Chapter Four

Ralph Faust: The Memory Eclipsing The Man

Ralph M. Faust, the principal of Oswego High School for more than twenty-five years, has become the centerpiece of the story about Oswego’s response to the refugees of Fort Ontario. At events sponsored by Safe Haven, Inc. over the last thirty years Faust’s name is the one most often invoked in the retelling of Oswego’s response to the presence of those refugees who lived at Fort Ontario for eighteen months. He is characterized as being an educator who was just and courageous man that played a critical role in opening Oswego’s schools to the more than 200 children of the refugees. The implication has been that without Faust the schooling of the refugee children might not have happened.

At an October 10, 2002 dinner following the dedication of Oswego’s Safe Haven Museum, a museum whose goal is to educate future generations about the Holocaust and Oswego’s response to the refugees, the keynote address was about Faust. Former Oswego Mayor John Sullivan described Faust as having been the cornerstone on which Oswego’s welcome of the refugees rested. Proud of their response to these people who were in such dire need, Oswegonians believe that Faust was the personification of that response.

Ralph Faust died in Oswego on August 5, 1993. For the last years of his life he had suffered from congestive heart failure and kidney disease, an ailment that took his mother in middle age. Though he was confined to a wheelchair, he was still active in the community. Ironically, for the last years of his life the Fausts lived in an apartment building for the elderly which had formerly been Oswego High School. Former refugee
student Dr. Ralph Manfred would humorously reflect on the fact that when he visited the
Fausts, he and his wife slept in what had once been his high school home room.

Faust’s funeral was reflective of his stature within the Oswego community. Inez
Parker, a forty-year librarian at Oswego State University, reflected on the occasion in an
unpublished account of the funeral of her beloved high school principal. She wrote:

Ralph Faust was the principal at The Oswego High School in the years that I
attended High School. He was also a member of my church. (Christ Church,
Episcopal - name now changed to Church of The Resurrection) When he died, I
volunteered to serve, as an acolyte, at his funeral. The Chapel was absolutely
filled to capacity. His frail wife sat in the front row accompanied by his only
daughter, Connie. The service was rather long because of all the telegrams and
messages sent to his widow. Most of these messages were from the refugees
who had stayed at Fort Ontario. They were unbelievably beautiful in their open
affection to this man and all that he had done for them. He was remembered as
someone who went against a number of people wanting the refugees to remain
behind the walls at the Fort. He insisted that these were children and that they
needed education. He insisted they be treated like the "other" children of
Oswego. The stories were moving and heartfelt. I was proud of him because he
was my principal, not having realized, at the time, just what an important man
he had been to young people he had not previously known. It was a very
special time for me; listening to these letters of love and admiration. I was
extremely proud to have known this man and to have served at his funeral, and
to finally hear for myself; just what he meant to those refugees for more than
fifty years.¹

Faust’s eulogy was delivered by a neighbor and friend in Oswego, Marilyn J.
Smiley. Her reflections on his life covered his whole career. She said:

Mr. Faust served as principal of Oswego High School for 24 years from
1939 to 1964. While in that position, he was active in the New York
Association of Secondary School Principals, even being president in 1946. He
was also involved at the state level by serving on several New York Board of
Regents Committees, and he represented state secondary schools for the
accrediting agency of the Middle States Association of Colleges and Secondary
 Schools. He was well liked by the Oswego High School faculty, and Anthony
Murabito stated it well in the newspaper when he referred to Mr. Faust as a fair
person who treated the teachers well. But most important, he influenced his
students. This is evident from recent newspaper comments by Thomas Halpin, who said. “In his own quiet gentlemanly manner, he made a big imprint on the city of Oswego.” “He did go the extra mile,”... and “he was there for the students.” Every former student I have met speaks of him in superlatives as teacher, principal, and friend. Throughout his life, he kept in contact with these former students, and a surprising number of them corresponded with him and looked him up when they were in town. All this brought him much satisfaction and joy.  

Smiley would then turn her attention to the events which had contributed to the reputation of this educator who had helped and inspired so many. She continued: “A high point of his career occurred while Oswego hosted 982 European refugees fleeing Hitler’s Holocaust by living at Fort Ontario from 1944 to 1946. As principal of Oswego High School, he welcomed forty refugees who chose to attend the school, and realizing the traumas they had experienced in Europe, he made every effort to accommodate their special needs. After the war, most of them elected to remain in the United States.”

