The International Institute of Rhode Island was organized by the Providence YWCA in 1921 as a membership organization for immigrant women. Photo, 1929, YWCA Graphics Collection. RHHS Collection (RH X3 8584).
Addams, Twenty Years at Hull House and “A Function of the Social Settlement” (paper submitted to the American Academy of Political and Social Science, no. 251, 16 May 1899); Carson, Settlement Folk; and Lissak, Pluralism and Progressives.

70. Ewen, Immigrant Women, 80-81.


74. “Reviving Italian Handicraft.”

75. Federal Hill House, 1918, n. pag.; “Reviving Italian Handicraft.”


77. Federal Hill House, 1923, n. pag.

78. The ideal of a classless neighborhood is discussed in Jane Addams’s Twenty Years at Hull House, 116-25, and “Function of the Social Settlement,” 55; Lissak, Pluralism and Progressives, 13-14; and Mina Carson, Settlement Folk, 67.

79. For discussions about the settlement concept of neighborhood, see Robert A. Woods, The Neighborhood in Nation Building (New York: Arno Press, 1970); Carson, Settlement Folk, 101; and Gilkeson, Middle-Class Providence, 248.

80. Gilkeson, Middle-Class Providence, 248.

81. Federal Hill House, 1918, n. pag.


83. “A Neighbor among Other Neighbors.”


85. Ibid.

86. The scientification of the settlement movement is discussed in Carson, Settlement Folk, 65-66; Lissak, Pluralism and Progressives, 7; and Ewen, Immigrant Women, 81, 85 (which deals specifically with friendly visiting and scientific housekeeping).

87. Gilkeson, Middle-Class Providence, 11. According to Gilkeson, recreational reform in Providence expressed the ideals of a “classless, homogenous society” while also aiming at social control of the working class. See also Roy Rosenzweig, Eight Hours for What We Will (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

88. Carson, Settlement Folk, 65; Lissak, Pluralism and Progressives, 6.

89. Union Settlement, 1908, pp. 3, 5, 12.

90. Ibid., 7, 11, 14-15.

91. Ibid., 13-14.

92. Addams, Twenty Years at Hull House, 126; Carson, Settlement Folk, 106.

93. “A Neighbor among Other Neighbors.”

94. Descriptions of the typical American settlement worker appear in Addams, Twenty Years at Hull House, 119-20; Carson, Settlement Folk, 87; and Lissak, Pluralism and Progressives, 21.

95. Gilkeson, Middle-Class Providence, 273-77.

96. Union Settlement, 1908, 18.

97. Gilkeson characterizes settlement work in Providence as work that “never seemed to have involved substantial numbers of idealistic college graduates residing as middle-class culture among the poor. Perhaps the city was too small for this to be contemplated.” Middle-Class Providence, 248.

98. For example, in 1915 the salaries of the head worker and all her assistants at Federal Hill House totaled $1,546, which was only about $200 more than Aronovici alone earned seven years earlier. By 1918, however, the settlement’s salaries had increased to $2,621.76, suggesting a higher degree of professionalization among the “helpers” and head resident. See the treasurer’s reports in Federal Hill House Association, 1915, p. 10, and Federal Hill House, 1918, n. pag.


100. Carson, Settlement Folk, 196.

101. Addams wrote of her participation in campaigns to better the living and working conditions of the poor through legislative reform. “We have attempted to compel by law, that the manufacturer provide proper work rooms for his sweaters’ victims, and were surprised to find ourselves holding a mass meeting in order to urge a federal measure upon Congress.” Addams, “Function of the Social Settlement,” 52. She and her settlement colleagues Ellen Starr, Julia Lathrop, and Florence Kelley dedicated themselves to legislative reform that went beyond the Hull House neighborhood. Robert A. Wood theorized about the neighborhood and its role in larger-scale social reform in The Neighborhood in Nation Building.
The International Institute of Rhode Island

The snapshots are fuzzy, the hairdos stiff, the expressions stiffer. Early twentieth-century immigrants look not pioneering but dazed. They were entering a land of opportunity, but one that welcomed them with ambivalence. For many, the International Institute was an anchor. Today it remains an anchor, in a land that remains ambivalent.

At the turn of the century, when Theodore Dreiser was romanticizing Sister Carrie into a tragic heroine, the Young Women’s Christian Association was helping real-life Sister Carries—women crowded into rooming houses, working in factories, friendless in cities. In 1912, as an experiment, the YWCA opened a New York City branch for foreign-born women. Under Edith Terry Bremer the International Institute for Young Women offered the same recreational clubs offered by the YWCA, as well as English classes and home visits.

The experiment was radical. Bremer saw the institute not as a social welfare organization but as an organization with a participatory membership, where volunteers would supplement a small staff and where the membership would control the group. The Protestant volunteers would not try to convert Catholic and Orthodox immigrants, nor would they “Americanize” them. Multilingual nationality workers (“cultured women of foreign birth,” according to an article in the Providence Journal) would make up the staff.

Philosophically, the staff believed that ethnicity was central to a woman’s persona (“a foreign community is a psychological unity,” said Bremer). To maintain women’s ethnic ties, the institute would establish “nationality” clubs rather than clubs that crossed ethnic lines. Earlier the YWCA had mixed business and industrial girls in the same clubs, but those clubs had failed. Since the YWCA sponsored “colored girls’” clubs, the nationality clubs—Polish, Armenian, German, and others—seemed a natural development.

