

# **Token Shipment**

## **The Story of America's War Refugee Shelter**

**UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR**

**WAR RELOCATION AUTHORITY**

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United States Department of the Interior

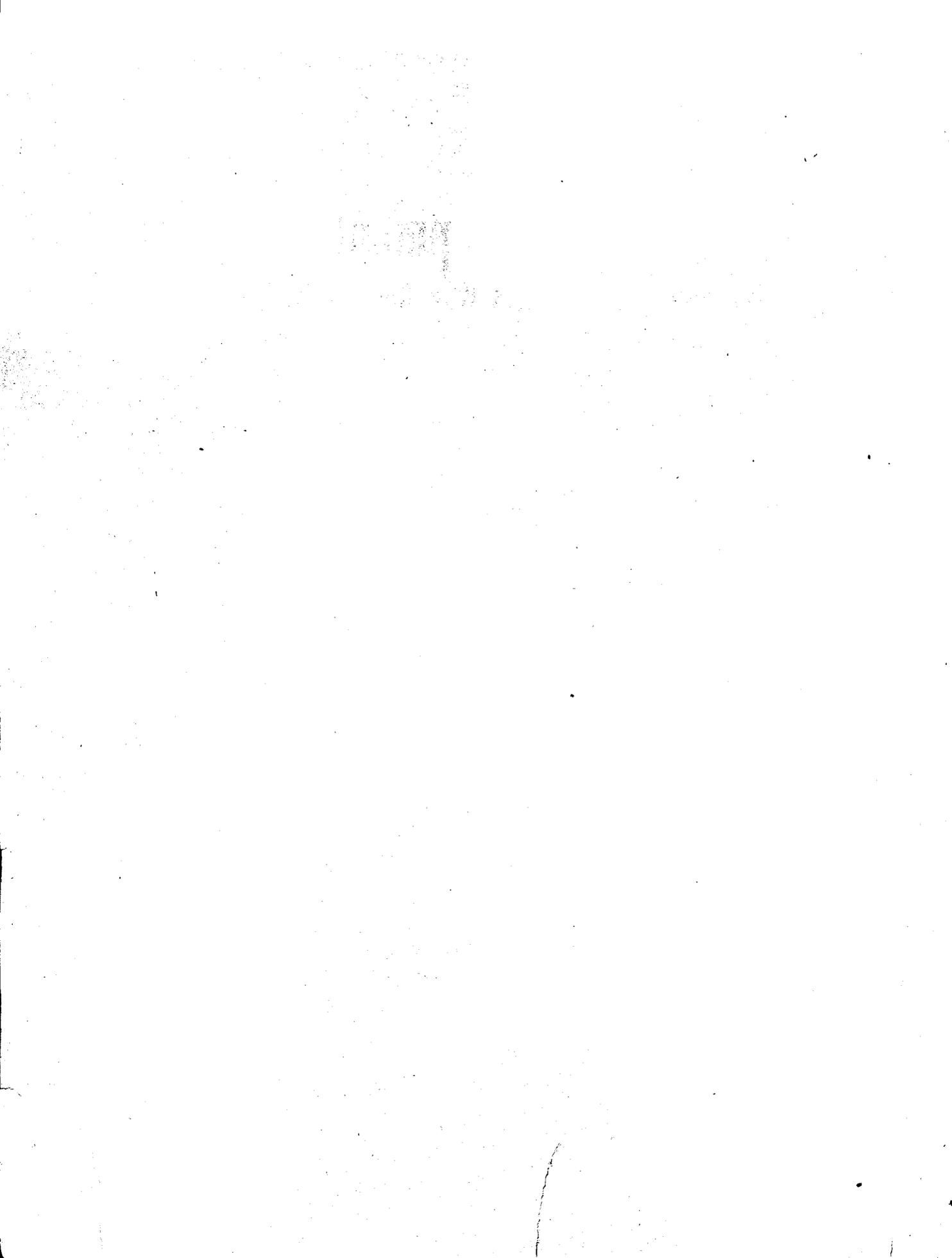
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War Relocation Authority

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## FOREWORD

The story of the Emergency Refugee Shelter at Fort Ontario, Oswego, New York, is the story of 1,000 refugees of assorted European nationalities brought to the United States from Italy by order of President Roosevelt in the war year 1944. They lived for 18 months on the shores of Lake Ontario in an abandoned Army camp administered by the War Relocation Authority. At the end of that period, the shelter was closed.

When they came to Fort Ontario this group of 1,000 was but a tiny segment of the unfortunate horde of displaced persons throughout the world. When they left the shelter they had become a thousand individuals with as many destinations.

The Oswego project was undertaken primarily to further long-range rescue objectives of the War Refugee Board. A secondary motive was to relieve overtaxed Allied supply lines in Italy. One purpose, of course, was to assist the people involved, but at the time the project was conceived this was not one of the major considerations.

In announcing the project to the Congress and to the public, President Roosevelt said that the refugees would remain at Fort Ontario "under appropriate security restrictions \* \* \* for the duration of the war," and that at the war's end they would "be returned to their homelands." Had the shelter been located in Africa, or even in the Virgin Islands, as the Secretary of the Interior first proposed, these two conditions could probably have been carried out with little question. But the shelter was physically located within the United States, where many of the refugees found relatives, friends and organizations interested in their welfare and within easy reach of the telephone. The result was that the protracted detention of these people and the possibility of their involuntary return abroad became a kind of minor cause celebre for many Americans who developed an interest in this unique colony. They felt that it was unjust to detain avowed anti-Nazis, particularly those who were the spouses, children or parents of United States citizens.

But it was difficult to arrive at a generally acceptable solution to the problem, not only because of the original conditions, but because there was divided responsibility among the various government agencies having an interest in the shelter. The War Refugee Board had been given overall responsibility for the project, but it did not have an operating program in this country. Its job was to rescue additional people from the Nazis, and its actual interest in the Oswego project ended when the refugees arrived in the United States. The interest of the Department of Justice was a negative one: it was anxious to prevent any violation of immigration laws or any untoward reactions likely to hamper future

immigration. The War Relocation Authority, on the other hand, was very much interested: it had to administer the project, although as the custodial agency it had limited policy responsibility.

Unfortunately there was no opportunity for the agencies concerned to get together before the announcement was made. WRA knew, out of its experience in maintaining relocation centers for Japanese Americans, that life in camps was far from satisfactory, especially where family groups were involved. But when it learned that it was to administer the shelter, the conditions of residence had already been set. WRA immediately tried to alter the plan to permit a kind of parole system, but it was too late.

Despite its many windows to the world outside, Fort Ontario never resembled a normal community. The people slept and ate and worked and studied and took part in leisure-time activities. They married, had babies and died. But they lacked the one thing that they wanted most—freedom. They were permitted outside the shelter only for certain hours each day and could not go beyond the city's environs. It was not simply that they were confined, but that their detention was of such an indeterminate nature.

After several months' operation of the shelter, WRA felt that the peak of its usefulness as a rehabilitative center had been reached, but the agency was unable, because of the original stipulations, to obtain authorization for a plan of sponsored leave under which the refugees could be permitted to live in normal communities under adequate safeguards.

So the people lived on in a kind of limbo. They saw their days slipping by as they continued to mark time. The experience was the more tantalizing because they were prisoners on the very brink of liberty. Many were able to take a rational view and so keep their resilience. But others who could not accept the fact that they were actually enjoying less freedom here than abroad, showed signs of deterioration. At times they were restless, moody, rumor-ridden, even childish in their behavior. In a modest way the Oswego experience points to the need for early action to relieve the uncertain status of displaced persons everywhere.

As the war in Europe drew to a close, anxiety over the refugees' detention was linked with the great fear that they would be forced to return to countries for which they felt only revulsion. They were fearful of renewed persecution in the countries from which they came, and had an understandable horror of going back to the villages, towns and cities in which so many of their wives, husbands, children, parents and other close family members had been exterminated.

Although they resented their long, unproductive detention, and were troubled about the uncertainty of their future, the shelter residents behaved surprisingly well during their stay at Fort Ontario. The majority of the group were people of intelligence and understanding. Years of non-private lives in internment camps and in flight had made extreme individualists of many of them, but they were well aware of their own frailties.

Despite the efforts of WRA, the private agencies, the refugees, their relatives and their friends, it took 18 months before a satisfactory solution could be found to the dilemma at Fort Ontario. It took a Congressional investigation, an administrative inquiry by three government departments, and finally action by the President himself to cut the Gordian knot. But when the time came for the people to leave, most of them faced the future with confidence. Their health was improved. They had learned the language and many of the customs of America. And although their only point of vantage was the main street of a small town in upstate New York, they had acquired a surprising sense of values and perspective about their chances in the days ahead.

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Note: This report prepared by Edward B. Marks, Jr., Refugee Program Officer.

## CHAPTER I

### GENESIS

#### Origins

In June 1944, the War Relocation Authority was about to close its first relocation center and was deep in the program of assisting Japanese American evacuees to leave the other centers under its jurisdiction and become reestablished in outside communities. The WRA, which had been operating centers for about two years, had learned that camp life can never be a substitute for normal existence and was bending every effort to liquidate the program which had made necessary the segregation of a group of individuals in an isolated setting. It was at this point that WRA officials were surprised to learn one morning, upon reading the paper, that the Authority had been designated to organize and administer a camp in northern New York to provide for the war-duration shelter of a thousand European refugees.

The project was announced by President Roosevelt on June 9, by publication of a cablegram he was sending to Ambassador Robert Murphy in Algiers. The President called attention to the fact that the flow of refugees to safety in Italy was being impeded "because the facilities in southern Italy for refugees have been overtaxed." He indicated the importance of keeping this channel of escape open. At the same time, he expressed belief that it was "important that the United States indicate that it is ready to share the burden of caring for refugees during the war. Accordingly," he went on, "I have decided that approximately 1,000 refugees should be immediately brought from Italy to this country, to be placed in an Emergency Refugee Shelter to be established at Fort Ontario near Oswego, New York, where under appropriate security restrictions they will remain for the duration of the war." The President stated that the refugees "will be brought into this country outside the regular immigration procedure just as civilian internees from Latin American countries and prisoners of war have been brought here." Both in his cablegram to Ambassador Murphy and in reporting his plan to the Congress on June 12, 1944, the President stated that "at the end of the war they [the refugees] will be returned to their homelands."

At the same time that he cabled to Ambassador Murphy, the President sent a memorandum to the Secretaries of War, Navy, and the Interior, the Director of the Budget, and the Executive Director of the War Refugee Board outlining the responsibility of each in connection with the selection and transportation of the refugees and the administration of the shelter. The President stated that "the actual administration of the camp is to be in the hands of the War Relocation Authority," but charged the War Refugee Board "with the overall responsibility for this

project." The War and Navy Departments were asked "to expedite the transportation of these refugees to the United States." The War Department was also ordered "to furnish and properly equip Fort Ontario to receive these refugees \* \* \* arrange for their transportation from the port of arrival to the camp; and \* \* \* for the necessary security precautions."

"Until UNRRA is in a position to assume the financial responsibilities involved," the President said, "the Bureau of the Budget shall make arrangements for financing the project; using to the extent possible any available funds of the War Department, the War Relocation Authority and the War Refugee Board, and from the Foreign War Relief appropriation, and if necessary, drawing upon the President's Emergency Fund."

Although the Oswego refugee project was presented to the Congress, the administrative agencies, and the public as a fait accompli, it was the outcome of long consideration and careful weighing of the advisability of such action. As early as March of 1944 the War Refugee Board\* had found its program hampered by the fact that members of the United Nations were not prepared to offer asylum to persecuted people. The main efforts of the Board were directed toward changing the attitudes and actions of the enemy and particularly satellite nations, and toward actual removal of persons from German-controlled territory. The situation offered a measure of moral justification to the Nazis, in that despite their denunciation of the enemy policy, the United Nations were unwilling to accept the refugees. It gave rise to the question of where such people could go even if they were liberated from the countries where they were undergoing various types of persecution. At that time the most promising routes of escape for the refugees were through Spain and Turkey, but these countries were refusing to permit their entrance because there was no assurance of an ultimate destination elsewhere.

A report prepared by an employee of the Treasury Department for the War Refugee Board outlined this situation and recommended that the United States take the lead in providing temporary havens of refuge where these people could "be placed in camps \* \* \* to remain there until the termination of the war, at which time they will be returned to their homelands." The plan, it was asserted, involved no violation or attempted evasion of immigration laws, and the refugees' presence would involve no danger from the viewpoint of security. If humanitarian considerations were urged against confinement of the refugees, the answer

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\* Material used in this section outlining the background of the shelter was obtained from War Refugee Board files.

would be that life under such restrictions was better than death from torture or starvation.

The plan was discussed with the members of the War Refugee Board and other interested Cabinet officers, and the benefits, risks, and legality of such an action were discussed.

Late in March the Board prepared a draft of a memorandum for the President, outlining the difficulties encountered in its work abroad, recommending the provision of temporary havens of refuge in the United States, and enumerating the benefits and risks to be expected. It was emphasized that such an offer would have value as an example to our allies and as a psychological weapon against the enemy. The two principal risks were the danger of unfavorable public reaction, with consequent attacks against the Congress and against the War Refugee Board, and the possibility of a breakdown of the immigration laws if the refugees did not want to return to their homes and if pressures were brought to bear on Congress to permit them to remain in this country.

While the draft was in process of review and revision, a memorandum was prepared by a WRB staff member on the administration of such a refugee camp, suggesting that the operation might be handled either by (1) the War Refugee Board, with private agencies providing subsistence and upkeep; or (2) the Army; or (3) the War Relocation Authority, because of its experience with evacuated Japanese Americans. Use of an abandoned Army camp or the discontinued Jerome Relocation Center in Arkansas was suggested.

During the month of April a public poll on a question framed to cover the proposed plan for a temporary refuge in the United States resulted in 70 percent approval, 23 percent disapproval, and 7 percent uncertain. Two syndicated columns by Samuel Grafton, proposing a system of free ports, also attracted favorable comment.

On May 11, the Executive Director of the War Refugee Board presented to the President the revised memorandum proposing temporary havens in the United States. Information was included to the effect that the Attorney General's office had advised that the President had legal authority to institute such a program without Congressional approval. Four courses of action were suggested for consideration:

1. Consultation with appropriate members of Congress, with a view to Executive action;
2. Putting the program into effect at once by Executive action;
3. A Presidential message submitting the matter to Congress for urgent action.

4. Introduction of a bill in Congress followed by Presidential message urging immediate enactment.

The President did not care for the name "free port" and proposed that some other designation be made. He suggested that an available Army camp be used. The question of Congressional approval was discussed, but it was decided that if full value as a psychological weapon was to be realized, the time was too short to obtain it.

Although the Executive Director of the War Refugee Board emphasized that the number of refugees entering under such an arrangement would doubtless be small, the President appeared to be reluctant, without Congressional approval, to take action to bring unspecified numbers of refugees into the United States. Instead, he suggested that if there were a situation in which not over a thousand refugees were actually in need of a haven, he would take the necessary action and bring them into the United States, at the same time making a public statement and sending a message to Congress as to what he had done.

Such a situation soon arose in Italy where the arrival of many refugees from recently liberated zones, and the limited facilities for their care, had created such a problem for the Army that steps were contemplated to discourage the coming of others. On May 18 a series of documents, prepared by the War Refugee Board at his request, was submitted to the President. These included a memorandum outlining the situation in Italy, and indicating that the admission of a group of a thousand refugees to be held in a vacated Army camp on the Atlantic seaboard would save lives and relieve military officials of a burden; a proposed message to Congress; a draft of a cable to Ambassador Murphy; and a draft of a memorandum to the administrative officials whose agencies would be responsible for the selection and movement of the refugees and the preparation and maintenance of the camp that would be their destination in the United States.

On June 1 the Executive Director of the War Refugee Board and the Secretary of the Treasury conferred with the President on this problem. The President favored camps in Europe and Africa for temporary residence of refugees, but after discussion of the important gains to be made by bringing a group to the United States, he was agreeable to the proposed plan. The name chosen for the camp was "Emergency Refugee Shelter"—the President felt that this clearly indicated the nature of the venture, since the government would be unable to provide much more than shelter.

The War Department suggested that either Fort Ontario, Oswego, New York, or Madison Barracks, Watertown, New York, could be made available. After a visit by a representative of the War Refugee Board,

Fort Ontario was selected. On June 8 the various documents were signed, setting up the Fort Ontario Emergency Refugee Shelter.

### Preparations

Before it embarked on the preparations for the advent of the group and the operation of the shelter, the War Relocation Authority made an eleventh-hour attempt to obtain a modification of the White House directive concerning the Oswego project. The principal change proposed by WRA in a meeting with the War Refugee Board would have permitted the Secretary of the Interior to provide for the residence and employment of the refugees, under suitable safeguards, in places outside the Emergency Refugee Shelter. However, the War Refugee Board, which was charged with the over-all policy and responsibility, felt that such a change would be out of keeping with the President's statements, so the War Relocation Authority set about its task of recruiting a staff, developing suitable policies and readying the old Army post at Oswego for its expected guests.

The WRA Community Analyst and Chief Engineer were sent to Oswego to size up the situation. The Chief Engineer, after a careful study of the physical plant, developed plans for remodeling of barracks and certain other changes which would be necessary in the physical set-up to provide year-around living accommodations for family groups. The principal changes involved were alteration of barracks into small family apartments, construction of women's lavatories, construction of additional fire exits, and provision for running water in the larger family apartments. The Army carried out the alterations without delay, at a cost of approximately \$250,000.

The Community Analyst tried to ascertain the nature and availability of local facilities, the temper of the community, and the extent to which WRA policies for the shelter might be influenced by these factors. He found that the fort had always played a significant role in the economic and social life of the town. In peacetime, when it was a garrison post, the soldiers participated in many local activities, and a number of them had married into Oswego families. When war came, Fort Ontario became a training ground for a sizeable detachment of Negro troops. This was a new experience for the town, which had a negligible Negro population. However, the troops were said to have deported themselves in such a manner as to dispel the dire predictions of their behavior made by some of the town's more alarmist residents. After the Negro troops had departed, the fort served as a training ground for illiterate troops. Again the town was faced with an unanticipated situation and again showed itself adaptable in handling it successfully.

Early in the war, the OWI made a moving picture of Oswego as one of its overseas documentary series. The purpose of the movie was to

show Oswego as a typical American community. One of the scenes of the picture showed Oswego residents of diverse backgrounds participating in a United Nations festival. So the townspeople had had experience, and some recognition, in the handling of atypical situations.

In March 1944, in the midst of the war, the troops at Oswego finished their training and the fort was vacated. During the spring months, the town petitioned the War Department and the White House to establish a new and appropriate use for the fort. In June, the Oswego residents received a surprise when President Roosevelt announced that it was to serve as a refugee shelter. When the Community Analyst visited Oswego, too little was known about the nature of the refugee group destined to the United States to be able to make any definitive judgment as to the likelihood of their acceptance by the town. However, valuable contacts were formed, particularly with school officials, representatives of the chamber of commerce, and members of the town's standing committee on the fort, which paved the way for later programs involving the town.

### Selection

In his cable to Ambassador Murphy, President Roosevelt stipulated that the refugee group should "include a reasonable proportion of various categories of persecuted peoples who have fled to Italy [and] for whom other havens of refuge are not immediately available." The selection of the group was to be made in Italy by a representative of the War Refugee Board, working in close collaboration with the Subcommittee on Displaced Persons of the Allied Control Commission.

In amplifying these two qualifications, the War Refugee Board made the following additional suggestions to their representative who had final decision on selections: (1) that the persons chosen be taken in family groups, community groups, or groups that had worked together; (2) that those in the greatest need be selected; (3) that an attempt be made to obtain a cross section of skills that would make the shelter as nearly self-sustaining as possible. Also, it was emphasized that nothing should be offered to the refugees beyond safety and subsistence and that every precaution should be taken to avoid any statements that might lead later to accusations of broken promises.

In southern Italy, the Special Representative of the War Refugee Board and the Repatriation Officer of the Interned and Displaced Persons Subcommittee of the Allied Control Commission visited internment camps and areas where refugees were living outside to take applications. They were assisted in the work by representatives of two private agencies--the American Friends Service Committee and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee--who had been working among the refugees. In Rome, a representative of the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees made the selections.

As the process of selection developed in the southern area, the general criteria listed below were used to determine which of the many applicants should be chosen:

1. No families with healthy males of military age.
2. No families including members with contagious or loathsome diseases.
3. No separation of family groups.
4. As many as possible from camps, if they filled other requirements.

The basis of selection in and near Rome, other than the President's stipulations, is not known. In this section, as in southern Italy, most of the persons selected were Jews from Central Europe who were refugees in the accepted sense of the term.

Many had fled from country to country, the path of their flight following the course of Hitler's march through Europe. Some went from Germany to Austria, to Czechoslovakia, to Poland, to Yugoslavia, and thence to Italy. In the desperate struggle for survival they lived by their wits, hid out, traveled on false passports, were interned, watched close family members dragged off to deportation and death, managed their own escape, sometimes miraculously, from camps, across frontiers, even from the windows of moving railroad cars. Some had fled across the Alps from a village in southern France where they were living when the Nazis reoccupied it on the day of the Italian surrender. The young and old, sick and well went on foot for three days and nights, crossing over a 9,000-foot pass to Italy. When they arrived, they found the Nazis there before them. Half the group were picked up and deported to Poland. The rest took to the mountains again, and eventually 150 found their way to Rome. Short weeks after their deliverance, a sizeable number of the survivors of this experience were bound for the United States on the transport for Oswego.

On the other hand there were a few individuals and families included in the group who did not readily fit into the refugee pattern. An example of this was Miss Anastasia Jouravieff who was selected in the Rome area. Miss Jouravieff, a 45-year-old native and citizen of Russia, had fled to Italy in 1919 with a Russian princess. She worked in Rome for a Jewish family for a period of 24 years. When they escaped from Rome in 1943 she took a job with a Countess Tolstoy. When the city was liberated some of the Countess' former servants returned and Miss Jouravieff lost her job. She went to a White Russian friend who was signed up for the transport to Oswego and explained her

difficulty. She was then put in touch with the people taking applications and was signed up for inclusion in the party.

Another example is that of the Marincovic family, consisting of father, mother and two children. Marincovic had always been a fisherman on the Island of Vis, off the Dalmatian Coast. When the Nazis invaded Yugoslavia, many Yugoslavs fled from the mainland to Vis, overcrowding that little island. As Italy was liberated some of the people from Vis were moved to Italy and the Marincovic family was somehow included in the transport. They were in Italy when the Oswego project was announced and decided to make application to go. Mr. Marincovic had a brother who was a fisherman at San Pedro, California. At the time they came they apparently thought the trip might afford a possibility to visit him, but had no intention of emigrating to the United States. They were simple people, Catholic by religion, who had not suffered any persecution and were refugees by the merest chance.

In reporting to the War Refugee Board, the Special Representative mentioned that the matter of selection had been more difficult than was expected. It could not be done merely by checking lists, as the Army had at first thought it might. It took legwork. All told about 3,000 persons applied to come to the United States. Of those selected 775 came from southern Italy and the remainder from the Rome area.

The probability that a least a portion of the refugee group would not want to return to Europe was faced throughout the early discussions of the establishment of temporary havens of refuge in the United States. During the period of selection, refugees frequently asked if they would be permitted to remain. In order to avoid misunderstanding, all persons coming to the Fort Ontario shelter were required to sign the following statement, which was translated into German, French, and Italian:\*

"I declare that I have fully understood the following conditions of the offer of the United States Government and that I have accepted them:

"A. I. I shall be brought to a reception center in Fort Ontario in the State of New York, where I shall remain as a guest of the United States until the end of the war. Then I must return to my homeland.

"II. There I shall live under the restrictions imposed by the American security officials.

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\* There are actually two versions of this statement, although the general sense of both was the same. The version quoted above was signed by the group selected in Rome.

"III. No promise of any kind was given to me either in regard to a possibility of working or permission to work outside the reception center, or in regard to the possibility of remaining in the United States after the war.

"B. I declare further, since I cannot take along any valuta under existing laws, that I shall accept in exchange for my valuta the same amount in dollars, which the authorities of the United States will eventually pay me after my arrival in America."

In spite of these precautions, it later became apparent that some of the refugees had regarded the restrictions as a formality, while others hoped that they would never be actually enforced.

Some of the refugees doubtless decided to make the journey either because they had relatives here or because they had made previous application to enter the United States. It is difficult to know whether these persons actually misunderstood the statement, or were simply willing to gamble on a change occurring in their status after they reached the United States.

In later months some of the refugees tended to idealize their existence in Italy. At the time they left, however, they were weary of Europe and the war and anxious for an opportunity to rest their minds and bodies under decent conditions. They were immensely grateful to the United States for the refuge afforded them. In truth, they expected, despite the statement they had signed, that they would have more freedom in this country than they had had abroad. There is at least some evidence that the Rome group was given false hopes with respect to the freedom of movement they would enjoy in the United States.

Concerning the statement signed by the refugees, there is a basis for argument that the translations did not make clear that residence at the shelter was mandatory, rather than possible. In all three of the translations, the English phrase "I shall remain" appeared as "I can remain."\* This was interpreted by many of the refugees to mean that the shelter would be operated for those who wished to remain but that others would have their freedom to live where they chose. No question of interpretation was ever raised on the matter of return to Europe. However, another troublesome feature of the statement was the phrase "guest of the United States," which gave a few of the refugees the erroneous notion that they would not be called upon to labor in their own behalf.

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\*Examples: Ich \* \* \* blieben kann, je pourrai rester, posso rimanere.

