

Ira Hirschmann Papers

Box 3
Memo on Refugee Children in France, Belgium and
Switzerland by Sir Herbert W. Emerson 12-11-44

INTERGOVERNMENTAL COMMITTEE ON REFUGEES
Room 208, 1344 Connecticut Avenue, N.W.
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REFUGEE CHILDREN IN FRANCE, BELGIUM AND SWITZERLAND

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Memorandum prepared by Sir Herbert W. Emerson
Director, Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees
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1. During the occupation of France and Belgium, very fine work was done by a number of agencies inside those countries, and in Switzerland, towards the rescue of children whose parents were deported by the Nazis, or had to flee from Nazi persecution. It is feared that many of the parents have been killed. The persecution was not confined to Jews, but was almost universal in their case, and was of a particularly brutal character. During our recent visit to France, Belgium and Switzerland, Dr. Kullmann and I investigated, so far as we could, the problem of the Jewish children, with special reference to the necessity of assistance by the Intergovernmental Committee and the means by which such assistance might best be given. While, owing to lack of communications and other causes, completely accurate facts and figures are not yet available, the position is sufficiently clear to give a general picture of the size and nature of the problem.

2. The children now in question are those who were separated during the occupation from both their parents. The majority of them were concealed under false names and papers in their own countries, and were maintained in private families or in religious institutions. The Churches gave great assistance. There were secret organizations operating in the countries, and also from Switzerland. The movement was financed partly by private contributions, but largely by the Joint Distribution Committee of America. In the later stages, the Intergovernmental Committee was able to give some financial assistance through the Joint Distribution Committee, which acted as its agent. In Belgium, the Belgian authorities gave a good deal of secret financial help. Some children were removed to Switzerland, which at the time of liberation, was giving asylum to about 1,000. The number there is now slightly less, since some children have been able to return to France.

3. The great majority of the Jewish children fall into three classes:-
- (i) The children of Belgian or French nationals.
 - (ii) The children of other nationals, mainly Poles, who have been long established in France or Belgium.
 - (iii) The children of refugees from Nazi persecution, mainly of German and Austrian origin, who had been given temporary asylum in France or Belgium.

In addition to the children of refugee parents, the mandate clearly includes those children who had to be removed to Switzerland. Moreover,

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when, as was frequently the case, the situation of the children was a direct consequence of the deportation or flight of their parents from their country of residence, it would seem ungenerous to hold that the children should be excluded from the benefits of the mandate merely on the ground that in order to save their lives, they did not in fact leave their countries of residence. I would hope, therefore, that when the time comes to consider what practical help the Intergovernmental Committee can give towards a solution of this problem, the Executive Committee will approve a broad interpretation of the mandate.

4. The figures so far ascertained are approximately as follows:-

(1) France - 8,000 children.

Figures are not available for the distribution of these among the three classes mentioned in paragraph 3 above, but it is probable that the majority of them are children of Polish parents long established in France. There may be as many as 500 children of German and Austrian refugees.

(11) Belgium - About 1,500 children were concealed who had neither parent with them. Of these a considerable proportion are children of German and Austrian refugees, the rest being mainly children of Polish parents long established in Belgium.

(111) Switzerland

About 1,000 divided among the three classes.

5. The Jewish community, as a whole, is giving very serious thought to the future of these children. There are certain organizations which took a very active part in their rescue and preservation. Such as the Comité de Défense in Belgium and the OSE, operating mainly from Switzerland. The Joint Distribution Committee is very closely interested because of the financial help it has already given, and the still greater help it may be called upon to give. The Jewish Agency for Palestine is prepared to make a considerable number of certificates available for immigration into Palestine. The French Government has in contemplation a general scheme relating to the welfare of war orphans, among whom most of the children now in question would be included. Under this scheme the French Government would be the legal guardian of the children, and would apparently provide for their maintenance, welfare and education. The Belgian Government may consider a similar scheme, although we have no definite information on this point. The Swiss Government contemplates the return of the children now in Switzerland to the countries from which they were received, but it has no wish to make this an immediate issue, and is prepared to continue to care the

and maintenance of them for the time being. Among the children are some who have reached an age when they are capable of making up their own minds as to what they wish their future to be. We were told, for instance, of 500 in Switzerland who have long made their plans to go to Palestine. About them there is no difference of opinion between the various Jewish interests. It is agreed that these youths should decide for themselves. About the others, the present attitude of the organizations which have been directly concerned with their rescue and preservation, is that no final decision about the future of a child should ordinarily be made until every reasonable effort has been made to trace one or both of his parents. Very good progress

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has been made in this direction. In France, for instance, 2,500 children have been united since liberation with one or both of their parents, and 500 more are in process of being united. There is also at present a strong feeling among the organizations mentioned that provision should be made in France or Belgium, as the case may be, for the care, education, maintenance, and training of many of the children. In France several homes previously in existence have been re-opened for the purpose, and others are in contemplation. Until the details of the scheme of the French Government are known, the Jewish community is not in a position to form an opinion as to how far it will assist their problem. Thus, there are several matters outstanding which can be decided only by the Jewish community itself.

Meantime, the children are safe, and are being well cared for. Many are still in the homes of their foster-parents, some of whom are loath to give them up, a matter which will require tact and patience for its solution.

H. W. Emerson
Director

Additional Comments: In a later report dated 8 January 1945, Sir Herbert Emerson states that the French Government has indicated its interest in establishing "a system of State guardianship and State care for all children who have lost their parents, including those within the mandate of the Intergovernmental Committee. Pending the introduction of that system, the children are being maintained from voluntary sources. Fourteen homes have already been opened, and others are in contemplation. The rest of the children are still with foster parents. A few of the children who were given asylum in Switzerland have returned, and a considerable number are likely to return in the near future."