Not all Americans shared Bremer’s thinking. World War I sparked a burst of xenophobia; “As industries closed and unemployment rose,” Bremer said later, “immigrants were seen as a burden.” Pseudoscientists voiced eugenic concerns, fearing “race-fusion” and the “over population” of America. Bremer hoped that when postwar industries reopened, “patience, tolerance, and kindly interest, the natural attitude of America toward immigrants, would replace the old suspicion.”

When women left New York City for Lawrence, Lowell, Philadelphia, or Providence, the International Institute forwarded their names to local YWCAs, some of which started their own International Institutes. The second was opened in Trenton, New Jersey. By 1915 six institutes had been established, three were in the study stage, and thirty YWCAs were interested. Two years later the National War Work Council gave money to the institutes, and that same year the YWCA held the first conference on immigration and the International Institute for Young Women.
Institutes' work. When the War Work Council money stopped, the YWCAs sought local funding. By 1923 there were International Institutes in forty-eight cities, with two more institutes planned.

In 1920 the Providence YWCA asked the association's national board to survey the city and its foreign-born residents, a first step toward the creation of an International Institute. An exhaustive survey was accordingly conducted. Of Providence's total population, 29 percent were found to be foreign-born; 73 percent were foreign-born or of foreign-born parentage. Over 40 percent of the residents in Wards 3 and 9 were foreign-born. The majority of the immigrants were Italians, followed by Portuguese and Armenians. Married women rarely worked; unmarried women worked in declining industries in the city's mills (in Olneyville, the survey found, "most of the mills are either part-time or closed. . . . there are over 10,000 out of employment"). None of the city's eight evening schools, serving 154 women, offered English classes for women of foreign birth. On the basis of this and other data (there were 8,391 foreign-language books in the Providence Public Library, nine public dance halls, fifty-one mills with minimal sanitary facilities), the establishment of an International Institute was found to be justified. The YWCA appointed a governing body for the new institute in 1921. The three-woman Committee of Management, led by Mrs. William W. Weeden, hired Agnes Holmes, who had headed the St. John's Settlement School in New York City, as executive director. An Armenian secretary and a Portuguese secretary rounded out the staff. Although the survey had discovered three communities of Italians—professionals, clustered around Atwells Avenue; "farmers" (mill workers who also tended backyard gardens), around Chalkstone Avenue; and laborers, in Silver Lake—the committee did not think the entrenched Italian community needed service.

The trio of staff members moved into two rooms at 37 Weybosset Street. According to a later report, their reaction to these quarters was mixed. "While the rooms were very attractive with a fireplace and beautiful hangings, the staff was very much annoyed by the creeping and crawling inhabitants that also resided at the same address."

The early years of Providence's International Institute were dominated by casework and group work. In 1921 the institute helped 498 people, 287 of them new arrivals. The Red Cross, which met incoming boats at the Providence pier, referred some of the newcomers; the national YWCA worker stationed at Ellis Island referred others. The institute found family members, translated, and intervened with landlords, employers, and government officials. Visiting in homes, institute workers (both staff and volunteer) brought a friendly voice. No case was typical, but two may be recounted here from case files.

In October 1923 the International Institute organized a bus trip for young men to meet the vessel Canada at the State Pier. On board were "picture brides," women who had become betrothed by correspondence. Clergymen performed weddings for these women and their bridegrooms back at the institute's Weybosset Street rooms that same day. One prospective bridegroom, Stefani, a young Greek restaurant worker from Clarksburg, West Virginia, asked for a Greek priest. By the time a staff worker brought the Reverend Peter Mihailides
from his Pine Street church, Stefani had fled. The would-be bride, Kiriaki, whose “heart was as blue as her dress,” was then whisked back to Boston by an immigration official. From there she would be returned to the Greek island of Chios—unless the International Institute could find either Stefani or her brother, who worked at a York, Pennsylvania, restaurant. The institute had two weeks to accomplish this task. The files, unfortunately, do not show whether it succeeded.

When Mrs. A., a nurse, came to the United States, she left two young daughters with the YWCA in Constantinople. At the State Pier the Red Cross referred her to the institute, which enrolled her in English classes, introduced her to the Armenian community, and helped her find a job. To bring her daughters here, Mrs. A. had to become a citizen. The International Institute helped file the necessary papers. Then, after the national YWCA negotiated the immigration of her daughters, the institute helped the girls adjust to their new home.

The group work of the institute included English classes, nationality clubs, and social events. In 1921 the first English class enrolled ninety-one women. By 1925 the institute was conducting five English classes. Classes were staffed by Pembroke College volunteers until 1927, when the state agreed to staff the classes that the institute organized. In 1931 fifty Portuguese women registered for institute classes at the Arnold Street School.

To accommodate women who brought children with them, the institute arranged for baby-sitting with Pembroke students.

Among the nationality clubs created or nurtured by the institute were groups for Polish, Italian, Armenian, Russian, and Portuguese women. Twenty Portuguese girls working as housemaids met weekly at the International Institute on their day off. The institute not only organized its own clubs but also provided space for clubs that had been independently formed. By 1931 there were twelve clubs meeting at the institute.

At teas and socials, foreign- and native-born women mingled and shared refreshments, music, and news from their respective countries. Over eight hundred people attended a “homelands” exhibit in 1927. In 1939 the institute held its first ball, featuring ethnic entertainment and food. Each year the entertainment grew more varied. The second ball, in 1940, featured Armenian, Italian, Greek, Portuguese, and American dances (square dances were demonstrated by Brown students), as well as Harfa, a Polish choral group. German, Chinese, and Mexican dances were added the next year. Many dancers wore costumes they had brought from their native lands.