Whatever the motivation may have been, the group that came to Fort Ontario undoubtedly included more persons with relatives in the United States and more persons who had applied for entry into the United States than a random selection of refugees in Europe would have produced. There were over 50 families with "fireside" relatives, including spouses, parents or children, and about 300 individuals who had made application in the past for entry into the United States. A few of these had actually obtained visas and were awaiting transportation when the war interfered..

### Composition

The group of 982 refugees arriving in the United States was highly diverse in every respect. Eighteen nationalities were represented. The Yugoslavs with 368, the Austrians with 238, the Polish with 153, the Germans with 95, and the Czechs with 40, were the most numerous. The youngest was "International Harry" Maurer, born in Italy two days before sailing, to Austrian parents, delivered by a British Army doctor in an American ambulance. The oldest was Isaac Cohen, a Spanish citizen born in Salonika, Greece, aged 80. The age distribution of the group is shown in the following table:

Age and Sex Distribution of Residents  
Fort Ontario Emergency Refugee Shelter, Oswego, New York

Age	Total	Sex	
		Male	Female
Total	982	525	457
Under 21	231	119	112
21 - 50	436	197	239
51 and older	315	209	106

The largest religious group was the 874 Jews, but their beliefs ranged the scale from Orthodox through various shades of reform. In addition, there were 73 Roman Catholics, 28 Greek Orthodox, and 7 Protestants.

Members of the refugee group spoke 21 languages as a mother tongue, and 713 persons spoke one or more languages in addition to the mother tongue.

Many of the refugees had known persecution and flight continuously for 10 years. Nearly 100 had been confined in Dachau and Buchenwald. During the five years immediately past, most had

experienced cruel deprivations, including the loss of family members by deportation to Poland or in other extermination camps.

In facing the problem of administering the shelter, the WRA was naturally desirous of having a population of diverse skills that could contribute to the maximum extent in the operation of the shelter. With the consent of the War Refugee Board, the War Relocation Authority compiled a list of desirable skills, with the recommendation that they be included in the selection of applicants wherever possible. This included physicians, nurses, teachers, religious leaders, cooks, and similar categories of persons who through their work could make a contribution to the life of the community.

The process of selection was not particularly successful in obtaining a distribution of skills most favorable for camp operation. A preliminary survey of job classifications of the refugees indicated that 12 persons were skilled as doctors, dentists, pharmacists, and opticians, and that 25 were artisans, but the largest groups were the merchants, tradesmen and salesmen (194); bookkeepers, clerks, and stenographers (49); manufacturers (27); tailors and dressmakers (26); with a wide distribution of the remainder in numerous occupations—teachers, lawyers, artists in various fields of expression, engineers, etc. Two rabbis were included, leaders of Ashkenazi and Sephardic congregations.

### Voyage

The War Relocation Authority requested permission to have a representative of its staff journey to Europe to join the group after its selection and make the return trip to the United States. The purpose here was to gain some insight into the make-up and characteristics of the refugee party which would aid the Authority in developing policies for the shelter, gauging staff requirements, and evaluating the immediate needs of the group from the standpoint of clothing, food, and medical care. It was originally planned to have the Community Analyst make the trip, but when this proved to be impossible, the Relocation Planning Officer of the Authority was selected. The Secretary of the Interior also designated a representative of his office with a knowledge of several European languages to make the trip for the purpose of assisting WRA to obtain the information it needed. Fortunately, Captain Korn, the United States Army officer who, as a member of the Subcommittee of Displaced Persons, aided in the group's selection and accompanied them to this country, was a former WRA assistant project director with a working knowledge of WRA policy and procedure. Thus there were three people aboard the SS Henry Gibbons, the troopship carrying the refugees, who had a specific interest in ferreting out the kind of statistics, social and other planning data which WRA needed to accomplish its job.

In addition to statistical information regarding the make-up of the refugee group, the WRA representative in his report on the voyage reported attitudes significant to the operation of the shelter:

"After the ocean trip was well under way, interest of the committee and of the refugees began to shift from their immediate surroundings to the nature of life at Fort Ontario. We discussed this matter through an interpreter \* \* \*. Immediate attention centered on the question of leaving the camp, although Captain Korn at Aversa had indicated that the question could not be answered yet and mentioned the humanitarian motives prompting the whole movement. They pointed out that in Italy they were free—that is, the Rome group had been free for a short time and those in camp could get permission to leave—and that surely a country like the United States would treat them as well as Italy \* \* \*. We pointed out that they had signed applications or statements which were clear on this point, but the group—perhaps the Rome contingent—countered that they had regarded this as merely a formality and that they were guests of the United States and expected treatment accordingly.

"From a cultural point of view some characteristics of different groups are somewhat more clear than at Aversa \* \* \*.

"The Yugoslavs are the most articulate, antagonistic, and difficult to deal with \* \* \*. They have a strong group consciousness, but every one of them seems to be most interested in himself, and their experiences do not seem to have induced any marked degree of willingness to sacrifice for the welfare of the group \* \* \*. Although they have lost temporary control of their properties and some have been in concentration camps for a period, those we have interviewed have not suffered the tortures and physical hardships some of those from other groups report \* \* \*. Even the Orthodox Jews of the Yugoslav group seem to maintain a national rather than a religious affiliation \* \* \*.

"The Austrians have not stood out as a group. A number of them are capable musicians \* \* \*. The Orthodox Jews of this group seem to have affiliated with the Orthodox Jews of the Polish group. \* \* \* A number of Austrians have been among the volunteers for work on the ship.

"Neither has the German group distinguished itself so far, although there seems to be some tension between them and

some others, notably some of the Yugoslavs. I have the impression they are regarded as Germans even though they are refugee Jews \* \* \*.

"Some of the Poles tell very heartrending experiences, and it is possible that as a group they have suffered somewhat more than the others \* \* \*. Many of the Poles seem to be Orthodox Jews, and to have the most integrated cultural pattern.

"A small group of Greek Orthodox—mostly of Russian descent—are in the group, but seem more nearly refugees of World War I than of World War II.

"The Orthodox Jewish group includes members from several countries, notably Poland, Germany and Austria, and forms a distinct cultural group \* \* \*.

"A further point merits brief comment. The motives of this group in coming to the United States are very mixed. Some are interested in education for their children, some hope to find permanent residence, some desire to carry on special work; and there are doubtless many other reasons \* \* \*."

The refugees had very crowded accommodations on the transport, which also carried wounded United States soldiers, and their trip across was not a pleasant one. A young baby in the party died the night before the ship landed, and several other refugee passengers became ill as a result of the voyage. The representative of the WRA was besieged with questions about the accommodations at Fort Ontario (which he had not seen) and about the policies which would govern the lives of the refugees in the United States.

A temporary council of the refugees was formed consisting of two representatives from each of the five nationality groups most prominently represented in the population. The refugees were particularly interested in housing assignments and worked out among themselves a distribution plan for the allotment of available apartments before they actually knew what type of quarters would be available. There were many questions concerning opportunities for work and the pay that might be earned. Many of the individuals in the group who had close relatives in the United States expressed their hope to join them after a few weeks of shelter residence.

The SS Henry Gibbons docked in Manhattan on the early evening of August 3. The refugees were detained on board overnight and early the following morning the Army began its disinfection process. After

the refugees were processed, they were loaded onto ferry boats in the North River and remained there until evening, listening to the music of an Army band until the ferries crossed the river to the point of en-trainment at Hoboken. Unfortunately, the chemicals used in the disin-festation process proved too strong for the worn clothing of a number of the refugees, with the result that many garments did not survive the process.

The refugees made the night journey to Oswego in day coaches, with a hospital car provided for the medical cases. One woman who had contracted a curious fever on the journey had been taken from the Henry Gibbons to Halloran Hospital on Staten Island for further examination. However, she was brought to trainside and put on the hospital car together with the others.

At trainside in Hoboken the reporters and photographers had their first opportunity to interview and photograph the refugees. Many representatives of the press were on hand.

After an all-night ride, the group arrived at Oswego on the morn-ing of August 5 and were unloaded at a railroad siding directly adjacent to the fort. They were assisted with their baggage and directed by guides and interpreters to their barracks and mess halls. Later in the day, a dozen customs officials who had made the trip from New York with the party, began the work of inspecting the baggage for customs purposes. As the refugees entered the gate at Fort Ontario they were checked off a master register by the Army representatives, and in this way officially turned over to the War Relocation Authority. A number of representatives of the press, including staff members of Life magazine, were also on hand at the shelter to photograph and interview the arrivals.

For the refugees, the long journey was over. The future was still in doubt, but for the present at least, they had a secure haven, out of reach of the bombs.

## CHAPTER II

### EARLY DAYS AT FORT ONTARIO

As soon as it was definite that the refugees would be maintained at Fort Ontario, WRA set about the job of making the necessary arrangements. Because of wartime security restrictions, it was not known exactly when the refugees would arrive. But although the actual date was less than two months after the President's original announcement, all was in readiness to receive them. The Army engineers had completed the renovation of the barracks, key WRA staff members were on the job, and the basic elements of shelter policy had been decided upon.

#### Staff

About a month before the shelter opened, the Director of WRA phoned to Joseph H. Smart, in Peru, and engaged him as shelter director. At the time of his appointment, Mr. Smart was stationed at Lima as head agricultural program officer of the Office of Inter-American Affairs. Two years prior to that he had served as regional director and field assistant director of the War Relocation Authority at Denver. Prior to joining the WRA staff he had held several positions of importance with the Farm Security Administration.

In order to coordinate shelter activities at the Washington end and serve as a liaison person between the Director of WRA and the director of the shelter, a Refugee Program Officer was named to serve on the staff of the Director. Edward B. Marks, Jr., who was selected for this position, had been with the WRA practically since its inception, in the Community Management and Relocation Divisions. He had also had three years' experience in one of the national private agencies assisting refugee newcomers. Prior to the arrival of the refugees, he was chiefly occupied in the development of early shelter policy with the aid of other WRA divisions and in dealing with the WRA Refugee Board, the War Department, and the many private agencies interested in the refugee group.

During the period immediately preceding the arrival of the refugees, WRA worked closely with the War Department and particularly with the Chief of Staff for Service Commands in Washington, so that there would be smooth coordination during the initial period in which both had a vital interest. At the fort, property was inventoried, the remaining Army personnel planned their departure, and arrangements were completed to turn over the post to WRA on July 28, 1944. In Washington, and at Governor's Island, New York, where the Second Service Command had its headquarters, WRA officials worked out with the Army the details of transportation to Oswego, and of press relations at the port. The Army was to have complete custody of the group until they arrived at the

shelter. However, WRA was to handle the press arrangements at the port of entry and generally consult with the Army concerning the mode and time of travel arrangements.

There was little advance indication of the nature of the shelter population and their work potential. It was therefore decided to start out with a shelter staff consisting mainly of experienced WRA employees from the Washington office and the centers and temporary workers from the Oswego area. The original staff was made up chiefly of the following elements:

1. WRA staff members on detail. Most of these were from the Washington office, although a few were brought in from centers to staff the community services and administrative functions during the initial period and stay on until a more definite notion could be gained of the work skills of the refugee population.
2. Oswego residents who had been employees of the Army and who were retained by WRA for essential shelter maintenance and fire protection.
3. Oswego residents who were employed by WRA on a temporary basis to work in the kitchens, hospital, warehouses, etc., during the initial period, until the refugees were able to replace them.
4. Interpreters to aid in the group's reception at the fort. These persons were obtained from various private agencies on a loan basis. They were to act as guides and interpreters in receiving the people, assigning them to mess halls and barracks, and, in general, informing them of WRA policies.

### Arrival

As they came into the fort in the early morning of August 5, 1944, the refugees presented a sorry spectacle. Their years of privation were accentuated by the discomfort of the sea voyage and the overnight ride to the shelter. Many looked haggard, unshaven and generally unkempt. A few wore conventional summer attire, but in many cases their clothing was frayed and soiled. The most noticeable lack was that of shoes. A large number of the children were barefoot and many adults wore the simplest kind of handmade sandals. It was fortunate that the group arrived in summer when the weather was moderate and light clothing could be worn.

The Fort Ontario fence at the point of entry fronts on one of Oswego's residential streets and as the refugees filed in they were stared at by scores of Oswego citizens. As the day wore on, the children on both sides of the fence began to play, and in time a number of the adults struck up an acquaintance. Cigarettes were passed over—and even beer—and the residents of the town who knew a foreign language tried it out on the newcomers.

On their arrival at the fort, the refugees found barracks, mess halls, a barbed wire fence—familiar reminders of life in other camps. But in other respects, they found Fort Ontario in summer a charming place: the parade ground was cool and green; the battlements of the old Fort fascinated the children, and the lake view was a delight. On the first evening they walked around—soothed and refreshed. They were happy about the place and well satisfied with the arrangements that had been made to receive them.

The refugees had arrived on a Saturday. On Sunday afternoon they assembled on the parade ground for a welcoming ceremony at which Director Dillon S. Myer of WRA and Shelter Director Smart were the principal speakers. In his address, the Director read a message from Secretary Ickes and outlined the basic policy tenets that would apply to the administration of the shelter. The shelter director assured the newcomers of fair dealing, and assured them that "whenever there is a knock on your door, it will be a friendly one."

The first few weeks were hectic. So great were the immediate needs of the population that WRA's assistance to the group during the opening period was an operation in some ways comparable to disaster relief. Few of the WRA staff specialists assigned to the shelter during this period were able to work intensively in their own field. Questions of clothing, food and health had to have priority. Another complicating factor at the outset was the official processing to which the group was subjected by other agencies of the government.

### Official Processing

A dozen Customs inspectors were on the train which carried the refugees to the fort. Immediately upon arrival, they began their inspection of the refugees' hand baggage, and later of the nondescript collection of old trunks, sacks, boxes and crates which passed as hold baggage. Every conceivable style of luggage was included. A few items were held for further examination, but on the whole the Customs officials found no violations of the Customs law. It was pathetic to observe how the refugees clung to their few remaining possessions. The Customs men were so moved by the whole experience that they chipped in and bought a complete outfit and toys for a particularly bedraggled nine-year-old boy.

The refugees had been subjected to some security investigation before they embarked. At the shelter, however, a thorough screening by military intelligence officials of the Second Service Command took place. All members of the adult population were interviewed and fingerprinted. The paneling was designed to check the background of the refugees for security purposes, but an even more important consideration was to obtain from these recent refugees from Hitler's Europe any information which might be helpful in aiding our own armed forces in the European theatre of war. While this process was going on, a quarantine period of several weeks was observed during which no refugees were permitted to leave the fort. People from the outside were permitted to enter the shelter only on official business. The quarantine was imposed partly for security reasons, but also to make certain that the incoming refugee group was free from any diseases which might be epidemic.

For a period of time all incoming and outgoing mail and telegraph messages were censored by the Office of Censorship. This was also designed primarily to intercept information which might be helpful to the Allied cause. After several weeks the censorship of incoming mail was lifted, and at the end of 60 days the censorship of outgoing messages was discontinued. There was never at any time any censorship on phone calls to and from the shelter.

During the first few weeks, before visits by friends and relatives were allowed, the telephone booths at the shelter were busy until the late hours of the night as refugees received telephone calls from relatives and friends whose voices they had not heard in many years. The list of shelter residents had been published in the papers at the time of the group's arrival, and many persons called the shelter in the hope of locating family members and friends who might be included in the group. WRA staff members who voluntarily assigned themselves during the evenings to help the refugees in placing and receiving the calls were struck by the poignancy of a number of these telephone "reunions" in which a relative reestablished contact with a son, brother or nephew.

### Some Questions

The peculiar arrangement under which the refugees had come to the United States gave rise almost immediately to a series of questions regarding their status under the immigration laws. Initially, the War Department had indicated that it would be desirable for the refugees to be registered under the Alien Registration Law. At the time of the security paneling, the WRA raised the question with the Department of Justice, but was informed that the Department did not want the refugees to be registered in view of the fact that they were in the United States outside of the immigration laws.

There were two couples among the refugees arriving at the shelter who desired to get married. This raised a question as to how and where the weddings should take place in order for them to have legal standing. It was decided that the couples should be escorted outside the fort as a valid exception to the quarantine then prevailing so that the marriages could take place in the city of Oswego and be recorded in the records of New York State.

On September 29, 1944, the first baby was born to Mr. and Mrs. Victor Franco, residents of the shelter. The Francos asked if their child was a United States citizen by virtue of its birth at Fort Ontario. The War Relocation Authority in turn referred the question to the Department of Justice for clarification, but no answer was given. WRA registered this and subsequent shelter births in Albany, and New York State birth certificates were issued in each case. But the question of citizenship was not decided for many months.

The shelter contained few men of military age; however, the question came up in the early days as to whether males between 18 and 65 years of age should be registered under the United States selective service law. This was referred to selective service headquarters, and on November 6, 1944, an order was issued by the selective service system exempting the refugees from selective service regulations so long as they were residents of the shelter.

A group of 29 men and 12 women from the shelter expressed a desire to volunteer for the United States Army. The women were all of an age group eligible for service in the WAC, but only four of the men were under the age of 41. This matter was referred to the War Department for consideration, but it was determined that because of their status (or lack of status) in the country, they would be ineligible to serve in the United States armed forces.

#### Open House

The institution of the "fence" lasted all during the quarantine period. On early summer evenings refugees and Oswegonians swapped accents and souvenirs, and in time curiosity and generous impulse gave way to friendship. To celebrate the end of the quarantine period, an open house was held at which the Oswego citizens and other visitors were invited to the fort. This was designed partly as a get-acquainted gathering, but another purpose was to disabuse the townsfolk of any notion they might have that the refugees were living in the lap of luxury. The guests were free to walk around, visit some of the apartments and judge for themselves the scale on which the fort was being operated. About 5,000 showed up for the open house.

The visitors included a substantial number of relatives and friends of the refugees who had thronged to Oswego on September 1 for their first reunions with the shelter residents, sorely taxing the town's limited hotel and restaurant facilities.

The open house signaled the end of the reception period. Now the people could have visitors, go downtown to shop, and enjoy a somewhat more normal relationship with the rest of the world. On the administrative side, there were many problems yet to be solved. But the emergency needs of the shelter population were being met, and the staff could begin to concentrate on the long-range job of administering the shelter.

### Policy

Basic policies formulated before the arrival of the refugees were retained pretty well throughout, although they were modified, as might be expected, when operation indicated the need.

Within the overall policies prescribed by the War Refugee Board for shelter residence, and the responsibility for maintenance of the Fort Ontario plant, the WRA endeavored to limit its control of the elements of life at the shelter and give the refugees the opportunity to manage as much as possible of their own affairs.

#### 1. Food

Food was served in mess halls operated by the government under wartime rationing restrictions, but insofar as possible menus allowed for the tastes of the refugees. The Authority had computed its food needs pretty much on the basis of the volume of food consumed at its relocation centers. It consequently underestimated the needs of this group at the time of their arrival and to some extent did not anticipate the types of food which were desired by them.

During the first few weeks, the WRA staff learned something of the behavior of people who had lived by their wits in an economy of scarcity. When food appeared, they gorged themselves. One man, for example, consumed eight eggs during one meal. They simply could not believe that there was enough for everybody. They had been in too many lines where supplies had run out before their turn was reached. The amounts of nutritious food, particularly milk, were stepped up so that deficiencies in diet could be compensated. Arrangements were made through the Army to order certain foods, such as dark bread, which the people wished to have.

During the first few months of shelter operation the food cost per person per day was 59 cents. This was gradually brought down to the

point where the average food cost per person per day was 45 cents, in accordance with WRA policy. The higher meal cost at the outset was caused primarily by the intense craving of the residents for substantial food during their early days at the shelter, as a result of their European experience. There were also differences in taste to be considered. For example, it took quite a while for some of the residents to get used to the idea of eating dry cereal, a type of food which they had always considered merely as fodder for animals. Nor was there uniformity in their expressed desires. The fact is that there were almost as many food preferences and styles of cooking as there were nationalities represented in the shelter population.

With the help of private agencies, a kosher dining hall was set up and provisioned for those persons in the Jewish population who wished to observe orthodox feeding habits.

One of the last of the basic policy questions to be settled was whether the refugees would be provided with individual cooking facilities. The War Relocation Authority had found at the relocation centers that mass feeding in dining halls was somewhat disruptive of family life. It was thought that if suitable refrigeration and cooking facilities could be provided in each shelter apartment, the people could cook their own meals. Fire hazards had to be considered, however, and it was decided that electric stoves would provide the most satisfactory answer from the point of view of safety.

The matter was discussed with the War Refugee Board, but that agency advised against the outlay of funds for this purpose. WRA anticipated that the group would request individual cooking facilities on their arrival, especially since there had been some indication given them that WRA was thinking along these lines. However, they seemed reasonably well satisfied with the dining hall arrangements, and during the life of the shelter there was never any strong sentiment for family cooking facilities.

Many of the families ate a meal a day at home, with one member of the household calling at the mess hall for the family's share of food. Virtually every household had a hot plate for the preparation of meals, even though the extensive use of these appliances was discouraged by the fire department. One reason why WRA allowances, provided for clothing and incidentals, were considered inadequate by members of the shelter population was that money intended for these purposes was in many cases used by the residents to purchase supplementary food in the town stores.

## 2. Housing

Housing was assigned to each family according to its size and composition. Apartment units for families were provided with cots, tables, chairs and clothing lockers, and, in the case of larger families, with running water. Dormitory accommodations were provided for most unattached persons. On the ship, there had been some pressure for assignment of housing by nationality groups. WRA did not think it wise to emphasize differences in this way, and allotted the barracks space without regard to the national origins of the tenants. The welfare section, with the assistance of a committee of residents, took care of necessary changes in housing assignments.

## 3. Medical Care

In general, it was provided that health and sanitation services would be provided at the shelter by refugee personnel working under the supervision of an appointed chief medical officer. Emergency medical cases for which care at the shelter was not feasible would be handled at outside hospitals at public expense upon approval of the chief medical officer.

The Fort Ontario Hospital, although well equipped, was considerably larger than the shelter population called for. It occupied three floors and was sprawled out through several corridors, with the result that it presented some difficulty in arrangement and in staffing. There were five physicians and two dentists included in the refugee population, as well as several persons capable of laboratory and pharmaceutical work. There were no refugee nurses. Shortly before the refugee group arrived, WRA detailed to the shelter a physician who had been chief medical officer in one of its relocation centers.

There were about a dozen patients in the hospital car attached to the train which brought the refugees up from New York City. Shortly after the group's arrival an out-patient clinic was opened and it became evident that, in addition to the few patients requiring hospitalization, a considerable number of shelter residents were in need of some kind of medical care. It was the policy of WRA to provide such care in all cases where the treatment indicated was essential to the health of the patient. WRA did not feel that the government should have responsibility for elective surgery and certain other types of rehabilitative medical and dental care. It was decided that private agencies could augment shelter medical services offered by the Government in all cases where the proposed treatment was approved by the chief medical officer. It took some time before a clear policy could be developed, as there were a number of cases which did not definitely fall in one category or the other. As time went on, however, the line of demarcation became more distinct and a workable division of labor was evolved. The private

agencies did not furnish medical treatment at the shelter except that several clinics were held at which persons who needed orthopedic and certain other appliances were examined. A dentist also worked at the shelter under the sponsorship of one of the private agencies. He examined the teeth of all the school children and performed preventive and corrective dentistry of a type which the Government was not in a position to provide.

It was considered at first that the detail of the chief medical officer would be a temporary one and that the shelter health section could carry on under the professional direction of one of the shelter resident physicians. This plan was abandoned, however, partly because none of the refugee physicians had the requisite hospital administration experience and partly because it was difficult for a doctor not licensed under New York State laws to maintain the professional contacts with local hospitals and medical societies which were necessary. After the detail of the first chief medical officer had terminated, he was succeeded by one of the town physicians, a recently discharged veteran who devoted half time to administration of the shelter hospital and half time to his own practice. As his own practice exerted greater demands upon his time, he was able to give less and less attention to the shelter and finally asked to be relieved. For a period of several months the health section was administered by a specialist in hospital management who was detailed from one of the relocation centers. On April 1, 1945, a new chief medical officer was assigned to the shelter. A former refugee himself, awaiting final United States citizenship, he had competently performed the duties of chief medical officer at one of the relocation centers before his transfer to the shelter. In the project's final months a medical social worker was added to the staff.

Despite the arduous experiences through which most of the refugees had lived, their health was reasonably good. During the life of the shelter there were 14 deaths and 23 live births. However, during the long months when the refugees were uncertain about their present status and their future, there was an outcropping of minor ailments, some of them psychogenic in origin, as a result of their extended confinement.

#### 4. Clothing

During the shelter's opening weeks one of the principal concerns of the welfare section was to see that the residents were properly clothed. Cash allowances for clothing and incidentals were to be determined on the basis of need and provided by the shelter's welfare section in accordance with a schedule of grants based on public welfare standards prevailing in the locality. The maximum monthly allowances were not to exceed \$4.50 for persons 11 years of age and under, \$7.00 for those from 12 to 17, and \$8.50 for those 18 and over. Unusual needs were

to be provided for. An initial grant was to be given upon application to bring each person's supply of clothing and incidentals up to a minimum standard.

The War Relocation Authority had considered the advisability of having supplies of clothing on hand at the time of the refugees' arrival. It was decided not to follow this course, however, for several reasons. In the first place, because of prevailing censorship, little information was available concerning the condition of the refugee group prior to its coming, and it was not known how urgent the need for clothing might be. In the second place, WRA believed that in order to cultivate favorable relations with the Oswego townspeople it would be desirable to have the refugees purchase as many items as possible through the local stores. Finally, in line with recognized American welfare standards, it was deemed preferable to give the refugees the money necessary to make their own clothing purchases rather than give them a clothing hand-out. As it turned out, the need for clothing, particularly for shoes, was so urgent that it taxed the diminished wartime stocks of local merchants more than had been anticipated. Another complicating factor was that during the quarantine period the refugees could not go downtown to shop. The result was that a shop store was set up on the project, while other supplies were ordered on the basis of size and purchased downtown by WRA and private agency staff members for the use of the shelter residents. Many articles did not fit properly and had to be exchanged. It was some time before WRA achieved its objective of having each shelter resident's wardrobe brought up to a minimum standard.

