

OH 283
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM: SAFE HAVEN
JULY 10, 1984 TELEPHONE INTERVIEW
INTERVIEWEE: SHARON LOWENSTEIN
INTERVIEWER: LAWRENCE BARON

SHARON LOWENSTEIN: Hello.

LAWRENCE BARON: Hello, Sharon, this is Laurie Baron. How're you doing?

SL: OK

LB: I hope I didn't disturb you too much last night.

SL: No, fine!

LB: Can you hear me OK?

SL: Yes. Can you hear me?

LB: The problem – I just talked to Joseph Smart, and I guess his hearing isn't so good, and so I was screaming and I didn't know whether it was the connection or his hearing.

SL: I think probably it was his hearing. How is he doing?

LB: He was doing fine and I'm sure you got some of the information he gave me, some of which I never heard. Maybe it's in your book. Just about . . . I never knew that there were plans to ship them back, or at least there was some sort of report, a rumor, that a ship had been registered to sail them back; that's why he claimed he resigned. Did you ever hear that?

SL: Well, yes. There were all kinds of rumors going on. But there were some legitimate efforts. You see the War Refugee Board – William O'Dwyer replaced John Pehle as Director of the War Refugee Board in January of '45. Pehle went back to working full-time in the Treasury Department and the War Refugee Board was reducing its operations overseas. And so O'Dwyer came in really to close the place down and one of the tasks he had was to get rid of the shelter. He tried to get UNRRA to take responsibility. UNRRA agreed only to accept responsibility for those refugees who were transferred to neutral areas, because it couldn't operate within the territorial limits of a belligerent country, so there were other reasons too.

But anyway, that was . . . so then O'Dwyer tried to get them transferred to Italy. He explored the possibility of having them sent to North African camps and meanwhile, while all these various possibilities were being explored in Washington and they were also being opposed, there were all these leaks that were going on. Because the refugees were never given any real concrete information, so that rumors and gossip went through like wildfire and the place lived on an emotional roller coaster. And there were, you know . . . and that was one of the things that led up to Smart's resignation. I'm really convinced that he had a good heart.

LB: Yes, so am I, so am I. Before I start on it, I should say we're actually being taped already and so I need to list who you are and all that – so when we listen to the tape we know what's going on – and also to tell you I wasn't able to get in touch with my Albany person who's the one who's my contact with Ruth Gruber. When I do, I will write you and let you know what the plans are. I would imagine it's the first week of August and that they're having some sort of fortieth anniversary.

SL: Is Ruth the one who's setting it up?

LB: I think so, I think so, and she doesn't even know I'm coming. The way I got in is these people . . . I don't know if you know they're going to do an exhibit at the New York State Historical Museum.

SL: Yes, where is that?

LB: And basically we're using each other. They want some of my interview tapes and in return they're getting me into some places they're got interviews with, and so I'm going to this reunion and we're going to jointly tape there so we don't duplicate efforts and over-burden some of these people who are getting tired, I'm sure, being asked questions.

SL: How can I get the tapes?

LB: The tapes . . .

SL: The interviews, copies of the interviews. Can I have access to those?

LB: Sure! Some of them, like I said have gone – I've made copies of some of the ones I've done already and have sent them to the Museum and then we've got them on file here for our radio show. These are reel-to-reel tapes that we've got here. And, we've got a whole set of Oswego tapes. Those were the first ones I did 'cause the radio station in Oswego gave us their facilities for a day just to interview people.

SL: How many hours of tape do you have?

LB: Oh, right now I'd say fifteen, sixteen hours. I haven't interviewed many refugees, and it's funny – the people who you gave me to interview I've been wanting to get to but through a whole bunch of coincidences I ended up interviewing other people.

SL: So, who have you interviewed?

LB: Walter Greenberg, who is an excellent interview, and it turned out, I was in . . . I'm on this other . . .

SL: He was Grumberg in the cast.

LB: Right, and I'm on this other project of interviewing people who helped Jews during the Holocaust. Or Jews who were helped, and I ended up talking to this . . . interviewing this woman who was hidden for several years in Holland and then she said, "What else do you do up where you're in?" And I said, "Oh, I'm working on this thing in Oswego". "Oh," she says, "my next door neighbor was there". And so it ended up I did two interviews that day. I went to her in the afternoon and him in the evening. And then I did Steffie Steinberg Winters.

SL: Who is the next door neighbor?

LB: The next door neighbor is a woman by the name of Ilsa Lobe.

SL: Ilsa Lobe?

LB: Yes, Walter Greenberg was the next door neighbor.

SL: Oh, OK.

LB: And so that just worked out coincidentally and I've really done most of my interviewing with Oswego people and now with Joseph Smart. Freedman does not seem to be at the address; he seems to have left and I haven't been able to locate him, and Pehle has not answered my letters yet. Otherwise, I was hoping that when I go to the August . . . I've also done Jack Cohen and when I go in August I was hoping to get most of my refugee interviews.

