The Story of Oswego Refugees: A Virtual Exhibit

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SUNY Buffalo State
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The Story of Oswego Refugees:
A Virtual Exhibit

A Project in
Museum Studies

by

Amy Grimes

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Abstract

This paper describes the story of 982 refugees who came to Fort Ontario in Oswego, New York from Naples, Italy on August 3, 1944. The research illuminates the reasons why they were chosen to come and their journey. The research explores their time at Fort Ontario, how they were able to stay in the United States, and how their story is preserved and remembered to the present day. This paper also describes the process of creating an online exhibit that resulted from this research. Images from the online exhibit are featured throughout the paper. The reader is encouraged to view the online exhibit and use it for educational purposes and personal enlightenment.
Chapter I: Introduction

In the summer of 1944, a group of 982 refugees took the opportunity to leave Naples, Italy and travel to the emergency shelter at Fort Ontario in Oswego, New York. This paper tells how these people became refugees and the reasons they were chosen to come to Oswego, NY. It continues with describing their experiences at the fort and the steps taken for them to stay in the United States. The final part of this paper focuses on how their story is preserved and the process of creating an online exhibit from this research. This research is important because this is one story about the Holocaust that is not as highly recognized and has a positive ending. Some of the images from the online exhibit are incorporated throughout the paper to go with the research. I chose to create an online exhibit after learning that there has never been one created for this topic. By making the exhibit accessible online it eliminated the issues of the lack of physical objects, cost, and finding exhibit space.
Chapter II: Creating an Exhibit: Inspiration behind creating exhibit

I chose to create my exhibit about this group of refugees who came to live at Fort Ontario in Oswego, NY from a newspaper article I received from my grandmother. The newspaper article was from her local newspaper, The Oswego Palladium Times, and was written in honor of the seventieth anniversary of when these refugees arrived at Fort Ontario. The article briefly described their journey and time spent living at the fort from August 1944 till February 1946. After reading the article, I thought that it would be interesting to learn more about this story and to share this story since it is not a well-known story about U.S. involvement with helping Holocaust refugees.

Why a digital exhibit vs. a physical exhibit?

I choose to create digital exhibit based on a couple of key factors. Most of the resources for my project are online. Photographs and other non-digital resources I wanted to include in my
project were scanned onto my computer. I confirmed to create a digital museum after visiting both Fort Ontario and the Safe Haven Holocaust Museum. From my visit, I concluded that I would not have access to many three-dimensional objects to put on display in a physical exhibit. At both Fort Ontario and the Safe Haven Holocaust Museum, mainly photographs, newspaper articles, and letters were used to create their exhibits. Based on these factors, I decided that creating a digital exhibit was more feasible. I also emailed Rebecca Fisher who is a historian at the Safe Haven Holocaust Museum. When I told her about the project she agreed that a digital exhibit would be best for this topic since it had not been done before. She also mentioned that it would be very useful and productive based on the type of resources available on this topic.

A digital exhibit was a better option as well because of the issue of finding a location and space to display a physical exhibit. I live in Amherst, New York and the ideal location would be Oswego, New York since it was where the refugees lived and is the home of both Fort Ontario and the Safe Haven Holocaust Museum. I would either have to choose one city or find a physical space in both locations which would be very challenging and time consuming. Additionally, a physical exhibit would be costly to produce and set up. Then, I would have to worry about transferring the exhibit from one space to another and what to do with the exhibit once it was no longer on display. By creating a digital exhibit, these worries about location and space are no longer an issue. Also, it would be easier to add new information or to make any necessary changes as additional resources were uncovered.

**Process of creating this exhibit**

Since I decided to create a digital exhibit, the first step was to determine the logistics of creating the exhibit. I chose to create the digital exhibit as a website because I could create the website with any type of format and design. I choose to use black, size sixteen, open sans font
because it was large enough for people to read. I chose blue for the background color of the entire website since it went with the images and the font. To access the main pages of the website, I had buttons for them at the top of the home page so visitors can click to view the different website pages. I created subsections to help organize the different parts of the exhibit and allow visitors to choose which section of the exhibit they want to view.

Second, I had to decide what parts of the Oswego Refugee story to include as well as decide what pictures would complement the story. For the website, I decided to include both a contact page and a resource page since this information would be beneficial to future researchers. These pages would also provide visitors with the types of resources I used for this topic. I also choose to create an inspiration page because it explains why this topic was chosen and serves as a dedication to my grandmother who is no longer alive but would have been extremely proud of this project. While doing this project, one of the main challenges was deciding which information to include in the paper and then for the digital exhibit. I had so many great resources, but I wanted to focus on the key pieces of the story. This decision was especially difficult for the website because I didn’t want to bombard visitors with information, yet I wanted them to have enough information for them to truly learn about the story of these refugees.

From creating this project, I had the opportunity to learn about America’s response to the helping Holocaust refugees. From the decision of President Franklin D. Roosevelt to create an emergency refugee shelter about 1,000 people under Hitler’s regime were saved. This project also gave me the opportunity to visit both Fort Ontario and the Safe Haven Holocaust Museum in Oswego, NY. The research that created the exhibit entailed is documented in the following chapters and is accessible by clicking this link http://oswego-refugees.my-free.website.

Chapter III: Literature Review
George Feldman in *Understanding the Holocaust: Volumes 1 & 2* focuses on the period between 1933-1945 with a “comprehensive range of historical information” and commentary about the Holocaust, Hitler, and the ruling of the Nazi party. Each chapter focuses on a particular topic such as the Nazi government and has side notes that elaborate on either a person or event within the chapter. To complement the text, there are illustrations and other elements to help readers and researchers, including a timeline, a glossary of key terms, and an annotated bibliography of sources for further reading. Feldman specializes in writing about the Holocaust and World War II. During WWII, his father fought in the French Army against the Nazis. His entire family went into hiding when the Nazi’s took over France. Some of his relatives were arrested and sent to concentration camps and survived. The experiences of his family members influenced him to write this book to offer people a better understand about the Holocaust. His book provided the information to establish the treatment of Jews and other enemies of the Nazi party in Germany and the other countries they took over. His book also helped establish the views of Mussolini and the people of Italy in terms of helping refugees fleeing Nazi controlled countries.

Ruth Gruber worked as special assistant to Harold L. Ickes, Secretary of the Interior, who led the effort to bring people over from Italy. Ickes hired Gruber due to her background in literature, the German language, and journalism. The author narrates the story in *Haven: The Dramatic Story of 1000 World War II Refugees and How They Came to America* with her

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2 Ibid, p.xii.
personal experiences and factual information while including the views and opinions of the refugees themselves. With this combination, it makes her book enjoyable to read because it allows one to stand in the shoes of the various people featured in the book and not just telling the cold facts. To write her book, Gruber used her own recollections written down in notebooks, and copies of the reports, letters, and documents prepared for the government as well as diaries of cabinet members.\textsuperscript{5} Her book was most useful with descriptions of the journey of the refugees from Naples, Italy to Fort Ontario in Oswego, NY.

\textit{Token Shipment: The Story of America’s War Refugee Shelter} is the record of the Oswego refugees by the War Relocation Authority (WRA) within the Department of Interior. Since this is a government record, it just focused on the facts such as the number of refugees and their occupations and didn’t include any personal experiences. However, the information included was detailed. The book helped with the present research since it was organized chronologically and included graphs to better understand the composition of the camp including gender, age, nationality, citizenship, occupations, and languages spoken.

\textit{The Varian Fry Papers: The Fort Ontario Emergency Refugee Shelter Papers} include primary sources from a wide variety of public and private institutions. The papers were assembled into a book by Karen Greenberg for the Columbia University Library. The collection is organized chronologically and it includes a section that describes how different documents were selected, the history of papers, and the importance to the overall documentation of the Holocaust.\textsuperscript{6} This goal of this book is to provide access to historical documents that otherwise would not be available for researchers to examine unless they are able to spend a lot of money

\textsuperscript{5} Ibid, p xv.

and time traveling to access documents. These papers contributed to the current research on the criteria used to select which refugees were to come to Fort Ontario, the official notice of the shelter closing, and the guidelines for the refugees leaving the shelter.

“Don’t Fence Me In!”: Memories of the Fort Ontario Refugees and their Friends was compiled exclusively from the archives of the Safe Haven Holocaust Museum. This book includes the stories and personal experiences of the refugees as well as the residents of Oswego who befriended or worked with the refugees. The first part of the book is about the USS Henry Gibbons, the ship that brought the refugees over from Italy. The second part of the book describes their time at the fort including the activities they participated, the different educational opportunities, and on the refugees fight to be able to stay in the United States. The last part of the book focuses on the establishment of the Safe Haven Museum and the challenges of preserving those Safe Haven stories. For this project, the book provided information about the establishment of the Safe Haven Holocaust Museum. The book allowed integration of the individual stories and contributions of the Oswego residents to life in the fort. For example, learning about one refugee who created an orchestra. Another recounts how, with help from private agencies, the residents were able to create their own newspaper.

Sharon Lowenstein teaches at her local Jewish Community Center and was a history professor at the University of Kansas. She chose to write Token Refugee: The Story of the Jewish Refugee Shelter at Oswego after hearing about the story of refugees from Theodore Wilson, a

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7 Ibid, p.vii.

colleague.\textsuperscript{9} Lowenstein’s book focuses on the story of the refugees from the events that led to Roosevelt making his decision to allow them to come to the United States, to the results of the decision made by President Truman to allow them to stay. In the acknowledgment section of her book, Lowenstein mentions the variety of resources she used, which included government records, historic records, and interviews with key people such as Ruth Gruber. This book is an excellent source for research with its detailed bibliography and footnotes. Her book contributed to this project because it informed the study about the work opportunities for refugees within the shelter. It provided additional information to many other topics throughout the paper, such as the people who left the shelter before its official closure.

