

Safe Haven



The forgotten story of the Holocaust refugees at Fort Ontario

By Joy Underhill

Photographs Courtesy of Bob Davidson and Safe Haven Museum

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 1,000 “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

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.

had worn in concentration camps. The ship also housed 1,000 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

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 1,000 wounded soldiers returning to hospitals in the States.

Ruth Gruber

Word went out to Jewish refugees hiding in Italy that the United States was willing to take 1,000 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 Nazis. 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

American servicemen, while allowing only 1,000 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 secondhand.

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.

Arriving at Fort Ontario

After a debriefing in New York, the refugees boarded an overnight train



bound for Oswego. Several were terrified, reminded of the trains that had taken them to dreaded destinations such as Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen. Many were dismayed to see that the fort was fenced in, topped with barbed wire. But almost all were grateful for a hearty breakfast. Things as simple as mattresses, towels, and bed sheets brought tears of gratitude.

On August 5, 1944, the residents of Oswego were there to greet them as well. In no time, items were being passed through the fence: candy, cigarettes, dolls, books, and stuffed animals. Even a bicycle was hoisted over the top.

As the names of the refugees were published in newspapers, phone calls began to trickle in from relatives who had escaped to America before the war. Spouses who hadn't spoken in years were stunned to find one another at the end of the line. When a three-week quarantine was lifted, the camp hosted an open house and was overrun with lost relatives, visitors, and Oswego townspeople.

Children started school in town. Some of the youngsters were understandably apprehensive. Many hadn't been to school in more than six years. Even college-age children were allowed to attend the local college.

...As a child, I knew how to survive under imprisonment

and confinement, having been put in jail and in concentration camps... But I didn't really remember what freedom was because I had left my hometown when I was 6. I had this tremendous beautiful fantasy of coming to America, the land of the free. And I was put in this camp, behind barbed wires...

Walter Greenberg, Safe Haven refugee



To Learn More

Ruth Gruber tells the story of the Safe Haven refugees in *Haven: The Dramatic Story of 1000 World War II Refugees and How They Came to America* (Times Books/Random House, 2000).

Safe Haven Inc. is a volunteer group dedicated to preserving the story of America's only Holocaust refugee shelter. Visit its website at www.syracuse.com/features/safehaven.

The Safe Haven Museum is located in Oswego and is open from Labor Day through Memorial Day. Take a virtual museum tour at www.oswego-haven.org.

For extensive links to archival materials, newspaper and journal articles, check out www.ushmm.org/research/library/bibliography/ontario/right.htm.



I'm very grateful. I know my parents were very grateful to the people in town, because they were very good to us. It's too bad that this was the only camp of its kind in the United States of

America. When you think of how many millions were killed, and how many could have been saved!

Eva Kaufman Dye, Safe Haven refugee

Living at Safe Haven

As frightening as coming to a new land could be, the Jewish refugees soon found friends in Oswego. Rena Romano Block recalls losing a treasured doll she had carried throughout the war. "I was an only child and this doll was the only remnant I had from a normal life in Zagreb," she recounts. "I come to Oswego, and they're bringing us books. They're bringing us dolls and ice skates, sleds, snow suits!"

Some of the refugees needed clothing and shoes when they arrived. Dozens of religious and secular groups extended helping hands, donating the basics needed to start over. Although the refugees were frustrated to be housed behind a fence, they had food and rooms of their own.

Accommodations were simple but adequate, and the refugees were safe for the first time in years. Fort Ontario earned the nickname "Safe Haven" and became a place of healing and recovery.

The 24 babies born at the camp over the course of 18 months all received good medical care. Manya Breuer recalls giving birth to her first child. "I talked of raising my children and being the happy proud parents of American children...We had the vision

of making our life worthwhile and becoming good citizens. And that was in front of us, all these years."

