

**ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
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**TELEPHONE INTERVIEW, APRIL 30, 1986
INTERVIEWEE: DAVID WYMAN
INTERVIEWER: LAWRENCE BARRON**

LAWRENCE BARRON: The first question is really dealing with your first book and dealing with reasons for the limitations of why we didn't use our full immigration quotas in the 1930's when it was possible and up until 1941, when it was possible for people to get out. What would you see is the major factors in the late 1930's and the beginning of the 1940's for limitations placed on immigrations from Nazi Germany and occupied areas?

DAVID WYMAN: I think the basic . . . well, first of all, the quotas were finally opened for full use in 1938 on the heels of the takeover of Austria, and Roosevelt did allow that the quotas would be fully used. Now that was a breakthrough in a sense because since 1931-32, the quotas had been held to about 10% on the ground that there was too much unemployment in this country to permit any number of foreigners to come in. But as the persecution developed in Germany and the pressure rose in the '30's, little by little the quotas were more widely made available to . . . particularly the German quota. Up until '36—'37 that was probably running at 50% of its capacity.

But in 1938, when the pressures were increased in Germany and, of course, in Austria with the takeover of Austria, Roosevelt agreed that the quotas could be opened to full use. That wasn't any great huge number of people. It meant a total of only 27,000 a year from Germany and Austria, but at least they were available, and also the quotas from countries that were coming more and more clearly under the Nazi's sway or the potential was there for Nazi takeover – say Poland, Czechoslovakia, Rumania, and so forth – those quotas were allowed pretty much in use from early '38 through 1940, so talking about a matter of a little more than two years. But in June, 1940, the State Department decided to cut back severely in the usage of those quotas and they cut to about 50% of the numbers.

That came on the heels of the German conquest of Western Europe, the takeover of Holland, Belgium, Denmark, and especially France. France fell so quickly in the spring of 1940 within five weeks, that there was almost consternation in the rest of the world. How could this possibly happen? And the Germans seem to have broken loose.

One of the reactions was to say that it was infiltration of subversives, Fifth Columnists as they were called, into France that had helped bring that about. Naturally, that didn't hold up on investigation, but there was a panic about subversion and enemy agents, that kind of thing, and it was reflected in the State Department here, and Roosevelt agreed with it, that we had to cut back very severely to be sure that there weren't any saboteurs—any spies, enemy agents—coming in disguised as refugees. Or refugees themselves who supposedly could come in and would be blackmailed by the Germans because they would have relatives back in Europe and blackmailed into doing the bidding of Nazi agents. That fear was grossly exaggerated; of course there was a problem and it had to be checked for and it had to be security measures but they went all overboard with it and far beyond what was necessary.

One has to conclude that there was, along with the question of security, a desire on the State Department to cut back on refugee immigration. That decline of 1940, where the use of the quotas was cut to 50%, that was a similar cut and the quotas were again halved so that the quotas were at 25%, and that was made in the summer of '41.

In connection again with the increasing tensions between the United States and Germany, so that we withdrew . . . we kicked out their diplomatic personnel in most of the consulates in the summer of 1940. And they responded by rejecting most of the American diplomatic personnel and relations became very strained in the summer of '41, and connected without the State Department locked immigration down again, this time to about 25% of the quota. After we entered the war and

after Pearl Harbor, the State Department tightened up even more; even after they heard about extermination they tightened even further so that during the Holocaust itself and during the War years, the quotas were only about 10% filled.

LB: My producer has a question. She knows where I need to fill in gaps. [Producer heard in background, LB rephrases her questions.] When refugees left Nazi Germany and they had the “J” stamped in their passport after 1938, what sort of impact did that have on admissions into the United States? Did that hurt chances of admissions, because of having the “J”?

DW: No, that only affected Switzerland because the Swiss border was open like ours is with Canada, and the only way they could turn back Jews coming over was to know that they were Jews so they required that “J”. Our immigration procedures had nothing to do with a religious background or the race or background of the intending immigrants; it was entirely based on the country in which you were born. So that the German quota, for instance, was available to anyone born in Germany. Now, in reality, at this period, this meant Jews because nobody else was trying to leave Germany. There was no restraint applied because they were Jews or because of the “J” on the passport. There was a restraint against all immigration and that’s what I was trying to explain.

