Chapter Eight

Schooling in Action: An Uneasy Routine

Once the hurdle of admitting the refugee children into the schools of Oswego had been traversed, the students themselves began to advocate in their own behalf. All of the groundwork by Faust, Ade, Smart and Swetman, just to name a few, had borne fruit. The refugee students no longer needed principled adults to intercede in support of them. They promoted their interests and reputation by their eagerness to learn and the overall quality of their scholastic performance. There were a few exceptions, however, though more often than not, those exceptions reflected more on the adults involved than the students.

With Faust at the helm the high school functioned the most smoothly. There was no doubt this was in part the product of the high school students’ age but it also reflected Faust’s hard work during the late summer weeks interviewing and placing the refugee students in individualized schedules. Faust put forth the extra effort to acclimate the students to the school itself. Faust described how he toured the high school with the refugee students. He recalled: “The day before school opened I had them come to the school and gave them a tour of the building so that they could be oriented to getting around the building. I can distinctly remember, as we got down on the lower floor, where the shops were, among themselves they spoke German. They were mostly Yugoslavs, but among themselves they seemed to be speaking German. As they looked into these shop doors I can distinctly remember them saying, hearing the words over the babble of German, ‘magnific’. ¹ Faust had learned during the interviews that these youths, for all
they had endured during flight, persecution and hiding, they were also young students
intimidated by the process of starting school anew in a strange country. Winters recalled
that Oswego was “a school system so very different from the one I was used to in
Germany...” 2

Faust, both before the refugee students and long after they departed, had a
reputation for being an exceptional administrator and educator. Dr. Ralph Manfred
remembered how the high school staff responded to Faust’s leadership. Manfred recalled,
“You could see in the office staff how they respected him.” 3 Faust translated those
qualities into how he dealt with the students and the teaching staff. Manfred remembered,
“Ralph Faust solicited and got the support of the teaching staff.” 4 Manfred, then only a
teenager, felt that he could tell how the teachers and staff responded to Faust that he was
held in respect by all who worked for him. For that reason Manfred believed Faust
deserved credit for the overall acceptance the Shelter’s high school students received.

The high school functioned best for the refugees, but it was not without incident.
Though Faust portrayed it as an aberration, a problem arose the first day of school. The
student government president, charged with greeting all the students, refused to welcome
the refugee students. Faust recalled: “Well anyway, we got them into school. They came
the first day. I had arranged with our school president if he would ask if he would give
them a word of welcome. Welcome to the school. He wouldn’t do it. He didn’t feel that
they were, we had a chance to, that the school had a chance to say whether they would be
allowed to come or whether the community would be allowed to receive these people, and
he wouldn’t do it. So I welcomed them myself.” 5 That set the tone for the year. Faust
led the students by example, and his faculty by both example and mandate. Faust made it known to all that these children who had fled Europe were welcomed in his building.

Faust’s success with the refugee students might be viewed as merely evidence of an educator who performed as was expected, in other words, his conduct could have been taken for granted. But not all of the Oswego public school administrators performed as well as Faust had. Virginia Dean was principal of Fitzhugh Park School. Fitzhugh Park was a combined elementary and junior high school on the east side of Oswego a few blocks southeast of Fort Ontario. She had in her school the second largest group of refugee students, fifty-four. Furthermore, she had the two most difficult age groups for students, the junior high school and the early grades. The largest contingent of refugee students was the sixty-four attending School Number Two, which was only an elementary school. The challenge of dealing with fifty-four non-English speaking students must have been enormous; nevertheless, Dean’s impatience with the tardiness of the first graders provoked a harsh, almost unprofessional, response. On November 4, 1944 she wrote Smart the following note in long hand:

According to our agreement that we should send back to the Fort any first grade pupils who were late for school, I am sending back the following pupils who were late this morning:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sonja Finzi</th>
<th>Peter Neuman</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Renata Guttman</td>
<td>Lurma Rampos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Herbert Druks</td>
<td>Lela Rampos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Albert Gal</td>
<td>Flora Kalederon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaon Lanko</td>
<td>Very truly yours, Virginia Dean</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Smart responded to Dean explaining that the first graders’ tardiness was not their fault.
He wrote: “Yesterday morning by mistake the gate used by the first grade pupils was not opened until 8:40 AM so that the pupils could not possibly be at school on time. I hope that the children will be excused for this unavoidable lateness.” From Fort Ontario to the Fitzhugh Park School is about eight-tenths of a mile. To walk it you must cross numerous streets. When an educator punishes a child that young in that manner about something that was most likely not the responsibility of the child, he or she is attempting to make a statement to someone, in normal instances, the parents. It was a group of students who were late, not just one student or children from one or two families. Furthermore, first graders can offer a reasonable account as to what had happened to them. Even though these children were in first grade, some were older. Granted, there was likely still a considerable language barrier. Regardless, sending children back home on a cold autumn morning for tardiness was extreme. It was extreme not just because it was an unreasonable discipline imposed on first graders, it showed no sensitivity to what these families had endured during the preceding years. If the children had difficulty explaining in English why they were late, so much more the reason not to take such extreme actions.

