

FORT ONTARIO REFUGEE PROJECT  
OSWEGO COUNTY ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

OH 269

Interviewee: Former Residents of Emergency Refugee Shelter at Fort Ontario

Maurice Kamhi  
Leon Levitch  
Fred Baum  
Samuel Grafton, Columnist

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Interviewee: Former Residents of Emergency Refugee Shelter of Fort Ontario

Interviewee:  
Maurice Kamhi

We were in Sarajevo when the war broke out, and Sarajevo was where the Olympics were held in 1984, and where Archduke Ferdinand was killed, which started the First World War. The Germans started off slowly. First there was the yellow arm bands, you were forbidden to go to public places (Jews were) and the, little by little, they started taking people away. Dalmatia was the place to go because the Italians were not anywhere near as rough on the Jews as the Germans, so my uncle and my grandmother went first and they sent a man who made it his business to transport Jews to Dalmatia. We went as part of his family with false passports. My father had to remain because my mother was supposed to be the man's wife, and I was his child. Shortly after we left, and got to Dalmatia, my father and grandfather were taken to concentration camp where they eventually died. My father didn't actually die in concentration camp. He was killed when the war was about to end and the allies were coming close so the Germans were destroying evidence and Jews were evidence, so they killed my father at that time. He actually survived the whole war. In Dalmatia we lived in *Cortula* [?] which is an island off the Dalmatian coast until the Italians changed sides and then an Italian sergeant got us on to a boat that was transporting Italians back to Italy. Now, we weren't supposed to be on that boat, but this Italian sergeant cared for us so much and he was such a good man and when we got on board, the guard said "you can't go, you can't bring these people in". Well, he took out a revolver and put in the guard's chest. He said, "if these people don't go on, I'm going to pull the trigger right now", so the guards turned around as if nothing had happened and just walked away, and we got on the boat. Of course, various other Jews got on the boat, too, because there was money, and so on, and because the Italians were soft hearted so a lot of Jews got there. We

sailed all night across the Adriatic, got to a point in Italy where that hook above the heel is, called Vieste. Unfortunately, the Italians, not having planned things too well, landed on the very spot that was surrounded

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by Germans, so two days later, I walked down a street and this German truck drove on a hill and a German sergeant came out and got on the megaphone to the Italian colonel in the fort. There were about 900 Italians there and there was a truckload of Germans, and the Germans said to the Italian colonel “you will have to surrender”. The Italian colonel said “how many of you are there?” and he said, “there are seven of us”. The Italian said, “well, there are 900 of us, how would it look to the world if 900 of us surrendered to seven Germans?” The German sergeant then had a machine gun taken out and he started machine-gunning people on the street. Well, the next day, the Germans came with planes and armored vehicles. They took the town very quickly. Now the problem was to get away from there, from Vieste to the southern part of Italy where the English and the Americans were. There were fishing boats that were taking people, for money of course. People had some jewels, so they sold them, and the first boat that first night, the Germans were there and they were searching houses for Jews. The first boat went and there was no room for my mother and myself on the first boat, so we left and we were supposed to go on the next night. The next day we found out that that boat had been stopped at mid-sea by a German patrol plane which saw it, the moon was full, and machine gunned everybody on that boat. Everyone was killed. Well, the next night was a choice to stay here or to go. There was no choice for you because you never stayed where the Germans were, so we went. Actually, we heard a German plane approaching and the moon was full. Just at the moment that the plane appeared, a cloud covered the moon and the plane didn’t see us, so we got to Bari and to camp. It was from this camp that we were chosen to go to Fort Ontario, and that’s how we got to Oswego.

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Interviewer: Do you have earliest memories?  
*Female in the background*

Interviewee: Of Oswego. Well, of course, Oswego was a fairy tale for all of us, and

though there was a barbed-wire fence. It didn't mean anything because we knew everything was just fine, people were fine. The girls came to the fence every evening to flirt with us because they liked foreign boys, and we loved that, of course. The only problem as far as I was concerned was that I had been starving during the whole war, so when we got to Oswego there was so much food and my mother happens to be a very good cook, she worked in the kitchen so she would bring home loads of food every night and I just couldn't stop eating. I got as fat as a butterball. Aside from that, everything was just wonderful. 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 was serious and we had a wonderful time in Oswego.

