From Budapest to New York: The Odyssey of the Polanyis

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This article is a short version of Chapter 4 of my manuscript, entitled "The Hungarian Pocahontas: The Life and Times of Laura Polanyi, 1882-1959," to be published by the University of Toronto Press. In the preceding chapters I describe the first stages of the Polanyis' Odyssey. It included the emigration from Hungary of Laura Polanyi's brothers, Adolf, Karl and Michael, to Italy, Austria and Germany, respectively. They left Hungary, along with scores of left-wing intellectuals, during the period of right-wing repression that followed the post-war democratic and Bolshevik revolutions. By 1939, both Michael and Karl had settled in England. As for Laura Polanyi's immediate family, in the late 1920s and early 1930s her children, Michael, Eva and George Strieker all studied and worked in Austria and Germany. While the latter, her youngest was completing his studies at the University of Vienna, Michael and Eva took a detour to the Soviet Union. By 1932, both had taken up positions as "foreign experts," Michael as a patent expert in Moscow, Eva as a designer, eventually working for the Lomonosov Porcelain Factory in Leningrad. Although keeping her homes in Budapest — where her husband lived — and Vienna, Laura accompanied her children to the Soviet Union for extended periods of time. She was there when, in May 1936, Eva was arrested and accused with participating in a plot to assassinate Stalin. Fourteen months later, in September 1937, when Eva was released and expelled from the Soviet Union, the family gathered in Vienna, preparing to leave for the United States.

The Polanyis, fleeing from Central Europe in 1938-39, were part of the great wave of intellectual refugees reaching the United States. Of the twenty-three family members in the second and third generations of the Polanyis, nineteen changed their country of residence between 1919 and 1942. In addition, the Strieker relatives, on the side of Laura's husband, were also generously represented in the ranks of the intellectual refugees. These numbers in themselves would make the Polanyis an ideal subject
for a case study in the history of the intellectual emigration. More than merely illustrating it, their case also highlights the significant gaps in the American scholarship on the refugee intellectuals.¹

The refugee intellectual wave sparked an instant and lasting fascination both in the American popular imagination and academia. From the first statistical surveys, pointing to the potential effect of the massive influx of intellectuals,² to the affirmation that "the exiles Hitler made were the greatest collection of transplanted intellect, talent, and scholarship the world has ever seen,"³ there emerged the consensus that the intellectual migration from Europe signalled a turning point in American intellectual and academic life. In the late 1960s, a new interest in intellectual history produced a couple of outstanding collections of essays that successfully combined the insights of former émigré but by then fully established American scholars with the fresh energy and broad outlook of a new generation of young scholars in a by then full-fledged academic field, the history of intellectual émigrés.⁴

As the period of the 1930s and 1940s became sufficiently removed in time, the intellectual migration took its place in American immigration history. The study of American immigration policy of the period and the attitude of the Roosevelt administration toward the refugees, in particular, was an overdue and necessary task. It was, however, accomplished at a price, by shifting the emphasis from the refugees and their interaction with American society to the role and responsibility of various government bodies, political factors and public opinion. Although these studies never claimed to focus on the intellectual emigration, their approach still resulted in the intellectual refugees being lumped together with refugees in general or, if the focus was on Jewish immigrants, limited to Jews.⁵ While government policy and its shortcomings were intensely scrutinized, the vital role of non-government organizations and individuals in the rescue effort was often overlooked.

The case of the Polanyis does not fit readily into a scholarship that has shown increasing compartmentalization and often limits the scope of its query according to the refugees' country of origin and academic or creative field.⁶ By virtue of their accomplishments, in fields ranging from physics to the arts, education, literature, economics, and philosophy, not to mention politics, the Polanyis always resisted easy classification. Because of the multiple stages of their emigration, and their temporary settlement in Austria, Weimar Germany, and England, not even their country of origin could be clearly determined.⁷ The same applies to their
ethnic background; their complex identities, developed through multiple affiliations with Austrian, Hungarian, German, and an increasingly secular Jewish culture are not easily fitted into a clear-cut ethnic or religious framework. Meanwhile, even relatively recent examples of the refugee scholarship display a tendency to ethnic or religious stereotyping that harks back to the popular perception of the refugees at the time of their arrival. 

Another lacuna concerns the stage between departure and arrival, the flight itself. With the attention focused on the organizations and individuals who were instrumental in their rescue (or, conversely, the hostile government officials whose efforts had to be overcome), only marginal attention has been paid to the refugees' own efforts to save themselves. By overlooking this aspect, scholarship not only failed to do justice to the efforts of the refugees, it also created an artificial discontinuity, turning the leading lights of Central European intelligentsia into helpless victims, unexplainably reinvigorated once in America. Yet, if the Polanyis' example is any indication, the intellectual refugees did not passively wait to be rescued. One of the underlying patterns in the Polanyis' immigration was their reliance on their own resources and their use of organized outside help only as a last resort, pointing to the need for a new focus on agency; it would not only bring the study of intellectual refugees in line with that of ordinary immigrants to the U.S. but could also point to additional unexplored aspects of the emigration process itself. Perhaps the most important of these is the "head start" of the Hungarian intellectual émigrés of the 1918-19 revolutions. Disruptive as it had been, this first emigration, from Hungary, offered invaluable lessons, a dress rehearsal for the next flight, this time from Hitler's Europe.

For, if there was one crucial factor in the flight of the intellectuals escaping from Hitler, it was the role played by their academic and intellectual networks. The Polanyis' case is paradigmatic because of the way they were grounded in the Central European intellectual, political and academic networks from the late 19th century. The post-1919 wave of emigration from Hungary did not disrupt, only expanded these ties into every corner of Europe, carrying relatives and friends everywhere from Paris to Vienna, Berlin, Moscow, and Manchester. In addition to the significance of these networks in transplanting the intellectual, scientific and artistic talent into America, they also forecasted a trend, the internationalization of modern academia, science and the arts.
The experience of Laura and the younger women in her family highlights another, relatively underdeveloped area in the study of intellectual refugees: that of intellectual refugee women. In addition to Laura and Eva, most women in the Polanyi family were intellectuals in their own right, armed with university degrees — some in science and engineering, almost unheard of for American women at the time — and a long list of professional and political accomplishments. They no doubt shared these characteristics with a much larger group of refugee intellectual women who found — and were often baffled by — the American social norms and expectations concerning women in academia and the professions much more conservative than in the European countries they had come from. The eventual professional success of Laura and her daughter, Eva Zeisel, seems to have been the exception rather than the rule: the majority of intellectual immigrant women had to settle for the role of the faculty wife and hostess or find socially acceptable creative outlets. Finally, despite the support of old- and new-world networks, the Polanyis were not exempt of the difficulties normally associated with emigration as they rebuilt their lives. That included the confrontation with the often-simplistic American perceptions concerning the refugees' identity. The reason for their flight, as in the case of many of the refugees, was a combination of their political opposition to Nazism and the anti-Semitic measures of Hitler and his allies. And, like many of the refugee intellectuals, they too refused to adjust their identity to Hitler's racial laws.

