

FORT ONTARIO REFUGEE PROJECT

OH 276

September 23, 1986

Interviewee: David Wyman

Interviewer: Pat McKeon

Pat McKeon: What were the major factors in the late '30's and early '40's involved in the limitations on immigration from Nazi Germany in the occupied areas?

David Wyman: The main reasons that we didn't allow many refugees to immigrate, both in the late '30's and through the war were three main reasons:

1. Up until 1940 was unemployment, the Depression. People had the concept that when the immigrants came in and took a job that this was taking a job that an unemployed American should have, and of course, this was very good logic and understanding to that, if there was a set number of jobs. If there were a hundred jobs only and some new person came in and took one, obviously depriving the native of the job, but in fact, that when people come in, they are also consumers, and they provide jobs so that it would not be a lessening of the possibilities for others, but that concept never really broke through in the discussions that went on about this, and so the unemployment argument was a very strong one in keeping immigration down.
2. The second reason was something that had been very high in the 1920's and continued quite high in the 1930's, and that's what I'll call "nativism" or "general anti-foreigner feeling" and that had peaked at the time in the '20's when KKK, not the KKK that terrorized blacks in the South after the Civil War, but the 1920's KKK which mainly attacked in the North. The South was anti-black and in the North was anti-Catholic and anti-Jew but particularly anti-alien and this was reflecting anti-immigration, anti-alien feelings high in the '20's and that's why we had immigration restriction laws coming into place for the first time in the 1920's. Those attitudes, a dislike of foreigners, wanting to keep aliens off our shore, that the melting pot was not melting and we were getting overcrowded with these people; that they don't talk our language, they don't do things the way we do, etc. Those were widespread in that period and into the '30's, so that was a force in holding immigration back, and the other reason, and I would say the most important of the three, actually, was anti-Semitism because the bulk of the people who needed to get out of Europe in this period, 85 – 90% were Jews, and the 1930's was a time, the time of the highest Anti-Semitism every in our history. The late '30's

and into the '40's, the exact years are '38 – '44, and the reason we can pinpoint this is because of the public opinion polls that were sufficiently sophisticated by '38 that we can trust the measurements, and increasingly sophisticated after that. Why anti-Semitism in the '30's? Of course it had always been there and was increased by the insecurities and the resentments that depression bred, and also the fact that the Nazi's spread anti-Semitism propaganda throughout the world during the 1930's and so all those factors were pulled together to bring about an immigration policy which was very restrictive regarding Jewish refugees.

PM: (*Voice is so far in the background it that words cannot be determined.*)

DW: Didn't have any effect in this country. The "J" was put on because Switzerland, up until the time of the Nazi's, of Hitler coming in '33, Germans could go into Switzerland without a visa, just as we can go into Canada, England, etc., without a visa, but you did have to have a passport. When the persecution began to become heavy in Germany against Jews, some of them took that way to escape because they didn't need to get permission to go into Switzerland. All they had to show was a German passport and they would be allowed in and they would attempt to stay. The Swiss began to get upset that they were being flooded with Jewish refugees, so they said to the Germans, "We're going to have to institute visa keeping at the borders so as to determine who could come", and then the Germans said, "Well, let's make a compromise, we'll put a 'J' on the Jewish passports and then you will know which ones not to let in".

PM: (*Again the voice is in the background, words undetermined.*)

DW: Anti-Semitism. I spoke about that already, peaked in that period. *What* it came out in terms of being increased, exaggerated, worsened by the Depression situation. It's also true that in that period, there was a growth of demagogues in the American society. This was true of western society, Hitler, Mussolini, etc., but we had sort of little tin-horn dictators running around here too. They never got very big followings but several of them specialized in anti-Semitism. One was a person named William Dudley Pelley who invented a group called "Silver Shirts" which you can figure out means SS which he had copied from Hitler. Pelley was very anti-Semitic in the position; he was really a fascist in an anti-Semitic slant to it. There was a group here called German-American Bund, which was Germans who had immigrated here recently, mostly after World War I, who were pro-Hitler, after Hitler came into power, and they began to form Nazi groups in this country, never too big, just maybe 5,000, somewhere in that amount, but they made a lot of noise, paraded around in their

uniforms with their swastikas, had youth camps and put out a lot of anti-Semitic information propaganda.