One Oswego native who remembered Dean did not believe she was prejudiced in any manner. It was her recollection that Dean was the strictest of the public schools’ administrators, hence her assignment to the junior high level. She characterized Dean as fair, but a stickler for the rules. No more than Faust may have treated the youths in his charge at the high school as he treated all of his students, one might say that Dean did the same, only with different results. Dean was a strict disciplinarian; however, simply being
strict is easy. If Faust could take the time from his summer to meet with forty-two
students, so too could Dean have met with the parents of fifty-four refugee students. This
had not been the first time Dean had exhibited recalcitrance toward the refugee children.

Two weeks into the school year Dean wrote Smart complaining about problems
she was encountering due to the refugee students. First, she complained that the
information they had on the refugee students was incorrect. She wrote, “Enclosed is a list
of pupils from Fort Ontario who attend Fitzhugh Park School. We are stating the
information which we have concerning them. Will you kindly verify this information and
add anything further you may be able to.”

This, on face value, seemed to be a reasonable request. Smart’s response offered
an indication of what may be in fact transpiring. In the case of eight refugee students
either the first name or surname were misspelled. It appeared that Dean had taken the
school board’s mandate about the schooling of the refugee children one step further.
Whereas the school board wanted the refugee children to produce no additional expense,
Dean appeared to want their presence to produce no additional labor for her staff or
herself. The children in question were attending her school, spread among a handful of
teachers. It would have been a simple process to find the correct spelling of names from
the children themselves. Furthermore the process of correcting the spelling may have even
afforded Dean an opportunity to meet the youths. Placing such a responsibility back into
the lap of Smart, shorthanded from the beginning and already overburdened with the needs
of the Shelter’s adult population, was inconsiderate at best, even unprofessional. Dean
was making a statement, it was the opposite message from the one being expressed by
Faust in both his words and actions.

Another example of Dean’s attitude about the refugee children occurred seventeen days after school began. Dean informed Smart that she was unhappy with the performance of the refugee children to date. She wrote, “We find that there is a great deal of tardiness among the children. We shall appreciate whatever you may be able to do to remedy this situation.” Though it was reasonable to expect that the refugee children abide by the same rules as the local students, what appeared was that even at this early stage Dean was unwilling to involve herself on the same personal level as Faust. Smart responded to Dean in the only manner he could. He supported her in her effort to have the refugee children arrive on time. Smart was aware that all of the Shelter’s students had spent most of the preceding four years staying at home as a means of avoiding detection and subsequent capture. He knew that one negative product of this essential survival skill was that many of the children did not want to venture out into the world. Subsequently, they had become accustomed to living without conventional schedules. The home, in sight of their parents and protectors, had become the extent of their comfort zone.

Smart sent a form letter to all of the principals who had refugee children in their schools. He outlined his support for making the Shelter students conform to existing rules on attendance. Smart wrote: “I have been informed by some of the Fort Ontario children about responding to school regulations with respect to tardiness and absence, and I should like to cooperate with you in any steps which are necessary to correct these. It is expected, of course, that you will subject these children to the same discipline as any others in your school, and I would be very glad to have your suggestion for any other
action we may take within the Shelter to re-enforce your efforts.” In light of all that
Smart had to accomplish to enroll the refugee children in the Oswego schools he could not
allow it to unravel over the issue of student tardiness.

It was not as if this problem was unexpected. When devising the rules for passes
on September 14, 1944, the Shelter’s Advisory Committee, a council of elected leaders,
anticipated problems with children and school. The rules that applied to students were as
follows: “5. No passes other than the school pass will be issued to school children
attending school for other purposes during school hours unless for some reason as medical
care. 6. Children who are kept home from school for such reasons as illness will not be
given a pass for shopping or other purpose for that day, and passes will not be issued to
school children evenings followed by a school day.” Student absence and tardiness are
common problems in education. Yet when there are common problems exhibited by
uncommon students, it might be reasonable to expect more innovative or pro-active
solutions from the professionals involved which reflect the complexity of the situation.

When Riley responded to Smart on the subject, Riley indicated that though he
supported his administrators when they enforced the rules, he understood the complexity
of the task facing the Shelter Director. Though tardiness and attendance continued to be a
headache for Smart, his politically astute response essentially defused the issue until Dean
escalated the confrontation five weeks later when she sent home the first graders.