By March 1938, Laura and her children had completed the preparations to leave for America. The Anschluss, declared on the 13th of March, served as a timely justification of their decision to leave the Continent behind. It also complicated matters. When the news of Hitler's troops marching into Austria reached Vienna, Eva, still suffering from the trauma of her recent imprisonment, was not going to take any chances; with her British visitor's visa in hand, she boarded the train and reached England a few days later. The sudden flight left her affairs in disarray: her American visa application was still pending and her divorce from Alexander Weissberg, a physicist working in the Soviet Union, uncompleted. Even the fact that Weissberg was arrested in May 1937 and was still imprisoned at the time did not phase Laura; she collected the paperwork and managed to finalize the divorce a month after Eva had fled Vienna.
More alarmingly, Egon Szécsi, Laura's brother-in-law, was arrested during a coffeehouse raid, a random victim of the terror of the first days of Nazi takeover in Vienna. Sophie Polanyi, the younger sister of Laura, and Szécsi, a social democrat, struggling lawyer and failed entrepreneur, had been living in Vienna for decades. Yet not even the news of Szécsi's arrest and detention in the Dachau concentration camp could shake the family's optimism. It only doubled the efforts of the Szécsis' eldest daughter who had been living in the States for some years, to make arrangements for bringing her parents over.\textsuperscript{14}

The Polanyis proceeded with their plan; Michael and Hilde Stricker — Laura Polanyi's elder son and daughter-in-law — sailed to the U. S. on the 13th of April 1938, leaving their two-year-old daughter, Michelle, in Laura's care. Michael who had business connections in the States did not waste his time. By the end of April, he had already opened an office on Broadway — Dr. Michael S. Striker, Patents and Trade Marks — and, according to his letterhead, promptly Americanized the spelling of the family name. The couple rented an apartment nearby and, most importantly, continued the process of securing affidavits for the rest of the family, sending almost daily dispatches of the developments.\textsuperscript{15}

By then they had first-hand confirmation that American visas were granted largely on the strength of affidavits; and while immediate family members made the best sponsors, in their absence, the length of American residency and the amount of income and assets of the guarantors were considered crucial. By May 1938, Michael had secured multiple affidavits for his mother as well as for Eva and her future husband Hans Zeisel, and mobilized the relatives of Barbara, the young wife of his younger brother, Otto. The names circulating as possible guarantors — from Emil Lederer, to emigre politician-turned-academic Oscar (Oszkár) Jászi, Paul Lazarsfeld, and nuclear physicist Leó Szilárd's brother, Béla — provide a good indication of the breadth of the family's connections, transplanted to the States from Central Europe.\textsuperscript{16} American immigration policy further complicated matters, requiring that potential immigrants apply on the quota assigned to each country based on their birthplace. Consequently, Ottó and Laura had to apply on the German quota (by force of their Austrian birth and the fact that it was now part of the Reich), while Eva and Barbara were to be considered within the Hungarian quota.\textsuperscript{17}

June and July 1938 brought promising developments; Hans Zeisel and Eva travelled to Prague (as a Czech citizen, he had to apply for his
American visa there), received his American visa and returned to England to marry in July. At the end of June, a family friend from Budapest optimistically reported to Michael Polanyi in Manchester that Ottó, his wife, and Laura all expected to receive their American visas in a few weeks. As far as Sophie's husband, Egon was concerned, continued the report, they were hopeful that he would be released in a couple of weeks. The optimism was not entirely unfounded; it corresponded to a period that lasted only a few months before the November 1938 Kristallnacht during which the Nazis granted passports to bearers of valid visas, even to those arrested and in prison or concentration camps. The Polanyi "brain trust", always on top of new developments, sprung into action: on June 28, Michael Polanyi rushed to cable the Szécsis' daughter in Chicago with the news. If they could provide strong affidavits, have them approved in Washington by the State Department, and cable the approval to the American consul in Vienna, there was a chance that her father could be released. As a result, Sophie applied for an American visa (both for herself and her husband) in July 1938. As Laura assured Michael Polanyi in late August, Sophie, nearing her fiftieth birthday, was healthy and full of energy.

Laura herself was wrapping up her affairs in Vienna. She was running last-minute errands: always the thoughtful mother, she ordered a new easel for Eva and packed her photography equipment. She was also planning one more visit to Budapest. The short side trip necessitated queuing for a number of extra transit visas (French, Italian and Yugoslav visas on top of the Czech and British she already had), yet she was determined to go home, to say good-bye, to see her mother one last time. Her brother Michael, anxious to see her leave Austria, understood her reasons but urged her to keep the trip short.

In August 1938 the family got one more step closer to the completion of the plan: Ottó and Barbara left for the U.S.. At their stopover in England, Eva awaited them with ashen face: she had just received the news of Laura's arrest in Vienna. As it turned out, it had nothing to do with political or "racial" reasons; Laura invited the unwanted attention of the Austrian police by holding too many business meetings and making numerous phone calls on her son's behalf in the lobby of her hotel. Her position, in the custody of the Austrian police, waiting for the review of her case, was precarious and prompted frantic action from her family and friends in Budapest and London.
In the absence of her children, on their way to or already in the U.S., the remaining family members and friends organized the battle lines with admirable speed. Sophie took over the care of Laura's grandchild, visited her sister in prison, and sent detailed reports to family members. The Strieker relatives in Budapest held an "emergency council meeting" and decided to dispatch the best lawyers to Vienna, to explore official and semi-official avenues. Finally, they relayed the news and developments to Eva and her uncles in England.

The disastrous event sounded painful echoes in Eva, herself only recently liberated from prison. The thought of her mother languishing in a Viennese jail cell in Nazi-annexed Austria was unbearable. While the Budapest relatives debated the chances of various courses of action and Laura was waiting for her case to go to a hearing, Eva made desperate attempts to acquire the help of the Quakers. The origins of the Quaker connection are far from clear. It may have been Karl Polanyi's idea who possibly met Quakers through his position in the British Christian Left. Another clue points to Michael Polanyi. While in England, Eva was the guest of a Mrs. Bruce, also a Quaker whose sister was "Professor Polanyi's" neighbour in Manchester. A few days later, a Mrs. Richards, a representative of the Friends Service Committee reported to Eva that despite her best efforts in Vienna, she was not able to bring her mother home with her. "But as long as there was the smallest suspicion of any money transactions" — a hint at the possible reason for her arrest — "it was quite impossible to get her out before the hearing of the case. I wish I could have stayed there longer," she continued "but I had to get home to get my children ready and off to school, and to look after some of my other cases, which are all urgent." Due to the combined efforts of Mrs. Richards, the Hungarian lawyers, the medical certificates, gathered by the Budapest relatives, attesting to Laura's poor health, and the leniency or, possibly, corruption of the Austrian police official in charge of the case, Laura was released on the day of her scheduled hearing. On the 22nd of September, she announced in a telegram: "Coming Friday 7 pm flight Mummy."

The traumatic experience had left little effect on Laura's fighting spirit. On her arrival in London, she immediately picked up where she had left off in Vienna: organizing her own and her granddaughter's passage to America. She was in almost daily correspondence with her brothers, Karl and Michael, only worrying about the slow progress of the Szécsis' affairs. Once Eva and Hans sailed too — they left for the U. S. in
October 1938, taking with them their little niece — Laura was left with no one to take care of and nothing to do but wait. She spent almost an entire year waiting for her American visa, possibly the darkest period for her in the entire endeavour. She longed to see her family in Hungary but, with her Austrian passport and the recent, close encounter in Vienna, could not risk a visit. In December 1938, she was taken to hospital for tests and to treat her feverish bouts. She was frequently visited by her brothers, yet the physical weakness, the inactivity, the anticipation of war, the worries about her family still trapped on the Continent drove her, perhaps the first time in her life, to complaints. In a letter to Andor Németh, a Hungarian writer living in Paris, whom she contacted to find out Arthur Koestler's address, she burst out: "I'm not healthy and stayed behind all alone, with my children already having left for America. My visa is still delayed but because of a grotesque accident I have an Austrian passport, I cannot go home either. It is a bad situation, being paralyzed and with many other troubles." Christmas, a time of family gatherings, still spent in the French Hospital in London, was the lowest point, although the telegram she received on Christmas Eve must have brought some holiday cheer: "Don't feel lonely children united as never before are with you good health many kisses au revoir. Hans Eva."

