

OH 284
INTERVIEW WITH SAFE HAVEN REFUGEE

[Long lead-in]

REFUGEE: The Germans started off slowly. First there were the yellow armbands, then you were forbidden to go to public places, Jews were, and then little by little they started taking people away. [Music, then narration]

NARRATOR: During World War II hundreds of thousands tried to flee the Nazi terror raging through Europe. Many did not escape but some did, and of these, nearly a thousand found refuge in America, in a camp on the shores of Lake Ontario. These are their memories. [Music]

WOMAN: It was the fifth of June, 1944. The Allied troops had landed in Anzio, Casino, in Caserno. And finally, we were liberated. I went to synagogue to pray, and it was near the coliseum where so many years before the Christians were hunted with lions, in that very coliseum. And I went by there and I knew exactly how they must have felt because that was the way I felt in Rome.

NARRATOR: Good afternoon. In Oswego, New York, today a thousand people are rejoicing over the greatest Christmas gift that could have been given them. Namely in order to save their lives they have been they have been admitted to the United States. They are not here on immigrants' visas or conventional visitors' visas. Legally, it is dubious whether they are here at all. Though they are our friends they are not enjoying American freedoms. They cannot move outside a restricted area. When hostilities cease, they must go back to Europe.

MAN: The question was, how did it feel then? I am a mature adult, forty years later trying to understand how I felt then. I felt wonderful and I felt terrible. OK? That's what the camp meant to me.

[Music, man singing bass: Never say that you have reached the very end when then sky's a bitter future may portend. For sure the hour for which we yearned will yet arrive and our marching steps will thunder, "We survive." For sure the hour for which we yearned will yet arrive and our marching steps will thunder, "We survive."]

NARRATOR, over the singing: In August, 1944, the U.S. Troop Transport ship *Henry Gibbons* sailed from Naples bound for New York harbor. On board were 982 refugees who had escaped from Nazi-occupied territory in Europe. They were interned for 18 months in an abandoned army camp near Oswego, New York, on the shores of Lake Ontario, the only group of refugees to be granted collective sanctuary in the United States during World War II. Who were they? Why were they the only ones? Why were they treated more like enemy aliens than needy guests? And where are they today? [Music/singing rises: now singing the song in German.]

NARRATOR: By 1944, four million Jews had died in Hitler's Europe. Rescue efforts were few. Most countries didn't want large influxes of refugees, particularly Jewish ones. The Zionist movement to create a Jewish state in Palestine was opposed by Britain, which severely limited refugee settlement there. And the United States, rather than open its doors, drastically cut immigration during the war years. Franklin Roosevelt, regarded as a strong President, did not provide strong leadership on this issue. Roosevelt would walk an especially fine line on the question of Jewish refugees. The problem was politically dangerous. Public opinion was firmly against loosening immigration restrictions, and nearly forty percent of Americans polled in 1943 said they could sympathize with anti-Semitic movements. Congress, also, wanted strict enforcement of immigration laws. Historian David Wyman, author of *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust*.

DAVID WYMAN: I think probably what he did do, when he looked at it, was to assess it this way: "If I take steps to help rescue Jews, I'm going to antagonize a significant group in Congress, and I'm going to have trouble in a Congress that I already have trouble with. So I'm at risk if I take steps toward rescue. What will

I gain by carrying out rescue, or moving in that direction? 'The Jewish vote?' He already had the Jewish vote. The vote of concerned liberals who might have been upset about Jewish extermination? He already had that vote. And I think what we have here is weighing situations in which he sees potential loss if he does anything and no potential gain.

NARRATOR: Neither did Roosevelt hear a strong unified voice from American Jews. Although they were alarmed about what was happening in Europe, they could not agree on what to do or on how to do it. In late 1943, sympathetic Congressmen introduced a measure recommending creation of a Jewish rescue commission. The State Department was opposed and might have prevailed, except for Josiah DuBois, General Counsel in the Treasury Department. DuBois and his colleagues wondered why official rescue plans kept falling through. When they investigated they found damning evidence. The State Department had, for two years, systematically suppressed and misrepresented news of the Holocaust and had used its powers to obstruct both public and private rescue efforts. Josiah DuBois:

JOSIAH DUBOIS: Unless remedial steps of a drastic nature are taken, and taken immediately, I am certain that no effective action will be taken by this government to prevent the complete extermination of the Jews in German-controlled Europe. And that this government will have to share for all time responsibility for this extermination.

NARRATOR: DuBois threatened to go public with his charges. To avoid that scandal, on January 22, 1944, Roosevelt created the War Refugee Board. Its purpose? To rescue and provide relief to the victims of enemy oppression. [Music, women singing: "la, la, la, la," etc.]
By spring, public pressure to establish havens on American soil was building. Columnist Samuel Grafton made a proposal.

