

OH 277
ORAL HISTORY, FORT ONTARIO REFUGEE PROJECT
40TH REUNION CELEBRATION, AUGUST 1984

[Very long lead-in, possibly five minutes, of chatter, singing, some high-pitched whine.]

JOSEPH PAPP: Welcome ladies and gentlemen. [Applause] I was just talking to Rabbi Moshevitz who's behind me, before we came in. We're rehearsing the play *The Golem*. I said, "We had a big discussion last night. How do you pronounce this: is it "Rebbay" or Rebbie? So he shook his head and said, "Well, 'Rebbay is all right; Rebbie is all right". It's a very Jewish reaction. We decided on Rebbie, anyway. [Some laughter.]

It's very appropriate that we're in this building. It's very appropriate that Governor Cuomo is with us today [Applause] because there's a series of events that are fitting. It's fitting that also we're presenting a play tonight, a great Jewish play by a great Jewish poet, by [Hey?] Leivick: *The Golem* [some audience comments] Lyvick? I think we have proponents on both sides. My father said Layvick. What can I do? We have the Litvak's here, and etc.

In any event, this building we're in, as you may know, is the HIAS [Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society] building. It was the building that housed thousands and thousands of Jewish refugees from all over the world, particularly from Eastern Europe. When we first came here, we came into a dark, old, deserted place that hadn't been used in two or three years. We came into rooms that had [talismans?] on the floor; there were prayer book siddurs everywhere. We picked them up. I got a tremendous sense of the history of Jews that had come through. The room next door was a shule and every time Yom Kippur came around there would be [?] come around waiting for the services to start, and I told them there was no shule here now. But the place just is full of history, of your history and my history, it's part of the history of New York. So it's very fitting that we're here today, and I want to welcome you on behalf of the Theatre and myself. I find it a very moving event. So we love you all; have a good time today. Thank you.

MORIC KAMHI: Dear friends, relatives. After all our experiences we're entitled to think of ourselves all as relatives. Welcome to the celebration of our 40th year in our haven. We'd like to express our thanks to Mr. Joseph Papp for graciously providing space for us in the public theater and for donating tickets to his production of *The Golem*, which he's in part dedicating to the Oswego refugees. We'd also like to thank Mr. Steve Cohen and the rest of Mr. Papp's staff for being so gracious and so helpful.

We're honored to have with us today a man who has done so much for the Jewish community, and continues to do so much. He is the Assistant to the Governor for Community Affairs, Rabbi Israel Moshevitz. [Applause]

We made the journey here today, some of us from the far corners of this great nation, which with its ample arms stretched into the blazing European inferno of 1944, scooping us onto the *Henry Gibbins*, where together with a thousand wounded GI's, we sailed across the submarine-infested ocean, toward the lady with the golden torch held high, and with a lady on board who, with all the goodness and the greatness of her Biblical namesake, guided us, nurtured us, held our aggregate hand. This wonderful lady, humanitarian, author, journalist, recently wrote a book called *Haven* about our experiences. It is a book so well written, so full of drama, warmth, so suspenseful once you pick it up you will not be able to put it down. One of the reasons we came here today, to this very building which, as Mr. Papp told you used to be HIAS, is to see this great woman to whom we owe so much. And here she is, our own Mother Ruth, Dr. Ruth Gruber. [Extended applause]

RUTH GRUBER: Governor Cuomo, Rabbi Moshevitz, Joe Papp, and all my family. Who would have dreamed forty years ago today, on August 3rd, 1944, when our troop ship the *Henry Gibbins* sailed into New York Harbor, that we would be meeting today in this beautiful theater? Certainly I didn't dream it, when I first met you on the *Henry Gibbins* in your rags, many of you without shoes, some of you with your feet bound with newspapers, empty suitcases. I never thought that we would have this kind of reunion. And I remember, as I'm sure all of you do, when we sailed past the great mythic mother, the Statue of Liberty, one of our rabbis asked if he could say a prayer. And I said, "Of course". So we made a little space for him on that crowded deck and Rabbi Tzechoval, you all remember Rabbi Tzechoval, bent down and kissed the iron deck and then he stood up and he said the prayer of survival, the Shehecheyanu and we said it with him, because we had truly survived, we had survived air raids, submarines. And he said, "Now that we have reached the land of freedom we must never believe the lies that the Nazis tell about us, that wherever we go we bring evil. It's not true. Wherever we go we bring the blessings of the Torah and we bring Truth. And now that we are here we must speak with one voice, one heart, and we must be filled not with hatred but with love". And it is that love that I feel today in this theater.

