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Fort Ontario Emergency Refugee Shelter 75th Anniversary Commemorative Logo

[12 April 2019] The Fort Ontario Emergency Refugee Shelter 75th Anniversary Planning Committee is pleased to reveal its official logo for commemorative events and activities. An operetta, *“THE GOLDEN CAGE,”* with words by Fort Ontario refugee Miriam Sommerburg, German Sculptress, and music by Charles Abeles, Austrian Composer, is the inspiration for the logo. 75th Anniversary events and activities will begin on 5 August 2019 with memorial observances of the arrival of the 982 refugees at Fort Ontario on 5 August 1944. Public programming will begin at 2:00 PM at the NA’AMAT Refugee Monument at Fort Ontario State Historic Site in Oswego, NY. Special events and activities linked to significant dates and life at the Shelter will continue into 2021.

From 5 August 1944 to 5 February 1946 the 75-acre Fort Ontario Military Reservation served as the only camp or shelter in the United States for mostly Jewish victims of the Nazi Holocaust. Established by order of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the Shelter was intended to convince America’s allies that the United States was serious about rescuing the Jews of Europe, and that they should accept refugees within their own borders and territories. Having signed documents before leaving Italy agreeing to return to their homelands after the war in Europe ended, the 982 refugees interned at Fort Ontario lived behind a barbed wire fence in America, the land of freedom, fearful of being forced to return to homes and families that no longer existed, facing potential persecution by former neighbors if they did, and unable to continue on with their lives, one way or the other.

“THE GOLDEN CAGE” was an ambitious work composed before President Harry S. Truman’s 22 December 1945 Executive Order announcing that the Fort Ontario Refugees could remain in the United States; it was intended as a dramatic plea for their freedom. The President’s announcement came before the operetta was produced, and a last scene, incorporating the good news was hastily added. *“THE GOLDEN CAGE”* revealed the refugees’ hatred of confinement, and their exultation at final liberation. In a scene at Fort Ontario depicting the period soon after their arrival, during the 30-day quarantine, *“elegantly dressed American ladies”* hear the *“poorly clad refugees”* singing behind the barbed wire fence:

THE GOLDEN CAGE

Words by Miriam Sommerburg

We are in a cage without reason,
We are in a cage, a golden cage;
We're missing nothing but our freedom....

A man sings:

I feel myself a monkey
In the zoological garden;
Are we to be on display?
There is nothing missing but the warden!
What are we, a sensation
For tedious people's pleasure?

Later, in another scene after 16 months at the Shelter, the refugees are still
"sitting behind the fence, looking longingly at the Statue (of Liberty), singing sadly":

Behind the fence of Fort Ontario
We are sitting, awaiting the glorious day,
When our unchained feet may finally go
Over the most wonderful country's way.

There is no food we are longing for.
No material need we are suffering,
But our hearts have never been cared for,
Are we tremendously troubled.

Like a lion in the cage
We are losing health and mood;
Like a bird, which after age
Finds its wings for nothing good.

A messenger arrives with news of President Truman's reprieve, and the refugees laugh, dance,
and sing:

We send our thanks to Roosevelt
Who heard us beyond the stars,
Who sent an angel to the world
To free us from this farce.

We soon leave Fort Ontario
And try to find our hearth;
To find our life, our work and move
At liberty on earth!

For information on events and activities of the Planning Committee of the 75th Anniversary of the Fort Ontario Emergency Refugee Shelter, contact Historic Site Manager Paul Lear at (315) 343-4711, or [Paul.Lear@parks.ny.gov]. Updates will be posted on the Friends of Fort Ontario Facebook page and website [FortOntario.com]. To learn more about the history of the Fort Ontario Emergency Refugee Shelter visit the Safe Haven Holocaust Refugee Shelter Museum located at 2 East 7th Street in the City of Oswego, NY. For public hours contact (315) 342-3003 [SafeHavenMuseum.com]. Fort Ontario State Historic Site contains an exhibit on the Shelter and is located at 1 East 4th Street in Oswego, NY; it will be open from 15 May to 14 October 2019, Wednesday – Sunday, and seven days a week from 1 July to Labor Day.

State Parks generates \$1.9 billion in economic activity annually and supports 20,000 jobs. For more information on any of these recreation areas call (518) 474-0456, or visit [www.nysparks.com].