



Salvation in a bunker

BY JOSEPH SCHLUSSEL

My

name is Joseph Schlusssel. I was 15 years old in 1951 when our family – my father, stepmother and brother and I – arrived in New York on the ship *SS America*.

We were happy to leave Europe behind where most of our family was murdered by the Nazis. We were the lucky ones who missed the train to Auschwitz by hiding for three months in a bunker underneath our own home in Munkatz, Hungary (now the Ukraine).

As we stepped down the ship we knew we could not expect to see too many familiar faces since most of our family perished and all my classmates were gassed in the concentration camps.

But as we cleared immigration a friendly lady from HIAS was welcoming us to the blessed shores. She offered to put us up in a downtown hotel as

well as financial help for a period of time. My father, of blessed memory, thanked the lady and said, “I accept your hospitality for one night until I locate some relatives. But, while I appreciate your offer of financial aid, I cannot accept it.”

At this point – to the amazement of all bystanders – he took out his wallet and said, “The Nazis took all our possessions but I do have \$600 in savings which I earned after the War; I cannot accept charity. According to our sages if one has more than 200 in currency he is not allowed to take from public charity.”

My father later told me perhaps because of their giving to charities such as HIAS, American Jews escaped the horrors and atrocities of the Nazis.

My father preferred to give charity than to receive, and this was directly instrumental to our being saved. In fact, my father credits our own miraculous survival to our experience with refugees. Let me explain: During 1942 to 1943, a few lucky Jews escaped from Poland and Slovakia to Hungary. My father had a business associate who for a price could obtain immigration papers from the Hungarian Ministry for these “refugees.” He was also active in and one of the organizers of



Joseph Schlusssel in the winter of 1943.

the “orphanage home” that helped these “refugees” hide until the Hungarian papers were formalized.

These refugees told horror stories of mass killings and warned my father and his associates against entering the ghettos. They said that the ghettos served as mere temporary camps before the “Final Solution.” My father believed these testimonies but most Hungarians dismissed or had not heard them.

His belief in what the refugees said served as the catalyst for his moving the immediate family into a bunker. Even though many of the Hungarian Jews believed that the war was coming to an end in the spring of 1944 (after all the Russian planes were very close) my father could

not dismiss what he heard and would not risk putting his family into the ghetto, especially the young children whom he believed would have no chance if deported to the camps.

Mostly, the Jews in the ghetto perished. We few, hiding in our tiny bunker with the Gestapo living above us, managed to survive till July 1944. Life in the bunker was very difficult and we in fact almost starved to death. The local Hungarian police, in fact, discovered us and threw us into prison with the “common criminals.” With God’s help, we did survive.