SAMUAL GRAFTON: I'd been in Staten Island the week before and I found that there was a free port for commodities in State Island. A very interesting idea. They'd let goods come in without paying duty, from anyplace. Then they manufacture them, process them within the free port, and when it was advantageous, ship them out, then they would pay the duty. So I said, "Why not for people? Coming without papers, at least have a place to sit down, go to the bathroom, raise your children. Then when they regularize their situation, then they could come out." [Music, women singing]

NARRATOR: The free port rapidly emerged as an idea with strong public support. Historian Sharon Lowenstein is author of *Token Refuge*, a book about the Oswego experience.

SHARON LOWENSTEIN: The Gallup poll asked Americans if they would favor the establishment of camps within the United States, to bring refugees over and keep them in camps for the duration of the war. And that Gallup poll showed a seventy percent favorable response. In addition, both the AFL and CIO both came out at their conventions with statements favoring the proposal, and so did a number of church groups. [Jewish music]

Still cautious, Roosevelt established a very limited resettlement program. On June 9, 1944, he announced that the United States would open a haven in New York, but in fact few would benefit. To pacify immigration restrictionists, the refugees would not be admitted through regular channels and would be sent back after the war. They were to be confined in Oswego, a small town on the eastern shore of Lake Ontario, more than three hundred miles northwest of New York City. They were to receive only basic human services. And, Roosevelt assured critics, there were to be no other refugee camps in America. [Music ends]

SHARON LOWENSTEIN: Oswego itself, the single camp, was really a token gesture, to some extent quieted, or at gave rescue advocates, some sense of action at the same time that it didn't pose a threat that would arouse hostility from restrictionists. Roosevelt was able to play it safe.

NARRATOR: But newspaper columnist Samuel Grafton thought Roosevelt did the best he could.

SAMUEL GRAFTON: He was leading a country, very different from the country today. Today we have, like, forty-five million college graduates. I don't know what the number was then but I'll bet it was under five

million. It was what Mencken called to a certain degree the “booboisie.” We don’t remember how bad it was when the isolationists and the American firsters were almost in charge for a period. And he had to do things about the refugees that I don’t think he really wanted to do. But he had to take this bitter, torn country and lead it into the struggle against Hitler. So I sympathize with the times he had to cut corners and compromise, he did. And in this case he did a masterly job, really, he did a masterly job.

NARRATOR: The refugees who were chosen to come to Oswego did not realize that there were political as well as humanitarian motives for the invitation. They were desperate to come to America; they had nowhere else to go. The 982 people who came reflected the millions of refugees uprooted and persecuted by the Nazis. They came from 19 countries, mostly from central Europe. Two hundred were children; another one hundred were over the age of sixty. Many were Jews who had been repeatedly interned and imprisoned. 108 of the refugees were Christians, running from the devastation of war, and from persecution, for political reasons and for personal ones. This is a recording made at Fort Ontario in 1944, for a national Christmas radio broadcast. [Music, woman singing *Silent Night, Holy Night* in German]

WOMAN: My name is Greta [Dienstein?] I was born a Christian in Vienna but the man I married is a Jew. When the Germans came to Austria we were put in prisons then ordered into exile. We escaped and hid in the woods, until, through the Underground, we found our way to Yugoslavia only to be interned. When the Nazis came to Yugoslavia in 1941, they stole all our personal possessions. With forty other people we again escaped. We made our way to Italy, only to be captured by the Fascist and sent to a concentration camp. Some of our people were killed at Fermonte by bombs from the air. Even in Italy we were not free from the Nazi terror because the Germans came there and we were expected to be killed. But the Allies saved us in time.

NARRATOR: Out of so many millions all over Europe, how were 982 people selected to come to a refugee camp in America? Historian Lawrence Baron, author of a history of Fort Ontario, says President Roosevelt developed criteria to make certain that the refugees chosen would create the least possible political repercussions in the United States. He wanted women and children, instead of able-bodied men of military age. He wanted skilled people so that the camp would be self-sufficient. He didn’t want to split up families, and he wanted a representation of all refugee groups, not just Jews. But time was short and Roosevelt’s criteria were largely ignored. Those who selected the candidates tended to rely on the Italian Jewish Relief Organization, [D’Ellesam?]. In the end, the group chosen was very unlike the one Roosevelt wanted. Lawrence Baron:

LAWRENCE BARON: They were predominantly Jewish; there were many men of employable and military age; within them was a wide variety of people, much wider than Roosevelt would have wanted. More important, many of them were people who had already applied for immigration to the United States. Many of them had American spouses, adult children, people—relatives who were serving in the American military. So these were people who were good candidates for immigration.