We're very fortunate to have with us the man who electrified the Democratic National Convention with his keynote address, the man . . . [applause] I have given him a copy of *Haven*, which tells our story and I have written: "To Governor Mario Cuomo, a man of wisdom and compassion, an

inspiring leader who is making our state a cultural and humanitarian haven for countless millions. On the occasion of the 40th reunion of the Oswego Refugees”.

GOVERNOR MARIO CUOMO: Thank you very much Ruth Gruber. I must tell you before I tell you anything else what the Rabbi said to me when Joe Papp got into the question of Levick, Layvick, the Rabbi said, “Levick, Layvick, abi gezunt, Italians would say [basta genophoma?] You understand that?

I’m delighted to be here and the Governor has many opportunities to be in various places every day and when we choose a place we exclude other opportunities. The choice of coming here was a clear one for me. The number of people involved in the reunion may be relatively small but what you symbolize is enormously important. Ruth has already pointed out that you symbolize the strength of the Jewish people, the goodness of the Jewish people. And the contributions that you’ve made represent the contributions which Jewish people have made to our state and certainly this city for many years. And also you symbolize in a very real way the great strength and goodness of this nation, and the idea that it represents, an idea, incidentally, that we will be talking more and more about throughout the course of this campaign.

Reunions aren’t often celebrated by those who weren’t there in the first place, but this is an exceptional reunion, and even those of us who only learned of what happened in Oswego on August 3, 1944, through Ruth Gruber’s book, *Haven*, are eager to take part in it. New Yorkers from every part of this state, whether they were alive in 1944 or not, are proud that persecuted and hunted people found a place of safety here. That a former governor of the state, Franklin Roosevelt, was the man most responsible for their rescue. Our New Yorkers are accustomed to refugees; we’re all descended from them. And the refugees who landed here that August forty years from part of the human stream that have given New York its greatness. Men and women from Europe, from Asia, from our own south fleeing hunger, or discrimination or oppression. Like all of those refugees, the refugees sheltered at Oswego have demonstrated abundantly their gratitude for the haven that they found here. As artists, workers, entrepreneurs, they’ve made their own contributions to preserving and extending the freedom and opportunity that they found in American, making this a better country than the one they found when they arrived. Whatever debt the refugees had to this country, they have repaid. And if they are proud of this state and what it gave them, we are equally proud of them, of what they have given, what they’ve achieved, what they’ve meant to New York and to the nation.

But the refugees we honor and remember today were all part of a process we still find it difficult to comprehend. Most of them were Jews. In Hitler's Europe being a Jew was a death sentence. All Jews were condemned to one end: The Holocaust. In large measure the world chose not to notice. Some simply preferred not to look. Others knew; others saw and decided to be silent. Many cooperated with the force they were afraid to resist. They paid their small part in the work of deportation and death by doing nothing. It's an ugly chapter in human history; but none of us can afford to forget it. Ugly as it is overall, however, it is not totally devoid of some uncommon bravery and extraordinary decency. The pages devoted to the story of Oswego are filled with those virtues.

The refugees of Oswego survived because people risked their lives to save them. They were sheltered in Italy by people who said, "No" to hatred; who shared their small rations with them; who hid them in barns, sheds and attics. Uneducated people, many of them, but far, far wiser than many statesmen, more compassionate, certainly more courageous. The simple refusal of those few Italian people who [?] the process of genocide, or ignore it, is a reaffirmation of what makes us human. Because of their largely anonymous heroism, one group of refugees was brought to this country, to Oswego, by President Roosevelt. And what happened to those refugees is part of an even greater story as old as the Exodus, and as recent as the Russian Jew who applied this morning for permission to leave the Soviet Union.

A story that was written in part in this very building, now a public theater, which was the headquarters of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society. A dream was nurtured here in this building. From this building Jews were given hope, a reason to believe there was a future, that lives could be started anew. From here a generation of refugees were given help, financial, medical, emotional. From here their survival was ensured. So in a real way a nation grew in this place, the nation of Israel. A vision of a better world was preserved here; a vision for all mankind.

