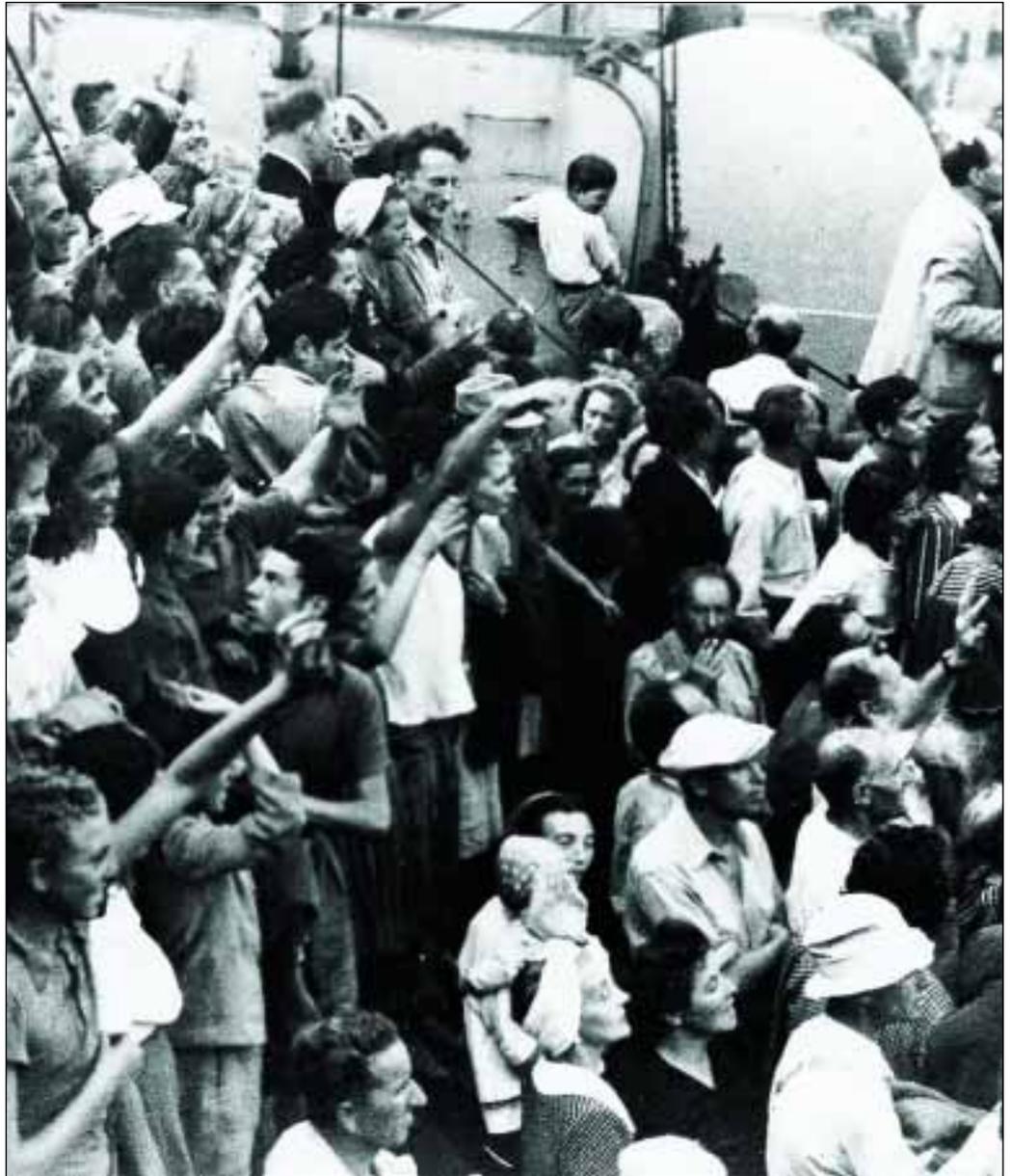


FINDING SAFE HARBOR

Though she's gained fame as an author and photographer, Ruth Gruber MA'31 found her greatest fulfillment advocating on behalf of the residents of America's only World War II refugee camp.

