



Collection 3083

**Joseph E. Beck
Papers**

**1902-1988 (bulk ca. 1950-1980)
3 boxes (21 folders), 2 flat files, 1 lin. feet**

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Lourie, Norman V. (MSS 158)

Joseph E. Beck
Papers, 1902-1988 (bulk ca. 1950-ca. 1980)
3 boxes, 1 volume, 2 flat files, 1.2 lin. feet

Collection 3083

Abstract

Joseph E. Beck (1904-1981), a native of Racine, Wisconsin, was a social worker who helped Jewish refugees during World War II. Having previously worked for various social agencies in Cleveland, Ohio, and Scranton, Pennsylvania, Beck became the executive director of the Jewish Family Society of Philadelphia in 1934. He headed this organization until 1942 when he accepted the executive directorship of the National Refugee Service, in New York City. He left this organization in 1950 and moved to California, where he continued social work and eventually retired.

This small yet vivid collection includes correspondence, family records, photographs, clippings, and 16mm films. The majority of the collection is comprised of Beck's candid and personal writings on a variety of social, political, and cultural topics. Many of these writings were used in Beck's autobiography, a copy of which is also in this collection.

Background note

Born in Racine, Wisconsin, Joseph Emanuel Beck (1904-1981) was Avrom Bach's (ca. 1864-1928) and Bela Ciora's (ca. 1909-1921) first child born in America. Avrom and Bela, both Romanian Jews, already had four older children, Jeanne, Samuel, James, and Edith, all born in Romania before the couple immigrated to America. After Joseph, they had one more daughter, Rose.

Avrom was the first of the family to immigrate to the United States. He arrived via Ellis Island in 1901 and made his way to Racine, Wisconsin after securing a job at a leather tannery. When he had saved enough money, Avrom sent for the rest of his family still in Romania. Bela and the four children arrived in Racine sometime in 1903. About six months after Joseph's birth in 1904, the family moved to a farm settlement in Arpin, Wisconsin. Around 1909, the family moved to Cleveland, Ohio, where Joseph spent his formative years.

Beck graduated from high school in 1921 and decided to attend Ohio State University, Columbus, where he remained for only a year. At the start of his sophomore year, in Fall 1922, Beck transferred to Harvard where he majored in government (or political science) and minored in economics. While at Harvard, Beck met Celia Frances

Garfinkle (1904-1974), then a student at Harvard's Radcliffe College. The two became engaged in 1926 and were married a short time later. Celia became a successful social worker and psychologist. Together they had two children, Albert William (1931-) and Deborah Ciora (1935-).

After graduating from Harvard around 1927, Beck returned to Cleveland. He was interested in continuing his education, but did not have the funds. He had heard of a fellowship given by the Associated Charities of Cleveland (ACC) which allowed one to pursue graduate studies in social work at Western Reserve University. Beck applied for and was awarded this fellowship; thus began his career in social work. In addition to his classes at Western, he worked as an ACC field agent. During this time he worked with needy people of all races and creeds. He developed a deep passion for social work and for helping others, especially immigrant families. He also cultivated strong views and opinions on the notions of charity, philanthropy, and welfare and the roles of the government and the individual in providing and obtaining such services.

In 1929, Beck was invited to become the executive director of the Family Welfare Association (FWA) of Scranton, Pennsylvania. He accepted the position, and in 1930 he moved to Scranton, a mining town. Beck worked with the families of disabled miners and with local coal union representatives to provide assistance for the miners. A few years later, Beck met with the executive director of the Jewish Federation of Philadelphia who offered him the executive directorship of Philadelphia's Jewish Welfare Society. Beck took the offer, and in 1934 he and his family moved to Philadelphia.

The Jewish Welfare Society (JWS) of Philadelphia set itself apart from other welfare organizations of the time in that it provided numerous services under one roof, such as work relief, small business loans, and shelter for homeless men. When Beck first began working for JWS the organization had plenty of funding for its small number of refugee cases. As Hitler's presence in Europe increased over the mid to late 1930s, however, so too did the number of Jewish refugees to the United States. In the late 1930s, the number of refugees who sought services from JWS increased rapidly. Unfortunately, JWS could not cope financially with the increase in refugees and had to halt its resettlement services in late 1939. Beck went on a personal crusade to help find funding for JWS and resources for the refugees. He found a timely ally in the National Refugee Service (NRS) in New York City, which aided JWS.

