Chapter Six

Critical Help

Smart had taken the first step in orchestrating an offer to school the children of the Shelter. He knew that if he could get the children into the public schools at no additional cost to the school board he would be permitted to do so. But there were problems. The “outside agencies” he speculated could provide the funds were actually an unorganized collection of dozens of charitable groups which, based on the extensive media coverage of the refugees’ voyage and arrival, had volunteered to help the refugees living at the Shelter.

Just days before Faust traveled to the quarantined Shelter to interview prospective high school students, Smart was taking the steps necessary to pay for the schooling. Among the early challenges facing Smart was that he had two specific problems, different in character but interrelated. First, he had to find a way to pay for all those expenses associated with schooling because the school board’s proposal proffered by the committee would be honored only if it cost nothing. The second problem, not really a problem at all, was that so many charitable groups were clamoring to help the Shelter’s refugees that it required much of Smart’s time to coordinate their support into some coherent process.

By mid-August of 1944, barely a month after he arrived in Oswego, Smart attempted to craft a solution that would deal with both problems.

On August 16, 1944, two days before a similar meeting was held with the Advisory Committee, Smart met in his office with six representatives of Jewish organizations. Though only three individuals were officially part of what was known as
the Coordinating Committee for Fort Ontario, this group would become the core of this other committee. In addition to the six representatives of charitable groups, Smart and his secretary, there were present two WRA officials, Dr. Gruber, two refugees recently elected to a Shelter Council and a rabbi who had volunteered to be the “spiritual leader” for the Shelter. The minutes read as follows:

Present:
Mr. Joseph H. Smart, Director, Emergency Refugee Shelter
Mrs. Vera McCord, Welfare Department, W.R.A.
Mr. Edward Spicer, W.R.A. Community Analyst
Dr. Ruth Gruber, Field Rep., Dept. of Interior
Mrs. Helen Adam, Emergency Refugee Shelter, Secretary
Dr. Leon Levy, Chairman of Shelter Council
Dr. Ernst Wolff, Vice-Chairman of Shelter Council
Rabbi Moses Tsechoval, Spiritual leader of Shelter
Mr. Alexander Holstein, Syracuse, Coordinating Committee for Fort Ontario
Mr. Max Stern, Syracuse, Coordinating Committee for Fort Ontario
Mr. Harry Lasky, Oswego, Coordinating Committee for Fort Ontario
Mrs. Ester B. Kaunitz, National Council of Jewish Women
Mr. Isaac Asofsky, HIAS
Mr. Ephraim R. Gomberg, National Refugee Service

The meeting with Mr. Smart and his staff was arranged for the purpose of discussing the method by which national Jewish agencies might best coordinate their work through the Coordinating Committee for Fort Ontario in providing supplementary services and aid to the refugees in the Emergency Refugee Shelter. ¹

The implication from the minutes was that the Coordinating Committee already existed and that it was anxious to work with national charitable organizations to coordinate their support of the Shelter’s residents. If the Coordinating Committee existed in fact at that juncture, it was solely in the form of those three local men. The three men who were listed as representing the Coordinating Committee were described as residing in either Oswego or Syracuse. It was not a coincidence that those official members were all local
persons. Because they were local residents, Smart was able to approach them personally to form the nucleus of his committee. Smart, living in Oswego for less than one month, did not personally know local Jewish leaders, particularly in Syracuse thirty-five miles to the South. At its creation the Coordinating Committee was comprised of eight agencies. They were; The National Refugee Service, National Council of Jewish Women, Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, Synagogue Council of America, B’Nai Brith, Agudas Israel, Jewish Welfare Board, and The American ORT Federation. During the eighteen months the Shelter was operational, another ten charitable organizations would join the committee, some focusing on the refugees who were not Jewish. At its creation this was to be a committee created with the hope that these national charitable organizations would be enticed to funnel their contributions through a coordinated and cooperative effort.

Like Gruber’s account of the creation of the Advisory Committee, Smart was successful in hiding his similar role in the Coordinating Committee as well. In the final report written as the Shelter closed in 1946, the Coordinating Committee’s Executive Director, Lotta Loeb, wrote an account as to how the committee came into existence. It read: “A number of Jewish national organizations in the field of refugee adjustment met on August 18, 1944 and decided to channel all contacts, offers of service and the meeting of requests through a representative committee in the Fort Ontario area. It was recommended that a Coordinating Committee be set up in Oswego to receive requests from the Camp administration for needs and services that the Government does not supply and to provide these services and others which may be offered by any organization Jewish or non-Jewish which may desire to channel its services through the Coordinating
Committee.” By obfuscating who “recommended” the committees’ creation it served Smart’s official position, and that of the WRA, that both committees were the product of spontaneous, pro-active steps by individuals not affiliated with the federal government.

Not only did Smart’s efforts to conceal his role obscure the true history of the Coordinating Committee creation, his secretiveness also masked the actual sequence of events as to how the Coordinating Committee found itself paying for the expenses of schooling. Subsequently, in Lotta Loeb’s final report she wrote an inaccurate account as to how it came to be that the Coordinating Committee paid for the education expenses of the Shelter’s students. She wrote: “When the question of education for the children at Fort Ontario arose, it was decided by the Coordinating Committee that the children’s education should not present an expense to the taxpayers of Oswego and should be paid by the Coordinating Committee. This measure was taken because it was felt important for the sake of public relationship that the small town of Oswego, who, on the whole had not welcomed the refugees to the Fort, should not have additional expenses in connection with them. All books, supplies, additional lunches as well as the salary of a teacher were paid by the Coordinating Committee.” Besides omitting Smart’s role in creating the Coordinating Committee, the report contained other, more substantive, factual errors.

