothing seemed to us more important than to help these refugees develop into a self-conscious group who could direct their own fate. Often it would have been easier for us to issue orders than to try to work out compromises with the various committees; but to us that easiest way was closed by our whole tradition and experience as Americans. And it was like watching a miracle to see the people's response.⁸⁴

The camps were transformed. Cultural performances were organized, gardens were cultivated, laundry and mending services were organized. One camp built an outdoor pavilion for dancing which it then rented out to neighborhood groups to raise money.

Margolis revealed a sense of superiority in her description of the refugees' democratic experiment. She recalled,

The people were at first very clumsy in using the techniques of democratic organization, which do not come naturally to those of German background . . . They learned to handle their own problems with intelligence and realism . . . And so even under Axis rule, these refugees learned to live in a democratic way, a lesson which we hope will stand them in good stead for their future.⁸⁵

Perhaps some of her overly patriotic rhetoric is due to the fact that her account of this incident was written for publication in the United States while the war was still on. However, it seems unmistakable that she believed American ways were superior. She also does not seem to realize that the refugees' prior lack of involvement was likely due

⁸⁴ Margolis, "Race Against Time in Shanghai," 190.

more to depression than to lack of experience with democracy. The elections gave these people who had largely lost their self-worth a chance to regain status and a sense of purpose.⁸⁶

Her amazement at “the amount of activity and life” suddenly visible from the half-starved refugees in the camps made her rue yet again the poor management of funds that had taken place under the Speelman Committee. She wrote, “An experience like this makes one fully conscious of how much might have been done with this same group at a time when they could have been well fed if the moneys going into Shanghai had been efficiently spent and if people administering those funds had cared more for the refugees.”⁸⁷ However, some slipped through the cracks, even with the improved program. One couple in their early fifties was placed on relief, but a few weeks later they committed suicide. When a relief worker entered their apartment, he found suitcases full of items that could be sold and a note addressed to the JDC. Margolis remembered it saying,

We can't go on living on relief, and we can't live on what we have. You resourceful Americans can perhaps use our things and make the money go further than we can. We hope our little contribution will help you Americans a little. You have done so much for all of us. We pray that America will never forget those who still have the courage to live.⁸⁸

She was touched that these despairing people were still thinking of others. She also contrasted them with the vast majority who still had hope.

⁸⁵ Margolis, “Race Against Time in Shanghai,” 190.

⁸⁶ David Kranzler, *Japanese, Nazis, and Jews: The Jewish Refugee Community of Shanghai, 1938-1945* (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1976), 139.

⁸⁷ Margolis, “Report of Activities,” page 12.

⁸⁸ Margolis, “Remarks at Annual Meeting,” page 6.

Their last cable from New York arrived on May 21, 1942, asking that they discontinue all contact. Margolis had been requesting that more credit be extended in order to be able to carry on the relief program. The JDC was not able to convince the State and Treasury Departments to officially sanction this action, so felt bound by patriotism to stop communications in order to avoid anything that could be construed as trading with the enemy. The Treasury Department had hinted that the JDC could send unauthorized cables, but the Joint did not feel they should do so, even though other organizations were continuing to send funds and telegrams through Switzerland.

Margolis wrote of the May 21 cable, "This was probably one of the greatest shocks we received because we somehow felt that even though money could not be transferred directly[,] contact with New York, though indirect, might bring an eventual solution."⁸⁹ She felt as if she were abandoned and forgotten by the JDC, and wondered how she was going to keep the refugees alive without its help. She knew all financial assistance would have to come from inside the community, but with their previous difficulty in raising funds locally, she did not feel optimistic about the prospect. Then in June, Captain Inuzuka left Shanghai, replaced by a man who was less sympathetic to the Jewish problem.⁹⁰ Margolis felt as if the situation was worsening quickly.

By the summer of 1942, the \$180,000 they had borrowed on the basis of the telegram was about to run out. Margolis and Siegel appealed for funds from Sweden, Turkey, Portugal, and Switzerland, but knew they needed more than they were likely to get from abroad. They had a difficult decision in front of them: they had to borrow more

⁸⁹ Margolis, "Report of Activities," page 7.

⁹⁰ Bernard Wasserstein, *Secret War in Shanghai* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), 145.

money to keep the operation running, but did not have permission from the JDC to do so. They eventually decided to go ahead and ask the community for additional loans. Margolis remembered,

It was a difficult decision to take because we had no authorization; we were committing an organization, our employer. But our logic was very simple: if we come out of this alive, fine; if the JDC is then displeased, they can fire us. But in the meantime, we have money to help the refugees. And if we don't come out of this alive, it amounts to the same thing.⁹¹

Again people in the community came forward with money, and the relief operation was able to continue.

As time went on and anti-foreign sentiment grew in Shanghai, Margolis and Siegel gave the Bitker committee more and more authority to raise money and manage the relief program, foreseeing the day when they would no longer be able to do so themselves. They officially resigned in July 1942. She later said, "In the summer and fall of [1942], we both slowly . . . disappeared. We were in the background if anybody wanted to ask us questions and get our advice, but more and more we manipulated so that they would be able to run without us."⁹²

The day they had foreseen came in January 1943. All enemy nationals were ordered to report at a certain place on a bitterly cold and rainy day. Margolis remembered,

There was the long queue of the white man who had been lord of the Far East -- now submissive to the little yellow man, the Japanese. I found it very amusing after what I'd seen when I first went out, which was the

⁹¹ Margolis, interview by Menahem Kaufman, page 23-24.

⁹² Margolis, interview, 7 October 1987, page 12.

reverse. Many white men resented it very much and kept mumbling under their breath, “Those little yellow bastards.”⁹³

They were told they would be interned and were given instructions about where to go. Siegel left on January 30 to go to an all-men’s camp called Pootung. Margolis was not interned until February 25.

She was sent to the Chapei camp, which was situated on an old school campus in the country outside Shanghai. The camp contained 1,500 people from all the Allied nations, mostly families with children, but also single men and women and couples -- “everything the China coast washed up.”⁹⁴ She was assigned to a room with 40 other women,

and what a conglomeration that was: American missionaries, Shanghai prostitutes, widows of diplomatic corpsmen in Peking who had been brought down to Shanghai after Pearl Harbor. One of my roommates had been presented to the Queen at the Court of St. James. This was the kind of mishmash we had in that room.⁹⁵

Elsewhere in the camp were representatives of American businesses like Standard Oil and Chase Bank. Laura was not impressed with their behavior: she later said that she thought the Japanese were more fair than the racist businessmen in the camp.⁹⁶ Interestingly, other Chapei internees complained particularly about the behavior of the missionaries.⁹⁷

Conditions were primitive. The building had been shelled during the Chinese-Japanese War and had a leaky roof and a sagging floor. The Japanese had placed a large

⁹³ Margolis, interview by Menahem Kaufman, page 24.

⁹⁴ “Clevelander Tells of Relief in France,” *Cleveland Press*, 27 February 1948, AR45/64, file 3103, JDC Archives.

⁹⁵ Margolis, interview by Menahem Kaufman, page 25.

⁹⁶ Margolis, interview, 7 October 1987, page 13.

⁹⁷ Wasserstein, *Secret War in Shanghai*, 139.

coal stove in the middle of her room for warmth, but the first time the prisoners tried to use it, there was so much smoke and soot that they decided the cold was preferable. Despite the environment, however, Margolis said the Japanese treated them well, remembering they were civilian and not military prisoners. The internees were allowed to bring whatever they wanted into the camp: food, clothing, blankets, even beds. The only restrictions were sharp instruments and current non-Japanese periodicals.⁹⁸ Margolis arrived with a folding bed, a mattress, and a trunk of canned goods. The Japanese followed the Geneva Convention and provided the same rations they gave their soldiers, which was fair, if not tasty (“rice, more rice, and dried fish”). Although it was censored, the prisoners were allowed to receive mail, as well as food parcels from the outside. Margolis remembered, “We made up all kinds of crazy recipes, the base of which was peanut butter.”⁹⁹

The prisoners were supposed to administer the camp themselves, appointing committees and assigning chores. The other internees, learning that Margolis had organizational experience, asked her to assume a leadership role. She refused, however, thinking she would be better off keeping a low profile. Instead she chose two tasks she thought “would help me to keep my sanity, considering that I was surrounded by all these women.”¹⁰⁰ First she opted to work on the farm outside the camp. Even though the prisoners remained under guard while working, Margolis enjoyed being outside the barbed wire and not feeling closed in at all times. For her other job she chose to work in

⁹⁸ Theresa Kaminski, *Prisoners in Paradise: American Women in the Wartime South Pacific* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000), 66.

⁹⁹ Margolis, interview by Menahem Kaufman, page 25.