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Chapter IV: Oswego Refugees: Why this group of people were considered refugees:

Treatment under Nazi occupation

The Nazi regime in Germany began on January 30, 1933 when Hitler was made the chancellor and leader of Germany. He gained this title with a “backroom cut deal between the Nazis and conservative party leaders who could not rule without Nazi support. He came into power legally without winning the majority of the votes.”10 The conservative leaders thought Hitler couldn’t gain more power since they still controlled the army, police, and cabinet.11 Hitler, with the enforcement of the Schutzstaffel (SS) put political prisoners in concentration camps. Members of the SS were considered the elite of the Nazi Party and had to prove they had no Jewish ancestry.12

The Nazi party took control over all radio broadcasts and shut down Anti-German newspapers.13 In 1934, Hitler made himself Führer by combining the office of chancellor and president. He was able to do this after the death of the president Paul Von Hinderburg.14 He gained absolute power of Germany after passing the Enabling Act, which allowed him to issue any laws without needing approval from anyone else.15

When a German official was shot in Paris, France the Nazis claimed that the Jews were responsible and that it was a crime against all Germans. On November 9, 1938, SS troops wearing civilian clothes “attached Jewish homes, stores, synagogues, and orphanages”16 in response to the shooting in Paris. As a result, several thousand businesses were destroyed, about

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10 Feldman, p.52.
11 Ibid, p. 52.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid, p. 94.
15 Ibid, p. 57.
16 Ibid, p. 76.
one hundred Jews were killed, and thousands of others were injured. This event became known as Kristallnacht which combines the Germans words for glass and night since the streets were filled with shattered glass. 17

The SS also arrested 30,000 Jews and sent them to concentration camps. The SS knew that this would force their families to pay for their release from prison and that as further measure they could force them to leave Germany. 18 On November 12, 1938, a new degree was made that prohibited Jews from selling “…any goods or services, from being independent craftsmen, or from being in the management position of any company.” 19 On November 15th, all Jewish children were expelled from nation schools. By December, Jews barred from many public places including movie theaters and beaches. 20

The concept of Lebensraum, room to live, justified Germany’s invasion of other countries. Hitler believed that they needed to conquer new territory because “…without this room, Germany could not survive.” 21 This expansion of land would begin with Poland in Eastern Europe and the Ukraine and White Russia, now Belarus, in the Soviet Union. Hitler believed that

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17 Ibid, p. 76.
18 Ibid, p. 77.
19 Ibid, p. 78.
21 Ibid, p. 102-103.
Germany had a right to take over these areas since they were made up with people that he considered to be a lower race. Also, by capturing Poland, Germany would be regaining territory they lost in WWI.\textsuperscript{22}

Germany began expanding its territory by uniting Germany and Austria in a pact called Anschluss which Austria agreed to after German troops were sent into the country.\textsuperscript{23} Then the German army invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, which resulted in Great Britain and France declaring war on Germany. By 1940, Germany invaded the Netherlands, Belgium, France, and Luxembourg. In 1941, Germany continued to invade other nations including North Africa, Greece, Yugoslavia, and the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{24}

**Flight to Italy**

It was especially difficult for Jews to legally leave Germany because they had to go through the Reich Central Office for Jewish Emigration and pay a large exit fee.\textsuperscript{25} Jewish people and other Nazi enemies fled to Italy because it was the only country free from Nazi control within an easier traveling distance. Italy formed an alliance with Germany when they joined the war against the Allied Forces on June 10, 1940.\textsuperscript{26}

Jews under the Nazi regime chose to go to Italy because it was known that Italy was not very anti-Semitic since only one percent of the population was Jewish.\textsuperscript{27} Mussolini didn’t believe in a pure race and had close colleagues who were Jewish. He only began to create anti-Jewish legislation when the Italian military was losing to German forces, but never went to the extremes

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid, p. 104.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid, p. xxii.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid, p. xxii-xxiv
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid, p. 79.
\textsuperscript{27} Feldman, *Understanding the Holocaust*, p. 335.
of Hitler and the Nazi party.\textsuperscript{28} When Mussolini created these laws in 1938, about 46,000 Jews lived in Italy. Of these, about 9,000 were born in other countries and had further restrictions such as residence requirements.\textsuperscript{29} One man who disagreed with how Mussolini treated the Jews in both Italy and Italian occupied countries was Joseph Goebbels, a Nazi propaganda minister. He suggested that all Jews living in Italian occupied Paris be forced to wear a yellow star to identify and humiliate them. However, Mussolini didn’t force people in occupied France to wear the Star of David and allowed them to not be drafted for work.\textsuperscript{30}

Although men were interred for a while he would release them, and they were welcome to live in villages throughout Italy with their families.\textsuperscript{31} Those who couldn’t live in the villages either hid in the mountains or were imprisoned. A lot of the refugees who came to Fort Ontario were in “…Ferramonti di Tarsia, a camp near the Cambria region of south Naples…it wasn’t an extermination camp, [but] it still was a concentration camp.”\textsuperscript{32} The establishment of these camps in Italy allowed Mussolini and the Italian government to refuse to deport Jews from Italy or from Italian occupied Croatia or France to Auschwitz.\textsuperscript{33} In the villages and in some mountain areas, refugees fleeing Nazi domination were able to live as “Livre De Confine, which means free confinement. [They] had to go the prestura, authority, once a day, to report that [they] were there.”\textsuperscript{34}

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\textsuperscript{30} History.com Staff, "Goebbels Complains of Italians’ Treatment of Jews.
\textsuperscript{31} Don’t Fence Me In!, p.42.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid, p.56.
\textsuperscript{33} History.com Staff, "Goebbels Complains of Italians’ Treatment of Jews,"
\textsuperscript{34} Don’t Fence Me In!, p.70.
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People were able to escape to Italy with help from allies, the kindness of strangers, even enemy soldiers. In Italy, people were more willing to ignore and evade the laws even going as far as falsifying documents and fooling authority figures.\textsuperscript{35} However, for many families “identification cards, food coupons and visas could send refugees either to freedom or into the abyss of Auschwitz.”\textsuperscript{36} Even after they arrived in Italy people still had to avoid capture. They were also being hunted down or arrested by Italian solders not only for being Jewish, but also for participation in resistance movements.\textsuperscript{37} Many Italians helped protect Jewish residents and refugees especially once Germany took over Italy in 1943 and were deporting Jews to Auschwitz and other concentration camps. One family who eventually made it to Fort Ontario with help from Italian strangers learned the culture, created cover stories, and changed their name from Schaufeld to Scapelli.\textsuperscript{38}

The ship that took the refugees to Fort Ontario left from Naples, Italy in 1944. Bill Neville, the editor in chief, of the GI’s \textit{Stars and Stripes} describes the destruction of the city. As a result, there was no food or water because the Germans “…blew up the water supply. They even blew up the whole sewer system…They [also] put a twenty-one-day bomb in the post office, so innocent people would get killed weeks after the Germans were gone. To add madness, they even emptied the prisons and insane asylums.”\textsuperscript{39}

\textsuperscript{35} Zuccotti, \textit{The Italians and the Holocaust}, p. 275-276.
\textsuperscript{36} \textit{Don’t Fence Me In!}, p.84.
\textsuperscript{39} Gruber, \textit{Haven}, p.45.
How they were able to come to the U.S.: Roosevelt invites as guests

Refugees trying to come to the United States in the beginning of WWII were told they could not come because the quotas were filled, yet, that was not the case. The quota system became law in the early 1920s, mainly to bar “Orientals” and immigrants from Eastern Europe who were mainly Jewish.40 One example was when President Roosevelt turned away 908 refugees who sailed on the ocean liner called the St. Louis. This ship left Hamburg, Germany in 1939 to set out for Cuba. Cuba originally agreed to allow them in the country for a large bribe. However, when they

arrived, the money was not able to be arranged quickly enough and the passengers were forced to go back to sea. They sailed north to the United States but were not permitted to land. A coast guard ship around them to make sure they didn’t land. The captain of the ship decided to take his time going back to Europe, so arrangements could be made for these refugees to go to other countries and not be killed by the Germans. The group of refugees on the ship were granted asylum in England, Belgium, France, and the Netherlands. 41

President Roosevelt would not consider approving one shelter unless Congress was assured that other shelters were being established in the Mediterranean. The American people were also demanding that the President allow Jewish refugees asylum in the United States after learning about the cruelty and nature of the Nazi’s.42 Roosevelt announced his plan to create a haven at Fort Ontario in Oswego, NY on June 12, 1944. With this announcement, 982 refugees from eighteen different countries traveled from Naples, Italy to Fort Ontario.43 The group of refugees was not larger because Roosevelt feared the political ramifications of having a larger number of refugees since immigration especially of Jewish people was not popular in the United States.44 Roosevelt’s announcement came after learning that Undersecretary of State, Summer Welles, and other State Department officials, signed an order to suppress cables disclosing Nazi atrocities.45 The first cable that was suppressed, dated August 8th, 1942, was about a plan discussed and under consideration

41 Feldman, Understanding the Holocaust, p. 83-84. On November 8, 2017 I had the opportunity to meet one of the refugees on the St. Louis at SUNY: Buffalo State. His name was Dr. Sol Messinger and he spoke for the Kristallnacht Anniversary Presentation which coincided with the opening of Witnesses: Buffalo’s Holocaust Era Stories exhibit which I helped create and install.
42 Lowenstein, Token Refugee, p.15 & 37.
44 Gruber, Haven, p.6.
that “…all Jews in countries occupied or controlled by Germany numbering [which was] 3.5-4 million…should after deportation and concentration in east be exterminated at one blow.”

President Roosevelt also learned about a report falsified by Henry L. Morgenthau Jr of the Treasury Department. This report dated January 13th, 1944 was called “Acquiescence of the United States Government in the Murder of the Jews”. This document was an “honest, passionate telling [of] how our State Department has not only barred Eastern European Jews from entering our country but used the machinery of government to bar them.” Morgenthau softened the more inflammatory language, deleted a specific proposal for temporary American Havens, and renamed it “Report to the President.”

It was decided in Washington that the policies for these refugees would be determined by the War Refugee Board(WRB) and the War Relocation Authority(WRA). The WRB was “a new and independent agency with Cabinet status.” The agency was created by Roosevelt to help rescue Jews after learning information was suppressed by the State Department. The WRB “…brought the camp into being, selected its occupants, and until June 6th, 1945, retained responsibility for overall policy. It based all policy decisions on the project’s possible influence on larger refugee questions.” The WRA “… operated instead from the perspective of an agency having to respond to the daily problems of camp life.”

