

OH 279

OSWEGO COUNTY ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Fort Ontario Refugee Project

[Probably in 1984]

Interviewer: Laurie Baron

Interviewees: Geraldine Rossiter, Aulus Saunders & Mrs. Saunders

[Long lead-time]

LAURIE BARON: I'm interviewing Geraldine Rossiter, who was very friendly with many of the refugees, used to sneak into the camp during this period. I was wondering if you could tell me about your first experience during the arrival of the refugees, and your first days with them. What happened?

GERALDINE ROSSITER: My very first experience was when I knew they had finally arrived and I went down on East Ninth Street where there was a wire fence with the barbed wire on top had been added, for their protection as well as probably for ours, I don't know for sure. When I looked in there I could see these grown men that had burlap wrapped around their feet or some material similar to that, and my heart was so full of compassion to think these grown men who had to be forced to walk around like that. And the children came up to the fence and they saw me on my bicycle, which by the way I waited until I was in high school – I couldn't afford to buy one till then—and they said “Beesecla, beesecla,” so I saw some fellows I knew and they stood on each other's shoulders and we passed the bike over each other and up over the fence, and what little French I did know I tried to convey to them and they could keep it till the following day and let all the children ride it. And they were quite thrilled with that, of course.

You could look in there and just see...people milling around...it was like in a zoo. All I could think of was, “Are they the animals or are we the animals?” We're behind a wire fence, they're looking at us, we're staring at them, that's the whole impression I got, but I realized they were from several nations in Europe: Yugoslavs, Czechoslavs, German, French, Polish, Russian – every nationality you could conceive of. But in the meantime they were not all Jews; there were Protestants and there were Catholics involved in this, which I think is something that a lot of people didn't understand. Maybe some of the people in Oswego wouldn't have been so...some of them, let me re-quote that...would not have been so condemning in their manners, their speech, their remarks, if they had known “Well, there's some of my brothers, so to speak, in there.” There were some Catholics, there were some Protestants, there were some non-Jews. Of course the majority were Jewish people, which as far as I'm concerned, humans are humans.

I was there about an hour and then I said to myself, "I'd like to be inside there, I'd just love to." Knowing that big rock was right behind there, behind the fort where I used to swim, I knew that fence going along the railroad tracks by the lake, and there was an opening right opposite big rock, so I got my cousin Bob Garlock and I said, "Let's go down and change into our old clothes." Because they did look desolate, the men wore their coats over their shoulders, they never had their arms through their sleeves. I said, "Now, let's try to look as much like them as we can. I know a little bit of French; I'll give you a few expressions, and if anybody asks you anything more, just walk away." Because he knew nothing; he was younger and he had not taken French or anything like that.

So we went down the railroad tracks and we found that little hole and we crept in, we get up there, we saw the guards, and I said, "Just pretend you belong here." So we're up at the fence and I'm saying, "Comment, ce vas," this or that, what little I knew and nodding to people, and he had his jacket over his shoulders. Then we got to this particular point, and here we see two or three of our Oswegonians friends and they're looking in and they do a double... "Is that you, Gerry?" And I said to Bob, "Just wave your hand and let's walk away, don't say anything." But you knew that they knew us, after all.

And that was my first night's experience. We just milled around and we listened. It was fascinating to hear all the different languages. Of course, I knew they all spoke Hebrew but some of them you could hear speaking their native tongue, other than Hebrew. It was fascinating, it was depressing, to think that people had to come over like cattle. That's the only way I could think of it. But at last I said, "At least, they're not in a concentration camp, they are free." Although I have learned since that a lot of them thought it was another concentration camp which they did apparently think when they saw the picket fence, the wire, the quarantine; they couldn't go out, nobody could come in, they couldn't even get in contact with their own relatives, whoever had any in this country. There was a lot to learn in the time they were here. Would you like to ask me something now? I feel like I'm overflowing at the moment.

LB: Well, you mentioned...you got to know them. You ended up going into the camp quite a bit.

