Chapter Eleven

Impasse

Faust’s high school had accepted the adolescent refugees and they gradually became almost indistinguishable from their American peers. The refugee students in the elementary schools settled into a routine common for American students. For the adults, English language instruction and vocational training were welcomed diversions from the tedium of confinement. In essence, the initiation of a comprehensive education program at the Shelter had been successful, but the existence of the Shelter itself had become a more pressing issue. The refugees who had fled Europe and had spent so much of the previous decade in flight and hiding, could not be expected to call this camp home. It was a refuge, a temporary refuge. With the children safe in the schools of Oswego, and the adults participating in various training programs, the challenge was resolving what was the future of these refugees. This debate created an impasse between those who advocated for the refugees all along and those who had never really wanted them to come to America in the first place.

The success of creating a comprehensive educational program for the Shelter had an impact both inside and outside the Shelter. Now that school proceeded without serious problems the members of the Advisory Committee sought to resolve the refugees’ broader problems by a similar approach. This committee created to promote schooling for the refugee children, now sought to resolve the impasse created by the refugees’ presence, and their desire to remain in the country which had provided them temporary refuge.

Though the effort to resolve the issues related to schooling of the Shelter’s
children had priority, the academic year started September 5th, Smart had actually introduced the issue of increasing refugee freedom at the Advisory Committee’s first meeting in his office. It was there that Smart outlined how the committee would function and what purpose it would serve. A description of the issues discussed in that meeting read: “The work of such a committee, Mr. Smart pointed out, would be largely of an advisory character, because much of the basic policy will be determined by the officials in Washington, but there were many matters pertaining to the operation of the shelter where local application would have an important bearing. Some of the policies would of course, be formulated here in recommendation to the Washington office. He also said that he felt such a committee would greatly aid in the public understanding of the program at Fort Ontario and that the persons’ service on the committee would be able to advise the WRA officials on the public reaction to the operation and the policies. He added that he felt also that the committee would aid in interpreting the policies to the local people and help to counteract unfounded reports and rumors which would be circulated.”

Mr. Smart then turned his attention to the issue which impacted upon all of the refugees, not just the Shelter’s children. The memorandum continued:

Mr. Smart then stated that there were some matters on which he wanted the counsel [sic] and guidance of the committee immediately. One was that of a policy for leave from the shelter which would make it possible for refugees quartered here to go to Oswego to shop and attend movies. He said that he personally wanted to make recommendations to the Washington office setting up leave policy and that he intended to do so unless there was evidence of adverse reaction on the part of the people of the community. Those present seemed to feel that there would be no adverse reaction provided a control was maintained, that refugees were allowed to leave the shelter area at specific hours and that no large number be allowed to leave at the same time. Mr. Smart said that he would like some expression from the committee as to
restrictions or regulations to be put into effect, but that he did not deem it wise to require the refugees to be taken to the business area on conducted shopping trips. He wanted them to enjoy a measure of freedom in our country consistent with the basic principles on which they were brought to [sic] United States. He indicated also that the persons here have been carefully selected, that they have met the standards required and that the administration is satisfied that there are no imposters/individuals with sympathies favoring enemies among them. 2

Unlike the issue of the refugee children attending the schools of Oswego where Smart wanted a proactive response to impress Washington, regarding the Shelter residents’ freedom Smart wanted only an indication that there would be no “evidence of adverse reaction.” As was always the case when dealing with Smart’s maneuvering, the question must be asked was this what he truly wanted, or was this just the pretense by which he posed the issue before this committee of community leaders? Unlike the schooling issue, there was no evidence to support either conjecture.

By the Spring of 1945 the Oswego Advisory Committee was comprised of thirty-four community leaders. There is some doubt, however, as to accuracy of this official figure. Attorney Richard C. Mitchell is the only person listed as a member of the committee who is still alive. Mitchell stated that he never attended any committee meetings and merely agreed to represent some of the refugees in legal actions. This is consistent with the flow of documents which indicated that the bulk of the real activity on the committee took place in the subcommittees among a nucleus of no more than twelve.

Before any of the refugees had set foot inside the Shelter, Myer had already sought and obtained concessions regarding Fort Ontario’s security provisions. In Washington’s disjointed policy pyramid regarding the refugees, the U.S. Army was placed in charge of security at the Shelter. In the weeks before the Shelter opened Myer resisted an effort by
the Army to make Fort Ontario’s security arrangements more oppressive. Smart described the debate in his memoir, *Don’t Fence Me In*. He wrote: “The facilities in the old army fort in Oswego were as confining, and the Army orders for control of the refugees were as harsh, as those for the relocation centers or even for a prisoner of war camp. Military authorities intended to place watch towers and flood lights at fifty-foot intervals around the fence, but Myer persuaded them to eliminate these before the refugees arrived and to approve a civilian security force instead of soldier guards that had been planned.”

For all the refugees’ frustration and anger over the fence and lack of freedom, little did they know that conditions could have been far worse.

At almost every juncture during the first month of the Shelter’s existence, efforts to address the issue of refugee freedom were eclipsed by the schooling dilemma. Even Smart’s telegram to Myer about the Advisory Committee’s invitation to the Shelter’s children actually opened with a reference to refugee freedom of movement. It read, “Oswego Advisory Committees for Refugee Shelter consisting of prominent representatives and leaders in religious [sic] cultural [sic] civics and political affairs unanimously recommends that refugees be given reasonable freedom for visiting [sic] shopping etc. in Oswego...” The statement about the refugee students being invited to attend the schools of Oswego actually followed the committee’s telegram’s reference to greater freedom for Shelter residents.

Part of the conflict was caused by the refugees whose definition of freedom was constantly evolving, in other words, expanding. For the first thirty days the quarantine was complete, notwithstanding the interaction through and over the fence. Then after the
first thirty days they were allowed to go downtown a few hours each day. The refugees were willing to tolerate the most restrictive regulations but only because they believed them to be temporary. All involved believed that the refugees would be at Fort Ontario only a short while. This was a reasonable assumption based on the experience of the temporary holding areas which greeted Japanese-Americans when they were first removed from their homes and then waited to be assigned to more permanent facilities. As Smart described in his memoir: “The euphoria of the refugees during the voyage on the Henry Gibbons [sic] from Naples to New York and upon their arrival at the Shelter the morning of Friday August 5, 1944, soon evaporated. The expectation that the Shelter would be a reception center on the way to freedom was replaced by knowledge that, instead of ‘honored guests,’ the residents would be virtual prisoners and that their hosts, however benign, would be their jailers.”