When the problem first arose in late September, Smart did set about the task of
acclimating the refugee students’ parents to the culture of American education. He
published two letters to all refugee families with students. One letter was sent to the
parents of the Shelter’s students. Smart wrote: “Your children are now attending the public schools in a new and strange land. Many of them are not familiar with democratic procedures and all of them are naturally unfamiliar with the American school system... We would therefore urge you to impress upon your children the desirability of a rapid adjustment to the American pattern of behavior in school, on the playground, and on the streets.” Though Smart wrote the letter, he made it a long quote of Riley, in doing so he inserted the authority of the superintendent as a means of removing himself as the primary enforcer of school discipline.

Smart then directed his attention to the children. Smart’s tone indicated that he knew that for some refugee children in the elementary school this was their first experience in formal schooling. Though he eventually addressed the problem of tardiness and attendance, he expanded his directive to include virtually every aspect of school etiquette and culture. Smart wrote:

Obey the teacher—she is your friend and wishes to help you all she can. She will always speak quietly and distinctly so listen attentively to every word she speaks.

Always be quiet in school. You cannot learn if you are creating a disturbance and you prevent others from learning if you are disorderly. American boys and girls are taught not to attract attention to themselves by being noisy, disobedient, or uncooperative.

Always respect the rights of others and they will respect yours.
Never leave your seat [sic] in the classroom without receiving permission from the teacher.
Pay strict attention at all times and participate fully in all activities.

Do not lay your hands on one another.
Do not push or shove other pupils and do not run in the school building.
Always take your seat upon entering the classroom so that you will be ready to begin your classwork.

Be on time to all school sessions and be regular in attendance.
(Sickness is the only acceptable excuse for absence from school.)
Do not hum, stamp, whistle, or mumble in the classroom.
Speak English in the school at all times.
Remember freedom does not mean license.
Recess is a play period— a time for play and relaxation. Be careful in your play. Wild running, climbing, and chasing are dangerous and we must avoid accidents. Do not push or pull other children and do not throw stones, sticks, or snowballs. Never run into the streets at recess time or any other time. Street traffic is dangerous.
Do not climb fireescapes [sic] or trees and never leave the school grounds during recess time. Upon a given signal for the teacher line up and be ready to return to school after recess period.
In going to and from school walk on the sidewalks. Be careful at all street intersections and look both ways for traffic before crossing.
Respect the rights of others on the street and give them their full share of the sidewalk when passing.
We are happy to share our school facilities with you and we know you will wish to show your gratitude by observing all our rules, regulations, and customs

Joseph H. Smart, Director

Though this letter was clearly directed at the refugee students and their parents, there was evidence that one portion was written for the teachers. When Smart wrote in a document crafted in consultation with the superintendent, “She will always speak quietly and distinctly...” Smart was likely interjecting a counter complaint of the students, if ever so diplomatically.

One of the ironies of the refugee educational experience was that Dean will have nothing but fond memories of their stay. In 1984, Dean recalled: “My memory is the first of August of that year that they came I was given cards for about, I think it was about sixty pupils. Most of them did not speak English. But I found that nearly all of them spoke either German or Italian. Now I could take care of the German if the need came for the principal to enter into the picture. I had an art teacher who could take care of the Italian. One of the things that I remember so well was how I, I had formerly been a
teacher of Latin in the high school and was interested in foreign languages. How quickly those young people, who were certainly far above average in intelligence, that was one of the things that I noticed could pick up the English so very quickly. We had put them in grades according to their ages because they had no school records which showed where they should go. So I simply took the ages from the cards that were given to me and during the month of August planned for them to enter the regular classes according to age.”

During the early days of the Shelter when Dean was being so inflexible dealing with the refugee children, it was a time when their English skills were the weakest. Once the refugee students could communicate with her in English, for she indicated she could speak some German, she may have been able to see past her initial response. It might have been that she came to regret her initial reaction to their presence once she witnessed what good students these children were. But it was more likely that she merely treated them the same as she had treated all her students, unaware of how such strict enforcement of rules might have added to the harm inflicted on these children.

Dean appeared unaware how difficult her reaction might have been for Smart who was dealing with a whole myriad of problems at the Shelter. She said: “They adjusted very quickly. We had no difficult problems at all in connection with having them there. In fact, I felt that it was a great advantage to a school to have them because they were such a good example of both behavior and, what shall I say, interest in work, and being willing to work hard, which some of our pupils needed. I thought they were an excellent example. They were not a problem. It was a delight to have them there. I never heard any teacher object. Now, maybe some did and kept it to themselves. But they certainly accepted
them. It was one of the most delightful examples of adaptation, when necessary, both on the part of the youngsters coming into a strange school and also on the part of the school to accept about sixty people. Probably, I have a record somewhere as to how many there were. My remembrance is that there were about sixty. 

