

Oh, yeah, that's about it.

I just want to move the microphone over to the other side--

I saw that too.

--now that it--

It almost doesn't feel.

Right, right. Not a cloud in the sky after the weather we've had.

Can you hear us? Can you hear all the nasty things we said about you?

You, you.

They're picking me up over there.

Oh, really?

OK. Let's just start walking forward.

OK.

That August morning in 1944, when the 982 refugees arrived here, we saw this six-foot-high chain link fence with the three strands of barbed wire. What did they think?

Oh, some of them began to scream at me, how could you? How could you bring us to free America and then put us behind a fence and barbed wire? It reminded them of everything they had escaped from-- concentration camps, prisons. But then some of the others said, don't let them upset you. It's all right. We feel safer inside the fence. And I realized, a fence has two different meanings. It has different meanings to different people. To some, it was this terrible reminder of bombs falling, and of imprisonment, and of torture. And to others, it meant that they would be secure because the enemy was outside.

It must have been tantalizing. Here they are inside the fence and they can see the homes.

Right, right. And the people all came here and stood here. And they began to have discussions. They made their own bridges with the people. And the first day, the people saw how they were dressed. They were in rags. Most of them had old pants. And some had nothing except the rags that they had on them, children without shoes.

So the people sprinted home and came back with shoes, and dresses, and suits, and passed them over the wire or threw them as if they were balls over the wire. And one little girl-- her name, I think, was Susan Sanders-- went home and got her Shirley Temple doll and gave it to one of our little girls because she had such a wistful face.

Some of the refugees had family in the US already. In that first month they were in quarantine, there must have been family reunions separated by chain links?

Right, right. Many of the families would telephone and say, when can I come up? One was a sergeant in the army whose parents came. And he wasn't allowed to come and enter. So a lot of them waited until the quarantine was over, which was September 1st. And then they came up. And we had this huge open house.

Tell me about that. There were several thousand people.

Oh, they came from all over. They came not only from Oswego, they came from Syracuse, and Rochester, and Watertown. And of course, all the relatives who by then had gotten telephone calls or had read the names and the papers, and they all came, and they walked all around, and they looked inside the barracks. And we had heard rumors that some of the people in Oswego, most of them, were really wonderful.

But there were some who were very much opposed to refugees. And they spread rumors that everybody had a bathtub and that everybody had their own bathroom. And you got the feeling that they were living in the lap of luxury.

Actually, all the toilets were together in one end of the first floor and the second floor because there was no privacy at all. The showers were open. And the rooms were furnished just like barracks for GIs, with metal cot, and a little table, and a chair. And the luxury was not there. So we opened the barracks and let the people in. And that rumor then was completely killed.

Other than the fence and the fear of the fence, you look at this beautiful park, and it's green and lush, and that August morning, it was gorgeous day.

Yes.

To some, it was beautiful.

Oh, one of the women came running to me. They were calling me Mother Ruth by then. And she yelled, Mother Ruth, I have a villa by the sea. She had one of the barracks was right overlooking beautiful Lake Ontario. And in the summer, this place is idyllic. It's in the winter that it becomes a real prison because the snow would sometimes be 15 feet. There'd be these huge snow heaps that made it impossible for older people even to walk out of their barracks.

But in the summer, the children were playing. And I kept thinking that they're in the oval. Horses once had paraded, and soldiers had paraded, and now, here were all these children finding freedom and beauty in America.

Was there a problem?

No, I think it's supposed to be good tomorrow too.

Tomorrow it's supposed to be nice. Wednesday, possible shower, so I may do Adam's interview tomorrow if he can spring free for me. Yes? OK. When Ernst and Manya wanted to get married, they had this beautiful outdoor ceremony. But it wasn't easy getting it all set up.

Oh, no. All the bureaucracy fell in on us whether we could allow them out of the camp during the quarantine, whether New York State would give them a license since they were here without any legal status. They were guests of President Roosevelt. But they were not enemy aliens. And they were really nothing. They were on a planet swimming in space.