Thus, with the realization that the refugees were to remain at Fort Ontario for the duration of the conflict in Europe, the restrictions imposed became a major source of conflict between the Shelter residents and the WRA..

Gruber described in *Eight Months Later* the overall commitment the Advisory Committee had made to all of the refugees, not just their children. She wrote: “The purpose of the Committee, as Mr. Mizen underlined it, was ‘to do everything we can to help make the lives of these people as full as possible.’ Mr. Goldstein added to that purpose, ‘Most of our people have accepted the refugee center as a place to help the downtrodden. Unfortunately we do have—yes—anti-Semitism. But I think our Committee can go a long way toward ending it.’” When Gruber returned to Oswego eight months after the Shelter opened she observed that considerable progress in the
community had been made in her absence. Gruber wrote: “After 8 months, the Committee had definitely gone a long way. Most of the shopkeepers welcomed the refugees into their stores, even though the refugees had less money to distribute than the soldiers of an earlier period had had. The refugees went downtown to the movies, bought toothpaste in the drug stores, ate dinner in the restaurants whenever relatives came to visit them, when they had extra money, or when they felt a need to pretend they were human beings again. They were like visitors from a nearby camp, coming to town on Saturday nights.”

The refugees had the access to the downtown they did not have when Gruber had departed during the late summer of 1944. But when Gruber met with members of the Advisory Committee she discovered they were displeased with the limited freedoms allowed the refugees. Like the refugees themselves, the committee members’ notion of what constituted freedom had changed. Gruber noted: “At my last visit to the Shelter, I found that all the members of the Citizens Committee with whom I talked, Mr. Goldstein, Mr. Waterbury, the publisher of the Oswego Palladium-Times \[sic\], and others considered it an outrage that after 8 months the people were still closed inside a fence, that they weren’t allowed to work outside the camp, they weren’t permitted to help solve the difficult work problem created by the manpower shortage, and they were treated worse than German or Italian prisoners of war. ‘We pamper the Nazi prisoners,’ one man said indignantly, ‘while those innocent people whom the Nazis tried to kill were treated as though they were Nazis. We just don’t get it.’”

The realization that Axis prisoners of war had enjoyed certain rights that the refugees did not was not merely an abstract notion at the Shelter. A contingent of German prisoners worked in sections of the Fort Ontario
tract off limits to the Shelter residents. Though separated by fences the German prisoners worked in clear view of the refugees, who knew who they were and what their presence represented.

Just like college admission for the Shelter students, the refugees’ pursuit of greater liberties was not a local issue, for its resolution encountered resistance in Washington. Secretary Ickes, in whose department the WRA was located, did not often express opinions about the Fort Ontario refugees. They were still officially under the jurisdiction of the WRB. Ickes wrote to Myer on December 23, 1944 and offered a unique perspective for limiting the freedom of the Shelter residents. He wrote: “It is scarcely to be tolerated that anti-nazi [sic] refugees should be kept under lock and key at Fort Ontario but we should move with caution with the primary objective of doing nothing to incite hostilities against these refugees or make it impossible to bring others over as I wish that we might do. I think that it might be well to feel our way by granting short-term leaves, being sure that in all instances we know where the refugees can be found if we need to find them. If this does not raise too much objection, we might go further.”

What Ickes meant by “hostilities” was unclear. Was the term a form of political hyperbole which intended to describe the bigoted reactions characterized by conservative columnist Pegler, or was he speculating that there could be an anti-Semitic reaction in America comparable to Kristallnacht? Smart’s description of events placed Ickes’ speculation as something closer to the latter. Smart wrote: “Ickes approved and forwarded Myer’s proposal for sponsored leave on February 27, 1945. Two weeks later, he told Myer that the shelter was ‘a mistake’, and that those who could not adjust to
internment might be better off returning to Europe. He wrote, ‘I can imagine nothing better calculated to add fuel to the anti-Semitic sentiment in this country than to permit almost a thousand foreign-born citizens, most of them Jews, to come and go at their pleasure in this country.’”

Ickes’ rationale might seem plausible in light of the anti-Semitic diatribes of radio demagogue Father Charles E. Coughlin. Yet millions of Jewish Americans had existed in relative safety and anonymity, despite many manifestations of bigotry, without the necessity of some form of protective custody.

This protective custody reasoning had played a significant role in rationalizing Japanese-American internment. Spicer, described in Impounded People: Japanese-Americans in the Relocation Centers (1971), the alleged reasons why Japanese-American citizens had to be incarcerated. He wrote: “The two principal arguments for the wholesale evacuation of the Japanese involved (1) doubt of the ability of anyone to distinguish between the loyal and disloyal among persons of Japanese ancestry, whether born in Japan or in the United States; and (2) doubt of the ability of non-Japanese residents of the West Coast to safeguard the Japanese residents from vigilantism (the traditional California term of Spanish origin for mob lawlessness) [author’s brackets].”

Ickes’ argument appeared to be as specious as those which created the internment at the Relocation Centers. Subordinating the rule of law to the threat of vigilantism, regardless of the costs or the inconvenience to government, was too high a price to pay for political expediency.

Since the decision to limit the freedom of the refugees originated in Washington there was little the Advisory Committee could do in the community except complain and
work to ameliorate the immediate impact of the restrictions on the refugees. Oswego’s Representative in Washington was a Republican. New York’s Republican Governor, Thomas Dewey, who would ultimately support the refugees’ cause, had opposed Roosevelt in the 1944 election. It would take two momentous events, the end of hostilities in Europe and Roosevelt’s death, to offer an opportunity to the Oswego Advisory Committee to again advocate for the refugees at Fort Ontario.

