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WAR RELOCATION AUTHORITY
COMMUNITY ANALYSIS SECTION

STORY OF OSWEGO

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The last time you heard from me in connection with WRA new business was in the News Letter which said that I was going over to the Mediterranean to pick up some refugees, but I didn't get over. I did, however, start my work with the refugees the day they got to the United States, and spent last month up at Oswego watching the community settle down and helping in community organization.

WRA first heard about its new problem, the refugees, early in June, and heard it all of a sudden. The first I knew was the cablegram which the President sent to Ambassador Murphy asking him to select 1000 refugees representative of those coming out of Central Europe, get them on a ship, and get them to the United States where they would be put in an emergency refugee shelter under the care of WRA. I think that was June 12.

Our first thought was, "What kind of people are these? What is a representative cross-section of refugees coming out of Central Europe?" There were no real sources of information as to who these people would be. We felt that we should send someone over to come back on the boat with the refugee group so that by the time they arrived there would be some understanding of them. The idea was well received not only by WRA, but by the War Refugee Board, and plans were made to send someone over. I didn't go, but Ralph Stauber, statistician in the Washington office, went and Ruth Gruber, who has been working in the Department of the Interior, studying particularly Alaska's problems, and who has written a book "I Visited the Soviet Arctic," was sent by the Secretary. The army decided to send Lew Korn, a very wise choice. Korn is an anthropologist, who was formerly with WRA as assistant project director at Gila River. He left WRA for the army and is now a captain assigned to the Displaced Persons Office for the Allied Control Commission. He worked on the selection of the group of refugees and knew a great deal about them before they got on the ship. By the time the refugees arrived in the United States, there was at least the beginning of an understanding. The administration of the project began on that basis. The project director immediately got in touch with the three community analysts who had made the trip from Europe with the refugees and obtained all the information he could from them. This knowledge was the basis for getting off to a good start.

Maybe you would like to know about the place the refugees have gone to. It is Fort Ontario, at the east end of Lake Ontario, in the midst of the town of Oswego, New York. This is the oldest garrison fort in the United States. It has been garrisoned by French troops, American troops, or British troops ever since the 1760's. It is a permanent type of army garrison--brick houses, a big parade ground of several acres, lush grass, beautiful trees, and directly on the lake front. It is a beautiful place. The chief resemblance to relocation centers is that the people are housed in temporary wooden barracks.

There has been an interesting relationship between the Fort and the people of Oswego. The Fort has housed as many as 3000 troops. Army people married into the community. Majors and colonels who were stationed there have come back to Oswego to retire because Oswego is such a pleasant place. A change set in a few years ago, however, when the army began to feel that Oswego is not so well adapted to training troops as other places in the United States.

The army sent a contingent of Negro troops to Fort Ontario about 1939. That threw the town into consternation. The people were worried and afraid of what was going to happen. They thought that the dignity of Oswego had been lowered. The Negro troops came, got along beautifully with the populace: there were no race troubles. Trade was as good as ever, and so the Oswego people decided all was o.k. Then a new crisis developed just after our entrance into this war.

The army decided to abandon Fort Ontario for the training of regular troops and devote it to the training of illiterates. A special program was put into operation at Fort Ontario for those who could barely read, or not read at all, and for some who were considered sub-normal. That again looked like a loss for the community of Oswego, but the people of Oswego liked these newcomers--mostly Southerners. Everything was nice again. That lasted until last March.

The special training group got so big that Fort Ontario could not hold it, so the army decided to move the illiterate group to Pinedale Camp, a little way to the northeast. That left Fort Ontario vacant. So the bottom had dropped out of things for Oswego and its fort. The people of Oswego formed a committee to put pressure in high places to make some use of Fort Ontario. The committee worked hard, but did not know just what it was accomplishing. They got in touch with army people. Then all of a sudden came the announcement on June 12 that refugees from Europe would be housed at Fort Ontario. The committee didn't know whether they had really got something or whether they had a lemon. They didn't know how the community would take this. But Oswego immediately began getting a lot of publicity, and all seems to be well again. That is the background of the community relationships, and I think it is worth telling.

Now, just what kind of people have been brought into this set-up?

There are 982 people--not quite a thousand. They were gathered together in Southern Italy around Bari on the heel of Italy, Ferramonti, Naples, Rome, etc. They were selected from 3000 people who applied to come to the United States. In coming, they signed a statement which said they were coming for the duration, as guests of the United States, to return to their homes in Europe later. A lot of our problems have stemmed from this word "guest."

Of these 982 people, 916 have classified themselves as Jewish. The others are classified as Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant. There are about half a dozen Protestants, 47 Roman Catholics, and 12 or 15 Greek Orthodox. The largest group is from Yugoslavia--about 371. The next largest group is Austrian--more than 250. Next, Polish--between 200 and 250. Next, Germans, who constitute about 100. There are something like 65 Czechs. There are a few Russians, a couple of Hungarians, a family of Greeks, a few Rumanians, and a few Bulgarians. There are also a few children who are technically Belgians because of having been born there. Therefore, from the point of view of nationality, it is a pretty motley group.