The actual sequence of events evidenced by documents did not support the assertions made in Loeb’s report. The school board had conveyed its primary condition regarding schooling, that is, the Shelter’s children could be schooled only if it cost nothing, prior to the formation of the Coordinating Committee. In addition, Smart’s commitment to find other sources to pay for the refugee children’s schooling also predated
the Coordinating Committee’s establishment as a viable agent.

The idea if not the plan to create the Coordinating Committee emerged from the same July 27th meeting in Washington which produced the Advisory Committee. In a WRA file memorandum written by Marks, he described a meeting where the problems facing the refugees’ arrival were discussed. It read: “Mr. Provinse, Mr. Stalley, Miss McCord and I met July 27th to discuss communications received from the American Friends Service Committee, National Refugee Service, and YWCA, and to recommend a policy governing our dealings with national agencies interest in the Oswego program. There was a general agreement that the responsibility for initial handling of offers received should be carried by the Washington office until a determination had been made of the services available from the group. The correspondence would then be turned over to Mr. Smart and handled by him from that point on.” ⁴ Evident by the memorandum’s description of a “non partisan local committee of Oswego citizens,” ⁵ what was proposed at that meeting was clearly only the Advisory Committee. Yet the problems posed by the involvement of numerous private charitable agencies were what prompted the meeting and subsequently the proposal. It was not clear when during the intervening three weeks it was decided that there should be two committees, one dealing with local issues comprised of local leaders and one to deal with broader, even national, concerns comprised of leaders of charitable organizations from throughout the nation.

An August 14, 1944 telephone memorandum outlined a conversation between Ephraim R. Gomberg of the National Refugee Service and Marks. It stated: “Mr. Gomberg called Mr. Marks to inform him of the progress in organizing a Committee [sic].
He said that the minutes have gone to all of the agencies participating, and all have accepted the principles which were set forth. He said that the Committee included most of the larger organizations such as Jewish Welfare Board, B’nai Brith [sic], ORT, HIAS, Council of Jewish Women, Synagogue Council of America, Agrudath Isreal, the NRS.... He said that in regard to Mr. Marks suggestion that representatives of these organizations meet with Mr. Myer, he would like to know whether such a meeting should take place in New York or Washington. Mr. Marks informed him that Mr. Myer had gone out of town this morning and will not be back until August 24. He said that he thought it would be more convenient for the Director if the meeting were in Washington.”

Gomberg had clearly set about the task of forming a committee at the request of Marks.

What then happened was that Gomberg, who was asked to coordinate charitable assistance to the refugees, began referring to an independent “Committee” as if one already had existed. The memorandum continued: “Mr. Gomberg then told Mr. Marks that they would appreciate his bearing in mind the existence of the Committee and if possible, make referrals to them. He said that the World Jewish Congress had called him this morning to tell him that they were all set to send a big shipment of clothing to the Shelter, and that when they were told about the Committee they were very interested and decided to coordinate their plans. Mr. Marks said that he would certainly bear the Committee in mind, but that it was the policy of WRA to work with any agency who wished to offer their services regardless of whether they were allied with Committee. He said that they would point out the existence of the Committee, but that they could make no official designation of any one agency or group of agencies.” Gomberg believed he
had formed a semi-official committee by contacting other charitable agencies and telling them of WRA’s desire to coordinate donations made to the Shelter. Marks then offered resistance by indicating that the WRA policy was to “work with any agency” and that “the WRA could make no official designation of any one agency or group of agencies.”

When Gomberg next appeared in the record in the August 16th meeting in Smart’s office, he was identified as representing the National Refugee Service, and three local men were designated as the official representatives of the Coordinating Committee for Fort Ontario. Though at that meeting Gomberg described the success that he had in encouraging other charitable groups to unite, it is clear that Smart had put in place the nucleus of a committee that reported to him, one he hoped he could control.

However, Gomberg resisted Smart’s effort to supplant the committee he believed he created when asked by Marks to approach other private charitable agencies. On August 21, 1944, less than a week after the Coordinating Committee’s first meeting in Smart’s office, Marks sent a letter congratulating Joseph A. Berger on his appointment as Executive Secretary of the Committee of Cooperating National Organizations. The letter read: “I was happy to learn that you have been designated as the Executive Secretary of the Committee of Cooperating National Organizations and will be working with us in behalf of the agencies represented in the Committee’s membership. I know you will enjoy dealing with Mr. Smart and others on our staff at Oswego, and I shall look forward to seeing you on my next visit.”

This step, taken by the charitable agencies Gomberg had approached, was in direct contradiction to what Gomberg had described at the August 16th meeting in Smart’s office. At that meeting Gomberg described his success. It read: “Mr.
Gomberg informed the group of the organization of the Coordinating Committee for Fort Ontario, stating the following national agencies had agreed to channel their future activities in relation to the Emergency Refugee Shelter through the Committees: Agudas Israel, B’nai B’rith, Hias [sic], Jewish Welfare Board, National Council of Jewish Women, National Refugee Service, Ort [sic], Synagogue Council of America.”