Though the Oswego Advisory Committee was frustrated in its efforts to secure greater liberties for the refugees, there were important tasks which could be performed in the community which benefitted the Shelter residents. One of these functions was to deal with unfounded rumors. On September 25, 1944, Eleanor Roosevelt wrote in her nationally-syndicated column, *My Day*, about the Advisory Committee’s work on behalf of the refugees. She wrote:

> In Oswego, N.Y., the other day, a local newspaper publisher told us with some pride about the rumor clinic which his paper had established there. As he described it, the clinic works out very well. For example, when cigarettes are hard to buy in town and someone begins to ask whether the shortage is due to the fact that they are all being bought by the refugees at Fort Ontario, this item is published in the paper and the real answer is given. The real answer, of course, is that the cigarette shortage exists almost everywhere, and is not due to any local condition!

> The Oswego advisory committee feels that the newspaper clinic has stopped many rumors which might have caused friction between the people of the city and the people living in the refugee shelter.  

Though Mrs. Roosevelt had some of the relationships confused, she was correct that there was a formalized effort in Oswego to deal with rumors with which the *Palladium-Times* cooperated. Many of the eloquent defenses of the refugees published in editorial letters were the product of the paper’s cooperation. However, the committee set up to deal with
rumors about the refugees and the Shelter was actually a sub-committee of the Advisory Committee and not a component of the daily newspaper.

At the Advisory Committee’s first formal meeting on August 23, 1944, the membership was divided into four subcommittees; the fifth and sixth subcommittees would be added later. The subcommittees were Recreation, Commercial, Visitors and Rumor Clinic. The Rumor Clinic Sub-Committee was chaired by Oswego State Teachers College Professor Marian Mahar and included Reverend W. T. Griffith, pastor Congregational Church, Father Jeremiah J. Davern, pastor of St. Joseph’s Parish, Edmund Waterbury, Publisher Oswego Palladium-Times, and Rabbi Sidney Bialik, of Adat Israel Synagogue. One can assume that by the make up of the committee, which had that composition when Mrs. Roosevelt wrote about it, that the clergymen were there to provide credibility and the publisher was present to offer the means of dealing with the rumors.

Smart and the WRA were unaccustomed to dealing with a community so close to one of their facilities. The WRA had provisions and protocols to deal with rumors at the internment camps but they were rumors circulated among the camp residents and not the facility’s neighbors. The nature of the relocation and interment of Japanese Americans had resulted in a distrust of normal communication channels. For the internees rumors filled the void created by the distrust of the federal officials who were managing their incarceration. In The Governing of Men: General Principles and Recommendations Based on Experience at a Japanese Relocation Camp (1946), Alexander H. Leighton described how rumors overtook traditional information channels. Quoting the Los Angeles Times of February 24, 1942, Leighton wrote, “Many rumors began making their
rounds. One concerned a family I knew and said their possessions were burned to the
ground and they were shot at in the night. It was later proved false, but these rumors
scared people.”  

Leighton explained that there was also a cultural component to the
reliance on rumors. He contended that the internees who were resident aliens, and who
had never become culturally assimilated, did not understand enough English to rely on
WRA sources.

Smart saw the Oswego rumor subcommittee’s role as vital; however, its limited
composition concerned Smart enough that he wrote Advisory Committee Chairman Mizen
asking him to add more people to the subcommittee and encouraged it to be more active.

On December 11, 1944 Smart wrote:

I do think it would be a good idea as you suggest to stimulate the
function of the Rumor Clinic. Perhaps the enlargement of the committee with
representatives of labor unions, American Legion or others you think would be
a good idea.

It seems to me... that this is one committee which should meet
frequently and regularly and carry on an aggressive campaign with church, club
and worker groups to dispel rumors and carry on a continuing educational
campaign of tolerance and understanding.

Two more people were appointed to the Rumor Clinic subcommittee, one of them was the
widow of Oswego’s recently deceased Republican Congressman, Mrs. Francis D. Culkin.

The Shelter Director’s *Final Report* described how dealing with rumors had
become the primary function of the Advisory Committee. It read: “The cooperation of
this committee with the administration appears to have been quite successful and to have
met a real need in the early life of the shelter. After my arrival at the shelter most of the
need for this kind of liaison had disappeared. The question of rumors had... not
disappeared and proved to be one of the serious shelter problems. It did not appear... that
the rumors that disturbed shelter residents and [sic] shelter administration could be coped
with by the rumor committee from the Oswego Citizens Committee. After much
deliberation and discussion with the Executive Committee it was decided to combat the
very troublesome problem of rumors by deliberately starting counter-rumors. This
program was quite successful and I am sure relieved many of the shelter residents of bad
moments caused by some of the more vicious rumors. They were more prone in the latter
days of the shelter life to laugh off rumors thinking they had perhaps been deliberately
started by shelter residents or a member of the staff.”

The Advisory Committee had been formed to deal with rumors generated within
the Oswego community, but as interaction between the refugees and the community
became more common, the barriers of communication which insulated the Shelter
residents from such unsubstantiated information had disappeared. The result was not that
the problems caused by perceptions of Oswego residents about the refugees were
impacting upon their treatment, but rather misinformation was introduced into the Shelter
population was compounding pre-existing refugee discontent. Rumors became more of a
problem within the Shelter than outside of it. When it became clear that rumors had little
impact on the long-term resolution of the refugees’ plight, dealing with them was demoted
to a level of concern and action appropriate for the mere annoyance rumors constituted.

Roosevelt’s death and Germany’s surrender impacted on the plight of the refugees,
but not as one might presume. Germany’s surrender did little to resolve the plight of the
refugees at Fort Ontario except to give them a better idea as to how long “for the
duration” meant. Roosevelt’s death, however traumatized the refugees were by the event, provided an opportunity to again plead their case to remain in America. The commitment to return to Europe had been made to the Roosevelt administration but with Truman’s accession to the presidency all of the commitments could be subject to renegotiation. Not only were commitments subject to change, but the political hostilities and ill will directed personally at Roosevelt, and any issue he might have advocated, were not inherited by Truman, at least not immediately.