In the fall of 1944 additional grants for winter clothing were made for individual families, and the next spring special assistance grants were made for clothing, most of the latter amount going to children and old people.

Again in the fall of 1945 there were requests for special grants for warm clothing for children. The limited WRA funds available for this purpose were supplemented by the private agencies.

## 5. Internal and External Security

The original order of President Roosevelt charged the War Department with responsibility for security at the shelter. In early meetings with the War Department and the War Refugee Board, the War Relocation Authority was anxious to have the sense of this somewhat amended so that WRA civilian personnel could be used as an internal security staff instead of having an Army guard police the premises. The War Department agreed that it would limit its responsibility for security to a determination that the security measures taken by WRA were adequate and ample. An initial inspection was made by the War Department shortly after the opening of the shelter and on several subsequent occasions.

The duties of the internal security personnel were not fully defined until after arrival of the refugees. When the shelter had been in operation for a time it was found that there was no problem of restraining the refugees from escaping. The job of the internal security staff developed into one of checking passes as residents and visitors passed in and out of the shelter, patrolling against loss and destruction of property, and maintaining law and order. They also provided emergency service, escorting patients to and from the hospital, meeting trains and buses, and delivering telegrams and long distance telephone messages.

Once the quarantine period was over, a pass system was set up by which residents of the shelter could visit the town. At first this was controlled in such a way that no more than a certain number of individuals were permitted to be out of the fort at any one time. WRA did not want the group to wear out their welcome in the town and thought that it would be best to limit ingress and egress during the opening weeks at least. Residents were required to state the reasons for their departure from the shelter, they were not allowed to leave the premises of Oswego and were required to return by a stipulated time. As the novelty of visiting the town wore off, requests for passes diminished somewhat and it was decided that no special restriction needed to be placed on the number of persons leaving the shelter at any one time. However, shelter residents were ordinarily permitted to leave the fort for a maximum period of six hours and had to return before midnight. The original curfew hour was set at 11:30, but was extended 15 minutes to permit the residents time to return from the last show at the local movie. School children were issued special passes covering daytime hours.

## 6. Religion

Freedom of religion was respected. Buildings were designated for groups wishing to conduct services, and services might be held in any language. The private agencies provided equipment and soon services were being conducted in two synagogues--one for orthodox and one for reformed Jews. The Protestants and Catholics attended church in town.

An incident took place at the first service of the reformed temple, less than two weeks after the group's arrival, that illustrated the type and extent of the nationality differences between the people. The religious service was attended by both Yugoslavs and Germans. All was calm during the service itself, but when the minister began to deliver the sermon in Serbo-Croatian about half of the congregation got up to go. It was the German group, who were offended that the German language was not being used. They waited outside the temple, and when the Yugoslavs emerged, an altercation started between members of the two nationality groups.

The shelter director had been invited to attend the opening service. Thinking the service was over when the first group left, he had gone out with them. When he found out his mistake on the following day, he issued an apology for his "lapse of etiquette," which was circulated to the entire shelter population. He used the occasion to point out that he had gone to the service "in reverence, happy to worship a common God who knows no difference of language or nationality; and proud to worship with people whom I thought shared a common bond of humility and devotion." He stated that "racial or national or religious difference" had no place in Fort Ontario or anywhere in America. The point was clear, and his apt handling of the situation was extremely beneficial.

## 7. Education

It had been many years since the older children had had any school experience of a normal character. Most of the younger children had never attended school or had had only brief periods of impromptu schooling in their years of flight, sometimes within the very camps in which they were confined. WRA recognized an obligation on the part of the Government to provide the refugees with essential shelter, clothing, food, and medical care. The Authority was also interested, of course, in seeing that the children of shelter residents received some kind of adequate school instruction. Because of the nature of the Oswego project, however, the Government did not feel that it had the same obligation with respect to the maintenance of a school system that it had in the case of persons of Japanese ancestry evacuated from the West Coast by restrictive governmental order.

From the beginning, it was WRA's hope that the shelter children would be able to attend the town's schools. If this did not prove feasible, however, it was thought that one of two alternatives might be satisfactorily worked out. The shelter population contained a number of adults of scholastic attainment who had conducted classes in Italy at the Ferremonte internment camp, and elsewhere, and who would probably have been capable of organizing a school at the shelter. The second alternative would have been for the private agencies to hire teachers and sponsor an elementary and high school program within the shelter.

Fortunately, the early contacts with the town's leaders bore fruit in an invitation for the children to attend the town's schools. A helpful factor at the outset was that the Catholic priest designated by the Bishop of Syracuse to look after the welfare of the Catholics of the shelter population wanted the Catholic children to attend the parochial school in town. This indirectly opened the question and helped pave the way for the acceptance of other children in the elementary schools and senior and junior high schools.

In normal years the Oswego school system might not have been able to absorb the refugee children in its regular classes. However, the town had lost population and the class loads per teacher were down. Therefore, the addition of relatively few children in each of the classes actually helped the school system in qualifying for State funds available on a per capita basis. The private agencies arranged to provide carfare for children attending schools that were not within walking distance. The agencies also furnished school books and school supplies and supplemented the amount available from WRA for lunch money so that the children could have hot lunches.

Several weeks elapsed between the decision that the children could attend the school and the actual opening of the schools. This was a busy period. The school officials unstintingly gave their help in registering and grading the students at the shelter. This was a difficult task because of the variety of languages involved and the gaps in school attendance for most of the children. The school people naturally wished to avoid placing older children whose experience had matured them in classes with children who were very much younger but had had continuity in schooling. There was some thought of setting up special classes, but WRA, parents, private organizations, and most of the school officials agreed that much of the value of having the children attend the schools would be lost if they were in segregated classes.

In order to bridge the gap, the private agencies arranged for several weeks of intensive English instruction for the children before the school term began. This, together with a knack for picking up languages gained during their refugee years, enabled many of the children to catch on quickly and be assigned to a grade commensurate with their age.

### 8. Private Agencies

The Government felt that its responsibility at Fort Ontario covered the essentials of everyday living--food, shelter, medical care, and grants to provide adequate minimum clothing and incidentals, but believed that goods and services over and beyond these creature comforts should be provided from outside private sources. Had there been no private agencies with an interest in the future of the Ontario group, it is possible that the War Relocation Authority would have been more flexible in its interpretation of what could be provided at government expense. As it was, however, a number of private agencies indicated at the outset--even before the people arrived--that they were ready and willing to furnish many supplementary services. WRA determined that such services might be provided at the request or with the approval of the shelter administration. Under WRA policy, private agencies were permitted to institute programs at the shelter: (1) when the permission

of the shelter director had been obtained, after initial clearance in Washington, and (2) when there was a recognized need for such services on the part of the residents.

At first the agencies vied with each other in offering educational, recreational, religious and other goods and services. While some of the offers were made to the shelter population as a whole, others were extended to special groups; for example, to members of a given nationality group. WRA and the more responsible agencies soon concluded that a more orderly use of proffered services and facilities could be made if the efforts of the several agencies were channeled through one coordinating source. Such a plan was desired not only to prevent duplication but also to forestall offers of assistance to individual segments of the shelter population. The principal agencies involved agreed to this plan and on August 31, 1944, the Coordinating Committee for Fort Ontario was formed with a resident executive director in Oswego. The members of the committee were interested citizens of the large communities of upstate New York.

The committee's administrative expense was borne by three of the interested private agencies, the Hebrew Sheltering and Immigrant Aid Society, the National Refugee Service, and the National Council of Jewish Women. These three agencies also helped to finance the programs offered, although other agencies contributed to the expense of the activities in which they had a particular interest. The committee's executive director consulted with the shelter director from time to time concerning offers of assistance made by private agencies and determined on the basis of discussion with him what desirable services not available from the government might be developed by private groups. Agencies making direct offers of service to WRA were generally encouraged to work through the coordinating committee. However, it was not compulsory for them to do so. Space permits only a partial listing of the services provided by the various interested agencies.

The National Refugee Service supported the largest number of the activities sponsored by any of the private agencies. They took care of supplies and other expenses in connection with the children's attendance in the town schools, they operated the nursery school and paid tuition fees for students permitted to attend the State Teachers College. They provided the essentials for most recreational and cultural activities, including athletic, art and music supplies. They furnished a mimeograph machine and the paper necessary for production of a weekly newspaper. The newspaper, a weekly called the Ontario Chronicle, was launched in November 1944, and continued publication through August 1945. It was written and edited entirely by shelter residents and was published in English with condensed editions in the German and Serbo-Croatian languages.

The NRS also provided 16 mm. movies several nights during the week and subsidized the various theatre groups which sprang up among the shelter residents. A fund was made available to provide for light refreshments and other items needed by social clubs organized by young and old among the shelter residents. Uniforms were purchased for a Boy Scout troop.

The NRS sponsored a book collection for the Fort Ontario Library. The agency also reimbursed WRA to the extent of \$9.50 per month for the employment of over fifty shelter residents who were employed in cultural and educational projects. Funds were made available at times to supplement the Government's clothing allowances, enabling the residents to purchase such items as bathrobes, slippers and rain apparel.

Perhaps the greatest contribution made by the National Refugee Service was in the provision of elective medical service, as previously indicated. By January 1945, their contributions in this area included 250 pairs of glasses, 75 pairs of correctional shoes, 2 artificial limbs, dentures in 15 cases, 12 trusses, hospitalization for 2 patients, institutionalization for 4 more, surgery for 3, and consultative and special services for 15 cases.

Various agencies were interested in the religious side of shelter life and made contributions toward the furnishing of two congregations, outfitting of a kosher messhall, special food for holidays, provision of a ceremonial bath, and religious instruction for children. These agencies included Agudath Israel, B'nai Brith, Jewish Welfare Board and Synagogue Council of America, as well as the National Refugee Service. B'nai Brith also provided furniture for the service club, where most of the receptions and entertainments were held, and for several smaller recreation buildings.

The National Council of Jewish Women gave curtains for the apartments of the residents, provided a layette, bathinette, crib and carriage for each child born at the shelter, and, together with the National Refugee Service, financed a program of English instruction. The English school was one of the most popular features at the shelter. At one time over 500 adult residents attended 29 classes conducted by more than a dozen trained teachers under skilled supervision. Dictionaries, grammars and other school materials were provided.

Two private agencies, the ORT and the National Refugee Service also cooperated in the sponsorship of vocational training classes. Originally a comprehensive program of classes was planned, with the object of retraining many of the shelter's adult population. At first, classes in auto mechanics, machine shop practice, carpentry and beauty culture were offered. The beauty culture class and a sewing class later added were well attended by the women at the shelter. Interest in

the men's courses lagged, however, and all except the carpentry course were dropped when registration failed to climb. Even the carpentry class served as a hobby rather than as a retraining experience for most of those who attended.

One of the most valuable programs sponsored by voluntary agencies was the work camp initiated by the American Friends Service Committee in the summer of 1945, to provide leadership for constructive leisure time activities for children and adults. When the summer ended two of the workers were kept on by the National Refugee Service to continue their group work.

While the private agencies first devoted their attention to providing supplementary services for the shelter population, it was inevitable that their interest would be caught by the plight of the refugees and the uncertainty of their future status. Representatives of the American Committee for Christian Refugees, National Council of Jewish Women, National Refugee Service, Unitarian Service Committee and United Yugoslav Relief Fund had been at hand on a loan basis to assist WRA staff personnel when the refugees first arrived. As they stayed on through the early days and assisted in interpreting, they learned something of the long-range problems of these individuals. Most of these agencies were members of the American Committee of Voluntary Agencies for Foreign Service and a special subcommittee dealing with shelter problems was set up within the council. Members of the subcommittee journeyed to Washington on several occasions and were extremely helpful in bringing to the attention of various officials the need for planning as to the ultimate disposition of the group. The National Council of Jewish Women and the HIAS were active in developing plans for shelter residents desiring to emigrate to other countries. The International Migration Service, also a member of the American council, cooperated with WRA in a survey indicating the characteristics of the shelter population and their desires for future residence. At a later stage the principal agencies concerned with refugee adjustment were to help write finis to the shelter's existence by their resettlement activity.

The line between services provided by the government and by private agencies was not always clear. This was particularly true in the sphere of medical service, but it was also reflected in other activities. WRA staff members, for example, were detailed to Oswego to supervise the launching of both the English and vocational training programs, although a portion of their travel expense was defrayed by private agencies.

The willingness of private agencies to perform services at Oswego had its good and bad features. There is no doubt that it considerably enriched life at the shelter and made available many services which the government could not have performed. At the same time the very willingness of the coordinating committee and its affiliated agencies to carry

on certain functions probably resulted in a natural tendency on the part of the Government to turn over for private sponsorship certain rehabilitative activities which would otherwise have been handled at Government expense. Some of the more thoughtful private agency representatives felt that the precedent might not be a healthy one for later undertakings of the Government for which aid from private sources might not be so readily available.

## 9. Community Government

In his early announcement of policy the Director of WRA expressed the hope that a representative group of refugees might be selected to advise with the shelter director on problems affecting the welfare of the shelter residents. Each of the principal nationality groups had an organization representing its own special interests but WRA wished to encourage a council that cut across nationality lines.

On the ship coming over a committee for representation of the refugees by their deck location was organized for the purpose of seeing that shipboard quarters were maintained in proper order. Within the first few weeks at the shelter a temporary advisory council based on a caucus of the nationality groups was formed. The basis of representation caused some difficulty in the formation of this council, the Yugoslavs requesting a larger representation than other groups. However, agreement was finally reached, and of the 10 individuals comprising the council, 2 each were selected from the Yugoslavian, Austrian, Polish and German groups, and 2 individuals represented the Czechslovakian, Russian, and other minority groups. The council worked with the administration in implementing the shelter plan of organization. Most of its members served as chairmen of subcommittees heading up education, labor, welfare, recreation and similar activities.

In the early stages of the project, these subcommittees were of considerable help in expressing the desires and needs of the shelter population, and in interpreting to the residents the policies adopted by WRA. The education subcommittee throughout the life of the project filled a valuable place, in planning for the activities of both school children and adults. On the other hand, a subcommittee which was set up in the early days to determine the sequence and number of passes to be issued to leave the shelter did not succeed in escaping criticism, probably because it was charged with a function which was really an administration concern. In the same way the employment subcommittee, and later the entire council, lost face with the population because they were unable to bring forth a workable solution to the basic shelter employment problems.

The temporary council was replaced in October 1944 by the advisory council which, with the aid of subcommittees, strove to bring about

an organized community. The permanent advisory council was elected in an elaborate procedure involving proportional representation. The election differed from the election of the temporary council because each shelter resident voted not only for representatives of his own nationality but of all other nationalities as well.

The council met through the fall with the shelter director but despite the democratic method by which it was selected it fell short of being a body truly representative of the shelter population. It was in office less than two months when it became involved in a crisis concerning the labor question. The administration had been unable to recruit sufficient workers for some of the more arduous shelter maintenance tasks. The issue was presented to the council, which tried through its subcommittee on employment to assist in the recruitment. The shelter director indicated to the council that unless a satisfactory resident-sponsored work plan was evolved it would be necessary for the administration to make certain types of work compulsory. The council made several attempts to develop a bonus plan by which those persons performing the heavier tasks would share in a collection made by the other camp residents. A mass meeting was called to broach the idea to the community. However, the council's leadership was not recognized by many in the shelter population, and after the discussion had been impaired by a considerable amount of heckling, the meeting broke up without the adoption of any plan. On the following day, December 6, 1944, the council members presented their resignation to the shelter director. Although the residents would not accept council sponsorship of a bonus plan, they soon adopted their own, and in one form or another it remained in effect throughout the life of the shelter.

In addition to the advisory council, the shelter director felt the need for another group of shelter residents to serve as his main channel of administrative communication with the refugees. At the relocation centers there had been block managers appointed by the administration to serve as administrators of their blocks. The shelter was too small for this type of arrangement but it was considered desirable to have one representative or "house leader" for each barracks building. This followed the pattern in Italy, where a "capo" had similarly served each barrack. A notice was sent out to all the residents early in the shelter's existence asking that each building select its own house leader, and this soon was accomplished. The house leaders held regular meetings with members of the administrative staff concerning the distribution and use of supplies and interchange of opinion about employment, health, sanitation and other phases of shelter life. In time a member of the advisory committee was designated as head of the house leaders and this body was tied in with the council. The house leaders fared better than the council and their organization served uninterruptedly throughout the shelter's life.

## 10. Refugee Employment

Originally, consideration was given to the possibility that the shelter residents might be able to work out their own economy without necessitating any outlay by the Government for wages. The first WRA policy statement had not mentioned wages but merely indicated that refugee residents would be expected to maintain their households and carry on such work as was needed to maintain the shelter and community welfare.

During the opening period, while individuals were being settled into their apartments and recovering from the effects of the journey, much of the work around the camp was done by Oswegonians who were temporarily employed for the purpose. This was necessary during the early days, but gave rise to some difficulty when the time came for a change-over and refugees were recruited to take over the essential maintenance tasks.

Within a few weeks WRA determined that a nominal cash wage over and above the essential maintenance provided by the Government should be paid for work accomplished. The wage level was set at \$18 per month for all types of workers with no differentiation between professional workers, such as doctors, and those carrying out more menial assignments. WRA, it was provided, would pay for all work performed that was recognized as being essential to shelter maintenance, including work in the hospital, warehouses, dining halls, maintenance shops, or offices. Refugees could be assigned to work in educational, recreational, religious or other activities deemed non-essential and might receive compensation from private agencies for this work at a rate not to exceed that given by the Government to its refugee employees. Actually, the private agencies did not pay the full \$18 wage, but added the sum of \$9.50 to the grant of \$8.50 given to these adult workers by the Government.

An effort was made to find employment at the shelter under WRA or private organization auspices for all able bodied shelter residents. Two representatives of the WRA visited the shelter from August 30 to September 10, 1944, to analyze the situation. An organization chart was set up and forwarded to the shelter on September 22, providing for a ceiling of 211 refugee positions. There were also to be a maximum of 86 civil service positions. The shelter staff was to be adjusted in accordance with the chart not later than December 1, 1944. Some of the refugee positions were filled by part time workers, but the majority were employed on a regular full time basis. If a man worked, his family members were entitled to an allowance for clothing and incidentals. Non-workers were eligible for grants only when certified by the health or welfare section as being unemployable for medical or family reasons. It had been announced as policy that no private employment would be permitted either inside or outside the shelter as long as the refugees were shelter residents being supported by the Government.

Had WRA pressed the point it is possible that the War Refugee Board might have acceded to a work policy which permitted members of the shelter population to be privately employed in the vicinity of the shelter at prevailing wages. It was the director's belief, however, that this would not have been feasible from a number of points of view. In the first place, the number of employable personnel in relation to the total shelter population was not high. If a substantial number worked outside there would have been a corresponding difficulty in retaining sufficient workers at the shelter at the \$18-per-month rate to man the essential project services. Some thought was given to the idea of a community fund into which outside workers might pay a portion of their earnings. However, WRA felt on the basis of experience at the other centers that as long as the refugees were living at the shelter at Government expense, their employment outside would create a host of problems not only in equating the wages received but also from a public relations standpoint. At one time there was a possibility of a project within the center for the renovation of clothing under non-profit auspices for overseas use, but this never materialized.

The only departure from this policy was in the fall of 1944 when the Department of Agriculture urgently requested WRA to permit able bodied shelter residents to help salvage a fruit crop in the region which was rotting on the trees because inadequate labor was available to pick it. After the War Refugee Board had given its assent, about 50 refugees were given agricultural work leave on a day-to-day basis over a period of several weeks to harvest the crop, and were paid prevailing wages for the work they did. On a voluntary basis the workers agreed to pay 20 percent of their earnings into a general community fund which would be used to provide additional compensation for the refugees at the shelter who carried on essential shelter tasks at the regular \$18 a month rate. The earnings were less than anticipated, however, and some of the amounts due were never paid.

#### 11. Oswego Advisory Committee

Before the shelter was opened, the shelter director held several meetings with a group of Oswego residents concerning cooperation between Government and town with relation to the project at the fort. Early discussions centered around shopping leave, schooling, and other matters of common interest. At a meeting held at the shelter two weeks after it opened, a formal Oswego Advisory Committee was set up to consult with the shelter director. A leading lawyer of the town was named chairman, a Catholic priest, vice chairman, and the high school principal, secretary.

## 12. Canteen

Because of the proximity of the town, WRA determined that an elaborate system of business enterprises for the sale of goods at the shelter would not be needed as at the relocation centers. After consultation with the Oswego Advisory Committee it was decided to have a canteen operated privately at the fort by one of the town merchants designated by the committee. The merchant bought a stock and was assisted in selling it by several of the refugees. He paid his helpers the prevailing wage for the area. They actually received only the monthly wage of \$18 available to other refugees working at the shelter. The balance of the money was paid into a community fund for the welfare of all shelter residents. During the quarantine period, the people literally stormed the canteen daily, not only to stock up on necessary items but also for the mere pleasure of being able to buy chocolate, beer and other merchandise not obtainable abroad. There was some question at first as to whether sales of alcoholic beverages should be permitted. It was finally decided that once suitable licenses had been obtained, the canteen could sell wine and beer to the residents for off-premise consumption.

## 13. Language

From the earliest days of the shelter the problem of language was one which had a pronounced effect on the interpretation of policy and in all other phases of shelter administration. After the interpreters originally provided by the private agencies had departed from the shelter, WRA was left with only two or three staff members able to converse fluently with the refugees in their native tongue. Other members of the staff had a mere smattering of languages or knew only English.

From the beginning, shelter instructions were issued in a variety of tongues. First notices were put out in English, German, French, Italian, Yiddish and Serbo-Croatian. In time it was found that all shelter residents, with few exceptions, spoke either German, Italian or Serbo-Croatian. While it was the second language of many people, German was understood by most of the group. Fortunately, there were some excellent linguists among the shelter population, including several people who had served as interpreters for the British Eighth Army. Two or three of the best of these were assigned to the administrative offices to act as interpreters.

A surprisingly large group of shelter residents came to the shelter with a knowledge of English. As a result of their own study in the English language classes, their contacts in downtown Oswego with tradesmen, visits from American friends and relatives, and the attendance of their children in the Oswego schools, the group's proficiency in English steadily gained.

At first, some of the adjustments were difficult for the school children. Learning enough English to keep up in their work was the hardest task of all, and between classes the refugee children would lapse into their native tongues. One day a puzzled refugee child came to his teacher. He had picked up four or five languages in flight, but found the Oswego children speaking a new and strange one that he had never encountered. It turned out that some of the town children, envious of the bilingualism of the refugees, were speaking Pig Latin by way of retaliation!

### "Protection"

One of the most popular non-English words in use at the shelter was the term "protection." It was used in various ways but generally referred to any situation, real or imagined, in which an individual refugee was given a "break" because he was friendly with a member of the administrative staff or anyone else in a position to grant favors. If, for example, a family was moved from an inferior apartment to a better one the word might be circulated that they had received "protection" from someone in the administration. The health section was also subject to criticism by patients who felt that others were receiving preferential treatment. The shelter director and others on the administrative staff found that it was difficult to select friends from the refugee population without giving rise at some point to the charge that "protection" was involved. The theme of "protection" was used to some extent in sketches and plays produced by the shelter residents. In general the Fort Ontario residents were very sensitive to any partiality which they believed was being shown to any individual or group in the shelter population.

### Honeymoon

The first weeks after the refugees' arrival at the fort could almost be called a kind of honeymoon period. They liked the setting and they were well satisfied with the arrangements made for their care. For the first time in many years they were at peace.

After the initial quarantine period was over they enjoyed the novelty of going downtown. They shopped Oswego's windows and even in some of its stores. They visited the library, the postoffice, the barge canal, the State Teachers College and other high spots of the town. About this time, many of their relatives and friends came up to visit and there was great excitement as they became reacquainted with loved ones they had never expected to see again. They were also delighted to have a visit from Mrs. Roosevelt and Mrs. Morgenthau on September 20.

In the early fall, children went to school and that experience livened the hearts of all of the shelter residents. It was perhaps the most significant evidence of their acceptance in the American scene. During the fall months representatives of the private agencies launched a host of activities at the shelter and the people were busy attending movies, going to English classes and enjoying once more pursuits which they had not been able to follow for many years. Finally, their health was improved. The early fall climate was invigorating; the food was healthful and plentiful; they were newly clothed; they were receiving medical care, and many of them derived interest and satisfaction from the work which they were performing.

But despite these advantages they realized that although better cared for physically than at any time in recent years, they lacked the one thing they wanted most--freedom. They lived in a compound surrounded by barbed wire; they could leave the shelter only upon presentation of their passes and then were required to return after a maximum of six hours; they were not permitted to go outside the city limits of Oswego. While many of the shelter residents prior to their liberation from the fascists had been similarly or even more restrictively interned, all, in the months preceding their selection for the Oswego party, had been free to move about, although some chose to remain in camps which offered more convenient housing and feeding facilities. The restrictions imposed by the Government at Fort Ontario seemed harsh, especially since they were now living in a country whose name to them had always signified freedom.

During the fall months there was little overt indication that the refugees were discontented, but to those administering the camp it became evident that in this period were born the seeds of discontent and restlessness which featured the later days at Fort Ontario. On the surface, however, the refugees were making a good adjustment and they were extremely grateful for the opportunity given them to obtain asylum in the United States. At least this spirit was evident in the mood of a Christmas broadcast over the Blue Network in which several of the members of the refugee population told of their experiences in flight and of their joy in coming to the United States. The feature of the broadcast was a talk by Dorothy Thompson and musical selections appropriate to the Christmas season were given by members of the shelter choral group.