After Oswego, forty summers later, the work continues. In New York where refugees from Central America and Asia struggle to realize the promises that have drawn them here, the work continues. In Israel where the work of securing a place Jews can live as Jews, in peace, the work continues. Everywhere that people strive to overcome disease and poverty and hatred, the work continues. Everywhere that refugees are welcomed and given shelter, everywhere that there is compassion, the work continues. Because of what happened August three, 1944, we all have reason to hope, Jew and Gentile alike, and in celebration of that I offer you that beautiful Hebrew wish, L'chaim, to life. Today a small band of refugees remembers, and we remember with them. Remember what they fled and what they found; how in the end, life conquered death and goodness was not destroyed by evil.

How traditions of faith and love and decency were preserved and were passed on and go on still, endlessly. L'chaim. Thank you.

MORIC KAMHI: Thank you Governor, for that wonderful speech. This audience was electrified, as audiences are when you speak. Thank you so much. [Applause]

There are some people we'd like to recognize in the audience today. We're privileged to have with us a man to whom we who were in Oswego owe a great deal. He is a man who during the days back in World War II conceived of the idea of a "Free Port", Mr. Samuel Grafton. [Applause]

In our audience today we are also happy to have with us a woman who is a candidate for the 46th Senate district seat, including Oswego, Jefferson County, and St. Lawrence County, Miss Norma Bartle. Miss Bartle. [Applause]

And Mr. Mario [Filipo Pinni?], Deputy Consul-General of the Italian Consul of New York. Mr. Pinni. [Applause]

We also have with us Dr. David Blumenfeld, Director of the New York City Holocaust Memorial Commission. Dr. Blumenfeld. [Applause]

Last but not least, we have in our audience, the women . . . Syracuse Council of Women, Pioneer [Niomatu?] Organization, Belle Shiro and Celia Meren. [Applause]

And now think back, and remember that time, way back forty years ago when we all lolled on the deck of the *Henry Gibbins* and listened to the lovely voice of that lovely lady. Remember the song she sang? Well here she is, directly from Los Angeles Olympic Games, where she's a translator for the West German fencing team, Miss Manya Breuer. [Applause]

MANYA BREUER: Ladies and gentlemen, I'd like to sing for you and I'm sure you will remember the *Henry Gibbins* where we mostly spoke Italian, and this is a song that I remember and it's called "Sorrento". [Sings it in Italian with piano accompaniment. Applause]

And the next song that I frequently sing, and that everybody liked, was "A Yiddisher Mama" and I'd like to sing it in Yiddish. [Sings it in Yiddish with piano accompaniment. Side One ends during this song. The song continues on Side Two. Applause.]

And my next song is called "Israel". You will recognize the melody; it is from [kosenkalen mazel tov?] And Al Jolson wrote the lyrics when the state of Israel was born, and I'm very proud to sing it for you now. [Sings it in English with piano accompaniment. Applause.]

MORIC KAMHI: How did it feel to be growing up in Oswego? We thought you might like to hear two representative viewpoints by two very popular Fort Ontario representatives. The first from a man who was an eleven-year-old boy at the time, who is now a documentary filmmaker. A very good man, a very good person, Mr. Walter Greenberg. [Applause]

WALTER GREENBERG: Shalom. The children of Israel wandered in the desert forty years until they reached their destination. We are reunited here today in celebration of our arrival forty years ago to this land of promise, America. My parents and I were liberated by the Allied Armies only a few weeks before we had the privilege of being part of the chosen few that journeyed on the *S. S. Gibbins*. Only one more perilous trip crossing the Mediterranean, and that world, the only one I knew, one of death, destruction, and of enslavement, would vanish forever. I promised that I would never forget the kind Italian people; without them this family of three would not have survived. *Molte grazie, el pople Italiano*. Arriving in New York Harbor in August of 1944, for a little boy of eleven was a magical moment. Colors were so bright and sounds so soft. It looked like a circus, although I had never seen one. I was used to khaki and grey colors and only sounds of war, not of life.

I was asked by death Ruth to reflect on how it felt to be a child in Fort Ontario. For me it was a bittersweet experience; it felt wonderful. For the first time in my life I went to school, I was not hungry, I knew that doctors would take care of me if I were sick. I joined the Boy Scouts, and was proud of my uniform. I experienced that wonderful feeling of knowing there will be a tomorrow, safe and sound together with my parents and friends.