A few men were allowed to leave camp to help harvest produce, but most of the refugees found themselves with time on their hands. With the help of charities and religious groups, the camp began to grow into its own community. A hairdressing school opened, regular religious services were begun, a newsletter was printed, performers began hosting musical performances and variety shows, and a Boy Scout troop formed (the troop leader was known to sneak boys out for campouts in the nearby woods). The first wedding took place at City Hall just two weeks after arrival.

Other than being fenced in, the only resounding complaint was the quality of the bread. Accustomed to the hearty black bread of Europe, the refugees couldn't tolerate the pasty white bread of America. With some experimentation, the mess hall staff found a way to create the favored darker bread.

For years, refugees seeking to enter the United States were told "Sorry, the quotas are filled." Now at last, the U.S. was opening its gates to nearly 1,000. Politically, the refugees had no status. They came in outside the rigid immigration quotas. They were not prisoners of war. They were not legal immigrants with legal visas. They were not boat people. They were guests of President Roosevelt, who assured Congress they would be sent back to their homes in Europe when the war ended.

Ruth Gruber



Living in Limbo

Just a month after arriving at Fort Ontario, Eleanor Roosevelt toured the camp and spoke with refugee families. Again and again she was asked, "What will happen when the war ends?" She couldn't give a firm answer. A camp anthem was adopted: "Don't Fence Me In."

Gruber returned to Washington to fight long and hard for the right of the refugees to immigrate. She and other supporters pleaded the case of the refugees to Congress over the course of 18 long months.

President Roosevelt died, the war ended, and still the refugees waited for the slow wheels of government to move. Europe was suddenly filled with "displaced persons": former POWs and concentration camp survivors whose homelands were now destroyed. Many still lived in the camps where they were imprisoned, half-starved and having nowhere else to go. Returning the Fort Ontario refugees to Europe looked like nothing short of cruelty.

Little by little, some of the restrictions were loosened. The first ship sailed for Europe in August 1945, and 69 of the refugees—mostly Yugoslavs—were allowed to return. Some of them wanted to find what family remained; others simply wanted to die in the villages where they had lived. But the vast majority remained at Fort Ontario to seek immigrant status.

When President Truman finally granted visas to the refugees in January 1946, more than 70 communities nationwide offered to take them in with jobs, homes, and good schools for their children. Ironically, the refugees had to officially leave the United States in order to enter it legally. They were driven by bus to Canada, where they crossed over the Rainbow Bridge at Niagara Falls as fully legal immigrants.



This is a story about America, the land of opportunity, which

opened its doors. The doors had to be pushed and shoved a little, but the doors did open, and in 1945 we were allowed to stay. It's a society and environment which allowed people to fulfill their potentials. And that's what most of us did, of the younger generation. We became lawyers, doctors, . . . musicians, professors, whatever. I'm sure that everybody felt we had to pay back something. And I believe that we have, in fact, repaid.

Ivo Lederer, Safe Haven refugee

The Legacy

The Fort Ontario refugees dispersed across the nation, many settling in New York City where other family members lived. They contributed to American culture in significant ways, becoming physicians, engineers, lawyers, teachers, artists, and psychologists among other professions. One California resident helped develop the CAT scan and the MRI technology; another worked to create the Polaris and Minuteman missiles.

Thirty-five years after their months at Fort Ontario, 50 survivors and their families returned to Oswego to dedicate a monument to the camp. The people of Oswego who remembered them were present as well: schoolteachers, Boy Scout leaders, and townspeople. Some of the original buildings were torn down; others had been revamped for a museum commemorating the role Fort Ontario has played in historic wars.

In 2002, the Safe Haven museum was dedicated at Fort Ontario Park. Housed in a 100-year-old building listed in the National Register of Historic Places, the museum is dedicated to preserving the story of the 982 refugees who found shelter there and the hope they found for a new life in America. 

It is a chapter in the history of the United States.

It's a chapter in the history of Judaism.

It should be told, it should be remembered.

And it should never be forgotten.

Adam Munz, Safe Haven refugee

Joy Underhill is a freelance writer who lives in Farmington. She can be reached at joyhill@rochester.rr.com.