SL: How was Jack Cohen?

LB: He was great; he's a character, but he's fantastic and he gave a good interview.

SL: Now would it be possible for me – in other words I'm still working on my manuscript and should be done by the end of the summer – would it be possible for me to listen to those tapes someplace?

LB: Mph! I could have them all copied but it's an expensive proposition.

SL: Where are they going to be located?

LB: They're in Oswego; they're here and we're gradually copying them over for the New York State Historical.

SL: In other words, when you say "here", where are you?

LB: I'm still in Canton, New York.

SL: They are going to be in Oswego?

LB: No, they are going to be in Albany with the person . . . Dartis McNamee is the name of the woman who's doing, really, all the work on setting up the exhibits, and she wants to use some of that. Something else I discovered that might be of interest to you, is, believe it or not, there's a copy of the Dorothy Thompson radio show.

SL: Really!

LB: That still exists, and we're in the process of getting the rights from NBC for the radio show and when we get that, we can make you a copy; either that, or you can get it from the Library of Congress for \$14.00 or something.

SL: Now, when will these tapes be available in Albany?

LB: It really depends on how quickly we can get things done. Most of the tapes – assuming that I go down to Ruth's in August – they will have copies of all . . . we're just going to jointly . . . they're going to be video-taping and I'm going to be audio-taping.

SL: Who's "they"?

LB: The people from the New York State Historical Museum.

SL: I see.

LB: So those will immediately be there; right now they have my Walter Greenberg, Ilsa Lobe, they have a couple of the early tapes I did for the first manuscript which are terrible quality.

SL: Who's your contact at the New York State Historical Museum?

LB: Her name is Dartis McNamee.

SL: Can you spell it?

LB: Yeah, hold on; let me . . . why don't I give you this stuff at the end of this. I have it here somewhere.

SL: All right. What I would like to do is call her – I can call Ruth and get the information about the August meeting because I think I might like to fly up.

LB: Oh, that would be great.

SL: And be there at the same time, and either go to Albany – but it wouldn't be at Albany yet you see, so that I'd like to hear whatever I could, perhaps while I'm there.

LB: I'll you what I can do. If I'm going and if I can arrange for several days I probably – well I don't know how much this is – let me look at how much it would be, mean in carrying, but if they could give me some sort of carrying case and we could get access to some decent machine or something, I could bring the lot down with me. Most of them, like I say, I finally got a hold of Ralph Faust, he finally was willing to . . . well, he wasn't willing to talk to me but I sort of forced him to on a radio hook-up. A lot of the people who have some good stories from Oswego are on there, a lot of the people I already interviewed, but some that I didn't for the article. There's quite . . . I've been . . . one of the things I'm finding interesting, and I hope the book reflects this, is that very few, at least the ones I've interviewed, feel they were rescued by Roosevelt.

SL: Right!

LB: They feel they saved themselves and then it was the U.S. prerogative to take them out of Italy instead of letting them stay there.

SL: They're absolutely correct.

LB: Yeah. But I found that interesting, 'cause I think it was Walter Greenberg, I said, "What did you first think when you heard that Roosevelt was going . . . you know?"

SL: They're correct!

LB: Yeah, I know, and they're angry. They like Ruth but they think that that's a real error.

SL: Oh no! There's no question, they weren't rescued. They were already safe.

LB: Yeah, and so, anyway, let me get our interview in and then at the end I will give you this phone number and . . . how's your work going otherwise?

SL: Well, I'm on the revision of chapter nine. I don't know if I'll be able to complete it this week and then I have the bibliographical essay and the conclusion, and I am pushing to get it done because

I have someone who's going to read it for me, so then I can look it over again and hopefully I'll be able to send it to Indiana by the end of the summer.

LB: Great!

SL: So I'm at the point, you see, where I'm nearing the end, but if there's some good material on those tapes, then I could add quotes or anecdotes or whatever throughout the manuscript. I mean, I can still do that; my work is on floppy disks.

LB: But if you could, at the end, think of specific sorts of topics or things you're interested in and flip 'em by me, I might be able – rather than bring all the tapes, which is a considerable amount of listening – I might be able to remember fairly well what sort of things are on tapes and what things . . . like Walter Greenberg for example, is a very bitter refugee who really does not have a very positive memory of that experience.

SL: Then he's particularly important for me because one of the things that I've found is that in making my own contacts – and I said this at the end – that the material, in terms of the refugees' responses and attitudes, is very skewed, because those people who are willing to talk to me were those, for the most part, who came from intact families or whose families did not include any severe emotional or psychological problems, whatever, and they were in that generation of people who were young enough so that they succeeded quite well here. Those who were older and were never really able to reconstruct their lives and achieve the status that they'd had before or who had families where there were various problems, didn't want to have anything to do with me.

