The dining room upstairs is very, very good.

Oh, good. I was going to ask you for a recommendation on a restaurant.

Well, if you like a very formal place, that's it.

Sounds good.

If you like to go out on the town, I'm not a very good person to ask.

Formal and what else?

OK.

It's very normal.

Eva suggest good places.

OK, we're ready.

OK. After you resigned, you went around and lined up 100 or so very prominent Americans to get behind you to help get freedom for the refugees. How did you do that and who did you get? Give me a quick list.

Well, we formed an organization, called it the Friends of Fort Ontario Guest Refugees. Of the 100 or more people, I talked to perhaps 10 personally, the rest of them by letter. They responded immediately and magnificently.

You had quite a list of people.

Yes. Hand me my notes there. Will you let me-- let me give you a few of those names. I jotted down a few of these names-- John Dewey, who was an educator and philosopher in those days, David Dubinsky, who was head of the Ladies' Garment Makers Union, Arthur Garfield Hays and Roger Baldwin of the American Civil Liberties Union, Governor Lehman of New York, Bishop Francis J. McConnell, an Episcopalian, Justine Wise Polier, who was the daughter of Stephen S. Wise, a great Jewish leader, who did not become a member, but who gave me a lot of advice.

Albert Einstein was on the list, right?

Pardon me?

Albert Einstein?

Albert Einstein was there. I didn't note his name.

Eleanor Roosevelt.

And Raymond Gram Swing, who was the Walter Cronkite of his day, he was there. We tried to get people who influenced opinion. William O'Dwyer, who had been head of the War Refugee Board, when he resigned, he immediately became a member of our committee. And of course, Governor Dewey, formerly of New York and a Republican candidate for the president. He thought it might get him some votes. He joined the committee-- people like this.

Now, you wanted to keep the Fort Ontario refugee question separate from the larger refugee issue. But some of the Jewish agencies, like the National Refugee Service, they wanted to walk carefully. They thought their efforts might undermine the wider effort.

This is true. They were more conscious of these factors than I was. My duty was to the Fort Ontario group. Their duty was to thousands of refugees all over the world and to several thousand in the United States who were here illegally or in a questionable status. And they did fear that calling attention to this group might arouse antisemitism and might arouse anti-immigration, which also was easy to be a problem politically in the United States.

So I became very sensitive to these problems through them and tried to conduct our campaign in such a way that it would not have those effects. I see that it could very well have had a bad effect. But fortunately, it did not. But I was free to do things that they felt they could not do. And I think we had mutual respect in view of that situation. I hope that they were happy that I was able to do things that they couldn't do.

Give me a quick list of what you did, who you talked to, whose door you knocked on, who you said, let them in already. Who did you talk to?

Well, number one, we set out to create public opinion. We wanted to exert as rapidly as we could a great public pressure on the administration. Don't send these people back or you'll be in trouble with the public. Do treat them with compassion. Find a solution that doesn't require to be sent them back. So the newspapers, the press, the TV, the radio-- there was no TV-- the campaign began there and among agencies, small and large.

Ruth Gruber, in her book, tells about a meeting that was held with Secretary Morgenthau, who felt committed, as to Roosevelt's commitment, that they had to go back. She says, the only thing to do is to go to the leaders of Congress and see if there isn't a way to handle this.

Ultimately, this was the course that I took. I went to the president of the Senate, the Speaker of the House. I had influential people arrange these interviews for me-- Senator Russell, the immigration committee-- and explained the situation to them.

I had been told by my friend, Oscar Chapman, in Washington that the president was inclined to sign an executive order using the immigration process to let the people come in. But he said, the president is afraid that if he does this, he's going to be accused in Congress and will open up a whole bag of troubles for refugees in general. And he says, he feels that he has to be assured that if he takes this action, he will not be criticized in Congress. So this was the reason that I went to the Congressional leaders.

Some of the Democratic leaders, as I've mentioned, thought that the refugees should be sent back. But he says, if you can work this thing out in this way, we'll go along. I sent this message back to the president through my roots up through Secretary Ickes and was told-- Ickes told Chapman, he says, well, tell Joe Smart, this is all well, but what about Senator Taft?

Senator Taft, of course, was Mr. Republican. And I went to Senator Taft. And he heard me out. And he said, Mr. Smart, you can assure Secretary Ickes that if the president signs the executive order, and if there is any opposition from the Congress, I will take the floor of the Senate to defend his action.

So you lined up Senator Taft on your side?