The institute added a Russian secretary to its staff in 1924 and an Italian secretary in 1930. The first executive director, Agnes Holmes, left in 1926 and was replaced by Gertrude Saunders. As the institute expanded its activities, it quickly outgrew its two Weybosset Street rooms. To hold classes for Russian women, in
1924 it bought a supplementary center, the North End House, at 49 Orms Street, where it provided space for a Russian school to hold its own classes as well. In 1925—a “banner year,” according to a later report—the institute moved to three large rooms at 141 Weybosset Street and renovated its North End House to include a classroom, a club room, and a kitchen. In 1928 the institute moved yet again, this time to 241 Weybosset Street, and in 1931 it leased additional space on Arnold Street as a center for serving Portuguese women. In 1939 it settled—together with its parent YWCA—at 58 Jackson Street, where it would remain until 1957.

Soon after the institute’s 1921 founding, the YWCA (which was also underwriting Travelers Aid, an outreach program operating in bus and train stations) began chafing at the expense of supporting the new organization. Consequently, in 1926 the institute sought financial support directly from the Providence Community Fund. This proved to be the first step toward the eventual separation of Providence’s International Institute from the YWCA. By the 1930s International Institutes all across the country were pondering such separation.

Several factors contributed to the movement toward disaffiliation. The American Federation of International Institutes was seeking a more powerful national voice, one less hampered by affiliation with the YWCA, and the Providence institute supported that effort. Moreover, institute membership in Providence (as elsewhere) had changed. The Great Depression all but halted immigration to the country: whereas there were 5,700,000 immigrants from 1911 to 1920 and 4,100,000 from 1921 to 1930, from 1931 to 1940 only 500,000 arrived. Some immigrants returned home; in 1932 Providence received 309 immigrants, but 332 of the city’s foreign-born residents—some of whom had lived in the United States for as long as twenty years—left the country (though most intended to return). By government edict, the importation of “picture brides” stopped in 1931.

The needs of the institute’s members had also changed. Immigrants needed jobs, not recreation or friendly visits. “People we have known as members of our clubs and classes now turn to us to help them solve the problem of unemployment,” said a 1937 report. Noncitizens were barred from government jobs. Native-born widows could collect a Mothers’ Aid pension after living in Providence for only three years, but foreign-born widows needed ten years of residence to qualify for that assistance.

Meanwhile, social work was emerging as a profession, with an emphasis on training and expertise for its practitioners. Begun as a membership organization, the institute was becoming a social welfare organization instead. Staff no
longer focused exclusively on young women. “One could not meet the daughter unless one knew the mother, who must in turn introduce the father,” said institute director Gertrude Saunders. “And so our work started by getting into the foreign home and thus in the foreign communities.” Even the institute’s orientation to Providence shifted; by 1938 the institute served sixty-six women in Cranston.

Dealing with the objection that disaffiliation from the YWCA would be detrimental to the concerns of immigrant women, the Providence institute’s Committee of Management decided in 1940 that the “fear. . . of women’s needs within the nationality groupings being lost or submerged by [the institute’s] seeking cooperation of men in [its] leadership was not . . . serious.” The committee then voted to separate the institute from the YWCA.

Judge Ellis Yatman, the husband of Marion Yatman, a committee member, was chosen president of the eighteen-member board, which represented six nationalities. Louisa Neumann, executive secretary of the institute before its disaffiliation, continued in that position. Other staff included a full-time activities director, an Armenian secretary, an Italian secretary, a Portuguese secretary, a Slavic secretary, an office secretary-bookkeeper, and a receptionist. Altogether the staff could speak ten languages. Twenty-six active volunteers supplemented the paid staff.

The institute drew members through word-of-mouth invitations. Attendees at institute meetings could propose prospective members, to be approved first by the Membership Committee and then by the board. The dues for individuals were fifty cents. Growing steadily, always through personal outreach, membership reached 130 after one year. “No general campaign has been undertaken,” Neumann explained in 1942, “because it was believed that membership should mean active belief and participation in the agency’s place in the community.”

Launched just before the United States entered World War II, the institute soon reduced its facilities and staff. Between December 1940 and December 1941 the number of clubs meeting at the institute dropped from twenty-two to thirteen; some clubs moved into members’ homes and others disbanded. In 1942 the Orms Street center was sold to a nationality group. By 1943 the institute had no full-time activities director, and its bookkeeper was a volunteer.

Activities during this time revolved around the war. The institute advised immigrants with relatives stranded in Europe or with children fighting there. Staff members wrote letters to servicemen on behalf of non-English-speaking parents. As the war bolstered the economy, more immigrants sought to become citizens; “People who used to ask for help with relief agencies, now want help with citizenship,” Louisa Neumann observed in 1943. Many of these people were Italians. At the start of the war all noncitizens who had come from countries now part of the Axis were required to register. When President Roosevelt announced in October 1943 that Italian residents were no longer considered enemy aliens, many Italians in Rhode Island came to the International Institute for help in filling out citizenship papers.

Such services were provided without charge. The Providence Community Fund continued to fund the institute, contributing $14,295 of the institute’s $15,054 income in 1942. During that year the institute earned $44 by translating for
companies and organizations. Its fifty-cents-a-year dues yielded $117 from individuals and clubs, and the rental of the Orms Street center, before its sale, brought $485. For the six rooms it occupied on Jackson Street, the institute paid the YWCA $42 monthly rent.