LB: Oh, I don't think he had a family that had problems, but I think his problem is he really had a great deal of bitterness towards being not brought here as just an immigrant allowed to resettle. He really . . . and he says he will never forgive being put behind a fence. He's a film maker and a very articulate guy. He's the one who's doing the film. He's working on a film about . . . first I guess it was about the first reunion, but . . .

SL: Where does he live?

LB: He lives in . . . oh, what's the name of it? . . . Monsey, New York. It's a real interesting Orthodox Jewish community, sort of in the sticks.

SL: Will he be at the reunion?

LB: He probably will because, like I said, he's been working on a film.

SL: OK, well . . .

LB: He's great.

SL: Anybody who's doing a film – my work will be extremely useful to them.

LB: Yeah, well anyways, let me ask you some questions about the politics, the Roosevelt politics.

SL: OK. I didn't know whether you wanted to get to the diplomatic, the political, the social . . . I wasn't sure what you really wanted.

LB: Well, I will ask you a couple of things and basically this is more for the behind the scenes Roosevelt reasoning and politics of the camp. Since I've got a lot on the town and I'm getting the

stuff on the camp and how it was run, but you're the best person for the behind the scenes things. Now, I should say, for purposes of the tape, I'm talking to Sharon Lowenstein, who is Assistant Professor of History at the University of Kansas, and whose book – is it still called *A New Deal for the Refugees*?

SL: I was Visiting Assistant Professor in History at the University of Kansas last year.

LB: Ah, so you're not employed now?

SL: I'm not employed at the present moment. I expect to be, but I'm not right now.

LB: What's the name of the book?

SL: The book is *A Raw Deal for Refugees*. That's what the publishers titled it at this point.

LB: All right.

SL: *A Raw Deal for Refugees, Oswego, 1944-45* and it's to be published by Indiana University Press.

LB: OK, so we will mention that when we take excerpts from this and introduce you. If you could briefly summarize what you feel the main reasons that Franklin Delano Roosevelt's administration and the American public had for not admitting refugees into the United States until this one group . . . if you could just sort of go into some of the causes you think were behind this.

SL: The single most important cause, I think, was the failure of rescue advocates to come together in a united way, and exert influence on the Roosevelt administration. They were divided amongst themselves, and because they were divided amongst themselves, Roosevelt really was never sufficiently pressed to respond. That's certainly the first reason.

Really, when he weighed the political issues, he really didn't have a need to take the kind of political risks that it might have entailed. There was the question of Zionist versus non-Zionist, the question of long-term goals as opposed to short-term; long-term, of course, meaning Palestine, short-term meaning immediate rescue.

The single strongest voice for immediate rescue and for putting aside post-war political questions – just as Roosevelt was postponing post-war political questions throughout the war – the strongest voice there came from Peter Bergson and the Bergonites and they were mavericks who were never accepted within the mainstream of organized American Jewry, and so they had limited influence. They were able to elicit wide-spread popular appeal and get support from a number of prominent figures in Washington and throughout the country, but they were really never able to overcome the opposition within organized American Jewry itself, particularly from the American Jewish Committee, the American Jewish Congress. The leadership of the American Jewry at that time – the average age was over 60, of the main leaders.

They really, honestly, did not have a full grasp of what was going on. Walter [Laquer?] talks that horrific gap between knowledge and understanding and they responded in conventional ways, instead of responding in new ways. Bergson was an outside maverick who was responding in new way, but who did so . . . whose credentials were suspect; he had an affiliation with the [?] whose tactics were looked upon with suspicion. He was a propagandist who believed in making mass appeals, mass public demonstrations. His tactics made the accepted leadership – Steven Wise, Malcolm Goldman and others – nervous, and so they were never able to get together.

That's certainly one of the . . . that's the principal problem that existed. There were, of course, other problems too. There was the Restrictionist . . . the prevailing Restrictionist mood of Congress. Roosevelt in the spring of 1944 was busily mending his fences on Capitol Hill. Relations with the Congress had deteriorated throughout the war but had reached their lowest point in 1943, to

the extent the relationship was characterized by some historians as one of guerilla warfare. The administration was trying to mend its fences in the spring and was not willing to risk upsetting the work that it was engaged in in the Congress in order to engage in rescue, particularly since there was no strong, organized, unified pressure for the administration to do so.

Oswego itself, the single camp, was really a token gesture that, to some extent, quieted or at least gave rescue advocates some sense of action. At the same time, it didn't pose a threat that would arouse hostility to any great extent from Restrictionists. Roosevelt was able to play it safe and, in addition, I think that my research shows that Roosevelt – throughout the first half of 1944 – was using the War Refugee Board in order to apply pressure on Britain. Because the Temporary Havens Proposal, the advocates of the Temporary Havens Proposal understood that logistically even if they could rescue tens or even hundreds of thousands of Jews – and at that time the Hungarian community of one million was still intact – when the effort to gain approval for temporary havens was going on throughout the first half of 1944.

