

## A Family Holocaust Archive

by Regie Buchsbaum Roth

*Editor's Note: This article was originally presented by the author on Yom Kippur afternoon, October 12, 2016, at Anshe Emeth Memorial Temple, New Brunswick.*

*"Whoever destroys a soul, it is considered as if he destroyed an entire world. And whoever saves a life, it is considered as if he saved an entire world." Mishnah Sanhedrin & and the Jerusalem Talmud.*

This is a story of selfless heroism and humanity in its highest form. It's a story of love and renewal.

The story passed down through family lore was that my grandfather, Benjamin Buchsbaum, was a hero, saving Jews from probable death by getting them out of Europe and to America before, during, and after WWII. He received letters from relatives and friends of relatives from Hungary, Germany, Poland, France, Austria, Rumania, Czechoslovakia, and a part of east Africa that is now Tanzania. My grandfather never turned anyone down. He signed and submitted affidavits for every single person who contacted him, over 41 in all between 1938 and 1946. The affidavits promised that my grandfather would sponsor each newcomer...he would find them housing and jobs, ensuring that none would become burdens on society. Some he took into his own house. He had to send copies of his tax returns to prove his means. He had to appeal to local judges and businessmen to attest to his moral character and integrity, offering every assurance that he was a man of his word.

Remarkably, my grandparents saved the letters and remarkably, my grandfather made carbon copies of each response he sent, assuring those seeking a better life that he would take the necessary steps to help them. As a collection, the letters are a testament to my grandfather's tenacity and love during a time when the Jews of Europe were facing the unspeakable.



*Benjamin Buchsbaum*

This past June, a friend told my father that the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC would be opening an exhibit in 2018 about the American response to the Holocaust, including a feature on those who saved European Jews during the war. Remembering my grandfather's efforts and being the keeper of the family tree, I contacted the Museum. What has happened since then has been a journey of discovery unlike anything I could have imagined.

The curator was very interested in my grandfather's story and asked me if we have any ephemera to document his story. At once, I remembered the letters I'd heard about as a girl! I'd never seen them before but I knew they existed. My grandmother gave them to my brother for safe-keeping sometime before she died in 1995. They moved with my brother over the years from New Orleans to NJ, from apartment to condo, and from a house to currently a storage facility. In June, he and I spent a couple of hours searching his storage unit for the letters. We found other photos, letters and family history, but we didn't find the letters. I was heartbroken.

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From Anita Wolfson: personal papers and photographs of Isabel Brylawski, a noted local violinist and long-time Home News music critic

From Jane Cantor: Anshe Emeth Memorial Temple documents including Confirmation Class photos dated 1942-1950

From Joshua Hamerman: Assorted documents from Jewish organizations in Union County, including Temple Emanu-El of Westfield, and Congregation Beth Israel and the JCC of Central New Jersey, in Scotch Plains.

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*("A Family Archive" continued from Page 1)*

Summer vacations and extreme heat prevented us from searching again, but just two Sundays ago we returned determined to find the letters. Pushing aside tables and chairs, a piano, household items, and an endless number of boxes of books, one particular box stood out from the others. Inside we found an intact, lovingly-bound red leather binder containing all of the original letters in perfect condition. The binder had been presented to my grandfather as a tribute to him on the occasion of his 70th birthday in 1958 by my grandmother, my father and my aunt and uncles.

The collection includes a total of 70 letters. So far, amidst the loving words in the letters, I have gleaned that my grandfather successfully brought 18 individuals to the United States and helped two go to Palestine. My father and aunt tell me that he saved 27 people in all. I am determined to find all 27 and intrigued to learn more about what happened to those who came and those who couldn't. The Holocaust Memorial Museum will be able to help by researching ship manifests, census reports and the Yad Vashem database.

I would like to share a letter with you.

*Vienna, April 4, 1938:*

*"Dear Cousin, you will perhaps be surprised to get a letter from us after such a long time but the events of the last days induce me to appeal on your family feelings and therefore I beg to write to you. People here say the American Jews undertake in helping the Austrian Jews. So, I take occasion to ask you for your advice and help. The matter is that I probably shall lose my subsistence and having no property it will be impossible for me to stay here with my family without any gain; therefore, we earnestly must think of a new future in another country, especially in America. But having no possibility now to go to America altogether (we are four), so we ask for your assistance for our son whose future here is quite without prospect. He is now 17 and in all regard a well-trained and intelligent young man...I am sure that it will be easy for you to place him at one of your friend's. Doing so, you will have done good work before God and have given your kindness to a Jewish child, who will ever*

*be thankful for that. You may trust that if we decide to take this step, we are giving a piece of our own heart away. We will not be selfish, but open the way into the wide world for our child; and you would do nearly the same what our fathers have done many years ago. It is very important for us, we shall be happy and much obliged for your soonest reply. Hoping you and your family are in the best health and we are, with heartfelt regard to you all. Your cousin, sincerely, Adolf Buchsbaum."*

My grandfather answered Adolf within days, telling him he would do everything in his power to bring Walter, then age 17, to America — and he did the following year. My grandfather took Walter in so he lived in my father's childhood home in Philadelphia for several months. One morning, when my grandfather was shaving, my grand-

father asked Walter if there was anyone else in Vienna that he would like my grandfather to try to bring over. Walter asked that my grandfather try to bring Kurt Loebel, Walter's 17-year old best friend.

