

Now & Then in Ripon ... Looking back with the Ripon Historical Society

Ripon has long history of helping displaced persons

Former Ripon resident Robin Wolzenberg recently spoke to an area organization about a new program she developed working with refugees to address the workforce challenges faced by long-term care providers.

The vice president of Housing & Clinical Services for LeadingAge Wisconsin, Wolzenberg has traveled the nation and Canada to present her program and the model is being studied by Boston University.

More than 60,000 refugees entered the United States in 2023. The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that migration will be the primary driver of the nation's population by 2030. Wolzenberg's comprehensive approach offers employment, housing and various forms of other assistance to refugees.

This type of assistance to refugees is nothing new to the community of Ripon.

In a March 2025 "Now & Then in Ripon," the Ripon Historical Society honored Ethel Bryan (1894-1977) and Gerda Ingeborg Krause Thiele (1909-2002) for Woman's History Month.

Both women chaired the First Congregational Church of Ripon's World Service Committee, which played a key role in helping war refugees, then called "displaced persons (DPs)" after World War II. Working with their church, as well as others, Bryan and Thiele helped to place 63 people from European countries in Ripon and about 176 more throughout Wisconsin.

In 1948, President Harry Truman signed the Economic Recovery Act, which became known as the "Marshall Plan." It was named for General George Marshall Jr. (1880-1957), secretary of state. Providing economic assistance for America's war-torn allies, this plan had a component which focused on aiding DPs. These were people forcibly moved from their homes during the conflict and allowed them to immigrate to the United States. Most of the DPs arriving in Wisconsin came from Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Poland, Eastern Germany and Hungary.

The July 14, 1951 edition of *Collier's* magazine printed an article on the Ripon DP program titled, "Wisconsin Welcomes the Wanderer."

The reporter writing the article spent more than a month living in Ripon to understand and report the full story.

The magazine noted that "By 1952, when the provisions of the Displaced Persons Act will have expired, more than 300,000 DPs will have entered this country. This works out to one-fifth of one percent of the total U.S. population. But in Ripon, which has gained a national reputation as a model town in the settlement of DPs, the percentage is much higher. About one in every 80 Ripon residents is a former displaced person."

Collier's explained that bringing the DPs to America was a savings to taxpayers because their camps in Europe were expensive to run. Once coming to America, the DPs became taxpaying citizens. The article noted, "Ripon businessmen and factory superintendents have found that DPs are among their most dependable workers. The same report comes from



THE JULY 14, 1951 edition of *Collier's* magazine featured this photograph of Karlis Racenis and Janis Grundsbergs from Latvia. Both were displaced persons and worked for Wilbur Van Metre, who owned an automotive business in Ripon. After coming to Ripon in 1949, Racenis and his wife lived in the community for 38 years.

Collier magazine photo

families who have engaged DPs for domestic help."

After arriving in Ripon, the DPs had to stay for one year. After that, most left Ripon to live in larger cities, but some stayed and became a part of the community.

In 1947 Reinhard Bets of Latvia became the first DP to attend an American college or university. He came to the United States in February 1947 and enrolled in Ripon College the second semester of the 1946-47 school year.

By 1949, Ripon College had four DPs enrolled. Private donations covered scholarships for these students allowing them to attend the school.

When Bets was 16 years old, the Germans invaded Latvia. He was taken to Germany, placed into a Nazi labor battalion and worked at an air field.

When the American forces captured the airfield, Bets was in a German uniform and spent three months in a POW camp. Once identified a Latvian national, he was transferred to a displaced persons camp. Bets graduated from Ripon College in 1951. It is unknown what happened to Bets after he left Ripon.

The Oct. 14, 1948 *Ripon Weekly Press* reported, "With Wisconsin people writing for advice these days to the displaced persons commission in Washington D.C., probably the most ambitious request came from a minister in Ripon. 'The people of my parish want to sponsor 100 displaced persons,' he wrote. 'We have several Latvian students already studying at Ripon College. One of our church women is in Germany and has been working with the displaced persons. Through her, we have been in touch with a number of them and assisting them as best we could. After a committee survey we are able to house and employ at least 100 people.'"

This minister was Rev. Charles S. Sowder Jr. (1907-?) of Ripon's First Congregational Church, 220 Ransom St. Sowder was an Army chaplain in WWII who assisted with DPs. He came to Ripon in 1946 and was active in getting DPs to Ripon. In May 1949, he moved to New York City to take a position with Church World Service to work on a national level with the DPs.

