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John W. Went Papers
Box 217
Refugees

November 24, 1941.

PRIVATE

For the Ambassador:

Memorandum on Refugees in French Camps

(talks with Sir H. Emerson and G. G. Kullmann, Nov.20, '41; David Astor, Nov.21; Eleanor Rathbone, Nov.22; Memoranda by Arthur Koestler and G. G. Kullmann).

Between 27-30,000 non-Spanish refugees are interned in the most deplorable conditions in French camps. Little is known of their occupational or age groups but it is believed that between 20 to 25,000 are Jews, many of them women, and several thousand children. About 3,000 were members of the International Brigade and there are a number of political refugees of every color from Communists to Monarchists; also, some White Russians. Probably thousands of these refugees are stateless. The housing conditions in the camps are very bad, the food altogether inadequate, and there is much sickness and a high death rate due to undernourishment: thus in the camp of Rivesaltes, Quaker reports indicate that 48 children died in one day of October, 1941. The food scarcity is almost certain to grow worse, and already the diet is one of semi-starvation.

Although there is not the same physical cruelty in French camps as in those under direct Nazi control, these

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refugees are the only ones who it may be possible to save and Arthur Koestler, with personal experience of the terrible conditions prevailing from his own internment in France, has suggested a method. Briefly, this is to "quarantine" the refugees for the duration of the war in some locality like the Vergin Islands, where they would be confined in labor camps to be made as nearly self-supporting as possible. The deficits could probably be covered by the various refugee organizations and, if necessary, by a small subsidy. The principal point of the quarantine is that it would not imply any claim, present or future, for admission to the United States except in the case of those with quota numbers, and would protect the United States from the entrance of hidden Nazi agents or other undesirable elements.

The second point in this plan is that the Allied countries concerned (notably Poland, and Czechoslovakia) should pledge themselves to repatriate their nationals or find suitable homes for them as soon as circumstances allowed. In the case of members of the International Brigade who might not be able to return to the lands of their origin, it is regarded not unlikely that a similar assurance can be obtained from the Soviet. There are also some White Russians to be considered, and certain Polish Jews who are very averse to being sent back to Poland.

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That is why the assurances to be asked from the Allied countries concerned are somewhat broader than the stipulation for repatriation.

The validity of this project obviously depends on the willingness of Vichy to issue exit permits and if relations with Washington should be interrupted it could naturally not be pursued any further. But until this happens, American promotion of a purely humanitarian project would be evidence of our sympathetic interest which could also be based on the French plea of famine and would make any refusal to let out a few thousand food consumers appear like an act of bad will. There can be little doubt that Vichy would gladly see the exodus of women and children, but there might be more difficulty in allowing out men of military age in spite of the assurance that these would be quarantined for the duration of the war. The political refugees might also be retained under Nazi pressure, although lately Germany is reported to have lost interest in recapturing her refugees except for a few particular cases. There is also some risk that the attempt to empty the French camps might defeat its own purpose by freeing space for more refugees whom the Germans would then push into Unoccupied France. This they have already done on a small scale.

If the plan proposed should be favorably considered, the question of transportation would not be a very serious

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obstacle. Mr. Kullmann, the Deputy High Commissioner, assures me that those benefited could probably be embarked in Spanish and Portuguese ships whose owners have been trying to secure the refugee trade.

When I discussed the project with Sir H. Emerson, I did not find him particularly receptive and the astringent virtues of the Indian civil servant were somewhat noticeable in the difficulties he raised. I had expressed my personal belief that the plan would stand a much better chance of success if it could be put forward as a matter for Anglo-American cooperation instead of the burden being thrown solely on the United States. The High Commissioner appeared astonished at my suggestion and thought that this would be quite impossible. He gave as his reasons the strong feeling which exists against admitting any more aliens into the British Empire and the likely charge on the Exchequer, which Parliament would not sanction. I then asked him if the President should see fit to make a request to the British Government in the sense suggested, would this cooperation still be impossible, and he agreed that that would be the only way in which it could be done. Sir H. Emerson, however, said that on his own initiative he could not recommend it. Yet I formed the impression that he is hardly less unwilling to be placed in a position in which he would seem to oppose it and thereby lend color to

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Miss Rathbone's criticism that he is Commissioner not for but against the Refugees. Sir H. Emerson was also most insistent on his desire to see you, and not a small part of that desire is, I believe, due to his wish to absolve his personal responsibility by throwing this on you. Although not very sympathetic to the plan, at the end of a protracted discussion the High Commissioner expressed himself in favor of confining its scope to women and children. Nonetheless whatever project may be accepted, I am convinced that he would do his best to carry it out as conscientiously and effectively as he could.

