‘We know full well the difficulties’

Alaska Jewish Museum exhibit recounts a fruitless 1939 plan to offer European Jews a refuge in the Last Frontier

By Aurora Ford

BRUNO ROSENTHAL wrote his first letter to the United States government in May 1939, begging for permission to immigrate to the U.S. Territory of Alaska. He feared for his life and the lives of other Jews in his small town of Neustadt, in rural Germany. Rosenthal was smart, prosperous, and kind, according to those who remembered him. He took it upon himself to advocate for his wife, Bianca, his friends, and his fellow Jews. Running out of time and options, Rosenthal, and other German and Austrian Jews, saw Alaska as a sanctuary far away from the persecution and violence closing in around them.

He wrote to the U.S. State Department:

> 30 members of the Jewish Community at Neustadt (Kreis Marburg/Lahn) Germany desire to make an urgently application for immigration to Alasca Territory. […] All are healthy, strong and energetical. We know quite well the difficulties making the rough clime of Alaska but now we have no other choice, we German Jews. […] We promise that we will be good citizens of Alaska and that we will obey always the law of the United States.

No answer ever came from the State Department, not to that letter or the one he wrote next. But later in 1939, Rosenthal was able to correspond with officials at the Department of the Interior instead. What he learned offered a glimmer of hope. The department was urging Congress to enact

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On May 22, 1935, the U.S. Army Transport ship *St. Mihiel* steamed into Seward with settlers and supplies bound for the Matanuska Valley Colony. The settlement, established by the Alaska Rural Rehabilitation Corporation and Federal Emergency Relief Administration, was intended to develop Alaska resources while providing opportunities to Americans dislocated by the Great Depression. The endeavor became a template for the never-realized plan to bring European Jewish refugees to the Alaska Territory in 1939. Alaska State Library ASL P270-187

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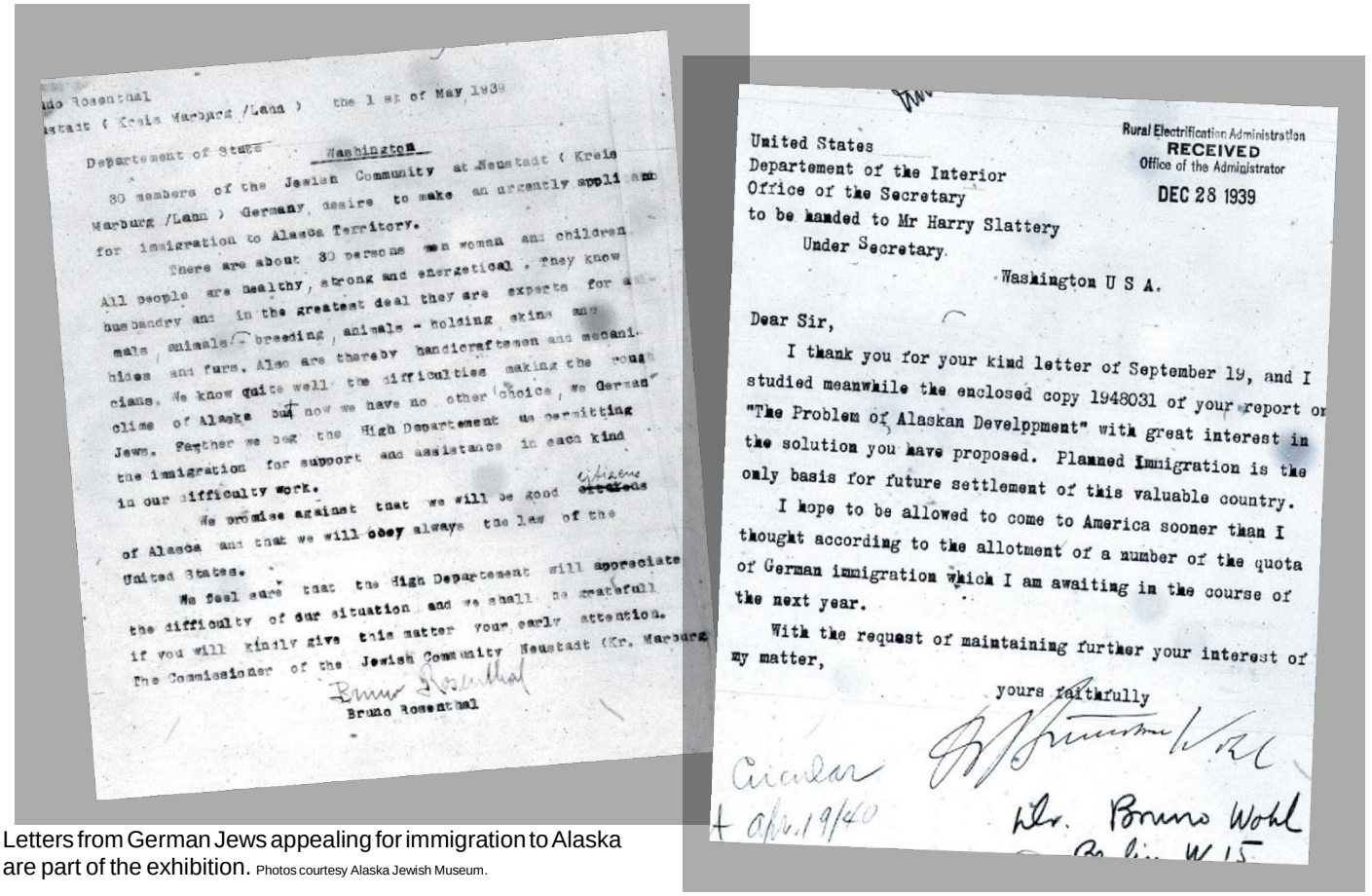