LB: You mentioned I know, in hearing you talk and reading the book, that American anti-Semitism, if anything, peaked in the ‘30’s and perhaps during World War II as a factor that might have worked to the detriment of Jewish immigration or some sort of large-scale Jewish rescue plan. Could you address yourself to American anti-Semitism in the 1930’s and 1940’s?

DW: Anti-Semitism was on the increase in the 1930’s. It was there in the ‘20’s, along with a lot of anti—general anti-alien feelings – that was the anti-alien feeling peaking in the early ‘20’s. In the aftermath of World War I that brought immigration restrictions for the first time, that is, numerical restrictions, that’s when the quotas were set up.

The quotas were allotted on the basis of, I guess I would say racism. That’s what they understood, that is to say, they perceived various European groups as being of different races; an Italian race, the Polish race, and so forth. Today we wouldn’t accept that analyses but it was a racist position and the quotas were allotted in such a way that people from Northern and Western Europe, who were more favored – from the viewpoint of the people who held power in this country, such as the English, the Scandinavians, the Germans – they had the larger quotas. The groups that were considered to be sub-standard – that is, the Mediterranean groups, the Italians, Greeks, Eastern Europeans, the Russians, Poles, Hungarians, and so forth, and always the Jews who were heavily settled in Eastern Europe – were given the least quotas.

The immigration quotas were basically built on a racist grounding. That involved anti-Semitism but it was broader than anti-Semitism. In the ‘30’s, the nativism, the anti-immigration feeling continued but it was added to along with an increase in anti-Semitism. Partly the anti-Semitism grew in the ‘30’s because the Germans stimulated it. They distributed propaganda . . . anti-Semitic propaganda throughout the world, but I think the most important reason for the increase in anti-Semitism in the 1930’s was the Depression.

The basic use of the Jews was a scapegoat, which was historically the case because of the ingrained anti-Semitism throughout Western culture. People were looking for causes of the Depression and many of them were amenable to the hate peddlers like Father Coughlin and the German-American born William Dudley and his Silver Shirts and other groups like that who fanned the flames of anti-Semitism against this economic crisis.

It has to be kept in mind that the Depression was a terrible trauma for a great part of the American population. It just didn’t end, it went on for ten years’ time and while it improved, it never seemed to get over the hill with that situation. There were insecurities and fears that built up and there tended to be, in some extent, to focus on the Jews. I think that’s why anti-Semitism was at such a high point as we come to, say, 1938 to ’40. It was exacerbated by these organizations like

Father Coughlin and his use of the radio. And it involved various other groups. It certainly wasn't all Catholic; there were Protestant clergymen who were in the picture too, spreading that kind of disease.

Then from what we have with the opinion polls, the anti-Jewish feelings even increased during World War II; it would indicate that the peak was 1944. That probably was because of the general tensions of the war itself, and the feeding in of the several years of the anti-Semitic government venom that had spread in American society.

Let me now make a connection between the two. You asked originally why the quotas hadn't been filled. The ostensible reason given by the State Department . . . well, they first weren't filled because of the unemployment issue, but after 1938 when they were opened then they were re-cut. The ostensible reason the State Department gave, back in 1940-41 and then during the Holocaust, was because of the fear of enemy agents. I think that was not the basic reason.

I think the basic reason had to do with anti-Semitism in Congress reflecting anti-Semitism in the country as a whole. What the State Department was essentially doing was that they were looking at a Congress that they didn't want to rile up . . . at least . . . I don't want to say that all members of Congress were anti-Semitic, but there was a good, substantial group . . . maybe 40% -- that was quite anti-Semitic and along with that others who didn't want any immigration. The State Department was very anxious not to get on the wrong side of that element in Congress. They didn't want a hornets' nest opened up on the issue. They were placating those elements in Congress that had that view. I think this is basically why they cut back, which means that the underlying reason was anti-Semitism.

LB: Could you discuss the State Department reactions to the first reports of the Holocaust and the eighteen-month delay which you described in your lecture at Millersville? What that really meant in terms of getting those first reports in July, and what the State Department did and why you think they did it?