Beck served as the executive president of JWS until about 1942, because in the spring of 1943 he became the executive director of the National Refugee Service in New York City. While he did not necessarily want to leave Philadelphia, Beck felt that through NRS he could better help the many Jewish refugees fleeing Europe and Hitler's concentration camps. Hence, the family moved to New York City in 1943, eventually settling for a time in Scarsdale.

As executive director of the NRS, Beck met with local refugee committees in various cities across the U.S., including San Francisco, Denver, and Kansas City. His primary purposes in these meetings were to rally local support for the refugee cause and determine how many refugees each city could handle. On a larger scale, Beck sought to

organize local groups under the auspices of the NRS in order to create a united, national effort to help Europe's Jewish refugees and, in the process, send a message to Congress to loosen America's strict immigration quotas. It seems that Beck spent a great deal of time traveling and speaking to social workers throughout the United States during the war and most of his direct work with housing and helping refugees occurred after the war had ended, in 1947 and 1948.

In 1948, President Truman signed the Displaced Persons Act which allowed 200,000 European refugees into the United States. In response, Beck opened up an office of the National Refugee Service in New Orleans to accept the first round of refugees. At the time, Beck would have liked to go to Europe to witness the refugee selection process, but he developed colitis and was unable to travel.

Around this same time, changes occurred in NRS's organizational structure. Its national and local functions were separated into two newly formed agencies: the United Service for New Americans, Inc. (USNA), and the New York Service for New Americans, Inc. (NYANA). Even though Beck became the executive director of USNA, he sensed it was time to move on. His work no longer appealed to him as it had during the war. In addition, he felt he had done all he could to help Jewish refugees (who were no longer coming to the U.S. in great numbers). Beck decided to leave USNA in early 1949, but agreed to stay with the organization through that year until they could find a replacement director. In June 1950, he and his family moved to San Jose, California.

Beck lived in California for the remainder of his life. He continued his social work and helped form the Jewish Community Council (JCC) of San Jose. In addition to his volunteer work with JCC, Beck volunteered his time with many other organizations, such as the YWCA and the World Affairs Council. Beck eventually found a paid job as a regional welfare consultant for the Welfare Division of the California State Office of Civil Defense. When he was not working, Beck spent much of his time writing on everything from his family's history to his social work to his political views. In his later years, Beck moved between several cities around San Jose and San Francisco and eventually settled in a retirement home in Palo Alto. Joseph E. Beck died of a brain tumor on November 5, 1981, at age 77.

Scope & content

This collection serves as a vivid and detailed account of one man's experiences as a social worker in the United States from the 1920s to the 1950s. Beck was most well known for his work with Jewish refugees in the 1930s and 1940s. The papers span from 1902 to 1988 and consist of three principle components: Beck's autobiography, his other published and unpublished writings, and family materials. Other items in this collection include photographs, news clippings, and two 16mm films. While these papers highlight Beck's work, there is a limited amount of materials that directly relate to Beck's social work. In his personal writings, Beck touched on a variety of topics such as immigration, anti-Semitism, communism, the New Deal, organizational management, labor unions, the Depression, and the role of relief agencies in wartime undercover work.

Box 1 contains Beck's autobiography, which is divided into four folders. In this work, Beck offered his "personal reactions to the knowledge and experience of poverty, as a member of a youth gang, to working at an early age, and as a Jew (a member of a non-Christian minority) against whom many social and economic discriminations were practiced" (ii). In this work, Beck wrote sections on everything from history lessons ["Jewish Farm Settlements" (10)], to work-related challenges ["Public Relief Halts" (235)], to personal anecdotes ["Vacationing with Horthy and Ellis" (300)]. Although the sections are arranged chronologically, Beck often interjected "flashbacks" about his mother and father and his childhood. Additionally, Beck also wrote sizable segments on his siblings, his wife Celia, and his own children, Albert and Deborah. It appears that this work was compiled by Albert Beck, sometime after his father's death. In its latter pages, Albert sometimes inserted "editor's" comments to explain transcription difficulties or out-of-order segments. The last section of the work entitled "The Final Years: 1976 to November 3, 1981," consists entirely of Beck's letters to Albert and other family members. There are also some photocopied clippings and family records near the very end.