Interviewer: Do you remember Manya? Do you remember her there?

Interviewee: I think I was too young to really remember Manya.

Interviewer: Do you remember Jack, any of the people?

Interviewee: I remember Jack. We had a gang, we were all going together but Jack was not really part of the gang. He and his mother were somewhat separated from us. There were people from various places, various countries, various cultures, so there were certain groups formed. The Yugoslavs stuck together and the Germans stuck together, so that there were fractions, they were not terribly unfriendly; there was a certain amount of feeling between the Germans and the Yugoslavs because the Germans were still the Germans and the Yugoslavs were something completely different. Jack was not a member of our gang; however, I do remember him and his mother. She had a beautiful voice and she sang some lovely songs.

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Interviewer: Do you remember the day you left the camp?

Interviewee: Yes. I remember the day we heard President Roosevelt died. It was a sad day for all of us because Mrs. Roosevelt came to visit camp, and Roosevelt meant a great deal to all of us, so it was a sad day. I do remember when we left the camp. We were supposed to actually go back but when we got to New York, my mother found a job and she liked it so

much, she liked the idea of earning money that we – of course, our homes had been ravaged in Yugoslavia, my father had been killed, so we didn't know if we had too many people to go back to. We didn't know what we would find there, and America had been so kind to us, everything seemed so wonderful here that we decided to stay.

Interviewer: You were young, you were a boy?

Interviewee: Yes, a boy.

Interviewer: What were your feelings when you first got to Oswego?

Interviewee: It was like being on another planet. The people were so different, the atmosphere, the air was so different. We were talking about that and it seems that many people can't go back to those days in Oswego. They feel that that's a part that's closed off and don't want to open it up again. I feel perhaps they don't want to open it up because it was so wonderful. I think like any really wonderful experience, when it's cut off and ended, you somehow don't want to go back to it. I think that may be part of the reason why we feel about Oswego the way we do. It was a fairy tale existence. We were still in our own environment, so to speak, but we were secure, we were no longer in danger and yet we didn't have the culture shock of being thrown into the American community which came later. I think all of us, when we're thrown into the American community, as much as we loved it, did have a tremendous adjustment to make. And, I think many of our personalities, and I'm

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sure all of our personalities changed radically as a result. I think when we come together again, the old personalities come out, but living with Americans, we use a completely different kind of personality which is almost like a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde difference, it's that drastic.

Interviewer: Thank you.

Interviewee: Thank you so much.

Interviewer: I look forward to tomorrow evening.

Interviewer: Tell me about leaving Europe and coming to Fort Ontario.  
*Female in the background*

Interviewee:

(Second) All right. Where shall we start? The liberation took place in late June or July,

*Leon Levitch* I believe, but my dates are going to be hazy. We arrived here on the third; we were en route for about two weeks, so we must have left somewhere around mid-July. That was really one of the biggest traumas for me, because I was already enrolled in the *Leipzig* [?] Conservatory of Music, something that I always wanted to do, and which of course, the war delayed, it seemed forever. Finally, I was able to enroll in that conservatory and I had two teachers, one for piano and one for theory. I still remember their names. Piano was Gennaro Sannino, and the theory was, I believe the first name was, it's hazy, it could have been Luigi, but the last name was unforgettable, because translated into English meant, it was a very colorful name, very powerful name. His last name was \_\_\_\_\_, one that breaks iron. He was a very colorful, and a wonderful teacher. My father had gotten a job working for the Allied military government, I don't know what he was doing, he was a pharmacist by profession, and I was just in heaven to be able to enroll in a regular form of music conservatory. But, hardly did I enroll, I don't know whether we were there at most,

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maybe a month. My father simply presents me with the idea that we had to pack up because we were going to America. I really was in shock. I said, "No, not again, I have to interrupt studying music all over again". I don't think I ever cried more in my whole life. When I had to say good-bye to my two teachers, two Italian teachers whom I adored, that was the prelude to coming to America.

Interviewer: Do you remember coming on the boat?

Interviewee: Yes.

Interviewer: What do you remember?