By John Allen



RUTH GRUBER (4)

Neither war nor weeks aboard the crowded troop ship U.S.S. *Henry Gibbins* could dampen the refugees' enthusiasm at their first sight of the Statue of Liberty. They would pass New York City by and disembark in Hoboken, New Jersey, before heading to Fort Ontario.

Photos from the book: *Haven* by Ruth Gruber. Copyright © 2000 by Ruth Gruber. Published by arrangement with Three Rivers Press, a Division of Random House, Inc.

Where you go, I will go ... your people shall be my people.

BOOK OF RUTH 1:16

In the language of biblical symbolism, Ruth is a daughter's name, not a mother's. Her eponymous book shows Ruth as the good child, so devoted to her mother-in-law, Naomi, that she would give up her homeland. When Ruth's husband dies, she follows Naomi to Bethlehem, in search of refuge from the poverty they face in Ruth's native Moab.

To be symbolically correct, a Ruth should be an unfortunate, a wanderer, a refugee. Motherhood, stability, and nurturing don't belong to her — they belong to Naomi. That's how the world would be, if life paid attention to its allusions.

But life, it seems, skipped the class on symbolism. With the sort of casual disregard for literary propriety that vexes English majors, one of the best real-life refugee stories of the last century cast a Ruth in the role of a Naomi.

Ruth Gruber MA'31 is an author, photographer, and journalist, but "the most important assignment of my life," she says, came in 1944, when she became a virtual adoptive mother for the 982 residents of Fort Ontario, near Oswego, a small city in upstate New York. There, at the only refugee camp set up in the U.S. during World War II, she helped a collection of impoverished Holocaust survivors adjust to life in America.

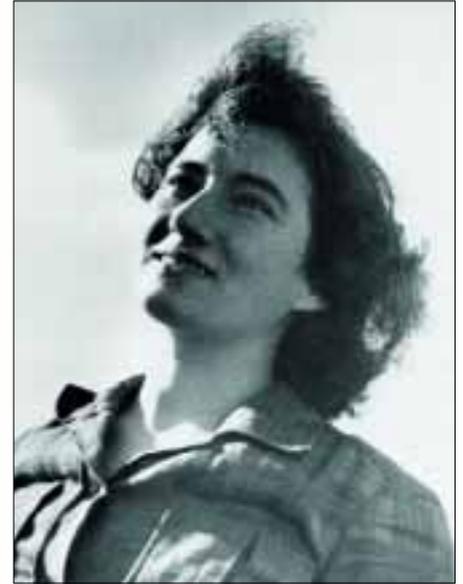
"The camp was one of the best-kept secrets of the war," says Gruber, but the secret's out now — in February 2001, CBS aired a miniseries called *Haven*, based on Gruber's memoir of the same name, which describes her time among the refugees. Television gave Gruber the face of Natasha Richardson and celebrated both her work and the camp's success. According to the program's tagline, "Her courage saved a thousand lives. A girl from Brooklyn defied the Nazis, challenged the U.S. government ... and changed the world."

The story unfolds¹ in the summer of 1944, when, after having largely ignored the plight of refugees until then, President Franklin Roosevelt declared that the U.S. should bring a thousand of them across the ocean from war-ravaged Italy. The decision was partly humanitarian, partly public relations, and partly pragmatic. "The army was getting ready to make a push northward from Rome," says Gruber, "and officers were afraid that refugees would get in the way of the tanks and jeeps heading to the front lines."

Roosevelt's refugees would fall under the administrative control of the Department of the Interior, and that's where Gruber joins the tale. She was a special assistant to that department's secretary, Harold Ickes, who appointed her as his emissary. "My mission was to help prepare the refugees for life in America, inside the camp," she says. "But I gave myself the mission of collecting their life histories, their case histories. We needed to have a better idea of where they'd come from, of their culture and what they'd been through, if we were to help them properly."

