

OH 273  
FORT ONTARIO REFUGEE PROGRAM

TELEPHONE INTERVIEW  
INTERVIEWEE: JOSEPH SMART  
INTERVIEWER: LAWRENCE BARON  
DATE: JULY 10, 1984

Lawrence Baron: Testing, one, two, three; testing, one, two three. (Sound of telephone being dialed.)

Joseph Smart: Hello?

LB: Hello, Mr. Smart this is Lawrence Baron.

JS: Hello?

LB: This is Lawrence Baron.

JS: Mr. Smart

LB: Yes, is Joseph Smart there?

JS: Yes, I'm Joseph Smart

LB: This is Professor Baron from St. Lawrence.

JS: Dr. Baron it's not ... you're not coming through very clearly.

LB: I am not coming through clearly. I wonder if that has anything to do with a hook-up.

JS: How am I coming to you?

LB: You are coming fine. Can you hear me better now?

JS: Yes

LB: All right, then I will ... I'll just back up from the mic and begin talking a little bit louder on the phone. Let me get some data on our tape so that we can identify, and then I'll start asking you some questions.

JS: Let me ask you one question. How long is this going to take?

LB: Oh, 30 minutes, maybe 40 minutes.

JS: That's OK. Now are you going to simply ask me the major questions as you did in the letter or would you talk to me in between with sub-questions?

LB: That can be done, without any problems.

JS: That would be more interesting as ... if I pause and let you lead me on occasionally, wouldn't it?

LB: Right. And one of the things is ... since this is a tape and ... since we are gonna take excerpts out of it, my questions won't be heard probably anyway, so it will sound as if you are just talking off the top of your head anyway. So that's probably better.

But let me mention, for our purposes here, I am talking to Joseph H. Smart, who was the First Director of the Fort Ontario Emergency Refugee Center from August, 1944 until May, 1945.

Mr. Smart, when you first came to Fort Ontario, do you remember what your initial instructions or expectations were of what you were supposed to do there? Was this an internment camp or a transit camp? If you could talk a little bit about your first days there and what you saw your role as, that would be helpful.

JS: Dr. Barron, are you recording?

LB: Yes, we are.

JS: Well, Let's start over again, because I ... didn't know you'd started.

LB: Oh, OK.

JS: Oh, and you have to raise your voice a little more, I am not getting you clearly.

LB: Oh, all right, all right. What I wanted to know was: what was your original expectation of what your charge was at Fort Ontario? What were your original orders or original assignments from the government?

JS: Well, I'll have to give a little lead into my answer to that question. For several years before that I had been involved in a resettlement program in the United States, and also had been in charge of the Japanese-American Relocation Program for the mid-Western states. We had ten of those camps and I was in charge of five.

So this experience led to my being asked to come back from Peru where I was stationed on another program, to direct this shelter and I was told that the camp would be simply a staging area, where we would keep these people for a few months pending arrangements to disperse them throughout the country under some kind of program which had not been devised. In short, I didn't expect at all I was going to be managing a modified concentration camp or detention center.

LB: When was it first that you learned what the terms of the internment were? What would be the conditions the refugees would come under? I am talking specifically here about the form that they had to sign in Italy?

JS: I knew nothing about that. The preliminary negotiations to bring these people over were conducted by the Army in Italy. And the agency I worked for, which was the War Relocation Board or the War Relocation Authority, under the Department of the Interior. Our job was custodial. We really had nothing to say about the policy bringing them here or what would happen to them after they left the shelter. So I was not familiar, except by hearsay, about the commitments that were made. I do know, from reading the record that they signed an agreement that they would be willing to return to their homelands after the war was over, but I know also that they were given private, informal, assurances that some way would be found to let them gain their freedom in the United States eventually.

LB: And what did you think of having ... I have read through a lot of your papers at the Butler Library, in Columbia, and it seems to me that on the one hand you had to enforce these rules; on the other hand you looked for ways to get around them. Could you talk a little bit about that, for example the problem of work, whether they could work outside the Fort? Those sorts of things.