To get around the rigid immigration quotas the refugees would be identified as Roosevelt’s guests. This gave them no legal standing in the United States. Roosevelt also

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46 Ibid, p.17
48 Lowenstein, Token Refugee, p.16.
49 Ibid, p.16.
51 Lowenstein, Token Refugee, p.41.
52 Ibid, p.41.
stressed that they would be required to return to Europe once conditions permitted.\textsuperscript{53} He chose to have the refugees come from Naples due to strain on Allied troops to help with the food shortages and other civilian needs. He also learned in a cabinet meeting that Yugoslavian refugees and others fleeing from Nazi control were getting to Italy at a rate of eighteen hundred a week.\textsuperscript{54}

President Roosevelt choose to call it an emergency refugee shelter because he felt the name “…clearly indicated the nature of the venture since the government would be unable to provide much more than a shelter.”\textsuperscript{55} This was more than most refugees had since earlier laws under Nazi occupation took away their livelihood. They had no means to support themselves since they choose to leave everything behind and go to Italy.\textsuperscript{56}

\textsuperscript{53} "Fort Ontario Emergency Refugee Shelter", United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

\textsuperscript{54} Gruber, \textit{Haven}, p.4-5


\textsuperscript{56} "Refugees Arrive from Europe", \textit{Life}, August 21, 1944, p.25.
Requirements for the guests

There were more than 3,000 applicants but only 1,000 were going to be chosen. The two representatives from the United States relied on Allied Officers and a local Jewish organization, Delasem, to help make the decision. As a result, about a quarter of the group was from Rome, Italy while the remaining three fourths were from various towns, villages, and camps throughout Italy.\textsuperscript{57} Since the government did not want any unnecessary delays, they decided that once the refugees arrived in the United States there would be further screenings and health checks and directed no unnecessary security screening be done in Italy.\textsuperscript{58}

During the selection process, the refugees were told that U.S. government would only offer safety, security, and shelter for the duration of the war. The goal was to help real refugees, so their religion was not to be a huge factor in the selection process.\textsuperscript{59} As a result of their undefined immigration status, the refugees would not be allowed to leave Fort Ontario including to work or visit relatives who were already living in the United States.\textsuperscript{60} Some of the general requirements for the selection process included “No families with healthy males of military age, no families including members with contagious or loathsome disease, no separation of family groups, [and] as many as possible from camps if they filled other requirements.”\textsuperscript{61}

In addition to keeping groups and families together the government wanted them to have skills that would make the emergency refugee shelter self-sufficient.\textsuperscript{62} Therefore, other

\textsuperscript{57} Lowenstein, \textit{Token Refugee}, p.42.
\textsuperscript{58} Greenberg, \textit{The Fort Ontario Emergency Refugee Shelter Papers}, p.144.

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid, p.144.
\textsuperscript{60} “Fort Ontario Emergency Refugee Shelter”, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

\textsuperscript{62} Marks, \textit{Token Shipment}, p.9.
requirements for the group included having one to three doctors and dentists, nurses, rabbis and other religious leaders, and interpreters. To help with the maintenance of the camp, the government also wanted to include carpenters, plumbers, and electricians. Since the government was only providing the necessities, refugees could bring any tools necessary for their work or profession in addition to their own personal belongings.  

Why the city of Oswego and Fort Ontario were chosen

When deciding to create an emergency refugee shelter in the United States, the federal government was deciding between two different locations. These locations included Fort Ontario in Oswego, NY and Madison Barracks in Watertown, NY. When deciding where to create this emergency shelter, it is important to remember that President Roosevelt had past connections with Fort Ontario. He visited the Fort when he was the governor of New York on Governor’s Day to review the troops. Also, he worked with the Fort back in 1913 when he was Assistant of

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63 Greenberg, The Fort Ontario Emergency Refugee Shelter Papers, p.143-144.
the Navy.\textsuperscript{64} He said that “Fort Ontario is my camp. I know the Fort very well. It goes back to before the Civil War times and is a very excellent place.”\textsuperscript{65}

Fort Ontario is a beautiful location since it overlooks Lake Ontario. In 1944, Oswego had 22,000 residents with a diversity of religions and ethnicities. Within the community, Jewish people played a large role in the town since the 1840s and were leaders in the Chamber of Commerce; many were merchants, and other professional roles. Since many of the refugees were still learning English it helped that in Oswego the languages and customs of the old world continued strongly.\textsuperscript{66} Although there was huge public support in Oswego for the refugees coming to live at the Fort, there was still prejudice which was highly discouraged by the community’s civic leaders, educators, and merchants which was not practiced in other cities.\textsuperscript{67} Also, within the community, the Jewish population had established positive relationships with non-Jewish residents which limited Anti-Semitism.\textsuperscript{68}

Before the refugees came to live at the fort, a regiment of black National Guardsman were stationed there, and illiterate soldiers came to the fort to receive an education. Therefore, the town was used to outsiders coming into the community and was known for tolerance of these newcomers.\textsuperscript{69} With a state teachers’ college and both a public school and parochial school system the town had the facilities and faculty to address the educational needs and desires of the adults and children who would be coming to the fort.\textsuperscript{70}

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\textsuperscript{65} Ibid, Quote: President Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1944.

\textsuperscript{66} Lowenstein, \textit{Token Refugee}, p.39.

\textsuperscript{67} Ibid, p.74.

\textsuperscript{68} Baron, “Haven from the Holocaust”, p. 16-17

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid, p. 12.

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid, p. 18.
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The site was chosen after a visit by the War Refugee board. An interesting connection was that the city of Oswego was featured in an Office of War Information film as a typical American community. Once the fort was chosen as the official site, preparations began to make the fort an emergency refugee shelter to accommodate 1,000 people.

Composition of this selected group of refugees: Nationality and Religion

When President Roosevelt choose to allow an emergency shelter to be created at Fort Ontario, NY he stated that only 1,000 people would be permitted. Due to previous screenings, 18 people were eliminated so the group now consisted of 982 people. From this group there were a total of eighteen different nationalities. The largest nationalities were Yugoslav, Austrian, Polish, German, and Czech. Also included in this group was a baby born in Italy known as International Henry and a Spanish Citizen born in Greece.

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71 Leir. “Lecture on Fort Ontario Refugee Center”.
72 Gruber, Haven, p.134.
Since the goal of the Nazi’s was to eliminate Jews, 874 of the refugees were Jewish. Their beliefs ranged from Orthodox to various types of reform.\textsuperscript{74} The other religions of the refugees included Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, and Protestant. Once they came to the United States, those who were not Jewish went into the town of Oswego to attend church. This was because they were welcomed by the parishes of these religions in town and since there were not as many it was easier to allow them to attend in town. Although there was a Jewish population in Oswego, it was not that large. Therefore, it would have been difficult to handle the size and the variety of practicing Jews among the group. Therefore, on the shelter grounds they had two services: one was for Orthodox Jews, and another for reformed Jews.\textsuperscript{75}

\textbf{Citizenship and Languages}

The range of natural citizenship varied especially since the Nazi destruction left many of the refugees stateless. The citizenship of 369 of the refugees was Yugoslav. The next largest group, 237, were Austrian. The third largest group, 146, were Polish. The fourth largest group,
96, were from Germany. The other citizenships included Czechoslovakia, Russia, Romania, France, Turkey, Danzig, Spain, Greece, Libya, Bulgaria, Belgium, Hungary, Italy, and Holland. With the group containing 982 people, 436 of them were stateless.76

Among the refugees, many different languages were spoken. Three hundred and ninety-two refugees were able to speak German making it the most common language spoken among the group. The other languages spoken included Italian, Yiddish, Polish, Czech, Hungarian, Dutch, Croatian, Rumanian, Slavic, Serbo-Croatian, Serbian, Yugoslav, Ladino, French, Russian, Hebrew, Greek, Bulgarian, Flemish, Arabic, Turkish, and Ukrainian. It was also noted that 20 refugees among the group spoke languages that were considered unknown.77 The number of mother tongues totaled 21 and 713 of the refugees spoke more than one language.78 Therefore, “…Language served as a lightning rod for seething national rivalries [because while] Yugoslavs constituted [of] the largest national group, …the German language had the greatest number of adherents.79

Copyright: Witness by Ruth Gruber
http://oswego-refugees.my-free.website/exhibit

76 Lowenstein, *Token Refugee*, p.56.
Sex and Age

It is important to remember that the requirements of the selection process included not having men of military age mainly due to political ramifications. Among the group of refugees, 525 were men and 457 were female. Of the men, 119 were under 21, 197 were 21-50, and 209 were 51 and older. Of the women, 112 were under 21, 239 were 21-50, and 106 were 51 and older. The distribution of the group was an issue for the shelter administration since there were not many men able to do heavy lifting and other work such as shoveling snow.

Occupation

Among the refugee population, there was a large variety of the former occupations of the refugees. The top occupations included merchants, tradesmen, salesmen, housewives, bookkeepers or clerks, manufactures, and tailors or dressmakers. Other occupations which were especially reflected in shelter activities included artists, actors, singers, musicians, and journalists. However, it is important to remember that many people in the group were doctors, nurses, teachers, religious leaders, cooks, and “…similar categories of persons who through their work could make a contribution to life in the community.”

The work opportunities outside of the shelter were limited because the War Refugee Board (WRB) feared that the refugees would be competitors for jobs both before and after the war was over. There was also a fear that it would affect opportunities for other shelters to be established. The WRB allowed fifty refugees to briefly work at nearby orchards and in a local...
Birds Eye storage plant during the fall of 1944 since the farmers stressed the need for workers and the WRB feared causing hostility.\textsuperscript{86} Those who worked outside of the shelter had to give 20\% of their salary to be used as bonuses for residents working in the shelter. It is also important to note that in Oswego there were also many POWS (prisoners of war) that came in 1943. They were given more work opportunities since the Geneva convention had a clear set of standards to follow for people employing them unlike the refugees who didn’t have these guidelines.\textsuperscript{87}

\textbf{Voyage: Conditions of ship}

Ruth Gruber accepted her assignment to accompany the refugees from Naples, Italy to Oswego, NY on the USS Henry Gibbons. She was given this assignment from Harold Ickes, Secretary of State. The ship was a “…khaki-colored vessel with steel cables, lifeboats, huge tubs with gun emplacements, and a single back smoke stack.”\textsuperscript{88} The ship weighted a total of 12,800 gross tonnage with a speed of 19 knots. The ship left Naples, Italy on July 21\textsuperscript{st}, 1944 and arrived in New York City on August 3\textsuperscript{rd}, 1944. The ship stayed in service until 1981 when it was sold as scrap metal to the Union Mineral and Alloy Corporation.\textsuperscript{89}

The conditions were not ideal because the other passengers included about one thousand wounded U.S. soldiers making the ship very crowded. These soldiers were from Anzio and Cassino where some of the refugees were hiding until they were liberated by the Allied Forces.\textsuperscript{90} On the ship, “…men [were]in tattered shorts, naked to the waist, women [were] in ragged and rumpled skirts and blouses, sad-eyed children in torn sandals or without shoes. Some of the

\textsuperscript{86} Lowenstein, \textit{Token Refugee}, p. 75.
\textsuperscript{87} Ibid, p.76.
\textsuperscript{88} Gruber, \textit{Witness}, p.68.
\textsuperscript{89} \textit{Don’t Fence Me In!}, p.6.
\textsuperscript{90} Ibid, p.6.
people had cloth and newspapers tied around their feet.”91 Due to these conditions and traveling on an army vessel, many people were becoming ill on the ship.92 Once they boarded the ship they were given identification tags “in bold letters the tags [that] read U.S. Army Casual Baggage. Each tag had a number…their passport to the promised land.”93

On the trip, other passengers included U.S. Army officials, civilians, Red Cross Workers, and American Field Service workers.94 During the trip, Gruber interviewed the refugees as part of a survey and to discuss life at the Fort.95 Due to her work for Ickes and teaching them the basics of English her nickname among the refugees was Mother Ruth.96 She was even featured in the ship’s newspaper called the Gibbins Gab in an article entitled “Meet Your Mysterious Shipmate”.97

One refugee on the ship told Ruth “…I’m sure the Americans are doing this whole thing for the best reasons: to save refugees. But I think they are also doing it for a little bit of publicity. We know what geniuses at publicity. After all, this is a wonderful thing. We are the personal guests of President Roosevelt.”98 Abe Furmanki, 35-year-old refugee, told Ruth that “You must write it down. The world must know. I hear people say that the things they did to us…it’s all propaganda…what I tell you is no propaganda.”99

One story Ruth noted was Mathilda, a refugee in her fifties. She told Ruth “I am a Catholic, a Roman Catholic. I could not understand why they killed Jews, who were innocent

91 Lowenstein, Token Refugee, p.56-57.

92 Ibid, p.44.
93 Gruber, Haven, p.125.

94 Don’t Fence Me In!, p.4
95 Marks, Token Shipment, p. 16.
96 Gruber, Haven, p. ix.
97 Ibid p.ix
98 Ibid, p.64.
99 Ibid, p.70
people, so I helped them escape...I am here only because I saved others. I didn’t want any other pay.”