Then again, from the point of view of their refugee experience and background, they are a mixed group. There are more than 250 who were gathered together in Rome, and those people had not recently lived in concentration camps. They are pretty much individualists. Many of them escaped from concentration camps, sometimes in groups of two or three or more, fending for themselves, picking up scraps in Rome, and living a pretty tough life.

These are in contrast to the people from Ferramonti Internee Camp in Southern Italy managed by Lew Korn, a highly organized camp with a system of wage and relief payment.

Another group from Bari, Italy, had a still different background. This was a transit camp, where the people lived and slept in a camp, but worked outside. Some worked in U. S. Army offices in Bari.

Still another group had had the freedom of the Italian towns. They had to report their whereabouts to the government, where they were living, change of address, and they could only change their address within a given area. They worked for wages, living in rented houses.

Thus you have many contrasts. You can't think of all of them as having in common even an "internee psychology."

Their mixed origins show especially in their physical makeup. There are all shapes, sizes, colors and kinds of people.

The only thing they seem to have in common is their common suffering. All had been through various kinds of persecution, either

in concentration camps or outside. Almost all of them had lost relatives. Some of them had lost all the relatives they could name, not only their immediate family, but up to fifth cousins. There are families of mothers and a couple of daughters who have seen all the other members of their families killed in front of their eyes.

Yet, there is a tremendous difference between what they have been through and how they have been through it. The Yugoslav people have only been under the heel since 1940 or 1941--the last three or five years at most. They came from a region which had no anti-Semitic movements until the beginning of this war. Nazism hit them suddenly and often wiped them out suddenly. They are much more like evacuees in their psychology. They contrast greatly with the Austrians and particularly with the Germans.

At the other extreme are the Germans. These people have been under the yoke since 1934 or 1935, leaving their home towns for concentration camps, escaping concentration camps, trying to get into France, deciding to leave France when the Germans overran that country, coming down under almost unbelievable difficulties to Southern France and into Northern Italy. These people have been uprooted for almost ten years. They feel that they can never go back to their own country. This is in contrast with the Yugoslavs, who still identify themselves with Yugoslavia and intend to go back.

Between these two extremes are the Austrians. Then there are the Czechs, who feel very secure. They are convinced that Czechoslovakia will remain Czechoslovakia forever. I do not believe they would give up Prague for New York if they could. The Poles don't know where they stand. I found it very difficult to get in touch with the Poles.

There is one more contrast among these people, and that is the contrast in religion. Although 916 of them are Jewish, they are not the same. To make a rough classification, I would say there are about 200 Orthodox, about 400 Conservatives, and the Reformed Jews would make up the difference. There is great contrast between these Jewish groups.

The Orthodox Jews are classified by the Reformed as having a primitive religion. Their services are participated in by the whole congregation. They are very strict in their ritual. These people would not consent to using the chapel that the Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholics and Protestants use because they felt that things on the altar would be contaminated. They observe strict dietary laws. Everything must be Kosher. When a Kosher kitchen was set up for them the people were almost in ecstasy. They said this was the first time in four years they had been able to eat as they should. Within the first week these people were thoroughly organized as a group. The morale of the Orthodox group soared high. They were a group apart. Poles, Germans, and Austrians constitute the greater number of the Orthodox group.

The ritual of the Conservatives is different from that of the Orthodox. The congregation does not participate so fully in the services. It is more like a Protestant or a Catholic service. However, they separate the men and the women, as do the Orthodox. Most of the Conservatives are Yugoslavs, and are Sephardic Jews, speaking the Ladino language, instead of Yiddish. These groups do not understand each other in everyday language. The common language of all the Jews is the sacred language of Hebrew.

Yugoslavs, Germans, and Austrians mainly belong to the Conservative group. The last two have joined the Yugoslavic Sephardic group because their ritual most closely resembles theirs. I did not find the Conservatives paying attention to any dietary laws at all.

The Reformed Jewish group may be compared to a majority of American Protestants who do not take their religion very seriously.

We have talked about the diversity of the background of the Japanese evacuees, but it does not compare with the diversity of background of these people. They are more homogeneous than the center populations in one respect only, and that is in economic level. They are pretty uniformly from the middle class--business and professional people--lawyers and businessmen, a few doctors, dentists, a number of prima donnas such as an Austrian novelist and scenario writer, an operatic baritone, and a dramatist from Vienna.

Conflicts developed during the settling-down process. The most obvious conflicts arose over the difference in language. Almost everyone understood at least a little German, with the exception of perhaps 25 or 30 people, so it seemed to be a pretty good choice for a common language. When they arrived in Oswego, there was a welcoming given by the Mayor and city dignitaries. The speeches had to be translated, and German was selected. A young Yugoslav was selected to translate them into German. He was a very able linguist, but there was lot of talk among the refugees about his being selected. They felt the Germans had been favored by the Administration, and at the same time the Germans resented a Yugoslav as translator.

Next, it was decided to issue all notices in English, German, Italian, and Yugoslav. There are more Yugoslavs than any other one group and when you use German and Yugoslav you cover about everyone, but there is still a small group of Hungarians, Russians, and some Poles who do not understand German or Yugoslav. Hence, we decided to use Italian, which many had learned in the camps in Italy.