GR: Just about every single day, sneaking in...I've forgotten how long the quarantine was, thirty or sixty days. It was my main thing every day when I got through work, was to go down, sneak in, go in. I met...before I had met Edith, I met a family. Her name was Elizabeth, there were eight children in the family. She had a brother who had his Bar Mitzvah while I was there. And I went to that Bar Mitzvah. Now, I don't understand Hebrew but when I heard him...you knew the speech they have to make...I wish I could ever have had it recorded so you could...the little fellow, he was slight even though I knew he had to be thirteen. He made the most dramatic speech, and they were applauding, even through it, they interrupted him. And I've been to a Bar Mitzvah since where they didn't do that, and I don't know whether that's an ordinary thing or not. But they had told me all the horrors they had lived through; but at least the mother, the father and their children were together.

Come to Edita Semjen, she was the next one that...she had asked me for a cigarette, and I said, "I don't smoke but," I said, "I'll certainly get you some." Then we struck up and acquaintance, and I had heard, of course, she told me how her father and brother had been taken and they'd learned how her father was one... had to dig the grave and they were shot and buried in it. And she and her mother had been in concentration camps and from what she told me she had been under molestation and so forth as I can assume, knowing what she looks like, she probably did. She worked for the Underground, for Mikhailovich and because she was an interpreter...she'd gone to a school in Switzerland. Her family, I guess, was quite wealthy – at the time he was a lumberman, had a lumber business. So she had learned several languages; I think probably in Europe it's maybe easier because there's border languages – which is nice, I think it's great to know all these languages. They used her as an interpreter in the Underground under Mikhailovich. She told me a lot of things about that. I don't know just how much you'd like me to tell you. I'd like you to interrupt me and maybe ask me a question...

LB: Whatever the stories you...to get a sense of what the refugees went through. You knew the refugees in a way that most people didn't.

GR: Well, I was in the barracks all the time which people in Oswego, and I hate to say...I'm not condemning all the people in Oswego at all...these were the few that I happened to listen to because I worked in a public restaurant, at that time one of the two best restaurants in town. And that had lawyers, judges and people. And I know they used to congregate...and I would listen to them say, "Why those Jews they have it all, they have the latest stoves and refrigerators and this and that." Knowing that all the time they were living in these old soldiers' barracks, one bathroom at the end of the hall, they had cots for beds, they had a wooden table, a small wooden table and two wooden chairs. The only way I could see they would ever be comfortable was to just lie down on the cot, and who would suggest that a cot would ever be all that comfortable.

And I used to get so furious and would think, "Should I say something? Shouldn't I?" I just hope...I would say that certainly someday they would find out the truth. That is not true, that they have all these luxuries. Matter of fact the only thing they ever had as far as I knew personally, the Jewish organizations had set up educational classes, languages classes and I believe that all those that could walk in any way, shape or matter went to learn the English language if they didn't already know it well enough. They were willing to learn, to study, to work, and as far as I'm concerned the Jewish people to me are the greatest example of if you want something, sacrifice, and work for it, and I'm afraid too many people I know want the free and easy road. This is my opinion, now I'm being prejudiced there, probably. But they work and go without. Now, when I visited Edith in New York she had what you call a walk-up flat apartment. She and her mother worked; they saved their money; they sacrificed. Then they get what they want; then if they get something everybody says, "Well, they've got all the wealth." They earn it. Maybe not all of them; I don't want to generalize like people did against them. You know what I'm trying to say? They work, they sacrifice, and they help each other. One Jewish person will help another, from my experience.

Now I'm a Baptist, or Irish, whatever. "I'm a Baptist, will you help me out?" "Huh, I got enough to do..." This is my opinion, so don't quote me, anything... I'm just saying to you, the way it looks to me, when I look at the vista of this whole picture, because I hear so much criticism. And I say, gee, that people are willing to work, sacrifice, even die, for something. Are we? Is the ordinary person?

LB: You also had some other experiences, more of a more personal nature, rather than overhearing that people in Oswego.