## CHAPTER III

### THE BLEAK PERIOD

The period extending from Christmas 1944, to the late spring of 1945 proved to be the bleakest in the life of the shelter. There were several factors that accounted for this depression. One was the unusually severe winter weather of northern New York. Oswego had its heaviest snows in many years with a total of 116 inches, of which 50 inches fell in January alone. A letter of January 6 from the director at the shelter vividly pointed out conditions which he said rendered it "impossible to maintain the people at Fort Ontario in health and safety and without actual peril to life." He said that because of the severe weather many people were unable "to leave the barracks buildings even for their meals," and that "construction of the buildings is such that it is difficult to keep warm." He reported that the condition of the people was deteriorating as a result of the situation and pointed out that about one-half of the residents were "by age or physical condition unable to bear rigorous environmental circumstances." Even if this statement is discounted somewhat, the extreme climate must have given an unexpected shock to a group of people recently arrived from southern Italy.

A second factor which accounted for the bleakness of the period was the realization on the part of the shelter residents that although their minimum creature comforts were provided for, they were being detained for an indeterminate period. They had not expected that the statements made by President Roosevelt in his announcement of the project would be so rigidly adhered to. As time went on, it became more and more evident that they would not be released to live in normal communities. Moreover, the papers and magazines which had featured their arrival lost interest; the visitors to Oswego dropped off with the coming of winter and, in general, they began to feel like a "forgotten village." They could see little evidence of progress in bringing about any change in their situation.

#### The Work Situation

Another adverse factor was the work situation. As has been indicated, most of the heavy work during the few weeks after their arrival was performed by Oswego residents who were temporary employees. It took a considerable readjustment for the refugees themselves to settle into the normal tasks of shelter maintenance and operation. Even when weather conditions were favorable, the administration had difficulty in recruiting sufficient workers for the roads and grounds crew and other units performing outdoor tasks. When the weather turned cold and windy and the snowdrifts piled high, the problems of getting the heavy work done were magnified a hundredfold. The consumption of fuel went up

considerably, requiring large quantities of coal to be unloaded from freight cars and hauled to the various buildings. This also necessitated removal of large quantities of ashes. There was, in addition, a vast problem of snow removal, and the presence of the huge drifts impeded other routine project chores, such as the orderly disposal of garbage.

The shelter population lacked a sufficient number of men who were able-bodied enough to perform arduous work in severe weather. Moreover, most of the men who had the physical stamina were from professions, trades, and totally unrelated kinds of work. Some had the European notion that hard physical labor was demeaning, and this played a part in their reluctance to perform the heavy tasks.

The administration made countless pleas for the recruitment of workers. Meetings were held with the advisory council, the house leaders, the heads of the nationality groups, and a refugee labor committee. At first, the emphasis was placed on attempting to recruit full time workers for the task at hand. When this proved impossible, the administration proposed a plan by which the heavy work was to be shared on a rotation basis. From time to time the employment department was able to obtain enough workers to limp along, but the results were never really satisfactory. During the winter of 1944-45 it became necessary to take on several appointed temporary employees to repair the damage caused by the heavy storms.

### Lack of Cohesion

Although directly traceable to the unpleasantness of the work itself and the physical inability of many in the population to perform it, the failure of the work program at this time was due in no small measure to a decline in shelter morale. There was very little "community feeling" about Fort Ontario. The nationality groups, especially the Yugoslavs and the Poles, had always held their own counsel; their relations with groups of other backgrounds were not especially cordial, although there were exceptions in individual cases.

There appeared to be no desire on the part of the shelter residents to elect a new advisory council, and the shelter director felt it would be unwise to force an election. After the old council had resigned, the shelter director had no group even nominally representative of the shelter population, but instead met with the best organizations available to him, which were the newly developed labor committee, the officials and committees of each of the national groups and the house leaders. He met with one or another of these groups and attempted to piece out the labor situation in the best manner that he could.

## Two Tragic Events

Two tragic events also took place during this period and highlighted the despair felt by many in the shelter population. On December 28, 1944, Mrs. Karoline Bleier, a 32-year-old mother of two small children, committed suicide. Mr. Bleier had noted for some weeks that his wife seemed fitful and depressed and that her behavior toward the children had been strange. However, he attributed it chiefly to her brooding over two other children by an earlier marriage whom she had left in Europe and concerning whose welfare she was anxious. On a bitter cold night, she said she was going down town and left him at home with the children. When she did not return at the curfew hour, police made a search for her but it was not until the following morning that her body was found near the barge canal about a mile from the fort. She had not been in the water, but had apparently died of exposure. An autopsy indicated that she had taken 100 tablets of aspirin before leaving the shelter.

The second incident was even more devastating in its effect on shelter morale because it was not simply the voluntary act of a depressed individual, but was definitely related to the work program. Arpad Buchler, 42, one of the most conscientious workers at the shelter, was regularly employed in the motor pool, but on February 19, 1945, he was taking his turn on a rotation assignment as a member of a crew loading coal for distribution to the shelter buildings. The weather of the preceding days had been so cold that the coal at the top of a huge coal pile was frozen, and as the men drew off coal from the pile it created an overhanging ledge of frozen coal. On this day, the weather had warmed somewhat and a thaw had set in. Suddenly the ledge gave way and Buchler was buried under the coal. The crew tried frantically to extricate him, but before they were able to do so he was smothered. He was survived by a wife and four children under 10 years of age and a mother who was a patient at the shelter hospital.

## The Compensation Issue

Apart from the shock of the accident and grief for the family concerned, the residents at an early point raised a question about the compensation to which the family was entitled. At that time the shelter was being operated on money allotted from the President's Emergency Fund. It was still several months before June 1945, when a regular congressional appropriation would be voted for its operation. The United States Employees Compensation Commission ruled that under the circumstances, refugee employees of the shelter were not eligible for compensation under the Compensation Act.

It was WRA's plan to have the shelter appropriation for the fiscal year ending June 30, 1946, contain a provision retroactive to the

opening of the shelter which would bring refugee employees at Fort Ontario under the protection of the United States Employees Compensation Laws. This was actually accomplished, but during the months between the Buchler accident and congressional approval of the appropriation, there was no positive assurance that compensation for the Buchler family would be forthcoming. This was a disturbing factor and heightened the reluctance of refugee workers to engage in tasks which might be considered hazardous.

In connection with the Buchler accident, WRA requested the Department of the Interior to send an investigator to the shelter to make a thorough exploration into the causes of the accident. Mr. Virgil P. Wallace, Supervising Field Representative of the Department, visited the shelter for this purpose and made a report on March 17, 1945. In essence he concluded that although no individual was directly responsible, in view of the inexperience of the refugee workers inadequate supervision had been given their work and inadequate measures taken for their safety. He called attention to the fact that although an instruction from Washington had urged the creation of a shelter safety council, no action along that line had been taken.

During all of this time, the War Relocation Authority in Washington made every effort to acquaint the Secretary of the Interior with the problems arising from the protracted residence of the refugees at Fort Ontario. A resumé of these efforts is contained in another section of this report, but during the period in question two steps were taken which significantly revealed the state of mind of the shelter residents. One involved a psychologist; the other, a psychiatrist.

### The Psychologist

In late December 1944, WRA arranged for Dr. Curt Bondy of the Department of Psychology of William and Mary College, to visit the shelter. Dr. Bondy had been a consultant to UNRRA in its camp program and as a result of many years of experience abroad in refugee camp work was uniquely fitted to analyze the situation at Fort Ontario. Dr. Bondy brought to Oswego a marked bias against the operation of camps when any more normal type of living arrangement is available. It was also true that he was not able to visit Fort Ontario for a sufficiently long period to go fully into the situation there. However, his judgments were penetrating and coincided to a surprising degree with the judgments of those in the administration and among the private agency representatives who were most concerned at the prospect of the shelter's continuance.

Dr. Bondy found the atmosphere of the camp unhealthy and the refugees restless and dissatisfied. Some of the reasons for dissatisfaction were those common to all internment camps: isolation and loss of freedom, together with too close contact with an unchanging group;

loss of money and social position; envy of people with freedom to live more fruitful lives; and the indeterminate nature of the detention.

Other sources of dissatisfaction were peculiar to the group at the shelter. They had not been in imminent danger of death or starvation in Italy, and to a considerable extent had had freedom of movement after the arrival of the Allies. Some had earned a living by working for the Allies or dealing in the black market. Many had not, or said they had not, fully understood the conditions of their residence in the United States.

Dr. Bondy paid special attention to the work problem, which was troublesome at the time of his visit. He found that the principal contributing factors were:

1. The relatively small group of men available for work, most of whom were unaccustomed to hard physical work and regarded it as degrading.
2. The misinterpretation of the wording of documents saying that the refugees would be "guests of the United States," that they would be "maintained at the shelter," and that the shelter would be equipped to "take good care of the refugees."
3. The wage and allowance policy, under which a full time worker received only \$9.50 per month more than a person exempted from work for health or other reasons.
4. The lack of any community spirit, since there was no common tie of nationality, religion, or social background. In fact, he made the point that their past had made them more, rather than less, individualistic.

He recommended that an interim solution be worked out along lines of the residents' suggestion that certain workers be given increased compensation for hard or disagreeable work; that the Authority send in an expert on wages to make recommendations; and that coercive methods be used only if absolutely necessary.

Concerning the shelter as a whole, Dr. Bondy's principal recommendation was dissolution at the earliest possible date. Until this could be accomplished, he suggested that a system of leaves of absence be inaugurated to relieve the stress of enforced residence at the shelter. He also urged that a new advisory council, elected on the basis of national groups, be chosen soon to work with the administration, to replace the council which had recently resigned because of its inability to solve the work problem.

## The Psychiatrist

The shelter medical staff were able to diagnose and give treatment for most of the physical ailments of the shelter population. There was no psychiatrist available, however, either on the shelter staff or in the town of Oswego. As time went on, the welfare section found evidence of mental disturbance in several individuals, and hospital records confirmed the belief that the strain of shelter residence on top of previous anxieties resulting from internments abroad, was severely taxing certain individuals. One or two were sent over to Syracuse for observation by a psychiatrist.

In March 1945, it was decided to have a psychiatrist detailed to the shelter as a consultant to make a further evaluation of the situation. In cooperation with the private agencies, arrangements were made for Dr. Rudolph Dreikurs of Chicago to make the trip. Dr. Dreikurs examined a number of individuals referred by the health and welfare sections during his visit.

In several cases, he prepared statements which were forwarded to Washington by the shelter director indicating his belief that further shelter residence on the part of the individuals concerned might seriously impair their future stability and health. These findings were turned over by the WRA to General William O'Dwyer, then the Executive Director of the WRB.

Dr. Dreikurs also conducted several group discussions with segments of the shelter population in order to determine the effect of their present mode of living. At these meetings, the residents had the opportunity to voice their fears and desires. He attempted to interpret for them the emotions and reactions they were experiencing in the situation in which they found themselves.

## Signs of Progress

Although the dominant note during this period was a gloomy one, there were a number of activities that showed gains and certain concrete results were achieved.

Several important staff changes made during the period were helpful in improving the performance of the operating departments. An administrative officer was named in early February to coordinate the work of the fiscal and personnel, supply and mess units. A new welfare section head was appointed on the same day. During March, a community organization specialist was detailed to the shelter to take care of the reports work and handle WRA's relationships with the coordinating committee and other private agencies in recreational and educational matters. On April 1, the new chief medical officer took office. Three of

these four key positions were filled by persons who had had relocation center experience. The persons selected stayed until the shelter's close almost a year later and thus provided continuity of leadership in the jobs for which they were responsible.

The main job was still, of course, the day to day operation of the shelter, but WRA began to look ahead. Although no ultimate plan for the future of the shelter residents had been evolved, the Authority considered it important to have up-to-date social histories, based on interviews with all the refugees, which would not only give the essential background facts concerning them, but would also bring together information about their relationships in various parts of the world, their desires for future residence, and other facts which might be useful in developing plans for their future.

At the time of the group's arrival, WRA had received a registration card prepared by the Army for each family. These were incomplete, and in some cases, inaccurate. The shelter welfare section had started in October to revise these forms and supplement them with social histories. But in the first hectic months progress was slow.

The process of compiling the histories was accelerated about the first of the year when the International Migration Service took an active interest in their completion and provided a staff worker to assist in the interviews. The IMS was anxious to have a sample of a group of displaced persons in order to obtain information which might be useful to intergovernmental and other agencies in the international handling of this important postwar problem. (The agency was obtaining similar information concerning a group of displaced persons at a camp in Switzerland). Permission was granted them to work with the welfare personnel in obtaining the relevant facts for their survey. The survey was completed in the early spring and revealed some very interesting facts about the shelter population.

One of the areas covered by the IMS study was the future plans of the refugees, and the characteristics of the group that might facilitate or retard realization of these plans.

Of the 496 family heads, 304 wished to remain in the United States, 68 wished to be repatriated; 9 wished to go to a country of established residence other than country of last citizenship; 22 wished to go elsewhere than the United States, the country of last citizenship, or of established residence, and 93 were uncertain or had no plans.

Those who wished to remain in the United States included members of every nationality group in the shelter. Many had attempted to come to the United States and had reached various stages of the immigration

process before leaving Europe. Of the 304 heads of families wishing to remain in the United States, 226 had 400 relatives in the United States, including 22 serving in the armed forces; all told, over 100 fell into the category of "fireside" relatives.

The families wishing repatriation mentioned a variety of motives: a desire to help rebuild their country; reunion with other family members; difficulty of adjustment in a new environment; the possibility of recovering property, and return to former employment. The Yugoslavs, 52 family heads representing 112 persons, were by far the largest nationality group desiring repatriation. Preferred destinations of these wishing to emigrate were Africa, Australia, Palestine, South America, and England.

The plans as stated by the refugees at the time of the interviews were, of course, subject to change induced by various considerations--uncertainty as to the fate of missing family members, possibility of recovering lost assets, political conditions in the homeland, frequently changing attitudes toward life in the shelter, the possibility of entrance into the United States as immigrants, and others.

The analysis showed that 56 percent of the 496 family units were complete, with all members of the immediate family at the shelter. The other 44 percent had a part of their family elsewhere, whereabouts for the most part unknown. In at least 71 families, spouses had been deported by the Nazis to unknown destinations.

The citizenship of 447 individuals, making up 270 family units, had been lost mainly through racial or religious decrees.

The survey brought together in one place the principal facts about the shelter population. Apart from its projected use by IMS, it was extremely helpful to WRA in waging the battle to obtain status for the residents of the shelter. The study not only resulted in valuable information; it was also helpful for the residents to sit down with a worker and discuss their situation. Even though no solution was yet possible, it was beneficial for many to take stock of their own individual hopes and plans.

### First Departure

The first plan became a reality on February 27 when the first departure from the shelter took place. Mrs. Elsa Neumann, an Austrian woman of 60 years, obtained a visa from the Union of South Africa, where her children were living. The war was still on and travel was difficult to arrange, but with the assistance of the National Council of Jewish Women, Mrs. Neumann was able to depart for Capetown via Lisbon and Lorenzo Marques, Portuguese West Africa. She had no valid passport, but

the War Relocation Authority prepared an affidavit in lieu of passport, which was accepted by the South African Consulate in New York.

### Redemption of the Lire

Mrs. Neumann's departure was heartening to the population because it was a concrete step. Similarly, the refugees were pleased in late February when their foreign currencies were finally redeemed and they could derive a little satisfaction from knowing that they were not dependent upon the Government for every cent they spent.

Before they left Europe the refugees had been required to turn over to the Army authorities all currencies within their possession. They were assured at the time that after their arrival in the United States they would "eventually" receive dollar value for the funds they surrendered.

It was some months after the group's arrival in the United States that the original receipts and the list of monies turned in were received from abroad. At that point the War Refugee Board, in connection with the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, worked out a method by which the conversion of the lire and certain other currencies could be effected.

Payment was actually started on February 28. The total value of the funds converted amounted to \$84,983, or an average of less than \$100 per person. The largest amount in the possession of any one individual was about \$2,500. Many of the group had no funds at all. Of the 585 persons who had made deposits, only 97 received sums over \$250. The following is a breakdown of these 97 accounts:

64 deposited amounts up to \$500  
25 deposited amounts from \$500 to \$1,000  
8 deposited amounts in excess of \$1,000

At the fort, the refugees were given the choice of receiving their money in cash, as a savings bank account or as United States war bonds. It was stipulated, however, that persons drawing over a certain minimum amount in cash for their own needs would not be eligible to apply for grants for a period of time. Actually the percentage of the money drawn in cash was small. About 90 percent of the total amount was converted to United States war bonds, while most of the balance was deposited in savings banks.

### New Health Developments

Considerable progress was made in the field of health during this period, including chest X-ray examinations of the shelter

population accomplished with the cooperation of the U. S. Public Health Service. The results of the examinations indicated that of the residents X-rayed, 848 were definitely negative, 10 cases were inactive (healed), activity was questionable in 15 cases, 2 were suspects, and one had far advanced tuberculosis. The one active case had been isolated for observation pending placement in a sanatorium. Arrangements were made to follow up on the questionable and suspected cases.

The permanent assignment of a chief medical officer on April 1 served to stabilize health services. As a skilled surgeon he was not only able to perform a large number of needed operations, but he also coordinated the activity of the refugee doctors. The private agencies were also responsible for a constructive aspect of the medical program. Under the supervision of the WRA medical staff the National Refugee Service ran an orthopedic clinic, and assisted materially in arranging for the fitting of eye glasses, certain types of dentures and other appliances. By the end of the period it could be said that the correctable defects of most of the shelter residents had been attended to.

### Leisure-Time Pursuits

During the winter period the private agencies cooperating with the shelter staff did their best to sponsor educational and other leisure time activities that would relieve the monotony of existence at the shelter. Apart from their therapeutic value, a good deal of artistic accomplishment resulted from these activities. An art class flourished. Individual artists, who were assigned studio space, did some of their best work. A writer who had been a Viennese playwright wrote an article on his refugee experiences in Italy that was accepted by The Commonwealth. Several of the singers and musicians in the shelter population performed in Oswego and other nearby towns. There were some outstanding theatrical productions. The Austro-German group performed a play at the State Teachers College. The White Russians, who formed their own "Sea Gull" troupe, gave rollicking performances of high calibre on a stage which they designed and constructed.

Even the work situation had its lighter side. The "rotation" system was kidded on the stage and was the subject of an article in the Ontario Chronicle for January 18, 1945, called, "I Have Removed Garbage," which is excerpted below:

"Last Friday was my D-day, excuse me, G-day, since I was requested to help in removing garbage \* \* \*.

"Coal or garbage, that is the question, and I prefer garbage \* \* \*. We are five, all fine fellows from 54 to 36 who handle the heavy cans as if they were tennis balls. My job is to take the cans and to empty them in the truck. Sometimes the stuff is frozen and you have to make several

times boum-boum, it is to knock the cans vigorously on the floor before garbage kindly agrees to leave its container.

"The garbage is an interesting material, reflecting the spirit of our residents. Some barracks are very intellectual and their garbage is chiefly composed of newspapers with the "ONTARIO CHRONICLE" on the honor roll. Others have a more materialistic mind with empty tobacco packages, biscuit boxes, tins, etc. \* \* \*.

"In the afternoon, \* \* \* the principal material which we remove now are ashes, a stepbrother of garbage and a family member of coal \* \* \*.

"Centuries ago ashes were a symbol of sadness but I doubt if the ashes which our forefathers have spread on their heads were of the good Ontario quality which is a bit heavy. The work in the furnace rooms makes us thirsty but the canteen is near and the beer is fresh. And so "All's Well That Ends Well" and beer, beautiful Yugoslav songs and a nice chatter with the American driver who is a fine guy, terminates my historical day. I have removed garbage."

#### School and College

Though their English was still quaint, the people were learning. The vocational training classes also got into full swing, and while the interest showed in some of the men's classes was disappointing, the ladies' department, consisting of beauty culture and sewing classes, teemed with activity.

The first report cards showed that the school children had, for the most part, been successful in passing their school work, although a few were still hampered because of language difficulties. School officials spoke of the intense interest which the refugee children gave to their work and expressed the opinion that in many cases they served as an incentive to students from the town. At least one refugee child had been elected president of his class. During this period, the coordinating committee hired a regular nursery school teacher to operate the shelter nursery school, and this activity was identified more closely with the health and welfare sections.

There were about a dozen young people in the shelter who had completed high school or its European equivalent and had in the early days of the shelter requested permission to attend college. Most of them hoped to be permitted to matriculate at institutions outside Oswego, especially two young medical students who wanted to complete their medical education. Under the shelter's residence regulations, however, this was not possible.

At the start of the second semester in January, those students who could meet the qualifications and were interested in doing so were permitted to enroll at Oswego State Teachers College. Their tuition costs and incidental expenses were borne by the agencies making up the coordinating committee. It was provided that students permitted to take college work would be expected to work at least the equivalent of one day per week at the shelter.

### End of an Era

The refugees were shocked and saddened by the death of President Roosevelt on April 12, 1945. A special memorial service was held in the old fort. Despite their discontent at many features of life at Fort Ontario, the refugees shared the feeling with so many other democratic Europeans that President Roosevelt was a symbol of the way of life to which they aspired. It was his act which had made it possible for them to leave Europe and come to the United States. Though still confined, they had continued to believe that somehow, despite his many other responsibilities, he was aware of their plight and at the appropriate time would arrange for their freedom. Apart from his loss to the world at a critical hour, which they fully realized, they felt that the solution to their own personal situation might be made more difficult of accomplishment because of his passing.

In the depths of winter, when movement between buildings was hampered by the heavy snows, morale had been at a very low ebb and Fort Ontario seemed to have little contact with the outside world. As spring weather came on, activity resumed and the residents began to press again for a modification of the leave policy. They were learning American ways. A popular tune they heard on the radio became their rueful theme song—"Don't Fence Me In." The stage was set for a period in which there would be repeated efforts on the part of the residents, their relatives and friends, interested agencies and committees, and the WRA itself to bring about a change in their detention status.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE FINAL PUSH

The most eventful period in the shelter's history was ahead. It began in the spring, and can best be dated by two events of major interest to the shelter residents which occurred less than two weeks apart: V-E Day and the resignation of the first shelter director.

#### A Shift in Emphasis

Up to V-E Day the main interest of the refugees had centered on gaining release from the shelter so that individuals and families could lead a normal existence in communities throughout the country. This paralleled the efforts of the War Relocation Authority to obtain authorization from the War Refugee Board and the Justice Department for a policy of sponsored leave.\* About the time of V-E Day the emphasis shifted somewhat. The residents were still naturally very much interested in gaining release—especially with the advent of good spring weather—but, in addition, they began to display an active concern as to their future destiny. President Roosevelt had indicated to the Congress that they were to be returned "to their homelands" at the end of hostilities. Now that the European phase of the war was over they realized that steps might soon be undertaken to carry out this condition. In the minds of many the fear of returning to countries with which they no longer felt any identification began to overshadow all other concerns.

There began a long period of uncertainty, extending from V-E Day almost until the year's close, when the refugees' future status was in doubt. There were times during this period when the prospects for their freedom and ultimate immigration to the United States were very bright; there were periods when everything seemed to go against them and deportation seemed inevitable; and there were long weeks of waiting during which speculation was rife, but there was no concrete indication as to how their cause was progressing. Long and exasperating as the period seemed, there was nevertheless (in retrospect at least) a thread of logic extending from its beginning to its close. Something was being done. The Government seemingly was aware at last that some action would have to be taken with respect to these people. They could not remain at Fort Ontario for the rest of their lives. After the end of the war in Europe, and particularly after V-J Day, their continued detention became indefensible even if President Roosevelt's statement was taken in the most literal sense.

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\* See entry in Chronology for February 27, 1946.

In Washington, the War Refugee Board, the agency responsible for overall shelter policy, was becoming concerned about the future of the refugees. Reports sent in by WRA about the severity of the winter, the observations of a responsible psychologist and psychiatrist, the growing anxiety of interested private agencies, and the many letters received from and in behalf of refugees all had their effect. The Department of Justice, however, had turned down the Interior Department's recommendation for a program of sponsored leave, and the War Refugee Board was able to offer no alternate solution which would relieve the mounting pressure at the shelter. A meeting was held in Washington at which, in the absence of other solutions deemed feasible, the Executive Director of the War Refugee Board requested the cooperation of UNRRA in returning the entire shelter population to Italy. After some discussion, he was persuaded to shelve this proposal and develop instead a plan by which those refugees who desired to return abroad could be repatriated or assisted to emigrate to other countries. The fate of the rest, in the meantime, hung in the balance.

#### The Shelter Director Resigns

The shelter director was kept fully informed of the progress of negotiations in Washington. In the long months since the opening of the shelter, he and his family had strongly identified themselves with the shelter population and were increasingly anxious regarding the group's future status. In the belief that he would be able to make a greater contribution to securing their freedom outside the Government service, he resigned his position to work in their behalf.

After the shelter director had announced his intention of resigning, but before he actually left office on May 19, 1945, Director Myer of WRA paid his second visit to the shelter. While there he addressed a mass meeting of the shelter residents and interpreted to the group the steps being taken by WRA in an effort to obtain their freedom. He also announced that Malcolm Pitts, Assistant Director of WRA, would succeed Mr. Smart as acting shelter director.

Mr. Smart organized a national committee known as the Friends of Fort Ontario Guest-Refugees, Inc. and established its headquarters in New York. He developed a sponsoring committee of prominent individuals to work toward the liberation of the shelter residents and obtain permission for them to apply for admission to the United States under the immigration laws. On July 9, the committee forwarded a statement to President Truman, signed by 100 Americans, asking freedom for the refugee group.

