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**On the Ambivalence of Being Neutral  
Switzerland and Swiss Jewry  
Facing the Rise and Fall of the Nazi State**

Jacques Picard

WASHINGTON, D. C.

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JOSEPH AND REBECCA MEYERHOFF ANNUAL LECTURE  
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THE JOSEPH AND REBECCA MEYERHOFF ANNUAL LECTURE on the Holocaust has been endowed by a 1994 grant from the Meyerhoff family to promote excellence in and to disseminate Holocaust research. Life-long residents of Baltimore, Joseph and Rebecca Meyerhoff were involved in philanthropic activities in the United States and overseas in music and the arts, Jewish learning and scholarship, and human services, among other concerns. Jewish history and education were a primary focus in their philanthropic efforts. This tradition has been upheld and enhanced by their children and their children's children. Their son, Harvey M. Meyerhoff, is Chairman Emeritus of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council. The annual lecture will be held in the Joseph and Rebecca Meyerhoff Theater of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.



BEFORE I BEGIN MY PRESENTATION, please let me thank you for the opportunity to speak in this notable institution. I appreciate the opportunity to speak before this audience for two reasons. The first is that my address may contribute to a clearer understanding of Switzerland's history during the period of the Nazi hegemony in Europe. We are meeting more than five decades after the end of World War II, certainly one of the most brutal episodes in human history. A second reason is that Switzerland today is in a process of changing perception of its own historical responsibility as well as of its present place in the international community. We look back, too, at the shadows of the war time and at how those spectres have come to influence historiography during the past fifty years.

It will be useful to look at these concerns by delving into four areas. The first examines the emergence of Swiss neutrality before 1933 and Swiss neutrality in relation to Nazi Germany. The second raises yet unanswered questions that provide the research blueprint for the Independent Commission of Experts: Switzerland-Second World War. The third section provides a case study of Swiss Jews and Nazi Germany. And the last section offers some conclusions while providing perspective on the meaning of the change of perception since the end of the war.

### **The Emergence of Swiss Neutrality and the Rise of the Nazi State**

Assessing the development of Switzerland as a modern state, and how this state differs from others, has become a historical burden. The legacy does not make a political reorientation easy for the Swiss today. In addressing this problem, it is therefore helpful to place in its historical context the problem of the Swiss definition of its foreign policy as "neutral."<sup>i</sup> This requires a historical reconstruction of the concept of neutrality and, as a specific aspect, the role of Swiss historiography in creating this concept. During the second half of the nineteenth century, Europeans lived in rapidly changing social, technological and political structures.<sup>ii</sup> The loss of old attachments and the modernization of daily lives and entire societies resulted in an urgent need for identification to provide new meaning and orientation for individuals and states.<sup>iii</sup> The combined process of industrialization and secularization led to a weakening of earlier ties and the traditional behavior patterns. Small political entities, such as the small states in the middle and northern German area, were unified, and larger political structures became more centralized.

The writing and publication of national histories at this time provided explanatory and educational frameworks for men and women who were having to adapt their daily lives to the requirements of modern administration in these new, larger political structures. Thus, the emergence of the national state in this period was based on the idea that each such entity should have the same language, the same culture, a common market and a rational territorial basis.<sup>iv</sup>

### **Neutrality and the Modernization of Switzerland**

As of 1871 Switzerland had new neighbors to the north and the south, the German Empire and the unified Italy; these states seemed to be powerful rivals to France on Switzerland's western border. The modernization of Switzerland, especially its evolution from the old confederation of independent states to a new federal union in 1848, was a long and conflict-ridden process, culminating in a constitutional democracy. The new constitution of 1874 is characterized as "legislation by the people."<sup>v</sup>

At its inception, the new federal state did not of its own accord define its international role as neutral. And at the beginning, the Jews in Switzerland did not have rights equal to those of other Swiss nationals. However, one should remember that there was and still is a difference between Switzerland and other states—the country's population was composed by distinct language groups and different cultural orientations: Italian, French, German, and Romanche. The small alpine federation, bordered at three sides by homogeneous national states, had an inherent interest in looking at history in a way that was not based on unified linguistic or cultural characteristics. The making of Swiss history in the nineteenth century was based on the idea that Switzerland was the result of its own political and legal tradition as well as of its multicultural character. It was a "*Willensnation*," based on the decision of its citizens to unite as a federal state.<sup>vi</sup> Therefore Swiss neutrality became an important component in the political system, symbolized by the constitution of 1874.

