

Right. So we'll sit and talk for as long as we care to. And then my job and the tough one is when I get it all together, I have to pick and choose little bits from everybody that we've interviewed. And we've interviewed six of the former refugees.

Did you get any of them in a group?

Well, we got Adam and Steffi together. We went back to Oswego. And that was exciting.

The

Careful, you're still wired.

You're still connected to the

OK.

Hand me that piece of picture there, will you? And you saw this.

It looks like Adam's drawings. It is an Adam Munz cartoon. How about that? Oh. I have lots of questions. We'll just talk all day long. Tell me briefly what you were doing before you were contacted and asked to be the director of the refugee shelter.

Immediately before? I was in Lima, Peru. I had been there as the director of economic mission for our government. And prior to that, two years before, I had worked for the Relocation Authority in the Japanese relocation thing. So Dylan Mayer called me from Washington and says, Joe, we want you to go back and manage a refugee shelter. And it was as simple as that.

Did he tell you anything about why the shelter was being opened?

He explained why they were coming and that they were coming over simply as temporary guests. I thought I was going to run a kind of a resort hotel for a group of friendly refugees. And frankly, I hadn't been very happy about my participation in the Japanese relocation role. And I thought, here is an opportunity to redeem myself. Of course, ultimately, I found that I was running another small concentration camp. But yes, I had been in Lima just before this assignment.

Did Dylan Mayer or anyone from the government explain why it was only this one camp and why there were only 1,000 coming?

Yes. He said it was a token gesture on our part. There are many, many refugees in Italy and other liberated areas. They were in the way of the army occupations and costly to maintain in camps over there. He hoped that this gesture would persuade other countries, such as Canada and Latin countries, to take large numbers of refugees.

When they arrived in Oswego at Fort Ontario, many of the refugees were surprised and bewildered to find a fence surrounding them. What did you, as the camp director, tell them to calm their fears?

Can I interrupt?

Sure.

You can shut off at any time, can't you?

Sure.

My hearing is bad. And I'm not getting your questions.

OK.

Can I come a little closer?

Sure. Oh, let me. Stay where you are, and I'll come closer.

OK. OK.

How's that?

My question is--

Don't speak much more loudly, but as clearly as you can.

OK. OK. My question is this-- when the refugees arrived, many of them were shocked and upset with the fence that surrounded the camp. What did you tell them to calm their fears?

Well, I told them something that probably was not quite true. And that was that the fence was as much for their protection as anything else, to keep the curious, the intruders out. I thought they had nothing to fear from the local population, but that they should be secure in their own community and not have to be bothered with outsiders.

Were many of the refugees coming to you very upset and complaining about the fence or asking about the fence?

This was immediately an issue. They were great organizers. They organized a committee on any pretext or to meet any situation. And yes, their protests on this score were immediate and continued all the time they were there.

They felt that they had been misled into what they were told by the Army interviewers in Italy. And they were sure that they were coming to the United States as honored guests. And I guess nobody had told them that they would be restricted, that their movements would be restricted. They assumed that even though they would live temporarily in the shelter, that they would be free to come and go.

Why were the refugees in quarantine for the first month?

Purely a health matter. Our health laws or procedures require certain quarantine measures against the foreigners who come to the country. You have to be sure they have the right vaccinations and so forth. I think that was the only reason.

During the quarantine, many of the refugees had family here in the United States.

Yes.

There must have been family reunions through the fence. What was that like?

Oh, not only through the fence. But their families were free to visit them inside the shelter. I don't think there was any difficulty about getting permits to come in to visit. They simply had to come to the gate and identify themselves. Entry was free, reasonably so. Exit was difficult.

Do you remember the controversy over white bread and black bread?

Over what?

White bread and black bread that the refugees wanted.

Yes, I do. This was part of the general problem of providing an appropriate diet for the Jewish people, particularly the Orthodox. And this is one thing we had overlooked in setting up the shelter. We hadn't provided for a kosher kitchen and kosher food. Well, immediately, the problem arose. We installed a kosher kitchen. And the Jewish agencies helped with this. They brought in the dishes, and the utensils, and so forth. So I think that takes care of the black bread question.

The camp tried to run itself. They set up an advisory council with 10 members. But that wasn't easy, was it? All the nationality groups.

It was a difficult thing. Number one, the government, and I mean the War Relocation Authority, which administered the shelter, expected the refugees to meet their own needs as far as they could. We set up a hospital, the facilities were all there. But we provided no doctors. They had plenty of doctors. Dr. Margolis, a very distinguished man, was head physician. So all of the services inside the shelter were provided by the refugees themselves. Some of them were pleasant and some were not.

Now, to get back to your question, it was my policy to give the refugees the greatest measure of self-government that they could have. And this meant running their own affairs to the extent that they did not get into trouble with the regulations we had to establish for conducting an orderly operation. They had difficulty setting up executive committees for the simple reason that they had a great many divisions among themselves.

