Chapter Three

Public Opinion And The Media

One significant impact of the educational programs at the Shelter, especially the elementary and secondary schooling, was how it deflected deteriorating public opinion regarding the refugees. After the initial euphoria concerning the refugees’ arrival, both the Shelter residents and the people of Oswego settled into a routine. It was this routine where there was friction. Once the novelty dissipated, the townspeople resumed their lives while Shelter residents attempted to adjust to this benevolent form of house arrest.

The routines produced friction. For some townspeople friction engendered negative feelings and hostility. Faust believed that most of the people of Oswego took little notice of the new residents of Fort Ontario. He said, “I would rather think that the majority of the people... didn’t even know about it, or weren’t concerned.” Whether the growing expression of negative sentiment about the refugees was a shift from those who had originally been positive or merely those who initially had no opinion weighing in is unclear in the absence of formal polling. The fact was that there was gradually emerging a pattern of more clearly negative opinions about the refugees expressed openly.

Edwin Waterbury, the publisher the Oswego Palladium-Times, had made an early commitment in support of the refugees’ cause. Waterbury joined the Advisory Committee early and it was he who provided the names of potential committee members. Though the paper’s editorial position favored the refugees, Waterbury allowed his newspaper to publish editorial letters that were critical of the refugees. The letters published reflected local attitudes and impacted on morale within the Shelter. Occasionally, refugees
themselves wrote letters to the editor, and that too had an impact both inside and outside the Shelter.

Smart’s assistant, Allan Markley, wrote *Oswego Refugee Attitudes Study* just weeks after the Shelter had closed in 1946. Markley wrote: “The local daily newspaper in Oswego maintained a consistent attitude of printing a number of letters to the editor containing comments from its readers on controversial subjects. It printed many letters about the refugees both pro and con. It required, however, that all communications printed be signed by the author and his address given. In time the volume of anti-refugee letters increased and there seemed to be indications of an organized campaign to discredit the refugees. The publisher of the newspaper, however, suspected that much of the opposition had its origin outside the circulating area of his newspaper and conducted an investigation. In at least one instance he learned that the name given in communications was fictitious and that the address was not accurate. In replies to the letters which he wrote, he found too, that the postoffice department would sometimes return his letter rubber stamped ‘unknown.’” 2 Markley noted the publisher’s support of the refugees. He wrote, “The publisher himself a member of the Oswego Chamber of Commerce and active in the business and civic life of the community, was favorable to the refugees in his editorial column.” 3 The question remained, regardless as to how many letters of the editor concerning the refugees, both pro and con, how representative were they? Markley noted to further complicate matters the refugees did not understand how our free press functioned, they did not comprehend that the newspaper could publish a criticism while supporting the refugees’ cause editorially.
Local public opinion regarding the refugees had multiple manifestations. It was divided into three primary categories; those who held negative views of the refugees, those who held positive views, those who held no view at all. Those who had opinions about the refugees fell into two categories, those whose opinions were associated with broader political considerations and those whose opinions were the product of direct interaction with the Shelter’s residents.

The *Oswego Palladium-Times* letters fell into the broad categories of those who had opinions. Two Syracuse newspapers also published editorial letters but they were limited to opinions based on political or ethical principles. On at least three occasions the Shelter was the focus of a national commentary or speech.

Interviews with refugees described a great diversity in the frequency and nature of their interaction with the Oswego community. The experience of the refugees ranged from high school student Rolph Manfred, who was regularly invited to parties of Oswego peers and never recalled a harsh word, to other Shelter residents who had literally no contact with local people. Even some students had little or no interaction with the other children of the community, leaving their only contact with townspeople that of the schools’ teachers and administrators.

One reason for the problem of limited interaction between local and Shelter students was because many of the refugee children were older than their classmates. A former student refugee, Edith Bronner Klein, recalled, “I didn’t speak any English. Most of the students were much younger because it was difficult for us without the knowledge of English. I think we missed five years of school with immigration. It was really hard to
Another former refugee, Ruth Tamar Hendel, expressed similar recollections, “Going to school was very, very gratifying.” Though every effort was made to take into account the age of the Shelter students in determining grade level placement, so many of the refugees had missed significant amounts of school that placing them in the age-appropriate grade was impossible, especially in this era before individualized instruction and schedules.

Some of the refugee students were able to negotiate more favorable placement in grades. One former refugee, Herman Kramer, recalled: “Well, for one thing I was a little older and I went to high school here. They wanted to put me into the junior high, but I didn’t want to because my cousin went to the high school and we had the same educational background in Italy where we had tutors and went to a boarding school. So they allowed me to go to high school. And I found, we went out every day to go to school and so on. I found very little problem at the beginning with the English because I didn’t know any. We switched quite fast. I was fluent in English much as I am fluent now. I found that the students were very, very acceptive. The teachers were quite helpful.”

A foreign, non-English speaking student who was older than his/her classmates, at a time of life when even minor differences in age are significant, faced significant assimilation challenges.

A second cause for the limited socialization between local and refugee children was produced by restrictions imposed on all Shelter residents. Markley wrote: “When the shelter children started to school the authorities at the shelter limited the time allowed off the Fort reservation in the passes given the children. This made it impossible for them to
remain in the city area for any length of time other than that required to walk back to the reservation. This was done at the time doubtless for sound administrative reasons, but it was a powerful factor in future events. It imposed limitations on the shelter children which were more rigid than those imposed by the parents of the Oswego children. It made it impossible for the shelter children to participate in any unexpected events which would keep them away from the reservation beyond the time specified in their gate passes.”

