

MILITARY REFUGEES IN SWITZERLAND DURING WORLD WAR II

Between the defeat of France in June 1940 and the end of World War II in Europe, up to 104,000 foreign military refugees were interned for various periods in Switzerland. About half that number of civilians were held as refugees in Switzerland during the war.

The military refugees included a French army corps, escaped Allied prisoners-of-war, German, Austrian and Italian deserters, and United States Army Air Force bomber crew who had either baled out over Switzerland, or whose crippled Flying Fortresses and Liberators had been forced to land by Swiss fighter aircraft, usually at Dübendorf near Zurich.

Under the Hague Convention of 1907 governing the rights and duties of neutral powers, Switzerland was not obliged to accept any foreign forces on its territory, but if it did, it had certain obligations. Troops of a belligerent force crossing the border to surrender to the Swiss rather than to their enemy would be interned under the rules governing prisoners-of-war, until the belligerents made peace. Airmen landing or forced down in Switzerland were similarly interned. Interned officers could be granted freedom of movement on parole, but if they escaped the country and reached their lines, their government was obliged to return them.

Escaped prisoners-of-war (known as *évadés*) and deserters, however, had a different status. They were to be left at liberty, but could be assigned residence. They could stay until it was safe to leave.

In all events, the foreign power concerned had to pay for the hospitality accorded to its interned servicemen.

When in the midsummer of 1940, General Heinz Guderian's mechanised divisions pinned General Marius Daille's 45th corps against the Swiss frontier, the Swiss Federal Council was swift to grant refuge to the beleaguered French troops. The last thing they wanted was a battle spilling over the border.

There had been, after all, a precedent in 1871, when a French army, similarly surrounded during the Franco-Prussian war, had also found safety in Switzerland.

Furthermore, the war was over for France — Pétain had sued for peace two days previously — and the French troops would soon go home.

The federal councillors would also have been calculating how much they could charge France for looking after the 34,500 men on the frontier.

Poles pay their way

The 45th corps included, however, the 12,000 men of the 2nd Polish light-infantry division. They were among the Poles who had joined the French to continue the fight after the German conquest of their homeland. Unlike the French soldiers, who were sent home in January 1941, the Poles had nowhere to go and the Polish state had ceased to exist. Switzerland had to accept the honour of fulfilling its humanitarian obligations for free.

To alleviate the burden of that honour, the army-run federal commissary for internment and hospitalisation (*Commissaire fédérale à l'internement et hospitalisation*) resolved to house, feed and control the Poles as cheaply as possible, while keeping them away from the civilian population. The solution was a concentration camp, although the adjective was dropped when its connotations dawned. The Polish “mass detention” camp at Büren, to house 6,000 men, was completed in time for the winter of 1940.

Until then, the Poles had been billeted in dispersed villages where, much esteemed for their gallantry and military bearing, they had become popular in the absence of much of Switzerland’s male population, which was manning the frontiers and fortresses. Their abrupt imprisonment and enforced idleness at Büren led the Poles to believe the Swiss were acting on German instruction. Morale fell. The Swiss tightened discipline. Anger broke out into revolt in December 1940. Shots were fired. A number of Polish soldiers were wounded.

The Poles were thereafter allowed to work, which they did willingly, in the fields, forests and factories for one franc a day. They ended up paying their way, providing, according to Swiss records, 8.3 million man-days of labour. Polish soldiers built 300 kilometres of road and more than 50 bridges, drained 900 hectares of land and mined 80,000 tons of ore and coal. They cleared forests and parkland, helping along the Wahlen plan to increase domestic food production in the blockaded country.

From 1942, the Büren camp was reappointed for a different category of refugees who couldn't pay — Jews and Russians who had escaped from Nazi labour camps.

Unhappy Americans

How well the military refugees lived was largely conditioned by how well they were funded. United States interned aircrew stayed in luxury hotels in such Alpine resorts as Adelboden, Wengen and Davos, where, to the satisfaction of the local shopkeepers, they had nothing to do but spend their generous allowances — about 20 times what a Polish internee earned. Yet most Americans left with unhappy memories of their Swiss holiday. Cultural differences, poor discipline and conflicting communications led to a breakdown in relations between the American internees and their Swiss military hosts. Around 200 of the 1,600 American internees were sentenced, mainly for trying to escape, to the squalor of Switzerland's notorious Wauwilermoos punishment camp, where according to British *évadés*, conditions were far worse than in equivalent Nazi establishments.

British POWs break out of Italy

Most British, Dominion and Commonwealth *évadés* were organized in detachments of around 50 to 200 men and assigned to more modest residence in

the towns and villages of northeastern Switzerland. They were mostly soldiers captured in North Africa, who had endured Italian camps for at least a year, and were grateful for small comforts. Under the control of their own officers, they were kept occupied with sports, learning trades, public works, dances and entertainments. They generally enjoyed good relations with the local civilians. Scores of engagements were announced and dozens of weddings took place. The men found it difficult to get drunk on 15 francs a week.

Early in the war only a handful of British troops and airmen had escaped from German POW camps and had made it into Switzerland. That changed after the fall of Mussolini in the late summer of 1943. By September the guards at some Italian camps were looking the other way. Tens of thousands of allied POWs escaped before the Germans took charge and started transporting them by rail to Germany. Some headed south to the allied lines. More than 4,000 went north to the Swiss border along with some 20,000 Italian deserters. Others stayed with the Italian partisans, dodging Germans. One group of Australians and South Africans smashed their way out of cattle-trucks taking them to Germany. Most *évadés* got under the border wire to Canton Ticino and were taken to Bellinzona where they were deloused and given the “Bellinzona haircut” that distinguished new arrivals in the detachments.

Several hundred Indian POWs managed to break out of their camp near Epinal during Royal Air Force raids on eastern France in May 1944 and get into Switzerland.

The British and Empire governments paid a million pounds a month for the upkeep of around 5,000 escaped prisoners of war in Switzerland. As soon as the allies reached the Swiss border at Geneva in September 1944, the *évadés* started going home.

Nobody wants the Russians

The 9,000 or so Soviet *évadés* who enjoyed Swiss hospitality were a special case, having no value to the Soviet Union and therefore none to the Swiss. They were kept apart and under strict surveillance lest they be communist agitators or spies. However, the reluctance of many to return to their homeland after the war has been attributed to their fear of Stalinist reprisals rather than to the comforts of their internment.

Switzerland was prevented from welcoming many more Russian and Polish *évadés*, when the increasing numbers arriving at its frontiers were deemed to have escaped from Nazi labour camps rather than prisoner-of-war camps. They had to be turned back.

The last military refugees welcomed into Switzerland were 7,200 German and Austrian deserters. Individual soldiers and small units started trickling in after the allied landings in the summer of 1944, arriving in increasing numbers as the Reich collapsed. They were mainly billeted in the French-speaking part of Switzerland. Deserters from belligerent armies had the same rights as escaped prisoners-of-war.

Switzerland has been criticised for its lack of generosity to civilians, and particularly to Jews seeking to save their lives in Switzerland during those totalitarian days. But in the ready acceptance of military refugees, it fulfilled its humanitarian obligations in an optimum way.

Military refugees had, in most cases, the value of hostages; they did not stay forever, they came under military discipline and provided a pool of labour or of tourists, and, judging by the heavy advertising in *Marking Time*, an important market for Swiss luxury products.

Many were grateful to their hosts, and retained good memories of their stay in Switzerland.

Sources and acknowledgements

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Marking Time