Chapter Five

The Schooling Problem

For historicity to re-emerge from nascent myth the events must be retold with all of the complexities and ambiguities intact, at least as intact as historical record and recollection will permit. The emergence of myth can be an accident, or what might be better described as an unintended product of some other factor, but to understand that process those factors should be analyzed. Faust never inflated his own story, that was done by others. How did it come to be that the schools of Oswego were open to more than 230 refugee children?

When President Roosevelt announced on June 9, 1944 that 1000 refugees were coming to America, the WRA was surprised that they would be their responsibility. Though the WRA was operating “relocation” centers, they were for native-born Japanese Americans, or Japanese resident aliens, who had considerable experience in this country. “With the arrival of the refugees at the Fort, the WRA began a new and unprecedented operation within the United States—the administration of a refugee camp. The task of receiving and registering the refugees was speedily accomplished and within the first few hours they were assigned to the apartments and dormitory rooms they were to occupy. Most contingencies had been provided for, although it was inevitable that certain of the arrangements would require later adjustment as a result of actual experience with the group.”1 Though it could be argued that there were disturbing similarities between both groups, it was clear that from the perspective of education there was a significant difference. At least the native-born internment camp residents spoke English. Only a
small minority of the refugees spoke English.

At all eleven internment centers the WRA provided education for school age internees. In California’s camps the children were from California. Not only were the children transferring from one American school to another, they were merely moving from one California school district to another. In the other WRA camps, different arrangements were established depending on state law and proximity to existing schools. Whatever the arrangements, all of the students attending schools operated for the children of the internment camps had previously been enrolled in American schools.

The schooling of refugee children not only provided a challenge in terms of Americanization, the WRA knew that most of the refugee children had their schooling interrupted by warfare and persecution. Furthermore, the WRA was led to believe by those close to the President that the Shelter would be in operation only a few months. Smart recalled: “I was told the camp would be simply a ready area, where I’ll keep these people for two months awaiting arrangements to resettle under some kind of program which had not been finalized. I didn’t expect at all I was going to be managing a modified concentration camp or detention center.” So when early plans for schooling were described which appeared minimal, it reflected an educational program tailored to what WRA officials believed appropriate. What was not clear was how early in the process did Smart learn the real duration of the refugees’ stay. Clearly no one could guess as to when the war would end, but once it was clear that the Shelter was not a short-term facility, they knew these people would be there for the duration of the war.

The WRA was flexible in its approach in creating schools. Where there was little
hope that states would support education programs, the WRA simply paid for it all. Where states were reluctant or had legal obstacles to meeting the needs of the camps the WRA made whatever accommodations that were necessary to set up schools. In California, the WRA worked with local officials to ensure as smooth a transition as possible. What the WRA officials had in mind for the Shelter appeared to be an educational program more limited than any of the other WRA camps. It appeared that initially there were no plans to enroll refugee students in local schools or to provide schools through the WRA. The policies read: “WRA will not employ any appointed school teachers or other school personnel at the Shelter, but will provide buildings and other facilities and encourage the refugees in organizing and developing their own school program.”

This suggested that services like those funded by an alliance of national charities, called the Coordinating Committee, were sufficient to operate a school inside the Shelter. The policies continued: “Public or private organizations may assist in the organization of Shelter schools through the provision of books or any other manner they see fit, provided WRA policies are adhered to. Schools established at the Shelter may be conducted in any language. Nursery schools, adult education classes, and vocational training classes may also be conducted at the Shelter. Religious denominations within the Shelter may be assigned buildings or rooms by the Shelter Director for religious instruction of children.”

The refugees’ recent history, and the intense scrutiny which their plight was attracting from the media and skeptical politicians, suggested that once it was known the refugees would be kept at Fort Ontario longer than the two months, this proposed educational policy was designed for one of two options. Either it was a feint to
hide from Congress the true projected duration of the refugees’ stay or it was a plan to appear callous about schooling to encourage the local leaders and officials to intervene?

At first the WRA proposed that there would be no education provided. This tough stance about schooling was first evident in a memorandum dated July 5, 1944 from WRA Director Myer to Ralph Stauber and Dr. Ruth Gruber, the assistant to Secretary Ickes, who both represented WRA and accompanied the refugees on their voyage from Italy. Gruber and Stauber were directed as to what they might tell the refugees. It read, “They will be maintained at Fort Ontario for the duration of the war. They will have adequate housing, food, clothing, and medical care. Every effort will be made to consider cultural, national and religious preferences in providing for them. They will be free to worship as they please, and insofar as possible, facilities will be provided for each religious group to carry on services. Schools will not be provided by the War Relocation Authority, but space will be made available if the refugee groups wish to organize their own schools. Family living arrangements will be worked out for those who desire it.”

This policy was a departure from WRA practice as evidenced by what steps were implemented in the internment camps schools.

What the WRA would allow at Fort Ontario was for the refugees to form their own schools. The WRA knew the refugees were a diverse group. Could this group so linguistically diverse effectively operate a school? Among the Jewish refugees there were those who were Orthodox and those who were not, this would be reflected in educational goals and styles. There were linguistic and cultural divisions as well. The more fragmented the population the more “schools” would have to be set up in the camp.
Medical professionals had been recruited with the thought of staffing health facilities at the encampment, but there had been no similar effort to entice educational professionals to emigrate to America. In WRB Director John H. Pehle’s June 16, 1944 directive regarding “the selection of refugees” an attachment indicated who should be included among the refugees: doctors, dentists, a nurse, carpenters, plumbers, and electricians, but no teachers, professors, or educational administers. It might be speculated that people who possess “leadership qualities” might also be natural teachers, but that is not evident. Directing families to be selected, which would produce a disproportionate number of children, and not to provide personnel to educate them in this “miniature community” was potentially a serious oversight.

What made this appear to be posturing on the part of the WRA to force local educators to step forward was evident early in the process of planning for the refugees. In a June 22, 1944 memorandum from Dr. John H. Provinse, Chief, WRA’s Community Management Division, to Myer, Provinse speculated that 300 school-aged children would be part of the 1000 refugees. Pehle’s speculation was not far off, there were 232 school-aged children residing at Fort Ontario. Though as early as June 22nd it was speculated that Oswego schools might admit the refugee children; however, Stauber and Gruber were not told of this option. They were directed to tell the refugees they would be allowed to form their own schools.

