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“Window into a more civilised world”

In his 1967 work “Das Boot ist voll” (The boat is full), Alfred A. Häslер shone a light on the shameful way in which Switzerland treated refugees between 1933 and 1945.

CHARLES LINSMAYER

Alfred A. Häslér, who was born in Wilderswil (canton of Berne) on 19 March 1921 and died in Zurich on 7 April 2009, would have been 100 this year. Like no other Swiss author of the 20th century, he used the media of newspapers and television to highlight great role models who epitomised the free and ethical thinking that constitutes the essential foundation of any credible democracy. Häslér was a well-known figure for different generations – thanks to his interviews in the newspaper “Tat” and on Swiss television with such personalities as Karl Barth, Jeanne Hersch and Carl-Friedrich von Weizsäcker.

The fate of refugees

However, Häslér’s greatest legacy was “Das Boot ist voll” (The boat is full) – the 1967 work based on a series of articles in “Tat”, in which the author recounted the fate of refugees who fled the Nazi regime but were turned away from Switzerland in many cases – telling their stories in a way that hit the national psyche with palpable force. Moreover, by no means was Häslér one of those who only criticised Switzerland’s inhumane refugee policy after the event. Back in 1939, the then 18-year-old typographer’s apprentice published passionate pleas for his country to rediscover its humanitarian tradition of providing asylum. Häslér founded his own clandestine newspaper, “Stimme der Wahrheit” (Voice of Truth), in 1943 after growing tired of censorship. And he became one of the first Swiss to visit the Auschwitz concentration camp after the borders reopened – an experience that shook him to the core.

Career as an interviewer

Häslér soon had the opportunity to practise what he preached, accompanying repeated aid shipments to Eastern Europe – where he met his wife Zofia Pawliszewska, a woman who had saved many Jews from the Nazis during the Warsaw Uprising. The circumstances that led to him being arrested for embezzlement of donations and made a communist scapegoat in a highly politicised court case in 1948 are still unclear. But instead of disappearing with-

out a trace, Häslér was able to launch his career as an interviewer for “Tat” – thanks to the newspaper’s chief editor Erwin Jaekle.

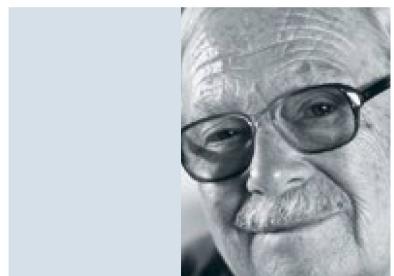
Learning from history

Everything that Häslér subsequently wrote, thought and campaigned for was founded on a promise that he made to himself in 1946 in the horrific aftermath of the Nazi atrocities. He said in 1997: “At Auschwitz, I made a pact with myself to do everything in my power as a writer and speaker to prevent a repeat of what happened – and what we let happen – in 20th-century Christian Europe due to too many states and nations, Switzerland included, looking the other way. It is a pact we should all make.”

Häslér, armed with nothing more than a primary school education, rubbed shoulders with the leading intellectuals and thinkers of his time. But he always remained true to himself. “I never intended to write academic biographies or become a cultural critic. All I wanted was to give contemporary figures a platform and, if possible, provide a window into a more civilised world.”

BIBLIOGRAPHY: “Das Boot ist voll” is available from Diogenes as a paperback.

For years, literary scholar and journalist Charles Linsmayer’s pieces in this magazine have focused on Swiss authors abroad. Linsmayer is now expanding his range to cover Swiss-based writers as well.



“We must always remember the past. It should be a part of our lives. This is what history is all about, isn’t it? Of course, we must consider what the past means in the here and now – in the knowledge that events such as the Holocaust, or the Second World War with the enormous devastation that it caused, also hinge on people like you and me to a certain extent. In other words, do we say yes or no? Can we reject destruction and open our hearts to the creative forces in this world?”

Alfred A. Häslér speaking to newspaper “Der Bund” on 6 May 1995