She also related the story about the refugee student who was denied an award he had earned. She spoke: “One of Ralph’s favorite stories was about Kostia Zabotin, a refugee student who entered a speaking contest sponsored by the American Legion. After winning first place at two levels, he was refused a monetary prize at the third level because he was not an American citizen. Being a firm believer in justice, Mr. Faust objected strongly since this student had done an outstanding job, and the price was indeed awarded him.” Few teachers in the history of Oswego have engendered such respect from such a broad cross-section of the community. As indicated by Parker’s recollection and Smiley’s eulogy, it was a fitting tribute.

Gruber’s eloquent and passionate tribute to Faust would become a regular part of
her formal speeches about the events that were the inspiration for her book. It was a tribute like the one offered in a telephone interview in January 2003, which was my first encounter with Faust’s reputation. She said: “In the Jewish tradition the belief that thirty-six righteous souls save the world. Ralph Faust is one of those righteous souls. He turned Oswego High School into a haven for our young people. He knew that they had been running from Hitler’s bombs while war and Holocaust raged. He liberated them from terror. He helped them fulfill their dreams. They became engineers, doctors, lawyers, physicists, teachers, business people, political figures. They gave back to America everything America had given them.” 5 This would echo a similar sentiment she offered in an interview with Debra Cunningham-Smith, who wrote a master’s thesis on Faust. Gruber said in that interview: “Faust was a man determined to help young persons dream and would strive to help them fulfill those dreams. He deserves all the kudos you can give him. He was an educator with a rare ability to help those who suffered so much.” 6

The most telling and enthusiastic recollections about Faust came from the refugees themselves. Dr. Rolph Manfred, Ph.D., the former Ralph Manfred Kuznitzki, remembered how Faust contributed to his experience at Oswego High School. Manfred recalled in a 1994 interview: “It was exciting. First half year we learned English. After the first half year things went easily. High school was excellent. The teachers were outstanding. Through Ralph Faust and Gladys Baker and some of the other people we were able to graduate from here which made it easy to enter college at the next town.” 7 Another former refugee high school student, Paul Bukros, whose life led him to become an expert in rocketry, recalled his impressions of Faust and the teachers at Oswego High School.
He remembered: “I would like to emphasize the role that Oswego High School, Mr. Faust was the principal of the school, and teachers of Oswego High School, played in the process of my personal education and outlook on life in general. I left Oswego, I went to Philadelphia, I went to college. I became an aerospace systems engineer. Eventually, I retired as vice president of operations at General Dynamics Electronics Division in San Diego. I feel very strongly the foundation for my interest in electronics and the sciences was really provoked by one of my teachers in the industrial arts class at Oswego, a Mr. Krupke. Fifty years ago he insisted on accuracy, on workmanship, and total quality management. The things which American industry today is trying to achieve.”

Thea Wise Sanders, a former refugee student at the high school, remembered Faust in an interview. She recalled: “Yes, at that time the principal of the high school was Mr. Faust. He was really a wonderful person. He came to the camp to see how many young people were there eligible for high school. I was already 19 at the time but he still felt I should be going to school because I had lost about four years of schooling. With his help and the help of the teachers, who were excellent, we were able to attend school for the duration of the time we were in Oswego. That was the best part, I must say.”

This is just a sample of the tributes offered by former refugee students about the principal who had welcomed them back to the world of learning.

The most stirring tribute was offered by Steffi Steinberg Winters. As a twenty-year-old forced to flee from Berlin to Italy where her father had died in prison, Winters and her mother were sheltered by Italians for the duration of the war. Once the Germans retreated from that part of Italy she and her mother fled to the British lines. Taught
English in Berlin she was quickly pressed into service by the British, for her fluency in both German and Italian, for the task of interviewing other refugees.