Gruber soon discovered that life in a camp had an ominous sound to many of the refugees. She joined them in Naples, just before they crossed the Atlantic, and as she collected their histories, she learned the full details of the terrors they'd faced. She met Manya Hartmayer, who had been imprisoned in the concentration camp at Gurs, in southern France, and who'd crossed the Alps on foot and hidden in a convent until the American army came. And she met Samuel and Breindel Silberman, who'd fought in the Belgian underground and had been forced to

¹ Here's a summation for those of you who missed the miniseries. And there's no shame in admitting you did — part of it aired on Valentine's Day. Maybe you had a date.



Gruber aboard the *Henry Gibbins*: bringing the refugees to Fort Ontario was, she says, "the most important assignment of my life."

leave their children behind enemy lines. And there was Mathilda Nitsch, a Czech who had run an underground railroad station helping Jews to escape. Captured by the Italian secret police, she'd been tortured, locked in a cellar for ten days without heat, then shipped off to the concentration camp at Ferramonte. Each refugee had a horror story, and Gruber recorded them all for Ickes and, eventually, the American public.

Gruber's charges had come from eighteen different nations, and during the voyage, she gave them a basic course in American life. She introduced some of them to the ship's other passengers, a thousand American soldiers wounded in the bloody battles at Casino and Anzio. And she began teaching them English phrases, working in a mix of the mundane and the bizarre — the refugees needed to learn not only simple pleasantries, but also to maintain military secrecy. "Walking around the ship," she says, "I could hear people reciting to each other in all accents the litany of their first words of English: 'How do you feel? I feel fine. The name of this ship is a secret. We come from the North Pole.'"

Gruber came to feel a parent's responsibility for the refugees' welfare. She cried with them when one of their number died; she cheered with them at their first sight of the Statue of Liberty; and she traveled with them to Oswego,

where they would live behind barbed wire for a year and a half. When the war ended and Congress threatened to deport them, she lobbied on their behalf, challenging rigid U.S. immigration policies and eventually helping to convince President Harry Truman that the refugees should be allowed to stay. In January 1946, they were offered visas, and most of them became citizens.

“Even today, I still travel all over the country to meet with them,” says Gruber, who’s now ninety. “And we have the best reunions. They still call me Mother Ruth.”

Gruber says she’s delighted with the CBS’s treatment. Natasha Richardson adds an element of glamour to defying Nazis and challenging the U.S. government, but the story hardly needs glamour to grab a person’s interest. If the events described in *Haven* didn’t change the world — and there are plenty of signs to suggest the world is still pretty rough on refugees (see sidebar, “The *Tampa*”) — they certainly changed Gruber. In the pages of her memoir, she describes her journey with the refugees as a defining moment: “From this voyage on, I knew, my life would be inextricably locked with Jews. I felt myself trembling in the Atlantic night, trembling not from the wind but from the revelation.” Before then, Gruber was a minor official in the Department of the Interior; afterward, she became a forceful advocate for Jewish refugees (see sidebar, “*Exodus 1947*”).

Still, the miniseries hardly gave a full picture of Gruber’s life. She was no simple “girl from Brooklyn” in 1944, and her voyage with the refugees didn’t spark her transformation so much as culminate it. Long before she became Mother Ruth, she was developing the skills and under-



Many of the refugees had been inmates of concentration camps, and some, like the men here, had no clothes other than those that had been issued to them by their German and Italian jailers.

going the experiences that would prepare her for that role. An important step in that education came — though she wouldn’t know it at the time — when she first left Brooklyn for the University of Wisconsin.

GRUBER WAS BORN, SHE SAYS, in a shtetl. However, her shtetl wasn’t a tiny village in Russia or Poland, but rather the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, New York. “On Moore Street,” she says of her birth home, “I thought the whole world was Jewish. The butcher, the grocer, the dressmaker, the corsetière who made my mother’s corsets — everyone was Jewish.” The Brooklyn of Gruber’s birth in 1911 was growing quickly, filling with recent arrivals to America. Her own parents had both been born in Eastern Europe, her father coming to America only in 1901. Both sides of her family kept close ties to relatives they’d left behind in Europe, and all her life, foreign affairs and family affairs would mix.