GR: Oh, yes, Edith and I were very close personal friends, and her friend Lea Hanf who was killed in an automobile accident. We had a lot of fun, a lot of laughter. Before the quarantine was up I said, "Would you like to go somewhere?" Wouldn't dare take them around Oswego. I said, "I know some friends who will take us to Rochester." That's quite a -72 miles away- it was in the wintertime. We took Lea Hanf and Edit Semjen, who is Edit Sharp Starckman. I said, "I'll be there at 6:30" or something. At that time I knew about what time the guards would be around, I'm probably not quoting the right times as to when did go or not, it was very early in the morning. I sneaked in, it was such snow, I had to dig my way around, then cover it, then look to see if the guards were around, then I got to her barracks Lea Hanf was in the same barracks and we got together, I said, "Now follow me and just walk along as though it was normal." I guess some people were going to breakfast then. We sneaked down the big bank, out, and were up the railroad tracks, and down to 11th and a half Street, to Mercer, and I had this car waiting with these people I knew. And we went to Rochester for the whole day, went to shops, went to this beautiful restaurant, and these people I knew treated them to dinner, and where the restaurant was, this nice dinner music, no dancing or anything, just nice music. And I got them back, it was dark, night-time, forgive me over forty years, I can't recall what time. I had told Edit's mother, [Adie Tes?] I used to call her then. "If we're not there, fix the bunk up so it looks like somebody's in there." The guards weren't all that...they weren't like Gestapo... they weren't going to poke the beds apart. "You people in OK? Fine."

I'd like to interject right here that in this book Dr. Gruber has said that they didn't have any bedcheck. But I was there when they did come around and I had to hide in a little cubbyhole of a closet once cause they came in unexpectedly. Now she suggests in this book that there was no such a thing, but there was, for some particular reason or not I'm not sure, but there was and I had to hide, cause God forbid I'd been caught there I don't know what they would have done to me. I never even thought of those things.

I went to the plays and the musical shows they put on. They were learning English and this one girl sing "I'll be loving you always." I used to sing it for my friends as she did, "I'll be luffing kew always." They loved it, it was so beautiful. And the children... There was one young fellow, who said he was in love with me, he was probably two years younger than I. His name was Walter and I cannot remember his last name...

LB: Arnstein?

GR: I'm not sure. Walter? Why, do you happen to know?

LB: I have an address for a Walter Arnstein.

GR: Younger than I. When you go back forty years, two years is hard to discriminate. Well, what else would you like to know?

LB: What I was mentioning—the personal aspect. Some of your experiences in terms of townspeople who knew about your friendship with the refugees.

GR: I told many people that I was going into the Fort. I said, "I know how to get in there." I wouldn't tell them; I didn't want anyone else to get in or to get in trouble or anything that was my risk. I was a daredevil; I didn't stop and think. I went first and thought about it after. And as I said, my father told me a week after the refugees arrived, he said "I don't want you going down there. They have federal guards and, you know, anything could happen." I never told my father, I was afraid to. He wasn't strict, but he was one of those persons...put your hat on to answer the door so you don't catch cold; if a dog passes you wash your hands you might have gotten a flea on...he was one of those types. In the meantime I was having a ball going in there and mingling. I said I'll never make it to Europe but I feel like I'm here now.

But when the refugees were finally allowed passes and they could go out, I'd walk down the street with Edita or I'd express my opinion, if they saw me...certain ones, I don't even know who they were...in the restaurant I knew who they were, judges and lawyers and people like that. Down the street people would see me, and somehow you could tell a refugee, I don't know how, they didn't have the clothes, they went out shopping and so forth, they happen to know. They'd go "Jew-lover, refugee-lover." Now I would say, this was in the minority but you know it only takes one or two cracks like that and it really gets to you. Well, it didn't stop me though. I felt sorry for them when I looked at it later on in years. At first I was so indignant and so enraged. But afterwards I said, "You know, they're the ones to be pitied." Anybody without human compassion who is bigoted is to be pitied. I was brought up that way, not by my family so much but I'm a Baptist and you love everyone, you don't distinguish color, race, creed, anything. And I believed it. And I started a nursery school in Sunday school, and I remember way back then, you don't dislike anyone, unless it's a...if you have a personal reason why you did this or that, OK. But you don't mass condemn. And I find that this happens all the time. "All those people do this." I say, "Well, what people?" I'm fighting to this very day. Some of my best friends say "All those so and so..." And I say, "What do you mean, all those so and so?" "Well, they're from northern Italy. You know them, they're gonna get even." I say, "You know, you're condemning millions of people?" It's a constant struggle for me. Maybe I should get on the air and talk about it. Whether it would do any good I'm not sure.