DW: Well, the first clear information that extermination was happening, the report that seemed to bring that into a meaningful context came in August 1942, came out through Switzerland and to the State Department to the British Foreign Office. Now, there had been earlier reports of mass killings, some of them even indicating that probably extermination was happening. The earlier reports were very important among other reason because it began to break the ground for acceptance of almost unbelievable phenomenon as genocide.

The report that came out in August '42 was significant because it originated in Berlin; it had been picked up by someone who was sympathetic to the plight of the Jews, and when he was able to get out to Switzerland on business he relayed that information on. What it did, since it came from Berlin, it made sense of the earlier reports which showed that dire things were happening to the Jews, but not clearly that there was a planned attempt to exterminate them. Then when someone with some credibility reports that there was in Berlin a plan to do exactly that, it brought the other information into focus.

That's why that report, which we call the Riegner Report, because it was Gerhart Riegner, a Swiss-Jewish leader who received the information from the German, the sympathetic German who relayed it on - his name was put on it. That's the breakthrough step in the information becoming available. Riegner's report was sent to the British Foreign Office which, as Riegner had asked, the British Foreign Office passed it on to the British-Jewish leadership. Riegner had also asked the State Department to send his information on to the American-Jewish leadership. The State Department did not, and it tried to suppress the information and never did pass it on to the Jewish leadership in the United States. But it happened that the British-Jewish leadership independently relayed their information on to the American-Jewish leadership, specifically to Rabbi Steven Wise in New York, and so, in this indirect fashion, Riegner's report did get also into the United States.

Then Steven Wise and other Jewish leaders approached the State Department with that information, which of course the State Department secretly already had and had suppressed, and the

State Department asked Steven Wise to hold back on releasing it to the public until they'd had a chance to confirm it.

In reality, once again what they were trying to do was to push the thing aside; they weren't willing to deal with it. It wasn't really that they disbelieved it; it's that they understood what the consequences were. That is, if millions of Jews were being annihilated, there was going to be pressure that could very well build on the United States government and on the British government to try to do something about rescue. They didn't want to deal with the problem and the essence of why they didn't want to face it is because they knew if they began to talk about rescue they were going to be confronted with: where are the Jews who are rescued going to be put?

There were no countries in the world that were ready to take Jews in, and it became clear that Palestine, which the British controlled and which they were trying to keep Jews out of, to keep the Arab's quiescent, that there would be pressure on Palestine and there'd be pressure on the United States. The State Department didn't want pressure on the United States because if they began to bring Jews in here, then there'd be an upheaval in Congress. And it ties in with what I said a few moments before. So that neither Britain nor the United States wanted Jews to come out in anything – in any numbers larger than a very few thousand – because of the pressures that would develop to take them into this country or let them into Palestine and this would run into difficulties in both, in terms of Palestine policy and on this side, in terms of anti-Semitism in Congress.

It is for that reason even when the State Department, three months later in November, 1942, agreed that the news had been confirmed and permitted Steven Wise to take it to the press, they still were not ready to take any moves towards rescue. So it happened that there was a period of fourteen months after that, from November '42 when the information was publicly released until January 1944 when Franklin Roosevelt was put into a corner politically because of some forces that developed during that fourteen months that he finally did take some steps towards rescue. But the fourteen months that elapsed, the whole of 1942 and the month before and the month after, the United States did nothing toward rescue. The State Department did not want rescue to happen and their policy held sway during that fourteen months, so we didn't do anything.

LB: Could you describe Roosevelt's particular reluctance, given the support that the American-Jewish community gave him? His reluctance to enter on this issue and especially maybe mention the story about Josiah DuBois and how he got Roosevelt to finally agree to start the WRB.

DW: That's two questions, I think; at least I'll handle it that way.

The question of why Roosevelt was unwilling to take steps is one that can't be definitely answered because we don't have any way of getting at his own thoughts. This is a problem for any kind of question regarding Roosevelt, not just on the question of rescue. He was not a person who committed his thoughts to paper, he didn't write memoranda, he didn't write personal letters that carried that kind of information. He didn't write any kind of memoirs. Nor did he confide in other people orally. He had one person who was a confidant in earlier years – Louis Howe, who'd come with him to Washington – and he did talk to Howe apparently, but Howe died in the mid 30's. After that there was virtually no way that people can get at Roosevelt's own inner thoughts.