Ruth learned an interesting piece of information from another refugee named Manya. She describes the meaning of a post card she received from her father after they escaped concentration camps. The post card said “...the leichter are coming for you. In Yiddish leichter are candles. It meant the fire is burning, the fire is destroying; so, we called the Nazi’s leichter, the destroyers. It was our code.” After listening to these stories and many more, she noticed a pattern “…a flight across mountains, dangerous frontiers, manifested waters; of hunger and filth of bombings; of hiding in caves; of capture, imprisonment, and obscene torture.”

Ruth was upset because of the fighting among the refugees mainly due to the different languages spoken where one word had different meanings. Many soldiers of the ship were angry and unfriendly to the refugees because they blamed them for the war and danger of the voyage. To help eliminate these feelings Ruth asked the captain to let the refugees perform a show for them. With his permission, preparations for the show were made and it was a success. The soldiers loved the show in which the refugees sang beautiful songs with the host being a great comedian throughout the show.

On the voyage, the most dangerous part was traveling on the Mediterranean Sea because “…Nazi bombers and Nazi U-boats scouted the water, searching for convoys like ours.” As a result, ships of Nazi war prisoners surround the Gibbons to protect it should German ships attack. In case of attach, preparations included having air raid drills every morning. At sunset,

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100 Ibid, p.78.
101 Ibid, p.90
102 Ibid, p.113.
103 Ibid, p.104.
104 Ibid, p.98-103
105 Ibid, p.78.
106 Ibid, p.79.
the ships “…looked like a ghost ships, with no lights, no people on deck”\textsuperscript{107} because otherwise they could be captured.

On the voyage, “Thirty Nazi planes flew over us and did not attack us. Nazi submarines detected our engines, but we escaped.”\textsuperscript{108} In order to prevent being seen by planes the ship was ordered to make smoke. For possible sub attacks, the ship received messages of flashing lights which indicated that there were subs ahead and to keep the ship closed up.\textsuperscript{109} Ruth stayed with the refugees. They followed orders to remain quiet and not move until they were told it was safe. They were scared but remained calm, putting their faith in God and the soldiers.\textsuperscript{110}

After the attacks, the soldiers stayed on alert. One of the refugees noted that it was important to focus on what awaited them in America, which included freedom, brotherhood, and justice. They also mentioned that during the war it would have been ridiculous for Roosevelt to transport them in a luxury ship.\textsuperscript{111} A few days before they arrived in New York City there was a tragedy. A baby on the ship died due to malnutrition and pneumonia.\textsuperscript{112}

\footnotesize{Copyright: Don’t Fence Me In-Safe Haven Holocaust Museum
Safe Haven Holocaust Museum
http://oswego-refugees.my-free.website/exhibit}

\textsuperscript{107} Ibid, p.79.
\textsuperscript{108} Gruber, Witness, p.69.
\textsuperscript{109} Don’t Fence Me In!, p.5.
\textsuperscript{110} Gruber, Haven, p.80-84.
\textsuperscript{111} Lowenstein, Token Refugee, p. 44.
\textsuperscript{112} Gruber, Haven, p.115.
Arrival in New York City and Journey to Fort Ontario

The refugees arrived in New York City on August 3rd, 1944 after being on the ship for thirteen days. Coincidently, this was the same day that Anne Frank and her family were found by Nazi forces.113 As they entered New York harbor, the refugees waved at the Statue of Liberty “…joyously, tearfully, as if she were a granite mother welcoming them to a new homeland.”114 From the ship, one of the rabbi’s said that “Now that we have reached the land of freedom, we must never believe the lies the Nazis tell about us, that wherever we go we bring evil. It’s not true. We bring truth and we bring the blessings of the Torah. And now that we are here in this land of freedom, we must not be filled with hatred, but with love.”115

From New York City, they took a ferry across the North River to Hoboken, New Jersey. From Hoboken, they met the train that would take them to Oswego. When they arrived, they were greeted by reporters and photographers who were excited, for it was the first opportunity to interview the refugees.116 Ruth Gruber picked which refugees would talk to the press which was only allowed after pressure was put on the United States Army. The press was anxious to learn

113 Gruber, Witness, p.69.  
114 Gruber, Haven, p.119.  
115 Gruber, Witness, p.82.  
about what happened to these people. As part of war time precautions, the refugees were not allowed to contact anyone until they arrived at the camp.\textsuperscript{117}

From the time they left Naples until they arrived at Fort Ontario fifteen days had passed. The voyage across the Atlantic, the disembarking procedures, and the armed guards on the train to Oswego had caused uneasy feelings among the refugees. Despite the journey, for many of the refugees it was worth it because many of them had either already registered for immigration or had family already in the U.S. Also, many refugees knew it would be easier for them to reunite with relatives in countries other than Europe or America if they were already in the United States. For others, coming to America gave them access to American health care and the opportunity to restore their health. For those with children, they would have the opportunity to attend American schools to continue their education and even pursue a specific profession or vocation they couldn’t have in Europe.\textsuperscript{118}

\begin{figure}
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\caption{Artist: Max Sipser-August 5th, 1944 Arrival in New York City}
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\begin{figure}
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\caption{Copyright: Don’t Fence Me In-Safe Haven Holocaust Museum http://oswego-refugees.my-free. website/exhibit}
\end{figure}

\begin{footnotes}
\item Gruber, \textit{Haven}, p.126-129.
\item Lowenstein, \textit{Token Refugee}, p. 47 & 49.
\end{footnotes}
Arrival at Fort Ontario

The refugees arrived in Oswego on August 5th, 1944 which was filmed by Universal Newsreel and released on August 6th, 1944. The film reel is about a minute and captures the arrival of the refugees, departing the train, and registering at the Fort.119 Once they entered the fort, they went through customs to process their baggage and custom agents checked their names off the master registrar.120 Once in Oswego, local residents and the press, especially photographers, came in droves to the camp trying to capture the images of these people. Since their clothing was disinfected, many of their clothes were ruined or had holes. They wanted to look their best when they arrived and was part of the reason why many of the refugees were hesitant to be photographed.121

The refugees did not like the fence because it was a barrier from relatives and exposed them to new people.122 The fence was also a “...psychological symbol for refugees. For most of them, the fence meant a prison, a concentration camp, a locked door, an end to freedom. To Kitty [one refugee], the fence meant security."123 Since America represented freedom to them it was contradictory that they would be surrounded by a fence. The camp itself was 80 acres and had a parade ground in the center, white wooden barracks, and red brick houses to serve as the residence for the director and part of the staff.124 To make the fort suitable for the refugees, the


120 Marks, Token Shipment, p. 17.

122 Lowenstein, Token Refugee, p. 47.
123 Gruber, Haven, p.133.
124 “Refugees Arrive from Europe,” Life, p. 27.
government provided $250,000 to alter the barracks into family apartments, build bathroom for women, build more fire exits, and put in running water for larger families.\(^{125}\)

The tags they were given on the ship that read “U.S. Army Casual Baggage” were also used as part of the screening and identification process. The refugees who had luggage carried it to the inspection points despite young boys from Oswego being hired to do so because they clung to their possessions.\(^{126}\) The luggage ranged from “…broken shoe boxes tied together with strings to expensive leather suitcases plastered with labels of hotels in Paris and Nice.”\(^{127}\)

The screening process was a two-way street because the refugees were eager to answer any questions that would help end the war while those who screened them were also trying to gain information about winning the war while asking the typical screening questions.\(^{128}\) When coming into the United States former Austrians and Germans had to hand over their “…German-language notebooks, manuscripts, and personal letters, as well as photographs, stamp collections, books, cameras, and gold pieces. Many had to give up treasured mementoes, but journalists, professional photographers, and film directors had to give up their material which was needed for projects documenting Nazism.”\(^{129}\) These items were eventually given back after several months.

\(^{125}\) Marks, _Token Shipment_, p. 8.
\(^{126}\) “Refugees Arrive from Europe.” _Life_, p. 27.
\(^{127}\) Ibid, p. 27.
\(^{128}\) Gruber, _Haven_, p. 133-134.
\(^{129}\) Lowenstein, _Token Refugee_, p. 68.
Quarantine period

The refugees began settling into their new homes. Everyone seemed very happy especially to have an actual bed. Many of the refugees lived in crowded conditions in dormitories or cells. Children began playing outside while adults enjoyed walking the grounds able to relax. Since they were quarantined, Oswego residents passed items and talked through the fence. One women, Geraldine “Geri” Desens, who knew about a hole in the fence even came into the camp and let the children ride her bike. These actions by Oswego residents made the fence to become known as the friendship fence. A section of this fence is going to be part of an exhibit at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum entitled “America’s Response to the Holocaust” which is scheduled to open in 2018 or 2019.

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131 Gruber, Haven, p.134-139.

During this time, the refugees were struggling to create a community in the camp due to vast differences in nationality and language. The relations in the camp were intensified due to the close quarters and uncertain future. The quarantine period was established to make sure that the refugees were settled, had no contagious diseases, and were not a security risk.133

At the end of the one-month quarantine, there was a celebration at the Fort. This celebration was an opportunity for people to see how the refugees were truly living. A total of 5,000 people came to the celebration. With the quarantine over, they could have visitors and go into downtown Oswego.134 Although the quarantine period was over, there mail continued to be censored. This was mainly due to the fear of spies gaining information during war time. This censorship lasted two weeks for mail coming into the camp and for six weeks for mail leaving the camp. The WRA (War Relocation Authority) wanted it to last three months which included 28,000 letters and 10,500 packages.135 This compromise was reached when Joseph Smart, the shelter director, pointed out that it was “unwarranted…unworkable…and unenforceable” with the refugees soon getting passes into Oswego and being a “…source of irritation and resentment that would grow to ugly proportions.”136

Official welcome

The official welcome was headed by the Oswego Chamber of Commerce on the parade grounds of the fort. One refugee stated that “it is hard to accustom yourself to being a guest, after you have been a refugee for so many years.”137 At the official welcome, speeches were given by

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133 “Fort Ontario Emergency Refugee Shelter”, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

134 Marks, *Token Shipment*, p. 22-23

135 Lowenstein., *Token Refugee*, p. 68.

136 Ibid, p. 69.

the shelter director, Joseph Smart, secretary of the interior, Harold Ickes, and national director of the WRA (War Relocation Authority), Dillion Myers. These speeches focused on the assurance of being welcomed, safe, and to outline the expectations and lives at the fort. In addition to these representatives, local representatives were welcomed but they wished the ceremony could have been a more public affair since there was great interest and curiosity of these new guests.

