Chapter Seven

Finishing Touches

With Ade’s whirlwind tour of Oswego and Albany over and Smart’s behind-the-scenes work creating committees progressing smoothly, work with the students themselves had to proceed. Ade had set up an ad-hoc committee comprised of a psychology professor at Oswego State and two refugee leaders to place elementary-age students in appropriate grade levels. Unlike the elementary school principals, Faust did not permit Ade to delegate this important task to surrogates. Faust, with the help of two refugee students, Steffi Steinberg and Edith Weiss, serving as interpreters, talked to each potential high school student individually.

Though there were significantly fewer refugees still eligible for high school, the process for the placement of high school students was more complex than that for the elementary students. There the challenge was matching age, grade level, ability, previous schooling, and language proficiency. Placing the high school student involved every factor considered for the elementary students, and more. A report written about the Fort Ontario Emergency Refugee Shelter in June, 1945 by the International Migration Service of New York City offered a more complete description of the process for placing the older students. That report stated:

To measure the educational assets of refugees is extraordinarily difficult for two reasons– the most obvious, the difficulties experienced by the interviewers in interpreting in equivalent American terms such a variety of educational systems as are represented in the 21 countries from which the refugees came, and with which the interviewer was wholly unfamiliar. The result of the lack of familiarity is that there has been no uniformity of interpretation; for example, in some cases education quoted as “Gymnasium” has been held to include high
school and as much as two years at a university; in some countries “Hochschule” (high school) is equivalent to a full university course, yet it might be recorded as “high school.” In some countries, “Commercial College” requires the equivalent of “Gymnasium” graduation as a prerequisite for entrance, while in some it ranks with Gymnasium. In some instances persons are recorded as having graduated from a college of music or art with the only preparatory education recorded as elementary. ¹

The Shelter’s secondary students represented twenty-one nations of origin: each had different educational programs. Though the flexibility of the secondary school schedule dividing the academic day into fixed periods permitted more individualization than in other school settings, the challenges facing Faust were formidable.

One problem was created by New York State educational reform. New York allowed secondary education until a student was twenty-one. Because of the horrendous conditions of their lives over the previous years, some refugees fell into this class of student. They had each suspended their schooling to flee for their lives and had remained in hiding. They had interrupted their educations during their teens, but now they were approaching adulthood. There would be evening courses offered at the Shelter for adults who sought high school degrees, but these teens, almost young adults, were too young to join middle-aged men and women each evening. The adult education process was geared towards those who had experienced difficulty while in secondary school, often the primary reason for suspending their education. These young students were not in need of remediation, only opportunity. Furthermore, the evening classes would provide no social dimension to schooling for these youths. There were many things these young people had been robbed of by all they had endured, no less among these had been their teenage years. Too old to feel comfortable among younger peers, too young to be schooled among
adults, these youthful refugees existed in an educational limbo.

One of the first examples of the exceptional steps Faust took to accommodate these young and innocent victims of man’s inhumanity to man was to visit the Shelter to meet with these older students. Before Faust began the process of interviewing each refugee student of high school age, Faust came to the Shelter when the full quarantine was still imposed to encourage all those youths still eligible under New York law to attend high school. Steffi Steinberg Winters, one of the former refugees who was one of those students Faust convinced they should return to school, reflected on her experience in an unpublished memoir written during the past decade. Winters wrote: “Then, one day, news came to the Shelter that the children would be allowed to attend the Oswego Public Schools, and within a couple of days it was announced that the Principal of the Oswego High School was visiting the Shelter to speak to the youngsters of high school age. Well, I – not long being of high school age– didn’t think I was going to go to that meeting... At the gathering, Mr. Ralph Faust, Principal of Oswego High School, spoke to us young people in the friendliest and warmest way (most of us understood and spoke quite a bit of English), encouraging us and inviting us to come and attend his High School and, by all means, to resume, now here in the United States, our education, that all of us had interrupted six years ago. To me it was a miracle– six years after losing our home in Germany and then being uprooted again in Italy, I had lost hope of ever being a student again!” Faust’s personal invitation was an important step in bringing these young victims back to a point where they had been before their lives had been so unjustly and inhumanely altered. It had been so long since they had felt welcomed by someone beyond
Winters recalled that Faust’s visit was “about two weeks” after they had arrived. In a memorandum from Ade to Smart, dated August 24th, he described Faust interviewing the high school students. Ade wrote: “Mr. Faust, the Oswego High School Principal, is cooperating with Mr. Kuznitski in helping to classify senior high school students. Senior high school students will be the group from 14 to 19 inclusive. Mr. Faust is already having individual conferences with high school students. He will have completed interviews at the shelter with all high school students before schools open on September 5.”