LB: Did churches...were the churches helpful in preventing more of this?

GR: You know, maybe they were. If they were I know nothing about it. I just don't know anything about that. I never heard of any big movement. Maybe there was, don't condemn them, because I was ignorant of the fact. I'm not sure they did or not.

LB: Did any of your friends...I don't know if people snuck into the fort as much as you did?

GR: I didn't realize that until I read *Haven* and then I understood that probably, the word got around that there's this girl getting in here, and where's she getting in from? This must be, because if you read the book you find we found the hole in the fence. Until I read this book a few months ago, I had no idea that they knew it. But I don't blame them for a moment if they could find a way to get out and breathe a little more freedom...especially the young people. They're gonna be as adventurous or as crazy or whatever as I was which was great, and what great harm. You will read in the book that a teacher sent a girl home because the only thing she had was slacks. And you'll read that that wasn't acceptable, as though they were free to go out and buy the proper, appropriate clothing. Those things get to me to the point...

LB: Do you remember them talking about whether they thought they would be able to stay in the United States or ...?

GR: They did talk about it, I heard them talk about it. They wanted to stay here. But until I read this book I didn't realize how hopeless so many of them felt and the reason why. See, I wasn't in the political game that much at that time I thought, "My gosh, they certainly can't send these people back." You know, blasé me, I thought, "Goodness, they're here, they're safe, they certainly can't send them back." But of course, the quota for refugees or people coming into this country, they had to be considered. I remember when I was in Fitzhugh Park School, which I talked to you about before. I forgotten when I first heard of Hitler, when I heard of the things that he had done or proposed, I wrote a letter to President Roosevelt. I probably was in fifth grade.

And a letter came back to my house and my father got the letter and you'd have to know my father to understand this. He said. "Now everybody be calm. There's a letter from the president." Cause it said from the President's office. And I wrote to him. I heard that Hitler was going to do these horrible things to people; I had heard of concentration camps. I was scared to death. At that time I wrote out of my own fear, I wasn't worried about others. He wants to conquer the world; he was going to come over here and make me a prisoner and my family. And I begged the President not to let that happen. And I got a response; course it was signed, I think, from the Secretary of State. I hate to say it, I don't know whatever happened to that letter, which is terrible; I don't know

who's got it or whatever. At that time, I was terrified of Hitler because as a child I was terrified of any oppression like that that would put you in concentration camps.

LB: You mentioned your friend Edith?

GR: Editha Semjan. She is now Edith Starkman, Or Mrs. Barnard or Bernie Starkman, whom I know them.

LB: Could you tell more of her story after *Life* magazine ran the article?

GR: After *Life* magazine ran the article, visitors were lined up waiting to get in, people traveled for miles while she was still under quarantine. They said, "Well, I'm sorry, you cannot get in." People came back, there were cartons, regular cartons, four by four whatever they are, there must have been thousands and thousands of what I would describe as fan mail. She was like a movie star. She's beautiful. Women and men and children, everybody was interested. "I'll marry you," "You can come into my home," "I'll adopt you." Adoption offers came through; it wasn't just marriage proposals. Strange though, people, which I'd probably do the same...somebody looks beautiful, you'd want them. Somebody looks a little bit ugly...I think I'll take her. Let's be realistic about it. But she had fan mail by the tons, boxes. When she was going to go to Canada to reenter and get her visa, she had to throw away tons of mail, she gave me lots of it, which I still have, fan mail from different ones. But I said box loads, and box loads, and box loads. They had nowhere hardly to stand. I said, "You're just like a movie star." She said, "I don't understand.: You see in her younger years she was busy fighting Hitler, war camps, Underground, with Mikhailovich, and even though she'd probably heard of movie stars she didn't dream such a phenomenon.

