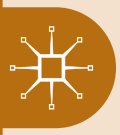

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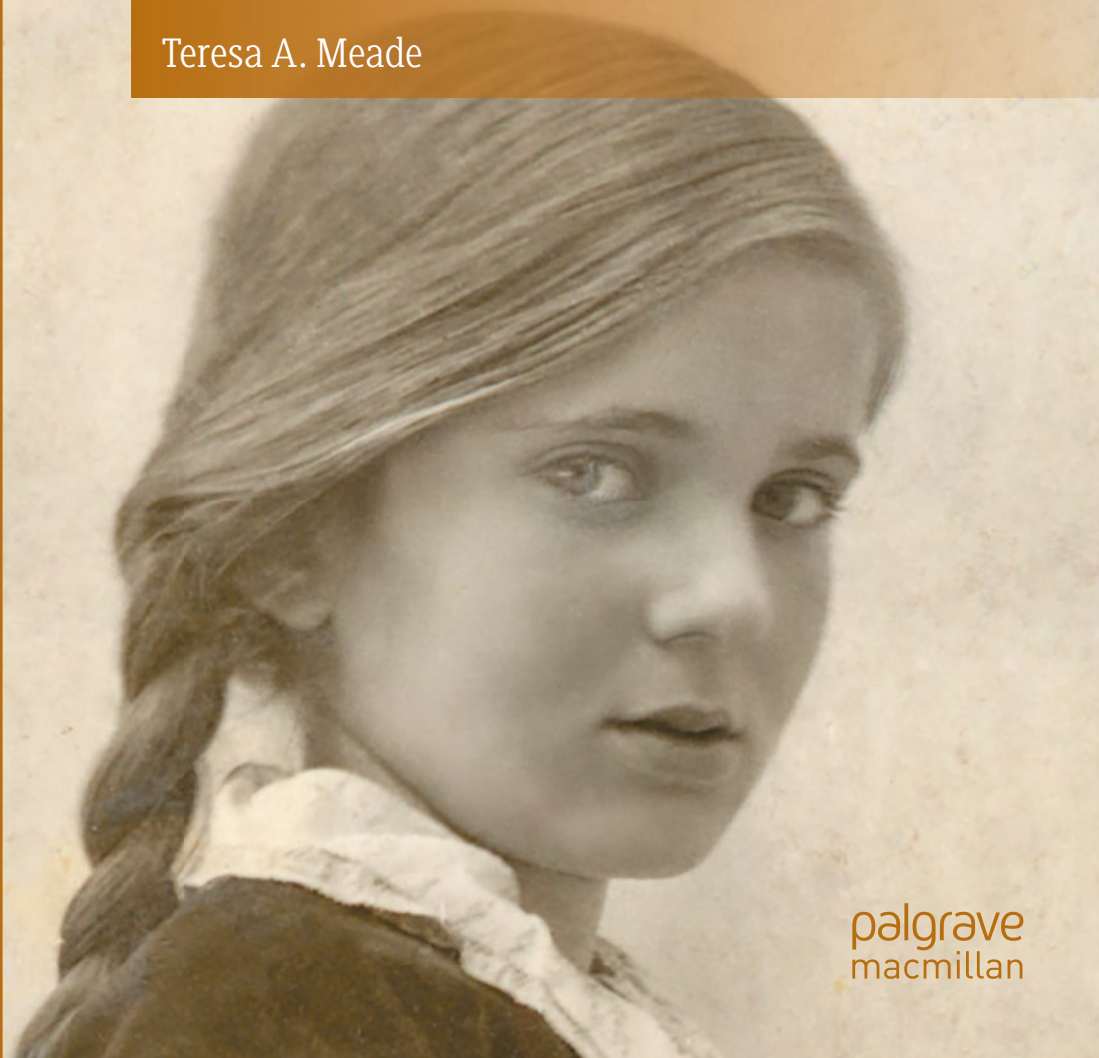
We Don't Become Refugees by Choice

Mia Truskier, Survival, and Activism from Occupied Poland to California, 1920–2014

