

Oswego

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# CONFIDENTIAL

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## REPORT ON THE CAMP ORGANIZED BY THE WAR RELOCATION AUTHORITY IN FORT ONTARIO, OSWEGO, NEW YORK

by S. D. Wolkowicz

I went to Fort Ontario as the official representative of the French weekly of New York, France Amerique. My work, however, was directed towards investigating conditions in which the World Jewish Congress and the American Jewish Congress are especially interested. My journalistic status gave me a degree of liberty and of access to all sources of information which the delegate of an organization would probably not have had at his disposal.

To call Oswego a free port is a sheer misrepresentation of what a free port should be, as far as the inmates are concerned. The original idea behind a free port was to bring people to America whose lives were in danger. Under present conditions, it would certainly be easy to find several thousand people whose lives are in danger in the partisan zones of Yugoslavia or in the Greek Isles. Of course it would necessitate a certain effort. The people brought to Oswego were, however, absolutely free to work and to circulate in Italy. I don't deny that conditions in Italy from the viewpoint of food are catastrophic, and that the overwhelming majority of those who came did not see any economic future for themselves in Italy. Nevertheless, some abandoned well-paid jobs with the military authorities in order to come to this land of dreams, America. It is true that before coming here everyone had to sign a paper stating that he was coming to a camp in Fort Ontario and that he would have to leave the United States after the war. In spite of this, it seems that false hopes were given to those people by a certain Mr. Smith, an Englishman connected with the AMO and Mr. Perlman of the Joint Distribution Committee. They stated that a possibility of staying in America permanently was not excluded, that the American government had reserved the right of non-admittance of the Fort Ontario refugees after the war, but that the American government still had the right of admitting the refugees. I can hardly believe that this is a lie, since the same statement was made to me and to Kener\* by almost a hundred persons. To believe that it is a conspiracy of lies made in the same words and the same terms by isolated individuals is from the practical viewpoint almost impossible.

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What is even more grave is the fact that the basis of selection in Rome was the possession of expired American visas, visa demands filed in Washington or relatives in America. This gave additional weight to suppositions in the fevered imaginations of the refugees who accepted it as a proof of the fact that the possibility of staying in America permanently was not excluded.

To this I must add that people, who have lived under false names for four years and who have saved themselves and their families by these false identities, have another conception of a document than the American authorities. For the State Department a passport is a passport and a signature is a signature. On the contrary, for those people who have been living as rolling stones for years a passport is a piece of paper and a signature is one signature more or less.

\* Kener is a member of the Polish Representative Committee of the World Jewish Congress.

Of course, by coming here they have actually not lost very much. This is especially true of those with families. Conditions in the camp are improving daily and it is to be hoped that in a month or two this camp will really be a model establishment of its kind. Better food is being provided. The refugees, to whom a piece of bread was something precious in Italy, are now satisfied. Of course, it is far below the American standard. Until now orange juice, beefsteaks, turkey, ice-cream and pies have been unknown in the camp, but I have been assured that in the very near future even those last refinements of civilization will be put at the disposal of the inmates.

I must say, however, that at the beginning mistakes were made. At present, the overwhelming majority of the staff of the Camp deserve the highest praise. In general, they treat refugees as human beings. Thus, for instance, old clothes are no longer being distributed. Instead, since the beginning of this week, refugees who need clothing are taken individually to shops in town and have the right of choosing whatever they need and like. The merchants have been told to consider these people as regular customers and to treat them with as much politeness and efficiency as their other customers. The work accomplished by certain social workers in the camp is really admirable. It should not be forgotten that some of the refugees in the camp are "trash" and have always been "trash". The method used for selection of the Fort Ontario refugees in Italy was such that very often those who were most aggressive succeeded in being admitted, and now continue to be just as aggressive in the camp. For example—a Yugoslav woman who was brought to town to buy stockings requested nylons, and said that she would pay for them with the money belonging to her which was being held up by the Treasury Department. She showed her appreciation of the cotton stockings by saying, "Sollen die Amerikaner solche socken tragen". On the other hand, there were many cases of people who really needed things and who refused to accept the things they needed, saying that one dress or one pair of trousers was sufficient. The overwhelming majority of the group are, fortunately, fine upstanding individuals.

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#### Future of the refugees

The refugees want, above all else, liberty to live and to work as free people. The following plans are being made by the administration of the camp:— Children will be sent to school. Professional courses will be organized for the others.

#### Legal Situation

According to the administration of the camp, it seems that many of the people who had supplied visas and demands for visas filed in Washington made their situation worse by coming to America, since the State Department will not even consider demands for visas coming from Fort Ontario. There are at present six pregnant women in the camp. It appears that children born in the camp will not be considered Americans. All of these statements are of course only rumours.

### Financial situation

The refugees are receiving the following help from the administration of the camp:

Adults— \$8.50 monthly.  
Children between 10 and 18 years— \$7 monthly.  
Children under 10 years— \$4.50 monthly.