Despite the fact that on August 16th in Smart’s office Gomberg had described the progress he had made forming “the Coordinating Committee for Fort Ontario,” five days later the national charitable groups Gomberg had approached appointed one of their own, Joseph Berger, as Executive Secretary to an independent committee, not what had been envisioned by Smart. What further indicated a problem was that though the minutes, which were presumably written of the August 16th meeting by Smart’s secretary, were dated August 23rd, two days after Berger’s appointment and one week after the actual meeting of the nascent Coordinating Committee. The timing of the creation of the minutes suggested that they were written in response to the unauthorized appointment of Berger which implied an independent committee.

Subsequently, Loeb’s assertion that the Coordinating Committee pro-actively took steps to pick up expenses for a community which had not welcomed the refugees was not supported by either documents or testimony. Additionally, by the time of the Committee’s formation on August 31, 1944 there had been little, if any, manifestation of hostility or bigotry by the Oswego community: that would come later.

The refugees’ welcome to Oswego had been warm and the community’s official response was that of the Advisory Committee, which had promoted not only the refugees’
admission to the city’s schools but the proposition that they should have free access to the community. The scores of Oswego residents who approached the fence surrounding the fort to welcome and interact with the newly-arrived refugees were not just curious or social, they had performed many acts of kindness for the beleaguered refugees. Hostile letters to the editor and incidents of bigoted taunts by local individuals were weeks, if not months, away. Granted, the school board’s refusal to finance the schooling of the refugee students might have been an indication of hostility towards them, either anti-Semitic or merely anti-immigrant, though there was no evidence to support either contention. In all likelihood, the Oswego school board was looking only at the bottom line, and not at the human component. This was a school board which did not offer free textbooks to any of their students. The school board neither supported school lunches, which meant that most students must walk home, nor provided transportation to and from school, both significant steps in light of Oswego’s harsh winters.

Lotta Loeb was not present when the committee was created nor when its financial support of schooling was orchestrated. What was evident in this report was an unintended reaction produced by Smart’s deception. By creating the illusion that groups had to step forward and take the initiative from federal employees, Smart falsely suggested a dereliction of duty by those same governmental officials. Bernard Dubin of the National Refugee Service, who was active in the Coordinating Committee and visited the Shelter regularly, offered a recollection about Joseph Smart in a recent interview. Dubin simply said, “we did not trust him.” 12 The manner in which Smart presented problems to these committees created the illusion that he was both powerless and insensitive, conditions
from which these committees must rescue him and subsequently those refugees in his care. Nothing was further from the truth.

The school board’s refusal to incur any additional costs to educate these children had produced ever-broadening commitments from the Coordinating Committee. First, there was an unanticipated expense, described by Loeb’s report: “At first the employment of an Orientation teacher was felt essential in order to adjust the children as quickly as possible to the educational system. Later when the Orientation teacher was no longer necessary because the children had made an excellent adjustment in school, it so happened that many of the refugee children attended the fourth grade. In consultation with the superintendent of schools it was felt advisable that a special teacher for the fourth grade should be employed and paid for by the Coordinating Committee.”

Though it was described as a teacher designed to help the refugee students adjust, it was, in fact, more of a teacher intended to deal with the disproportionately large numbers of fourth and fifth graders from the Shelter.

In a letter written September 8, 1944, Smart assured Riley that the Coordinating Committee would pay for the additional teacher requested. Smart wrote: “Joseph A. Berger, Executive Director of the Coordinating Committee for prominent Jewish Welfare organizations including Agudas Isreal, B’nai B’rith, Jewish Welfare Board, National Council of Jewish Women, National Refugee Service, Ort [sic] and Synagogue Council of America assures me that they will pay the cost of one school teacher employed by you at the rate of $120 a month for four months…” The date of Smart’s letter suggested a
series of events. Though it was anticipated that there would be more students in grades four and five, hence Ade’s plan for the laboratory school to take the overflow, it was clear after two days of class that another teacher was required for the public schools.

The core of the problem was that the refugee children were not distributed to grade level by age alone. All of the Shelter’s students had had their educations interrupted. Some had been privately tutored by family members or by compassionate Italians. The placement of students in the various grade levels was a delicate and complicated balancing of chronological age with previous scholastic experience.

Since the school board refused to rescind its initial condition on schooling the refugee children, Smart had to allay Riley’s fears that this might have produced an educational crisis. Smart’s only solution was to pay for a teacher outright. Smart’s letter described the full extent of the financial commitment made by the Coordinating Committee on behalf of the refugees’ schooling. He wrote: “In our conversation yesterday you advised that it was the practice in your school system for the school children to buy their own pencils and paper and certain books, other books being supplied by the school board. It also observed that the understanding under which the refugee children were admitted to the school was that the school board would be put to no extra expense, and that the books as well as the pencils and paper would be provided them from other sources. Mr. Berger had previously approved the purchase of pencils and paper and I understand that you will go ahead and provide these, billing Mr. Berger.” Even though Berger was not available for approval of such an expenditure, Smart made the commitment that he would personally guarantee the public school’s reimbursement for books ordered for the
In a September 25, 1944 letter to Riley, Coordinating Committee Executive Director Joseph A. Berger approved Smart’s commitment regarding textbooks and expanded it to include other cost related to schooling. Berger wrote:

> This committee has agreed to reimburse you for the cost of textbooks, pencils, exercise books etc which you are supplying to these children, and for which I shall be glad to honor your bills in due course.