What may also have changed Dean’s opinion of the children may have been the experience of meeting the adults of the Shelter. Though there were only a few poor and relatively unskilled adults in this group hand-picked by government officials, the majority of the refugees were either artisans or professionals. Smart provided many opportunities for the people of Oswego to meet the refugees in the Shelter. There were concerts, plays, recitals, and sometimes, just parties. Meeting the adults of the Shelter might have helped change Dean’s opinion. There were indications in her recollections that the parents played a role in her conversion. She continued: “Then another thing I have as a recollection was that the parents of those children that I met were very fine people. Of course, many of them were professional people in Europe before their problems.” 

However commendable Dean’s eventual conversion to the cause of the refugee children, she should not have prejudged them in the first place. For Dean the act of prejudging did not mean she held bigoted opinions about the children because they were Jewish or even because they were refugees. Dean’s prejudgement meant that she treated the refugee children as if they were the product of either permissive or dysfunctional American families. Faust did not judge his students individually, he dealt with anticipated problems not with knee-jerk firmness but with hard work for an educator, that is, counseling, discussion, interaction and problem solving.
Laboratory school & parochial schools

Smart and Ade had crafted a solution to the schooling problem which built upon Roosevelt’s plan to mask the true make up of the refugee population. Fearful of anti-Semitic responses to allowing one thousand Jews enter America, WRB directed Allied officials in Italy to pick a few Gentiles for emigration. The presence of approximately seventy non-Jews among the 982 refugees enabled Roosevelt to imply a greater diversity than there actually was. This misrepresentation was evident in the telegram sent by Smart that gave equal weight to all three school types. It stated that “be permitted to enter Oswego Public and Parochial Schools and State Teachers College under such regulations W.R.A. considers essential and plans to be worked out with school authorities.” The parochial school students comprised only 2.5% of the total and the laboratory school made up no more than 13%; the telegram implied a more equal distribution.

Most of the refugees who were not Jewish were Catholics. Oswego had Catholic schools since the early 1850s, pre-dating the public schools by a decade. In 1944, there were two Catholic grade schools, Saint Paul’s School on the east side of the Oswego River and Saint Mary’s on the west side. Saint Paul’s was the closest to the Shelter about one mile south of Fort Ontario. Father Shanahan, whom the Roman Catholic Bishop of Syracuse had appointed to represent him on the Advisory Committee, was pastor of Saint Paul’s. Father Shanahan had committed early to the task of addressing the educational needs of the refugee children. Though he would ultimately accept only ten pupils to his school, his involvement served a more important function, a strictly political role. Both the Superintendent of Schools and the Mayor of Oswego were Irish and Catholic.
Additionally, Anna S. Riley, former president of the school board and one of four current members, who had seconded the Superintendent’s motion at the first public Advisory Committee meeting, was also Irish and Catholic. According to some estimates, Irish Catholics comprised nearly forty percent of the population of Oswego, while other Catholic ethnic groups made up almost another third. In short, Father Shanahan’s involvement was needed not only to provide additional space in classrooms for refugee children, but perhaps even more so to offer concrete proof of the Catholic Church’s favorable position regarding schooling the Shelter children.

Any reluctance on the part of the school board with regard to the refugee students appeared to be the product of fiscal concerns. Accompanying political concerns would be the direct outgrowth of the cost of schooling the Shelter’s children. The appointed school board was fearful that there would be political repercussions for offering free schooling in a school district where the citizens believed that they were already imposed upon, not only by school taxes, but also by the war effort. The record suggests what other reservations the school board had were legal. Fearful that officials in Albany might determine that offering a public education to non-citizens, even non-immigrants, might leave them exposed to adverse legal action. Once Ade had cleared the way with Albany, and Smart finessed the local political environment, there were no more reasons to deny these children an education.

Both Shanahan and Swetman were not burdened with such immediate fiscal and political constraints. Shanahan reported to his bishop who, though not totally insensitive to public opinion, functioned largely in the authoritarian structure of his church.
Swetman, who was ultimately responsible to the Commissioner of Education, knew that the laboratory school was of minimal concern in light of the broader issues facing his institution. The fact that Shanahan’s role served a political as well as a pedagogical function did not diminish the importance of having a place to put ten more refugee students. Shanahan allowed twin brothers to attend his school despite the fact he knew their baptism as Catholics in Hungary had been a ploy to protect them from the Nazis. Despite serving the smallest group of students, Shanahan was one of the more visible members of the Advisory Committee. What reluctance Swetman might have had would have dissipated when it was evident that Ade had success persuading Albany. Shanahan and Swetman were two educators who were free to follow their consciences.

One outcome of this freedom was that there were few conflicts. In the parochial and laboratory schools there was not the initial reluctance to allow the children to attend. There was not the unprofessional conduct, as exhibited by Dean, where the school board’s fiscal parsimony was viewed as license to initiate a form of rationing of instructional and administrative services. In short, these two schools operated without the early problems which were encountered in the public schools.

