

# Fort Ontario and the Arrival of the Refugees

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Excerpt from a paper read by Dr. John W. O'Connor of Oswego before the Oswego County Historical Society Assembled at VanBuren Inn, Volney Town, July 15, 1946, to Commemorate the 150th Anniversary of the Evacuation of Fort Ontario by the British. Published in the Tenth Publication of the Oswego Historical Society Journal, 1946, pages 97-107.  
<http://www.rbhousemuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/sm-ochs-issue-1946.pdf>

## Training Ceases

The completion of this program March 15, 1944, when the special training officers were transferred to Pine Camp and the departure of these rehabilitated troops marked the end of Fort Ontario as a strictly military post at least for the time being. During the summer of 1944, the Fort was abandoned except for the presence of a small caretaker force. Even the Quartermaster's Corps and the 1212th Service Unit had been shipped out.

During the period when large groups of troops had been stationed here, it was natural that local business would expand. When it was finally learned that no more troops were to be stationed here, the business men of the city made every effort to keep the post alive. The Oswego Chamber of Commerce appointed a special committee to work for that end.

In the meantime, President F. D. Roosevelt had conceived the idea of bringing a token group of selected European refugees to this country. It is said that he was mulling over the matter in his mind when a brief

of the Chamber of Commerce Committee reached the White House desk and suggested to the president's mind Fort Ontario for use as a refugee shelter. President Roosevelt promised the refugees shelter at Fort Ontario, and directed the Army in Italy to select a group of 1,000 for immediate immigration. He acted on his own responsibility and without seeking the approval of Congress.

## Arrival of Refugees

On August 1, 1944 the Refugees arrived. It was a sorry sight that early morning when they stepped off the train for their first glimpse of American freedom and hospitality. From the four corners of Europe, our of the with unpronounceable names, across the rivers and through the forests, fleeing, hiding, fleeing again with Tyranny always a short step behind, leaving a few more of their worldly possessions and a great deal more of their courage behind at every point at which they were forced to stop, they had converged on Rome, but their true destination was America. They wanted freedom, these people. They had suffered untold hardships for it. They had lived on somehow when even hope was gone. Some of their companions had died for it. Now America wanted them,

had thrown open its arms to receive them. They had arrived. They were Free. This was what we saw in their eyes that morning, deep down in their eyes behind that last, lingering, furtive glance of fear. And the dirt-encrusted faces were smiling, and bedraggled garments hung jauntily from shoulders thrown back for the first time in years, and in their home-made sandals or their bare feet, they stepped out gladly, eagerly into the land of unlimited opportunity. They had come to Fort Ontario directly from the ship on special trains, without stopping at New York, and an augmented force of Customs officers was on hand to examine and segregate their baggage. Whatever money or securities they had been able to bring with them, whatever articles of value they had been able to salvage were retained by the Government. They were permitted to keep their clothing and other articles of no intrinsic value.

Captain Korn of the Army had been responsible for their safe arrival at Fort Ontario, traveling with them from Europe. The Army had made preparations for their quarters. But, from the moment they arrived, they were upon orders of the President under the jurisdiction of the War Relocation Authority, a branch of the Department of the Interior. During the first few days after their arrival they were registered, given complete physical examinations and assigned quarters. Most of them were housed in the wooden barracks that had been newly erected at the beginning of the war. Each individual was assigned the equivalent of one room.

Family groups were kept together and the rooms were adequately, although modestly, furnished. They were not permitted to leave the Fort during the first month, and after that for a time



Photo: Officer admits father and daughter to the refugee shelter at Fort Ontario; National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD.

only with permission. After Christmas they were permitted to leave the fort during certain hours to shop. Eventually all restrictions as to visits to Oswego were removed except that the refugees had to be back at the fort by 11:30 P. M. And they had to sign a register when they checked out or in.

Prior to their arrival, the War Relocation Authority, under the direction of Mr. Joseph C. Smart, appointed as the first director of the Shelter, had set up complete fire, police and maintenance authorities. A community store was established in the quarters formerly occupied by the Army Post Exchange. Plenty of food was provided which the shelter members prepared for themselves in community kitchens.

