

Die Schweiz und die Flüchtlinge zur Zeit des Nationalsozialismus

Switzerland and Refugees in the Nazi Era
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Summary

The present study is centered on the subject of Swiss refugee policy from 1933 to 1945 and is a revised second edition of the report published in December 1999 under the same name. In the 1950ies already, but to an even larger extent from the 1980ies on, the Swiss refugee policy in the times of the Second World War was the subject of fierce controversy. Well-founded investigations are now available on many issues. In the present study, an overall synthesis of the results of this research is presented, and at the same time new facts are included on several topics. As required by the mandate of the Federal Council, the financial aspects of refugee policy constitute one of the focal points of the investigation.

Categories, Figures and Method

During the Second World War, Switzerland sheltered for a shorter or longer time a total of almost 300 000 persons seeking protection. Among these were such disparate categories as interned military personnel (104 000), refugees admitted on a temporary basis (67 000), children on vacation (60 000), civilian refugees (51 000), immigrants (10 000) and political refugees (250). The horizon of orientation of the study is less the war and the people seeking sanctuary in Switzerland as a consequence of war, but rather the victims of the national socialist policy of persecution and destruction, i.e. in particular all those who tried to enter Switzerland as civilian refugees, immigrants or political refugees (chapter 1.4 and tables 1-2). Such orientation of the focus of research requires an investigation not only of the actions of authorities, but specifically of the consequences of Swiss refugee policy for the persons concerned. The refugees, their fate, their despair and hopes are therefore given their due place. An important methodological procedure in this context is the investigation of single cases and the presentation of individual life histories.

The years 1938 and 1942

For Swiss refugee policy, two years were of particular importance. In 1938, Switzerland was involved in the marking of passports of German Jews with a «J», and in August 1942 it closed its borders for persons persecuted «for racial reasons only».

In view of the exodus beginning after the «Anschluss» of Austria in the spring of 1938, Switzerland was looking for ways to keep refugees at bay. When the former Austrian citizens were given German passports, Switzerland was considering a general visa requirement for all Germans. From a Swiss point of view, however, economical and political interests were in opposition to this. Eventually the German authorities agreed to the suggestion made by the Swiss, to mark passports with a discriminating imprint, limited to German «Non-Aryans». After the basic agreement, the definition of the imprint – a stamp with text, the name underlined in red, or a «J» – was merely a question of technical details. Although the head of the Federal Police Division, Heinrich Rothmund, expressed legal and ethical reservations regarding this marking, it was unanimously approved by the Federal Council. Thus Switzerland based its entry practice on the racist criteria established by German law, making the distinction between Aryan and Non-Aryan, and it accepted an agreement which in principle also allowed the marking of passports of Swiss Jews. For German Jews, this «J» resulted in rendering difficult or impossible their departure for other countries as well (chapter 3.1).

In the summer of 1942 the situation was fundamentally different. Switzerland, except for the Southwestern border, was encircled by the Axis powers, and the supply situation was precarious. The study shows through what channels and to what extent information on German mass murder reached Switzerland, making it an actual turntable for information of all kind. It was difficult, however, to distinguish reliable information from rumors. In addition, the mass murders talked about were crimes that many deemed hardly conceivable. Nevertheless, there is no doubt: The Federal Council, the Federal Department of Justice and Police as well as army headquarters knew in summer 1942 that rejected refugees were threatened with deportation to Eastern Europe and therefore with death. In view of this fact the Schweizerische Israelitische Gemeindebund, aid agencies and parts of the population vehemently protested the closing of the borders (chapter 3.2)

Motivation and Instructions

The closing of the borders in the summer of 1942 was justified in part by the food supply situation. Sources prove, however, that neither the food supply situation nor military or political pressure from abroad played a decisive role in the closing of the borders. The question, therefore, arises why Switzerland, in spite of the knowledge it had, and without any stringent necessity, in the following months rejected thousands of refugees and got involved in national socialist crimes by abandoning refugees to their persecutors. In the present volume, anti-Semitism appears as an important reason for either not perceiving the persecution of Jews, or not drawing the necessary consequences in favor of the victims from this knowledge. This appears clearly from a comparison with policy regarding those refugees who had fled the repercussions of the Russian revolution and had found refuge and financial support in Switzerland. While in this case the all pervasive anti-communism worked in favor of the refugees, the rejection of Jewish refugees was motivated by a widespread anti-semitic attitude. Anti-Semitism in Switzerland was culturally, socially and politically founded and linked to forms of Christian hatred of Jews. It was embedded in a population policy which had been fighting the «Überfremdung» («over-foreignization») of Switzerland, and in particular the so-called «Verjudung» («over-Jewishization») since World War One (chapter 1.3). There were other factors affecting the definition of Swiss refugee policy, however, factors of national as well as international origin. At a national level, in particular xenophobia and the discourse of «Überfremdung» (chapter 2.2.2), economic protectionism (chapter 2.2.3), concerns regarding supply and national security (2.2.4) and the concept of a humanitarian mission (chapters 2.2.1 and 6) are to be mentioned. The interplay and incompatibility of these motives made it impossible for the Swiss decision makers to decide for a more generous admission of Jewish refugees, in spite of their extensive knowledge of the national socialist policy of persecution and destruction. At an international level, the issue of refugees was the subject of deliberations in the League of Nations in the thirties; in July 1938 there was an international conference taking place in Evian, at which the admission of refugees from Austria and Germany was to be coordinated internationally. In all attempts to coordinate the various national refugee policies, however, Switzerland kept in the background.

