VII. THE REFUGEE PROBLEM

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Public opinion in the democratic countries made great strides in the direction of understanding the refugee problem, during the period under review. From the tragedy of the steamer Struma, from the herding of victims of Hitlerism on the Island of Mauritius, to setting up a War Refugee Board with broad powers and the proposal of "free ports" indicates a swing of considerable magnitude. However, this change for the better in the understanding of the refugee problem had little if any practical effect on the situation of the masses of refugees.

 Barely a year has elapsed since the Anglo-American Bermuda Conference on refugee questions came to the conclusion that the solution of the refugee problem has to wait for final victory because such measures as were proposed for the rescue of refugees would unfavorably affect the conduct of the war. The public was given to understand, however, that decisions were taken by the Bermuda Conference for some earlier steps but that these were of a confidential nature.

 When, in November, 1943, these "secret" decisions of the Bermuda Conference were given publicity by Breckenridge Long, Assistant Secretary of State, to the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the House of Representatives, public opinion was profoundly disappointed; the most important decision was to vitalize the Intergovernmental Committee for Refugees set up by the Evian Conference by widening its base and by adding to the British Director, Sir Herbert Emerson, an American Co-Director, Mr. Patrick Malin.

 Fortunately, real and effective assistance to the victims of Hitlerism was rendered by the small neutral countries, notably Switzerland and Sweden, and by the private agencies, like the American Joint Distribution Committee, the

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1 Rescue of the Jewish and other peoples in Nazi-occupied territory — Hearings before the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, 78th Congress 1st session on H. Res. 350 and H. Res. 352, November 26, 1943, Washington.
HIAS-ICA Emigration Association, the American Friends Service Committee, and others, within their limited means and power.

When, beginning in 1943, France was completely occupied by the Nazis, the number of refugees seeking a haven in Switzerland grew daily. At first, the Swiss frontier guards attempted to stem this tidal wave; some of the unfortunate refugees were driven back to French territory. But very soon, under the pressure of Swiss public opinion, supported by the press of all shades of political convictions, the Swiss authorities adopted a more lenient policy. Switzerland’s decision was the more laudable because it was surrounded by the many difficulties linked with the strict neutrality to which the country was legally bound.

By the end of 1943, Switzerland was giving asylum to more than 60,000 refugees from France, Belgium, Holland, Luxembourg and Italy. Among them were about 20,000 Jewish refugees. These figures increased following the Allied invasion of Italy. At present, the total number of refugees in Switzerland is 100,000 of whom 25,000 are Jews. Particularly noteworthy is the fact that there are about 30,000 children among these rescued people. This underlines especially the humanitarian character of the help extended by the Swiss people and their government.

It should be remembered that the three and one-half million population of Switzerland is, itself, exposed to serious privations because of the war. Everything is strictly rationed; transport is strained to its utmost. It is obvious that, under such conditions, admission of an additional population of one hundred thousand involves a direct and tangible sacrifice on the part of the Swiss people. As for the Swiss Jews, it must be recalled that they total no more than 18,000. The number of Jewish refugees is thus one and a half times as large as the country’s native Jewish population, and this ratio is growing because the influx of new refugees continues. According to information given out by Dr. Joseph Schwartz, the European Director of the J. D. C., the illegal passage of refugees into Switzerland in November and December 1943, averaged some 60 per day. Dr. James Bernstein, Director of HICEM in Lisbon, reports that in the month of May of this year, the number of illegal entries into Switzerland reached
an average of 30 per day, without counting the children who were carried across the border in groups of hundreds.

After crossing the Swiss border, the refugees are examined and registered by the military authorities, and are then billeted in various labor camps and housing centers of which there are more than fifty dispersed all over the country. It is interesting to note that the attention of the authorities is directed to satisfying not only the material but also spiritual requirements of the refugees. The authorities have gone to the trouble, for example, of placing French-speaking refugees in the part of Switzerland where French is spoken, German-speaking emigres among the German-speaking Swiss, and those speaking Italian in the Italian-speaking part of the country. Labor service is required from all refugees between the ages of 18 and 60. (Swiss citizens themselves have to give a number of weeks of their labor every year for the benefit of the whole country.) The regime in the labor camps for refugees is the very best possible under the circumstances. Hygienic conditions are excellent. The refugees are insured against sickness and accident, and insofar as it is possible, families are not torn asunder. But where such separation becomes unavoidable, members of the family receive a 7 days leave of absence after 90 working days, and a 30 days leave after 270 working days, when they can be together, thanks especially to the hostleries provided by the American Friends Service Committee. Persons over 60 years of age and children under 18 are placed in special institutions and in schools. The practice of families or for school classes to become foster parents to refugee children has become very popular. Almost all the 30,000 refugee children are thus taken charge of. The Jewish children are being cared for by the Society OSE under the direction of its untiring eighty year old leader, Dr. Boris Tchlenoff, of Geneva.