But even more historiographical background is necessary. The Swiss status of neutrality was described to have a rather special basis in international law. The Swiss had last experienced foreign occupation by the French from 1798 to 1803, when Switzerland was known as the Helvetic Republic; however, this experience instigated the previously mentioned process that put the country on the road to modern democracy. Switzerland was restored as an independent confederation at the Congress of Vienna in 1815 and this settlement guaranteed Switzerland "permanent neutrality" as an obligation by international agreement.<sup>vii</sup>

At the end of the nineteenth century, Switzerland became active in welcoming the headquarters of several international organizations on its soil in order to promote the credibility of its neutral status. Before and even after the First World War, the International Committee of the Red Cross, the International Bureau of Peace, the International Postal Union, the International Railway Union, and the Bank of International Trade were established in Geneva, Berne or Basel.<sup>viii</sup> The main elements of the Swiss concept of neutrality were definitively clear around the turn of the century. Switzerland based its policy of neutrality on international law obligations that derived in particular from the 13th Hague Convention on Neutrality at Sea of

1907. These commitments were limited to a few important points, as for example, the obligations to demonstrate impartiality and restraint and to protect its own territory.<sup>ix</sup>

At the beginning of First World War, Switzerland made a formal declaration of neutrality, emphasizing its intention to stand aside from the conflict of the belligerents. This policy aimed at stabilizing the institutional and constitutional framework of the federal state and seeking to limit social tensions and to preclude conflicts between the German- and French-speaking cantons. The Swiss promoted the credibility of their neutral status by performing a broad spectrum of international services, especially the provision of good offices and the undertaking of humanitarian commitments.<sup>x</sup> Economic relations with the belligerents followed the principle of universal access. This policy was not strictly dependent on the law of neutrality, but was important since the declaration of a neutral policy permitted economic relations with all belligerents.

After the First World War, Switzerland gave up the status of complete neutrality. The Swiss did so in conjunction with the creation of the League of Nations that had been founded after the Paris peace conferences. The League established its headquarters in Switzerland, at Geneva. Initially, the League's presence seemed to complement the notion of Switzerland's role as a neutral setting for international congresses and organizations promoting multilateral cooperation and peacekeeping in Europe.<sup>xi</sup> But the weak League of Nations could not fulfil the Swiss and world expectations that it would guarantee a better international security system; these hopes proved illusory. The historically founded Swiss idea of neutrality, with its domestic and foreign policy implications, was called into serious question with the rise of Nazism.<sup>xii</sup> In 1938, when the Nazi state turned to an aggressive policy, Switzerland withdrew from its international obligation to take part in any economic sanctions imposed by the League. Switzerland now faced Hitler's demand for a "new order" in Europe—an order based on laws and policies completely antithetical to peace and democratic freedom. External pressures had their internal reactions. Not immune to the siren call of the times, inside Switzerland the so-called Frontist movement began to demand a fascist-oriented revision of the 1874 federal constitution.<sup>xiii</sup>

### **Facing Nazi Germany**

As they had done at the beginning of World War I, the Swiss made a formal declaration of neutrality even before the outbreak of World War II. We must ask whether this political and legal security arrangement of Switzerland with its neighbors could work as it traditionally had worked in the past. With the establishment of the Nazi rule in Germany in 1933, matters had accelerated dramatically. The Nazi Reich was a "double state"; behind the facade of respect for international law, it combined political totalitarianism in domestic fields with increasingly aggressive foreign affairs—the so-called *völkische* (national racial) policy.<sup>xiv</sup> This notion included a so-called *Grossraum-Politik*, a program of expansion in Europe, especially directed toward Eastern Europe.<sup>xv</sup> The Nazis also began an active policy of disenfranchisement and discrimination aimed at Jews, other minorities, and competing political organizations.<sup>xvi</sup> After the war began in 1939, the areas conquered and occupied by the Germans were forcibly inte-



grated into an economic system relying in large measure on loot and plunder. After 1941, this escalated into the systematic program of mass murder, known today as the Holocaust. Destruction and despoliation on an industrial scale included forced nationalization, looting, deportation and the brutal exploitation of forced labor for the armaments industry.<sup>xvii</sup> It seems entirely possible that even after the agony and collapse of the “Third Reich,” many of those who had practiced economic plunder continue to use the profits from those activities, having exported than in the form of flight capital after 1945.