One possible catalyst for change from the initial educational plans of the WRA was the expectations of the refugees themselves. Though both the WRB and the WRA seemed to think that education could be an secondary consideration, it became clear early that for
some refugees education was the primary reason they came to America. The first report filed by Stauber to Myer and Smart discussed this. It read: “The educational problem needs careful examination. There are about one hundred children between eight and sixteen years of age, and 65 between two and seven. There are also some in the late teens and early twenties. Some of the parents have been partly—probably largely—motivated in their desire to come to the United States by their desire for their children to have an American education. If arrangements could be made for children of school age to attend school in Oswego it would be a great boon for the children, many of whose schooling has been retarded during the years of flight and persecution. Some of the older ones doubtless desire to attend college. Perhaps outside assistance can be found to make such study financially possible.” With the educational policy in such a state of flux, bounded on one side by WRA’s reluctance to operate schools in the Shelter and on the other by the refugees’ expectation that they were coming to America to have their children educated in American schools, conflicting signals should have been anticipated. The WRA did not disappoint.

One reason for the WRA’s reluctance to commit to operating schools at the Shelter, as they had at every other internment camp, might have been caused by presidential control. Few federal programs involving less than 1000 individuals received more intense scrutiny from the President, the First Lady, and the president’s political opponents both inside Congress and in the media. Subsequently, Roosevelt had to personally approve every policy involving the refugees. In an August 14, 1944 meeting between the WRA and the WRB, when a possible solution to the problem of schooling
had emerged, the participants questioned the wisdom of refugee children attending public schools and speculated about the President’s ultimate approval of the action.

Mr. Marks outlined the preliminary discussion that Mr. Smart had had with Mr. Rutherford and Dr. Swetman at Oswego concerning possible attendance of refugee children of school age at the Oswego schools. Mr. Abrahamson pointed out that there will undoubtedly be language difficulties in the case of a considerable number of children; that while the younger ones would probably fit into elementary classes, some special instruction might be necessary for the older children if they were not to be seriously handicapped. He also raised the question of whether it was entirely appropriate for these children to have their education in American schools. Mr. Pehle stated that he was generally in agreement with the objectives of having the children attend local schools, although he felt that some might be taught within the Shelter itself. He stated that the arrangements, of course, would have to be worked out by us but that it was necessary in his belief for the matter to be cleared with the President before it actually gets under way... We should go ahead with the arrangements for schooling on the assumption that everything will be O.K., but should let him know as soon as our plans are developed so that this memorandum can be drawn up and approval secured.

The only overt evidence of the President’s concurrence would come from his wife, who visited the Shelter about five weeks after the refugees’ arrival and voiced her approval.

The officials at both the WRB and the WRA knew that every action they took on behalf of the refugees would be scrutinized. Even something as rudimentary as schooling for the children might have broader implications. In an August 10, 1944 New York Post article, less than a week after the refugees’ arrival, one refugee explained reasons for his receiving technical training. A former Yugoslav lawyer, Dr. Leo Levy, said: “Then we go back to make a new life and take up our same jobs. But we want to train here because here there must be easier ways of doing things than we have done them in our countries.” This article showed that the WRA emphasized the temporary nature of the refugees’ presence in America. In light of the limited access that journalists had to the refugees at
this early date it was clear that the Shelter administration wanted to have even training viewed as being part of the temporary character of the refugees’ stay in America. It was possible that the WRA feared that the refugee children entering public schools might portray some unintended indication of a more permanent stay in America, something opposed by Congress and Roosevelt’s critics in the media and elsewhere.

A further indication of an evolving policy on schooling was the cursory manner in which education was addressed in the welcoming ceremonies on August 5, 1944. Despite the importance education played in some refugees’ decision to emigrate and the degree to which schooling was part of every discussion to date about the Shelter, there was only a brief reference to schooling in any of the speeches. That was, “Building and facilities will be made available and other encouragement given you to organize your own school program.”

What is meant by “other encouragement” was unclear. The brevity and vagueness of the reference might have reflected indecision. It may have been as Smart indicated that they believed they were to have the refugees only a short time before they would be sent on to other institutions. Though there were only a few teachers among the refugees, those there by accident, it was doubtful that the WRA really believed that this diverse group which exhibited such discord and dissent on the Henry Gibbons could be capable of operating something as organizationally complex as a school for more than two hundred thirty students.

When the WRA stated that it would not offer schooling for the refugee children it did depart from agency practice, but was practice official policy? In an August 26, 1942
memorandum sent to Ade, then on loan from the Office of Education, from Lewis A. Sigler, Acting Solicitor of WRA, Sigler noted the inconsistencies in the education agreements, secured under Ade’s direction, with the states which had WRA camps. Sigler wrote: “The California, Arizona, and Idaho memoranda have an outstandingly better statement in paragraph No. 3 with respect to local responsibility for education. This statement says unequivocally that the public school system has traditionally been a State and local responsibility, and that the War Relocation Authority wishes to preserve that responsibility. The corresponding statement in the Wyoming, Colorado, and Arkansas memoranda contained in paragraphs 3 and 4 gives almost the contrary impression by indicating that the War Relocation Authority desires to assume the responsibility for education in the relocation centers, that it recognizes its responsibility to do so, and that a separation of State and Federal control is necessary.” The WRA could not convey a coherent policy on education because it had none, at least not one which could be legally consistent with regards to issues of federal versus state authority. What was evident was that sometimes the WRA ran the schools and other times it trusted the local school systems to perform the task. What was different about the official Fort Ontario educational plan was that the WRA initially planned to do neither.

