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Abstract

In August, 1944, 982 refugees, most of whom were Jewish, set sail from Naples for Oswego, New York. They were to reside for the next eighteen months at a federal facility called Fort Ontario. This fort had been re-designated by President Roosevelt as the Fort Ontario Emergency Refugee Shelter. Among the refugees were more than 250 youths who needed to resume or begin their education and hundreds of adults who needed vocational and language training.

The history of these events has been recalled by a handful of books and by a citizens’ group in Oswego, called Safe Haven, Inc., that has opened a museum to commemorate these events. In the intervening years one version of history has emerged which depicts Oswego High School Principal Ralph M. Faust as having played a critical role in the success of the educational program, the Shelter’s most successful component. Though Faust was an early advocate for the refugees, and his actions benefitted his high school students greatly, he was only one of a group of men and women, among them Oswego State Teachers College President Dr. Ralph W. Swetman and Oswego Attorney Henry Mizen, whose actions enabled the educational program to succeed. Most importantly, the individuals who played the most important role in the process have been lost in the emergence of the Faust myth. Shelter Director Joseph Smart and War Relocation Authority Education Director Dr. Lester K. Ade worked extensively behind the scenes to accomplish much of what Faust has been given credit. Even First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt and Eleanor Morgenthau, wife of Secretary of the Treasury Henry
Morgenthau, both played a significant role in opening college to refugee students.

Principal Faust’s contribution was significant, but not in the manner portrayed today. The depth of his commitment to the refugees attending his school paid dividends throughout the Shelter’s educational program. The complexities of what really transpired in Oswego those eighteen months can provide lessons as to how people of diverse interests and responsibilities can work together for the betterment of those who are in need.