After the war the institute’s staff concentrated on casework—settling displaced persons, bringing over war brides, blocking the deportation of aliens. The Displaced Persons Act of 1946 allowed admission of 205,000 persons over two years, with a special commission established to certify their eligibility. International Institutes helped file the necessary “assurances.” When the first ship carrying displaced persons docked in New York on 30 October 1946, Katherine Lawless, who had been hired as the Providence institute’s director in 1944, joined other International Institute staff from across the country in meeting the 800 newcomers. Eventually the Providence institute filed assurances for 255 people. Seventy-five displaced persons were guests at the institute’s 1948 ball. (In 1950 one of Providence’s displaced persons was an Armenian actress who had left Italy with her husband and toddler daughter. Twenty-six years later this woman—Nelly Ayvasian—became the institute’s director.)

War brides needed a sheaf of notarized documents guaranteeing that they would not become public charges. “Some days it seemed as if the entire Army and Navy were at our doors” petitioning to bring their brides here, Lawless remarked. The Community Fund acknowledged that the institute needed a full-time caseworker to greet the influx of brides referred by the Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization.

As for deportations, the institute helped people maneuver through a regulatory maze. The United States did not deport aliens during the war. Afterward, potential deportees could go to Canada and then solicit a visa from the United States consul to reenter the country. The institute helped prepare the necessary documents. An institute report noted an ironic element in the deportations: “It seems as if our government was sending help to those war torn countries in such dire need of food, clothing and shelter and at the same time deporting to those same countries people who have lived in the United States for a number of years, many married to American citizens and who have American born children. These people would only add to the number already needing relief from our government.”

In 1945 the institute’s staff had to deal with a severe lack of space. “She [Lawless] still has no office and the YWCA is using their room more and more so that we have no good place for interviews,” secretary pro tem Mrs. John Wells reported in her minutes of a board meeting. “It is very hard to keep up the morale of the staff under these conditions.” A few weeks later Lawless noted that “conditions at the present headquarters have not improved. The hooked rug classes are larger than ever; they work longer and are proportionately more vocal and bustling.” The institute could not purchase new quarters without the approval of the Providence Community Fund, which would have to subsidize such a purchase or allow the institute to raise money independently. The institute’s board could only seek better rental quarters. Committee members investigated first a house on Thomas Street, then the Fresh Air School on Meeting Street. For special events like the institute’s Christmas party, the Rhode Island Republican Club across the street lent space.
After a special committee of the Providence Council of Social Agencies conducted a study of the International Institute in 1946, the Community Fund decided that “new housing is not indicated at this time”; instead, it recommended that the institute make fuller use of the space it had on Jackson Street. The council’s report challenged certain basic premises of the institute, challenges that would be repeated throughout the 1950s. On the basis of that report, the Community Fund discounted the institute’s group work and clubs, claiming that they should be only “incidental” and “a byproduct of case work.” The clubs were seen as tangential, if not harmful, a “bridge” to Americanization rather than the psychologically essential experience that Edith Bremer had conceived. “They should be purposely limited to those individuals who need a nationality group experience before they can be assembled into the community,” said the report.

In 1946 the institute added an assistant in charge of casework to its staff. Conceding that “it no longer seems possible to find Nationality Secretaries with language skills who are willing to come to us at the low rate of pay we are able to offer,” it reluctantly chose a native-born applicant for this position.

During the 1950s xenophobia was not just ethnic; it was political as well. Fearing Communist infiltration, a congressional committee proposed transferring jurisdiction of immigration and naturalization from the House Judiciary Committee to a newly formed Committee on Internal Security, an outgrowth of the House Un-American Activities Committee. (Speaker Sam Rayburn killed the measure.) The quota system imposed by the McCarran-Walter Immigration Act, based on the 1920 census, favored northern Europeans, not the southern and eastern Europeans most eager to come. Some countries quickly filled their yearly quotas, while the quotas of other countries went unfilled. John Foster Dulles characterized the system as “offensive to American traditions and harmful to our country’s foreign relations.”

Nevertheless, in spite of Dulles’s warnings and President Eisenhower’s strong opposition, Congressman Francis Walter blocked revision of the quotas. “Our country, if it is to remain strong, cannot be flooded with selfish nationality groups, swelled by new arrivals imbued with ideologies hostile to our way of life and our social and political system,” he declared. The American Federation of International Institutes—along with Catholic Relief Services, Lutheran Refugee Service, American Hellenic Educational Progressive Association, and American Relief for Chinese Intellectuals, among other organizations—lobbied for revision; the Daughters of the American Revolution called these opponents Communist fronts, created to weaken the nation’s stringent quota system. The House Un-American Activities Committee labeled the American Committee for Protection of the Foreign Born “the chief instrument of the Communist Party in its efforts to destroy the Walter-McCarran Act.”

Even refugees from Communism were not to be trusted in their commitment to their new country. Lieutenant General Joseph Swing, the commissioner of immigration and naturalization, warned the International Institutes of the possibility of redefection: “To counteract the positive and active campaigns ... set up by Communist countries to encourage redefection ... —publications sent to their ‘nationals’ in the United States, special contacts by ‘agents’—it is essential for the agencies throughout the United States to be constantly on the alert and
to advise the Immigration Service immediately of any indication" that an immigrant was planning to return to his Communist homeland.24

The temper of the times was such that not even Hungarian freedom fighters gained easy access to the country. The United States readily admitted them after the 1956 revolution, but it did not readily authorize the visas that would allow them to settle here. At Camp Kilmer, where he was visiting refugees who "had been in the forefront in the fight for freedom," Vice President Nixon maintained that "the countries which accept [them] will find that rather than having assumed a liability they have acquired a valuable national asset."25 Still, legislation to reform the immigration system lagged.