*Token Shipment* (1946) described the dilemma faced by the refugees produced by the end of the war in Europe. It read: “There began a long period of uncertainty, extending from V-E Day almost until the year’s close, when the refugees’ future status was in doubt. There were times during this period when the prospects for their freedom and ultimate immigration to the United States were very bright; there were periods when everything seemed to be against them and deportation seemed inevitable; there were long weeks of waiting during which speculation was rife, but there was no concrete indication as to how their cause was progressing.”

The heart of the conflict was that all 982 refugees had signed agreements which indicated that they would return to Europe at the end of the war. The Roosevelt administration had used the agreement to deflect Congressional criticism regarding the refugees’ admission, which had been accomplished without formal approval from Capitol Hill.

The agreement itself was a simple one, and if it were not for linguistic differences there might have been no debate. The agreement read as follows:

I declare that I have fully understood the following conditions of the offer from
the United States Government and I have accepted them.

A.I. I shall be brought to a reception center in Fort Ontario in the State of New York where I shall remain as a guest of the United States until the end of the war. Then I must return to my homeland.

II. There I shall live under the restrictions imposed by the American Security Officials.

III. No promise of any kind was given me either in regard to a possibility of working or permission to work outside the reception center or in regard to a possibility of remaining in the United States after the war. 17

There should have been no problem understanding such a seemingly straightforward agreement. Part of the problem developed in the translation. Smart described the confusion which arose when the agreement was translated into the refugees’ primary languages. Smart wrote: “It could be deduced that the refugees understood the U.S. intention and simply gambled that, in the traditional great heartedness of the American people, it would not be enforced. But in two vital respects the language of the agreement was confusing and open to honest misinterpretation: (1) The term ‘reception center’ in English and as interpreted in any language means a place in which people are quartered temporarily and processed for residence elsewhere, and (2) as stated in Token Shipment, the official report by WRA, ‘The statement signed by the refugees did not make clear that residence in the shelter was mandatory, rather than possible. In all three translations, the English phrase ‘I SHALL remain’ appeared as ‘I CAN remain.’ The meaning is open to argument.” 18

For some it was a linguistic failure while others would have signed any document which would have taken them away from the Europe that had betrayed them. As one former refugee, Adam Munz, said, “We would have signed almost anything. Some of us
couldn’t believe that the United States would stick to that. We felt that it must be some sort of pro forma statement that we were signing.” 19 Another former refugee, Walter Greenberg, questioned what he was going back to. He said: “I thought of it and I was afraid of it in a way, but I couldn’t comprehend really where I was going back to, because there was no way to go back…. Yugoslavia wasn’t my country, Austria wasn’t my country. North Africa wasn’t my country. There was really no place to go back to…” 20

Amidst these complex issues, accentuated by all the human suffering and uncertainty endured by the refugees, there were seemingly few things a local committee comprised of community leaders could do to impact national policy. Roosevelt’s death would ultimately provide an unforeseen opportunity. On the eve of his death the Advisory Committee resolved to act on behalf of the refugees. It was only after the President died that the committee decided to abandon the idea of circulating a petition and instead devise a media event. The Advisory Committee planned to produce a memorial for the late President which would attract national media attention. With that media attention the refugees could again plead their case to remain in America. The Advisory Committee published The FDR Memorial which would showcase the plight of the refugees.

On April 11, 1945, Mizen wrote a cryptic letter to the five committee members who would soon comprise The FDR Memorial subcommittee. The subcommittee was comprised of Reverend W. T. Griffiths, Father Jeremiah J. Davern, Dr. Ralph Swetman, President of Oswego State, Daniel Williams, a retired businessman and Marian Mackin, Secretary at Oswego’s Red Cross. The letter read: “Acting pursuant to the authority and
direction of the last meeting of the Committee, after considerable reflection and consultation with interested and thoughtful parties, I have appointed you to the membership of the special committee to study and recommend to the general committee the problem presented by Mr. Smart and afterwards considered and discussed at the executive session.”

The secretive nature of this communication was wholly uncharacteristic for the Advisory Committee. Most of the communication among members was done informally by telephone or personal visits. The reason for the secretiveness was discussed in Smart’s memoir. Smart wrote: “I met with the leaders of the Citizens Advisory Committee before announcing my resignation and explained the general plan of the campaign. They approved and assured me of their support. I suggested that it would be helpful if they would send to the President and Congress a statement, perhaps a petition, in aid of the refugees, and I gave them some notes and statistical information to help them prepare it. A draft was quickly produced.” Smart had informed the Advisory Committee he was planning to resign his position as Shelter Director. Smart’s resignation enabled him to openly lobby for the refugees’ permanent admission to America. He had informed the Oswego Advisory Committee of his intent because he wanted them to work with him on the refugees’ behalf.

The subcommittee met on the evening of April 13 to draft a tentative document which was to be circulated to the remainder of the committee at the April 17th meeting. It appeared that Swetman was, if not the primary author of the draft statement, the guiding force behind its composition. Attached to Swetman’s cover letter were notes about points
which would be included in the finished document. The notes read:

The Oswego Citizens Advisory Committee for Fort Ontario was formed at the request of the War Relocation Authority shortly after the establishment of the Fort Ontario Refugee Shelter. Its members are citizens selected as being representative of the various business, civic, social, educational, political, religious and labor interests and activities of the City of Oswego.

The committee was planned to be fair, and we believe that it represents a cross section of the attitudes and opinions of the people of Oswego who are informed on the subjects discussed herein.

In the unprecedented situation presented by the Refugee Camp at Fort Ontario the committee now finds itself with a heavier responsibility than anticipated.

The committee is more or less familiar with many of the arrangements which preceded the arrival of the refugees, and it can sense how the different departments in Washington may have difficulty in reconciling some of the unusual political and legal problems.  

Swetman’s notes became the cornerstone of the document, *The FDR Memorial*. There was evidence to suggest that the Executive Committee, comprised of Mizen, Father Shanahan, and Faust might have edited the document.

The plan was that *The FDR Memorial* was to be circulated among national political leaders. It was signed by Mizen, the committee’s chairman, and Faust, the committee’s secretary. It was as reasoned and articulate advocacy on the refugees’ behalf as any published during the Shelter’s existence. The document’s preamble had only minor changes from Swetman’s draft. The addition of “non-partisan” was important in garnering support of Roosevelt’s former critics and political opponents. In creating the committee Smart had sought a political cross section of the community, no less among them the Democratic Mayor of Oswego and the widow of its recently-deceased Republican Congressman.