The financial cost of this work has been largely borne by the small Jewish community. From the outbreak of the war to the end of 1943, Swiss Jews have contributed no less than 12 million Swiss francs ($3,000,000). The report of the Union of Swiss Jewish Welfare Societies (ISRAV), presented at its annual meeting on January 23, 1944, showed that that agency had spent, in 1943, a total sum of 3,250,000
Swiss francs ($812,500). The J. D. C. spent in that same year over $100,000 per month and was compelled to increase its appropriations for 1944. These combined efforts cannot completely satisfy all needs, and are supplemented by government subsidies for the care of all refugees.

With a view to improving the condition of the refugees and of lightening the financial burdens thrown upon the Swiss Government and the Swiss Jewish community, the HIAS has organized the transfer of monies to refugees by their relatives in the United States. Such remittances make possible the improvement of the feeding of refugees in the camps and even the release of some who are enabled to live privately. HIAS published in the American press lists of 12,000 Jewish refugees in Switzerland. Funds transferred average between $15,000 and $30,000, per month.

Emigration of refugees from Switzerland is for the time being out of the question, but the HICEM office in Lisbon is carrying out, in cooperation with ISRAV in Zurich, a preliminary registration of candidates for emigration, whenever this may become possible.

No less generous and spontaneous was the aid extended by Sweden to the Jewish refugees from Denmark. Early in October, 1943, the Germans drastically changed their attitude toward Denmark in general, and toward the Jews in that country in particular.

About one thousand Jews and some non-Jews were caught in a raid, forcibly put on two steamers and sent off to Gdynia for hard labor. This event served as a signal and, on the night preceding the total occupation of Denmark by the Nazis, about 8,000 people, the great majority of them Jews, crossed the Sund to Sweden. They were not only allowed to land without any unnecessary formalities, but were received with touching hospitality and consideration. First aid was extended, at the cost of the government; all the newcomers received equal treatment regardless of their religion or nationality.

According to Under Secretary of State Breckenridge Long, the Swedish government declined the financial assistance offered by the United States government and declared that it considered it its duty to look after all refugees from Scandinavian countries. By that time Sweden had over
30,000 refugees from Norway, of whom about 700 were Jews. In addition, there were about 3,000 Jewish refugees from Germany, Austria and Finland who had found their way into Sweden at the very outset of the war. The Jewish community of Sweden, though freed by its government from the most elementary responsibility for the upkeep of the refugees, nevertheless attended to the specific needs of the Jewish refugees, such as the organization of children's homes, the setting up of kosher kitchens, assistance to Halutzim in the matter of agricultural training, and in many other ways. This tiny Jewish community (about 7,000 before the war) collected during 1943 about 500,000 Swedish crowns ($125,000).

It is worthy of note that the Swedish Jews were not only aiding refugees in their own country, but also answered the call from Shanghai, where about 20,000 Jewish refugees were left in a helpless position, cut off from the whole world by the Japanese occupation. Over 6,000 of them are being taken care of in feeding centers, supported by funds granted by the J.D.C. The Shanghai Committee of Hicem has created out of the funds sent by Sweden, a loan kassa which enables artisans and mechanics among the refugees to earn an independent livelihood.

The role of Sweden in the matter of assistance to refugees was sketched in the following terms by Attorney General Francis Biddle in his address on March 6, 1944, to the 57th annual convention of the Hias.

"There are other countries smaller but not less civilized than ours, which have responded far more generously. From 1939 to last November, the Swedish nation admitted 41,000 refugees, of whom 12,000 were children under 16, and of whom approximately one third were Jews. Had we furnished refuge on a similar scale and in the same proportion to our population, 850,000 refugees would have come to the United States since 1939 alone." 2

Previously, in November, 1943, former Assistant Secretary of State Breckenridge Long had created a sensation by giving, to a Congressional Committee, erroneous figures of the num-

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2 "Rescue" Information Bulletin of the Hias, Vol. 1, Nos. 3-4, March-April, 1944.
ber of refugees admitted to the United States during the decade 1933–43. His statement that “we have taken into this country since the beginning of the Hitler regime and the persecution of the Jews until today approximately 580,000 refugees” gave the erroneous impression that the total immigration from 1933 to 1943 was refugee immigration and that it was all occasioned by anti-Jewish persecution.

