

Report details history of Switzerland's anti-Gypsy policies

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A recent report shows that Gypsies were systematically refused entry into Switzerland during the Second World War, even though the authorities knew they faced extermination in Nazi Germany. The report *Roma, Sinti and Yenish-Swiss Gypsy policies at the time of National Socialism* was produced by the Independent Commission of Experts: Switzerland—World War Two. It is the last instalment of an investigation into refugee policies published last year by the commission, which comprises an international body of historians headed by the Swiss historian Jean-Francois Bergier.

The commission's earlier studies had focussed on the Swiss treatment of Jewish refugees. It shows that whilst Switzerland admitted 27,000 Jewish refugees during the period of Nazi rule in Germany, it had also excluded a similar number. Between 1942 and 1943 the borders were shut completely to Jewish refugees.

Discrimination against Gypsies in Switzerland has a long history. Official policy was to try and prevent entry to all foreign, stateless and even Swiss-born Gypsies. Already in 1850 the federal government had a policy of forcefully settling Gypsies in their place of birth and deporting foreign Gypsies. The different Swiss cantons began to bar Gypsies entry in the last third of the nineteenth century. Finally in 1906 the Swiss authorities decided to ban Gypsies from entering Switzerland altogether and to exclude those already resident from travelling on public transport.

In several ways, Switzerland's Gypsy policies acted as a model for the rest of Europe and especially for Germany. Not only was Switzerland the first country to bar entry to Gypsies, it was also in the forefront of developing policies aimed at systematically destroying their itinerant way of life and actively sought international co-operation for this task. These policies

were nourished by pseudo-scientific racist theories and eugenics, in which Gypsies were described as "hereditary criminals".

From 1913 onwards Switzerland began putting foreign Gypsies into internment camps. Gypsy families were separated; the men were taken to the Witzwil workhouse while the women and children had to stay in asylum homes. The authorities would then carry out a so-called identification process, which involved making racial profiles that were compiled into a "Gypsy registration" document. Afterwards the families were reunited and deported.

Some 144 people were treated in this way before World War 1, and the policy remained in place throughout the war and after. They were considered so successful that the Swiss delegate to the annual conference of the "International Criminal Police Commission" in October 1932 boasted, "For Switzerland this question [of Gypsy refugees] is not very acute, since it disallowed the settling of Gypsies after the war and all Gypsies that were at that time within Switzerland were interned from the beginning of the war, and had to leave Switzerland." Official Swiss restrictions on Gypsies were only lifted fully in 1972.

Even prior to World War I Switzerland had tried to coordinate international "Gypsy policies". The commission reports that after 1918 these efforts were "far more successful". Far reaching cooperation was established in the work of the "International Criminal Police Commission"—the predecessor of Interpol—founded by the Austrian and German police authorities in the "fight against the plague of Gypsyism". In 1932 a "Gypsy centre" for the exchange of information was founded in Vienna and in 1934 a continuous commission aimed at deepening the "fight against Gypsyism" was set-up. Even when the International

Criminal Police Commission came completely under the control of the Nazi SS and its databanks were used for the extermination of Jews and Gypsies, the Swiss authorities saw no problem with continuing their co-operation on these issues.

The new report says that the measures taken against foreign Gypsies found their mirror image in the policy of breaking up Gypsy families within Switzerland. Swiss Gypsies were subjected to forced assimilation by the “Pro Juventute” foundation, which in 1926 established the “Welfare Organisation for the children of the highway”. This organisation saw its task in breaking up itinerant as well as settled gypsy families, removing their children to institutions or foster parents so as “to render harmless and destroy the unsettled way of life”. It is not known exactly how many children were torn away from their families in this way. One estimate by “Pro Juventute” counts 619 cases. Many of these children ended up in psychiatric institutions and orphan hostels due to lack of foster parents. Their traumatic childhood left many with great psychological and physical damage.

The commission reports that the policies of the Swiss authorities towards the Gypsies differed from that of Germany's Nazi regime only in that the latter was prepared to carry the logic of its racial policies through to mass murder and genocide.

Much of the general line of Swiss policies towards Gypsies can be found in official documents, but Francois Bergier reported that in attempting to make a study of the 1930s and 1940s, he was confronted by a severe lack of documents. Swiss border guards did not identify Roma, Sinti or Yenish as ethnic groups in official records. Bergier therefore had to use examples of individual cases. Apart from a few exceptions, there was no evidence that Gypsies of foreign origin were granted asylum, while there were plenty of cases to indicate the opposite.

Several of these cases are listed in the report. Some of these are from the 1930s, when the Dutch authorities had also hardened their own policies against Gypsies, seeking to deport many to their country of origin.

In the case involving the B. family, the parents both had Swiss passports but their two young children were not registered. The Swiss authorities gave orders to the border police that the children were to be barred entry and the other family members sent direct to prison on

arrival. In this instance, the Dutch authorities allowed the family to remain in the Netherlands. However, the Swiss authorities withdrew the parents' passports, making the family stateless.

Another case documented by the commission involved Josef F., who was also living in the Netherlands. Mr F. was Swiss but was barred from entering Switzerland by the authorities with catastrophic consequences. Josef F. was interned in Auschwitz and later in Buchenwald. The fate of his mother Katharina F. and her other five children is not known, but it appears most likely that they were also deported to Auschwitz.

The commission also referred to the case of Anton Reinhardt, a 17-year-old German Gypsy with a Swiss mother, who swam across the Rhine in 1944 and tried to claim asylum in Switzerland. Despite clearly being in danger of persecution by the Nazis, Reinhardt was turned back by the Swiss authorities and deported to Germany. Captured by the Nazis, he was put into several concentration camps, where he was subjected to forced labour and was later shot while trying to escape.

Probably the most famous individual to be refused entry into Switzerland was the jazz-guitarist Django Reinhardt. The report documents that Reinhardt was turned away but does not deal with his subsequent fate. Reinhardt survived the war in Paris, dying in 1953.

The international panel was unable to estimate how many Gypsies had tried to flee to Switzerland and how many had later died. The report says that general estimates of the number of Gypsies killed by the Nazis vary between 250,000 to 1.5 million.

The report by the Independent Commission of Experts: Switzerland — Second World War can be read at: <http://www.uek.ch/eindex.htm>



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