That effort was really a means of applying pressure on the British in the hopes that the British would then open, establish, temporary havens in Palestine – in other words get around the “White Paper” by bringing Jews in only on a temporary basis and placing them in refugee camps. The “White Paper” was due to expire in May and there were still 25,000 unused certificates and there was a lot of pressure on the British to respond to that. The Zionists and the British were at each other, and both were looking to the United States.

Roosevelt told Morgenthau that he wanted to press Britain into opening Palestine and he used the War Refugee Board to do so throughout those few months, and the Temporary Havens Proposal was also a means of trying to do that. When Britain didn't respond, and when the Jewish community could not come together in a unified position, then Roosevelt had no need to stick his neck out and buck the Restrictionist Congress.

LB: What do you see as the major reasons/arguments put forth by those against admitting refugees, and what particular branches of government or sections of the country or types of people held these views? I'm trying to just get a portrait of the political landscape for a refugee policy in 1944.

SL: I think I first ought to start with some of the people who were in favor. David Niles Commission had Gallup run a poll in April of 1944 when he set out – at a point where he was hoping to help the Temporary Havens Proposal along – and the Gallup poll asked the Americans if they would favor the establishment of camps within the United States for refugees, to bring refugees over and keep them in camps for the duration of the war. And that Gallop poll showed a 70% favorable response.

In addition during 1944, not only did both political committees actually make statements favoring a proposal, the AFL and CIO both came out at their conventions with statements favoring the proposal and so did a number of church groups. But at the same time you had a . . . I'm not convinced that . . . I don't know how the American public itself might have accepted it but I think that a good argument could be made that it might have been possible to sell it to the American public. I think there's evidence that – rather tantalizing evidence – that the possibility at least existed.

Certainly in terms of opposition you have a long-time Restrictionist presence in the Congress that had wielded influence for some time; you have Department of Labor which wasn't terribly active at this time. I think that the main opposition that's really apparent is the opposition in the Congress and I have not made a study in terms of regions of the country. I'm aware of that one poll but I did not actually get into an analysis of regions of the country and different segments of the American population and how they would feel toward this. You do have, of course, this heritage of anti-Semitism that was really quite strong in the '30's.

We tend to forget that at the same time that Nazism was growing in Germany that within the United States there was very strong folk anti-Semitism. Throughout the '30's, actually going back to the '20's, Father Charles Coughlin, Charles Townsend, Gerald K. Smith were extremely popular in the mid 30's and in fact in '36 organized a campaign that came too little, too late to unseat Roosevelt;

and of course one of the charges they hurled at him most effectively was that the “New Deal” was in effect the “Jew Deal”.

There was a fear that – the Nazis had been very active in terms of their propaganda over here – there was fear that refugees would be a Fifth Column. Refugees were caught in a Catch-22 situation. On the one hand they had caused, according to Nazi propaganda, they had caused the economic downfall of Germany, and on the other hand, they were strong enough – the Jews, that is – sufficiently strong; they had to be stopped before they could take over the world. Some of those views were still prevalent in the United States.

There are polls through '45 indicating that the figures varied, depending on the way the questions were asked. At different times throughout the forties as many as one-third to – even in one poll, most of them varied between a third and forty and forty-five percent. One poll, I think, gets to about 50-52 percent where there is a view that there is . . . Jews, in some extent, deserved what they got; that they really had posed a danger to Germany and would pose a danger – refugees now – would pose a danger to the United States.

Some historians referred to this as a security psychosis. That was certainly true in the State Department. Breckenridge Long was in charge of the State Department refugee policy of course and he took as his responsibility – keeping refugees out – because he was protecting the United States. He was protecting national security and that of course was also the policy. His commitment to protecting national security and Britain's commitment to protecting its Palestine policy, then gave Washington and London a common interest. Alex George Randall was Breckinridge Long's counterpart in London and they cooperated beautifully on refugee policy until the introduction of the War Refugee Board in January of '44.

At that point, London – the Foreign Office, that is – really thought that the War Refugee Board was simply a cosmetic gesture which it referred to as “eye wash” on in-house memoranda and this was simply a gesture on Roosevelt's part, but that the consort of interest would remain; and then, as the weeks and months progressed there was increasing alarm in the Foreign Office because they are feeling the pressure from Washington on their Palestine policy. They begin to think that the War Refugee Board has enormous clout, that it is Morgenthau's child and that Morgenthau has enormous influence in the White House and so there's a great deal

[End of Tape 1, side 1, one-half hour]

SL: [continued] of concern and they begin to see themselves as being under direct attack, in terms of their Palestine policy.

LB: Do you . . . I noticed that you've entitled your book *A Raw Deal for the Refugees* which I don't know whether you're implying about the original terms and how many people came, or about the Fort itself. What do you think about the Fort Ontario project itself as a token gesture but non-the-less for the people who went, how would you rate its success as being a haven, a temporary haven for them?