¹⁰⁰ Margolis, interview by Menahem Kaufman, page 25.

the kitchen, because she had learned that “when you’re near the food supply, you’re in a good strategic position to help yourself.”¹⁰¹ In camps such as these, those who worked in proximity to food generally found themselves having elite status because others hoped to gain access to better nutrition through them.¹⁰² Work itself was an important aspect in camp life, as it gave prisoners something productive to do, as well as allowing them to feel that they were contributing to the camp’s well-being.¹⁰³

Margolis did not remember cruelty on the part of the Japanese -- she said many times that they were fair and even generous with the prisoners. Individual soldiers showed their humanity as well. She recalled one incident where a guard who was watching the prisoners as they worked on the farm turned and said to her, “Why are we doing this to you?”¹⁰⁴ She never felt that they were vindictive or severe. This is perhaps unexpected in view of the vicious anti-Western propaganda of the time which urged Asians to “chop up Anglo-Saxon Devils.”¹⁰⁵

As Margolis could not wake up without her coffee, she had difficulty with the 5:30 a.m. roll call. She would often say the wrong number, thus disrupting the process. She ended up working out a system with one of her roommates. It was this woman’s job to go down and fire up the stoves in the kitchen at four or five in the morning. She would fill Margolis’s thermos bottle with coffee and bring it to her in bed, thus giving her a

¹⁰¹ Margolis, interview by Menahem Kaufman, page 26.

¹⁰² Lynn Z. Bloom, introduction to *Forbidden Diary: A Record of Wartime Internment, 1941-1945*, by Natalie Crouter (New York: B. Franklin, 1980), xxi.

¹⁰³ Kaminski, *Prisoners in Paradise*, 111.

¹⁰⁴ Margolis, interview, 7 October 1987, page 14.

¹⁰⁵ Krasno, *Strangers Always*, 4.

chance to wake up before the counting off. Margolis later laughed about being served coffee in bed in a prisoner of war camp.

All in all, as far as prison life went, things could have been much worse. A Shanghai resident who visited three local internment camps at the end of the war said that the Chapei camp was in by far the best condition.¹⁰⁶ Margolis was able to keep in touch with what was happening to Siegel and the refugees by exchanging letters through the refugee community using a code they had worked out beforehand. This contact with the outside world was important as it would make her feel that she was in some way continuing her “normal” life on the outside.¹⁰⁷ The one thing that bothered Margolis about camp life more than anything else was the lack of privacy. She tried getting away by reading a book on the roof, but was told by a guard with a bayonet that prisoners were not allowed there. By summer she was becoming depressed. She remembered, “I felt that if I didn’t get out for a breather, I couldn’t take it.”¹⁰⁸

Dysentery had broken out in the camp, which gave Margolis an idea. The camp doctor could give sick prisoners permission to go to the hospital in Shanghai, and with this, she saw her way out through what she called her “Sarah Burnhart [sic] act.”¹⁰⁹ She stopped eating anything beyond the bare minimum to keep herself alive, thus making herself weak and sick. One night she took a sleeping pill, which made her woozy, and then went straight over to see the camp doctor. He could not decide what was wrong with

¹⁰⁶ Krasno, *Strangers Always*, 206.

¹⁰⁷ Kaminski, *Prisoners in Paradise*, 67.

¹⁰⁸ Margolis, interview by Menahem Kaufman, page 27.

¹⁰⁹ Margolis, interview, 11 July 1991, page 26.

her, but agreed she should be sent to Shanghai General Hospital, which was under Japanese guard as well.

In the hospital she discovered that the medical director was a man she had met several times, an Italian named Dr. Vio. He immediately understood what she was doing, and for the record wrote down all her symptoms and said she was very ill. He winked at her and said her health was far too poor for her to remain in a ward, and the next day she was moved into a semi-private room. While still in the ward, however, Joseph Bitker from the refugee committee came to visit his aunt, who was in the next bed. He saw Margolis, and they were able to surreptitiously set up a time to meet on the roof the next day where they would be out from under the eye of the Japanese guards. He spread the word within the refugee community that she was in the hospital.

When she was moved to her semi-private room, her roommate was a White Russian woman, the mistress of a German Nazi banker who visited often. Margolis became friendly with them, and after a few days she remembered the German saying, “You are not allowed visitors. Wouldn’t you like to tell your friends outside that they can use my friend’s name and come up and see you?”¹¹⁰ Thus with the help of a Nazi, Margolis was able to speak with anyone who came to see her and found out everything that was going on in the refugee community. It was not an encouraging picture: the same power struggles and incompetent leadership that she had faced were still weakening the relief effort. Shortages of food and other necessities were severe, and by this time the refugees had been forced into a ghetto, making the housing situation especially desperate.

¹¹⁰ Margolis, interview, 11 July 1991, page 27.

Meanwhile, the JDC was frantically trying to gain the release of both Margolis and Siegel, writing numerous letters explaining their situation and asking they be given places on repatriation ships. JDC headquarters was also fielding inquiries from Margolis's brother Otto who wanted to know her whereabouts. Her family's worst fears about her safety seemed to be coming true.

In August 1943, after she had been in the hospital about two months, Dr. Vio asked her to meet with him in his office. There he told her Italy had just withdrawn from the war, meaning that he was now considered an enemy national and would have to leave his job. Since he did not know who would be taking his place, he advised Margolis to let him sign her release and send her back to the camp, as she would likely be safer there. He also told her that he had asked at the Swiss consulate about her situation that morning, and had learned that she was on the list for repatriation in September. She later discovered that she had been scheduled to be part of an earlier prisoner exchange after Pearl Harbor, but that the Japanese had removed her from the list because they needed her to work with the refugees.

So she left the hospital and began to prepare to return to the United States. First, however, she found a way to meet with Bitker and a few other refugees once more, thus acquiring up-to-date information about funds, conditions, populations, and so on. All those who were being repatriated were told they would not be allowed to bring any written material with them and that they would have to undergo a body search. Margolis did not trust her memory with the facts and figures she wanted to report back to the JDC, so she wrote everything down on squares of toilet paper. She planned to roll up the squares tightly and put them in the waistband of her underwear.

In early September 1943, Margolis passed inspection with her rolled-up information and boarded a Japanese passenger ship with the others who were being repatriated. Conditions on the ship were appalling. It was carrying about 1,500 people (at least five times its capacity), there were only three toilets for all the passengers, and the late summer heat was stifling. They were given straw mattresses set up in three-high tiers in wooden stalls reminiscent of those used for livestock. However, the mattresses were full of fleas, so the passengers dumped them overboard and slept on deck with blankets for the rest of the journey. The ship stopped to pick up other prisoners of war in Manila, Saigon, and Singapore, and then continued sailing for another month. Finally in October they reached Goa, the exchange point, on Margolis's fortieth birthday. The prisoners were exchanged one by one in a scene Margolis later described as "like a school . . . each one going a different direction, not looking at each other."¹¹¹ The former prisoners of the Japanese were allowed to board a Swedish ship, the *MS Gripsholm*. She called it "the greatest birthday party of my life . . . Those lovely Swedish people had a tremendous smorgasbord waiting for us."¹¹²

She had a letter waiting from Moe Leavitt:

Welcome and thrice welcome to freedom and liberty! . . . I cannot tell you how often we have talked about you and how concerned the officers of the committee were with your and Manny's welfare . . . This is a personal note to you, to express my admiration for the way in which you handled yourself during these trying years . . . Everybody at the office is excited at the news and is looking forward with the greatest anticipation to your arrival.¹¹³

¹¹¹ Margolis, interview, 11 July 1991, page 30.

¹¹² Margolis, interview by Menahem Kaufman, page 30.

¹¹³ Moses Leavitt to Laura Margolis, 25 August 1943, AR33/44, file 130, JDC Archives.

He expressed disappointment that Siegel was not repatriated as well, but reminded Margolis that even though she was distressed that he was left behind, she herself would be of more use out of China. She received another letter en route, this one from Executive Vice-Chairman Joseph Hyman, asking if she would be willing to write about her experiences and perhaps speak on the radio.

Margolis's trip on the *Gripsholm* was pleasant. The boat itself, with its good food and swimming pool, was worlds apart from the Japanese ship on which she had begun her journey. The *Gripsholm* sailed around the Cape and stopped in Port Elizabeth before continuing up the South Atlantic. Margolis wrote to Moe Leavitt from Port Elizabeth:

Even as I type this there is a sense of unreality about it. I never thought freedom would be so hard to get used to . . . With each passing day am getting my pep back . . . Thanks to the vitamins and food provided by Uncle Sam, and the fine facilities of this ship; I expect to be as good as new . . . I am really excited about getting home. One of the worst features about internment is the inactivity. God knows we worked hard enough to provide ourselves with the essentials of living; but it's much more fun to work at providing others with those essentials.¹¹⁴

The *Gripsholm* stopped in Rio de Janeiro for two nights, and the JDC's representative in South America, Lou Sobel, met Margolis there and gave her money, as she did not have a penny. She remembered, "That was a great reunion: we went all over Rio, night clubs, good food, some rest, and I was allowed to do some shopping."¹¹⁵ She wrote Leavitt again from Rio, thanking him for his cables and letter, saying they reassured her that she and Siegel had not been overlooked: "So many times during the past two years we felt

¹¹⁴ Laura Margolis to Moses Leavitt, 3 November 1943, AR33/44, file 463, JDC Archives.