This lack of interaction may have contributed to growth of negative opinions about the refugee students and subsequently about all of the Shelter’s residents. Markley described how the refugee students denied access to their peers in Oswego turned to each other for socialization. He wrote: “It resulted... in the formation of groups of the refugee children who would walk back home together, and thus promoted unwittingly the ‘gang’ spirit which later developed. Months after the school program started it was not unusual to see groups of the shelter boys on one side of an Oswego street and groups of Oswego resident boys on the other, tossing taunts and jibs [sic] back and forth at each other sometimes even tossing loose stones or orange peel [sic] or whatever was easy to throw.”

Thus, conditions not related to anti-Semitism or anti-refugee sentiment began to impact negatively upon local public opinion. In hostile interactions where youths of the two groups might have been equally to blame, though actually promoted by conditions neither side created, both the parents of the local children and the refugee children likely blamed the other side for the conflict.

The question then became how public opinion impacted on the individual refugee children. The answer was that it did sometimes while other times there was no
correlation. Repeatedly, former refugee students described their stay in Oswego as near idyllic. Margaret Spitzer Fisse recalled: “We went to school which was one of the biggest thrills of our life. During the time that we were in Italy we could not attend any schools. Going to school after three years of not learning anything was very, very impressive on all of us.” However, because local and national public opinion impacted upon WRA policies and subsequently on Smart, public opinion had a profound impact. Despite frequent claims to the contrary, most of the restrictions imposed on the Shelter residents had been the product of the WRA’s concerns about adverse political reactions.

The same could be said of individual interactions. To what degree did hostile or merely rude behavior directed at the refugees reflect broader issues or local hostility to refugees? Could such actions merely have been a manifestation, in the case of students, of adolescent anti-social behavior, or when among adults, an indication of psychological or social problems of the instigator? It was difficult, if not impossible, to analyze and ultimately discern the motives to the townspeople’s changing feelings about the refugees.

Markley’s report described in simplified terms what had been the complex nature of the interaction between the community and the refugees. Markley wrote, “There are evidences also of anti-Jewish feeling on the part of many of the Oswego people. The extent of this feeling is not known, but it is known to exist.” Markley introduced anti-Semitism as a factor then reduces it, when he acknowledges that the amount of anti-Semitism was difficult to quantify. In February 2001, the movie produced by Hollywood about the Shelter entitled Haven portrayed the response of the community as being largely anti-Semitic. The question was not whether there were any manifestations of anti-
Semitism, because there were. The question was how prevalent were these incidents and how much did they represent the opinion of the community.

Markley was hindered by his long absence from the Shelter. He was present for the first four months, then he returned in January 1946 to help the Shelter close down. His report included accounts of interactions between refugees and local residents, but because he was absent he did not understand what motivated the behavior. The complexities of local opinions were not so much the conclusions but how they were arrived at. One example of this process was Harold Clark who volunteered to be the refugee students’ Scoutmaster. Clark evolved from cautious observer to activist without the complex rationales expressed by supporters of the refugees. Clark described his transition: “I worked in Fitzgibbons Boiler Works work on a tanks. Worked all day welding on tanks and aircraft carrier parts. Defense work. At noon we’d see these kids over there and they’d look at us wistfully through the fence. Some people even regarded them like animals. Some didn’t want Roosevelt to bring them here. I couldn’t see where it did any harm. These people were not out of the gutter. These men, the fathers, were violinists, musicians, doctors, lawyers, professional men. They were not hobos, or anything like that. They were smart people and clean. They weren’t the scum of the earth or anything like that. Neither were they selected. I don’t know how they happened to select them, how that happened. There were nine hundred and eighty or ninety of them, pretty close to one thousand. I think there was one thousand when they started and some died. Some were born here. Some died and are still out in the little cemetery.”

Some of the townspeople who never came to accept the refugees were motivated
more by partisan political philosophies than any characteristic of the refugees themselves.

One local magician, Frank Barbeau, recalled: “So when the refugees were there I
entertained the refugees, then a woman came, that I shouldn’t dislike, but I disliked her
because I thought she was dishonest, Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s wife. She said that they
were abused. These poor people were abused. Well, I knew that they weren’t okay, they
were not allowed out on the streets after eleven o’clock at night. Barbeau’s
negative response to the refugees was the product of his dislike of Eleanor Roosevelt.

Markley contended that the local pro-refugee committees were not true indications
of the community’s sentiment. Markley wrote, “It has come to light also now that this
action on the part of the local Oswego committee on behalf of the refugees was not of the
spontaneous kind.” He noted that the committees formed were not authentic but part
of the pattern employed by Smart to form local committees to both create the illusion of
broad-based local support and also to influence elements of the local community.

Markley conceded that the local committees had succeeded in that goal. He
wrote: “Whether it was due to the influence of this Cooperating committee or not, it
remains a fact that the great mass of leading business and professional people in Oswego
and the more liberal minded leaders were in favor of permitting the refugees to remain in
the United States.” Markley suggested that economic status and education impacted
upon views regarding the refugees. He continued: “Opposed to them, however, were
others in the local population, not so prominent in civic affairs, not so active or outspoken
but nevertheless definitely not favorable to the refugees. A factor contributing to this
opposition was the large percentage of Jewish people in the refugee group.”
The city of Oswego has always been divided economically. The Oswego River divides the city evenly and the east side was largely working class. Nearly all of the factories were on the east side, and those on the west side were on the west bank of the river. The Shelter was located along the shore of Lake Ontario on the east side. The college, Oswego State, is located on the lake at the city’s western extreme. Those faculty members who lived in Oswego lived on the west side of town. Except for one four block area six blocks south of the Shelter, the most prestigious neighborhoods were all on the west side.

Geography might have had an impact on recollections. Those Oswegonians from the west side did not recall anti-Semitic or anti-refugee incidents, while, Geraldine Rossiter, from the east side, does. Most of the former refugees interviewed either downplay or have no recollection of anti-Semitism. However, the process of securing interviews required the former refugees to travel to Oswego for the Safe Haven, Inc. reunions. Willingness to return to Oswego as a variable may have skewed the sample. It is difficult to determine if the former refugees who returned to Oswego were a representative sample of the experiences of the group as a whole.