SL: Both the government and the refugees began with very different assumptions; they had very different reasons for the shelter. Roosevelt, of course, established it as a token gesture to try to relieve some of the heat of him without arousing any opposition and it was meant to provide only minimal services, no more. There was no thought to enrolling refugee youngsters in American schools; there was no thought of giving them extensive medical care, rehabilitative care of any sort; the government simply felt obliged to maintain them in whatever condition they arrived in, except in-so-far as that might . . . as individuals were in serious danger, health danger, or might present health-care dangers for the group as a whole. In other words, if there were contagious diseases or if there were conditions that had to be addressed and could not be delayed, then the government would accept those as its responsibility.

It went so far – in the case of dental care – to say that there were over 350 people that needed dentures. This was a population that had long been deprived; more than 100 of them had been in Dachau or Buchenwald, many of them suffering excruciating tortures; they had been on the run some time, a number of them had lived in caves, you know; they didn't have eyeglasses, they needed all kinds of things.

In the case of dentures, the government determined those who could not masticate without receiving new dentures should receive those new dentures at the government's expense. Those who needed new dentures but could eat without them, on the other hand, were not the responsibility of the government in terms of providing dentures.

The refugees on the other hand, came with entirely different expectations. More than a fourth of them had been living freely in Rome; others had been living in the mountains and caves and surrounding areas. The majority had come from Italian camps. The refugees referred to those camps as concentration camps, but they were not concentration camps in the sense that the Nazis had concentrations camps. The people in those camps suffered the same deprivations that the Italians in general were suffering in the midst of enormous shortages of food and medical care and clothing. The population itself was suffering that. They were not in a strict internment.

The Black Market flowed freely; women used to leave the camp and wash shirts of Allied soldiers to pick up a few coins here and there. They would visit, sometimes, with the Italian soldiers. The refugees would say the Italians didn't make very good Fascists and they knew that they were safe. They were not in any physical danger.

Those who came to the United States, who took advantage of Roosevelt's invitation to apply to Oswego, came for very specific purposes. The government didn't know what it wanted from the refugees but the refugees knew exactly what they wanted from the government.

The first thing that they wanted was to restore their health; they wanted rehabilitative health care, not merely to be able to exist in a minimal way. They wanted surgery, orthopedic devices; they wanted hearing aids, glasses. They were all suffering from malnutrition. They wanted proper diets for themselves and their children. They wanted to be able to regain their health so at the end of the war they could begin to rebuild their lives.

The second thing that they wanted, those who had children wanted to give their children the opportunity to have an American education. The children had not had schooling for some time; in some cases parents tried to teach them, but it was quite inadequate. In other cases that was totally impossible, so they wanted to give their children a chance to resume their education and to have the opportunity to study in American schools – that was a specific.

On the way over, during the Atlantic crossing, one of the fathers made a card index file on every single school-age child, giving exactly how much education the child had had, where the child was at; that's the kind of information that you would need so that as soon as they arrived at the camp they could be enrolled in American schools.

A third thing they wanted – many of them in this group had a number of American relatives, some American spouses, American children. In other words, the National Origins Quota System caused families to split up. In some cases, people who had been born, for instance, and women and their children who had been born in Germany or Austria could immigrate in 1938-1939; whereas the husband who might have been born in Czechoslovakia or Hungary or someplace and therefore had to come in on a much smaller quota, had to remain behind. In a number of cases, those families had been separated for six, seven, eight years and the family members who had immigrated here were already citizens; a number of them had sons serving in the American Armed Forces, so that family reunion was the third reason that people wanted to come.

Several also wanted to come to the United States in order to find a way to reunite with family members in a third country that they couldn't get to from Italy. One elderly gentleman had a daughter in India and he couldn't reach her from Italy but he hoped, once he was here, to arrange to go to India. Others had family in Britain or in Australia, throughout the world, in Uruguay, in South Africa. They saw this as an opportunity to somehow improve their chances of reuniting with relatives regardless of where they were; that was their third cause.

Some of them had jobs waiting for them here or if they didn't have jobs waiting, they hoped that they would be able to resume their professional lives and begin to get on with the business of living. But in some cases there were actually specific jobs waiting for them. One man was . . . had been a screen writer for MGM and he was working as a translator for the Allies in Italy, living freely and well, and one of the fellows he was working for asked – was so grateful to him – asked if there was any way he could be of assistance, and the refugee said, “Yes, get me to America”. So when this project came up, he was told about it and he was added to the list. He had a job waiting for him in Hollywood with MGM. He fully expected to get off the boat and head for Hollywood.

So whatever the reasons were, the refugees came here with very specific expectations. Whereas the government, on the other hand, was prepared to place them in a camp, give them a roof over their heads, three meals a day, and the government expected that they would organize their own classes for their own children, teach them whatever they wanted, arrange their own recreation; perhaps some private organizations would come in and help out, that sort of thing, but they would remain in the camp for the duration – was not prepared to meet the expectations of the refugees at all. So they came from very different points.