Some were political-- the Yugoslavs didn't naturally love the Germans. There was difficulty between the Poles and some Russians. And the Orthodox Jews didn't always get along with the liberal Jews. So these kinds of problems made it difficult to form committees which could serve across the board. And during these troubles, they did extremely well, I think, in this connection.

At one point, you went to a Sabbath service at the camp. And the rabbi started to give a sermon in Serbo-Croatian, as the refugees tell me. And some of the Germans were upset and walked out because they didn't understand the language. And there was a misunderstanding there.

Yes, I remember that too. I remember that incident. And Ruth Gruber tells it very well in her book. I thought the meeting was over. So I walked out with the Germans. And when I got outside, Freddy Baum, who was our translator and my good advisor and friend at all times, he came to me and told me the blunder I had made. So consequently, I went back. And we explained to the Yugoslavs and the others there what had happened. But there was some feeling, of course, in the community about it.

And the next day, I wrote a bulletin and sent it out to the residents explaining the mistake that I had made. I remember, I told them that I had come to the service being of a different religion, but wanting to worship a common God with them and that I didn't expect to find intolerance in religious worship in our community. And we should all respect each other's religious opinions and differences and not have this kind of thing happen again.

I must tell you that some of the people I've talked to, because of their experience in Europe, where people in authority were always right, they were pleasantly surprised to see a man in authority make an apology.

I suppose so.

That was very different for them and made a big impression. You were a good representative for America. Eleanor Roosevelt paid a visit to the camp.

Sir?

Eleanor Roosevelt came to visit the camp in September. Eleanor Roosevelt. Tell me about her visit.

Oh, Eleanor?

Yes.

Well, I got a call one day. And it was from Ms. Thompson, Tommy, her secretary and companion for many years, saying that Mrs. Roosevelt would like to come and to visit the shelter. And she came with the other Eleanor, Eleanor Morgenthau, her neighbor and very dear friend. And they spent the day touring the facilities.

And there was a little informal meeting. We got a crowd together and a little entertainment. And she visited some of the apartments and made herself very much at home and friendly in a perfectly informal way, a thing she did so well.

There was a-- what do you literary people call the-- sequel to this. There was a sequel to this. A few weeks later, I was invited to go up to her home on the Hudson in New York to tell a group of her neighbors and friends a story about the refugees. And we had the picnic-- chicken and watermelon-- out in the garden.

Down at the other end of the garden was the great man himself in his favorite cloak and with his cigarette in the air as he was well known for. He paid no attention during all the proceedings and working on his papers. So we had a very pleasant visit up there.

What was Eleanor's reaction to the refugees?

She loved them. She loved everybody. And she was indignant, immediately, about the restrictions in the shelter, scolded me before she left about what the government was doing to keep these friendly people behind the fence.

Do you think she scolded her husband later that night?

I'm sure she did. She no doubt did. And I suspect that, as usual, he paid no attention to her.

That's funny. It was a very important development when the kids were allowed to go to the Oswego public schools.

Oh, yes.

How did that come about? It wasn't supposed to be.

It resulted, as all good things did at the shelter, from pressure from the refugees. They were starving for education. They demanded education. The Jewish agencies, again, came into the shelter and provided a good deal of education of one sort and another. But these youngsters, who expected to stay in the United States, wanted to be educated as Americans.

And as a consequence, I applied a little pressure down in Washington and was authorized to negotiate with the school people in Oswego. And as a result, we worked out a system where the students would be given leave to go into the community, and attend the schools, and work for credits. And they did.

And they did well.

They got credits, yes.

They did very well in school too.

Oh, and sure they did. They got the honors. They led the classes in many respects.

Did that make you proud? It was almost a reflection on you.

Well, they were my kids. I cared for them. I loved them.

Was it ironic that there were Nazi POWs in the area and that the government had brought in several hundred thousand Nazi POWs into the United States while here was the one group of 1,000 refugees?

Yes. And the refugees were quite well aware of this. And this resulted in another pressure because the prisoners of war were allowed to go into the agricultural areas and help harvest the crops. There was a great labor shortage in agriculture. So there, again, we were able, after a certain time, to get permission for our workers to go outside and work in the orchards and the fields and get paid for it. So this, again, was a relaxation of the confinement and an extension of the people into the community.

There was a wedding at the camp about two weeks after they arrived, Manya, the pretty blonde, and Ernest. But there were problems getting the OK to have the wedding. Do you remember that?

Yes. It was no problem, simply a question of finding out what was the legalities were. Of course, it was a religious ceremony. But we simply registered them locally in Oswego to get their licenses and another precedent established.

That must have been a joyous day, to come from hell in Europe and come and have a joyous wedding.

It was very interesting and the first Jewish wedding I had been to. A rabbi performed the service under the traditional canopy. And after it was all over, there was dancing and the festivities, a lovely experience, yes.

There were babies born at the camp also.

Good many. Nature went on.

And a question of legality again. Are they American citizens?

It was debated. The point didn't arise. But it was generally assumed among our legal people that they immediately were citizens. And if the people had been sent back, by then it would have created a serious problem. How could you evict an American citizen born in the United States? But fortunately, that didn't arise.

OK.