Whatever was the policy of the WRA regarding the education of its school-age charges, even if there was no policy at all, only site-specific arrangements, Smart would have known how the system worked. One indication of the importance of the Shelter for the WRA was that it recruited a former administrator who had supervised five internment camps to head just one small camp. Smart had been Regional Director of the WRA’s
Denver Office when in 1943 he accepted a foreign service position with Nelson Rockefeller in Peru. The WRA was allowing Japanese-Americans to leave the interment camps if they relocated away from the west coast. With camp populations declining there was not the need for as many administrators as there had been initially. Smart was working in Peru when he was appointed as Shelter Director.

The idea of appointing a committee of Oswego citizens to advise the WRA did not originate with Smart. It first appeared in a meeting just days before the refugees’ arrival. A July 28, 1944 meeting at WRA headquarters with Edward P. Marks, Refugee Program Officer, Dr. John H. Provinse, Chief, Community Management Division, Stalley and McCord present discussed the need to create a local advisory committee. A file memorandum described the meeting, it said: “It was suggested that we propose to Mr. Smart the possibility of his setting up a non-partisan local committee of Oswego citizens to advise with him regarding the Shelter needs which could be handled locally and assist him in determining which services should be sought from outside agencies.”

All of the WRA camps were in remote areas. There were advisory committees formed for those camps, but they were largely issue oriented. Committees on education, recreation or health had been formed comprised of state and local officials and professionals in the respective fields. No community-based committees had been formed because no WRA camp was close enough to a populated area to warrant it.

Once Smart received the suggestion from headquarters he immediately set about the task of creating an advisory committee. An undated letter from Smart to Edwin M. Waterbury, the publisher of the Oswego Palladium-Times, outlined Smart’s rationale for
forming a committee of local leaders to advise him. It read: “Here at Fort Ontario we are engaged in an important and humane work which has been undertaken by our government. While local responsibility has been delegated to me as a representative of our government, I want to have the benefit of the considered judgment of responsible men and women in the community of Oswego. I feel that in an advisory way they can and will be very helpful to me, and in that way will contribute to the quality of administration of the Emergency Refugee Shelter.”

Smart then asked Waterbury to offer critical help. The letter continued: “It is with this purpose in mind that I am today asking a few people in Oswego to accept appointment on an advisory committee. I want from time to time to meet with these committee members, either as a group or as individuals, so that some of our problems may be discussed and planning done, within the framework of the general policies laid down by my superiors in Washington.”

On August 3, 1944, the day the refugees arrived in New York City, six days after the idea was raised in Washington, Waterbury responded to Smart’s request for recommendations for the advisory committee. Waterbury wrote: “By request of Allan Markley, I am enclosing herewith a list of persons each of whom I think would make a desirable member of the Advisory Council or Committee which I understand you purpose [sic] to name to assist you from time to time with counsel or advice in regard to local problems which may in arise in connection with the conduct of the Shelter.”

As requested, Waterbury recommended a non-partisan collection of community leaders. Though not stipulated in the Washington discussion, Waterbury made his recommendations religiously diverse. Waterbury recommended “Robert L. Allison, President of Wilcox Pros., Wholesale Grocers Inc.,
Episcopalian, Mrs. Francis D. Culkin, former President of the Oswego Board of
Education, Widow of Representative Francis D. Culkin, Episcopalian, Charles E. Riley,
Superintendent of City Schools, Catholic, Ralph Shapiro, proprietor Wholesale Paper and
Supply House, Jewish, Dr. Ralph W. Swetman, President of Oswego State Teachers
College, Presbyterian, Daniel A. Williams, Director of the Historical Society, Catholic,
Mrs. Max Gover, Department store owner, Jewish, Mrs. James G. Riggs, widow of
former President of Oswego State Normal School, Presbyterian, Ralph M. Faust, Principal
of Oswego High School, Episcopalian, Harry B. Lasky, Manager Oswego Netherland
Company plant, Jewish, A.C. Hall, retired wholesale baker, Congregationalist, Charles G.
Goldstein, one of the proprietors of Kline Bros. Department Store, Jewish, E.D. Street,
former Vice-President and Cashier of First & Second National Bank & Trust Company,
no affiliation, Charles W. Linsley, officer of Oswego Candy Works, Church of the
 Evangelist.

Checks made in pencil next to some, but not all, of the typewritten names,
indicated that Smart did not accept all of Waterbury’s recommendations. Markley
submitted an undated note to Smart for final approval as to who should be invited to join
the committee. Markley wrote:

Identical letters for Advisory Committee to [sic]

E.M. Waterbury Publisher Oswego Palladium Times
Robert L. Allison President Wilcox Bros Wholesale Grocers Inc.
Mrs. Francis D. Culkin Oswego N.Y.
Charles E. Riley Supt of city schools Oswego
Ralph Shapiro Oswego N.Y.
Dr. Ralph Swetman, President Oswego State Teachers College
Daniel A. Williams Oswego N.Y.
Smart responded to Markley by editing the list. In pencil Smart wrote:

Add:  
Faust  
Lasky  
Goldstein  
Catholic minister designated by Bishop  
Head of Oswego Council of Churches

Though the suggestion to create the Advisory Committee originated with Smart’s superiors at WRA headquarters, from the earliest stages Smart was exercising control and direction. Though Smart himself helped foster the illusion that the committee was a spontaneous, community-based, grass-roots action, it is clear that not only did he create the committee, he controlled who would serve on it.

Months later two men present at the Advisory Committee’s inception discussed Smart’s sustained deception. In a note sent to committee member Daniel Williams by Oswego State President Swetman reminding Williams why they should take additional steps for the refugees, Swetman stated, “The Oswego Citizens Advisory Committee for Fort Ontario was formed at the request of the War Relocation Authority shortly after the establishment of the Fort Ontario Refugee Shelter.”

This was not a public letter, and if it had been learned how Smart worked behind the scenes in the beginning it might have discredited his efforts to help the refugees.

Another account which confirmed Smart’s role in the formation of the committee was offered by Smart’s onetime aide, Allan Markley, shortly after the Shelter closed in 1946. In Smart’s letters to Washington it appeared that the community-based committee was formed by local initiative, Markley stated otherwise. Markley wrote: “The City of
Oswego Cooperating Committee (a group of prominent citizens) which was formed by the administration to aid in the public understanding of the shelter and in making factual information available, in time became an active force working for the refugees and the decision of the government favorable to them to remain in this country.”  17  18

Acknowledging that there was an alliance of Jewish groups helping the Fort Ontario refugees would indicate that most of the refugees were Jewish, a fact the Roosevelt administration tried to hide from Congress and anti-immigrant political forces.