Ade wrote this the day after Riley had stepped forward and officially invited the Shelter’s students to attend Oswego’s schools, only eight days after Smart had called community leaders into his office to discuss the problems with schooling the refugee children, and it depicted Faust’s interviewing students as an ongoing process.

In Ade’s memorandum, the process of placing the younger students was described in the future tense, that is, a process which had yet to begin. “Dr. Snygg has met with Mr. Merzar and Mr. Wittenberg. These three men will assume the responsibility for making tentative classifications by grades of all elementary and junior high pupils.” Not only did Faust personally take on a tedious chore no other school principal would assume, he started the process almost immediately. Additionally, Faust began this time consuming task almost two weeks before the school board had formally approved the admission of the Shelter’s students, at a time both Smart and Ade were acknowledging that the overall plan might not be approved. This was likely an indication of the importance Faust attributed to the task of integrating these students into his school, also reflective of his
desire to make them feel welcomed at the highest level.

If Riley had made a commitment through his role in the Advisory Committee which angered the cost-conscious, conservative school board by his presumptiveness, Faust might have been in a position to capitalize upon it politically. According to Anthony Murabito, Faust had been passed over as the likely candidate for Superintendent in favor of the Irish-Catholic Riley by a school board appointed by a mayor who was himself an Irish-Catholic. Riley was the first Catholic in history to hold that prestigious position in a community which had a significant Irish minority since the mid-nineteenth century, and when combined with other Catholic ethnic groups had constituted a Catholic majority by that time for more than six decades. Riley’s appointment as Superintendent over the popular Faust, the most senior of male administrators in the system, had angered the city’s educational establishment. What was significant about Faust’s actions was not just that he invested his personal labor to promote the interests of the Shelter’s children, he did so to the disregard of potential career advantages.

Any skepticism indicated by Smart and Ade as to the ultimate outcome with regard to the school board might have been a product of this assessment of the politics of education in Oswego, or an indication of a reluctance, based on past experience with the WRA Internment Camps, to take for granted self-assessments of political power by local officials. Ade was sufficiently unsure of the school board’s ultimate approval that in a September 7th telephone conversation Marks told Smart that Ade wanted to know if the educational plan for the Shelter was ever formally approved.

It was common knowledge in the community that Faust, who had ample staff to
have delegated responsibilities, took on the task the task of evaluating the Shelter’s high school students personally. But reports sent to Washington did not adequately portray Faust’s commitment. The report written by WRA for the WRB glossed over the complexities. It read: “The problem of evaluating their language ability and European credits and grading them in proper classes was worked out cooperatively by the educational officials of the town, WRA staff members and a committee on education developed by the refugee group. The pupils received preliminary instruction in English before the school term began. Despite the language handicap, it is expected that all children will be able to fit in within one year of the proper grade for their age.”

In an endeavor to provide information in as brief form as possible, Faust’s effort was portrayed as indistinguishable from that of Snygg and his committee. In addition, Ade’s contribution was downplayed while the contribution of the refugees who assisted Faust and Snygg might have been somewhat inflated. Dr. Rolph Manfred, then Ralph Kuznitzki, states that he did not assist Faust as depicted in various memoranda, whereas Winters recalls she and Edith Weiss merely interpreted for him.