But Fort Ontario was a source of great disappointment for me. Again I was in a camp with a fence around it; people on the outside looking in and I on the inside looking out. Indeed we had everything but our freedom. I suppose that this little boy grouped all camps into one and all fences were the same, not understanding the subtle political differences of confinement. I was last to be bar mitzvahed at the camp, finally coming of age in an age of no reason, for it was the worst of time and more. On October of 1981, we had our first reunion in Syracuse, New York. I was with my mother, wife and son, and thirty-seven years later I tried again to understand those dark years of organized

amnesia but to understand it is to condone it, to understand it is to justify it, to understand it is to forget it.

I left Syracuse that morning, after a wonderful brunch, with a warm and happy feeling. Traveling with my wife, son and camera crew, we left first needing time to set up our cameras so we could continue that special day. But as I drove through Oswego I started to cry, not knowing why. Could it be that I was crying for that little boy who did not have the luxury to cry as a child? On that cold morning of January, 1945, we traveled to Canada, staying there only a few hours, the last step from bondage to freedom. Crossing the Rainbow Bridge I was home at last, where all men can be free. [bocco?] and shalom. [Applause]

MORIC KAMHI: As grateful as we were to be in our haven, and allowed to go to school – some of us in our life of escape keeping one step ahead of the Germans, hadn't been to school for years, some had never attended – there was one thing about Fort Ontario that troubled us: we lived behind a barbed wire fence. However, with the kind of humor that helped us survive centuries of persecution, we promptly adopted a new national anthem. Now Manya and I are going to start it off for you; those of you that remember please join us. Manya.

MANYA & MORIC: [Sing *Don't Fence Me In*, with piano accompaniment. Applause.]

MORIC KAMHI: Now we're going to hear from a man who's presently the Director of Psychological Services at St. Luke's Hospital and Associate Professor of Medical Psychology at Columbia University. In our Oswego days he was a teenager, a matinee idol, that's right, and a terrific ping-pong player. Dr. Adam Munz. [Applause]

ADAM MUNZ: I wondered if you were talking about the same man I know. Forty years. How often do any of us have the opportunity to celebrate a fortieth anniversary of anything? More than a generation ago, and yet it is as though it happened yesterday. How vivid the memory of that day when we landed in New York Harbor aboard the *SS Henry Gibbins*. After what felt to me like centuries of oppressive darkness, the glow of the heart of Manhattan on that first appeared like a promise to be fulfilled, rather than a reality. It still seemed too far away to touch. The stench of death was still in our nostrils, the pangs of unrequited hunger still doing funny things to our stomachs, the years of Nazi tyrannies still assaulting our minds and bodies, the mourning for relatives and friends still numbing our chests.

The sudden loss of childhood instantaneously transformed young ones into adults, and most of those my age seemed ill-prepared in a new land, a markedly different culture and way of life. Yet another language to master; the need to adjust seems to be the unending refrain. This land was to be a haven, a shelter for the duration of the war in Europe, a war that at this moment forty years ago was still wreaking havoc through much of Europe and the world.

It was to be a haven from the terror of subjugation, from hunger, cold and illness. We were to be returned to our respective homelands after the carnage was over. For some, the homelands were the very countries that had expelled us, that had extruded us as undesirables, and [convulsed?] us from our homes and families. How were we to return to such countries?

We were the token refugees, as we later learned; the 982 that were to be this country's symbolic gesture for the free nations to emulate. How wanted were we? Hard to say. How much did we yearn to be wanted? We all know the answer to that one. After so many years of abomination that was the Holocaust, the need to be wanted was a paramount one, and how badly we ached for it.

Beloved Ruth Gruber, who poignantly and ever so lovingly described the saga of our group in her marvelous book *Haven*, who flew into the Bay of Naples as our government's emissary, who, as some would swear, landed by plane on the deck of the *Henry Gibbins* like an angel from Heaven – and who accompanied us on our long voyage to these shores, was our transitional object that linked us to the outside world. She was the hope that we might, after all was said and done, not have to return but instead would be permitted to stay in America. She tells the story in her book with vivid details.

As already mentioned several times, this very building, now Joseph Papp's celebrated public theater, was for many of us our first shelter to total freedom since the onset of the war. It was then, as you know, the Hebrew Aid Immigration Society headquarters, whose initials still adorn the northwest corner of the building. While I have visited this building several times since, to attend Mr. Papp's fine theater, this moment is a unique one and dreamlike in character. As in our own dreams, we are the authors, and playwrights, the directors, the actors, the audience, and the critics all at once as we emotionally relive our past.