### **Education For Refugee Children**

Shortly after the refugees arrived, and Oswego Advisory Council, made up of civic leaders in Oswego, was formed to meet with officials of the War Relocation Authority for the purpose of discussing the immediate problems of recreation, education, religion and social adaptation. This council, in time became very actively identified with the activities at the Shelter.\* Since there were more than two hundred children in the group, a first problem was that of education. It was solved by throwing open the public schools of Oswego to them. They were, for the most part, good students, and soon took on a veneer of

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\* - The Advisory Council played an active part in effecting the final disposition of the problem much mooted in Oswego and elsewhere as to whether the Shelter Refugees should be deported to Europe following the termination of the war, or if those otherwise qualified for admission to the United States as immigrants should be permitted to remain in this country if the immigration quotas available to the respective countries from which they originally came would permit. The Advisory Council advocated the latter course. It framed a printed appeal addressed to the President, the Congress, the Attorney General, the Secretary of the Interior and other government official urging the latter course of action which was finally adopted. Several Oswegonians served on a national committee, later organized, to work for the adoption of the same solution.

Americanization. A system of adult education was later set up at the Fort under the auspices of twelve Oswego teachers. The emphasis, of course, was on the study of the English language, and the results were very satisfactory.

In the meantime, a series of recreational programs were being established. Among the residents of the Shelter were several who had been professional entertainers in Europe. Scene designers, actors, singers, musicians and stage directors joined together with various entertainment groups in Oswego. An orchestra was formed, singers and other concert musicians were invited to appear before many civic and fraternal groups. There was a weekly vaudeville show, and several plays were given. Many of these plays were translated into English before production and others were given in the native language of the group. Since ninety percent of the group were of the Jewish faith, most of their religious needs were adequately taken care of by various Jewish organizations throughout the country. The others attended religious services in the churches of Oswego. For some time prior to their departure, a representative of the Society of Friends was resident at the Fort. Throughout their stay, a series of lectures was given weekly. These lectures were prepared and given by representatives of various civic, industrial, political and commercial groups. They were designed to quickly familiarize the residents with the customs

and social aspects of American life, and to hasten their adoption of American manners.



Photo:  
Beit Hatfutsot Museum.

### **Cause of Dissatisfaction**

The fact that many of the residents had relatives and friends in other parts of the country who were ready and anxious to take care of them, and whom the refugees were not even permitted to visit was the cause of some dissatisfaction. There was also a feeling in many quarters, abetted by certain periodicals, that these refugees were not being treated in the usual kindly American fashion. It is not the purpose of this paper to editorialize, but merely to report conditions. During the early part of their stay, they were grateful and entirely satisfied with condition. But, as time ran on, with no definite, official decision as to their future status being announced, and especially after hostilities ceased in Europe, many of them felt the restrictions keenly. Efforts had been made from time to time to obtain an official statement from the Washington Administration as to whether they would be permitted to become legal residents of the country or be forced to return to their native lands. Experts and Congressional committees from one department or another came here from time to time, to take testimony and inspect conditions. Finally, in February of this year, it was decided that those who wished to remain would be permitted to make legal entry into the country from Canada, and during that month, through the cooperation of Canadian officials, groups were transported daily by buses from Fort Ontario to the Canadian border at Niagara Falls, Ont., there to receive visas entitling them to enter legally the United States as immigrants, unless they elected to go to other countries and some did.

With the departure in April of the last of the refugees, Fort Ontario was once more turned over to the War Department by the War Relocation Authority. The Fort, as a military post had outlived its usefulness. Similar posts throughout the country were being declared surplus by the War Department. The emphasis for future military training was no longer on small, scattered forts, but on huge military reservations. Consequently the military authorities welcomed the suggestion that it be turned over to New York State Housing Authority.

### **Veterans Occupy Buildings**

Because the returning veterans were being given unprecedented opportunities to further their education, the enrollment at the Oswego State Teacher's College had greatly increased, and as a result the housing problem in Oswego had become acute. Competent authorities thought that the shortage could be somewhat relieved by using and expanding the facilities at the Fort. Negotiations were entered into and an agreement reached between the City of Oswego, acting through its Industrial Commission and the State Housing Authority, for the use of the Fort buildings for providing additional housing for veterans and their families in Oswego.

### **Military Post Abandoned**

On April 3, 1946, the flag was hauled down at Fort Ontario and the property formally turned over to the State. As this is written in July of 1946, the work of transforming the historic old fort into a sort of real estate development is rapidly progressing.\* The sound of the morning gun or the thin, sharp blast of the bugle is no longer to be heard over the city. The old order passes.

\* - During 1946 nearly all of the new construction provided for the fort during World War II was razed while the permanent brick and stone structures of the former military post were reconstructed to provide housing units for 116 families. The State of New York paid for the alteration of the buildings and then leased them to the City of Oswego for a period of five years. The city leases the units to the tenants and collects the rents, but most if not all the rental proceeds are to be paid over eventually to the State of New York to liquidate the cost of reconstruction of the buildings.