NARRATOR: In most cases, refugees did not understand the terms of their rescue; that they were to be confined in a camp and would have to return to Europe after war. Some were never told; in other cases poor translation of statements they were asked to sign misled them. Most thought that once in America they would finally be able to work and live where they chose. After years of war-time upheaval they were anxious to re-establish normal lives. Others had relatives living in America—parents, grown children, even spouses—and they expected to live with them. But they would continue to be separated by American confinement. Ruth Gruber, author of *Haven*, a book about the Oswego refugees, was Special Assistant to the Secretary of the Interior, Harold Ickes. Gruber was sent to Italy to accompany the refugees on their journey to America.

RUTH GRUBER: Well, there they were, in their rags, some of them still in the pajamas of prison camps, and concentration camps. Many without shoes; they had their feet wrapped in newspapers. Some of the women looked as if they’d been in the same housedress for months. They’d slept in it, walked in it, and come on the ship in it. And after a little while, and we’d got to know each other, I said to them, “You have to tell me what you’ve been through because America and the world doesn’t know yet what’s happened. You’re the first witnesses coming into America.” So they talked. Morning and night we walked up and down that deck.

And they told me stories of courage, of terror, of risking their own lives to save other lives, of running from one border to another, always just ahead of the Nazi armies, of hiding in sewers, in caves, finally reaching Italy.

Some of them crossed the Alps, for three days and three nights; there were twelve hundred people who had fled from one village on the Riviera. People who had been crippled in Dachau and Bergen-Belzen and somehow managed to escape took their crutches and walked. Women who were nursing babies told me that they nursed their babies; when their milk ran out the babies suckled blood. There was a woman in the last stages of labor. She gave birth to the baby that first night in the Alps, carried the baby and they continued walking for three days and three nights until they reached what they hoped was safety. The Italian side of the Alps and the Italian villages, only to have the Nazis right on their heels. Five hundred of them were immediately rounded up and sent to Auschwitz. And the others were hidden out, some went with the partisans, some hid in monasteries and convents, in peasants' homes. And of that group that was left, we had about a hundred, I think, on our ship. [Music]

And then we reached New York harbor, and as we sailed past the "mythic mother," the Statue of Liberty, one of our rabbis asked me if he could say a prayer, and I said, "Of course." So we make a little space for him on that crowded deck and he bent down and kissed the deck, and he said, "Now that we have reached the land of freedom we must speak with one voice, with one heart, and we must be filled not with hatred but with love." [Music]

NARRATOR: A special overnight train brought the refugees from New York to Oswego. On the morning of August 5, 1944, they saw their new home for the first time, Fort Ontario, the compound of a recently-vacated Army base, surrounded by a fence, topped with barbed wire. For many this was a bittersweet moment. There was the joy of deliverance from war-torn Europe, but also the disillusionment of continued captivity. [Music] Walter Greenberg was eleven years old when he arrived at Fort Ontario.

WALTER GREENBERG: I experienced that wonderful feeling of knowing that there will be a tomorrow, safe and sound together with my parents and friends. But Fort Ontario was also a great disappointment for me; again I was inside a camp with a fence around it, people on the outside looking in and I on the inside looking out. Indeed, we had everything but our freedom. I suppose this little boy grouped all camps into one, and all fences were the same, not understanding the subtle political differences of confinement.

NARRATOR: Jack Bass was also eleven when he arrived at Fort Ontario.

JACK BASS: I think the thing that made me more comfortable than anything else in the camp, at first, were the people themselves, the American people, the American personnel, and the Oswego inhabitants that welcomed us, that came to the surrounding fence of the camp itself. I think that no one could have said it or could have did better than the people themselves. [Music]

GERALDINE ROSSITER: When I looked in there, and I could see these grown men that had burlap wrapped around their feet, or some material similar to that, my heart was so full of compassion to think these grown men had to be forced to walk around like that.

NARRATOR: Geraldine Rossiter, an Oswego teenager at the time, was there to greet the refugees.

GERALDINE ROSSITER: The children came up to the fence and they saw me on my bicycle, they said, "Beesecla, beesecla." So I saw some fellows I knew and I stood on their shoulders and we passed the bicycle over the fence. In what little French I did know I tried to convey to them that they could keep it until the following day and let all the children ride it. They were quite thrilled with that, of course. [Music]

NARRATOR: The welcome given the refugees surprised federal officials who had feared that the influx of this predominantly Jewish group would anger many of Oswego citizens. But there were pragmatic as well as humanitarian reasons why a strong backlash did not materialize. The fact that Oswego had been settled by waves of immigrants from different countries and with diverse religious backgrounds fostered a greater degree of tolerance than might have been found in a similar small American city of the 1940's. As a site of an Army base, Oswego had a tradition of hosting outsiders. When the base was closed in March of 1944,

