

## Switzerland

Country in central Europe. Since the early nineteenth century, Switzerland was a neutral country with a tradition of providing a safe haven for refugees. During World War II, however, Switzerland floundered in its attitude towards immigration and refugees: at some points, it practiced a strict immigration policy, while at other times many Jews were allowed into the country. This was influenced by the course of the war. In all, over 300,000 refugees passed through Switzerland during the Nazi period; 30,000 were Jews.

Right before World War II, there were 18,000 Jews living in Switzerland. Its Jewish communities were organized into the Federation of Swiss Jewish Communities. During the years of Nazi power, Swiss Jewish aid institutions joined under one umbrella organization, the Swiss Aid Society for Jewish Refugees. Immediately after the Nazis came to power in Germany in January 1933, thousands of Jewish refugees tried to enter Switzerland. The government then decided to distinguish between different types of refugees: political refugees, who were allowed in; immigrants, who were given residence for a limited time only; and refugees whom the government tried to kick out as soon as possible. During the war, non-Jewish refugees also fled to Switzerland.

After Germany annexed Austria in March 1938, thousands more Jews tried to enter Switzerland. The Swiss government, not wanting such a large group of refugees entering their country, asked Germany to mark the passports of German and Austrian Jews with a special sign. In this way, the Swiss could tell which German and Austrian tourists were Jews, and thus turn them away. In the fall of 1938, Switzerland and Germany agreed that every German and Austrian Jew would have a "J" marked on his passport.

During the war, the Swiss government tried to curb the number of Jews it allowed into the country so as not to offend Germany, on whose economy Switzerland depended. In October 1939, just a month after the war began, the Swiss created new limitations on the entry of foreigners---especially Jews---into Switzerland. In 1940, after Germany occupied many other countries in Northern and Western Europe, the Swiss authorities were terrified that

Germany would invade their country, as well. Thus, they tried to appease Germany by putting their refugees into camps, and prohibited the entry of refugees from France.

In 1941, the Swiss government was much less strict regarding the refugees from the Netherlands and Belgium. This saved the lives of several hundred Jews. However, their policy changed once again as the tide of the war changed: when Germany occupied southern France in November 1942, the rules for entry into Switzerland were made much stricter. Several dozen refugees were even sent to Swiss labor camps. Despite the stringent regulations, though, several thousands of refugees managed to enter the country illegally.

Germany invaded central and northern Italy in September 1943. At that point, Switzerland relaxed its rules somewhat, and allowed many refugees to enter. About 20,000 Italians, including 10,000 partisans, crossed over the border into Switzerland. Among those were several thousand Jews. Some groups of Jews also arrived legally as a result of negotiations with the German authorities. In 1944, 1,684 Hungarian Jews arrived in Switzerland from Bergen-Belsen as part of the Kasztner transport, and in 1945, 1,200 Jews arrived from Theresienstadt. By February 1945 there were 115,000 refugees of all types in Switzerland, about half of them military deserters who had fled the countries bordering Switzerland.

During the war, many international organizations used neutral Switzerland as their headquarters, and as a center of information from German-occupied Europe. Reports on the mass extermination of European Jewry reached Switzerland first, and were then passed on to the rest of the free world. Some Swiss agencies also tried to rescue Jews from the Nazis.

During the Holocaust years the Swiss banking community worked closely with many Nazis. Large quantities of pilfered gold and currency were deposited in Swiss banks. After the war most of this remained in Switzerland, as did money deposited by thousands of Jews from outside of Switzerland who had been murdered in the Holocaust. In the late 1990s international pressure on the Swiss led to the investigation of these issues. A committee was established under former chairman of the US Federal Reserve, Paul

Volcker, which uncovered much information; a process of restitution and painful confrontation with this difficult period in history was begun.