Teresa A. Meade



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Teresa A. Meade

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For Andor

Acknowledgments

I first want to thank Peter and Mary Truskier for all their help providing access to documents, sharing with me memories of Mia's life and her family, and for their generous hospitality throughout this project. I have appreciated their factual clarifications and corrections, while leaving me free to develop and express my own interpretation of Mia's life, of her relationship with her family, and of the environment surrounding her. Gretchen Muller allowed me to use her transcribed interviews from 2001 and shared with me her insights from the many hours she spent with Mia. I am only sorry that I did not meet Gretchen until after Mia had died, preventing us from having a wonderful three-way conversation. Mia's relatives Gabriela (Truskier) Sherer and Abraham Lacheta, were forthcoming with interviews and offered corrections and clarifications about the Truskier family. At the East Bay Sanctuary Covenant, I learned from Manuel de Paz and most important of all, Sister Maureen Duignan, Mia's longtime working partner and friend. Mia's respect for Sister Maureen shone through in every conversation we had and it was through her that Mia connected with EBSC and the refugee cause. We are all indebted to Sister Maureen and the staff of the EBSC, whose tireless dedication to refugee rights makes the present world a more livable place and provides us hope for a better future.

In the course of writing this book, I have benefitted from many professional and personal friendships. Specialists in Polish and Eastern European history Christopher Browning, Michael Meng, and Steve Berk offered valuable suggestions. I am especially grateful to John Connelly from the University of California, Berkeley, history department for his interest in

the project from the start. He came to Mia's house in Berkeley to talk with her about her experiences, which she enjoyed tremendously, as did he. He read parts of the manuscript and offered valuable corrections, advice, and encouragement. My former colleague at Union College, Bob Sharlet, shared his seemingly boundless store of knowledge about Eastern Europe with me in many conversations and email exchanges before he died. I wish he was here to see the outcome.

I am indebted to many scholars and friends for their feedback on history, theory, and readability, especially Rui Afonso, Ken Aslakson, Harold Berkowitz, Andrea Foroughi, Alicia Frohmann, Linda Gordon, Jim Green, Atina Grossman, Temma Kaplan, Linda Kerber, Melinda Lawson, Judith Lewin, Joyce Madancy, Elena McGrath, Andrew Morris, Brian Peterson, and Barbara Weinstein. Claudia Koonz encouraged this project early on and kept me at it. Claudia, Ron Grele, Danny Walkowitz, and Sarah Dohrmann read chapters and offered helpful, challenging, and supportive critiques. That I finished this book at all is to their credit. The wrong turns and grammatical errors that they probably tried to correct are my fault alone. Special thanks to Bob Mindelzun whose own book about his parents' life in the Soviet work camps inspired me and helped fill in so many gaps. I am grateful to Debbie Rosenberg for introducing me to Bob, and for her years of friendship and hospitality.

Thank you Jonathan Truskier, for scanning documents, Isia Tlusty, for suggestions on family history, and Jay Newman for his help with the family tree. The staff at Union College's Schaffer Library and the Computer Services Help Desk promptly responded to my questions, ordered books, found digital sources that made it possible to carry on despite the worldwide coronavirus pandemic of 2019–2021. They came to my rescue more times than I can count. Library, archival, and computer support is crucial to the research and writing enterprise any time, but was indispensable during the forced isolation of the pandemic. I am grateful to Union College's history department office administrator Jane Earley, student researcher Emma Moger, and the student support staff who were there for help with photocopying, transcribing, and generally taking care of the paperwork that piles up during a long project.

I am indebted to three tremendous Polish–English translators, Viktoryia Baum, Michelina Kulesz, and Emilia Strzalkowska. Emilia worked on this project from its earliest days, translating the correspondence while sitting with Mia, going over wrinkled and faded old letters, deciphering impossibly small script, and piecing together a wartime story. Chris Carlisle

stepped in at the end to translate some key phrases and help with the context of Polish sayings. Thanks to Mia's friend and neighbor Barbara Ehrenberger for her hospitality and good company. My deepest thanks are to the California contingent who appreciated Mia and over the years listened to my stories about her, offered advice, drove me around, and opened their homes for rest, good food and drink, laughs, walks, and conversation, especially Sharon Bohn and George Gmelch, Chris Farmerie, Irene McGinty, Kristi Rasmussen, Brian Tulloch, and Roxanne Dean. I want to thank Steve Turmes for his hospitality during past visits to the Bay Area. We share the pain of losing my sister Martha, who we loved and who delighted in visiting with Mia often before her own untimely death.

Research for this book was supported by the Union College Humanities Faculty Development Fund, Union's travel funds, and the Hadassah Brandeis Institute Research Award. Thank you also to Meagan Simpson, Paul Smith Jesudas, Divya Anish, and the editorial staff at Palgrave Macmillan.