This experience would make her invaluable to Faust. When Faust interviewed the refugee students Winters served as his interpreter. The relationship struck with Winter’s first American mentor lasted the remainder of Faust’s life. The Fausts and the Winters visited one another regularly. The Fausts even attended the Bar Mitzvah of one of the Winters’ sons. Winters’ tribute was simple, “My gratitude to Mr. Faust is endless, and it has flourished into a beautiful friendship between our two families, a friendship which I value and am very honored by.” She continued, “He was my friend, he was our principal.” She elaborated: “He was an extraordinary man of great kindness and everything he did was for the good of others— for all the students. He was totally giving of himself. He took all of us under his wings. He was extremely friendly with us. He was just a lovely man I respected him from the first moment to the last.” Winters believed Faust had a role in Truman’s decision regarding the refugees at Fort Ontario. She said: “Mr. Ralph Faust was also one of the kind and thoughtful citizens of Oswego who drew up and signed the ‘Memorial to The President and the Congress of The United States Concerning the Freedom of War Refugees Temporarily Living at Fort Ontario, Oswego New York’ which helped bring about our release from the Shelter in December 1945 and our being permitted to re-enter the United States (via Canada) as permanent immigrants— by a directive of President Truman to the Congress.” Though Winters may have forgotten the actual title of the document, the sentiment expressed was genuine.

Many of the local residents shared the belief that Faust was instrumental in the
education of the refugee students. One such person was Professor Seward Salisbury of Oswego State. He stated in a 1994 interview what many believed. He said, “He was the best friend the refugees had in Oswego.”

This sentiment was echoed by one of the English language teachers at the Shelter, Francis Marion Brown. She remembered, “Mr. Faust who was certainly a friend to all of them.”

Another local resident who had invited adult refugees to parties in her home was Mae Tompkins. She described Faust’s role in a manner which would become common among local residents. Tompkins recalled, “I know that Ralph Faust, who was principal at the time, he did a wonderful job of getting some of the refugee children into the school and they were very thankful for that because they went on to greater things.”

Former teacher under Faust, and former Principal of Oswego High School, Anthony Murabito, recalled his boss and mentor in his speech at the dedication of the Ralph Faust Theater in the high school on June 4, 1997. Murabito said: “Some of you will recall the arrival of the refugees in the summer of 1944. Ralph devoted many hours and much effort getting the children registered and enrolled in appropriate classes. You will also recall that several high school teachers—Jessie Wood, Ralph Konduct, Frieda Schuleke, Elizabeth Otis, to name a few, volunteered to help the refugees to adjust to our culture and way of life.”

Murabito, present at many of the events where Faust’s role was described, resisted the mythologizing pattern and instead spread around the accolades to several teachers, a practice that had become too uncommon.

In May, 1987, an Oswegonian nominated Faust, then retired and living in Oswego, for an award called the Louis E. Yavner Teaching Award. The nomination for
the award read, “Ralph M. Faust was Principal of The Oswego High School at the time 1,000 refugees from the Holocaust of World War II came to Fort Ontario. Mr. Faust was instrumental in assisting the refugee students in attending Oswego High school.” 18 The award was created by the New York State Board of Regents to recognize a teacher in New York State who has made an outstanding contribution “to education about the Holocaust and other violations of human rights. The awards are given annually by the Regents in honor of the late Regent Emeritus Louis E. Yavner.” 19 Faust had never taught about the Holocaust and only had an association with its victims; however, the nomination was an indication of the depth of the sentiment in the community regarding this educational leader. Needless to say, Faust did not qualify for the award. A news article attached to the nomination read: “I would like to call to your attention to the tribute paid to former Oswego High School Principal Ralph Faust. This gallant gentleman played an important part in the story of the Jewish people in Oswego and was instrumental in the education of the children. His work was outstanding and of great historic importance to both the citizens of Oswego and the State of New York.” 20 Even in death Faust’s reputation grew. In an Internet posting following the broadcast of the television mini-series *Haven*, one former student at Oswego placed this message for all to see. It read, “One hero of that story was Ralph Faust, who was my high school principal. He forced the US State Department to let the children out of the camp to attend school.” 21

Faust’s reputation after death grew to reach proportions that were evident in a masters’ thesis written by Debra Cunningham Smith. She wrote: “Ralph M. Faust, by his actions, could be called a giant among men. His actions were profound given the era in
which they took place and had a lasting effect on Oswego, the United States of America, and on hundreds of school children, both camp and city residents.” 22 The accuracy of that statement, and the assumptions on which the assertion is made, will be a focus of deliberation.

