

# Closing the Emergency Refugee Shelter at Fort Ontario

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President Harry S, Truman, Official Presidential Portrait painted by Greta Kempton, 1945. This image is in the public domain because it was published in the US between 1923 and 1977.

**Close to 1,000 refugees** were brought to the Emergency Refugee Shelter at Fort Ontario in Oswego, New York in 1944. Immigration to the United States was very tightly controlled and very limited during the war. . As a result, the refugees were expected to return to their homeland after the war. However, many of the refugees wanted the opportunity to become citizens of the United States. During their 18 months at the shelter, the refugees and others worked to attain US citizenship. After many disappointing months President Harry S. Truman, in December 1945, allowed the refugees to remain in America for those who wanted to stay. Since the closing of the shelter in February 1946, most of the Fort Ontario refugees dispersed throughout the U.S. and have contributed to American society.

Truman said, “it had been decided ‘upon the basis of a careful survey by the Department of State and the Immigration and Naturalization Service that if these persons were now applying for admission to the United States most of them would be admissible under the immigration law. In the circumstances it would be inhumane and wasteful to require these people to go all the way back to Europe merely for the purpose of applying there for immigration visas and returning to the U.S. I am therefore directing the Secretary of State and the Attorney General to adjust the immigration status of the members of this group who may wish to remain here, in strict accordance with existing laws and regulations.” (Token Shipment: The Story of America’s War Refugee Shelter, Fort Ontario, Oswego, NY, Edward B. Marks, US Department of the Interior War Relocation Authority, 1946; Revised and Illustrated, Rebecca J. Fisher and Paul A. Lear, Friends of Fort Ontario, Inc., 2017.)

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### EXTENSION OF REMARKS

OF

HON. HADWEN C. FULLER

OF NEW YORK

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Monday, June 4, 1945

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Mr. FULLER. Mr. Speaker, the situation of nearly 1,000 war refugees housed at Fort Ontario, N. Y., has attracted wide attention in the Nation.

I wish to include in my remarks a memorial to the President and the Congress of the United States concerning the freedom of these refugees which has been placed in my hands by the citizens' committee for the Fort Ontario Refugee Shelter, of Oswego, N. Y. This gives the history and present status of these people.

In view of the importance of the matter, I believe the reading of this memorial is worth while for every Member of the House.

The memorial is as follows:

A MEMORIAL TO THE PRESIDENT AND THE CONGRESS OF THE UNITED STATES CONCERNING THE FREEDOM OF WAR REFUGEES TEMPORARILY LIVING AT FORT ONTARIO, OSWEGO, N. Y.

In August 1944, 982 refugees, natives of 17 European countries, were brought to Oswego, N. Y., as guests of the United States. Many of these people had been on the march since 1934, escaping ever from Hitler's advancing power and persecution. During their years of flight, most of the values ordinary humans hold dear and sacred were lost to them—homeland, possessions, security, friends, relatives and, in some instances, family. Consequently, when, to a limited group, the invitation was extended to come to America, it was seized with eagerness and anticipation. Now at last, behind them lay terror, persecution and insecurity; ahead of them was freedom and an opportunity to build life anew.

These refugees have now lived in our land for almost a year. They have a tentative security, the friendship of the people of Oswego whom they have been able to meet, modest provision for food, shelter, and medical care. But instead of the freedom they sought and of which they dreamed, they have been closely held in a fenced area on the shores of Lake Ontario, with permission to be absent from the camp for only 6-hour periods, and without permission to visit relatives or friends beyond the limits of the city of Oswego. Instead of the opportunity to begin a new life for themselves and their families, they have been deprived of a chance

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These refugees have now lived in our land for almost a year. They have a tentative security, the friendship of the



to work at any gainful or life building pursuits; and this last in the face of a local and national war manpower shortage of critical proportions.

To be sure, after all arrangements for their departure had been made and they were at the ports of embarkation, these people signed statements saying that they agreed to reside at Fort Ontario for the duration of the war and then to return to their homelands. When, for so long, one's very life has been in jeopardy, all the ramifications of a document one signs to gain security do not immediately become evident, and it does not seem fair to enforce commitments which are inhumane and which are accepted only in desperation.