The church woman Sowder wrote about living in Germany was Bernice Shoebrook Barner (1905-1969). While in Ripon, Barner's husband, Thomas Barner (1905-1991), was the commander of the

Army Specialized Training Reserve program at Ripon College.

Barner and her two children left Ripon in November 1947 to join her husband, who was stationed at Nuremberg, Germany. She volunteered interviewing DPs in various refugee camps and helped them to find sponsors in the United States, especially with her friends in Ripon and Wisconsin. She is credited in finding homes in the United States for approximately 500 DPs.

Among the successful and more prominent Latvians to settle in Ripon was Velta Freibergs Latsons (1911-1999). Latsons was a longtime employee and supervisor for the food service at Ripon College. She also did private catering.

Latsons was a home economics teacher in her native Latvia. She also was a consultant for the university and arranged receptions at the Latvian embassy and president's home. She also was a radio commentator, giving household hints to homemakers. By 1944, Russians occupied Latvia and Latsons, along with her twin children, fled to a labor camp in Germany. Her husband was a chemist and made to stay in Latvia to help the Russians. Latsons never discovered what happened to him.

Ending up in a refugee camp near Nuremberg, Germany Latsons spent five years there. It was there that she met Barner, who was able to get the Congregational Church in Ripon to sponsor her and her children.

Karlís Racenis (1922-1992) and wife Irma Gerings Racenis (1921-2019) from Latvia were two refugees who came to Ripon in 1949 and made the community their home for 38 years, retiring to Wauwatosa in 1987. Their sponsor was Wilbur Van Metre (1905-1987) and his wife, Edna Williams Van Metre (1908-1990). Wilbur Van Metre came to Ripon in 1938 and owned the local Chevrolet garage, while Karlís Racenis worked as a mechanic at his business.

Before WWII, Karlís Racenis attended engineering school and worked as a mechanic during the war. After the war, he worked for the U.S. Army as a driver and mechanic. Karlís Racenis met Irma at a refugee camp in Germany, where they were married.

In Latvia, Irma Gerings Racenis had studied English, German and Latin, and after graduation she worked as an interpreter and also did office work. She



VELTA SMILDZINA LACIS, a displaced person from Latvia, became a top producer at Ripon's Knitting Mills (located where Ripon Drug now stands). Also shown in this 1951 *Collier's* magazine photograph is Alfred Reed, president of the Knitting Mills, who hosted Latvian DPs in his home at 536 Watson St.

continued this type of work in Ripon.

While in Ripon, Karlís Racenis took correspondence courses. In 1955, he started working in the engineering department of Speed Queen, now known as "Alliance Laundry Systems." He and his wife had two children who were born in Ripon and both children graduated from Ripon College, one becoming a U.S. Army officer. They lived at 222 Scott St., along with Irma Racenis' mother and DP friend Emilja Sprogis.

The 1981 book, "When a Woman Wills, A Narrative History of Ripon, Wisconsin Women," by Beverly Mureen Thomann (1917-1986), states that the Racenis's "reception in our country almost overwhelmed them. They found people so organized, so soft spoken 'angels without wings.'" It also noted that Irma Racenis thought "the best people in the world live in Ripon where they were warmly welcomed. ... A well-furnished apartment and jobs awaited them as well as loving friendship and concern."

A few people in Ripon did complain about the DPs. However, Herb Brandt (1900-1974), a foreman at Ripon Foods, stated in *Collier's*: "I just don't understand how anybody who knows the history of this country can talk against the DPs. My grandparents came over from Germany 40 years ago and made it possible for me to be a free man and hold the job I have. ... When you come right down to it every American has a DP in his family background somewhere. The people that landed on Plymouth Rock were DPs in their time, and I don't think they were any better than these fellows that are working here."

Alfred Reed (1907-1953), who lived at 536 Watson St., sponsored DPs and welcomed 50 of them to a Christmas party at his home. Reed also employed some of the DPs at his business, the Ripon Knitting Mills, located where Ripon Drug stands today at 328 Watson St. In *Collier's* he noted that "These people have been a real revelation to me. How they can find so much joy in living after all they've lost is hard to understand. I think they have discovered something that a lot of us could afford to discover — that just breathing the air of freedom is the greatest thing in the world."