For Swetman, working with the refugee students was more than an act of conscience, it was a learning experience. In *Eight Months Later*, Gruber described Swetman’s response to the refugee children. Gruber wrote: “Dr. Swetman, the unusually sympathetic and intelligent President of the State Teacher’s College and the Campus Elementary School, told me that having these children was one of the greatest things that had ever happened to his school. They’ve taught us new sets of values; they’ve enriched
our thinking; they’ve given us an experience that we shall never forget.” 

As president of a teachers’ college Swetman’s was a teacher of teachers. Nevertheless, Swetman’s response gave an indication as to the enthusiastic and scholarly spirit in which he approached the refugee children.

There were a few minor exceptions to the general calm experienced at the Catholic and laboratory schools, but nothing of the caliber of Dean’s reaction. One minor problem involved the bus provided by the Coordinating Committee for transportation from the Shelter to the laboratory school. On October 17, 1944 Berger wrote a terse letter to Smart calling attention to the problem. Berger wrote: “The bus company calls to my attention the fact that the children are not assembling at the corner of East Seventh and Bridge Street, according to plan. They are also using the corners of East Sixth, East Fifth and other streets. Apparently this holds up the bus schedules, and the company asks that the original plan be adhered to.”

There were two things evident in this letter. First, the children of the Shelter were congregating on more than one corner, forcing the bus to make more than one stop to pick them up. In the students’ defense it’s difficult to imagine twenty-five children waiting on one corner along the narrow sidewalks of Bridge Street. Spreading out to other adjacent corners might have been a natural reaction to the overcrowding. More importantly, it appeared that Berger found it necessary to write Smart with his frustration. Telephones were readily accessible as evidenced by the numerous call memoranda filed by federal officials. Whether Berger’s frustration was with the refugee children or with Smart, or both, it appeared this “tempest in a teapot” could have been handled differently. Whereas the tardiness of the refugee students early in the
school year might have been a reflection of problems of adjustment to America and life at the Shelter, the students moving to adjacent corners was an example, innocuous by contemporary standards, of the refugee students asserting themselves by reasonably challenging authority.

One indication as to how smoothly the non-public schools were operating was evident in what incidents warranted Smart’s intervention. In a November 24, 1944 letter to Shanahan, Smart wrote, “The children from the Shelter attending your school would appreciate it if the milk can be kept at room temperature instead of being refrigerated.”\(^21\) This was a problem born of the European practice of serving milk at near room temperature which conflicted with the American practice of serving milk cold, not so much the product of custom but rather superior refrigeration. Smart continued with the children’s complaints. He wrote: “As you know, their lunches are cold, and they feel the milk would be more beneficial if it is not too cold. Some of the children also would prefer chocolate milk, and I believe the cost is the same, and would appreciate it if you can make the chocolate milk available if individual students request it.”\(^22\) The root cause was that many refugee students were from wealthy families. In other words, while these people were destitute and persecuted, they had not been so all their lives. These children had come from successful families who had been forced to give up everything and flee from Nazi persecution and eventual annihilation.

A second process was evident in the innocent complaints of the refugee children. The refugees, though angry about the restrictions imposed upon them from the beginning at the Shelter, were extremely grateful for all that was implied by their arrival at the
Shelter. In every public expression they made it known how grateful they were to
America and even Oswego. What was gradually but undeniably emerging in the refugees
was a restored sense of justice and the security to express it. This gradual transition from
grateful refugee to assertive internee had an impact on both the Shelter and the
community.

Relations Between Student Groups

A July 1945 article “The Fourth R,” in *Woman’s Home Companion* analyzed the
complexities of educating young people who had suffered so much. It read: “In Oswego,
New York, a generation of youngsters who never looked beyond Main Street before are
learning the new lesson smartly, thanks to the help of a fourth R. Refugee is the fourth R
for them—embodied in the daily companionship of one hundred and eighty-nine children
from a dozen different countries of Europe.” 23 The article then shifted its focus to what it
was like for the local children to encounter a large number of new students. It continued:
“It is not easy for adults, let alone children, to assimilate many strangers all at once. So a
number of children went to school the first day expecting the newcomers to be—well
what? Not quite trustworthy? Perhaps a little laughable? They didn’t really know, but
they were suspicious.” 24 Emphasizing the perspective of local children over that of
refugee students might seem insensitive; however, the article was written for Americans,
not Europeans. Nevertheless, it offered insight into the interaction in Oswego during the
Shelter’s existence. It suggested one had to understand the perspective of the refugees,
but there also had to be some realization as to what the local people encountered, if only
to learn from the experience.
Most indications were that the initial reaction of the people of Oswego to the refugees was positive. There were exceptions. Though a majority of Oswegonians either accepted or ignored the refugees, a minority voiced their dissension. Allan Markley on August 26, 1944 wrote an official account for the WRA. Markley described the initial reaction to the refugees by the people of Oswego as one of curiosity. Markley wrote:

... Mr. Waterbury’s prediction of curiosity on the part of the local people was borne out. When the refugee trains arrived on the morning of August 5, 1944 people lined the railway right of way all through the city to get their first glimpse of the people who were coming to live in the same city. Workers in some of the factories along the track left their benches and machines to see the train and to wave to the people who were looking out the coach windows. At the point of detrainment— which is at the northeast corner of the Fort reservation [sic] along the shore of Lake Ontario— hundreds of people lined along the fence and stood for hours watching the people come through the gates, go to the checking station, deliver their hand baggage for customs inspection and then off to the dining halls. That evening large crowds watched through the fence until late at night. This did not stop with that first night but for the next two weeks the crowds were at the fence now on both sides of it, because the refugees soon went there to visit with the townspeople. 

The interaction between the townspeople and the refugees may have begun as simple curiosity, but it evolved. Markley continued: “While the project administration was fearful of this fence contact at first, it appears to have been helpful rather than otherwise. There were a large number of parcels passed over and under the fence, gifts of the local people to their less fortunate brothers and sisters from across the broad Atlantic. Boys ran errands to the neighbor [sic] food stores and brought back ice cream, soft drinks and in some cases bottles of beer. There was some bartering and there were some reports of goods being sold at inflated prices (the refugees had very little idea of the value of American money) [author’s brackets] but this was not widespread.”
Gruber’s *Eight Months Later* had a different view of those first days. Gruber wrote: “Oswego accepted the refugees with mixed emotions. The intelligent townspeople welcomed them warmly. They invited them into their shops, their schools, their churches and even their homes. It was emotionally and intellectually exciting for them to know Europeans who had a different culture than theirs, a different language from theirs, and who yet were profoundly human. The thousand people were as good a cross-section of a thousand human beings as you could find anywhere in America. They were strong and weak, brunettes and blondes, intellectuals and workers, happy and unhappy, good, bad and in-between. They were human beings and the good citizens of Oswego recognized that startling fact with pleasure.”

Gruber’s eloquent account depicted a community which was welcoming.

Gruber continued to describe some of the negative responses of Oswegonians to the refugees. She continued: “But the less intelligent citizens had the typical suspicious attitudes of people in a small town. They resented all newcomers in general and those foreigners in particular. Anti-Semitism began to spread through the town and grow ugly in the schools. Some of the town boys ganged up on the resident students. There was the usual name calling, ‘You dirty Jews,’ and the usual envy of inferiority: ‘You always get on the honor rools. [sic] They treat you better than they treat us.’”

Gruber’s account was no doubt factual as was Markley’s version. The variances in substance can be attributed to differing perspectives.

During the first four months Markley was present at the Shelter every day, serving as Smart’s assistant. Gruber visited the Shelter twice during that first year, when the
refugees first arrived and then eight months later. Stationed in Washington, she had begun her relationship with the refugees while in Italy, which evolved into a role as an advocate on the refugees’ behalf to the federal government. In the eyes of the refugees she was viewed as a representative of the federal government not connected with either Smart or the WRA. It is not difficult to imagine that upon her arrival in Oswego, Gruber was confronted by those refugees who were frustrated with the conditions at the Shelter. Each complaint was likely true, though sometimes the product of misunderstandings. How reflective were the refugees’ complaints about conditions during the entire first eighth month interval in shedding light on the euphoria of the first two months?

A closer look at early relations between the youths of Oswego and the Shelter suggested there was conflict and ill-feelings; however, it might have been caused by more common sources of interpersonal conflict. One former refugee attributed problems to adolescent jealousy. He recalled: “The girls came to the fence every evening to flirt with us because they liked foreign boys, and we loved that, of course.... We went to school. Of course we had to fight the American boys because they were angry that the girls were flirting with us, so there was a fight every single day, but nothing serious and we had a wonderful time in Oswego.” In other instances anti-Semitism did manifest itself. Ray Boni, fifteen at time, recalled: “The kids were not always friendly. Some kids, for some reason or another, called us cruel names. They would throw snow balls in winter time, especially they would attack us with snowballs. On a couple of occasions they confronted us. I had a couple fights until I proved that I could hold my own. Then they left me alone. Well I shouldn’t say me alone, we traveled in groups, usually. I was protective of
my younger brothers. Always have been.”  

Boni now sees the incidents more sympathetically. He continued, “These were a strange group of kids. They spoke a different language. They looked different. Somehow they had to be tested, I suppose.”

When specifically asked if there were anti-Semitic taunts Boni responded, “Well I suppose there was some anti-Semitism that might have been taught at home, or might have been learned at home... ‘Dirty Jew,’ this and that, I don’t recall specifically.”

