

Exploring the past & creating personal histories in uncertain times

A resource based upon the Leo Baeck Institute exhibit *Refuge in the Heights*

Refuge in the Heights

The German Jews of Washington Heights



CENTER
FOR
JEWISH
HISTORY



LEO BAECK INSTITUTE –
NEW YORK | BERLIN
for the Study of German-Jewish
History and Culture

- › **How do we know what we know about the past?**
- › **How do people living through historic times help to create a record of their experiences?**

This resource guide will help you think about how you can document your own experiences through photos, videos, interviews, and personal archives as you examine the words and images created by the mid-20th century German Jewish community in Washington Heights, New York City.



Parents of Ronald Bloch in Fort Tryon Park, 1950
Courtesy of Ronald Bloch

This guide draws on the Leo Baeck Institute exhibit *Refuge in the Heights*, which will be on view at the Center for Jewish History when the building reopens. We invite students in grades 9-12 to explore the stories of immigrants and their children living through difficult times and making new homes for themselves as a lens for understanding primary sources, archives, and the way that history is made, preserved, and retold. These activities are ideal for teachers in search of novel distance-learning materials, as well as families looking for fun and educational ways to pass the time indoors.

With so many unanswered questions about what lies ahead, one of the most reassuring things we can offer for our young people is a window into the way that humans have managed difficult times and thrived. Exploring the past and curating personal histories is a way to feel rooted in a confusing time. As you and your students look at these sources and imagine the lives of the people who created them, we hope you will have the opportunity to think about how generations before us have created community and meaning in the face of uncertainty.

We look forward to welcoming you to the Center in person in the near future!

Cover image: View of the George Washington Bridge, photo taken by artist Tobi Kahn as a child when he lived in Washington Heights, 1950s; *Courtesy of Tobi Kahn*

Preserving the Present, Curating the Past

› How could a person 100 years from now learn about what your life is like today?

Maybe they would look at the photos saved in the cloud from your phone. Or an old version of your Facebook or Instagram feed. Maybe they would stumble upon the journal you kept when you were in middle school, or your college admissions essays.

When historians attempt to learn about a person or event, they look for written records, photos, or videos that are as “close” to the person or event as possible, like those you brainstormed above. These are called “primary sources.”

Historians and museum curators use primary sources to put together a story of the past, but there can be some issues with them one has to be aware of: the sources we have available decades later aren't always ones that people saved on purpose. Not everyone writes the whole truth in a journal or memoir. A photo is just a snapshot of a single moment in time—and who knows what else is happening just outside the frame! At the same time, when treated properly, these microhistories often help us better understand the Big History we learn about from textbooks. **What might it look like to create a record of your current experience that would help future researchers tell the story of our time? Watch our short how-to videos and look at examples from our archives to learn some of the skills of an archivist, historian, and documentarist.**

As you think about creating the record of your own history, we will take a look at some primary sources that archivists and curators used to create the exhibit *Refuge in the Heights*, which tells the story of German Jewish refugees who moved to Washington Heights, New York City, just before and after World War II. Coming to America was complicated for many German Jews: they had to leave everything they knew behind, including friends, jobs they loved, and homes they thought they'd live in forever. What was it like for them to move to a new country and leave their lives behind? How did they create new homes and communities? What did becoming “American” mean to them?



View of passengers sleeping on the crowded deck of the SS Navemar coming to the United States, 1941
LBI Archives, SS Navemar,
Saul Sperling Collection

Washington Heights is a neighborhood of voices and stories—those of immigration, refuge, inclusion, exclusion, Americanization, differentiation, conflict, harmony, and reinvention. The story of the neighborhood itself is a remarkable chapter in New York’s history—one in which millions in NYC began their lives anew, delighting in their proximity to scenic parks, dramatic vistas, and easy access to the heart of the metropolis.