> This committee has agreed to re-imburse [sic] you for the salary of the special orientation teacher whom you engaged for the benefit of these children, such salary being at the rate of $120 (onehundred [sic] and twenty dollars) per month, and I shall be glad to honor your bills on a month-by-month basis accordingly.

> This committee has agreed to re-imburse [sic] you for the cost of milk to be supplied to these children, each to have a glass of milk daily, commencing November 1st. 16

The Coordinating Committee’s commitment did not stop there. Berger, and probably Smart, were unaware that the Oswego public schools did not provide a facility where students who lived in the city could eat their lunches. Not only did the schools not offer an opportunity to purchase a lunch, the students who lived in Oswego were expected to walk home for “the mid-day meal,” for which they were given a long lunch period. Students who were bussed into the city schools from adjoining school districts were allowed to eat their lunches in school facilities. Under normal circumstances it might not be considered harsh or insensitive to expect an elementary student to walk home for lunch, but all of the Shelter’s elementary students walked six blocks each way. The high school students walked more than a mile each way for lunch. Additionally, Oswego’s winters are extremely harsh and snowfalls in excess of three feet are not uncommon. Almost all of the Shelter’s children were unaccustomed to America’s winter weather, having lived most of
their lives in a Mediterranean climate.

Berger’s response to this potential problem was in a letter to the ever cost-conscious Superintendent. Berger wrote Riley: “I understand that it is your recommendation that the refugee children should go back to the Fort for their mid-day meal each day during the recess from 11.45 a.m. through 1.15 p.m., and you have told me that other children coming from similar distances are already doing this. This remark applies particularly to the children at the high school. You said, however, that during particularly bad weather days in the winter, it may be advisable for the children to bring their lunch to school and that on those days you will probably provide hot soup, if facilities can be arranged therefor. We will re-imburse [sic] you for this too, as the occasion may arise.” 17 In summary, Berger, and the member agencies of the Coordinating Committee, fulfilled Smart’s grand design of meeting the terms set forth by an ungenerous school board while funneling monies from many diverse sources through a manageable organizational infrastructure.

The Coordinating Committee was not limited to providing the funds necessary to solve the schooling dilemma. That was just the first crisis. They would be called upon time and again to step into the void created between governmental promise and its practice. The final report described the ongoing challenge facing the Coordinating Committee during the nearly eighteen months the Shelter housed the refugees. The report read: “All requests of the satisfaction of needs and for services which the Government did not supply whether stemming from the residents of the Shelter or elsewhere were transmitted by the Shelter Director to the Executive Director of the Coordinating
Committee. Offers for services addressed to the Coordinating Committee were in turn
discussed with the Shelter Director.”  

So far, Smart’s complicated plans were having mixed results. In one instance, the creation of the Advisory Committee, Smart’s plans went relatively smoothly and his behind-the-scenes orchestrations were, if not unnoticed, unchallenged. In contrast, in the creation of a pliant Coordinating Committee, Smart faced resistance, a harbinger of things to come. Reiterating Dubin’s recollection, “we did not trust him,” took on a more complicated and more ominous meaning.

On August 28, 1944, just eight days before the Oswego schools opened, Smart wrote Dr. Paul Neuberger, President of the Association of Yugoslav Jews in the United States. Neuberger wrote Smart seven days earlier proposing a plan where the refugee children could be distributed to American families, as if they were foster children, and from that arrangement they could attend American schools. Smart wrote: “We are trying to work out a plan whereby children from the Shelter will be permitted to attend both public and private schools in Oswego. It is difficult to say at this time how successful this effort will be. Since the President’s order said that the refugees were to be provided shelter at Fort Ontario, it does not appear that arrangements could be made for any of them to go outside to live in American homes.” 

Not only were the arrangements not yet finalized, Smart indicated that the outcome was in doubt. The Advisory Committee was pressuring the school board from below as the grass roots committee Smart had hoped they would become. But until the school board approved the arrangement, all of the politicking and pressuring was just that.
If Smart was going to finalize the offer made by the school board, until now only discussed behind closed doors, he was going to need help. There were more pressing problems facing the Shelter Director than those posed by the portion of the Shelter’s population that was of school age. The refugees were from nearly two dozen different countries, and that fact alone posed many problems. Many refugees had chronic health problems, some serious. The psychological impact of persecution and flight had taken an enormous toll. Except for those refugees who came to America expressly to educate their children, schooling of the children was not an issue of utmost importance. Smart had far more pressing challenges before him.