In addition to his work with outside sponsors, Mr. Smart maintained his contacts at the shelter through a freedom committee composed of shelter residents. While this committee had no official standing as

representative of the shelter population, it included a number of the more articulate residents. Some members of the committee favored a moderate policy and urged against any demonstration that was likely to bring discredit upon the shelter population. On the other hand, there were several members of the committee who felt that only through public enlightenment as to the plight of the refugees could any relief be obtained.

Mr. Smart's family continued to live in Oswego, and he made frequent trips from New York to the shelter to confer with the freedom committee and interested townspeople. This created something of a problem for the shelter directors who followed. Although the Smarts were no longer living on the post, they spent much time at the shelter. To the residents, the former director still had the aura of office about him, though as a private citizen he no longer had the same access to information from Washington which could keep him fully abreast of the progress of negotiations between WRA and the other agencies concerned.

### Oswego Adds its Voice

From the shelter's inception, residents of the city of Oswego had been interested in the shelter. At first they assisted in gaining acceptance for the refugee children in the Oswego schools. Later they sponsored helpful activities at the shelter. In time they took an interest in the issue of the refugees' future. The most active in the group drew up a memorial to the President and the Congress, recommending that the refugees be permitted to leave the shelter, "reside at places of their own choice," accept gainful employment and qualify for admission to the United States. The memorial was signed by 27 leading citizens of the city, including members of the Oswego Advisory Committee on Fort Ontario. The memorial was a heartening sign of progress to the shelter residents, who felt that the endorsement it contained would aid them in their struggle to obtain recognition of their status in this country.

In addition to the freedom committee, there were several other individuals in the refugee community who made known their distress at continued confinement. Bernard Guillemain, a shelter resident who had been a journalist and writer abroad, wrote a letter to the Oswego Palladium-Times on May 22 in which he eloquently set forth the dilemma of the refugees and urged that they be given freedom. Mr. Guillemain's article was largely an expansion of remarks he had made at the shelter in an address delivered at the time of Director Myer's visit. Although a great deal had been written about the refugees, including several pieces calculated to inspire sympathy for their plight, this appears to have been the first plea by a member of the refugee community to appear in print. Following its publication, the Palladium-Times, whose publisher was a member of the Advisory Committee on Fort Ontario, received

a barrage of letters both supporting and attacking Mr. Guillemin's position. The unfavorable letters were very disturbing to the shelter population. Individual refugees spoke with the acting shelter director expressing the desire that something be done to counteract such adverse reports. In fact, they turned somewhat against Mr. Guillemin and were ready to attack him because of repercussions in the community which they felt might hurt their case. Actually, the favorable letters more than outweighed the unfavorable ones, but it was some weeks before the residents calmed down.

On June 6, 1945, it was announced that President Truman had transferred over-all responsibility for the Oswego project to the Department of the Interior in view of the contemplated early termination of the War Refugee Board. This served to fan the hopes of some who believed that the War Relocation Authority would not be bound by the same policy considerations as the War Refugee Board, since it had not originated the policy which kept the refugees confined. About this time, Brigadier General William O'Dwyer, in his final report to the War Refugee Board, urged that the refugees be permitted to remain in the United States until further clarification of international policy on displaced persons, and also endorsed the sponsored leave program. These two occurrences further heightened the optimism felt by the refugees and set the stage for the most dramatic of the events which took place at the shelter in connection with determination of the residents' fate.

#### The Dickstein Committee Hearings

As a result of War Relocation Authority's efforts, General O'Dwyer's report, representations to Congress by interested committees, and appeals in behalf of the refugees by their relatives and friends and private agencies, the subject of Fort Ontario became a matter of congressional concern. It was announced that a subcommittee of the House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization would visit the shelter in late June to study the situation at first hand. The delegation of six Congressmen who were at Oswego from June 25 to 26 included Chairman Samuel Dickstein of New York and the following five other Congressional members: O. Clark Fisher of Texas, Lowell Stockman of Oregon, John Lesinski of Michigan, George P. Miller of California, and James I. Dolliver of Iowa.

The subcommittee heard testimony from Government officials, Oswego residents, and the refugees themselves. General O'Dwyer flew up from New York and testified movingly in the refugees' behalf. He argued that they should be permitted to leave the shelter under adequate sponsorship pending a solution of their problem that would be in keeping with the United Nations repatriation policy. Representatives of WRA reviewed the history of the project and told of the expense and difficulty of operating a plant far in excess of the population's needs. The citizens

of Oswego were represented by officials of the school system and State Teachers College, the police chief, the publisher of the Oswego Palladium-Times, and a local attorney who was chairman of the town's Advisory Committee on Fort Ontario. All praised the talent and deportment of the shelter population, young and old.

The police chief said that there had not been "any trouble with these refugees in our city" and that "they go along the street and behave themselves very nicely." The publisher of the local newspaper risked local displeasure by saying that there was "more talent in this group than there is in all of Oswego together." The comments about the school children were unusually complimentary. The superintendent of schools stated that their scholastic performance had been "superior" and their achievement "amazing." The high school principal called attention to the fact that 8 of about 40 high school students from the shelter had just qualified for the National Honor Society, and a teacher of 22 years' standing said: "These boys are of the finest I have ever had in my home room."

But the best witnesses at the hearing were the refugees themselves. The Representatives heard witness after witness, including members of the Fort Ontario Boy Scout troop, testify that they had no homelands to return to and wished to remain in the United States. Among those called were Mrs. Rosa Mosauer, a widow with two sons, a staff sergeant and a lieutenant, in the United States Army overseas; Jacob Ernest Kahn, whose wife and two children lived in Minneapolis; Mrs. Regina Loewit, whose husband worked in a New York war plant; Josef Langnas, aged 14, who was president of his class in the Oswego Junior High School; Mr. and Mrs. Rachmiel Seif, parents of a 15-year-old girl in England who had just received an immigration visa to come to the United States; Prince Peter Ouroussoff, who said he had no further use for his Czarist title, but wanted to join his sister, director of a ballet school in New York; and Jakob Charasch, whose two sons were in the U. S. Merchant Marine. The Congressmen heard the plight of Aca and Rajko Margulis, who had been invited by Harvard Medical School to continue their studies if they could obtain permission to go to Cambridge before the beginning of the fall term. They talked with 20-year-old Marcella Weinstein, who shepherded her five brothers and sister to Fort Ontario and learned the day she arrived, through an advertisement in an American paper, that their mother was safe in Switzerland. They did not get to hear Alfred Thewett, 65-year-old Viennese fashion designer. Mr. Thewett was scheduled to be called, but died of a heart attack the night before the hearings began, a scant three months after his wife arrived in the United States on an immigration visa.

While the Congressmen were at the shelter, the spirit among the residents was high. They put on a special performance for the honored guests, which included a scene "taking off" one of the hearings. They

gave a party in the service club which the Congressmen attended. They expected as a result of the visit by these dignitaries that they would soon be released. The Congressmen returned to Washington; shortly thereafter a resolution concerning the shelter was passed by the full House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization.\* But as time wore on and the shelter residents saw no practical results of the Congressmen's visit, they settled down for another period of watchful waiting.\*

#### Administrative Changes

While efforts to "do something" about the Fort Ontario refugees began to hit pay dirt, some interesting administrative developments were taking place at the shelter. Mr. Pitts, who had been detailed to the shelter as acting director immediately following the resignation of Mr. Smart, served in this capacity until July 1. During his term at Oswego, Mr. Pitts brought about several changes in the administration of the shelter. A closer surveillance was instituted at the shelter gate, and sentences were given at the shelter jail to several individuals found violating the shelter pass regulations by visits to Syracuse and New York. Mr. Pitts also introduced regular fortnightly "clean-up" days, in which the gate was closed and all persons at the fort were held responsible for policing the buildings and grounds. During this period a vast improvement in relations with the private agencies also took place.

During this period, a new system was also devised to bring about the accomplishment of necessary shelter maintenance operations for which an adequate full-time refugee staff could not be recruited. This variation of the earlier "rotation" system was called the "redistribution" plan. Under the redistribution plan, priorities for shelter workers were set up and those not working or assigned to lighter tasks were required to take their turn on the roads and grounds crew or in other essential duties. The residents were told that the redistribution plan was a temporary one and that the number of men called for redistribution assignments would diminish as workers were found to fill the full-time jobs. The priority system established was as follows: (1) able-bodied non workers; (2) workers employed half time; (3) workers employed full time in WRA administrative offices or in recreational educational, and other jobs financed by the Coordinating Committee for Fort Ontario. Persons in group (1) were to be called on an average of twice as often as persons in the other two groups. Full-time workers in the operations division, dining halls, warehouses, and hospital were not subject to redistribution work. Persons who did not meet their redistribution assignments were deprived of pass privileges in accordance with the period of work they missed, unless they could present a valid medical or welfare excuse.

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\* See entry in Chronology for July 6, 1946.

The redistribution plan was met with a certain amount of grumbling, but on the whole its fairness was recognized. It had the effect of bringing into the labor pool some of the individuals who had never made any contribution during their months at the shelter to the work of the community. A few of the persons assigned elected to lose pass privileges rather than accept work assignments, but they were in the minority. Persons on the redistribution list were paid for the work they performed, and if they were otherwise employed, given time off from their other jobs in order to accomplish their redistribution assignments. Perhaps the only adverse feature of the redistribution plan was that the men assigned were not always properly used. Some of the work supervisors were not able to give adequate supervision, training or a sufficient sense of participation to the refugees who were assigned to work for them. Efforts were made to correct this, but it continued to have the effect of lowering the morale of some of the redistribution workers. For example, a violinist who taught every morning at the shelter music school said he would prefer to lose the chance to go to town rather than cancel worthwhile teaching appointments in order to carry out a redistribution work assignment in which he did not feel his skills would be advantageously put to use.

The redistribution plan applied only to the men at the shelter; however, a modified plan was set up for the women who were not employed. It was decided that they would take their turn at assisting with the work in the dining halls. In this case, the penalty was not revocation of pass privileges, but withdrawal of the privilege to attend vocational training classes. The beauty culture classes in particular were so popular that this threat constituted sufficient sanction for most of the women at the shelter who preferred to take their turn at a rotation kitchen assignment rather than to forego the opportunity of becoming expert beauty operators.

The redistribution assignments for men and women came in for a lot of comment. A few of the refugees protested that their liberty was violated if their passes were taken up because they failed to meet their redistribution assignments. On the other hand, most of the residents did the work with good grace. As long as they were convinced that there was no favoritism being shown and that the schedule of assignments was being administered fairly and equitably, there was no organized opposition to the plan in effect on the part of the shelter population. There was some justified criticism when it was found that some of the redistribution workers had been assigned to trim lawns and police up grounds in the section of the project occupied by the appointed personnel. When it was made clear, however, that this was done on the initiative of one of the appointed foremen and was counter to the policy of the shelter director, the explanation was accepted. Later on, when a more critical evaluation was made of the types of jobs and the incentives offered, it was possible to recruit more full-time employes for the

heavier tasks and the quota of redistribution workers was reduced accordingly.

### Bonus System

The bonus system set in operation by the residents shortly after the resignation of the first advisory council in December 1944, continued in effect. Most of the population gave cash contributions to the refugees regularly employed in the hauling of garbage, ashes and coal, and in many cases to those working in the messhalls. So far as can be learned, the methods used to exact this tribute were not extortionate. The families in a given house simply agreed to pay a sum out of their wages, grants, or savings, or funds received from the outside to those who were doing the dirty work. There are no data available as to the sanctions applied against those families who did not "kick in." It is entirely possible, however, that they did not receive the same degree of service as the residents who made regular contributions. An unofficial report for this period indicates that a tariff of 50 to 75 cents per person per month was charged for garbage and ash removal and coal delivery, while an additional charge was levied by the kitchens. One head of a family of four whose wages and grants totalled \$28 per month stated that he paid out as much as \$5 a month in tribute.

Although compliance was never more than about 75 percent, it is possible that the weight of the bonus system fell rather heavily on those shelter residents who received no funds from the outside and were forced for health or other valid reasons to rely upon welfare grants for their main income. The fact remains, however, that the bonus plan was the most effective means devised by the residents to accomplish the onerous chores. Through the spring and summer, a special crew of five men was responsible for the removal of the ashes and garbage and for the hauling of coal. They were recruited by the head of the house leaders and ostensibly reported to him. The house leaders collected from the various houses the sums which "supplemented" the regular wages of the men employed on this crew at the regular \$18 WRA monthly wage.

The crew's performance in the hauling of garbage was good and, in general, they did a fair job in delivering coal to the barracks buildings and dining halls. The contributing residents paid for these services and were anxious that a thorough job be done. In the other areas of the job the crew's performance was inclined to be more superficial. The residents were less interested in the delivery of coal to the administration buildings and in the removal of ashes from all buildings, although these functions were equally necessary from the standpoint of safety and effective project administration. Once or twice the system threatened to break down, and at one point there was a complete turnover in personnel. On several occasions the numbers of coal

crew, together with the head of the house leaders, was called before the director of the shelter in order to be reminded that their obligations extended to the shelter administration as well as to the residents. In the fall a second crew was organized to make coal deliveries, and from that point on all went well.

### Private Enterprise

Strictly speaking, the bonus system was illegal in any form, as no private enterprise was permitted at the shelter under the prevailing WRA policy. In actuality, all four of the shelter directors who were in office on a temporary or permanent basis condoned private enterprise in one form or another simply because it was not significant enough to create a problem in shelter administration. Moreover, it helped to keep people occupied and often resulted in prices lower than those in the downtown stores.

The War Relocation Authority was forced on several occasions to discourage entrepreneurs from the outside who were interested in establishing regular industries within the shelter. However, the administration winked at the enterprises which flourished within the shelter. An unofficial report from the shelter in May 1945, indicated that the following entrepreneurs were carrying on business at Fort Ontario with other residents as customers: two photographers, three barbers, one shoemaker, one radio repairman, one watchmaker, five or six dressmakers, two milliners, one beer salesman, several tailors, two carpenters, two corset makers, two furriers, one laundress, several English teachers, one custom baker. In addition, one resident represented an Oswego laundry as an agent, while another represented a dry cleaning establishment.

Most of the people mentioned above used their own apartments and materials. One or two occupied unused space in other buildings on the post. Originally the barber charged 25¢ per haircut when the 65¢ downtown price was too high. Gradually the price for shelter haircuts went up to 40¢. It was reputed that the man acting as a laundry agent had the most lucrative job. He received 3¢ commission on each shirt, and his income was said to approximate \$100 a month, as a number of the residents set their laundry out.

While most of this enterprise was carried on for shelter residents, there was some trade with residents of the town. The shoemaker, for example, repaired shoes for shelter residents, but also accepted a few orders for bootmaking from the more affluent townspeople. Several women in the shelter turned out craft novelties for occasional outside sales. The photographers did some portrait work in the town, and several project artists were known to have received fees for portraits which they painted of Oswego personages.

There were a few instances in the life of the shelter when residents of the shelter were found to be temporarily employed outside the shelter by residents of the town. In one case a man was painting a house on a part time basis; another man worked for a watchmaker; a third for a tailor; and one woman worked briefly as a domestic. It is believed, however, that these were exceptional.

### The Summer: Tensions Ease

The change-over which gave the War Relocation Authority rather than the War Refugee Board responsibility for shelter policy determination did not permit any major relaxation of the leave policies. However, WRA found it possible to permit shelter residents to venture up to 20 miles from the fort. This welcome relaxation of the former rule which did not permit the refugees to go outside the city limits of Oswego was announced on July 4, 1945. The residents could now take advantage of the favorable summer weather, visit neighboring towns, and bathe in the two State parks within the larger orbit. However, they were still prohibited from visiting Syracuse, some 35 miles away.

Summer weather also attracted more visits to Oswego by relatives and friends. In one or two cases, relatives actually took cottages in or near the town during the summer period. Shelter regulations were also modified slightly permitting spouses and minor children of shelter residents to stay overnight in the shelter if they so desired.

Through the late spring and early summer, there were other factors accounting for an easing of tensions. Great interest was centered on the graduation from high school of six shelter children as well as the successful completion by many others of their year of schooling. There was a great deal of activity in the arts, some of it activated by the arts and crafts exhibit held at the shelter from April 30 to May 5. Painting, sculpture, and arts and crafts creations of all types were on display in this exhibit, which was attended by hundreds of visitors from Oswego and nearby towns. The high quality of the exhibits and the favorable notice they attracted in the local papers brought an offer from the Syracuse Art Museum to have a selection of the best work on exhibit during June. This was done, with a consequent new interest in artistic accomplishment.

The theatrical groups were also active. Performances were put on at two shelter theatres by Austro-German, Russian, Zionist, youth, and children's theatre troupes. Benefits given at the shelter netted funds for the Oswego Red Cross and other causes, and several of the programs were repeated at the State Teachers College.

There were numerous social organizations among the residents. Perhaps the most picturesque of these was the "Club of the Lonesomes,"

for single people over 50, which met on Wednesday afternoons. The members conversed, enjoyed light refreshments provided by one of the private agencies, and listened to music written by their own members and by others. The club had been organized by the head of the ladies' committee, a redoubtable group whose welfare services were an important factor in sustaining camp morale. Their ladies' exchange of children's out-grown clothing and other items did much to supplement wardrobes and to compensate for the fact that many residents spent for other purposes the minimum clothing allowance provided by the Government.

The leadership of the ladies' committee is well illustrated by this quotation from an article by its president which appeared in the Chronicle: "The best way to overcome boredom, melancholy and preoccupation about the future is to help other people, to give a good hand to those who are lonesome, old and weak."

Summer educational and recreational activities received their greatest impetus through a work camp program sponsored by the American Friends Service Committee. Discussions concerning the content of this program began in the late spring. The nucleus of the work camp staff of 15 was a group of girls who had completed a special course for overseas relief at Haverford College, but for whom overseas assignments were not yet available. They desired practical experience in work with displaced people of diverse backgrounds. At the same time the shelter faced the problem of organizing, with a limited staff, a summer activity program for school children and adults. The mutual need resulted in a project of extreme value for all concerned.

The Friends unit included several skilled practitioners of recreation and education, as well as a younger group who could be used as activity leaders in their own specialties. A lively program for children of all ages was set up and, in addition, classes were organized for adults in certain subjects which members of the group were qualified to teach. The Friends Service people were young and energetic. They had a real interest in the work at hand and in the people they served. They introduced the refugee youngsters to scavenger and treasure hunts, American folk dances, and many other activities. They lived on the post cooperative style, in a house made available by the administration and were completely accepted by the refugee population.

The Friends summer program was supplemented by the regular English and vocational training activities sponsored by the Coordinating Committee for Fort Ontario, as well as by special educational opportunities. During the summer, some 60 children of grade school age were privileged to attend a special session at the practice school of the State Teachers College, while a group of young girls continued with their work at the Oswego Business School.

## First Repatriates

Following the completion of arrangements with UNRRA, the first group of shelter residents left Fort Ontario on May 30, bound for Yugoslavia. They were all voluntary repatriates. The entire shelter had been circularized when UNRRA made it known that a group of shelter residents could be taken on the Gripsholm sailing. At first it appeared that a larger number would go, but when the final arrangements were made, the group had dwindled to 13, all Yugoslavs. Seven of those sailing were unattached adults. One family of three, one couple, and a man who left his wife and son to follow him (they sailed in August) completed the group.

In July UNRRA informed WRA that another sailing of the Gripsholm scheduled for August could accommodate an additional party of Yugoslavs who might desire to return to their homeland. At this point, the war in Europe had been over for some months. Although news reports were still spotty and conflicting, there was more information available about conditions abroad than had been the case at the time the first party sailed. A number of the Yugoslav leaders in the camp signed up for this second sailing and the list grew to a total of 53.

For many of the Yugoslavs it was a difficult decision to make. Yugoslav Jews had actually experienced little of persecution in their own country until it was overrun by the Nazis. While many of their family members had been exterminated, some had friends and relatives they believed to be still alive, including men and women who had served with Tito's army. It was also true of the Yugoslavs that a smaller percentage had close ties in the United States.

The Yugoslavs at the shelter included a number who were motivated by a desire to go back and help rebuild their native land. On the other hand, some were uncertain as to the future of their country and were loath to leave the United States and the possible chance of being admitted as immigrants. At the time of sailing, there was still no word as to whether the Oswego refugees would be permitted to stay in the United States. The Dickstein Committee had come and gone, and the later negotiations which were to lead to the final solution had not yet begun. The sailing list included the two young Yugoslav medical students who had been admitted to Harvard for the fall term. They had been eager for an opportunity to obtain their medical education in the United States and wanted to stay if it appeared likely that a solution might be reached that would enable them to enroll before the term began. On the other hand, after a year of residence at the fort they were tired of waiting for a deliverance which they feared would never occur, so they decided to go.

When the first group of 13 left, the advance notice was so brief as to permit less than a day in New York for the departing group. The August sailing afforded more time, and arrangements were worked out for the 53 voyagers to spend a period of 4 days in the port city before they actually sailed. During this time, they were royally feted and entertained by several private relief organizations and committees and were given funds, packages of clothing and other supplies sorely needed in the country to which they were returning. Although they went back without ever having lived in any normal kind of community in the United States, they were able to enjoy a brief taste of liberty before finally quitting the country.

Two other shelter residents left the United States during the period. Transportation arrangements were finally worked out for Ludwig Reis, an Austrian, to join his son in Uruguay, and he sailed for Montevideo on August 3. His passage had been delayed because of the unwillingness of the Argentine Government to provide the transit visa he needed. The last resident to leave the country during the shelter's life was Cecilia Melcer, a Czech, whose husband awaited her in Prague. Because of the need for military clearance, UNRRA was unable to arrange early repatriation for Mrs. Melcer. Through private sources, however, she obtained passage to Paris with a reasonable expectation of completing arrangements there for the return to Prague. WRA granted her terminal leave from the shelter on October 9, and her plans worked out as anticipated.

Mr. Pitts was at the shelter as acting director until July 1, 1945. During this time the Authority was negotiating with the War Department for the release of Captain Lewis Korn, a member of the Civil Affairs Division, who had aided in the selection of the refugees in Italy and had accompanied them to this country. Captain Korn at one time had been assistant project director at the Gila River Relocation Center, and his familiarity with WRA and with the refugee group made him a logical choice as shelter director. Unfortunately, there were complications which postponed the date of his release from the Army and ultimately made it necessary for WRA to abandon the idea. While the negotiations were being carried on, Edward B. Marks, Jr., who had been Refugee Program Officer in Washington since the inception of the program, was detailed to Oswego on July 1 for a 3-week period as acting director.

#### A Residents' Committee Is Formed

From early December 1944, when the advisory council resigned, until July 1945, no group of shelter residents could be said to represent the shelter population in dealings with the administration. This was an unfortunate and time wasting state of affairs. It meant that individual shelter residents, through lack of any other channel, felt

it necessary to consult with the shelter director about a variety of matters. It also meant that various groups of residents representing the refugee workers, the nationality committees, the freedom committee, the house leaders, etc., all came up through the shelter director. At one time there had been an assistant director to handle many of these delegations, but with this position vacant the shelter director found that a good deal of his day was occupied in meeting with these groups and individuals on problems which really did not merit his attention.

From the standpoint of the shelter residents, it was also a disadvantage not to have a responsible group of their own representatives. The shelter director had no group that he could call in as a sounding board and it was inevitable that policy sometimes was interpreted in various ways by the groups that came before him, depending upon their particular interests.

The administration hinted strongly, but never actually came to the point of convening a representative group. Fortunately, the residents themselves recognized the desirability of having a channel of communication. Accordingly, a new organization called the National Board of Fort Ontario Residents was established, and nine members of the board were selected as an executive committee to meet with the administration. The first meeting, with Mr. Marks present, took place on July 18.

The national board consisted of 30 members. Eighteen of the members had the right to vote; the others served in an advisory capacity. The executive committee consisted of nine members selected by the nationality groups making up the national board. The committee contained two Yugoslavs, two Austrians, two Poles, two Germans, and one Czech.

In the committee's first meeting with the acting shelter director, the chairman made it clear that the group was representing the community and not the administration. He pointed out that the principal failing of the earlier advisory council had been its unsuccessful effort to represent both community and administration. The council had taken heat from both sides and in the last analysis was able to serve neither. The executive committee, said its chairman, would chiefly serve to bring to the attention of the administration the principal matters affecting the welfare of the shelter residents.

The acting shelter director expressed the hope that the executive committee would be able to organize a judicial commission for handling the intramural disputes of individuals and groups in the shelter population. Some months later, on October 19, the national board announced the formation of a complaint settlement committee and a court of arbitration to handle this type of function.

During the last six months of shelter operation, the shelter director found the executive committee a useful instrument, and called on it frequently for assistance in interpreting to the community the points of administration that he wished to emphasize. Other resident groups, such as the freedom committee, remained in existence, but lacked the status of the national board and executive committee. However, there were always shelter residents, including former members of the advisory council, who opposed the executive committee, or at least subtly resisted its efforts at leadership.

### New Shelter Director

Clyde H. Powers came on as shelter director on July 20, 1945, and served in that capacity until the shelter's close. Mr. Powers had been with the Bureau of Indian Affairs for a number of years before joining the staff of WRA in 1942 as Chief Engineer. With the coming of Mr. Powers, continuity of direction was established once again. His impartial and understanding direction of the project was a stabilizing influence in a difficult period. During his administration there was a notable improvement in the coordination between the various WRA divisions and sections. He also worked harmoniously with the executive committee and the National Board of Fort Ontario Residents which remained in office throughout his regime.

Shortly after Mr. Powers took office, the refugees had the first anniversary of their stay at the fort. There was little in the way of celebration. However, the Ontario Chronicle, in its anniversary cartoon, bespoke the feelings of many, after a year half in and half outside of the United States. The upper panel of the cartoon, representing 1944, showed the group arriving in New York Harbor and looking up hopefully at the Statue of Liberty. In the 1945 panel, a white-bearded refugee peered out over the fort's barbed wire fence with a spy glass and fastened his gaze on Miss Liberty—far, far in the distance!