When asked if the local students treated the refugee students better in school Boni talked about his teachers. He said, “The teachers were extremely friendly, very helpful. Very concerned with teaching us the American way and they did a good job. They instilled a lot of interest in the language and the history. That’s why the kids did so well.”

Faust’s own recollection was that incidents of bigotry and associated brutality were infrequent. He recalled: “I don’t think there was any trouble. There may have been some isolated incidents, but generally speaking I think our, I know a lot of our kids invited them to their homes and so on. I don’t think there was any great opposition in the community. There wasn’t. There were some who were narrowminded who didn’t think this was the thing to do. But I think our community accepted them and I know the teachers, college faculty, and our faculty were very sympathetic to what was, what seemed to be the way of helping some of these folks.”

The remembrances of Winters and Manfred support Faust’s recollections. Neither recalled any anti-Semitic or anti-refugee incidents in the high school. The bigoted behavior of the senior class president on the first day of school was a drama played out
behind-the-scenes which only became known to some of the refugee students over time as their grasp of English improved. By welcoming the students himself, Faust had succeeded in hiding, for a time, the student leader’s insult. There was no doubt that what Boni encountered happened, and it certainly happened more than once. Yet it was not clear how extensive were such incidents nor the motivation. It is difficult to characterize the conduct of an abusive adolescent who shouts anti-Semitic slurs at one youth in one instance, and taunts another child, an American, into tears regarding their weight. Adolescents, particularly adolescent males, can be brutal.

In contrast with what transpired among adults, the problems which existed between the children of the Shelter and their local peers dissipated over time, a strong indication that unfamiliarity might have played a significant role. *Women’s Home Companion* captured this process, it read:

> Then, just before Thanksgiving, the situation cleared up. A class was discussing the Pilgrims and one Austrian boy asked who they were.
> “They were people who came here to find freedom of religion,” he was told.
> “Oh then,” he exclaimed, “we’re just like the Pilgrims.”
> That set the Oswego youngsters to thinking. If Karl was like a Pilgrim, that would make the Pilgrims our first refugees. Everyone likes the Pilgrims, so what’s wrong with refugees? The answer was obvious. 35

In scores of incidents like the one described above, the Oswego children came to accept the Shelter children. In some instances acceptance meant a pro-active welcome while in others it merely meant allowing refugee children to blend into relative anonymity. For the refugee children the last year was far less turbulent than the first six months. Winters recalled: “Unlike our parents and all the other ‘Shelter Residents,’ we hardly felt the
confinement of the ‘camp.’ We were not only physically away from it most of the day, but we were living a normal school life, involved in our studies, and had contact with American people. It is for this reason, for me and I believe for our entire student group, the ‘Fort-Ontario-Oswego Experience’ was a very positive one.” 36

Winters’ observation that the experience of the refugee students was significantly better than that of the adults living at the Shelter was insightful, but it did not go far enough. The educational program developed by Smart and Ade, assisted by local officials like Faust, Swetman, and Riley, was the most successful component of the Shelter project. In *Eight Months Later*, Gruber described the children as the primary success story in the Shelter. She wrote: “The children were by far the brightest picture in the whole camp. They brought credit to the whole Shelter in the work they did in the city schools of Oswego. Sixteen of the children in the high school were placed on the honor rolls... One of the children, Vladimir Lang, called “Laddie” by the children, the son of a Yugoslav butcher, was elected president of the seventh grade.” 37 Gruber focused on how they brought “credit” on the refugees of the Shelter as a group. They served a more important role than being good will ambassadors. At times it appeared that the success of schooling kept the entire project from imploding.

The refugee children’s success in school was an indication to the refugees that not all was wrong. Amidst frustration over the conditions at the camp and the slow process by which volunteer agencies responded to long-standing collective and individual needs, most predating the refugees’ emigration, the overt success of the schools was a beacon of hope to tide them over and offer a promise of what might be.
It was difficult to gauge the collective psychological condition at the Shelter once the routine of daily life there took hold. There had been the early euphoria which surrounded the refugees’ selection, voyage and arrival in America. However, that positive sense dissipated gradually over the following weeks. An adult refugee, “Miss Clemmer,” was interviewed March 12, 1945. The interview read:

**Question:** “What is the attitude of the refugees at being kept at Fort Ontario?”

**Answer:** “Most of the refugees are bitter and resentful over the restrictions placed upon them. They were grateful for the opportunity to come to America, but they cannot understand why they should not be free in a land of freedom.”

Apparently, Clemmer was not alone in her feelings. Official reports substantiated that the Shelter’s conditions were taking a toll on the refugees.

