

A Pile of Shoes and How a Writer Remembers

• Miriam Bat-Ami •

Résumé: Au mois d'août 1944, les USA accueillent, à la suite d'une directive du Président Roosevelt, 982 réfugiés, en majorité des Juifs, et les installe dans un camp temporaire à Oswego, dans l'état de New-York. Considérés d'abord comme des "invités" en sursis, le Président Truman permettra finalement à ceux qui le désirent d'immigrer et de vivre aux États-Unis. Dans cet article, Miriam Bat-Adam explique ce qu'elle a appris de ces réfugiés et de ceux qui les ont reçus; elle montre comment elle a transformé et adapté leurs récits dans son premier roman pour jeunes adultes, *Two Suns in the Sky*.

Summary: In August 1944, under the directive of former US President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, 982 refugees, the majority of whom were Jewish, were brought to the US and housed at the Emergency Refugee Center, Fort Ontario, Oswego, New York. Considered only temporary "guests" of the US who had agreed to return to their homelands when the war was over, these refugees lived at this one and only US safe haven until early 1946 at which time President Truman allowed most of them to officially immigrate. This article explores what the author learned about these people, about Oswego and its response to the camp, and how she transformed stories of endurance and courage, of the youthful will to live and live fully into her first young adult historical romance, *Two Suns in the Sky*.

Sometimes, when I face my English education students and discuss teaching children research techniques, I speak of my most recent young adult novel, a World War II romance called *Two Suns in the Sky*. "It is a fictionalized story based upon a true event," I say. Then I relate something of this nature:

While writing an article devoted to children and war, I came across David Wyman's *The Abandonment of the Jews*. Neither the text nor its bibliography were going to help me expand on my article, but I had always wanted to know about US policy regarding Jewish refugees during WWII. Also, as I rationalized it to myself, I was a writer and a scholar interested in children's historical fiction. It was all right to make a short detour.

I sat down and read. Later, I took the book home, grew by degrees angry and sad until, propped up against pillows in my favourite reading position, I came across a passage nearly buried in one of the concluding chapters. From this I learned that in August of 1944, under the directive of President Roosevelt, 982 refugees, the majority of whom were originally either Yugoslav, Austrian, Polish, or German Jews, were brought to the United States from Italy. For the next seventeen months, they were housed at what was referred to as the Emergency Refugee Center at Fort Ontario, a decommissioned army base, in Oswego, New York. Considered "guests of the United States," they were to return to their homelands at the end of the war. But, under a directive from President Truman, they were finally allowed to immigrate. In late February of 1946 the one US safe haven was officially closed.

I speak to my students about facts; my voice belies the merely factual nature of all this. "You know, I tell them, "I have been a student and a teacher nearly all of my life. But I didn't understand what research could mean until I came upon a question which not only seized me but held and still holds me in its grip. And that is what you have to do. You have to find the burning question, let it take shelter inside your soul, allow it to grow and change; and you have to allow yourself to be changed."

What I don't say is that I never intended to write a novel even remotely connected to the Holocaust. It seemed like such a painful topic. What could I add that had not been said? Besides, I had just surfaced from writing a pre-adolescent work which had tapped the reserves of my emotional energy. I wanted desperately to avoid issues of identity, particularly Jewish American identity.

Yet when I came across that passage about the refugee shelter almost buried in that concluding chapter of a history text, the search began. "How come I've never heard about that?" I asked myself. "Has anyone written a children's or adolescent work on the subject? Why aren't more people aware of this camp?" I dashed to our library's infotrack system. This research area would be different, original, and thoroughly interesting. I would write a Sabbatical proposal. I was due for year's leave. The choice seemed perfectly timed.

It appears here as if I were doing the choosing when in fact, the subject not only chose me but might have even been waiting for me. For while I was seeking to find a topic with no conceivable links to an imagined younger version of me or some fictionalized version of my children I found something which had much to do with me: not in what I lived, but in what I needed to live out through the characters I would create.

I grew up in the late '50s in a religious Jewish home in Scranton, Pennsylvania. I attended a Conservative Hebrew school three times a week.