Located near the upper tip of Manhattan—with Inwood to its north, and Harlem to its south—the Heights is perhaps best known for its ethnic enclaves, including those of Irish, Jewish, Armenian, Greek, Cuban, African-American, Puerto Rican, and Dominican newcomers who called it home throughout the twentieth century. And though they shared the neighborhood, most lived within their own defined boundaries and social milieu.

For German and Austrian Jews fleeing the Nazis in the 1930s and early 40s, Washington Heights was fertile ground upon which to build new lives. There they could retain what they loved best about German and Jewish culture, while committing to the exercise of becoming American. Many who grew up in “Frankfurt on the Hudson” remember it as a beloved community of family, neighbors, parks, synagogues, Jewish businesses, continuity, and also change.

Neighborhoods of New York
City’s Information Board
Courtesy of iStock
By Getty Images



When Hitler came to power in 1933, there were more than 500,000 Jews living in Germany and 200,000 in Austria. Some quickly searched for a way out, but most stayed, hoping the crisis was temporary. By the end of 1937, one third of German Jews (135,000) had left. With violence erupting after Germany annexed Austria in March of 1938, some 100,000 Jews left Austria that year. The November pogroms prompted a similar sense of urgency in Germany.

Only a few countries were willing to accept refugees, and the process of leaving could be strenuous, lengthy, and desperate. While many hoped to build new lives in America, only 125,000 German-speaking Jewish refugees were admitted; about 20,000 of them settled in Washington Heights.

—Refuge in the Heights, Leo Baeck Institute exhibit at the Center for Jewish History

ACTIVITIES

This is an excerpt from an oral history interview of Arthur Beiser, a German Jew who came to America before World War II, conducted by the Research Foundation for Jewish Immigration. The interview was done in 1972.

Q: Why did you decide on the United States?

A: That was the only country that I was thinking of. Europe was out, in my opinion, with Hitler in Europe.

Q: What was your image of the United States? Did you have a correct image, looking back on it now?

A: Not at all. It was so far away, you know.

Q: Well, what did you think of the United States?

A: As a haven.

Q: What was your image of the country? What did you expect to find here, and how was that different from what you actually did find?

A: That was no consideration at all. We wanted to get out. It didn't matter where. The best thing we thought would be the United States, what I thought. Many went to England.

Q: Were you surprised at what you found here?

A: In the beginning, yes.

Q: In what way?

A: The attitude, you know, for finding a job.



Aerial view of Washington Heights, 1952
Courtesy of YM & YWHA of Washington Heights
and Inwood

Q: In what ways?

A: That in one way they considered me a German, the other one they considered me a Jew. I was told when I came here "Say listen, the chemical industry, you just forget about getting a job there." The jobs which I had in mind, in the research departments and so on.

Q: What other things about this country did you find different from what you had expected?

A: It was too big.

Q: You didn't expect it to be that big.

A: No. It's so big, you know. I'll never forget it. When we arrived here, my brother-in-law drove us through the Times Square section. I was flabbergasted. This was a tremendous impression. Tremendous. If you come from a country where they only have two story houses.

➤ People who move have reasons to leave their current homes, called "push" factors, and reasons to choose a new home, called "pull" factors. What were the "push" and "pull" for the family in this interview?

➤ What surprised you about Mr. Beiser's answers?

➤ If you were the interviewer, what would you ask next?

This is an excerpt from “You Can Call Me Lucky,” a memoir by Wolfgang Rauner.

Saturday, June 21, 1941 was the first day my feet touched this blessed soil, the day that God gave us our life. Ever since, I've observed the anniversary of that date as my own personal holiday. I have chosen to start this history with that day, since this is the day I was born again and the beginning of my history in this country.

It was approximately 6:30 in the morning when the little Portuguese liner “Mouzinho” steamed into New York harbor. Hundreds of people were cramming the decks and stretching their necks to get a view of the Statue of Liberty. I was one of those hundreds although at that time I had no idea what that statue meant. I vaguely remember a series of small tugboats coming alongside and our ship was pulled into Pier 8 on Staten Island. Once the ship was safely berthed, dozens of people were coming on board. These were the US immigration officers and representatives of various refugee organizations who came aboard to determine if and when we could disembark and what to do with us. Everyone had to line up for inspection of their various papers, permits, and assorted required documents. There was much confusion as everyone was milling on the crowded decks not knowing what to do next...