Oswego civic leaders had asked the government to re-open it in some capacity, in order to generate local employment. When the refugees arrived it was hoped that they and their visitors would spend lots of money in local stores and restaurants. And sympathy for the victims of the Nazis increased as townspeople read more in the newspapers about the German atrocities and heard the refugees own stories. The townspeople were not unhappy to have the refugees in Oswego, but many of the refugees had mixed feelings about being there. Lawrence Baron:

LAWRENCE BARON: There was initial euphoria that people had come to America; they had left the war front. But there were all these other expectations: that they would soon be released, that they would be able to live with family, and all these things were shut very quickly. Even when the quarantine was lifted after a month, they discovered that their freedoms were very limited; in fact in many cases, they had less freedoms in the United States than they had had in Italy, in Italian refugee camps.

NARRATOR: A number of problems arose. One was lack of privacy. They lived in small apartments or rooms, converted from Army barracks, and the walls were very thin. They ate in a mess hall, cafeteria-style, rather than around a family table. For many this was awkward and stressful. There were tremendous ethnic conflicts; the refugees came from many different countries and cultures. There were disputes over which language to use; there were disputes over rituals and traditions in religious services. When they tried to form a refugee advisory council, the issue of how various nationalities would be represented caused trouble. The refugees were also demoralized by not being able to work outside the camp. Many were skilled people who had worked all their lives. The refugees could work inside the camp, but that usually meant doing menial tasks. Freddie Baum recalls what it was like.

FRED BAUM: Most of the people in the camp worked; they either worked in the garbage detail or in the coal detail or they worked in the kitchens. We had communal kitchens where we had residents would be cooks and dishwashers. If anything there may have been problems with people who did not want to work. You figure that we were on welfare in the camp and you were supposed to work, contribute to life in the camp. Some people didn't do it.

NARRATOR: From *The Ontario Chronicle*, the refugee newsletter, February 22, 1945:

MAN READING: "We have the highest esteem for manual labor and so we have an opportunity for the vocational re-training. However, everybody who has attended the men's' work on rotation basis must admit that 80% of the people who have to accomplish these tasks are not fitted for such a labor, particularly during a period when rain, storm, ice and snow, make a dangerous job of shoveling coal or handling heavy cans full of ashes and garbage. It is not our fault when we are unfitted for those heavy tasks, which are indeed essential for our life in the shelter. Our age, or former profession, and still more, many years of suffering in Nazi concentration camps, explains our unfitness."

NARRATOR: But there were some refugees who found ways to circumvent the work restrictions. Leon Levitch was seventeen at the time. He was one of those who got work outside the camp.

LEON LEVITCH: Word got around in Oswego that there was, among the refugees, somebody who could fix pianos. I was just treated like a king. They would come in to get a special permit. I think that was even before we started to go to school, because when we went to school we had our pass, and we could go every morning to school and come home after. There was no problem. But this was a special pass because sometimes they would have to come after work, in the evening, to take me out so that I could take care of their pianos.

NARRATOR: There were also happy occasions. In the eighteen months of shelter confinement, there were many marriages and 23 babies were born. [Music] The Jewish people were probably best served. They had a kosher kitchen set up under the auspices of Avida Israel, an orthodox organization. There were bar mitzvahs and seasonal celebrations, and for many, the joy of their religious traditions made camp life bearable. But those who had some sort of interest outside the camp, those were the ones who fared best. Steffie Steinberg was one of the teenagers who went outside, to high school in Oswego.

STEFFIE STEINBERG: For us young people it was a good experience because we were involved in our school. We were away the better part of the day from the camp and therefore not involved in all the little political things that went on in a community such as this.

NARRATOR: Lawrence Baron:

LAWRENCE BARON: The older people had a great deal of trouble orienting themselves to the new culture, learning a new language. And what made it more difficult was the fact that younger kids adapted very quickly. This is a traditional thing among immigrants, is that the young adapt quicker and often are more adept in the society than their parents so you have a role reversal. Life in Oswego for the children who got out, who went to school, who really built a new life, was OK. For the artists who had an opportunity to ply their skills within the camp, it was OK for them. For people who were older, for people who maybe didn't have those sorts of skills, life was more difficult, it was very stress-filled. This was not necessarily a happy time; it was at best a respite between persecution and a freedom that was yet to come.

NARRATOR: What picked up everything were the charitable agencies allowed in the camp. Since the federal government did not furnish more than the essential custodial care, food, shelter and medical services, numerous charities and private agencies stepped in to fill a variety of cultural, educational, religious, and medical needs. Muriel Perry of Oswego was one of the volunteer teachers at Fort Ontario. She used popular songs of the time to help the refugees learn English.