The national mood affected attitudes toward the International Institutes. In a study of Boston's International Institute by the United Fund—a report shared with the Providence Community Fund—Harvard researchers questioned nationality clubs as potentially subversive, and probably counterproductive.26 Meanwhile, as institutes struggled to find "nationality workers," foreign-born and multilingual, for their staffs, many institutes felt pressured to hire graduates of American schools. In response, Mary Hurlbut, a personnel consultant at the American Federation of International Institutes, called for the hiring of "professionally educated Europeans and Asiatics." 

No International Institute should be pressured by lack of understanding of community chests or other social agencies ... into trying to build up a staff solely composed of native American school graduates," she wrote, "even if these have linguistic skills and have taken courses in social and cultural sciences. This may be a controversial point of view. ... It may be a point which takes courage to maintain."27

Providence institute director Katherine Lawless faced severe challenges during the early 1950s. The space at 58 Jackson Street was cramped. In 1952 two staff members, including the activities director, resigned; and because the Community Chest (the former Providence Community Fund) could not meet its 1952 budget, it cut the institute's allocation, and there was no money to fill the vacancies. Requests like that made in 1952 by the pastors of St. Vartanantz Armenian Apostolic Church and SS. Sahag and Mesrob Armenian Church, who asked the institute to hire an Armenian-speaking secretary, could not be granted.28 Reluctantly the institute closed "a considerable number" of its cases. An executive secretary's report called 1954 "a gloomy year."29

Though the situation did not quickly improve, the institute tried to do what it could for those who needed its help. When the owner of a nearby Chinese laundry wanted to bring his son to America from Hong Kong, the institute helped cut through the red tape. And when, later in the decade, a bill sponsored by Rhode Island senator John Pastore allowed emergency visas for victims of an earthquake in the Azores, the institute helped resettle the new immigrants.

The International Institute finally moved in 1957, when the YWCA was to raze the Jackson Street building. The institute's board had looked into renting space at the Rhode Island Republican Club, but that ultimately proved impossible, and it had no money to buy a building. Fortunately the United Fund (formerly the Community Chest) allowed the board to undertake the necessary fund-raising, though the permission was hedged with restrictions: the board could ask "only friends interested in the work of the Institute and with no publicity, no campaign, and within a limited time, so that it would not interfere with the campaign of the United Fund."30 Board members successfully raised "the mira-
The Institute's whom 21 and ple, of and 709 included students  organizations. Unlike after modeunification, family held a reaush out of 1961 Stimson Avenue, with the institute's director and remained in that position until 1962, then left to head the International Institute in Philadelphia. Nelly Ayvasian served as acting director until Raymond O'Dowd, a social worker at Bradley Hospital, took over.

The years that followed were an upbeat time for the institute, a time of balls and cabarets and teas. The distinctive character of these years came about largely as a result of the nation's restrictive immigration policies, which favored the educated. According to a 1962 Department of Labor study, 16 percent of the immigrants from 1947 to 1961 worked in "professional" or "technical" fields, compared to 9 percent of the nation's overall labor force. During the 1950s fourteen thousand physicians and twenty-eight thousand nurses came to the country. Of the forty Americans who won the Nobel Prize in chemistry or physics by 1962, fifteen were foreign-born, and six had received degrees before immigrating.

The immigrants of these years wanted sociability, and the institute responded with teas, film festivals, travelogues, open houses, cabarets, and picnics—events featured in the society pages of the Providence Journal. As always, the institute highlighted the cuisine, the languages, and the native costumes of its members. In 1961 it resumed staging its ethnic balls, which became regular events. It reached out to foreign-born physicians, interns, and medical students, and it held a reception for foreign-born lawyers. It began hosting a weekly Sunday afternoon radio show.

In 1963 the influx of foreign students, often with spouses, spurred the establishment of another organization promoting sociability—International House, modeled after International House in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Located on Stimson Avenue on the East Side of Providence, International House gave foreign students a friendly base, with chances to perfect their conversational English. Unlike the International Institute, it did not advise on immigration, family unification, or major domestic problems. The two "International" organizations clearly differed, and O'Dowd regretted that International House had not included "Students" in its name to avoid confusion.

The institute's membership soared during the 1960s. From 85 members (of whom 21 were board members) in 1960, it grew to 530 in 1964, 634 in 1966, and 709 in 1967. Annual dues were $2.00 for an individual, $3.00 for a couple, and $3.50 for a family. The United Fund continued to finance most (87 percent) of the institute's budget, which by 1960 had increased to $31,000. In 1963 the budget rose to $45,000, with $41,000 supplied by the United Fund.
In the early 1960s the institute was serving people of fifty-eight nationalities. By 1967 it had a Cuban Advisory Council, assisting 245 Cuban Rhode Islanders. When the state needed multiple translations of newly passed Medicare regulations in 1965, the International Institute provided them without charge.

Enjoying this kind of growth, the institute was soon facing a familiar problem: a need for more space. "We try to overcome the lack of proper physical facilities by using imagination and being flexible," O'Dowd told the board in 1964. These efforts included using the local library and renting other space. In 1965 the institute was able to alleviate the problem by purchasing the adjoining property at 99 Moore Street.