¹¹⁵ Margolis, interview by Menahem Kaufman, page 30.

like forgotten stepchildren, although we kept telling ourselves that it ‘just couldn’t be.’”¹¹⁶

Finally, on December 1, 1943 -- three months after boarding the Japanese ship -- Margolis disembarked in New York. She was glad to see the city standing: the news in the camps had been “that the hell had been bombed out of New York, and here people were complaining about rations.”¹¹⁷ As it was the height of the war, no one was allowed to meet her at the dock, but she had a message to come to the Commodore Hotel. There a suite was waiting for her, filled with flowers and JDC friends. She remembered, “It was a real homecoming and a very deeply emotional experience for all of us.”¹¹⁸ None of them had forgotten that Manny Siegel was still interned; he would remain so until the end of the war.

Moe Leavitt asked her what she had done when the JDC-authorized credit had run out. She told him outright that she had borrowed more money and given a commitment that the JDC would repay it, and said they could dismiss her if they liked. But, she said later, “they were thrilled I’d had the sense to do this, and I was relieved I wasn’t being fired.”¹¹⁹ She had gambled, but had made the right decision.

Margolis was still suffering the effects of her internment and her journey; she was exhausted and clearly needed rest. She was confused enough that she telephoned the hotel switchboard to ask if the tap water was safe to drink. Her parents wanted her to

¹¹⁶ Laura Margolis to Moses Leavitt, 15 November 1943, AR33/44, file 463, JDC Archives.

¹¹⁷ Margolis, interview, 11 July 1991, page 31.

¹¹⁸ Margolis, interview by Menahem Kaufman, page 31.

¹¹⁹ Margolis, interview by Menahem Kaufman, page 31.

come to Cleveland and spend some time with them, but the JDC asked her if she would first go to Washington to speak with the State and Treasury Departments, and she agreed.

She met with Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau to try to convince him to allow the Joint to send funds to the Bitker Committee. He was concerned about whether the money would fall into Japanese hands, but she assured him it would only go to the refugees. She explained the relief operation and told him that money would keep 8,000 people alive. After this meeting, the Treasury Department authorized the JDC to reestablish funding for the Shanghai program.

Margolis made the trip to Washington with Leavitt and Joseph Schwartz, who was the Joint's director for Europe. In Shanghai, Margolis had been rather insulated from news of the war and had not heard about the concentration camps and other horrors of the Nazi regime. Now, speaking with Schwartz on the train to Washington, she found out for the first time what had been happening. She knew immediately that she needed to go to Europe to help. The JDC felt she had been through enough, and had a job lined up for her in Santo Domingo once she was well enough to go, but she refused to "sit under a palm tree." She later recalled,

They offered me a nice, safe assignment in South America as soon as I felt ready for it. But I simply couldn't accept being stuck in a backwater when the European refugee situation was so desperate. JDC didn't want to send me back into a war zone, but they relented when I threatened to take a job with UNRRA [the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration]. I simply had to get back into action.¹²⁰

Meanwhile she spent time with her family and underwent a thorough physical examination to make sure she was healthy. She wrote a full report for the JDC about

¹²⁰ Koestler, "No Heroine She."

what had taken place since Pearl Harbor, describing the personalities, the relief operation, and the financial arrangements. She concluded:

I sincerely feel that everything which could possibly have been done was done in order to save as many of the refugee population as possible. The handicaps were numerous and least of all these handicaps were the Japanese themselves. We have in Shanghai, and have always had, a group of Jews who have no social consciousness and no feeling of responsibility towards the community . . . Added to this, we have a group of refugees who are underfed and undernourished and terribly discouraged . . . And one can never know what the attitude of the Japanese will be towards this defenseless element of the Shanghai population once they start losing the war. Knowing the Japanese, I would venture to say that “anything might happen at any time.”¹²¹

She was still concerned about the situation she had left behind, and felt discouraged about the prospects of rehabilitating the refugees after the war.

Both survivors and scholars have credited Margolis and the JDC with doing immeasurable good in Shanghai during this period. David Kranzler states that without the JDC’s help, the refugees’ survival would have been doubtful.¹²² Yehuda Bauer believes that the Joint had a right to “be proud of its two delegates, who had guided the refugees through misfortune and dangers.”¹²³ Survivor Ernest Heppner specifically remembered Margolis:

There is no doubt in my mind . . . that without the professionalism, the dedication, the persistence, and the nerve -- the *chutzpa* [sic] -- displayed by Laura Margolis, thousands of refugees would have slowly starved to death. If there is one deserving hero in the whole Shanghai episode, it certainly is Laura L. Margolis.¹²⁴

¹²¹ Margolis, “Report of Activities,” page 23.

¹²² Kranzler, *Japanese, Nazis, and Jews*, 99.

¹²³ Bauer, *American Jewry and the Holocaust*, 315.

¹²⁴ Heppner, *Shanghai Refuge*, 100.

She gave speeches for the JDC and wrote an article for *Survey Graphic* magazine about her China experience. She also met Eleanor Roosevelt, who wrote in her syndicated *My Day* column, "I shall never cease to marvel at the courage of people like Miss Margolis who, after having escaped from one dangerous situation, seem anxious to return to another."¹²⁵ The JDC wanted to send her on a lecture tour to tell her story, but she refused; she wanted to get back to work. Finally in March 1944, she got the call: Joe Schwartz told her to come to Lisbon.

Thus closed what was perhaps the most dramatic period of her life. Cut off from JDC finances and instructions, she had proven herself able to carry on her work and make independent decisions. Even with a disunited community and a severe lack of funds, she had managed to feed thousands of people and improve the relief program. She had kept her wits about her in the internment camp and was able to keep in touch with what was happening with the refugees. Once she finally was able to return to the United States and tell her story, she gained the lasting respect of her JDC colleagues, many of whom certainly wondered how they would have fared under the same circumstances. This trial by fire proved her competence and reliability, and in all likelihood led to the increasing responsibility of her subsequent assignments.

¹²⁵ Eleanor Roosevelt, *My Day*, 26 January 1944, AR33/44, file 130, JDC Archives.

CHAPTER 4: “MORE THAN ONE COULD BEAR”

Margolis would witness the devastation of World War II firsthand and would be deeply affected by what she observed. The suffering she saw was initially more than she could stand; it then led to a renewed dedication on her part to help the remnants of the European Jewish community. After the war ended, her work would change its focus from day-to-day lifesaving measures to long-term planning and rebuilding, a change she welcomed. Her personal life would also see a transformation, as the fiercely independent woman found a life partner. This may have been one of the factors that led her to finally seek roots, settling down in one country and ceasing her “gypsy” existence.

The JDC’s main European office in neutral Lisbon was to be Margolis’s “home base” while working on the continent during the war. She had “really nice company” on the journey from Philadelphia -- her fellow passengers on the Portuguese ship were mostly English women and children who had been evacuated to America during the Blitz and were now returning home.¹ Even with the danger of submarines, she enjoyed the trip, and was glad to find several JDC staff members welcoming her on the pier in Lisbon when she arrived. Meanwhile the JDC sent out a press release in the United States announcing that two “women aides” were being sent overseas (the other was going to Uruguay). Even though she was given a “masculine” assignment in a war zone, her gender was not forgotten.

¹ Margolis, interview by Menahem Kaufman, page 33.

She had an assignment in Sweden, but since it was wartime, she could not travel until she received clearance from the military and the War Refugee Board. While she was waiting for the paperwork to go through, she agreed to take on a temporary job in Barcelona. While the JDC did have a representative there, he was overwhelmed with the large number of refugees in Spain needing assistance and had no time for additional projects.

Margolis's assignment was to set up a home for children who had been saved by the Jewish underground in France and were now being smuggled over the Pyrenees by JDC-financed Basque guides. Their ultimate destination was Palestine, but until they could travel there, they needed housing and care. Margolis set up a home in a "very lovely villa" outside the city. She organized a program and hired a staff to run it. She also went up to the border posts in the mountains to meet the children after their fifteen-hour trek and bring them to the home. Later she said this was a great experience; she was reunited with many of the children at a gathering in Israel after they had grown up and had children of their own.

After about two months, the program was running well, so she returned to Lisbon to await her next assignment, as Joe Schwartz told her that her papers were likely to come through at any time. She was soon given clearance to fly to London, where she would await instructions about how she would travel to Stockholm. She was dropped off at a hotel on the Strand, and there was introduced to wartime London. She remembered,

That was also the first time I heard of the V-1's, those German missiles. They were doing terrific damage all around but I was so dumb that I just slept through the night. When I did wake up, there was a knock on the door and someone dragged me down to the shelter.²

² Margolis, interview by Menahem Kaufman, page 34.