By spring, things were looking up. Following a long stay in the hospital, in February Laura was feeling better, staying with Mrs. Bruce, admiring her garden and trying to push things along. Her correspondence testifies to hopes for a spring or summer sailing date, pending receipt of the American visa, postponed over and over. In March 1939, Adolf Polanyi arrived in England, prompting a long-overdue reunion of four of the five Polanyi siblings. Adolf's visit was far from voluntary; he had settled in Italy since the early 1920s, but anti-Semitic legislation introduced there in the fall of 1938, set a short deadline for foreign-born Jews to leave the country. Since he had hardly any prospects in England, it was agreed that Adolf should pursue emigration to the Americas, preferably to a South American country where he could use his prodigious business and language skills. He should, however, take advantage of his stay in England to speed up the exit of his four children from Italy, all about to finish their university studies.

The surge of new anti-Semitic measures introduced in Hungary and Germany seriously limited the chances of helping the relatives there. Michael Polanyi who carried the responsibility of financially supporting his mother in Budapest and his sister, Sophie, in Vienna, grew increas-
ingly concerned as his property in Germany was, to all intents and purposes, confiscated and his regular income in Hungary (as scientific advisor for the reputable electric company Egyesült Izzo) which he used to support Cecile, blocked. The window of opportunity for the release of Egon Szécsi — and, with it, Sophie's emigration — seemed to close up. The Szécsis had had their English visa since July 1938 and could expect their American visa reasonably soon. Egon, however, was still in the hands of the Gestapo and an American visa for their mentally disabled son was out of the question. Michael Polanyi, the mastermind behind the efforts to save them, reported in February that matters had reached an impasse; following a denunciation, the Gestapo called in Sophie, took away her passport, and made it clear that her husband would not be released and their passports given back, unless they procured a visa for the boy or left him behind in the care of an institution.

In the end, Laura slipped out of England in late August, 1939, mere days before war broke out. A few weeks after arriving in New York, Laura received news from Budapest: on September 5 her mother, the legendary Cecile, had died. Condolences poured in. Aunt Irma described Cecile's last day — a beautiful, sunny day, spent in the park and reading in her bed — and the funeral that she had organized in the absence of Cecile's children. The widow of Károly Pollacsek, Laura's aunt had always been a reliable presence, frequently reporting on Cecile's physical and mental well-being and only a few months earlier reminding the "children" to mail their birthday greetings to her. A friend sent the obituary of the Social Democratic daily Népszava. Its author wrote of Cecile's Russian roots and international Socialist connections, a gesture of remarkable courage at the time, before turning to praise her beautiful eyes, revolutionary reform-dresses and hairdo. An old friend, the former Hungarian Social Democrat activist now Chicago businessman Alexander (Sándor) Vince, commented bitterly on "the shackled writer of the Népszava" who was afraid to write of Cecile's real significance. "To us and to the entire progressive Hungary she was the mother of the Gracchi," inspiring the intelligentsia of a generation.

Oscar Jászi's wife, Recha, summed up perhaps best the mixed feelings over Cecile's passing: "The time is so sad and tragic that I do know very well that it is best so. She was old and sick and she had lived her life. But a landmark is gone..." As if marking the end of an era and the passing of the torch between generations, Aunt Irma died not long after, in June 1940.
Laura's welcome in New York quickly erased the memory of her lonely and miserable months in London. Michael and Hilde, who as Aunt Irma had predicted, were "people made for America" were thriving.49 Eva began to work in design and teach at the Pratt Institute within months of her arrival, and Otto soon procured a job as an engineer at the Zenith Company in Chicago. The inevitable hurdles of social adjustment were eased by the wide circle of old friends already settled in America. Laura's Riverside apartment as well as Michael's on 115th Street were right in the middle of the Upper West Side neighbourhood preferred by the Central European refugees, creating a social environment not very different from that of Budapest or Berlin.50 Even Julius (Gyula) Holló, the Polanyis' family physician in Budapest, made it out and set up practice in Manhattan. In addition to the friends and relatives already mentioned above, Alfred Adler's widow and the artist Anna Lesznai, Jászi's first wife, also lived nearby. Jászi and his second wife, Laura's Viennese friend from her youth, Recha had made their home in Oberlin, Ohio since the late 1920s.51 The Jászis were among the first to greet Laura in America on her arrival. "Dearest Mausi, welcome, welcome! How good to know that you are here, safe and happy with your children. And all of them working! I have read your 'Odysee' with great emotion and joy — knowing the happy end!"52 I cannot tell you how I admire your courage! You have done a good job, Mausi!"53 To which Jászi added in Hungarian: "Dear Mauzi, Heartfelt greetings in the new homeland, wishing you all the best, Oszkár."54

Recha, delighted to know that her oldest friend was near and safe, was also the first to remind Laura of the immediate reversal of roles; that as soon as they arrived, the rescued became rescuers.

There is an "aching" point in every family, Mausi. I have more than one. Shall I begin to tell you my "Odysee", a ghastly year in which I suffered not by being an actor, but only a spectator, in a distance. ...My sister's husband, whom I know only slightly (and herself I know almost as little,) is a very decent but indolent type. Only by late November [1938] he woke up to the idea to leave Germany. We have sent affidavits, ours and of a well to do friend, but their turn might come — when? For Mother I have sent a preference visa. She was sailing August 23d with the 'Hansa.' August 25th the boat was recalled from
Southampton. Nobody allowed to land. Poor thing! Now I have paid a passage for her on an Italian boat but being without competition the Italians are sitting on a high horse. I cannot get any information on which boat Mother will get accommodation, when she will sail, etc. No news from her, though I have cabled three times, reply prepaid. It is a nerve wrecking experience.\(^5\)

Recha's subsequent letters described the Jászis' efforts to help friends and relatives flee Hitler as an all-consuming, full-time undertaking that not only exacted a heavy mental, physical toll on the Jászis, but ate up their savings as well. "Ghosts sit on my bedside" she wrote, capturing the anxiety that was only heightened by their own safety. Laura's letters must have revealed her own worries to Recha with whom she shared not only their former Viennese social circle, now dispersed all over the world, but also the agony of having a sister stranded in Germany.\(^6\) The outbreak of the war in Europe made communication with family members in Budapest and Vienna even more fragile and increased the sense of urgency to act on their behalf.

Despite his relative safety, the most urgent task was to bring Sándor Stricker, Laura's husband, over. His children did not waste any time and submitted the applications for him in August 1938.\(^7\) Even if his was a relatively simple case, Laura and the children did not take any chances. By this time, they were almost certainly aware that the Hungarian quota for 1940 was taken up entirely, even if parents over the age of 65 of American residents were exempt from quota regulations.\(^8\) Laura asked the old family friend Alexander Vince for help, who in turn approached the local members of the House of Representatives.\(^9\) The latter promised to intervene immediately with the American consul in Budapest and by February 1940, the Republican congressman assured his constituent of his "very best efforts" in the matter, in exchange for his "unqualified support."\(^10\) Still, it took another year and half to complete the preparations. Sándor's trip began on the 20th of July, 1941, and, with stopovers in Vienna, Switzerland, Spain and Lisbon, he arrived almost a month later in New York.\(^11\) His impeccably organized journey, with relatives and friends to contact in case of emergency at every step of the way, was a monument to the organizational skills, "sustained efforts and considerable sacrifices" of Michael Striker.\(^12\) It completed the transplanting of Laura's immediate family.
These praising words came from Karl Polanyi, at the time in Washington, making the rounds in the State Department to secure his own and his wife, Ilona Duczynska's stay in the United States. In 1941 Karl Polanyi accepted an invitation to teach at Bennington College, Vermont, frequently visiting his sister and family in New York City and contributing to the sense of a family reunion. It was during the years in Bennington that he wrote the *Great Transformation*, first published in New York in 1944. Although Karl Polanyi and Duczynska returned to England in 1943 and remained there for the rest of the war, the publication of his seminal book and his growing reputation resulted in the invitation for a visiting professorship at Columbia University in 1947. Until his retirement from Columbia in 1953, when in New York, Karl lived in the apartment on 115th Street, across the street from the main entrance of Columbia. Karl's relationship with his older sister, always close but now facilitated by the geographical proximity, was also underlined by a belated outburst of academic productivity and success, an experience brother and sister shared and much enjoyed.62b

