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How trailblazing US labor secretary Frances Perkins quietly lobbied for Holocaust refugees

While the labor activist is famous for being the first female Cabinet member, on the 60th anniversary of her death, a new book explores her overlooked efforts to help Jews fleeing the Nazis

By **RICH TENORIO**

BOSTON, Massachusetts

As labor secretary, she was the first female Cabinet member in a US presidential administration and set a record for longevity in her department. She is widely credited with a key role in some of the administration's domestic achievements, including Social Security. Yet one aspect of her background has been relatively unexplored: Her advocacy on behalf of refugees from Hitler.

Perkins's quiet lobbying is estimated to have helped tens of thousands of refugees, including Jewish refugees. Many desperate to leave Nazi Germany had informed her of their predicament through heartrending letters. Beginning in 1938 after Kristallnacht, these letters often shared

the same three-word salutation, which happens to be the title of a new book about Perkins' forgotten advocacy: "Dear Miss Perkins: A Story of Frances Perkins's Efforts to Aid Refugees from Nazi Germany," by Rebecca Brenner Graham.

"Before my work, it was a relatively unknown chapter," Graham told The Times of Israel about Perkins's attempts to help refugees. "Overall, it's not a happy story. Of course, most people were unable to find refuge."

However, Perkins's efforts were wide-ranging, from an initiative to help refugee children to supporting a failed quest to resettle Jewish emigres in Alaska. Her efforts left a legacy: She asked FDR to issue an executive order combining two bureaus under her purview, Immigration and Naturalization. They became the Immigration and Naturalization Service, or INS, on June 10, 1933. The combined agency was eventually transferred to the Department of Justice in 1940. Decades later, in the wake of 9/11, its components were separated into three agencies and placed under a new Cabinet department, Homeland Security.

Graham has been on tour to speak about the book, published earlier this year by Citadel. On March 20, she appeared at Temple Israel of Boston, a historic Reform congregation. This particular talk was moderated by James Roosevelt, a grandson of FDR who has held leadership positions in the Democratic Party and the health care industry.

They sat in wooden chairs flanking a table on an auditorium stage. While the book's title references the letters Perkins received from refugees, the discussion at one point turned to another kind of correspondence she got: Hate mail from Americans upset over her pro-refugee actions.

"There were multiple bigoted social forces... all types of bigoted, overlapping social forces of hatred," Graham said.

And, she continued, "her hate mail reads like Twitter replays."

Now a postdoctoral research associate at Providence-based Brown University, the author has researched Perkins since her undergraduate days. They share the same alma mater: Mount Holyoke, an all-women's college in western Massachusetts. Through Mount Holyoke, Graham found a Perkins-related internship opportunity, which proved the basis of her undergraduate thesis.

"The argument of my undergraduate thesis was, basically, this is a story about a progressive woman who ended up encountering the sinister forces in American society like racism, xenophobia, antisemitism, and other things women faced like misogyny, and resistance to the New Deal," Graham said. "They were all obstacles in her efforts to aid refugees."

Graham developed a fascination with Perkins's efforts on behalf of refugees. This fascination lingered even after Graham graduated from Mount Holyoke and wrote a PhD dissertation on US postal history that focused on the topic of Sunday mail delivery. And so she returned to her original subject.

Historical lookback through a millennial prism

"Dear Miss Perkins" brings a millennial's perspective to Perkins's life that incorporates issues of race, class, religion and ethnicity. The book examines how a daughter of privilege, born into an upper-class New England Episcopalian family, became an advocate for labor and immigration.

A 1902 graduate of Mount Holyoke, Perkins volunteered at Hull House, reformer Jane Addams's initiative to help the poor in Chicago. Perkins relocated to New York, where in 1911 she witnessed the horrors of the Triangle Shirtwaist fire, in which immigrant garment factory employees perished amid hazardous working conditions. Perkins eventually served

as de facto secretary of labor in New York State under two governors, Al Smith and FDR.

“She was the product of a broader women’s social movement,” Graham said, “volunteering at Hull House, witnessing the Triangle Shirtwaist fire.”

“The women’s labor movement diverged from the men’s labor movement, which tended to be anti-immigrant,” noted Graham. “[Perkins] had a pro-immigrant background from social reform and social work causes, [where] she had come into contact with more immigrant people,” including Jews, with the activist Cecilia Razovsky becoming an ally.

In the Roosevelt administration, after getting FDR to combine the Immigration and Naturalization bureaus, Perkins “wanted reform at INS,” Graham said, including to “help people immigrate to the US... whether Jewish or non-Jewish. The reality is that in the spring of 1933, when Hitler came to power in Germany, there was an influx of applications from Jewish immigrants. That was who was in danger at the time.”

American policy on immigration had swung toward restrictionism, reaching a crescendo in the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924, which issued quotas that limited immigration. This policy finally changed in the year of Perkins’s death, with the Immigration Act of 1965.

At the White House, Perkins battled anti-immigrant opposition, notably from the State Department, as well as claims that she was soft on communism, which led to her impeachment. Which was unsuccessful.

Saving the von Trapps

Her pro-refugee efforts were determined and comprehensive, according to the book. She lessened the restrictions for entry to the US and extended the temporary visas held by many immigrants already in the country, a number estimated at over 10,000.

Noting that the American public was particularly unfavorable to incoming adult refugees, Perkins appealed to somewhat softer sentiment regarding child refugees. A subsequent initiative on which INS partnered is estimated to have saved several hundred refugee children.

“The spirit of the program was that it was OK to bring over just one ship, just one child, it was worth saving that life,” Graham said.

One refugee family whom Perkins did help was a non-Jewish success story: The von Trapp family of Austria, immortalized in “The Sound of Music.” In a chapter on the von Trapps, Graham parses out the myth from the facts, including how surprised she was to learn that these escapees from Hitler were not Jewish, as she had once believed.

The book addresses a failed attempt to resettle Jewish refugees in Alaska. While the novelist Michael Chabon envisioned how it might have played out in “The Yiddish Policemen’s Union,” the real-life plan didn’t gain traction in Congress — and, Graham points out, it would have brought European Jewish immigrant settlers into an already complex mix of Anglo American settlers and the original inhabitants of the snowy, remote land, Alaska Natives.

The book devotes an entire chapter to the “Dear Miss Perkins” letters Perkins received, and the wider story of refugees who sought help. The outcomes range from happy to tragic. Felix Weinheber of Austria was in the US on a temporary visa but his prospects for an extended stay were dim. He ended up finding another way to stay away from Europe, thanks to Mexico. He married an immigrant to the US and eventually became a

Hollywood actor, Felix Wayne. Conversely, all three members of the Langer family — a Czech mother and her two children — committed suicide in 1939. They were in the US on temporary visas and did not wish to be deported back to Czechoslovakia, which Hitler had invaded earlier that year.

How strong was public opinion against immigration? You can judge for yourself from the book's discussion of the hate mail Perkins received, which was often filled with antisemitic statements.

"People saw themselves as tax-paying citizens — that's how they would sign their open letters," Graham said. "They were people who saw themselves as 'true' Americans and would organize in interest groups just as well as the progressive interest groups. They saw themselves as protectors of a certain America, white and Christian, that has a long history in the US — since the American Revolution, even since the colonial era."

By 1940, Perkins was sidelined in her efforts to help refugees. Oversight of INS had passed from Labor to Justice, and that year, the "Dear Miss Perkins" letters stopped.

"Ultimately, this is a sad story," Graham said. Yet, she added, "It's important to highlight the part in which she was able to work creatively within the system to help."