Directly related to his autobiography are Beck's other writings and a folder of family correspondence. Because some of these writings were used in his autobiography, they contain numerous edits, presumably made by Beck or Albert. But there are also copious musings that were not included in the autobiography. One quote he used repeatedly is that of 19th-century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, "Life must be lived forward, but can only be understood backward." It sums up well Beck's reasons for and methods of writing.

Boxes 2 and 3 contain Beck's work-related documents and personal writings. The first two folders contain speeches, reports, and letters that highlight Beck's social work. Most of these items date from just after Beck left Family Welfare Services in 1934 to several years after he had settled in California, in the early 1950s. Beck was not trained as public speaker, but he developed an eloquent and pointed style in speech and writing, and often reinforced his arguments with historical research. A good example of this is a 1937 report to the Philadelphia Coordinating Committee for Aid to Refugees and Immigrants. In this report, Beck compared the current efforts to resettle Jewish refugees in Philadelphia to the actions of the United Hebrew Charities of New York which helped resettle Russian Jews in Philadelphia in the 1880s and early 1900s. He noted that, at the time, the refugees were not easily absorbed into Philadelphia, and there were shortages in jobs and housing as more and more refugees were sent to the city. Beck offered an analysis of the city's past experiences with resettlement in order to prevent such problems from recurring. Other interesting speeches include an untitled 1940 discourse on the problems faced by Jewish refugees in America, a 1941 speech entitled "Lay Participation in the Work of a Social Agency," and a 1944 lecture on the history and formation of the National Refugee Service.

Beyond the folders of speeches are several folders of Beck's published and unpublished essays, through which his personality shines as a person of candor, action, and high moral standards. Beck wrote about a variety of immigration-related subjects, from U.S. immigration laws and methods since 1790 to Jewish migration paths in the 19th and 20th

centuries. He discussed America's anti-immigrant and anti-Semitic sentiments of the 1920s and early 1930s through the Sacco and Vanzetti trial and the radio broadcasts of Father Charles E. Coughlin. Beck also discussed President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal legislation and its effects on immigration. Interspersed among the historical evidence are Beck's personal opinions and stories. For example, of his experience welcoming the first group of refugees to the NRS shelter in the Hotel Marseilles New York in 1947, Beck wrote, "Perhaps one of the most important moments is when the refugee arrives at the hotel and is handed a key to his room. A key meant privacy for the first time in many years. Clean white bed sheets bring tears to many women who have not seen or used these in years."¹ He went on to describe some of the challenges he and his staff faced in housing refugees, such as instructing them on the use of everyday items like utensils, telephones, and flushing toilets, and preventing them from hoarding or stealing food.

In addition to his thoughts on immigrants and his work with refugees, Beck captured on paper his views on societal changes since 1900. Again, in addition to historical evidence, Beck utilized his personal experiences to discuss how different societal changes affected him and others like him. His subjects were varied and he touched upon economic, scientific, political, and cultural transformations. A good example of this is his discussion of the concept of charity. He seemed most stirred by the fact that charity for the poor had evolved from a transitory crutch to a societal right. After this discussion, most of his writings on societal changes, whether economic or political, seemed to have been driven by his views on charity, immigration, and poverty.

One last component of Beck's writings is his correspondence to his son Albert at the time Albert was serving with the U.S. Army in Korea. Beck noted the reasons for these letters in his autobiography. "Both Celia and I wrote to Albert of our family backgrounds while he was stationed in Korea. We did this because he had displayed a degree of curiosity. In addition, we both found it difficult to know what else to write him on a regular basis."² A few of these letters are in the "Correspondence and autobiographical notes" folder in Box 2, but most are housed in Box 3 in the "Family correspondence" folder. In these letters, Beck and his wife offered dramatic descriptions of their lives and experiences from early age to present times. While the often undated letters appear to be in order, Beck's stories are not in chronological order, as he often noted at the beginning of each letter.

