

Oral History Interview
with
GEORGE L. WARREN

Long career dealing with problems of refugees and displaced persons starting in 1928, including service during the Truman administration as a member of the U.S. delegation to the Second, Third, Fourth and Fifth Sessions of the Council of UNRRA, 1944-46; U.S. representative, U.N. special Committee on Refugees and Displaced Persons, 1946; adviser to the U.S. representative, U.N. Economic and Social Council, 1946; U.S. representative, Preparatory Commission, International Refugee Organization, 1947-48; adviser to U.S. delegates, U.N. General Assembly, 1948, 1949, and 1950; and U.S. representative, General Council and Executive Committee, International Refugee Organization, 1948-52.

Washington, D.C.
November 10, 1972
by Richard D. McKinzie, Harry S. Truman Library

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MCKINZIE: Mr. Warren, many students of history would be interested to know how one becomes an expert in the subject of refugees. You had a long career dealing with refugee problems dating from the First World War. What motivated you? Is there any particular reason that you became interested in the problems of refugees and indigent aliens?

WARREN: I think it was a matter of gradual development. When I was in Harvard from 1906 to 1910, I spent three hours a day the last two years, 1909 and 1910, working with the Associated Charities in Boston dealing with homeless men -- wanderers. Later when I was in Bridgeport,

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Connecticut in 1919 to 1928 -- that was the time of World War I, Bridgeport was just chaos, it was a war production city. The Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Connecticut, Honorable George W. Wheeler was also Chairman of the Draft Board, and wouldn't let me go to war. I was Chairman of the Home Service Committee of the American Red Cross. And one of the cases that came to my attention was a woman whose husband was a GI and was killed in the war. She was left with only a few hundred dollars, and I had to take care of her.

Then I had another case. It was an Italian woman with six or eight children whose husband just got up and left one Friday afternoon and went to Italy and joined the army -- the U.S. Army. And she was left with six or eight children.

Well, these two cases got me interested in problems of families that were created by separation between countries. After I left Warner Brothers in 1928, I was offered the

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position of Director of the International Migration Service, which dealt with just this kind of problem. It is now called the International Social Service. And that's how I got interested in families whose problems were created by migration -- where the families were separated.

In 1938 when the refugees began to increase, President Roosevelt (prior to his calling the Evian Conference) organized the President's Advisory Committee on Political Refugees. And members of the committee, like Hamilton Fish Armstrong, James G. McDonald, Paul Baerwald, Basil Harris, Rabbi Stephen Wise, and Joseph P. Chamberlain all knew me and named me secretary of that Committee. And that's how I happened to be asked by Sumner Welles, Under Secretary of State, to go to Evian to be adviser to Myron Taylor, who was the U.S. Representative at the Evian Conference, and unfamiliar with the problem.

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MCKINZIE: You weren't completely satisfied with the outcome of the Evian Conference?

WARREN: No. But there were reasons for that and it wasn't a complete failure. It was toward the end of the depression. All the Latin-American countries, which might have been reception countries of resource, were having trouble by movements from the rural areas into cities -- and serious unemployment. Our own Congress was very hostile to the idea of admitting any refugees. We tried to get the United Kingdom to provide some place of resettlement on the land. Everybody at that time thought that the only thing to do was to colonize them in agriculture.

MCKINZIE: Did you also believe that, at that time?

WARREN: I did at the time, but I realized later that it was completely impractical. President Roosevelt himself, was very much interested in such colonization. And incidentally, in 1939 he

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predicted remarkably closely the problem of the refugees and displaced persons at the end of the war -- it's amazing. He was constantly working with the president of John Hopkins University at that time, Isaiah Bowman. Roosevelt during that period had Isaiah Bowman exploring every uninhabited land where these people might be placed. And Bowman had more reality about problems of settlement than Roosevelt had. He [Bowman] knew every square foot in Latin America. He finally came up with the only solution -- that you had to introduce these refugees and displaced persons to existing rural areas and set them up in suburban areas to existing urban areas. But nothing ever came of that. We tried it out in a special mission that we sent to British Guiana, which the British very reluctantly agreed to. It was a joint British-U.S. mission under the auspices of this President's Advisory Committee.