After two nights, she was notified that she would have to vacate her hotel room. It was a holiday, she knew no one in London, and no staff would be at the JDC office for two days. She went there with her bags anyway and persuaded a friendly elevator man to let her into the “ice-cold” office. For lack of a better option, she had decided to spread her fur coat on the floor and sleep there when the telephone rang. To her surprise, the person on the other end of the line asked to speak to Miss Margolis. It turned out to be a relative of a couple she had helped to emigrate from Shanghai on the last boat before Pearl Harbor. The grateful family had been keeping track of her whereabouts. The man on the telephone had learned from the JDC that Margolis would be in London and was calling the office -- with impeccable timing -- to see if he and his wife could be of any help to her. Recalling this incident later, she said, “There is a God who watches over me.”³

The couple came to the office and picked her up, and she stayed with them for two weeks. At that time she was put on a military plane and flown to an army base in Wales. She spent two nights there in the barracks before finally getting on another military plane, this one bound for Stockholm. She was warned that they had to fly over Nazi-occupied Norway and that the flight before them had been shot down. The plane flew without lights and the three passengers sat in their parachutes, freezing cold, for the entire journey. They were given specific instructions: they had to jump if the pilot told them to, but first they were to throw away their passports so the Germans could not copy them. The five-hour flight was harrowing for Margolis, even in light of her previous

³ Margolis, interview, 11 July 1991, page 35.

experiences. However, she later said it was when she felt most alive -- strapped in a parachute and not knowing what the next moment would bring.

Her mission in Sweden was to set up a food package service to the concentration camps at Bergen-Belsen and Theresienstadt. The main obstacle she faced at the outset was the lack of a permit to violate the blockade and send materials into enemy territory. The World Jewish Congress (WJC) had received such a permit from the War Refugee Board, but did not have the money to actually carry out the plan. The WJC wanted the JDC to give them the money to send the packages; Margolis wanted the WJC to give the JDC the permit. Eventually she won out. She later said, "That was important to me; I wouldn't give up feeding the people for the sake of the JDC's name, but if I was able to get it in the JDC's name, I would."⁴ She also felt, along with quite a few others, that the Congress should concentrate on its political role and not try to "horn in" on the relief work that was the Joint's province.

When she was not working on the parcel program, Margolis spent her time conducting an in-depth study of the refugee situation in Sweden. Approximately 12,000 Jewish refugees were in the country, the majority of them from other Scandinavian countries, mainly Denmark. (In comparison, the Swedish Jewish community numbered only 6,500.) She felt the Swedes had generally done a good job of accommodating the newcomers. In a report to JDC headquarters, she wrote, "It is certainly no pleasure to be a refugee anywhere, but I can truthfully say that if I had my choice of a place for 'refuge,' Sweden would certainly be a good place to choose . . . No refugee has sought me out in

⁴ Margolis, interview by Menahem Kaufman, page 36.

the two months I've been here to complain about anything.”⁵ She must have compared this to her experience in Shanghai where she was constantly besieged with criticisms of the relief operation.

In her report, she outlined the policies of the refugees' home countries regarding the maintenance and return of their citizens. She also noted what action the governments planned to take with regard to stateless refugees who had been living in their country before being forced out. By estimating necessary expenses and naming people in the various communities who were trustworthy, she attempted to assist the JDC in its planning for postwar operations in Sweden and other parts of Scandinavia. She also chose a Joint representative in the city, thereby opening the organization's first Swedish office. She received several compliments on her report, including one comment that it had “the usual ‘Laura touch.’”⁶

During her stay in Sweden she heard many stories of escape and rescue. Overall, she believed the Swedish government had been “outstanding” in its work assisting the refugees who came streaming into the country. She was also particularly impressed with the actions of Danish citizens on behalf of their country's Jews, stating that “the stories of how the Danish people helped the Jewish refugees to hide and then to escape are among the most dramatic and finest of this period.”⁷ She still did not understand the full impact of Nazi policy in Europe -- nor did most others at that time -- but was gaining more insight the longer she worked with those it had affected.

⁵ Laura Margolis, November 1944 report, page 20, AR33/44, file 921, JDC Archives.

⁶ Donald Hurwitz [?] to Laura Margolis, 20 March 1945, AR45/64, file 3103, JDC Archives.

⁷ Margolis, November 1944 report, page 6.

She apparently was also involved in some way in negotiations for the care of camp survivors. Plans were being made by the end of 1944 for the release of the women in Ravensbruck; they were to be sent to Sweden and their maintenance would be at least partially subsidized by the JDC. She briefly mentioned this subject in a 1983 letter, adding, "Don't think there is anything written about this. We didn't have much time in those days for writing."⁸ It is not clear just how much she was involved in this project.

If Swedish journalism is any indication, Margolis was something of a minor celebrity during her stay in Stockholm. Numerous articles were written about this "lady social worker" in which she was described as a "globe trotter" and "a very international lady." She used the articles as opportunities to educate the Swedish public about the refugee problem and the work of the JDC. She also spoke to groups explaining the Joint's history and current operations and visited cities around the country, including Malmo, Goteborg, and Halsingborg. She requested publicity material from New York that she could distribute locally.

At the end of November, she cabled Joe Schwartz and told him the Swedish operation was running smoothly and that her presence would not be necessary much longer. Plans were thus made for her to leave the country around the beginning of the new year. In her four months in Stockholm, she was able to get the parcel service running smoothly and received confirmation that they were reaching their destinations. Later she met survivors from the camps who told her they had received the packages, each containing sugar, bread, powdered milk, and either bacon, oil, or herring.

⁸ Laura Margolis Jarblum to Ralph Goldman, 18 December 1983, AR65/99, JDC Personnel, Laura Margolis Jarblum, JDC Archives.

On January 1, 1945, she flew back to England on another military plane with Norwegian prisoners of war who were joining the English army. She did not understand why there was a large crowd meeting the plane; later she learned that the flight before theirs had not made it back, and that there had been worry that this one would not arrive safely either. She spent a week at the military base. She recalled, “That’s when I had the awful experience of watching RAF planes fly out and not all of them coming back.” Eventually she was able to return to London, where she spent two months “listening to the V-2’s” while waiting for clearance to travel.⁹

Meanwhile the issue of the Polish yeshiva students in Shanghai reemerged. Orthodox groups were now trying to help the religious group emigrate and were insisting that special priority once again be given to the needs of the scholars. Margolis had told the JDC she believed this action would endanger the other refugees and discouraged the organization from supporting it. This prompted a letter from a prominent rabbi to a JDC representative in Jerusalem demanding to know Margolis’s reasoning. The letter was forwarded to Margolis in London, and she composed a reply in which she explained that the Japanese did not like to be bothered with the Jewish community’s concerns, and were especially irritated when asked for any kind of “exception.” She therefore felt that any special request for the yeshiva group’s repatriation would likely have consequences for the entire refugee community. She also pointed out that the scholars were already living in better conditions than the rest of the refugees. One can sense her irritation at the continuing unequal treatment and at the yeshiva group’s seeming lack of gratitude for their fortunate circumstances.

⁹ Margolis, interview by Menahem Kaufman, page 37.

In March she was finally given permission to travel to France. She met with Joe Schwartz at the JDC's newly reopened Paris office, and he told her he would like her to survey conditions in Belgium, Holland, and Luxembourg. She agreed to take on the job, and arrived in Brussels in April. The JDC sent out another press release announcing her new assignment, again pointing out that she was one of only two women on the organization's overseas staff.

At that time, one could not enter the Low Countries without being affiliated with the military. She was given the rank of colonel and wore an army uniform. She based herself in Brussels; Belgium had been liberated, and the situation was not so dire as in other places. Her work there involved relief to needy Jews as well as special projects like homes for children and the aged. Children were given top priority, as thousands of them were destitute in the country and needed to be cared for. Margolis cabled New York saying more money was needed for programs in Belgium, no matter that the JDC's budget was tight, and eventually they agreed. The Belgian government later granted her one of its highest honors, the *Palme d'Argent de l'Ordre de la Couronne* (Silver Palm of the Order of the Crown), in recognition of her wartime work in the country.

She also spent a good deal of energy aiding illegal immigration to Palestine. Survivors were coming out of the camps and making their way through Belgium with the help of the Jewish Brigade. Practically speaking, the JDC was forced to facilitate the immigration, as Palestine was the only place to which large numbers of refugees could go. But since the Joint was a non-political organization, it had to be careful about overtly breaking any laws, as doing so might endanger its other work. Margolis did all she could to legally assist the refugees, and quietly did more that was not quite legal. Though she

may have been a lifelong Zionist, this was the first time she showed clear evidence of this philosophy. It could be that her father fostered in her a love for Palestine, or she may have developed a belief in the need for a Jewish homeland based on the destruction she was seeing around her. A colleague of hers from this period remembered, “We were all Zionists in those days.”¹⁰

Meanwhile, Holland was still partly occupied by the Germans. Margolis visited Eindhoven in the liberated south to survey the situation. She found many problems: Jews who had been in hiding had lost their homes and belongings; not even a black market existed for necessities, even if one had the money to buy them; schools and synagogues were damaged during the war; many children were orphaned and homeless. The previous winter had become known as the *hongerwinter* (hunger-winter), bringing deprivation to the entire Dutch population.¹¹ She helped the local committee to make up a budget, and passed along her impressions in a report to New York. She noted,

There is no doubt that Holland is one of the most devastated countries in Europe. The shops are empty, food is scanty, the people look ill, depressed and badly dressed. I had the impression that even members of our own committee hadn't had enough to eat . . . There aren't many phones working, there is no gas, no transportation, and electricity is rationed . . . The people coming out of hiding are completely unoriented [sic], in addition to being nervous and bewildered.¹²

Her travel to other nearby towns was limited because she was within eight miles of the front lines. Later, when the Germans finally evacuated Amsterdam, Margolis arrived in the city twenty-four hours later to survey conditions and try to start getting relief where it

¹⁰ Feder interview.

