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Book: Loth Refugees

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First draft

REFUGEES

(Up to the Outbreak of War: 1938-39)

For years after 1933, the plight of refugees fleeing from totalitarianism or trapped in the meshes of that inhuman system was an increasingly serious indictment of our civilization. Repeatedly the world heard with horror of the brutalities which were being visited upon helpless minorities. Repeatedly the conscience of the world was shocked. Repeatedly there were demands to do something about it.

But for years the only efforts that amounted to anything were those of private organizations and individuals. These efforts were a glowing success in that they actually saved some of the doomed. But they were a tragic failure in that they met only a small part of the need. Private means, financial and diplomatic and organizational, were not and could not be adequate. It is impossible to tell how many lives were finally saved through the generous actions of many individuals. It is also impossible to tell how many lives were lost because years elapsed before there was an appropriate official agency to handle the job.

It was one of Franklin Roosevelt's claims to greatness that no matter how thick and heavy the burden of public affairs became, the very human problem presented by the victims of Nazism and Fascism kept recurring in his mind. But despite

his interest, the actual intervention of the United States as a government was for a long time a nullity.

The President recognized that, while all the victims of Hitlerism had a claim upon free men's humanity, the Jews were a special problem because Hitler had made them so, singling them out for specially atrocious treatment. For example, on January 24, 1938, during a long luncheon conversation ranging over many topics, he told me about a visit he had received from Rabbi Stephen Wise. He had, he said, warned Dr. Wise that he might as well give up any ideas of getting Jews admitted to Transjordan, but why did he not consider settling German Jews in former German colonies in Africa (Mr. Roosevelt had been studying reports on some of them as suitable for European colonists) or Mexico or Venezuela? He had been quite surprised by Dr. Wise's excitedly unfavorable reaction to this suggestion.

"Do you see anything so terrible in my suggestion?" he asked.

"No," I replied, "I think it is most practical and I think it is the only hope that I know of establishing the German Jews where they can live and earn a living. You know, my father visited Palestine years ago and made a report that the Jews should not send any more of their people to Palestine as the land could not support them and he was terrifically criticised."

Mr. Roosevelt said that he believed his plan would take about \$1,000 per family. He expressed the thought that Christians as well as Jews would contribute generously to such a fund.

Within eight weeks, the President's views had crystallized sufficiently to enable him to suggest something practical a few days after the Germans had marched into Vienna. He brought the problem of Austrian political refugees before the Cabinet on March 18, and my notes made at the time read:

He said, "After all, America had been a place of refuge for so many fine Germans in the period of 1848 and why couldn't we offer them again a place of refuge at this time." He suggested that we combine the quotas of Germany and Austria and let the Austrian refugees come in under the combined quota.

Miss Perkins said that this could not be done legally. The President asked the Cabinet if they thought they could increase the quota by getting an act through Congress. The consensus of opinion was that they could not get such an act through Congress. Miss Perkins said that possibly the International Labor Bureau at Geneva could handle this situation. The President said that he thought this was a good idea. He said he thought if different countries were appealed to that, depending upon their size, they would taken from 100 to 1,000 families each and, in this way, we could find homes for 10,000 to 15,000 families.

That Sunday night I discussed the idea confidentially with Irving Lehman, who thought well of it, and at lunch on Monday discussed it at further length with Mr. Roosevelt. He was already planning an appeal to the governments of the world and asked me to confer with Sumner Welles and have something ready for him in 24 hours. My notes show how speed is possible in the Government:

I got Welles over here at 3 o'clock and we went over the whole proposition and he thought extremely well of it and his whole attitude was simply fine. I asked him whether he could have something ready by 11:30 Tuesday, March 22. He said he would work all evening, if necessary, to get it ready.

He came here on Tuesday and I was most pleasantly surprised to find that he had two finished documents on this subject. I asked him if he had shown these to Mr. Hull and he said he had and they met with his approval. The documents covered the subject admirably and I had no suggestions to make.