Interviewee: I remember – of course, a whole bunch of bedraggled people, myself, one of them. This strange woman, Ruth Gruber, who was directing things, seemed a very important

person. The whole thing was somewhat unreal. Out of a clear blue, the war was over, I was going to study music in Italy, and now I'm going on a boat and where, how, America. My mother had a brother who came to America during the First World War. During the crisis in Europe we were desperately trying to get some kind of a visa to run away from the Nazi's, who were surrounding, us every day closer and closer, but there was no chance of getting a visa for anybody to go to America - at the time it was most desperately needed, and now, after it's all over, now I have to go to America. I didn't want to go. I felt pretty ominous; I didn't want to interrupt my studies, and I was miserable.

Interviewer: Do you remember the first day when you got to Fort Ontario?

Interviewee: The first day when we got to Fort Ontario was again, not for real. Here we are in another strange country, different language, people again checking us out, giving us numbers, papers, all kinds of things we were quite familiar with and so it

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was more of the same. I didn't know what was going to be, what was going to happen, barbed wire fence, curious people looking at us, and I think that just for a moment, I turned myself off. What is going to happen, when am I going to have a piano? When am I going to be able to continue to study music?

Interviewer: And what did happen?

Interviewee: Then, of course, things began to develop, which were like a fairy tale. Slowly, we were assigned our barracks, there was hot water, there was food, people were friendly, everything was beginning to develop in a most fantastic, unbelievable, dream-like fashion. Little by little we began to become accustomed to this fairy-tale kind of life. Sure, we resented the fence, but what was inside the fence was not so ominous any more. Of course, we were able to go to school which was a fantastic thing, but again, I resented it because all I wanted to do was stay with the piano. Of course, I found loads of pianos. This was my basic training in piano tuning. I must mention that, already in Ferramonte, I had my first acquaintance with maintaining a piano because the Italians whatever the regime, may take life, liberty and property from you, but not music. In Ferramonte, we had one broken down old, ancient grand piano. We had among our inmates, one Viennese piano tuner who's

name was *Laschis Steinberg* [?] who's name I will never forget. He was in charge of maintaining the instrument with whatever means and tools or materials we could scramble up and scrape up some leather, whoever had some leather gloves they managed to salvage, we collected. Whenever the piano was broken, we went around collecting whatever materials he thought he could use to keep it going, because that was the only light in the midst of darkness which had overtaken all of Europe. I, of course, hung around the piano room all the time. Little by little, I began to learn from him how to tune a piano and how to maintain it. And, all of a sudden in Oswego, Oswego was an abandoned army camp that had scads of old, broken down upright pianos. Some were not all that broken down, and when I saw that, of course, I was in heaven, but I had no tools whatsoever, then I requested tools from highers and lo

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and behold, I did get some very antiquated piano tools. They were originally intended for old square pianos, but I somehow had someone to modify the tuning hammer so what I could put it on a normal tuning pin. The old tuning pins were oval so that tuning hammer would not fit the pianos which, although they were more of a contemporary construction. So, I had that modified somehow and sent it into Oswego to some blacksmith so that he could pound them out and make a square head out of them rather than an oval one so they could fit over it as standard tuning pins. And, of course, I had a heyday practicing my tuning and practicing whatever ingenuity I had with very little tools to do the repairs. This was my basic training and there I had absolutely no guidance. I was totally on my own and lo and behold, the word got around in Oswego that there was among the refugees, somebody who could fix pianos. I was just treated like a king! They would come in to get a special permit; I think that was even before we started going to school. We had our pass and we could go every morning to school and come home after. There was no problem, but his was a special pass, because they would sometimes have to come after work in the evening to take me out so that I could take care of their piano. They even paid me, which, of course, I couldn't believe, and in those days, a few dollars was a lot of money, and I would bring home this few dollars, whatever, three – four, sometimes I even got five dollars. People worked all week in those days; I think school children did part-time work after school. I think they got maybe five dollars a week, so that was a lot of money, and here I would spend a day, maybe, or a whole evening and they would be so pleased because in those days you couldn't get any piano tuners to come to Oswego to tune pianos because it was war time, people were busy

or they were in the service so there was no such thing. And so, I became really a persona grata among the people who owned pianos. Some of those pianos were extremely old. I'd never seen a square piano before because the one we had in Ferramonte was an old grand piano. And so, I tried to use my ingenuity in whatever way I knew how to make these things work again, and of course, people were just enthralled and I was treated wonderfully, and I enjoyed that very much. Eventually, I become known on the campus, whenever a piano was broken down, Leon had to