Well, they got down there to Georgetown and there was an American flyer with a seaplane

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and he flew them over the rain forest, up to the plateau behind all the Guianas -- very fertile lands. There were refugees from our Civil War populating this area married to the Indians. The problem was, how would you get the refugees over the rain forest, because it was a hundred miles deep. You could bring them up through Brazil -- approach it that way or you could fly them in. Well, war broke out in 1939 and that was the end of that. And that was the end of any further efforts of colonization. From then on it was entirely an individual movement.

MCKINZIE: There was, after the war, some considerable guilt feeling, don't you think, on the part of some people in the administration for their failure to take in Jewish refugees from Hitler's Germany?

WARREN: I don't think so. I think Roosevelt's hands were completely tied by an overwhelming unwillingness in the Congress to admit refugees based

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partly on fear that the refugees would be fifth columnists. I don't think that fear was real, but there was no question about the attitude of Congress. Roosevelt's hands were tied. He did all he could in the situation. Later, he just arbitrarily brought a thousand refugees from Italy and put them up in a camp in New York State, Oswego. And was terribly criticized in Congress for doing that, but that is proof of his concern. Actually, he called the Evian Conference in July '38, because he felt he had to do something to react to the Anschluss in Austria. He didn't know what else to do. He was terribly embarrassed because, having called the conference, he couldn't do anything about taking refugees into the United States himself. And all he could do was to exhaust the quotas, which they did. But he did that with Congress growling at him every day of the week.

MCKINZIE: Then there was little that your own organization could do to change the situation?

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WARREN: Only for these intellectuals, that's all we could do. And otherwise we tried to work through the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees, which resulted from the Evian Conference. That was a futile effort by George Rublee to get some kind of a financial deal with the Nazis to let the refugees out with some of their own property. That failed completely. And when that happened Rublee resigned and it just got down to a refugee placement job. The Intergovernmental Committee -- which only had financial support from the U.S. and the U.K., all the other members simply paid their dues -- was the first organization that actually put up some money to buy a boat to move some refugees without charge out of Germany. That was their big contribution. They put up the first money to support refugees in the occupied countries, and they put up the first boat that started moving refugees out of Europe. Nobody has ever given them credit for that.

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Later, as the Congress became more involved, and that brings me to this report. [See "The Development of United States Participation in Intergovernmental Efforts to Resolve Refugee Problems," in George L. Warren Papers, Harry S. Truman Library.] In UNRRA and IRO the U.S. was paying 70 to 75 and 80 percent of the cost. We were paying for the support of the refugees in Germany. We were feeding them through our subsidization to the German economy. That's where Congressman [Francis E.] Walter comes in. He was just as opposed to having refugees enter the United States as every other Congressman, and that's why he was interested in creating IRO, International Refugee Organization, in an effort to divert the pressure on the United States to get refugees off to other countries. It wasn't all so glorious as this report.

MCKINZIE: Once the war was underway -- once the United States got into the war, the War Refugee Board began to consider those kinds of problems. What was your relationship with that, and can you assess their work?

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WARREN: I was the liaison officer in the State Department to the War Refugee Board. All their messages came to me, and I had to get the messages cleared through the Department, because otherwise they wouldn't go out. I thought they were very aggressive. They certainly took advantage of every opportunity that was available. They saved a lot of people -- I can't put figures on it, although they produced a report somewhere.

They produced a report and it was factual. They had no regard for the State Department's problems with other governments. I remember one telegram, particularly, that in my judgment was so insulting to the Swiss Government, which I felt was doing all that it could under a situation of neutrality, that I myself didn't want to send it. I went to John Pehle, he and I got along very well together. He told me that [Henry, Jr.] Morgenthau had said that Secretary [Cordell] Hull had agreed to send this cable. I couldn't believe

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that. And I went to the Secretary and I said, "Did you tell Morgenthau that I could send this out?" He read it and he was shocked. So I went over to Morgenthau and I said, "I'm afraid there's been some misunderstanding because I can't get Mr. Hull to agree to this." Morgenthau tore me to pieces. I went back to Hull. It was so late then I got him at home at night. He told me

to round up everybody in the Department who had anything to do with this particular cable at quarter of nine in his office the next morning. And I spent the whole night rounding them up; and they were all there. Hull walked in and said, "Sorry gentlemen, I've got to go somewhere else." And then he said to me, "See [Green H.] Hackworth."