My uncle, Simon Kahn had emigrated to the United States from Germany in 1938 and Cousin Paul, Dr. Paul Kahn, arrived in the late 20s after medical school in Germany and was a successful physician in New York. They, together with my aunt, Minna Hanau, my mother's sister, had been instrumental in getting us out of Europe in the last minute. They had posted the security affidavits necessary for us to be admitted into the country and had purchased the tickets for our passage from the American representatives of the Portuguese line in New York. We were milling around



Jewish refugee children wave at the Statue of Liberty as President Harding steams into New York harbor, 1939
Courtesy of United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

deck for hours. It was hot. Finally uncle Simon managed to have someone send ice cream pops on board for the children. It was my first Creamsicle in America, and I don't believe any ice cream ever tasted better before or since. Finally after hours of questions, interrogations, and legalities we were told we could disembark. That was relatively easy, since we arrived with only a few suitcases and the clothes on our backs. My mother, brothers, sister, and I walked down the gangplank into the waiting arms of our relatives. My father insisted on staying on board since it was Shabbat and he would not leave the ship until after sundown. I remember my uncle and cousin imploring him since neither of them were Sabbath observant and did not understand my father's strict adherence to his beliefs even in such circumstances. The rest of the family, however, went with cousin Paul in his car to his apartment on West End Ave, where we waited till after sundown for my father to arrive.

› What does Rauner remember about arriving in America?

› How did he feel about his new home? What do you think he meant when he said he was "born again?"

› What questions do you have about this memoir? What would you like to know more about?

› Compare this narrative to the interview above. How are the ways that the two men talk about America the same? How do they differ?

› The oral history interview and the memoir are very different not just in what they say, but in how they say it. Both recount the moment of coming to America, but they give very different levels of detail: the oral history has short answers, where the memoir is written as more of a story. Why do you think they are so different? Which do you think is a more trustworthy source? Why?

Watch this video featuring Michael Simonson from the Leo Baeck Institute, as he reads an excerpt from a memoir written by Charlotte Elsas.

▶ **Watch the video at youtu.be/e2iLdVYkeuw**

› How does the author remember New York City?

› How does the story of the sisters add to your understanding of immigrants' experience in Washington Heights?

› What questions would you like to ask the author?



Try it yourself: Find out about your past.

Now is the perfect time to talk to older relatives and friends about their memories of the past. Pick someone you would like to interview by phone or video chat. Create a list of questions you would like to ask about their experiences with starting something new: it could be as big as coming to a new country or as small as starting a new grade in school. What can you find out about their experiences? Can they remember any vivid details? How did the change in locations make them think differently about themselves?

Watch a video featuring Malgorzata Bakalarz Duverger from the Center for Jewish History, about effective oral history questions.

► Watch the video at youtu.be/QKgSdDSqOPg



You are looking at a photo of the Mathias family taken in 1938. It is one of several photos of the family in the Leo Baeck Institute's archive.