¹¹ Bob Moore, *Victims and Survivors: The Nazi Persecution of the Jews in the Netherlands, 1940-1945* (London: Arnold, 1997), 227.

was needed. She later remembered, “I hope never to see such a sight again. The city was dead, absolutely dead.”¹³

She celebrated V-E Day in Brussels. After the European victory, Belgium was full of Jewish refugees from the newly liberated camps. In conjunction with a local group, Margolis helped establish a large program to assist them. Meanwhile she was hearing eyewitness accounts of the camps from a JDC colleague who had visited them and from survivors as they found their way to the Low Countries. She was greatly upset by what she learned. She met one young woman who had just come out of hiding in Holland; her parents had been deported, and up until that time she had hoped they might still be alive. She asked Margolis if all she was now hearing about atrocities could possibly be true. Margolis later said, “The emotional impact was terrific for me . . . It was more than one could bear.”¹⁴

It led to a breakdown. Once after returning from Amsterdam she had difficulty breathing. Listening to her heart, a Belgian doctor told her she would never be able to work again, but after a week in an army hospital she was physically fine. However, she realized she was suffering from “battle fatigue” and knew she needed a break, so she flew back across the Atlantic to spend time with her family. She also took a vacation to Havana. She reminisced a bit about her previous work there, “but it was now a different Cuba, and a different me.”¹⁵

¹² Laura Margolis, “Report on Visit to Holland, April 20-22, 1945,” page 6, AR45/64, file 485, JDC Archives.

¹³ Koestler, “No Heroine She.”

¹⁴ Margolis, interview by Menahem Kaufman, page 38.

¹⁵ Margolis, interview by Menahem Kaufman, page 38.

One wonders how her collapse was seen by her male colleagues -- if they viewed her emotionalism as womanly hysteria or if they were fighting the same feelings themselves. To be sure, the suffering they dealt with must have affected them all, but her physical reaction seems to have been rare. While she did not seem to be consciously competing with her male counterparts, one still gets the feeling that she did not like to be treated differently than they were or be unable to do the things they did. She must have truly needed a rest in order for her to have admitted what could be seen as a weakness.

She was on leave from February to June 1946, but then felt ready to work again. Joe Schwartz gave her a new assignment in France, where she became the JDC's first female country director. This was an important and prestigious position, and the fact that it was given to her is strong proof of the Joint's belief in her abilities. Her office was in an old Rothschild mansion which had been the Gestapo's headquarters during the war. Some staff had already been hired, and local relief committees had been set up. She set to work to learn about the local situation and determine what her priorities should be.

She found that the needs were twofold. First, there were thousands of Jewish refugees, both French and non-French, who were coming to France from the camps. Some of these transients planned to stay in the country, while others hoped to emigrate to Palestine and wished to use France only as a way station. The second major issue was the devastated French Jewish community. Many of its leaders and members were dead or deported, and its institutions had largely broken down.

Margolis saw that this assignment would be different from the others she had done for the JDC. In Cuba and China, as well as in her other work in Europe during the war, her job was to meet present emergencies; she did not have the time or luxury of

planning to rebuild a community. Now she had the chance to create a more permanent structure and could finally think about the future. She was excited by the opportunity to forge something lasting instead of concentrating on stopgap measures.

She was also responsible for a very large budget: in 1948, for example, the Joint's appropriation for France was \$7.6 million. This level of funding represented the fact that the organization saw the country as "the center of JDC activity in Europe."¹⁶ When she began her work, the JDC was subsidizing forty separate agencies, so she saw one of her major tasks as setting priorities for programs and funding. She determined that the three most important should be aid for transients, children, and the aged, sick, and unemployable. Other needs would be met from what was left. By 1950 only sixteen agencies were being subventioned, with further reductions expected. Through what Yehuda Bauer calls Margolis's "talent for Jewish diplomacy," she was able to convince groups with very different beliefs about orthodoxy and Zionism who were usually at odds with each other to collaborate on many programs.¹⁷

The transient problem itself was a large one, with up to 2,000 Jewish refugees entering the country each month in the years following the war, totaling at least 50,000 between 1946 and 1950. They were drawn from the camps and from Eastern Europe by the relatively stable government and the Marshall Plan-fueled economic recovery.¹⁸ In order for the refugees to be admitted into the country, the JDC pledged the French government that they would not become a burden on the state; therefore the organization was responsible for supporting them. One-third of the budget for France was spent on

¹⁶ Administration Committee minutes, 9 May 1950, AR45/64, file 3103, JDC Archives.

¹⁷ Bauer, *Out of the Ashes*, 240.

assisting this group, providing for them when they arrived and then either helping them emigrate to Palestine or training them for employment in France.

Margolis worked to decrease the number of children needing support from the JDC. Many of them emigrated to North America, Israel, or Australia, joining relatives or foster families. Teenagers were taught trades and helped to start independent lives. Continuing efforts were also made to find surviving relatives and place children with them once the family was able to be self-supporting. By 1952, the number of children supported by the JDC outside institutions decreased from 10,000 to less than 500, a testament to the fact that people's lives were being rebuilt.

Building on her past experience and the Joint's philosophy, Margolis wanted to create a community-run structure for fund raising and planning. When she told Joe Schwartz about her strategy, she remembered him asking, "Laura, are you going to try to make good Americans out of the French?"¹⁹ Her idea ran counter to previous efforts in France, but Margolis was convinced she could persuade locals of its value. The organization that was finally created out of these plans at the end of 1949 was called the Fonds Social Juif Unifié (FSJU). Although she divided the responsibilities -- the JDC would handle the transient issue, while the FSJU would take care of local problems -- she still worked together with them to make up a combined budget for all aspects of the program. They set goals together, and the FSJU began to raise funds in the community. The JDC, through the FSJU, became a unifying force in the country, pulling together the many factions within the Jewish community.

¹⁸ Handlin, *A Continuing Task*, 96.

¹⁹ Margolis, interview by Menahem Kaufman, page 39.

Margolis clearly believed that the local leaders needed to be taught how to organize the program. She referred to the joint budgeting process as one of her “teaching methods.”²⁰ She told a reporter that Americans had brought efficiency and high standards to Europe in their work there, implying that the methods Europeans had been using were inferior.²¹ This is reminiscent of her American-centric description of “democratizing” the camps in Shanghai.

Given that the political situation in Europe was in flux and there was no knowing what would happen next, Margolis was in something of a difficult situation. She believed that she needed to press forward with her work no matter what, and saw the JDC and other organizations as the saviors of the people there. She told a journalist, “If Europe had to wait for governments to move, millions more would be dead. The committee moves in and acts. The mistakes we make are those of action, not of failing to act.”²² New York headquarters was aware of the challenges she faced; years later mention was made of how “her adroit and forceful management skills overcame many bureaucratic obstacles.”²³

In 1948, another crisis arrived on her doorstep. A boat full of 4,500 Jewish refugees who hoped to emigrate to Palestine was met at Haifa by British soldiers who forced the passengers off their ship, the *Exodus*, and onto three British prison vessels. The would-be emigrants were then taken to Port-de-Bouc in the south of France, but once there they refused to disembark. At one point they went on a day-long hunger strike to

²⁰ Margolis, interview by Menahem Kaufman, page 39.

²¹ “Clevelander Tells of Relief in France,” *Cleveland Press*.

²² “Clevelander Tells of Relief in France,” *Cleveland Press*.

bring the world's attention to their situation. They were anchored off the French coast for a full month in terrible weather -- first blazing heat, then constant rainstorms. Conditions were extremely harsh, with severe overcrowding and few sanitary facilities.²⁴ A journalist who was allowed to visit the ships called the re-imprisonment of these Holocaust survivors a "grim joke."²⁵

Margolis went to Port-de-Bouc and directed the JDC's relief efforts there. The organization rushed 165 tons of food and medicine to the port, along with items like toothpaste and schoolbooks. Barges were sent out to the boat every day with the supplies. The passengers were eventually taken back to Germany and forced to disembark by helmeted British soldiers, often fighting and screaming. This incident was crucial in turning the tide of world opinion in favor of creating a Jewish homeland in Israel. One writer referred to the affair as "a legend that summarized the courage and steadfastness of Holocaust survivors."²⁶ By 1949, every living *Exodus* passenger had become an Israeli citizen.

Apart from career challenges, Margolis's stint in France greatly changed her personal life. Up until this time, there is no evidence of romantic attachments on her part. The only hint of a possibility that comes through in her JDC papers is her "very good friend" Morris Cohen, who escorted her during her two visits to Hong Kong. But as far as can be ascertained, those two occasions were the only times she saw him. She was

²³ Michael Schneider to JDC Board Members, 9 September 1997, AR65/99, JDC Personnel, Laura Margolis Jarblum, JDC Archives.

²⁴ Aviva Halamish, *The Exodus Affair: Holocaust Survivors and the Struggle for Palestine*, trans. Ora Cummings (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1998), 123.