Switzerland, a country whose foreign trade was strongly integrated into the European and other international markets, was also involved in these events in various ways. It engaged in commercial exchange with the Axis powers, but also maintained significant contacts and ties with the Allies and with other neutral countries.<sup>xviii</sup> Switzerland’s relationship with the government of Vichy France may be of special interest. But it easy to make too much of those trade arrangements that did exist. In general, the Swiss faced a double economic blockade during the war—by the Axis as well as the Allies; this increasingly forced the Swiss to expand their efforts into an intensive mobilization of whatever economic resources remained available. However, the implementation of Swiss neutrality and its attendant obligation of universal impartiality lead to a substantial imbalance in favor of the Axis powers. The Third Reich and its vassal regimes did, after all, surround Switzerland for much of the war. The Swiss did not subscribe to Hitler’s plan to create a “new order” in Europe, but they were relatively isolated from 1941 until the end of 1943.

Initially, the extent of economic cooperation with the Third Reich was rationalized in Swiss historiography by referring to objective constraints arising from the small state’s need to preserve its independence. From the 1950s to 1970s, Swiss historiographical analysis focused on why Switzerland had been spared direct involvement in the war.<sup>xix</sup> This was not the case when German troops invaded other small countries, such as the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, and Denmark. From the period beginning with the fall of France to the invasion of the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941, the Swiss feared that they might be next on Hitler’s target list.<sup>xx</sup> Although they had good reasons to feel apprehensive, Switzerland was not invaded; nonetheless, both the Axis and the Allies did commit incursions of Swiss air space. Further, Swiss historiography has insisted that neutrality and independence were maintained by smart diplomacy and a strong army, allowing the Swiss to concentrate on their traditional humanitarian roles and offering their so-called good offices. In this latter capacity a neutral serves as a protecting power; Switzerland had forty-three such mandates including the representation of the United States and its civilian and military internees in Nazi-occupied Europe.<sup>xxi</sup>

During the past twenty years, Swiss historiographical discussion has focused on the control of transportation between Germany to the north and Italy to the south—the country sitting astride an otherways inaccessible gateway of the European continent. Another focus has been on the advantages that Switzerland’s neutrality afforded to international diplomacy, foreign intelligence and secret services of the belligerents. Today, Swiss historiography looks into questions about the use of Swiss industries and financial institutions to the benefit of Nazi

Germany. The belief that private profit was probably a consideration in Swiss neutrality until the last days of Nazi Germany has gained reasonable ground.<sup>xxii</sup> Thus, the picture of Switzerland as a threatened companion in misfortune, determined to resist and to support humanitarian relief, has been tempered by a growing understanding that Switzerland, a small country deeply entwined in Europe, benefitted from the business possibilities of the war.<sup>xxiii</sup>

Under traditional rules, trade by neutrals with warring parties was permitted. This included weapons sales but restricted the government itself from selling to belligerents and required that private industries not favor one or the other of the belligerents. A key question is why Switzerland traded with the Nazis in a bilateral flow of goods, and if this bilateral clearing system was inevitable or not. We have to distinguish between the prewar and the war periods.<sup>xxiv</sup> Surrounded on all sides by Germany and its vassals, Switzerland needed to supply food for its 4.2 million inhabitants, and it needed coal, petroleum, and other raw materials to maintain employment. The Allies were fully informed about Swiss trade with the Germans, just as the Germans were kept apprised of Swiss trade with the Allies.<sup>xxv</sup> But one trade practice is open to criticism under the rules of neutrality. The Swiss treasury advanced funds to Germany so that the Germans could import Swiss goods; on the other hand, the Swiss did something similar with the British.<sup>xxvi</sup> However, the matter is closely connected with the issues regarding the gold that the German Reichsbank sold to Swiss National Bank.<sup>xxvii</sup> Here lies a strong ambivalence in the story of Swiss neutrality, and these matters must be investigated fully and objectively.<sup>xxviii</sup>

The operative question is how the Swiss state felt responsible to those regulations in international law that limited occupying states in their utilization of the wealth of defeated countries to that of a usufructuary or a life tenant. According to international regulations, private property in occupied countries was not to be confiscated. The mass looting of wealth by the Nazis clearly violated those provisions. This inevitably leads to the crucial questions of whether or not the Swiss acted in good faith or if they were ignorant, especially of the origin of gold and other categories of private capital transfers. Furthermore, we must learn how the Swiss viewed the confiscation of Jewish and other private property inside Germany when the Nazis traded the loot in their so-called aryanization activities.