Faust recalled: “When that was done I was just finishing my summer session here and was asked to go to the fort and meet the students of high school age. I did that and found I had to spend the rest of the summer interviewing them to find out what their background was and where they could fit in to [sic] our courses of study. Most of them had been out of school from three, four, five, six years and they were eager to get back. I had to figure out what their background, how much science and math and so on, they ‘d had and what their command of English was and so on. Then I’d schedule, then I’d go
over each day and interview them. I had two or three gals act as interpreters for me. Then [we] set up programs for them for the opening of school.” 6 Who asked Faust to come to the Shelter was unclear. It could have been Riley, Smart, or Ade. But Riley had not asked any of his other administrators to take on such responsibilities for the refugee students. During the week Ade was in Oswego he appeared to have taken over the responsibilities for working out schooling from Smart, so it was likely Ade or Smart, under Ade’s suggestion, who asked Faust to help. This would be consistent with Ade’s summary to Smart of steps taken to resolve the issue of schooling for the refugees.

An article in Survey Graphic, (XXXIV, June 1945) a magazine from that era, acknowledged the complexity of the task but omits any reference to who might have performed these time-consuming chores. The article read: “The integration of the children into the Oswego’s schools was complicated. Some of them had never gone to school. Others had had a very good education but knew no English. Thus, before the regular school term started, Oswego’s teachers spent a fortnight observing the Fort Ontario girls and boys and assigning them grades. Now they go to school every day.” The article inaccurately stated that “teachers spent a fortnight observing the Fort Ontario girls and boys and assigning them grades.” This was only technically correct. As a psychology professor, Snygg was a teacher at the college. As a life-long educator Faust was primarily a teacher. In reality, neither was a teacher as implied by the article. This created the illusion of a broad-base of support among educators for the schooling of the Shelter’s students. That emerged eventually. What it did not portray was how Faust led by example. His personal involvement with the refugee students was as much an
indication of his perception of their individual needs as viewed by an educator, as a means of showing the teachers who worked under him what he expected from them when dealing with these casualties of war and oppression.

The impact of Faust’s work on behalf of the refugee students during their first exposure to him was indelible. Winters recalled his efforts with unparalleled fondness. She wrote: “Mr. Faust most cordially welcomed us 40 young people from the Shelter to his school and with total dedication set himself to the task of fitting each one of us into the grades and curriculums into which he felt we belonged. It must, indeed, have been a very difficult problem, since not only were we from various different European countries, but were of different ages and different school levels! [sic] With his untiring help, it all worked out beautifully, and what followed was a most productive and rewarding year for me and my friends.”

Winters’ view of Faust’s contribution was indicative of what will make its way into history, that is, his contribution was significant, even critical, but he was only one of many who labored to help the refugee students.

The task of interviewing the refugee students would have a lasting and deep effect on Faust. It would shape how he would treat these students over the next eighteen months. In Gruber’s Eight Months Later, she described Faust as having a “profound understanding of the psychological problems that refugee children face...” That understanding was a product of his early involvement.

The actual approval by the Oswego Board of Education was anti-climatic. It happened on the evening of September 1, 1944, the Friday before Labor Day weekend with school to begin on the day after Labor Day. Every obstacle the school board
presented had been overcome by the combined and individual efforts of Smart, Faust and Ade. There would have been virtually no record of the event if it had not been for the WRA’s penchant for creating file memoranda detailing the contents of important telephone calls. On Thursday, September 7, 1944, Marks called Smart to check on the status of the Shelter’s school children. The memorandum stated: “Mr. Marks asked about the school children, and Mr. Smart said they were all getting along fine... Mr. Marks said Dr. Ade wanted to know if the school board as such has taken any action, and Mr. Smart said they had had a meeting last Friday giving approval.” What was surprising was that apparently the Shelter children’s attendance at school that week was not an automatic indication of the school board’s official action.