Considerable confusion about these two distinct committees and the functions they served would linger in the public’s recollection.

Ickes’s aide Dr. Gruber wrote a memorandum to her superiors at Interior in early 1945, entitled *Eight Months Later* (1945). She stated that she was present at the Advisory Committee’s first meeting. She wrote: “At the Citizen Committee’s first meeting held in the Shelter a few days after the refugees arrived, a meeting which I attended, the Committee made it abundantly clear that it had excellent intentions. It carried out those intentions well in the months that passed. At the first meeting, the citizens, in a magnificent gesture of democratic hospitality, invited the children to go to city schools. In fact one of the educators said he would be glad to take all of the children in his school. But it was though best to farm them out among various institutions.”  19 A committee comprised of the community leaders of Oswego, hand picked by Smart, had formally invited the refugee children to attend the schools of Oswego. What sort of authority did this committee have to make such an offer? If Oswego Public School Superintendent Riley was present the invitation carried some weight.
But Riley was not present at that first meeting of the Advisory Committee. Smart’s account of the meeting, written that day, was more informative. In an August 18, 1944 file memorandum Smart described the first meeting in his office. He wrote: “A group of citizens of Oswego met in the office of the Director of the Emergency Refugee Shelter. Present were: Robert L. Allison, Ralph Shapiro, Daniel A. Williams, Ralph M. Faust, Harry Lasky, Charles Goldstein, Rev. Griffith, Harry B. Mizen and Rabbi [name left blank]. In addition there were present representatives for Father James Shanahan and for Dr. Ralph W. Sweatman [sic]. Invited to attend but not present were: Charles E. Riley, E.M. Waterbury, and Mrs. Francis D. Culkin.” 20 Smart’s memorandum distinguished between persons absent but who sent representatives and those who were simply absent. Father Shanahan, who had been appointed by the Catholic Bishop of Syracuse, had sent Father Jeremiah Davern, future committee member and pastor of Saint Joseph’s parish. Oswego State College President Swetman sent Marion Mahar, a professor at the college who would also eventually join the committee. Though Faust was present it was clear to Smart that he did not represent Riley and subsequently not the Board of Education. One of the few Oswego teachers from that era still alive recalled that Faust had to encourage Riley to participate. Anthony Murabito, said, “I think Faust had to bring Riley along.” 21

What authority this group of citizens had, notwithstanding Smart’s role creating the committee, was also a subject of concern for federal officials. At this meeting Smart outlined to the committee the major problems facing the refugees. He described issues related to the freedom of the refugees to shop in Oswego, Smart also described the problems regarding schooling refugee children. Smart covered the reasons. Many
refugees had come specifically to have their children educated. Also, the children had been denied schooling for years because of the war and persecution. Smart then added something, which read “...he felt it would be to our country’s benefit to have these children and adults also, who are returned to Europe they will have knowledge of our people and our schools, to meet, mingle with, study and play with American boys and girls.”

Smart was cautious not to overstep his authority, at least in this official account. He outlined the schooling problem before the committee members without suggesting a specific solution. As Smart discussed funding he implied there were multiple options for where schooling would take place. He wrote: “If schools are to be operated either at the shelter or outside the area, local facilities would be required. Books, supplies and possibly some professional assistance may be obtained from some of the national welfare organizations which are interested in the work being done for the refugees. He said that he felt that if necessary transportation might secured in this way, because it is impossible for the Government to provide transportation outside the area for school purposes.”

In the Weekly Report August 13 to 20, Smart described to his superiors the first gathering of the group which would comprise the Oswego Citizens Advisory Committee. He outlined the role of the committee and talked about how that committee could serve the needs of the refugees. Smart acknowledged that he discussed educational problems and whether or not the refugees would be granted leave to shop in Oswego. Smart wrote: “We have taken positive steps looking toward the formation of a cooperating committee of Oswego people. On Friday afternoon some selected persons representative of the different leadership, civic, educational and religious met in my office and I outlined the
scope of activities of such a committee. They responded willingly and immediately
effected a temporary organization electing Harry Mizen (chairman of the Chamber of
Commerce Fort Ontario Committee) as chairman, the principal of the high school as
secretary, and one of the leading Catholic priests as name vice chairman. We hope this
committee will be very helpful both in public relations and dealing with some of our local
problems. I spoke briefly on matters of policy relating to leave for shopping in Oswego
and our problems regarding educational facilities and was assured assistance.” 24 Though
not recommended by Waterbury, Smart turned to local attorney Harry Mizen, a
Protestant, to chair the Advisory Committee.

Gruber’s recollection in *Eight Months Later* differed from Smart’s account.
Gruber described the group of Oswego leaders present as offering options immediately
and spontaneously to Smart’s presentation of the Shelter’s educational conundrum;
Smart’s memorandum did not. Gruber recalled Mizen’s response, “The purpose of the
Committee, as Mr. Mizen underlined it, was ‘to do everything we can to help make the
lives of those people as full as possible.’” 25

This discrepancy can be explained. Gruber wrote more than eight months after the
events. She described the actual response of the committee’s members. Smart, writing
that day for his superiors, knew that additional steps must be taken before the offer made
by this ex-officio committee could become a reality. Any presumptiveness on Smart’s
part about his immediate superiors’ approval, which was contingent on the approval of
President Roosevelt, Superintendent Riley’s support, or the final permission given by the
Board of Education, might have voided the offer.
Furthermore, Smart knew that anything he did would be scrutinized by those closest to Roosevelt, that is, his wife and the WRB. In an August 14, 1944 telephone call Marks and Smart discussed Smart’s recent visit with Mrs. Roosevelt and Eleanor Morgenthau, the wife of Secretary of the Treasury, Henry Morgenthau. The memo read: “Mr. Smart said that he had spend a good deal of time with Mrs. Morgenthau and had had a discussion with Mrs. Roosevelt and stated that both were very sympathetic and interested in the Oswego program. There is a possibility they will visit the Shelter some time after September 5.”