There was one fellow from Georgia, who came to visit her and stayed at the Adams Hotel, where I was a waitress. He had a glass eye; they guy he had good intentions, he was nice. He was a little uncouth in the fact—I arranged to get Edith there to meet him because he asked me. I don't know how we got talking but he said "I'm here to visit somebody in the refugee camp..." And when he told me who I said, "Well, that's my best friend." I said, "I'd like you to meet him." We were sitting at the table in there, and he says, "You know I've got a glass eye." And he took his thumb under it and it flipped it out. Well, pity the fellow with the glass eye but it didn't do too much for us to see him do that. A lot of humor in these things.

LB: Any other refugees who you were very close with?

GR: Well, her friend Lea Hanf, was the one we took to Rochester. Let's see, there was Edita, my first friends were Elizabeth Lederer, I think if I recalled it correctly. Edita Kampf...this is terrible, over the years, I can see them just as plain as I can see you, but the names. There was a photographer who took my picture and he had a horrible time

because I couldn't quit laughing, and he would say, "Now be serious." And I would laugh...who set up business in Fulton, New York, which is twelve miles away. As I say I knew...

LB: Is he still living in Fulton?

GR: I'm not sure if he's still there or not. If he isn't he's moved just recently. Leo Mirkovic, the opera singer; I love opera; I loved opera long before I met him. He was just tremendous. But I'd meet people...I go through...I lived there. I was there every day, even the guards that...when you had to get a pass to go in or out, even after the quarantine was lifted you needed a pass who you were going to visit and when you left you had to hand it back into them. And they'd say to me, "You got your visa, you packed to go and reenter the United States?" Cause I did literally live with them. I walked around, I'd go to the shows, I went into their kitchens, which sometimes made me almost nauseous. Nothing to do with their food. When I hear people say what wonderful meals and this and that, had these big kettles of things, maybe some food I didn't like. But they had to eat in these big kitchens, big kettles of stuff they scooped out. Went in all the barracks. Went to the plays, their musicals, and they had a lot of talent, they had a lot of talent. Edita was in a couple of shows—she danced. You know who I first heard of that they had heard and they liked? Was Stan Kenton. The first song I ever heard them do and I heard it after one of their shows was "you put your right foot in, you put your right foot..." and they'd all stand up and they'd get going and be so happy doing that.

LB: Do you remember when they heard they were going to be allowed to reenter the United States as immigrants?

GR: The exact day...

LB: Well, what they felt, what the response was.

GR: Some of them disbelief, the ones I knew were just exhilarated. I don't believe ever gave up. The ones I happened to know... I'm sorry to say I've forgotten some of the names, the faces, believe me...they wouldn't recognize me today, half of them. That was forty years ago. But so many said, "We're here and we're not going to stop here." That's the way I would think. "I've gotten this far, God isn't going to let me down now." But some of them chose to back, they didn't know, they wanted to go back to families, which was a bad decision in some cases I have since found out. When I first heard it, "We're gonna start packing," they were exhilarated, packing their clothes and there was a lot of joy and activity in the camp. Especially when a lot of them said to me "You gonna get packed, you getting ready to go?" "Yeah, I'm gonna go with you." And the guys say, "Well, Gerry, you got your visa, preparation for Canada?"

I've forgotten just what the whole thing was, what they had to go to Canada and re-enter, legally under Roosevelt's new home...as you will understand, Eleanor is the one that really got them here...God bless Eleanor. But it was activity like Christmas or something. "We're gettin' packed up, we're gonna go, gee we're gonna go there and then we can go anywhere we want to." Certainly they didn't have it easy, but they never would have been able to afford to do any of these things, as far as I could see, at all, unless the Jewish organizations throughout the United States had contributed to this cause. Set up the schools, set up the funding, set up the...put the wheels in motion, so to speak. And that's what I mean, they help your brother. That's what I call helping your brother. And I wish we all would do that. Maybe if we all did it there might not ever be war. If you had that much concern for your fellow man, how could there be? I don't know; that's my opinion.