This country now [longs?] and ascertains how little the powers that were, really needed to fear. Those who opposed our being brought in, have long since – and deservedly so – been relegated to historical oblivion, the kind that failed views and narrow-mindedness bring on themselves. Many of you have succeeded in leaving an indelible mark on this country's culture, science, art, and economy. You have – we have nothing to be ashamed of. We never really had nothing to be ashamed of; the shame belonged out there in the world at large. So many more of us could have, and

should have, made it. It was not just the shame of our tyrants, but it was a shame that should be shared by a world that stood by and did so little to put a stop to the bloodbath.

Let us be glad we made it, but let us not forget those who did not. Above all, let us remain cognizant of the fact that the kind of prejudice and tunneled vision that opposed our coming here is still around, and thriving while feeding on itself. The peril might even be greater now that our society seems to be even more inured to pain, hunger, misery, and cataclysmic events than it ever war. Let us continue to help strive for a world where refugees will not have to be sheltered because the conditions that will prevail will not make for hunger, pain, illness and suffering. In short, a world that is a better one than the one we came into. Thank you. [Applause]

MORIC KAMHI: The camp had its own musicians and entertainers who performed not only for us in the camp but for distinguished guest like Eleanor Roosevelt, Mrs. Henry Morgenthau Jr., and others. One of the most beloved was a seventeen-year-old musician who led the Youth Chorus, and who today is a composer of chamber work for flute, two symphonies that were performed in California, sonatas for violin and viola, piano. A piece titled *Recuerdo de Mario, Remembrance of Mario*. This was composed in commemoration for the tenth anniversary of the passing of his beloved composition teacher, Mario Castel-Nuovo Tedesco. Mr. Leon Levitch. [Applause]

LEON LEVITCH: I would like to say a few words about this piece, as was announced. It is also a tribute on my own to the great, compassionate, Italian people. Mario Castel-Nuovo was also an Italian refugee of great fame and great compassion. And it was largely due to his generosity that I was able to continue my studies and to realize my dreams of becoming a composer someday. Those dreams were with me when I was on the *Henry Gibbins* and when I was in Oswego. I am very privileged to be able to share this piece with all of you. Thank you. [Applause, background comments, then some laughter.]

When I first came to Oswego, the pianos were all out of tune. This is where I began my career and my livelihood as a piano tuner and technician. As a matter of nostalgia, I did bring my tuning tools. However, I was assured that the piano in this illustrious theater was perfect. I therefore did not come ahead of time to check it out. This makes it all the more poignant. The piano sounds just as the pianos did in Oswego. [Much laughter]

MORIC KAMHI: Mr. Papp just assured me that this piano is in tune. [Laughter, some comments in the background. Piano piece played, out of tune, five minutes or so. Applause]

MORIC KAMHI: After eighteen months in the camp, not knowing whether we were to be deported, sent back to Europe to homes that had been ravaged, President Truman allowed us to leave the camp, cross the Rainbow Bridge to Canada, shake the American Consul's hand, go back, re-enter the United States, and apply for citizenship. The joke in those days, of course, was that you had to leave America in order to enter it.

Those of us who were to live in New York City, first went to HIAS shelter until apartments could be found. This was a time when America really opened its arms to us. Seventy communities offered to take us in, and New Yorkers came to HIAS, right here in this building. With us to say a few words, is an eminent educator, writer, Professor Emeritus at Hunter College, and Honorary President of the Women's Division of HIAS. Her father was John L. Bernstein, President of HIAS from 1917 to 1926. Dr. Florence Freedman. [Applause]

FLORENCE FREEDMAN: Rabbi Moshevitze, Mr. Papp, [?] I'm greeting them in a group (thank you, I always forget to do this [adjusting microphone]). I've been to many reunions in my life but I think this has been the most moving of all. Because when we go to a college reunion, we see our friends and contemporaries. Here, we are reuniting with people of all ages, friends whom some of you have seen through the years, and many of you haven't.

