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The burdens of the past



Photo: Hans Peter Klausner, Swiss Institute of Photography / Prolitteris

The expert commission believes Switzerland could have done more to help refugees. The picture shows a refugee line in Hemishofen (SH).

BY LUKAS M. SCHNEIDER

At the end of 1999 the Independent Commission of Experts published an extensive report on Swiss refugee policy during the Nazi era.

THE COMMISSION CHAIRED by Jean-François Bergier submitted a wide-ranging report on the refugee issue, accompanied by four supplements. The team of experts

deliberately selected the victim's perspective as their methodology, in order to better highlight the impact of government action on the people affected.

At the core of the controversy are two decisions which worsened the plight of Jewish refugees. By introducing the "J" stamp in 1938 to mark the passports of German Jews, Switzerland based their visa practice on racial categories of "Aryan" and "non-Aryan" applicants, thereby making it more difficult for Jews living in the Third Reich to find a country willing to accept them.

Problematic border closures

The other decisive measure was the Swiss authorities' decision, in the summer of


1942, to close the borders against racially persecuted refugees. The Commission makes it clear in its report that there were no compelling grounds for this move – neither scarcity of food nor direct military threats from abroad. Yet the political decision-makers, in the words of the experts, saw the refugees more as a threat to the country's security than as persecuted people in need of protection. Even the knowledge of the genocide being committed against the Jewish population did not lessen the authorities' resolve; the narrow room for negotiation was not leveraged to defend basic human values.

This implacable attitude resulted in over 24,000 border rejections documented in writing for the entire period of the war. The exact number of people whom Switzerland could have saved from deportation and murder is difficult to determine.

However, the report documents the fact that there were people who upheld Switzerland's reputation as a traditional haven for asylum-seekers. Private individuals and organisations helped refugees to cross the border, and courageous border guards turned a blind eye to the regulations. The number of refugees taken in by Switzerland during the war is estimated to be 51,000, including 20,000 Jews.

Appeal to humanity

Swiss refugee policy did not contravene the prevailing international accords, since most inadequately regulated the acceptance or rejection of refugees. In the opinion of the experts, however, it would certainly have been possible to meet the refugees' need for protection more substantially.

Hence the report comes to the sobering conclusion that Switzerland's humanitarian commitment left much to be desired, since it declined to help people in mortal danger: "A more humane policy might have saved thousands of refugees from being killed by the Nazis and their accomplices." 

Federal Council's reaction

The government praised the report as a "fundamental contribution to a better understanding of Swiss refugee policy". It was aware that Switzerland at that time had "not exercised its humanitarian tradition as much as it could and should have done." For this reason it aims to intensify its activities in the field of human rights and the prevention of racism. At the same time the Federal Council expressed regret that the Commission of Experts did not place greater emphasis on the international environment of the time, since it believes there existed a "collective failure of refugee policy" within the community of states. The report can be consulted on the internet (www.uek.ch).