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Switzerland in the Second World War: refugee policy in a frontier canton

Between solidarity and harshness

During the Second World War, 15,000 refugees crossed into Switzerland through the border canton of Schaffhausen. Amongst these were 300 Jewish people, but another 15,000 Jews were refused entry.



(MAP: BURI)

End of August 1938. The Horowitz family – father, mother and sons Erich and Herbert – were making their second attempt to reach Switzerland. The first, unsuccessful try had taken place several weeks earlier in the Constance area. This time they journeyed from Munich to Singen by train. When dark came they set out on foot in the direction of Ramsen. Their prospects did not seem to be very good. The border followed a very confusing line. In addition, a few days before the government in Berne had declared the frontier closed to Jewish refugees.

In spite of all the dangers, however, the Horowitz family was successful this time. A German border guard even showed them a place where they could cross the Swiss border unnoticed. And there they found a car which took them to Schaffhausen, where they were taken under the wing of the Jewish Refugee Assistance.

Hidden in a cattle truck

End of February 1939. 16-year old Richard Wunderli's parents' house was on the edge of the Canton Schaffhausen village of Thayngen, only 60 metres from the German frontier. On this February morning, the boy saw four people – two adults

and two children – crossing an open field. They were walking in a strange way. Their hands were bound behind their backs with barbed wire.

Jürg Schoch *

The boy took the family into his parents' house – unnoticed by the neighbours, Germans and Austrians who were Nazis. Secrecy was essential because the frontier crossing had been illegal. No doctor was called, and the family treated the refugees' hand injuries as best they could. The boys of the Wunderli family were sent to sleep in the hayloft, and the Jewish family was put up in their room.

But what should be done with the refugees? Walther Bringolf, Schaffhausen's city president, was approached. A young farmer produced a cattle truck, and he and Richard Wunderli used it to bring the family in utter secrecy to Dachsen. There a car belonging to a Social Democrat member of the Zurich cantonal government, Jakob Kägi, awaited them.

"Strict, but correct"

These are just two examples of how refugees succeeded in crossing into our country with private help and against official regulations. The spontaneous demonstrations of solidarity, fellow-feeling and resistance contrasted with the cold administrative acceptance of orders by the Schaffhausen cantonal authorities. There were in fact occasions, however, when even these behaved with more humanity than the federal government wanted. From 1942-43 on, the cantonal police admitted to Switzerland about 1,000 Polish and Russian people fleeing from German forced labour.

The border control corps, which was part of the frontier police taking orders from the Federal Police Department, was more severe. The intention was "to protect against unnecessary inundation" by refugees, say contemporary witnesses of the strict approach of the time. This severity was felt particularly by Jewish people. There were many dramatic scenes. Some of them took place at Thayngen railway station, where refugees

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lay on the lines in front of the locomotive which was to return them to Singen.

But those refugees who did reach Schaffhausen and were allowed to stay temporarily found a climate of terror. This was particularly the case when they were called to appear before the head of the cantonal police for foreign nationals, Robert Wäckerlin, who was a notorious Nazi sympathiser. The refugees were strictly prohibited from taking up gainful employment, and they were also required to show that they were taking steps to remove themselves as soon as possible.

What was the reason for this rigorous attitude on the part of the Schaffhausen authorities who, close as they were to the frontier, must have known or at least have had some idea of what their brown-shirted neighbours were doing? The explanation is possibly to be found in the exposed position of this small canton. It had always had close relations with the Germans next door. Many workers and officials of the German railways and customs crossed over into the canton of Schaffhausen in the course of their duties – and amongst them there were of course many Nazis.

Collaborationist strongholds

In any case the winds of the so-called "collaborators' spring" were blowing very gustily in Schaffhausen. There were many Nazi sympathisers amongst the staff of big firms like Schweizerische Industrie-Gesellschaft SIG and Georg Fischer AG, especially in senior management, and they also abounded in the cantonal non-commissioned officers' association. There was also much vacillation amongst the middle-class liberal establishment. Critical witnesses at the time said that if history had taken a different course many Schaffhausen businesspeople would have come to a swift arrangement with the Nazis. ■

Refugee policy

During the Second World War Switzerland took in 240,000 refugees, of whom 51,000 were civilians. It has been proved, however, that another 30,000 were rejected, a large number of whom were Jews. The actual number of those refused entry is probably higher.