The knowledge that both influential women were interested in the program and that they intend to visit the Shelter in less than one month would have been incentive enough for any federal employee to be cautious.

Significantly, the disparity between the official accounts offered by Gruber and Smart’s was that Smart worked behind the scenes to accomplish his goals, a practice he had learned while working at the WRA. This was evident in several assumptions made by Gruber. In Eight Months Later Gruber stated her understanding as to how the committee was formed. She wrote, “Even before the refugees arrived on the 5th of August, 1944, the Oswego Chamber of Commerce formed an ‘Oswego Citizens Advisory Committee for Fort Ontario.’” Gruber can be forgiven for not knowing how the committee was created. Smart went out of his way to create the illusion that the emergence of a local committee supporting the cause of the refugees was spontaneous. Gruber, a Washington-based official representing Ickes, was excluded from the confidence about all the behind-the-scenes maneuvering in Oswego.

Prior to meeting with the committee Smart began the process of seeking approval
from federal officials outside the WRA. In an August 14, 1944 telephone call Marks, acting for the absent WRA Director, described how he traveled to the WRB to inform them of the potential solution to the Shelter’s schooling problem. The call memo read:

“Mr. Marks informed Mr. Smart that the Director was out of town. He said that Mr. Pitts had gone with him that afternoon to keep an appointment made with the War Refugee Board by the Director to discuss the question of schools for the refugee children. He said that the WRB representatives were perfectly willing to have WRA make any exploration or tentative arrangements at Oswego, although it was thought that the final school plans would have to be cleared with the President. Pehle thought it would be O.K. for Smart to go ahead talking with state and local people and making advance arrangements, but not final commitments.”

Marks also asked Smart if he needed Ade, by this time WRA Director of Education, to come to Oswego and assist in resolving the education issues. It read: “Mr. Marks asked whether Dr. Ade should go to Oswego in the near future, and help make arrangements. Mr. Smart said yes, have him come later in the week. Mr. Marks said that Mr. Provinse stated that Dr. Ade’s feeling is that we should work with the state people as well as with local authorities.”

Smart and Ade had worked together before when Smart was a WRA region director and Ade was a consultant from the Office of Education.

Ade’s recommendation to Smart that he “work with the state people” was understandable in light of Ade’s notable career. Prior to joining the WRA, Ade had been Pennsylvania’s Superintendent of Public Instruction from 1935 to 1939. When his term expired, he was appointed President of Mansfield State Teachers College in north central
Pennsylvania where he served from 1939 to 1941. Prior to his state-wide appointment, Ade was President of New Haven State Teachers College in Connecticut. A Williamsport, Pennsylvania native, captain in World War I, son of a German immigrant, Ade had received his bachelors degree at Bucknell, a Masters from Yale, and a doctorate in Education at New York University. In summary, Ade was not a typical career federal bureaucrat.

Ade wrote an undated draft plan of school operation some time after Roosevelt proposed the Shelter and before the educational plans had been finalized; however, it was clear that the invitation to attend Oswego schools already had been made. The plan proposed that the refugees would help operate the schools, but now it is a reference only to the adult education and nursery school programs. It read: “With respect to the elementary and high school programs, an invitation has been extended by the Oswego Advisory Committee to have children of elementary and high school ages attend the Oswego public and parochial schools, and arrangements to this end are being made.”

Ade stated that they offered an “invitation” to have the children educated in local schools. What was not clear in this memorandum were the terms associated with fulfilling the promises implied by the invitation. Ade continued: “Pupils will be well distributed throughout the Oswego schools with the result that in all likelihood no additional teachers will need to be employed. Pupils assigned to the regular public schools in Oswego will walk from the Shelter to their school and return, thus requiring no transportation. This will also be true of the small number of elementary pupils who will be going to the parochial schools.”

Ade had done his research. He continued: “Arrangements are also
being made to transport not more than one bus load of elementary pupils, preferably grades four and five, to the laboratory schools [sic] of the Oswego State Teachers College. Funds to provide this necessary transportation to the College are being requested from outside agencies. Laboratory school pupils at the College include other children of Oswego families, and the refugee children attending will all receive full credit for their work in the same manner as if they were in Oswego public schools.”  

What was unstated but evident was that there were limits to the offer made by the committee on behalf of the school board. Ade stated that Shelter students were to be distributed among the public schools, that some students were to attend parochial schools while others would attend the college’s laboratory school. Hence, no additional teachers would need to be hired by the Oswego public schools. Ade’s draft also described that children were to walk to and from school, therefore no large-scale school bussing would be required. One bus would be necessary to carry children from the Shelter to the Oswego State Teacher’s College campus laboratory school where they planned to send an undetermined number of fourth and fifth graders, but the cost of transportation will be paid by “outside agencies.” What was not discussed was the overarching condition placed on the offer made by the committee on behalf of the school board. That offer was contingent that the children were welcomed to attend the public schools as long as it did not result in any additional costs.

In a September 26, 1944 letter by Riley to the New York State Education Department regarding adult vocational training at the Shelter, Riley confirmed what Ade only implied. Riley stated, “Our Board of Education has taken the position that no part of
any educational program conducted for the refugees should cost the local community anything.” 33 Since it was clear that the school board wanted no costs of schooling refugee children passed on to them, it was unlikely that the invitation for the Shelter students to attend the public schools originated from the school board, the only institution authorized by law to offer such an invitation. Most of the expenses associated with the refugee children’s schooling would be absorbed by the Coordinating Committee, which was still in its nascent form. It was unlikely that this organization could make such a commitment before its first organizational meeting. However, it was probable that the invitation was orchestrated by Smart, with the advice of Ade on the federal level and Faust and later Riley on the local level. Smart speculated that so many Jewish and non-Jewish organizations had expressed an interest in helping the Shelter’s refugees, that there would be funds available for the incidental costs associated with educating the Shelter children. What had to be orchestrated was that there could not be so many Shelter students as to warrant hiring new teachers. In essence, the school board would only permit the Shelter children to utilize available seats. Funds from “outside agencies” would be used to buy books and the amenities of schooling, such as papers, pencils and items only of peripheral educational value, such as suitable clothing for attending school.