Letters from German Jews appealing for immigration to Alaska are part of the exhibition. Photos courtesy Alaska Jewish Museum.

legislation to settle European refugees in Alaska. Rosenthal wanted to be one of them.

With the help of a $10,000 grant from the Alaska Humanities Forum, the Alaska Jewish Museum in Anchorage has opened a new exhibit, *A Refuge in the Last Frontier: Evolution of the Alaska Development Plan* about this chapter in history.

"We've included letters from some of the people who desperately wanted to move to Alaska, and some of it is pretty tough to read," said museum curator Leslie Fried. "'We promise to be good citizens,' or, 'Leo Rosenthal, farmer and soap boiler, speaks English and Russian,' or, 'English teacher, knows all house and garden work.' They were trying to tell us, 'we can contribute to the growth of the Alaska Territory.'"

FEW OPTIONS

In 1935, four years before Rosenthal's first contact with the U.S. State Department, the Nazi party issued what would become known as the Nuremberg Laws. The laws stripped Germany's Jewish people of their citizenship and political rights, and made it illegal for them to marry or have sexual relations with "persons of German or related blood." Whether one was a practicing Jew or not didn't matter; anyone who had three or four Jewish grandparents was no longer considered German.

Anti-Jewish sentiment in Germany surged during this time. The mayor of Neustadt, home to Bruno Rosenthal, declared a boycott of Jewish-owned businesses. Rosenthal was forced to give up his home due to new laws requiring Aryan ownership of property.

In March 1938, Germany, largely unchallenged, invaded and annexed Austria, bringing it into the fold of the Third Reich. For Austrian Jews, there followed a wave of beatings, confiscation of property, destruction of businesses, and the establishment of detention centers. Germany promptly extended its anti-Jewish legislation to Austria.

In the United States, President Roosevelt talked with his cabinet about increasing the U.S. quota for refugees. He was discouraged; to do so would require an act of Congress, and no one had any confidence such legislation would pass. Waiting lists for traditional immigration could be years long. European Jews did not have that kind of time.

In Europe, mass emigration of Jewish people from Germany and Austria had created a refugee crisis that surrounding countries, still feeling the dislocations of World War I and the Depression, were unwilling to accept. Under increasing political pressure, Roosevelt convened a conference in Evian-les-Bains, France in July 1938. Thirty-two countries attended, but only the Dominican Republic agreed to ease immigration restrictions in an effort to resettle Jewish refugees.

Options for people like Rosenthal and his wife were evaporating. Then it all got drastically worse.

BROKEN GLASS

Over two nights in November 1938, Germany, Austria, and parts of Czechoslovakia exploded in a paroxysm of violence. More than 250 houses of worship were destroyed; when synagogues burned, firefighters were instructed to do nothing. Jewish cemeteries were desecrated. Untold numbers of Jews were raped, beaten, or forced through the streets performing acts of public humiliation. Ninety-one were killed. An estimated 7,500 Jewish-owned businesses were looted. Their shattered windows provided a name for the riots: *Kristallnacht*, "Night of Broken Glass."