JS: Yes, under the rules set up by the War Refugee Board, they had to be confined to the shelter. This was contrary to the understanding that we all had, that they would come in as guests and would have some freedom of movement. As you say, I had to provide security according to the rules and at the same time I set out from the beginning to get those rules modified.

The people of Oswego accepted these refugees with open minds and open arms and open hearts and they saw no reason for having them confined. So the first thing I urged was to let us grant leaves locally, so that the people could have the freedom to go downtown to shop and attend entertainment and search in the town and those sort of things. And then we moved from that and urged for a policy of general leaves so that people would be allowed, under the sponsorship of welfare agencies and local community organizations, to live wherever they wanted to in the United States, pending the eventual solution. Many of them had family and relatives in the United States and of course the Jewish agencies and other agencies were willing to sponsor them locally. So this was something we were pushing for all the time.

LB: Could you ...

JS: And as you suggested, we wanted --- and the local people wanted --- to give these people some freedom to get out and take jobs and eventually we were able to arrange for that.

LB: That was with the farm picking program, for harvesting?

JS: Sir?

LB: That would be harvesting?

JS: There was a labor shortage in New York State that year. Crops. The food was spoiling in the fields, so they ... their help was needed, particularly in short term harvesting of crops. And this was done and there was no problem.

LB: You mentioned the people of Oswego and your work with them. Could you describe a bit more about your relationship with ... I guess it was the Fort Ontario – I forget their name – the Fort Ontario Advisory committee and what sort of programs you jointly set up to make ... to coordinate the presences of refugees with city policy.

JS: Yes, there had been some fear in Washington and on the part of the Jewish agencies in New York that the presence of these people would be resented. But on the contrary, their acceptance by the people of Oswego was very warm and sympathetic from the beginning. The day they arrived at the shelter the people there handed them candy and cigarettes, even beer, through the fence. So the climate was right to follow a policy of cooperation with the local community, and we carried this out by forming an Oswego Advisory Committee.

As I recall, there were 27, 28 prominent citizens on that committee, representing the political, and church, civic groups, the biggest names in that part of the state. The publisher of the newspaper was on it, and the President of the Oswego State Teachers College, the Principal of the high school, these kind of people.

Merchants, of course, hoped that the refugees would be able to go downtown and spend their money; the churches wanted them to participate in local churches; schoolteachers wanted them in the schools. Through this Oswego Advisory Committee we were able to accomplish this kind of policies.

We did have a leave policy. The children were eventually allowed in school, students in the high school and in the teachers' college, and a very outstanding example of the refugees ... the refugees had a number of talented theatrical people in their number. They put on plays and entertainments for the community and the Oswego people also use their talents in some of the local entertainment features. So altogether there was an extremely warm and friendly relationship.

LB: Do you recall what you ... one of the things I have read and this is ... I know less about this than about the ...

JS: I can't hear you.

LB: OK. I am gonna ask you if you can recall what problems did you have specifically with the refugees, not so much with the town, but with organizing the camp; what were the greatest problems as far as refugee self-government?

JS: Well, the main problem was this great block in their minds about being behind the fence. They had been invited to come as guests to the United States, and they interpreted being guests as something entirely different than our government people interpreted it. Most of the problems stemmed from this indignation about being behind the fence at all. And not having to look forward to eventual freedom. And on top of this was the nature of the group.

It was not a cohesive group of people: there were 17 different countries represented among these 1,000 people. And the old animosities between the Yugoslavs and the Germans for example, were brought with them and this created problems. There were problems, animosity, between the Orthodox and the Reformed Jews, and between German Jews and Yugoslav Jews. So we were faced with the problem of making a community out of all of these disparate backgrounds and interests. And this was done by forming an executive committee of the refugees on which all the national groups were represented and religious groups. And to the extent that I could possibly do it, to turn self-government in the community over to them.