But finally, we got permission. And then we rushed everything through. And Manya said to me, but I have no wedding dress. So I called my mother in Brooklyn. And I said, Mom, I left a cocktail dress in your house. Would you come up and bring it for the wedding? And she did. And she crocheted a lace shawl that Manya could wear on her head and even remembered to bring up a string of pearls. And Manya look ravishing. And it was held out here with all the refugees and the staff.

And my mother and Adam Munz's mother became her parents, the ones-- she didn't know whether they were still alive or not. And she said to my mother, you are the mother today. And maybe you will be my mother. But I will always love you for this. And the wedding was held right out here. It was a beautiful day like today. And we were all so thrilled.

Oh, and the staff then forgot the budget. The budget was something like \$0.45 a day for food. But the chef made a big cake. And they had all kinds of wonderful sandwiches. And it was really a great wedding. And then the Oswego paper, the Oswego Palladium Times wrote the whole thing up as if it were a Junior League wedding.

Good. OK, let's put on a different mic.

Yeah. Stay right there.

Yeah, we can--

Check one, two, one, two. Check, check, one, two. Check, one, two. Sounds great, wonderful. We can leave that other one right on. This one just gives us a little extra added insurance.

You're going to get a whole sunburn today. That's why I took it off. I wanted to. I haven't had any color yet. And I have to burn at least once before I ever get tan.

This is as good a day as any.

Yeah.

I don't know if it's strong enough to make you burn.

We got all the way up onto Route 104 going right by Webster, I remembered I forgot the tapes. And I was going to call you because I could have had you brought them. But we drove back and got them.

Oh, my. I really thought about that. I said, should have brought him myself.

OK. The only thing I'm going to do is just put that down inside your coat.

Is it all right if the jewelry hides it a little?

That's good. I just don't need it to rub up against it. But that should be fine.

Good.

You want to move the tripod?

You can hear better now?

I'll just move the tripod down.

OK.

Don't move. Just a little.

What's the time on the tape, Susan? You OK?

Yeah. Do you want to be in any of this, Paul?

No, we can just stay on this. That'll be fine. One of the first things that was important when the refugees got to the camp was setting up a kosher kitchen. Tell me about that.

Well, quite a few of our people were kosher when they were in Europe. And now that they were in America, they dreamed of being able to follow all the old traditions. And two rabbis came up from New York one morning and asked me if they could take our children back to Brooklyn to their yeshivas. And I said, no, nobody could leave the camp. But I said, you can do something for us. You can help us set up the kosher kitchens. And the next day, two trucks rolled in. And they had 200 sets of dairy dishes, 200 sets of meat dishes, and assorted pots and pans. And then the people who wanted to eat kosher were very happy.

Oh, great. There was a controversy here not long after people got settled and the initial adjustment took place over white bread and black bread. Kind of a funny story, but it was symbolic of a deep difference between this culture and that.

Right. The people who ran the camp, the chefs, and the cooks, and so on, were people who were running the Japanese internment camps because the same part of the Department of Interior, the War Relocation Authority was in charge. And so they had food here identical with the food they were serving in Colorado and wherever the Japanese camps were. And for Europeans, white bread, they would say, was to be on one tooth. And in fact, on the ship, they said to me, how can they serve frankfurters with white bread? That's cake.

What they wanted was black bread, thick, dark black bread that you could cut with a knife. And there was a big quarrel about it. And one of the newspapers ran a story about this crisis over bread. So Ickes, the Secretary of the Interior, said to me-- I was then in Washington-- you better go back and solve that crisis. Well, I went to Joe Smart and I said, why don't we start a bakery here and bake black bread? And we did. And the crisis ended.

Setting up the camp government was very difficult because, as we talked about on the voyage over, there were a lot of nationality, ethnic conflicts that continued once they were here.

Yes. Yes. They had brought all of the nationality problems that they had grown up with and that had existed in Europe for hundreds of years. And we decided that this was a democracy and that they should learn to self-govern. So in the end, they set up their own committees. And they very rapidly became democratic, with a small D. But they democratized the camp.