The anti-Jewish riots were carried out or abetted by a catalogue of infamous ac- tors: Minister of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda Joseph Goebbels; the *Sturmabteilung* or SA; the *Schutzstaffel* or SS; the Hitler Youth; the Gestapo; and sympathetic ordinary citizens.

In the aftermath, the Nazis imposed fines totaling a billion Marks (about $400 million, in 1938 dollars) on Jews, ostensibly to cover the cost of cleanup and repair for the

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The exhibition design for *A Refuge in the Last Frontier* evokes a refugee ship.
Artwork courtesy Alaska Jewish Museum.

THE ST. LOUIS IN ANCHORAGE

Leslie Fried, curator of the Alaska Jewish Museum, was a librarian, a decorative painter, and a scenic artist for theater and film before taking her current job in fall 2011. Her background in theater and the decorative arts is evident in the exhibition design for *A Refuge in the Last Frontier: Evolution of the Alaska Development Plan.*

"The way that I conceived this exhibit was to use the story of the ship *St. Louis* as a metaphor," said Fried. In May 1939, 937 Jewish refugees left Hamburg, Germany aboard the liner *St. Louis*. They were headed to Cuba, which had taken in refugees before, but this time the *St. Louis* was turned away. "The captain, who was a good-hearted guy," said Fried, "floated the ship close to the coast of Miami, hoping Roosevelt would intercede on their behalf. But he did not." Some of the refugees were taken in by various countries in Europe, but more than 200 died in concentration camps.

"We've created this exhibit with curved walls and railings to look like the refugee ship," explained Fried. Cleverly designed "portholes" bring history to life through films and images. The exhibit includes a timeline of events in Europe, the U.S., and the Alaska Territory from 1933 to 1945. Above the "ship" hang reproductions of letters, like Bruno Rosenthal's, requesting immigration to Alaska.

ALASKA JEWISH MUSEUM
1221 E 35th Ave, Anchorage
Sunday–Friday, 1 p.m.–6 p.m.

Kristallnacht riots. Jewish men—30,000 of them—were arrested and thrown into concentration camps where they were forced to labor throughout the winter. Bruno Rosenthal was one of them. Hundreds of men died there. Others were released with the stipulation that they begin the process of emigrating out of Germany immediately.

When Rosenthal returned home to Neustadt, he urgently sought an exit.

'NEITHER COLDNESS NOR OTHER NATURE-FORCES'

The brutality of *Kristallnacht* sparked outrage around the world. While the U.S. State Department still opposed accepting refugees, Harold Ickes, Secretary of the Interior, had other plans. The Territory of Alaska, population about 65,000, fell within his administrative domain. Ickes commissioned a feasibility study from the Department of the Interior on the topic of settling refugees in Alaska. He wanted to exceed current immigration quotas.

The study culminated in the Slattery Report, named for the department's undersecretary, Harry A. Slattery. It was formally titled "The Problem of Alaskan Development." The solution presented would today be called a "win-win." The U.S. could offer refuge to European Jews who would help build the Territory of Alaska. The idea was not outrageous: "Our own nation is actually the product of such a mass migration," Slattery observed.

The report was released nine months after *Kristallnacht*, in August 1939. The focus of potential settlement was limited to Baranof Island, the Kenai Peninsula, and the Matanuska and Susitna valleys. The report projected industries based on Alaska's resources, from coal deposits in the Matanuska Valley to tin on the Seward Peninsula. Potential was seen for farming the vast flat areas of the western Kenai Peninsula, and raising cattle and sheep on Kodiak Island. Much was made of the abundant possibilities of Southeast Alaska. Tourism was a promising venture there. "The coast is a continuous panorama. [It] is to become the show place of the earth," the report proposed. "Pilgrims will throng in endless procession to see it."

The report also conjectured that "Alaska forests could be a perpetual source for 25 per cent of the newsprint consumption in the United States." The advantage of these industries, and the communities that might grow around them, is that they would operate year-round, unlike the territory's seasonal fishing industry.

The Slattery Report also proposed that while other areas of the U.S. might be burdened by an influx of settlers, in Alaska quite the opposite was true. Alaska needed more people to develop a thriving economy. Slattery posited that people of the frontier were willing to accept anyone who wanted to work hard. "Immigration to Alaska supported by industries properly financed will bring both capital and man power to the Territory," the report stated. "Both are prerequisites for social and economic stability."