The overall assessment of local attitudes was hindered by the absence of scientific polling. Even Markley’s report, the most thorough attempt to describe the community’s response to the Shelter and the refugees, had serious limitations. Its greatest failing was that it was not scientific. Though it factually represented sentiments expressed in editorial letters, despite Waterbury’s contention that many negative letters came from outside the community, there was no reason to doubt the veracity of the quotes attributed to
townspeople. However, the impact on the refugees and the ultimate outcome of the project were obscured by the unscientific nature of the report. Most refugee students interviewed did not have negative experiences which were the product of either ill will or prejudice. It was also unclear what percentage of the letters to the editor were actually written by Oswego residents or even individuals living in the region. If there was such ill will, it was not often expressed in interaction between townspeople and the refugees but rather limited to expressions of disapproval directed at local residents who were working with the refugees. If such sentiments were not acted upon, one must wonder how representative they were, and subsequently how relevant they were to the ultimate outcome of the endeavor.

In the *Oswego Palladium-Times*, most of the letters advocated on behalf of the refugees. A letter written by a Margaret Leighton on June 14, 1945 was typical. She wrote:

> I feel that Oswego has been fortunate to have had a group of such talented people living here as have been at the Refugee Shelter for the past months.  
> I am personally very grateful for the pleasure which I have experienced in listening to the musicians and in seeing the paintings and handicraft done by the artists.  
> These men and women have contributed largely to the cultural life of the community. May their future be bright!

Leighton's opinion was influenced by all of the artistic endeavors of the Shelter residents. Smart promoted interaction between the community and the refugees through the arts. Regrettably, there was often a class and educational factor impacting upon taste in entertainment. The art of the refugees was European, the music was largely classical.
Only two or three of the artistic refugees had worked in cabarets, the closest proximity to the tastes of Oswego’s east side working class.

In contrast, writers critical of the refugees often suggested that they were more representative of general public opinion. One such letter was written to the *Oswego Palladium-Times* by Ardella Parkhurst, who lived outside the city. Parkhurst described an incident where neither national nor international politics were an obvious factor. On July 25, 1945 she wrote: “I for one would like to use a space in your column on ‘what people say’ on the refugees. I am not in favor of them and I know they are good many more like myself, just neglect telling what I think, but I have heard so much lately that the more I think about it the more disgusted I get. I live in the country and used to enjoy going into Oswego once a week, but I can’t say that any more. Who wants to walk into a store and have some one tag you along and see that what you buy and what you have in your purse? That’s what happened to me and when he followed me to the third counter I was so disgusted I walked out. I will admit I felt like slapping his face.” The implication was that this male refugee might have been following her around a store to either exploit or victimize her in some way. Yet with 982 refugees living eighteen months inside the city there was not one criminal incident. What was likely happening was a process described by other Oswegonians more sympathetic to the Shelter residents. They observed refugees were so intent on becoming Americans that they observed people intent on learning about American behavior and styles. The man following Parkhurst was probably doing something as innocent as studying the protocols and etiquette of American shopping.

Parkhurst described another complaint common among local residents. This
complainant’s theme was that the refugees were living in the lap of luxury while most Americans were dealing with rationing and the shortages produced by the war effort. She continued: “I also went into a store to buy my son a pair of shoes and the clerk told me maybe I could find them at the fort as the refugees had them. I suppose our children could go barefooted, why should they worry. They came to Oswego to have the best and they certainly are getting. Isn’t that the way of everything: They come first.” The comment “They come first,” probably had anti-Semitic implications even though the offending man might have been one of the Shelter’s few gentiles. It most certainly was anti-refugee. At the heart of the negative opinion was the misconception that the refugees were contributing to the shortage of certain goods. Though Parkhurst did not mention government support, many of the negative letters did. Where these people were wrong was that with the exception of a stipend earned for menial work, everything except their housing and food had been donated by the Coordinating Committee.

Returning to Parkhurst’s complaint, there may very well have been community-wide shortages created by 982 new people entering a community of nearly 20,000, but it was unlikely. There was a greater likelihood that the shoe store which had its supply depleted was the shoe store closest to the Shelter. Limited in time outside the Shelter and with no transportation, the refugees shopped in the stores nearest Fort Ontario. In other instances, the refugees shopped in stores where discounts had been arranged by the owners with the Coordinating Committee, often over the objections of store employees.

Parkhurst then described another misconception about the refugees which angered local residents. She wrote: “What about the cigarettes for our hard working men. When
they say hard working men that’s what I mean, our men can’t doll up and walk up and
down Bridge street [sic]. They have to work to help bring the boys home and then all but
get on their knees to beg for a cigarette. I ask is it fair to the men of our country?” The
refugees were granted a ration of cigarettes. Probably many of the refugees were no
longer addicted to cigarettes because of the years they had spent in flight and hiding.
Whether cigarette rations were pooled or individual refugees just were acquiring their
personal allotments, the implication that they received preferential treatment regarding any
rationed item was untrue. More importantly, Parkhurst was unaware, as were most
complainants, that the men of the Shelter were angry that they were denied opportunities
to work. Smart received numerous requests to allow refugees to work in this region
where there was a serious shortage of labor. The WRA did not allow the men or women
of the Shelter to work outside the fort. The federal officials were afraid that if the
refugees were allowed to work it might further legitimize their requests to remain in
America.

Lastly, Parkhurst’s reference to the refugees conduct when they “doll up” probably
was an indication that she, like most Oswegonians, did not know that most refugees had
been business owners, artists, and professionals. A working class individual allowed to
purchase a limited wardrobe with charitable donations might buy practical clothes,
whereas, a refugee who had been part of their community’s elite might buy with their
meager allotment one suit of clothes appropriate for their former station in life.