One of the most significant developments of the whole 18 months they were here was getting the kids into the Oswego public schools. How did that come about? It was only a month after they arrived, they were already in public school.

Yes, that was one of the best things. Oswego opened its arms to our children. And we had a committee made up of Oswego citizens. And they decided that the children should be allowed into the Oswego schools. And it was a wonderful thing because those children, whether they were in elementary school, junior high, or high school-- and later, they even went into the college here-- brought the Bill of Rights back into the camp.

They brought everything that America was teaching them into the camp and taught it to their parents. The most wonderful of all the educators was the principal of the high school, Ralph Faust, who recognized the ability of these children and gave them every advantage that the high school could give them. And they, in turn, returned all that by their excitement.

He said, they changed the whole character of the school. I think they helped change the character, even, of the town because they brought so much yearning for learning. And other youngsters who hadn't been quite so eager began to feel, well, if they go to the library every day, I better go to the library. And so the whole atmosphere changed.

What was the atmosphere in the town, though? Were the refugees accepted? Was there some antisemitism?

There were some antisemitism. But by and large, the acceptance was great. Because the town had had many different kinds of populations in this camp. At one time, it was an all-Black camp. And they had been very worried. They had heard terrible stories that as soon as the Blacks came in, there would be murders and rapes. And none of that happened. The Black soldiers were just as friendly, and warm, and well-behaved as the white soldiers were.

And then there was another period when the so-called morons came. They were the boys who needed training. Many of them were taken into the army illiterate. And again, there were all these fears. And again, they proved to be without any grounds so that the town really was as good a place as any to have this kind of camp.

On the whole, the Oswego experience seems to have been terrific for those 20 and younger who were able to go to the schools and far less than terrific for those who were older. Is that accurate?

That's accurate. And that is the immigrant story, anyway. In every wave of immigration, you find that the young people make it. And they become part of the American culture. From 20 to 30, it becomes more difficult, but they make it too. And then it becomes very hard. There are people who came in earlier waves of immigration who never learned English, who never really adjusted. And I think the same thing happened here. But it was in a very controlled society.

It must have been quite something to spend their first Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur here in quasi-freedom.

Oh, yes, yes. All the Jewish festivals became so much more meaningful because they had escaped. They had the exquisite relief from bombs and terror. But at the same time, even their joy was bittersweet because they didn't know what was happening to their relatives in Europe. And word kept coming to us that most of them were killed.

Was it tantalizing to be able to walk these huge grounds, really live in freedom, and then stop at the fence?

It was a strange thing. They could go out into Oswego for six hours at a time. But they couldn't go to Syracuse, which was about 30 miles away. We had magnificent artists. And we could send their paintings, and their sculpture, and their drawings to art exhibits in Syracuse. And they could win first prizes. The paintings could go, but not the painters.

Eleanor Roosevelt came to visit in September not long after they got settled. Tell me about that visit.

Oh, they felt really that the First Lady of the world had come to visit them. And she went from one house to another talking to the people as only Eleanor could. And then she came with Henry Morgenthau's wife, whose name was also Eleanor. In Washington, we used to call them the two Eleanors. They were inseparable. And the two of them had lunch with the people.

And then they went into the big hall, where all the concerts and all the programs were held. And all our artists put on wonderful shows for them, singing and performing. And then Eleanor came up to the stage and spoke to them in English. And most of them had no idea what she was saying in words. But they understood completely what she meant.

It wasn't too long before the Francos from Libya, Lydia and Victor, had a baby girl in the camp, the first baby girl born in the camp. The joy was tremendous. But also it was scary because no one knew what her status was.

Right, right. It was as if, really, this one place here was on a planet swimming in space. They had no legal status in the United States. And nobody knew whether they were American citizens. You could have a baby on a freighter in the South China Sea. If the freighter had an American flag on, that baby was an American citizen because it was American soil. But if you had a baby born here in the big white hospital that we had then on these grounds, the lawyers in Washington couldn't decide if the baby was an American or not. In the end, it all worked out. And every baby who was born became an American. But it took a while.

OK.

OK.