Like other postwar Jewish-American children, I was exposed to a good many Holocaust film clips. I remember being eleven or twelve and sitting with twenty or so other kids in a classroom next to the principal's office. This same principal, who taught our class, spent his childhood in a *shitetl* and lived through pogroms. He spoke of them as he lit one cigarette after another; oftentimes lighting the second with the burning butt end of the first. I stared at his intense, haunted face as the ashes fell around him. Along with my peers, I was held captive.

And it didn't matter that many of us had carefully put our morning selves together in front of the mirror so that no one would dare say we looked different or unusual. That we girls had lasted the night out, our hair pulled into perfect pageboy straightness by scratchy rollers that we slavishly slept upon, poking our fingers through spaces between wire and brush, sighing and scratching as we dreamt about what we were told was beauty. That our parents were models of US success; we were their offspring. We could sit in our nicely pleated kilts and neatly creased pants feeling somehow protected by a sense of wellbeing. He stripped all that away while we alternately feared, respected, hated, and loved the man. On reflection, I imagine that this teacher may well have felt driven to lead us into a realm which he considered a peculiarly Jewish one. Growing up as he did, he must have believed that a Jew should never feel secure. Therefore, it was his duty to transmit to us our duty: we were to remember. Part of this remembering revolved around the films we viewed which, all duty aside, we couldn't possibly forget. Even now, as I sit here typing, I see images flashing before me: men so thin they had lost almost all semblance to anything human; open graves filled with human bones that seemed to be thrown together as if they were yesterday's garbage. Naked women, forced to run across fields. And then there were the shoes.

I don't know why this last image held so much power nor why it still makes me weep to think of it. Inside what may have been some death camp storage area, there were broken-down shoes of various sizes piled one atop the other like a veritable tower of Babel. Some of them were so small they must have been the first shoes of young children. Perhaps, when I saw these shoes, stripped of their laces and seeming so oddly vulnerable, I thought about the feet which had moulded the leather into all these shapes. About the people who woke in the morning and found their shoes where they had left them. People who slid their toes inside the comfort of leather, tied the laces up to a respectable and secure firmness, and opened their front doors, walking into the world. I thought about those who built such a tower, and I felt the palpable force of all those who were forced to leave these shoes behind. They were not just shoes: they were silent witnesses that told each of us sitting in that darkened classroom that we couldn't be silent. We must re-

member and speak. For those shoes could have been ours. Those people were *our* people.

But what were we to say — we the youngsters of that baby boom generation? It was all so confusing. Were we to speak of the mass extermination of men and women who looked like our grandparents and parents; children who looked like our brothers or sisters? Were we to speak about the newly-born state of Israel which was held up to us as the centre of Jewish strength, power, and renewal? How were we to feel as Jewish children born in North America? Were our parents telling us that a holocaust could happen anywhere?

Moreover, was it wrong to feel American? If the United States had seemed so strangely silent then, would it be so a decade later? Were we fooling ourselves during all those months between Easter and Christmas when we could ignore our status as being somehow *different* and celebrate, instead, all that *sameness* that bound us to our neighbours, classmates, and friends?

Maybe, we consoled ourselves, a few of us did keep silent when everyone else murmured “Our Father who Art in Heaven.” Maybe we simultaneously enjoyed and suffered through countless public school assemblies while we sang “All I Want for Christmas is My Two Front Teeth” and “Rudolph the Rednosed Reindeer.” But we all loved sipping cherry cokes. We loved twirling around on stools at the local soda fountain while flipping through comic books that replayed how Archie lost Veronica and Jughead behaved just like his name implied.

More than that, we knew where our hearts were. We placed our right hand over that muscle beating patriotically in time to our voices and daily chanted, “I Pledge Allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America.” Nobody could take that away from us. Our grandparents or parents might have come from Poland or Russia or Lithuania or Morocco. They might have escaped from countless countries whose names we couldn’t pronounce and might never see in our entire lives, but *we* were different. We had a homeland that would always be ours. Therefore, we felt angered to be thrust into such a state of ambivalence.