David Astor in his talk with me next day showed a generous and highly intelligent sympathy. He felt that removal from the camps offered the only hope of rescuing these unfortunates from certain death and that even if the chances of success are slender, yet the effort ought to be made as soon as possible. He remarked also that the plan provided a test of Vichy's real dispositions. He further assured me of his father's interest as a humanitarian to support the plan in Parliament. Miss Rathbone is also keenly interested, and said she was convinced that there would be no difficulty in forming a small group in Parliament favorable to the project. Both she and David Astor agreed with me that the best chance of success would be to put it

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forward on the basis of Anglo-American cooperation. If, for instance, we offered the Vergin Islands as a suitable "quarantine", why could not England find room for these refugees in Jamaica, British Honduras, or Guyana? This would have the further advantage of reducing the problem for each country to the unlikely but more manageable maximum of 15,000.

Miss Rathbone has asked me to meet informally a group of members who would be sympathetic, mentioning among others Lord Astor and Captain Cazalet; she thought that Mr. Eden also would be favorable to the idea, and proposed to speak to him about it. ~~All~~. This would of course strengthen support and be extremely useful. Yet I find it difficult to believe that any humanitarian effort of this nature, initiated at this time in England, could in itself acquire sufficient volume to overcome the indifference and probable opposition which is only to be anticipated, unless the stimulus and sympathetic interest for it could emanate primarily from Washington.

Even if the chances for its ultimate success are slender, I believe the plan possesses enough merit to be attempted as soon as possible. These are the reasons:-

- (1) The direct benefit of saving from death some thousands of refugees suffering today through no fault of their own.

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(2) The opportunity for the United States to take a practical humanitarian step in helping to ameliorate the refugee problem without this affecting domestic legislation. If such a thing could be done, the experience and precedent established should be of distinct benefit when the time comes later to handle one of the great post war questions.

(3) It places Vichy in a position where the French Government will be obliged to cooperate or else demonstrate its further abject subservience to Hitler, and the hypocrisy of its own plea for food.

In case of approval, the practical steps to be taken appear to be as follows:

(a) An expression of sympathetic interest by Washington with instructions to ask for British cooperation;

(b) An inquiry from the Allied Governments along the lines previously suggested;

(c) If these assurances can be obtained and little difficulty need be anticipated, the cooperation of Vichy to issue exit permits would then have to be secured.

J. S. [unclear]
Note: What happened afterwards? [unclear]
was of J.G. to [unclear]?

Nov. 27, 1941. *1941*
original

For the Ambassador

Note to the Memorandum on Refugees in French Camps

On November 26th at the request of Sir H. Emerson I had a lengthy talk with him and his Deputy, G. G. Kullmann. The points brought out not already mentioned in my previous memorandum were as follows:

(1) Of the refugees interned in French camps probably not more than 2,000 are now "political" and probably three quarters of these are Jews.

(2) Mr. Kullmann estimates that four fifths of the Jewish refugees interned come from Germany and Austria. There can therefore be no question of obtaining their governments' consent for eventual repatriation. Technically they remain subjects "of enemy origin" who the British Government and Dominions are averse to receive.

(3) In addition to those interned in France, some 7,700 are in Algeria and 5,500 in Morocco. Most of these served during the war either in the Foreign Legion or the French Pioneer Corps and many have now been sent to work on the Saharan railway.

(4) Few of the refugees in France are of the pioneer type. When Sir H. Emerson pointed this out I suggested that they could be organized and trained to do

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industrial work, and he agreed that this might be possible.

I add a memorandum drawn up by Sir H. Emerson (please return) which brings out his general attitude, as previously outlined, and his desire to throw any solution for the plan solely on the United States.

28.
LEWIS WINSTON

November 25th, 1941.

MEMORANDUM BY SIR HERBERT EMERSON.

Since the discussion with Mr. Einstein I have given much thought to the proposed scheme of evacuation of refugees from unoccupied France. In the light of that discussion, my present views are as follows:

1. There is no hope at present of such a scheme being arranged on an international basis.
2. There is no hope of the British Government being able and willing to reverse its policy and to take in a large or appreciable number of refugees, many of whom would be of enemy nationality, into Great Britain or its colonial possessions. There is equally no hope of the Dominions reversing their policy in this respect.
3. If the suggestion, very tentatively discussed, is pursued, of an arrangement by which, at a later stage, President Roosevelt might make a personal request to the British Government on the matter, then both as High Commissioner and as Honorary Director of the Intergovernmental Committee I should have to regard it as incumbent on me to discuss the scheme with the British Government. I could not be associated with a scheme which might not only involve a large obligation on the British Government, but might also raise political considerations, without informing that Government of what was being done.
4. It follows in my view that the scheme can only proceed on a unilateral basis, namely, as a splendid contribution, outside the normal immigration laws and outside the basic principle of the Intergovernmental Committee, made by the Government of the United States of America on humanitarian grounds.
5. Since, presumably, immigration to the United States must be governed by the laws of the country, the reception area must be outside that country, e.g., the Virgin Islands.
6. If the U.S. Government accepted the scheme in principle, it would be necessary to find a place suitable for the temporary location of the refugees, having regard to climatic, economic and other conditions. It would then be necessary to lay out a camp or camps, construct the necessary habitations, etc. The actual running of the camps, when set out, could probably be carried out by voluntary workers plus a minimum official staff.
7. The extent to which such a settlement would be self-supporting would obviously depend, first, on local conditions, and second, on the character of the refugees. Even if the latter were of the pioneer type — and this is not the basis of the proposal — experience elsewhere shows that the camp, even under very favourable local conditions, would not be self-supporting for several years, quite apart from the initial expenditure involved.
8. Heavy expenditure would therefore be involved on transport, construction of the camp, staff and maintenance. The recurring expenditure would continue until the settlement was dispersed, though probably on a declining scale, that is to say, it might continue until a year or two after the end of the war. The question of finance should be considered on this basis.