Though Moore Street was predominantly Jewish, Gruber could find a

variety of cultures just beyond her door. “Brooklyn was like a little Europe then,” she says. “There was a Jewish section, a German section, an Italian section, an Irish section, and the Gypsies wandered through it all.” Moving from neighborhood to neighborhood was like passing from nation to nation, an environment that gave Gruber easy access to different languages. She grew up speaking not just English but Yiddish, and she soon learned its close cousin, German, as well. A precocious student, she graduated from high school at age fourteen, and received her bachelor’s degree from New York University at eighteen.

She fell in love with the works of Goethe and Schiller, and so she studied German language and literature. But she fell in love, also, with the idea of independence. In Brooklyn, she had a large and supportive family, with four siblings and nearby grandparents, but an army of support leaves little room for privacy. “Goethe says that children rebel against their parents and return to their grandparents,” Gruber would write in her autobiography, and her rebellion was



“against Mama and Papa, against orthodoxy, and against Brooklyn.” The hours of freedom she found as she attended university classes in Manhattan gave her a desire to strike out on her own. The University of Wisconsin gave her the opportunity she was looking for.

“The UW German department offered the La Frenz Fellowship to one New York student each year, and that year I had won it from NYU,” she says. “So I decided to hitchhike to Wisconsin. My family was so proud of the fellowship that no one uttered a word of protest.”

Once she left Brooklyn, Gruber’s education expanded as much outside of classrooms as in them. At the UW, she studied with poets like William Ellery Leonard and Louis Zukofsky, and began

Though the adult refugees had been made wary by their wartime experiences, the children adapted quickly to their new lives.

EXODUS 1947

Haven isn’t the only movie inspired by Gruber’s writing. The 1960 film *Exodus* also owes her a debt. A year and a half after the Fort Ontario saga reached its happy conclusion, Gruber was following another ship loaded with Jewish refugees, one that would take a different course altogether. As a reporter, Gruber would give the world one of the most extensive accounts of the fate of the *Exodus 1947* and its passengers.

In 1947, Palestine was under British control as the United Nations tried to divide it into two independent states, one Jewish and the other Arab. The process was far from peaceful, and a rush of post-World War II immigration didn’t make the situation any more stable. The British tried to block all new settlers, hoping to ease tensions between incoming Jews and the current Arab population. But that was no simple matter. In 1947, Europe was still dotted with DP — displaced person — camps, full of hundreds of thousands of people the war-torn continent could hardly supply or feed. Many of the DPs were Holocaust survivors who wanted nothing more than to escape the scene of their persecution and live in the promised Jewish state in Palestine.

Enter the *Exodus*. Its crew, indignant that the British were barring Jews from Palestine, took on some 4,500 passengers from among Europe’s DP camps and attempted to run the Palestine blockade. On July 17, a squadron of British destroyers sighted the *Exodus 1947*, took control of the vessel, and brought it into the harbor at Haifa.

Gruber was in Haifa at the time, working as a reporter for the *New York Herald Tribune* and covering the U.N. Special Committee on Palestine. She saw the *Exodus 1947* limp into port and watched as its passengers were unloaded. Three were dead, and hundreds were wounded. The refugees were then reloaded onto three so-called “hospital ships,” and Gruber followed these vessels as they were shunted back across the Mediterranean.

“I was the only reporter chosen by the British to represent the American press and go aboard these prison ships and speak to the people of the *Exodus*,” she says. “The British called them hospital ships, but they were prisons. The conditions were awful. In one of the vessels, the *Runnymede Park*, the refugees were kept in a hold where the temperature was 108 degrees. There were two latrines with six holes to serve over a thousand people. The refugees called it ‘our floating Auschwitz.’ ”

Ultimately, the British sent the refugees back to Germany. This treatment generated sympathy in the U.S., Europe, and even Britain for granting Israel’s independence, which came in 1948. That year, Gruber compiled her reports into a book, *Exodus 1947: The Ship that Launched a Nation*.

