

How has Switzerland commemorated the end of World War II? : Coming to terms with its own past

Autor(en): **Lenzin, René**

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How has Switzerland commemorated the end of World War II?

Coming to terms with its own

Fifty years after the Second World War Switzerland is still not at ease about its conduct during the war. The anniversary year began with a difficult birth and has occasioned quite a few events and publications devoted to the subject of "Switzerland during the War".

For me there is no doubt that with our policy towards the persecuted Jews we have burdened ourselves with guilt. (...) The Federal Council regrets this profoundly and apologises

René Lenzin

in knowledge of the fact that in the end such failure is inexcusable".

With this apology to the relations and descendants of Jews who were refused entry into Switzerland, many of whom were sent to their deaths, President of the Confederation Kaspar Villiger has earned recognition on many sides. The words were spoken during the special session of parliament with which on May 7 of this year Switzerland officially commemorated the end of the war in Europe. They were words which many Swiss citizens had waited to hear from their government for a very long time.

Pressure from below

The commemoration of the end of the war took place both at the special session and at a memorial ceremony organised by the Christian-Jewish Association and held in Berne Cathedral in the presence of all members of the Federal Council. But "pressure from below" was required before the Federal Council and parliament were prepared to carry out this official commemoration. The initial attitude of the authorities was to give thanks in silence for the fact that Switzerland was spared involvement in the war. It was a resolution in parliament combined with a number of appeals from the media and public opinion which finally persuaded those responsible that a special session should be held.

This attitude by official Switzerland – lauded as restrained by some and attacked as feeble by others – reflects

the inner conflict throughout the country in judging its conduct during the war. Not only have historians been in dispute for many years about why Switzerland was not involved in the war, but questions like "What was the significance of the army in maintaining independence?" are now causing bitter controversy amongst large sections of public opinion. This demonstrates the fact that critical reappraisal of its own history was not a welcome subject for too long in Switzerland.

But this anniversary year of 1995 is being used in a number of quarters to open up a chapter which has so far been closed. The range of subjects being examined could not be more opposed. Switzerland's contribution to the French resistance has been illuminated as well as that to the German Waffen SS. The fact that Swiss official bodies were aware of the annihilation of the Jewish people has figured in many publications and television programmes alongside the remarkable humanitarian achievements of individual Swiss citizens.

Good, medium and bad

Fifty years after the horrors of the Second World War much about the 1940s and 1950s in Switzerland is becoming clearer than before: good things such as honouring the deeds of the brave, worrying things such as plans by the army to obtain nuclear weapons at the end of the 1950s, and bad things such as evidence that the Swiss authorities knew more about the extent of persecution of the Jews than hitherto supposed. In the context of this anniversary year many such subjects have finally been thoroughly documented and the results made public.

Quite apart from the apology by the Federal Council to the victims, Jewish and others, of Swiss refugee policy,

many publications and exhibitions will remain longer in people's minds than the official events of this memorial year. The latter not only had the difficult birth described above but also gave rise to other political rumblings. The Social Democrats complained that only members of the centre-right parties were

Vom 21. bis 25. April 1945
haben Tausende von Flüchtlingen, z. Teil
elend, verwahrlost und hungrig an dieser
Stelle die Schweizergrenze überschritten.
Sie gehörten folgenden Staaten an:

Frankreich und Elsass 487
Belgien 93/ Luxemburg 1/ Holland 106
Italien 317/ Spanien 3/ Griechenland 33
Rumänien 3/ Jugoslawien 178/ Ungarn 1
Tschechoslowakei 164/ Polen 671
England 2/ Litauen 117/ Lettland 3
Deutschland 764/ Russland 1677
Palästina 3/ Syrien 1/ Nordafrika 71
Canada 1/ Norwegen 1/ Montenegro 9
Annam 235/ Staatenlose 2
Schweizer und ehemalige Schweizerinnen 58
Schutzaufenthaltsuchende aus den bad.
Nachbargemeinden 120
Der Gedenkstein ist ein Geschenk der
Stadt Furtwangen im Schwarzwald.

