

Barbara Steinmetz

WE WERE ALL ONCE REFUGEES

Lauren Eckstein
Stories that Live

Barbara –

Thank you for being the role model not only of a strong Jewish woman but an activist we should all strive to be.

A WORLD BEFORE CONFLICT

Barbara Bandler Steinmetz was born in Győr, Hungary, in 1936 to Margit and Alexander Bandler, though her family lived on the Italian island of Lussinpiccolo, where they owned and operated Hotel Alhambra.

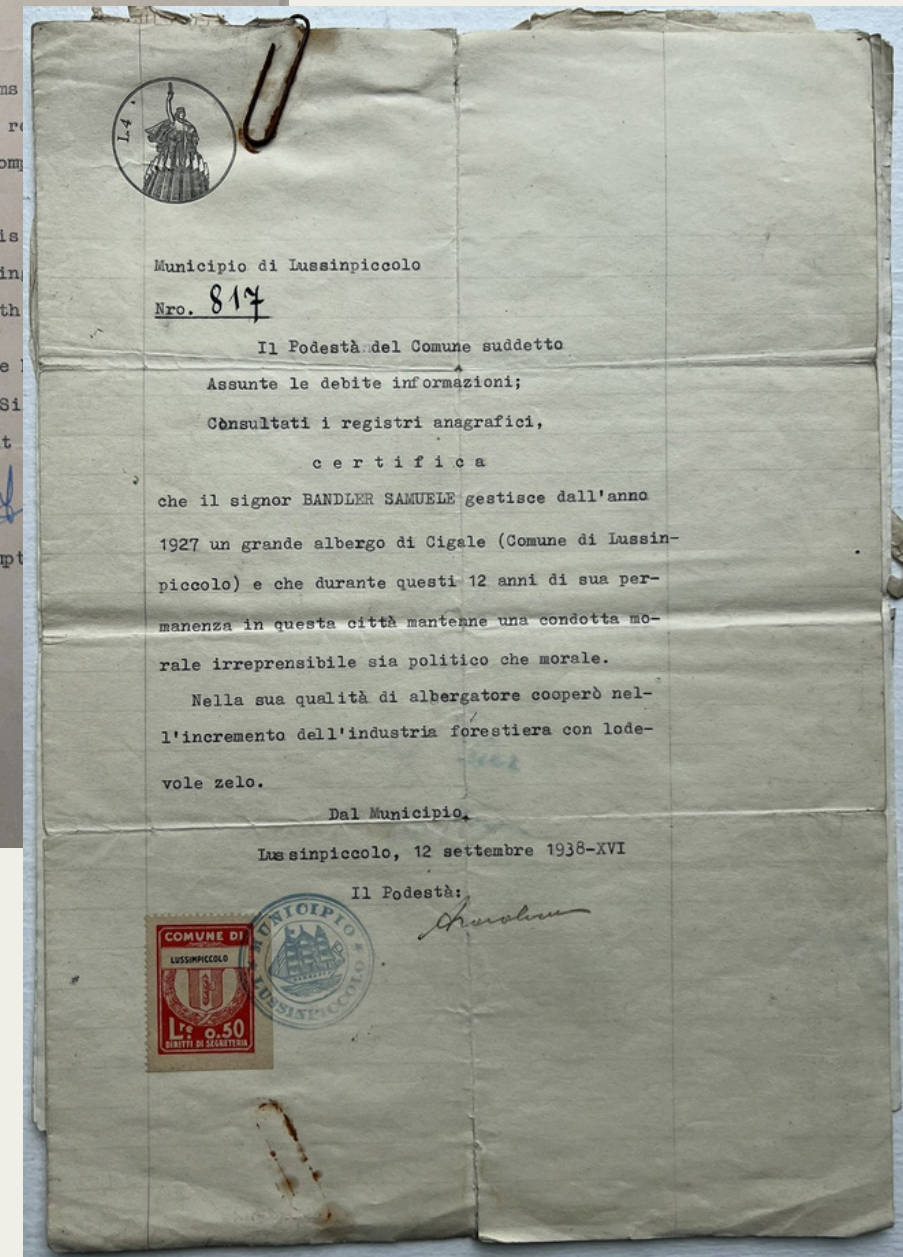
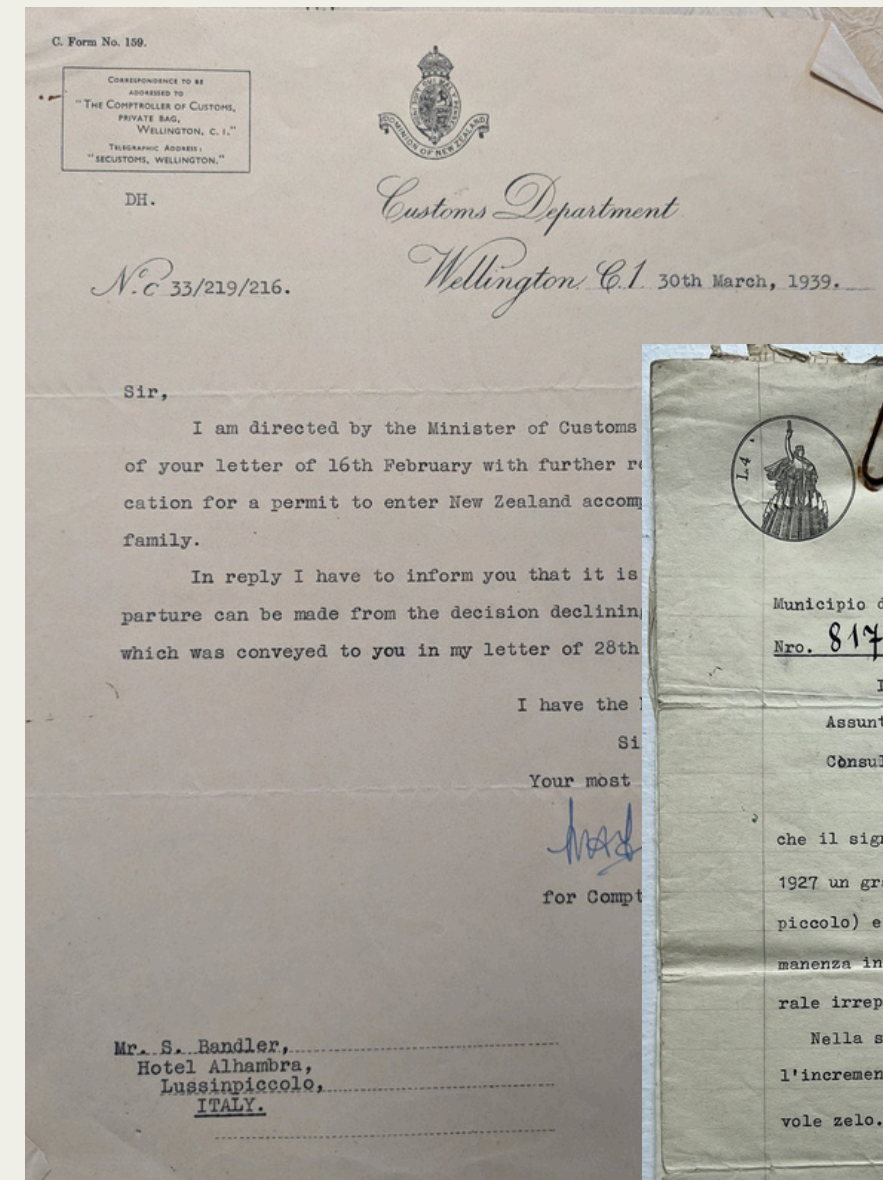
Throughout the 1930s, the Bandler family thrived. Their daughters, Barbara and Ann, grew up in a warm and lively environment, surrounded by visitors who returned year after year. However, as fascism spread across Europe, their future became increasingly precarious. Mussolini's alliance with Hitler and the passage of Italy's 1938 Race Laws stripped foreign Jews of their rights, leading to the expropriation of businesses and forced deportations. Because the Bandlers were not Italian citizens, they faced expulsion and the loss of their livelihood.