Dr. Lester K. Ade’s name first appears in relationship to the Shelter at Oswego on August 14, 1944 when the potential use of his services was discussed by telephone. According to the record, “Marks asked whether Dr. Ade should go to Oswego in the near future, and help make arrangements.” 21 Two days later, on August 16th, Marks elaborated on Ade’s impending trip to Oswego in a letter to Smart. Marks wrote: “Dr. Ade is taking the night train from New York on Sunday and will be at Oswego Monday morning, August 21 for a few days’ stay. He asked me to tell you that he will be glad to follow any schedule you arrange for meetings with your staff, persons in Oswego or possibly persons in the refugee group who may be interested to discuss their children’s educational problems. He can arrange to stop in Albany on the way back from Oswego if that seems to be desirable. In any case, he will be in Oswego Monday and Tuesday.” 22 Ade was the Director of Education for WRA. The scope of his assistance was broad. The implication of Marks’ offer was that he felt that though the Advisory Committee was in
place advocating for the refugee students, more work had to be done to facilitate this arrangement. Ade was uniquely qualified to take on responsibilities as diverse as those described in Marks’ August 16th letter. In addition to all of his other experience Ade had previously been a classroom teacher in his native Williamsport, Pennsylvania area, where he had also been a school administrator.

When Ade arrived in Oswego some groundwork had been laid by Smart’s work with the Advisory Committee and their semi-official negotiations with the school board. If the refugee children were going to be enrolled in school when the academic year started on Tuesday, September 5, 1944, much more had to be done. The WRA’s comprehensive notion of what comprised education at its facilities meant that schooling at the elementary, middle and high school levels was only a part of the program. There were dozens of children who were of kindergarten and pre-school age in this era before such programs were provided by the public schools. There were also college-age refugees, some of whom had attended institutions of higher education in Europe and others whose flight and hiding had prevented them from ever achieving those educational goals for which they had prepared. There were also men and women of all ages who needed to retool their vocational skills. And most significantly, virtually all of the refugees needed to speak English adequately.

Initially, Ade’s plans were to stay just two days, as Marks’ letter indicated, “he will be in Oswego Monday and Tuesday.” It appeared that Ade made plans to be in Albany by Friday, August 25th, where he planned to meet with New York State Education Department officials. Though there was no itinerary, references to Ade’s meetings...
suggested he was very busy during his brief stay in Oswego.

Two days after Ade’s arrival in Oswego the Advisory Committee had its first formal meeting. The minutes read: “On Wednesday evening, August 23, 1944, at the Pontiac Hotel, a meeting of the Citizens Advisory Committee was held, attended by the following persons: Mr. Harry C. Mizen, Rev. James Shanahan, Mr. Ralph Faust, Mr. Charles E. Riley, Mrs. Anna S. Riley, Dr. Ralph Swetman, Mr. John O’Connor, Mr. James Lally, Miss Juanita Kersey, Miss Marian Mackin, Mr. Matthew Barclay, Mr. Charles G. Goldstein, Mr. Daniel A. Williams, Miss Marian Mahar, Mr. Ralph Shapiro, Mr. Robert Allison, Miss Margaret Roach, Mrs. Francis D. Culkin, Hon. Joseph T. McCaffrey.” 24 It was unlikely that Ade organized this meeting on such short notice since he had arrived only on Monday. He likely timed his presence to be there for the meeting. What was most notable about this more formal meeting of the Advisory Committee was who was in attendance: Superintendent Charles E. Riley, Father James Shanahan, Mrs. Francis Culkin, the widow of Oswego’s late Republican Congressman, and Oswego Mayor McCaffrey, who was a Democrat.

The presence of Father Shanahan meant that the Roman Catholic Bishop of Syracuse had endorsed the committee’s agenda. But the inclusion of Riley and Mayor McCaffrey was most significant. For Riley to attend meant that he was now openly supporting the goals of the committee, which might be why he didn’t attend the first meeting in Smart’s office. McCaffrey’s presence was important for political reasons. At that time the school board was appointed by the Mayor. His presence gave political cover to the appointees on the school board.
Riley was not only present at the meeting, he played a pro-active role. The minutes read: “On a motion of Mr. C. E. Riley, seconded by Mrs. Anna S. Riley, voted that it was the expressed policy of the Advisory Committee that a recommendation be made to the Shelter authorities, subject to proper federal approval, that children of the shelter [sic] be accepted by the various educational institutions of the city, if the refugees so desire. Whatever reason or reasons Riley had for missing the first meeting, and to what degree Faust had to persuade him to support the effort, by this night Riley was a wholehearted supporter. The significance of the presence of Mrs. Anna S. Riley, no relation to the superintendent but a member and past president of the school board, and the fact that she seconded the superintendent’s motion, in all likelihood was an indication that Riley had some support on the four-member school board, if only Mrs. Riley.

Riley’s change of heart was likely the product of multiple pressures. Anthony Muribito remembered that Faust had to encourage Riley on this issue. Mrs. Riley’s presence suggested her support as a member of the school board. However, Ade was not listed as attending the meeting, his work with Riley was clearly a factor, though his role would not be evident until the next day.

On Thursday, August 24, 1944, Smart sent the following telegram to WRA Director Dillon Myer. The telegram read:

Oswego Advisory Committees [sic] for Refugee Shelter consisting of prominent representatives and leaders in religious [sic] cultural [sic] civics [sic] and political affair [sic] unanimously recommends that refugees be given reasonable freedom for visiting shopping etc [sic] in Oswego and that the children of the group be permitted to enter Oswego public and parochial schools and State Teacher’s College under such regulations as WRA considers essential and plan to be worked with school authorities. WRA educational
advisor and Superintendent of Schools Riley report that all prospects of students can be accommodated in existing school organization and details placement analysis of children are being made looking towards admission early September or towards private schools in Shelter. No commitment to refugee or Towns people have been made but we urge early adoption of leave and internal security recommendation transmitted on 22nd. Joseph H. Smart, Director, Emergency Shelter Fort Ontario New York [Text altered from telegram’s all capitals format.]  