No doubt our parents did not realize just how ambivalent we felt. Rather, I suspect there was an unspoken agreement amongst them and our teacher: while we were to be educated in the beautiful traditions of our past and feel proud of ourselves as Jews, we were also to understand the horrors inflicted upon us. Such exposure was a good and necessary thing. We were the next generation of decision-makers. Perhaps, too, our parents felt it our responsibility to know of this horror because they could no longer bear the burden alone. We shouldered their horror, their surprise, their sense of helplessness and anger. We became their vessels; and we said, “We remember,”

even while we wondered why all this happened and what our country had done. We began to see our identity as divided. We belonged and didn't belong to the United States. We belonged and didn't belong to Israel. The ghetto lived in us all.

We felt that connection each Passover as we ate the bread of affliction and sang songs of the Exodus. We sensed it when we toured around in our parents' cars looking at beautiful Christmas lights which were all right to enjoy from afar or when we watched our mothers bless the Sabbath candles and our fathers chant the blessing over the Sabbath wine. We could sing all the old melodies that bound us to one Old Country or another. We were only missing the new melody — the song about ourselves as second or third generation children of immigrants. At least that is what *I* was missing.

I knew that I didn't want to compose a song of what wasn't or isn't. The song of a silent child who nods when a checker asks her if she's excited about Christmas and all those gifts because she's learned that people have trouble when you say, "I'm not getting Christmas presents. I'm Jewish. I get Chanukah presents." I wanted to compose a new tune of what was and is. Its notes would call up images of courage, survival, of the passage over to another country, of beginning again. When you sang it all the way through, you'd feel as if you read a kind of Jewish-American Horatio Alger story. That would set things straight in my mind and allow me to move beyond that adolescent helplessness so many of us felt sitting in that classroom.

Thus, seized by an emotional yearning as well as by the sheer desire to know more about the refugee centre at Fort Ontario, in the spring of 1995 having had my Sabbatical proposal accepted, I began research in earnest. I read Dr. Ruth Gruber's wonderful text, *Haven*. Dr. Gruber was the Special Assistant to the Secretary of the Interior, Harold Ickes. She helped bring the refugees over from Italy. From Gruber's book I learned all these amazing stories of survival: people climbing the Julian Alps to make it into Italy; a woman who led her two children through a sixty-kilometre trek through fighting lines; a female partisan fighter; a Roman Catholic woman who ran an underground and saved over a hundred families; a man who had survived several camps and gave others the courage to do so. I stared at the photographed faces and came to know, in some small way, these people.

I read Sharon Lowenstein's *Token Refugee* and copied down reams of facts. Back in 1942, I read, the State Department actually knew of Nazi plans to exterminate the Jews. Gerhart Riegner, a refugee from Berlin working for the World Jewish Congress in Switzerland, had investigated news given to him by a German industrialist about Hitler's plan to exterminate all the Jews of Europe with prussic acid. He had found such news to be accurate, and attempted to deliver it to Rabbi Wise, president of the American Jewish Congress, but that first cable was never delivered. The State department consid-

ered the information “unsubstantiated” and suppressed the cable. In early 1943, Riegner attempted to send another cable which contained pages of horrific passages about the massacre of Jews in Poland and Rumania. Not only was this cable suppressed, but the State Department also cabled back requesting that no more messages concerning such atrocities be sent. The general sentiment in the US was to first win the war and then think about the refugees — if there were any left to think about. There was a great deal of anti-semitism then; very few people wanted Jews to enter the country. Only in 1944 was sentiment beginning to change. The safe haven was created out of compassion, but also out of political savvy. Refugees were clogging the roadways along the Italian front and making it difficult for the US army to move its troops. Roosevelt realized he could convince the public that by bringing 1,000 refugees over here the US would at least appear to care. This, too, would alleviate problems on the front. If there were any dissenting voices in Congress, Roosevelt could say that the refugees had signed an agreement indicating they would return to their homelands after the war. Whatever his personal feelings, he knew he had public opinion (read prejudice) to deal with.