Andor Skotnes introduced me to the Truskier family in 1975 and is therefore the most responsible for this book. He was there at my side through it all with countless hours of conversation, and careful reading of the manuscript. His expertise in oral history methodology, technique, and guidance on recording, saving and cataloging the interview files cannot be underestimated. I dedicate this book to him as a small way of saying thank you for this and everything else. My son Darren has always been a crucial assistant to my academic life, driving me to and from airports, advising on travel arrangements, computer problems, and with scanning documents. My daughter Claire and Mia clicked from the first moment the two met, howling with laughter at the "old Polish sayings" that Claire then wrote down for this book and for posterity. Finally, I am thankful to all the Truskiers for their energy, interest, and support. Mia talked about her family lovingly and constantly; they were her anchor and the pieces that made her who she was, namely, Peter, Mary, Jon, Ben, Erin, Vince, Rudy, Alice, Matt, Michelle, Chance, Wemberly, Libby, Orlando, and Kelsey.

Notes on Interviews, Sources, and Formatting

Mia (Tłusty) Truskier is the main narrator of this book. Mia's story was told in her own words to me over many hours in her home in Berkeley, California. From 2010–2013, I lived with Mia at intervals of one to two weeks and recorded over twenty hours of audio interviews, in addition to two hours of video in which she talks about her art, displays newspaper clippings, photographs, and varied memorabilia. Because we interacted on a daily basis, shared meals, and talked about a wide variety of subjects, many of our conversations, and my observation of her day-to-day life and surroundings, were not captured on "tape." On those occasions, I jotted down notes and wrote summaries afterward.

I also interviewed members of Mia's family, her friends, relatives of her deceased husband, Jan, and people she knew through her work in refugee rights. These interviews provide background to the era in which she lived, occasionally add alternative perspectives on historical events, and deepen our understanding of Mia personally and as a political activist. In the text that follows, large portions of my informants' testimonies—again especially Mia's—alternate with my own voice. I have indicated in the text when I draw on the words of Mia and other informants, especially Peter and Mary Truskier, Gabriela (Truskier) Sherer, Abraham Lacheta, Ánh Tran, and Sister Maureen Duignan. If they, or Mia, provided me with written or published comments, I placed the remarks in quotes and provided citations. In a few cases, I have labeled a particular passage with a name to distinguish the comments from Mia's.

Finally, I relied on Gretchen Muller's transcribed interview of Mia, especially regarding the latter's early years in Poland. Throughout the

text, I interspersed Mia's words from the Muller transcription with those from Mia's interviews with me, sometimes noting how she repeated and slightly altered an account that she relayed to both of us. Gretchen Muller interviewed Mia from November 1999 through October 2001 and completed the transcription in December 2001. I began to interview Mia ten years later, when she was in her nineties and had endured more health problems, but was still very alert mentally, if more confined in terms of mobility. My conversations with Mia went beyond in topic and time period the interview with Gretchen and focused on her political activism, work with the East Bay Sanctuary Covenant, and views on current political events.

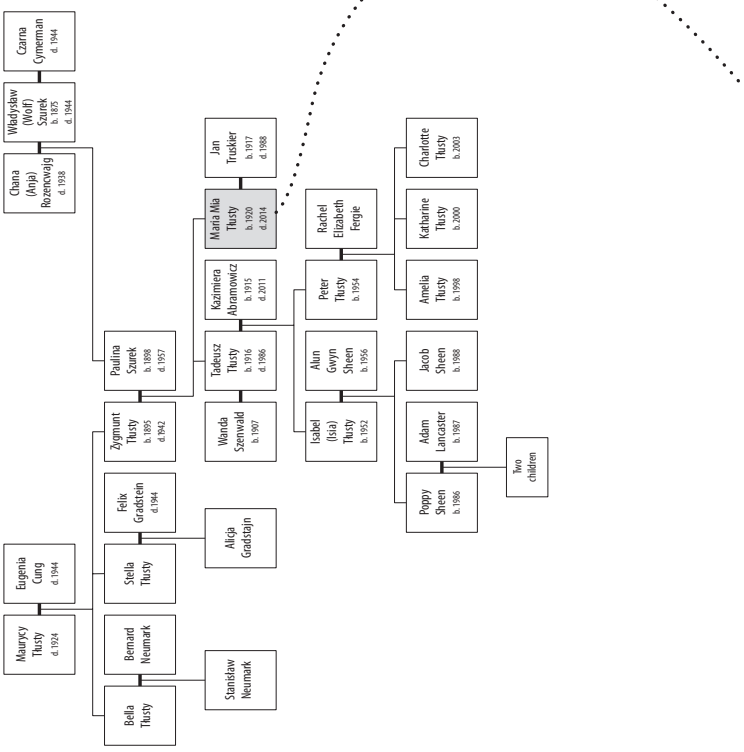
In deciding on the visual presentation of Mia's testimony, I am influenced by the advice of Alessandro Portelli. In his many books and essays on the practice and uses of oral testimony, Portelli emphasizes the importance of placing the interviewee at the center of the narrative. The voice of the interviewer, the person arranging, constructing, and conveying the testimony in a written document—in this case my voice—should, he warns "be used as sparely as possible."[1] Because it is Mia's own life history that interests us, her testimony is primary. Nonetheless, my comments and questions to Mia, my agreements, disagreements, and conclusions, as well as empirical documentation, are indispensable to the presentation of Mia's life. In effect, Mia and I are conversing as historians with the goal of understanding her experiences and the era in which she lived.