²⁵ Ruth Gruber, *Exodus 1947: The Ship that Launched a Nation* (New York: Random House, 1999), 139.

²⁶ Arie Lova Eliav, foreword to *The Exodus Affair*, xiii.

also clearly close to many of her male JDC colleagues, but as she was generally working several time zones away, it seems unlikely that any deep relationships blossomed.

By the time she began her work in France, she was an unmarried woman in her forties. One assumes that changing her status as a single woman was likely not important to her, as her constant travels were not very conducive to finding a husband. But giving her career priority over marriage and children set her against the conventions of her day. One wonders how her family felt about this choice, and also how much the decision was a deliberate one. In Carolyn Heilbrun's words, she may have unconsciously fallen out of the "marriage plot." Heilbrun believes that highly gifted women often lead unconventional lives "in the service of a talent felt" and "a profound sense of vocation," thus dropping out of the usual marriage-and-family narrative prescribed for females.²⁷ However, eventually Margolis found a way to reconcile a romantic life with her work.

Shortly after she arrived in France, she met a local Jewish leader named Marc Jarblum. Earlier in his life he had lived and worked in Poland and Russia, active in both the Socialist and Zionist movements. He was a writer and journalist who had worked for several newspapers, mainly of a Zionist bent. Active in the French Resistance during the war, he had had to escape from the Gestapo into Switzerland. After the war he became the president of the French Zionist Federation, and his work brought him into frequent contact with Margolis. His organization assisted in the work of absorbing refugees into France, and he led demonstrations against the forced return of the *Exodus* passengers.

Margolis once joked, "Sometimes when people in silly magazine interviews would interview me, they'd say, 'What made you do all these things?' I said, 'Well, I

²⁷ Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Writing A Woman's Life* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1988), 51-53.

went around the world looking for my husband, and I found him.”²⁸ She and Jarblum became close, and in 1950 they were married in a small ceremony. The JDC cabled its good wishes, and she replied with a short note from their honeymoon in the French Alps. Despite their age difference -- she was 47, he was 63 -- they were a compatible couple. Their strong beliefs about Zionism and community service were complementary, and they greatly enjoyed each other on a personal level as well. She particularly remembered his wonderful sense of humor. Ted Feder, a JDC colleague from that period, remembered them frequently laughing and joking together and called their match “made in heaven.”²⁹

By this time Margolis remembered feeling “very tired of running.”³⁰ The couple decided they would emigrate to Israel and settle down. She recalled, “We both felt that the time had come not to just talk Zionism, but to do it.”³¹ She had taken her first trip to the country in 1947 even though a friend was of the opinion that it was “a little premature for a holiday there.”³² Despite the chaos of pre-statehood Palestine, she greatly enjoyed her trip, describing it as “most fascinating” and “very exciting.”³³ Her favorable impressions of the country were now looming large in her life, and she wanted to return to stay. She and her husband decided to give themselves three years to finish their work in France before moving.

²⁸ Margolis, interview, 11 July 1991, page 41.

²⁹ Feder interview.

³⁰ Margolis, interview, 11 July 1991, page 42.

³¹ Margolis, interview by Menahem Kaufman, page 42.

³² S.H. Scheuer to Laura Margolis, 8 November 1947, box D11, folder 10, World Union for Progressive Judaism Records, Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives.

³³ Laura Margolis to S.H. Scheuer, 17 December 1947, box D11, folder 10, World Union for Progressive Judaism Records.

In a report written the year before she left for Israel, she outlined the conditions in France. At that time the country had a larger Jewish population than any other European nation apart from Romania and the Soviet Union. The influx of refugees into France had now slowed considerably, and the Joint's support had shifted to those who were staying in the country. JDC funds assisted approximately 10,000 people per month with programs including care of orphans, vocational training, medical assistance, loans, and legal services. In addition, with less money needed for direct relief as people were getting back on their feet, more emphasis was put on educational and cultural needs, resulting in funding for libraries, summer camps, theatres, schools, and religious supplies.

As for the FSJU, its fund raising had gotten off to a rocky start, but by 1952 it surpassed its goal and raised 142 million francs, nearly half again as much as it had raised the year before. By this time it had become a solid structure in the community and Margolis felt assured of its continuing role. This meant that the JDC could begin doing less while the community did more. Overall, JDC leaders were impressed with what she had accomplished in France, and said hers was a record of "remarkable achievement" there.³⁴ Yehuda Bauer agreed, calling postwar France "a JDC success story."³⁵

Margolis herself felt that the community was well on its way to becoming strong again and believed she could move on. The FSJU held a farewell ceremony for her at which she was given a keepsake engraved with the words, "On behalf of the Jews of France -- June 1946 - December 1953." The organization's president, Guy de Rothschild, stated, "She will remain in our memories, connected to the works to which she has given

³⁴ Administration Committee minutes, 24 June 1952, AR45/64, file 3103, JDC Archives.

³⁵ Bauer, *Out of the Ashes*, 245.

the best of herself.” He made special mention of her ability to resolve conflicts within the community, and told her she would always be welcome in France.³⁶ Clearly, she would be missed.

Years later, Margolis said she was glad she left the country when she did, as her conscience was having difficulty with continuing to give so much assistance there. The ratio of JDC to local funds had decreased from 4 to 1 down to 2 to 1, but the Joint’s portion still seemed too high to her. She felt the French Jewish community was not doing enough to meet their own needs. She believed they could match “millionaire for millionaire” with the Americans, and that they should be taking more responsibility for funding and planning their local programs. She added,

I don’t know why the JDC should be more concerned with the quality of French Jewish institutions than the French themselves are. They have the means. So, morally and ethically, I think it’s wrong that the JDC still gives money to the French community.³⁷

Here she once again showed her strong ethical principles, and also displayed the extent to which she believed in the JDC’s philosophy of community self-help.

When she left France, Margolis resigned from the JDC’s foreign staff, planning to continue her association with the organization as a local staff member. She recalled,

I was one of those starry-eyed Zionists who felt that one doesn’t work in Israel for dollars . . . I wanted to be just like everyone else here in Israel. I came to Malben as local staff, and that’s been one of the good experiences of my life -- the fact that I was able to feel like a “native” and not like a “foreigner.”³⁸

³⁶ “The FSJU Shows Its Recognition of Mrs. L. Margolis-Jarblum,” *World Jewish News*, 2 December 1953, AR45/64, file 3103, JDC Archives.

³⁷ Margolis, interview by Menahem Kaufman, page 41.

³⁸ Margolis, interview by Menahem Kaufman, page 42.

Malben was an agency created through an agreement between the JDC and the Israeli government in 1949. In essence, the JDC agreed to care for all of the new citizens who were unable to live independently because of age or handicap -- a truly massive undertaking.³⁹ Margolis was assigned to lead its social service department.

She continued in this work for two years, until 1955. She then decided to take time off to better learn Hebrew. But she had only just begun studying when a colleague told her she “had no right to stay at home and ‘amuse’ [herself] with Hebrew” when the country needed her help. Large-scale immigration was taking place from Hungary, Romania, and Poland, and her expertise was needed in dealing with the new arrivals. She took a job with the Jewish Agency working in the new villages, helping to set up day care programs. To staff the new centers, she recruited women from the groups of recent immigrants. She recalled, “It was a new experience for me, but one which took me out into the heart of the country where I felt that I was really getting to know the country and the people.”⁴⁰ She did regret not continuing with Hebrew, however; she later said that she bluffed her way through the language for a long time.

Margolis was very happy in Israel. She recalled, “I felt for the first time that I had roots. I had been floating. And it was really . . . I think the first time in all my years since [my childhood in] Constantinople that I felt rooted and at peace.”⁴¹ She finally felt like she was making a home for herself and could plan for the future, instead of knowing she would soon be sent on another assignment. Her attachment to her husband likely also contributed to her newfound feeling of stability and rootedness.

³⁹ Handlin, *A Continuing Task*, 104.

⁴⁰ Margolis, interview by Menahem Kaufman, page 42-43.

After two years of working for the Jewish Agency, an old colleague of Margolis's, Lou Horowitz, was appointed as the new Malben director. He told her he had a job for her, one that would involve both working with voluntary agencies and establishing programs to assist handicapped children. While she had a great deal of experience with agency coordination, the field of handicapped children was enticingly new to her, and she always wanted to learn something different. He thus convinced her to come back to Malben and the JDC, although the decision was difficult for her as she greatly enjoyed her work with the Jewish Agency. At first she kept both jobs, but after a year finally was too overwhelmed and resigned from the Agency to work at Malben full time.

Her work eventually diversified from her two original tasks, and in 1958 she became the head of a new catch-all division called Special Projects. She said she liked to think of the division "as an experimental laboratory and experience has proven that this is what we are . . . We are ready to try anything which somehow does not fit into any other department."⁴² Some of the problems she was asked to take on included social work with emotionally disturbed and mentally ill adults; hearing screening and speech therapy for preschool children; community education about the needs of handicapped children and adults; and attempts to assist "hard core" cases who had not yet left the transit camps set up as temporary housing for new arrivals.