“How modern,” I thought. I began to realize that I was not only about to write a historical fiction. I was also dealing with issues that affect democratic societies right now. Right now we debate the issue of immigration. Right now we have those who would have no more people enter into this country. We debate about policy, about what is practical and what is honourable, about what is humane and what isn’t. I felt (and still do feel) that I needed to write a book which would allow adolescents the forum to really explore immigration policies and the ideals of democracy. I wanted adolescents to see what immigrants could do for a country, and how the issue of the Holocaust is not solely a Jewish issue: it’s something which affects us all in our understanding of what is an ethical, responsible life.

During the ensuing year, I continued to read and write, asking questions as I found answers. What of the people who came over to the US? Who were they? What did they feel? What was their past? What about the Oswegonians? Here was this small town which suddenly had an influx of nearly 1,000 refugees. How did townspeople respond? What did they learn? Why was there a fence around the shelter? I read it was there because the shelter was an old army barracks. But why wasn’t it torn down? What was it like to live behind a fence after you came from a concentration camp? I thought about these refugees who travelled from Italy to the United States. I was intrigued by the Oswegonians, particularly one girl who got on the shoulders of some boys and passed a bike over to some refugee children; a girl who, I later learned, sneaked under the well-known hole under the fence and made daily visits to the camp. I also found out that a non-profit organization was in the midst of collecting and preserving documentation from the

Emergency Refugee Center. Scott Scanlon, director of Safe Haven Inc., spoke to me about his efforts to establish a museum.¹ I ascertained that many boxes of information were (and, for the moment are) being temporarily stored in the Pennfield Library, at the State University of New York, Oswego. There was material in the Oswego County Historical Library, and the Head Start Building at Fort Ontario. Of even more value was a list of former refugees with their addresses and phone numbers. I could actually speak to people who had lived through the experience!

At first I had phone conversations — all of them unforgettable. From one woman I learned what it was like to hold your mother's hand and think that any minute she might disappear. I felt her joy at being in the camp. From one man I learned to see the greyness of war and understand why the sight of New York harbour would be so unbelievable. The colours and sounds of safety came to me in his words. From the many cassette tapes done of the refugees during Safe Haven's 50th reunion I learned what it was like to sail on the Liberty ship, the *S.S. Henry Gibbins*; the fear people felt when smoke entered the hold; the amazement one child felt when she ate jello for the first time.

I spent days listening to and transcribing tapes. Then I went to Oswego. I met the woman who had passed her bike over the fence. Geraldine Rossiter and I sat together on the shores of Lake Ontario. She told me where the hole was and how she sneaked under it. (There was a quarantine period where no one was allowed in, and during the whole time refugees had passes they had to show in order to get out. Children had the liberty to go to school outside the fence, but adults were confined much more, and they didn't use the well-known hole as the children often did.) She told me about her best friend from the camp; about going to a bar-mitzvah and not understanding the words but feeling the emotion of the boy and his family; about learning dances from Yugoslavia, about encountering prejudice from some people she knew in Oswego and finding others who generously gave of themselves — of examining in her own soul what it meant for her to be a Christian.

The stories told by a woman who spent most of her life in one town and yet seemed to find and embrace the world were woven into the fabric of my main character, Chris Cook. I interviewed Mrs. Dorothy Faust, former home economics teacher at Oswego High and wife of Ralph Faust, principal. I had heard of how he worked so hard to get the children into public schools; how he managed to get several of them to take the New York Regents' exam. He, too, came into my book. Later, in New York city, I was to interview former refugees: Mrs. Edith Klein, Mrs. Steffi Steinberg Winters, the late Dr. Ivo Lederer, and Mr. Kostia Zabolin.

I don't think I'll forget sitting in Mrs. Klein's elegant New York apartment and hearing how she somehow managed to help her father escape

from a roundup. In her hometown, children under fourteen didn't have to wear the star — it appears that small, out-of-the-way communities, sometimes bent the regulations — but her father did. He was going to take it off, but she said, "Don't. You take it off, and somebody will recognize you. You will be killed for not following the rules." She put her arm around the place where the badge was and led him home. Nor will I forget Dr. Lederer's stories. Sitting in the conference room of his huge international relations firm, sitting across from this man who had a PhD from Princeton, taught at Princeton, Yale, and Stanford, and had continued to make such a success of his life in America, I listened while he told me what it was like to be a young Jewish boy in Italy. I documented small things: like how his mother requested he wear short pants even when he was long overdue for long ones: young boys in Italy wore short pants; it was safer that people think him young. I thrilled to the story of how he was caught; of how he would have been sent to the front lines, and of how, according to him, not with brains, but with "pure instinct," he said: "What are you doing? You can't do that. I'm German."