There was another class of letters which had both a pro-refugee and anti-refugee
dichotomy. These were letters which were dealing with the issue which engendered the
greatest response; that is, whether or not the refugees should be allowed to remain in America. Markley described this issue as being the fundamental question confronting the refugees and those who advocated on their behalf. Markley wrote:

What is the attitude of the people of Oswego... toward the refugees and the attitude of the Oswego people to the decision to admit the refugees to the United States? [underlining omitted] For all practical purposes these two questions may be treated as one. Those who were opposed to the refugees as a group of people apparently are the same persons who dislike the decision of the Government to allow them to enter the United States under existing law. Those who were friendly and sympathetic to the refugees as a group, are the same as those who applaud the decision of the Government to allow them to remain in this country. Since no special exception was made for this group of people, there is no legitimate ground on which a protest against the decision could be founded. This situation may account for the fact that no such protest has been launched by the anti-immigration forces. The very absence of such a protest does not imply that such opposition does not exist either in Oswego or elsewhere in the country.  

Markley was most likely correct in his assessment as to what benchmark issues identified opposing sides with regards to the refugees.

Some editorial letters supported Markley’s beliefs. On June 22, 1945 Miss B. Brown of Syracuse wrote in the Syracuse Herald-Journal. She wrote: “... I think it is fine that these people have been able to be our guests for the duration of the European War. However, I believe that it is now time for them to go home and take their talents with them and build up the countries which they had to leave and which our boys done their best to liberate. I do not really believe it would be right for them to remain in this country and take a job which some of our boys may be needing when this war is all over. Their brains and brawn will be needed to rebuild Europe into a civilized place to live.”

Some Americans whose sense of economic security was devastated by the Great
Depression were uncertain America would not return to a similar economic crisis following the war. Nevertheless, believing that fewer than 920 refugees, for some having already returned to Yugoslavia, would impact on the job opportunities of returning American soldiers was naive at best.

Some letters written in defense of the refugees were artful in capturing the essence of the dilemma. An August 3, 1945 letter by Kathleen E. Roberts of Oswego, was an example of eloquent and well-reasoned support of the refugees. She wrote: “This letter is an appeal to the people of Oswego; an appeal for more friendliness and kindness toward our neighbors. During the past year, we have been given the opportunity to become the nucleus of international good will and understanding; to have in our homes the pleasures and benefits of an international society. We have failed. The insularity displayed by the citizens of Oswego a year ago doomed us to failure from the beginning, and this failure has only been confirmed by their attitude since that time. What our men have fought for and won on the battlefields, we have lost at home– the battle for freedom and democracy and tolerance toward our fellow men.” Her address indicated she lived in one of Oswego’s most affluent neighborhoods. She continued: “A little over a year ago, we have thrust upon our town a thousand people who had fled from the Nazi menace in Europe to find peace, comfort and happiness upon our shores. Tired, disheveled and frightened, they herded like sheep into the shelter of Fort Ontario. Yet, underneath their unsightliness, they carried in their hearts a faint hope, and eager anticipation to witness and experience some of the glories of this nation about which they had heard and read such glowing reports.” Roberts demonstrated that she was informed about the refugees. She
continued: “At first, they were puzzled about the restrictions under which they lived and the unfriendliness which was evident in their neighbors. It was difficult for them to understand the reasons for repeated rebuffs from fellow allies. Ignorant of our customs and manners, they were accused of committing outrage after outrage against our honored institutions. They could not, or did not adapt themselves quickly to our mode of dress, our manner of transacting business. They did not bow humbly to the town folk. There were misunderstandings and difficulties about language. But gradually, as the months went by, their difference wore away. They began to accept our way of life, to adopt our customs, to speak our language and bow humbly to Oswegonians, but by that time, so much resentment had been built up against them that even Solomon would have found it difficult to have arrived at a solution to the mutual problem.”

Roberts then dealt with the question which was at the forefront this second summer of the Shelter’s existence. She wrote: “In spite of these handicaps, and the frigidity of their reception here, many of these people have found this a very attractive country, and have expressed a desire to stay. However, the consensus of the people of Oswego seems to be against their remaining. ‘The political and economic order which was built up in this country through the sweat of our grandfathers’ and fathers’ brows, and maintained even today by our own sweat, must not be disrupted by any group of political exiles.’ How easy it is to forget that our own forefathers who were also refugees were also discriminated against.”

Roberts then attempted to reason with her neighbors. She continued: “Most of the refugees are of the finest calibre. Some are bold, others shy. Some are brilliant, others
stupid. In short, we have mistakenly thought of them as a homogeneous group, when, in fact, they are extremely heterogeneous. But one unalterable fact stands out. During the entire year they have been among us not one penal offense has been committed by any of them either amongst themselves or against their neighbors. It would be surprising, indeed to find a similar commendation about any other group of a thousand people, anywhere in the world.” Roberts concluded with an appeal to Oswego to respond to the humanity of the refugees. She concluded:

There is a great deal of evidence on both sides of this controversy, and the conduct of both sides is somewhat open to censure, but this question can never be settled by the backyard bickerings [sic] which have taken place over our fences. Whether these people stay in our country or not. Whether they are Jewish or Gentile. Whether or not they speak English is not entirely pertinent. The real problem, simply stated, is this: They are human beings, and our neighbors, and as such are deserving of humane treatment. Since this is true, I appeal to my fellow townspeople for more tolerant attitude toward them for the duration of their visit here. They will not be with us much longer. Some have already gone, others are preparing to leave this month. Even if permission is granted by the government to the others to remain in this country, they will undoubtedly choose some community other than Oswego in which to reside. In the short time that then they will be with us, let us enjoy their company. Let us forget our prejudices and grievances, and give these people a taste of friendliness and a show of real American democracy, so that they may leave here with kindlier feeling in their hearts towards Oswegonians. “Bread cast upon the water will return a thousandfold.” Has been true a million times over for those who have already given these people a friendly smile and a helping hand in their time of uncertainty.

