

59 Years Ago, They Fled To an Internment Camp

Jewish Refugees Recall Spending Months Behind Barbed Wire in Upstate New York

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By CLAUDIA ROWE

MOUNT KISCO, N.Y., July 20 — It has been nearly 60 years, but to many of the Jews kept at an upstate New York refugee camp during World War II, the trauma is still too painful to discuss. Others, however, cannot say enough.

Only 134 people survive from the group of nearly 1,000 who were shipped from Italy to an Army camp in Oswego by the United States government in the summer of 1944, and many of them were gathered here today at the home of Judy Goldsmith, daughter of a deceased camp survivor, to reconnect and reminisce.

The truth about Jewish internment in the United States is a little-known chapter in the history of World War II, and Ms. Goldsmith said she had opened her home to the former refugees as a way of honoring one of them — her father, who never spoke about those 18 months in upstate New York, and of keeping the story

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alive.

For Walter Greenberg, 70, talking about a childhood running from the Nazis was easy. But it took him nearly four decades to speak about living behind a fence at Fort Ontario.

"I'd known what prison was. I'd lived behind bars in Italy. But I'd never known freedom," Mr. Greenberg said. "In America, I looked out at the rest of the world and I saw normal people with everyday lives, and I felt deceived."

Not that it was a terrible experience. Compared with living one step ahead of the SS it was heaven, the survivors said. Each family had its own barracks, plenty of food and eventually access to education. After a one-month quarantine, Mr. Greenberg and the other children were allowed to attend classes at Oswego's elementary and high schools. Social workers came to teach their parents English. And the people of Oswego were endlessly generous.

Nevertheless, the experience of being rounded up and enclosed behind a fence topped with barbed wire left its mark.

"They came here thinking they would be welcomed," Ms. Goldsmith said. "And these were the only people that America — this big, powerful country — even tried to save. It's pretty shameful."

In Washington, knowledge of concentration camp realities had been documented, but isolationist government policy had barred most Euro-

pean Jews from entering the country. In June 1944, however, after the Allies liberated Italy, President Franklin D. Roosevelt commissioned an Army ship, the Henry Gibbins, to transport the refugees to America. On July 21, 59 years ago, the ship left Naples, arriving in New York on Aug. 3.

Those hiding in Italy who had already escaped concentration camps were accepted first. After these came families with young children. Three thousand people applied for just under 1,000 slots.

Ruth Gruber, who, as a special assistant to Interior Secretary Harold L. Ickes, had been dispatched to Italy to escort the refugees, said an American official charged with choosing among them "went to pieces."

"I can't go on playing God; how can I choose who's going to live and who's going to die?" the official said, according to Ms. Gruber, 91.

The final tally from the ship's log of 983 refugees included Jews from 18 countries and 108 Roman Catholics, Protestants and Russian and Greek Orthodox. Listed upon their arrival in New York as "U.S. Army casual baggage," each had to sign papers promising to return to Europe when the war was over. Fewer than 100 actually did.

Abraham Dresdner, now 74, and his eight siblings were among those selected. His brother Rudy also attended the reunion. By the time he boarded the Henry Gibbins, Abraham Dresdner, 15, had been in and out of three French concentration camps and had seen other children running from the Nazis, parts of their bodies already blown off. But boarding a boxcar for an unknown town in central New York State created its own special fear.

"Of course we were scared," he said. "After all, trains were not a popular thing for us in Europe."

At several points along the journey from Naples to Oswego, however, the refugees were greeted by Red Cross workers bearing milk, cookies and ice cream. "We had all this food, so we knew it wasn't a concentration camp," Mr. Dresdner said.

Without official standing in America, the refugees were detained for seven months after the war was over until President Harry S. Truman allowed them to apply for citizenship.

By then, 23 babies had been born, one couple had married and at least two teenage boys had managed to sneak out and hitchhike to Manhattan for a day of adventure. All of their stories have been captured at the Safe Haven Museum and Education Center in the former Fort Ontario administration building, which opened recently.

"This was a story that for so long was untold," said Judy Coe-Rapaport, president of the museum's fund-raising arm. "And it really should have been told." →