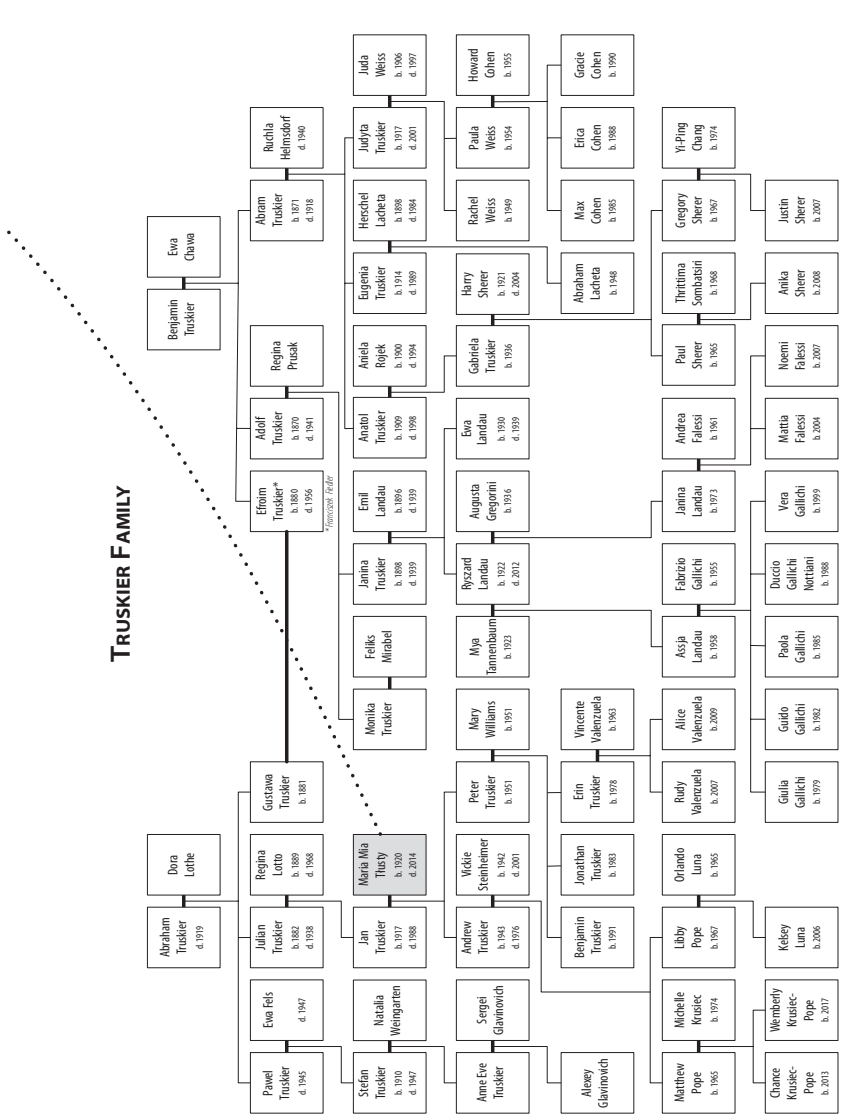
The interviews with Mia have been digitized, loosely indexed, and portions have been transcribed. Copies of these interviews, Gretchen Muller's transcript, and many letters in Polish, are in my possession and in the possession of Mia's son, Peter Truskier. We plan to deposit them in a scholarly archive.

Note

1. Alessandro Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different," in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, eds., *The Oral History Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 68–69.