When Mr. Papp spoke of the eloquent relic that he found here when he went through the rooms and into the synagogue, I wish he could have seen, as some of you did when you came to the shelter and as I have done through the years, the shelter of this building, when it was bustling with people. The lobby on Sundays was almost as filled with people as it was today. There too were reunions. People who had been brought by HIAS were met here by their American relatives. There were lines of people waiting to fill out papers for their citizenship. There were other people.

[End of Tape One, Side Two. Beginning of Tape Two, Side One.]

... filling out documents for locating, then bringing their relatives. You may remember those of you who are here, remember the rooms, there were many, many rooms where we could house hundreds of people. Family rooms, where families could be together, dormitories for single men and women, a playroom for the young children that had been established then by the Women's Division, and the synagogue where people came to pray, to mourn, to be joyful.

So those of you who did not come to the HIAS shelter, who were taken in by the generous communities that Mr. Kamhi referred to, HIAS had also a little hand in some parts of your coming to Oswego. We had published a pamphlet on Free Ports, in which we quoted the advocates of Free Ports, among them Mr. Samuel Grafton. We arranged for a kosher kitchen at Oswego, such as we

had had at Ellis Island over the years. We helped with the documentation of those who had to go out of the country to come back in, and then, of course, we were so happy to welcome you here. There is a thread, a very little thread, that unites us with the public theater, and one that I remember for itself and also, for its connection. You probably, most of you have seen the play *Chorus Line*, which came out of the vision of Joe Papp, and which has been such a success for so many years. Their simple lines, I'll quote just a few that make me think of all of us. And they're the lines "Kiss today goodbye, the sweetness and the sorrow; kiss today goodbye and point me toward tomorrow". I think that's what we did, what Ruth did, what our government did, what HIAS and all of us are continuing to do with a new wave of newcomers. Thank you. [Applause]

MORIC KAMHI: The man who has changed the theater in our time, who has given us *Chorus Line* as was just mentioned, and countless smash hits, the brilliant mind that conceived the idea of free theater and made *Shakespeare in the Park* a joyous reality for hundreds of thousands, our host who took the HIAS shelter and turned it into this beautiful theater, Mr. Joseph Papp. [Applause.]

JOSEPH PAPP: Yes, we did have here when we came to this building a [muskedicka?] and a [fleishadicka?]. The kitchens down below were quite beautiful. Didn't know how to preserve them, but someone has them now.

I was thinking as I was listening to people talking, who went through this extraordinary experience, where was I August 3, 1944? I recall I was on an aircraft carrier in the North Atlantic, the Murmansk run, and we were . . . I had learned that my father's family had been wiped out in Poland and I was very anxious that the war proceed and deal with the Nazis and the Germans at that time. I remember aboard ship I was trying to think of a song that was being sung at that time, and we could hear it over the radio speaker system, *White Cliffs of Dover*. I wonder if you remember that song. I'll try to sing it for you without a piano [laughter and applause. He sings it. Piano joins in. Applause.] Thank you.

MORIC KAMHI: I'm sure you all remember an outstanding woman with two children, whose photograph was featured prominently in *Life* magazine. Her name was Eva Bass, and both those children that you saw, in those very touching pictures, are here today. The baby in that picture, that little baby that she's holding in her arms is right here on our stage, and she's going to say a few words. Miss Yolanda Bass. [Applause]

YOLANDA BASS: Hello, I'm Yolanda Bass. I was fifteen . . . I was born in Italy and I was fifteen months old when we arrived in Oswego. They say that babies steal the show, but no when their

mother has the personality and talent that my mother had. My mother, Eva Bass, died in 1971, but I am honored to introduce her gifted and precious voice. The song that I have chosen to play for you, on a tape that she made probably in 1968, is a Yiddish lullaby, which she sang to me as a young child. And it's called "Oyfen Pripetshok". Thank you. [Applause. Woman's voice singing the lullaby, with a man joining in some, guitar accompaniment. Applause.]

MORIC KAMHI: Ours was the Holocaust experience, brought to America. Now it is to become the centerpiece of a Holocaust exhibit in the New York State Cultural Education Center in Albany, due to the efforts of one man, who himself escaped from Nazi Germany as a teenager. Due largely to those efforts, the New York State Legislature voted \$150,000 for this permanent exhibit. I am speaking, of course, of Senator Manfred Orenstein and were he not presently out of the country we are certain nothing could keep him from this gathering. We are fortunate, however, to have with us his special assistant and liaison to the Jewish community. She's the author of *The Outraged Conscience*, to be published next month. Mrs. Rochelle Sidell. [Applause]

ROCHELLE SIDELL: Thank you. It's *pro forma* for a special assistant to apologize for her boss and say he would be here, as you've already been told. But this is more than *pro forma*; nothing could have kept Senator Orenstein away if he were in the country. He's on a long-ago planned vacation with his family, and as a refugee from Hitler himself he very much empathizes with this reunion and wanted to be here. And is going to be very sorry when I report to him, even more sorry, because this is a very special event. I've said my own private Shehecheyanu and I can be here with you.