The ceremony occurred the day after the refugees arrived to personally reassure their safety and welcome into this country as well as outline daily life and regulations for living at the fort. The group paid close attention to the messages being addressed to them and showed great appreciation for what has already been done to them while dealing with the fresh horrors and tragedies they have faced in Europe. For those who did not speak English, there was a German translator Fredi Baum. He was twenty-five years old and was veteran of the Yugoslavian army. Joseph Smart noted that the German language was chosen since it was spoken by the majority of the refugees and to remind them that the war is against the Hitler regime and not the German language.

To begin the ceremony, the national anthem was sung by Dr. Lloyd Sunderman who was the director of music at SUNY Oswego. Other guests included the mayor of Oswego, local church officials, and Anne Laughlin who represented the War Refugee Board (WRB). Dr. Levy was chosen to represent all the refugees and speak during the ceremony. He expressed the gratitude of the hospitality and welcome by Oswego and the rest of the nation. He also briefly

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138 Ibid.
139 “Reception Moves Refugees Deeply at Fort Ontario”, Oswego Palladium Times, August 7, 1944.
140 Ibid.
141 Ibid.
talked about the hardships they faced and the new possibilities and opportunities the refugees were looking forward to during their time at the fort.\textsuperscript{142}

\textsuperscript{142} “Reception Moves Refugees Deeply at Fort Ontario”, Oswego Palladium Times, August 7, 1944.
Chapter V: Time at Fort and Shelter Residents: Education

As previously mentioned, one of the reasons that the city of Oswego was chosen was because they had the educational facilities and staff willing to teach the refugees. The War Relocation Authority didn’t want the children to have segregated classes at the Fort. The town’s advisory committee figured out the provisions that would be needed to educate these children. Since the Catholic children were accepted into the parochial school, the committee decided to allow the rest of the refugees into the public schools and other schools without charging tuition. This result not only provided a unique opportunity for international education but helped Oswego receive more state funding since these students would increase enrollment.143

During the summer, teachers from Oswego came to the fort to teach the children both written and spoken English so they would be more prepared when they attended school in the fall. For the children, the most challenging part of learning English was the linguistics. To compensate the teachers spoke articulately and slowly. These children had already been forced to learn other languages to survive in Europe so overall it was not too difficult for them to learn English.144 Private agencies also helped arrange transportation, lunch, school books and school supplies for the children.145

The children in Oswego and at the fort benefited from knowing each other. For the children in Oswego, they “developed a tolerance and understanding, a sympathy, and a generosity of sharing” while being able to meet children from other countries.146 For the children

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143 Baron, “Haven from the Holocaust”, p. 19.
144 Ibid
145 Marks, Token Shipment, p. 30.
146 Baron, “Haven from the Holocaust”, p. 21.
at the fort, they were able to feel welcomed, make friends, and learn how to live as children since that freedom was taken away with their experience under the Nazi regime. Although there was a separation between the local children and the refugees, the barrier eventually closed. This was especially seen when a refugee boy was elected and served as president of the seventh grade.\textsuperscript{147}

At the fort, adult English classes were offered five days a week at four different levels. The classes were popular with about 300 refugees registering for them because they were eager to learn the language to help them gain citizenship. One of the teachers also taught Italian since some of the refugees expressed an interest to retain the language that they previously learned.\textsuperscript{148}

Other adult English classes were informal. One of these classes was called English Conversation and met three times a week in the afternoon for women and in the evening for men. The other English class also met three times a week and was called Shorthand. This class was for refugees who were already fluent in English and introduced them to writing shorthand.\textsuperscript{149}

From the college, Professors Charles Snyder, Marion Mahar, and Seward Salisbury created a weekly lecture series called “Life in America”. In this series of lectures, the refugees not only improved their understanding of English but learned about American history, government, and culture. In exchange, the refugees assisted the foreign language professors at the college by conversing with the students learning German and French.\textsuperscript{150} There were also three other weekly lecture series offered. One of the series entitled “American Home Life” focused on American manners and customs, nutrition, household supplies, food preparation, and

\textsuperscript{147} Ibid

\textsuperscript{148} Ibid, p. 21-22.

\textsuperscript{149} Greenberg, \textit{The Fort Ontario Emergency Refugee Shelter Papers}, p.215.

\textsuperscript{150} Baron, “Haven from the Holocaust”, p. 23.
buying food at the grocery store. The second series entitled “American Government” focused on local government, political rights, congress in action, the executive department, and judiciary and civil rights. The final lecture series entitled “American Economic Life” focused on the U.S. Employment Service, social security, industrial locations, and yearly incomes.151

Some of the refugees expressed an interest to attend SUNY Oswego but they were not allowed to enroll due to previous federal regulations. This ban by the WRA (War Relocation Authority) was due to the fear of public reaction of allowing refugees to attend college while their needs were being maintained by the government. This ban was reversed due to influence in Washington by Mrs. Roosevelt and Mrs. Morgenthau, the wife of the Secretary of Treasury. Mr. Smart also put in his support for refugees to be able to enroll in the college. Private agencies donated the money necessary for any interested refugees to attend. The college welcomed eleven students in January 1945. Their enrollment helped SUNY Oswego since the enrollment at the college had been depleted by the war.152

The principal of Oswego High School, Ralf Froust, advocated for the refugees to be allowed to attend the local schools. He even went to the Fort to meet some of his future students to welcome them and to help them organize their class schedules. Before the students started school, he made sure the faculty made an effort to teach these students English and American ways. He gave the students a tour of the school to welcome them on their first day of school.153 One faculty member that was remembered for her teaching style and her dedication to help her

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153 *Don’t Fence Me In!*, p.75-76.
refugee students was Marion Mahr. She taught history and was able to communicate with her students in German since she studied in Berlin in the 1930s.\textsuperscript{154}

For those who were too young to attend the local schools, there was a kindergarten at the shelter. This class had a total of thirty-five children ranging between ages two to five years old.\textsuperscript{155} The other 189 students attending school either went to Oswego High School, School Number 2, St. Paul’s, Fitzhugh Park, and Campus School.\textsuperscript{156} As previously mentioned, adult English classes were offered at the fort. These classes took place at the English Center. This center was well equipped by the State Department of Education and the Coordinating Committee of Fort Ontario with “grammars, dictionaries, speech books, maps, texts, and other equipment.”\textsuperscript{157} Many of the refugees realized they would not be able to return to previous occupations and professions so classes were created so they could explore new career opportunities. The classes were also very enjoyable and included metalworking, wood working, beauty culture, and sewing.\textsuperscript{158}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[154] Ibid, p.79.
\item[155] Ibid, p.82.
\item[156] Ibid.
\item[157] Ibid, p.83.
\item[158] Ibid, p.85.
\end{footnotes}
Leisure/Social Activities

Harold Clark was inspired to create a Boy Scout troop for the refugee children when he saw them playing in the courtyard of the fort while he was on his lunch break outside the boiler factory where he worked. He became known to his troop as “Clarkie” and it was the only international troop in the world. Mr. Clark soon realized that he would need an interpreter to help him communicate with his troop. He was amazed at the hard work the boys put into achieving their goals. In 1946, he received the highest honor in scouting, the Silver Beaver, for his leadership.159 From Mr. Clark’s example, other types of scouting offered were cub scouts and girl scouts. Other activities offered for youth included ping pong, volley ball, boxing, arts and crafts, games, dancing, story times, gymnastics, and singing.160

There were many artists, sculptures, and painters among the refugees. Since there was enough interest, two of the buildings at the fort were transformed into art studios. These studios allowed the artists space to continue their passion and creativity. It also allowed any of the children who showed potential to learn how to sculpture and draw.161 One person who wanted to

159 Baron, “Haven from the Holocaust”, p. 25.
161 Don’t Fence Me In!, p.89.
help artists living at Fort Ontario was Dr. Aulus Saunders. He was the head of the art department at SUNY Oswego. He especially became close to Siegfried Kuttner because their sons became friends. Before he fled from Germany, Mr. Kuttner was an accomplished stage designer. The two men worked with Jewish agencies and American Friends Service Committee to get art supplies. With his job at the college, Dr. Saunders was able to arrange an exhibit of some of the refugees’ artwork in the college gallery.\(^{162}\)

Dr. Saunders worked with the shelter director, Joseph Smart, to help organize an art school at the fort. These artists provided their services to the community; it was also perceived that with the trials they faced in Europe, their art would be a powerful message to the world. Art became one of the key activities at the fort after a visit from the director of the Syracuse Art Museum, Miss Olmsted. She was able to include some artwork and items from the industrial art classes in an exhibit in Syracuse that eventually went to New York City.\(^{163}\) After the exhibit was completed the artwork was given back to the artists. Dr. Saunders also wanted to help his friend with his stage-managing career. The stage models and decorations Mr. Kuttner created were for operas including “Carmen, Faust, Fidelio, and ‘The Magic Flute.’”\(^{164}\)

One of the other activities offered for adults was a weekly square-dancing class. This class gave people the opportunity to “learn to swing your partner and promenade the hall.”\(^{165}\) The other activities for adults included exercise classes which were offered twice a week, ping pong, volley ball, shuffleboard, and other exercises.\(^{166}\)

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\(^{163}\) Ibid

\(^{164}\) Ibid


\(^{166}\) Ibid.
The National Refugee Service provided paper and machinery which gave the refugees the opportunity to publish a weekly newspaper which they called *The Ontario Chronicle*. The first issue was published November 1944. The paper was entirely edited and written by the refugees until the last issue published August 1945. Although the newspaper was published in English, they also published condensed editions in German and Serbo-Creations languages.\(^{167}\) In the camp, Max Sipser resumed his art and caricature work which was featured weekly in *The Ontario Chronicle*.\(^ {168}\) *The Ontario Chronicle* stopped publication because the editors resigned after refusing to meet the demands of the shelter director. Once the editors quit, no other refugees who were qualified were interested in continuing to publish the paper.\(^ {169}\) The remaining copies of *The Ontario Chronicle* are part of the Safe Haven Holocaust Museum’s collection.