Dr. Lederer told me what it was like to be a boy at the Emergency Refugee Shelter: a boy who wanted desperately to live life to the fullest. From his stories, and those of Kostia Zabotin, who lived through the internment camp at Ferramonti and boldly spoke out against the fence in the Oswego shelter, I created Adam. The adventures Kostia and Ivo had in the camp, along with those I heard on tape from other former "teen" refugees on tape, became adventures Adam had with his friends or with Chris.

Another whole day I spent with Steffi Winters in Teaneck. I wrote down small things: what it was like to stand in line on ship with a mess kit in your hands; what it was like to go to an American school. You had to learn to be quick when the bell rang because you changed classes. Steffi was used to sitting in her seat and waiting for teachers to change rooms. She made me understand how a girl felt having lost years away from school; the courage it took to go back to high school; the desire refugees felt to learn everything; her immense satisfaction at graduating from high school. She made me understand what it was like to lose so much: to have her father taken away from her; to live in a remote village of Italy, to come with her mother to America, almost as if by chance. She said to her mother "You go there, and you register." Eight days later they were accepted because, as Steffi said: "we were alone. We had nobody left over. We had nobody of military age."

From Steffi I learned what it felt like to become stateless; to lose one's identity and homeland; to live in some temporary state of being wherein one's real life is always about to begin after all the horror is over. These feelings, too, I internalized, asking myself: What is it like to be a refugee? What is it like to be an immigrant? To want to be safe? To have one's own postbox, one's own address? To walk into a library and know one can check out books?

As I wrote, I kept these pictures in my mind, holding them alongside the memory of that pile of shoes, and I took more pictures, particularly when I was in Oswego. They weren't pictures of the barracks wherein the refugees were housed because these shelters had been torn down shortly after the war. Only a replica of the barracks is on view at the State Museum in Albany, New York.² In Oswego, little else is left as a physical reminder of this amazing event except some administration buildings, a memorial plaque, the excellent photos³ inside the Head Start Building and pieces of the fence — at least I think it is the old fence. On one occasion, cursing my lack of photographic knowledge and attempting to do my best with the lens my husband uses for close-up shots, I skirted around the Fort and found parts of the fence. Down near the railroad tracks, as Geraldine described it, I think I even found the hole.

But what remained in my mind, and what I wish I could have captured better than I did, was this tree. It had managed to grow over a segment of fencing as if wire could not stop the tree's need to grow and thrive. And that, too, seemed to stand as silent testimony. Against all odds, these refugees lived. They became successful and thrived. They had children and grandchildren. But there could have been more people brought over. So many more people who would have had more children and grandchildren — who would have spoken of success — who would have been able to tie their shoelaces and walk freely into the world as is all our right to do. And so Chris, near the end of *Two Suns in the Sky*, finally says to Adam: " ... There should have been more camps like this. Without fences. We should have had so many."

Notes

- 1 The *New Ontario Chronicle*, which documents recent events related to Safe Haven and its former inhabitants, is published quarterly by Safe Haven Inc., PO Box 846, Oswego, NY 13126. Information about Safe Haven can also be found on the World Wide Web. The website is <http://www.syracuse.com/features/safehaven/>.
- 2 Plans for Safe Haven museum are currently in the works. Ruth Gruber has donated \$10,000 as start-up money, the city of Oswego has leased an old bakery to Safe Hamen Inc. for next to nothing, and Carl Banmann is fast at work with architectural plans for the museum. I am donating one-tenth of royalties from the sale of *Two Suns in the Sky* to the museum. I am also donating one-tenth of my profits from any public readings.
- 3 Photos of the refugees arriving in America, the barracks, and individual shots of refugees can be found on the website listed above or in Dr. Gruber's text, *Haven*.

