

Presentation by Andrea Baumann Lustig, President, ARIF

Good evening everyone. My name is Andrea Baumann Lustig and I am President of ARIF—the Association for the Restoration of Jewish Works and Institutions in France. My grandfather was one of a handful of French Jews who, having escaped to America, founded ARIF in order to aid fellow Jews still suffering in war torn France. Well before the end of World War II, a group of French refugees urgently gathered in New York to address the needs of their Jewish brethren in France. As far back as December 1943, a meeting was held in the Baron Edouard de Rothschild's NY home. There and then, they decided to form an association to find solutions to the devastation confronting French Jews during and following the war and, ARIF was born. I thought I might briefly share with you how my grandfather made it from Strasbourg, France to that room in New York City and why he and generations after him sought to aid Jewish life in France from their American homes.

The story begins on a day in 1938, when, over the radio, it was announced that my grandfather who was President of Banque Asch, the Jewish bank in Strasbourg, was wanted by the Gestapo. Immediately, the extended family including my father who was 8 at the time —fled to Saumur further into the South --able to smuggle the gold reserves from the bank with them. While in Saumur, my father told us what an impression it made one night, when a soldier pulled up in a big black car and came in for a meeting with my grandfather. That soldier turned out to be none other than the man who became President of France, Generale de Gaulle. He proposed a deal to my grandfather—in return for contributing 10% of the reserves to the French Resistance, de Gaulle would safeguard the gold until the family got

to safety. My grandfather made the deal and as the Germans penetrated further south into France, the immediate family fled to Spain. Despite desperate pleas to join them, my grandmother's sister's family remained behind. Turned in to the Gestapo by their neighbors because they were feeding a dog, my father's first cousin was shot on the roof of his house and the remainder of the family deported to Auschwitz where they perished. As children, my brother and I listened with wonder to the remarkable series of coincidences that subsequently unfolded and allowed our grandfather to reach the U.S. My father told us how my grandfather's car was pulled to the front of the long line of cars waiting to leave France by a border guard who, as luck would have it, had long ago worked for and loved my grandfather and, then how, as they approached the Spanish border, my grandfather punched my father in the stomach so that the Spanish border guard might let them in faster annoyed by the shocked and screaming child. From Spain, the family then made its way to Portugal where in another coincidence, the wife of the French Ambassador happened to be from Strasbourg and helped smuggle the family onto a freighter ship headed for Cuba. On board the freighter, my father recounted being hidden under a tarp on the lowest deck when the Nazis boarded the ship for inspection before it sailed. He replayed for us how he could hear the Nazi boots clinking on the steel steps as they descended to the deck where his family was hiding...but amazingly re-ascended without raising the tarp and discovering the stowaways. Then in another remarkable twist of fate...the freighter crossed the ocean and stopped unexpectedly to refuel in Hoboken—fed up with carrying people instead of just freight, the captain hurried them off the ship and onto US soil. My father's sister, told us how then my grandfather, finally assured that they had escaped with their lives, emptied four cyanide capsules he had carried with him from France into the Hudson River. Taken in hand by a sympathetic US customs official, they were put on a train to Canada and told to re-enter the US

through the Canadian quota that had not yet been filled. They finally reached New York City where they found fellow French Jewish refugees and were able to begin their lives again. Once in New York, de Gaulle who remained a friend for the rest of their lives, true to his word shipped the gold by plane to New York. My father would laugh as he recounted my grandfather telling the story of how he went to, Idlewild, the airport, to pick up the suitcases and how the baggage handler unloading them exclaimed “boy these bags are heavy—what have you got in here gold bars?” In response to which my grandfather pretended that his English was simply not good enough to understand what was being said. As a result of de Gaulle’s fidelity, my grandfather was able to return to Strasbourg after the war, reopen the Bank and restore the gold to its rightful owners. Going back and forth several times a year, my grandfather helped rebuild the Jewish hospital in Strasbourg and negotiated with the mayor to obtain a plot of land on which to rebuild a synagogue since the Germans had burnt the original Grand Synagogue to the ground and built a pig market in its place. Today, by the way, ARIF continues to support Jewish learning inside that very same synagogue.

Interestingly, my brother and I grew up with only bits and pieces of this story—we actually had to pull the whole thing out of my father over time--one can only imagine what a two-year flight from home under the constant fear of capture and death must have been like—and how frightening the stories heard about those left behind must have been. It seems worthwhile therefore to share you with the following lines from ARIF’s archives which plunge us back into the atmosphere of more than half a century ago and permit us to relive a few pages of ARIF’s history... The following are taken from a report written in extreme haste in 1944 by the Director of the Jewish Social Assistance Works for Alsace-Lorraine.

"Devastated by shootings, massacres and deportations, wandering for weeks in the forest, seeking camouflage in caves and abandoned huts--without opportunity to obtain adequate food, under constant terrible fear of discovery by the Germans, our fellow believers are totally impoverished. A large number of families who have been victims of fire or the looting carried out by barbarian hordes, face complete and utter poverty. Entire families have been exterminated or have disappeared. Many are the children saved by clandestine actions of the brave and, who are now orphans. Many are the disabled, elderly or the sick abandoned to their fate.

The Jews in Alsace and in Lorraine find themselves facing a complete vacuum—they have nothing. They not only need to be clothed but also to be furnished with linens and household articles-- box springs, mattresses and "furniture" which need be nothing more than crates. Artisans and tradesmen need unsecured loans with which to reestablish themselves, children need serious vocational guidance.

A great task lies ahead of us-- after two years of absolute poverty—to try to engage a community which has suffered terribly in a reconstruction effort to restore a desire to work, a joie de vivre and, ultimately, confidence in a better future.”

United by the experiences of having achieved meaningful Jewish lives in France, abandoning those lives and successfully making it to the United States, the handful of French Jewish refugees who gathered in the Rothschild home that December night sought to aid and protect Jews in their native country. Guided no doubt by

their Jewish values, they created what was one of the first charitable organizations that could make overseas grants. Their first fund raising effort in October 1944 yielded \$23,000—the equivalent of \$2.8 million today.

For over 70 years, ARIF has sought to fulfill its mission of restoring Jewish life by continuing the work started by its founders. Following my father's death this past February, I represent the third generation of involvement and I feel the responsibility of my father and grandfather's legacy. Yes, it is true French Jews aren't facing the same basic survival concerns as when ARIF was founded but contemporary Jewish life still confronts struggles borne from both the challenges and opportunities of living in a great, modern and vibrant community. Today ARIF responds by making grants to schools, senior care centers, synagogues, libraries, and museums in Jewish communities throughout France. By seeking to help preserve and augment France's rich Jewish heritage, we hope to help sustain it. It was none other than the Frenchman Alexis de Toqueville who during his historic visit to the United States in 1831 remarked on Americans' unique ability to organize associations for all sorts of purposes. Perhaps ARIF's founders became a bit more American than they realized upon reaching our shores—or perhaps they simply could never forget their French Jewish heritage. Either way, by translating our memory of their dedication into action today, we seek not only to honor their accomplishments but perhaps, more importantly, to help enhance, preserve and invigorate Jewish life in France today so that it lives on into a vibrant and exhilarating future.