Succoring these people, less than 1,000 of the distressed millions of the world, represents our "token of good will to all mankind." Such was our statement when we carefully selected them to be our guests. The wisdom exercised in their selection has been confirmed by our own relations with them, for we have learned that they are unquestionably very worthy. They are intelligent; the adults, in their contacts through lectures, visits, etc., have provided an intellectual stimulus to the city of Oswego. The children and young people in our schools and college rank high. All are cultured and talented; many of the group were formerly business and industrial leaders; some are musicians of concert-stage ability, artists, actors, writers, and members of many of the learned professions. They are law abiding. Having so long been the victims of autocracy, they are imbued with the idea that democracy represents the good life. Some are already tightly bound to this country. Nineteen have sons in our armed forces; some even have wives and many have brothers and sisters who are citizens of this Nation.

These 982, wisely or unwisely, we have brought to our shores. They are now very definitely our problem. We need to face it realistically. Regardless of what they signed, they cannot all go back to their homelands, for in some cases these have been destroyed, and approximately one-third have been deprived of citizenship in the countries of their origin. We cannot keep them confined for an indefinitely longer period, inactive and desperate (to the point in some cases of insanity and suicide) as they see life slipping by with no opportunity to make a place for themselves and families in an onrushing world.

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Germany & Austria	105,595	7,913	337
Poland	22,834	6,000	151
Czechoslovakia	9,959	1,435	41

Unless we are to deny the very essence of what we are fighting for now and have always stood for (life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness), we should give our guests their freedom. If we do not do this, our pledges of world good will indeed sound hollow.

At the time of the arrival of the refugee, the War Relocation Authorities requested that a citizens' advisory committee be formed in Oswego to act as a liaison group between the refugees and the people of Oswego and the other nearby communities. Its members were appointed from citizens representing the varied business, civic, social, educational, religious, and labor interests and activities of the city of Oswego. It is nonpartisan in character. Both the individual members of the committee and the committee as a whole have visited the shelter many times during the past few months and have been in continuous contact with authorities at the shelter.

Gradually the committee has become cognizant of the situation as described above, and now finds itself facing a much greater responsibility than it anticipated. After long and careful consideration, the committee believes that -

Less than 1,000 in a population of 135,000,000 will not in any way disturb the economic life of our country, and, since they represent a unique experiment, our treatment of them will not in any way establish a precedent or in any way complicate existing laws. As a matter of fact, we could permit them all to stay in this country without conflict with our immigration quotas. In the last 3 1/2 years only a small percentage of the immigration quotas have been filled. To give as examples, the four countries which are most numerous present at the Fort Ontario shelter:

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1. The situation is different from anything anticipated by all concerned a year ago.
2. Action to meet the new situation is imperative.
3. Action should be taken along the lines of the following resolutions.
4. That the action recommended is in conformity with the thinking of the citizens of Oswego who share the information given in this memorial.

Resolved, That—

1. Benevolent and generous as was the intent of our Government in providing a shelter for the 982 refugees, because of restraint of their freedom, Fort Ontario has taken on the psychological aspect of a prison. We feel the refugees should be permitted to reside at places of their own choices with friends and relatives. The taxpayers of the country should be relieved of the expense of caring for these refugees when relatives, friends, or private agencies are ready to care for them, if necessary, and guarantee that they shall not become public charges.

2. In this period of critical manpower shortage, the refugees should be permitted to accept gainful employment, and build themselves anew into their professions. In the case of many who have seen their productive years uselessly spent and no security ahead for their families, this is an imperative need.

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3. The refugees who would, except for their present peculiar circumstances, be eligible under our existing immigration quotas should be permitted, should they so desire, to become citizens of the United States under existing rules and regulations.

4. Those who desire to return to their homeland or any portion of the world should be given the opportunity as soon as conditions permit.

Finally, the committee believes that the problem of these 982 refugees now living at Fort Ontario should be considered unique and apart from all other refugee problems consequent to the present war. They constitute our country's immediate responsibility. It is the Nation's clear duty, in charity and decency, to carry to its logical solution this definite obligation.

Signed: Ralph W. Swetman, president Oswego State Teacher's College Harry C. Mizen, lawyer and president of citizens' committee for Fort Ontario refugee shelter; Marian C. Mackin, executive secretary, American Red Cross; Daniel A. Williams, director of Oswego County Savings Bank; Jeremiah J. Davern, pastor of St. Joseph's Roman Catholic Church and

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Poland	6,524	6,000	151
Czechoslovakia	2,874	1,436	41
Russia	2,712	1,800	18
Belgium	1,304	805	1
France	3,086	1,991	13
Bulgaria	100	51	4
Hungary	809	750	3
Turkey	226	.....	7
Spain	252	979	5
Greece	307	970	4
Italy	5,802	455	1
Holland	3,153	685	1
Danzig	100	.....	8
Libya	.....	.....	5
Rumania	.....	.....	18

## Immigration status, 1942-45

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Congressional Record-Appendix, A2859, 1945, CR-001; Safe Haven Congressional Record-001, Oswego Public Library.