Probably the best known and the most harmful of the anti-Semitic leaders was a Catholic priest named Father Charles Coughlin, who was in the Detroit area but had a radio program which ran on Sunday afternoons that was carried on 30 – 40 radio stations throughout the country. Up until 1938 he was not openly anti-Semitic, but after '38 he began to put forth a lot of anti-Semitic propaganda on the radio and weekly newspaper that he put out, and he had a tremendous effect in spreading poison through American society. Now it is true that during the Holocaust itself in the '40's, while the Jews were being annihilated, we find a very indifferent attitude in many parts of American society, and even an antipathy toward bringing any Jews in here. That the like of Father Coughlin and *Pelley*, etc., this was partly the fruit of things that they had spread, and I think it would be correct to say that people who perpetrated anti-Semitism *of the sort* had nearly a direct role in the elimination of life, because of people, if the society hadn't had that poison pumped around in it in the late '30's and into the '40's, there might have been a more favorable response.

PM: (*Unable to hear question.*)

DW: Josiah, Josiah DuBois, he is sort of a personal hero of mine. First, I'll tell you how much of a hero he is, and I'll tell you why. My university is, this year, establishing a special chair for me which is called "The Named Chair" and if you are in the academic world that is not very nice to have. They asked what I would like my chair in the History Department to be named, and I thought a bit, and I thought I would like to have it named "The Josiah DuBois Holocaust Remembrance Chair", bringing in two concepts. One, Holocaust Remembrance, which is very important for me and for all of us. But Josiah DuBois, in particular, I want to mention because he was a middle level official, a lawyer in the Treasury Department in World War II. The Treasury Department, this group, DuBois and five other lawyers in the Treasury Department, who were involved very *peripherally* in the question of refugees and rescue, began to uncover the fact that the State Department through '41, '42, '43 and coming to the end of '43 had intentionally, not only intentionally, refrained from trying to help save Jews, but the State Department had obstructed efforts toward rescue that the Jewish organizations in this country were trying to launch and get off the ground. For instance, one Jewish organization tried to transmit \$25,000 to Switzerland to be used to initiate a rescue program. During World War II you couldn't send any funds overseas without government clearance to see that there would be no way that the Axis would benefit from these funds. To get government permission you had to apply to the State Department and the Treasury Department. The State Department because of foreign affairs role, the Treasury Department because of its economic role. This organization, the Jewish organization applied

to the State Department, asked “May we send the \$25,000?” The State Department stalled, delayed, did everything they could to keep that money from going over because they didn’t want Jews to be saved, because they didn’t want to be under pressure to bring any of them into this country. The Treasury Department was brought into it because they had to deal with the question of licensing to send the fund and these six men who were particularly in that area began to get very suspicious of the delays for a simple little license, and DuBois especially, and went into underground means. DuBois had two friends in the State Department who told him what was happening, and he managed to collect documentation out of the State Department, get it in the Treasury Department, put it into the form of an 18-page memorandum documenting all the obstructions and *malfeasance* that had gone on in the State Department and entitled that memorandum, “Acquiescence of This Government in the Murder of Jews”, which is exactly what it gave, and took that – DuBois wrote it, the other five worked with him but he was the main one in it, took it to the Secretary of Treasury Henry Morgenthau and said, “Mr. Secretary, you must go to the President with this and you must tell him that this is going to break, it’s going to get into the press, there’s going to be a terrible scandal about this is he doesn’t act and take forward steps to a rescue”. Morgenthau did that and Roosevelt did, as a result pressured into a corner seeing that there was going to be trouble if he didn’t move ahead, set up the War Refugee Board, which was a half-step, but at least something in the direction of rescue.