It should be stressed that the Yugoslav group was not only in the best physical and economic shape but was also the first to be helped by the Yugoslav Jews in New York and by the Yugoslav Christians in Pittsburgh. They received about \$15 or \$20 individually.

### Rescue possibilities

Those in Fort Ontario can be divided into the following categories:

- 1) People who escaped from Belgium and France to Italian held territory in France and who went to Italy after the Italian Allied armistice. Because of military operations in France this road of escape is closed.
- 2) People who were in Italy when it entered the war.
- 3) People who were evacuated from Yugoslavia by small fishing boats or by British and American planes from the Isle of Rab.

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It seems that aside from Switzerland the only way of escape from Nazi Europe is Tito held territory. According to the refugees in the camp, there is a geographical possibility of organizing the rescue of Hungarian Jews on a small scale from Hungary to Tito held territory. Of course they left Yugoslavia so long ago that they don't know the present position of Tito's troops, and they could not give me any useful details concerning the organization of rescue through this channel.

The general opinion of those in the camp is that if more false documents were provided more people would have been saved. Many of them travelled by means of false papers to Italy, where they used forged Aryan documents. Of course it is to be hoped that the present military developments will make it unnecessary to do anything further about this matter, but I would suggest that the question of counterfeit papers be given serious attention, as in this way we can save thousands of people if Germany should unfortunately be able to resist for some time in her inner fortress.

Everyone in the camp felt that if more money had been sent through underground channels to Europe, thousands of Jews would have been saved, as almost every Nazi and Quisling official could have been bribed.

I should like to add that most of the refugees who had come from France spoke with enthusiasm of the wonderful rescue work achieved by Jarblum and Silberschein.

### War Crimes

During my short stay in the camp, I could not investigate in detail the war crimes of which the people in Fort Ontario were witnesses. There is such a wealth of material to amass that it would be necessary for a special man to go to the camp and to stay on the spot for several weeks in order to get all the details.

In general the refugees praise the Italian people and the Italian authorities—even the Fascist authorities. They complain about the Flemish Belgians in Antwerp, praise the Belgian population in Brussels, are not very enthusiastic about the behaviour of the French people in Southern France and utterly detest the French Vichy police. I have been told that the French Vichy police agents were capable of playing cards in a Jewish house until 10 P.M. and then of coming back to the same house at 12 o'clock in order to arrest their hosts and to deport them to Poland. The refugees also complained and spoke with horror of the cruelty of the Croat ustasha.

It is characteristic that as far as the Yugoslav Jews are concerned, those coming from Serbia are willing to return to the old country, but those coming from Croatia don't ever again want to see the country where they suffered so much.

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### Belgium

As you already know there is a very well organized Jewish underground committee in Belgium. It is made up of members of the various Jewish parties. This committee was very helpful in placing Jewish children in Belgian families, and collaborates with the Belgian White Brigade. At present it is impossible to disclose the names of the members of this committee as this would be dangerous to them and to their families, if they are still living in German-held territory.

The Germans appointed a Judenrat in Belgium. The most serious accusations have been made against this body. It seems, however, that they acted not as accomplices but simply as dupes. This information was given me by people who left Belgium in 1942 and by others—in one family—who left in 1943.

Jewish Belgian boys distributed summonses, issued by the Judenrat of Brussels, to the Jews of foreign origin who were subject to the labor levy. (The Judenrat was more expressively called, by some, the Judenverrat.) This summons said that in order to avoid exposing the entire Jewish community of Belgium to reprisals people should not try to evade the Arbeitspflicht. The summons also stated that false rumours had been spread in Belgium about deportation and that in reality Jews from Belgium only went to Northern France to work. Actually deportees were sent from Belgium to Northern France and from Northern France to Poland.

The refugees were particularly bitter about the attitude of certain members of the Judenrat. It has been reported that one member of this body who was warned to resign several times by the Patriots,—and who did not,—was finally killed by the Belgian Patriots. I think that an investigation should be started as soon as possible in Belgium, in order to determine to what extent these accusations are founded on facts.

In general the Belgian refugees have unpleasant recollections of their stay in Southern France. The Prefect of Nice, Mr. Galli, and his helper, Mr. Jarbot, have been brought to my attention as notorious persecutors of the Jewish people. When the signal for deportation came--old people, sick people, children, those who only had a few hours to live because they had cut the veins in their wrists--all were deported to make up the number required by the Germans.

During my stay in the camp, I formed a Belgian group of 46 persons and suggested to approximately 100 refugees who had come from France that they form a French group made up of those individuals who had been residents but not nationals of France. Some of these people had been volunteers in the French Army. Since my visit, Mrs. Grinberg has received a letter from that group which asked to have a French Jew visit them at the camp.

In my report, I have passed over in silence the diverse cultural activities which will be organized at Fort Ontario by various Jewish organizations in the near future.

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