One reason Faust’s reputation grew was that he was one of the few local people mentioned in Gruber’s account, Haven (1983), the cornerstone of the resurgent interest in the Shelter and the refugees who lived there. Faust was even depicted in the television mini-series Haven, which aired on CBS on February 11, 2001. Though Faust was the local figure most mentioned in Haven, it was not her depiction of Faust in her book that led to the emergence of his mythical reputation. That would be accomplished by her reflections about him at the many fund raising events needed for the museum’s creation.

In Haven, there were six references to Faust. First, Gruber wrote, “Ralph Faust, the principal of the high school, came toward me, clearing his throat. ‘I’m a little shaken. I just saw an elderly woman kneel down and kiss the ground.’” 23 The event described had taken place at the official welcoming ceremonies on Sunday, August 5, 1944 when the educational establishment of Oswego was invited along with other local and federal dignitaries to join in the public opening of the Fort Ontario Emergency Refugee Shelter.

The second reference was an event which would be significant in the emergence of Faust’s reputation for helping the refugees. Guber wrote:

In the high school, Ralph Faust waited at the entrance to greet the young people who had crossed the bridge over the Oswego River. “We’re going to have an assembly this morning,” Faust explained as he led them into the building. “Wait here, we’ll be calling you in a little while.” In his office, he sent for the president of the Student Council. “This is a
unique experiment in American history. I would like you to give the welcoming address.”

“I won’t do it.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t think they should be in our school, or even in our town. The whole community should have been asked if we wanted the refugees in Oswego.”

“You may leave now. I’ll welcome them myself.”

The assembly began. The American students, already seated, stared at the unprecedented spectacle of foreigners walking down their aisle in strange clothes, tall and short, fat and scrawny, acne-faced and clear-skinned, plain-looking and handsome, some shy, some apprehensive, some filled with hope. 24

In a 1984 interview, Faust confirmed the details of the event. Faust, as the effective administrator and gentleman he was, did not tolerate such impolite conduct. The former class president has never been interviewed; however, those Oswegonians who recall the event believe the student was motivated by anti-Semitism.

The third reference is simple but has unexpressed implications. Gruber wrote, “The whole gym, even the congressmen, applauded when Ralph Faust announced that in his high school, ‘just today, I notified eight Fort Ontario students that they are eligible to join the National Honor Society.’” 25 What Gruber did not describe was how much work went into securing academic awards for which there was little or no record. Faust had to go to considerable lengths to justify awarding unschooled scholars with admission to the National Honor Society despite the existence of undeniable empirical evidence regarding academic achievement.

The fourth reference involves a series of events where there is some dispute. Gruber described the events as follows: “Kostia Zabotin entered the American Legion public speaking contest in the high school. Kostia spoke on the American Constitution,
and won first prize. The American Legion was not about to give him the award; he was not a citizen. But Ralph Faust ‘raised hell’ he told me in describing the incident.” Other interviews describe Faust traveling to New York City to advocate personally on behalf of Zabotin before the national board of the American Legion. Gruber’s account was factual in most respects. Faust was angered by the exclusion of Zabotin from the final step of competition. But Faust did not plead Zabotin’s case personally, he sent a teacher, Anthony Murabito, to argue the cause of the excluded refugee student before a regional board governing the competition.

*Haven’s* fifth reference to Faust was an example of how Gruber’s style of writing so effectively captured an event in history. They would be the first and only refugees to graduate from Oswego because the Shelter closed before the next class of students could graduate. Gruber wrote: “And on graduation day, families and friends applauded loudly as Anita Baruch, Alfons Finci, Lean Hanf, Gordana Milinovic, Steffi Steinberg, and Edith Weiss, dressed in long white robes and white mortarboards, marched down the auditorium. Smiling and grateful, they shook hands with Ralph Faust, who had made all this possible. They walked off the platform with diplomas, full-fledge graduates of the Oswego High School.”

Faust received credit as the person “who had made all this possible,” which was correct. But it was the meaning of this statement that was to be misconstrued. What was the “this” to which Gruber referred? Obviously, Gruber was referring to the event of graduation. Faust had worked hard to allow the refugee students to earn credit for their proficiency in multiple languages, the key to their graduating. He had designed innovative
schedules where the refugee students took as many as three courses in English in one semester. Faust, along with the graduates themselves, was instrumental in their graduating so quickly. Another administrator might not have been willing to sort out the maze of regulations, bend the interpretation of the rules, all to allow these youths to graduate. What happened in local history, what might even be called local mythology, was that the meaning of “this” was expanded.