The memorial plaque on the wall of the Schleithelm customs house reads as follows:

"From April 21 to 25, 1945, thousands of refugees, many wretched, unkempt and hungry, crossed the Swiss border at this point. They belonged to the following states: France and Alsace 487, Belgium 93, Luxembourg 1, Holland 106, Italy 317, Spain 3, Greece 33, Romania 3, Yugoslavia 178, Hungary 1, Czechoslovakia 164, Poland 671, England 2, Lithuania 117, Latvia 3, Germany 764, Russia 1,677, Palestine 3, Syria 1, North Africa 71, Annam 235, Canada 1, Norway 1, Montenegro 9, stateless 2, Swiss and former Swiss women 58, asylum seekers from neighbouring towns and villages in Baden 120. The memorial plaque is a gift from the town of Furtwangen in the Black Forest".

(Photo: Max Baumann)

past

called upon to speak at the special session and followed by organising their own event. But apart from the differences in content some part was certainly played in all this by the fact that Switzerland was beginning an election year. In spite of all, the memorial occasions

will have had at least some lasting value. They will prevent Switzerland going down in history as a country which in 1989 was prepared to celebrate the mobilisation at the beginning of the war but ignored what happened towards the end of it. ■

The Swiss government and its war policy

Critical reports and selfless actions

During and immediately after the war the Swiss authorities had to come to terms with their own policies. But only much later and with great delay were the "illegal" humanitarian actions of individual officials decently honoured.

For Switzerland too the end of the Second World War came as an enormous relief but hardly a surprise. The tide had turned at Stalingrad, although Hitler's unpredictability made

there was constant supervision and criticism as and when necessary.

Extensive reporting

At the end of the war it was felt that a wide-ranging series of reports should be made about the use of the special powers in all areas of federal policy. The hope was that lessons could be drawn from the wartime experience. One set of reports was from the army's active service. The report of the general was eagerly awaited and with it were published the reports of the most senior officers – the chief of the general staff, the adjutant general and the head of armaments.

Some parts of the general's report contained sharp criticism of the Federal Council, with which the commander-in-chief had had problems regarding the call-up of troops during the war. For the general military and strategic considerations were all-important, while for the Federal Council financial and economic factors played a major role, as also political considerations. It was afraid

that demands on the civilian militia might be too great and war-weariness might set in. It was an open secret that there had been many problems between the army command and the Federal Military Department. The Federal Council felt obliged to reply to the general in a counter-report. But in view of the great popularity of General Guisan it had to do this very diplomatically.

Max Nef, editor of the "Neue Zürcher Zeitung", drew up the report on press and radio and gave a well-informed description of the restrictions laid on press freedom. There was relatively little censorship and few confiscations, and the freedom enjoyed by the Swiss press elicited spiteful attacks and repeated threats from Nazi spokesmen.

The war economy was also the subject of a comprehensive report. It had functioned excellently. Food and petrol rationing had worked in a most exemplary way.

The delicate subject of asylum and refugee policy was put in the hands of a liberal member of the Basle cantonal government. His criticism of the treatment of persecuted Jews by the immigration authorities was outspoken. It was met by a counter-report from the minister responsible, Federal Councillor von Steiger. However, this did not succeed in justifying in any convincing way practices which were questionable on humanitarian grounds.

Delayed rehabilitation

During the war years a brave show was put on by the people of this neutral country most of which went unrecognised. This included the farmers' wives who had to look after farm, home and family alone as well as the many working people who willingly did extra hours. Particularly important were the civil servants who disobeyed questionable regulations and followed their consciences. Two examples out of many were consular official Carl Lutz and St. Gall police chief Paul Grüninger, the last of whom has unfortunately never been fully rehabilitated.

In Budapest Lutz managed to provide thousands of Jews left to the mercy of Nazi thugs with documents which saved them from being transported to the extermination camps. Grüninger allowed refugees to cross the Swiss border into safety. On orders from Berne he was dismissed without a pension and spent the rest of his life in poverty. ■

*Hermann Böschstein **

it by no means certain that the hated little country would not be attacked.

Upon the outbreak of war the Federal Assembly gave the Federal Council special powers which suspended a small part of the constitution. But the government's jurisdiction was much narrower than in the First World War. In spite of this the executive and legislative branches agreed that these extra powers should be reduced and abolished altogether as soon as possible. Periodic reports on their use also meant that

* Hermann Böschstein was Berlin correspondent for the "Basler Nachrichten" until being expelled from Germany by the Nazis in 1937. After periods spent in Paris and London he was parliamentary correspondent in Berne from 1953 to 1984.