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Second World War: Report from a Swiss refugee camp

An explosion of joy

Were the Swiss refugee camps in the Second World War really intolerable? A former inmate thinks not, and looks back...

To me the factory building seemed paradise. The October sun at the foot of the Üetliberg, a little river, old trees dressed for autumn... Even the camp commandant's speech when we arrived was the purest music from heaven. "Here you can live out the war.

*Inge Ginsberg **

Sorry, it's not a luxury hotel. We have had to take in too many refugees at once."

Who was bothered? We were alive. And proved that people and cockroaches have evolved as the most adaptable of God's creatures. Downstairs there were 300 men, upstairs 300 women and children. Each of us was given 32 inches of straw mattress and 2 blankets. The food was SKK – Suppe, Kraut, Kartoffeln –: soup, cabbage, potatoes.

Many of us had already been in camps in France and knew that the bread rations had to be hung in headscarves from the ceiling because of the mice. I got together with a friend and made a straw double-bed. That meant that we could use the fourth blanket as a pillow. All the women showed great imagination, using cloths and trinkets that they had saved to make something special of their niche.

Sovereignty over the powder room

Committees formed at once, responsible for cleanliness, the management of the lavatories, contacts with the camp authorities and so on. The WC was taken over at once by a very large Vienne woman and her two daughters, both equally tubby. In principle, there were five lavatories for 300 women; in practice there were only four. The fifth was hired out for periods of a quarter of an hour at a time to whoever made the best offer, for conjugal discussions; it was

always booked out. The large lady set about this impartially, adopting the highest moral principles: she would only accept married couples and then only if they paid.

Mr Kaiser, a time-worn conjurer, and his much younger wife, an acrobat, put on a new show every week. There were sketches, music, conjuring, dancing and a great deal of laughter. Every one joined in. As our deadly fear evaporated there was an explosion of "joie de vivre".

Individuality in uniform

Our uniform was pretty, a blue and white polka-dotted house-dress. You are much mistaken if you suppose that the same clothes looked alike on all the women. Mrs Sacher-Masoch put her belt in her piled up hair and wore a gay scarf around her waist. She was at once widely imitated. Others tied their belts just under their busts or on their hips. Given old pullovers, we unravelled them and reknitted the wool to make splendid models. And in the tailor's workshop men's suits were converted into smart tailor-mades: it was a time of great creativity.

A sergeant major used to sell cheap apples but offer never could keep up with demand. His "S hät kei Öpfi meh" – "sorry, no more apples" – still rings in my ears. Just one member of the camp staff harassed us spitefully. He had just come back from the Foreign Legion. If our blankets were not folded just so, to the nearest millimetre, they were thrown down into the snow. If there was any noise after lights-out, we were

paraded at attention for a night roll-call. He did not realise how distressed we were: we had had to run for our lives, we had lost friends and relations, and all our possessions as well. But he quickly disappeared again.

Though we did not have to, we were allowed to go for a walk every day up to the Felsenegg, or along the path beside the Sihl. More often than not "by chance" at teatime we arrived at a pub. And as often as not "by chance" we were treated by kind, friendly people. Once a week we went to Kilchberg to the public baths for a shower and then, this time officially, to the baker's shop where we were allowed to choose between 8 ounces of bread and a Guetsli – a cookie. Keep in mind: at that time the Swiss themselves only had 4 ounces of bread a day each.

There were love affairs. Werner Rings traded in his wife for Frau Sacher-Masoch, and indeed he later married her. Just 20 at the time, I was in love with Hans von Rathenau, nephew of the German politician Rathenau, who was 39 years older than I was. He was always hungry and our relationship consisted of my slipping him one of my two boiled potatoes. My husband-to-be boxed my ears publicly when he noticed this unfaithfulness; and that was the end of my potato romance.

Some years later I failed to recognise the old gentlemen who greeted me so warmly. He had been more attractive when he was hungry and slim, as he was in Adliswil. I still meet other camp colleagues throughout the world. Most have been successful. And, like old soldiers, we always look back happily on our time on the straw.



Switzerland and the Second World War

In 1995, when commemorating the end of the Second World War, the federal council made a statement on the country's policies during the war. The authorities subsequently referred to a reassessment of this period being in prospect. Nonetheless Switzerland was taken aback by the intensity of the international criticism which broke over the country soon after. The situation remained tense until the big banks reached a compromise with the class action plaintiffs and Jewish organisations in the US.

The "Swiss Revue" took up this issue at once and for more than two years every issue devoted space to its various ramifications. Now, for the moment, the editors are concluding the series "Switzerland and the Second World War" with the article on this page on policies towards refugees. We shall of course return to the subject if events make it necessary.

The Editors

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