On September 1, 1939, shortly after the report's release, Germany invaded Poland, igniting World War II in Europe.

Back in Neustadt, Rosenthal received a copy of the Slattery Report in November, enclosed with a reply sent him by the U.S. Department of Interior. He immediately wrote back, emphasizing the willingness he and his fellow Jews possessed to be exactly

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the pioneers Alaska needed: "Neither coldness nor other nature-forces shall prevent us to do our duty."

The State Department still wasn't on board, but Ickes met with Roosevelt, and the president seemed to be considering the idea. Encouraged, the Department of Interior drafted the King-Havenner bill, or the Alaska Development Plan, based on the Slattery Report. The bill, introduced to Congress in March 1940, faced an uphill battle.

While America ruminated about whether to offer Alaska as sanctuary, Hitler was not idle. In April 1940, Germany occupied Denmark and Norway. The following month, they took France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and Belgium. Rosenthal and the Jews of Neustadt waited and hoped.

Ironically, some reservations about the Alaska Development Plan came from the Jewish community in the U.S. Some Jewish organizations thought the plan was a misdirected effort; time and resources ought instead to be directed toward the Zionist goal of creating the state of Israel. Rabbi Stephen Wise, head of the American Jewish Congress and the American Jewish Committee, claimed that the Alaska plan was deficient: "It's not enough, because the big issue is opening the gates of Palestine."

TALK RADIO

The vast majority of the opposition, however, came from non-Jewish America. The United States in the late-Thirties and early-Forties harbored much of the same anti-Semitism that existed in other parts of the world. This was, in part, driven by social leaders such as Father Charles Coughlin, a Catholic priest. Coughlin became the first public figure to disseminate his opinions through a nationwide radio show. At its peak listenership, the show reached an estimated 30 million of America's 130 million citizens. Coughlin frequently used this outlet to espouse his increasingly anti-Semitic ideals. He expressed sympathy for Hitler's fascist government, blamed Jewish bankers for various world conflicts, and believed there was a Jewish conspiracy to seize control of the planet.

He wasn't alone. More anti-Semitic groups existed around the country. The German-American Bund was an organization comprised of American citizens of German descent who were sympathetic to the Nazis. The Silver Shirt Legion was made up of Ku Klux Klan members, Protestants who had been in America for generations. The Silver Shirt Legion's founder, William Dudley Pelley, spread widely a false narrative that seven million Jewish Communist refugees had infiltrated America, conspiring to overtake the government. As implausible as it sounds today, the story likely impacted the debate over refugee quotas in Congress.

It wasn't just fringe groups who held anti-Semitic views. *Forbes Magazine* conducted a survey in July 1938, asking how the American people felt about German, Austrian, and other political refugees, most of whom were Jewish, settling in the United States. Less than five percent of respondents believed immigration quotas should be raised. Two-thirds of Americans preferred excluding the refugees.

'UNSUITED FOR ALASKA'

Despite Ickes' advocacy, many Alaskans were skeptical of his plan to populate the territory with Jewish refugees. Chambers of commerce in Anchorage, Fairbanks, Juneau, and Valdez passed resolutions opposing the Alaska Development Plan. Skagway, Petersburg, and Seward supported the plan.

Some individuals were receptive to the idea, such as Emma de la Vergne, U.S. Recorder in Fairbanks, who told the Fairbanks *Daily News-Miner*, "Let the German Jews come to Alaska if they want to. Alaska is a big country. Give them a chance. If they cannot make a go of it, they will leave."

Most, though, resisted. Some opposed the plan for economic reasons. Others believed that America should first offer such opportunities to its citizens who had been hit hardest by the Depression. Many felt Europe's refugee crisis simply wasn't America's problem. A few barely bothered to conceal their distaste.

In a report written to summarize Anchorage's objections to the plan, Anchorage Chamber of Commerce President Clyde R. Ellis blamed the victims: "We can safely say without fear of contradiction that those refugees have proven their non-assimilability [in their own countries] which has resulted in this disaster which has overtaken them."

Fairbanks mayor Leslie Nerland, quoted in an article titled "German Jews Unsuited for Alaska Settlers Is Prevailing View Here," and printed in the *Daily News-Miner,* stated the following: "Making a haven of Alaska for refugees of any kind is not favored by me. Such a proposal in my opinion is almost as unpopular among Alaskans as the suggestion some time ago that the Territory be used for the location of penal colonies made up of convicts from prisons in the states."

