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Autor:	Südbeck-Baur, Wolf
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Switzerland's churches in the Second World War

Humanity – carefully rationed

It was only in 1942–43 that the Swiss League of Evangelical Churches took an interest in Jewish refugees, although their needs were obvious earlier. The Catholic Church supported government policy until the end of the war.

There were “certain anti-Jewish reservations” within Swiss Protestant circles. That is the conclusion to which Hermann Kocher has come. A historian and pastor of the Reformed Church from Emmenmatt, in

*Wolf Südbeck-Baur**

his book “Rationierte Menschlichkeit” (Humanity – carefully rationed) he has made a competent and perspicuous assessment of the attitude of the Swiss League of Evangelical Churches (SEK) during the national-socialist period. In his book Kocher suggests a number of reasons for the SEK’s relatively late involvement in support for Jewish refugees, which started only in the winter of 1942–43.

In agreement with other charities, their main concern was to concentrate on Protestant refugees of Jewish origin: “refugee work was initially addressed to those who had converted from Judaism to Christianity” the historian says. The third reason for the SEK’s late commitment was its sense of confidence in the federal authorities. “The churches did not see it as their job to question refugee policies in a critical way” says Kocher.

Provocation imputed to Jews

There is evidence for this attitude. In 1944, when the frontier had already been closed for two years, the then president of SEK, Alphons Koechlin, wanted to issue a declaration which condemned anti-Semitism as godless. But the SEK board did not accept Koechlin’s suggestion. The board

argued that some anti-Semitism had been provoked by the Jews themselves. “It was monstrous in 1944, when a great deal was already known about the emergence and consequences of anti-Semitism, to suggest that the Jews shared responsibility for the situation as it then was” said the 42 year old Kocher, emphasising his critical attitude.

At the time the SEK board could only bring itself to say that anti-Semitism could not be reconciled with Christian beliefs. The board said this, according to Kocher, at a time when it was very well informed about the fate of the Jews who were hammering at Switzerland’s doors. For President Koechlin, refugee pastor Paul Vogt and the legendary “refugee mother” Gertrud Kurz, were among those figures who had received circumstantial information at a very early stage.

Concentration camps known

In 1943 and 1944 these Protestants had available to them reports of the national-socialist extermination camps at Auschwitz and Birkenau, some of the reports being very detailed. “The fact that information is available is not to say that it is accepted as true, let alone absorbed into one’s view of the world to the point where it triggers action”. Kocher defends Koechlin, then president of SEK. By August 1942 the latter had raised the question with the political authorities vehemently and repeatedly, recommending that Jewish refugees be accepted. The response of the federal authorities in Berne was by no means overwhelming – it could not have been expected to be otherwise. But although federal councillor von Steiger subsequently insisted that the churches’ approaches had had no influence on his decisions, Kocher says that the authorities “let themselves be persuaded to moderate the rigid requirements of their refugee policies”. The historian concludes that the churches had in fact achieved more than von Steiger wanted to concede; though not as much as they themselves believed.

Support for “boat is full” policy

Throughout the war the churches tried to work with the authorities within

the framework of legality. In passing judgement on the way the church league acquiesced in von Steiger’s “the boat is full” policy, Hermann Kocher draws distinctions: “it is disconcerting to see that it took so long for responsibility for Jewish refugees to be accepted. Moreover it is astonishing to see how very



“The reformed churches did not see it as their task to question refugee policy in a critical spirit” says Herman Kocher.
(Photo: Iris Krebs)

little the maxims of the political authorities were questioned. On the other hand we must recognise and approve the broad front on which the churches’ work progressed from 1942 onwards within the charities supporting Jewish refugees.” Kocher describes Swiss Protestantism’s refugee work and refugee policies as “rationed humanity”.

The bishops did not raise a finger

This judgement does not apply to Switzerland’s Catholic Church. On the contrary, Catholic church historian Urs Altermatt comes to the conclusion that the Swiss bishops during the Second World War “supported the country’s government and army without reservation”. Unlike SEK President Koechlin, the bishops expressed no criticism of the restrictive refugee policies of the Berne authorities; even less did they protest. According to Altermatt, patriotism, loyalty and obedience to the authorities were the highest commandments for Catholics. What then bishop of Basle Franz von Streng wrote in a pastoral letter on the occasion of the end of the war in 1945 sounds today positively cynical: he expressed gratitude for the “readiness and alertness of our authorities and our army...” in holding back “unwanted and dangerous people at our frontiers”. The position of the Swiss bishops was determined by calculated inhumanity.

*Wolf Südbeck-Baur is a freelance journalist in Berne, and editor of “Aufbruch; Forum für eine offene Kirche” (New Departure: Forum for an Open Church)