The inaccuracies in Gruber’s *Eight Months Later* regarding the committee’s formation demonstrated that in relatively short order the story about how the children came to be educated had been altered. Apparently outside the confidence of the WRA officials, Gruber was unaware of Smart’s role in forming the Advisory Committee. Any suggestion that Gruber was an accomplice in an effort to perpetuate Smart’s initial
deception was dispelled by a meeting with Gruber in October, 2002. In that discussion, Gruber did not recognize Ade’s name, even after being told what position he had held at WRA. In short, as Icke’s eyes and ears in Oswego, she had been deceived herself.

For Smart and Ade to receive credit for their actions in Oswego would expose their roles both in Oswego and throughout the WRA system of Japanese-American Internment Camps. There Ade and Smart artfully manipulated state officials to accomplish their goals. Both men were federal officials who cared about both their Japanese-American and European charges and were sympathetic to their plight. The WRA cared enough about the internment center camp children to insure that some of the rights that most Americans enjoyed were brought to them during their unconstitutional imprisonment, this dark chapter of American history. Smart and Ade employed a rather innocuous form of deception to allow the imprisoned Japanese-American children to receive an education. The extension of these sentiments and subsequent practices to aid the refugee children of Fort Ontario was a small but natural step.

It is difficult to speculate whether Oswego’s community leaders would have stepped forward to help the refugees in the same manner had they not been encouraged to do so by Smart. It is to their credit that once they were shown the way, so many like Mizen, Faust and Swetman willingly participated in this noble endeavor. Yet history must assume that Smart’s role was critical, if not essential. However, the policies and the practices exhibited in Oswego by Smart and other WRA officials were themselves not spontaneous. Smart and Ade had worked together in the WRA administering the educational programs at Relocation Centers. What transpired in Oswego had been a
strategy which had evolved at the WRA.

Though much has been written about the Relocation Centers from the perspective of the program’s unconstitutionality and the associated injustice to Americans of Japanese descent, from the standpoint of those working at WRA there were more immediate and practical challenges. In *Uprooted Americans: The Japanese American and the War Relocation Authority during World War II* (1971), WRA Director Dillon Myer described what faced the agency during the first months after its creation. Myer wrote: “The first problem concerned the handling of the displaced people and their actions, reactions, and frustrations. More than 70,000 of the total 110,000 evacuees were American born and thus full-fledge [sic] citizens of the United States. During a six-month period most of these evacuees were moved first from their homes into army-managed assembly centers within the exclusion area of the three Pacific coast states; then after a few weeks or months these people were moved a second time, to bare dusty barracks-type dwellings in ten relocation centers scattered from California to Arkansas and from Idaho to Arizona. A few persons came from eastern California or from adjoining states without ever having been in assembly centers.” 34 Those who came to work for the WRA faced questions as complex and fundamental as the constitutional arguments and as mundane as how do people who were used to living in metropolitan areas become accustomed to living in desert and rural camps.

Though Smart’s federal career had reached its zenith at the WRA, it began as an F.B.I agent. In his memoir, *Don’t Fence Me In* (1991), Smart wrote: “I was indeed reared in a small Mormon community in Utah and chose early to follow a government
career. My father had political influence, and Senator Smoot, Chairman of the powerful 
Finance Committee, sponsored me, first as a clerk in the Department of Justice, then at 
age 22, as a special agent in the F.B.I.” 35 Smart eventually moved to the National 
Recovery Administration (NRA) where he met federal officials who recognized his talents. 
Smart remained there until, as he described it, “The Supreme Court declared the NRA 
unconstitutional, so I transferred to the Resettlement Administration.” 36 One of the lesser 
known programs of the New Deal, “The Resettlement Administration laid out model 
communities for displaced farmers and refugees from the shattered industrial cities...” 37 It 
was at the Resettlement Administration (RA) where Smart learned how to accommodate 
people who had been forced to move from their homes by events beyond their control. 

At the RA Smart met Myer. Smart recalled meeting Myer, “... Dillon Myer was 
chief of National Soil Conservation Service. Our programs were closely allied. He met 
frequently with our Denver group and loaned out experts to help plan land-use features of 
some of my projects.” 38 Smart recalled how Myer became WRA director. He wrote: 
“When he was selected to run the War Relocation Authority, he had to plan, establish, and 
operate inland communities for the entire Japanese-American population in the states 
bordering the Pacific Ocean. This, too, had never been done before, and for staffing, he 
turned principally to the Resettlement Administration. I was drafted as regional director in 
Denver, where I administered four of the ten relocation centers having about half of the 
110,000 who were moved away from the Pacific coast states.” 39 Smart worked in that 
capacity until the relocation centers began to be phased out. When the Denver regional 
office closed, Smart transferred to Washington to work as WRA Assistant National
Director. Smart quickly grew tired of Washington and requested a transfer within the federal service. He wrote, “I had long been ambitious for foreign service, and Nelson Rockefeller was, in the newly-formed Institute of Inter-American Affairs, staffing economic aid missions in Latin America. On Dillon’s recommendation, I was appointed Chief of Mission to Peru.”

It was from that position in Peru where Smart was recruited to return to the WRA to head the Shelter in Oswego. Smart, and by his account many of his colleagues at WRA, were significantly influenced by the nature of their responsibilities administering the relocation centers. As Smart described it: “The administrator of the War Relocation Authority who managed the Relocation Centers for Americans of Japanese ancestry interned during World War II, and later the Fort Ontario Emergency Refugee Shelter, were fated to be constantly at odds with the policies that controlled them. In both programs, security measures were dictated by the Army; and policy for the refugee shelter was the province of the War Refugee Board– which could be over-ruled by the Secretary of State and/or the Attorney General. Disharmony and confusion resulted.” So frustrated with the convoluted policy hierarchy at WRA, and its impact on the Japanese-American residents of the camps, its first director, Dr. Milton Eisenhower, brother of the then General, resigned in protest over policies imposed on the WRA. Myer replaced Eisenhower as WRA Director.