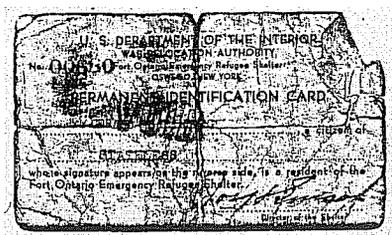
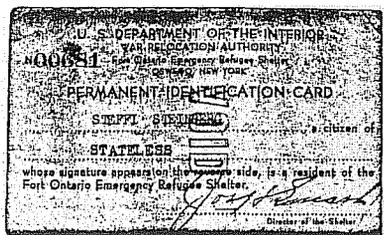
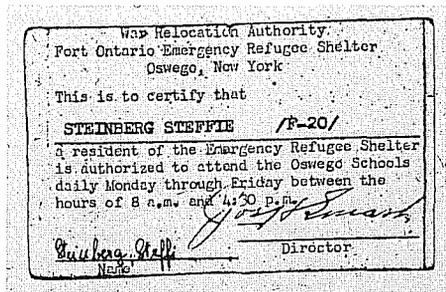


Fig. 1: Card indicating the stateless status of Steffi Steinberg when she entered the US and the pass she used to get in and out of the camp. Children were given school passes and so had more freedom than adults. They also sneaked under the infamous fence hole which, it appears, everyone knew about. Still there was a fence. German POWs could actually work and did migrant farm labour (particularly in Michigan). The people inside the Emergency Refugee Shelter could not, although they did harvest one group for a local farmer. This was aggravating to many shelter residents. However, they created a very full community inside the fence, and townspeople came to see plays, hear music, attend lectures, etc.

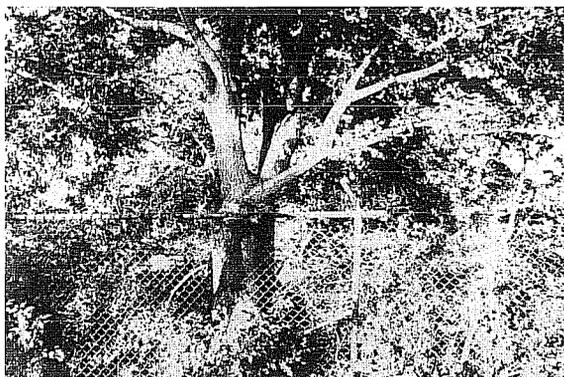


Fig. 2: A small segment of the old fence remains. When I visited Oswego, I took this picture. For me it symbolized the amazing strength of the refugees. They would grow around all barriers if necessary. They would survive and thrive.

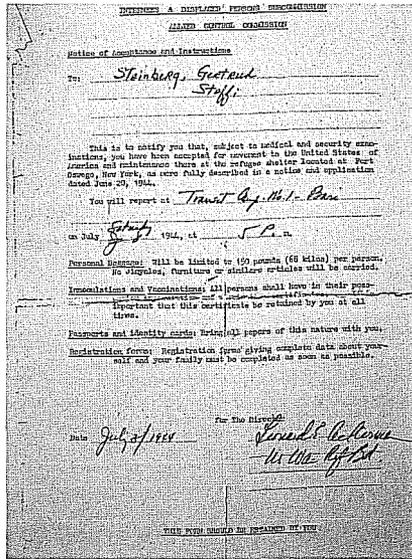


Fig. 3: A facsimile of the transit order given to Gertrud Steinberg, Steffi (Steinberg) Winters's mother. I used this order and other pieces of government documentation inside the body of my manuscript.



Fig. 4: So many of the children at the shelter had not stepped inside a school for years before they came to the US. They learned on the run. When they were offered the possibility to go to school, they were overjoyed. At first Steffi, who was past high school age, was afraid to go to high school. She felt too old. But she went, passed her New York Regents' exam and graduated. One day, in Teaneck, years later, she showed me her yearbook. Being able to attend high school and graduating meant the world to her. Principal Faust worked to help a good many students. In my text Adam relishes learning. He is unashamed about asking questions and studying and he wants to get ahead. Our own children forget what it's like to be unable to read, to be forbidden access to schools and libraries, museums and theatres. I wanted to make teenagers see what it was like to be so deprived and to be thirsting for knowledge.