Near the end of this collection are family records, correspondence, and photographs. The folder entitled "Family records" contains a variety of items such as Joseph's and Celia's birth certificates, Beck's mother's death certificate, various documents in German or Romanian, and notes written in Yiddish. There are also oversized family records in flat files 1 and 2. In the folder of family correspondence are letters from Joseph and Celia to their son Albert, as well as various other letters from and to family members. All the letters in some way relay the Beck family's history. There is a folder dedicated to

¹ "Immigrants and immigration writings" (ca. 1950-ca.1980), folder 1 of 2, [Joseph E. Beck papers (Collection 3083), The Historical Society of Pennsylvania].

² "Autobiography, pages 1-149" (ca. 1978), folder 1 of 4, [Joseph E. Beck papers (Collection 3083), The Historical Society of Pennsylvania].

Celia F. Beck which contains clippings, letters, and Celia's death notice. In addition, there is a folder of photocopied pages from a scrapbook dedicated to Celia Beck's work as a reporter for the *Scranton Sun*. Many of her "around-the-town" and social events articles she penned as "C.F.B." Her original scrapbook is housed separately as Volume 1. The last folder in Box 3 contains mostly unlabeled photographs. There are images of family members from Beck's childhood, formal portraits of Beck as a teenager, and a few pictures of Beck and his colleagues taken in the 1940s or 1950s.

Rounding out the collection are two 16mm short films which have been transferred to DVDs, *This is America* and *Over the Rainbow Bridge*. *This is America* was part of a series produced by Frederic Ullman Jr. in the 1940s. This episode, which dates from around the late 1940s, focused on a German immigrant (or refugee) and his quest to become a United States citizen. Depicted are his arrival in the city via Ellis Island, meetings with immigration officials, and attempts to find housing and a job. He is led to the National Refugee Service where he finds friendly assistance. He perseveres and is eventually sworn in as a United States citizen. The second film, *Over the Rainbow Bridge*, relates the story of one thousand Jewish refugees who were brought to the United States under special orders from President Roosevelt in 1944. Once in America, they were transported to the Fort Ontario Emergency Refugee Shelter in Oswego, New York. At the fort, the refugees led somewhat peaceful lives but were unable to travel beyond its boundaries. They remained in the shelter for about a year and a half until President Harry S. Truman allowed them formal entry into the United States.

Separation report

None.

Related materials

At HSP:

Family Service of Philadelphia. Records, 1878-1999 (Collection 1961).

Lourie, Norman V. (MSS 158).

At the American Jewish Historical Society, New York, NY:

National Refugee Service (I-092).

Bibliography

Feldman, Kathryn Levy. "The History of the Philadelphia Jewish Federation." *Jewish Virtual Library*. <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/US-Israel/phillyfed.html> (18 October 2006).

Gruber, Ruth. *Haven: The Unknown Story of 1,000 World War II Refugees*. New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1983.

"Serving the Community: A Timeline of Philanthropy, Charity, and Non-profit Organizations in Cleveland, Ohio." <http://www.wrhs.org/html/philanthropictimeline/1921to1928.htm> (19 October 2006).

Languages represented

English, Yiddish, German, Romanian.

Subjects

Autobiography – Jewish authors

Charities – New York (State) – New York

Charities – Pennsylvania – Philadelphia

Charities – Ohio – Cleveland

Human services – New York (State) – New York

Human services – Pennsylvania – Philadelphia

Immigrants – Jewish – United States of America – Legal Status, laws, etc.

