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Is Swiss asylum law too liberal?



THE election poster faced the Palais des Nations – European headquarters of the United Nations and landmark of what is widely considered to be one of the world's most international cities.

But the poster showed a cartooned gnomish Swiss struggling desperately to slam the door on an oversized dark-skinned foot, with some shadowy figures waiting in the background. "Remain masters at home", the inscription urged voters.

The posters, scattered throughout Geneva, were attacked as racist in the press and dismissed as "too crude" even by one of the leaders of the Vigilance Party, which had put them up.

But they evidently helped the Right-wing movement to emerge recently as the third largest political force in a local vote closely watched throughout the nation.

A front page editorial in the independent *Tribune de Genève* warned of the "wings of xenophobia" beginning to blow over the city.

There is no doubt, however, that concern over a dramatic upsurge in the number of foreigners seeking sanctuary in neutral Switzerland is widespread.

According to the Swiss Justice Ministry, 7,135 people from 75 countries requested political asylum in 1982 – almost four times the total registered three years ago before new liberal legislation took effect. The upward trend is continuing this year.

Under the law, asylum is to be granted to people not only fleeing "direct threat to life and freedom but also measures which lead to an unbearable psychic pressure".

The definition is considered by legal experts to be one of the most liberal in the world. Conservative critics charge that the law has encouraged the influx of false refugees – people not being persecuted but hoping to find a new home in what is statistically the wealthiest western country.

Ever since John Knox escaped to Geneva from Queen Mary's Scotland in the 16th century to join French-born Jean Calvin in exile and turn the town into a Protestant Rome, Switzerland has been a traditional haven for the persecuted.

French Huguenots, Italian revolutionaries and Russian anarchists were accorded Swiss hospitality. So was composer Richard Wagner, sought by authorities in Germany as a political dissident.

Mussolini, when still a socialist, briefly gained Swiss shelter before the First World War and Lenin awaited the Russian revolution in Switzerland.

Pressure from neighbouring Germany and official fears that "the (Swiss) boat is full" prompted a departure from that policy early in the Second World War, when Switzerland was the lone island of freedom in Nazi-controlled Europe.

Thousands of Jews were turned back at

the border, and often thus sent to certain death, under a decree that denied asylum to those who sought refuge only from racial persecution.

That rule was later relaxed and almost 300,000 refugees were in Switzerland at the war's end. But the memory of the era still haunts many Swiss.

Since the war, tens of thousands of refugees have found new homes in Switzerland. The largest number came from Hungary after the abortive revolution of 1956 and from Czechoslovakia after the Soviet intervention in 1968.

Many have since been naturalised and are no longer counted among the 926,000 foreign nationals making up 14.5 per cent of the country's population.

The first non-Europeans accepted in modern times by the Swiss were almost 1,400 Tibetans after the 1953 Chinese Communist takeover.

They have been joined by more than 7,000 Vietnamese and 1,500 Cambodian refugees. But integration has posed some problems despite remarkable public and private efforts.

Opposition to the liberal policy has been fuelled by the growing number of Africans seeking political asylum. Last year, 1,090 from 29 African countries came to Switzerland.

Pending a decision on their request, many

settled temporarily in Geneva, where foreigners already account for one third of the residents.

With a backlog of 7,000 applications waiting to be processed by an overworked staff of 40 at the Justice Ministry, decisions can take up to two years or more. In the meantime, applicants receive welfare payment and can get work permits.

"The well-dressed Africans queuing up at the welfare office to collect their monthly payment made many workers opt for vigilance", the Zurich independent weekly *Weltwoche* commented after the Geneva vote.

"Word has spread around the globe that one can enjoy a free holiday in Switzerland, with full board and sufficient pocket money", said a reader's letter published by the independent Berne newspaper, *Der Bund*.

"Our authorities expose themselves to ridicule with that new law".

Editorially, the media, along with all major parties, support the government's liberal policy which climaxed in the 1979 law. But a recent memorandum by local immigration officials from all 26 cantons warned that the country risked facing "insolvable problems" if the liberal course was not modified.

The Swiss Trade Union Federation urged tighter curbs on new arrivals "to avoid an upsurge of xenophobia". And Justice Minister Rudolf Friedrich spoke of a "growing number of abuses" of the asylum law by some foreigners.

★ ★ ★

SWITZERLAND is to acquire the rare Igor Stravinsky archive of manuscripts and letters – considered by scholars as one of the most important 20th century private collections of musical, dance and literary history.

The collection is currently in the United States, and has been sold to the Paul Sacher Foundation in Basle for an estimated \$5.25 million dollars (about Sfr. 11 million) – a figure far higher than that offered by any American institution or library.

Paul Sacher, 77-year-old founder-conductor of the Basle Chamber Orchestra is a noted collector of musical manuscripts and a philanthropist who has commissioned many new works.

In an interview, he emphasised that the

Stravinsky collection was being purchased not for himself but for his foundation, where it will be exhibited in a nearly completed seven-storey building in Basle under terms set out in the agreement with the Stravinsky trustees.

The Sacher fortune reportedly derives from his wife, Maja Stehlin. Her first husband was Fritz Hoffmann, son of the founder of the Hoffmann-LaRoche international pharmaceutical company.

★ ★ ★

THE Swiss not only make the world's best chocolate but are also champions in chocolate eating.

According to Chocosuisse, the trade

organisation grouping the country's top chocolate manufacturers, the average Swiss munches his way through nearly 10 kilos of chocolate a year.

The Germans and the Belgians are a long way behind in joint second place, with a per capita consumption of 7.4 kilos. Then come the Norwegians (7.3 kilos), the British (6.8 kilos) and the Austrians (6.4 kilos).

At the bottom of the 18-nation listing come the Finns and the Americans (3.7 kilos), the Hungarians (2.3 kilos) and the Italians (1.2 kilos).

Swiss manufacturers make some 80,000 tasty tons of chocolate every year – a quarter of it for export.



80,000 mouth-watering tons of Swiss chocolate are produced every year. Now comes the news that the Swiss themselves are the world's biggest consumers of the delicacy.

Le goût du vrai.

Suchard