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Gino Pezzani's prisoner number in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp. "Sch." stands for Swiss, the red triangle for political prisoners. The Nazis deported Pezzani from occupied France in 1944. He barely managed to survive.



Swiss citizens in Hitler's death camps

At least 391 Swiss citizens, many of whom were Swiss Abroad, were imprisoned in Nazi concentration camps. This is the finding of a historical textbook in which three journalists shed light on the fate of Swiss internees in the concentration camps for the first time.

SUSANNE WENGER

Young mother Marcelle Giudici-Foks was transported by rail to Auschwitz on 10 February 1944. The Gestapo in occupied France packed her and over a thousand other Jews into cattle cars. Marcelle, a fun-loving dance teacher from Royan on the Atlantic coast, was married to the Swiss Abroad Jean Guidici, which gave her Swiss citizenship. Jean's parents had fled a life of abject poverty in Ticino and were trying their luck as waffle bakers in France.



Die Schweizer KZ-Häftlinge. Vergessene Opfer des Dritten Reichs
(Swiss concentration camp prisoners. Forgotten victims of the Third Reich)
Balz Spörri, René Staubli, Benno Tuchschmid
NZZ Libro; 320 pages, 147 images. CHF 48.–
Only available in German.

France. Before this, Berne had hesitated to act for a long time, despite the Head of the Swiss Consulate in Paris, René Naville, warning several times that Swiss citizens were under threat. However, repatriation came too late for Marcelle Giudici, and she died in Auschwitz.

"Worthy of our attention"

The Swiss Abroad René Pilloud was also interned in a concentration camp. He was born in Fribourg and emigrated to French Bellegarde, near the Swiss border, with his parents. His father worked in a factory; René completed an apprenticeship as a tool maker. In February 1944, while on the way to a sports competition, the 17-year-old was unwittingly caught up in a Wehrmacht operation against the French resistance. He was mistreated and taken to the Mauthausen concentration camp via a circuitous route. The Swiss authorities went to great

lengths to free him. According to the records, he was "particularly worthy of our attention".

On one occasion, a prisoner exchange was tabled, but Switzerland refused to cooperate. It did not want to swap innocent Swiss citizens for legally convicted German criminals. These noble constitutional principles extended Pilloud's ordeal. At the beginning of 1945, he was seconded to the camp crematorium and made to burn hundreds of corpses every day. The Red Cross was only able to get him home to Switzerland just before the war ended. He was emaciated, traumatised and had tuberculosis. Switzerland paid him 35,000 francs in compensation as a Nazi victim. He died in Geneva in 1985.

Putting faces to the numbers

René Pilloud and Marcelle Giudici: two names; two horrific stories. They are outlined in detail in the book writ-

ten by the journalists Balz Spörri, René Staubli and Benno Tuchschen. Other fates were also reconstructed. For four long years, the authors conducted painstaking, in-depth research in archives and databanks, and spoke with descendants of the victims. As a result, they now have the first proven list of victims containing the details of 391 women and men with Swiss citizenship who suffered in Nazi concentration camps; 201 of them died there. The book also contains information on 328 inmates who were born in Switzerland but never held citizenship: 255 of them did not survive the concentration camps. All the victims were arrested in Germany or in occupied areas and then deported. This occurred most often in France, where the majority of Swiss Abroad were living.

Some of the Swiss concentration camp victims were Jewish, but resistance fighters and marginalised groups were also persecuted. The authors list all 391 in the book as a “memorial”, from Frieda Abegg to Maurice Zumbach. Where possible, they give the victims a face with photos. “They were numbers in the concentration camps; they are compensation cases in the Swiss Federal Archive,” write the authors, “this book restores their dignity as human beings”.

Spineless authorities

It is quite remarkable that it has taken 75 years for there to be public awareness in Switzerland of the fact that Swiss citizens were interned in the concentration camps. Although survivors such as René Pilloud spoke openly of their experiences after the war and parliament approved compensation, the Swiss public showed little interest. These biographies are missing in seminal academic works. By writing about the fates of these people, the journalists are not just expressing sorrow at what occurred, something that any-

one can do by uttering trite platitudes. They are also posing the tough question of the role of Switzerland’s officials. Their conclusion: “Switzerland could have saved dozens of lives if it had acted more courageously and put more pressure on the German authorities.”

It is “always easier” to make such an assessment decades later, says co-author Balz Spörri in a conversation with the “Swiss Review”. If you want to judge the strategies of the time objectively, you need to consider the knowledge and leeway possessed by those involved throughout the various phases. The book outlines in depth how politicians and the media in Switzerland reacted to the development of the concentration camps by the Nazi regime. Although there was evidence, the concentration camps were not truly perceived as death camps in this country for a long time.