Where does DuBois come in? One other point, besides having done the sleuthing, having put the memorandum together, we have minutes of these people in the Treasury when they found out what they did about the State Department. They were livid with anger and DuBois, his words come off the page, the fire, he is so upset he said to Morgenthau, “If you don’t go to Roosevelt with this, and if the President doesn’t take steps, I personally am going to call a press conference and rip the lid off this whole damn scandal, even though that *will* be the end of my career in government but it has to be done,” and Morgenthau, who need some pushing, then went to Roosevelt. I wish we had a transcript of what Morgenthau told Roosevelt and whether he told him what DuBois was going to do.

PM: (*Quiet, no voice heard.*)

DW: Right, DuBois did not have to expose this because the step was taken, but here is somebody who puts something on the line out of just plain human decency.

The State Department was certain that *Josiah* DuBois was a Jew because his name was *Josiah* and because he was so upset on this issue. He wasn’t. He was born an Episcopalian, he died an Episcopalian. He was a human being. There should have been many more of them.

PM: (*Quiet, no voice heard.*)

DW: He did not lose anything on it, but he was willing, he was willing to.

PM: Lastly, (*Quiet, no voice heard after first word.*)

DW: The Oswego Project was a token move by the Roosevelt administration. When the War Refugee Board was finally established in January '44, the people on the board, who were very committed to rescue, immediately perceived that the biggest roadblock to rescue was that there were no places that would take Jews in. They needed to open places that Jews could go before they could be successful in carrying out rescue, and one of their main objectives at the beginning was to find places to put them. Their strategy was if the United States would agree to take, preferably an unlimited number, but at least say 100,000 Jewish refugees from Europe, put them in camps, and by this time Army camps *were beginning* to get out of use because we had more than enough manpower trained by '44 and they knew that the war was coming to an end, put them in unused Army camps on the east coast, hold them until the war is over so they can survive, and then send them back home. This was their plan. Now what they hoped was that Roosevelt would say, "We'll take 100,000 *or* an unlimited number, then go to other countries and say we're willing to make a big step, can't you do your share and take 10,000 or 20,000, whatever?". Use that as a lever to open Latin America, Palestine, as far as the British were concerned, parts of North Africa, etc., and this would solve that problem as where rescued people go. So, they went to the President, and told him about this plan and he said, "Great idea if you can find 500 *or* 1,000 who need to get out of Europe, we'll take them in". And so they took 1,000 in from Italy who had escaped to the part of Italy that the U.S. and Britain had conquered. They were getting a little bit in the way of the military and the military was going to be happy to get them out of there, and they opened one camp and took 1,000 in and put them in Oswego, Fort Ontario, New York. Needless to say, that was not the example that persuaded the other countries. If the United States, with its tremendous resources, could manage 1,000 refugees, what is Brazil going to say? What it said was that "We weren't willing to do anything". By the way, the quotas, the immigration quotas *which* permitted us to take 60,000 refugees each year with no change in the law, but the State Department was not letting them use only 10%; 54,000 a year were not being used in the quotas and we took 1,000 in, outside the quotas and put them in the camp under the provision that they be sent back after the war. That's what Oswego was, and that's why I call it a token. The President made that step hoped that would quiet down the people who wanted action and it wouldn't upset those who didn't want anything done for the Jews, and would clear the issue for him. He made it obvious; he made it quite certain there weren't going to be any further shipments. The government agency that ran the camp, when they wrote up the history

of the Oswego Camp after the way, entitled the little book, "Token Shipment", and that's exactly what it was.

(Some chatter in the background. Ends about halfway through side 1.)

Editorial changes added by jCook are seen in italics. January 2006.

Original transcriptionist unknown.