It was not clear why the school board waited until such a late date to render its official decision regarding the Shelter’s students. The delay could have been a reflection that the school board wanted to have resolved all of their reservations prior to any binding commitment, or perhaps it was simply caused by summer vacations. Whatever the reason, it did not seem to deter Faust and Snygg from performing the preliminary tasks necessary to have the children of the elementary and secondary schools in class on Tuesday, September 5th.

Throughout the negotiations it was apparent that Smart was always confident that he would have a source of funding. Even when the coalition of charitable groups formed their own organization in defiance of Smart’s manipulative steps to form a pliant and dependent Coordinating Committee, the Shelter Director proceeded as if all were well.
Oswego State Teachers College

When WRA officials first met to plot out how they would accomplish the tasks given them by Roosevelt, they speculated that Oswego State could be a potential source of support. A June 22, 1944 memorandum from Provinse to Myer discussed that probable support. It stated, “The president at the Normal School at Oswego can probably be counted on for much help working out our educational program and might be sympathetic to establishing practice teaching at the Fort which would answer refugee needs.”

When Ade planned how he would accommodate the Oswego Board of Education’s desire to have the addition of more than 200 children result in no additional costs, he included the college’s laboratory in his proposed solution. Ade wrote in an undated draft, “Arrangements are being made to transport not more than one bus load of elementary pupils, preferably grades four and five, to the laboratory schools of the Oswego State Teachers College.” Ade did not indicate the same level of doubt about Swetman’s commitment on behalf of the college. It was clear that Swetman had committed at the earliest stages to allowing refugee children to enter the laboratory school. This was critical because had there not been a source for educating additional elementary school children beyond the handful sent to parochial school, the initial offer by the school board might not have been ever proffered in the first place, or at the very least, might have placed the commitment of the school board in jeopardy.

On Friday September 1, 1944, Swetman wrote Ade outlining the college’s commitment to the Shelter’s educational program. This memorandum described a
perspective espoused by Swetman, and eventually other educators, that is, becoming involved with the work of the Shelter, and interacting with the refugees, was a growth experience for those who partake in the endeavor. Swetman put at the disposal of Ade members of the college’s faculty to assist with problems encountered regarding the refugee students’ schooling. Swetman wrote:

As per your request I am enclosing a copy of our student hand book giving a list of our faculty members. We have checked the names of the members who have assisted with the refugee project at Fort Ontario. They are:

- Miss Marion Mahar, Department of Social Studies
- Dr. Donald Snygg, Department of Psychology
- Miss Irene Eisele, Critic & Supervisor in College Elementary School
- Dr. Harold Alford, Director of the Campus Elementary School

Ade, a former college president, sought a faculty directory in anticipation of broadening the college’s role in resolving educational problems, Swetman concurred and obliged him.

Despite the critical role the college would play in providing an outlet for overcrowding caused by Shelter students, there seemed to be little controversy involved in placing twenty-five students there. To discuss the children’s attendance at the college, on the opposite end of town two and one half miles away, required discussing the school bus provided by a committee made up of Jewish charitable groups. To acknowledge that an alliance of Jewish charitable groups was paying for the ancillary education expenses of refugees living at the Shelter would admit that the vast majority of the residents there were Jewish. President Roosevelt did not yet want this fact known.

The primary concern of the Shelter administration and the college in September 1944 was the potential for those refugee youths of college age to attend Oswego State. The existence of a school bus traveling from the Shelter to the college each morning must
have produced frustration for those young refugees who had either planned to go to college for the first time or hoped to resume an interrupted college education. The problem was simple. Whereas elementary and secondary educations were considered a right, in 1944 a college education was viewed as a privilege. Furthermore, World War II was being fought and young men were being drafted out of college. Had the obstacles regarding refugee youths attending college resided either with the New York State Education Department or with the college itself, there would have been a discussion to that effect. Swetman committed to work with Ade “in whatever way you may wish to use our facilities.”  