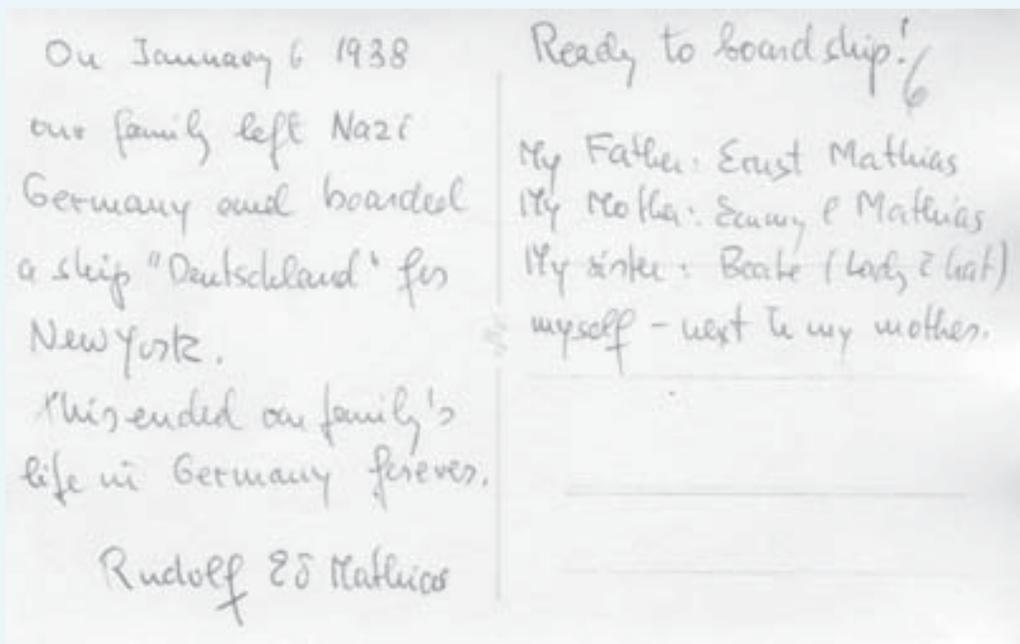
› What is happening in this picture?

› Who might have taken this picture? Why?

› What caption might you give this picture?

› What questions do you have about this picture?

The back of the picture was labeled by a Rudolph Mathias:



On January 6 1938 our family left Nazi Germany and boarded a ship "Deutschland" for New York.

This ended our family's life in Germany forever.

Rudolf Mathias

› How does this caption change the way you understand the picture?



Try it yourself: Create a visual record of your life at home.

Sometimes it's the moments that we take for granted that can provide future historians with important clues about what life was like in the past. Using the video tutorial below, take a series of photos or a short video of everyday life in your home. This video with Noah Benus from the Center for Jewish History will help you learn more about how to create a photo journal. Remember: what you consider boring surroundings or routine activities might be interesting or exciting to people who have never shared those experiences!

▶ Watch the video at youtu.be/HMhe9-9Cwt4

Caption your best photo with the who/what/where/when, and send it to education@cjh.org (just remember to get permission from any people who might appear in your photo!) We will feature some of the best photo journals on our Instagram feed throughout the spring.

Photos: (left) Ellis family; LBI Archives, Peter Ellis Collection; (top right) Inside of an apartment in Washington Heights, 1956, *Courtesy of Ronald Bloch*; (bottom right) Woman with a child, 1950s, LBI Archives, Peter Ellis Collection



Watch this home movie of a family Hanukkah celebration in 1947. The people in the clip are grandmother Emma Haas; her daughter Else and her husband Jack Reinheimer (lighting the candles); their two sons, Steven (5 years old) and Michael (14 months old); and the Reinheimers' friends from the Kahn family.

▶ **Watch the video at bit.ly/33NeUQU**

- › What are some things that look familiar to you from your own family holiday or birthday celebrations?

- › No one carried a video camera in their pocket in the 1940s! Why do you think the family chose to take out their video camera and record these moments? Why do you think the clip survived to be put in the archive?

- › What sorts of hints can we get about the lives of German Jewish refugee families from watching a clip of life at home? What are two questions you would like to ask after seeing this clip?

Try it yourself: Think about archives.

Watch the short video with Sarah Hopley from the Center for Jewish History, and with Michael Simonson from the Leo Baeck Institute, about what goes into making an archive. Archivists choose what goes in and what stays out, which shapes the way that historians can understand the past, but they don't do this work alone: they take their cues from the ways that people organized and labeled their own papers and images (like that caption above!). Imagine you're making an archive of your elementary school experience. What would you save and what would you not? How would you group things together? What kind of story would you want to tell?

► Watch the video at youtu.be/YFNySfTkDvY