Tłusty Family




TRUSKIER FAMILY
Abraham Truskier d. 1919
Dora Lothe
Julian Truskier b. 1882 d. 1938
Regina Lotto b. 1889 d. 1968
Jan Truskier b. 1917 d. 1988
Maria Mia Thusty b. 1920 d. 2014
Natalia Weingarten
Ewa Fels d. 1947
Paweł Truskier d. 1945
Stefan Truskier b. 1910 d. 1947
Gustawa Truskier b. 1881
Efroim Truskier* b. 1880 d. 1956
*Ephraim Feller
Benjamin Truskier
Ewa Chawa
Regina Prusak
Adolf Truskier b. 1870 d. 1941
Abram Truskier b. 1871 d. 1918
Ruchla Helmsdorf d. 1940
Janina Truskier b. 1898 d. 1939
Felliks Mirabel
Emil Landau b. 1896 d. 1939
Aniela Rojek b. 1900 d. 1994
Anatol Truskier b. 1909 d. 1998
Eugenia Truskier b. 1914 d. 1989
Herschel Lacheta b. 1898 d. 1984
Judyta Truskier b. 1917 d. 2001
Judа Weiss b. 1906 d. 1997
Monika Truskier
Ryszard Landau b. 1922 d. 2012
Mya Tannenbaum b. 1923
Augusta Gregorini b. 1936
Ewa Landau b. 1930 d. 1939
Gabriela Truskier b. 1936
Harry Sherer b. 1931 d. 2004
Paula Weiss b. 1954
Howard Cohen b. 1955
Mary Williams b. 1951
Peter Truskier b. 1951
Vickie Steinheimer b. 1942 d. 2001
Andrew Truskier b. 1943 d. 1976
Sergei Glavinovich
Anne-Eve Truskier
Vincente Valenzuela b. 1963
Erin Truskier b. 1978
Jonathan Truskier b. 1983
Benjamin Truskier b. 1991
Alexey Glavinovich
Assja Landau b. 1958
Fabrizio Gallichi b. 1955
Janina Landau b. 1973
Andrea Falessi b. 1961
Paul Sherer b. 1965
Thritima Sombatsiri b. 1968
Rachel Weiss b. 1949
Erica Cohen b. 1988
Gracie Cohen b. 1990
Alice Valenzuela b. 2009
Rudy Valenzuela b. 2007
Guido Gallichi b. 1982
Paola Gallichi b. 1985
Duccio Gallichi Nottiani b. 1988
Vera Gallichi b. 1999
Mattia Falessi b. 2004
Noemi Falessi b. 2007
Abraham Lacheta b. 1948
Max Cohen b. 1985
Gregory Sherer b. 1967
Yi-Ping Chang b. 1974
Anika Sherer b. 2008
Justin Sherer b. 2007
Orlando Luna b. 1965
Libby Pope b. 1967
Kelsey Luna b. 2006
Michelle Krusiec b. 1974
Wemberly Krusiec-Pope b. 2017
Matthew Pope b. 1965
Chance Krusiec-Pope b. 2013
Giulia Gallichi b. 1979

Contents

About the Author

Teresa A. Meade is Florence B. Sherwood Professor of History and Culture Emerita at Union College. She has authored and edited books, articles, and journals on Latin America, and gender, sexuality, and women's studies, including *A History of Modern Latin America, 1800-to the Present, "Civilizing" Rio: Reform and Resistance in a Brazilian City, 1889–1920, A Brief History of Brazil, and The Companion to Global Gender History*. She is a member of the *Radical History Review* Editorial Collective, former president of the Board of Trustees of the *Journal of Women's History*, and recipient of grants from the J. William Fulbright and the National Endowment for Humanities Foundations, and the Hadassah Brandeis Institute.

List of Figures

CHAPTER 1

Mia Truskier: The "Oldest Refugee"

On May 17, 2014 a large group congregated at St. John's Presbyterian Church in Berkeley, California for a memorial service in honor of Mia Truskier. Sister Maureen Duignan, Executive Director of the East Bay Sanctuary Covenant (EBSC) and Mia's closest friend and collaborator, greeted the congregants: "We are gathered here this morning to bid farewell to our dearly beloved sister Mia Truskier for whom we grieve and whose life spanned ten decades. As we honor Mia today, we celebrate a woman who truly loved her family beyond compare, a woman of peace, who tried to bring harmony in conflict, a woman of hospitality, whose door was wide open to all, especially the immigrant and the refugee."