MURIEL PERRY: They knew some of our popular songs, and every song it taught them they enjoyed because the words came better, the pronunciation. So one night I asked them to stand and sing *The Star-Spangled Banner* and they did. And they were absolutely thrilled that they could do it. Then I turned to them, and I said, "Sing your own national anthem." Well they were just amazed. The tears ran down their cheeks. And they said, "Could we? Could we? Is it possible?" Each one was kind of afraid to do it, and I said, "You stand right there and do it." So they did, and when they finished, they were all crying, and it was one of those moments when happiness was mingled with the tears and I just stood, I didn't do anything else, and they were so proud of me because I stood up for their national anthem, and I didn't know one word of it.

NARRATOR: Services that the private agencies and charities provided became essential to the functioning of the camp. English classes, vocational training, recreational and cultural opportunities—these things were the highlights of life at Fort Ontario. Again, Muriel Perry:

MURIEL PERRY: Hugo Wantoch was a dear friend right from the beginning. I don't know, he was in his late seventies or going on eighty, and he spoke English fairly well, really quite well. This is a letter he wrote me while he was there. "You wish to know why I attend the English classes. Well, there are several reasons. One of them is that I found a teacher, a magician, who understands splendidly how to make us enjoy our English lessons so that I, for instance, who detests nothing more than to sit quietly on the floor and to study when I was a little schoolboy, couldn't find at present a dearer hobby than to attend her class. Another reason is that I find it is quite a nice change after having worked a whole day long in our welfare office, like I do, not to have to listen for a while to persons who wish to have their shoes repaired, they need eyeglasses, who complain about their grants, who wish absolutely to know the exact day we shall regain our complete freedom and liberty.

[End of side one, long lead out]

[Side two]

[Music]

NARRATOR: The refugees also did much to help themselves to improve the cultural and intellectual life at Fort Ontario. There were actors, musicians, and artists among them and as a result, the Fort Ontario orchestra, chorus, chamber ensemble, stage productions, dramas, skits, and even an operetta about life at Fort

Ontario called *The Golden Cage*. Leon Levitch began his musical training in Italy; besides tuning pianos he contributed much to the cultural life of the camp as a musician.

LEON LEVITCH: We had among us a fellow who played the violin; his name was Schimel and a fellow who played the viola, his name was Sternberg. And Levinson and the two of them formed a trio. For the first time I heard a live chamber music; I think was mostly interesting they played, of course, Brahms.
[Music]

I decided I was going to start a youth chorus. Most of my peers didn't read music and I would train them, some of them by rote, those that could read, and after we felt we were good enough we accepted engagements to perform at this or that, whatever occasion that we had in the camp.

NARRATOR: Joseph Smart was Fort Ontario's first director; he had a diverse background. He'd been a special agent for the FBI; a manager of New Deal resettlement projects, and a director of Japanese-American relocation centers. Smart organized special projects with many individuals and organizations in town. One of the most successful was the education of refugee children in Oswego schools. Ralph Faust was the principal of the high school.

RALPH FAUST: They got into the school system. They had difficulty at first with the English; they had to use a dictionary a lot of the time. But they were eager to get back to school and I think they did a lot to motivate our teachers to go out of their way for them. I thought that as a collective group they were equal to or more motivated than an equal number of students in our school.

NARRATOR: From *The Ontario Chronicle*, the refugee newsletter, February 22, 1945, an essay written by Edith Weiss.

EDITH WEISS: We haven't yet made friends among the American youth but we admire them, 'cause they are really young, happy and worryless. Some of them are our age but seem to be much younger as their youth hasn't been spoiled by Nazi terror. I wish they could teach us a little of their way of taking life easy. It would still be useful to us and still more to those millions of young people who are still suffering in Europe, who never knew what actually means being young.

NARRATOR: David Simmons was an Oswego grammar school pupil at the time.

DAVID SIMMONS: I remember two children in our first grade class – one was a girl from France and one was a boy who I recall being from Yugoslavia. I remember sitting across the aisle from him and watching him do a lot of drawing, or what you might think of doodling, and drawing a lot of airplanes and dogfights, that kind of thing, which didn't really strike me as significant at the time but he was probably drawing what he had seen.

NARRATOR: For refugee children, going to Oswego's public schools was a tremendous opportunity to fill the educational vacuum left by years of internment and hiding. Steffie Steinberg was amazed when she was given the chance to attend the town's high school.

