



BACKGROUND INFORMATION



Jews forced to scrub the pavement in Vienna, 1938



Niv. Bild 183-E01073
g. 1. Januar 1939

Crowd of Jews desperate to emigrate in front of the travel agency "Palestine Orient Lloyd" in Berlin's Meineckestraße, January 1939.

Bundesarchiv Bild 183-E01073, CC-BY-SA 3.0



From the mid-19th century, Jews enjoyed equal rights in Germany. Although some level of social antisemitism existed, German Jews integrated well into the German society. They contributed to it socially, culturally and economically, and largely felt at home in Germany.

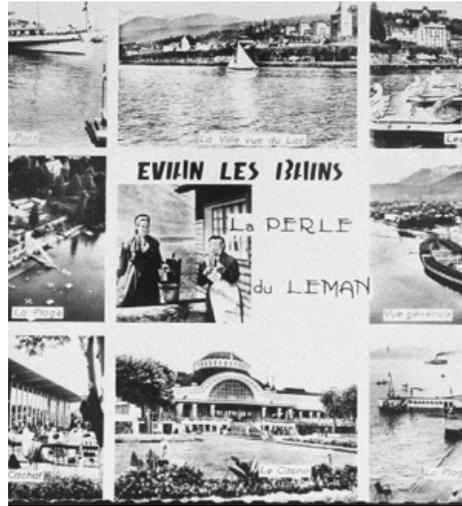
This situation changed drastically when the Nazis came to power in 1933 and started to implement their harsh Anti-Semitic policies. The Nazi aim (before World War Two) was to isolate and persecute the Jews, in order to make them leave Germany. In 1935, with the Nuremberg Laws, Jews lost their legal and civic rights. As early as 1933 Jews were expelled from sports and cultural associations, were forbidden entry to public facilities and gradually lost their jobs and property – culminating in confiscation and an employment ban. The Nazi government constantly published and spread Anti-Semitic propaganda, and violent attacks on Jews increased. In March 1938 Nazi Germany annexed Austria, and the approximately 180.000 to 200.000 Jews who lived there found themselves under Nazi rule and persecution.

Following the Nazi Anti-Semitic policies and harassment, Jews were anxious to leave Germany and Austria. However, most countries held very strict immigration policies, and were unwilling to accept refugees in large numbers, especially since many of the Jews were impoverished following the Nazi policy. While 130.000 had already escaped by the end of 1937, approximately 400.000 Jews remained in Germany.[1]

Following the escalation in the problem of Jewish refugees, and the pressure that was put on the United States in particular to accept more refugees, the American president Franklin D. Roosevelt initiated an international conference to discuss ways to solve the problem of the Jewish refugees from Germany and Austria.

The Evian conference was opened on the 6th of August 1938, in the small town of Evian in France, and was covered extensively by the media. Representatives of 32 countries from Western Europe, North and South America, Australia and New Zealand participated in the conference. It should be noted that the participating countries were told in advance that they will not be compelled to change their existing immigration policies.

[1] Die Verfolgung und Ermordung der europäischen Juden durch das nationalsozialistische Deutschland 1933,1945, Band 2 Deutsches Reich 1938 – August 1939, Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, München 2009



Period postcard of Evian-les-Bains, the site of the 1938 International Conference on Refugees.

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Martin Smith.



US-american representative Myron Taylor addresses the International Conference on Refugees at Evian-les-Bains, July 1938.

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of National Archives and Records Administration, College Park.



Participating countries at Evian Conference, 1938.

wikipedia, public domain

A description of the settings and atmosphere in Evian

“From the green glass cupola of the casino, reminiscent of a railway-station, waved the Tricolour, as though to declare the grande nation’s pride in its roulette players; even now, in the afternoon, impatient gamblers crowded the broad steps. Outside the little cafés suntanned people were sitting over milky-green aperitifs; on the promenades by the lake old men and women were moving as though seen by a slow-motion camera; one-horse carriages whose back-rests were covered with lace doilies were trotting over the astonishingly clean asphalt. The smell of the lake water mingled with the slight but constant smell of sulphur and chocolate, that twin scent typical of old therapeutic baths. Architecture and gardens recalled the beginning of the new century; ... a light breeze moved the empty swings on the terrace ... – but the Professor asked himself why this hothouse of the past had been chosen as a place in which to discuss the terrors of the present.”

Hans Habe: The Mission, London 1966. Habe, a correspondent for the Prager Tageblatt (Prague Daily News), was one of more than 200 journalists that covered the conference in Evian. His book “Three Over the Frontier” is considered to be the first novel about refugees during National Socialism.

Footage from the Conference