Swetman’s letter indicated that when Ade met with Dr. Herman Cooper in Albany it concerned the problems associated with refugees attending college as undergraduate students. Cooper was the Assistant Commissioner of Education in Charge of New York State Teacher Colleges.

Another indication of the existence of difference of opinion within WRA about college admission for Shelter students appeared in a September 2, 1944 telephone call memorandum. It read, “They discussed the attendance of refugees at the college in Oswego and the Director’s decision regarding this.”  

What would be evident from the record was that Smart was advocating for permission for refugees to attend Oswego State, while WRA’s Director Myer opposed it. In response to a telegram sent by Smart to Myer in Washington, Myer wrote, “In further reference to your wire asking if refugee students may attend college in Oswego, I have decided that for the present at least, it would be unwise to permit this, even though tuition funds were assured.”

One reason the WRA had opposed college education for the refugees was the
product of Roosevelt’s commitment to Congress. In a January 15, 1945 letter, dated the
eve of the refugees’ admittance to Oswego State, written to Myer by WRB Director John
Pehle, Pehle indicated his continued opposition to the refugees’ college attendance. Pehle
wrote: “In his message to Congress on June 12, 1944, President Roosevelt announced that
the refugees at Oswego would remain in the Emergency Refugee Shelter under
appropriate security restrictions until the end of the war at which time they would be
returned to their homelands. To permit any selected group to leave the Shelter even
temporarily would hardly be in harmony with this publicly expressed commitment.”  

Pehle’s rationale seemed to ignore the fact that elementary and secondary students were
leaving the Shelter on a daily basis to attend school. Pehle can be forgiven if he did not
know that a busload of elementary students from the Shelter was traveling every day to
the laboratory school, neither the Shelter’s administration nor WRA would have informed
him of such measures. Nevertheless, his reasoning seemed flawed. Pehle continued:
“Furthermore, from a public relations standpoint there may be resentment if young men of
military age were granted permission to leave the Shelter to attend colleges and
universities at a time when many American citizens are foregoing their education to serve
in the armed forces.”  

Fear of adverse publicity, as in many instances regarding this
endeavor, drove policy.

Smart openly challenged the official position of the WRA. In a September 4, 1944
letter to Myer, Smart offered his rationale for challenging WRA policies when they
contradict what he believed to be ethical and constitutional grounds. Smart wrote, “I
realize that the function of the War Relocation Authority is largely custodial but it is
impossible to separate policies of internal operation from broader ones and I am sure I will be forgiven if I do not attempt such separation.”

Smart continued with his explanation as to why the college-age refugees should be afforded the same opportunities as the elementary and secondary students in the Shelter. He drew upon Roosevelt’s notion of the freedoms which are the basis of American life. Smart continued:

**Freedom of Education:** At your behest we have made it possible for the children to attend elementary and high schools in Oswego. This opportunity should be extended to the college students. Our universities have a long tradition of exchange educational opportunities with foreign countries and foreign-born students on our campuses have become commonplace. During the war, many refugee instructors have been welcomed in our universities and communities where universities are located have a tolerance and liberalism which should make the enrollment of refugee students readily acceptable. It is true that we do not owe an education to these refugees, except that society owes an education to every person who will have it. If the refugees are to remain in the United States it is to our advantage that they be well educated. If they return to Europe, it is also to our selfish interest that they take with them all possible enlightenment and educational background in the American system. Their education can be obtained through private funds or contributions, thus placing no burden on our taxpayers but on the contrary relieving our Government of the expense of maintaining a prospective student at the Shelter.

What Smart was proposing was that these college-age refugees be permitted to attend institutions of higher education away from Oswego. This was like the program which was developed for Japanese-American college-aged residents of the WRA’s Internment Camps. Despite this impassioned plea, the refugees of college-age were denied the opportunity to attend school, at least for the time being.

