

Life at the Fort Ontario Emergency Refugee Shelter

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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. "Despite its many windows to the world outside, Fort Ontario never resembled a normal community. The people slept and ate and worked and studied and took part in leisure-time activities. They married, had babies and died. But they lacked the one thing that they wanted most - freedom. They were permitted outside the shelter only for certain hours each day and could not go beyond the city's environs. It was not simply that they were confined, but that their detention was of such an indeterminate nature." (*Token Shipment, The Story of America's War Refugee Shelter, Fort Ontario, Oswego, NY*, by Edward B. Marks, United States Department of the Interior War Relocation Authority, 1946; Revised and Illustrated by Rebecca J. Fisher and Paul A. Lear, published by Friends of Fort Ontario, Inc., 2017.)



Image courtesy of Safe Haven Holocaust Refugee Shelter Museum and courtesy of The Herbert and Leni Sonnenfeld collection, Beit Hatfutsot Museum, Israel.

REFUGEES SHELTERED AT FORT ONTARIO

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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

Self-Government and Schools Planned for Newcomers at Fort Ontario Shelter

By LINDSLEY H. CROCKER
AP Features

OSWEGO, N.Y.- Five questions are uppermost in the minds of the 982 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 essential. Food costs about 43 1/2 cents a day per refugee.

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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.

They were selected by State Department representatives in Algiers, with the aid of the Army's Dis-

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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*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.*



Image courtesy of *Safe Haven Holocaust Refugee Shelter Museum* and courtesy of *The Herbert and Leni Sonnenfeld collection, Beit Hatfutsot Museum, Israel*.

Church Organizes Plan For Fellowship With European Refugees

Oswego—The 987 refugees from Europe who are at Fort Ontario presented an opportunity for service to Christ Episcopal Church, Oswego. The Rev. Frederick W. Kates, rector, told in an interview that these refugees are all survivors of concentration camps and refugees from Nazi tyranny and persecution. "They are all Jews, representing seventeen different nationalities," Mr. Kates said, and explained that until Christ Church saw its opportunity, "no one had done a thing for the kids, so we stepped forward with whatever we could do to be neighborly, friendly, decent, Christian and democratic."

Parties are organized for the refugee children at the Fort. Other parties are at the parish gymnasium, where the refugee boys and girls come as guests of the Episcopal young people; speakers come from the Fort to tell Christ Church people of their hopes and needs, and there are constant pleasant contacts among refugees and Church people, old and young.

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During the war in Europe, most of the younger children had never attended a school and many of the older children hadn't attended school in a few years. Schooling became a focus once the children came to the shelter. Many local leaders invited the children to attend town schools. Local agencies helped furnish school supplies and found transportation for the students who attended schools beyond walking distance. However, prior to attending the public schools, students learned English at the Refugee Shelter.

(Token Shipment: The Story of America's War Refugee Shelter, Fort Ontario, Oswego, NY, Edward B. Marks; 1946, revised by Rebecca J. Fisher and Paul A. Lear; published by the Friends of Fort Ontario, Inc., 2017.)



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Campus School Accepts Refugees

As a token of the European refugee problem and to show our sympathy to these peoples, a refugee shelter has been established at Fort Ontario. The group includes 984 people, 193 of whom are children. Since it is the primary aim of the College to further elementary education, 25 of the children have been accepted in the Campus school. The majority of the children are Yugoslavian. All of them speak three languages, and many of them speak four to six. A great many of them speak English fluently. Every Yugoslavian child speaks the three official languages of the country: Serbian, Croatian, and Slovenian. A great number of these children have never been to a formal school because they have been refugees from three to five years. Some have not been to a formal school in seven years. The Anglican Church helped evacuate a large number of these children from Austria and Czechoslovakia prior to Axis occupation. Racial laws in Axis-occupied countries deny citizenship and education rights to all Jews. The most dramatic flight of these people was after Italy signed the Armistice with the Allies. A few of them came over the Alps on foot and finally succeeded in getting through the German lines into Rome, where the Americans were. All of the children have relatives fighting in this war. Some have fathers and brothers in the Czech or the American armies.