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come to tinker with it, fix and tune it. I started making demands, I wanted to have a piano of my own, so I was given one of the small – you know there were these service clubs which had a little separation cabin with a stove, even had a bathroom, and I demanded, I wanted to have a little cabin like that with a piano of my own choosing, just for my own exclusive use. I had what they call “chutzpa” and, after some doings, it was granted. Then, I began resenting having to go to school because all I wanted to do was to stay with the piano. I was, of course, the laughing stock of all my peers because they wanted to have a good time; they ran around with girls, they did all kinds of mischief things. They were having a wonderful time. I was carrying the burden of the world on my shoulders because I felt that I had lost all this time in becoming a musician because of the war. So, I began to develop a lot of anxiety, and there was a lot of trauma for me in Oswego, which was not Oswego's doing because they did everything they could to fulfill my demands and needs. I started piano with two inmates, one was Mrs. Levinson and another one was Mrs. *Sipsler*. (*Frieda Sipsler* Mrs. Levinson was a refugee from *Czarist* Russia and she lived in Paris before the war and studied with none other than *Gorteau* [?] who was a very, very famous pianist, and the other one was Viennese trained, she was from Vienna – Mrs. *Sipsler*. So, originally, I started I think with Mrs. *Sipsler*, and later on, I switched, I thought I would like to study with Mrs. Levinson because she did a lot of performing, she was much more, I thought, much more technically accomplished pianist and although I had funny feelings leaving *Sipsler* because she was very kind and encouraging, a wonderful person. But, she didn't take it to heart. After I studied with Mrs. Levinson for a little while, I decided I was going to start a *youth* chorus, and Mrs. *Sipsler* agreed to accompany the chorus, so that made me feel very good because I didn't want to hurt her feelings for having left her. That is the first time that I really got to hear some really wonderful chamber music. We had, among us, a fellow who played the violin. His name was *Schimmel* [?] and a fellow who played the viola, his name was Sternberg and

Levinson and the two of them formed a trio. For the first time I heard live chamber music and the thing that mostly impressed me was when they played Brahms. To this day, Brahms is one of my most admired and

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favorite composers. So little by little, I began to create my own musical world in Oswego. It was sort of a basic training in everything that later on became not only my livelihood, but also my life.

Interviewer: Eva?

Interviewee: Oh, Eva.

Interviewer: Manya

Interviewee: Manya was already a young lady and didn't mix too much with us, but you know we knew her all very well. She was married there and *Diana* was born in Oswego and Manya would sing. She had, as you know, a very lovely voice and I would accompany her whenever there was some occasion when entertainment was needed. God knows, it was, because everybody was basically not doing very much, except taking it all in and enjoying respite from danger and horror and so we performed quite a bit. Then, after I felt that my chorus was trained enough because most of my peers didn't read music and we didn't have any music, so I had to write the music so I arranged and harmonized some of the Israeli songs, or then there was no Israel, Palestinian songs which many of the soldiers from the Jewish brigade brought into Ferramonte and then we learned them, and then I had harmonized them into four part harmony. I would train them, some of them *by rote*, and those that could read, even my sister was in the chorus. I think there is a picture somewhere. I didn't bring anything because I had to come from work. After we felt that we were good enough we accepted engagements to perform at this or that, whatever occasion that we had in the camp.

Interviewer:

*Female – background*

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Interviewee: (Third)

(Probably Fredi Baum) Not really, I just speak seven or eight languages. I learned how to speak with the deaf and mutes, too.

Interviewer: What did the

Interviewee: Well they used me, \_\_\_\_\_ interpreter, I worked in the administration office in camp. I was the Administrative Assistant to the Director of the camp, and I worked in the camp from the first day until the last day.

Interviewer:

Interviewee: Well, you \_\_\_\_\_ first to be in a camp like this, being in America, they felt very uncomfortable. They would have to be in a camp, although everyone of us who came there signed a piece of paper saying that we will be in a camp, a shelter, and will go back to Europe after the war, and people were quite unhappy about being fenced in, if you please, although we were not fenced in. We could go into Oswego after a few days we were in the camp. We could go to Syracuse, which was not far away, as long as you were able to go and come back in the afternoon. You could go, more or less, anyplace you wanted to. Some people went to New York without permission.