THE SHADOW OF PERSECUTION

Alexander wrote to former hotel guests, friends, and officials in countries like England, South Africa, and New Zealand, pleading for visas to escape. However, with most nations enforcing restrictive immigration policies, his efforts were met with rejection.

In 1939, the Bandlers were forced to leave Italy under the Race Laws, taking only essential belongings. Fleeing to Budapest, they urged their family to escape, but their warnings went unheeded. Seeking safety, they traveled to Nice, France, where Alexander and Margit found work despite lacking visas, while Barbara and Ann attended a German school.



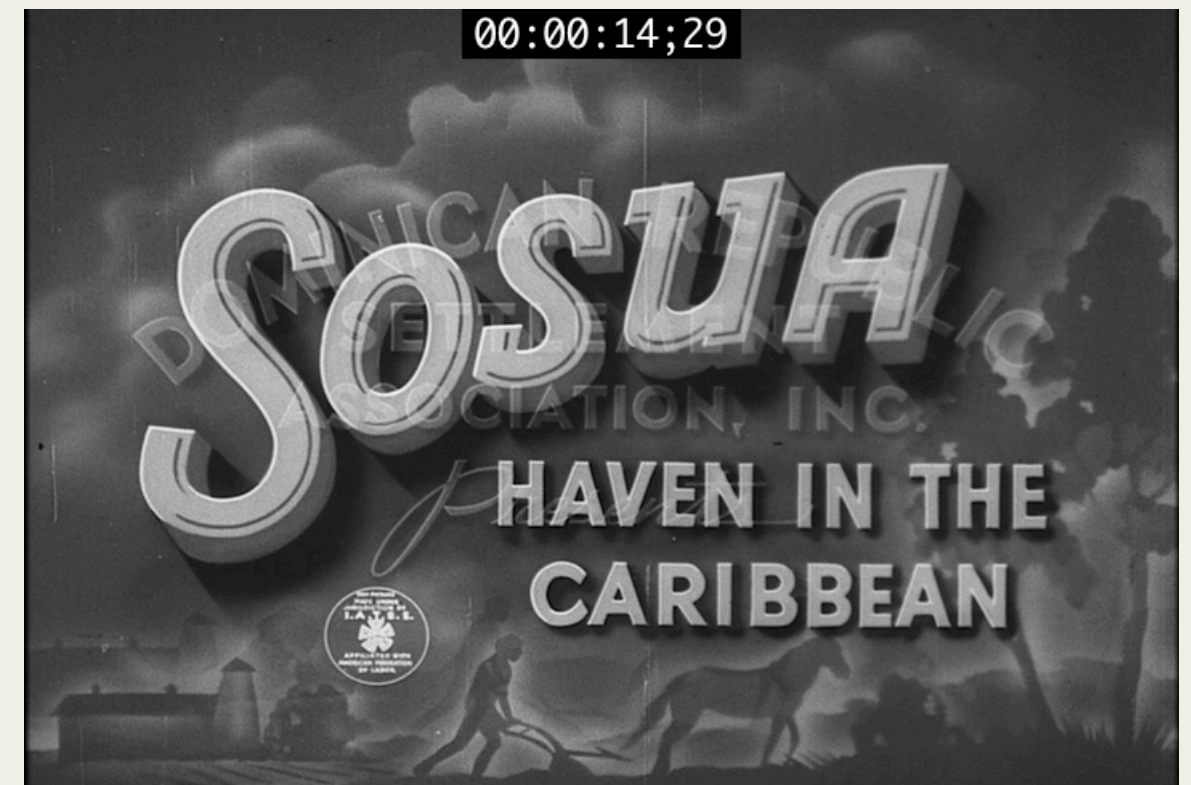
FLEEING ACROSS BORDERS

Like many Jewish refugees, the Bandlers felt forsaken by the international community following the 1938 Evian Conference, where 32 nations failed to reach an agreement on accepting Jewish evacuees. The Dominican Republic stood alone in offering refuge to a substantial number of Jews — a decision made by its authoritarian leader, Rafael Trujillo. His motivations were far from altruistic: he aimed to rehabilitate his global reputation and deflect attention from his regime's violent persecution of Haitians. Trujillo, who held racist views, also saw Jewish and European immigration as a means to "whiten" the Dominican population. Yet, despite these troubling intentions, his offer created one of the few safe havens available to Jewish families escaping the horrors of the Holocaust



DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

When Jewish refugees arrived in the Dominican Republic, they were warmly received by the local community, who welcomed them like family. Despite this hospitality, life in Sosúa proved challenging. The settlement — established on a former banana plantation purchased by Trujillo — suffered from poor soil, rocky land, and minimal infrastructure. Early residents contended with inadequate housing, the absence of a sewage system, and unsafe drinking water. Many of the refugees were educated professionals — teachers, doctors, and writers — unfamiliar with physical labor. Alexander Bandler worked in both the dairy and the fields, while Margit contributed in the communal kitchen, both adjusting to the harsh realities of their new environment.



IMMIGRATION TO AMERICA

In February 1945, Soviet troops liberated Budapest from Nazi control. Just a month later, the Bandler family learned that their U.S. visas had been approved. By late May, Margit and Alexander suddenly pulled their daughters out of school and, without offering any explanation, hurried them onto a bus headed for the Dominican capital. From there, they boarded a plane to Miami, arriving on June 1, 1945. Barbara, already familiar with a life marked by constant change, looked forward to the new adventure — but she never had the chance to say goodbye to her friends or her cherished horse. After a short stay in Miami's South Beach, the Bandlers took a bus to Boston to begin their new life in the United States.

BARBARA TODAY

Today, Barbara lives in Boulder, CO. She participates in many protests, such as every week since October 7th for the hostages. She also speaks at schools and warns students about authoritarian regimes. She worries for the current state of the United States, and is vehemently against the anti-immigrant sentiments. We were all once refugees is an important saying to her, as she fled Europe and sees other in need of an important refuge.