Among the refugees were many singers and musicians who had the opportunity to perform in Oswego and other nearby towns. The refugees created their own chorus, orchestra, and chamber trio. Charles Abeles conducted the orchestra and began a music school which offered classes in music composition, theory, and lessons in various musical instruments.\(^ {170}\) Before the war, he was an orchestra conductor near Vienna and composed many musical works including an operetta. He also helped Miriam Sommerburg create an operetta “The Golden Cage” which told the story of the experience of the refugees in Oswego. “The Golden Cage” was performed on New Year’s Eve, 1945.\(^ {171}\) There were also theatrical performances done at the college. One of the groups that performed called themselves “Sea Gull”. They created their own sets and were

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\(^{167}\) Marks, *Token Shipment*, p. 29-31.  
\(^{168}\) *Don’t Fence Me In!* , p.94.  
\(^{169}\) Marks, *Token Shipment*, p. 68.  
\(^{170}\) *Don’t Fence Me In!* , p.110.  
\(^{171}\) Ibid, p.150.
made up of White Russians.\textsuperscript{172} Since these activities need workers to make them possible, the National Refugee services paid them.\textsuperscript{173}

Religious Practices

As previously mentioned, most of the refugees were Jewish. Since the city of Oswego couldn’t accommodate such a large group, religious services were held for them at the fort. The chapel at the Fort was redesigned to be a synagogue which included adding a kosher kitchen and a formal dedication of a scroll. While the refugees were living at the Fort, the chapel was also used for holidays and vigils.\textsuperscript{174} The chapel was a tall, wooden, white structure located just

\textsuperscript{172} Ibid, p.50, 143-144.
\textsuperscript{173} Ibid, p.146
outside the main gates of the Fort. The government ordered that every Army post in the United States have a chapel. The chapel was built at the Fort in 1941 with the government contributing $21,000.\textsuperscript{175}

For many of the refugees, it was the first time in years that they were able to freely practice their religion. The supplies needed, such as prayer books, were provided by private agencies. As previously mentioned, Protestants and Catholics attended services in Oswego. For those who were Jewish, they could either go to the service for orthodox or for people who were reformed.\textsuperscript{176}

Despite protests from the Oswego County Historical Society, the chapel was auctioned off in 1948 and sold for $1,500 to a Christian Science congregation in Buffalo. The chapel was moved from Fort Ontario and is currently located at the University of Buffalo South Campus. The chapel is still being used for religious services.\textsuperscript{177}

\textsuperscript{175}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{176} Marks, \textit{Token Shipment}, p. 28.

\textsuperscript{177} Cilento, "Lost and Found: The Fort Ontario G.I. Chapel", \textit{The Palladium Times}. }
Employment

Many of the refugees wanted to work while at Fort Ontario. The adults wanted to make money towards their future, and it gave them something to do that made them feel useful. The work assigned to the refugees was based on their skills and capabilities. One hundred of the refugees worked in services that maintained the camp. This work had some refugees working ten to eleven-hour days. The refugees expressed an interest in working outside the shelter but the WRA wouldn’t allow it based on the policy from Washington that stated, “We can’t operate a public boarding house for the people to go out to work.” As previously mentioned, the two exceptions included working at nearby orchards and at the local storage plant. The work was only temporary and allowed by the WRB after local owners stressed they needed the labor due to wartime shortages.

Everyone working at the shelter made $18.00 per month no matter how many hours they worked or if their job was considered professional. The non-professional work at the fort was on a rotation system that “…divided all able-bodied men between the ages of eighteen and fifty-five into ten groups of twenty and assigned to heavy outdoor work for two days each month.” One worker died after he volunteered to shovel coal and was stuck in a large pile of coal that fell off one of the trucks. His death caused worry among the other workers. They mentioned that “Even with proper supervision, the work would continue to hold dangers for inexperienced men, and, fearing permanent disability or death, workers insisted on financial protection for their

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179 Ibid.
180 Lowenstein, Token Refugee, p.36.
181 Ibid, p. 102.
After working with government leaders, the workers were granted eligibility for workers compensation in June 1945 with the extension of the United States Employees Compensation Act.

Mrs. Roosevelt’s visit

One of the most remembered and best memories of the refugees was when the First Lady, Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, visited the shelter. On September 22, 1944, with Mrs. Henry Morgenthau, Jr. To the residents of the shelter she represented “…all that was idealistic, unselfish, and compassionate in America.” As she toured the camp she graciously accepted the gifts being offered to her, including flowers, embroidery, and drawings for they “…in the absence of money, represented work.” She asked about “…life in the camp, about self-government, about the schools, and about the reactions of the townsfolk.”

During her visit, Mrs. Roosevelt described Oswego as a community that is “…cooperating with the government and is doing a wonderful job. Both the shelter and the city, I believe, can profit by their contacts. This has shown me that if the human side of a government undertaking is understood, complete cooperation is possible.” In her papers, she notes that after lunch, she truly enjoyed listening to an opera singer from Yugoslavia who sang for them.

After visiting the fort, she went to speak at the local elementary school in Oswego. David Furman was in sixth grade when she came to the school. He remembers her talking about the war.

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182 Ibid, p. 103.
183 Ibid, p. 103.
184 Gruber, Haven, p.188.
186 Gruber, Haven, p.185.
188 Roosevelt, "My Day".
in Europe and the refugees from there who were currently residing at the fort. She also
mentioned that the refugee children would be attending the schools.\textsuperscript{189} Her visit led her to later
advocate for the refugees to be able to stay in the United States after the war.

\textbf{Shelter residents who already left the Fort}

According to the \textit{Ontario Chronicle}, the first person to leave the shelter was Elsa
Neumann on February 28\textsuperscript{th}, 1945. She chose to leave the shelter to join her children, three sons
and daughter, in Capetown, South Africa. She was able to leave the shelter with the help of
national welfare agencies and Gabriele Derenberg, who worked for the Welfare Department. To
get to Africa, she first traveled to New York City and stayed for a few days to go through
customs and other travel regulations.\textsuperscript{190} From there, she was able to get to Capetown. She had no
valid passport, but the War Relocation Authority presented an affidavit to the South African
Consulate in New York and they allowed her to travel to Capetown.\textsuperscript{191}

Another individual who choose to leave the shelter was Ludwig Reis. He left on July 28\textsuperscript{th},
1945 to join his children in Uruguay. The only other individual who left the shelter was Cecilia
Melcer who was from Czechoslovakia. She went to rejoin her husband who was waiting for her
in Prague on October 9, 1945.\textsuperscript{192}

Since there was no sign that they would be able to stay in the United States, two groups of
refugees left to go back to Yugoslavia. The first group left the shelter on May 31\textsuperscript{st}, 1945. One
couple, Jakob and Katarina Kabiljo, left to join their brother who had partisans (land parcels).
Elvaira Alfandari joined her fiancée Herman Frudenfeld whose son and daughter had partisans.
Alexander Grin went back to Yugoslavia assess the conditions of their home while his wife and

\textsuperscript{189} \textit{Don’t Fence Me In!}, p.31.
\textsuperscript{190} Ibid, p.134.
\textsuperscript{191} Marks, \textit{Token Shipment}, p. 48-49.
son stayed in Oswego. Zora Jakovljevic went back to join her son who had partisan. Another four men in the group joined their wives who had stayed in Yugoslavia, since they were not Jewish.193

The second group left the shelter August 23rd, 1945, with confirmation that the war was truly over.194 Mr. Grin’s wife and son left to join him since he had previously left in May. Another man, Dr. Rafailo Margulis, left because he had terminal cancer and wanted to spend his remaining time in his home country with his family. Another couple who chose to go back was Mr. & Mrs. Stevan Koen. He was a former president of the Belgrade Chamber of Commerce. Other people who left to reunite with their husbands who had partisans included Flora Arias and her daughter; Sonfija Andanja and her two children; Estera Altaras and her two children; and Vilma Market with her son and sister. Although her husband was now a POW in a German camp, Sarvika Pesah went with her son since her husband did have a partisan. The Montijilo and Papo family, went back because their children had partisans. Moric and Josef Montijilo were able to bring machinery to start their own shoe business. Abraham and David Kabilijo with his wife and daughter went back to meet with another brother who had partisans. Hugh Ebenspanger returned to reunite with his brother and sister who had partisans. Zlata Levi left with her husband and daughter whose parents had partisans.195

The first group that left the shelter wrote a letter from New York City to the shelter director, Mr. Pitts. The letter was published in the Ontario Chronicle on June 14th, 1945. The letter focused on their gratitude and appreciation for the U.S. Government and shelter

193 Lowenstein, Token Refugee, p. 198.
194 Marks, Token Shipment, p. 64.
195 Lowenstein, Token Refugee, p. 198.
administration for their hospitality while they lived at Fort Ontario. They also wished everyone the good wishes and the hope to keep in touch with the friends they made in America.\textsuperscript{196}

The residents who left the shelter received help from the WRA, the National Refugee Service and other private agencies. They helped the refugees obtain visas and other necessary documents to travel to their destinations. With the groups that left before the official closure of the shelter, the WRA gave them supplies which included sheets, blankets, and towels. The National Refugee Service even sponsored a three-day trip to New York City for the group of residents who left in August of 1945.\textsuperscript{197}

**Steps for them to be able to stay in the United States**

To help the refugees stay in the United States, Joseph Smart quit his job as director of the shelter on May 19, 1945. He founded the Friends of Fort Ontario-Guest Refugees which was “a national organization devoted to lobbying for the release of the refugees and their possible naturalization as American citizens.”\textsuperscript{198} They argued that the refugees would be good citizens and could legally enter the United States since the immigration quotas from their home countries had not been filled during the war. They also argued that if desired the refugees should be given the opportunity to gain U.S. citizenship, go to other countries, or go back to their homeland. They advocated that the refugees should be able to stay and work in the U.S. until a final decision was made by the American government.\textsuperscript{199}

\textsuperscript{196} Don’t Fence Me In, p.134.
\textsuperscript{197} Lowenstein, Token Refugee, p. 199.
\textsuperscript{198} Baron, “Haven from the Holocaust: Oswego”, p. 25-26.
\textsuperscript{199} Ibid, p. 26.
In Washington, it was decided that the promises made by Roosevelt should be honored. This would include creating measures that would satisfy Congress and assure that there was “no breach of faith.”\textsuperscript{200} They also decided that the immigration laws needed to be upheld. On June 25\textsuperscript{th}, 1945 Congress created a subcommittee that would investigate the camp. The committee was made up of twelve people chosen by Ickes and the Departments of State and Justice.\textsuperscript{201} It is important to remember that in Congress and the entire country many people were anti-immigration and wanted immigrants who were in America to be Americanized.

