

Testimony of Leo Bretholz
Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, Refugees,
Border Security, and International Law
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I was living in Vienna, Austria in March 1938 when Hitler and the German army entered the city. At the encouragement of my mother, I fled Austria.

In April 1941, I had an Aunt and Uncle in Baltimore who prepared affidavits, hoping to obtain a visa of immigration for me to the United States. That autumn, deportations from Vienna began. An Aunt and cousin of mine were shipped to a Lodz ghetto *en route* to Auschwitz. An Uncle of mine was already there. During this time, I was in France, dreaming of immigrating to the United States. Every day, I went to the post office, hoping to find good news somewhere beyond so much awfulness. One day, my eyes fell on a red-white-and-blue bordered envelope from America.

“Enfin, ca y est,” the postal clerk said. At last, it’s here.

The postal clerk knew. For weeks, I’d been sighing disappointingly when no mail arrived from the United States. Now, my Aunt in Baltimore was writing to me. With the help of the Hebrew Immigration Aid Society, my affidavit was accepted by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service. In the near future, my Aunt wrote, I should receive notification from a U.S. Consulate to appear at its office for my visa.

In November, I received the notification that stated: “Present yourself at the U.S. Consulate in Marseilles on December 8, 1941.”

Early in the morning of December 8th, I stopped at a newspaper kiosk on my way to the U.S. Consulate. I saw a headline: *Le Japon Attaque La Flotille Americaine A Pearl Harbor.*”

I stood transfixed. Never had I heard of Pearl Harbor, and now it was the fulcrum of my entire life. At nine o'clock, I presented myself to a receptionist at the consulate, and saw more than a dozen other visa applicants.

We were told by the consulate that, "In view of the hostilities, the consulate has been instructed to cease all visa-processing formalities until further notice."

A woman standing with her small children began to cry, so the children also cried. A dreadful wailing commenced. A mistake, we proclaimed. People are waiting for us, we moaned. Yes, yes, we were told by the consulate, but this is war and we all must make sacrifices.

We waited at the consulate for someone in authority to enter the room, to tell us our pleas would be answered, that an exception would be made for us. No one came. As I left the consulate it seemed like a descent into doom.

After being denied a visa to the United States, I spent the next six years on the run, barely escaping death. I had escaped Germany by swimming across the River Sauer; I escaped a French camp at St. Cyprien; I crossed the Alps by foot into Switzerland; hid in attics and ceiling crawlspaces; I escaped and leapt from a train at night that was bound for Auschwitz; I was arrested by French gendarmes, beaten by prison guards, and escaped again; and I joined the French resistance until the War in Europe was over.

The end of the War in Europe in 1945 was not like the end of a winning ballgame or the beginning of a new year. Instead, it felt like the winding down of an endless era of exhaustion, and the beginning of a great unknown.

I wanted to find myself in the United States. From Baltimore, I received a letter from my Aunt telling me to be patient. She had prepared another affidavit of support

with help from the Hebrew Immigration Aid Society. But, at the time, there were thousands like me, trying to immigrate to the United States. The process was slow.

Almost a year later, on March 18, 1946, I received a letter from the American Consulate in Bordeaux, saying that I had been given a low case number, 531. Receiving the low case number made me feel important.

In December of 1946, I received my French exit visa. A week later, I was booked passage on the steamer *John Ericsson*. I departed for the United States in January of 1947.

Early on the morning of January 29, 1947, I saw seagulls gliding through the air. An airborne welcoming committee, I thought. Our steamer was approaching the coastal waters of the United States. In the afternoon, the steamer entered New York harbor, moving past a fog-enshrouded Statue of Liberty. Many of us stood on the deck of the steamer and gaped, not quite believing we had finally arrived. Spontaneously, we applauded her welcoming figure.

I reached America in 1947 and hid my story for the next fourteen years. Why had my life been spared when so many had been taken? Would some miracle arrive in the mail, telling me that my mother and my sisters were still alive somewhere in the wreckage of Europe? However, I do know that if I and many others had received visas to immigrate to the United States in 1941, many of us would have been spared the horrific experiences we endured and many, many more people would have survived.