I called Miss LeHand and asked for an appointment to see the President. She called back in two minutes and we had the appointment for 12:45. The President read the document through and was enthusiastic about it. He said, "I have only one suggestion to make. The words 'religious' and 'racial' should be changed to 'political.' I think it would be better." We all agreed.

Sumner Welles told the President that he thought if he made an appeal for money for these political refugees he would get an excellent response on the North and South American Continents. It was agreed that at the same time that the President made his appeal that it would be announced that the United States Government recognized that Austria was part of Germany. This would be necessary in order to combine the two immigration quotas.

However, it would also have recognized the validity of Anschluss. The announcement, therefore, was omitted from the note which the President next day, March 23, requested the State Department to send to 32 governments asking if they would cooperate in a committee to facilitate the emigration of refugees from Austria and, presumably, from Germany and Italy. So far the program had proceeded with admirable smoothness and rapidity. Sumner Welles himself called on the Papal Delegate on March 23 to explain the program to him and enlist Vatican support.

This good start soon petered out into futile talk. Most of the governments replied cordially to the United States note and the proposed committee was called to meet in July at Evian. Meanwhile the President appointed an Advisory Committee on Political Refugees, headed by James G. McDonald, former League of Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. The inter-governmental committee held meetings under the chairmanship of the American delegate, Myron C. Taylor, and named another American, George Rublee, as director. But they were still discussing the strategy of the proper approach to Germany when Munich had come and gone. On October 5 the President urged Prime Minister Chamberlain to take the matter up directly with Hitler, but the Prime Minister preferred to leave it to the regular diplomats, and they could not or would not do anything. Meanwhile the intergovernmental committee had proposed emigration of 100,000 refugees a year for five years, but the participating countries were reluctant to commit themselves on receiving anybody. Mr. Roosevelt's impatience with all this was perhaps partly responsible for an incident which is thus described in my notes of October 25, 1938:

The President told me at lunch today that he had sent for the British Ambassador this morning and told him that he would stand for no nonsense, that the British would have to give a permanent homeland to the Jews and that they would have to keep their word; that he just would not stand for any nonsense. He said, 'There are 400,000 Arabs that are working for the Jews and to let them get out of this section and to have the Jews keep out of the section occupied by the Arabs.' The British Ambassador said, 'We want to keep the friendship with the Arabs,' and the President said, 'You can buy that for about £50,000,000 and the United States will be glad to chip in.'

The timeliness of the Presidential demand on Britain was proved with startling suddenness. Within a few weeks the worst reign of terror against the Jews yet to break out in Germany was sweeping that country in reprisal for the murder of a Nazi diplomat in Paris. At least that was the ostensible excuse given. It was such a poor excuse that on November 15 Roosevelt issued one of his strongest public statements condemning the Nazi terror and recalled Ambassador Wilson to give more force to his protest.

In the next few weeks a number of efforts to do something tangible for the relief of the survivors of all this horror were initiated but came to little. On November 16 I passed on to the President a suggestion made by Constantine E. McGuire of New York to Dan Bell that the British, Dutch and French Guianas be made into an independent state to receive refugees under international auspices for a term of years. Payment to the three countries was to be in the form of reduction of World War I debts owed to the United States. Roosevelt had been eager for a suggestion but replied:

It's no good. It would take the Jews from 25 to 50 years to overcome the fever and it's just no good. What's the matter with the idea I have been talking to you about for a long time and that's the Cameroons. The Cameroons was a former German colony and now belongs to France and the same suggestion that you have of giving these countries a credit on their debt to us would apply there and I know from explorations that have been made in the Cameroons that they have some very wonderful high land, table land, wonderful grass and very thinly populated. All of that country has been explored and it's ready.

It was at this time that I first realized the importance of having someone who could devote his attention to the problem,

not just give it some spare moments on occasion. Obviously the question of a refuge was the important first step. My notes that day after my conversation with the President contain these thoughts:

I think it is most important that whatever is done is opened up to all refugees irrespective of religion; that it should not be just for the Jews...