### End of the Chronicle

In late August, the editors of the Chronicle resigned over a controversy as to the weekly's purpose. For some weeks prior to their resignation, they had been publishing material which the shelter director considered as prejudicial to the interests of the refugee group. The editors held that it was the duty of the paper to publish articles pressing for the freedom of shelter population. The shelter director felt that the circulation of inflammatory editorials on this subject might hurt the situation, and urged that the paper give more attention to news coverage of the day-to-day shelter development. Numerous conferences were held between the shelter director and the paper's editors. The shelter director agreed not to censor the Chronicle in return for a

promise by the editors that they would not print any items which would be destructive to shelter morale.

The show-down came with the publication shortly thereafter of an issue containing two articles which the administration regarded as offensive. One was a review of a play in which the reviewer made uncomplimentary references to a member of the cast; the second was an anonymous letter to the editor in which unfounded charges were made concerning the food situation at the shelter, without the opportunity given for a reply. Because he felt that these items might spread discontent among the residents and perhaps react unfavorably among the paper's readers outside the camp, the shelter director caused the issue in which they appeared to be suspended.

On the following day, the editor and managing editor resigned, and the paper was not published from that time on because no other qualified residents were interested in running it. It is of some significance to note that no petition or other request for its resumption ever came to the notice of the administration.

### The Paneling

During July and August and the first part of September 1945, there was no visible result at the shelter of the various efforts being made to obtain freedom for the Fort Ontario residents. It came as something of a surprise when the announcement was made in early September that representatives of the State and Justice Departments, in connection with the Interior Department, would visit the shelter to conduct interviews with all shelter residents concerning their status. At first many of the residents took this inquiry to be the final one. They felt confident that the step was merely a formality prior to granting them their liberty. Some even had the notion that the hearings would constitute an actual immigration examination.

The delegation which arrived at the shelter on September 14 consisted of four members each of the State and Justice Departments. The Interior representatives included the Refugee Program Officer from Washington and three members of the shelter staff. There were to be three primary panels, consisting of representatives of each of the Departments, and one review panel. The shelter administration cooperated in mimeographing a special questionnaire which the review committee and primary committees drew up, and the interviewing began.

It soon became clear to the residents that the hearings were being held for exploratory purposes only. In addition to the background information requested in the questionnaire, each resident was asked certain other questions by the panels, and a transcript of all testimony was made.

The main purpose of the hearings was to determine the practicality of returning the shelter residents to their countries of former residence. In order to get at the basic information needed, the members of the panel went into the individual and family situation of the residents rather intensively. They were asked about their refugee period in Europe, their war experience, the extermination of their family members, and the location of their surviving relatives, including relatives in the United States, and their hopes and fears for the future.

The rehearsal of their past misfortunes and present uncertainty of status was a painful one for many of the group. At their best, the panels were noncommittal in their interrogation of the residents. In some instances, however, individual members of a panel showed a definite bias that was not lost upon those who were being questioned. One panel member, particularly, placed a great deal of stress on the statement which the individuals had signed before they departed for the United States. He indicated that any wish to violate or change the terms of this agreement would be an act of bad faith. He did not appear willing to take into account the pressure situation at the time which, it was alleged, had made the refugees willing to sign any document that would enable them to leave Europe. Another panel member seemed to attach little or no importance to the fact that many of the individuals interviewed had lost their nearest of kin by Nazi persecution. He seemed to feel that the refugees, having been revived and strengthened by their year in the United States, should be anxious to go back and rehabilitate their homelands. When a number of the refugees indicated that they were concerned about reports of anti-Semitism they had read about in the papers, this possibility was discounted. It was assumed that since the United Nations had won the war and was in control of Europe, all rumors of this sort were groundless. In general, the questioning was fair enough, and the proportion of residents seriously disturbed by the experience was small. The bulk of the people, however, realized that no quick deliverance could be expected.

While the State and Justice representatives were at the fort, they were entertained at several theatrical performances and parties, and almost all of them individually expressed themselves as being deeply interested in the shelter population and the question of their future welfare.

The hearings were held at a time when the European situation was very unclear. The papers were filled with reports of the deplorable conditions in displaced persons camps, of the probability of serious food shortages during the coming winter, and of anti-Semitism in certain European countries. This gave rise to a feeling of panic on the part of a number of shelter residents who feared they would be sent back against their will.

There was a long, bleak period before any results of the hearings were known at the shelter. During this time, speculation was rife. Actually, the review committee did not complete its report to the three Cabinet officers until October 24, 1945, and it was over a month after that date before the State and Justice Departments, which were to take the initiative, convened members of the three Departments with a recommended plan. It was natural that a long wait would give rise to much doubt and pessimism at the shelter, where many members of the appointed staff were as concerned about the outcome as the refugees themselves.\*

During this period the Director of the Friends of Fort Ontario Guest-Refugees (and former shelter director) was in and out of the shelter a great deal, meeting with members of the freedom committee and others in the refugee population. In the absence of concrete developments, the grapevine was active. For a time there was talk in the shelter of a deputation to Washington, or possible hunger strikes on the part of a few residents.

In a sense, the closing months of 1945 were even more barren of hope for the shelter residents than had been true of the preceding winter. The refugees had seen a variety of efforts to secure their freedom come to naught. As a gesture calculated to call attention to their plight, a number of the residents who believed some kind of action was necessary scheduled a day of sorrow and prayer for December 12. While the occasion was no doubt sincerely motivated, it was evident that at least part of the reason for scheduling it was to attract favorable notice in the press. The plan included invitations to representatives of a number of interested periodicals to visit the shelter on the day in question. The event was finally called off by those who were planning it when the shelter director pointed out, on advice from Washington, that a demonstration of this kind could very easily backfire. It could, for example, have been misconstrued by persons on the outside who were not fully acquainted with the shelter problem and taken to denote ungratefulness for the hospitality which was being accorded to the group.

#### Variants of Medical Leave

During the fall of 1945 the shelter director had petitioned Washington for consideration of a policy which would permit residents of the shelter to go out on short term leave. This had been proposed on several previous occasions, but at this time the shelter director reaffirmed the importance of enabling individuals to get away and spend at least a short period in normal surroundings. It was decided in Washington that in view of the status of the negotiations to close the

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\* For a resumé of the panel findings see Chronology entry for September 14 to 22 et seq.

shelter, it would be inopportune to push for a halfway change in policy at that juncture.

However, there had for some months been a gradual extension of the one type of leave which was permitted under the original shelter policies—leave for medical purposes. During the spring and summer, this type of leave was granted for convalescent care to a number of individuals who needed a "break" from protracted shelter living. In most cases, they were individuals recovering from physical illness, and in all cases, their leave was subject to the approval of the chief medical officer. The expense of convalescent care was borne by a private agency.

This type of care did not answer the need for all who required it; nevertheless it gave the health and welfare sections greater flexibility in relieving some of the more distressed family situations, at least for a few weeks, during which the patient was outside in a supervised nursing or rest home, or, in some cases, in the care of family members. Washington also gave approval for the placement in foster homes of several children at the shelter whose parents were not able to care for them in a satisfactory manner.

In the late fall another variant of medical leave was permitted, and two individuals—one partially paralyzed and the other almost blind—both shattered physically as a result of their refugee experience, both advanced in years, and both having close relatives on the outside willing to care for them, were permitted to leave the shelter for an indefinite period. They were still shelter residents in a technical sense, but at the time they left there was no expectation that they would ever be brought back for actual residence at Fort Ontario. Had the shelter continued for a longer period, it is likely that the chief medical officer and shelter director would have recommended to the Director in Washington that another half dozen persons be granted this form of rehabilitative leave.

One of the persons affected was Feibish Koppelman, a man of 63. His wife and two married daughters, all citizens of the United States, were living in California, where Mrs. Koppelman ran her own shop. She had made the trip East on three occasions to visit her husband at the shelter. As a result of his concentration camp experience he was deaf and otherwise in very poor shape when he arrived. The fact that he could not join his family probably contributed to his further decline, and he became almost entirely paralyzed. In November 1945, his departure from the shelter on medical leave was finally authorized; his wife took him West, and he spent several weeks of reunion with his children. Early in January he died.

## Problems of Administration

During the summer and fall months there had been a vast improvement in the administration of the shelter. Although there were still personality clashes, the shelter director was able to evoke far more satisfactory cooperation among the various divisions and sections than had hitherto been the case. There was also a marked improvement in the performance of refugee personnel in certain areas. However, the operating divisions were still inclined to look askance at refugee leadership. There were only a few instances in which shelter residents were able to maintain their standing in positions where they had real authority and responsibility.

The shelter director's immediate staff during the last year of shelter operation consisted of an administrative officer, construction and maintenance superintendent, chief medical officer, welfare supervisor, community activities specialist, and chief of internal security. The mess, supply, and fiscal and personnel sections were under the administrative officer; the various construction and maintenance shops and the fire department reported to the construction and maintenance superintendent.

All during its final months, the shelter administration was faced with the question of whether desirable changes of policy and personnel should be made, in the light of the fact that a decision was expected at any time. It was difficult to plan, even in terms of needed repairs, in the absence of knowledge as to how long the shelter would go on.

After August 20, 1945, there were no further additions to the Fort Ontario Manual covering shelter administrative procedures except for those issued during the final weeks concerning the liquidation of the shelter and the resettlement of its population.

One significant addition to the staff was made during the final months, however, with the creation of the job of medical social worker. The WRA Medical Social Consultant had come to the shelter for a 2-month detail in early September 1945. When it came time for her to return to Washington, a qualified worker from one of the relocation centers was transferred into the new position, remaining in office from November 15, 1945, until the shelter's close. She made an important contribution during the final period, devoting a major portion of her attention to liaison work between the War Relocation Authority, the National Refugee Service and the many shelter patients involved in types of treatment for which the private agency was assuming responsibility.

The medical social worker's final report contains the following paragraph in analysis of the types of problems encountered at the shelter:

"The type of emotional problems existing among the residents which related to family life as well as to individual adults and children and reflected on the general health were essentially the same as those found by the medical social worker among patients in a hospital in any average community, particularly during a crisis period. Here there was a concentration and intensification of these problems, however, brought about by the traumatic experiences from which this entire selected group had suffered for several years immediately preceding their arrival in this country and from the abnormal ingrown conditions under which they had to live in the Shelter. Separation and loss of parents, children, husbands or wives, family disharmony, sexual incompatibility and insecurity about the future were some of the causes which led to emotional problems and physical breakdown."

Another helpful staff addition during the final months was an appointed employment clerk, in October 1945. Her control of work assignments resulted in far fewer accusations of favoritism than had been the case when refugee leadership was responsible for this function.

Among the constructive administrative accomplishments of the period was the reduction in size of the refugee labor force assigned to the operations division. This was accomplished after a study of the situation by the shelter director had revealed that inadequate use was being made of the workers then employed.

### Still Waiting

As they awaited the Christmas holiday season most of the shelter residents were discouraged by the seeming fruitlessness of their own efforts and the attempts of their relatives and friends and interested committees to obtain their freedom. They had seen two Government deputations, one Congressional and one administrative, make exhaustive inquiries into the shelter problem without attaining any visible result. Most of the shelter residents felt that WRA was striving to do an honest and reasonable job of maintaining a camp under the strictures which controlled its policy; but month on month of delay and uncertainty had worn them to a ragged edge, and the various hopes and desperations engendered by rumors had contributed to the deterioration of morale.

In mid-December, after the day of sorrow and prayer was called off, wise counsel generally prevailed, and there was no immediate prospect of an incident that would embarrass the administration and shelter population. However, it would have taken very little to create one. As it was, the people despaired of an early solution and were becoming resigned to another winter at the shelter. The word had gotten around

somehow that the Government would not ship them back during the winter because of the food situation and unsettled political conditions abroad, but that all except a few with unusual claims to enter the United States were destined for return in the spring.

## CHAPTER V

### EXODUS

On December 22, 1945, President Truman made a statement on immigration that provided the long sought answer to the plight of the Fort Ontario refugees. In this message he urged that the United States take a part in providing refuge for the displaced persons of Europe and declared that "to the extent that our present immigration laws permit, everything possible should be done at once to facilitate the entrance of some of these displaced persons and refugees in the U. S."

Making specific reference to the Fort Ontario residents he said that it had been decided "upon the basis of a careful survey by the Department of State and the Immigration and Naturalization Service \* \* \* that if these persons were now applying for admission to the United States most of them would be admissible under the immigration laws."

"In the circumstances," said the President, "it would be inhumane and wasteful to require these people to go all the way back to Europe merely for the purpose of applying there for immigration visas and returning to the U. S. \* \* \*. I am therefore directing the Secretary of State and the Attorney General to adjust the immigration status of the members of this group who may wish to remain here, in strict accordance with existing laws and regulations."

#### Christmas Present

Coming when it did, the President's announcement was a sensational Christmas present for the residents of the fort. The people were excited as they speculated about the President's order and when it would be likely to take effect. It was a joyous season for the refugees, culminating in an extremely gay New Year's celebration. A few of the residents actually began to assemble and pack their belongings and take other steps in anticipation of their departure. Some wrote to relatives and friends asking them to begin the search for housing and employment. Others, on the basis of past performances, were more cynical as to the actual date of their deliverance.

The holidays were barely over when it became evident that no time was to be lost in getting the closing procedure under way. On Monday, January 7, there converged upon Fort Ontario some 20 immigration inspectors, border patrolmen, clerical workers and other personnel of the Immigration and Naturalization Service; a representative of the State Department; 2 officers of the U. S. Public Health Service; and about 20 workers representing the private agencies which had been designated by WRA to accomplish the resettlement of the shelter population.

Between the President's announcement of December 22, and the arrival of the public and private agency representatives, a good deal of the preparatory work had already been accomplished at the shelter. All of the residents were registered by the Oswego Ration Board for their sugar ration books; all men between the ages of 18 and 65 had been registered under the selective service act; photographs necessary for the official visa and immigration forms had been made of all members of the shelter population, and a variety of forms for alien registration and other purposes had been typed.

### Immigration Examination

With this preparatory work out of the way the Immigration and Public Health officials were able to plunge right into the final processing of the shelter residents. The Public Health doctors finished their examinations in about two days' time and the work of the immigration inspectors and border patrolmen in examining and fingerprinting the applicants occupied less than a week. The residents themselves pitched in and assisted the visiting officials and WRA staff members in accomplishing the necessary tasks. The shelter Boy Scout Troop aided the border patrolmen in taking finger prints, and refugee girls who were studying at the town's business school assisted in typing the necessary forms. Other members of the shelter population pasted photographs, served as translators or interpreters, or acted as messengers. The procedure went on at such a pace that even the most skeptical of the residents were amazed by what they called the "American tempo." The group did not have time to develop real apprehension about the future, which might have been the case if there had been a protracted period without any action after the President's announcement.

The factor which chiefly accounted for the speed of the officials of the Immigration and Naturalization Service and State Department was that there was a deadline to meet. President Truman's order which freed the refugees was primarily designed to facilitate quota immigration of displaced persons in Europe. While the processing was going on at Fort Ontario, State and Justice Department officials were in Europe arranging for the establishment of consulates in United States occupied zones where visa applications could be taken. If space were to be available on spring 1946 quotas for as many as possible of the applicants now in Europe, it would be necessary to process the Oswego group during the early months of 1946.

Because immigration to the U. S. had been virtually at a standstill during the war, the quotas were generally open. The quota situation for Germans, Austrians, Poles, Czechs, and Russians was such that all of the shelter applicants of these nationalities could be accommodated during the months of January and February. The situation was different, however, in the case of the Yugoslav group which, despite

the repatriation of 66 persons, remained the largest single nationality group at the shelter. The annual Yugoslav quota is 845, but the law stipulates that no more than 10% of the quota allotment of any country may be used in any one month. Consequently, it was necessary for the Yugoslav applicants to be spread over a 3 month period. This was also true of several of the smaller groups, notably the Greeks and Roumanians.

It had been decided in Washington that the refugees would change their immigration status at the American consulate at Niagara Falls, Ontario, Canada. As this was a small office it was thought desirable to accomplish as much of the procedure as the law permitted while the refugees were still at the shelter. Accordingly every step of the immigration process, including alien registration and finger printing, was completed before the refugees departed for Canada to make their formal application for immigration visas. A total of 765 shelter residents were scheduled to appear at the consulate in January and February and another 88 were to go in March for permanent admission to the United States on immigration visas. The American consul at Niagara Falls, Canada, journeyed to the shelter in early January to discuss arrangements and agreed to handle up to 100 persons a day at the consulate. It was decided that the refugee groups of approximately that size would leave the shelter on alternate days, beginning January 17.

As under this arrangement most of the residents would be processed at the border during January and early February. The War Relocation Authority set a shelter closing date of February 6. There seemed no need to keep the shelter open for an additional month when the 88 persons due to visit the consulate in March could just as well set out from other destinations. The Immigration and Naturalization Service agreed to give these 88 persons temporary permits to enter the country. Temporary permits were also given to 8 persons awaiting emigration to a country of their choice, 19 persons desiring repatriation and 19 persons found by the officials to be inadmissible to the United States for reasons of health.

#### Citizens By Birth

The 23 children born at the shelter were admitted to the country as United States citizens, although this point had remained undecided until the actual immigration processing took place.

The question had been put to the Department of Justice on at least one occasion, but no official opinion was ever given. However, in the January 1945 issue of the American Journal of International Law, a special article had appeared on this question which concluded that the children born at the shelter were United States citizens.

When the final immigration processing began in January 1946, WRA was informed by the representatives of the Immigration and Naturalization Service that it would not be necessary for the 23 children born at the shelter to be processed as aliens since they were citizens of the U. S. This fact was borne out in Commissioner Carusi's memorandum of January 3, 1946, to James O'Loughlin, in charge of the immigration detail to Oswego, which stated: "The children born at the shelter at Oswego, New York, are deemed to have been born subject to the jurisdiction of the United States and consequently citizens of the United States at birth, under the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution."

### Resettling the People

The processing by the Immigration and Naturalization Service resulted in the admission to the U. S. of all shelter residents on a permanent or temporary basis. But apart from satisfying the legal requirements, WRA felt a responsibility for seeing that the persons in its charge were resettled in as constructive a manner as possible. Three private agencies—the National Refugee Service, the American Committee for Christian Refugees, and the Catholic Committee for Refugees—had pledged themselves to provide corporate and in some cases individual affidavits covering all persons in the shelter population. In so doing these agencies pledged the Government that none of the Fort Ontario residents would become a public charge.

In the light of this responsibility, and because of its experience in the field of refugee resettlement, the WRA designated the National Refugee Service as the agency responsible for the resettlement of the shelter residents. The NRS was to work in close collaboration with the Christian and Catholic committees and with other private agencies in a position to assist in the placement and adjustment of the refugees.

It was originally anticipated that the agency carrying out the resettlement program would have a period of 60 to 90 days to accomplish its task. The necessity of meeting January and February quotas, however, made this impossible. There was some thought given to the possibility that refugees whose resettlement plans were not complete might return to the shelter after they had been admitted at Niagara Falls. However, this might have placed them in the category of being public charges and was therefore inadvisable. Faced with the necessity of stepping up their program the NRS and cooperating agencies arranged to have a larger staff on hand to accomplish the resettlement task in a shorter time. An entire building was turned over to them for their use, telephones were installed and they set up an office for the period of a month in which they carried on their work.

Before the interviewing started, the representative of the National Refugee Service in charge held several meetings with large

groups of shelter residents in which he explained the resettlement program and the services of the various agencies participating. Conferences were also held between representatives of the NRS and WRA in which the basic policy for the operation was reviewed.\* The WRA Welfare Section was to have the responsibility of scheduling appointments for the resettlement interviews conducted by the private agencies, and of forwarding to the agency in each instance a summary giving the relevant case material about the family and their situation.

During the first few days of interviewing, the building occupied by the private agency was in a state of confusion. The workers had not anticipated that their time for accomplishing the task would be so short and that they themselves would be under such pressure in completing the resettlement plans. It was a complicated and delicate process. The worker interviewed a refugee client he had never seen before, and although the material provided by the WRA Welfare Section gave him some notion of the family situation, in many cases he had to start from scratch in giving advice as to possible destinations in the United States. The task was lightened where there was a close relative or friend willing to accept responsibility, but even so it meant checking with the person concerned to make sure that the offer was a bona fide one. There were many instances, however, in which there was no relative, or the relationship was such that it would not support a resettlement plan. In such cases the agency representative had to develop a complete resettlement plan that made sense to the refugee client.

The report of the NRS representative in charge at Oswego tells something of the stresses encountered by his staff in accomplishing the resettlement of all of the refugees within a 30 day period:

"Time was of the essence; resettlement had to be 'talked through' in one or at the most two interviews. If places for resettlement were uncertain, it was impossible to give the refugee a feeling that he really had a place to which to go where he would be truly welcomed. There simply is no privacy in camp life such as at Oswego. The fears, problems, prejudices of any individual, appear in an exaggerated form and become the property of all. Plans for an individual frequently become exposed to group thinking in the camp. Therefore, the usual client-worker controls which operate in our community setups did not prevail in Oswego. For example, if a worker agreed on a particular community with a refugee and then the community refused to accept the individual, not only was there the necessity of helping the refugee face this rejection, but other refugees learning of this experience would not consider that particular city. It cannot be overemphasized that these people feel rejected. They were put out of their homelands and simply cannot bear similar experiences regardless of how well-meaning is the intent. Some

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\* Fort Ontario Manual Section 60.6.

communities finally worked out temporary housing outside the city as the only solution they could provide. Some refugees when they learned of the arrangements, would not accept them for a variety of reasons. Many did not want to live 10 to 25 miles outside a city, thereby limiting even temporarily their accessibility to work, increasing travel time and cost of travel; many who accepted resettlement outside of N. Y. at first with some reluctance, then refused to go when they learned they would be faced with congregate living especially outside of the city. In the final analysis, rather than accept these conditions, they would request going to New York, for they knew that in New York at least there was a HIAS shelter to welcome them."

The mecca of New York attracted many of the refugees. Those with valid reasons for going there presented no difficulty, but it was the goal of the private agencies (and of WRA) to resettle the refugees in as wide a selection of communities as possible. An effort was therefore made to divert from New York those persons who had no special reasons for selecting that city. No coercion was used--a man could resettle wherever he wished--but every effort was made to influence his selection of another community.

The National Refugee Service, which accomplished the major part of the resettlement job, had cooperating committees and agencies in various parts of the country who had agreed to participate in the resettlement plans for the Oswego residents. Many of these committees had not been active since the start of the war when immigration had virtually ceased. NRS experienced some difficulty in getting its local groups to realize the urgency of the situation. Speed was necessary because of the quota deadline, but a number of the local committees asked for an additional period to check with relatives, to attempt to find housing or employment and for various other reasons. Some communities were reluctant to accept aged persons and others whose employability was limited. Much of the work in connection with resettlement placement had to be done over the phone and by wire, and the resettlement period unfortunately coincided with telephone and telegraph strikes in several communities.

WRA could not assume financial or other responsibility for the Fort Ontario residents after they departed from the shelter. However, it was thought that relocation officers and WRA cooperating committees in various communities might be helpful to the National Refugee Service in the work of resettlement. A communication was sent out to relocation officers in cities designated by NRS asking them to stand by for use as a possible resource to locate housing, employment and other adjustment needs. Actually there was very little call on their services.

The American Committee for Christian Refugees and Catholic Committee for Refugees interviewed and developed resettlement plans for

their own clients. These agencies each had a representative at the shelter, but their community contacts throughout the country were not as well developed as those of NRS. The WRA held NRS responsible for the entire operation, including some scrutiny of the plans developed by the two other agencies, so that the resettlement of their clients would be constructively handled. NRS was also held responsible for working out suitable arrangements for the cooperation of several Jewish agencies interested in assisting with the immigration and resettlement of the refugee group. The Hebrew Immigrant and Sheltering Aid Society had representatives at the shelter and at Niagara Falls to assist in immigration work, and extensive use was made of that organization's shelter in New York City, especially as housing for those persons temporarily admitted. The National Council of Jewish Women had several staff members detailed to the NRS contingent at the shelter and also provided escorts for all parties going to Canada.

In addition to working out the resettlement plans, NRS was responsible for providing such assistance as the refugees might need en route and upon arrival in their new communities. The agency also handled all transportation arrangements, including shipment of baggage. Its responsibility included not only the resettlement of refugees permanently admitted but also the care of individuals temporarily admitted pending their repatriation, emigration to other countries or later immigration to the U. S. WRA also arranged with NRS to have the responsibility for the care of Fort Ontario residents hospitalized outside the shelter transferred from Government to private auspices on February 1, 1946.

On the basis of its experience at relocation centers for Japanese Americans, the War Relocation Authority was apprehensive that some of the shelter residents, when they realized that they were free to go, would be reluctant to leave the security of the fort. The original announcement of shelter closure policy and subsequent planning were geared to make it plain that no persons would be permitted to stay on after the final resettlement process was completed. Even so, there were a few tentative inquiries about the possibility of remaining until the end of the school year or of having the family bread-winner resettle in advance of his family and summon them out of the shelter when he had found a job. For the most part, however, the very pace with which the immigration and resettlement processes were carried on militated against indecision. Before they realized what was happening to them, individuals had passed inspection by the immigration officials and were well on their way toward developing a resettlement plan with the private agency representatives.