Here is the letter from Kurt's father dated February 22nd, 1939, Vienna:



Ann (L) and Walter Buchsbaum with Katharine Buchsbaum (R), wife of Benjamin Buchsbaum.

*"Gentleman, while I am writing this letter, our son Kurt is crossing the channel for England. On February 24th, he will board a ship sailing from Liverpool to start for his new home. When our son left our city yesterday morning, our benedictions accompanied him. And you, Gentleman, will wait for him to take him in as a friend and benefactor and to introduce him in a new career. You may scarcely understand the grief of parents*

*whose only child which they idolize goes abroad, particularly in a period surely the most terrible in many centuries. We only take comfort in the fact that our boy is well accepted in your house. ...To our repeated thanks to you, we add our fervent prayer to help our son in having a new existence and also to assist him in his ardent efforts to procure immigration papers for his parents. The most beautiful day of our life will be to see our Kurt in short time and to return our thanks personally. With our best wishes to you and your family, we remain, Randolph and Margareth Loebel."*

*(continued on page 5)*

# Moe Berg's Incredible Life

Moe Berg's life proves the adage that "truth is often stranger than fiction." One of the best educated, intellectually accomplished and patriotic Jewish athletes in the history of American sports, Berg got his start in baseball in 1906, at the age of four, playing catch with the beat policeman in front of his father's Newark, NJ, pharmacy. Berg became a world-class linguist at Princeton University, where he studied Latin, Greek, French, Spanish, Italian, German and Sanskrit. He began his career as a spy on the roof of a hospital in Japan (more about that later.)

After graduating from high school at the top of his class, Moe went to Princeton, an unusual accomplishment for a poor Jewish boy in the 1920s. He became the star shortstop of the baseball team, graduated magna cum laude and was offered a teaching post in Princeton's Department of Romance Languages. Wanting to study experimental phonetics at the Sorbonne but unable to afford graduate study overseas, Berg accepted a contract to play shortstop for the Brooklyn Dodgers. Moe's hitting was below par, and he was sent to the minors after the 1924 season. One teammate said, "Moe, I don't care how many of them college degrees you got, they ain't learned you to hit that curve ball no better than the rest of us."

Berg returned to the majors in 1926 with the Chicago White Sox. At the same time, he attended Columbia Law School. Despite his hectic schedule, the brilliant Berg managed to finish second in his class at Columbia. That year, the White Sox asked him to play catcher, a position which took advantage of his strong arm and intelligence. Casey Stengel compared Berg's defensive skills to the immortal Bill Dickey. Moe hit .287 in 1929 and received votes for Most Valuable Player but in 1930 he seriously injured his ankle, ending his career as a full-time player. He played as a reserve for three more teams until he retired in 1939.

In 1934, Berg toured Japan with a group of major league all-stars, including Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig. Still respected as a linguist, Moe was invited to lecture at Meiji University, where he delivered an eloquent speech in Japanese. Apparently, prior to the trip, the U.S. government had recruited Berg as a spy, and while at Tokyo hospital ostensibly visiting an American mother who had just given birth, he sneaked onto the roof and took photos of the city. The photos reportedly were used by pilots during bombing raids in World War II.

As a Jew wanting to fight Nazism, Berg wanted to serve his country when America entered the war in 1941. He was asked to become a Goodwill Ambassador to Latin America. Before

he left on his ambassadorial mission, Berg made a radio broadcast to the Japanese people over the radio in which, to quote his biographers Harold and Meir Ribalow, "In fluent Japanese, he pleaded at length, 'as a friend of the Japanese people,' for the Japanese to avoid a war 'you cannot win.'" The Ribalows report that "Berg's address was so effective that several Japanese confirmed afterwards they had wept while listening."

After his stint in Latin America, Moe returned to the U.S. to work for the Office of Strategic Services, forerunner to the Central Intelligence Agency.

He parachuted into Yugoslavia and, after meeting Tito, suggested that the U.S. back him rather than his Serbian rival. Despite the fact that he was not a scientist, Berg was next assigned to help determine how close Germany was to developing an atomic bomb. In a few weeks, Berg taught himself a great deal about nuclear physics by studying textbooks. Traveling through Europe, Berg discovered that a factory in Norway was producing an atomic bomb component for the Nazis, and Allied planes bombed it. Berg then learned that the Nazis had an atomic research center at Duisberg, Germany, and it too was bombed.