St. John's Presbyterian may have seemed an odd choice for honoring the life of a secular Jew and spiritual skeptic, but as one of the founding parishes of the Sanctuary Movement in 1982, it was entirely fitting. Along with four other Bay Area churches (University Lutheran, St. Joseph the Worker Catholic Church, St. Mark's Episcopal, and Trinity Methodist), St. John's joined with Southside Presbyterian Church in Tucson, Arizona, to provide sanctuary to thousands of people fleeing torture, imprisonment, and death at the hands of the brutal military-ruled governments of El Salvador and Guatemala. Mia was active in this cause, serving on the EBSC Board of Trustees until her death on February 8, 2014, just short of her ninety-fourth birthday.

T. A. Meade, *We Don't Become Refugees by Choice*, Palgrave Studies in Oral History, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-84525-4_1

As a historian of Latin America, I interviewed Mia about her work while in the first stages of a book on North American activists involved in providing sanctuary for Central American refugees in the United States (US). Our conversations began in 2011 and continued over the next two years. In her nineties, physically frail but mentally sharp as ever, Mia was continuing to offer material and moral support to the EBSC projects and fundraisers, even making it down to the Berkeley office on occasion. When I asked why she devoted so many hours to this work, she responded: "The answer is simple, because I will never forget what it is like to be a refugee."

From Survival to Activism

Often called EBSC's "oldest refugee," Mia along with her husband and other family members had escaped from German-occupied Poland in the spring of 1940, lived semi-clandestinely in Italy through World War II, and immigrated to the US in 1949. Although her journey from Poland to Italy to Nebraska, and eventually California, is a remarkable tale, it is not what drew so many people to her memorial service. Mia's son Peter said it best in his welcoming remarks: "This is the thing that most impresses me when I think back on my mother's life. The fact that her experience during the war made her more, not less, able to embrace the common humanity of all people and that she felt compelled to act on it." Mia had traded in the dangers and disappointments of the war years for a life of responsible activism in aid of refugees facing similar circumstances today. As the many testimonies during the memorial service revealed, Mia's was an activism that crossed racial, ethnic, and national lines.

Mia identified as a refugee but used the rights citizenship accorded her to advocate for new waves of refugees. She recognized that just as doors had slammed shut denying safe harbor to Jews fleeing Nazi persecution, people currently escaping violence, abuse and grinding poverty are deserving of our assistance. Since she had been refused asylum in Switzerland and elsewhere in Europe in 1940 when she and her family desperately needed it, she was not going to sit by while the same thing happened to millions fleeing from El Salvador, Haiti, Syria, Sudan, Palestine, and many other places.

Most often, refugee narratives focus on dangers overcome, on near-misses with capture and death, and on survivors' arrival to a safe and meaningful present. We discuss the lives of refugees in our book clubs, teach or learn about them in classrooms, and ponder the refugee crisis

Fig. 1.1 Mia selling crafts at the EBSC table at the Berkeley Holiday Craft Fair, ca. 2009. (Credit: Truskier Family Collection)

from a comfortable distance. The heroic memoirs, biographies, collected oral testimonies, films, and podcasts that chronicle the plight of millions of displaced people inform us of suffering and human deprivation across the globe. Mia's story is different, possibly quite rare. As a former refugee, she worked with others to provide housing, employment and a path to citizenship for all refugees, regardless of their particular backgrounds. In the EBSC newsletter that she edited, Mia explained what motivated her work.

> A few years ago, at one of our EBSC gatherings, I was jokingly introduced as "our oldest refugee." I accepted the title in the way it was intended. I felt amused but also honored. The fact is that I never was a refugee in this country. I came to the U.S. on an immigration visa and have been a citizen for half a century. Still, I do deserve the title of refugee because, during World War II in Europe, I became what today people often refer to as an "illegal alien." I think that, regardless of when, where, or under what circumstances they have to flee their country, all refugees have so much in common that they are entitled to speak on each other's behalf. We don't become refugees by choice.[1]

Mia recognized her status as an immigrant to the US, but tended to speak of herself as a refugee, particularly in her later years. The Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Viet Thanh Nguyen, whose family escaped from South Vietnam in 1975, emphatically refers to himself as a refugee, not an immigrant, as a way of legitimizing all refugees. According to Nguyen, "We call ourselves a 'nation of immigrants'; it's part of our mythology that immigrants come here and achieve the American dream. … But refugees are different. Refugees are unwanted where they come from. They're unwanted where they go to." Immigrants, the myth would have it, came here willingly, worked hard, overcame discrimination, beat back hardship and constructed a great land. Refugees, by contrast, are victims with no standing in the creation of national greatness, mythical or otherwise. Nguyen turns the tables by insisting on his identity as a refugee and, similar to Mia, using it as a source of empowerment "to advocate for the new refugees today."[2]

