

He wants to listen too. [LAUGHS]

He likes to be where we are all the time. He's used to be with company. We have a party here, the dog is all over.

Oh, good.

OK.

OK.

After the initial needs were taken care of, food and shelter, that's basically all the government wanted to provide. The Jewish agencies were a big help in getting other things to the camp?

This is true. The administration didn't do a very good job of pre-planning on this thing. I came into it cold. The people in Dillon Myer's office had had a great deal of experience in this thing through the Japanese program. And they should have anticipated a lot of the problems we were faced with. My background has been in resettlement work even before that. And I think that if I had been present, we might have avoided a good many problems.

At any rate, as you say the intention was to provide the minimum facilities. Fortunately, the Jewish agencies, the welfare agencies, Christian and Jewish, had a great deal of experience in this sort of thing. And they knew the needs. They knew the needs of the Jewish peoples. And they stepped in and spent a great deal of money. They sent skilled personnel.

The ORT organization set up a machine shop for vocational training. Hadassah, I think, saw the open windows and immediately brought curtains to cover them. This sort of thing had happened in the medical field. Freddy Baum, who had peg legged his way across Roosevelt, across Europe, on a very primitive wooden leg got a new one. All such needs were met and well met by the Jewish agencies, field recreation and across the board.

Work was the big problem at the camp from what I understand. Many of the people did not want to work doing the menial jobs that needed to be done around the camp, is that right?

This was certainly a problem. It wasn't the big problem. The big problem was confinement, lack of liberty. When they were told they were coming to the United States as guests, they conceived themselves to be guests in the sense that they would be guests at a hotel, that they would be served and taken care of.

They didn't like the menial jobs see. Garbage collection was a terrific problem. Coal hauling in the winter was another. Somehow it got done. It got done.

We had to set up a rotation system so that people were required to do some of those jobs. They never got to the point of rebellion. But they never became happy about it either.

How were the refugees accepted in Oswego? Was there much antisemitism or anti-refugee feeling?

This fear of antisemitism was a constant with us, both when I was in shelter and after I left. We were all fearful that somehow we would create a new wave of antisemitism in the country. And the people of Oswego were extremely hospitable.

They came to the fence the first day with candy and cigarettes to give the children and the young people through the fence. There never was a problem with the people. We tried to forestall that by creating a community committee of leading citizens in Oswego, including the educators and the publishers and the mayor and lawyers and whatnot. And so the community had a policy. And they tried to establish normal relations as far as we would permit them to.

In December 1944, there was a special broadcast, Dorothy Thompson, the Christmas broadcast. Tell me about that.

"Christmas and Freedom," they called it. I don't remember how that was set up. Dorothy Thompson, who was, of course, a noted radio figure in those times and it was her program. Mrs. Roosevelt moderated it from her apartment in New York. And I, in a similar capacity, at the shelter. Freddie Baum, as I remember, was really the master of ceremonies. And we recruited the best entertainers we had and put on a very fine Christmas program.

Was Dorothy Thompson in Oswego or in New York?

She was in New York. She didn't appear at Oswego.

It must have been very exciting though.

It was really self-produced. And she simply monitored it. So it appeared as an all refugee production.

It was a very harsh winter.

It was the worst the old timers could remember, the coldest and the deepest snow and the most prolonged bad weather. It was terrible. Terrible.

Sometimes meals had to be brought to people who couldn't get out of their barracks.

Oh, yes. A good deal of that. Some of the older people and some who were infirm and ill, of course, a great many. And on the coldest days, why nobody could leave their barracks. It was against the rules-- against my rules to prepare food in the barracks. But nearly every apartment had a hot plate and closet with some food in it.

Your whole style of administering the camp seems to have been fairly easygoing. You treated them like adults.

I read in one of the books-- I think it was Mrs. Sharon Lowenstein's very fine book-- that I wasn't a very good administrator. My sympathy seemed to have been too much with the people.

Is that accurate?

I don't know whether it's good or bad. But at any rate, I think nothing bad happened at the shelter as a result of relaxed rules if people didn't take advantage of us very much. They found holes under the fence. But nobody got in trouble as a result of it.

Friends of mine in New York called me up to tell me one day that Adam Munz and some of his friends from high school were down in New York having a little vacation. [LAUGHTER] It didn't bother me very much.

Is it surprising or what that there were no real problems at the camp. No one escaped. No one got in trouble with the law.

I suppose it is statistically surprising. In a two-year period, a certain percentage of 1,000 people should get into some kind of criminal troubles. There just weren't any. They were good people.

And the opinion of the American people was very important to them. It affected their chances of staying in the United States. And I'm sure that they were telling each other this all the time.

