

Fort Ontario Refugee Camp, The Arrival

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In 1944, as the war raged in Europe, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, in response to the atrocities as well as to the growing refugee populations in allied occupied zones in Europe, allowed for 1000 refugees to come to America for the duration of the war. They were placed at the Fort Ontario Emergency Refugee Shelter in Oswego, NY. This shelter would become the only refugee shelter established in America for victims of the Nazi Holocaust. The shelter was active from August 1944 - February 1946.



Image courtesy of Safe Haven Museum and Education Center, Oswego, NY; <http://safehavenmuseum.com>

Franklin Delano Roosevelt:

"...because the facilities in southern Italy for refugees have been overtaxed."

"...important that the United States indicate that it is ready to share the burden of caring for refugees during the war. Accordingly, I have decided that approximately 1,000 refugees should be immediately brought from Italy to this country, to be placed in an Emergency Refugee Shelter to be established at Fort Ontario near Oswego, New York, where under appropriate security restrictions they will remain for the duration of the war."



Source: Edward B. Marks, *Token Shipment: The Story of America's War Refugee Shelter, Fort Ontario, Oswego, N. Y.*

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R E S T R I C T E D

copy

PARAPHRASE
WAR DEPARTMENT CABLE

FROM: ASF, Mobilization Division
TO: CG US Army Forces North African Theater of Operations, Algiers
DATED: 14 June 1944

The following cable was sent to Ambassador Robert Murphy in Algiers by the President.

A. It is indicated by information which is available to me that by bringing more refugees to Southern Italy through Yugoslavia there are real possibilities of saving human lives. Also I am informed that because the facilities in Southern Italy for refugees have been overtaxed from time to time refugee escapes by this route have been impeded greatly. I have been told that at the present time this is the situation and that accordingly the possibility of the flow of refugees to Italy to be increased may be lost.

B. It is my understanding that a lot of the refugees in Southern Italy have been and are now being moved to temporary havens in adjacent to the Mediterranean areas and that efforts to increase existing refugee facilities in these areas are being made. I am very anxious that the effort be intensified to take refugees to areas relatively close by from Italy.

C. I believe that at the same time it is important that the U.S. indicate that during the war it is ready to share the burden of caring for the refugees. I have decided, accordingly, that about 1,000 refugees should be brought to this country from Italy immediately, and be put in an emergency refugee shelter which is to be set up at Fort Ontario near Oswego, New York, where they will stay for the duration of the war under appropriate security restrictions. Just as prisoners of war and civilian internees from Latin American countries have been brought here, these refugees will be brought into this country outside of the regular immigration procedure. It is contemplated that they will be returned to their homelands at the end of the war. The emergency refugee shelter will be well equipped to take good care of these people.

D. It may be assumed that when these refugees arrive the emergency refugee shelter will be ready to receive them. Therefore, I will appreciate it if you will arrange as rapidly as possible for the departure to the United States of about 1,000 refugees in Southern Italy. The full cooperation of our Naval and Military authorities should be obtained in getting the prompt transportation and removal of the refugees. In this matter you may call upon representatives of the War Refugee Board in Algiers to help you.

War Department Cable

Joseph Smart, *The Documents: Friends of Fort Ontario Guest Refugees*. From the collection of Joseph Smart found in the archives at the Safe Haven Holocaust Refugee Shelter, Oswego, NY. (ca. 1990)

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3
SMART
French
8/18/44
(TRANSLATION)

Departure for the United States of America

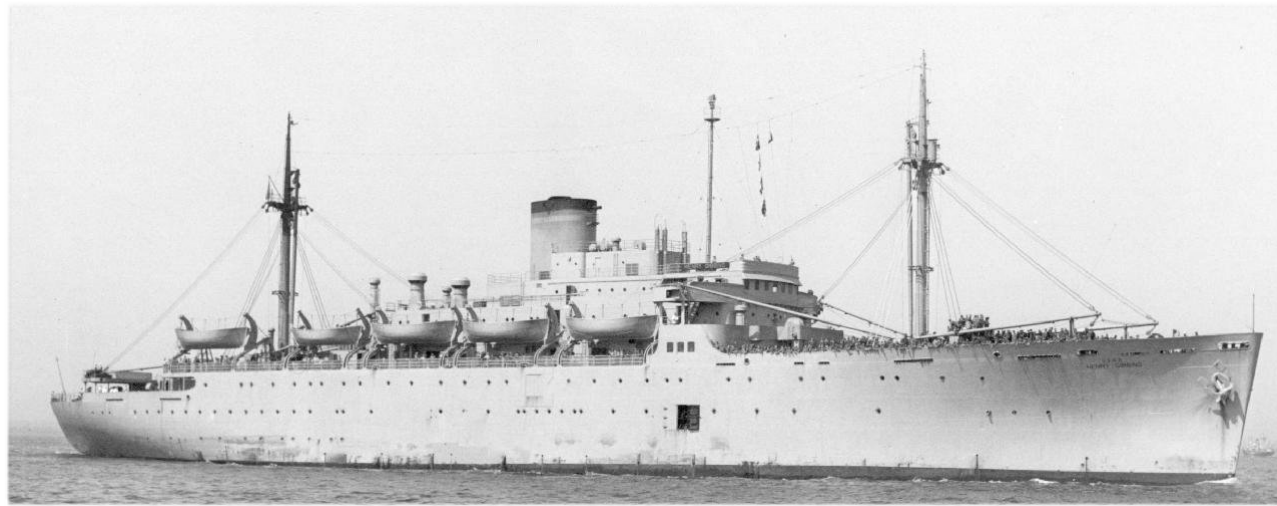
I declare that I have fully understood the following conditions of the offer of the United States Government and that I have accepted them:

- A. 1. I shall be brought to a reception center in Fort Ontario in the State of New York, where I shall remain as a guest of the United States until the end of the war. Then I must return to my homeland.
- II. There I shall live under the restrictions imposed by the American security officials
- III. No promise of any kind was given to me either in regard to a possibility of working or permission to work outside the reception center, or in regard to the possibility of remaining in the United States after the war.
- B. I declare further, since I cannot take along any valuta under existing laws, that I shall accept in exchange for my valuta the same amount in dollars, which the authorities of the United States will eventually pay me after my arrival in America

(Copied from translation obtained from B. R. Stauber. FEF)

The Agreement

As per contract they had to sign prior to leaving Italy, the refugees agreed to be seen as guests to President Roosevelt with no legal status in America and agreed to return to Europe at the end of the war. Despite this contract, the refugees began making a new life in America- while at the shelter- and immersed themselves in education and learning. Over time, it would be the contract that haunted the refugees. They felt unsafe to return to Europe fearing continued persecution even after the war.



USNS Henry Gibbins
This image is in the public domain.

On July 21, 1944, the USNS *Henry Gibbins* left Naples, Italy with 982 of the 1000 refugees on board the ship. The remaining 18 refugees never made it to the ship. The refugees consisted of Jews, Catholics, Greek Orthodox, and Protestants. They came from 18 European countries including Yugoslavia, Austria, Poland, Germany, and Czechoslovakia.

One of the criteria for being selected as a refugee was the ability to help run the camp by themselves. Doctors, engineers, cooks, skilled laborers, musicians, artists, all types of people were selected and headed for Oswego, NY.

Also on board were wounded soldiers headed back to the United States. The *Gibbins* was flanked by other ships, some carrying German POW's to the United States, others for defense against German attack.

During the trip, refugees shared their traumatic experiences under the Nazis and Nazi sympathizers with Ruth Gruber. Ruth Gruber was appointed as a special assistant to Harold Ickes, Secretary of the Interior. She wrote about their stories and the Emergency Refugee Shelter at Oswego in her book: *Haven - The Dramatic Story of 1,000 World War II Refugees and How They Came to America*, 1983.

To ease the tensions between the soldiers and refugees on board, Ms. Gruber organized the refugees to entertain the soldiers. As a result of the show, soldiers onboard began to understand the plight of the refugees and saw them as ordinary people, just like them Ruth Gruber, *Haven* (Three Rivers Press: NYC, 1983), 98-103.

On August 3, 1944, the ship arrived in New York City. The next day, the refugees boarded a train for Oswego, NY.



Refugees onboard the Henry Gibbons, 1944. Copy found in Ruth Gruber Collection at the Safe Haven Holocaust Refugee Shelter Museum. Oswego, NY.



*Foreground: Refugees with luggage;
Background: Barrack-homes with letters on exterior to organize the refugees alphabetically by last name, 1944.
Fort Ontario Emergency Refugee Shelter, Oswego, NY. Copy found in COFOSHS, NYSOPRHP.*

REFUGEES SHELTERED AT FORT ONTARIO

Nearly 1000 refugees from various war zones arrived at Fort Ontario in Oswego last Saturday where they will make their homes for the duration. They represent 17 countries of war torn Europe most of whom have been under Nazi oppression for several years.