STEFFIE STEINBERG: Somewhere, it must have been late August or early September, Mr. Faust the principal of the high school, came over and started to speak to some of us young people and encouraged us to come to the high school. And I hadn't been to any – having left Germany in '38, this was now '44 – I hadn't gone to school in six years. And so we all decided that despite the fact that we were a couple of years older than high school age, we accepted the principal's invitation which was a very gracious action on his part, and we entered the high school. And he must have had a hell of a job trying to integrate us into the high school, but he did.

NARRATOR: Another way the boys and girls from Fort Ontario were introduced to American culture was through scouting. Oswego resident Harold Clark recounts what prompted him to form a Boy Scout troop of refugees.

HAROLD CLARK: Well I worked in Fitzgibbons Boiler Works, working on tanks. Work all day welding on tanks and aircraft carrier parts, defense work. At noon we'd see these kids over there, they'd look at us wistfully through the fence. Working there, next door, I guess I had compassion for them. And my wife says, "If you want to do it, all right". I spent enough time away from home as it was. But I thought, "If I can get some boys of my own to help me it won't be any big chore". So scouting, although they probably had heard of it, was a new experience for them. Well, it took a little while, but eventually they got a neckerchief, maybe a shirt, and a cap. After a while they got a belt and a pair of pants. We had three patrols and they became very proficient and within a year several of them became First Class, which is exceptional.

NARRATOR: Walter Greenberg remembers how scouting boosted his morale during his confinement at Fort Ontario.

WALTER GREENBERG: I was very active; I was very proud of my uniform. Coming from my time and place where uniforms meant terror, to have my uniform which meant goodness, be prepared, help others, don't cheat, and all the values that the boys have, love of nature, which I like. The Boy Scout leader was a very kind man; he used to come around with his two children sometimes. And to put it in a nutshell, I think that was in a way, a father to us, the way our fathers couldn't perform, not that they didn't perform well, but on a different level, because he had lived his normal life in a free society. He was fun to be with; it was a good happy time. [Music]

NARRATOR: Getting out into the community was a real treat for the refugees. Many developed friendships with the teachers and volunteers at the camp, who invited them into the town. Muriel Perry of Oswego:

MURIEL PERRY: My father had planted strawberries and we had oodles, great big strawberries. So mother and my neighbor, Mrs. Helen Morton, and my next door friend, Mrs. Helen German, decided to entertain each class for supper. And at the end they served biscuits, real home-made biscuits, lots of strawberries. And I think one of the nicest parts about that was, they were thrilled with the first helping but the second helping, they were just amazed that they could have more.

NARRATOR: After years of deprivation, it wasn't only the abundance of food in America that surprised the refugees. They were eager to find out how Americans lived.

MURIEL PERRY: They wanted to get into people's homes; they wanted to see what they were like inside. They didn't want to just go in your living room; they wanted to see everything. Their main desire was to see the insides of the house. All three ladies let them go upstairs, even to the attic with Mrs. Horton and Helen – we didn't have an attic – and they even let them go downstairs into the cellar, where they had a grand time. I suppose they hadn't been in their own homes for a long time, and secondly, I think they thought the European homes were probably different from ours. [Music]

NARRATOR: And the refugees were eager to get involved in other aspects of life in Oswego. The Christian refugees participated enthusiastically in local church services and they were welcomed. Seward Salisbury was a professor at Oswego State Teachers College at the time.

SEWARD SALISBURY: I can't think of a specific clergyman that was any more outstanding than any of the others, but they were all very supportive and very sympathetic. In fact, practically all the churches had their small group of refugees who came, and some of the children went to parochial schools, too.

NARRATOR: The refugees greatly enjoyed their trips to town. Spending time in Oswego houses, shops, and restaurants was the closest they could come to freedom. It's no wonder that one of the hit songs of the time, by Gene Autry, became such a favorite with them and even today is recalled by many of the Fort Ontario theme song. [Music: Autry singing *Don't Fence Me In*]

There were however, those who were hostile toward the refugees. Some townspeople expressed this antagonism in irate letters to the local newspaper. A few took offense at the refugees' alien customs, such as

haggling over prices with merchants or sitting for hours over one cup of coffee in a restaurant. Some blamed the refugees for the shortages of certain items in the stores. Oswego resident Geraldine Rossiter:

GERALDINE ROSSITER: These were the few that I happened to listen to, because I worked in a public restaurant, at that time one of the two best restaurants in town. And I had lawyers, judges and people, and I know they used to congregate, and I would listen to them say, "Why those Jews they have it all, they've got the latest in stoves and refrigerators and this and that". And all the time knowing they were living in these old soldiers' barracks, one bathroom at the end of the hall. When the refugees were finally allowed passes and they could go out, I would walk down the street with Editha – people would see me, and somehow you could tell a refugee, I don't know how exactly, they didn't have the clothes, they weren't out shopping, and they would say, "Jew lover, refugee lover". Now I would say this was in the minority.