It might very well be that the bulk of the negative reaction to the refugees took place in the editorial columns and “over the fences” of Oswego and not when in direct interaction with the Shelter’s residents. One reason that the refugees might have seen few indications of negative feelings was that those Oswegonians were sufficiently polite not to express the views they held.
The initial reaction of the merchants of Oswego to the refugees was one of qualified support. On August 14, 1944 a local merchant, Harold James, wrote Smart and outlined a plan to have local merchants provide clothing for the refugees. Despite a general willingness to work with federal officials and the Advisory Committee, what local businessmen feared most was that the largess associated with 982 new customers might not be distributed equitably. James wrote, “On the part of the clothing merchants there was a tendency to pull back from the whole transaction. Apparently they could not conceive a workable plan to allocate the business equitably among themselves.” Advisory Committee representatives extracted concessions from the recalcitrant merchants. Only when they were assured that no one of their peers would garner a disproportionate amount of a share of the new customer base did they agree to help.

This same view of community responsibility was described in Markley’s report. Markley quoted one merchant who stated that the refugees were good customers. Markley wrote: “The fact that there was considerable divided sentiment in the community and that the issue was an important one, was evidenced by the statement of a small business man, who said: ‘As far as I am concerned I like some of the refugees. They came into my place always acted like gentlemen. I dare not take sides, because I am in business. I have to keep out of controversies, because I depend on this little business for my living and my customers are not new ones every day.’” Thus it was not inconceivable that the shoe salesman who reinforced Parkhurst’s negative opinions about the refugees by implying they had bought up all the shoes of the community thus causing a shortage, may have been pandering to the opinions of one of his long-term customers. Nevertheless, for
any business operator to make such a statement would suggest that complaints from local
customers were commonplace enough to warrant such a practice.

There were problems where the refugees shopped as evidenced in a November 21,
1944 telephone call between Marks and Smart. A memorandum outlined the discussion:
“Mr. Marks said that he had talked to Mr. Tozier and Mr. Brodinsky about preparing a
release on the redemption of the funds. Mr. Smart said that Mr. Gomberg was going
down to Washington to talk to Mr. Abrahamson to try to get the Treasury to back a bond
buying plan. Mr. Smart said he was worried because of the feeling among the
townspeople of Oswego. He said that the leading people are still favorable but there is an
undercurrent of criticism among the laboring class which was very strong among the store
clerks. He felt the best thing to do is to have an aggressive bond campaign as well as to
cut off the grant, depending on the number in the family.” 19

So Smart was proposing a reduction in the refugees’ shopping allowance because
seeing the Shelter residents spend money was angering Oswego’s working class clerks.
Marks then told Smart there were problems with his suggestion. The memorandum
continued: “Mr. Marks said that neither WRA nor WRB could promote a bond drive. He
said they should be allowed a small amount for reserve, such as $100 per family. Mr.
Smart said the trouble was it will be a reserve for these people; he thought they would
spend it for luxury goods which are not now available to them. Mr. Smart said he felt
seriously that their public relations would suffer and it will create an ugly situation in
Oswego. Mr. Marks asked if there was much indication that a voluntary plan by the group
to buy bonds will work, and Mr. Smart said not unless it is tied up with the grants. He
said they won’t do it for any patriotic or good will reason. He said he had the impression that the people rather expected to be taken off the grants when they got their money.”

The monies discussed were the small monthly stipends the refugees received for doing menial chores around the Shelter. Originally, the refugees were given grants which did not take into account who was willing to work around the Shelter and who was not. There was a deteriorating public relations crisis in Oswego. If there were not Smart would not have taken steps to address it. At every possible juncture he was supportive of the refugees whenever he believed their rights had been infringed upon. Yet when Smart noted that “they won’t do it for any patriotic or good will reason,” it must be that he believed that the refugees were unnecessarily contributing to a decline in public opinion.

Despite Smart’s efforts to deflate negative publicity by reducing the refugees’ stipends, the public relations issues continued to be a problem for the duration of his tenure and that of his successors. It may have been inevitable that these people who had survived so much adversity, who had each resolved to outlast and outsmart their tormentors, were unfazed when confronted by petty jealousy and bigotry not accompanied by violence. The refugees’ adverse actions might even have been a manifestation of battered egos salving wounds with a form of conspicuous consumption; what is sometimes called pent up consumer demand or “shopping therapy.” Nevertheless, what damage occurred was not enough to derail the program. However much bigoted or petty carping happened over the fence and effectively behind the scenes of Oswego, the refugee children were largely unaware of it and subsequently unharmed by its existence. Ruth Tamar Hendel, a former refugee student, put all the pettiness in perspective when she recalled
what was indeed most important. She said: “It was a great relief not to be hiding anymore. It was a great relief to be stable. It was a great relief to have a life. We did not have a life, a life that we could pursue openly, without hiding. That was a wonderful relief.”

The Press

Smart’s summary for WRA headquarters, *Second Week Report*, indicated, “Interest in the shelter continued unabated during the week.” Though there were about a dozen magazine articles published about the Shelter and the refugees, the only interest from news dailies was found in Oswego, Syracuse and Rochester, and occasionally a newspaper in New York City or the Jewish Community.

Typical of the national articles published about the Shelter was an August 9, 1944 article entitled “Oswego Opens Its Hearts to Refugees” in the *New York Post*. It read:

This is a pleasant town, but hardly ripe in fun sports, so in the evening instead of a stroll around the block, now it’s “let’s go out to the fence by the fort.”

Surprised to find that those on the inside are gentle, cultured, intelligent people, local residents have become very sympathetic and are bringing offerings of books, chocolates and other delicacies in exchange for the newcomers stories of their experiences at the hands of Hitler [*sic*] gang...