The policy of giving the highest priority to education at the WRA Relocation Centers originated with Eisenhower. In an April 7, 1942 memorandum entitled “Education of Japanese Children,” was written just months after the WRA’s creation.
Eisenhower wrote to a military officer, Colonel Karl R. Bendetsen, an eventual Secretary of the Army under Truman, who had indicated that a relocation center school at one camp would not be operational for many months. In responding to Bendetsen, Eisenhower articulated WRA policy on schooling. Eisenhower wrote: “The War Relocation Authority has already taken steps to initiate the planning and construction of schools and housing for school employees on all relocation projects including Manzanar. We will utilize, in this connection, the architectural and engineer staff of the Farm Security Administration, at least for the time being.”  

Having informed the camp’s commandant that construction of educational facilities was to go forward with other federal agencies if the Army were unable to complete construction on schedule, Eisenhower then set about the task of determining who would operate the schools once they were built. Eisenhower continued: “In view of the fact that public education has always been considered the responsibility of State and local governments, we will attempt to obtain the cooperation of State Departments of Education in equipping and staffing these schools. (We do not anticipate any substantial success in this direction.) [author’s brackets] Where such arrangements cannot be effected, we propose to equip and staff these schools, employing accredited school teachers from the various states of the Western Defense Command.”  

Before the first student walked into a school located at a WRA facility, Eisenhower had stated that education was primarily the responsibility of State and local government; however, if those governmental entities would not live up to those obligations the WRA would.

The policy articulated by Eisenhower during the first two months of the WRA existence became formalized in an undated document entitled, *Statement of Policy For The*
Operation Of School Programs On Japanese Resettlement Centers. Since Eisenhower did not refer to this document in his April 7, 1942 memorandum to Bendetsen, it is safe to speculate that the official policy pronouncement was generated after the exchange with Bendetsen. The formal policy expanded on what had been expressed by Eisenhower on April 7th. It read:

In keeping with the established American principle that public education is primarily the responsibility of State and local governments, the War Relocation Authority shall attempt, where possible, to have State and local educational agencies assume the major responsibility for the operation of schools required on the respective Resettlement Centers. Consequently, each Resettlement Project is expected to function, insofar as possible, from the standpoint of the operation of schools as a school district with the provision that any agreements entered into relative to the operation of such schools shall permit the War Relocation Authority to retain such general administrative and supervisory direction in the Local Project Administration as necessary to meet its own responsibility. Where arrangements, as indicated, for the operation of these Project Schools can not be made, such schools shall be operated by the War Relocation Authority with the advice and guidance of the U.S. Office of Education in cooperation with the State Department of Education of the State involved. In each Resettlement or Relocation Center, the War Relocation Authority will construct and equip the school building facilities required for the operation of an adequate instructional program. 44

Two items of special note in this policy. First, the reference to the “guidance of the U.S. Office of Education” was a reference to Ade. At this juncture, Ade was a consultant on loan from the Office of Education to WRA. Any guidance at the WRA from the Office of Education originated from Ade. In fact, it was to Ade, not Eisenhower, that Bendetsen’s aide first indicated that the schools would not be operational for months.

A second note of interest was a sub-text which possibly alluded to a problem described by Smart in his memoir, Don’t Fence Me In. Smart stated that WRA officials had been displeased with the fact that policy often originated with the Army, who had the
real authority for the Relocation Centers, and later with the WRB, which had the legal authority for the Fort Ontario refugees. In this instance it appeared that WRA officials, in the person of Eisenhower, were asserting their own authority, that is, establishing their own policy. Eisenhower did not allow a regional administrator for the Department of the Army to tell the WRA that they would get around to creating schools at the Relocation Centers when they found time. Eisenhower stated if the Army could not build schools, the federal agency from which much of his staff had come from would, in other words, be the Relocation Administration.

In essence, by overruling an Army representative, Eisenhower had challenged the existing chain of command. This independence from established authority structures to create policy on certain critical issues was at the heart of why Smart and other WRA officials regularly challenged and/or subverted policies they deemed unfit for their charges, that is, the internees and the refugees. Eisenhower’s untimely departure from WRA on June 17, 1942 may have been an indication to lower-level WRA officials that sub rosa defiance was a safer approach, and because it promoted career longevity and the ability to promulgate their view of disputed policy, a more effective approach than outright challenging of the established hierarchy of authority.

What was unique about the WRA was not just how they dealt with the fact that other agencies of the federal government established policy for them. Not only did WRA challenge authority structures in the interest of the people forced to reside in their camps, the agency believed that education played a significant role in their overall responsibility to these people. On October 8, 1942, Smart, then just nearing the end of his tenure as a
WRA regional director, gave a speech at a WRA Educational Conference for teachers from the various internment camps. In that speech Smart offered some insights into the WRA philosophy of education, Smart’s relationship with Ade, and Smart’s personal views on schooling at the relocation centers. Smart said: “When I left Denver I assumed that my part in this program would be to make a few complimentary remarks to you and to let you proceed with your business as teachers; however, a discussion with Dr. Ade on the train yesterday raised a question which I feel obligated to discuss here. The question was posed by the Superintendent of Schools at Granada, and was: ‘How shall we interpret democracy to a regimented people?’”

Introducing this critical and sensitive topic to the teachers of the children whose liberties had been abridged was itself a courageous act. Smart was asking the fundamental question as to how do you teach democracy in the face of such undemocratic conditions?

What was evident by the reference to Ade’s presence on the train and the discussions which ensued was that the former Pennsylvania Superintendent of Instruction was introducing this former F.B.I. agent to the more elemental questions confronting education in a democratic society. Both men were delving into the questions which were at the heart of the controversy over the existence of these unconstitutional camps. Smart continued: “This is a profoundly disturbing question and difficult to answer. It has been gnawing at my mind since Dr. Ade raised it and I feel that it must be faced squarely. It cannot be evaded because, in one form or another, it is in the minds of all the people who are in relocation centers. One Japanese-American boy said: ‘They tell us we are citizens of the United States, but there we are set aside from other citizens in internment camps;
we have lost our rights of citizenship. What privilege, then is it to be an American?’