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9. I see no prospect of any Government other than the U.S.A. contributing towards it. Governmental finance, if any, would therefore have to be unilateral by the U.S.A. Government. This presumably would involve a vote by Congress. It is not for me to attempt to assess the prospects of this.

10. If Governmental finance is ruled out, the scheme would have to be financed from voluntary sources. Here again, I see no prospect of voluntary contributions of any appreciable value, except from the American public. If, therefore, there is to be no Government assistance, the feasibility and scope of the scheme must depend on the adequate and continued flow of voluntary contributions. In the interests of the refugees it would be essential to have financial guarantees. If, however, the finance of the scheme would depend on American contribution from voluntary sources, it would be essential at an early stage to consult the voluntary bodies concerned, and in particular the Joint Distribution Committee, which, assuming that the majority of the refugees would be Jews, would have to bear the major portion of the financial burden. Since the funds of the J.D.C. are not unlimited, it would have to consider as a matter of policy whether it could raise the necessary additional funds, or in the alternative, was prepared to divert money from its present purposes, namely, curtail its present activities in some directions.

11. With regard to the ultimate dispersal of the refugees to permanent homes, I do not know of any country which, in present conditions, would be prepared to give guarantees that after the war they would take for permanent residence an assigned number of refugees, even if the condition were attached that such refugees should be selected by themselves and conform to the immigration laws and regulations. I can see no prospect of any country committing itself now to the reception of permanent immigrants in whose selection it had taken no part. This does not mean that I take a gloomy view of a solution of the refugee problem after the war, or that in fact countries will not then be persuaded to take refugees. But I see almost insuperable difficulties in getting Governments to make commitments in present circumstances, and particularly in regard to individuals whom in the circumstances they cannot previously vet. This being so, there would appear to be only two solutions to this aspect of the question:

First, that the Vichy Government should give a guarantee that it would take the refugees back at the end of the war. The power of the Vichy Government to give such a guarantee in present political circumstances is open to question. Its ultimate ability to carry it out is still more doubtful.

Or, second, that the United States Government should select the immigrants on the same principles as would apply to permanent immigrants to the U.S.A., so that if, at the end of the war, other arrangements could not be made for permanent settlement, they could be admitted to the U.S.A. within the relevant quotas and in accordance with the immigration laws.

12. It being thus my definite opinion that the proposals inevitably involve unilateral action by the Government of the U.S.A., the first step to be taken, if it is decided to proceed with the proposals, would seem to be to ascertain the prospects of such action.

ADRESSE TÉLÉGRAPHIQUE : INTERLAB GENEVE

TELEGRAPHIC ADDRESS : INTERLAB GENEVE

Refugees

BUREAU INTERNATIONAL DU TRAVAIL

INTERNATIONAL LABOUR OFFICE

GENÈVE

GENEVA

May 23rd, 1946.

Dans la réponse prière de rappeler le

When replying, please quote reference

M. JACQUES SÈCRÉTAN

DOCTEUR EN DROIT.

AVOCAT.

John Gilbert Winant Jun., Esq.
Ambassador of the United States of America,
c/o Department of State,
Washington D.C.

By Air Mail

Washington D.C.

U.S.A.

Dear Mr Winant,

May I address to you for help in the following case ?

Friends of mine, of Rumanian nationality, formerly victims of the nazis in the concentration of Bergen-Belsen, Mr and Mrs Edmund Weisz, presently at the Hotel d'Angleterre in Geneva, are registered on the waiting list for emigration to the United States under the Rumanian quota and are entitled to administrative priority as of May 1945, when a preliminary application under centralized procedure was filed with the State Department.

But I hear that the pressures against the Rumanian quota are so considerable that persons having no preference and no priority earlier than May 1945 might have to wait several months.

The news are terribly distressing for my friends Weisz.

The mother of Mrs Edmund Weisz, Mrs Sara Ruben, Wallace Street 2015, Philadelphia P.A., is ill and her daughter did not see her for years now.

Mr and Mrs Edmund Weisz have got money in the U.S.A. but the license they get from Swiss authorities are insufficient to live upon.

Any measure you could eventually take to hasten the delivery of their visa in favour of my friends Weisz by the General Consul in Geneva would be welcome.

Thanking you in advance, I remain, dear Mr Winant,

Yours very sincerely,
Jacques Secrétan
CONSEILLER JURIDIQUE
DU
BUREAU INTERNATIONAL DU TRAVAIL