This, of course, was an artificial thing that we couldn't do fully, because of the government regulations, but in general, it gave them a push toward cooperation and overcame the natural separations that they had brought with them. In the actual administration of the program, the work problem which you mentioned was the most severe.

They had expected that they would not be required to work at all, again going back to their expectations that they would be treated as honored guests in the United States. And a great deal of the work was unpleasant, shoveling coals, hauling garbage, cleaning, household work, serving food, cooking it, and this was rather an elite group, many doctors, lawyers, and artists and other professionals, they hadn't ever done this sort of thing. So we had to require ... I had to see no alternative of this ... we had to require them to provide their own services. So the division of the work and the work conditions were difficult at all times. And there really was no solution as long as they were held in this kind of situation.

Another difficult thing was the first winter was the hardest winter that New York has ever recorded. Deep snow, very severe cold, and these people had come from the warm climate of Italy and were not prepared for this and we weren't very well-prepared either in clothing or in shelter to meet that kind of winter conditions. So it was pretty rough.

LB: There was one refugee who was killed or something in ...

JS: One refugee was killed, one of our finest men who had not been assigned to shoveling coal, but he volunteered, and he was loading the truck and a great wall of frozen snow, also some coal, which had built up in the pile, caved in, and covered him, and he was killed. Yes.

LB: While you were there, there were two commissions that came and studied the morale of the refugees. Rudolph Dreikurs was one, for some reason, and Curt [Bomby?] I guess it was ...

JS: Yes.

LB: ... was the other. What were their findings and what did you think of their findings?

JS: I thought that their survey was well-conducted with a minimum of disturbance to the people, which I thought was important. And I not being a psychiatrist or a psychologist ... I thought that their findings were sound. Essentially they called attention to the severe psychological pressures that were on the people, because of their imprisonment there, and the only solution would be to help them get their liberty, which was what I had been maintaining, of course, all along.

LB: Did you receive help from people in Washington while you were Director, who were also lobbying for liberalization? I am thinking of Eleanor Roosevelt, who I know visited. I was wondering what people in Washington were working in your behalf and in behalf of the refugees before ...

JS: Yes, from the beginning, I kept the pressure on pretty strongly on my own people, my own administration in Washington. First, to get a leave policy locally and visiting policy and that sort of thing we talked about, but always, urging a total solution. First, in the form of sponsored leaves throughout the United States and eventually, when the war would be over, to give these people the right to have immigration status under their country quotas.

The difficulty was that the people to whom I had access, that is, the director of the War Agency Authority and the Department of the Interior, their view was the same as mine. They didn't need convincing. It was the Attorney General and the Secretary of State, the Secretary of War, and the War Refugee Board who were following out Roosevelt's original commitment that the people had to be returned; there was no budging that. They took that stonewall position and maintained it consistently up to the time of my resignation.

LB: Talking of your resignation, could you talk about why you specifically resigned in May of 1945, and then describe the campaign that you became involved in, "The Friends of Fort Ontario" and the people who were involved in it? What was done between May of 1945 and January of 1946?

JS: My resignation was prompted by a rumor that a ship had actually been chartered to take these people back to Europe. The rumor came to me through informal committee of the refugee leaders, who usually heard these kinds of stories before I did. And I called my chief in Washington, who was Dillon Myer, splendid man, good friend. He said, "Well, that story isn't exactly correct, but essentially yes. The final decision has been made and they've got to go back; there is nothing that I can do about it."

This group of refugees had come to me with that story and had said, "As a last resort, can't we organize an outside committee of prominent people to plead our case before the American public and with the Congress and President?" I answered, "A fine idea, but who would lead such a campaign?"

And I debated this for several days and talked to one or two people in Washington and in New York and the general consensus was that leadership was the key to the thing. If a Jewish organization were to undertake to do this then you immediately would have a wave of anti-Semitism and anti-immigration as a result. So the consensus finally was that if anybody is going to do it, Joe Smart will have to do it; having had the experience at the shelter, understanding the problem perhaps more than anybody, a Christian, interested primarily in the Jewish group, plus the other experience I had.