# 50 Refugees to Leave Oswego

● Washington, INS—The War Relocation authority announced today that 50 Yugoslav refugees from the Fort Ontario emergency center, Oswego, N. Y., will leave New York City August 24 on the Gripsholm for their homeland.

Among the refugees, WRA said, are a former colonel in the Yugoslav Army's Medical corps, a 24-year-old girl who fought with Marshal Tito's Partisans and the former president of a local Chamber of Commerce in Yugoslavia.

Fifteen families and couples together with eight single persons make up the group. There are 12 under 18 years of age.

WRA estimated there are about 925 European refugees of various nationalities remaining in the shelter.

Last May a group of 13 Yugoslav refugees left the shelter to return to their homeland. One man, Ludwig Reis, 62, stateless and formerly a German Jew, will leave Friday for Uruguay where he is to be admitted as an immigrant, WRA added.

The shelter was set up by executive order of the late President Roosevelt.

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Endicott Daily Bulletin, August, 2, 1945



## Refugees Should Remain in This Country Indefinitely, Says Brig. Gen. O'Dwyer

The Massena Observer, September 24, 1945

By LARSTON D. FARRAR

Washington, Sept. 20—(GNS) — Brig. Gen. William O'Dwyer, candidate for mayor of New York city and executive director of the war refugee board set up by the late President Roosevelt, has recommended that the more than 900 refugees at Fort Ontario, Oswego, N. Y., be allowed to remain in this country indefinitely with "greater freedom."

In a 75-page mimeographed "final" report in his capacity as executive director of the WRB, O'Dwyer told the state, treasury and war secretaries on the board that the "basic" reasons for confining the refugees to a camp "no longer exist."

"Security reasons are no longer controlling and it seems unlikely that they (the refugees) can be returned in the immediate future," he said in the report.

"Until such time as the United States government policy with respect to the more general United Nations problem of the ultimate resettlement of permanently displaced persons, including those at Oswego and elsewhere in the United States, is definitely determined, the refugees at Oswego should be

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Further, O'Dwyer recommended that over-all responsibility for the Oswego project should be transferred "immediately" from the WRB to the war relocation authority of the department of the interior, which already has the actual administration of the camp.

O'Dwyer reported that during August, 3 refugees at Oswego departed for Yugoslavia, while 19 Yugoslavians had preceded them in May.

"The refugees have been a subject of debate in congress ever since it was learned on June 12, 1944, that the late President Roosevelt had arranged for them to be brought into the United States "outside the immigration laws," but the late President Roosevelt said that he authorized the action "as a token of the willingness of the United States to share the burden

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In his message to congress, President Roosevelt said specifically that "upon the termination of the war, they will be sent back to their homelands."

However, the O'Dwyer report declares now that "to return these people to Italy on the formal consideration that this was the country from which they were shipped to Oswego, in my opinion, would not be in accordance with the president's commitment."

"The great majority of the refugees at Oswego either do not now have 'homelands', in fact, or in their own consideration, or do not voluntarily wish to return to their national homes," O'Dwyer said in the report.

"Furthermore, conditions in Europe at present preclude the possibility of the immediate return of many of the people at Oswego, and more generally, the resettlement of most displaced persons.

"Finally, our national policies with respect to displaced persons should be determined and developed in proper relation to a United Nations solution of the problem. In the meantime, every effort should be made to settle as many of the refugees in Oswego in permanent homes, anywhere in the world they can and are willing to go."

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It was generally admitted then—as O'Dwyer says in his report—that the refugees were brought to the United States "outside the immigration laws," but the late President Roosevelt said that he authorized the action "as a token of

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The Massena Observer,  
September 24, 1945



## 922 Refugees Thankful They Can Stay In U. S.

Oswego—(AP)—The 922 European refugees at the Fort Ontario Emergency War Refugee Center were thankful today that they could remain in the United States as legal immigrants.

Clyde Powers, center director, said that several adult groups met in prayer after they had heard President Truman's announcement that persons at the shelter could apply for admission to the United States under their individual nations' quotas without returning to their homelands to go through the visa routine.

Mr. Truman made the announcement Saturday night.

Powers said there was no demonstration at the shelter when the news was received there but that the refugees were extremely happy and pleased.