I got hold of Hackworth. And Hackworth and I walked the corridors of the old State Department Building for two solid hours discussing this cable. And finally Hackworth said, "George, send it." The Swiss Government

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was in Washington the next day. They even went down and protested to Morgenthau. And the next day Hull called me back and he said, "George, I don't think I was very helpful to you, and I hereby give you authority to pass any cable, provided you're convinced it won't start a war between us and the recipient." That was the kind of thing that went on. In the end, [Edward R., Jr.] Stettinius and Pehle exchanged letters and Hull said everything had gone well. But it was a terrific experience!

MCKINZIE: Do you think that the War Refugee Board anticipated the nature of the postwar refugee problems -- or did anybody?

WARREN: No. No. They were more interested in immediate rescue. No. Actually they went out of business in the late summer of '45, before we even got around to facing the postwar refugee problems.

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MCKINZIE: Were you aware, or was anybody aware that you knew of, that there were going to be problems of the Volksdeutsche that were going to be political refugees from Eastern Europe? Had that been anticipated during the war?

WARREN: No, only by Roosevelt. Roosevelt is the one man who predicted that, and nobody believed him at the time, and he did that in '39.

MCKINZIE: Then you went from this liaison position to working with UNRRA when UNRRA was established.

WARREN: I was only with UNRRA about a month and that was before Charlie [Charles P.] Taft brought me in to the State Department to act as liaison officer with the War Refugee Board. I had no experience with the State Department at all. I didn't know how their trains ran and was suddenly thrown into this situation.

MCKINZIE: Could you talk about your experience with UNRRA?

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WARREN: My only experience with UNRRA: I was Chairman of the Committee on Displaced Persons in the UNRRA governing organization. As a representative of the U.S. I was Chairman of that Committee. Then when UNRRA was actually in existence immediately after Atlantic City

where it was set up, I was on the UNRRA staff for about a month. I disagreed with Governor [Herbert H.] Lehman who insisted that this problem of refugees had to be handled through the country organizations that UNRRA now was setting up. I said, "Governor this is an unusual problem that supersedes any country interest. You've got to handle it with a separate organization, directly responsible to you." He rejected that. And I think only the next day Charlie Taft called me up and said, "Won't you come over and provide liaison with the War Refugee Board?"

MCKINZIE: Did you have the feeling that you were alone in arguing this to Governor Lehman, or were there

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some other people arguing?

WARREN: I was completely alone. Nobody else was interested or knowledgeable.

MCKINZIE: Did you have the feeling that UNRRA people didn't think that refugees would be a large problem at the end of the war.

WARREN: I had a feeling that Governor Lehman had a staff assistant, Hugh Jackson. He was a younger man, who had no knowledge or understanding of the problem. And Governor Lehman was following his line. He was a good administrative officer, but he had no special knowledge of this problem. You see, prior to this time, while I was consultant in the State Department on a day to day basis, Professor Joseph Chamberlain of Columbia University and I had a committee in the State Department -- representative of the Navy, John D. Rockefeller III, Wall Cohen, downtown, and so on. While the firing was still going on we were compiling estimates of the persons who were

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displaced by the war. Some thirty million in Europe, and we never knew what the figures were in the Far East. I remember Ike [Dwight D. Eisenhower] came home one time for the weekend. He came home on Thursday night, and he said, "I want the analysis that you folks make of what the displaced problem will be when the shooting stops." I spent an entire night down at the Government Printing Office getting these statistics together and we handed Ike the report. It was on that report that the military based their whole treatment of refugees and displaced persons as soon as the shooting stopped.

MCKINZIE: And then it was -- wasn't it just about as soon as the shooting stopped that President Truman appointed Earl Harrison?

WARREN: On one trip.

MCKINZIE: To make a trip to assess the nature of the refugee problem?