At a time when critics of the Shelter, like Pegler, questioned not only the
authenticity but the relevancy of the committee, the document addressed these criticisms. It read: “The members of the Oswego Citizens Advisory Committee for Fort Ontario feels that because of the special functions of the Committee and its relations to the problems of the refugees, and as representative citizens, they have a proper and logical concern with the status of the refugees.” 24 Like the Declaration of Independence, this proclamation clearly listed the conditions which the committee sought to rectify. The document continued, “They believe that it is their duty at this time to make the following representations and recommendations to the Government and the people of the United States.” 25

The committee sought to recapture the attention the Shelter held the previous summer. It read, “1. The 982 refugees from 17 different European countries were brought from Italy as guests of the United States last August, and this humanitarian act was generally applauded by the press and the people of the country.” 26 It acknowledged that commitments to return to Europe were made by the refugees. Next it addressed what had been the essence of the objections offered by conservatives like Pegler. It noted, that contrary to the bigoted assumptions regarding Jews and Communism, that these people had resisted Fascism with their lives. By surviving they had fought for freedom just as American soldiers had. In fact, some refugees who had children were serving in the American armed forces. The proclamation also dealt with the paradox of “guests” being kept in a facility such as Fort Ontario. Last among the list of grievances, the document described what had been found in the Bondy Report. Bondy found that the residents of Fort Ontario were developing the same psychosis as people housed in more oppressive
facilities, such as concentration camps. This section of the committee’s proclamation also addressed the absurd notion that despite a critical shortage of labor, one requiring the use of prisoners of war, that the able bodies of the Shelter were not permitted to work. Despite the presence of such a wealth of information circulating around the Shelter and the refugees, no group outside the government had developed such a coherent and concise analysis as that presented by the Advisory Committee.

The Committee described other injustices and made recommendations, again with a succinct and reasoned expression of attainable goals. It continued: “1. That the treatment of the refugees, however benevolent the intention, is shameful, inhumane, and unfair; that restraint upon the freedom of such people, not charged with crime, in the United States is repugnant, undemocratic, and UnAmerican [sic], and a potential threat against the liberty of us all.” 27 Next it questioned why people were being held in a government facility, funded by American taxpayers, fed at the expense of the American people when almost every one of the refugees had someone who would have supported them. It reasoned, “2. That the taxpayers of the country should be relieved of the expense of caring for the refugees when relatives, friends or private agencies are ready to care for them, if necessary, and guarantee that they shall not become public charges.” 28 It continued that there were jobs for these people, “3. That, in this period of critical manpower shortage, the refugees should be permitted to accept gainful employment, and reside at places of their own choice.” 29

The document then introduced one to the essence of the injustice, that is, America was refusing to admit these refugees at a time when immigration quotas were not even
being fulfilled. The authors delved into the broader issues as to how the fate of the Shelter residents impinged upon that of the entire question of displaced persons. This committee attempted to separate the issue of the Fort Ontario group from the question of refugees in general. The document concluded: “Finally, the Committee believes that the problems of these 982 refugees at Fort Ontario should be considered wholly apart from that of world refugees in general; and that the granting of citizenship to them should not be considered in connection with or have any effect upon national immigration policies.”  

This was a step that few other groups advocating on behalf of these refugees had embraced. But this committee, because of its unique relationship with the people of the Shelter, advocated for them in a manner which abandoned others who were less fortunate.

The final version of *The FDR Memorial* expanded and embellished on the themes addressed in the preliminary draft. Regardless of the form, the members of the Advisory Committee had entered the fray on behalf of the refugees. The success of the education program to which the committee had contributed had both emboldened them and bound them to the broader cause of the refugees. Despite Mizen’s commitment made at the August 18th meeting in Smart’s office described in Gruber’s *First Eight Months*, it was with this proclamation where they actually stepped forward with resolute conviction. Like Smart, this committee broke with the WRA and struck out independently to work for the refugees’ admission to the United States. For all the good the committee had done to date, this document might have represented its finest accomplishment. The *Congressional Record* published the extension of remarks by Congressman Hadwen C. Fuller of Parish, Oswego County, New York, a Republican, who had succeeded Francis Culkin in 1943.
Representative Fuller had *The FDR Memorial* placed into the official record of The House of Representatives.

**The Dickstein Congressional Committee**

Faust, Mizen and educators from the community testified on behalf of the refugees when a subcommittee of Congress moved its hearings to Oswego. The Committee on Immigration and Naturalization, chaired by Congressman Samuel Dickstein, Democrat, of New York, had authorized a subcommittee of five committee members, also chaired by Dickstein, to hold hearings on the Shelter and the refugees residing there. In this venue they advocated as individuals and not as Advisory Committee members. On July 27, 1945, the *Rochester Democrat & Chronicle* reported: “...its leading citizens came through with generous testimony as to the cultural contributions that the refugees had brought.”

Early in the proceedings Faust testified. It was apparent that the refugee students’ success in the high school was of intense interest to the Congressmen. In response to a question from Thomas M. Cooley, Counsel to the Subcommittee, Faust testified, “Their scholastic performance is very good, in fact, today I notified eight in the school from the shelter that they are eligible to join the National Honor Scholastic Society, as a result of having achieved the appropriate averages throughout the year.”  

Cooley then asked Faust how many from the school were so honored, and Faust responded that there were thirty overall. Cooley asked Faust to calculate the relative proportion of honor students and Faust stated that honors were achieved in a far higher proportion among the refugee students than among the population of the high school as a whole.

Cooley then asked Faust to describe how he had accommodated the students from
the Shelter. Faust responded: “When they first came the counselors and myself came over here to interview them individually as to their educational background, and we tried to work out a program in school for them, I think generally they have anywhere from first year to third years in the gymnasium, that is the European high school. ...We found that by reason of their excellence in foreign languages that we could give them advanced credit and most of those people have earned anywhere from three to nine regents units of credits in enough time so it was possible for six of them to graduate this June from high school and along with the work they took during the year, in addition to the special examination that foreign languages gave them in January, six were able to complete their diploma requirements this June, five girls and one boy.”