LB: I thank you. Just the sort of things I wanted to get down on tape.

GR: I'll probably think of a million things...

LB: That's OK.

GR: I'm going back forty years. But I have so many pleasant memories. They gave me such joy.

LB: Each person I'm talking to has a different...Muriel has it from a teacher...

[End of that interview. Sounds of dialing a telephone then:]

INTERVIEWER: LAURIE BARON

INTERVIEWEE: AULUS SAUNDERS

LAURIE BARON: For some reason I'm still getting dial tone. Could that have something to do with your...? Hello, Mr. Saunders. This is Laurie Baron. How're you doing? I know that you're having company at two o'clock and let me know if this is intruding or not. Let me check one thing. This is the first call we've made on this taping apparatus for a telephone call. So let me make sure that things are working out OK. Hello, Mr. Saunders.

Aulus Saunders: Is everything OK?

LB: Everything is fine.

AS: Would you like to start with some questions, or anything of that sort?

LB: Are you rolling now? OK. We're on. I'm interviewing Mr. Aulus Saunders who was an art professor at Oswego State during the time that the refugee camp was at Fort Ontario. And what I was gonna...

[End of Side 1]

LB: ...I'm gonna base this on a number of the things I asked you when I was here last time. You had told me at the time that there were some negative responses, at least initially, to the refugees because they were different. Could you tell me a little bit about that?

AS: Well, I'll tell you very frankly, representing the college as well as a department head, I felt the difference between the attitude of the college faculty and that of the average citizen of Oswego. I think that possibly because almost all of the members of the faculty were from various parts of the United States, from Maine to California. There were a couple of New Englanders, several from Missouri, Nebraska, Utah, and Kentucky and so forth. I think a broader point of view by the average faculty member.

LB: What were the sort of things that townspeople who maybe weren't part of the college or part of the business community might have disliked?

AS: Incidentally I want to thank you for sending me the copy of *New York History* in which the article appeared. I noticed some of both the positive and the negative aspects in the community with regard to their reaction to the members of the refugee group. I don't know that I could add to that, one way or the other. I believe probably the typical Oswegonian was more conservative in showing friendship to a stranger than were the members of the college faculty because they were from various parts of the country, as I have said, and I think most of them were from parts that were open and friendly, as you find in the West and the Mid-West. Not quite as conservative as those in the east. Do you follow me?

LB: Right. Well, I was going to mention...since what I wrote in my article was based on things you said, if you could talk a little bit about the some of the stereotypes or things that bothered local townspeople.

AS: Well, there were different sociological levels in this community as there are in any community of this size. But I think that some of the members of the community were certainly...unwilling to see any advantage flow to members of other communities who came in as strangers, such as these people were. Consequently, they...as you pointed out in your article, they were a little bit overcome, you might say, by seeing members of the refugee group go behind the counters and haggle with the clerks. They were not accustomed to this kind of activity and I think some of the members who were less-traveled, possibly didn't understand that as well as others. That's one little point. I think it represents an attitude which is possibly a little more closed. They'd lived here for generations, some of them, and they were not accustomed to other points of view.

LB: You were at the Fort when the refugees arrived.

AS: Yes. My daughter Susan Saunders, who was the little girl who gave her doll to the little girl from Austria. Our daughter and I went down to the Fort to see them get off the train on that Saturday, which I think was the fifth of August, 1944. There were quite a few people there. Sue happened to have her doll with her. I think she took it because she had possibly in mind something like giving it to one of the children, as a token, when she left our home. Anyhow, she had it along. The radio station from Syracuse, who had its members there, saw this occurring across the fence, so they rushed her inside and made her re-enact the gift, which was carried on radio. Not that that was of any importance except in its significance. That at least some of the members of the community were glad to be friendly and to welcome these strangers in our midst.