The telegram offered an account consistent with the position crafted by Smart that this local committee was both grass roots and pro-active in their recommendations. It acclaimed that the committee “unanimously recommends” that the Shelter’s children be invited to attend local schools.

The “WRA educational advisor” mentioned in the telegram was Ade. He and Riley had been working together during the three full days prior to the Advisory Committee’s first official meeting to resolve the logistical problems created by two hundred thirty refugee students. As suggested in Ade’s draft plan for schooling in Oswego, this plan devised by Riley and Ade sought to spread the elementary age refugee children around between the public schools, parochial schools and the laboratory school. Yet the telegram still offered as a possibility the unrealistic option of creating schools within the Shelter. Again they seem to be pulling back in deference to some decision yet to be made. The probable areas of concern for Ade and Riley were the critical players who had yet to approve the arrangement on schooling negotiated in Oswego.

There were three potential vetoes; the first was Roosevelt. The second potential veto was the school board itself, fearful that it did not have the legal authority to admit the refugee children even though they had the political support and the approval of the mayor.
A third obstacle was the approval of the State Education Department. By this point no one could really have believed that they could open elementary and secondary schools inside the Shelter. During the first six weeks of the Shelter’s existence it was unclear to Smart and WRA officials how long it would be operational. The Japanese Americans were placed in temporary holding facilities while more permanent accommodations were created. Was the Shelter a temporary holding facility or the long-term accommodations? These as yet unanswered questions rendered the creation of a comprehensive educational program totally within the Shelter impractical. Of equal importance, the WRA had always insisted that education was a local responsibility at all of its facilities regardless as to whether state or federal agencies ultimately provided schooling.

The telegram was designed to impact upon officials in Washington; but what officials? The WRA knew the Advisory Committee had been created by Smart at their suggestion and manipulated by him to propose what they wanted. Informing them that they had been successful did not warrant a telegram. A letter or telephone would have sufficed. Notifying the WRB was always the responsibility of the WRA national office. In light of Mrs. Roosevelt’s and Morgenthau’s intense interest in the Shelter and the knowledge that final approval for any plans rested with Roosevelt himself, the telegram may have been a theatrical step designed to capture Roosevelt’s attention and to allay his political fears. A communication as urgent as a telegram permitted Myer to pass the information up the chain of command, even to the highest levels. Like Smart, Ade worked primarily behind the scenes. As mentioned above, Gruber did not recognize Ade’s name. There was no mention of Ade in either Gruber’s *Eight Months Later* or *Haven*. If the plan
was to have Roosevelt think that the Advisory Committee was a pro-active, grass roots organization and that it was that committee which had invited the refugee children to attend school. Gruber, the eyes and ears of Ickes in Oswego, himself a confidant of Roosevelt, could not be brought into the deception.

Though Ade was out of the limelight in Oswego, his colleagues at WRA knew of his work there. In a speech made before the Community Analysts Convention on September 7, 1944, WRA’s Edward Spicer gave this account of Ade’s image among the refugees and subsequently his WRA colleagues. Spicer said: “The refugees say there is a great difference between the Italian camps and the American camp. They say in the Italian camps when you go up and ask for a pair of shoes, etc., the Italian administrator says, ‘...the refugees are very pleased with the quickness with which many things are done here.’ They say, ‘This is the American way.’ They were amazed at the speed with which Dr. Ade established schools at the camp. He came to the camp and in one day had the schools set up.” 29 This substantiates the notion Ade played a significant role in gaining admission for the refugee children in the schools of Oswego. It also indicates Ade was instrumental in establishing other educational programs at the Shelter.

Ade himself did not long for the limelight. Though the timing of his arrival suggested that he was instrumental in moving the negotiations about schooling along, Ade was willing to share the credit for the successes in Oswego. In an August 24, 1944 memorandum, written while he was still in Oswego, Ade wrote: “With respect to the school program I want at first to congratulate you in laying the foundation for a splendid cooperative spirit in Oswego and vicinity. Every person I interviewed offered to help us
Praising Smart for “laying the foundation” in “our educational program” was yet another indication of how involved he was. Ade stated, “every person I interviewed,” suggested extensive work at resolving the problems regarding schooling. In his memo to Smart, Ade wrote: “The President of the State Teachers College, Dr. Swetman; the Superintendent of Schools, Mr. Charles E. Riley; the High School Principal, Ralph M. Faust; the Librarian, Miss Juanita Kersey; Father James M. Shanahan, Miss Marian Mahar, Dr. Snygg, and other others have offered to help us in every way possible.”

Even on what was his last day in Oswego, Ade was fine tuning the work of the previous day. On Friday, August 25th Smart sent a second telegram to Myer. Smart wrote: “Mayor Joseph McCaffrey and Police Dept. Concur in recommendations. [sic] Oswego Citizens Advisory Committee regarding leave and educational policies.”

Ade, while complimenting Smart on his efforts, added the ever present caveat which overshadowed all the progress made up until this time. “This group... will get most of their instruction after they enter Oswego Public Schools if the plan is approved.”