Dickstein then made a reference to Pegler’s premise and those others opposed to the refugees’ admission. He asked Faust if he believed these people to be “dangerous.” Faust replied, “Not at all, I don’t believe they would be dangerous to us in the slightest.”

Faust’s testimony had consisted of answering questions which had as a general theme the assertion that most of the refugees attending the high school were exceptional students.

Riley also testified on behalf of the refugee students. He offered basic facts about the students and the financial arrangements, omitting any factual references to the actual process by which the students were ultimately admitted to the public schools. Riley, under questioning, stated before the committee something quite surprising in light of the Oswego school board’s apparent reluctance to admit the refugee students. When asked what were the financial arrangements for the refugee students Riley responded, “There are no
financial arrangements; the laws of the State of New York require children to present themselves to public schools and they must be accepted, and they were accepted on that basis.”)

When asked if the school system had any difficulty finding space for the children, Riley answered, “During the past 3 or 4 years we have had a decrease in our attendance as most communities have, and we were able to absorb these children in our regular classrooms without increasing the number of classes that we had to provide.” These may have been facts Riley and the school board were ignorant about before the process of admitting the refugee students began, but if these facts were known from the beginning, the obstacles seemingly put in place by the Oswego school board were not just unwarranted, they were in violation of New York State’s Education Law.

In spite of that surprising revelation, Riley offered his enthusiastic support of the refugees. When asked about the refugee students’ academic performance he responded, “It has been superior; their achievement has been superior. It has been very amazing to me the rapidity with which they have achieved.”

When asked by Cooley the critical question, that is, if the refugees should be allowed to remain in America, Riley responded: “I definitely believe they should have that privilege.”

The presence of one witness who testified on behalf of the refugees was surprising, in light of her initial reaction to them at her school. Fitzhugh Park School Principal Virginia Dean offered her testimony about her refugee students. She was asked by Cooley about the collective scholastic record of the refugee students. Though Dean did not quite offer the resounding support testified by Faust and Riley, she was supportive of the refugees’ cause. Dean was asked if the refugee students had been handicapped by the fact
that their educations had been suspended while they endured persecution and were forced to flee and hide. Dean stated that the only handicap she witnessed was associated with the refugees’ inability to speak English. Unlike his questions of Riley and Faust, Cooley asked Dean what appeared to be more probing questions. Whether he sensed her support of the refugee students was not as strong as the other educators, or this was some prearranged exchange intended to placate the likely dissenters on the committee was unclear. Cooley pressed the issue regarding how well the refugee students were prepared for education before their arrival at her school. The transcript reads:

Mr. Cooley: Was any substantial number of them put in a grade that was lower than would have been normal for a similar age group in this country, because of their language handicap or absence of education?

Miss Dean: I think the difference was about 1 year in a few cases, and a little greater because we didn’t have the exact age in the case of a few in the beginning, for the most part about 1 year, some of them have completely overcome that.  

What was ironic about Dean’s testimony was not just that she had reversed her initial coolness to the refugees’ education, but she did not appear to understand how her own actions may have enhanced the problems she was describing to the committee. Had Dean been as involved as Faust had been with his students during that first summer, she might not have had students for whom she did not know their actual age.

Cooley turned his attention to a well-publicized event regarding the refugee students. Cooley asked Dean if the election of one of the refugee students as a class president was a real election. Dean affirmed that the election reflected the will of the students and was not the product of teacher intervention in any way. When Dean was asked by Cooley about the topic which was the real focus of the committee, whatever
reservations the middle school principal may have had in the beginning of the academic year had been dispelled. Though it may have been a measure of Dean’s former state of mind on the issue, Cooley appeared to cue his witness as to the desired answer in the question; nevertheless, Dean responded affirmatively. The vice principal at Fitzhugh Park School, Paul Alfred, also testified before the committee and supported Dean’s account as to the fairness of the student election which produced refugee students as victors for both the office of class president and vice president.

The next witness was Susan Donovan, Principal of School Number Two. Donovan, who appeared to have none of the problems encountered by Dean, had more refugee students in her school than any other in Oswego. Her testimony was brief and straightforward. Cooley, somewhat frustrated by Donovan’s succinct responses to his questioning, tried to draw out more illustrative examples from the taciturn educator.

Cooley continued:

Mr. Cooley: Do you have any illustrative examples of that. Of the kind of thing they’ve done that indicates their ability to enter into community life?
Miss Donovan: They have entered into school life just like our own– no different. In fact, you couldn’t tell one from the other if you were to come in unless they were pointed out. 39

Despite Donovan’s reluctance to offer expansive responses, her testimony was the most telling from among the public school educators. It was her unassuming testimony as to what an educator should do when called upon to teach children like those that had come to her school from the Shelter which said far more than any eloquent analysis, or inspiring pedagogic philosophy. As Donovan said, “They have entered into school life just like our own– no different.” 40
The day before the educators of Oswego testified before the committee, an unheralded component of the education program at the Shelter was highlighted. In a ceremony performed before Dickstein’s subcommittee, the Boy Scouts of Fort Ontario marched in and recited the Scout’s pledge. They were introduced to the committee by Acting Shelter Director Nelson Pitts. The chairman proceeded to talk to each boy about his personal history. Alfred Rosenthal, a Yugoslav youth, told Dickstein how his father was a German prisoner, and that he’d like to stay here in America. The youth spoke about how he had spend three months in a German concentration camp in near starving conditions. Dickstein asked every boy similar questions. What these refugee youths lacked in eloquence they made up with poignant visual imagery. Fourteen boys who only a year earlier were in flight for their lives, now stood before a Congressional subcommittee in their Boy Scout uniforms performing the Boy Scout oath so that they might remain in this nation of immigrants.

Educators from Oswego State also testified. Eric Brunger, vice principal of the Campus Elementary School at the college testified. In contrast to Donovan, Brunger offered eloquent and lengthy responses to the inquiries. When he was asked if he had anything to add to the other educator’s testimony he responded at length. Brunger described an incident where one of the refugee students at his school offered wisdom uncommon for such a young age. Wisdom that was the product of all the suffering the child had endured.