She grew particularly concerned with people who needed help but for some reason did not qualify for Malben's assistance. She reported cases where mental, physical, or social problems prevented adults from leading independent lives in their communities,

⁴¹ Margolis, interview, 11 July 1991, page 42.

⁴² *Proceedings of the First Annual Malben-JDC Conference*, May 1960, 45-46, AR45/64, file 734, JDC Archives.

and said that without help they had become pariahs. She felt strongly that Malben should assist them, saying, "It is perfectly understandable that a young state such as Israel should have neglected this problem in view of more urgent priorities, and its emphasis on the young and constructive elements. I feel, however, that Israel cannot continue to ignore this unmet need any longer and still maintain that it is a progressive welfare state."⁴³

Her work with handicapped children and their families was particularly rewarding. She made sure that programs took into account not only the children's needs, but those of their parents and siblings. Under her guidance, parents' groups began their own fund-raising campaigns, thus becoming able to support services ranging from nurseries to workshops to assisted-living hostels. The parents' pressure and example stimulated public agencies to do more in these areas as well. Once again, Margolis was successful in helping a community take responsibility for itself and develop its own programs rather than remaining dependent on an outside agency for assistance.

Margolis always emphasized that the agency staff should not think of themselves as experts -- that they needed to keep in mind that they could and should learn from their clients as well as teaching them. She stated, "We must always be careful that our activity is not interpreted on the outside as 'bringing knowledge and wisdom to the natives.'"⁴⁴ Doubtless she sincerely believed this, but one also remembers her sense that efficient American social work practices were superior to all others.

She showed her usual proclivity to go beyond financial reports and statistics to find the human stories involved. For example, when a workshop for the blind came

⁴³ *Proceedings of the First Annual Malben-JDC Conference*, 48.

⁴⁴ *Proceedings of the First Annual Malben-JDC Conference*, 53.

under her purview, she was disturbed to learn that during the ten years of the shop's operation, "no effort had been made to become acquainted with these families as individual human beings with social and emotional problems."⁴⁵ The result had been hostility on the part of the workers toward Malben and a lack of belief that the agency was truly interested in their welfare. She sent one of her most skilled social workers to the site to learn about the problems the workers and their families faced and listen to their ideas about how to improve their situation.

She continued with Special Projects until 1974, when she decided the programs that were close to her heart were established well enough to allow her to retire in good conscience. Her husband had died in 1972 in his mid-eighties, so she entered retirement on her own. Even without him, she felt that Israel was truly her home and did not want to leave, but her family encouraged her to come back to America and be closer to them. She was extremely reluctant to move and put it off as long as she could, at one point writing to a colleague,

I've fought it for 10 years, but must give in. I am still in good shape considering age. However, I have no family here who could be of any help to me in case of emergency, and my friends are also thinning out. My housekeeper on whom we depended for years so I could work is 75 and ill. No choice, as hard as this move will be for me.⁴⁶

Home for her meant Israel, not America, but eventually she moved back to the country where she grew up, settling in Teaneck, New Jersey, and later in Boston. She made it clear that she wanted her own apartment, explaining that "I love [my family] dearly, but I

⁴⁵ *Proceedings of the First Annual Malben-JDC Conference*, 46.

⁴⁶ Laura Margolis Jarblum to Ralph Goldman, 30 July 1982, AR65/99, JDC Personnel, Laura Margolis Jarblum, JDC Archives.

wanted to have my own life.”⁴⁷ She said at one point that she still did not know whether she had done the right thing by leaving Israel, and felt she would rather be there than in America.

In her retirement she received numerous awards from institutions ranging from Brandeis University to a Jewish day school. She was the first recipient of one school’s “Healers of the World” award. The various recognitions all specifically noted her work in Shanghai during the Holocaust, naming her as a hero of the Jewish people. She was also honored at a reunion of Shanghai refugees that took place in 1993, there called an unsung hero whose intervention made the difference between life and death for many. The survivors presented her with a two-foot by three-foot framed certificate “in recognition of her extraordinary dedication and unselfish devotion to the Shanghai/Hongkew refugee community.” It went on to declare that “by her tireless work she saved thousands among us from starvation,” and was signed by over one hundred former Shanghai Jews.

She continued to share her experiences, although never exploiting them. In 1991 she was invited to speak at a JDC Board dinner. Though she was in ill health, she told stories from her experiences that had the audience captivated. In her late eighties she looked back and said that she was very satisfied with her life, but that she was not sure how everything had happened as she had never gone looking for adventure. She added that she wished she were ten or fifteen years younger -- no more than that -- to give her more time in the world she found so interesting. Her time ran out after 93 years; she died in Brookline, Massachusetts, on September 9, 1997.

⁴⁷ Margolis, interview, 11 July 1991, page 44.

Margolis seemed to have found some peace in the last part of her life. She spent the end of the war meeting crises and witnessing the results of catastrophe, but beginning with her work in France, she was able to plan for the future and build lasting community structures, which was a welcome change for her. After her years of urgent work in chaotic situations, she was finally “tired of running,” and settled down with her new husband in the adopted homeland which she grew to love dearly. She was never as happy in America as she had been in Israel, but she remained active and enjoyed speaking with people about her experiences and the work of the Joint. Her death was noted by many who had come to know how much good this unusual woman had done in the world.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

“What’s heroic about doing your job?” -- Laura Margolis Jarblum¹

The ways in which Margolis and her career have been remembered and honored are clearly the result of forces ascendant within American society at the end of the twentieth century. The Holocaust, after being virtually ignored in this country for several decades after it occurred -- or at least not recognized as separate from the overall devastation of World War II -- has taken a central place in the culture for Jews and non-Jews alike. In polls, large percentages of Americans say they believe it is “essential” or “important” that their fellow citizens understand the Holocaust.² Anything related to the destruction of the Jews acquires something of a sacred aura, and particularly any example of virtue or heroism that can alleviate the narrative’s horror. Given this cultural phenomenon, it is not surprising that Margolis is most remembered for her work during the war.

The prevailing focus of remembrance in a nation or group can indicate the cultural climate of that group. Halbwachs believes memory serves the present, in that past events will only be recalled if they are somehow useful to society. Remembering is an active process performed by individuals with the encouragement of their community.³ If this is

¹ Koestler, “No Heroine She.”

² Alvin H. Rosenfeld, “The Americanization of the Holocaust,” in *Thinking About the Holocaust After Half a Century*, ed. Alvin H. Rosenfeld (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 120.

³ Mieke Bal, “Introduction,” in *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, ed. Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe, and Leo Spitzer (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1999), x-xiii.

so, what is it about contemporary American society that leads to such an emphasis on the Holocaust? What societal needs does this narrative serve?

Peter Novick argues that within the American Jewish community, the Holocaust has become a unifying factor in the current era of identity politics. When the diversity among Jews means they do not have religious practice or culture in common, something else is needed to bring them together. The destruction of European Jewry serves as “an instant Judaizer, shocking people back into their Jewishness.”⁴ The Holocaust is a symbol for fears of assimilation and intermarriage -- sometimes described as “cultural genocide” -- and also gives Jews a place of honor in the current “victim culture.”⁵ It has served as a useful tool in justifying militancy with regard to the protection of Israel. In addition, it has been more effective than anything else in encouraging Jewish youth to become interested in their heritage and committed to their faith.⁶

But the Holocaust has become a central concern of non-Jews in the United States as well. The event has been “Americanized,” culminating in the construction of an immensely popular federally funded museum on the Mall in Washington, D.C. Thus an event that occurred in Europe has been adopted as part of America’s history.⁷ Representations of the Holocaust have also taken on an American flavor, reflecting the

⁴ Yaffa Eliach, quoted in Edward T. Linenthal, *Preserving Memory: The Struggle to Create America’s Holocaust Museum* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1995), 13.

⁵ Walter Benn Michaels, “‘You Who Never Was There’: Slavery and the New Historicism -- Deconstruction and the Holocaust,” in *The Americanization of the Holocaust*, ed. Hilene Flanzbaum (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 196.

⁶ Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), 7-10, 187.

⁷ Tim Cole, *Selling the Holocaust: From Auschwitz to Schindler: How History is Bought, Packaged, and Sold* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 14.

country's inclination to "individualize, heroize, moralize, idealize, and universalize."⁸ The American tendency toward optimism has led to the popularity of "uplifting" Holocaust stories like *The Diary of Anne Frank* and *Schindler's List*.⁹

Why has the American general public chosen this time to centralize the place of the Holocaust in the culture? Novick argues that the destruction of the Jews is an appropriate symbol for the rather bleak recent decades, in which morale in the United States has been low due to Watergate, Vietnam, and the dangerous future promised by the arms race.¹⁰ The widespread use of the phrase "nuclear holocaust" to describe the potential outcome of the Cold War seems to support this contention. It is also possible that the Holocaust serves as a Freudian "screen memory" masking America's own traumas, from the persecution of Native Americans to the Vietnam War.¹¹

On the other hand, Holocaust memory can also satisfy a self-congratulatory tendency. If the destruction of European Jewry is the ultimate catastrophe, the various oppressions endorsed and carried out by Americans -- slavery, for instance -- are therefore somehow less evil. Thus, the wrongs of the United States are lessened in comparison with those of Europe. And since many of the survivors later settled in America, it can see itself as a haven for the oppressed -- a democratic land where genocide and hatred are not tolerated.¹²

⁸ Rosenfeld, "The Americanization of the Holocaust," 123.