During that very harsh winter, there were two incidents that kind of plunged the camp into a group depression-- the suicide and the coal accident.

Yes.

Tell me about the mood in the camp after the--

Of the what?

The mood in the camp of the people.

The mood?

Yeah.

Well, people more qualified than I have interpreted that mood. We sent psychiatrists there to study the mood of the people. Some of them definitely were psychiatric cases as a result of their experience. In the literature and the commentaries it's reported as being quite ugly. Frankly, I was not aware that it was very ugly. I saw a group of people under restrictions, which were basically unfair and uncomfortable, performing rather heroically in these difficult circumstances and particularly during that terribly hard winter.

There were rumors that they would be set free around Passover time in 1945. Was that a problem to quell rumors?

I don't recognize it as a problem. It required a certain mechanism. We had to be alerted to these things. And usually, we were alerted to it by the refugee leaders themselves, either individually in the form of gossip or by one of the many committees. And usually, we would simply discuss it among the leadership of the shelter and of the refugees and accept the rationalization.

And they would take it back to their people and explain it. And we didn't try, as an administration, to do a lot of explaining. We tried to keep the confidence of the people with whom we had good communications and to rely on them to have the good sense and ability to bring it back to their own peoples.

I want to ask you about what must be a wonderful memory for you. When you attended the Passover meal and they started to dance around you, tell me about that?

Oh, I don't remember that one particularly. We had so many fine parties. We had so many fine parties. And my family and I loved parties. I loved them.

I liked to dance. I still do. One of the best things I learned from the refugees was to do the Hokey Pokey. Do you ever do the Hokey Pokey? [LAUGHS] So this Passover party was an outstanding one. We had another outstanding one--

Oh, but they lifted you up on their shoulders and carried you around.

Frankly, I'd forgotten this. I read about it in one of the books. And I thought, did this really happen? I'm not accustomed to being carried around on people's shoulders. [LAUGHS]

They obviously--

But that's a very happy memory, yes.

The refugees in the camp obviously adored you for your manner with them.

Well--

That's a two-way street right?

This is a case of Mary loving the lamb because the lamb love Mary. [LAUGHS]

That's lovely. I like that. All the time that you were director of the camp, you seem to be uncomfortable enforcing the government regulations keeping them in. At the same time that it's your job to administer this internment camp--

That's right.

You hated the fact that they were being interned, it seems.

We had security regulations. It was my job to enforce those regulations. And I don't think I ever told any refugee that I didn't approve of those regulations. It would have been disloyal for me to have done so.

I was distressed and unhappy at the need for them. I didn't like them. In retrospect, I think they were terrible.

And then you resigned in-- you announced it in May--

In May of '46 that would have been.

'45.

'45, May of '45.

When you resigned that was because a group of refugees came to you and had a conversation with you. Tell me about that.

They had sources of information, as good or better than ours. They often came to me and told me what the government is about to do before I knew it. The consensus at that moment among all of the government people was that every effort had been made to arrive at a policy to permit the refugees to stay in the United States, and the effort had failed. The Department of State, the Department of War, the Attorney General's Office were adamant that the original commitment of Franklin Roosevelt that the people would be returned after the war would be carried out.

Ruth Gruber had information that this was likely to take place on the 30th of June when the War Relocation Board was to go out of existence. And it was with the awareness of this situation that a refugee committee came to me and said, this is the way it is and everything else has failed. Couldn't we organize a group on the outside of prominent citizens to plead our case with the public and with the government?

It was a new idea. I said, let me think about it for a day or two. There was no suggestion at that point as to who might do such a thing.

I consulted with a few of the Jewish leaders in New York and with one or two people in Washington, particularly with the Assistant Secretary of the Interior, Ickes' assistant, an old friend of mine from Denver, Colorado. His name was Oscar Chapman. He later became Undersecretary and then Secretary of the Interior, a very liberal man and a brilliant man.

And we discussed how could this be done and who would do it. And he says, Joe, number one, he's got to be a Christian. If a Jew does this, you start antisemitism, and you never get anywhere. It has to be somebody who has identified with the problem. And who cares enough about the problem to do something about it.

And Oscar said, I can only think of one person and that's Joe Smart. And I agreed. I thought that on all those scores that if anybody were to undertake the job with any possibility of success, it had to be me. And I thought it would have another effect that the mere fact of my resignation would have sufficient shock value that the government would pause and say, well, we won't send them back immediately because this would create too much of a scandal.

And it--

And it seemed to have had that effect. Dillon Myer told me that it had that effect. So I called the committee back and told them about my reaction. And that if they requested it, I would be willing to resign and undertake the mission.

OK. Why don't we take--

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