At the earliest stages of planning in Washington there was the presumption that Oswego State could play some role in resolving the educational problems of the refugees. The offer of support was evident in Swetman’s early work on the Advisory Committee but it was Ade who found a way of fully utilizing the broad range of potential support such an institution might provide. Ade laid out a blueprint which made the college an active player in the process. Ade wrote: “Dr. Snygg has met with Mr. Merzar and Mr. Wittenburg. These three men will assume the responsibility for making tentative classifications by...
grades of all elementary and junior high school pupils. This includes the age group from 6 to 14 inclusive. Dr. Snygg will work closely with Superintendent Riley in suggesting grade classification for all elementary and junior high school pupils. Suggestions about elementary and junior high school pupils should be referred to Dr. Snygg of the State Teachers College of Oswego...”  

Ade proposed that Snygg, a psychology professor, would work with refugees who were elected to the Shelter Advisory Committee. The task before them was one which confounded the administrators at the public schools and was likely the source of much of Riley’s early reluctance. The question anticipated the problems which resulted in the Coordinating Committee having to pay for a new teacher in the public schools.

The problem was simply explained but complex in its resolution. The refugee students attending Oswego’s schools all had their educations interrupted at some point. They were from a variety of European nations, each with its own educational program. At what level were students when their education was interrupted? How much had they progressed? How did that person’s home nation’s educational program relate to America’s? A report on the Shelter written by the WRA for the WRB stated, “The problem of evaluating their language ability and European credits and grading in proper classes was worked out cooperatively by the education officials of the town, WRA staff members and a committee on education developed by the refugee group.”

The process undertaken by Snygg and his ad hoc committee was a delicate one. They had to quantify how the educational progress matched the age of each student. A fourteen year old who had been in flight four years could not be placed four grades behind
where they should be. Furthermore, the language abilities were so varied. Some children actually had English instruction in school, while others, most of whom could speak at least three languages as a product of their years of flight and hiding, spoke no English.

The genius of Ade’s plan was how it included the refugees in the process. Their presence was an assurance to the refugees that the process was not arbitrary. Time and again, Ade masterfully combined the practical solution with the political one. Not only did Ade involve the college in the process of admitting the refugee children in the Oswego schools, he finalized placement of some of the Shelter’s students in the college’s laboratory school. Swetman wrote Ade on September 1, 1944 about plans for refugee children to attend the college’s laboratory school. It read: “Affairs in connection with the refugee project seem to be progressing very well. Twenty-eight children have been allocated to our College Elementary School. We shall be very happy to have them with us.” 36 Ade had involved the college in the process of determining grade level and then finalized with the college a commitment to accept twenty-eight children in its elementary school. Additionally, he found time to work in a orientation session for refugee students held at the college. The Oswegonian, the college’s student-run newspaper, reported on October 9, 1944: “The teaching of the American language and school routine to the refugee children at Fort Ontario was in charge of Dr. Ade, of the War Relocation Authority. Miss Marion Mahar, director of the school, was assisted by the Misses Irene Eisele, Marian Moore, Paula Nelson... School was in session from August 15 to September 8.” Mahar was a faculty member from the college’s Social Studies Department. This “school” was conducted as a training effort to introduce the Shelter
children to basic practices of school routine. Not only were the students unfamiliar with American educational practices, while fleeing for their lives they had grown unaccustomed to the routines which were a part of everyday scholastic life.

When Ade first left for Oswego he had made plans to visit the New York State Education Department in Albany. As a former state superintendent Ade knew that if the arrangement negotiated in Oswego was to have any legal standing it must have state officials’ approval. In an August 31, 1944 memorandum to Dr. John H. Provinse, Chief, Community Management Division, Ade described his trip to Albany. After describing a meeting on English language training, Ade continued: “While at Albany I also conferred with Dr. George D. Stoddard, President of the University and Commissioner of Education for the State of New York, with respect to our entire proposed education program at Oswego and especially in securing his approval of our contemplated elementary and secondary school arrangements with the local Oswego school officials. After some discussion with the Counsel of the State Education Department, Mr. Charles A. Brind, Jr., I was informed by Commissioner Stoddard that WRA had his hearty approval and the approval of his group.” 37 With the approval of Stoddard’s legal counsel Ade seemed less tentative. He referred to “our contemplated elementary and secondary school arrangements” 38 without the ever-present disclaimer about pending the plan’s ultimate approval by all the parties involved.

While there Ade met with division directors and chiefs of bureaus at the New York Department of Education who were responsible for other areas of education essential to the Shelter’s other educational components. He actually began the memorandum to Dr.
Provinse with a description of his progress working with Miss Caroline W. Whipple, Bureau Chief, Adult Education. Dr. Ade said that Miss Whipple “would be able, after September 5, to help in initiating and developing a program at Oswego... Miss Whipple will explore the possibility of securing volunteer teachers in Oswego and vicinity and then will request full time instructors to be provided by the National Refugee Service and other organizations who wish to help in this program. I have requested Miss Whipple to keep Mr. Smart fully informed on the development of the adult English language program.”

While in Albany, Ade was artfully positioning all the potential collaborators, that is, in the schools, at the Shelter, at Oswego State Teacher’s College, and in the Education Department, so that they could continue working with one another without his facilitation.