*End of side one*

Just a police like you would have on the streets of New York. They were not a day or two old or too early, you know, you have to have some sort of police in any place where you live. Most of the people in the camp worked, they either worked in the garbage detail, coal detail, or they worked in the kitchen. We had communal kitchen where residents would be cooks, dishwashers, waiters, no not waiters because it was cafeteria style.

Interviewer: Tell me about

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Interviewee: Well, it all depends, red tape. There may have been people who had family in New York and they wanted to go and visit. They couldn't do it. The first several weeks that we

were in the camp, people with family in the States couldn't be visited by them, because we had to be whatever they wanted – they wanted to have us get used to life in camp and get the camp organized. The only problem in the camp was the people wanted to get out and some people became impatient after 6 months or a year. When they were from August '44 until March '46, about a year and a half. But, I don't think there were major problems. If anything there may have been problems with people who did not want to work. Well, you know, it was expected that people in certain ages do certain chores and they didn't want to do their chores, which is nothing unusual. You figure that we were on welfare in the camp, and you were told where you went to eat, or not eat, and that you were supposed to work and contribute something to the life in the camp. Some people didn't do it, but it wasn't a big problem really. Some of these people would end up in the hospital, faking some sort of an ailment. Again, it was not a serious problem.

Interviewer:

Interviewee: When we first came, we were a novelty for them; army camps have a mesh fence and on one side stood the people from Oswego. Actually, the houses in Oswego started on the other side of the fence, so the people who lived in those houses would hang around the fence and talk to us, and the people \_\_\_\_\_ took pictures of it right at the very beginning. The Oswego people, as a whole, were friendly to the residents of the camp. The newspaper in Oswego, and I don't recall the name anymore, was always very friendly, very positive about our being there. The young people in the camp, younger than I, I was 24 when I came to the camp, they went to high school and they did extremely well in high school. Not knowing the language, they were skipping grades immediately so that most of those 15 and 16 year old kids graduated in a year's time in Oswego High School, speaking English well and they did very well. An older group of young people went to Oswego State

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College, Teacher's College. They did extremely well there, too. Well, you had a regular life in the camp like you would have in any small town, you had problems which are normal in any community, but on the whole, as far as I'm concerned, you may have other people tell you different. I didn't find any serious problems in Oswego. People were worried that they may not be allowed to stay in the United States. It was a serious worry to many people. A

group of Yugoslavs at the end of 1945 returned to Yugoslavia. It was a small group; I think there were only about 80 or 90 people who went back to Yugoslavia voluntarily.

Interviewer: Thank you.

Interviewee: O.K. You're very welcome.

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Interviewer:  
(Female in background) was your idea. Tell me about when it hit you and when it became your idea.

Interviewee:  
(Fourth)  
Samuel Grafton Well, it happened almost accidentally. I'd been in Staten Island the week before and I found that there was a free port for commodities in Staten Island. A very interesting idea; they let goods come in without paying duty. Then they manufactured them and processed them within the free port and shipped them out, then, they would pay the duty, so, I said "why not for people coming in without papers, at least have a place to sit down, go to the bathroom, raise your children, then when they regularized the situation, get their papers and come out, and the president liked the idea, finally and it went on. I had hoped it would be bigger than it was.

Interviewer: Who were you that you could go to the President?

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Interviewee: I wrote a column for the New York Post which ran in about 75 other papers. I had a large daily audience, about 5 million, I believe. It was a liberal column and it ran on and I needed a subject for tomorrow. It was great to write the first column but the Thursday of the seventeenth week, you're in a little bit of trouble, and I remembered the free port and just came out of nowhere, a free port for people. The idea, I heard in Washington was catching on and being talked about so I kept writing columns on the subject like throwing matches on the fire to keep it burning, and it finally did.

Interviewer: Did you ever go to Washington at any point to deal with this?

Interviewee: With this project, no, not on that. I used to go to Washington quite frequently.

Interviewer: Did you go to Oswego?

Interviewee: I never went to Oswego, that's how busy – in a silly way one can be in this world. That's right, I never went to Oswego.

Interviewer: You never got into the dynamics or the mechanics of it?

Interviewee: Never did, not a thing, just threw out the idea like a little firecracker and let it go.

