

# **Obstacles to Immigration**

## **EMIGRATION FROM GERMANY**

Until Nazi Germany started World War II in 1939, antisemitic legislation in Germany served to "encourage" and ultimately to force a mass emigration of German Jews. The government did all it could to induce the Jews to leave Germany. In addition to making life miserable, the German authorities reduced bureaucratic hurdles so those who wanted to leave could do so more easily.

At the same time, the Nazis viewed the Jews' belongings and their financial capital as German property, and they had no intention of allowing refugees to take anything of material value with them. Most of those who fled had to relinquish their titles to homes and businesses, and were subject to increasingly heavy emigration taxes that reduced their assets. Furthermore, the German authorities restricted how much money could be transferred abroad from German banks, and allowed each passenger to take only ten Reichsmark (about U.S. \$4) out of the country. Most of the German Jews who managed to emigrate were completely impoverished by the time they were able to leave.

## **OBSTACLES TO IMMIGRATION**

Many nations in which the German Jews sought asylum imposed significant obstacles to immigration. Application processes for entry visas were elaborate and demanding, requiring prospective immigrants to provide information about themselves and their family members from banks, doctors, and the German police. In the case of the United States, applicants were required to provide affidavits from multiple sponsors and to have secured a waiting number within a quota established for their country of birth, which severely limited their chances to emigrate. All this red tape existed against the backdrop of other hardships: competition with thousands of equally desperate people, slow mail that made communication with would-be sponsors difficult, financial hardships, and oppressive measures in Germany that made even the simplest task a chore. Finally, many who wanted to flee had, by necessity, to apply to numerous countries for entry. It is no wonder that for many Jews in Germany in the 1930s, the attempt to emigrate was more than a full-time job.

## **THE 1930s**

In the late 1930s, a severe worldwide economic depression reinforced through Europe and the United States an existing fear and mistrust of foreigners in general, as well as antisemitism in particular. Above all, people were wary of immigrants who might compete for their jobs, burden their already beleaguered social services, or be tempted as impoverished workers by the promises of labor agitators or domestic Communist movements.

Even government officials in democratic countries were not immune to those sentiments. Most foreign countries, including the United States, Canada, and Great Britain, were unwilling to increase their immigrant quotas to admit very large groups of refugees, especially the impoverished and the dispossessed. Indeed, the United States refused to reduce the many

obstacles to getting an immigrant visa, with the result that until 1938, the immigration quota for Germany was unfilled. Many German Jews who were in immediate danger were forced to emigrate elsewhere, such as France, the Netherlands, and Czechoslovakia, where eventually the wave of German conquest overtook them.

The bureaucratic hurdles for emigration were overwhelming. Far from streamlining the process to allow more refugees to enter, nations required extensive documentation that was often virtually impossible to obtain. In some cases, refugees literally faced a "catch-22": proof of passage booked on a ship was required for a visa, and proof of a visa was required to book passage on a ship.

### **EVIAN CONFERENCE**

After Germany annexed Austria in March 1938 and Nazi-sponsored street violence in both Austria and Germany dramatically increased the numbers of German and Austrian Jews seeking to emigrate, pressure mounted on U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt to address the intensified refugee crisis. He responded by proposing an international conference to be held in the French resort town of Evian-les-Bains on July 6-15, 1938.

At the same time, the tone of the invitation reflected U.S. and international ambivalence about the refugee situation. Thirty-three nations were invited with the reassurance that "no country will be expected... to receive a greater number of immigrants than is permitted by existing legislation."