As was the case with all of the educators who testified, Brumger agreed that from what he had witnessed with the children whom he educated, these people, the refugees as
a group, should be allowed to remain in America. Brumger took it a step further. He suggested that there would be future national leaders found among this group of refugees. He continued: “.... they want to know about conditions and they haven’t had this opportunity, and you must realize, of course, some of these youngsters since they have been on this earth have been consistently under Fascism or National Socialism– they knew nothing different and I could point out that some of these youngsters had no formal schooling and they are making it up.”

Brumger had articulated a fundamental truth in his testimony, something expressed only many years later by those who had time to reflect on the events of those eighteen months. That truth was that most of these children had excelled in school despite the educational privation they had experienced prior to coming to the Shelter and Oswego.

Dr. Harold Alford, Director of the Department of Elementary Education at Oswego State also testified. Alford, whose department supervised the teachers in training at the Campus Elementary School, described how the refugee children were an asset to the institution. Alford continued with a theme that was similar to that found in the testimony of Donovan. He testified: “...it wasn’t long before you could defy anyone to go into a room and pick out the children from the shelter and you just simply couldn’t pick them out. They did inspire our own youngsters. They were very careful about citizenship, politeness, and they were very anxious to conform to the rules and regulations.”

Representative Dolliver asked Alford if there had been any disciplinary problems, possibly in keeping with the notion of that era that such college-affiliated teacher practice schools sometimes became the repository for students with problems. Alford assured the
committee that the refugee students were no problem at all.

Oswego State History professor Marian Mahar also testified before the subcommittee. When asked if she agreed with the other witnesses she added: “Yes; and these students seem to appreciate the real opportunities we have here in America because they have lived under a government in which they have been lost, and they can contribute so much to our students; they feel it so much more deeply than our own students do.”

In subsequent questions Mahar elaborated on the notion that the presence of the refugee students actually proved to be a benefit to the other students. Though her testimony was brief, Mahar added her affirmative vote as to the worthiness of the refugees to enter America permanently.

Dr. Charles Wells, a professor of English, also testified before Dickstein’s subcommittee on behalf of all the residents at the Shelter, not just the refugee students. Wells affirmed what all of the other teachers had testified. He said, “Yes; I found them to be very excellent students as has been reported by other members of the english [sic] department... They have done more than was expected of them, they are very serious and conscientious students.”

With Well’s testimony the committee heard yet again how the refugee students’ presence actually benefitted other students. Wells testified, “I think they had a very good influence on our American students and encouraged them to scholarly activity and more dependable study and research.”

Then Dr. Wells introduced into the record a part of the educational program which had not been emphasized as yet. As an English professor, Dr. Wells had worked with the English language education program at the Shelter. He described in his testimony that as
part of that program he had guest speakers who lectured on topics relevant to American
citizenship. Dr. Wells said:

I had occasion during the winter to organize a series of forum meetings for a
group of English-speaking adults here at the shelter. That series, called
Cultured American, ran through 22 weeks, from October into May. We had 50
to 75 of the English-speaking adults attending these meetings. The speakers
were various town people; people from the college. It was organized primarily
to give them some information about the culture of the United States—
geography, history, governmental organization, election technique, our
economy, and education— and I believe that that information was given to those
50 or 75 people and it spread out throughout the other members of the shelter.
I believe that information that they now have probably makes them better
candidates for American citizenship than many who might come here with that
information. Secondly, these forums helped them to gain some possession of
English and they would meet and have discussions throughout the week in the
English classes, so the forum did not serve just the 75, but I think perhaps
several hundred who were in the shelter.  

Representative Dolliver asked Wells a question about a speech given by one of the refugee
students. Wells said when he answered the question he said: “...he pointed out the
opportunities that American students have in this country by living under freedom of a
democratic society, and he made an appeal that they appreciate that and not take it for
granted as many American students are a little inclined to do. He also pointed out in
passing some of the hardships he had experienced, and stated how highly he valued his
experience in this country; he made a very emotional appeal and it was very well received
by the American students.”

Well’s testimony had shed light on a process the WRA had employed in the
Relocation Centers. That is, employing every form of education as a tool designed to
address a broader goal. In the case of the Japanese-Americans it was the perception that
they were disloyal to America. With regards to the residents of Fort Ontario even
language training was designed to teach the refugees about American culture and educate them about issues of citizenship. In other words, almost every component of the educational program at the Shelter was preparing the refugees to stay in their new homeland.

The longest testimony by an educator on behalf of the refugee students was offered by President Swetman. Cooley asked the college president to characterize the students that attended the college’s laboratory school. Swetman responded, “I would say their main characteristic probably was eagerness; they were very anxious to do good work; they have fitted in very nicely with our children and before long it was hard to tell them apart when you go into the room...” 48 Swetman discussed an incident involving refugee student Vladimir Lang, whose contribution was discussed above.

Eventually, Swetman was asked by Dickstein if he believed these children could make the transition from refugee to American citizen. Swetman stated, “There would be no question on my part in regard to that; as far as these youngsters are concerned I know what they are, and I think they would fall in beautifully. They have individual differences, just the same as our children.” 49 Swetman added, after a follow-up question by the chairman, “I think that they would become pretty good Americans, as I look them over, and the language difficulty is simply a temporary obstacle. In my opinion these youngsters have entered into the spirit of the school very much.” 50

Then Swetman was asked by Dickstein to describe his experience with the refugee students who attended the college as undergraduates. Swetman replied: “We had nine probably from the ages of about 18 to 24... it just happens that none of the nine are
interested in teaching. Some of them want to study architecture and law, and one or two want to become doctors. We made them the offer last September but there were a great many rules and regulations regarding their life at the camp so it wasn’t until the 1st of February that they were permitted to come. They did come for the second semester.”

Dickstein then asked Swetman if he would approve of his students being returned to Europe. Swetman replied: “…I know these children the same as I know our own children up here, I have also met a great many adults here and I would like to see them stay here and have a part in America. If I may go further, I am an American and I am grateful for it, but I am an American by birth– I had nothing to do with it– and I would like to see these children have the same chance I had. I have come to know these children pretty well.”

