

## Easter egg - U.S.A.T. HENRY GIBBINS & RUTH GRUBER

This illustration includes a few Easter Eggs. Before explaining each of the dotted circles, I should explain that the illustration contains a thematic Easter Egg. My character, Renato, leaves Naples in 1944 with his family on the U.S.A.T Henry Gibbins, bound for New York, where they were then transported by train to a camp in Oswego, NY. This in itself is another whole story, which I had no room to tell in 44 pages. The Henry Gibbins was the one and only rescue mission of refugees to American soil by President Roosevelt during World War II. Originally intended to rescue 1,000 Jewish refugees, approximately 100 people were not Jewish:

"The final tally from the ship's log of 983 refugees included Jews from 18 countries and 108 Roman Catholics, Protestants and Russian and Greek Orthodox. Listed upon their arrival in New York as "U.S. Army casual baggage," each had to sign papers promising to return to Europe when the war was over. Fewer than 100 actually did." <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/07/21/nyregion/59-years-ago-they-fled-to-an-internment-camp.html>

I point out that not all the people on board were Jewish because it was very important to me that this storyline work for a Jewish or Christian boy and his family. When I was in Italy, I met a bookseller that was age 7 in 1944, and he described his Jewish grandmother living on the same street as the rest of the Catholic family. This strengthened my gut feeling that Renato could have been of mixed decent, Jewish or Catholic. It's hard to articulate exactly why I wanted the storyline to work in both threads. To me, World War II in Europe is about 6 million innocent lives lost due only to heritage. After watching documentaries and researching history related to this storyline, I am overwhelmed by the loss of Jewish life. It is out of respect that I didn't feel entitled to tell a story solely from the Jewish perspective. Being married into an Italian family, and living in a predominantly Jewish community on the Upper East Side of Manhattan for three years, I feel that the two cultures are so similar in many ways—food and family! But I am neither Italian or Jewish, though I happily wedge myself into my friend's family-centered cultures when I can. So Renato may be whatever you want him to be—the history matches up either way.

In the ship's register, there were two Renatas and two Renates. I was happy to find names so close to Renato!

Ruth Gruber was the person tasked with guiding the refugees safely to America. She was the youngest person in the world (at the time) to receive a doctorate. This is from Wikipedia:

"In 1944, she was assigned a secret mission to Europe to bring one thousand Jewish refugees and wounded American soldiers from Italy to the US.<sup>[7]</sup> Ickes made her "a simulated general" so in case the military aircraft she flew in was shot down and she was caught by the Nazis, she would be kept alive according to the [Geneva Convention](#).<sup>[8]</sup> Throughout the voyage, the Army troop transport *Henry Gibbins* was hunted by Nazi [seaplanes](#) and [U-boats](#). Gruber's book *Haven: The Dramatic Story of 1000 World War II Refugees and How They Came to America* was based on case histories she recorded as she interviewed the refugees." –[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ruth\\_Gruber](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ruth_Gruber)

Ruth was alive when I wrote this story, and I was very eager to meet her. A critique partner put me in touch with a close friend of hers, but at the time, she was too frail for visitors. In November of 2016, Ruth passed away at the age of 105.

I was able to speak with a person she helped across the Atlantic. Doris Schechter was a young child evacuating Europe with her family in 1944. In her book, *AT OMA'S TABLE*, she recounts that when the ship arrived in America, on the same day, Anne Frank and her family were betrayed to the Nazis (August 3, 1944). Above you can see an old newspaper photo of Doris, arriving safe in the United States (eating a hot dog!). Doris went on to create *MY MOST FAVORITE FOOD*, a restaurant on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. I ate there with the same critique partner, Mona Kanin, and Michael Patrick Hearn—her friend who was trying to put me in touch with Ruth Gruber. The food was outstanding!

While doing research on this incredible element of history, I discovered about a half dozen different spellings of the ship's name. In the end, U.S.A.T. Henry Gibbins was the name of the boat on the day of their journey—though it changed in the 1950's to U.S.N.S. Henry Gibbins. I've seen reputable sources spell it Gibbons as well. But when the hat was made for the veterans, I figured that name was the most dependable. Veterans know what the name of their boat was!

"USNS Henry Gibbins (T-AP-183) was a troop transport that served with the United States Military Sea Transportation Service (MSTS) during the 1950s. Prior to her MSTS service, she served as US Army transport USAT Henry Gibbins during World War II. She later served with the New York Maritime Academy as TS Empire State IV and with the Massachusetts Maritime Academy as USTS Bay State."  
–[https://books.google.com/books/about/Usns\\_Henry\\_Gibbins.html?id=tXWSMQEACAAJ](https://books.google.com/books/about/Usns_Henry_Gibbins.html?id=tXWSMQEACAAJ)