Once the committee arrived at the shelter, their tour was organized to demonstrate the different ways in which the refugees were being Americanized. This included showing them “…the classrooms where people studied English and learned the Bill of Rights [and] the exhibition hall with works of art that had recently won prizes in a museum in Syracuse.”\textsuperscript{202} As part of their visit there was a forum conducted among the congressmen, representatives from both inside and outside the camp, and the refugees themselves.\textsuperscript{203} The forum allowed them to determine the practicality for these refugees to return to Europe based on the situation in their home countries and their own willingness to return to these countries.\textsuperscript{204}

The visit to the camp was a success since the subcommittee unanimously voted to allow the refugees to stay in the United States. The next step would be for the entire committee to approve the decision for the remaining 923 refugees. The committee made the decision more challenging because they decided that both the the Departments of State and Justice should also determine the practicality of returning the refugees to their homelands.\textsuperscript{205} Many of the refugees

\textsuperscript{200} Lowenstein, \textit{Token Refugee}, p. 120.
\textsuperscript{201} Ibid, p. 130.
\textsuperscript{202} Gruber, \textit{Haven}, p.221.
\textsuperscript{203} Ibid, p.221-227.
\textsuperscript{204} Lowenstein, \textit{Token Refugee}, p. 130-131.
\textsuperscript{205} Gruber, \textit{Haven}, p.229.
had no one or any reason to go back and others choose to stay at the camp when they heard that most of Europe was destroyed. The President sent Earl Harrison to explore the conditions in Germany.\textsuperscript{206} He discovered that those who went back found “…their families dead. Their homes plundered, and the smell of blood in the streets. Their neighbors staring at them as if they were ghosts, found time-honored ways of driving them out. Anti-Semitism [had] not died with Hitler’s suicide in the Berlin bunker.”\textsuperscript{207} Based on these conditions, he advised the president not to force the refugees to go back to Europe.

The issue of the refugees staying in America was addressed by President Truman on December 2\textsuperscript{nd}, 1945. He stated that the United States was willing to aid more people who suffered under Nazi occupation.\textsuperscript{208} Since he decided to allow about 4,000 displaced people from Germany and Austria in the American zones to be admitted into the United States monthly\textsuperscript{209}, it would have been counterproductive to send the refugees in Oswego back to Europe. This decision was made after the Department of the State and the Immigration Naturalization Service concluded that most people applying for admission to the U.S. would be admissible under the immigration laws.\textsuperscript{210} As a result, “853 of the refugees were granted immigration status, and the 23 infants born at the shelter were given American citizenship immediately.”\textsuperscript{211}

His decision also affected the immigration quota system since he instructed that the quotas for Germany and Austria be kept filled since it was never fully utilized and basically not used for

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{206} Ibid, p.232.  \\
\textsuperscript{207} Ibid, p.234.  \\
\textsuperscript{208} Marks, \textit{Token Shipment}, p. 75.  \\
\textsuperscript{209} “Truman Opens Gates to Refugees”, \textit{Christian Century}, January 2, 1946, p. 4.  \\
\textsuperscript{210} Marks, \textit{Token Shipment}, p. 75.  \\
\textsuperscript{211} Baron, “Haven from the Holocaust”, p. 33.  
\end{flushleft}
the past five years. The decision to allow the refugees at Fort Ontario to enter America as legal immigrants took eighteen months.

Official Notice of Shelter Closing

The official notice for the shelter closing was written by the WRA on February 4th, 1946. This letter announced that the shelter would be officially closed, and that the War Department would oversee the records and distribution of the property which was to be completed within the next forty-five days. The letter briefly describes the shelter population and how it changed during the time at the Fort. The letter concluded with the plans for the remaining refugees at the shelter which included either staying in the United States with visas or going to other countries.

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Procedure for residents leaving shelter

By January 1946, the process for granting the refugees official immigration status was in full swing. This included ten National Refugee Service workers interviewing every family. More than twenty government workers also arrived to take photographs for visas, distribute ration cards, and perform health checks.\(^{214}\) They decided in Washington that the immigration status of the refugees would be changed at the American consulate located in Niagara Falls, Ontario, Canada. After discussions with the consulate, it was decided that multiple trips would be made since they could only handle 100 people per day and a total of 853 refugees needed visas.\(^{215}\)

The first group was sent to the consulate on January 17\(^{th}\), 1946. They stopped in Buffalo, NY at the Temple Beth El where they were invited to eat a roast beef lunch. Then, they crossed

\(^{214}\) Lowenstein, *Token Refugee*, p. 136.

\(^{215}\) Marks, *Token Shipment*, p. 75.
the Rainbow Bridge to Niagara Falls, got their visas, and entered back into the United States as legal immigrants. The rest of the trips were made by February 6th, 1946. The elementary, junior high, and high schools in Oswego as well as the college agreed to give the students with satisfactory records full credit once they were notified of the shelter closing. It was noted that these students should arrange to receive their school records before they left Oswego. The U.S. Customs Service and Foreign Economic Administration sent a letter of instructions letting the refugees know what they could take back with them. They could take any personal belongings, anything else up to $60.00 per person, any tools or machines of personal use, any foreign currency except only $50.00 (U.S.) and 5 British pounds, and as part of censor regulations all forms of communication such as letters were to be kept in hand baggage for inspection.

Private organizations and the National Refugee Service provided services to help residents move to their new homes. These services included handling transportation and making arraignments so that their baggage would be sent to their new homes. The 923 residents left at the shelter resettled in 21 different states and the District of Columbia. Most of the residents settled in New York City and other areas of New York State.

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216 Gruber, *Haven*, p.245.
218 Ibid, p.252.
219 Marks, *Token Shipment*, p. 81-82.
220 Ibid, p. 86.
Chapter VI: How their story is remembered: Reunions and other events

Lawrence Baron was a professor at Saint Lawrence University. He worked with WRVO (NPR in Oswego, NY) and interviewed the Safe Haven refugees in 1984 during their 40th reunion in New York City. These interviews were conducted for “Haven from the Holocaust” which was a one-hour radio documentary about the refugees and people who worked with them. These interviews were later digitized from audiocassette tapes by SUNY: Oswego students in 2004 and 2005.\footnote{221 “Oral Histories: Emergency Refugee Shelter at Fort Ontario (Safe Haven)”, Penfield Library: Special Collections, 2017, Accessed September 6, 2017, https://www.oswego.edu/library/oral-histories-emergency-refugee-shelter-fort-ontario-safe-haven.}

In 1994, SUNY: Oswego hosted a 50th reunion for the Safe Haven refugees and their families from August 5-7th. Safe Haven Inc, a non-profit organization, organized the reunion which included religious services at Temple Adath Israel, interviews, a dinner-dance, and three panel discussions held on the SUNY Oswego campus.\footnote{222 “Safe Haven Reunion”, Penfield Library: Special Collections, 2017, Accessed September 6, 2017, https://www.oswego.edu/library/safe-haven-reunion.} Safe Haven Inc. was formed in 1989 and “…is dedicated to preserving the refugee’s stories and documenting how life in Oswego contributed to their experiences and new-found freedom.”\footnote{223 Ibid.} The interviews were mainly conducted by the president of Safe Haven Inc Scott Scanlon. In these interviews, the refugees describe the hardships they faced in Europe during WWII, the journey on the USS Henry Gibbons, life at Fort Ontario and in Oswego, and their lives once they became U.S. citizens.\footnote{224 Ibid.} These interviews would be used as resources for the Safe Haven Holocaust Museum.

\footnote{223 Ibid.}
\footnote{224 Ibid.}
In 2011, there was a screening and discussion of a documentary about the life of Ruth Gruber. This documentary, “Ahead of Time”, is directed by Bob Richman and premiered in 2009. Ruth Gruber, a journalist, was part of the Oswego refugee story since she escorted them from Italy in 1944. Doris Schecter, a former refugee at Fort Ontario, led the screening and discussion. This event took place in Tyler Hall Waterman Theatre at SUNY Oswego.225 Ruth Gruber died on November 17, 2016 at the age of 105. She is remembered as a wonderful, caring woman who truly helped the refugees.226

The Safe Haven Holocaust Museum hosted the 70th reunion at Fort Ontario from June 19th to June 22nd of 2014. The museum was excited to host the reunion since many of the refugees had not been to Oswego since the shelter closed in 1946. This gave them a chance to come back to Oswego with their families. The museum wanted to host the reunion since they aren’t sure if they will have the opportunity again.227 According to Judy Rapaport, president of the board of directors for the Safe Haven Museum, less than 100 of the 982 refugees are still alive. She expects about ten former refugees and their families to attend.228

The museum was chosen to host the Jewish Motorcyclists Alliance’s annual “Ride to Remember” on June 20th in conjunction of the reunion. This ride is done to “memorialize the

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victims of the Holocaust and to promote Holocaust education and awareness." 229 The reunion events began with a barbecue at the Best Western. They were also given a local tour of the city which included the former Oswego High School, SUNY: Oswego, and Riverside Cemetery, where many refugees who passed away while at the shelter are buried. 230 The other events that occurred included kosher dinners, an exhibit at the Oswego Public Library, speeches by former refugees, and an art exhibit of their work at Fort Ontario. 231

During the 70th reunion, Jack Wilson recalled arriving at the fort. He came to Fort Ontario when he was eight years old. At the time of the reunion, he was 79 years old and a pharmacist in Brooklyn. He came to the fort with his mother and were both happy to be safe and not being bombed. However, like many of the refugees they were disappointed to see a fence around the camp. 232

In honor of World Refugee Day, there was a free history walk hosted by the Oswego Friends of Fort Ontario on June 20th, 2015. During the one-mile walk, the story of these refugees was told and will included different events held at Fort Ontario. 233 World Refugee Day was established in December 2000 by the United Nations to “honor the refugee populations of the

229 “Safe Haven Museum to Host 70th Reunion”, The Palladium Times.


231 “Safe Haven Museum to Host 70th Reunion”, The Palladium Times.


world. The first World Refugee Day was observed June 20, 2001 on the 50\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of the 1951 convention of the status of refugees.”

In 2016, there was a play created to tell the stories of some of the refugees at the shelter. This play entitled “Dawn of Freedom” was written by Rick Sivers. The play was performed on October 8\textsuperscript{th} and 9\textsuperscript{th} at the Frances Marion Brown Theater of the Oswego Civic Arts Center. The proceeds from the play went to the Safe Haven Holocaust Museum. The eleven characters of the play range from ages 10-50 and while interacting with each other told their own stories in the form of a monologue. For the play, Sivers said “I’ve taken the words of the refugees and given them life on the stage.”

In honor of United Nations World refugee day, a new outdoor interpretive panel describing the Fort Ontario refugee shelter and its significance during WWII was unveiled at Fort Ontario. This panel was possible through a grant from the Oswego Community Foundation to the Friends of Fort Ontario. As part of this event, there was a short walking tour of the former shelter after an introductory program reveling the panel at 7pm on June 20th, 2017. Also, in honor of World Refugee Day the Safe Haven Holocaust Museum hosted an open house with free admission to the museum on Sunday, June 25th. In addition to being able to tour the museum, two former refugees were honored with the Ralph M. Faust Humanitarian Award. This award was presented to Harold Clark and Joyce Suslovic. Mr. Clark was a resident of Minetto who

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234 “Fort Ontario to Host Refugee Walk on June 20\textsuperscript{th}”, The Palladium Times.