Immigrants – Jewish – United States of America – Services for

Immigrants – New York (State) – New York

Immigrants – Pennsylvania – Philadelphia

Immigrants – Romanian – United States of America

Jews – Intellectual life

Jews – Politics and government – 20th century

Refugees – Counseling of

Refugees – Economic conditions

Refugees – Employment – United States
Refugees – Europe – History – 20th century
Refugees, Jewish – Germany
Refugees, Jewish – Government policy – United States
Refugees, Jewish – History – 20th century
Refugees, Jewish – Services for – New York (State) – New York
Refugees, Jewish – Services for – Pennsylvania – Philadelphia
Philadelphia (Pa.) – Economic conditions – 20th century
Public welfare – Pennsylvania – Philadelphia
Public welfare – Ohio – Cleveland
Social Security – United States – History – 20th century
Social service – Vocational guidance
Social work administration – Pennsylvania
Social work administration – New York (State) – New York
Social work with immigrants – Pennsylvania – Philadelphia
Social work with families – Ohio – Cleveland
Social work with families – Pennsylvania – Philadelphia
Social work with families – Pennsylvania – Scranton
Social work with refugees – New York (State) – New York
Social work with refugees – Pennsylvania – Philadelphia
Social workers – New York (State) – New York
Social workers – Pennsylvania – Philadelphia
Social workers – Ohio – Cleveland
Volunteer workers in social service – California – San Jose
World War, 1939-1945 – Refugees
World War, 1939-1945 – War work – United States

Associated Charities (Cleveland, Ohio)
Family Welfare Association (Scranton, Pa.)
Jewish Community Council (San Jose, Calif.)
Jewish Family Welfare Society (Philadelphia, Pa.)
National Conference of Jewish Social Welfare (U.S.)
National Refugee Service (U.S.)
United Service for New Americans

Beck, Albert W., 1931-
Beck, Celia F., 1904-1974
Beck, Deborah C., 1935-
Beck, Joseph E., 1904-1981

Administrative Information

Restrictions

The collection is open for research.

Acquisition information

Gift of Albert Beck, 1992.

Accession number 1992-040.

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Processing note

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Box and folder listing

*These folders contain material written or printed in Yiddish, German, or Romanian.

Folder title	Date	Extent	Box	Folder
Autobiography, pages 1-149	ca. 1978	149 pages	1	1
Autobiography, pages 150-299	ca. 1978	150 pages	1	2
Autobiography, pages, 300-449	ca. 1978	150 pages	1	3
Autobiography, pages, 450-545	ca. 1978	96 pages	1	4
"Family Case Work Services for Refugees"	1941	2 items	1	5
News clippings	1956, 1975, 1976	4 items	1	6
Speeches, reports, and letters	1934-1944, 1961, n.d.	23 items	2	1
Speeches, reports, and letters	1939-1960, 1980, n.d.	34 items	2	2
Thoughts and observations	ca. 1940- ca. 1977	87 items	2	3
Correspondence and autobiographical notes	1948-1975, n.d.	56 items	2	4
Vignettes on famous people	ca. 1950- ca. 1970	11 items	2	5
Social and economic essays	ca. 1950- ca. 1978	93 items	2	6
Immigrants and immigration writings	ca. 1950- ca. 1980	98 items	2	7
Immigrants and immigration writings	ca. 1950- ca. 1980	106 items	2	8
Miscellaneous notes and articles	ca. 1950- ca. 1980	59 items	3	1
Miscellaneous notes	ca. 1950- ca. 1980	64 items	3	2
Miscellaneous notes	ca. 1950- ca. 1980	83 items	3	3
Family records*	1902-1968, 1981, n.d.	40 items	3	4
Family records*	1902, n.d.	4 items	n/a	FF 1
Family tree	ca. 1986	1 item	n/a	FF 2
Celia F. Beck	1925-1974	8 items	3	5
"Celia Beck, reporter, <i>Scranton Sun</i> " scrapbook preservation copies	1930	32 items	3	6
"Celia Beck, reporter, <i>Scranton Sun</i> " scrapbook	1930	1 item	Vol. 1	n/a

Family correspondence	1936-1988, n.d.	49 items	3	7
Photographs	ca. 1910- ca. 1975	16 items	3	8
Audio materials: <i>This is America</i> and <i>Over the Rainbow Bridge</i> DVDs and miniDV backups	ca. 1945	6 items	3	9