Ten years later, the novelist Leon Uris wrote *Exodus*, an epic romance about the founding of Israel. One of the most important scenes in the tale is a confrontation between British destroyers and a fictionalized refugee ship called the *Exodus*. The book became the best-selling novel since *Gone with the Wind*, and in 1960, Hollywood transformed it into a movie.

— J.A.

a thesis on *Faust*. She perfected her German and expanded her knowledge of literature and philosophy.

However, the Madison of the 1930s could be far from welcoming, and it presented a foreign landscape to someone who'd grown up in the shtetl of Williamsburg. She describes several members of the German department and some of the staff at *Das Deutsche Haus*, where she lived, as "suffocatingly anti-Semitic." Most of her friends were from her home state — the university, she says, was a mecca for New Yorkers — and they stuck together like expatriates, taking comfort with each other in a strange land. She spent only a year in Madison, quickly wrapping up her master's degree before moving on.

But Madison had given Gruber more than Goethe — it had given her a taste of the wider world. While at the UW, she had applied for another fellowship, this one from the Institute of International Education, which allowed her to study at the University of Cologne in Germany.

Whereas the UW had impressed her family, Germany terrified them. Though Hitler had not yet come to power, the Nazi party was already strong, and Gruber's decision to go to Cologne, even for a year, shocked her parents. "When I hitchhiked back to New York, my mother told me she was afraid I'd gotten pregnant," Gruber says. "When I told her I was going to Germany, she said she wished I was only pregnant." Her parents did everything they could to convince Gruber to stay in the U.S., even offering to buy her a car,² but she went anyway.

If the UW had taught her about facing prejudice in a foreign landscape,



The refugees arrive at Fort Ontario: each wears a tag labeled "U.S. Army Casual Baggage." From August 1944 until the camp disbanded in January 1946, the refugees were required to live behind a barbed wire fence, legally neither in the U.S. nor anywhere else. "It was as though they were on a planet swimming through space," says Gruber.

Germany would teach her about politics and the hard realities forced on European Jews. Gruber made contact with the local Jewish community, and shared their political discussions and fears. On the streets of Cologne, she saw fights between Nazis and Communists and read handbills accusing the "insatiable Jew" of "race-lust and fanaticism." Politicians openly advocated violence. "Thugs in brown shirts marched insolently," she says, describing one Nazi parade, "stopping pedestrians, halting traffic, screaming their curses: 'Death to the Jew-Weimar Republic!'"

At the same time, the German university system helped Gruber's academic career thrive. While she had studied German in America, she turned to modern English literature while in Germany. The head of Cologne's English language department urged Gruber to write a

² "There are two kinds of people," Gruber says. "Those who drive and those who are driven. I'm the second."

dissertation on Virginia Woolf and earn her doctorate, even though she had just one year to complete it — her fellowship money would last only twelve months, and her parents would never have paid for her to stay on in Germany after that. "In Germany at the time," she says, "the requirements for a PhD weren't the same as in the U.S. It wasn't the course work that counted, but the dissertation and the orals — and I could finish them as soon as I was ready. No one had ever done it in a year before, but the department head said I should try."

When she succeeded, Gruber became a minor sensation on both sides of the Atlantic. On her return to the U.S. in 1932, the *New York Times* lionized her as the youngest PhD in the world. "But even with that publicity," she says, "I couldn't get a job. The Depression was on, and when there were any jobs available, they went to young men, not young women."

Here the UW had one more part to play in forming Gruber's career. Along with Barnard, Cornell, and New York

University, it refused to hire the “girl Ph.D.” Instead of entering academia, she turned her attention to journalism. “I started sending out articles as a freelance writer,” she says. “And I got enough rejection slips to cover the walls of my bedroom.” But eventually her work began to sell, and she found in journalism a source of power — she could use her writing to help people see the world as she had seen it.

GRUBER WAS NOW ON THE ROAD

that led her to Naples and a ship full of refugees. All she needed was a series of happy coincidences to put her in the right places at the right times.