This statement aroused a storm of protest; many competent agencies, including the HIAS, the Yiddish Scientific Institute, and the Jewish Labor Committee, hastened to demonstrate, on the basis of official data, that during the 1933–1942 decade a maximum of 160,000 Jewish refugees were admitted to the United States and all within the framework of the existing immigration laws.

Owing in part to the confusion created by Mr. Long’s incorrect data, the Foreign Affairs Committee of the House of Representatives hesitated to approve resolutions introduced by Representatives Will Rogers, Jr., and Joseph C. Baldwin “providing for the establishment by the Executive of a Commission to effectuate the rescue of the Jewish people of Europe” without waiting for the decision of this Committee.

President Roosevelt, under the influence of an ever-growing public opinion in favor of concrete measures, as more and more was learned of the unexampled Nazi atrocities, promulgated on January 22, 1944, an Executive Order creating the War Refugee Board, whose functions were to “include without limitation the development of plans and programs and the inauguration of effective measures for the rescue, transportation and maintenance and relief of the victims of enemy oppression, and the establishment of havens of temporary refuge for such victims.”

John W. Pehle, appointed director of the Board, lost no time in getting to work. He dispatched immediately to Turkey, Portugal, Spain, Egypt and Sweden, representatives endowed with the rights of special attaches on refugee matters to the American embassies and consulates in these countries. Negotiations were being conducted through neutral channels with the Rumanian government.

3 Rescue of the Jewish and other peoples, see footnote 1.
regarding the return to 46,000 Jews from internment in Transnistria, with a view of their eventual emigration. Little is known as to the actual results of these negotiations. In view of the swift advance of the Red Army toward the Rumanian border, the expediency of this proposal has become extremely doubtful. Proof of this is the fact that despite incredible efforts during the months of March, April and May of 1944, it was possible to evacuate, on small ships from Constanza via Turkey to Palestine, no more than one thousand refugees, in batches of 100 to 250 on each ship. The negotiations which followed about the simultaneous evacuation of 1,000 children, met with almost insuperable difficulties, just as earlier, no tangible results were obtained by the Jewish Agency, the J.D.C. or HICEM to obtain permission to transport 5,000 children from Bulgaria to Palestine, and an equal number of children from France to the United States, Canada and Argentina.

Not all the rescue efforts of the War Refugee Board have as yet been made public. From its very start, the Board attempted to make contact with the underground organizations in occupied countries and took other steps, generally considered as somewhat unconventional and off the beaten path of diplomacy. This originality is, of course, fully to the Board's credit. The unprecedented methods used for the extermination of Jews were opposed too long by "parliamentary" procedures which were totally ineffective. For this reason, the bold change in the methods of rescuing refugees is a most welcome one, although there are many who feel that this change has come much too late.

Considering the very modest achievements of the War Refugee Board, whatever Jewish private agencies, such as the J.D.C., the HIAS-ICA, and the Jewish Agency for Palestine, have done merits, under the existing conditions, quite a good deal of attention.

These three organizations managed, after long and protracted preparatory work, to arrange in January, 1944 the first evacuation of 750 refugees from Portugal, Spain and Tangier to Palestine, directly by way of the Mediterranean Sea. (Before the Mediterranean was cleared of the Nazis, emigrants from the Iberian Península had to travel to Palestine by a roundabout way via Lourenço Marquez,
Mozambique, and the Red Sea.) The chartering of S. S. Nyassa on which this group was transported cost over $400,000, and this sum was covered 80% by the J. D. C., and 20% by HIAS.

About two-thirds of the refugees were stateless, the remaining third were citizens of 21 countries. More than 100 were children. The group, which was conducted by the HICEM representative, David J. Schweitzer, received a hearty and triumphant welcome on the steamer's arrival in Haifa, as this was the first ship since war began to arrive in Palestine with a group of legal immigrants from Europe.