The thing to do is to get a list of the colonies which they took away from Germany and see which are the good ones. Before the Germans get them back let us give them back and forgive part of the National debt. I am thinking in terms of \$500,000,000. The President and I figured it out. In the first place, the most difficult thing is to get the land. Assuming that we have that, we are talking in terms of \$500,000,000 raised privately...

I think I could go to the Vice President and he would say "What the hell. You want to knock off \$25,000,000? Go ahead." The temper of the people today (is such that) we can make this a political refuge for all creeds. I think the public is ready. My motto is "Nothing ventured, nothing gained."

The point is the President has this. Nobody is helping him. I am going at least to do the spade work. The thing to do is have it ready before Congress comes.

As a result, I obtained from Isaiah Bowman reports, prepared by him and other geographers consulted by him, on various possible countries for colonization. On one Sunday evening we had a long discussion, from which it was apparent that there were plenty of suitable places in the world but the difficulty would be to get refugees out of Germany and get the consent of other countries to admit them. Bowman believed the best that could be done would be to persuade many countries to take a few hundred or a thousand families each, spreading

them out wherever possible. Meanwhile the intergovernmental committee was meeting in London, the chief result being the increased reluctance of member countries to accept refugees. On December 6 at luncheon, Mr. Roosevelt outlined to me his own program in more detail. It was essentially one worked out by Rublee for the absorption of 100,000 Jewish refugees a year for five years. The President thought \$500,000,000 would cover the cost, and he was prepared to make a definite governmental commitment contingent upon all the rest of the countries putting up a like amount and a balance to be raised by private subscription. He estimated that 20,000 Jews would be admitted to the United States each year from Germany alone, 15,000 to Palestine and the balance in other parts of the world. As a great secret he said he hoped to get a few into the back country of Ethiopia.

The very next day, Sumner Welles told me, a secret meeting was held in Brussels between German representatives and members of the intergovernmental committee in an effort to arrange terms for the Jews to leave Germany. Welles mentioned this because he was very anxious that the countervailing duties then being considered against Germany should not be announced until the secret meeting had a chance to effect something. I agreed.

The negotiations were transferred to London on December 15 when Hjalmar Schacht arrived there with a proposal. In effect it was a blackmail proposition by which German exports were to

be increased (to finance war preparations, although Schacht did not mention this) at the expense of the refugees' property in Germany. The plan was described by Treasury experts as "outrageous" and the State Department cabled Myron Taylor that it was "asking the world to pay a ransom for the release of hostages in Germany and barter human misery for increased exports."

Nevertheless the negotiations were continued because there was always some hope that the German position might be modified. While no one concerned really thought this hope was anything more than the slimmest and weakest of reeds, every chance had to be kept alive. Even after the war began, the President encouraged the intergovernmental committee to maintain its organization and addressed its meeting in Washington on October 17, 1939. He foresaw the enormously enlarged nature of the problem which the war would leave and spoke of the need for planning not for hundreds of thousands but for millions of refugees. But he also saw that nations at war would be unable to do much of this, and he called upon neutral nations to assume the burden. Unfortunately there were not to be enough neutral nations left to do the job.

Of course the work of the intergovernmental committee and the surveys made were not altogether wasted. Some areas of settlement were opened up, pitifully small and inadequate, notably a colony in the Dominican Republic. But such efforts

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were more than overbalanced by the continuing reports of refugee misery. Ships roamed the seas carrying desperate human cargoes to whom all ports seemed to be barred. Men, women and children who had invested everything they had in a passage and what they believed to be valid papers were turned out of countries whose consuls had accepted their fees. Private organizations struggled manfully to alleviate distress, and worked wonders against the apathy and downright hostility of governments. But there still was no official agency to uphold them. On the continent of Europe, the millions of whom Roosevelt had spoken prophetically were on the march. The problem was growing; the means of solving it were shrinking.

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(Note: On March 2, 1939, Rublee telephoned HMJr. and offered to meet him and HMSr. at any time to tell them of his negotiations with Germany. Was this meeting ever held?)