Although Sándor Stricker's arrival in America was the result of a truly collective effort by his children, Laura's role in reassembling the family had been crucial. On her 60th birthday in February 1942, her brother Adolf, never at a loss for words, summed it up: "You have saved all or nearly all of what had and has meaning to, things born and formed by you and forces revolving around you in a closed and self-supporting circle. I feel that life has given you a birthday present for the 60th recurrence as few people have received in this uprooted world."63

The success of reuniting, in a remarkably short time, Laura's closest family, only highlighted the tragedy of her sister and her family. The efforts to save them, directed by Michael Polanyi, did not let up and in 1939 accomplished bringing the Szécsis' younger daughter, Edith, to England. She died there, in February 1944, most likely a suicide.64 The urgency of the Szécsís' situation became more evident by each day, even if no one could possibly foresee the full extent of the coming disaster. By September 1939, Sophie and Egon would have got their American visa. His release from the concentration camp and their freedom hinged on finding a solution for their mentally disabled son, Karl. Earlier, in 1938, relatives had offered to place him at an institution in Hungary yet back then, still hopeful to keep the family together, Sophie was reluctant to leave the boy behind.65 Last-minute attempts to acquire a visa for him to Mexico or the Dominican Republic fell through.66 And by the time
Sophie decided to leave without her husband, it was too late. In March 1941 she and the boy were taken to the Kielce ghetto in Poland. As for Egon, he was killed in the concentration camp in April of 1941.

For another two years, the family miraculously managed to keep in touch with Sophie, even send her money. In March 1942, news was relayed that the boy was taken away from her, prompting one last push to save her. By then, the family must have had some understanding of the fate of Jews taken to the East. But Sophie was already beyond reach, despite the American visa waiting for her in Vienna. After the spring of 1943, she was not heard from any more. "My last postcard came back with the note: 'Addressee moved to address unknown'. The rest is silence," wrote a friend to Laura.

As the Nazis' hold was tightening on the Continent, there came news of other tragedies. The widow of Samuel Klatschko, Anna, starved to death, abandoned in occupied Paris. Her daughter, Lina, Laura's childhood friend made it to New York, but died shortly after. The fate of Anna Klatschko, Cecile's friend from the Vilna and Vienna of their youth confirmed that Cecile's peaceful end was for the better. Laura's nephew, an "enemy alien" in a French internment camp, cut off from his wife and children who were trapped in the occupied zone, sent desperate messages to New York. Recha's own sister and brother-in-law in Germany perished in a concentration camp. By February 1943, she lost touch with them entirely. What made Sophie's fate perhaps more difficult to accept than that of other victims was that she had the chance to escape and, guided by moral obligation or indecision, she chose not to take it. Adolf expressed what must have been on everyone's mind, writing on receiving the news of Egon's death and Sophie's deportation. "What you write about Sophy is terrible. We cannot help but feel that Egon could have probably been saved and Sophy living with a new lease of life in America if it had not been for the unfortunate idiot boy, whose fate has in no way been changed or altered by all this. She is certainly the most tragic victim of her loyalty, to a lost cause."

At the time he wrote this letter, Adolf had his own worries. Of his four children, Eszter had earlier moved back to Hungary. When Adolf and Lily, his second wife, had to leave Italy in the spring of 1939, his other daughter, Vera, and his two sons, Thomas and Michael, stayed on in Rome to finish their studies. Vera was training to be a psychiatrist and the two sons were completing their Ph.D.'s in Enrico Fermi's institute. After unsuccessful attempts to stay closer to them, in France or England, Adolf
found employment with a company in Brazil. In May 1941, the Polanyi boys, with their freshly earned degrees but their prospects cut off in Italy, were ready to leave. They enlisted as deck hands on a neutral merchant ship, heading for New York, with valid Italian passports but without any visas. Forewarned by Adolf, Laura watched the arrival times of merchant ships in the newspapers and when six weeks later the ship docked "in a godforsaken dock on Bayonne, N.J.," she waited for them, in time to convince the authorities to take them to Ellis Island. Meanwhile Adolf mobilized his connections and his company's lawyer in Washington acquired Cuban visas for the boys.

In the course of the following months and years, Laura was in almost daily contact with her nephews, who were cooling their heels in Cuba for over two years. She provided them with moral and financial support, while orchestrating a widespread campaign to bring them into the States. It is an extensively documented story whose value goes beyond the sheer human interest it represents; it casts a light on the *modus operandi* of Laura, her incredible grasp of the bureaucratic obstacles raised by the authorities, and the way the family pulled ranks around two of its members. Moreover, it provides an insight into the issue of the Polanyis' Jewish identity, a subject only seldom mentioned in the family's correspondence.

Within days after the boys' arrival, Laura contacted prestigious members of the Italian refugee community, such as professors Giuseppe Borgese (Thomas Mann's son-in-law) at Columbia and Lionello Venturi at the University of Chicago, as well as Enrico Fermi, and various other potential sponsors. Everyone in the family, or least those with incomes was instructed to fill out affidavits for them. At the same time, Adolf also took steps to engage his company's support (he was employed by the South American affiliate of an American company in Rio de Janeiro). By an unfortunate coincidence, the State Department's visa policy had been considerably tightened to correspond exactly with the arrival of the boys. Purportedly introduced to protect the country from subversive aliens, the new visa regulations took effect on June 5th, 1941. On that day, instructions went out to diplomatic and consular officers to withhold visas from all applicants who had parents, children, husband, wife, brothers, or sisters resident in territory under the control of Germany, Italy, or Russia. These instructions, meant to be secret, barred the Polanyi boys' entry on multiple counts; they had sisters, their mother, and countless relatives in Italy, Hungary, even Germany and Austria. How-
ever, following a leak, the State Department was forced to make the new policy regulations public; and the instant reaction of Laura is obvious from the photocopy of the related *New York Times* article, found in her file containing the boys' documents as well as her request for the new sets of visa application forms.82

More importantly, she instructed her nephews to avoid a serious mistake in the visa application:

> When you fill out the emigration application, try to make sure AT ALL COSTS that under “race” they write Hungarian. I don’t know if you have taken care of the religious matters, I heard from Brazil that it was the case, it would be useful in any case. ... If they write in your application, as they do with pleasure that the race is: Hebrew, that will remain in all your documents that you will have to show at every job application, and that is not to your advantage but in your field almost prohibitive. Neither Otto nor the others claim their ancestors' race and religion!83

It was an only slightly coded warning to the boys, intended not only to guide them through the bureaucratic procedures but to make them aware that anti-Semitism was not limited to the Fascist and Nazi countries they escaped from; that it was alive and well in the U.S. too (84). And if they needed further proof, the fact that their application was promptly refused provided one. In July, Michael Polanyi reacted to the new visa policy and his nephews' failure to enter the States in an uncharacteristically passionate outburst:

> The Polanyi boys have been refused entry to the U.S. because they have relatives living in a Fascist country. I think they are now in Cuba awaiting the results of Mausi's further strenuous efforts to get them access to some place on the Western Hemisphere. This new law of the U.S. which prevents their entry is one of the worst piece of cruel and hypocritical legislation, pursuing a policy of antisemitism under the pretext of protecting the country against Hitler's influence.85

In December 1941, their application was rejected again, the refusal signed by the very official, A. M. Warren who was one of the
authors of the new policy. Adolf, in faraway Brazil, was desperately searching for a way to bring the boys to South America but concluded that "the United States are the only reasonable hope left." Despite the unfair and unjust position of the American Government, evident in the visa regulations, he shared with most refugees a "too strong a belief in American Ideas of fairness as to accept the situation as final." As for the role of Laura in bringing the Polanyi boys to America, she displayed a commitment that went even beyond her usual determination. Always the responsible eldest sibling, she was motivated primarily by the sympathy she felt for the boys who (although not exactly children; they were 27 and 23 years of age, respectively, in 1941) had not had their own parents around to help them. Adolf, himself too far away to act, and never the model father, also delegated her as his proxy. He repeatedly asked her to look after matters, as he doubted whether "Karli has the push and ... Misi the time" and to go to Washington where her "energy and tenacity would do a lot more than all the rest put together." An additional motive for Laura to pour all her energies into the boys' cause may have been that she felt she was handed another chance; she could help them while there was nothing left she could do for her sister. It would take an additional two years and several rounds of reviews before the two could enter the U.S. Even then, one of the brothers, eager to offer his Ph.D. in physics for defense projects, was denied clearance.