236 Ibid

formed and led a boy scout troop at the shelter. Ms. Suslovic is a teacher at Henninger High School in Syracuse, NY. She continues to work very hard to help refugee children in the Syracuse area.238

To honor International Holocaust Remembrance Day, the Safe Haven Museum featured recently uncovered artwork done by some of the refugees while they were living at the shelter. This artwork was found due to a donation to the museum.239 This artwork was presented at the Frances Marion Brown theater on January 27th, 2017 by Rebecca Fisher, a staff member and historian at Fort Ontario. International Holocaust Remembrance Day is celebrated on this day in honor of the liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Concentration Camp in 1945.240

According to Rebecca, many of the artists were classically trained and educated in European art schools; however, they rejected these classic techniques.241 Their artwork focused on the people and environments in their lives which was different from traditional art subjects including religious and historical events.242 Hitler didn’t embrace this artform and made his intentions known through a “contemptuous exhibit held in Munich in 1937, mockingly showcasing “Entartete Kunst” — “Degenerate Art.”243


240 Ibid

241 Ibid

242 Ibid

243 Ibid
Although many of the pieces showed the anxiety and uncertainty of possibly returning to Europe there were some pieces that showed a humor and daily life. The artwork in this presentation was previously displayed at an exhibition back in 1945. This event while serving part of the mission of both Fort Ontario and the Safe Haven Museum to “preserve the history and culture of the refugee shelter” also showcases the amazing talent at the Fort and brings humanity to their story.

This year in honor of International Holocaust Day there was a presentation about the role Oswego played during the Holocaust. Paul Lear, the superintendent of the Fort Ontario State Historic site led the presentation. In his presentation, he told the story of these refugees from what made them become refugees, their time in Oswego, and how their story is remembered. I was able to attend the presentation myself. My favorite part of his presentation was to learn about President Roosevelt’s previous connection to Fort Ontario.

As previously mentioned, there was a fence that surrounded Fort Ontario when the refugees arrived. Although this fence frightened many refugees because it reminded them of their horrible experiences in Europe it also became a way for residents of Oswego to pass goods and become friends with the refugees. The fence was taken down after the refugees left the fort. A section of the fence is going to be part of an exhibit at the U.S. Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C. This exhibit is entitled “America’s Response to the Holocaust” and is scheduled to open in 2018 or 2019.

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244 Ibid
245 Ibid

Creation of The Safe Haven Holocaust Museum

Once Fort Ontario was no longer used as a refugee shelter, they turned it into a temporary housing facility for veterans and their families. In 1951, it was decided that the Fort would turn into a New York State historical museum and park describing its long, unique history from the French War to WWII. In 1981, the Syracuse chapter of Na’amat had a monument placed at Fort Ontario where the barracks once stood while it was an emergency refugee shelter. On January 27th, 1986, the New York State Museum in Albany premiered an exhibit called “Bitter Hope: From Holocaust to Have”. This exhibit featured the emergency shelter created at Fort Ontario during WWII. This exhibit in Albany inspired The Safe Haven Committee to create a museum and art exhibit that would honor the refugees that were brought to Oswego, New York.


248 Gruber, Haven, p.252.
249 Don’t Fence Me In!, p.147.
250 Gruber, Haven, p.294.
The proceeds from the exhibit and other fund raisers went towards building a research library and a museum on the former campgrounds in the building that once was the bakery. 251

Safe Haven Inc was a “not-for-profit group dedicated to building a permanent museum at Fort Ontario.” 252 The media coverage and the momentum of 50th reunion, made other people realize that there needed to be a permanent place to remember their story. Safe Haven Inc. concluded that it would take between $1 million to $1.5 million to design and build the museum at Fort Ontario. 253 The former refugees donated their own photographs and other artifacts to build a collection of artifacts for the museum. During the reunion, detailed interviews, discussion panels, and events were videotaped which resulted in twenty hours of information the museum used to develop exhibits. 254 Safe Haven Inc wanted to build the museums to tell the story of the Oswego Refugees and topics not being covered such as America being largely anti-Semitic and U.S. early involvement with Hitler Ruling. 255

The founders of the museum also wanted the personal stories to be preserved because they were starting to be forgotten. The mayor of the city, John Sullivan, with the support of the other community leaders asked Dr. Schum from SUNY Oswego to lead turning the buildings at Fort Ontario into a museum to honor the WWII refugees that lived there. The funding to repair the buildings came from State Assemblywoman, Frances Sullivan, State Senator, James White, and Congressman John McHugh. 256 The building they chose was owned by the local baseball league, but they were able to make an arrangement with them and use the building. The building

251 Gruber, Haven, p.294.
252 “Reception Moves Refugees Deeply at Fort Ontario”, Oswego Palladium Times, August 7, 1944.

253 Ibid.
254 Ibid.
255 Don’t Fence Me In!, p.146.
256 Ibid.
chosen was of great historical significance to the refugee story since it housed the offices of the director, Joseph Smart, and other staff members. Ruth Gruber even had an office in the building she used when she visited the shelter.\textsuperscript{257} The Safe Haven Holocaust Museum was dedicated on October 6, 2002. The museum serves as a “memorial to suffering and the triumph of the human spirit”\textsuperscript{258} while also providing a place to tell “… the story of their voyage to America, their arrival in Oswego, their interaction with the city residents and the life-long friendships that developed during their stay.”\textsuperscript{259}

The museum received $100k in state funding to help improve their exhibits and change the visitor experience in July of 2017. This funding came from the New York State Economic Development Assistance Program. To announce this funding, State Sen. Patty Ritchie, R-Heuvelton visited the museum. During her visit she expressed that she didn’t know the museum existed and that their story should never be lost.\textsuperscript{260} The president of the Safe Haven Board of Directors Kevin Hill said that with this grant money they could work on current plans to “…redesign the museum’s content to take visitors through the lives of the refugees with a first-person experience that would highlight the journey refugees took to arrive in Oswego.”\textsuperscript{261} With the new exhibits, visitors would gain a better understanding into the reasons why the refugees chose to leave their home countries, there voyage to America, and living at Fort Ontario.\textsuperscript{262}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{257} Ibid, p.147.
\textsuperscript{261} Ibid
\textsuperscript{262} Ibid
\end{flushright}
The Safe Haven Holocaust Museum & Fort Ontario Becoming National Historic Sites

Fort Ontario is a state historic site and in order to become a national historic site a reconnaissance study must be completed. This type of study determines the best way to preserve these sites. This first step was approved by the National Park Service (NPS) and was announced by Congressman John Katko when he came to visit the both Fort Ontario and the Safe Haven Holocaust Museum on July 14th, 2016.263 The next step is to have a special resource study. Having the reconnaissance study completed before the special resource study “could place the site[s] higher on the list of sites to analyze for possible national park status.”264

Congressman Katko submitted a bill to the House Committee on Natural Resources for the special resource study which was approved. The next steps include getting this bill onto the floor of the House of Representatives and then to the Senate. Katko thought the bill would easily get though the Senate with the partnership of U.S. Senator Charles Schumer and Kristen


264 Ibid
Gillibrand. Katko hopes that by completing this process it would increase the awareness of the historical significance and importance these two places represent.265

The bill submitted by Congressman Katko is called the Fort Ontario Study Act. The bill was passed in the House of Representatives in January of 2017 and was co-sponsored by Rep. Claudia Tenny, R-New Hartford and Louise Slaughter, D-Rochester.266 The bill was passed out of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee which oversees national parks in July of 2017. However, the bill has not been approved by the full senate and there is no sign that any more progress is being made to try to get the bill passed in the senate.267 It is important to remember that the bill was part of a “large legislative package related to public lands”268 and that it was on the floor on the last day of the last session. If this act is passed, it would provide federal finding to conduct the special resource study which would evaluate the Safe Haven Holocaust Museum and Fort Ontario to determine the sustainability and feasibility of these sites becoming a national park.269

To try to get the act passed in the senate, local officials in Oswego approved to find a resolution to support the study in February 2018. Local officials decided to submit a letter to federal representatives showing the support of the study for Fort Ontario and the Safe Haven Holocaust Museum to become national historic sites by both the public and local government.

265 Ibid


Currently, the reconnaissance survey is being completed and should be done by the fall of 2018. As previously mentioned, this study is the first step for any historic site to become a national historic site and to be part of the national park service. By the end of 2018, the senate is expected to vote on the bill previously passed in the House regarding funding the study by the National Park Service to determine if Fort Ontario and the Safe Haven Holocaust Museum can become national historic sites.\textsuperscript{270} If Fort Ontario and the Safe Haven Holocaust Museum became national historic sites it would help to preserve, increase tourism, and create jobs which would be beneficial to the city of Oswego and nearby areas.\textsuperscript{271} This status would also be a fitting tribute since Oswego county already has visitors from all over the world due to the areas offering of natural, historical, and cultural assets.\textsuperscript{272} It is also important to remember that since there are less than 100 refugees who are still alive their story needs to be preserved and the continued effort to get this bill passed is imperative.\textsuperscript{273}

\textsuperscript{271} Reitz, “City Officials Push for Fort Ontario to Become a National Park”, The Palladium Times.
\textsuperscript{272} Staff Reports, "Fort, Safe Haven Bill Passes House", The Palladium Times.
\textsuperscript{273} Staff Reports, "Katko Renews Effort to Make Fort Ontario, Safe Haven a National Park", The Palladium Times.
Chapter VII: Conclusion

Research for the online exhibit allowed me to explore the different reasons why the United States allowed only this one group of refugees to come to America during WWII. President Roosevelt allowed this one group to come to the United States to rectify the actions of the State and Justice Department suppressing information about the Nazi regime. When the American public learned about the treatment of Jews under the Nazi regime they wanted Roosevelt to provide them asylum in the United States.

By doing research about this group of refugees, I learned about the criteria for those selected, their journey to Oswego from Europe, and their experiences at the fort. From the research, I discovered the steps that were taken to allow them to stay in the United States since their original agreement only allowed them to live at the shelter for duration of the war. Since the refugees came over as Roosevelt’s guests, Truman chose to honor the wishes of Roosevelt who passed away before the war over. President Truman’s decision changed the immigration system which allowed the refugees to stay in the United States and for other refugees from European countries that were previously denied entry into the United States.

Since many of the refugees have already passed away my research also included how their story is preserved. As of 2014, there were less than one hundred refugees still alive. Some of the refugees still talk about their experiences before and during their time at Fort Ontario. These talks are educational but are not part of any formal educational programs. In the past two years, five refugees have shared their stories at the the Safe Haven Holocaust Museum. Since I chose to create a digital exhibit, I learned how to create a website that would include images to feature the research from this paper.
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