LB: You had told me when I interviewed you before that art and music were the common language that the refugees and especially the college community spoke. Could you talk about the relationship between the college, and especially your part of the college, and the refugees?

AS: My part of the college, of course was the department of Art and I felt that in building the department to a greater strength at the college that I was trying to influence the central part of the state more toward understanding the heritage of the country, as far as its artists were concerned, as well as understanding the changes that were taking place in art in America. Trying to build an awareness of art to a various types of families, who were represented by their children who came to the college campus, to broaden their points of view and to add to their cultural background.

Consequently we were interested in building an exhibition program, bringing in good examples of art from various places; as a college without a great endowment, you might say, since most of our students came from middle-class or poor families. We had no opportunities as some of them had, in the largest or private universities. Consequently, we were very much interested in developing an art exhibition program, and in doing so our first thought when the refugee business came up, was perhaps we could trade, you might say, get acquainted, help them

get acquainted, get acquainted ourselves with their background more by showing them some American art exhibitions and also having exhibitions of their point of view in their work of the artists and photographers in the group, on our campus. Which we did.

We had several teas, receptions, to which these people were invited during the two years that they were here. I think there was some of this that was quite evident in other departments as well. We happened to have a book of clippings that we have made of newspaper articles that were significant to the Saunders family from time to time. I happened to note in here one that suggests the Forum Series, organized by Dr. Wells, whom you've mentioned in your article. This forum was a continuation of presentation, as a series, you might say, of talks, lectures, demonstrations, illustrations, of the various points of view in America that these people would come up against and also a sharing of theirs with ours. So the Forum Series was one of several different efforts on the part of the college. I felt very proud of the college because it sort of took a lead, I think, in trying to do something constructive to help the refugees understand America because it was evident that some of them were going to stay here and be Americans. And in that regard, let me say that Professor Kuttner, with whom we became great friends and his wife and his boy, Peter, after they were able to leave here...some time later on we got a nice letter of appreciation from him from Texas where he had finally obtained a position on the faculty of the University of Texas. He enclosed [a photo?] of himself wearing a ten-gallon hat and I thought well now, there is really a transformation from the middle of Europe to Texas with the ten-gallon hat.

LB: Could you tell us a little about your relationship with Siegfried Kuttner and also about his background before he came here?

AS: Yeah, sure I've got...I also have a record that I kept from time to time of significant things. I could read from that, if you're interested?

LB: Yeah, if it's handy.

AS: It's handy. Speaking of nearly a thousand refugees who came here, I've mentioned it. During the process, that is the process of setting up a program for the artists and photographers, and so on, sculptors, among the refugees, and getting materials for them. I've said: "During this process I met the Kuttners, Siegfried and his wife Lotta and their son Peter. I won't forget the first day we met. The Kuttners had a little space, like a small apartment, in one of the Army barracks buildings, very neat and very well-arranged, with flowers on the table, fresh flowers. I had gone to talk with Kuttner about art supplies and needs since he was appointed the leader in this area among the refugees, having been a prominent professor of stage design in a German university before the war." Incidentally, getting out of Germany he went to Czechoslovakia and was appointed stage designer for a theater in Czechoslovakia and I guess he was the only non-Czech who ever held that position.

So he was a prominent man in Europe. Anyhow, I went on to say here: "Since Kuttner was busy at the moment I met Peter, his son, and we got into a game of chess, and while waiting Kuttner came in; this was our introduction and a very pleasant one. We later became very close friends and went out on sketching trips around the town and in the country together. They were at our house many times with some of their friends from the Fort."

LB: What was the level of music presentations, and theater? What did you think about those?

AS: This was a reciprocal thing. I remember there were some musicians in the group. Incidentally, there were some very fine concert violinists, other musicians, who came up from New York, outstanding people in the field of music in America who came up to give their services in entertaining some of these folks at the Fort. At more than one of these occasions Mrs. Saunders and I were given special invitations to come in and be their guests at these musical concerts. Here's an old Army barracks building, with an old upright out-of-tune piano, and a fine violinist with his accompanist playing on this piano producing music that was just, it was almost weird because of the surroundings, you might understand. Anyway, we were treated almost royally by these people who seemed to enjoy the contact with the people of the college.