Yes, I lined up Senator Taft. And well, there were a great many factors which led to the president's decision. I felt then that this was probably the decisive one, gave him the assurance that he at least would not have political opposition for doing so.

Is that coming through on the tape?

Yeah, a little.

OK.

Just a little.

Is that it?

No, I have another question for you if you don't mind. Yeah, I could hear it.

I didn't overdo that, did I?

No, that was great. That was fine. The mood of the country was a problem for Truman-- not only the possible antisemitism, but the restrictionist attitude, right? Tell me about that.

A great many people in the United States were opposed to any immigration at all. They felt that foreigners had been swarming in and taking jobs from American workers. And there was a great deal of opinion in favor of restricting all immigration, and particularly of displaced persons from Europe who were likely to come here without any resources or money and be a drain on our resources.

Now, 40-some-odd years later, the former refugees have become tremendous successes, many of them--

That's true.

--and have made a very significant contribution to American society.

I think so.

What message does that send?

Well, I guess the same message that appears on the Statue of Liberty. I forget. I can't quote it, but it says, welcome the distress of all companies because they enrich our society. They contribute. Whether down the road there comes a point where that would fail to happen, I don't know. But I think that there's still room in America for the kind of people that we brought from Fort Ontario, at least.

How should Fort Ontario be judged by history?

By whom?

By history. Is it a triumph for 1,000 people? Or is it a sign of a failed policy?

I don't think it was significant in any way as of that time. The refugees really were not in need at the point at which they were brought over here. They had been earlier. Some of them had been in the concentration camps. But they were in Italy, and free, and getting along fairly well. As an expression of Roosevelt's hope that it would help solve the total refugee problem, it did not. And so it became a nuisance, rather than an expression of good government policy.

Let me ask you this. Let's go back to the camp. When you first met the refugees, I mean, people had been reading in the newspapers about what was happening in Europe. But here, you were one of the first Americans to see and to talk to people who had suffered. What was that like for you?

To me?

Yeah.

Well, they weren't a very prepossessing group as they came off that train. A good many of them stood in all the clothes that they owned, mostly shirts and shorts that time of year. I knew, of course, from the list that they were very superior people among them. But you couldn't tell by looking at them. They were pretty rag-tag-looking outfit.

But there were some surprising contrasts. One of these men who was dressed in shirts and shorts and looked very on the script, he carried only a violin case. It turned out that this case contained a Guarnerius violin that was worth $50,000. I took it to the Brooklyn Museum and had it appraised for him. So some of them had a few resources.

It must have been very emotional to hear some of their horror stories of what happened to them.

Oh, yes. Yes. Of course, Ruth Gruber was the one who had this fine experience, really. She came with them on the boat. And she knew them as persons. And I knew them, at first, only as a problem.

Very good. What a great interview. Terrific. Stay where you are for just a moment. If you will, Steve, get a two shot from behind. Right.

I hope my voice comes through. I've lost it now, you see. I can hardly talk.

All of the former refugees really speak very highly of you. And it's funny that you talk about Adam slipping under the fence because he told me about that too. He said that the lure of the bright lights in New York was just too much. He had to go.

Why don't you take a shot of that bust?

I will.

You will? I'd like very much if you could show that. Can you?

Yes, we will.

Adam's picture. I hope he would like to have it shown.

You've had such a full life. How do you measure, how do you view the Oswego experience for you in terms of your life? You've done so many things. Is Oswego among the most important in your life?

As government jobs go, no, it was not an important job. My job in Peru was more important. In the Japanese program, I was-- we had 10 shelters. Five of them were under my supervision. There are about 50,000 people in five camps. I was regional director in Denver.

And then, when we started to disperse the Japanese, I went into Washington as assistant national director. Those are bigger jobs. I had been assistant national director of the Resettlement Administration earlier. And then after Fort Ontario, I established as-- set up another economic aid program in Indonesia, which in the scale was more important.

As a personal experience?

But as a personal experience, the most important I ever had.

Really?

Yes.

Wow.

Yes.

Well, great. Wonderful.

OK, got sound.

Yeah.

Tell me about the bust here.

Well, this bust was made and presented to me by Miriam Sonnenberg. I think she was German. She had had quite a reputation in Europe as an artist. And after she left the shelter, she became established in New York and gained quite a reputation there, I understand.

This little cartoon up here was made by another of the residents. His name was Zipser. He had me making a speech to the assemblage.

Very good. Terrific.

Very good.