One indication how important the schooling was at the Shelter is evidenced in a report by a psychologist. Dr. Curt Bondy was contracted in December 1944 by the WRA to determine the overall psychological conditions at the Shelter. Bondy’s findings were not encouraging, or for that matter, not very flattering. The report was delivered to WRA about the same time the Battle of the Bulge had shaken the Roosevelt Administration to its foundations. Bondy viewed the Shelter as being comparable to a concentration camp, not the extermination processing centers devised by the Nazis, more like those operated by the Italians, or even the WRA internment camps. A WRA summary of Bondy’s report stated: “Dr. Bondy’s general outward impression of the Shelter was ‘not a good one.’ The barracks houses are crowded and the cold climate not favorable for the old and sick. The residents are ‘developing the typical unrealistic attitude of people in internment camps,’ are ‘restless, nervous and full of inferiority complexes’, and ‘more and more
uninterested in creative activity.” 39 Bondy discussed “feelings of inferiority” among the Shelter residents and attributes those emotions to their lives at the camp. He did not see the problems as part of the refugees’ long-term experience. Nevertheless, Bondy did capture in terms of the collective feelings at the Shelter a clue why the refugee students’ successes were so positive in contrast. Faust’s hearty and sincere welcoming of the refugee students was a powerful tonic for youths who might have had more than the standard amount of adolescent insecurity and accompanying sense of inferiority. Seeing these young people of the Shelter leave each morning for school, full of enthusiasm and hope, had to have an impact on this community of refugees.

The official record was not as revealing as Bondy’s report would ultimately be. Regular reports to WRA headquarters provided concise assessments of the refugee students’ progress. The first Six Week Report, a regular update provided by the WRA for WRB, described early progress: “The refugees are delighted with the thought that their children are attending school again. The refugee pupils have been absorbed into the regular school system at no expense to the Federal or State government.” 40 When Marks reported to Myer after Marks’ visit to the Shelter he stated, “From everything I could observe, the children appear to be making a good school adjustment.” 41

In response to a letter from a rabbi, Dr. Steven Wise, President of the American Jewish Congress, who had been involved early in advocating for the creation of the Shelter, Myer called attention to the success of the education program. Wise wrote Myer complaining about conditions at Fort Ontario. In his six-page reply Director Myer wondered why Dr. Wise’s associate who visited the Shelter did not mention the success in
the schools. Myer wrote: “I am glad that Mrs. Cohen found the nursery school children
happy and adequately cared for. I am sorry that she did not find occasion to mention one
of the most gratifying features of the entire project—the fact that 189 children of school
age are making an excellent adjustment in the elementary and high schools of the town of
Oswego.” When Smart and Ade invested so much effort into establishing a
comprehensive educational program they could not foresee how important their efforts
would be for the morale of the entire refugee population and subsequently for the overall
success of the Shelter.

Endnotes

1 Faust 1984.

2 Winters 1990.

3 Manfred 2002.

4 Manfred 2002.

5 Faust 1984.

6 Virginia Dean, November 3, 1944, handwritten note to Joseph H. Smart, Box 12, The
Fort Ontario Emergency Refugee Shelter Collection, The National Archives, Washington,
D.C.

7 Joseph H. Smart, November 4, 1944, letter to Principal Dean, Box 12, The Fort
Ontario Emergency Refugee Shelter Collection, The National Archives, Washington, D.C.

8 Virginia Dean, September 22, 1944, letter to Joseph Smart, Box 12, The Fort Ontario
Emergency Refugee Shelter Collection, The National Archives, Washington, D.C.

9 Dean September 22, 1944.

10 Joseph H. Smart, September 28, 1944, letter to Ralph Faust, Box 12, The Fort Ontario
Emergency Refugee Shelter Collection, The National Archives, Washington, D.C.


13 Smart 1944.

14 Smart 1944.

15 Virginia Dean 1984, telephone interview by Lawrence Baron, Safe Haven Collection, Special Collections, Penfield Library, State University of New York at Oswego.

16 Dean 1984.

17 Dean 1984.

18 Smart August 24, 1944.

19 Gruber 1945, 12.

20 Joseph E. Berger, October 17, 1944, letter to Joseph Smart, Box 12, The Fort Ontario Emergency Refugee Shelter Collection, The National Archives, Washington, D.C.


22 Smart November 24, 1944.

23 Jolles 1945, 16.

24 Jolles 1945, 17.


26 Markley August 26, 1944.
27 Gruber 1945, 8.

28 Gruber 1945, 8.

29 Unidentified Male Refugee, 1984, Transcript of interview, File 31, Refugee Interview 3, Safe Haven Collection, Special Collections, Penfield Library, State University of New York at Oswego.

30 Boni 1998.


33 Boni 1998.

34 Faust 1984.

35 Jolles 1945, 17.

36 Winters 1990, 3, 4.

37 Gruber 1945, 12.


39 Clemmer 1945.

40 Myer September 14, 1944, 4.

41 Edward P. Marks, October 21, 1944, letter to Joseph Smart, October 1944 Readers’ File, Fort Ontario Emergency Refugee Shelter Collection, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Butler Library, Columbia University, New York, 5.