Her journalistic skill and academic prowess would land her another fellowship, this one sponsored by the Guggenheim Foundation, in the mid-1930s. With that money, she returned to Europe to study the differing conditions of women’s lives under democracy, fascism, and communism. There she came into contact with Jews who hoped to escape from Germany but couldn’t, as U.S. immigration policies kept them waiting, often for years. These policies would continue, even when the American government and public were well aware of the extent of Nazi persecution. “During World War II,” Gruber says, “we brought 450,000 Nazi and Fascist prisoners across the Atlantic, but fewer than a thousand refugees.”

Gruber’s articles, particularly on conditions in the Soviet Union, would gain the attention of Harold Ickes, whom she describes as the most sympathetic member of Roosevelt’s government. “Of all the cabinet members, Ickes was the most passionate in denouncing the Nazi atrocities against Jews, and the angriest that the doors of America were shut.” She jumped at the chance to work with him, and when she learned that he would have executive responsibility for Roosevelt’s refugee camp, she was finally able to act on her desire to help.

“Until then,” she says, “I’d been feeling so frustrated, so helpless. We in Washington knew a little more than the

THE TAMPA

On August 26, 2001, the Norwegian cargo ship M.V. *Tampa* responded to a distress call. An Indonesian ferry, overloaded with more than four hundred refugees, was foundering in the Indian Ocean. Aiming for Australian waters, the ferry planned to land at Christmas Island, where its passengers, mostly Afghan nationals, hoped to receive asylum. The *Tampa* changed course, plucked up the refugees, and carried them the rest of the way. The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported the rescue the next day with a dozen dry sentences, giving no sign that the *Tampa*’s predicament would become the biggest scandal in international politics for the next two weeks.

But that’s what happened.

Australia, it seems, didn’t want to see any more of what its prime minister, John Howard, referred to as “illegal immigrants.” It sent a team of commandos to take control of the *Tampa* and ensure that it did not reach port.

The world went into an uproar. Norway, Indonesia, and even Afghanistan’s Taliban complained that Australia was acting very badly, but no one offered to take the refugees in. Ultimately, Australia worked out a deal with New Zealand and the island nation of Nauru, several thousand miles to the east. Those two countries would each take a share of the refugees. This worked well for the government of Nauru, which received several million Australian dollars, in John Howard’s words, to “underwrite the whole cost” of caring for the castaways. But just about nobody else was happy with the deal, and grumbling continued.

Then came September 11, and the plight of the *Tampa*’s refugees was forgotten.

But the situation in Afghanistan hasn’t improved. There may be as many as 3 million Afghan refugees living in Pakistan and Iran, says Geno Teofilo ‘88, an information officer for the American Red Cross. Perhaps another million are “internally displaced,” wandering within Afghanistan’s borders. “Ideally, the Red Cross would like to get them all to go back home,” says Teofilo. “But they’ve got to have a safe home to go to, first.”

Since the U.N. estimates that there are currently nearly 28 million refugees around the world, it’s likely that incidents like the *Tampa* affair will only become more common.

— J.A.

rest of the country about what was going on under the Nazis, yet we were doing so little to help. So I went to Ickes, and I said, ‘These refugees are going to be terrified, traumatized. Someone has to fly over there and hold their hands.’ He said, ‘Right. I’ll send you.’”

With those few words, Ickes would turn Gruber into Mother Ruth, the stuff of a TV miniseries.³ As the Fort Ontario story has gained more publicity in recent years, she’s worked to remind people that it has implications for the current world. “After a schoolteacher showed the miniseries in her class, I received letters from

her students,” Gruber says. “One child was a Cambodian refugee, and he wrote, ‘This is my story; *Haven* is my story. How did you know my story?’ But then, what refugees face is a universal problem. It’s a problem of humanity.”

Since Fort Ontario was disbanded, Gruber has written more than a dozen books. She continues to speak to audiences around the country, and her photos appear in nearly twenty books, museum exhibits, and documentaries. “I fight injustice with words and images,” she says. “My typewriter and my camera are my tools.” 📷

³ Now also a musical play. The stage version of *Haven* premiered in Los Angeles in 2001.

John Allen, associate editor of *On Wisconsin Magazine*, recently conquered his cheese phobia.