I have to say that first, that we can't have a definite answer there; I think that interpretively speaking, it's pretty clear to me what happened. First of all, we know Roosevelt knew at the very latest December 8th, 1942. He was fully aware that extermination was happening and he indicated that he had no question . . . he had no doubt about it. He knew and he believed what he had been told, and yet he didn't act for fourteen months after that, not until pressured into it. I don't think he paid much attention to it to begin with; I think it was a tremendous failure on his part not to be able to perceive the historical dimensions of the tragedy that was unfolding.

This seems to me the only reasonable conclusion to make from what information is available. Of course, he was burdened with tremendous problems connected with the war but I still say this issue was important enough that if he had a full understanding of it, that he should have been able to come in and provide the leadership that could have made the difference.

This, I think, is how he reacted and the why he reacted and why I am critical of his response. What finally pushed him to take any action at all was partly because after many months of inaction, there was a pressure building up in Congress on the question of rescue and it took a specific form of legislation calling on the President to set up a special rescue agency. Because by the time this began to happen in late 1943, it was becoming clear to some people who were concerned in Congress that the State Department was not going to do anything to rescue Jews. And that meant that they had to bypass the State Department and the best way to do that was to set up a brand new rescue organization that would try to get the objectives of rescue carried out. Their approach was to put legislation in calling on the President to establish a rescue agency.

That legislation went into committees in both the House and Senate, was reported favorably by the Senate committee, and was due to come to the floor of the Senate for debate in January '44. And there's no doubt that when it hit the Senate floor there would have been a debate that would have meant a great deal of trouble for the administration because the fourteen months of inaction would have been brought out into the open and it would have been exposed in that fashion in such a way that the press have picked it up; because of being on the floor of Congress and being an issue of some sensitivity it would have been important enough it would have received a major airing in the press. It would have been a good deal of difficulty for the administration if that were to happen.

Just as that development in Congress was coming to a head in January '44, there was another development working behind the scenes in the administration through the previous few months in 1943 – late part of '43 – and that was in the Treasury Department where a few middle level Treasury Department officials had uncovered the fact that the State Department had been not only not doing anything for month after month but they had been obstructing those limited efforts the Jewish organizations were trying to mount on their own.

This is the Treasury Department people; these six people – handful of people – begun to become suspicious of State Department policy. One of the six people was named Josiah DuBois, one of the Treasury people who had connections with a couple of friends in the State Department on the lower levels and was able to get them to make available to him a whole reef of documentation of State Department obstruction and malfeasance over those past months. They didn't give him the documents but they showed him the documents and Treasury Department was able to obtain copies and DuBois and the other five people in the Treasury, who were all lawyers, took the State Department records and they wrote a memorandum that summarized the whole sorry record, the miserable obstructive record of the State Department, and laid it out in such a fashion that they documented their statements, their accusations against the State Department with the State Department's own papers itself, its own telegrams and memoranda. They put this into a condensed form, an eighteen-paged memorandum, and once they sketched out the State Department's record and they titled that memorandum "Acquiescence of this Government in the Murder of the Jews".

They then took it to the Secretary of the Treasury, Henry Morgenthau, who himself was Jewish. Of course they had been telling him over the past weeks what they were beginning to uncover. Now they gave him the whole information in the form of this memorandum.

They insisted, "Mr. Secretary, you must go to President Roosevelt and you must require . . . tell him this is going to break this information that we have on the State Department and there's no way we can keep it hemmed in". And he must take steps to set up a rescue agency, to get the thing out of the State Department and get some action. Morgenthau was a little hesitant to go over the head of the Secretary of State; he needed a little extra pressure and this he received from Josiah DuBois, the one who had been most active in collecting the information.

[Most of the above paragraph is on the tape twice.]

DuBois said, "Mr. Secretary, if you don't go to the President with this and if he doesn't respond by establishing a government rescue agency, I am going to call a press conference myself and I'm going to rip the lid off this whole scandal. I'll expose it to the American people through the press".

