

Henry Morgenthau Jr Papers

Box 406

Book: Grossman
Himmler and Refugees

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In August, 1944, three hundred and seventy seven Jews, released from the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, arrived in Switzerland. On February 7, 1945, 1210 Jews, about 500 Frenchmen, and some Swiss from the Theresienstadt camp were convoyed out of Germany. From time to time, with increasing frequency as the war in Europe approached its end, other convoys came by truck or train from German prison camps.

These saved remenants owed their good fortune to Heinrich Himmller, who in the last days of Germany posed as a friend of Jews. He had his motives. Germans fleeing from the swift Russian advance along the Eastern front were homeless, and even the internment camps seemed to offer some place of refuge. There was a food shortage in Germany which was aggravated by the destruction of the transportation system. Many German leaders feared that the presence of Jews in concentration camps would be embarrassing evidence against the German people when allied forces swept in. And quite a few officials hoped to gain credit both for Germany and for themselves when the final day of reckoning came.

Several persons negotiated with Himmler for the rescue of Jewish internees. One was _____ Musy, a Swiss Nazi who was trying at the last moment to rehabilitate his political fortune by posing as a great humanitarian. He also seems to have been trying to feather his own nest with a little bribe money on the side. He had negotiated the rescue of one of the convoys which came into Switzerland. He tried to get additional refugees out, but in return demanded that the Nazis get a good press write up for humanitarian gestures.

About March 10, 1945, _____ Burckhardt, President of International Red Cross also saw Himmler and arranged for exits of certain groups of refugees from Germany and for decent care for those remaining in camps.

About the same time, Felix Kersten, a masseur in Stockholm, who had served Himmler, went to Berlin, supposedly to render certain medical attention. He discussed with Himmler the Jewish problem.

Himmler was receptive to the idea that Jews be placed under jurisdiction of the Red Cross, regretted that allied propaganda agencies used his talks on the Jews in order to portray German weakness and agreed to receive an emissary from Sweden to talk over the Jewish problem. On March 24th, according to Kersten, he called all Jewish camp administrators, ordered them to treat Jews

better, and told the leaders he would hold them strictly accountable for Jewish deaths in their camps.

Kersten had a letter supposedly signed by Himmler which stated that he Himmler had always desired "the good of the individual human being and of humanity as a whole." He had sent in three months 2700 Jewish men, women and children to Switzerland in two trains, and in so doing was following out a policy that he had advocated in 1935 - 1940 - emigration without violence of the Jewish population. Unfortunately war had interrupted his program. But, he wrote to Kersten "I shall gladly examine requests which you transmit or communicate to me in the humanitarian sphere and, whenever it is at all possible, shall decide generously."

If Himmler was trying to butter up the allies by acting the good Samaritan, Hitler wasn't. Musy had been in Germany early in April and spoke of a meeting at which Hitler scolded Himmler and other generals for the negotiations to release internees, especially Jews. The Führer wanted Jewish camps evacuated by foot to Nazi fortresses in the South.

Himmler recognized that such a march would have been murderous, and in spite of Hitler, agreed to leave internees where they were until Allied armies arrived.

Toward the end of April, while Germany was disintegrating, Norbert Masur, official of the Swedish section of the World Jewish Congress proceeded to Berlin with Kersten for a discussion with Himmler of the Jewish problem. Himmler, in resplendent uniform discussed the problem in a friendly and informal manner. He decried the atrocity stories told. The "crematoria were the only means with which the German authorities could cope with the rapidly spreading typhus epidemic," he explained. He was particularly bitter at allied propaganda on the Bergen-Belsen camp and Buchenwald. The camps were left intact because of orders in order to save the refugees from evacuation on foot. In return all he got was Allied horror stories. Himmler gave several promises, the most important of which were that no Jews would be shot, that the Red Cross would be given free access to the delivery of food and medical supplies and that Jews would not be evacuated from camp to camp before the Allied advance. Mindful of his promise to Hitler that he would not release any more Jews, he kept referring to them as "Poles."

In the last few weeks of the war, small groups of Jews kept arriving at various German frontiers. Their "rescue" made little practical difference. It was only a matter of days before German annihilation and the Allies would have taken over anyhow.