Incognito, Berg managed to lure the leading German atomic physicist, Werner Heisenberg, to Switzerland to

give a lecture on quantum theory. At a dinner afterwards, Berg heard Heisenberg imply that Germany was behind the U.S. in bomb development. His report was greeted warmly by President Roosevelt. At great risk as a Jew, Berg spent parts of 1944 and 1945 in Germany, helping arrange for the capture by U.S. troops of several prominent German atomic scientists before the Soviets got them. At war's end, Berg was offered the Medal of Merit, the highest award given to civilians in the war effort, but he modestly declined it. Moe lived out a quiet life in Newark, where he died at age 70.

Some of Berg's friends felt he squandered what could have been a brilliant career in law or academics to play baseball. His brother observed that "all [baseball] ever did was make him happy." His teammate Ted Lyons said, "A lot of people tried to tell him what to do with his life and brain and he retreated from this... He was different because he was different. He made up for all the bores of the world. And he did it softly, stepping on no one."

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(A Family Archive, continued from Page 3)

Kurt Loebel came to America with a suitcase, a fiddle and \$30. He'd studied the violin in his native city of Vienna. Once in America and settled, he was schooled at Juilliard and the Cleveland Institute of Music. He became first chair and taught at the Institute from 1954 until his death in 2009. He married and had one son, David, who is now a famed conductor and Professor at the New England Conservatory of Music.

After Walter Buchsbaum left my grandparent's home, he moved to New York where he met and married Ann Fried, also a newcomer from Vienna, who'd left earlier on the Kinder Transport. Walter became a very successful electrical engineer, publishing over 13 books on the subject of computers and circuits well before the computer age. Walter and Ann lived out their lives in Forest Hills, Queens. They had one son, Bob, and one grandson, Stephen. Walter died years ago, but Ann is 93 years old and lives on her own in Forest Hills.

I have one more correspondence to share.

*June 10, 1945*

*"Dear Uncle, I received your letter of September 19th and was delighted with it. I read your letter several times and am happy that you are willing to do the utmost to help us. It's still remarkable to me that there are some people who do not believe the things that have been happening in Europe under German occupation. I wish those people could see the concentration camps like Buchenwald or any of the others. When I saw them I thought I was dreaming, but I wasn't. They were stark and real facts. I cannot describe how I felt."*

*August 8, 1945*

*"Dear Uncle, at last I am back home in my own country after so many years but I must say I am rather disappointed. I can't describe to you what I felt like when coming home. I am the only one who is left alive from our family. My parents were deported to Poland in 1942 where they died in the gas chamber with my two brothers...so you can imagine how I feel. The situation on the whole is very bad at the moment in Czechoslovakia. There is very little food especially in the towns and no cigarettes. All the shops are empty. You can't get a thing to buy here. Out of my few lines you can see that there is no future for me over here at all. I couldn't live here for anything in the world in a country where I lost all my dearest ones. Therefore, I want to ask you a favor if you could help me (I better say us because I am married), to come to the states. My wife was in England too during the war so there would be no language diffi-*

*culty either on hers or my part. As for myself, you probably know that I have a profession as a cook. And if not in that line, I am willing to do any kind of work as long as I know we shall have a quiet life and what's most important...a home. Please, dear Uncle, try and do your best. It is our future that is on the weight scale. Kind regards and lots of kisses, Robert."*

My grandfather's response crossed with Robert's second letter. My grandfather wrote:

*"Dear Robert, I am in receipt of your letter of June 10. As soon as the limitations of entry to this country are better, I will put in your application to the government. This country is in cooperation with England in opening the doors of Palestine and it may be that they will delay the lifting of the ban. Have you ever thought of migrating to Palestine? If so, have you any knowledge as to the means of approach to go there? Write more on this subject for we must keep all avenues available if possible. I am in touch with authorities here, and as soon as I learn of events, you can count on my having your application in."*

Robert and Pauline Lehrfeld settled in Holon, a suburb of Tel Aviv, where they lived out their lives. They had 2 daughters and 8 grandchildren. I met the family in 1981 on my first trip to Israel. I remember my grandmother putting some cash money in my hand to hand off to Robert upon my arrival.

My grandparents remained in close touch via mail and phone with 'all of their refugees', as my grandfather called them, until his death in 1970 and her death in 1995. The letters and stories together form a giant jigsaw puzzle for me. During the past 16 days since unearthing the letters, I sit at the puzzle before me and find where one or two pieces fit in. The picture is just starting to come together into one cohesive image. I hope to make it whole someday by finding how each piece fits. Who were the people behind the letters? What was their life like before the war? Who survived because of my grandfather? What did they make of themselves? And who didn't get out in time, perishing at the hands of the Nazis? How many descendants are on this earth because of the heroic efforts of my grandfather Ben? These questions will haunt me until I find all of the answers. I know in time I shall.

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*Regie Roth is the current President of Anshe Emeth Memorial Temple. She works as the Fund Development Associate at Carrier Clinic. She also volunteers and helps raise money for African causes, makes jewelry, bakes, and travels.*

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