



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Patty Ritchie

Senator Ritchie's Community Spotlight: Fort Ontario

SENATOR PATTY RITCHIE August 16, 2019

| ISSUE: **REFUGEES**



Senator Ritchie's Community Spotlight

Fort Ontario in Oswego County has played a significant role in our nation's history dating back to the French and Indian War in the 1750's, through the end of World War II when its ownership was transferred to New York State. Upon taking over, New York State opened Fort Ontario's housing up to World War II veterans and their families until 1953 when Fort Ontario became a New York State Historic Site.

Perhaps its most important historical purpose though, was when in 1944 then President Franklin D. Roosevelt ordered Fort Ontario to serve as a refugee camp for nearly 1,000 Jewish victims of the Nazi Holocaust. It was the only such camp in the nation.

Just recently, Fort Ontario hosted events to commemorate the 75th anniversary of when refugees first arrived in Oswego. Participating were former refugees and their family members, who throughout the day shared stories of their time at the shelter, also known as "Safe Haven." I was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to take part in the day's events, where I talked with refugees, including 94 year-old Eddie Levitch, who arrived at Safe Haven as a teenager.

Fort Ontario and the Safe Haven Holocaust Refugee Shelter Museum are critically important to the history of Oswego and our nation as a whole. That's why in recent years, Oswego County has worked to see that Fort Ontario and the Safe Haven Holocaust Refugee Shelter Museum be added to the National Park System. These efforts finally paid off when in October of last year, the President signed a bill ordering the federal government to study whether Fort Ontario should be designated as a National Park.

As state senator, I have been proud to play a role in ensuring the future of these two important parts of our history. My recent efforts have included securing a \$100,000 grant to help the museum enhance its exhibits, which builds on other work being done at the site, including renovations to the Fort's two officer's quarters.

If you've never been, I encourage you to visit Fort Ontario and the Safe Haven Refugee Shelter Museum to learn about their significance firsthand. In addition to being open to the general public most days of the week, the site also hosts a number of community events throughout the year.

One of its biggest is the annual “Bemelmans’ Festival” which is held each spring in honor of Ludwig Bemelmans, an officer stationed on Fort Ontario in the early 1900’s who would go on to author the beloved “Madeline” children’s book series.

For more information on Fort Ontario and the Safe Haven Holocaust Refugee Shelter Museum—including more on its history, as well as hours of operation—I encourage you to click [here](#).