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WARREN: Oh, no, no, no. Earl Harrison was sent by Truman on the instigation of the War Refugee Board. The War Refugee Board had become convinced that the treatment of the refugees and displaced persons in camps was pretty awful. And it was awful. John Pehle complained to Truman and Truman sent Harrison to check that fact. And Harrison came back and said, "Yes, the conditions in the camps are terrible." I think he might have added, "I don't think Ike is aware of what he's got to deal with. He's preoccupied with other problems." And that's when Truman sent Ike a pretty stiff cable and said, "Get on the job and do something about these refugees and camps." I think Ike got furious.

MCKINZIE: President Truman by December of 1945 was trying to help a little bit by bringing some

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refugees into the United States.

WARREN: Yes.

MCKINZIE: Using quotas that had not been filled during the war.

WARREN: That's another story and I was on the side of that. And I have a paper that will summarize all those actions.

MCKINZIE: You were aware then that you were a part of the great dialogue that was going on then -- from May to December of 1945, between the defeat of Germany and the attempt of President Truman to open up the immigration quotas a little bit, to use some of the unfilled immigration quotas. In short, how did you get your message to him?

WARREN: Well, I don't know. You see, the only, personal, contact I ever had with Truman was on the occasion of those pictures. Thereafter, I dealt with persons who were appointed by Truman. For instance, Truman nominated Arthur

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Altmeyer. I worked very closely with him. He was succeeded by [William] Hallam Tuck, who was a great [Herbert] Hoover man. He was suggested by Jerry Vorhees who had helped us to get the IRO money through. I think he came from California. But Tuck didn't work out too well. He was not a good administrator, but he was very popular with European governments. Quite unexpectedly, we got an inquiry from the White House about Tuck. How was he doing? Well, I sent word very frankly that he wasn't doing too well. Whereupon the White House nominated J. Donald Kingsley, and I had to secure Tuck's departure and get Kingsley appointed. It was a nasty piece of business.

MCKINZIE: I have a newspaper clipping here from the *New York Times* [see clipping in OF 85-Q, *New York Times*, July 7, 1949] dealing with the appointment of...

WARREN: Mike [Michael, L.] Hoffman.

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MCKINZIE: ...of Kingsley. That's right, that's the reporter's name, yes.

WARREN: Yes, I know. That was one of the toughest problems I ever faced, single-handedly. Tuck resigned, but he didn't advise us that he was going to, or that he had resigned. That was a little discourtesy on his part, and this combined with my report to the White House that he wasn't doing very well anyway. I had instructions from Truman to get Kingsley appointed. I sat out a whole week standing all alone against all the other members of the IRO Council. I finally went to Tuck and I said, "Look, if you're wise enough to withdraw your resignation, I'm helpless, because if your resignation doesn't exist, I haven't the authority to replace you." And he wouldn't do that. I said, "All right. Then I sit here until you withdraw."

And finally I said to the other governments, "Look, I will send any message to the Department

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that you want to send in your effort to overrule my position. And I will refrain even from calling the Department. You draft the cable. I'll send it, and we'll see. It so happened that Herb Fierst and General [John] Hilldring got the cable, and their feeling was Truman has told Warren to get Kingsley elected. So they sent me back a cable completely supporting my position, which was a godsend. Well, then the other governments broke down and elected Kingsley overnight. And then Mike Hoffman came on and wrote this. Mike Hoffman knew Kingsley and thought very well of him. But Mike thought that I was throwing the U.S. weight around. We were! But it was in a good cause because actually IRO was a mess at that time.

MCKINZIE: A mess in the sense that it was inefficient?

WARREN: Inefficient, yes. At this particular meeting, I got three financial reports from the administration -- all different. And Tuck didn't know

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what was going on.

MCKINZIE: But he was still very popular, evidently. All the other representatives supported him.

WARREN: Oh, all the other governments were for him. Yes, they were for him.

MCKINZIE: Could we go back just a little bit to 1945 and '46 and the perception of the refugee problem by people in the State Department, people such as Secretary [James F.] Byrnes and...