During this era the institute feted a number of naturalized citizens. Some examples: Larry Egavian (honored in 1961) came to the United States from Armenia when he was thirteen years old, became a product engineer with the navy, and, with his brother, founded an electronics business. Joseph Jamas (1963), who left Poland as a teenager, became a probate judge in Central Falls, president of the Polish Relief Committee in Rhode Island, and a prewar representative of the General Consulate of the Republic of Poland. Jacob Hohenemser (1963), a cantor in Munich's Great Synagogue until 1938, became cantor at Providence's Temple Emanuel. Manuel DaSilva (1973), a Portuguese-born Bristol physician, wrote the historical study Portuguese Pilgrims and Dighton Rock. Charles Fortes (1974), of Cape Verdean descent, spearheaded a private community action agency called the Providence Corporation.

The institute also reunited families. Two of its more publicized successes involved the Kwongs and the Salyks. For seven years Mrs. Luke, a board member, struggled to bring her parents and younger brother to the United States. The Kwongs had escaped from Canton to Hong Kong, but without visas they could not come to America. In 1963 the International Institute, Samuel Friedman (also a board member), and Senator Claiborne Pell successfully interceded with the immigration officials and brought about the family's reunion.

With the help of the institute, in 1961 the Salyks were reunited with the daughter they had been separated from twenty-one years earlier. In 1940 the Nazis had forced Mr. and Mrs. Salyk to leave Poland for a work-farm in Germany. The Salyks took their six-month-old daughter Eugenia but left her sickly twin, Stefania, with a grandmother. First the war, then the Iron Curtain, precluded contact between the Salyks and Stefania. Now in America, the family came to the International Institute in 1957 for help. Four years later, after numerous pleas to the Red Cross, the State Department, and even Premier Khrushchev, Stefania, then living in a Ukrainian village, was directed to report to Moscow. From there she began her trek to Providence. The persistent Nelly Ayvazian, who had been
overseeing the institute's efforts in pursuing the case, joined the Salyks in greeting their daughter at the airport in New York.

Although the government hatched a bevy of social programs throughout the 1960s—Medicare, Medicaid, Model Cities, and Community Action, among others—the institute had only minimal involvement in these programs. It was the United Fund, not the government, that underwrote the institute, and the Bureau of Immigration required that "sponsors" oversee the well-being of new immigrants and help keep them off welfare.

If the Vietnam War changed the psyche of America, its end changed the International Institute. After Saigon fell, Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian refugees streamed into the United States. Unlike earlier refugees, these came at the invitation of our government, which pledged resettlement for people who had supported United States troops—people like the Hmong clansmen whom the CIA had recruited as a "secret guerrilla army." The stream of immigrants was steady; by 1980 there were 2,200 Southeast Asians living in Rhode Island, with 1,200 Hmong clustered in Elmwood and South Providence.

To aid the immigrants until they could receive state assistance, the federal government paid an initial resettlement stipend of $200 to $250, and it reimbursed 100 percent of the state's welfare costs. By 1980 there were 1,160 Southeast Asians on Rhode Island's welfare rolls. In addition, the Office of Refugee Resettlement contracted for English classes and job-training sessions with community organizations, including the Opportunities Industrialization Center, Project Persona, Urban Education, and the International Institute.

All the Southeast Asian immigrants had organizational sponsors. These sponsors included Catholic Charities, a group of Protestant churches, and the International Institute, whose parent organization was designated an official sponsor by the federal government. Sponsors agreed to find the newcomers jobs, housing, food, clothing, and medical care. The number of institute-sponsored refugees grew yearly. In 1978 the institute sponsored 66 Southeast Asian families; in 1979, 449.

The problems faced by these immigrants dwarfed those of earlier refugees. The Southeast Asians had no ties to America, and often no inkling of culture, climate, or language. Hmong tribesmen had had a written language only since the 1960s, when westerners transcribed the vocabulary into a Roman alphabet. When the first planeloads of immigrants arrived via resettlement camps, there
were no relatives who could be called upon for assistance. And the institute—its staff and its members—knew little about these newcomers.

Nonetheless, the institute's staff served as the refugees' link to Providence and to American culture, registering children at school, taking people to dentists, scheduling driver's exams, explaining American gadgets. Staff members negotiated with landlords and utilities and furniture stores. The institute even acted as a bank, loaning money to refugees.

But resettlement did not go smoothly. Local institutions encountered problems as they struggled to accommodate their new clients. For instance, Providence regulations required medical exams for all children starting school, yet the health clinic had a weeks-long backlog of appointments. Until the Providence school system received a $97,000 federal grant to hire four teachers and three aides, the schools had no personnel familiar with Southeast Asian children. Everybody needed English classes, yet the Office of Refugee Resettlement did not pay for enough classes for those wanting to enroll in them. Contracts for job training were short-term and hampered by rigid regulations. Federally funded mental health workers, stationed in Boston, spent only two days a week in Providence. Services were so scattered that in 1979 the Council of Community Services published a service guidebook for sponsors.35

Worst of all, though, was the abrupt transition from Thai camp to South Providence tenement, a transition that left many refugees distraught and frightened of new neighbors, new laws, new homes filled with unfamiliar televisions and toasters and doorbells. And there was no simple solution for their anguish.

The Office of Refugee Resettlement wanted sponsors to settle newcomers into housing, jobs, and school quickly. The more quickly immigrants were settled, however, the less time they had for the English lessons, job training, and acculturation that would ease their transition. Early bureaucratic reports praised Rhode Island sponsors for resettling their clients expeditiously; later reports noted that refugees who were more slowly resettled used the extra time to good advantage.