A group of leading citizens of the city of Oswego, formally welcomed the group at a reception at the Fort. Mayor Joseph McCaffrey, Joseph H. Smart, director of the shelter; Dillon S. Meyer, national director of the war relocation authority; Miss Anne Laughlin, representing the war refugee board, and Oswego clergy assisted with the reception. Rabbi M. Tzechoval, director of a Belgian Jewish seminary, in a short response to the welcome, brought tears when he said that was the first time in more than four years that he could speak Hebrew in a public gathering without fear of a Nazi bullet. Dr. Leon Levy of Zagreb, Yugoslavia, in behalf of the refugees, expressed the deep thanks of the group.



Women and children registering for the Fort Ontario Refugee Camp, August 1944. Source: wikimedia commons, this image is in the public domain in the United States because it is a work prepared by an officer or employee of the United States Government as part of that person's official duties.

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The Pulaski Democrat, August 10, 1944

By LINDSLEY H. CROCKER
AP Features

OSWEGO, N. Y.—Five questions are uppermost in the minds of the 982 European refugees who are making the Fort Ontario Emergency Refugee Shelter their home for the war's duration:

What is the news, particularly from the Russian front? May we have radios? May we write letters? May we visit our relatives (or town)? What about schools?

Dillon S. Myer, national director of the War Relocation authority, under whose jurisdiction the shelter was set up by Presidential order, answers in this fashion:

They will be given the news. They may listen to radios—their own or if radios are given them—but the government will not furnish radios. Letters may be written, subject to censorship. Shelter occupants' movements will be restricted to the 80-acre camp area, at least for the present. They may have visitors after Sept. 1. Schooling probably will be provided on a volunteer basis—"we hope, with refugee teachers."

A Token Movement

The Shelter was set up, Myer says, with the basic idea of a token movement to help relieve the pressure in Europe resulting from refugee influxes.

The establishment is being financed, Myers explains, through the President's emergency fund under allotment to the WRA.

Each refugee gets a basic allotment of \$4.50 to \$8.50 a month, depending on age and needs to cover

essentials. Food costs about 43 1/2 cents a day per refugee.

"There are no plans for other such camps in this country," Myer said.

Operation of the Shelter, under the Interior Department, has been strictly in civilian hands, since the Army released the refugees to WRA officials Aug. 5.

Volunteer Fire Fighters

There is a permanent staff of about 45, plus some 150 temporary employees. About 15 from WRA's Washington headquarters, on hand for the Shelter's opening, will depart as soon as operations are well underway.

As soon as possible, maintenance work of the camp will be handled by the refugees. Myer says it is hoped to organize volunteer fire fighters, to supplement the trained staff of nine men.

Recreational facilities include tennis and basketball courts, a library and four clubrooms supplied with furniture donated by B'Nai B'Rith, the YWCA, the National Council of Jewish Women, the National Refugee Service, the Oswego Elks and other organizations. For the ill, there are 65 hospital beds.

The 982 are of 19 different nationalities. Since they came in outside the immigration quotas, none is expected to achieve U. S. citizenship.

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Self-Government and Schools Planned for Newcomers at Fort Ontario Shelter; Plattsburgh Press-Republican, Plattsburgh, NY, August 29, 1944.

Continued next page...

placed Persons commission. They had to be free of contagious disease, unable to support themselves fully, and over military age if male.

Self Government

Selection was made after application by the refugees from a group of about 3,000 over two weeks. About 250 came from Rome, after the Allies liberated that city. A total of 156 speak English in varying degrees.

It is hoped, shortly, to establish a self-government among the refugees, at least to the extent of having them choose a committee to represent their body with the administration headed by Joseph H. Smart, shelter director.

The refugees include 262 family groups and 228 single persons. The family groups are housed in 30 barracks which have been converted into apartments of one, two or three bedrooms each, plus a kitchen. The bedrooms are furnished with army cots, blankets, sheets and mattresses. The kitchens have sinks with running water. At present the 982 are eating in five mess halls, seating 200 each. The unmarried men live in dormitories; the single women in apartments.

Most are more than 40 years old; there are slightly more males than females. All brought some money with them; most, very little.

Originally, they engaged in at least 29 pursuits — 192 of them merchants and salesmen, 45 bookkeepers and clerks, 27 manufacturers, 26 tailors and dressmakers, 25 artisans, 13 executives, nine writers and journalists, nine lawyers, six bankers, five physicians, five artists and four teachers.

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Questions for further discussion and research:

1. How does war displace people?
2. What were some strategies people used to find safe places during World War II?
3. How were children impacted by the war?
4. What happened to people's homes, belongings, and businesses during World War II?
5. How were other countries handling the refugee crisis in Europe?
6. How are the strategies used in World War II similar or different to the strategies used today with war refugees from around the world?