In an act of heroism, Hollywood mogul and German émigré Carl Laemmle (1867-1939) helped hundreds of Jews to escape Nazi Germany in the years between 1936 and 1939. Laemmle’s affidavits and his tireless efforts to support Jews saved the lives of many by securing their emigration to the United States. This contribution focuses on the daily life of one protégé, Werner Maas, who came to the US with his mother in 1936. This article illustrates the family’s personal struggle regarding work, language and integration and places it within the larger framework of contemporary accounts on exile from Nazi Germany, particularly on the contrasting career of Hertha Nathorff, who arrived in New York City in 1940.

_It can be done_ was the life motto of German immigrant Carl Laemmle (1867-1939), who became the founder and first president of Universal Film in Hollywood. After selling Universal in 1936, Laemmle dedicated the last four years of his life to helping German Jews to escape Nazi Germany and to emigrate to the United States. His affidavits (written pledges of financial support from a benefactor that were required of every immigrant upon arrival in the United States) saved the lives of hundreds of relatives, friends and residents from his native Laupheim (located in the federal state of Baden-Württemberg) and neighbouring villages without ties to the Laemmle family, by securing their emigration to start a new life in the United States. In addition to his affidavits, he also helped immigrants once they arrived in the United States in order to secure their well-being. In a mission that made Laemmle ‘America’s most important Holocaust rescuer after Varian Fry,’ he provided necessary affidavits for more than 300
immigrants, facilitating entry into the United States, and he also offered generous loans and the promise to help and care for the refugees from Nazi Germany upon arrival in the United States. Laemmle’s tireless philanthropic efforts in an ‘emotional battle’, as Neil Gabler puts it, against the German government as well as the American State Department allow comparisons to Oskar Schindler’s efforts to save Jews from the Nazis.

Two recent German-language publications on Carl Laemmle have focused on his biography including his career as film pioneer and also on his philanthropic efforts in the later years of his life. This article takes the existing research on Laemmle’s help for German-Jewish emigrants a step further, namely by focusing on the everyday life of a protégé of Laemmle’s who did not become part of the Universal family in Southern California or the film business in general. This contribution focuses on the life of Werner Maas (born 1921), one of Laemmle’s protégés with an ‘ordinary’ career far away from the glitz of Hollywood, and illustrates the initial challenges faced by the refugees regarding work, language and integration into a new socio-political environment. The article further shows how Maas succeeded in starting a new life in a country that finally provided security from the persecution he and his family had endured in Nazi Germany. Maas, today one of the leading US scholars in microbiology and still active as Professor Emeritus at New York University Medical School, was able to emigrate from Germany with his mother in 1936. His life story is a remarkable illustration of his mentor’s life motto that, against the odds, it can be done.

To facilitate the understanding of the wide range of German-Jewish immigrant experiences in the United States from the late 19th century to the years immediately preceding World War II, this project juxtaposes Maas’ personal account with reflections from Hannah Arendt and Peter Gay, fellow immigrants from Germany, as well as referring extensively to the diaries of Hertha Nathorff, née Einstein (1895-1993) of Laupheim, which present a very different picture of a