



# RUTH GRUBER

## *My Hero*

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Ruth Gruber is my hero. She is the role model who has inspired me to go places in my life that I would never have dared to go. Ruth Gruber is one of my best friends. I call myself her “surrogate daughter.”

About 20 years ago, as co-chair for the Museum of Jewish Heritage – A Living Memorial to the Holocaust, I was looking for a speaker for the Spring Women’s Luncheon, and I was introduced to a lovely, well spoken, intelligent but tiny, elderly woman. I was impressed immediately but was not certain that this petite woman could get the attention of 500 women. Well, was I wrong! Ruth captured the minds and hearts of every person in the ballroom of the Pierre Hotel. Her story was set during World War II and her secret mission, as special assistant to Secretary of the Interior, Harold Ickes, was to accompany 1000 refugees from Italy to a camp in Oswego, New York, as guests of FDR and the government of the United States.<sup>1</sup> These were people who had escaped concentration camps and ghettos, and they were the first ones to tell their stories to the world, through Ruth, about their harrowing experiences. Ruth had written *Haven* telling their stories in detail. We all went home with her book in hand, mesmerized and anxious to read the rest of her passionate true story escorting these traumatized people on the military transport ship *Henry Gibbons* to the safety of America.

After that, I tried to be in Ruth’s company whenever I could. I attended lectures she gave for Hadassah and United Jewish Appeal (UJA). I brought her photography exhibit to the Museum of Jewish Heritage and invited her to speak each time she wrote a new book. The latest of her nineteen books, and most encompassing with 190 of her own photographs, is *Witness: One of the Great Correspondents of the Twentieth Century Tells Her Story*.

Who is this amazing, tiny, brilliant woman, Ruth Gruber, and how has she become such a giant? Ruth Gruber was born in Brooklyn, New York, on September 30, 1911. She received a B.A. from New York University in three years, a master’s degree from University of Wisconsin a year later, and a Ph.D. from the University of Cologne (magna cum laude) one year after that, becoming, at age 20, the youngest Ph.D. in the world, and making headlines on the front page of *The New York Times*. Her thesis was on a little known (in America, though well known in Europe) writer named Virginia Woolf (whom Ruth met at her home in the Bloomsbury area of



FIG. 20. Ruth Gruber and Linda Stein, 2014.

London some years later). While in Germany, Ruth attended a Hitler rally and actually stood near The Fuhrer. She was horrified by his message of hate, “Death to the Jews!” “Death to America!” She told me she thought, “These are the words of a mad man!” She said she would never forget the horrible sound of his voice and his words!

At age 24, Ruth became an international correspondent for *The New York Herald Tribune* and was the first journalist allowed in the Soviet Arctic. Six years later, as special assistant to Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes, she traveled to the Alaska Territory “to be his eyes and ears” and to report back on conditions, with the possibility of World War II veterans homesteading there after the war.

In 1944, Ickes assigned her the mission of escorting the 1000 refugees she described at the museum luncheon and in her book *Haven*. It was a life changing experience for Ruth. From that moment on, she said, “I knew I would be, not just an Arctic expert, but I wanted my life to be involved with rescue.”

After the war, Ruth was invited to be *The New York Post* correspondent visiting displaced persons camps, interviewing survivors who, overwhelmingly, wanted to settle in Palestine. She also sat in the front row of the Nuremberg Trials, where she watched the murderers of the Jewish people be sentenced to hanging. She

said it was an experience she would never forget. Ruth then traveled for *The Herald Tribune* with the United Nations Special Commission on Palestine (UNSCOP), visiting displaced persons camps and again interviewing survivors. In 1947, while Ruth was traveling with UNSCOP, she learned of the attack by the British on the ship *Exodus 1947*, as it was moving outside territorial waters to Haifa to bring 4,500 Jewish refugees to safety. She rushed to the scene and reported “the ship looks like a matchbox splintered by a nutcracker.” Ruth, representing the entire American press, photographed the refugees as they were herded onto three prison ships. As an act of defiance, they painted a swastika on the British Union Jack and Ruth sent this photograph around the world. Together with the UNSCOP recommendations and Ruth’s photographs, the world saw the British treatment of victims of the Holocaust. Ruth’s photos were powerful images contributing to the founding of Israel.

Although Ruth studied both German and journalism to prepare for her life’s work, she never took a photography class. She once met the great photographer Edward Steichen, who said to her, “Ruth, take pictures with your heart,” and she followed his advice. In fact, the International Center of Photography was so impressed with Ruth’s collection of work that, after seeing her photographs in *Witness*, the ICP mounted a solo traveling exhibition, *Ruth*

*Gruber: Photojournalist*, which is still traveling around the United States.<sup>2</sup>

You now have a glimpse into the life of my dear friend Ruth Gruber, a giant of a tiny woman who has changed the world for good. She is a role model for all her friends and family and for anyone who meets her. However, for me, it was a little different. For all the years I have been lucky enough to know Ruth Gruber, people have been saying that they wanted to make a film on her life. And, of course, I encouraged everyone who suggested it, because I also believed that her story should be told. However, no one saw the idea through.

Consequently, on her 97th birthday, I announced to Ruth that a film should be made about her life and I was going to do it.<sup>3</sup> Being so close to Ruth and watching how she led her life, by allowing no obstacles to stand in her way, inspired me to know that I had a chance to do something so important as to introduce Ruth Gruber to the world through a film.

I first approached Ruth's "other surrogate daughter" Doris Schechter to ask her if she would like to make the film with me.<sup>4</sup> Neither of us knew anything about making a film, but we knew Zeva Oelbaum, a woman who made a documentary we liked; and so we hired her to be our producer, who then recommended Bob

Richman to be our Director. We hired Sabine Krayenbuehl to be our editor. We hired the National Center for Jewish Film at Brandeis University to be our fiscal sponsor and solicited a hundred friends who each made tax-deductible donations of \$25 to \$100,000.

I told Zeva she had one year to make the film because Ruth was elderly. With Doris, Denise Benmosche and me as executive producers,<sup>5</sup> the film *Ahead of Time: The Extraordinary Journey of Ruth Gruber* opened at the Toronto International Film Festival and went on to win seven "Best Documentary" awards. The film travels to festivals, synagogues, Jewish Community Centers, universities and high schools in the United States and throughout the world spreading Ruth's message to fight injustice.<sup>6</sup> Ruth attended many screenings in the past, but now, at the age of 104, we represent her.

Ruth would say that each of us has something special within ourselves to make a difference in the world and we have to look inside to find it. She says that her tools were her camera and her words, and that is what she used to fight injustice. She would say that each of us has the ability to help make peace and to fight injustice with our own tools. We just have to find them and use them to make the world a more humane place. ■