But what to make of the advice Laura had given the boys to hide the fact that they were Jews? Was this not pure opportunism? Or the chameleon-like behaviour of the parvenu German Jew Hannah Arendt satirized so memorably? These are questions that deserve to be carefully weighed against the perspective and experience of the highly assimilated Central European Jews arriving in America. First of all, the existence of strong anti-Semitism in the U.S. had come as a shock to the Central-European intellectual refugees for whom Roosevelt's America was associated with the best liberal values. Laura felt she had to warn her nephews about it. After all, the Polanyi boys' future depended on their chances to work in their field; their university degrees came at a price of substantial sacrifices from Adolf's entire family. And in the Polanyis' value system, the boys' academic brilliance, their Hungarian birth, even their Italian upbringing and culture defined them more than the Jewish religion of their ancestors. They could not risk their entire future life because of one question on an application form that served, in their eyes, an anti-Semitic immigration policy.
Their Jewish ancestry was an indelible part of the Polanyis and one they had never hidden or denied. Yet they felt nothing in common with the Yiddish-speaking Eastern-European Jewish world of New York. If Laura advised her nephews to hide their religion in the application, it was only one angle of a wider strategy. The future choices of Laura's children and grandchildren in their education and professional life demonstrated that the family continued in its long-standing tradition to strive for intellectual and academic excellence. They went on to produce academic high achievers who attended the best schools and rose to the highest echelons of American academic and cultural life. If, under the circumstances they found in America, that meant to underplay their Jewish identity, it was a small price to pay.

The Polanyis also had the luxury to make choices free from immediate financial pressures. The majority of intellectual refugees, made up of German Jews, had to leave everything behind because of the Nazi regulations and reached America penniless. They had no choice but to rely on the refugee aid organizations, organized along ethnic and religious lines. One refugee, an assimilated German Jew, summed up the circumstances that forced him to reluctantly shift his identity in the following: "in New York, you were either Jewish or nothing; otherwise nobody would help you."93

While maintaining their numerous ties with fellow émigrés, Laura and her children quickly developed connections with the local non-immigrant community. The family attended the Unitarian church in Brooklyn where Laura was a highly regarded member of the congregation.94 Her granddaughter remembered that they had to take Sunday school lessons at Laura's insistence. She also explained to her grandchildren that they chose the Unitarian church because of its ties to 16th-century Transylvania.95 Again, a seemingly opportunistic move had, at least to some degree, its explanation in long-standing cultural tradition. Their membership in the Unitarian congregation was also an indication that they recognized the community-building role of the local churches in their new homeland. The family's encounter with the Quakers and Laura and Eva's temporary stay in England when they had occasion to witness their help to the refugees could have played a role as well.96

One last case among Laura's files demonstrates that the solidarity displayed in the rescue efforts went beyond family responsibilities and blood ties. It concerns the fate of Alex Weissberg, Eva's first husband. When we last met him, he was in a Kharkov jail, waiting for his trial.
Perhaps because Weissberg was one of only a very few never confessing to any of the crimes he was accused of, he never went to trial or received a sentence. As soon as Eva reached England, she began a relentless campaign to free him. Weissberg's valiant efforts in the Soviet Union to save Eva created a solidarity between them that survived the break-up of their marriage.

In 1936, at the time of Eva's arrest, Weissberg had solicited reference letters for Eva, regardless of the risks involved. Now the roles were reversed yet the method and the network they used remained the same. The details of this fight and his own part in it are described in Arthur Koestler's *The Invisible Writing*. Koestler's efforts, motivated by his friendship with Weissberg and Eva and his growing disenchantment with Communism were reinforced by his own recent imprisonment and near-execution by Franco's forces in Spain. Eva's uncle, Michael Polanyi, played at least an equal part by contacting his colleagues, members of the community of physicists. Koestler's idea of soliciting letters from three French Nobel-Prize laureates, all Communists, masterfully combined the professional and political aspects while Michael Polanyi arranged for a separate letter from Einstein. Einstein's letter and Joliot Curie's telegram were duly sent to Stalin in 1938 and although they did not achieve the freedom of Alex, they were credited with saving his life.

No news came from Alex until April 1940 when Eva received a telegram from Aunt Irma in Budapest. Weissberg was alive and free in German-occupied Krakow, begging for help to get out of Poland. Weissberg, according to the stipulations of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, had been among the German nationals handed over by the NKVD to the Gestapo a month earlier. He escaped from the Lublin prison and ended up in the newly established Krakow ghetto.

Weissberg's letters and postcards, mailed under the Gestapo's nose in the Krakow ghetto and miraculously delivered to New York, chronicle the indomitable spirit of this "human Jack-in-the-box," in Koestler's words, and Eva and Laura's efforts to save him from the seemingly inevitable end. Hoping to reach a neutral country (since the Allies no longer had consulates granting visas in German-occupied Poland), Weissberg tried to contact Niels Bohr who could bring him to Denmark. He also urged Eva to turn, one more time, to the physicists' network. A last chance to save Alex would be, she wrote to his old colleagues (and her friends from the Berlin days), by now settled in the States, to get him out through Lisbon on a non-quota visa. Eva even managed to collect the
$600 deposit needed. Then she called on Einstein, reminding him of his intervention two years earlier. In order to acquire a non-quota visa, she asked him to write to a Mr. Charles Liebmann, president of the Refugee Economic Corporation, one of the organizations assisting refugees.

Einstein produced the letter in a mere five days. Not surprisingly, he also avoided any reference to Weissberg's well-known Communist persuasion and long stay and in the Soviet Union. Instead, he emphasized his "three years" of imprisonment by the Germans (in fact it lasted only a few months) and made a strong case for him as a candidate for a non-quota emergency visa, not only as a potential university professor but also as a valuable expert who could contribute to the war effort. Normally, a university professor applying for a non-quota visa had to have a position secured at an American institution and a two-year minimum teaching experience in Europe. Weissberg did not meet these criteria. But these were desperate times calling for desperate measures and Einstein's name may have carried enough weight to secure Weissberg a non-quota visa. In any case, it was too late. In September 1940, a HIAS (Hebrew Sheltering and Immigrant Aid Society) official Laura had previously contacted to make travel arrangements for Weissberg informed her that "We are in receipt of a letter from Warsaw advising us that at the present time the emigration of the above named [Weissberg] is impossible for the reason that the Italian border has been closed." It was the contemporary equivalent of a death sentence and the last the Polanyis heard from Weissberg for the rest of the war.

Despite the failure of the rescue mission, the efforts to save Weissberg highlighted the strength of old-world networks. First among them was the community of physicists, the forerunner in the internationalization of academia. The reasons physics emerged as the model of international academic networks were complex and included the pioneering practice of international exchanges and collaboration from the 1920s. Another Hungarian physicist, already mentioned as Michael Polanyi's friend and colleague in Berlin, the great Leo Szilard, described how his own professional and social connections in the world of physics laid the ground for the first organized rescue efforts in 1933. To these ties of solidarity, grounded in professional interests and connections, the Polanyis' social circle during their Viennese and Berlin years added layers of friendship and a shared cultural and social experience.
Attesting to his amazing resilience, Weissberg survived the war in Poland, and resurfaced in Stockholm in 1946, eventually ending his life in France. His escape added a fitting postscript to the already outstanding success of the Polanyis in emigration.