The college’s commitment to assist the refugees was not limited to elementary, secondary or post-secondary schooling. On September 1, 1944 Swetman wrote Samuel L. Marshall, Technical Director of ORT, about coordinating support for training at the
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Shelter. Swetman wrote: “Confirming our conference of August 24th and in reply to your letter of August 28th, I believe we may proceed with the plans under discussion concerning our cooperation with the needs of the refugees at Fort Ontario. I shall be happy to see you when you arrive in Oswego next week.” Vocational training, while not an issue that was as time-sensitive as elementary and secondary education, actually impacted on a greater number of refugees. Though the refugees were comprised of many professionals and experienced business operators selected for their skills, many had found that they had to learn new skills, adapt old skills to the American economy, or find a way to become re-certified. Those who had businesses had been stripped of the capital necessary to rebuild or start over.

An educational issue which impacted upon literally every refugee, to one degree or another, was that of English language training. The college was instrumental in carrying out Ade’s plan to offer English language education to the refugees. As discussed above in his memorandum to Provinse, Ade described how he had involved officials from New York’s Education Department and college professionals in carrying out the plan to educate the refugees in English. Caroline A. Whipple, Chief of the Adult Education Bureau at the State Department of Education, met with college officials. Ade wrote: “She is planning to go to Oswego some time this week for a preliminary conference with Dr. Charles Wells, Head of the Department of English and Speech, State Teacher’s College at Oswego and with Miss Marian Mahar of the College faculty, who is now supervising our preliminary English instruction program for elementary and secondary refugee students at the Shelter.” Oswego State through the commitment made by Swetman, and
complimented by the work of college staff like Snygg and Mahar, played a significant but unheralded role in educating the children. Time and again there will be evidence that Swetman and his associates assisted Smart in resolving critical education problems. Smart will value Swetman’s contribution. In his autobiography, *Don’t Fence Me In* (1991) Smart remembered what friends he made while in Oswego, he will recall, “Warm friendships grew with a few Oswego families, notably Ralph Swetman, president of Teachers College, and his wife Alice.”

This is just one indication of the broad range of support offered to the Shelter by the college.

Though not every component of the Shelter’s educational program became operational, critical elements did. The most important component, the education of the primary and secondary students, despite initial reluctance by the local school board and some initial difficulties with administrators, was functioning well. This component was most important because it was the children of the Shelter who had endured the most harm to their education. Fleeing for their lives and hiding from their persecutors, these children had been denied schooling during the most critical periods of their formative years.

Smart, with the assistance of Ade and the help of local leaders like Faust, Waterbury, Mizen, Swetman and Fr. Shanahan, had persuaded the local school board to educate the children of the Shelter. With the assistance of an association of charitable organizations whose presence in Oswego was called the Coordinating Committee for Fort Ontario, all of the associated expenses of schooling were paid for through donations. Through these complex relationships Smart had facilitated this critical component of the Shelter’s educational obligations to the refugees at Fort Ontario.
Endnotes


2 Winters 1990, 4.

3 Ade August 24, 1944.

4 Ade August 24, 1944.

5 Myer September 14, 1944.

6 Faust 1984.

7 Winters 1990, 4.

8 Gruber 1945, 13.

9 Edward P. Marks, September 7, 1944, telephone call memorandum made to Smart, September 1944 Readers’ File, Fort Ontario Emergency Refugee Shelter Collection, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Butler Library, Columbia University, New York.


11 Ade 1944.

12 Swetman September 1, 1944.

13 Swetman September 1, 1944.

14 Edward P. Marks, September 2, 1944, telephone call memorandum made to Smart, September 1944 Readers’ File, Fort Ontario Emergency Refugee Shelter Collection, Rare
Book and Manuscript Library, Butler Library, Columbia University, New York.


16 Pehle 1945.

17 Pehle 1945.


19 Smart September 4, 1944, 5.

20 Swetman September 1, 1944.

21 Ade August 31, 1944.

22 Smart 1991, 10.