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## An Act Long Overdue

After more than a year of confinement in a war refugee camp at Oswego, nearly a thousand Europeans who were rescued from the cauldron of Europe at war have been permitted to enter the United States as immigrants.

As a nation we have thus erased the principal ground for being charged with complete hypocrisy in the advice we have given other nations about admitting those cast adrift by the war.

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## An Act Long Overdue

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Ogdensburg Journal, January 2, 1946

## Processing for Refugees Under Way

OSWEGO (AP) - Final processing begins today for some 923 European refugees who are eagerly awaiting their legal entry into the United States.

First step in the processing is the interview each refugee must have with immigration and State Department representatives.

When processing is completed, the refugees will be transported to Niagara Falls, Ont., and then back into the United States. The first group is expected to leave Fort Ontario - home of the refugees since August, 1944 - in a week or 10 days.

THE REFUGEES are permitted to apply for legal entry into the United States under a presidential order which stipulates admittance is to be controlled by standing quotas of the various nations represented.

La Gazzetta di Syracuse, January 11, 1946.

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# 100 Refugees End Bitter War Epoch

Niagara Falls, Ont.—(AP)—The simple process of crossing the friendly border between Canada and the United States today was to end a bitter epoch for a group of some 100 Europeans, the vanguard of more than 900 “duration guests” of Uncle Sam to be re-admitted as legal residents.

It meant they no longer were “refugees”—that they could enjoy freedom for the first time since fleeing Nazi and Fascist oppression.

**THE INITIAL** contingent was to arrive from the Fort Ontario refugee shelter at Oswego, N. Y., in three buses, the first about 1 p.m., to be legalized as immigrants at the U. S. consulate here.

Until a recent Presidential order permitted them to apply for legal entry into the United States, they were restricted to the vicinity of Oswego, where they were brought for temporary haven in August, 1944.

**ALTHOUGH ALL** had been advised it was planned to return them to their homelands after the war, many claimed they would have agreed to anything in their desperation to escape persecution and most expressed a desire to remain in the United States.

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Ogdensburg Journal, January 17, 1946

## 92 EUROPEAN REFUGEES NOW LEGAL RESIDENTS

BY CHARLES J. WELLNER

NIAGARA FALLS, Ont., Jan. 17

(AP)—Ninety-two Europeans, the vanguard of some 900 fugitives from Nazi persecution who were “duration guests” of Uncle Sam, stepped across the border today as legal U. S. residents.

They were brought here in three buses from the Fort Ontario refugee shelter, Oswego, N. Y., where they arrived from Italy in August, 1944, many bearing the scars of concentration camps.

Today's group included 46 families. The oldest person was Mrs. Leah Wadler, 73-year-old native of Poland. The youngest was five-month-old Lebnard Fajnzylberg, one of 22 babies born at the Fort Ontario refugee shelter.

All were taken to a temporary hostel in Buffalo, N. Y., where they would be cared for pending their departure for various cities throughout the United States.

All were brought here to comply with immigration laws requiring that visas be obtained on foreign soil.

The remainder of the refugees will be brought here in similar groups every few days until all who desire are admitted under regular immigration quotas. Relatively few have expressed a wish to return to their homelands.

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Plattsburgh press-Republican, January 18, 1946



## Refugee Center at Oswego Now Empty Journal Washington Bureau

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Journal Washington Bureau

Washington—(GNS)—After 18 months as a temporary home for war refugees the Emergency Refugee Shelter at Fort Ontario, Oswego, was closed, as the last group left the shelter.

Interior Secretary Harold L. Ickes announced final disposition of property and records will be completed within 45 days, when the plant at the Fort will be returned to the War Department.

Total of 982 refugees of 18 nationalities arrived at Fort Ontario from Italy in August, 1944, under arrangements set forth by President Roosevelt in a June, 1944 report to Congress. War Relocation Authority records show 69 of the original group have since been repatriated or admitted to other countries, 13 died. Twenty-three children, born at the shelter, are being admitted to the United States as citizens.

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Most of the others totalling 900 receive permanent visas as they become admissible under monthly immigration quotas of their respective countries. Some will receive temporary permits. They will await repatriation or admission to other countries of their choice.

Complete responsibility from both groups has been assumed by responsible private organizations, Ickes said.

Many of the permanent immigrants are immediately joining households of relatives or friends already established here. Rest are being aided in resettlement adjustments throughout the country by private organizations.

National Refugee Service, American Committee for Christian Refugees and Catholics Committee for Refugees are among the private organizations giving aid.

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Ogdensburg Journal, February 9, 1946.