Possibly because she came to America as an adult anxious to embrace the opportunities her new life afforded, Mia saw no benefit in parsing a distinction between refugee and immigrant. Certainly she had not chosen to leave Poland, but she did choose to come to the US for the very specific reason that this was a place where she could participate fully in civic life. When I asked why she and her husband Jan (pronounced "Yon") did not remain in Italy, where many people had assisted them when they really needed it, where they had found work, and where they had made many friends, her response was definite. "We could not become citizens in Italy, at least for a very long time. We had no future there." Ryszard, Jan's cousin who escaped with them from Poland, remained in Italy, married and had children, but was only able to obtain citizenship after twenty-five years. That was not an existence Mia and Jan envisioned for themselves and their family; they sought a place in which they could participate as full-blown citizens. In the wake of the war, destruction, and the Holocaust, neither Poland nor Italy afforded them such rights and, crucially, responsibilities. Despite the fact that the US had not in the past shown any willingness to admit Poles, nor to provide refuge to Jews escaping Nazi oppression, it was a country willing to grant citizenship to refugees.

The crux of Mia's story, as the title to this book implies, was surviving in order to start again in a place where full civic engagement was possible. The hackneyed concept of "starting again" furthers a myth of America as a land of opportunity where immigrants struggled and presumably were able to fulfill their dreams. In reality the masses who poured into the

harbors of New York, Boston, New Orleans, and San Francisco in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were often fleeing famine, war, political oppression, and persecution in their homelands. Were they not refugees? Indeed with the exception of indigenous people, who had not invited the settlers to take their land, or Africans enslaved and transported across the ocean, or Mexicans who lost their rights and property in war and treaties, were not all the rest running from the hard times of the old country? Alas, historical context is everything. Thousands of women, men, and children escaping famine in Africa are in today's terminology refugees, but the multitudes who fled famine in Ireland in the nineteenth century were immigrants. At what point does a refugee become an immigrant? When is a victim of oppression no longer a burden pounding at our shores but is instead proof of the American dream? The outcome has rested on the shifting sands of economic prosperity, political realignments, and short-term policies. For the Truskiers, it was the difference between prewar scarcity and the booming economy of the postwar era, the luck of a presidential decree that opened the borders to victims of war who were unable to return to their homelands, and the fortuitous existence of a Truskier uncle in Nebraska who was willing to serve as a sponsor. Others fleeing identical circumstances then and now have faced a closed, often hostile, border. As her son remarked at her memorial, it was Mia's own experience in the war and, I would add, her own good fortune surviving it, that made her more, not less, able to see the common humanity of all refugees.

Who Was Mia Truskier?

In our conversations, Mia told me stories about her happy, comfortable childhood in Warsaw before the outbreak of war. She recounted her escape in 1940 to Italy on a black-market visa, followed by the perilous war years in Rome where she and her husband passed as gentiles, supporting themselves in the gray market of odd jobs available to those without working papers. She was a go-between for Poles confined in Vatican City who were supporting the Polish Government-in-Exile based in London. She and her husband knelt in chapels to receive messages from partisan diplomats in the Vatican intended for members of the underground resistance in Poland. Always she worried about the health and safety of her mother who along with thousands of other "hidden Jews" remained on the Aryan side back in Warsaw, constantly evading the watchful patrols of the Gestapo.[3]