Another said: ‘I am told that I have the rights of a citizen, yet I cannot freely leave the community center. If you think you are a citizen, just try to walk out the front gate and see what happens to you.’” 46 Smart had enough faith in teachers, and in education, to entrust them with the challenge of somehow bridging this chasm between democratic ideals and what the internment centers represented.

In May 1943, Ade officially left the Office of Education and joined the WRA as the agency’s Director of Education. It was in that capacity that he brought all the skills he had acquired earlier as teacher, principal, superintendent, college president, state-wide director of public schools, and lastly, federal bureaucrat, to bear on the daunting challenge of educating youths who had been forcibly moved from their homes and kept involuntarily in rural camps.

One example of the scope of Ade’s responsibilities was evident when he was required to deal with State School Superintendents angry with the WRA. Ade resolved the problem which involved non-payment of vouchers submitted by the superintendent, but it showed just how diverse Ade’s responsibilities were. When he was not addressing the needs of angered superintendents he was visiting each camp and working with the staffs at the various camps. One indication of the range of his responsibilities was evident in a two-day schedule from 1944. That schedule depicted a federal official who met with camp directors, lectured teachers on instructional strategies, and gave pep talks to both high school and elementary students. Not only did this schedule demonstrate the breadth of Ade’s responsibilities and skills, but it provided insight as to how he accomplished so
much during the week he spent in Oswego and the weekend he spent in Albany where he
laid the groundwork for the educational program at the Shelter.

Ade and Smart both learned at WRA how to work the system, and more
importantly, work within the system. They learned how to deal effectively within the
parameters while challenging policies they believed were ill-conceived. When Smart
created a local committee to do his bidding, he did so in the best interest of the people
who looked to him to protect their interests. Smart believed that having policies originate
on the local level protected him while enabling him to challenge those policies he deemed
unwise. In most instances Smart worked with his WRA superiors. Smart and WRA
headquarters were in collusion because the WRB had held the legal authority for the
refugees and if WRB policy was to be challenged it was better that it was done by a local
committee rather than a subordinate federal agency like the WRA.

When the WRA alternatively announced first that they would not educate the
youths and then they would educate them at schools run by the refugees, it was posturing
designed to produce a response within the community. Had people like Faust, Swetman
and Mizen not stepped forward, the WRA might have had to follow through on what was
essentially a bluff. Whether it was Smart or Ade, or both, who believed Oswego would
ultimately respond favorably, or merely a calculated guess, nevertheless, they were right.

Endnotes

1 Dillon S. Myer, September 14, 1944, “Six Week Report,” memorandum from WRA to
WRB, Transfer from Italy to FOERC File, Fort Ontario Emergency Refugee Shelter
Collection, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Butler Library, Columbia University, New
York, 2.

2 Joseph H. Smart, July 10, 1984, telephone interview by Lawrence Baron, Safe Haven Collection, Special Collections, Penfield Library, State University of New York at Oswego.

3 Marks August 2, 1944.

4 Marks August 2, 1944.

5 Dillon S. Myer, July 5, 1944, memorandum to Ralph Stauber and Ruth Gruber, re: Responsibilities on Mediterranean Mission, Transfer from Italy to FOERC File, Fort Ontario Emergency Refugee Shelter Collection, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Butler Library, Columbia University, New York.

6 Stauber August 3, 1944.

7 Marks August 16, 1944a.

8 Myer and Smart August 6, 1944.


10 Edward P. Marks, July 27, 1944, meeting on participation of national agencies in refugee program, July 1944 Readers’ File, Fort Ontario Emergency Refugee Shelter Collection, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Butler Library, Columbia University, New York.


12 Smart 1944.


14 Markley 1946.

15 Markley 1944.
Markley misnamed the committee. He called the Oswego Citizens Permanent Advisory Committee, its rarely invoked formal name, “The City of Oswego Cooperating Committee.” He called the committee a name which is similar to another committee formed later by Smart in Oswego, that is, the Oswego Coordinating Committee. This may have been a simple error by Markley, who had left Oswego for other assignments at WRA before returning to write the final report. Another possibility was it may have been a reflection of a broader deception engineered by Smart, at his superiors’ direction, regarding the actual composition of the refugees living at the Shelter. The Coordinating Committee, was an alliance of charitable organizations, mostly Jewish groups, who formed to help the refugees at the Shelter. Was this an indication of the possible effort in the earliest stages to disguise the true religious make up of the Shelter’s refugees, when Markley was the assistant to the first Shelter Director, Joseph Smart?

Gruber 1945, 9.

Joseph H. Smart, August 18, 1944, file memorandum, “Meeting August 18 in Director Smart’s Office,” Box 4, The Fort Ontario Emergency Refugee Shelter Collection, The National Archives, Washington, D.C.

Murabito 2002.

Smart August 18, 1944, 4.

Smart August 18, 1944, 4.

Smart August 21, 1944.

Gruber 1945, 8.

Edward P. Marks, August 14, 1944, telephone call memorandum made to Smart, August 1944 Readers’ File, Fort Ontario Emergency Refugee Shelter Collection, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Butler Library, Columbia University, New York.

Gruber 1945, 8.

Marks August 14, 1944.

Marks August 14, 1944.

31 Ade 1944, 2.

32 Ade 1944, 2.

33 Charles E. Riley, September 26, 1944, letter to Oakley Furney, Education File, Fort Ontario Emergency Refugee Shelter Collection, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Butler Library, Columbia University, New York.


36 Smart 1991, 6.


38 Smart 1991, 7.


40 Smart 1991, 7.


42 Milton Eisenhower, Ph.D., April 7, 1942, memorandum for Colonel Karl R. Bendetsen, Dr. Lester K. Ade Collection, Lycoming Historical Society, Williamsport, Pennsylvania.

43 Eisenhower April 7, 1942.


45 Smart 1942, 1.

46 Smart 1942, 1.