It is appropriate to look also at Switzerland's rights and its moral obligations as a neutral providing its good offices as an intermediary. Swiss historians have examined extensively the exercise of that role. This includes the treatment of civilian refugees from the Nazi state and occupied territories, and the designation of Switzerland by both the Germans and the Allies as a protecting power with respect to prisoners of war. Although Switzerland accepted approximately 300,000 military and civilian refugees, including 29,000 Jews, during the period 1933 to 1945, more than 20,000 attempting to escape Nazism were turned away, including those fleeing deportation in 1942 and 1943.<sup>xxix</sup> That behavior casts a shadow on the moral basis of Swiss neutrality. The same ignorance of Swiss politicians and bureaucrats in these affairs is also true of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). The ICRC has been criticized because it suppressed information it possessed about the death camps in 1942.<sup>xxx</sup> It must be stated explicitly that the ICRC had been dominated by the Swiss during

the war years; it is known that, within the ICRC as well as within the Swiss Red Cross organization, humanitarian matters were closely linked to concerns of the Swiss political, military and economic elite. In summary, it seems that the neutral state implemented its moral obligation to refugees and humanitarian actions in a legalistic way and with hidden antisemitism. We must not shrink from identifying this very real *Judenpolitik* (Jewish policy) carried out by a mostly right-wing elite in Switzerland.

It is no small task to understand this, especially within a country that has arrayed itself in the special status of neutrality and that long has claimed for itself an ethical and humanitarian principle of conduct. Today, the ambivalence of being neutral opens the question of whether the temptation to profit from totalitarian structures can be applied to Swiss policies towards Nazi Germany. Therefore, I shall present the main issues being researched by the Independent Commission of Experts: Switzerland-Second World War, hereinafter called the ICE. I do not intend to give answers but to describe the main questions to be answered. The risk of the research lies in the conditions and reliability of the archives and the other evidentiary materials bearing upon investigations.

### **Unanswered Questions**

The ICE has defined six areas of investigation. The first area is designated *international economic relations*. The scope here is not merely Swiss foreign and foreign economic policy, but also includes the role of Switzerland as a hub for intelligence about the war, and for the flow of information about humanitarian actions. It also involves questions about transportation routes and the transit of supplies. Moreover, international exchange relations are to be placed into a historical context of security affairs in order to understand how political systems functioned and developed policies.

A second area of investigation concerns the *history of the financial system*, including the individual branches of that system. Here we must analyze how banks, insurance companies, trust companies, and financial intermediaries reacted to political events that took place before, during and after the War. This matter is to be investigated not only for Switzerland, but also in every country where Swiss banks and insurance companies had their own representatives.

The third research area concerns *capital transfer* in connection with the political developments. This is arduous investigative terrain for the ICE, yet it is of paramount concern. This topic requires shedding light first on the Nazis' seizure of assets and property within Germany and in the German sphere of power and influence, as well as examining those assets located in Switzerland; this involves research into the "aryanization program." The problem of capital transfers concerns not only Germany, but also Italy and Vichy France and, additionally, the Allied and neutral countries. The various types of flight capital transfer include the Nazi attempt to dispose of loot as well as in the plunder of art and other objects. It is necessary to evaluate the role of Switzerland as a hub, and to examine its credibility. Finally, there are two additional problem areas associated with the transfer of capital: first, the acceptance of gold by official institutions, and second, the private trade in gold.

The fourth area of investigation is *trade companies and industrial enterprises*. They are of

interest not only within the general context of foreign trade, the war-economy, and employment policy, but also for their relations with the Allies and with the Axis. This last concern also could be of decisive importance for our study of the transfer of capital. The research foci include: the relationship between domestic and foreign investments, business development abroad, the granting of licenses and patents along with the transfer of scientific and technological knowledge, the question of forced labor and other Swiss conformity to unusual employment practices specific to the Nazi sphere of power, and the question of relationships between refugee policy and employment policy in Switzerland.

