

OH 272
ORAL HISTORY TAPE
FORT ONTARIO EMERGENCY REFUGEE SHELTER PROJECT

[Long lead-in with high pitched whine]

INTERVIEWER LAURIE BARON:... yeah, you looked at him and he looked twice as mad.

INTERVIEWEEEE DAVID SIMMONS: That's right. 'Cause I can remember what he looked like in high school.

LB: But on the other hand, apparently, his wife said he died robust. I mean, he went swimming, came out and had a heart attack.

DS: Well, that's the way most people would like to go out.

LB: I suspect so. All right, this is Laurie Baron and I am interviewing David Simmons, who is a minister in Canton, New York, but who grew up in Oswego during the time of the Fort Ontario Emergency Refugee Shelter program. And I was wondering, you were in the first grade then, but you said that you remembered the refugee children being integrated into your class. What do you remember about them and what do you remember about how you and your classmates related to them?

DS: I remember two children in our first grade class. One was a girl from France and one was, I recall, a boy from Yugoslavia. I remember specifically sitting across the aisle from him and watching him do a lot of drawing, we might think of doodling. And drawing a lot of airplanes and dog fights and that kind of thing. Which didn't really strike me as significant at the time but now I realize he was probably drawing what he had seen.

They were there . . . we realized that they were from Europe and they were here in the United States as displaced persons, refugees, they were living at the Fort where many others were. I did not realize at that time that they were Jewish. As far as being integrated in the class, I guess they were just two of us, like any other kids in first grade. They either did or didn't do their homework, along with the rest of us, although we didn't have much homework in the first grade. Then they just were not there. They had gone to wherever they were going. It seems to me they did leave before the end of the school term. They just were no longer there and it was explained to me that they were going back . . . they were going somewhere else, anyway, going back to Europe or what, I don't recall that part of it.

LB: You don't remember any instances of maybe thinking they were strange because of their difficulty with language or because of maybe their acting . . . I don't know whether they would act somewhat suspicious of the outside world. . .

DS: I don't recall them being, having any language problem; maybe they did and I don't recall that part of it. In terms of being or acting strange, I don't recall that either. I just know they were there and as far as I was concerned they were accepted. They would have gone home a different way than I would have gone home so I would not have had the opportunity to walk home with them or anything like that, or see with whom they walked home.

LB: You don't remember playing at the Fort? I found a number of Oswegonians who . . .

DS: Not then. I . . . seems as though the Fort was a little more off limits. When it had been abandoned as a military post, then it was sort of a public playground. Then I guess it was later when I was going to Fitzhugh Park that we would go over there, down in the old Fort gun emplacements, stuff like that. But that wouldn't have been during that time; it was later.

LB: Do you have any memories of your parents saying anything about the refugees that were at the Fort or of being in town and seeing other refugees?

DS: Nope, can't help you there.

LB: Any other things related to the Fort or to the nature of Oswego when you were growing up? One of the things that surprised me in doing research is that there was so little negative response to have a number of refugees coming into a small town, and the town seemed to be fairly accepting. Having grown up there, what were your impressions of the kind of town Oswego was, politically and in terms of its attitude?

DS: I would suspect that - - and I guess this is more suspicion than knowledge - - that we had been helping these people in Europe and we were helping them by giving them a home temporarily, knowing they had been through a war and they had lost a lot of things, property, homes and so forth. We were putting ourselves out to be hospitable. In terms of the town in general, I guess it was . . . felt itself as sort of a backwater during the '50's when I was growing up. You know, Syracuse was

the big hub and we were just out on one of the spokes and not that significant. I think it was only later, after I'd left, that some of the urban renewal kinds of things started happening and we got a lot of publicity in Oswego because of the big snows but that would have been in the late '50's and '60's.

LB: Do you remember anything, especially now that you're a minister, about Christian – Jewish relations growing up in Oswego?

DS: The one thing I have that always puzzled me about Jewish people being different, quote unquote, is that I was a paperboy and I came along past the synagogue one morning on a Saturday and Mr. Laskey, who I knew – lived just a couple of doors from us – asked me to come into the synagogue and turn on the lights. And I did and didn't question. But I was full of questions when I got home. "How come he couldn't turn on the lights?" Well, Saturday was the Sabbath, and they weren't allowed to work and I guess turning the lights on was work, so, you know, I went in, snapped on a few lights, "thank you very much", and went on about my way. I remember that; that would have been when I was about thirteen or fourteen.

LB: But the city . . . Oswego won an award in 1943 for being an all-American City. I was wondering if that . . . maybe this wasn't an issue, certainly in the late '40's or 50's, but it seems to me there was very little anti-Semitism. Which would help the refugees, I think, with the Jewish families fit in well in town.

DS: Well, remember they were in what was government surplus property which was in a corner of the town. Was it not cut off? I mean, people just didn't drive in, around or through.

LB: It had barbed wire fences around it.

DS: OK. Had they been scattered around the town, or maybe more visible, living in different places, like up on Polack Hill, on the West Side, things would have been a little different. I don't know. They were somewhat segregated as I understand it.

LB: Any other memories of comments you have?

DS: Not really, no.

LB: We're OK. Why don't you come back to my office; I'll Xerox that article for you. I've got it in my office; we've got a Xerox machine in the department. And it's right across here.

DS: I don't know whether I've been much help to you.

LB: Just to get a sense . . . I think one thing you said, for me was real good. And I've noticed it up here too. Is the sense that you didn't think of these students as Jewish, you just say they were refugees? I've a great story up here . . . I don't know if you know the Cohen's.

DS: Here in Canton?

LB: Yes, Hall Cohen was a famous basketball star at Syracuse for a number of years. It's one of the few . . .

DS: Yeah, yeah, he graduated from Canton High School.

LB: Right.

DS: OK, then I know who you're talking about.

LB: It's one of the few Jewish families in town, indigenous Jewish families . . .

DS: He's the one who holds the record for the most successful number of free throws.

LB: So anyway. I had a friend up here who is a North Country person, and we were talking about Jews in the North Country. There is a book that came out about Jewish families. And he said, "There aren't any Jews in Canton". And I said, "Sure there are. What about the Cohen's?" "That's a Jewish name?" And to me that said volumes.

DS: Well, I suppose that Canton being a college community they would be used to varieties of people; that would be my assumption not having lived in a college community.

LB: I think Oswego had that too, as well, being a college community.

DS: I never think of Oswego as a college community. I think of . . . before I graduated from high school, Oswego State College was about three buildings and I just don't conceive of it as a college town, like I think Canton or Hamilton, or even Geneva, or towns like that.

LB: Let us go and I will Xerox this for you. They took longer to set it up than we did to use it. It's helpful because every sort of angle we can get. We're only to do a thirty minute segment just in Oswego, then thirty minutes on government policy, then thirty minutes on the refugees. I can also show you some addresses I was just sent; maybe some of your friends . . .

DS: I'd be glad to . . . give you some tips . . .

LB: The people of Oswego have been very nice to me and they're not real happy about [sound is fading, they may have been walking away] Ruth Gruber and her book . . .

[Ambient sounds, someone forgot to turn off the microphone, not quite half-way through side one, for the rest of side one.]

[Side two seems to be all blank.]

Transcribed by jCook, January, 2006