In an almost equally surprising development, Laura's younger son, Ottó, decided to return to Hungary after the war. The decision prompted a carefully worded warning from the Stricker relatives, picking up the pieces of their former life among the ruins of Budapest. "I'm surprised to hear that Ottó wants to come back. Needless to say we are very glad to have him back, only wondering as for the reasons when everyone else is trying to go the other way." 

Ottó had been and remained a Communist since his youthful commitment in 1934 Vienna. He participated in the war-time émigré activities in Chicago, and was elected as acting secretary of the Chicago section of the "Hungarian American Relief" in April 1945, as a representative of the "Hungarian American Democratic Council" whose president was László Moholy-Nagy, the eminent Bauhaus artist and professor at the University of Chicago. As soon as the war drew to a close, émigré Hungarian organizations, united by war relief during the war, were quickly dissolving into an infight between the various political agendas. While conservatives as well as members of the pre-war democratic opposition turned pro-Communist in increasing numbers and many of the émigré politicians decided to return, Jászi remained entirely sceptical.

In an exchange with her old friend, Laura urged him to take a stand in Hungary one last time. The democratic Left in Hungary, she argued, desperately needed his moral leadership. And the Soviet Union which, as she believed, continued to support a limited parliamentary democracy in Hungary, needed political leaders representing the ideals of the old progressive camp. Jászi, the creator of the idea of the "Switzerland of the East," a peaceful, democratic, multi-ethnic East-Central Europe, was the only one left to stop the Communist tide. Jászi was not convinced. Laura's hopes for a democratic development in Hungary and the Soviets' need for his moral leadership were "pure fantasy," he replied. "You cannot seriously think that the Soviet needs me. I am afraid they don't even need Károlyi who is much closer to them."

Jászi was soon proven right in his assessment. Although Soviet foreign policy and the Communist Party in Hungary insisted for another three years on their "sincere" desire to keep the framework of a parliamentary democracy in place, the
beginning of the Cold War was followed by unmistakable signs of an imminent Communist takeover.\textsuperscript{119}

It was yet another indication that when it came to politics, Laura, in sharp contrast to her unerring instinct in practical matters, was driven more by wishful thinking than reality. She may have been also influenced by Ottó’s plans to move back to Hungary and her maternal instinct to justify his decision. Ottó, anxious to participate in the rebuilding of a new, Communist Hungary, and prompted by the signs of increasing anti-Communism in the States, returned in 1948. By the 1950s, he rose to become a high-level functionary in the Hungarian scientific hierarchy, enjoying such limited — but by contemporary Hungarian standards, substantial — advantages as trips to the West and a relatively comfortable lifestyle. His decision to move back to Hungary also helped to maintain Laura’s ties to the family’s Hungarian members. She kept up correspondence with the relatives and sent a steady supply of much-needed food packages.\textsuperscript{120} As soon as the worst years of the Cold War were over, she visited her son and her three grandchildren almost yearly.

Laura’s continuing ties to Hungary resulted in her last feat: of rescuing a relative from mortal danger six years after the end of the war. Eszter Polanyi, Adolf’s daughter survived the Holocaust and was living in Hungary when in 1951 the Communist regime introduced the internment of “former bourgeois elements” in makeshift camps in the countryside. In one last concentrated effort that had all the trademark elements of her old skills, Laura saved Eszter Polanyi from “a second deportation within seven years!”\textsuperscript{121}

It was a case that showcased the multiple layers of the Polanyis’ old loyalties and connections; it also highlighted the universality of methods, used by Laura and the family when it came to successfully fighting dictatorships, whether it was Stalin, Hitler or Rákosi. Rákosi, the Communist dictator of Hungary, had been a former deputy commissar and as such, Adolf’s one-time superior, in the heady days of the Hungarian Republic of Councils in 1919. Adolf who was desperate to bring his daughter, lonely and ill, to Brazil, had already tried to contact Rákosi, "being fully convinced that my name would carry weight with him!”\textsuperscript{122}

When his efforts failed — for the simple reason that no one in Hungary was brave enough to deliver the letter — Laura wrote to Rákosi herself, reminding him of the old connections and achieving, in a matter of days, Eszter’s release.\textsuperscript{123}
Laura's regular visits to Europe highlighted the fact that her family, the Polanyis and Stickers, were now represented by a large contingent living in the United States and South America as well as spread over Europe from Hungary to Italy, Switzerland, France and England. Her visits and correspondence helped maintain the ties between them and keep up the family traditions. The collection of family documents that she preserved was only one of the signs that it was a role she consciously cultivated. Among her last notes, there were detailed lists of lesser-known Stricker ancestors and their academic and intellectual contributions.

After a 1957 visit to Italy where she met up with the daughter of a cousin, she reflected on the continuity of old connections with the "beautiful new ones that you represent." She also sent them the family tree, for the sake of the grandchildren. It was an act highly illustrative of the role that she earned and cherished to be the link between generations and the custodian of the family's history.

NOTES

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An example of this sometimes arbitrary compartmentalization is Hartmut Lehmann and James J. Sheehan, eds., *An Interrupted Past; German-Speaking Refugee Historians in the U.S. after 1933* (Washington, D.C. German Historical Institute, Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

Pachter, in his essay "On Being an Exile," Boyers, ed., *The Legacy of the German Refugee Intellectuals*, already warned of the dangers of simplistic classification of this kind, citing the example of such subgroups as White Russians, Red Spaniards and Hungarian Communists.


from the refugee autobiographies commissioned by Harvard University and the Leo Baeck Institute during the war, without adding much new insight.

11 Anderson, *Hitler's Exiles*, includes accounts by German woman physicians, fighting an uphill battle against the combined challenges of immigrant hardship and social conventions.

12 Peter Gay's account of the reaction of his own family of secular, assimilated German Jews and their refusal "to be Jews by Nazi edict" is typical in that regard. Peter Gay, *My German Question: Growing Up in Nazi Berlin* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1998), 110.


15 Letters of Michael Striker to Laura Polanyi, New York, 27 April 1938, 2 May 1938, and 19 May 1938, in the possession of Eva Zeisel.

16 Lederer, the husband of Laura's cousin, was a professor at the New School. Lazarsfeld, Hans Zeisel's friend and collaborator in Vienna, had stayed on in America when his Rockefeller scholarship expired in 1934. Paul F. Lazarsfeld, "An Episode in the History of Social Research: A Memoir," in Fleming and Bailyn, *The Intellectual Migration*, 275-76.

17 Michael Striker to Laura Polanyi, 10 May 1938, in the possession of Eva Zeisel.

18 Fragment of letter from unknown to Michael Polanyi, Budapest, 22 June 1938, in the possession of Eva Zeisel.

19 Michael Polanyi to Eva Stricker, 28 June 1938, in the possession of Eva Zeisel.

20 Laura Polanyi's biographical draft about Egon Szécsi, in the possession of Eva Zeisel.

21 Postcard of Laura Polanyi to Michael Polanyi, 30 August 1938, in the possession of Eva Zeisel.

22 Postcard of Laura Polanyi to Eva Stricker, 28 August 1938, in the possession of Eva Zeisel.

23 Postcard of Laura to Michael Polanyi, 10 August 1938, in the possession of Eva Zeisel.

24 Michael Polanyi to Laura, Manchester, 2 August 1938, in the poss. of Eva Zeisel.

25 Interview with Barbara Stricker, Budapest, December 1997.

26 Máriusz Rabinovszky to Eva Stricker, Budapest, 19 September 1938, in the possession of Eva Zeisel; Lili Radványi to Eva Stricker, Budapest, no date, in the possession of Eva Zeisel.
In her interviews, Eva often refers to the mirror images of their imprisonment and their bond forged by the act of saving each other’s life. Interview with Eva Zeisel, March 1994 and Lessard, "The Present Moment," 49-50.