DuBois said, "That will end my career in government, I'm sure, but if that's the price then I will pay that price".

He didn't have to make that move because Morgenthau . . . that last push was what Morgenthau needed. He went in the middle of January 1944 to the White House on a Sunday afternoon to see President Roosevelt on this question. He took a condensed form of that memorandum and he took two of the Treasury Department officials who had been involved – not DuBois, but two others – and they saw Roosevelt for about a half-hour. Roosevelt didn't want to read the memorandum. He said, "Explain to me what's in it". The two Treasury Department aides explained that there was a scandal that was brewing and it was about to burst and there was really no way to hold it back.

And then Morgenthau told the President that the only thing you can do in this situation is to get ahead of this problem by establishing a rescue agency. So he presented Roosevelt with a draft of an executive order that his staff had drawn up for him before he came to the meeting and he told Roosevelt to sign the executive order. "You will establish a rescue agency, you'll receive credit for rescue, and you'll get ahead of the scandal".

Roosevelt looked at the situation; it was made clear to him that he was in trouble if he didn't move. He also looked over at Congress and he was quite aware that the whole issue was about to break onto the floor of Congress, and there was going to be a nasty debate there and the pressures were on him from both directions. He decided that this would be just the right time to take steps towards rescue. After fourteen months of inaction he agreed to sign the executive order, which he did, and within a week the War Refugee Board – the American rescue agency – was established in the Roosevelt administration.

LB: Could you . . . I know we disagree a bit on what happened in Oswego, but could you place the Oswego project within that context of the broader American response to the Holocaust? Where did you see it as fitting in? Was it important as a token gesture? What do you see as its significance?

DW: Let me first put a post-script on the War Rescue Board; I should have mentioned it. DuBois, who had been the main instigator, was a real thorn in the State Department. They were most angry at him and they were absolutely sure that he was Jewish because his name was Josiah. And because he cared what happened to Jews. They castigated him through that whole period and even after the war. DuBois was not Jewish, he was an Episcopalian, he was from a long line of Episcopalians; he was a human being who perceived a problem, was angry at finding evasion of that problem and wanted to see things done.

First of Oswego, the camp in upstate New York, Oswego, Fort Ontario. In August 1944, 900 some refugees – close to a thousand refugees – were brought into Fort Ontario from southern Italy where they had escaped to from various parts of Europe. The largest percent of them had come from across the Adriatic, from Yugoslavia. The origin of the bringing of that thousand refugees over was connected with the War Refugee Board. The Board was born in January 1944. The people of the Board . . . and it was the same Treasury people who moved in and carried out the activities of the War Refugee Board.

They quite quickly perceived that the main bottleneck and roadblock to rescue was that there weren't places to put Jews if they came out. This is why there had been no action taken for fourteen months by the British-American government. They didn't want Jews to come because they would be confronted with the problem of where would they put them? And the pressures on us and on Palestine, with the British-Palestine policy. So the War Refugee Board leadership perceived correctly that to get rescue, one of the major steps was to find places where Jews could go.

In an attempt to solve that problem they came up with a plan that the United States, and other countries, would offer to take Jews in on a temporary basis. They would be accepted into various countries, held there under restriction until the war was over, and then they would be sent back to where they came from.

[Tape skips, repeats, and then ends side one.]

This, at least, would mean that they could survive; in effect, they'd be held for safekeeping in some safe part of the world and then they'd be returned to their homes. This was the approach of the War Refugee Board because they knew that countries weren't willing to take Jews in and this seemed to be, at least, a stop-gap way in which life could be saved. They went to President Roosevelt and explained to him that we needed to set an example in the United States because we were the most capable of dealing with an influx of refugees because of the great economic capacity in the country.

And that because we were a world leader what we did was extremely important. We needed to set an example, and if we would set a strong example, we then could turn to other countries and say, "We were doing a big share, can't you do something?" That way they would open up enough places that rescue could be carried out. What they hoped was that Roosevelt would agree to take about 100,000, somewhere in that range, and put them in camps on the East coast, which was most readily available, and then they'd be shipped back after the war.