It was favorable articles like this one which produced a deluge of gifts and support, so much help that a committee had to be formed to coordinate the donations offered. The support produced by favorable media coverage was essential to the success of the Shelter. For all of the efforts of Smart, Ade, Swetman and Faust, even schooling would not have been possible had there not been the resources generously donated to defray any additional cost to the Oswego school board. Every program at the Shelter, beyond food
and housing, was provided by donations which were inspired by media coverage.

An article in the July 1945 issue of *Woman’s Home Companion*, dealt with the educational issues. The article read: “In Oswego, New York, a generation of youngsters who never looked beyond Main Street before are learning the new lesson smartly, thanks to the help of a fourth R. Refugee is the fourth R for them—embodied in the daily companionship of one hundred and eighty-nine children from a dozen different countries of Europe.” Such specialized perspectives, in this case telling the story of the refugee children’s education in a manner that would appeal to American mothers, was indicative of how the Shelter was kept in the public view.

Articles about the education program served a strategic purpose. Amidst all of the conflict and controversy about whether or not the refugees should be allowed to remain in America, the success of the schooling program was, as Gruber described, “The children were the brightest picture in the whole camp.” Any article about schooling, no matter what perspective it portrayed, helped the cause of the refugees. Seeing the Shelter’s children succeed in American schools had an enormous impact on Americans.

*Survey Graphic* was a monthly periodical which was a media product of the Progressivism which had become the cornerstone of the New Deal. One Internet source described the periodical’s history. It read, “Established in 1921 as a companion to the social work journal *The Survey*, *Survey Graphic* targeted a wider audience of citizens in the social professions — politicians, journalists, doctors, lawyers, engineers, architects, city planners, and so on — who were interested in the welfare of the nation.” The article focused on the refugees’ future. It read: “These people were brought to the
Emergency Refugee Center from Italian concentration camps ‘for the duration’ as a symbolic gesture by the traditional land of freedom to the driven, lost victims of war and fascism in Europe. Now the question is being widely raised as to whether those who wish to stay in this country should be permitted to do so.”

The article sought to be more observant. It didn’t view the refugees from a perspective which might have omitted the complexities associated with the Shelter and the issues related to its existence.

At times the Shelter’s administration was less successful in managing the press. One example of this was an article published by a daily newspaper in New York City, *PM*. An article published February 27, 1945 in *PM*, entitled “Oswego, an Average U.S. Town, Chooses to Ignore Its Refugees.” The article began as almost every article about the Shelter did, that is, portraying Oswego as a typical American small town. The author suggested that Oswego’s reaction to the refugees would have been what would have happened in the rest of America had a more comprehensive program of admitting refugees been initiated. What those who believed that Oswego was a success had called “a thousand other Oswegos.”

The article continued: “Oswego was given the choice of welcoming or rejecting these 982 people from all parts of Europe who fled from Axis horrors... Oswego has rejected them. It determined to ignore them right out of existence–or at least right out of Oswego.”

The article was critical of almost everything happening in Oswego. Nothing, not even the schooling, could redeem the people of Oswego. The author said that money was the reason Oswego rejected the refugees. It read, “The town was prepared to resent them individually and as a group long before they arrived. This was because Oswego’s
pocketbook had been dealt a staggering blow.” The article stated that shortly before the refugees arrived the camp had been used to house soldiers, which was correct. It also stated that the Chamber of Commerce lobbied the federal government to make some other use of Fort Ontario which would benefit the city, which was also true. But there was no “long before they arrived.” The interval between Roosevelt’s announcement and the refugees’ arrival was about six weeks, such a duration could not be accurately characterized as “long” by any reasonable standard, even if the underlying assessment about the townspeople was correct.

The article implied that the Chamber of Commerce regretted soliciting the federal government to have the refugees brought there. There is little evidence that this is correct. The Chamber of Commerce did not appear to take any official position on the question of the refugees; however, many members of the Advisory Committee were also members of the Chamber. When Waterbury made his recommendations to Smart for Advisory Committee members it appeared he was mostly proposing his colleagues in the Chamber of Commerce. Attorney Harry Mizen, who chaired the Advisory Committee, also chaired the subcommittee of the Chamber of Commerce which was charged with finding a replacement for the soldiers who had departed Fort Ontario in the Spring of 1944. Yet there was no indication Mizen ever regretted his role. Long after the novelty of having 982 refugees in the community had worn off, Mizen was vigorously advocating for their admission as legal aliens.

One irony in the PM article was that it quoted Steffi Steinberg [Winters] who today has nothing but positive memories about her stay at the Shelter and her time in the
high school. Winters’ positive perspective was evident even in this article which attempted to reach a conclusion she would have never supported. It read: “Said 20-year old Steffi Steinberg of Berlin, Germany, who lives with her mother at the Fort: ‘The teachers and the students have been wonderful to us. I am sure they like us. We haven’t made friends— we aren’t free like others to make after school dates, because we must report back to the Fort, so we don’t have much time to get to know them. But I have learned to love this country and its customs in these seven months. My greatest wish is that one day I can speak of it as my own home.’”  

Even amidst such glowing compliments the PM article found that the people of Oswego had collectively rejected the refugees.

However negative the PM article was, it was lost in sea of favorable or neutral newspaper articles. There would be no evidence that negative news articles had any impact beyond the readership they sought to inform. This was not the case with nationally syndicated columnists, and one conservative writer in particular, Westbrook Pegler.

A persistent critic of Roosevelt, Pegler was known as “journalism’s angry man.” One biographer, Oliver Pilat, described this precursor of present-day conservative radio pundits in what would become familiar terms. Pilat wrote: “Poorly educated, non-intellectual, not even sophisticated— despite the Broadway-wise cynicism he affected— he found it easier to grapple with an enemy than with an idea. He became as deadly a duelist with words as Alexander Dumas with a sword at Versailles, or Aaron Burr with a pistol at Weehawken.” Roosevelt was just the sort of enemy Pegler sought to focus his skills and energies on; the Shelter and the refugees were the club with which Pegler beat the
President.