The fifth area of investigation encompasses a number of different research topics going forward under the umbrella appellation of *public clarification processes* during the *postwar period*. This concerns decision-making processes and procedures for searching out the unclaimed assets within the context of the 1946 Washington Agreement and the 1962 Registration Decree on heirless property. Furthermore, it encompasses the production of official reports and mandated historical studies as well as implicit or explicit policies of public remembrance. It also involves the efforts for public rehabilitation of previously censured or ostracized individuals or groups. An example is the case of Paul Grueninger, the former chief commander of police in the Canton of St-Gall who saved thousands of Jewish life in 1938.<sup>xxxii</sup> Today we must understand why Mr. Grueninger did not receive rehabilitation and recognition after the war and during his life-time.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

The sixth area of investigation concerns the topic of *refugee and alien policy*. This is understood to focus on the policy towards minorities of both Swiss and foreign citizenship in Switzerland. Therefore, the Gypsies (the Sinti and the Roma) will receive special attention.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Nowhere is the subject more clear than in the case of Swiss policy toward the Jews. We can observe this by studying the situation of the Jews in Switzerland, that of the Jews of East European origin who had settled in Switzerland, the situation of Jewish refugees during the Nazi era in Europe, and that of the Jewish assistance organizations in Switzerland and abroad.

I will now turn to the third part of this presentation and focus on refugee policy; this involves a case study of Jews in Switzerland during the Nazi period.

### **Swiss Jewry at a Difficult Time**

In 1866, the Jews in Switzerland were politically emancipated. This came about under external pressure from the United States, the Netherlands and France, and also reflected the political maturity and liberal vision of progressive forces inside Switzerland. After 1866, Swiss Jews were affected by the rapid tempo of social change resulting from industrialization.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Many began an economic and social climb, especially in textiles, watch manufacture, trade, and small-scale industry, and also as lawyers and doctors. Established in the Swiss countryside, Jewish communities rapidly developed into a population group residing primarily in the towns. This movement was complemented by the immigration of Jews arriving principally from Russia and elsewhere Eastern Europe. In 1894, there was an attempt to restrict this influx of foreign Jews through a ban on ritual slaughter.<sup>xxxv</sup> In Zurich, for example, the naturalization

of Jews between 1925 and 1936 faced increasing obstacles, reflecting discrimination.<sup>xxxvi</sup> Thus, in 1930, only 19,000 Jews lived in Switzerland; nearly half of them were foreign nationals.

The integration of Jews in Switzerland could not be unaffected by the Nazi assumption of power in 1933. In the years prior to the Second World War and during it, Swiss Jews were under pressure from two directions. On the one hand, they were apprehensive because of the aggressive behavior and propaganda of the Nazi state that sought to export antisemitism to other countries. An expanding Germany at war constituted a plausible threat to Switzerland's independent existence. Jews living in Switzerland must have viewed that small country as a sheltered island that was nevertheless exposed to great danger in the middle of German-occupied Europe. On the other hand, Switzerland, maneuvering for its own political survival, transmitted external pressures inward to the "home front." Swiss Federal policy was tightly circumscribed: it sought to avoid irritating Nazi Germany, while confronting it as a neutral state that was ready to defend itself and at the same time was economically useful. In these circumstances, most of Switzerland's own Jewish community was willing to do little that would risk making them appear an "unnecessary burden" for that country.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

### **Switzerland as a Symbol of Freedom**

Jewish citizens carried out their duties as loyal Swiss, but many of their fellow citizens regarded Jews as foreigners. Jews had been seen widely for a long time as "alien to the nature of Switzerland" and therefore unwelcome, especially if they were immigrants who had not yet been naturalized. In this inhospitable climate, many settled Jews, including some belonging to the second generation born in Switzerland, preferred to emigrate overseas. In general, Jews living in Switzerland saw their country as a symbol of freedom and democracy. Jews consequently joined the ranks of those engaged in the intellectual and military defense of their country, going about it in a disciplined manner, albeit sometimes nervously, sometimes over-enthusiastically. Swiss Jews, like other Swiss citizens, were active in military and civil service as well as in voluntary aid organizations. They willingly accepted the general decline in quality of life in the belief that by doing so they served Switzerland as a stronghold of asylum and determined resistance.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

Meanwhile the Federal Council considered Jewish refugees as increasingly unwelcome. Approximately 29,000 Jewish refugees remained in the country briefly or for longer periods between 1933 and 1952. Between 1938 and 1944 they could not migrate further. These Jews thus threatened remained safely and were not sent to their death through deportation by the Nazis.<sup>xxxix</sup> However, Switzerland clung tenaciously to the principle that refugees had to leave the country as quickly as possible. This also continued to be true after the War, and from 1945 to 1952, the majority of all Jewish refugees had to leave Switzerland. This requirement meant that Switzerland threw away its last chance to keep people in the country who offered great intellectual, cultural and economic potential. Before and during the War, the Swiss variety of hostility to the Jews blinded people to the dangers of racial antisemitism; even members of the elite and the authorities held this view covertly.

