

# The Swiss who saved 2,000 jews

Autor(en): **[s.n.]**

Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK**

Band (Jahr): **- (1971)**

Heft 1608

PDF erstellt am: **29.04.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-686597>

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# The Swiss Observer

FOUNDED IN 1919 BY PAUL F. BOEHRINGER.

The Official Organ of the Swiss Colony in Great Britain

Vol. 57 No. 1608

FRIDAY, 22nd JANUARY, 1971

## THE SWISS WHO SAVED 2,000 JEWS

The most troubling problem which the Swiss Government had to face during the war was the policy to adopt towards the thousands of Jews who were pressing on the northern and eastern borders of the country in the hope of being granted asylum—and salvation from almost certain death. By the time the Reich had occupied Austria in February 1938, the problem had become very acute.

On one hand, it was plain that the Swiss traditions of hospitality and humanity should have inspired the Government into allowing these destitute refugees in. But these considerations conflicted with the hard reality of an almost certain war and an impending isolation of the country. Switzerland had to face the prospect of feeding itself in a war situation. Could this be guaranteed with the presence of an untold number of refugees? Opening the doors to an influx of Jewish refugees brought with it a risk to the very physical survival of the country, and so it was that stark realism prevailed. Politics is the art of the possible, and our leaders applied this maxim in putting an upper bound to what they considered as "possible". Thus a Federal decree was proclaimed on 18th August, 1938 ordering the repulsion of all Jews and political refugees attempting to cross into Switzerland and safety. *Dr. Rothmund*, the then head of the Department of Justice and Police, had the historically ungrateful task of making sure that this order was implemented, and that every measure was taken to seal the borders with Germany and Austria.

This situation was soon unbearable to the conscience of many policemen and soldiers responsible for controlling the entrants into Switzerland. One such man was Police Commander Paul Grüninger, head of the Alien Police of St. Gall.

He was recently appointed Honorary members of the League for Human Rights. This honour may presage his full rehabilitation. This will have to be decided by the executive council of the canton of St. Gall.

Paul Grüninger was responsible

for allowing 2,000 Austrian Jews into Switzerland in breach of defence regulations. He achieved this feat by various administrative frauds such as issuing unwarranted entry documents and falsifying dates of entry. He acted in such a way that the refugees who were brought to him immediately found their way to camps organised and paid for by the Jewish organisations of Switzerland. He couldn't have smuggled Jews on such a large scale however without the complicity of his direct superior, a socialist national councillor by the name of Valentin Keel, who was a member of the executive council of Solothurn. Keel, who was himself the object of an administrative complaint for having irregularly given right of entry to political refugees from Germany, tacitly supported Grüninger in his operations. He was aware of what was going on, as Grüninger's office was close to his. Indeed, as Grüninger later maintained at his trial, Keel had kept a blind eye on his humanitarian infringement of regulations. However Keel changed his mind one day and turned against his subordinate. He lodged charges against Grüninger, later pretending that he knew nothing of the scope of his activities, having only been aware of isolated cases of illegal Jewish entries. Whether his sudden move was aimed at diverting attention from his own administrative irregularities remains open to speculation. The fact remains that he stayed at his post of *Regierungsrat* whereas Grüninger was summarily dismissed from the police after a muddled trial. Keel tried to have Grüninger sent to a psychiatric asylum before the beginning of the enquiry, perhaps in a conscience-soothing impulse. The cantonal doctor whose co-operation he had secured however changed his mind at the last minute when the car which was to have driven Grüninger to the institute was already waiting in the court of the municipal building and policemen were lining the entry.

Grüninger was thus tried for "having broken the duties of his office in repeated cases". He was tried on two proven charges: One of them was that

he had consciously lied to an immigration official who had come from Berne to conduct a search for a German political refugee escaping from Dachau who had been known to have entered the country. Grüninger pretended that he didn't know where the man was hiding. The other case was that of a Polish Jew living in Zurich for a year on irregular papers supplied to him by Grüninger.

Grüninger not only used his high position in the police to allow entry to Jewish refugees, he was the contact with the Jewish organisations who took care of them. He also enabled refugees to hide their valuable belongings in an inn at Bregenz, in the Voralberg. This hidden cache was later discovered because of the indiscretion of a refugee. Grüninger also became known to the Gestapo.

Found guilty of having broken a police and immigration order on many occasions, but benefitting from some leniency owing to the humanity of his offence, Grüninger was heavily fined, dismissed from the police force and from the pension fund. He was thus driven to seek a living for the survival of his family, and that wasn't easy in the war days. Grüninger was 48. He had begun his working life as a primary school teacher. But there was no lack of primary school teachers. He eventually became a lumberjack. He sold insurance, gave driving lessons and worked in textiles before reverting to his original profession of school-teacher after the war. He taught in a number of schools scattered across the canton of St. Gall. Now he is 78 and retired at Au.

Before Paul Grüninger was faced with his problem of conscience, he was just interested in the efficient detection of crime and in the training of good policemen. When the spectre of war arose and when the first Jews attempted to crawl in, he realised that he *could not* force them back to certain death. As a Christian, he could not break away from the fact that the laws of his conscience were more imperative than the laws of his country. Thirty years

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