The actual processing began on January 7; the first three bus loads were scheduled to leave the shelter for Niagara Falls at 6:00 a.m. on the morning of January 17. It was agreed that once NRS had

submitted to WRA its trip list of those who had completed resettlement plans, cancellations could be authorized only by WRA. Several families scheduled for departure on the first trip wanted to back out at the last moment. In all cases but one, however, inquiry by the Health or Welfare Section revealed the desire for postponement to be based only on reluctance to leave the shelter on the date scheduled. One man was postponed to a later trip because of a valid health condition. The others were retained on the list and left as scheduled on the designated morning. Once the first group had left and the people saw they were really on their way, they were eager to move, and exceeded all expectations in coming to a decision on their relocation plans. Many requested departure earlier than had been anticipated. Several bus schedules were rearranged to permit this earlier exodus. The last group left the shelter on February 4, two days ahead of schedule. The last resident, an old man for whom special ambulance service was necessary, left on the following day. Those departing on or before February 4 included not only the permanent immigrants but also the holders of temporary permits.

About the only uneasiness discernible was among the group who were temporarily admitted. This was particularly true of those Yugoslavs who were last to complete their resettlement plans and were consequently included in the group scheduled for permanent immigration in March. The private agencies had arranged for them to leave the shelter in early February and proceed to New York and other communities with the understanding that in early March they would reconvene on a special train bound for Niagara Falls where they would accomplish their change of status. The arrangements were all very definite but a number of the individuals concerned grew panicky. Probably as a result of their European experience, they were afraid that something would happen in the intervening time which would upset the plan and make them ineligible to enter the United States as permanent immigrants. Any concern they may have had about their ability to make a living and get established seemed to be swallowed up in this fear of some unexpected disaster in connection with their immigration. It was with greatest difficulty that WRA and the private agencies convinced the individuals involved that their fears were groundless, that quotas had been reserved, that all arrangements had been made and that there would be no slip-up in the immigration plans.

There was really greater cause for concern among the 19 persons who had been adjudged inadmissible. Some were confident that upon re-examination they would be able to meet the health requirements of the law. But for all, it meant prolongation, at least for a time, of their uncertainty of status, with future deportation as a possibility.

WRA granted terminal leave to a shelter resident only when his immigration processing at the shelter was complete and he had developed a suitably sponsored resettlement plan. Even after these two conditions

had been fulfilled there were certain matters which WRA had to accomplish before the refugee could actually leave the shelter. WRA wanted assurance that all his Government property had been turned in, that his papers were in order, that he had his sugar ration books and selective service card, and that his baggage was ready for collection.

Most of the departures were in the early morning so that the buses could arrive at Niagara Falls in time to permit the consul to issue the immigration visas on the same day. The departing residents gathered between 4:00 and 5:00 a. m. in the service club, had doughnuts and coffee, and turned in their check list indicating that all WRA requirements had been fulfilled. Many residents not actually scheduled for departure came out to bid their friends good-bye, and there were stirring scenes as comrades through many years of flight and internment said farewell before setting out for their different destinations in the United States.

### Last Shelter Activities

Shelter activities in the final period were submerged in a rush of preparations, processing, packing, and leave taking. However, there were two theatrical performances given during the period. A gala variety show was put on in honor of the visiting Government officials and representatives of private agencies. One of the high lights of this production was a sketch lightly satirizing an immigration hearing. In another scene the refugees made sport of the efforts of the private agencies to have the refugees use their own funds in payment for their transportation and other expenses en route rather than apply to the agencies for support. In this scene a refugee father inflated his financial situation to an American suitor for his daughter's hand but in the next moment complained of his poverty and need to the representative of a private agency who called upon him in his home. The humor of the situation arose from the fact that he confused the identity of the suitor and social worker with very disastrous results.

### "The Golden Cage"

Another performance given during the last few weeks was of "The Golden Cage," an opera written and composed by two of the shelter residents. This ambitious work had been composed before President Truman's order and was originally intended as a dramatic plea for freedom of the Fort Ontario refugees. The President's announcement came before it was produced, and a last scene, incorporating the good news, was hastily added. In the final rush there was no time to give the opera a regular production; however, it was performed one evening by resident singers and actors who read and sang their parts to the accompaniment of a piano. It traced the entire history of the group from their refugee period in Italy until their final release.

The libretto of the "Golden Cage" did not represent the high point of the refugees' artistic creation, but it poignantly revealed their hatred of confinement, their joy at final liberation. In a scene at Fort Ontario, reminiscent of the days immediately following the group's arrival, "elegantly dressed American ladies" hear the "poorly clad refugees" singing behind the fence:

We are in a cage without reason,  
We are in a cage, golden cage;  
We're missing nothing but our freedom \* \* \*.

A man sings:

I feel myself a monkey  
In the zoological garden;  
Are we to be on display?  
There's nothing missing but the warden!  
What are we,--a sensation  
For tedious people's pleasure?

In another scene after 16 months' existence at the shelter, the refugees are still "sitting behind the fence, looking longingly at the Statue (of Liberty), singing sadly":

Behind the fence of Fort Ontario  
We are sitting, awaiting the glorious day,  
When our unchained feet may finally go  
Over the most wonderful country's way.

There is no food we are longing for.  
No material need we are suffering,  
But our hearts have never been cared for,  
Are ever tremendously troubled.

Like a lion in the cage  
We are losing health and mood;  
Like a bird, which after age  
Finds its wings for nothing good.

A messenger comes with the news of President Truman's reprieve, and the refugees laugh, dance and sing:

We send our thanks to Roosevelt  
Who heard us beyond the stars,  
Who sent an angel to the world  
To free us from this farce \* \* \*.

We soon leave Fort Ontario  
And try to find our hearth;  
To find our life, our work and move  
At liberty on earth!"

### Farewell

In the final days there were several farewell parties in the service club. For the last time the people joined hands and danced the Holky-Polky. It was a dance they had learned in Italy from the liberating British Eighth Army. Some had learned the words of the song before they knew any other English. This night the circle was wide, with WRA staff members, private agency workers, and immigration officials joining in the dance.

The contrast in the appearance of the group at the time of arrival and at the time of departure was marked to those who were present on both occasions. By the time they left their dress was virtually indistinguishable from that of residents of any American town or city. Significantly, one of the last shelter activities was a drive sponsored by the residents in which they donated some of their clothing to UNRRA for use of less fortunate refugees abroad. Most of the shelter residents were able to converse quite readily in English. The children had learned it in school; the parents in English classes, but it was the daily contact with WRA personnel, Oswego townspeople, and visitors to the shelter, as well as American newspapers, movies and radio programs that had really wrought the change.

### Closing Down the Post

The departure of all the refugees between January 17 and February 5 created certain difficulties in maintaining project services during the closing period. Many of the key refugee staff worked right on through, almost to the moment of their departure. Others were inclined to beg off as soon as they could, to wind up their own personal affairs. With minor exceptions, the appointed staff stuck to the end. It took a little stretching, but the shelter administration was able to work out matters so that all essential shelter services were operating up to the departure of the last contingent.

Following the departure of the last resident, the shelter staff were occupied in writing up their reports and in the steps necessary to wind up the WRA property responsibility at Fort Ontario and turn the post back to the Army. Property belonging to the WRA, private organizations, and the War Department had to be sorted and prepared for shipment or storage. Various other steps were necessary to put the fort in good stand-by condition, and men from the internal security force were added to the regular operations crew to assist in this work. The Army

aided in the handling of its own property by providing a detail of Military Police with a contingent of German prisoners of war to do the heavy work. Fort Ontario was turned back to the War Department on February 28, 1946.

### Where They Went

Although the majority of the refugees settled on the Eastern seaboard, with the largest group in New York City, the rest are pretty well scattered throughout the country. A summary of all destinations, including those persons temporarily admitted, showed that the 923 residents at the time the shelter closed went to over 70 communities in 21 states and the District of Columbia. A total of 573 went to New York State, 61 to California, 58 to New Jersey, 46 to Pennsylvania and 42 to Ohio. Of those entering New York State, 82 settled in communities other than New York City. It is probably fair to say that the number choosing Syracuse, Rochester, Buffalo and other up-State cities was somewhat larger than would have been the case if the shelter had not been located in that part of the country. Although as shelter residents the refugees were not permitted to visit these cities except when special medical problems arose, they were visited at the shelter by people from all these communities, they read their daily papers, and although the climate of northern New York was far from idyllic, they had become used to it.

So the individuals in Uncle Sam's token shipment, sheltered after years of internment and flight abroad, at last have the experience of reestablishing themselves in normal ways in a free country. Some, with relatives and friends to help them, and with work and housing assured, face the future with confidence. Others are suddenly aware that their long period of dependence on circumstance has ended and that they must think and plan for themselves again. The private agencies made special efforts to place this group without close ties in communities where their skills could be utilized and their adjustment made the concern of a locally interested agency or committee.

Some of the residents selected their destination almost by a process of dead reckoning. One man, single, and with no close relatives, settled in Baltimore. He had a second cousin in Philadelphia and a friend in Washington, D. C. He selected Baltimore because it was geographically between the two—he did not want to be a burden to them, but desired the chance to visit them as equals. In Baltimore he hoped to reenter his old trade, the spice business.

A few were lucky enough to line up jobs before they left the shelter. This was true, for example, of a former German newspaper correspondent—a resident of Paris for many years—who had attracted the attention of a Rochester publisher by his work on the Ontario Chronicle. He was offered and accepted a position at a starting salary of \$35 a

week. Several weeks after his arrival he wrote to a friend that Rochester was "a city modern, with polity and helpful people and humming of work. Now all is behind me and a new life has started. A good start in a wonderful country."

Although it is still too early to tell, there are already some encouraging examples of Fort Ontario residents who are making their own way. A skilled pastry baker and his wife, bound for New Jersey, stopped off on their way back from Canada at a Buffalo hotel which the private agencies were using as a dispatching point. A Buffalo resident came to the hotel and asked if any of the group were pastry bakers. When the couple spoke up, they were hired on the spot for \$100 a week and board. A girl who was graduated from Oswego high school and later took a business course in the town, now handles foreign correspondence as secretary for a Providence export firm. A photographer found a place as a retoucher in a Washington studio. A fisherman is employed at his trade in San Pdero, California; his wife, daughter and son are working in a fish cannery. A young Yugoslav, expert in five languages and an experienced courier, has gone overseas as administrative assistant on a UNRRA mission. His father, a former manufacturer of baby carriages in Zagreb, is helping a machine shop in New York convert to peacetime uses.

It is probable that a number of the shelter residents who counted on finding employment rather easily have had difficulty. Others are in "temporary" jobs until they can find an opening in their own field. For some, it is a time that may never come.

Housing has also been a problem. Wherever possible the private agencies tried to have friends and relatives of the Oswego refugees share their accommodations so that they would not be competing in the open housing market. But over a month after the camp had been vacated, there were still some persons living in temporary accommodations at the HIAS shelter in New York.

It would be incredible indeed if these people did not show some effect of the nightmare of their last European years. Some will undoubtedly require care by relatives and private agencies for years to come. But the bulk of the people, in the best judgment of those who observed them at Oswego, have a high potentiality for successful adjustment. The children's school record, as cited by Superintendent Charles E. Riley, shows that they were able to apply themselves with diligence and verve in spite of (or perhaps because of) the experiences they had been through. The following is quoted from Mr. Riley's letter of February 6, 1946, to Dillon S. Myer, Director of WRA:

"I followed the records of the refugee children in our schools quite carefully from the time they first entered. I have never known a group of children to accomplish so much in such a short period of time.

Their presence in our classrooms was both stimulating and amazing and we feel that we were very fortunate to be able to serve them.

"All in all it was a delightful experience. There wasn't a single unfortunate incident to spoil the picture. Our only regret is that we could not keep these children until they all graduated from high school. I am absolutely certain, however, that they are off to an excellent start and they will adjust themselves immediately in any school system they enter."

The remarkable fact that during the entire period of 18 months at the shelter not a single refugee name was entered on the Oswego police blotter is further evidence that their fight for survival did not leave these people undisciplined.

There is no question that the contacts with the town and the services provided by private agencies speeded the process of Americanization with the result that the shelter population, by the time it was released, was far better prepared to enter the country than would have been the case 18 months before. This was true not only of the school children but also of the adults, most of whom had learned English, American customs and tastes and had acquired a sense of values about the country, even though Oswego's Main Street was the only glimpse of America afforded them. The experience of WRA is borne out by the judgment of the immigration authorities that all but a handful of the shelter population were fully qualified to meet this country's immigration requirements.

Despite the stress within the shelter at various times, because of the uncertainty of the future, the shelter population were good neighbors who proved to be 100% law abiding so far as the town of Oswego was concerned, and they show every promise of becoming loyal and productive Americans.

### Renaissance

It was a proud moment for these people when they visited the U. S. Consul at Niagara Falls, Canada, to receive the visas which permitted them to enter the United States as quota immigrants. After so many years in limbo, this precious document with its impressive seal was a symbol of the status which they had lacked for so long. Small wonder that there was consternation on the faces of the first group when the newly-acquired visas were taken up at the border by the U. S. immigration officials, a few minutes after they had been issued. This was normal procedure, of course, but it took a considerable amount of interpretation to allay the fears of these individuals to whom "papers" had come to be such a vital necessity during their long years of flight. It

will probably take some time before they and succeeding post war immigrants get used to the idea that once legally admitted to this country they have a right to live unchallenged as long as they obey its laws.\*

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\* Further material on the Oswego Emergency Refugee Shelter may be found in the National Archives and the Library of Columbia University.

## STEPS TOWARD FREEDOM

The following paragraphs represent a chronology of the principal events affecting the status of the Fort Ontario refugees and leading up to their eventual freedom. The chronology is not complete but is intended primarily to serve as a record indicating WRA's participation and effort toward this objective.

June 8, 1944 President Roosevelt sent a memorandum to the Secretaries of War, Navy and Interior, the Director of the Budget, and the Executive Director of the War Refugee Board, outlining the responsibility of each in connection with the selection and transportation of the refugees and the administration of the shelter. The WRB was charged with over-all responsibility for the project and the WRA with actual administration of the camp.

At the same time a cablegram was sent to Ambassador Robert Murphy in Algiers, announcing his decision that 1,000 refugees should be immediately brought to the United States, "to be placed in an Emergency Refugee Shelter to be established at Fort Ontario, where under appropriate security restrictions they will remain for the duration of the war," and that, "It is contemplated that at the end of the war they will be returned to their homelands."

June 12, 1944 President Roosevelt reported to Congress on the refugee situation and informed them of his plans to establish the Emergency Refugee Shelter to house 1,000 refugees to be brought over from Italy.

In his message he made two statements that were to assume great significance in the history of the shelter:

"Upon termination of the war they will be sent back to their homelands \* \* \*. They will be placed on their arrival in a vacated Army camp on the Atlantic Coast where they will remain under appropriate security restrictions."

June 23, 1944 Attorney General Biddle made the following statement in a letter to Senator Robert R. Reynolds:

"These refugees will not be permitted to enter the United States under the immigration quotas and thereby to obtain any rights to be at liberty in the United States or to remain here."

August 3, - 5, 1944 The refugees arrived in the United States on August 3 and reached the shelter on August 5. Conversations with John W. Pehle, Executive Director, and other members of the War Refugee Board staff, prior to the arrival of the refugees, dictated the policy that no

refugee could go outside the city limits of Oswego except for special medical care.

September 4, 1944 A letter from Joseph H. Smart, shelter director, to the WRA Director, that refugees be given "as great freedom as that accorded to other friendly aliens" with permission to join their families and "go and come as they choose."

September 16, 1944 A letter from Attorney General Biddle to Secretary Ickes stated: "In view of the application of the immigration laws which is involved, this Department [Justice] would appear to have the principal responsibility for the authorization of any of these persons to leave the Shelter temporarily or to remain in the United States." Mr. Biddle also said that pending a further clarification of policy questions involved, "permission to leave the Shelter and its environs should not be authorized."

This letter was in reply to Mr. Ickes' letter of August 15, 1944, asking whether the Department of Justice would assume responsibility for the apprehension of any refugee who departed from the shelter without authorization.

September 19, 1944 In a report to the War Refugee Board, which Mr. Pehle forwarded to the White House on October 4, Dillon S. Myer, Director of WRA, called attention to the fact that "pressure is developing for some modified type of leave parole arrangement."

September 23, 1944 The War Department reported on the screening and paneling of refugees by Military Intelligence during first month of their residence at the shelter.

November 6, 1944 An order was issued by the selective service system exempting residents of the shelter from selective service regulations, since their movements were confined to the immediate vicinity of the shelter.

November 20, 1944 At a meeting with officials of War Refugee Board, WRA representatives brought up requests of refugees for permission to leave the shelter, including requests for eligible refugees to enter as quota immigrants. Representatives of WRB preferred to hold all such requests in abeyance until a sizeable group had returned to Europe, and opposed issuance of visitors' visas. They also stated that informal discussion with representatives of Department of Justice had indicated that that Department was fearful any misstep in granting leave to refugees might be capitalized upon by interests wishing a more restrictive immigration policy.

December 7, 1944 A memorandum from Mr. Myer to Secretary Ickes on the status of the refugees after four months at Fort Ontario indicated that the peak of the shelter's usefulness had been reached. Mr. Myer predicted retrogression beyond this point and urged consideration of (1) a short-term leave policy; (2) a sponsored leave policy; and (3) a policy permitting refugees otherwise eligible for admission to apply for entrance to the U. S. under existing quotas. He recommended that step (3) be adopted at least in cases where refugees were entitled to preferential quota status. Mr. Myer reviewed recent conversations with the WRB, indicating that Mr. Pehle still opposed the relaxation of shelter residence requirements, chiefly because of the possible adverse effects on postwar immigration.

December 9, 1944 In a letter to Secretary Ickes concerning 41 shelter residents who had indicated their desire to join the U. S. armed services, Acting Secretary of War Patterson stated that "it would be incompatible with the conditions under which these aliens have been given refugee shelter in this country to permit any of them, otherwise eligible, to enter the Armed Forces of the United States."

December 23, 1944 Secretary Ickes in a memorandum to Mr. Myer said: "It is scarcely to be tolerated that anti-Nazi refugees should be kept under lock and key at Fort Ontario." The Secretary nonetheless felt that "we should move with caution" to avoid inciting hostility or making it "impossible to bring others over." He suggested short-term leave as a possibility. (The War Refugee Board, however, at about the same time, had rejected any relaxation of leave policy).

December 29, 1944 Mr. Pehle in a meeting with WRA officials in Under Secretary Fortas' office was still adamant on overall leave policy. However, he said he was willing to consider the possibility of admission of non-quota and preference visa cases. This information was subsequently compiled and forwarded but no action was taken on it.

Mr. Pehle said that short-term leaves from the shelter should be given for medical reasons only:

He added that after a substantial number of the refugees had been returned to Europe, consideration might be given to admitting into the U. S. those among the refugees who under normal circumstances would be entitled to preference under the immigration quotas.

December 29, 1944 Attorney General Biddle wrote to President Roosevelt concerning a plan proposed by officials of several private agencies to arrange for the voluntary departure of a number of Fort Ontario residents and permit them to apply for immigration to the United States under the preexamination procedure. Mr. Biddle advised against such a step, and reminded the President of the conditions under which the

refugees had been brought to the United States. He particularly called attention to the representations made to Congress by the President and by himself.

January 2, 1945 Mr. Myer forwarded to Mr. Pehle a petition signed by the chairmen and members of the various nationality groups at the shelter, asking that a greater degree of liberty be given them.

January 6, 1945 Shelter Director Smart in a letter to Mr. Myer cited conditions which rendered it "impossible to maintain the people at Fort Ontario in health and safety and without actual peril to life." He said that because of severe weather, many people were unable to leave the barracks buildings even for their meals. He said "construction of the buildings is such that it is difficult to keep warm." He said that the condition of the people was deteriorating as a result of their situation and pointed out that about one-half of the population were "by age or physical condition unable to bear rigorous environmental circumstances." Mr. Smart urged that the refugees "be given special permits under appropriate bond to be provided by relatives, friends, or agencies, to reside anywhere in the United States they desire." He concluded by saying that there was a "basic sense of frustration in the community" and that the "situation \* \* \* if unchanged may result in tragedy and public scandal."

January 17, 1945 President Roosevelt replied to Attorney General Biddle's communication of December 29, 1944, by stating that he "wholly agreed" with the Attorney General's position that the Fort Ontario refugees should not be brought under the preexamination procedure and permitted to apply for admission to the U. S. He added that the group should be returned abroad as soon as a favorable opportunity presented itself. (Original in files of Department of Justice).

January 31, 1945 A statement by representatives of several responsible private agencies deplored the refugees' plight at Fort Ontario, urged adoption of a program of sponsored leave, and assured the Government that "none of these individuals, regardless of where settled, would become a public charge."

February 27, 1945 A letter from Secretary Ickes to General O'Dwyer (copy to Attorney General Biddle) strongly urged adoption of a program of sponsored leave enabling the refugees to live in normal communities throughout the United States pending final solution of their problem. (In an earlier draft, submitted for the Under Secretary's approval on February 13, WRA had proposed that the Secretary announce his decision to initiate the program within the next 30 days).

March 1, 1945 Attorney General Biddle wrote a letter to General O'Dwyer (copy to Secretary Ickes) in which he said that he was "opposed" to the

recommendation for sponsored leave; that he had "on a number of occasions \* \* \* assured members of Congress that the admission of these refugees did not give them any right to be at liberty here or to remain permanently in the United States, and that they would be detained in a refugee settlement until they could be safely returned to their homelands."

March 3, 1945 A letter from General O'Dwyer in reply to Secretary Ickes' letter of February 27, stated that the proposal for sponsored leave was "being studied" by the WRB, and that he would be informed "as soon as a decision has been reached." (There was no further response).

March 16, 1945 Under Secretary Fortas and General O'Dwyer conferred with Attorney General Biddle and Mr. Herbert Wechsler on relaxation of the leave restrictions. On General O'Dwyer's suggestion, Mr. Biddle said he would consider giving assent to the granting of leaves to shelter residents in danger of physical or mental deterioration because of their protracted stay.

April 9 - 21, 1945 During this period, WRA attempted to obtain minor relaxations of the rules controlling movement of shelter residents. On April 9, Mr. Myer wrote to General O'Dwyer, requesting permission for certain children at the shelter to be placed outside in foster homes. On April 10, Secretary Ickes wrote to General O'Dwyer, asking if groups of children might be permitted to go to outside camps during the coming summer. On April 12, Mr. Malcolm E. Pitts, Acting Director of WRA, asked if the next of kin could be permitted to visit their shelter relatives who were confined to outside hospitals or other institutions. On April 19, Secretary Ickes, at General O'Dwyer's request, forwarded summaries of several cases in which a responsible psychiatrist expressed belief that further shelter residence would be likely to jeopardize the health and future welfare of the individuals concerned. On April 21, General O'Dwyer acknowledged the above letters by stating that "every effort is being made to obtain the necessary policy determinations with respect to amelioration of the conditions at Oswego and with regard to the whole Oswego project. I shall advise you as soon as these determinations are made."

April 12, 1945 Secretary Ickes wrote to General O'Dwyer, asking the War Refugee Board to take the lead in arranging for the repatriation of shelter residents desiring to return to their homelands and to assist in arranging for the emigration of those wishing to go to other countries.

April 12, 1945 At a meeting held in Mr. Fortas' office attended by General O'Dwyer, Mr. Abe Feller of UNRRA and representatives of WRA, General O'Dwyer stated that in view of the refugees' plight and the anticipated early wind up of the WRB, a solution to the shelter problem

should be found. He tried to get UNRRA to accept overall responsibility, but Mr. Feller said UNRRA's participation would be limited to assisting in voluntary repatriation. The following agencies were asked by General O'Dwyer to delegate representatives for early discussion of the shelter situation: State Department, Justice Department, War Refugee Board, War Relocation Authority, UNRRA, and the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees.

April 19, 1945 A meeting in General O'Dwyer's office was attended by representatives of the six agencies designated in the meeting of April 12. After General O'Dwyer's suggestion of returning the refugee group to Italy was rejected as not being a constructive solution to a venture of the U. S. Government, it was decided to ask WRA to ascertain the number of persons desiring repatriation to their homelands or emigration to other countries so that this information could be transmitted to and acted upon by UNRRA and the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees.

April 26, 1945 A letter from Mr. Myer to General O'Dwyer transmitted the information requested above concerning the desires of shelter population as to future residence. It showed that:

- 133 persons in 68 families wished to be repatriated
- 42 persons in 31 families wished to emigrate to countries other than the U. S.
- 641 persons in 304 families wished to settle in U. S.
- 166 persons in 93 families were uncertain or had no plans

May 16, 1945 Herbert L. Lehman, Director General of UNRRA, wrote General O'Dwyer stating that "the (UNRRA) Administration will undertake to return such of the Oswego refugees as can and desire to be repatriated or returned to their countries of former residence and to whose repatriation their governments agree."

[On July 31, C. M. Pierce, Acting Director of UNRRA's Division on Displaced Persons, stated in a letter to Mr. Marks of WRA that "It has always been the policy of the (UNRRA) Administration not to coerce in any way individuals who do not desire to be returned or repatriated to their former homes."]

May 19, 1945 Joseph H. Smart, Shelter Director, resigned to head the Friends of Fort Ontario Guest-Refugees, Inc. On July 9, this organization forwarded a statement to President Truman, signed by one hundred prominent Americans, asking freedom for the refugee group at Oswego.

May 21, 1945 A memorial was addressed to the President and Congress by 27 leading citizens of Oswego, including members of the town's Advisory Committee on Fort Ontario. The statement recommended that the refugees

be "permitted to reside at places of their own choice," that they should be "permitted to accept gainful employment," that refugees who would "be eligible" should be permitted to become citizens of the United States, and that "those who desire to return to their homeland or any portion of the world should be given the opportunity as soon as conditions permit."