### **The Concerns and Burdens of Swiss Jews**

During the Nazi period, Swiss Jews were confronted with conflicting tasks. They publicly had to defend themselves against antisemitism, and they did so with a keen sense for the principles of a democratic, civil society. In doing this, they found themselves abandoned by their government; anti-racist legislation, called for as early as 1936 in the context of the defense of democracy, was still a long way off. Swiss Jews also had to care for Jewish refugees and meet demands for their living expenses and transit opportunities in order to satisfy federal decrees. The *Schweizerischer Israelitischer Gemeindebund* (SIG, the Swiss Federation of Jewish Communities) and the *Verband Schweizerischer Jüdischer Fürsorgen* (VSJF, the Association of Swiss-Jewish Welfare Organizations) pursued a careful policy of keeping a low profile in order not to offer any pretext for a claim that they were criticizing their own authorities, and because of the Nazi threat and related European events. Within the Jewish community, Zionist, socialist and middle-class left-wing circles opposed this docile conduct and called for more aggressive policies. Though relatively obsequious, the Swiss Federation of Jewish Communities and the Association of Jewish Welfare Organizations ultimately were dropped by their government, on whose support they had long relied, and used as tools of government policy.<sup>x1</sup>

Jews felt abandoned by their government's policies toward refugees. Switzerland had secretly contributed to the introduction of the *J*-stamp in German passports in 1938. In 1942, the Federal Council refused to consider Jewish refugees threatened in life and limb as worthy of asylum.<sup>xli</sup> At the same time, Jewish children were excluded from staying for rest and recovery; this was in contrast to the otherwise generous practice of humanitarian stays for non-Jewish children, and with the readiness of many non-Jewish Swiss families to take in Jewish children. The unyielding policy of the Federal Council towards returning Jewish women who formerly had been Swiss was similarly distressing; having married foreign husbands, these women were considered foreign nationals now standing outside a locked door. In 1938, the administration threatened to close the border entirely to foreign Jews, if Swiss Jews were not prepared to carry the burden of these refugees both financially and organizationally.

The Swiss Jews paid. Collections made by the Swiss Federation of Jewish Communities and other Jewish charities ran to a total of 15 million Swiss francs from the roughly 5,000 employed members inside the country. This sum would have been the equivalent of 3 billion Swiss francs, if recalculated on the basis of the total population. But this sum of 15 million Swiss francs was insufficient to support the refugees, since the government strictly prohibited employment of refugees. The SIG and the VSJF in Switzerland sought and found help both within Switzerland and abroad. Many charities in Switzerland, joined together in the Swiss Refugee Aid Joint Committee (*Schweizerische Flüchtlingshilfe*), contributed support. They donated about 5 million Swiss francs even though not all of them supported the political position of the Jewish organizations toward refugees.<sup>xlii</sup>

Above all, foreign charities, most notably the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) and the Jewish migration charities, such as the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society

(HIAS), sent money to Switzerland.<sup>xliii</sup> They were persuaded that the small neutral state was conducting a benevolent policy towards refugees in providing a reliable asylum pending further migration. Direct foreign subventions from internationally active Jewish charities to Switzerland amounted to 44 million Swiss francs. The federal government and cantons spent 9 million Swiss francs on onward travel, particularly at the end of the war. Meanwhile, a legally-doubtful special tax was imposed by the Swiss government on those refugees who still had financial resources; this was known as the “Solidarity Tax.”

Financial coercion by Swiss authorities showed Swiss Jews the price they had to pay for their “race.” The question of whether they had a place in Switzerland was raised in other ways as well. In 1941, a disquieting question for the National Parliament was whether or not the Federal government was ready to protect Jewish Swiss nationals in occupied France against Nazi measures. The government response was ambiguous, raising the issue of equality of all citizens under the Federal constitution. Jews in Switzerland also were deeply troubled that members of their families and relations abroad received little support from Berne. Nevertheless, the Swiss mission in German-occupied France offered help in cases dealing with the “aryanization” of Jewish property, thereby representing the interests of Swiss Jews.