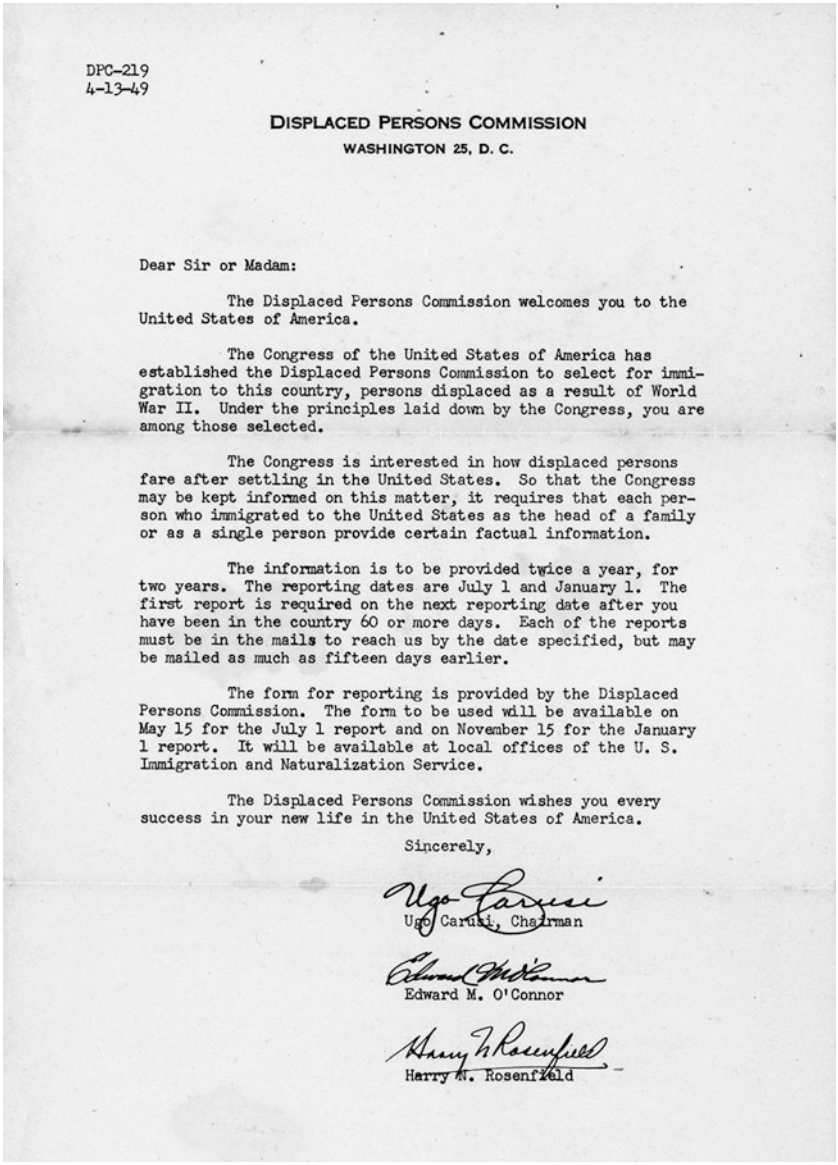
Fig. 1.2 Trees for Haiti poster. (Credit: Truskier Family Collection)

Likewise, she was anxious to know the fates of her father, brother, and sister-in-law, held in a work camp far into the interior of the Soviet Union. The stories that had taken up residence in her mind while living through World War II, and in the years afterward as an immigrant political activist building a new life in the US, now tumbled out into my digital recorder.

Meeting Mia

I first met Mia, and her husband Jan, in 1975 at their home in Long Beach, California. I got to know them through my partner, Andor Skotnes, a friend for years of their son Peter and his wife Mary. Our first meeting made an impression. I recall how they greeted me with such genuine warmth and expectation of maturity that as a twenty-something student I was caught off guard. Then, over the years, our relationship deepened when Andor and I paid visits to Long Beach, and later Oakland, where they moved to be closer to Peter and Mary. I only saw Jan a few times over the years before his death in 1988, but remember him as gracious and

Fig. 1.3 Mia and Andy Truskier International Red Cross Passport for Travel by Stateless Persons, 1949. (Credit: Truskier Family Collection)



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DISPLACED PERSONS COMMISSION
WASHINGTON 25, D. C.

Dear Sir or Madam:

The Displaced Persons Commission welcomes you to the United States of America.

The Congress of the United States of America has established the Displaced Persons Commission to select for immigration to this country, persons displaced as a result of World War II. Under the principles laid down by the Congress, you are among those selected.

The Congress is interested in how displaced persons fare after settling in the United States. So that the Congress may be kept informed on this matter, it requires that each person who immigrated to the United States as the head of a family or as a single person provide certain factual information.

The information is to be provided twice a year, for two years. The reporting dates are July 1 and January 1. The first report is required on the next reporting date after you have been in the country 60 or more days. Each of the reports must be in the mails to reach us by the date specified, but may be mailed as much as fifteen days earlier.

The form for reporting is provided by the Displaced Persons Commission. The form to be used will be available on May 15 for the July 1 report and on November 15 for the January 1 report. It will be available at local offices of the U. S. Immigration and Naturalization Service.

The Displaced Persons Commission wishes you every success in your new life in the United States of America.

Sincerely,

Ugo Carusi, Chairman

Edward M. O'Connor

Harry N. Rosenfield

Fig. 1.4 Letter to Truskiers before leaving Italy from Displaced Persons Commission, Washington, D.C., 1949. (Credit: Truskier Family Collection)