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The Oswegonian, October 9, 1944.

REFUGEES ENTERTAIN AT CLUB MUSICAL

At the Monday Historical club musical held Monday evening at the Meacham Community center several numbers were presented by guests from the Refugee Center in Oswego. The pianist entertaining was Vera Levinson and the violinist was Albert Schimel. His accompanist was Robert Feilbogen.

The program was well received. Mrs. D. W. Benson was chairman of the music committee. Refreshments were served.

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Oswego Refugees Entertain At Faculty Party

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French and German Classes Organized

Under the leadership of Miss Mahar and Dr. Salisbury, French and German tables have been organized in the cafeteria. Students interested in learning these languages meet each noon in the cafeteria and carry on lunch table conversation with the students from the shelter. From these lessons the pupils hope to become more fluent in the language.

Besides these noon hour conversations regular lessons are given once or twice a week. People from the fort conduct these regular lessons. Those interested in learning German meet at the fort while those taking French meet at Dr. Salisbury's house and in school once a week.

Madame Carmona, Mr. Ourossoff and Mr. Guilleman are conducting the French lessons. The French pupils are: Helen Beha, Pam Meade, Dorothy Warner, Margaret Reynolds, Jane Annal, Pauline Clair, Etta Ayer and Jean Fanning.

The German students under Dr. Lederer are Inez Todaro, Betty Reed, Bette Fisher, Ursula O'Leary, Eileen Farrell, Ray Connors, Luther Ridgeway and Stanley Smart.

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The Oswegonian, March 26, 1945, page 1.

Mrs. Roosevelt Visits Oswego Refugee Center

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The First Lady and the wife of the Treasury Secretary visited with individual refugees, watched them at work in their own community, relaxed with them in their barrack-type family units and lunched in the service club—largest recreation room at the shelter.

Mrs. Roosevelt praised the method of administration at the shelter and she expressed gratitude "for the wonderful way the people of Oswego have cooperated in making the program a success."

"Evidently the shelter program has been very successful," said Mrs. Roosevelt. "I have spent the morning there, met and talked with a great many refugees and I did not receive a single complaint."

The First Lady said that on at least two instances matters of health were brought to her attention which dealt with surgery needs. She pointed out that residents of the shelter represent only a small portion of the thousands who have suffered "at the hands of the enemy in Europe."

"The attitude has been wonderful at the shelter," she added. "At last these people have freedom from fear of their very lives."

Mrs. Roosevelt and Mrs. Morgenthau arrived here at 10 a.m., motoring from Syracuse where they spent the night at the Hotel Onondaga. The President's wife came from Hyde Park and Mrs. Morgenthau from New York City. They were met at Syracuse by Joseph C. Smart, director of the refugee relocation center here, who drove them to Fort Ontario.

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While most of their time was spent at the refugee center, Mrs. Roosevelt and Mrs. Morgenthau appeared at the Oswego State Teachers' College Wednesday afternoon on invitation of Dr. Ralph T. Swetman, president. The First Lady addressed the college assembly at 2:15, her audience including 20 refugee children who attended elementary school at the college. The refugee students are capable, for the most part, of speaking in

Ogdensburg Journal,
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Mrs. Roosevelt was introduced to the Oswego College assemblage by Miss Betty Burden, president of the student body. Dr. Swetman presided over the meeting. The First Lady and Mrs. Morgenthau

left Oswego late Wednesday afternoon for Syracuse where they boarded a train for return to Hyde Park.

ATTIRED IN A STRIKING tailored blue suit, Mrs. Roosevelt carried a heather-colored coat and a fur piece. The last two clothing articles were left by the President's wife in the Relocation Center office while she made the camp tour. Mrs. Morgenthau wore a black suit with matching accessories.

The First Lady and the Treasury Secretary's wife went through family unit home, individual units, the laundry, hospital, warehouses, mess halls, the post chapel and recreation rooms. The refugees went about their daily activities and there was nothing rehearsed. Officials at the refugee center have known for a week of the planned visit of Mrs. Roosevelt but the event was kept a secret.