At the same time, the refugees were able to regain, initially, much of their stamina. Just the fact that they had three good meals a day was very helpful; within three months a number of them were worried about putting on weight and then having to go on diets. Then they developed a high rate – a very high rate – of psychosomatic illnesses, all kinds of things that took over because of the frustration of being interned indefinitely, an indeterminate sentence. They saw themselves as being victimized in a land of freedom.

There was no distinction drawn between them and the enemy. When they had one opportunity to work outside the shelter, in the Oswego area, they came in contact with German POW's, who were also working in this area. German POW's had even worked in the camp, helping to get the camp ready, and a group of youngsters came across them their very first week in camp and they were absolutely stunned. So the refugees wrote a skit several months later, put it on, and in the skit they were asking why they were seen in the same light, treated the same way as POW's. Not knowing that one of the arguments that the War Refugee Board staff made when it was trying to gain acceptance for the Temporary Havens Proposal was, that in fact, the refugees would be treated the same way as POW's.

That was the argument used to assure the administration, and the public if it got to that, that there was no attempt to circumvent immigration laws. That any refugees brought over would not pose a threat to national security, would not circumvent the laws, simply would be held in camps and given the same treatment of POW's.

In actuality, POW's were treated better than the refugees because of the Geneva Convention and for some other reason too, actually. The POW's were given complete uniforms for every season; they were given much finer clothing than the refugees were; and they were also given more food, as a matter of fact. Because when the camp was set up they started out by giving the refugees the same rations as used in the Japanese relocation centers, only the appetites were far different. This was a group of deprived people who had not eaten sufficiently for some time. In the case of the POW's, the Geneva Convention said that it obligated each nation to feed POW's the same rations as its own combat troops at base camp. Which also meant that German POW's here ate much better than American POW's that the Germans had, because we fed our troops much better than they fed theirs. Some of the POW's here wrote home saying, “I've eaten more in a day here than I used to eat in a week”.

LB: Let me ask you something. By the way, the fact that I'm being quiet when you talk – I've learned from radio taping I can't make a peep while you're talking or else it will wreck the broadcasting.

SL: Am I going on too long?

LB: No, no! A lot of this material I've never heard, and I'm really looking forward to your book now because a lot of this is just obvious material that never made it to any of the things I've read and certainly didn't make into Ruth's book. What do you think in terms of this whole debate over whether the refugees were misled in Rome as to what they were coming to? The one group saying they signed the document saying what terms were and other people saying either the translation was bad or they were misled and they were told it wasn't serious.

SL: Once Oswego was agreed to the arrangements were handled as rapidly as possible. At Roosevelt's direction Pehle insisted that the refugees be selected and transported over here as rapidly as possible while there was still acceptance for the idea and before opposition could be organized. He in turn sent instructions to Leonard Ackerman who was to handle the selection. Now those instructions didn't actually reach Ackerman until the selection had already actually occurred but Ackerman had ten minute verbal instructions and he operated on those. The instructions were to select a mix. Roosevelt didn't want to be accused of bringing the Jews over, not to split up families, not to take families that had men of military age . . . what was your question again?

LB: The question was, were they misled about the terms?

SL: Ackerman, in the haste to do the selection, he didn't have enough time to get to every area. He turned over the Rome selection to the International Government Committees Representative. His name was Sir Clifford Heathcote-Smith. It was Heathcote-Smith who was in charge of the entire selection of the Rome area. He is the one who gave and slated promises. Ackerman did not. Ackerman was very careful not to give them any information. He simply said, "I don't know whether you'll be able to work on or you won't; I don't know how long you'll have to remain in the camp". Heathcote-Smith, on the other hand, concocted all sorts of promises because he operated on his own assumption.

The one-quarter of the group that came from Rome really had reason not to believe that they would be interned. In turn, when they shared their views with the rest of the group, the rest of the group, of course, accepted that because they heard what they wanted to hear.

That was certainly one of the problems. There was also a problem in terms of translation. The agreement that the refugees signed indicating that they would remain in the shelter for the duration and then would be returned to Europe – that agreement was translated into French, German and Italian. In the translation the absolute verb in English became conditional. The refugees looked more closely at the word "guest". Every agreement said that they were to be guest of Roosevelt. They focused on the word "guests" and they assumed when they read the conditional verb that it meant they would have a choice as to whether or not they remained in the camp.

There was also a view that was quite prevalent – in other words Roosevelt who was inviting them as guests and that America, the land of freedom and Roosevelt, the great humanitarian, would not keep them confined to a camp and this was simply something he needed to state in case he wanted to use it. That view also prevailed.

So that there were a number of reasons why they had reason not to really realize that they would, in fact, remain interned for the duration, even though the War Refugee Board thought that it had stated it very clearly and Leonard Ackerman was very careful not to make any promises. He, of course, could not say for sure what would occur 'cause at the time the War Refugee Board was not entirely sure what was going to occur. The War Refugee Board was not positive that these people were going to remain interned throughout, and in fact, within two weeks of the time they arrived the War Relocation Authority began to seek ways to have them released from the camp.