Then Swetman expressed the pedagogic philosophy which appeared to have been the operational principle for those educators who embraced the challenge represented by the refugee students. Swetman said, “My job is to see that every youngster in the college has a chance to finish his education, and these nine are no different than the other children, and I would like to see these nine have their chance.”

One of the last questions asked of Swetman involved his participation in the FDR Memorial. Cooley asked Swetman, “The sentiment contained therein, I assume, still represents your sentiment?” Swetman said, “That’s right.” Then Cooley inquired about the other signatories of the document. Cooley wondered if the thirty signatories of the document were representative of the community’s sentiment on the refugees. Swetman replied diplomatically, “…I expect in any democracy there is nothing unanimous.” With the questioning it had become abundantly clear that the Advisory Committee’s FDR
Memorial had succeeded in sending their plea for justice for the refugees at least as far as Capitol Hill.

The parade of Oswego’s civic elite before Dickstein’s subcommittee was not limited to the educational leaders of the Oswego community. Edwin M. Waterbury, publisher of the Oswego Palladium-Times, had a chance to testify. Cooley asked Waterbury how were the refugees accepted in the Oswego community. Waterbury testified: “At the outset... they were not permitted to go out over town, and the people in the community were not permitted to go inside the fort grounds with any considerable freedom, you had to have a pass or be especially invited for some occasion, and when they finally began to permit them to go overtown [sic] to shop, and so forth, their customs... were somewhat different from the townspeople, their knowledge of the language was very limited, and they were used to more or less bartering, or were not used to have a fixed price on goods, and some of the merchants at the outset were a little upset about that; but the refugees soon learned about the American practice and stopped that, and the merchants speak very highly of them today.” Waterbury noted that other testimony before the committee had described a less favorable picture of relations between merchants and refugees, then he described how the refugees impacted on the community both collectively and individually. Waterbury continued:

...As to their mingling with the community and taking part in community life, they have been very liberal, they are a very talented group– there is more talent in this group than there is in all Oswego together, and I am not discrediting my own home town, but when you get painting, sculpturing, music, acting, dancing and playwrights, they would do credit to a city of 500,000 population; but you have them packed here in this little group and they have made a very important contribution to the social life of the city. They have
been very generous on appearing on public occasion, and providing music, and so forth. ...They have gone into private clubs, they have gone into homes and they have gone into the State college, they have gone before the Rotary and Kiwanis Clubs, and never that I know of has any request been refused for any participation or help in any program. Their handicraft that they arranged here was literally amazing to our own people, who have learned to have a very high respect and regard for their ability.  

Waterbury closed his testimony with a story about one of the Shelter residents who assisted the American Army when they landed in Italy. The refugee, D. Wolff, had translated leaflets which had been dropped by the allies over occupied areas of Italy.

Advisory Committee Chairman Mizen also testified. He described how he provided legal assistance to resolve minor problems of the refugees. Then when asked the broad question to which each witness was subjected he responded: “...I consider them as a group, equal if not superior, to any group of people who come to this country from Europe during the last 70 years, including my forebears who came from Europe. The thing that impressed me about the refugees, as a practicing lawyer, was the respect they had for the dignity of the law, and the care with which they unveiled to you the fact, swearing to the facts, in an affidavit.”

Then Mizen was asked the standard question posed to all of the witnesses, that is, would you advocate or recommend the refugees remaining in America? Mizen responded: “Well, I have given that considerable thought. I have been asked that question a great many times, and I have received innumerable letters from abroad asking the same question. I think it is only fair to say that there may be people here who under a very careful screening might not be within the general over-all endorsement that I have given this morning, but I don’t know as I would care to make a percentage, but if I did, I would
say it would be very small, maybe 5 or 10 percent– that is, because I haven’t sufficient factual information to make a decision on it. Perhaps an investigation would change my view in that respect.” 58 Mizen concluded his testimony by reading letters to the editor which were critical of the refugees. With each negative letter Mizen indicated that he believed the sentiment expressed was not indicative of the community’s broader opinion.

In Dickstein’s conclusion, the chairman said to Mizen, “I thank you very much on behalf of the committee. I think you have done a great job– you have done humanitarian work and I think God will bless you some day, I hope.” 59

Encouraged by their success locally, both Smart and the core members of the Advisory Committee sought to replicate their success on the national stage. In petitioning national institutions and testifying before a committee of Congress, these advocates for the refugees’ full admission to America sought to influence the policy-making process on a national scale. Smart, emboldened by his success in Oswego but frustrated by obstinance in Washington, resigned his position as Shelter Director to form a committee to advocate for the refugees’ admission to America. Smart ended a long career with the government to advocate for people he had only met nine months earlier.

These were all bold steps. But the national political scene was and is far more complex than the politics of a small community like Oswego. Regional, partisan, and even personality clashes impacted on Capitol Hill’s response to this endeavor. The ultimate decision by Congress regarding the refugees was as cloudy as the methodologies employed by the Roosevelt administration.
Endnotes

1 Joseph H. Smart, August 18, 1944, file memorandum on meeting, Box 4, The Fort Ontario Emergency Refugee Shelter Collection, The National Archives, Washington, D.C.

2 Smart August 18, 1944.


4 Smart August 24, 1944.

5 Smart 1991, 22.

6 Gruber 1945, 9.

7 Gruber 1945, 9.

8 Gruber 1945, 9.


10 Smart 1991, 45.


17 Smart 1991, 23.


19 Adam Munz, 1994, videotape interview by Chris Ulanowski., Safe Haven Collection, Special Collections, Penfield Library, State University of New York at Oswego.


21 Harry C. Mizen, April 11, 1945, letter to Rev. W.T. Griffiths, Rev. J. J. Davern, Dr. Ralph W. Swetman, Mr. Daniel A. Williams, Miss Marian Mackin. File 13, Safe Haven Collection, Special Collections, Penfield Library, State University of New York at Oswego.


23 Ralph W. Swetman, Ph.D., April 14, 1945, undated attachment to a letter circulated to Advisory Committee members Davern, Griffiths, Mackin, and Williams, File 13, Safe Haven Collection, Special Collections, Penfield Library, State University of New York at Oswego.

24 Swetman 1945.

25 Swetman 1945.

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