LB: One further thing, cause I don't want to take up your time. Your wife had talked about the experiences of your children...your daughter going to school with refugees. Could you talk a little bit about that? Or if you want to put your wife on?

AS: I don't know what she had in mind.

LB: Is she around? She just mentioned how she thought it was a good experience. I'd like her to comment a little on...

AS: [talking in aside to wife] Can you pick this up at this point? Mr. Baron wanted to get a response from you about the attitude...Sue in school with some of these refugee children.

Mrs. Saunders: If you're asking about the attitude of the children, our children thought it was a marvelous opportunity and we were very pleased too, because children from other countries mixing with our children was very educational, and social, and ...oh they got acquainted very easily. The children here, it seemed to me, assimilated the little strangers, made friends out of them. Really, it was an opportunity.

LB: Do you remember your daughter's response to them? What her playmates thought about having refugees?

MS: They got along beautifully. There was absolutely no question at all. They took each other in as best friends. It was great—a very nice experience all the way.

LB: And you did entertaining of...it sounds like the Kuttner's and some others. Do you remember any other stories of people who you met?

MS: The Kuttner's, we were very fond of them. In fact, Peter Kuttner, the boy, and our son were about the same age and they were very close. They were here many times; after all, it was like old friends. There was one person that we became quite fond of, Luba Chernitza, a White Russian countess. A very courageous woman, very strong; she had seen her husband and child---I don't know what it was, I think, a girl—killed, and course she had to try to forget and be very brave, but she cried too. She was here many times; we were very fond of Luba. Well, she was courageous to this point. She had a very serious surgical job done over here at the hospital, and two weeks later—normally other people would be just quiet—she walked the mile from the hospital to our house. I have a costume collection, mostly Americana, some lovely gowns. And with her experience in such things, she taught me how to wear and how to walk down steps in and how to handle some of my long skirts. I remember her walking down our curved stairway; she was so beautiful. I took her picture here in the yard in one of my gowns. But she died, we don't know...after she left here she died.

We had a lot of friends. We went to social affairs down there. One concert...we were quite upset, because we were given seats of honor right in the front row. The concert was fine, the performers were doing very well, but the people in the audience hissed. I was so embarrassed. I thought they should clap, give them a chance, they were doing their best with the old piano they had. We learned later that hissing was a form of a compliment; that was the European way, or Jewish or something. And until I found that out I was terribly embarrassed, I thought that they were being insulted. We went to many parties, private parties down there. We enjoyed them, we enjoyed them very much, socially. Course my husband had a lot of experiences with them with the arts. [Aside to her husband] You want to talk to him again?

LB: Thank you very much, by the way.

MS: Well, we enjoyed them.

LB: Thank you for letting me enter into your house. I know you've got company and..

MS: He hasn't arrived yet.

LB: I just wondered if Mr. Saunders has any other stories he remembered that he might want to bring up. Of his experiences?

AS: Hello, again.

LB: I just wondered if there's any further stories that you had, that might be of interest that we might use? Relationships between the town and the refugees, or your relationships, things you knew about them?

AS: I can't speak for the town but I can speak for the college and I can assure you that there was a great deal of sympathy between the college campus people and the people at the Fort, for each other's point of view and respect for each other's backgrounds.

LB: OK. Well, I thank you for letting me take up your time. And it should be about a year we'll have something out. I hope this summer we get to do the splicing, and it's gonna be three parts, and it will probably run over WRVO. We'll let you know when we get our act together and get the tapes done.

AS: Good. And thank you again for sending me your off-print of your article.

LB: I hope you enjoy it.

AS: Yeah

LB: Goodbye.

AS: Goodbye

[Side 2 ends about half-way through.]

Transcribed by jCook, fall 2005