In the interval, the Jewish Agency which issued the immigration certificates to this group of refugees, made many attempts to assure the immigration to Palestine of other contingents. One such attempt was unsuccessful, sad and costly owing to the stubborn refusal of the "friendly" Iraq government to allow transit through its territory of 1,000 children from Iran to Palestine, the shortest and cheapest way. A long detour had to be taken via the Persian gulf and the Red Sea, necessitating an enormous loss of time and money, and much suffering to the children who had already gone through terrible ordeals on their way from Poland to Soviet Russia and thence to Iran. In cooperation with the I.C.A. (the Jewish Colonization Association) and the J.D.C., the Jewish Agency has helped in the wholesale transportation of over 3,000 Yemenite Jews from Aden to Palestine, thus liquidating almost entirely this Jewish settlement in Arabia. Finally, the J.D.C. and HICEM helped a group of 190 Jews to emigrate from Northern Africa to Palestine by land.

Thanks to the initiative of the Canadian Jewish Congress, the Canadian government agreed, in November, 1943, to admit for the duration of the war refugees from the Iberian Peninsula, and suspend the operation of the usual restrictive conditions. The J.D.C. guaranteed the cost of transportation while HICEM, in cooperation with the special representative of the Canadian government, made the selection of those to be transported and prepared them for the trip. The first two groups of 350 left for Canada via the United States in March, 1944. The Philadelphia Branch of HIAS took care of the arrangements in this country (it was
Passover week), its agents accompanied the group up to the Canadian border; many of the refugees wept, overcome with joy at their final rescue. From information received from the Canadian Jewish Immigrant Aid Society, all but six of the new arrivals had found defense jobs soon after their landing.

In June 1944, it became at last possible to evacuate a group of 600 refugees from Spain to the Lyautey Camp near Fedalla, in French Morocco. This operation was carried out partly through the cooperation of the Voluntary American Committee working in Spain. Thanks largely to the efforts of the American, British and French government agents in North Africa, the Lyautey Camp is well arranged and can hold from ten to twenty thousand people. To induce these 600 refugees to leave Spain, where they were living in full liberty, and go to an African camp where at best they would be kept interned for the duration of the war, was no easy task. The American authorities did all they could to assist, while the French Committee of National Liberation interposed all kinds of obstacles on the ground of national safety.

To show what a maze of formalities had to be complied with, it will be enough to mention that each refugee had to fill in 16 questionnaires, to five of which photographs had to be affixed, while the other 11 had to have finger prints. An idea of the composition of this group of refugees can be had from the fact that the 600 refugees had come from 33 different countries; that they spoke 16 languages; and that they asked for 11 different religious services.

By the end of June, 1944, it became possible for the Jewish Agency, the Joint Distribution Committee and the American Friends Service Committee to start work in Italy under the auspices of the Intergovernmental Committee for Refugees. According to a report from Dr. Joseph Schwartz, there were, by that time, about 5,000 Jewish refugees in Italy (of whom 3,000 were in southern Italy and about 2,000 in Rome). Most of these refugees are stateless. A substantial number of them are of Yugoslav nationality. About 600 emigrated to Palestine during June, 1944. It is also expected that the temporary haven for refugees at Fort Ontario, which was
established by the proclamation of President Roosevelt on June 12, will absorb 1,000 refugees from southern Italy, the majority of whom will be recruited among the aforementioned group of Jewish refugees.

Finally, note should be taken of some other groups, especially of Jews living in Nazi-occupied countries, whose actual proof of their Spanish or Portuguese nationality saved them from deportation and ruin. To them, as well as to other Jewish citizens of neutral countries, the Germans gave permission to proceed to Spain or to Portugal. Thus, in July, 1943, a group of 150 Portuguese Jews and 300 Spanish Jews from Paris arrived in Portugal and in Spain, respectively. In January, 1944, a group of 385 Jews from Salonika reached Barcelona from a German camp at Belsen-Bergen.

The rescue of these small groups makes more vivid the horror and the helplessness of the catastrophe which has befallen Europe's Jews. Thus, the 450 who were saved from Paris represents a mere fraction of the total number of victims in France. The 385 Jews from Salonika, on their own showing, were the only ones who managed to save their lives, the remaining 45,000 Jews in that city were deported to Poland and, in all probability, perished there. Thus, too, the 24 richest Hungarian Jews who arrived recently at Lisbon in a plane are but a striking proof of the hopelessness of the situation of the hundreds of thousands of Hungarian Jews.