On the day you landed in New York I was fortunate enough to be a baby in a community, an upstate New York community, but I'm very fully aware that had my grandparents not gotten out of Europe before World War I that I could well have been with you, if I were lucky enough to have been with you. My grandfather sang me to sleep every night for my first few years – and I still remember it – with "Oyfn Pripetshok" so I really feel part of the group, having heard that beautiful song.

Senator Orenstein believes that the best way to memorialize the Holocaust and its victims is to educate future generations so that there will never again be a Holocaust for Jews, or for anybody. And because of this he did obtain the funds to set up a special exhibit and resource center in the New York State Museum and Library, the Cultural Education Center in Albany. When we began talking with Education Department people they wanted to know why we should have a Holocaust exhibit, because the State Museum really reflects the state history, the history of the State of New York. One of our answers was that New York State has the largest number of Holocaust survivors anywhere outside of Israel.

But more important than that, when we talked to them about Fort Ontario, and Oswego, and the uniqueness of your experience, this became a very important part of New York State history for the Education people and they were very pleased to go ahead with this. At our first meeting of the advisory board for the project, of which Senator Orenstein is the Chairman, Professor Abraham [Karp?] spoke about Oswego, and about your experience. Some of you may know; he's in Rochester and is the Past President of the American Jewish Society. And just as some people spoke today, he spoke of the sunshine and the shadows of your experience. And we do hope to reflect that in the exhibit, and not just wash something over and say that everything was wonderful, beautiful. Really to reflect some of the problems, the "Don't Fence Me In" problem and the worrying about having to go back problem, and really make it a historical exhibit.

Jack Cohen from Rochester, whom some of you remember, has much of the archives of the Oswego camp and is going to share them with the exhibit, and with his help, and Ruth Gruber's help, and with the help of many of you who have been interviewed, or will be, or videotaped, and spoken with, we hope to make this very special and unique.

One last announcement. Governor Cuomo mentioned something that I would like to share with you, and afterwards perhaps you can speak to Ruth or me. He spoke of the anonymous heroism of a small number of Italians. In September, September 17, there's going to be another reunion. The United State Holocaust Memorial Commission is arranging a reunion of survivors and the Righteous Gentiles who saved them, and they have kind of run up against a stone wall when trying to find the Italians. And when they heard of this today they were very excited and they said, "Please, if you can get us any specific names of Italian Righteous Gentiles, we will seek them out and get them to the reunion". So afterward we would be happy to have that information from any of you who have it. Once again, thank you for allowing me to share this moment with you. [Applause]

MORIC KAMHI: The name of Jack Cohen was just mentioned, and I'd just like to remind you all, that Mr. Jack Cohen – who couldn't be with us today – is in Rochester, was the man who brought the first Sefer Torah to Oswego so we could have our Friday night services.

Well, now, sometimes the best comes first and sometimes it comes last. If you're lucky you can have it both ways. I don't know how many in this world are fortunate enough to have a guardian angel. Adam mentioned it. I do know that we who are gathered here in this room have one. She came to us in 1944 in the guise of a beautiful lady. Her beauty and goodness shine from within, from without, they light up the world. Her accomplishments too numerous to mention. She has written countless articles, twelve books, among them *Rachel, A Woman of Israel*, which won the National Jewish Book Award for the best book in 1979. And of course, *Haven*, which tells our story. For this lady has been our guardian angel ever since that day when, like a vision, she appeared before us. Her

beauty and deeds of goodness have grown and continue to grow with each passing day. May we all live a thousand years and may the last voice we hear be hers. Dr. Ruth Gruber.

[Tape ends here, about halfway through Side One. Nothing on Side Two.]

[Dr. Gruber's remarks, plus interviews done at the reunion, are transcribed from OH 271, two tapes.]

Transcribed by jCook. February 2006.