Second-class citizens

In 1942, the Head of the Swiss Aliens’ Police, Heinrich Rothmund, delivered an innocuous report on his visit to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp. The Federal Council was eager to believe his story. The authors found no evidence “that the Federal Council as a whole addressed the topic of concentration camps or Swiss concentration camp prisoners before 1944”. It was fearless diplomats such as the Swiss ambassador to Berlin, Paul Dinichert, who managed to gain the release of several incarcerated Swiss. However, after Germany occupied France, Berne called for restraint. Dinichert’s successor, Hans Frölicher, spent his time doing nothing. If Switzerland provoked Hitler, he feared that Hitler would order his armies to march into the neutral country. But Frölicher was viewed in Switzerland as an opportunist and a Nazi sympathiser.



The fun-loving Swiss dance teacher Marcelle Giudici-Foks on a beach in Royan on the French Atlantic coast. In 1944, the new mother was deported to Auschwitz and murdered for being Jewish.



The Zurich hairdresser Nelly Hug was arrested by the Gestapo together with her lover in Berlin in 1942. She survived the tortures of the Ravensbrück concentration camp – the photo shows her in ironed prison clothing.



Mina Epstein, born and raised in Zurich, murdered in Auschwitz, with her husband in Antwerp, Belgium. She sought refuge as a Jew in Switzerland, but the border guards turned her away as she did not have Swiss citizenship.



Anne-Françoise Perret-Gentil-dit-Maillard, a book binder from Neuchâtel, joined the Resistance in Paris. She was deported to a concentration camp, but managed to escape. Switzerland refused to compensate her for her suffering as a Nazi victim.



The Zurich social democrat Albert Mülli, pictured here in 1995, fell into the clutches of the Gestapo in Vienna in 1938. He survived several years in the Dachau concentration camp. Back in Switzerland, he was spied upon by the intelligence services.



Claude Richard Loever was arrested in France in 1944 for his involvement in the Resistance. The occupation authorities initially deported the 18-year-old to the Mittelbau-Dora concentration camp. He died in 1945 in the bombardment of the Buchenwald concentration camp.

All photos: Laurent Favre, Dorénaz Archives. From: "Die Schweizer KZ-Häftlinge", 2019, © NZZ Libro

There was another reason why the Swiss authorities refrained from doing everything they could to protect at-risk Swiss citizens abroad. Some – criminals, social misfits, disabled people – were actually unwanted because it would have put a strain on the state purse to house them. Others belonged to groups that were ostracised in Switzerland: communists, gypsies, homosexuals, social outsiders. "There is considerable evidence in the records to support this," says Spörri. Thus, the Chief of the Division of Foreign Affairs in Berne, Pierre Bonna, informed the diplomats in Berlin that "the embassy is not permitted to put itself on the line if by doing so it disadvantages all other Swiss that are worth protecting for the benefit of elements who have contributed to the difficulties they now find themselves in through their own fault or un-Swiss, challenging behaviour".

"That sort of woman"

This stance sealed the fate of Anna Böhringer-Bürgi from Basel. The authorities labelled her behaviour "dissolute" early on; she also encountered problems with the law. By marrying a German, the mother of seven lost her Swiss citizenship. Shortly after war broke out, she sought refuge in Switzerland at the age of 54 and applied to regain her citizenship. She was turned down. She was deemed to be "a notorious harlot and law-breaker"; care would be taken to ensure that "that sort of woman does not regain cantonal citizenship" noted a civil servant. Böhringer had to leave the country. In 1945, she died in the Ravensbrück concentration camp. Later, Switzerland rejected her daughter's application for compensation. They justified their decision by saying that her mother did not have Swiss citizenship at the time of her arrest.

The 391 concentration camp victims detailed in the book have now all died. Their horrific experiences stayed with survivors like Albert Mülli their whole lives. The Zurich plumber and social democrat was arrested by the Gestapo in Vienna in 1938 and later transferred to the Dachau concentration camp as a political prisoner. He was accused of having communist ties. Mülli survived six years there. He returned to Switzerland, started a new life and became a member of the cantonal parliament. Before his death in 1997, the past caught up with him. In the nursing home where he lived with dementia, he was tormented by nightmares. Day and night, he relived the horrors of the concentration camp. Mülli's daughter told the book authors that it was very painful to watch him suffer this way.

Keeping memories alive

The book is just the start, says Spörri; extensive research into Swiss victims of the Nazi terror is required. Moral reparation is also needed; recognition that these victims existed, that they were harmed and had suffered injustice. Many of them fought against the Nazi regime and paid with their lives. "We think it's time that a member of the Federal Council says something on the topic," Spörri says. The author welcomes the commitment of the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad to erecting a memorial (see Page 9). To date, the Federal Council has said nothing definite on the topic of memorials.

A memorial could be combined with digital forms of remembrance to reach the younger generations too, suggests Spörri. Such as a website containing the life stories of the victims; i.e. a virtual memorial. One thing is clear: there will soon be no more contemporary witnesses to the Holocaust. This makes it all the more important to store their accounts in a collective memory.