Pegler ultimately wrote three columns about the Shelter and the refugees. Each was as vitriolic as the other, and though there might have been legitimate reasons for opposing the Shelter or the admission of refugees, Pegler’s diatribes were riddled with inaccuracies. Pegler began his first column on the Shelter and its inhabitants, published November 13, 1944, by setting the stage. He wrote: “In the closing hours of the presidential campaign, a New York political parasite calling itself the Liberal Party sent a telegram to Tom Dewey, accusing John Bricker, his running-mate, of cruelty and callousness in a speech about the colony of 1,000 European refugees at Oswego, N.Y.” 33

Aside from the polemical use of the term “parasite,” this was a factual statement.

Republican Vice Presidential candidate Ohio Governor John W. Bricker, a former World War I army chaplain, had made allegations about the refugees in an October 23, 1944 campaign speech. Bricker said “instead of pale-faced children and women, the group consisted largely of men.” 34 According to Pegler, Bricker did not end the accusation with that allegation. Pegler continued: “Bricker said Roosevelt deceived Congress and the people when he announced that the 1,000 refugees would be ‘predominantly’ women and children. They were not and nobody who was watching the plot ever expected that women and children would predominate. There were several hundred adult males among them, and they were not toilers, but ‘intellectuals.’ After much secrecy, the Immigration Bureau revealed the true figures, which showed that Roosevelt had told Congress a falsehood.” 35 Bricker was correct that there was deception practiced by Roosevelt. But the deception was not regarding the ratio of healthy men to
women and children, the primary deception regarded the percentage of refugees who were Jewish. Healthy men were inevitably among those admitted because families were given a priority. How difficult would the selection process have been if recruitment were limited to families where the adult males were all physically unfit?

Pegler continued, uncritically blurring what Bicker had said with the columnist’s own opinion. Pegler wrote: “...he had no right to admit any of these people because Congress had specifically refused to suspend the immigration laws for him. Mr. Biddle, the Attorney General, requested that suspension, and gave several false and obviously dishonest reasons, but Congress suspected a plot to let in all the Communists of Europe and turned him down cold. After that, Roosevelt let in this batch and just told Congress about it.” 36 Roosevelt had in fact circumvented a Congress whom he had rightly supposed would oppose his plan. Congress at that time was dominated by Southern Conservative Democrats, committee chairman by virtue of the seniority system. But Pegler’s next step had to be more creative, more subtle. Since Pegler’s base readership was in New York City, where his career had begun, he could not be overtly anti-Semitic. He could, however, equate these ethnically-unidentified refugees with Communism, and ostensibly circumvent any accusation of being an outright bigot. He knew the common anti-Semitic prejudice was that most Jews were closet Communists. Even Hitler understood that ploy.

Bicker’s, and later Pegler’s, accusations, as outrageous and erroneous as they were, struck a chord at the WRA. Whether it was the nationally-syndicated forum or Pegler’s collusion with Bicker, WRA officials sought to address the heart of the criticism,
the composition of the refugee population. On October 24, 1944, the day after Bicker’s speech, Marks wrote Albert Abrahamson, Assistant Executive Director at the WRB. Marks refuted Bicker’s accusations. He wrote: “Of the 982 residents, 370 are females 16 years of age and over, and 189 are children of both sexes under the age of 16. Thus the number of males 16 and over totals 423, while the number of women and children amounts to 559.” Marks offered more detail. He continued: “Of the 423 males 16 and over, 299 are 45 and over and 124 are between the ages of 16 and 44 inclusive. The 124 males between 16 and 44 inclusive 23 in the age group 16-29, of whom eight are 16 and four 17 years of age; 32 in the age group 30-37; and 69 in the age group 38-44.” Marks used the standards employed by the draft boards to refute Pegler’s and Bicker’s accusations. Of the 982 refugees only a small segment were of an age where military service would be expected. This equation does not take into account physical conditions nor the number of dependents, both factors taken into consideration by draft boards. Marks concluded: “Our records indicate that of the 43 men between the ages of 18 and 37 inclusive, approximately two-thirds have wives, children, or other dependent family members living at the Shelter. A number of the group are physically handicapped or have undergone privation to the extent that their health has been impaired.” It was safe to assume that because of all what the refugees had endured, that a disproportionate number of men who would be normally eligible for military service would have suffered from disqualifying adverse medical conditions produced by what they had experienced.

With Roosevelt’s victory in the November 1944 elections Bicker returned to Ohio, where he was eventually elected to the U.S. Senate, and Pegler turned to other vehicles to
pursue his nemesis. It was not until the summer of 1945 that this columnist again turned his attention to the Shelter and the refugees. With Roosevelt dead, Germany defeated and Japan’s eventual fate a certainty, the long-term fate of the refugees had again become the debate’s focus.

On July 11, 1945 Pegler again weighed into the fray over Fort Ontario and its beleaguered residents. He wrote: “A campaign of propaganda is now in progress to repudiate President Roosevelt’s pledge to Congress that a group of ‘approximately’ 1,000 refugees from continental Europe who were brought here last summer would be returned to their homelands ‘upon the termination of the war.’ These people have been quartered at a disused military post near Oswego, N.Y., and an organization calling itself the Oswego Citizens’ Advisory Committee has implored President Truman and Congress to waive the Roosevelt promise and their own agreement that their asylum here would be temporary.”