The War Relocation Authority, which administered the camp as it administered the Japanese Relocation Centers, had very strong feelings against keeping people confined to a camp. It struggled from the beginning to have Japanese-American evacuees released. At the time when Oswego was established it had managed to have thirty-five thousand of the one hundred and ten thousand Japanese-Americans released from camps and re-settled in communities throughout the Midwest and

almost from the beginning it struggled to have the refugees released on some sort of an internment-large program.

Actually until Germany surrendered, it was striving most to get permission for sponsored leave, which was an interment-at-large program and then after Germany surrendered the focus then moved to closing down the camp by having them released and obtain regular immigration. The War Relocation Authority pushed for that throughout. The refugees, of course, did not know that.

And the National Refugee Service, which was working very closely with the War Relocation Authority, did everything that it could to prevent individuals' relatives on the outside and organizations with whom it was not working closely from approaching individual Congressmen; the National Refugee Service tried to keep the lid on any independent efforts to obtain freedom for individuals within the camp.

Because they were trying to prevent any kind of negative publicity or hostile reaction knowing full well what the War Relocation Authority and the Department of the Interior were working very hard to achieve throughout, in the face of opposition from the State Department and the Justice Department.

LB: How would you characterize the reasons why Truman ultimately decided to admit the refugees rather than to abide by the original agreement, given what you just mentioned about the last post-period, especially the days after Germany and Japan were defeated?

SL: The shelter continued to operate for eight months after Germany surrendered because the question of what to do with them became such a difficult one. The State Department and the Justice Department wanted throughout to send them back to Europe. On the other hand, there was this growing DP problem in Europe, particularly after Earl Harrison came back after having made his report about the conditions there, that prompted Roosevelt . . . and Earl Harrison report not only told about the poor conditions in DP camps but also indicated that there were 100,000 Jews who could not be resettled in Europe and who wanted very much to go to Palestine and yet at the same time he indicated that there was very little interest in immigrating to the United States. I think that was also an important point as it turned out. Truman got the Harrison report in mid-August of '45; in late August he issued the public request to Clement Attlee to admit 100,000 Jewish DP's to Palestine.

Given that situation and given the fact that the DP population was growing in Europe and in addition to 100,000 Jewish DP's you had another 700,000 – you had considerably more DP's – but 700,000 non-Jewish DP's who were considered hard-core DP's. That meant they had no homes to return to and they were going to have to be absorbed someplace.

The problem was, how could the United States return a token one thousand when in fact, European nations were going to have to – were facing a problem so much larger and would look to us as an example. It became extremely difficult and even diplomatically embarrassing for us not to resolve this problem. That's one of the things that was occurring; by the time Truman issued the directive, the State Department had stopped opposing permitting the Oswego refugees to remain, because the problem had been so difficult.

The Justice Department would still prefer that they could have been returned and was even soliciting support on Capitol Hill for that. On the other hand, you have hard-line Restrictionists in the Congress who, before Truman issued his directives, had concluded that it was better to permit this one thousand to remain, that they were preferable to taking in, say, one thousand who didn't look nearly as attractive and who weren't Americanized. So this group then became a more attractive group to permit. Senator Robert Reynolds, who was an arch-Restrictionist, was one of those who then changed his mind.

As the awareness of the DP problem in Europe became more apparent, the international implications of our attempting to send them back also became more apparent. There began to be a growing recognition that we would need to permit them to stay. They were able to stay without enlarging the quotas in any way. They simply took numbers that otherwise would have gone to DP's

in Europe who frankly, didn't look very attractive at all to Americans, particularly American Restrictionists.

That was really the changing international situation after the war; it really played the greatest influence. There were, of course, individual occurrences that were happening here and individual people who had some influence, but the most significant aspect of it was the changing international picture, certainly.

LB: One final question – I notice our tape is going to run out – which has to do with something you mentioned in your article about this was the first venture that you could find about the government working closely with private agencies and sort of letting private agencies do things that the government wouldn't do.

SL: Right.

LB: Could you elaborate a little on that?

SL: That came about because of the difference between the refugees' expectations and what the government was willing to do, and/or what the government was prepared to do. Private Jewish organizations – there were also some non-Jewish organizations who participated – were eager . . . you know this was the single group of refugees brought over as a group. They drew enormous interest within American Jewry and also in other segments of the country as well.

If anything, there was too much eagerness to help so that the situation could have developed to one of chaos had not the National Refugee Service organized a coordinating committee to bring together those groups that wanted to offer some kind of assistance, and bring some kind of order and avoid overlapping. In the process the coordinating committee – but primarily the National Refugee Service who really was the leader of that – also took independent action. The National Refugee Service paid for and arranged the bulk of medical care that was given in the shelter. The coordinating committee arranged for the refugee children to attend school; they wouldn't have been able to attend Oswego schools had not the coordinating committee provided text books and materials so that none of the Oswego schools had to pay an extra penny to include refugee youngsters in classrooms that were otherwise under-utilized.