Mrs. Bruce to Eva Stricker, Kent, 12 September 1938, in the possession of Eva Zeisel.


This seems to be supported by a letter of Eva to Laura in which she makes a coded but obvious reference to a friend, underlined in the original, an acquaintance of her uncle Karl, soon to call on Laura in Vienna. Eva Stricker to Laura Polanyi, London, no date, in the possession of Eva Zeisel.

In the same letter, Mrs. Bruce is referred to as "a friend too." Ibid.

Phyllis Richards to Eva Stricker, 12 September 1938, in the possession of Eva Zeisel.

As a sign of gratitude, Eva named her first-born daughter Jean Richards — after Mrs. Bruce's daughter and Mrs. Richards. The families stayed in touch in later years. In 1943, Phyllis Richards wrote to Laura: "I have asked Hans and Eva to send me a snapshot of Jean, as I long to see what she is like. I hope you got the letter I wrote in answer to yours, in which you told me about her birth and christening. I was so touched to think she had been named after me..." Phyllis Richards to Laura Polanyi, no date, in the possession of Eva Zeisel.

Telegram of Laura Polanyi, 22 September 1938, original in German, in the possession of Eva Zeisel, my translation.

Laura Polanyi to Andor Németh, London, 23 December 1938, in the possession of Eva Zeisel.

Ibid., original in Hungarian, my translation.

Telegram of Eva and Hans Zeisel to Laura Polanyi, 24 December 1938, in the possession of Eva Zeisel. A letter from Laura's niece that reached her in London also recalled, with nostalgia, the memory of old Christmases. Lili
Szondi to Laura Polanyi, Budapest, no date, Országos Széchényi Könyvtár (the National Library of Hungary, hereafter OSzK) PC 212/205.

38 Red Star Line, Passenger Traffic Manager to Laura Polanyi, 10 March 1939, in the possession of Eva Zeisel. Ella Bruce to Laura Polanyi, 25 March 1939; 15 June 1939, in the possession of Eva Zeisel.


40 Michael Polanyi to Laura Polanyi, January 1938, in the possession of Eva Zeisel.

41 In Hungary, decree no. IV/ 1939, the so-called "second Jewish law" further limited the number of Jews in the professions and employable by companies, and established racial criteria instead of the previous religious ones. Michael Polanyi's reaction spoke volumes: "Since according to Hungarian law I am a Jew, I expect to be fired soon." Michael Polanyi to Laura Polanyi, Manchester, 11 December 1938. Original in Hungarian, my translation. In the possession of Eva Zeisel.

42 Michael Polanyi to Laura Polanyi, 16 February 1939; notes of Laura Polanyi on Egon Szécsi, in the possession of Eva Zeisel.

43 As the legendary Hungarian essayist Ignotus wrote to her, "I was really delighted to hear that you caught the last pre-war steamer..." Ignotus to Laura Polanyi, 17 February, 1940, OSzK PC 212/130. Getting out of Europe on the "last ship" or "last train" as well as "catch the last ship" were some of the most commonly used phrases in the émigré mythology. Eva Zeisel "caught one of the last trains out," in March 1938, according to Lessard, "The Present Moment," 49. Following the burning of the Reichstag, Leo Szilárd took the last train to Vienna that was not stopped and searched at the border. Leo Szilard, "Reminiscences," Fleming and Bailyn, *The Intellectual Migration*, 96-97.

44 Michael Polanyi to Laura Polanyi, Manchester, 8 September 1939, in the possession of Eva Zeisel.

45 Irma Pollacsek to Laura Polanyi, no date (probably November 1938), OSzK PC 212/247.

46 Photocopy in the possession of Eva Zeisel.

47 Sándor Vince to Laura Polanyi, Chicago, 30 November 1939, OSzK PC 212/213. Original in Hungarian, my translation.

48 Recha Jászi to Michael Polanyi, 26 September 1939. OSzK PC 212/134.

49 "I can already see them as future American millionaires," she quipped. Irma Pollacsek to Laura Polanyi, 5 August 1939, OSzK PC 212/170.


51 The friendship of the two women preceded World War I and Recha's marriage to Jászi.
Odyssey was a reference frequently used by this most literate cohort of refugees. See Hannah Arendt, "We Refugees," in Anderson, Hitler's Exiles, 260.

Recha Jászi to Laura Polanyi, Oberlin, 7 November 1939, OSzK PC 212/134.

Ibid., in Hungarian, my translation.

Recha Jászi to Laura Polanyi, 7 November 1939, Oberlin, OSzK PC 212/134. Victor Weisskopf, Eva Zeisel's physicist friend from Vienna and Berlin, described this common experience in a darkly humorous vein: "[It was] a period when you were asked if you were expecting children, and you said, 'No, first we expect parents.' It was literally so. Of what little money we had, we had to pay the way of my mother, my brother, and my little sister coming over. They were facing death and they had to come over." Charles Weiner, "A New Site for the Seminar: The Refugees and American Physics in the Thirties," in Fleming and Bailyn, The Intellectual Migration, 222.

Their correspondence in OSzK PC consists of mainly Recha's letters with copies of only a few of Laura's.

Mariusz Rabinovszky to Laura Polanyi, Budapest, 2 February 1939; István Rudó to Michael Striker, Budapest, 1 December 1939, in the possession of Eva Zeisel.

Mariusz Rabinovszky to Laura Polanyi, 6 January 1939, OSzK PC 212/175; Wyman, Paper Walls, 170.

Alexander (Sándor) Vince to Laura Polanyi, 30 November 1939, OSzK PC 212/213.

Ralph E. Church to Alexander Vince, Washington, D.C., 20 February 1940, in the possession of Eva Zeisel.

According to the Declaration of Intention, in the possession of Eva Zeisel, he finally reached the U.S. on 18 August 1941.

Karl Polanyi congratulated with these words his nephew. Karl Polanyi to Michael Striker, Washington D.C., 8 August 1941, OSzK PC 212/325. The itinerary of Sándor Stricker is in the possession of Eva Zeisel.


Adolf Polanyi to Laura Polanyi, Rio de Janeiro, 16 February 1942, OSzK PC 212/172.

Laura Polanyi to Karl Polanyi, 26 April 1944, Karl Polanyi Archives, Concordia University, Montreal (hereafter KPA), box 14.

Sophie Szécsi to Laura Polanyi, October 1938, in the possession of Eva Zeisel.
Arthur Rényi to Laura Polanyi, Budapest, 25 February 1940, OSzK PC 212/178.

Arthur Rényi to Laura Polanyi, Budapest, 10 March 1941, OSzK PC 212/178.

Michael Polanyi to Ilona Duczynska, 30 July 1941, KPA, box 14.

Recha Jászi commented: "What a blessing that Sofie's son is gone, what a relief for her! Or have the Nazis sent him off in their humanitarian fashion?" Recha Jászi to Laura Polanyi, Oberlin, Ohio, 21 March 1942, OSzK PC 212/134.

Even if they could keep the fragile lines of communication open, it would have taken a miracle to get her out. "In October [1941] legal exit from Nazi territory ended. Escapes took place throughout the war, but for most victims of Nazi terror the closed borders formed an almost insuperable barrier." Wyman, Paper Walls, 205.

Arthur Rényi to Laura Polanyi, Budapest, 31 August 1946, OSzK PC 212/178, my translation.

Recha Jászi to Laura Polanyi, 14 February 1943, OSzK PC 212/134.