So I reported back to the refugees that the idea had a favorable reception and that I would consider forming and leading such a campaign. I insisted that the request had to come officially from the Refugee Executive Committee and be approved by the people and I attached some conditions. One being that I would have the exclusive right to represent them. So this was the ... this was the upshot and I agreed to from such a committee and did resign.

LB: And who ended up joining your committee?

JS: Sir?

LB: Who ended up supporting your committee? What famous people?

JS: You mean on the committee or behind it?

LB: People who publicly supported it, who publicity supported this ...

JS: One major support that I fully expected but did not get was from the national agencies who were interested in refugees. Both Christian and Jewish. They were concerned with the world situation and on refugees dealing with some millions of victims of the Holocaust and other situations around the world, and

they feared that to put this little token group in the public eye might defeat other efforts they were making in a larger picture, and I think they were quite reasonable in that. But in any rate they did not support us either financially or publicly.

My technique was to make up a list of people that I thought whose names and reputations were recognizable to most Americans and to get them to be the sponsoring committee for the organization. I wrote an appeal and sent it to something over a hundred people and more than a hundred responded enthusiastically and said, "Yes, we would be on your committee."

People such as Eleanor Roosevelt, of course was there. Governor Dewey of New York, the man who had previously been head of the national refugee service in Washington, Thomas Mann, Albert Einstein, the Episcopal Bishop of New York, and a radio announcer, who would today be known as Walter Cronkite, his name then was Raymond Brownswing. We were after opinion formers and each of them could exert their own influence and at the same time stir up support in the media through the organizations around the country and our hope was to very quickly, get such a tremendous public response through organizations and the media that we would have a forceful impact on the opinion in Congress and on the administration, including the President. And this, of course, happened.

Another thing we did, we felt that we had to advance a concrete plan of what we wanted to do. So we hired a lawyer, probably the best immigration lawyer in the country, to work out the details of plans which had been under general discussion. And it was he who came up with the proposal, and all the details, that the refugees would be sent to Canada and allowed to apply there for immigration under their public office ...

[End of Side One.] [Side Two]

[Included in a previous transcript, from reel-to-reel tapes, but not included on this cassette:

JS: ... and then would be re-admitted as immigrants. And this is eventually what happened.

LB: And do you believe that the main reason that Truman agreed to allow the refugees to enter as immigrants was because of the public pressure and interest in this issue that your group ... (nothing more recorded after this point)]

JS: ... I think it'd be interesting if I tell you precisely what happened, finally. Secretary Ickes sent word to me through his liaison, Assistant Secretary of the Interior, he said, "You tell Joe Smart that Truman will sign an Executive Order following the plan that you developed, if he can be assured that he won't get repercussions in Congress." I went to the Chairmen of the Immigration and Naturalization Committees for the Senate and the House, this of course being Democrats in those days. And both of them assured me that they would support the President if he were to sign such an Executive Order.

I went then to Senator Taft, who was popularly known in those days as "Mr. Republican," of course the biggest name on the Republican side. He heard me out and when I finished he simply looked at me a moment and he said, "Mr. Smart, you may tell Secretary Ickes that if the President signs such an order and if there is any reaction against it in the Senate I will take the floor of the Senate to defend his action." [Laughs.]

So I reported this back and the order was signed in a matter of days.

LB: And were you there when the first group of refugees re-entered the United States?

JS: No, I deliberately stayed away. At that point the government stepped in, the Immigration Service came in and took charge; it was their operation. I didn't want to detract from the thing which was being accomplished. I didn't go back.

LB: And you recently have been recognized for your part, the role you played in gaining the refugees immigration status? Could you talk a little about the organizations that have recognized you recently?