Robert Sheldon, President of the Fairbanks Chamber of Commerce, stated: "They are not the type of hardy Scandinavians who have had so much to do with development of Alaska. It seems the only way refugees

The Fairbanks *Daily News-Miner* reported on local reaction to the 1939 Slattery report.
Courtesy Alaska Jewish Museum.

German-Jews Unsuited For The Territory

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Junior Chamber of Commerce: "The matter should be given thought. Civic leaders and members of the Alaska Planning Council, for instance, should give the proposal serious attention. It is a grave matter."

George Preston, agent of the Northern Commerciay Company—"Forced colonization is not likely to succeed in a country like Alaska. Absorption of newcomers can be effected only as conditions warrant."

Frank S. Gordon, Territorial legislator and pioneer merchant dealing in drygoods and women's wear—"I am unalterably against intolerance. I favor giving the persecuted Jews in Germany habitations somewhere in the United States, her territories or possessions. I am not prepared to designate any particular place or places for such habitation or habitations."

Jess Lauder, Territorial legislator and businessman—"I do not believe a Jewish or any other racial group of alien origin would be able to maintain themselves in Alaska. I do not believe the suggestion that German-Jews be given refuge in Alaska is feasible.

Andrew Nerland, former mayor of Fairbanks, former legislator, president of the Board of Regents of the University of Alaska, pioneer and

Editor's Note:

TELLING AND RETELLING

Accounts of Bruno Rosenthal, the Slattery Report, and Alaska's proposed role as a sanctuary for European Jews have been published before. The story—compelling, intricate, and heartbreaking—is sure to be told anew in the future. The distance from which we view the events, and the breadth of our knowledge, give us a clarity of hindsight we lack when regarding the present. Alaskans' recurrent fascination with the 75-year-old story testifies to its power to complicate our judgment about events today.

Those looking for a more detailed and immersive history will find it at the Alaska Jewish Museum's exhibit. The account in *FORUM* is indebted to the narrative composed for that exhibit by Curator Leslie Fried, and to the following sources.

"The Problem of Alaskan Development," the U.S. Department of the Interior document known as the Slattery Report, was released in 1939. An original copy of it may be viewed in the Alaska Collection of the Loussac Library in Anchorage.

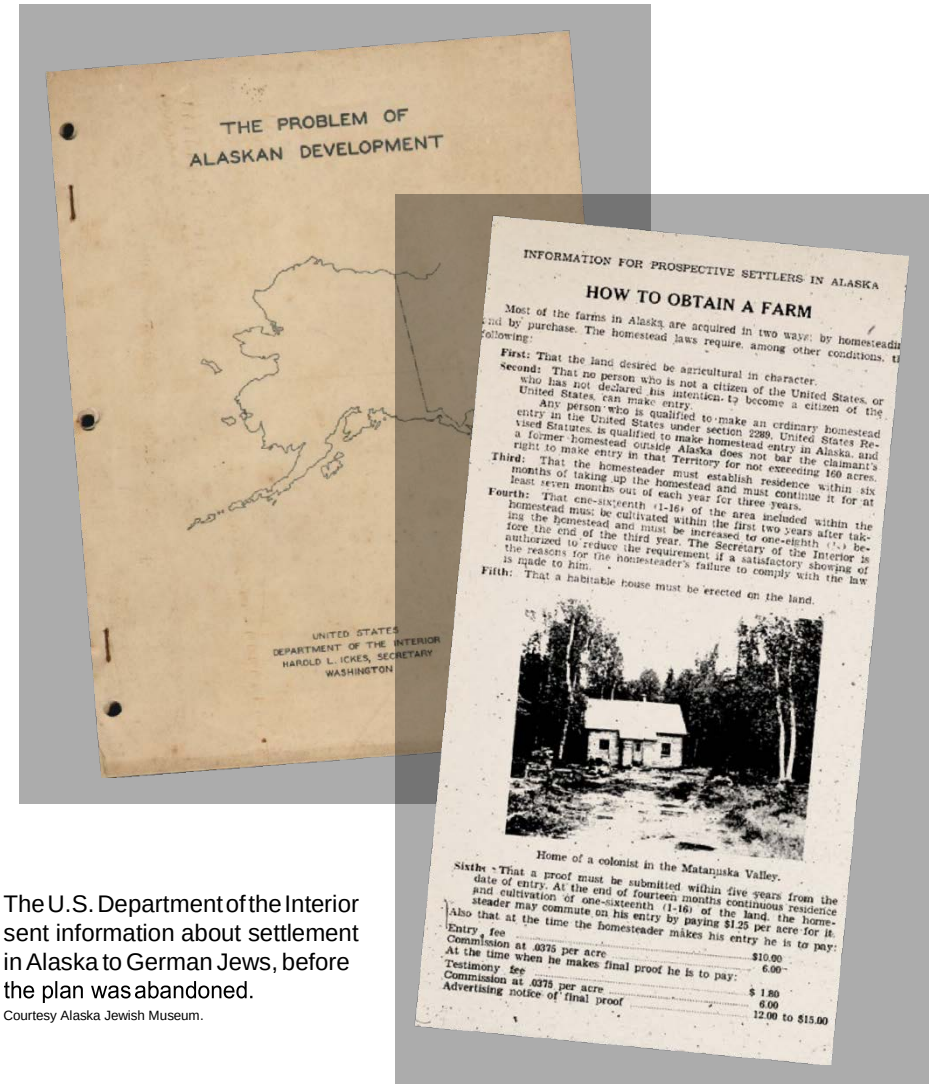
In May 1999, the *Anchorage Daily News* ran a comprehensive four-part story on the subject by Alaska journalist and author Tom Kizzia. The parts are titled "Beacon of Hope," "'Give Us This Chance,'" "'Alaska Wants No Misfits,'" and "'Are There No Exceptions?'"