WARREN: Oh, that's the strangest part of this whole history -- you mentioned Secretary Byrnes. In 1946 I had been to London on two preparatory committees drafting and planning the finances of IRO. And we brought back a draft constitution and a budget to the U.N. Economic and Social Council in September '46. [John Gilbert] Winant was the U.S. representative, and I had met him at the Evian Conference. He had the flu and he was in bed. I came home from the meeting one afternoon

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and I said, "Governor, we're going to lose. Sir Philip Noel-Baker, representative of the British Government, is persuading the Latin-American countries that they are being asked to participate in a budget for this organization that in some instances is larger than the budgets of their own governments for a year." Sir Philip Noel-Baker who was a very prominent member of the Labor Party, I don't think he was actually in the government at the moment, but he was the representative here. And I said, "If he has another day this project is dead."

And Winant said, "Well what do you want me to do?"

I said, "I want you to get Sir Philip Noel-Baker out of New York tonight." Without another word he picked up the phone and got Clement Attlee -- so quickly I was surprised. And he said, "Clem, you know that when I left London you wanted to give me a great to-do, and I wouldn't take any of it." And he said, "Now, I have a raincheck."

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And Clem said, "Gil, I don't know what you're going to ask me to do, but it's done."

Gil said, "Fine, I want you to withdraw Philip Noel-Baker from New York tonight and send over in his place Sir Hector McNeil."

McNeil was there the next morning and Baker was gone. McNeil was interested in giving relief to refugees -- moving them. Baker in his younger days had been an associate or assistant to Fridjof Nansen. His idea of the whole problem was to give everybody an identity paper. He was acting on his own, because Hector McNeil and Sir George Rendall, they'd already approved all of these budgets. It was all planned. But Baker thought he outranked them I guess and tried to act on his own. That's what I left out of the report because he was still alive. Now he's dead and I can tell it. But that's what saved IRO.

Later, Mrs. Roosevelt and I got the thing through the Economic and Social Council, but I had

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to cut a hundred million out of the budget to do it -- overnight. The Committee in London received some terribly misleading information about the cost of taking care of the refugees. I think the budget that we brought to New York was two hundred and fifty million. Winant and I cut a hundred million out of the budget overnight. And we finally got that through.

MCKINZIE: At whose order was this cut? Who ordered the cut to the hundred million dollars?

WARREN: Winant and I did it. We had no orders from anybody. But I knew if we had left it in, we'd be licked. We didn't have to consult anyone in the State Department. We were just being realists. Well, later, we went through the same performance in the General Assembly.

Mrs. Roosevelt was the U.S. representative in Committee 3. The Russians put in seventy-five amendments to the constitution. Mrs. Roosevelt

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and I fought those amendments and we won most of them by 14 to 13, and 16 to 15, and 12 to 9. Finally Mrs. Roosevelt said to me, she said, "Mr. Warren, are you sure we're on the right track?"

I said, "I think I am, but..."

She said, "Well, what authority have you to do this?"

I said, "I haven't any. The only backing I've got is Senator Vandenberg." He came in one day and listened to this and sat behind my chair, and after listening to two or three votes he patted me on the shoulder and he said, "Stick it out. Get that through."

Well, it was after that Mrs. Roosevelt began to get query. She had the right to. And she said, "I don't know, I'm getting worried about this. You say you have no authority from the State Department, you had no instructions?"

I said, "No, I haven't. Well, look, you're going to lunch with Secretary Byrnes tomorrow.

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Why don't you ask him? He's the top man in the State Department." I met her after lunch and she said, "I asked him four times, and I couldn't get an answer out of him."

"Well," I said, "then under those circumstances, let's keep going," which we did. Incidentally, General Hilldring and Herb Fierst came up just like Vandenberg and listened to me, and didn't say a word. I didn't know they were there. Finally, when I wrote this report, I figured out what the difficulty was. In another committee in the U.N. Assembly -- Dean Acheson and Mr. Byrnes were desperately fighting against Mayor La Guardia's efforts to extend UNRRA. The reason that they were opposed to it was that the Soviet Government had so exploited UNRRA that they just couldn't take any more of it. So, the U.S. position in the General Assembly of the U.N. was terribly ambivalent. Here Acheson and Byrnes were fighting against any more UNRRA, and Mrs. Roosevelt and I were fighting in another committee

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for a hundred and fifty million dollar budget for IRO. I didn't know that at the time. I finally figured it out when I wrote this report. But I don't think that's in the report.

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