

The refugees and the birth of cross-border wealth advice

*Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland), Solicitor (Hong Kong),
Solicitor (England & Wales)*

The Huguenot exodus created a new demand: for advisers capable of helping dispersed families to manage assets located in several countries. A refugee settled in Geneva might own land in Languedoc, hold claims in Lyon, have shares in a trading house in Amsterdam and relatives in London or Berlin. The transmission of such assets raised questions of succession law, the validity of wills, matrimonial property regimes and the recognition of foreign deeds. The confiscation of the property of fugitives in France added particular difficulties.

To meet these needs, Genevan notaries, jurists and bankers developed an early expertise in international assets. They drafted powers of attorney allowing action at a distance, organised sales and recoveries through correspondents, and advised on the choice of place of residence and on the drafting of wills. They knew the rules of several countries and the practices of their administrations.¹

This expertise is one of the roots of the contemporary practice of cross-border wealth advice, in which Geneva occupies an important place. The international families who today turn to Genevan lawyers, notaries, fiduciaries and wealth managers encounter comparable questions: a plurality of applicable laws, tax coordination, protection of heirs, anticipation of political risks. The instruments have changed; the nature of the service remains.

1 Notes

1. Wikipédia (fr), art. “Refuge (protestantisme)”: around 200,000 Huguenots left France, out of some 800,000 Protestants in the kingdom, after the revocation of 1685; the Edict of Fontainebleau prohibited emigration on pain of the galleys for men and of “confiscation of body and goods” for women, which forced the fugitives to cross clandestinely, often with the help of smugglers; the British Isles and the United Provinces formed the “great Ark of the Refuge” for refugees from north-western France, the Swiss cantons receiving those from the Midi, while others went to Hesse-Kassel, Hesse-Homburg, Lippe, the Palatinate, Scandinavia, the North American colonies, Suriname, the Cape and Russia. ↩

For general information only. This article does not constitute legal or tax advice, does not replace advice on an individual case and creates no lawyer-client relationship. It reflects the legal position as of September 2026.

Online version: helveticaregister.com/geneva-the-refugees-and-the-birth-of-cross-border-wealth-advice