

Refugees at the border of Basel

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Basel, at the border with Germany and occupied France, was one of the places where the Swiss refugee policy of the war years was enacted. Refugees from Nazi persecution, above all Jews, tried to cross the border into Switzerland, where the Swiss authorities decided whom to admit and whom to turn back. In 1938, after the annexation of Austria, Switzerland asked Germany to mark the passports of German Jews with a "J", so that Swiss border officials could identify them. Germany then introduced the stamp.¹ In August 1942, at the height of the deportations, the Swiss authorities closed the border to refugees persecuted solely on racial grounds, declaring that persecution on racial grounds did not qualify for asylum.

The Independent Commission of Experts estimated that Swiss authorities turned back or expelled thousands of refugees during the war, many of whom were later murdered, while admitting tens of thousands of others.² In Basel, as elsewhere, individuals and organisations helped refugees, among them the Jewish community, which supported refugees at its own expense, and some officials who interpreted the rules generously. The refugee policy of Switzerland during the war, which the Federal Council officially acknowledged and for which it apologised in 1995, is part of the moral history of the Swiss financial centre, since the same authorities that turned away refugees protected the assets that persecuted persons and their persecutors had deposited in Swiss banks.

1 Notes

1. On the "J" stamp in the passports of German Jews, introduced by Germany in October 1938 following Swiss requests, see the final report of the Independent Commission of Experts and its study *Switzerland and Refugees in the Nazi Era* (1999). To be verified. ↩

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2. On the number of refugees admitted and turned back by Switzerland during the Second World War, see the study of the Independent Commission of Experts, Switzerland and Refugees in the Nazi Era, 1999, and the final report of 2002. Figures to be verified. ↩

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