### **Alliance Problems and Defense Against Racism**

There were many brave Swiss who recognized that the fundamental moral integrity of the Swiss state was challenged by Swiss policies toward the Jews and other minorities and toward the refugees in general, as well as by European and Swiss antisemitism. It was obvious to them that racism and fascist policies could destroy the intellectual and humanitarian foundations of Switzerland’s modern freedom and independence that had been based on liberal values and democratic principles. These perceptive individuals and groups saw themselves as patriots obliged to work for human rights and to offer social help. They included judges, editors, workers, priests, many women and even young people. Among politicians, parliamentarians from among the social democrats and notable middle-class “rebels” stand out.<sup>xliv</sup> These individuals did not constitute the norm in Swiss public life, that was based on personal conformity and political consensus. Nevertheless, it was particularly important that Swiss Jews were not obliged to feel alone in their concerns and worries, even if the difficult climate meant that political allies were rare.

As a whole, Swiss Jews did not concentrate exclusively on their own difficulties—the native antisemitism or the refugee question as it related to Switzerland. The presence of numerous foreign services and international rescue organizations, among them Swiss charities, operating during the war from Swiss soil, meant that news of the Jewish suffering under German hegemony often reached the free world through the neutral nations. This information confronted Jews in Switzerland as well as in the free world with the challenge of how they could help their suffering fellow Jews.<sup>xlv</sup> London and Washington distrusted every delivery of goods or money into German-occupied countries, considering it “support for the enemy.” They largely ignored Jewish suffering and suppressed information about systematic annihilation of the Jews.<sup>xlvi</sup>

### **Aid and Attempts at Rescue in German-Occupied Europe**

Jewish organizations—seventeen in all—mounted aid operations using Switzerland as a base. They collected money, financed local helpers, and sent parcels with food, clothing and medical supplies, and set up contacts to support those threatened by starvation and death. Often these activities were initiated by individuals or by the relatives to those affected. Understanding among the politically very diverse Jewish aid organizations and Christian, socialist and other partners was a precondition for rendering effective long-term aid.<sup>xlvii</sup> Swiss men and women in Switzerland and abroad committed themselves to help, once they became aware of the fate of the Jews. Bits of information about the fate of the victims were not concealed by Swiss government, the ICRC and Allied governments.<sup>xlviii</sup> To take “loving action beyond the borders,” as this course was known, required people to react quickly and courageously, all the more so since circumstances such as governmental impediments and the dynamics of the war often subverted the intentions of these helpers. Individual helpers often worked in a grey zone between legality and illegality. This included aid with crossing the borders into Switzerland, taking in refugees, obtaining passports and visas from abroad, smuggling hard currency into German-occupied territories, and the smuggling of refugees, particularly children, into Switzerland.<sup>xlix</sup>

Events in Poland and southern France were especially distressing and brought helpers into action. Suffering had increased drastically after the German attack on Poland in 1939. The creation and walling-in of ghettos, deportations to the so-called Government-General (Polish territory under German rule), the systematic exploitation of men and women as slave workers and their starvation were steps in a program that brought death to thousands. Meanwhile in France and other Western European countries, Jews were concentrated in the barracks of internment camps, bringing suffering and death.<sup>1</sup> Local authorities in many occupied countries cooperated with the Germans in the subsequent deportations and transports to the places of mass murder, from which very few returned.<sup>ii</sup>

### **Emotional Upset and Crisis**

The whole catastrophe profoundly distressed Swiss Jewry. Until 1942, Swiss individuals and groups had concentrated on sending help to all these countries and areas under Nazi control. After the Germans had started systematic deportations to the killing centers, several aid organizations increasingly began to organize the smuggling of threatened Jews into Switzerland. Federal refugee policies had been tightened seriously after August 1942, subsequently turning back thousands of Jews and other men and women and thereby condemning them death.<sup>lii</sup> The exact numbers of refugees refused entry or turned back is not clear today. Swiss authorities demonstrably refused entry into Switzerland to at least 30,000 people seeking asylum. A great many Jews were among the rejected, but we do not know how many. This figure of 30,000 also includes many Polish and Russian slave laborers, as well as Italian and French nationals who had tried to evade forced labor or war service in Germany.<sup>liii</sup>