June 6, 1945 General O'Dwyer, in a memorandum to members of the War Refugee Board, urged that the refugees be permitted to remain in the United States until further clarification of the United Nations policy on displaced persons, and also urged adoption of the sponsored leave program. He pointed out that many of the refugees had no homelands, either in fact or in their own consideration, and others did not wish to return to such homelands; that conditions in Europe precluded their immediate return; and that the end of the war had eliminated the considerations which had made advisable their confinement at Fort Ontario.

June 6, 1945 President Truman transferred over-all responsibility for the Oswego project to the Department of the Interior in view of the contemplated early termination of the War Refugee Board.

June 14, 1945 Secretary Ickes wrote to President Truman that in view of the recent transfer of responsibilities to his Department he favored introduction of a policy of sponsored leave for the refugees at the shelter. He reviewed the origin of the shelter and developments since the arrival of the refugees. Secretary Ickes pointed out the impracticability of immediate return and the hopes of the intergovernmental committee that refugees would remain in present locations until conditions were more settled. He further expressed the opinion that to continue to detain the refugees would not be in keeping with American principles and traditions.

June 15, 1945 Earl G. Harrison, U. S. representative on the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees, in a letter to Attorney General Biddle, stated that "many countries in Europe have admitted many more refugees on a temporary basis than we have." Mr. Harrison went on to say: "From the standpoint of the work of the intergovernmental committee the worst thing that could happen right now would be to require that all of the people at Oswego be moved immediately, somewhere--anywhere just so long as it is outside of the United States." He concluded his letter by saying: "I hope we will not act too hastily in insisting that the full letter of the original agreement be carried out immediately with respect to the entire group without regard to the ultimate disposition of many members of the group. If we do so, it certainly will put me in an awkward position when it comes to urging, as a member of the committee, that other governments assist the present situation by retaining people as far as possible within their borders until some semblance of order comes out of the present chaos."

June 25 - 26, 1945 The subcommittee on Fort Ontario of the House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization held hearings at the shelter. Among those testifying were General O'Dwyer, members of the WRA staff, representative citizens of Oswego, and a considerable number of refugees of all ages.

June 28, 1945 Asked by President Truman to comment on Secretary Ickes' letter of June 14, Attorney General Biddle wrote to the President saying: "It is at least doubtful that the refugees may be granted leave under the sponsorship plan without complying with the immigration laws. The immigration laws, however, may be complied with by issuance of visas or by the waiver of documents by the Secretary of State and, if necessary, by the waiver of ground of inadmissibility by the Attorney General. If the plan proposed \* \* \* should be adopted, I recommend that it be modified to include such documentation or such waiver of documents under the immigration laws.

"In my view, it is of the utmost importance to obtain adequate Congressional clearance of any such amelioration of the existing situation. I recommend that this discussion include a written report to the Chairman of the Senate and House Immigration Committees explaining the plan, including the proposal of waiver of documents under the immigration laws, and asking for the approval of the plan by the respective committees."

July 5, 1945 President Truman replied to Secretary Ickes' letter of June 14 concerning sponsored leave, and asked him to "proceed in accordance with Mr. Biddle's recommendations" which he said were "sound."

July 6, 1945 The Immigration and Naturalization Committee of the House heard the report of its subcommittee on Fort Ontario and unanimously resolved: (1) that the Departments of State and Justice should ascertain the practicability of returning the refugees to their homelands; (2) that the "continued expense of \$600,000 per annum" in maintaining the shelter is "inadvisable, unwarranted, and should be discontinued" and (3) that if the refugees' return is not practicable, the Attorney General should declare them to be "illegally present in the country" and "undertake deportation proceedings."

July 10, 1945 WRA leave policy was modified slightly by authorization of the Director to permit shelter residents to make day trips within 20 miles of Oswego; to permit shelter residents visited by spouses to remain outside the shelter overnight; and to permit next-of-kin to visit shelter residents in outside hospitals or foster homes. These were all special leaves requiring approval of the shelter director.

This was the only departure from the original leave policy of the shelter, except for agricultural work leave given about 50 shelter

residents in the fall of 1944 when their assistance was requested by the Department of Agriculture to salvage a fruit crop. Workers returned to the shelter at night and permits were issued on a day-to-day basis.

July 31, 1945 Secretary Ickes wrote identical letters to Secretary of State Byrnes and Attorney General Clark urging that in accordance with the President's letter, a prompt determination be made as to the practicability of returning the refugees to their homelands. "If that determination is in the negative, as to all or some of the refugees," said Mr. Ickes, "then I believe that, as to such refugees, the proposal for the issuance of a waiver of documents by the Secretary of State, to be followed by temporary admission of the refugees by the Immigration and Naturalization Service and subsequent preexamination on the application of individual refugees, will best meet the needs of the situation."

August 4, 1945 Following up Secretary Ickes' letter of July 31, Mr. Fortas and Mr. Myer conferred with Attorney General Clark concerning the shelter situation. Supplementary data requested by Mr. Clark were sent him by Mr. Myer on August 6.

August 23 - 24, 1945 Secretary Byrnes and Attorney General Clark in their replies to Secretary Ickes' letter of July 31 expressed general agreement with the proposed plan but felt that before any of the refugees could be granted a temporary stay, the matter would have to be presented to the Chairmen of the Senate and House Committees on Immigration to be certain that those committees would not object to the procedure to be followed.

August 28, 1945 Fifty-three Yugoslav refugees sailed on the Gripsholm for voluntary repatriation. A party of 13 Yugoslavs had departed on the same vessel in May. Two shelter residents had also left for South Africa and Uruguay, and a third was destined to leave for Czechoslovakia in early October. These 69 persons were all who left country during the life of the shelter.

September 14 - 22, 1945 Representatives of the State, Justice and Interior Departments paneled the entire population of the shelter to ascertain their desires for future residence and the practicability of returning them to their homelands. The classifications were reviewed in Washington by a review panel from October 4 to 10, and a joint report with findings went forward to the three Cabinet officers on October 24.

The panel found that 32 persons desired repatriation, 72 persons desired to seek admission to other countries, and the balance of 814 persons presented various reasons for not wishing to return to countries of origin. The panel agreed unanimously that 119 individuals in the last group should be classed as "not practical to return" and the WRA representatives dissented on 90 percent of the remaining 695 cases

classed by the other two representatives as "repatriable." The difference of opinion was based on the desire of the persons involved—the State and Justice Departments feeling that this should not be taken into account in determining "practicability." The WRA representative held that, in view of conditions in Europe and the policy of UNRRA and the U. S. Army not to force involuntary repatriation, this group should be permitted to remain in the U. S.

October 31, 1945 Secretary Ickes wrote to President Truman requesting adoption of a program of sponsored leave so that the shelter could be closed pending the final disposition of its residents under the procedures being worked out by the Departments of State and Justice. (No reply was received to this letter).

October 31, 1945 Miss Martha H. Biehle, American Resident Representative of the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees, wrote Mr. Marks that the executive committee of her organization had given favorable response to WRA's request of June 22 by allocating up to ten thousand pounds sterling for assistance in meeting the transportation expenses of certain of the refugees wishing to emigrate to new countries.

December 5, 1945 A meeting held at the office of Howard K. Travers, Chief, Visa Division, State Department was attended by Marshall P. Vance, State Department; Joseph P. Savoretti, Justice Department; Edward B. Marks, Jr., Interior Department. The main purpose of the meeting was to go over a draft prepared by Mr. Savoretti for the signatures of the Attorney General and the Secretaries of State and the Interior to be sent to Senator Richard Russell, Chairman of the Senate Committee on Immigration and to the Hon. Samuel Dickstein, Chairman of the corresponding committee of the House.

Although State and Justice were in accord on the draft, Mr. Marks raised several objections and said that so far as Interior was concerned it would need revision before it could be accepted, since the letter as phrased bore no relationship to current conditions in Europe and the policies of the Government and such international agencies as UNRRA and the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees with reference to the matter of displaced persons.

December 6, 1945 Mr. Glick and Mr. Marks, War Relocation Authority, met with Under Secretary Fortas to discuss the proposed draft to Senator Russell and Congressman Dickstein. It was agreed that the draft was unacceptable to the Interior Department in its present form. The Under Secretary called Attorney General Clark on the phone, and Mr. Clark agreed to have WRA submit an alternate draft. The alternate draft was prepared and sent over to the Attorney General's office, as well as to the office of Assistant Secretary of State Russell, early the following week.

December 6, 1945 Congressman Dickstein spoke in the House on the information obtained by his committee during hearings at the shelter in June. He outlined the background of the refugee group and their life at the shelter, and recommended that the shelter be closed and the residents permitted to come in as legal immigrants under existing laws.

"It would be almost impossible for these refugees to go back to Europe. The conditions are such that so-called displaced persons would find it exceedingly hard if not impossible to resume life in those places from which they were driven out \* \* \*. I am sure that if these persons are allowed to enter the United States \* \* \* they will make a valuable addition to our population.

"Since the executive branch of the Government has created the problem, it is up to the executive branch of the Government to solve it \* \* \*. I therefore believe \* \* \* that relief can be given to these refugees by executive action under our immigration laws \* \* \*."

December 10, 1945 A draft of a letter was transmitted to Under Secretary Fortas for approval of Secretary of Interior, Secretary of State, and Attorney General. It was forwarded to Attorney General on December 13 with the approval of Secretary Ickes. Addressed to Senator Russell, Chairman of the Senate Committee on Immigration, the proposed letter outlined briefly the background of the shelter and the considerations making it impossible to determine the practicability of returning the refugees to Europe--their unwillingness to return to a place where there were grave possibilities of religious and political persecution and where members of their families had been exterminated; the unsettled conditions in Europe; the policy of UNRRA, the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees and of the U. S. armed forces that displaced persons should not be repatriated against their will; the President's statement that emigration of Jews to Palestine should be facilitated.

It was proposed that the following procedure be presented for consideration and approval of the Senate and House Committees on Immigration:

- (1) The Immigration and Naturalization Service should be given jurisdiction over the shelter residents and directed to proceed on an individual basis with a determination of their status under immigration laws.
- (2) Shelter residents should be examined by officers of INS and U. S. Public Health Service to determine admissibility.
- (3) The State Department should waive documentary requirements for admission of aliens for a temporary period.

- (4) Admission for six months as non-immigrants of residents found eligible, during which time they could voluntarily leave the U. S. or apply for entrance as immigrants under preexamination procedure.
- (5) Persons found inadmissible to be admitted at the discretion of the Commissioner of Immigration and Naturalization for a period of six months for the purpose of facilitating their voluntary departure from the U. S. to any country of their choice.

Neither the draft prepared in the Interior Department nor the earlier draft of the Justice Department was ever forwarded to Senator Russell or Congressman Dickstein.

December 22, 1945 President Truman, in a general order to speed immigration to the United States of certain displaced persons in Europe, directed the Secretary of State and the Attorney General to adjust the immigration status of the residents of the Fort Ontario Shelter who wished to remain in the United States, in strict accordance with existing laws and regulations. Pointing out that a careful survey by the Department of State and the Immigration and Naturalization Service showed that most of the shelter residents would upon application be admissible under the immigration laws, the President stated that "it would be inhumane and wasteful to require these people to go all the way back to Europe merely for the purpose of applying there for immigration visas and returning to the United States."

December 26, 1945 A meeting was called by Immigration Commissioner Ugo Carusi, with representation present from the United States Public Health Service, State Department, Justice Department, War Department and War Relocation Authority. After considerable discussion, it was decided to have State, Justice and Public Health officials arrive at Fort Ontario on January 7 to begin processing of refugees. A subsequent meeting for the formulation of definite plans was held at the State Department on Friday, December 28. Present were Messrs. Howard K. Travers and R. C. Alexander, State Department; James O'Loughlin, Justice Department; Edward B. Marks, Jr., War Relocation Authority; and Bernard Dubin, National Refugee Service, the agency designated by WRA as responsible for making resettlement plans for the shelter residents.

January 7, 1946 Representatives of the State and Justice Departments, United States Public Health Service, War Relocation Authority and private agencies began the processing and resettlement planning of the refugees at Fort Ontario. George Graves, American Consul at Niagara Falls, Ontario, Canada, visited the shelter for completion of arrangements.

January 17, 1946 The first contingent of 95 refugees left the shelter for Niagara Falls, Canada.

February 5, 1946 The last group left the shelter on February 4; one individual departed on February 5.

Their destinations were more than 70 communities in 21 states. Of the 922 shelter residents at the time the processing began, 853 were permanently admitted to the United States at Niagara Falls, Canada, in the early part of 1946. Forty-six were temporarily admitted. Of the temporary admissions, 19 were planning repatriation to countries of origin, 8 were awaiting emigration, and 19 were inadmissible.

The remaining 23 persons were born at the shelter and were consequently declared to be citizens of the United States.

TABLE 1 .--FINAL DEPARTURES BY NATIONALITY AND TYPE OF DEPARTURE: Fort Ontario Emergency Refugee Shelter Residents  
August 5, 1944 - February 4, 1946

NATIONALITY	TOTAL	BORN IN UNITED STATES	R E F U G E E S										
									IN UNITED STATES				
			Total	Death	Repa- triate	Emi- grant	Total	U. S. Immi- grant	Temporary Resident				Inadmi- sible
									Total	Awaiting Immig.	Awaiting Emig.	Awaiting Repat.	
TOTAL	1,005	1/23	982	14	67	2	899	765	134	88	8	19	19
Austria	238	-	238	5	-	1	232	212	20	2	3	7	8
Belgium	3	-	3	-	-	-	3	3	-	-	-	-	-
Bulgaria	4	-	4	-	-	-	4	4	-	-	-	-	-
Czechoslovakia	40	-	40	-	1	-	39	38	1	-	-	-	1
Danish	9	-	9	-	-	-	9	8	1	1	-	-	-
Holland	1	-	1	-	-	-	1	1	-	-	-	-	-
France	13	-	13	-	-	-	13	13	-	-	-	-	-
Germany	95	-	95	1	-	1	93	90	3	-	3	-	-
Greece	4	-	4	-	-	-	4	4	4	4	-	-	-
Hungary	3	-	3	-	-	-	3	3	-	-	-	-	-
Italy	6	-	6	-	-	-	6	6	-	-	-	-	-
Jugoslavia	368	-	368	6	66	-	296	207	89	74	-	12	3
Poland	153	-	153	1	-	-	152	146	6	-	1	-	5
Romania	17	-	17	-	-	-	17	11	6	6	-	-	-
Russia	16	-	16	1	-	-	15	14	1	-	1	-	-
Spain	4	-	4	-	-	-	4	4	-	-	-	-	-
Turkey	8	-	8	-	-	-	8	5	3	1	-	-	2
United States	23	23	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

1/ Includes one person awaiting departure to Jugoslavia with repatriating family member.

Source: Fort Ontario Emergency Refugee Shelter Closing Roster

TABLE 2 .--FINAL DEPARTURES BY STATE AND COUNTRY OF DESTINATION AND TYPE OF DEPARTURE: Fort Ontario Emergency Refugee Shelter Residents  
August 5, 1944 - February 4, 1946

DESTINATION	TOTAL	BORN IN UNITED STATES	R E F U G E E S										
									IN UNITED STATES				
			Total	Death	Repa- triate	Emi- grant	Total	U. S. Immi- grant	Temporary Resident				Inadmi- sible
									Total	Awaiting Immig.	Awaiting Emig.	Awaiting Repat.	
TOTAL	1,005	1/23	982	14	67	2	899	765	134	88	8	19	19
UNITED STATES	922	23	899	-	-	-	899	765	134	88	8	19	19
Arizona	3	-	3	-	-	-	3	3	-	-	-	-	-
California	61	2	59	-	-	-	59	58	1	-	-	-	1
Connecticut	21	1	20	-	-	-	20	19	1	-	1	-	-
Georgia	5	1	4	-	-	-	4	4	-	-	-	-	-
Illinois	20	1	19	-	-	-	19	18	1	-	-	-	1
Indiana	12	-	12	-	-	-	12	10	2	2	-	-	-
Kentucky	1	-	1	-	-	-	1	1	-	-	-	-	-
Louisiana	1	-	1	-	-	-	1	1	-	-	-	-	-
Maryland	21	1	20	-	-	-	20	18	2	2	-	-	-
Massachusetts	17	1	16	-	-	-	16	13	3	3	-	-	-
Michigan	7	-	7	-	-	-	7	7	-	-	-	-	-
Minnesota	6	-	6	-	-	-	6	6	-	-	-	-	-
Missouri	5	-	5	-	-	-	5	4	1	-	-	1	-
New Jersey	58	1	57	-	-	-	57	53	4	2	1	1	-
New York	573	13	560	-	-	-	560	461	99	61	5	17	16
New York City	491	1/11	480	-	-	-	480	407	73	40	5	17	11
Other Cities	82	2	80	-	-	-	80	54	26	21	-	-	5
Ohio	42	-	42	-	-	-	42	35	7	6	-	-	-
Pennsylvania	46	1	45	-	-	-	45	32	13	12	1	-	1
Rhode Island	10	-	10	-	-	-	10	10	-	-	-	-	-
Texas	3	-	3	-	-	-	3	3	-	-	-	-	-
Wisconsin	2	-	2	-	-	-	2	2	-	-	-	-	-
District of Columbia	8	1	7	-	-	-	7	7	-	-	-	-	-
FOREIGN COUNTRIES	69	-	69	-	67	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Czechoslovakia	1	-	1	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Jugoslavia	66	-	66	-	66	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Union of South Africa	1	-	1	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Uruguay	1	-	1	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
DECEASED	14	-	14	14	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

1/ Includes one person awaiting departure to Jugoslavia with repatriating family member.

Source: Fort Ontario Emergency Refugee Shelter Closing Roster

TABLE 3 .--AGE SEX COMPOSITION: Fort Ontario Emergency Refugee Shelter Residents August 5, 1944 (Number and Percent)

AGE	NUMBER			PERCENT		
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
TOTAL	982	525	457	100.0	53.5	46.5
Under 5	35	16	19	3.5	1.6	1.9
5-9	79	33	46	8.1	3.4	4.7
10-14	61	43	18	6.2	4.4	1.8
15-19	50	25	25	5.2	2.6	2.6
20-24	23	4	19	2.3	.4	1.9
25-29	22	3	19	2.2	.3	1.9
30-34	72	23	49	7.4	2.4	5.0
35-39	82	14	68	8.3	1.4	6.9
40-44	114	64	50	11.6	6.5	5.1
45-49	107	79	28	11.0	8.1	2.9
50-54	100	65	35	10.2	6.6	3.6
55-59	109	71	38	11.1	7.2	3.9
60-64	81	57	24	8.2	5.8	2.4
65-69	28	15	13	2.8	1.5	1.3
70-74	16	10	6	1.6	1.0	.6
75-79	2	2	-	.2	.2	-
80-84	1	1	-	.1	.1	-

Source: Fort Ontario Emergency Refugee Shelter Closing Roster

TABLE 4 .--GRADE IN SCHOOL BY YEAR OF BIRTH: School Children at Fort Ontario Emergency Refugee Shelter September 15, 1944

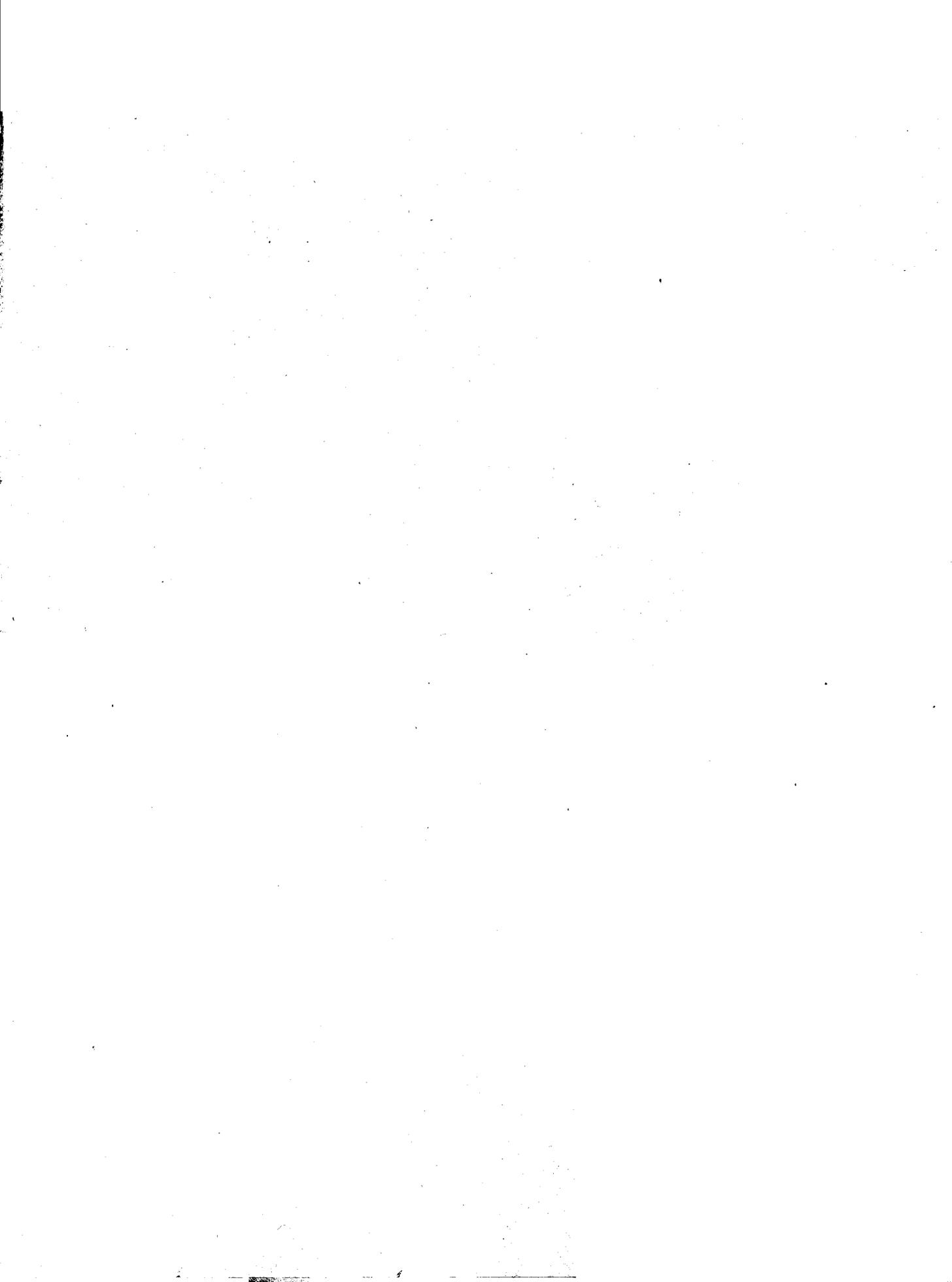
YEAR OF BIRTH	TOTAL	GRADE IN SCHOOL									
		Kinder- garten	First	Second	Third	Fourth	Fifth	Sixth	Seventh	Junior High	Senior High
TOTAL	193	11	33	17	20	10	13	20	3	24	42
1923	3	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	3
1924	5	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	5
1925	8	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	8
1926	5	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	4
1927	8	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	3	5
1928	12	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	4	8
1929	14	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	8	6
1930	13	-	-	-	-	-	-	3	-	7	3
1931	15	-	-	-	-	-	3	9	2	1	-
1932	12	-	-	-	-	-	3	8	1	-	-
1933	9	-	-	1	-	3	5	-	-	-	-
1934	11	-	-	1	1	7	2	-	-	-	-
1935	23	-	1	3	19	-	-	-	-	-	-
1936	12	-	3	9	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
1937	13	-	10	3	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
1938	19	-	19	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
1939	11	11	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Source: Public School Records, Oswego, New York

TABLE 5 .--SIZE OF FAMILY: Fort Ontario Emergency Refugee Shelter Residents, September 14, 1944

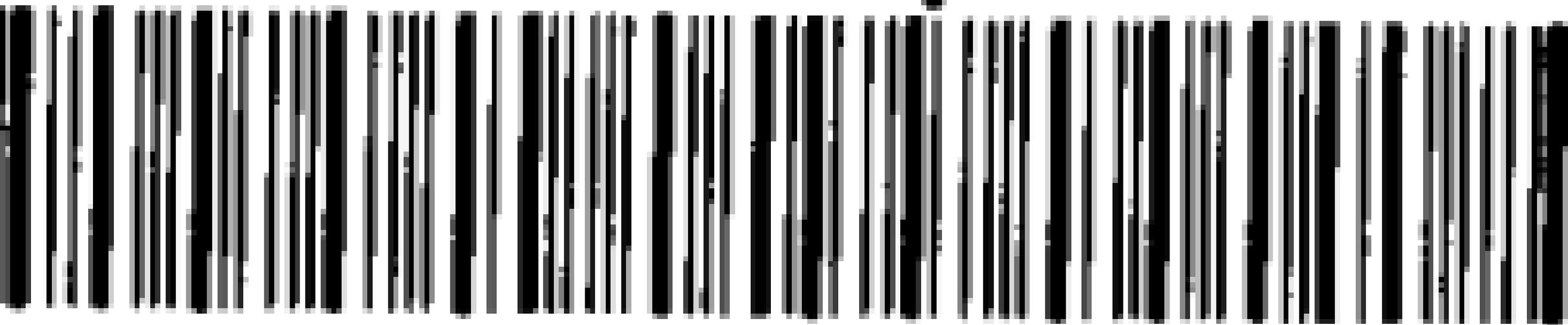
SIZE OF FAMILY	NO. IN FAMILY	NO. OF PERSONS
TOTAL	511	982
1 (Male)	177	177
1 (Female)	68	68
2	145	290
3	64	192
4	40	160
5	12	60
6	4	24
11	1	11

Source: Fort Ontario Emergency Refugee Family Card File





# Denison University Libraries



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