László Radványi to Laura Polanyi, Le Vernet, 15 August 1940 and to Ottó Stricker on 18 November 1940, in the possession of Eva Zeisel. Radványi and Anna Seghers were eventually sent out of Marseilles by Varian Fry. Andy Marino, A Quiet American: The Secret War of Varian Fry (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 259. They survived the war in Mexico.

Recha Jászi to Laura Polanyi, 14 February 1943, OSzK PC 212/134.

Adolf Polanyi to Laura Polanyi, Rio de Janeiro, 29 July 1941, OSzK PC 212/172.


Ibid.

Laura Polanyi to Lionello Venturi, 31 May 1941, in the possession of Eva Zeisel.

Laura Polanyi to Michael and Thomas Polanyi, 1 June 1941, Laura Polanyi to Lionello Venturi, 31 May 1941, in the possession of Eva Zeisel.

Wyman, Paper Walls, 195.

Eric D. Frankel to Laura Polanyi, 30 June 1941, in the possession of Eva Zeisel.

Laura Polanyi to Michael and Thomas Polanyi, 1 June 1941, in the possession of Eva Zeisel, her emphasis. Original in Hungarian, my translation.

Just as Laura was warned, on her arrival, by her friend Recha of anti-Semitism in the U.S.. "Things in America look easy over there [in Europe],"
Recha wrote. They don’t know how antisemitic America already is.” Recha Jánszi to Laura Polanyi, Oberlin, 7 November 1939, OSzK PC 212/134.

85 Michael Polanyi to Ilona Duczynska, 30 July 1941, KPA, box 14.


87 Adolf Polanyi to Laura Polanyi, Rio de Janeiro, 29 July 1941, OSzK PC 212/172.

88 Ibid.

89 Adolf Polanyi to Laura Polanyi, Rio de Janeiro, 1 November 1941, OSzK PC 212/172.

90 Ibid.

91 Thomas Polanyi to Laura Polanyi, 31 December 1943, in the possession of Eva Zeisel.

92 In Arendt’s parable, Mr. Cohn, the 150 percent German patriot, becomes an instant 150 percent patriot in every country he flees to for he simply cannot come to terms with simply being a Jew. Hannah Arendt, “We Refugees,” Anderson, Hitler’s Exiles, 253-262.


94 Letter of John H. Lathrop to Laura Polanyi, 28 December 1944, in the possession of Eva Zeisel.

95 Interview with Jean Richards, New York, March 1995.

96 Lathrop to Laura Polanyi, 28 Dec. 1944. The minister thanked Laura for her gift, a book of Michael Polanyi and “for giving me some insight into the rare intellectual atmosphere of your family.”


98 “It took two months to get this present letter,” wrote Michael Polanyi to his niece on 30 May 1938. Michael Polanyi to Eva Zeisel, in the possession of Eva Zeisel.

99 “The joint protest of the French Nobel-laureates, supported by a simultaneous letter from Einstein to Stalin, was never acknowledged or answered, but seems nevertheless to have influenced Alex’s fate. ... Once higher quarters recognised the significance of the case, his bare life at least was safe.” Koestler, The Invisible Writing, 501.

100 “My Dear Mausi! Ilus Pikler received the following news that you should forward to Evi: ‘Befreit, verständiget Weisskopf, Placzek, Ruhemann. Bezoget Einreise erlaubniss neutralen Landes’ Alex Weissberg, Krakau, ulica Dietla 75/14.” Telegram of Irma Pollacsek to Laura Polanyi, 11 April 1940, in Hungarian and German, in the possession of Eva Zeisel.

Alex Weissberg to Eva Zeisel, Krakow, 11 April 1940, 18 June 1940, 25 June 1940, 29 July 1940, Alex Weissberg to Arthur Rényi, 14 May 1940, in the possession of Eva Zeisel.

Eva Zeisel to Georg Placzek, New York, 21 May 1940, in the possession of Eva Zeisel.

Eva Zeisel to Albert Einstein, New York, 17 July 1940, in the possession of Eva Zeisel. At the beginning of her letter, she referred to her uncle, Michael Polanyi, who had already contacted Einstein in a separate letter.

Albert Einstein to Mr. Charles Liebmann, Knollwood, Saranac Lake, N.Y., 22 July 1940, in the possession of Eva Zeisel. The text of Einstein's letter is reproduced in the appendix to this paper.


He may have had the required teaching experience; his curriculum vitae in Laura Polanyi's handwriting, photocopy in the possession of Eva Zeisel, listed his employment at the Charlottenburg (Berlin) *Technische Hochschule* as assistant between 1927 and 1930; however, there is no sign of a position waiting for him in the U.S.

Isaac L. Asofsky, executive director of HIAS to Laura Polanyi, New York, 10 September 1940, in the possession of Eva Zeisel.

Weiner, "A New Site for the Seminar," 190-234, provides a thorough analysis of the internationalization of the field and the quick reaction of the scientific community to come to the aid of the refugees.


Telegram of Alexander Weissberg to Eva Zeisel, Stockholm, 23 April 1946, in the possession of Eva Zeisel.

Gina Kernstok to Laura Polanyi, Budapest, 6 May 1946, OSzK PC 212/137.


articles by Péter Hanák, Attila Pók, Thomas Spira, György Litván, Thomas Szendrey and N.F. Dreisziger).

115 Laura Polanyi to Oszkár Járszi, draft of letter, no date, [March 1945], in the possession of Eva Zeisel.

116 Ibid.

117 Járszi to Laura Polanyi, no date [February-March 1945], in the possession of Eva Zeisel.

118 Ibid.


120 Letters of Gina Kernstok to Laura Polanyi, OSzK PC 212/137.

121 Laura Polanyi to Karl and Ilona Polanyi, 14 August 1951, KPA, box 14.

122 Adolf Polanyi to Laura Polanyi, Sao Paolo, 1 November 1946, OSzK PC 212/176.

123 In an uncharacteristic departure from her usual modesty, she reported her success to Karl and Ilona. Laura Polanyi to Karl and Ilona Polanyi, 14 August 1951, KPA, box 14.

124 Notes on the Strieker ancestors, in the possession of Eva Zeisel.

125 Laura Polanyi to Eva Carocci, 25 September 1957, OSzK PC 212/82.

126 Ibid.

127 Michael Polanyi sent her some family documents addressed to "the custodian of the family's traditions." Michael Polanyi to Laura Polanyi, 11 August 1957, in the possession of Eva Zeisel.

Appendix

Albert Einstein's letter to Charles Liebmann
22 July 1940

Dear Mr. Liebmann:

A very good friend of mine, Mr. Michael Polanyi, Professor at the University of Manchester, brings attention to the fate of a young physi-
cist, Mr. Alexander Weissberg. I have heard of him before and I should like to help him in this emergency situation. I understand that you are one of the few persons who is able to save him in this desperate situation.

Mr. Weissberg was recently released from a German concentration camp after three years of imprisonment with the notice that, that he would be brought back again, if he cannot obtain immediately an immigration visa for an oversea country. His numerous friends in this country are trying to obtain a non-quota visum for him (as University Professor) but this will not be possible in the short time he is given by the German authorities. Would it be possible that Mr. Weissberg gets some visa through your help in the meantime?

I understand that his friends here are able and willing to support him. But in addition to that he is a specialist in the field of refrigeration [low-temperature physics] technique and will prove to be an asset for any country which will accept him.

I should greatly appreciate if you could help me to save Mr. Weissberg. If there is such a possibility, please communicate with Mr. Rudolph Modley, Director of Pictorial Statistics in New York. He is an old friend of Mr. Weissberg and will be glad to provide you with all the necessary information.

Very sincerely yours,
Professor Albert Einstein.

[Albert Einstein to Mr. Charles Liebmann, Knollwood, Saranac Lake, N.Y., 22 July 1940, in the possession of Eva Zeisel.]