SEWARD SALISBURY: Some people thought, of course that they were over there subsidized and maintained, and the old thing, our taxes support them, and why can't they go out and work; course they couldn't go out and work, that was beyond the rules of their stay here at that particular time.

NARRATOR: Seward Salisbury heard complaints that the refugees were not earning their keep.

SEWARD SALISBURY: The only negative thing at the college – we were down to about eight or ten American boys, who were 4F – all the other American boys were in some branch of the service. Some of these young fellows who were maybe 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, seemed to be in good health, just occasionally you'd get the impression, "Why aren't these boys out fighting? Why are our boys supporting them?"

NARRATOR: Meanwhile, in Washington, Restrictionist Congressmen were still suspicious of Roosevelt. They worried that he planned to use the Fort Ontario experiment as a precedent to undermine American immigration quotas. They sought and received, from the administration further guarantees that it would stick to the original policy: eventual repatriation of the refugees. [Music]

At Fort Ontario, life went on despite an uncertain future. A number of refugee couples married and started families in the camp. This created a whole series of bureaucratic problems because the legal status of the refugees was still in question. Manya Hartmayer met her fiancé, Ernst Breuer, while fleeing from the Germans in Italy. When they decided to marry at Fort Ontario, they discovered how precarious their situation really was.

MANYA BREUER: We wanted to get married, Ernst and I, we were very much in love. But we didn't get the permission right away from the government, since we were in a very special status in the camp. And my husband said, "How can we not get married? We are here, in America, there is nothing that can hold us back. Why is it that we can't do that?" And we would ask Ruth Gruber; and Ruth would do everything. She would call Washington, she would try to get us permission to leave the camp, the Army camp, Fort Ontario, to go to the city hall and do the procedure of getting a marriage license, which finally we got. [Music]

NARRATOR: The refugees may have been safe but they grew frustrated by the lack of control they had over their lives and their futures. They were denied permission to visit or live with American relatives who were willing to act as their sponsors. Their requests to obtain work outside the camp and to practice former occupations were always refused. Resentment at their continued confinement increased. But most of all they dreaded the prospect of returning to Europe and to bad memories. Manya Breuer:

MANYA BREUER: We were in a limbo, so to speak, because we didn't know if we were going to be sent back after the war is over or if he would give permission to stay, which was not told to us. We were told that after the war we have to go back, but of course, nobody in their heart believed that people would send us back again, to Hell.

NARRATOR: The conditions of camp life and uncertainty about their futures began to take a psychological toll on the refugees. As the war in Europe drew to a close, the anxieties increased. They mourned the death of President Roosevelt in April of 1945. They still considered him their benefactor and were uncertain about

Truman's stand on the issue of repatriation. When the unconditional surrender of Germany was announced the next month, the refugee's joy was clouded by concern for their own futures. From *The Ontario Chronicle*, May 17, 1945:

MAN READING: "Here in the shelter we heard with deep satisfaction and relief that the great massacre in Europe came to an end. But nobody could expect that we could celebrate this great day with explosions of joy. Why? Because we have lost too much. There is no family among us which has not to deplore the loss of at least one member assassinated or deported by the Nazi gangsters. We have lost all our property, our existence, and many of us have lost forever the homeland, if not other [?] so we continue to live the poor existence of a refugee and to migrate from one country to the other without the possibility of establishing a permanent residence".

NARRATOR: The end of the war spawned rumors that deportation was imminent. Finally, Joseph Smart resigned as camp administrator in order to devote his time to securing the refugees' freedom.

JOSEPH SMART: My resignation was prompted by a rumor that a ship had actually been chartered to take these people back to Europe. The rumor came to me through an informal committee of the refugee leaders who usually heard this kind of a story before I did. And I called my chief in Washington, who was Dillon Myer, and he said, "Well, that story isn't exactly correct, but essentially yes. The final decision has been made, they've got to go back, there's nothing we can do about it".

NARRATOR: Smart felt strongly about refugees. He had come to know them well, knew what they had endured in Europe, and knew the potential contribution they could make as American citizens. He organized an aggressive lobbying effort in Congress and with the White House. President Truman, however, did not take the lead on this issue; instead, he left the decision to Congress. Hearings were held, refugees questioned, studies were written. The War Relocation Authority contended that over 600 of the refugees had legitimate grounds for not wanting to return to their homelands. The State and Justice Departments argued that most of the refugees were repatriable and ought to be send back to Europe. But there were other factors to be considered. The Displaced Persons, or DP, situation in Europe was reaching a crisis point. And in the end, Truman stepped in. Sharon Lowenstein:

SHARON LOWENSTEIN: You have hard-line Restrictionists in the Congress, who – before Truman issued his directive – had concluded that it was better to permit this one thousand to remain, that they were preferable to taking in, say, one thousand who didn't look nearly as attractive and who weren't Americanized. There began to be a growing recognition that we would, in fact, need to permit them to stay. And, of course, they were able to stay without enlarging the quotas in any way.