Alaska History, the journal of the Alaska Historical Society, published "Dashed Hopes for a Jewish Immigration Haven in Alaska," by Hannah L. Mitson in its spring 1999 issue. (The piece is available online at the Forum's Alaska History and Cultural Studies site, akhistorycourse.org.)

"A Thanksgiving Plan to Save Europe's Jews," by Raphael Medoff, appeared in *The Jewish Standard*'s issue of November 16, 2007.

In 2014, Jordan Norquist, a German and history major at the University of Alaska Anchorage, wrote a senior-seminar paper titled "Charity Begins at Home: How Public Opinion Denied Jewish Refugees Asylum in Alaska." Her paper was honored at UAA and summarized online in the university's "Green and Gold News."

For background on the era, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's website, ushmm.org, has a robust and readable educational component.



The U.S. Department of the Interior sent information about settlement in Alaska to German Jews, before the plan was abandoned.
Courtesy Alaska Jewish Museum.

without means could subsist in Alaska would be with government relief grants." Many shared Sheldon's opinion: European refugees didn't know what lay in store for them in Alaska, and would become burdens to the territory. The would-be immigrants simply did not understand the travails they would face.

On the contrary, according to exhibit curator Leslie Fried, Rosenthal and others vying for entry into Alaska received from the Department of the Interior a copy of *Information for Prospective Settlers in Alaska.* This pamphlet described in detail Alaska's climate, the types of vegetables that could be grown, transportation costs, opportunities for work, schools, livestock, population, trapping, laws for hunting, and cost of living: "a man can live on $1 a day."

The refugees' ability to assimilate or adapt didn't matter in the end. Many in Congress argued that while most of the tenets of the Alaska Development Plan might be true, it need not be Jewish refugees who would help settle Alaska. The King-Havenner bill, they contended, was an end-run around immigration quotas and a humanitarian effort disguised as something else. "Do you not know this bill is almost wholly humanitarian on its impulse?" asked Senator Homer Bone of Washington. After raising the hopes of European Jews like Bruno Rosenthal that the Last Frontier might be their sanctuary, the bill was unceremoniously dropped. President Roosevelt never spoke about it publicly.

In November 1941, according to Nazi records, Bruno Rosenthal and his wife were put on a train leaving the nearby town of Roth, headed for a Jewish ghetto in Riga, Latvia. Before the end of the war, occupants of the Riga ghetto were transported to concentration camps, or simply taken outside the city and massacred. There is only an infinitesimal chance that the Rosenthals survived long enough to be liberated by the Allies, but we cannot know. The letters ceased. ■

Aurora Ford is a former Vice Media writer and frequent contributor to the Anchorage Press.