Fig. 5: The Oswego Shelter residents — teenagers attending Oswego High School. Several of them graduated high school while at the shelter.

THE PARADOX

Schools at War Committee

Chairman	Mark Fugittobona
Secretary	Elizabeth King
Advisor	Mr. Francis T. Riley

The committee is made up of representatives from each home room in the school.

This year our quota was \$25,000 which we raised and surpassed. The students from the shelter were of great help in attaining this goal.

The committee is responsible for carrying on the sale of stamps and bonds as well as the construction of graphs showing weekly gains.

Fig. 6: Yearbook photo from WWII given to me by Steffi Winters — I looked through the yearbook as well as through newspapers to get a feel for that time. In one chapter, Adam is on the War Bonds committee. Many refugee teenagers raised a good deal of money for the war and felt deeply committed even while they were considered stateless and lived on what was termed “neutral ground.” At first babies born in the shelter were not considered US citizens because of the “neutral ground” status of The Emergency Refugee Shelter, but many fought for citizenship. Steffi told me a humorous story which I put at the end of my novel. At the immigration check-point (refugees went out to Canada and re-entered legally), everyone was asked to disembark from their buses and get official stamping. One woman who held her baby said “He doesn’t have to come out. He’s a US citizen.” This relieved the tension.



Fig. 9: Safe Haven material is now being temporarily housed in the Special Collections room of the Pennfield Library at SUNY, Oswego. Here I am in my white gloves checking through boxes. During research, I was very aware of the delicate nature of some material, particularly *The Ontario Chronicle*, the newspaper produced by shelter residents. I can only hope that agencies will come to the aid of Safe Haven so that this material does not vanish.

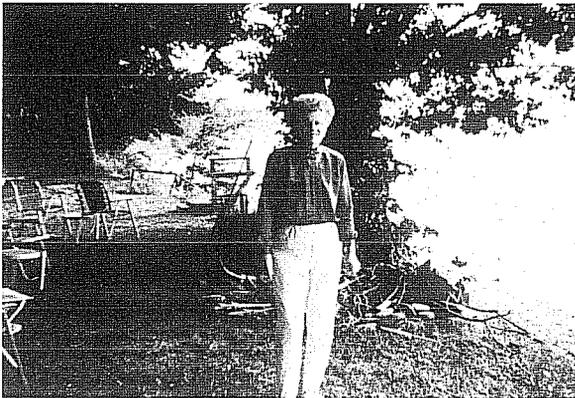


Fig. 10: Geraldine (Gerry) Rossiter outside her home on the banks of Lake Ontario, Oswego, New York. Gerry, the girl who passed her bike over the fence, was transformed into my Chris. Gerry told me about the things she learned at the camp; about how the world opened to her; her shock at the stories, and her deep friendships. I also got humorous stories about how she disguised herself as a refugee; how she went under the hole, attended plays, classes, went to a bar-mitzvah etc. She told me about the prejudicial attitude of some people and how others opened their hands and their hearts. She let me see a town and its response to this camp.

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Miriam Bat-Ami is an associate professor of English at Western Michigan University where she teaches children's literature and has developed several courses on multicultural literature for children and adolescents. She is the author of three children's books, a picture book (Sea, Salt, and Air, Macmillan, 1993), and two pre-adolescent novels (When the Frost is Gone, Macmillan, 1994 and Dear Elijah, Farrar '95, paperback by Jewish Publication Society, 1997). Dear Elijah was a '95 spring Pick of the Lists Book from the American Booksellers Association. Dr. Bat-Ami won the Scott O'Dell award for best historical fiction of the year (2000) for Two Suns in the Sky, which is also on the YALSA list for best books of 2000. Bat-Ami has also written several critical articles for Children's Literature in Education, Children's Literature Association Quarterly, and Language Arts Journal of Michigan. Her academic specialty is historical fiction and nonfiction for children.