NARRATOR: Even so, Truman still wanted to be certain that he had bipartisan support for admitting the Fort Ontario refugees under existing quotas for their respective nations. He was assured the support was there, and on December 22, 1945, President Harry Truman announced that the refugees would be allowed to stay in the United States. [Music]

Of the original group of 982 that came to Fort Ontario, 854 chose to stay in America. In January and February of 1946, these refugees were granted immigrant status. But political sensibilities required that they apply for admission to the United States from outside the country, to maintain the pretense that they had never officially been in America. Moritz Konig describes this process.

MORITZ KONIG: After eighteen months in the camp, not knowing whether we were to be deported, sent back to homes that had been ravaged, President Truman finally allowed us to leave the camp, cross the Rainbow Bridge to Canada, shake the American Consul's hand, go back, reenter the United States, and apply for citizenship. The joke in those days, of course, was that you had to leave America in order to enter it.

NARRATOR: America now beckoned to the refugees with its promise of freedom and opportunity. To be sure, some refugees were too old, too ill, or too traumatized by the war to start life over, and adjust successfully to the American society. But most adapted rapidly and ultimately prospered in their new

homeland. Forty years later, more than 300 of them were together in New York City for a reunion. They heard speeches from officials, including New York's Governor, they sang songs and exchanged stories of life at Fort Ontario and the memories of those left behind in Europe. Those who came to America became laborers, inventors, musicians, small shopkeepers, scientists. Some worked in sweatshops, some became doctors, and teachers. Leon Levitch who had tuned pianos in Oswego became a classical composer and helped create a Department of Piano Technology at UCLA in the 1970's. He played one of his compositions at the reunion. [Piano music]

Walter Greenberg became a documentary filmmaker and communications expert. After leaving Oswego, he lived for a while in Israel and Cuba before returning to the United States. Manya Breuer, Fort Ontario's first bride, went on to sing with the Los Angeles Opera Company, the American Opera Company, and the Beverly Hills Symphony. Separated from her parents and brothers during the war, she discovered years later that they were still alive, and was finally reunited with them in the 1960's. Fred Baum was hired by the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency to work with Displaced Persons in Germany. He is now president of Atlas Trading Corporation. Jack Bass owns a limousine service in Manhattan. Steffi Steinberg married, had three children, and became an administrative assistant to an exporter in New York City. Adam Munz, eighteen when he left Oswego, went on to become Director of Psychological Services at a New York City hospital and president of the New York State Psychological Association. He spoke at the 40th union.

ADAM MUNZ: We were the token refugees, as we later learned, the 982 that were to be this country's symbolic gesture for the free nations to emulate. How wanted were we? Hard to say. How much did we yearn to be wanted? You all know the answer to that one. After so many years of the abomination that was the Holocaust, the need to be wanted was a paramount one and how badly we ached for it. We have nothing to be ashamed of. We really never had anything to be ashamed of. The shame belonged out there, in the world at large. So many more of us could have, and should have, made it. It was not just the shame of our tyrants. But it was a shame that should be shared by a world that stood by and did so little to put a stop to the bloodbath. [Music]

NARRATOR: We will never know how much human potential was lost in the Holocaust. The Fort Ontario refugees were the only refugees to be granted collective sanctuary on American soil during World War II, a saving remnant of a decimated people. But for six million others there was no Fort Ontario, no hope at all, and no haven from the Holocaust. [Music]

NARRATOR: *Haven from the Holocaust* was produced and distributed with support from the New York Council for the Humanities, the Joe and Emily Lowe Foundation of New York City, the Baron DeHirsh Fund of New York City, and the Hadassah Chapter of Ogdensburg, New York. Jackie Sauter was executive producer, the producer was Beverly Hickman. Dr. Lawrence Baron was researcher and script consultant. The narrator, Pat McCallen. Excerpts from "Christmas and Freedom" were used with permission from the Library of Congress and the National Broadcasting Company. Thanks to WRVO, Oswego, New York, to Norma Ball of the Holocaust Resource Center of the New York State Museum and to all those who consented to be interviewed for this program. Thanks also to Joshua Sacco for technical assistance. Special thanks to the people of Oswego, New York, and to the Fort Ontario refugees for sharing their memories. *Haven from the Holocaust* is a production of WSLU-FM, North Country Public Radio, St. Lawrence University, Canton, New York, which is solely responsible for its content. [Gene Autry singing *Don't Fence Me In*]

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