The last reference to Faust referred to the 1984 reunion of refugees and townspeople held in Oswego commemorating the fortieth anniversary of the Shelter’s establishment. Gruber wrote, “Ralph Faust, white-haired but ramrod-straight, was pummeled and hugged by former students who had never forgotten what they owed him and the high school.” Again, the account was entirely factual. Personally, they each were indebted to him for what he had accomplished. The question remained, what specifically had Faust accomplished?

Ralph Milligan Faust was born November 6, 1901 in Camden, New Jersey. His parents, Harry Faust and Bertha Milligan were Pennsylvania Dutch who had recently moved from the hamlet of Pottstown Station about thirty miles northwest of Philadelphia. The Faust family had lived in that German-speaking region of southeastern Pennsylvania for many generations.

Dorothy Faust, Ralph’s widow, described her husband’s family as having been conventional in every way by the standards of that era. She recalled, “His father was in the lumber business, his mother was a housewife. Children were told what to do, you couldn’t talk back. They were strict but loving.” Mrs. Faust recalled, “His family lived
in Camden, New Jersey... that’s where he went to school. He won a scholarship to Syracuse University after his high school days.” 30 It was while in Syracuse Faust discovered the teacher vacancies in the public schools of Oswego.

Faust was in the classroom only two years when appointed an administrator. He progressed through the ranks quickly. As an administrator he moved from assignment to assignment in the Oswego Public Schools until in 1939 he was appointed Principal of Oswego High School, the city’s only senior high school. According to his widow Dorothy, “He was very active in the church. He was a vestryman, senior warden, wrote the histories that took hours and hours of research. He was involved with fund raising. Whatever he did he worked at it.” 31 He died August 5, 1993.

Endnotes

1 Parker 2003.


3 Smiley 1993, 3.

4 Smiley 1993, 4.


6 Ruth Gruber, May 1996 telephone interview by Debra Cunningham-Smith.

7 Ralph Manfred, Ph.D., 1994, videotaped interview by Scott Scanlon, Safe Haven Collection, Special Collections, Penfield Library, State University of New York at Oswego.
8 Paul Bukros, 1994, videotaped interview by Chris Ulanowsky, Safe Haven Collection, Special Collections, Penfield Library, State University of New York at Oswego.

9 Thea Wise Sanders, 1994, videotaped interview by Chris Ulanowsky, Safe Haven Collection, Special Collections, Penfield Library, State University of New York at Oswego.


11 Winters 1990, 3.

12 Winters 1990, 3.

13 Winters 1990, 4.

14 Seward Salisbury, Ph.D., 1994, videotaped interview by Chris Ulanowsky, Safe Haven Collection, Special Collections, Penfield Library, State University of New York at Oswego.

15 Frances Marion Brown, 1994, videotaped interview by Chris Ulanowsky, Safe Haven Collection, Special Collections, Penfield Library, State University of New York at Oswego.

16 Mae Tompkins, 1994, videotaped interview by Chris Ulanowsky. Safe Haven Collection, Special Collections, Penfield Library, State University of New York at Oswego.


18 Frederick J. Maxon, May 29, 1987, application for Louis E. Yavner Teaching Award—submitted by Frederick J. Maxon, Faust File, Safe Haven Collection, Special Collections, Penfield Library, State University of New York at Oswego.

19 Louis E. Yavner Teacher Recognition Award 2003, Faust File, Safe Haven Collection, Special Collections, Penfield Library, State University of New York at Oswego.

20 Maxon 1987.


22 Debra Cunningham Smith, July 1996, “The Influence of Ralph M. Faust,” Faust File,
Safe Haven Collection, Special Collections, Penfield Library, State University of New York at Oswego.


24 Gruber 1983, 152.


26 Gruber 1983, 199.

27 Gruber 1983, 199.


29 Dorothy Faust, May 1996, interview by Debra Cunningham Smith, 49.

30 D. Faust 1996, 49.

31 D. Faust 1996, 49.