Interviewer: And what did your \_\_\_\_\_ for the refugees over the years?

Interviewee: Nothing.

Interviewer: How did you come here today?

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Interviewee: Ruth Gruber was writing her book, and she checked into the origins of this thing and I gave her my original columns and she mentioned me in her book, and then from that, the refugees made contact with me.

Interviewer: All right, before I check with somebody about other political involvement that you had

Interviewee: Oh, that was it, the free port was my second biggest job. The biggest one, it's not exaggerated, I personally overthrew the oldest Italian Crown in Europe, dating from, I think 1230, the House of Savoy. I was doing a Saturday Night Radio Broadcast WOR, and we were *about* to make a deal with Victor Emmanuel, The Second, the so-called King of Italy. I broadcasted an essay which called him "The Moronic Little King". Well the OWI put him on world-wide radio, it made an international scandal it broke up the negotiations, destroyed that deal, and it destroyed the \_\_\_\_\_. Roosevelt denounced me, and we had been good

friends, denounced me quite bitterly, papers wrote editorials against me, and I got a call from the White House to come on down. So, I came down, and he said, "You're quite right, he is a moron. The best I can do after a public insult is a private apology".

Interviewer: Did you have some kind of relationship with Roosevelt?

Interviewee: Oh yes.

Interviewer: How did you see him as President?

Interviewee: I thought he was a man of genius, and a great, great leader. I really did.

Interviewer: Would you comment on \_\_\_\_\_ *lack of action* \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewee: Because he was leading a country, very different from the country today. Today we have like 45 million college graduates, I don't know what the number was then, but I'd bet it was under 5 million. It was what *Mencken* called to a *certain* degree, the \_\_\_\_\_ and he had a \_\_\_\_\_ and lead him \_\_\_\_\_ into the struggle against Hitler. I sympathize with him because he had to cut corners and compromise. He did. One of the glory of American system is that nobody has his own way, and I like that. In this case, he did a *masterly* job, he did a *masterly* job of carrying us into this struggle against Hitler, which he knew was necessary, and it was. In the course of that, he had to make deals with local political leaders and he had to do things about the refugees, but I don't think he really wanted to do but he was carrying this immense apparatus along with him, you know, this bitter, torn, we don't remember how bad it was when the isolationists and the American *Firsters* were almost in charge for a period.

Interviewer: Were there various reasons that he may have allowed the refugees to come into Oswego? Would you like to comment on the various different reasons why he might have? Give you own reasons why he agreed.

Interviewee: Why he agreed to it? Well, he liked the idea. I think also, it was a very good gesture, a thousand is not that many, I can understand that, it was a token, it was a token, but it was a good token, and certainly a great token for the thousand that made it. More than a token for them, it saved their lives. I think he wanted to do something on that side. He stopped other

shiploads of refugees from coming here. I used to have to wind myself up to forgive him once in a while, but I always forgave him.

Interviewer: Did you at least attack him in your column?

Interviewee: Oh yes. That was \_\_\_\_\_ He once told me that was worth 35 votes in the House of Representatives. He would say to a representative "You do that, and *Grafton* is going to write a piece again".

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Interviewer:  
(*Lawrence Baron*) I would like to ask you if you would care to comment *about* Truman's reluctance to reverse Roosevelt's decision and it took quite a long time and there was a lot of talk about sending the refugees back. What were the politics about that?

Interviewee: Well, I didn't know Truman as well as I did Roosevelt, and I had hope for him, great hopes for him but it was a weird election, and, no this was before the second one, but I never got to know Truman as well as I did Roosevelt. Roosevelt was eastern, liberal, had an education similar to mine, and we were to a degree, simpatico.

Interviewer: Did you follow the *Dickstein* hearing, the Congressional hearing on the Oswego refugees?

Interviewee: Yes, I read them all, but at that time, I was off on 10 different subjects, always traveling, I went around the country doing things I really never had time to do. But, I did think of myself as sort of an idea man; let other people do the dull administrative work, which has to be done.

Interviewer:

Interviewee: I feel very good about it, and I always will. Thank you.

Interviewer: Thank you very much.

*Ends part way through side 2.*

*Unknown original transcriptionist.  
jCook made editorial notes throughout in January 2006.  
jCook's notes are seen in italics.*