Then one would expect they could pressure Latin American countries, Canada, other places, that we could set up camps in North Africa, so that that great bottleneck would be broken. The War Refugee Board also said to Roosevelt, "You don't need to expect that 100,000 are going to come because it's a long distance and because the war is pretty close to over. But if we make the offer, then we'll have the leverage to find places that are closer and we can go on ahead and carry out a maximum rescue effort. But we need to take the step; we need to express the willingness and to take some steps in that direction".

So Roosevelt thought it over and he said, "All right. I will agree that if you can find a group of 500 or a thousand Jews somewhere that we need to get out of Europe we'll take them in". Five hundred or a thousand, that was the maximum he was willing to go. This ruined the War Refugee Board's program because that kind of example was nothing like what they were looking for. Of course it was valuable to save a thousand lives, but it wasn't going to be a major project when it was approached from that sense.

In any case, the War Refugee Board went through with it; they found that those Jews had reached southern Italy and were clogging up the flow of further refugees coming out into southern Italy and they needed to be taken out of there, so they went to President Roosevelt and said, "We've found a group of a thousand that need to be moved. Can we take them?" He said, "All right. Take them in an Army camp; see the War Department".

And the War Department provided Fort Ontario, which had been closed down as a regular Army installation at that point and was vacant and available. So we brought a thousand in, put them behind the fences there, because that was the agreement to begin with, and there they remained from August '44 until January '46. In the meantime Roosevelt had died and Harry Truman, the new President, was finally willing – in January, December '45 – to agree that they could stay in the United States that limited number of them.

But, to me, the great significance of the Oswego experiment is the proof of the unwillingness of the Roosevelt administration to do other than the minimum. That is why it would be accurately called a token; in fact when the government agency that took care of that camp – the Department of the Interior – when they wrote up the summary of what happened there after the camp was closed down, the title of their summary was "Token Shipment" which is exactly what it was.

What kind of an example was that for the rest of the world in terms of getting influence on other countries to take refugees in, if the United States with its tremendous capacity was willing to take only one thousand? It was very well put by one of the journalists of the day, who said he considered it to be a "bargain counter flourish in humanitarianism", where somebody goes in and buys a cheap piece of jewelry and pretends that this is a great show of affection and concern for someone. It was good that those people came out but, in effect, it sabotaged the possibility of the

whole program. Every other country looked at the American record there and said that doesn't mean anything; they're not willing to make any steps. Couple of points to connect in with that.

We took a thousand in, in 1944; the quotas . . . the immigration quotas would have permitted 60,000 a year to come from the affected countries of Europe. We were letting only 6,000 come in a year; that means in 1944 there were 54,000 unused quota slots and we let a thousand come in. How can anybody consider – outside the quota and put them in camps – that to be a generosity?

LB: Thank you. Let me check with my producer if there are any further questions, but I think you've really answered most of my questions. I had one other question I wanted to ask you which relates to maybe bringing you here as a speaker next year. Do you know if you have any plans to speak in the upstate New York area or Ottawa/Toronto/Montreal area next year?

DW: Not at this point.

LB: OK, 'cause that might be the best way of doing it, linking you up. We're so remote that it's probably best if you're coming to Ottawa, or Montreal, or Burlington, Vermont or Syracuse.

DW: That would make good sense if there were some way to tie that in.

LB: Yeah, I know the head of the Jewish Studies program at Syracuse; maybe I'll talk with him and see if we can coordinate something. We've done some of that in the past.

DW: That sounds like a good idea.

LB: He's a great guy. They have a big lectureship there every year and that might be the way to do it. That Feingold lecture I mentioned, on the American-Jewish response, was part of that series. Anyway, thank you very much; this really was helpful. We've had a couple of interviews this way but some of them very dryly academic and this certainly wasn't. This will work very well, and we're hoping to have finished this this summer. I guess sometime next year trying to get on National Public Radio.

DW: Good! Well I hope you'll let me know when it's ready to run.

LB: Oh, yeah, definitely.

DW: So I can keep an ear open for it here.

LB: OK. Thank you very much.

DW: OK. And I'm glad we finally did it.

[About ten minutes on side two of tape]

Re-transcribed by jCooke, December 2005