The immigrants were ripe for exploitation. Not only did they not know English; they did not know their rights or how to insist on them, and they feared reprisals for speaking out. Some landlords crowded families into overpriced tenements; some factory owners severely overworked their new employees. Racial animosity erupted into violence, and the refugee-victims did not complain. Critics blamed the people who abused the refugees, but they also blamed the refugees' putative protector-sponsors—organizations like the International Institute.36

Continuing to adapt, by 1979 the Institute had three Southeast Asians on its staff to help the refugees. Though acculturation was difficult, over time the immigrants began to grow more acclimated to their new home, and clans and families were reunited when Southeast Asians came to Providence from other cities.

In 1976, when the task of resettling Southeast Asian immigrants was beginning, Nelly Ayvasian became the new director of the institute following the death of Raymond O'Dowd, who had served as director for fifteen years. Ayvasian had come to the institute in 1954, when she had been invited to dance at its Flag
Day festival. It was an invitation she had initially refused. She had been working for four years as a dressmaker in Providence when she got the invitation, which had a red feather in the corner to represent the Red Feather Community Fund. But the juxtaposition of a red feather beside the word International connoted Communists to her. “International to me meant the organized Communist party and the red feather on the stationery scared me.” Only after a Russian friend at Brown University assured her that the institute was not a Communist front did she agree to dance. Subsequently she volunteered as a tutor and a translator for the many languages she spoke. In 1959, the year she became an American citizen, she joined the staff as a social worker, and later she became the institute’s supervisor of immigration and naturalization services. For a few months in 1962 she served as acting director. The position she stepped into in 1976 seemed made for her, in an organization whose history was intertwined with her own.

In 1979 the institute moved again, leaving the carriage house-stable that Raymond O’Dowd had deemed inadequate years earlier. Initially the United Way (the former United Fund) did not approve a capital campaign to purchase a new building, but after observing the numbers of people streaming into and out of the Princeton Avenue facility, it gave its consent. Thanks in large measure to Providence’s mayor Vincent Cianci, who pledged support from the Office of Community Development’s Block Grant Fund, the institute bought the Dr. Edmund D. Chesebro House, a 2½-story mansion dating from 1900, at 421 Elmwood Avenue. Fittingly, the institute’s former Princeton Avenue headquarters were later occupied by the Southeast Asian Women’s Cooperative, a group of forty-five women marketing the colorful hand-quilted squares (pa ndau) that hang today in Rhode Island offices and homes.

In 1980 the budget of the International Institute reached $625,000, much of it funded by the Office of Refugee Resettlement. The institute was no longer dependent solely on the United Way, though that organization remained a key financial supporter (in 1982 it allocated $147,000 to the institute). As a United Way agency, the institute followed a long-established procedure: it presented its budget to the United Way, which reviewed the request, along with competing requests, before dividing money among its member agencies. Barring major program revisions or United Way campaign shortfalls, agencies generally received roughly the same allocation from year to year.

In the early 1980s the institute learned that government funding was less reliable. In 1980 President Reagan promised to reduce spending by the federal government; two years later that promise halved the institute’s budget to $325,000. Other programs focusing on refugee resettlement fell to the same federal ax. The institute reduced the size of its staff, but not the number of clients that it served.

Spurred by relaxed immigration regulations and by poverty and persecution in their homelands, substantial numbers of refugees from Central and South America were arriving in the United States by the early 1970s. As many as 6,000 lived in Rhode Island in 1970, and their number would grow to some 33,000 by 1982. While most immigrants gravitated to the International
Institute, if only to bring relatives here or to apply for citizenship, many Latin Americans did not. Some had come illegally, or on temporary visas. Some planned to stay only a few years, earning money to send home, and then return home themselves. When President Carter offered conditional amnesty to illegal immigrants, many did not pursue it.

Yet the Latin American newcomers needed basic services, primarily English lessons. In response, an organization born of 1960s idealism and governmental largess sprang up: Project Persona. Its founder was Judy Murphy. Working in Providence’s Model Cities Program in 1971, Murphy complained that English classes for foreigners were not geared to the Spanish-speaking immigrants, who instead needed instruction in “Survival English,” offered at convenient times and in convenient places. Besides, the established centers for instruction—the Opportunities Industrialization Center, the Urban Education Center of Rhode Island College, the Providence Adult Basic Education Center, the International Institute—were turning people away from oversubscribed classes.

She had an idea: with supplies donated by the Providence Public Library and with volunteer tutors recruited from Brown University, she could offer Survival English in local churches and immigrants’ homes. Soon the program, officially called Providing English Referral and Social Opportunities, established a base at the Knight Memorial branch library on Elmwood Avenue. As the program’s sole full-time staff member, Murphy recruited volunteers from Brown, the Teachers’ Corps, Vista, and the local community. All she asked was enthusiasm. “It might help if the speakers know a little Spanish,” she said, “but it isn’t necessary.”

In addition to Survival English classes, Project Persona offered discussions on topics as varied as sex education, child care, politics, and grocery shopping—

Staff members of Project Persona, 1982. Photo courtesy of the International Institute of Rhode Island.
whatever people were interested in. It conducted high school equivalency preparations, spurred production of a film, took people on a bus tour to Red Cross headquarters, ran a children’s story hour. Volunteers tutored people in their homes. Because it gave people the help they wanted, the program thrived, with word-of-mouth praise spreading throughout the refugee community.