As was the case in the past, Pegler opened with a relatively accurate account of events, even if one might challenge the notion that the opposing opinion was “propaganda.” Pegler even conceded that the bulk of refugees at Fort Ontario might not be Communists. He continued, “I believe most Americans will wish them well but with the dubious hope that all of them will be able to cleanse their minds of European politics and become Americans.” Then he lapsed into his standard anti-Communist fare. He wrote: “As far as we know, this the only group of refugees so admitted under Mr. Roosevelt’s decree and, if that is the case, we hope that there is no Trotsky among them. But, from the beginning, the proceeding has been lawless and a calculated imposition on the moist sympathy of the American people.” Pegler ignored the 1944 election that
provided Roosevelt an unprecedented fourth term despite Bricker’s protests about the Shelter. Pegler so vehemently disliked the refugees that he distrusted the charity of the American people in dealing with them.

Pegler then delved into the heart of the issue confronting refugees and the Truman administration. Pegler continued: “In what was flatly predicted at the time of their admission that they would not be required to go back and the propaganda to admit them permanently began within a few months after their arrival. Incidentally, although Mr. Roosevelt told Congress that these refugees would be ‘predominantly’ women and children, that was not the case. However, a prompt challenge of this action probably did thwart an intention to bring in many more thousands without the slightest regard for their politics or their fitness for immigration under the laws which the American people adopted for their own protection, convenience and domestic peace.”

Again, while many opposed the refugees remaining because they feared they would take scarce jobs from returning soldiers, Pegler questioned their fitness to be Americans because of some assumption he had reached about their personal politics. At this point the only characteristic the refugees had in common with one another, besides being refugees, was that they were Jewish. The implication that the refugees’ politics were offensive to Americans can only be based on some unarticulated equations which involved their being Jews.

Pegler spent the remainder of the long column rehashing his list of complaints about the now deceased Roosevelt. He outlined how the late President defied Congress and engaged in deception, all to help this band of potential Communists. As evidenced by
his continued focus on the predominance of military-aged men among the 982 refugees, Pegler was not deterred by the facts.

His final effort to derail the admission of the refugees took place after the Truman administration had made its decision about the refugees. On January 2, 1946 Pegler wrote: “There seems to be no legal objection to President Truman’s decision that immigration shall be resumed under the quota system, but he would have made a better impression and honestly would have been served if he had not resorted to the same hypocritical imposition on our sympathies that was employed by his late predecessor when he decided to admit the Oswego party in 1944.” Though Pegler can’t seem to work up the same lather for the working-class Truman as he had for the aristocratic Roosevelt, he still could not see past his hatred of the late President, or Pegler’s anti-Semitic assumptions, to allow these refugees to remain in America.

In his final column on the Shelter, Pegler again covered familiar territory. The refugees were mostly men. They were intellectuals, not workers. They had promised to return to their countries. He again discussed, this final time at little more artfully, his premise about the refugees’ desirability to remain in America within the context of their presumed affiliation with Communism. Pegler wrote: “This is no discussion of the desirability of these persons as immigrants. Their desirability, according to the usual standards, has not even been considered and the adults, men and women both, for all we know, may be Communists, so many of whom in Europe, were traitors to every land but Russia and so many of whom are lawyers, doctors, musicians, writers and artists. For that matter, we have no way of protecting ourselves if a Communist does manage to put his
name on a list and has friends here or in our consular service who will use their influence to advance him, as often happened in the years just after the other war. A little graft is helpful too.”

Here, in what appeared to be a nascent form of McCarthyism, Pegler implied that government officials were in collusion with the subversive refugees. Like so many conservative demagogues, had Pegler done a minimal amount of research he could have discovered that the most vocal advocate for the refugees’ permanent admission to America, Joseph Smart, was a former F.B.I. agent.

What was so important about Pegler was that he articulated a position about the refugees which was held by some Americans, certainly some politicians on Capitol Hill. It was precisely this form of nativist thinking which led Roosevelt to engage in the deception which became the obsession of Pegler. Just like Pegler, it was assumed that those who shared Pegler’s vision of American politics, and the subsequent view of refugees, also agreed with the columnist’s bigoted equation. How else could 300,000 former German and Italian soldiers, many of whom had likely killed American soldiers in defense of the Third Reich and Fascism, be allowed to work without supervision in America as prisoners of war, all while refugees were turned away?

The Roosevelt administration’s obsession with public opinion was because the whole program represented by the Shelter was itself a public relations effort from the first day. Allowing a mere 982 refugees to enter the United States as “guests” during a period when millions died and hundreds of thousands more could have been offered refuge, was primarily designed to deflect the public opinion of one segment of the population while not arousing the anger of another segment. Even the misconception that these people had
been rescued by the act of coming to America had its basis in the spin placed on the whole endeavor by the Roosevelt administration. Though internal memos made it clear that they were soliciting volunteers from liberated sections of Italy, time and again the press characterized the refugees as having been saved from certain death. Even to this day, much of the discussion surrounding the plight of the refugees at the Shelter seemed to have had its genesis in this misconception.

The refugees were not just Europeans, with all the cultural significance that implied. They existed in what might be called the cultural context of the refugee. Poor communication, misunderstanding, differing perspectives on what was important and what was not, all emanating from the impact of not just where the refugees had lived, but what events the refugees had each experienced and the trauma they had endured.

Though many of the negative responses of Americans were either anti-refugee bigotry or anti-Semitism, these conditions were made worse by a lack of understanding. Individuals not otherwise inclined to bigoted views, perhaps only what might be called petty, may have been influenced by the perception that the refugees were squandering their government-supplied clothes allotment on expensive clothes. All this existed in a political cauldron where national political interests fanned the flames of interpersonal misunderstanding.

The decision to place the refugees in the care of the WRA might have been merely an act of expedience. It may also have been that the WRB’s decision was based on the WRA’s view as to what was owed people who found themselves incarcerated.

Regardless, the decision placed the 982 refugees in the care of federal officials, most of
whom had their welfare at heart. The residents of the Fort Ontario Emergency Refugee Shelter were fortunate that the WRA officials they dealt with had done this all before.

Endnotes

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