⁹ Michael Berenbaum, *After Tragedy and Triumph: Essays in Modern Jewish Thought and the American Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 13.

¹⁰ Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*, 112.

¹¹ Cole, *Selling the Holocaust*, 14.

¹² James E. Young, "America's Holocaust: Memory and the Politics of Identity," in *The Americanization of the Holocaust*, 73-74.

The destruction of the Jews has also become a metaphor used by those with grievances against society. According to Diane Purkiss, the story of the Holocaust has become “the paradigmatic narrative for understanding atrocity in the late twentieth century.”¹³ A sort of “Holocaust envy” has sprung up, with different groups in competition for the greatest past suffering.¹⁴ It also seems likely that the increased identification with the Holocaust is related to the late-twentieth-century preoccupation with disaster and victimhood.¹⁵ And, of course, there is timing: as fewer and fewer survivors remain, it becomes important to hear their stories before they are all gone.¹⁶ Now that there exists what Novick describes as “a substantial cadre of Holocaust-memory professionals,” the centrality of the Holocaust has become self-perpetuating.¹⁷

The identification of the Holocaust as the epitome of human evil has led to a search for the righteous few who dared to take personal risks in order to save others. When confronted with such a disastrous event, it is not surprising that people want to focus on any good that can be found. Stories about “rescuers,” “liberators,” and “righteous Gentiles” have proliferated in the popular media. According to some observers, Americans feel that valuable lessons can be learned from the rescuers.¹⁸ Alvin Rosenfeld writes, “These people are now frequently regarded as the ‘moral heroes’ of the

¹³ Diane Purkiss, *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations* (London: Routledge, 1996), 17.

¹⁴ Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*, 192.

¹⁵ Henry Greenspan, “Imagining Survivors: Testimony and the Rise of Holocaust Consciousness,” in *The Americanization of the Holocaust*, 57.

¹⁶ Walter Benn Michaels, “‘You Who Never Was There,’” 190.

¹⁷ Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*, 6.

¹⁸ Eva Fogelman, *Conscience and Courage: Rescuers of Jews During the Holocaust* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994), xix.

Holocaust, the ones who managed to exemplify virtue during a time when basic human goodness was otherwise scarcely to be found.”¹⁹ They lend hope that a society will never be completely corrupted.

It is clear that this centralizing of the Holocaust within American culture and the consequent search for heroes has affected the way in which Margolis is remembered. She did not begin receiving awards and attention from the general public until the 1990s, when the country’s interest in the Holocaust had reached a high point. And indeed, this recognition virtually always highlighted her work to assist Jews during the war. Notices of her death focused on these activities as well. The subtitle of her obituary in the *New York Times* stated, “Helped Rescue Jews.”²⁰ Another writer called her a “laureate of courage” in an article extolling her nerve and principles during that difficult period.²¹ Even the JDC emphasized the significance of that era, calling her “a giant from JDC’s Heroic Age.”²²

One wonders what Margolis would think about being remembered almost exclusively as a Holocaust rescuer or hero. During her lifetime she firmly rejected any suggestion of heroism on her part, insisting that she had only done her job. One journalist noted that when Margolis talked about her relief activities, “it is always ‘Joint’ or ‘we’ but never ‘I.’”²³ She was resolutely modest and did not attempt to gain personal glory

¹⁹ Rosenfeld, “The Americanization of the Holocaust,” 138.

²⁰ “Laura Margolis, 93; Helped Rescue Jews,” *New York Times*, 22 September 1997, AR65/99, JDC Personnel, Laura Margolis Jarblum, JDC Archives.

²¹ Morris B. Margolles, “A Laureate of Courage,” AR65/99, JDC Personnel, Laura Margolis Jarblum, JDC Archives.

²² Schneider to JDC Board Members, 9 September 1997.

²³ Vera Forsberg, “Jews All Over the World Are Helped by Joint,” *Vi*, 25 November 1944, AR33/44, file 921, JDC Archives.

from her work. However, she does fit Eva Fogelman's description of a typical rescuer: "a personality inclined toward risk taking, emotional involvement with Jews, special abilities, available resources . . . ability to confront complex moral questions, and, ultimately, trust in one's competency."²⁴

There is no doubt she was deeply affected by the devastation of the Jewish community. When she first learned what was happening in Europe, she immediately demanded to be sent there, despite the war, to do what she could to help. In 1945, when faced with the full extent of the destruction and the atrocities that had occurred in the previous decade, she suffered a physical collapse. Later in life, she never disputed the significance of the Holocaust. In 1983 she discussed the book *Schindler's List* with a JDC administrator, saying she "couldn't put it down," and reminisced about the importance of the Joint's work during that period.²⁵

However, as vital as her wartime rescue and relief activities were, she later felt that the most important work she had done in her career was the rebuilding of the French Jewish community after the war.²⁶ Though the period she spent in Shanghai was certainly more dramatic, she wanted to be remembered for her work reconstructing community organizations and helping French Jews to develop independent fund raising and services. In a remembrance of the founding of the FSJU, she wrote, "I feel a very personal pride in having played even a modest role as the Joint's representative in France

²⁴ Fogelman, *Conscience and Courage*, 237.

²⁵ Margolis to Goldman, 18 December 1983.

²⁶ Feder interview.

following the holocaust.”²⁷ To her, long-term recovery was more noteworthy than day-to-day survival.

Apart from her personal wishes, there are other reasons the label of “Holocaust hero” perhaps is not the most apt by which to remember her. While she did help to save Jews from starvation and disease, especially in Shanghai, the idea of a rescuer or hero is more usually used to denote people who actually saved people from the camps, either through escape or hiding, and often at great risk to their own lives. Her work was with those who had already eluded the direct Nazi threat and were simply trying to survive in their new environment, and later with those who had lived through the camps. This was certainly no less important, but not as dramatic as the “rescuer” label would suggest.

She also did not have to deal directly with Nazi anti-Semitism. In Shanghai, the danger she faced and her eventual internment were due to her American citizenship rather than her religion. She did not feel the Japanese were particularly anti-Semitic, believing their attitude toward the Jews was based on their practical interests rather than on race hatred. In fact, through Captain Inuzuka, they did more for the Jewish refugees than for any other group needing assistance in the city. While it is true that the Japanese generally were not anti-Semitic in the way European Christians were, with a sentiment based on religious hatred, there still was a common belief in Japan -- held by Inuzuka himself -- that an international conspiracy of Jews promoted Communism, commercialism, and the

²⁷ Laura Margolis Jarblum, “Reflections of the Creation of the Fonds Social Juif Unifié,” 17 May 1981, AR33/44, file 130, JDC Archives.

destruction of traditional Japanese culture.²⁸ Still, it is difficult to compare this more subdued sentiment to that prevalent in Nazi-occupied territory.

Therefore, while her personality fit that of a “rescuer,” the situations within which she worked did not. The description in her *New York Times* obituary, “Helped Rescue Jews,” is a bit misleading. The phrase would encourage a reader to see her in a preconceived media-constructed “hero” role, and focuses away from the long-term work she found more lasting and important. Ultimately, it seems not to be true to her life. Thus, it is perhaps better to remember her as a humanitarian whose great concern for the welfare of her fellow Jews led her to dedicate herself to improving their condition throughout several decades, including, but not limited to, the period of the Holocaust.

It also seems important to keep in mind the ways in which she both defied and conformed to contemporary gender expectations. Certainly, by delaying marriage until she was in her forties, not having children, and opting for a career that took her around the globe instead of staying in the home, Margolis was an unusual woman in her generation. But her choice of the female-dominated profession of social work and her lack of ambition for powerful leadership positions within the JDC both are in line with traditional women’s roles. It seems unlikely that she would have seen herself as an activist for women’s rights, even though she did not want to be denied opportunities because of her gender. But it cannot be denied that she broke new ground for women within the Joint and the larger male-dominated world of international humanitarian work.

²⁸ Ian Buruma, *The Wages of Guilt: Memories of War in Germany and Japan* (New York: Meridian, 1994), 42.

But she was valued in that world not for her “feminine” characteristics of caring and compassion, but for her administrative capabilities. She disdained those who were too “sentimental” and believed that excessive emotional involvement would get in the way of efficient services. Instead, while she was sympathetic to the plight of those she was helping, she was unfailingly practical with a no-nonsense attitude. When JDC executives praised her as “forceful” and “a capable administrator,” they showed their appreciation for her personality traits that were more stereotypically masculine. One wonders how many careers Margolis could have chosen where she would be thus rewarded for stepping outside traditional gender roles.

Overall, from her beginnings in domestic social work through her growth into a confident actor on the international scene, her talents and skills matured into those of a self-assured and knowledgeable relief worker. Personally, she developed from a girl content to stay close to home to a “gypsy” wandering the world, and finally to a married woman who found a true home where she felt “rooted and at peace.” Both personally and professionally, she defied expectations throughout her life. By so doing, she fell into a satisfying career and did a great deal of good in the world.

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