Murphy parlayed the work of Project Persona into money—from government, from the United Way, from foundations, from businesses. In 1971 the project received $12,000 from the library. By 1974 its budget had grown to $56,000, half underwritten by the Office of Economic Opportunity and half by the United Way, with additional contributions from local businesses. The library donated space and managerial help. Still drawing funds from governmental poverty programs, Project Persona became an affiliate of the United Way in 1977. The following year, when it moved to the Central Providence YMCA, the organization had a staff of twenty full- and part-time workers.

In 1980 Murphy was succeeded as director by William Shuey, who had taught English in Turkey with the Peace Corps and in Providence with the Opportunities Industrialization Center. That year, with a budget of $225,000 ($58,000 from the United Way), the program expanded beyond the Hispanic community. A class designed just for Indo-Chinese refugees quickly filled its seventy-five slots, and fifty people had to be turned away. Local Hmong clansmen were invited to enroll in a special six-hour-a-day language class, with the promise of a $3-an-hour stipend from CETA (Comprehensive Employment and Training Act) money. In 1981 six hundred students of twenty-five different nationalities were attending the program’s language classes on an average day, and the Survival English approach was winning national recognition. By then the project’s personnel comprised thirty ESL (English as a second language) professionals, a volunteer community board, and several dozen volunteer tutors. When the organization felt the omnipresent federal ax in 1983, the United Way gave it an additional $40,000 emergency grant. In 1984 Project Persona’s budget reached $450,000.

Two refugee-assistance organizations were now operating along parallel tracks. The established and venerable International Institute had been offering its expertise in immigration, language classes, and social work to immigrants from over fifty countries for some sixty years; the eleven-year-old grassroots endeavor Project Persona was conducting a statewide program built around its classes in Survival English, a program originally designed for Latin American immigrants but since expanded to include other groups as well. The two organizations were clearly performing complementary services for much the same people. Moreover, both organizations were drawing from the same pool of dollars, competing for dwindling federal grants and for money from the same local foundations and businesses.

The resolution of this situation was difficult but obvious. In June 1984 the two organizations’ boards of directors merged, and Project Persona became a division of the International Institute. At that time the institute also acquired a new director. Having decided to retire, Ayvasian had been interviewing prospective replacements referred by the national organization, but she had found none that she thought could—or should—head the institute. Instead, she chose William Shuey, the director of Project Persona, as her successor.
With Immigrants continuing to seek out the International Institute, by 1988 it had outgrown the Chesebro mansion. Once again the board began the search-and-bid process, looking for a building large enough to accommodate oversubscribed programs, yet cheap enough for a strained budget. Mayor Cianci, the grandchild of immigrants, again pledged public dollars.

The board finally settled on a foreclosed property at 645 Elmwood Avenue, a few blocks down the street. The building had been constructed by the Elks in 1967, then sold in 1985 to a nonprofit group that sought to “incubate” small businesses. The institute purchased the building for $290,000 and moved in during the summer of 1993.

Edith Terry Bremer, the founder of the first International Institute, would not recognize the Providence institute’s new home. People fill its three floors of classrooms, meeting rooms, and offices, space that previous directors would never have imagined. Indeed, one unsubstantiated yet plausible anecdote holds that when Ellis Yatman and his friends were quietly raising “the miracle dollar” for the carriage house at 104 Princeton Avenue in 1957, they could have raised enough to buy the larger main house, but they believed that neither the community or the United Way would accept such a commodious facility for assisting foreigners.  

Bremer would laud the Providence institute’s broad community funding. Service fees and tuition now provide 42 percent of the institute’s $1.6 million budget, and government contracts supply another 25 percent. The United Way, providing 13 percent of the budget, remains important, but it is no longer the institute’s sole funder or controlling voice.

Yet the institute is not just buildings and budgets but an idea, first formulated by Bremer in the early part of the century. Bremer envisioned the organization as an ethnic mosaic, one in which newcomers would be offered guidance, with full respect for their ethnic backgrounds, by “nationality workers.” Today, twenty of the thirty-five full-time staff at the Providence institute were born in other countries, including El Salvador, the Dominican Republic, China, Portugal, Cambodia, and Bangladesh. Cambodian wall hangings and Latin American quilts line the walls, and there are Spanish-language newspapers scattered on tables in the front hall. Board members plan ethnic balls. Meanwhile, immigrants still learn English, fill out citizenship papers, and struggle to bring over relatives to join them in this country.

Since 1970 the number of immigrants to Rhode Island has almost doubled. A slowing influx of Southeast Asians has reduced their proportion among the institute’s clients from 50 percent in 1980 to 10 percent today; most clients now come from Latin America, though turmoil anywhere in the world has its reverberations here. Nearly one in five current residents of Providence was born outside the United States.

“We were all immigrants once,” an institute fund-raising appeal once declared. Even more to the point, we are all Americans now.
More than seventy years after its founding, the International Institute continues to help new generations of immigrants. Photo, circa 1986, by John Foraste, courtesy of the International Institute of Rhode Island.
Notes


4. Bremer, "Confidential Proceedings."

5. YWCA, "Survey of Providence, December 1920," Rhode Island Collection, Providence Public Library.


8. Saunders, "10-Year Report to the Board."


10. Ibid.


15. Ibid.


19. Ibid. A minority on the study committee disagreed with the report's view of the institute's clubs.


31. Ibid.


33. Raymond O'Dowd, internal memo, September 1963, International Institute archives. The memo reported that the founders of International House "had just 10 hours to find a name for the house, and since they are following the pattern of the International House of Cambridge, they just picked the same name."

34. Executive report to the board, 1964, International Institute archives.


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