As soon as that determination was made and translations began, some refugees began to make protests. The Poles said we should include Yiddish. They said there were older people who did not understand the other languages. We still may find it necessary to translate some things into Yiddish.

They are more eager to learn English than anything else so we are planning to start English language classes. Ruth Gruber was besieged on the ship on the way over by would-be pupils. A minimum of two-thirds of the refugees have their hearts set on staying in the United States. The Yugoslavs are the only sizeable group who want to go back to their own country.

The others either want to stay here or go to South Africa, Palestine, or some British possession, but do not want to return to Central Europe. They hate the Germans. Many have a racial attitude toward the Germans. They feel there is no hope for order in Europe unless the Germans are exterminated. They feel that it is a racial characteristic of the Germans to persecute.

When you get down to the bottom of the conflicts about the use of a language, you find there are feelings of superiority involved. The German Jews walked out of a religious service because German was not used in the service. The Yugoslavs say "that's just like the Germans, the German Jews are really Germans at heart." The Germans say the Yugoslavs knew we Germans were attending the service, but they had the whole service in Yugoslav--an insult.

They also take pot shots at each other in terms of who suffered most. This sounds silly, but it is important to them. The Germans look down on the Yugoslavs because they did not suffer as much as they did; and the Yugoslavs look down on the Germans because they had no children fighting against the Nazis while the Yugoslavs have. The Yugoslavs say that the Germans saw the whole thing coming and had a chance to fight it, and the Austrians even had a chance to get out. The quibbling they do over the amount of suffering is amazing. It is very easy for the administrative personnel to get mixed up in those conflicts. They come to the project director with their problems and he tells them that they have to iron them out themselves because they are their own problems. After a 15 or 20 minute talk, they say, 'Well, maybe we can work it out.'

The refugees say there is a great difference between the Italian camps and the American camp. They say in the Italian camps when you go up and ask for a pair of shoes, etc., the Italian administrator says, "Tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow!" That is the stock answer. They say it is very different here in the United States. When you go to an American administrator and ask for this or that, the answer is, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry." This gives you a very different feeling. When they say, "Tomorrow," there is some hope, but when they say, "I'm sorry," they feel there is no hope. But the refugees are very pleased with the quickness with which many things are done here. They say, "This is the American way." They were amazed at the speed with which Dr. Ade established schools at the camp. He came to the camp and in one day had the schools set up.

The major problem I am worried about and about which the people on the Project are worried is the problem of employment. The tentative policy which was set up was the no-wage policy: not to pay them anything during the settling-down period and to see what the reactions would be, then to formulate a definite employment policy in a couple of months. The result was that when the people came in from the ship they found a few Oswegans manning the mess halls, taking care of the garbage, and cleaning up the place, and a pretty nearly complete crew of maintenance men. To get the whole shelter going satisfactorily required volunteers to come out and work in the mess halls, as maintenance men, etc. There had been trouble on the ship on the way over. It had been said there were to be no wages in the shelter, and that people would be expected to volunteer to do the work. When the representative asked for preliminary volunteering, there was trouble. "What is this? We came as guests of the United States, and here you want us to volunteer for labor." When some of the people did volunteer, they were threatened by others.

After the people got settled there was a remarkable number of volunteers. There were about 150 people who had volunteered for jobs in a short time. An advisory council was established which discussed the whole question and tried to decide how the thing could be worked out. While this was going on a meeting was called on the parade ground by nobody knew who. About 150 people attended this meeting. A very active-minded chap, who would be called a trouble-maker in a relocation center, got up and began to speak and wondered if the people were going to submit to this plan of working for no wages. He was hooted down by persons in the audience who said, "What are you talking about? You haven't begun to work yet." Someone else in the audience got up and said, "This is no time to make protests. Let's see how this thing works out first." While all this was going on the project director became convinced that a no-wage policy would not work. The tentative proposal which was made by the council was that the mess halls be manned by a rotation of crews, and a council member began recruiting such crews. He appealed to the people with the idea that in normal times in Europe the people would be working in their own homes, so that in working in community mess halls they would not be working for anybody else but themselves. The cleaning of the barracks was also done on a rotation basis, and the removal of garbage likewise. But when it came to the general maintenance of the camp, the only way in which it could be worked out was to pay the people. There was a discussion on the methods used in different camps in Italy. At Ferramonti a wage policy was used. At St. Maria the refugees were given grants out of which they paid for their food and clothing. The council made a comparison of the different proposals and offered to pay wages for some of the key positions at the shelter until September 15. They hope the administration will work out a plan on a wage system. If they don't, the council has suggested that that can be done by the outside Jewish agencies who

are helping. The administrative reaction is this: From the Washington end the Director feels that things are working out nicely. The people are taking responsibilities themselves for the mess halls and house cleaning. He feels sure that if a general wage system had been established at first these responsibilities would not have been undertaken by the community. Once this question has been settled, a wage scale can be worked out for the skilled workers (who are not working for themselves, but for others).