After a two-hour walking tour, Mrs. Roosevelt and Mrs. Morgenthau were guests at a buffet luncheon in the service club. More than 40 persons were in attendance including 20 from the Oswego Advisory Committee headed by Harry C. Mizen and 10 members of the refugee advisory committee and their wives.

All along the tour, Mrs. Roosevelt and Mrs. Morgenthau greeted refugees, shook hands with them and paused long enough to "chat." Both were visibly impressed at what they saw.

Mid-way through the inspection, Mrs. Roosevelt was met by an accomplished artist, Mrs. Miriam Sommerburg, whose home is in Hamburg, Germany, who presented the First Lady with a water color drawing of a scene in Oswego. Mrs. Sommerburg completed her painting, done on a canvass two feet by two feet, only Tuesday.

Mrs. Morgenthau's husband is a member of the War Refugee Board which directs policies of the shelter, opened Aug. 5 by the War Relocation Authority. There are 266 families at the fort and 245 single persons.

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My Day by Eleanor Roosevelt September 22, 1944

HYDE PARK, Thursday—Tuesday evening I went with Mrs. Henry Morgenthau, Jr., to Syracuse, where we spent the night. In the morning Mr. Joseph Smart called for us, and we went to Oswego to visit the refugee shelter where the United States is temporarily offering hospitality to 982 refugees from concentration camps in Italy. Our army there was glad to have them come to this country, and since Fort Ontario is not being used at present, they are housed there in soldiers' barracks. Partitions have been put up, affording them some privacy, but only the absolute necessities of life are being provided.

Forty-five cents a day per person is what is allowed for food. Regular iron cots and springs with cotton mattresses, army blankets, an occasional bare table and a few stiff chairs—this is the furniture of what must be considered a temporary home. Restrictions are plentiful, and there is much work to be done around the place; but at least the menace of death is not ever-present. They have elected a committee of their own which decides on questions concerning camp organization and direction, and they work closely with the camp director, Mr. Smart.

Oswego has an advisory committee that works with theirs, and they have set up recreation, education and business sections, so that both the shelter and the city may profit by their contacts. Volunteers come out to teach English; but since most of the people in the shelter are professional people and frequently have many talents, they, too, have much to offer to the community. After lunch, for instance, an opera singer from Yugoslavia sang for us, and I have rarely enjoyed anything more.

I was much touched by the flowers which were given me, and especially by some of the gifts, for these, in the absence of money, represented work. One talented young woman had put a great deal of work into her temporary home. Although clothes have to be hung on hooks in the wall, she had covered them with a piece of unbleached muslin, and up above had painted and cut out figures of animals, stars and angels, which were placed all over the plain surface to become a decorative wall covering.

Brightly colored pictures from magazines and papers had been cut out and pasted elsewhere on the walls, and colorful covers had been made for their beds. The effort put into it speaks volumes for what these people have undergone, and for the character which has brought them through. Somehow you feel that if there is any compensation for suffering, it must someday bring them something beautiful in return for all the horrors they have lived through.

E. R.

Eleanor Roosevelt, "My Day, September 22, 1944," The Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Digital Edition (2017), https://www2.gwu.edu/~erpapers/myday/displaydoc.cfm?_y=1944&_f=md056905.

Eleanor Roosevelt, July 1947, speaking at the United Nations. Image is in the public domain in the United States because it is a work prepared by an officer or employee of the US Government as part of that person's official duties under the terms of Title 17, Chapter 1, Section 105 of the US Code.





Images courtesy of *Safe Haven Holocaust Refugee Shelter Museum* and courtesy of *The Herbert and Leni Sonnenfeld collection, Beit Hatfutsot Museum, Israel.*

Questions for further research and discussion:

1. Describe several ways the daily lives of the refugees at the shelter were different from their life as a refugee in Europe.
2. What strategies may have been used in order to attain community within the variety of refugees at the shelter.
3. How did SUNY Oswego embrace the refugees?
4. Based on further research, describe the similarities and differences between the shelter and Japanese internment camps in the United States.