Safe Haven

Subhead: The forgotten story of the Holocaust refugees at Fort Ontario

Excerpt:

Throughout most of World War II, the United States closed its eyes to the genocide that was taking place in Europe. Telegrams sent in the early 1940s were secreted away and ignored by the highest officials. But late in the war, the government could no longer discount the horrifying stories that were emerging from concentration camp survivors.

Limited U.S immigration quotas were strictly enforced during the war, leaving millions of refugees desperately on the run to escape the Nazi regime. Just nine months before the end of the war, President Roosevelt finally allowed one thousand “guests” to enter America, effectively bypassing immigration law. With no promises of visas or citizenship, it was understood that these refugees would return to their homelands after the war.

Fort Ontario in Oswego, a former Army camp, was chosen to house the refugees. For Roosevelt, this temporary haven was a way to silence some of the outrage over U.S. immigration policy. For the 982 men, women, and children who arrived in August 1944, Fort Ontario meant the difference between life and death.

Fleeing from Italy

It took days in Air Force planes to reach Naples, where the 982 were already chosen. The government officials making the selection chose families and survivors with skills that could help run a camp in America. The first priority was refugees who had been in concentration camps and escaped. The 982 were put aboard the Army transport ship Henry Gibbins *with 1000 wounded soldiers returning to hospitals in the States.*

—Ruth Gruber

Once clearance was given, things moved quickly.

Ruth Gruber was a 33-year-old assistant to Harold Ickes, Secretary of the Interior, when she was given the highly unusual and dangerous task of escorting the refugees to America. Her tireless commitment to the plight of Jewish refugees, a solid command of Yiddish and German, and her distinguished work in Alaska made her an ideal candidate.

Word went out to Jewish refuges hiding in Italy that the U.S. was willing to take one thousand refugees. Three thousand applied, each of whom was screened, an onerous task that sorted those who would be rescued from those who would face continued suffering and possible death at the hands of the Germans. One woman even gave birth in an Army truck en route to the ship in the Naples harbor. The baby was aptly named “International Harry,” and he became the youngest refugee ferried to safety.

When Gruber boarded the Henry Gibbins in war-torn Naples, she was met with the desperate faces of 982 men, women and children from 18 European countries. Many were barefoot or clad in makeshift newspaper shoes; a few were dressed in the tattered remains of the striped uniforms they had worn in concentration camps. The ship also housed a thousand wounded American soldiers and a handful of nurses and doctors to tend them all. On the day the ship set sail, the Normandy invasion had just begun, and the Mediterranean was heavily patrolled by Nazi planes and U-boats.

The Henry Gibbins sailed as part of a large convoy, picking up additional escorts as it drew toward Gibraltar. Flanking them were boats that carried Nazi POWs, situated intentionally on the edges of the convoy to help protect the convoy from attack. The irony was not lost on the Jewish refugees. American policy saw fit to bring in 100,000 German POWs to fill the farm labor shortage caused by American servicemen, while allowing only a thousand Holocaust refugees within its borders.

Orders were strict. The convoy sailed in complete darkness at night. Not even a cigarette was allowed above deck so as not to draw attention from German bombers. The two-week journey was not without its risks; German U-boats were spotted off Gibraltar, and everyone waited in utter silence until the danger had passed.

The refugees who were able were assigned cleaning duties but spent most of their time on deck or in bunks, mourning those they had left behind, trying to regain strength, and fighting off seasickness. Gruber spent days listening to heartbreaking stories of loss and heroism and wrote them down until her eyes were too clouded by tears. These were the first accounts to be told by actual survivors; previous stories had always come second-hand.

The Henry Gibbins was far from luxurious but it represented the last hope for Jews desperate to flee Europe. Bunks were stacked three-deep in the cramped, hot quarters. Buckets were strung on deck as makeshift saltwater showers to cool off.

Gruber decided that the best way to communicate with the refugees—and to get them talking to one another—was to teach them English. She set up a blackboard on deck and began. "How are you?" she would ask. "I am fine," would come the answer.

Again and again, the refugees asked what it would be like in America, and what would happen to them after the war. Given their undetermined political status, Gruber could not give a firm reply. When the ship sailed into New York harbor two weeks later, tears spilled forth as the refugees gazed at the Statue of Liberty and listened to Gruber translate the words inscribed at the foot of the statue. A rabbi recited a solemn prayer. No longer praying for deliverance, these refugees were living it.

Published in Life in the Finger Lakes, 2004