Escape, Rejection, Admission and Residence

The study is dedicating particular attention to the escape from the persecuting state, the border situation with all its hazards, the rejection of refugees and the conditions of residence of the admitted refugees. By reconstructing the path of a great number of refugees, a differentiated picture is created. For many thousands the escape ended already at the diplomatic missions of Switzerland abroad, when they learned that they had no prospect of receiving an entry permit. There were also employees and officials of Swiss consulates, however, who were standing up for refugees and granted entry permits generously. But they were disciplined for their actions because these were against regulations. But the decisive fact is that as of 1938 Switzerland – except for so-called hardship cases – was generally rejecting all Jewish refugees at the border. At the same time, however, those refugees who had illegally passed a stretch of several kilometers behind the borders and had reached the

interior of the country as a rule were not evicted. This made the border the center of action where truly dramatic scenes happened. The report shows that many private persons and organizations, abroad as well as in Switzerland, helped refugees to cross the border and make it to the interior of the country. There were border officials who suffered a conflict of conscience and ignored regulations. Thus Switzerland admitted around 51 000 civilian refugees during the war, about 20 000 of which were Jews (chapters 4.1–4.3). The rejections and deportations in the canton of Geneva in the fall of 1942, however, make it clear that the contrary could also be the case. Here, refugees were deported by force and in part directly handed over to their persecutors. It has to be noted that the responsible persons were later tried and convicted for their unlawful proceeding. These incidents, however, do not constitute some accidental, unaccountable misdemeanor, but need to be seen in a wider context. In the canton of Geneva there were important border check points, and in the fall of 1942 it was the actual focus of events. The authorities in Bern waited some time before they interfered, as they were hoping for an effect of deterrence from these harsh measures (chapter 4.3.3 excursion: The practice in Geneva in fall 1942)

The stay of the refugees in Switzerland was marked by a far-reaching control and incapacitation in many respects. After the crossing of the border followed a stay in an complex system of camps. Before getting to civilian work camps, the refugees were placed in military camps where living conditions often were particularly precarious and controls especially rigid: Thus the entire mail was subject to censoring, and it was not permitted to write letters in Hebrew. Many of the military personnel charged with taking care of the refugees were not prepared for their duty and in case of conflicts reverted to their authoritarian military patterns of behavior. The stay in military camps, which often lasted several months, was usually followed by the assignment to a civilian work camp or refugee institution; for a limited number of refugees there was the opportunity of a so-called free place, i.e. accommodation with private persons (chapter 4.4). Especially humiliating for many refugees was the financial incapacitation which derived from the fact that the refugees entering the country after August 1942 were deprived of the right of disposal of their assets. While the management of the assets of refugees was entrusted to the Schweizerische Volksbank, the refugees were permitted to dispose of these only with the authorization of the Police Division, granted with great restriction. These measures were taken by the authorities with the intention of producing securities for the settlement of claims under public law (chapter 5.5).

Financial Aspects of Refugee Policy

The investigation of financial aspects of the refugee policy is connected with the economic crisis of the thirties, the national socialist plundering policy and the economic war after 1939. From 1937 until 1940 first the immigrants and later all non-German foreigners in Switzerland were excluded from the Swiss-German financial transactions. The Swiss interest to save the scarce clearing funds for the requirements of their own political economy, and the interest of the Germans in getting access to the assets of refugees were complementary (chapters 5.1 and 5.2). The costs for the refugees up to 1942 were borne mainly by the aid agencies (for aid agencies cf. chapter 2.3). In the period from 1933 to 1954 these spent around 102 million Swiss francs. The largest part, that is 69 million francs, was assumed by the Verband Schweizerischer Jüdischer Fürsorgen (VSJF) which received more than half of its funds from the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (chapter 5.3, tables 5 and 6, figure 1).

When the US blocked continental European assets in June 1941, this created numerous new problems for the transfer of aid funds. On the part of America as well as of Switzerland, the requirements of the aid agencies and refugees were set back in favor of concerns of war economics (we refer in this context to the report on blackmailing of ransom in the occupied Netherlands (ICE publications, vol. 24). This report illustrates the dilemma between the objectives of economic warfare and the attempts to ransom Jews from the national socialist dominion. It further appears that the Swiss financial place played a central role in German blackmailing for ransom. Looking at the transfer of dollars it becomes clear how Switzerland

made the situation of refugees even harder. From May 1942 until the end of 1943, the Swiss National Bank did not accept any dollar transfers for the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, and for refugees who had fled to Switzerland illegally after January 1, 1942 it was almost impossible to receive support payments from the USA (chapter 5.4). Against this background, the discussions of that time on the subject of cost for accommodation and food for the refugees are to be seen in a new dimension. The federal government substantially increased its financial commitment as of 1942 indeed and until 1954 spent more than 136 million francs on the refugee policy (tables 8–11). Detailed investigations of several proprietary measures show, however, that financial aspects were embedded in the overall refugee policy and in part were used by the authorities for a restrictive refugee policy (chapter 5.3).

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