As noted earlier, the government had refused to allow Jewish children temporary rest



and recovery stays in Switzerland. These actions undermined trust in the government and provoked resistance from many groups. As a consequence of the government action, the Swiss Federation of Jewish Communities faced a deep internal crisis that resulted in a real democratization of the association's structures, but did not put backbone into the organization's public stance. Jewish and Swiss helpers, nevertheless, "illegally" brought hundreds of threatened children from France and Belgium into Switzerland. These youngsters were taken into orphans homes, sometimes openly, sometimes covertly. After the war these children left Switzerland mainly for Israel, France and the United States. For the most part, they retained thankful but ambivalent memories of the country that had saved them.<sup>liv</sup>

A last attempt to save Jewish lives in German-occupied Europe was made in negotiations between Jewish circles and representatives of the German SS. The aim of these ostensible negotiations about money, goods and lives—dealings that were conducted from Switzerland and Sweden in the last year of the War—was to end the deportations to the death camps and to transport large numbers of Jews from Hungary into Switzerland. These negotiations were successful in at least small measure because of the courage and audacity of many individuals in Budapest, Sweden and Switzerland—individuals such as Carl Lutz<sup>lv</sup>—but also because of the auspicious circumstances created by the impending defeat of Nazi Germany.<sup>lvi</sup> The end of the Third Reich left behind a crater-studded battlefield of human destruction as well as spiritual and cultural emptiness.

### **History as a Learning Process**

In comparison to what happened in other localities, the bitter reality of the Nazi period in Europe had barely grazed the Jews in Switzerland, since that country had remained politically and militarily untouched. Jews had made extreme financial sacrifices during that period, of course, but the emotional impact they underwent was intensified by the recognition that while their country had made survival possible for a relative few, it had not stood up to outside pressure or even to domestic antisemitic tendencies. Swiss Jews had to accept that even after 1947, in an incorrigibly antisemitic manner, their government refused to provide durable asylum for the remaining Jewish refugees.

Moreover the wishes and demands of the Jews were not respected when it came to the clarification of legal claims or even historical circumstances. The proposals of the SIG for an independent or "mixed commission" to establish a public trustee were ignored in 1962, when it was proposed that the federal government should issue a decree to identify the heirless assets of murdered victims—assets that lay on deposit in Swiss banks and other financial firms.<sup>lvii</sup> After 1954, public opinion was inflamed by the discovery of the background of the *J*-stamp of 1938. With strong feelings of squeamishness and hesitation, Switzerland gradually started to address the darker side of its history.<sup>lviii</sup>

This gave and still gives impetus to a learning process that shows that the country's borders are not impermeably sealed, but a porous membrane communicating with the world that at times seems to be irritating. In this context, Auschwitz is an undeniable symbol that reminds us of the global dimension of the issues of humanity, democracy and culture in mo-

dern times. The Swiss and the Jews, as any nation anywhere, today must understand the irrecoverable losses of that period both as a legacy and as a catalyst for the future of mankind.

This presentation has examined events since the nineteenth century. Looking back, many of the lessons to be learned from that clash of conflicting values and political cultures during and after World War II seem obvious. The experience and suffering of the War and the Holocaust have laid the foundation for universal values expressed in the Declaration on Human Rights. It is true that the United Nations owes its origin to the idea and existence of the earlier League of Nations. However, in the United Nations Organization, the protection of groups and minorities is now elevated into the sphere of individual rights as a universally recognized human principle.

The decline of neutrality occurred with the advent and creation of the United Nations. Switzerland never has joined, although it contributes to many of the U.N. subsidiary organizations. There are many domestic reasons why and how the Swiss, after the War, missed the opportunity to become a fully responsible member of the United Nations.<sup>lix</sup> On the other hand, it had been argued in the late 1940s by the Western Allies that states such as Ireland and Portugal should also be ineligible for membership because they too had remained neutral in the great moral contest of the age. The relationship between a neutral state and the United Nations as a multilateral body still needs clarification today, thus the contemporary dimension of the ambivalence of being neutral. However, there is no doubt that this self-isolation of Switzerland can be changed, if we are able to understand its history as one of the mirrors leading to such results and as a door that must be opened for the future.

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