Among his many Albany conferences Ade met with Dr. Lewis A. Wilson, Deputy Commissioner in Charge of Vocational Education. The impending academic year had meant working out the arrangements with the Oswego Board of Education, a time-sensitive project. Resolving issues regarding vocational training were not as pressing. The elementary and secondary students would have to be enrolled by the time school opened September 5th or face additional impediments to their academic and social integration into the schools. This was only a preliminary meeting, initiating vocational education for adults could wait for a little while longer.

In light of all those Albany officials Ade stated that he had met, along with those who indicated they had met with him, it seemed that Ade was not only a master at facilitation but highly skilled at creating and keeping a productive schedule, all accomplished in a single weekend. The August 31st memorandum written to Provinse
was evidence that Ade met with Dr. William E. Young, State Director of Elementary Education, Dr. Ruth Andrus, Chief of the Bureau of Child Development, and Elizabeth A. Woodward, Adult Education Supervisor. Ade’s thoroughness was admirable. Evident in his work in Albany were the talents of an educator who was a local school superintendent by the age of thirty-two, dean of a state teachers college by thirty-seven, president of same by thirty-eight, and state-wide superintendent of public schools by the age of forty-five.

However, his trip to the state capital was not a clean sweep. While in Albany Ade dealt with an issue where he did not experience the resounding success he produced regarding the Shelter’s other educational needs. Ade met with Dr. Herman Cooper, the Assistant Commissioner in Charge of New York State Teacher Colleges. Ade was trying to gain admission for college-age refugees from the Shelter into Oswego State Teachers College. Though Cooper, along with Lewis, promised “their cooperation,” Ade’s plan of allowing refugees to attend Oswego State Teachers College would not succeed without significant help. The obstacles to approval for this component of the Shelter’s educational program were not in Albany, but rather in Washington.

It appeared at many levels that Ade’s contribution, both in Oswego and later that week in Albany, to the successful implementation of the Shelter’s education program was critical. Not all cooperation was the product of Ade’s persuasion. One example was Commissioner of Education, Dr. George D. Stoddard, a former Professor of Psychology and Director of the Iowa Child Welfare Research Station, who was himself a life-long educator. It helped also that, like Ade, Stoddard was from northern Pennsylvania and a former college administrator. However, it was not just that these two men saw themselves
as kindred spirits. A considerable amount of work went into Ade’s effort. Ade’s contribution to resolving the Shelter’s problems might be better understood when viewed within the context of his career. He had resigned his position as President of Mansfield State Teachers College in Pennsylvania, where he had not only a secure income, but as president was provided a residence, to accept a lower-paying position with the federal government, a position whose responsibilities required considerable travel.

Smart had not relied only on Faust, Swetman, Mizen, and all the Advisory Committee members to pressure the Oswego Board of Education to seek approval from the state. Instead, Smart summoned the support of friend and colleague Dr. Lester K. Ade, also WRA’s Director of Education with whom he had worked at Relocation Centers, to gain all the necessary approvals from the New York State Education Department for all the Shelter’s educational programs. Ade’s clandestine trip to Albany preceded the Oswego Board of Education’s formal approval of the proposed plan to educate the refugee children, and it may have seemed presumptuous if local school officials knew that Ade had gone over their heads and sought Albany’s approval. On the other hand, having witnessed the school board’s initial reluctance about schooling for the refugee children, Smart could not provide them the opportunity to use Albany’s delay or disapproval as an excuse to nullify the agreement.

Endnotes

1 Joseph H. Smart, August 23, 1944, minutes of Wednesday August 16, 1944 meeting, Box 4, The Fort Ontario Emergency Refugee Shelter Collection, The National Archives, Washington, D.C.

3 Loeb February 21, 1946, 2.

4 Marks July 27, 1944.

5 Marks July 27, 1944.

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

7 Marks August 14, 1944.

8 Marks August 14, 1944.

9 Marks August 14, 1944.

10 Edward P. Marks, August 21, 1944, letter to Joseph Berger, August 1944 Readers’ File, Fort Ontario Emergency Refugee Shelter Collection, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Butler Library, Columbia University, New York.

11 Smart August 23, 1944.


13 Loeb February 21, 1946, 2.


15 Smart September 8, 1944.


17 Berger September 25, 1944.

18 Loeb February 21, 1946, 2.
Dubin 2002.

Joseph H. Smart, August 28, 1944, letter to Dr. Paul Neuburger, Box 12, The Fort Ontario Emergency Refugee Shelter Collection, The National Archives, Washington, D.C.

Marks August 14, 1944.

Marks August 16, 1944.

Marks August 16, 1944b.

R. Faust, August 23, 1944.

R. Faust, August 23, 1944.

Joseph H. Smart, August 24, 1944, telegram to Dillon S. Myer, Oswego Committees File, Fort Ontario Emergency Refugee Shelter Collection, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Butler Library, Columbia University, New York.

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Myer September 14, 1944, 4.

Ralph W. Swetman, Ph.D., September 1, 1944, letter to Dr. Lester K. Ade, Education File, Fort Ontario Emergency Refugee Shelter Collection, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Butler Library, Columbia University, New York.

Lester K. Ade, Ph.D, August 31, 1944, memorandum to John Provinse, Education File,
Fort Ontario Emergency Refugee Shelter Collection, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Butler Library, Columbia University, New York.

38 Ade August 31, 1944, 1.

39 Ade August 31, 1944, 1.