JS: Well, from my ... for the committee itself we weren't very successful in raising money and I've had to use my insurance, savings, to pay the bills until it was over. One of my main helpers there was Roger Baldwin, who was head of the American Civil Liberties Union. He was one of the most active. So when I sent him the final report he went out and passed the hat, and raised enough money among the committee members to reimburse me for what I'd been out of pocket. Finally he wrote me a letter and said, "This is the most impressive one-man campaign that I've ever been involved in." Nice little thing.

A few months later an award was established by a German language publication in the United States, called [ausspou?] which I think means "forward." With the permission of the Roosevelt family they established an annual Franklin D. Roosevelt Award for Americans who had done the most to help new Americans. They gave me that first award.

I've never been one to seek recognition for things that I felt I needed to do, and never have in this event. But last year when the Salt Lake Jewish community was celebrating the national observance of the Holocaust Day, they had heard about me and they set up a Utah celebration which featured me, gave me an award, services, what-not.

Several things like this happened. As a matter of fact, the national Jewish organization, Pioneer Women, gave me an award in connection of their establishment of a monument up at Fort Ontario. They established also in Israel a scholarship in my name. So there have been several nice gestures which I've appreciated.

LB: Well, you've been a very good person to interview. We really covered a lot in a minimum amount of time. The information ... I know I'll be using a large part of it in the radio show, and I'll get back to you once I know when we're going to finish production and start distributing it to National Public Radio Stations.

JS: Do you feel you got pretty much what you need from me?

LB: Perfect, I couldn't have asked for more. It really worked out nice. One thing I wanted to know: have you ever read my article on the local reaction to this?

JS: No, and I'm hoping you'll send me a copy.

LB: All right, I'll send you a copy. I didn't remember if I'd sent you a copy or not, so I will send one. Thank you again.

JS: We didn't cover one heading you suggested ...

LB: Which is?

JS: Which was ... oh, [long pause] incidents remembered most fondly.

LB: Ah, right, you got me. Which incidents do you remember most fondly?

JS: So you want me to comment on ...

LB: Yes, yes.

JS: Well, the most vivid memories I have are not the problems that we have been talking about or the measures we took to solve them. But was the cultural and a personal interchanges which occurred between my family and those people that enriched our lives a great deal. The plays, the dances, the entertainments, visits back and forth ion our homes. Perhaps the outstanding event which I remember most fondly was the national radio show which was conducted under the name of "Christmas in Freedom." This of course was Christmas, 1944. It was a program of entertainment features by the refugees. I was Master of Ceremonies at the Shelter and Eleanor Roosevelt was MC in New York; Fred Baum was the interpreter and the voice for the

refugee performers: Dorothy Thompson spoke very movingly and helped create this atmosphere favorable to their eventual freedom. This is a very outstanding thing.

LB: Interesting thing. A copy of that program still exists.

JS: As far as I know never was one made.

LB: There is. I've just got permission to use it. It's at the Library of Congress. NBC donated its copies, made a copy, and we're in the process of getting permission, through NBC, to use it for our show.

JS: Let me have a copy.

LB: I can send you the information on it so you can get a copy. I was surprised: I didn't think it existed either, but I started digging and sure enough, it had been donated to the Library of Congress.

JS: That is splendid.

LB: So there is a copy, and I will send you that information too.

JS: Maybe you can include that – an excerpt from it – in your program.

LB: Wonderful, wonderful.

LB: OK, I thank you very much and, like I said, I'll send you the article and I'll send you the information about the Dorothy Thompson program.

JS: When this is all over, is there any chance I could get a transcript of the whole thing?

LB: Certainly, certainly. It'll probably be another six months to a year. I have to do three separate shows, write them up, splice it, that sort of thing, once we're done I will, for sure, send something out to you.

JS: Well, I hope I live long enough to see it.

LB: You were a very good person to interview, and I hope you stay well.

JS: Thank you.

LB: Thank you. [Background] We did it.

[Ends about one-third through Side Two.]

*Transcribed by jCook, February, 2006*