The service kept growing to the extent that the private agencies began to fear that the government would come to rely on it too much, would then be less willing to give help than it had been before these private agencies got into it all.

Through this you get the development of a close working relationship in terms of the delivery of social welfare services, which occurred, for the first time in this camp.

LB: Well, I thank you, and now we can talk about some of this other stuff, that's sort of the kind of stuff inner-politics which you're really the only person I think knows or at least has an overall vision. Certainly Joseph Smart doesn't. He was running the show and yet it seems like there were a lot of aspects . . .

SL: He had . . . in other words, he knows what was going on in his office.

LB: Yeah, yeah. You have an overall grasp that is really impressive and really will be helpful in putting this together. Things I need to tell you . . . did you see that nasty, nasty review of Ruth Gruber's book in *Martyrdom and Resistance*?

SL: No.

LB: Woo! Do you know Drucks . . . Herbert Drucks at all? He wrote . . . I mean it's libelous, not that Ruth's book is wonderful, but he wrote a book in which . . . a review in which he accuses Smart

of resigning and taking over the lobbying effort because he wanted to live in Washington on refugee money, crazy things like that. He also doesn't know his facts; he argues that the Polish group was the largest, he had that uncle there apparently, he argues all sorts of crazy things. He argues that how bad it was with the War Refugee Authority and they ran the camps for Japan and wasn't this an insult . . . without any of the other sort of stuff that you mentioned which balances that off, and it really is a nasty review. If you can get a hold of it, I think you'll be angered. I was really ticked off.

SL: OK.

LB: Well, I mean, he accuses Ruth, justly, of making herself the center of the story but then he tries to destroy anything she has to say, making this seem like a positive experience which he argues was entirely negative. Really, really nasty, especially the stuff about Smart.

SL: The accusation about Smart is rooted in feelings that were prevalent in the National Refugee Service at the time because when Smart resigned he then made an appeal for a grant to the Council of . . .

[End of tape one, side two, one half hour]

[Tape two, side one]

SL: (continued) . . . the Jewish Federations. Wanted a \$25,000 grant to fund this Friends of Fort Ontario, which was never more than a paper organization, never had a meeting, the Council of Jewish Federations didn't know who he was and they turned to the National Refugee Service. The National Refugee Service asked that the Council of Jewish Federations not give him any funding and there was a view that he was trying to personally profit, at least that was one of the charges that existed at the time.

What the NRS was really upset about was that he was taking the issue to the public which was, of course, anathema of both the NRS and WRA. Both Smart and Samuel Dickstein, who then held Congressional hearings, took the issue to the public and demanded that the refugees gain their freedom and have immigration. The NRS was afraid of the results of that and thought it was premature and wanted simply to have the refugees released on internment-at-large with the idea of postponing the ultimate issue of immigration, because it wanted to be able to address the large issue in immigration terms and it wasn't yet prepared to do that. So Smart made them very nervous, and there was the view that he was trying to, you know, benefit himself.

He did raise – his wife remained in the camp – and they did raise \$10,000 from refugees and their relatives and friends on the outside to fund his campaign. I'm convinced that it was an honest effort; I don't think he profited at all. I think he really had a good heart. In addition, between you and me, he was having personal home-life problems and it was more comfortable for him to change his residence. Now, I don't know where that fits in exactly, but that was also true. I think basically, he really cared about the people in the camp. He was much better at meeting with different groups of people and working with them on a one-to-one – but he had real empathy – than he was as an administrator.

He was not one of these typical Washington bureaucrats; in fact, he drove his staff somewhat up the wall because he didn't . . . because he was not . . . they wanted someone who would have been a better administrator, where he really wanted to spend his time mixing with the people. He was able to diffuse a number of very serious incidents in the camp that could have blown up into something far more serious, but he was able to diffuse them because he cared and because he stepped in personally, and because he really felt what he said. He had a great impact of them, although interestingly enough, many of them don't actually remember him in any great detail now.

LB: Hmm, that's interesting, but I get the impression, too, not only from talking, but reading, and I've read lots of letters and communications that he sent off, and it's clear that from very early on, he was working at cross-purposes with at least official policies. That he was . . .

SL: Well, you see, the War Relocation Authority was very sympathetic. I mean that agency was administering the camp where the War Refugee Board was making policies and the two had very different agendas. The War Relocation Authority was always sympathetic, was always opposed to the idea of keeping people interned. That's a different situation altogether.

LB: Let me look at what I've got here. I can give you the woman in Albany who's working this project. Her name is Dardis McNamee and her phone number is area code 518 . . .

[Tape ends here, five minutes]

Transcribed by jCook, November 2005