

# Evian: The Most Fateful Conference of All Times in Jewish History

Part One

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*After Evian and Kristallnacht, Jews being expelled, London, November 1938*

In its confrontation with Western powers, Iranian tactics of 2008 show a clever replay of Nazi tactics, reminiscent of 1938. Iran has been boycotting, stalling, and side-stepping every Western attempt to halt its nuclear program. So far the United Nations and the Security Council failed to come up with a satisfactory answer to the threat posed by Teheran to the safety of the Western World, and in particular to Israel.

The Six-Nation Meeting in Geneva, Switzerland, on July 19, which for the first time included a high-level US official, Undersecretary of State William Burns, failed to persuade the

Islamic Republic to halt its uranium enrichment program. As if it were the five European powers and the USA that are not fulfilling their obligations, the Chief Iranian negotiator, Saeed Jalili, declared at the meeting: “Iran is calling on the Western powers to resume the dialogue”.

The good guy, Iran, is calling on the bad guys, led by the European Union envoy, Javier Solana, to give up on their recalcitrant, childish games of avoiding the real issues, pleading with them “to resume the dialogue”. Hitler reborn. The bad guy is turning to the good guy with the earnest appeal to finally consider becoming good. The Anschluss of Austria in March 1938 was not the invasion of a sovereign state in the heart of Europe. It was the rectification of the evil of Versailles. And so down the lane of history in 1938: The bad guy played the role of the good guy and whatever he did was declared to be yet another saving grace for the world.

The year 1938 – 70 years back – was a chilling year. That year took place the Anschluss of Austria, the Evian Conference, the Munich Agreement, and Krystallnacht.

The Evian Conference was one of the most significant conferences of all times concerning the Jewish people

The world is doing its best to forget the Evian Conference, 1938. Thus the great *Grand Larousse Encyclopedique* of France speaks about the beauty of the place (as do other encyclopedias) and mentions solely the Conference of March 1962, which dealt with the signing of a French-Algerian accord. Its most significant conference of all times, that of 1938 is not mentioned.

*The Schweitzer Lexicon* does indeed mention the Evian Conference, held 6 to 15 of July 1938, “called at F.D.R.’s initiative after Hitler’s march into Austria, to find a suitable solution to the German and Austrian refugee problem”. Note that Jews are not mentioned at all!

The *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1982 ed.): “In 1962 a ceasefire agreement between the French Government and the provisional government of Algeria was concluded in Evian.” The 1938 Conference is not mentioned at all by the august encyclopedia.

Obviously, the Evian Conference of 1938, one of the most significant conferences of all times determining the fate of the Jewish People, seems to be swept under the rug by the world, which does its best to forget it.

### **A Bit of Background to the Evian Conference**

In March 1938, Adolf Hitler staged a sensational march into Austria, with all the clatter and terror, all the pomp and circumstance of which the Nazis became consummate masters. I was as yet a child, growing up in nearby Czechoslovakia, but I remember vividly that watershed event in our lives. It was Friday afternoon. The radio in our home was tuned to Vienna. The news was unambiguous. German troops were marching into Austria. There was a continuous flow of news. As the troops advanced on Vienna, Hitler made his birthplace, Braunau, the first stop and touchingly placed flowers on his mother’s grave.

Late afternoon, Hitler was on his way to the Austrian capitol. My father broke away from the radio and ordered us to the Synagogue. For the first time in my recollection he left the radio on for Shabbat in our traditional home. We barely returned from Services, after a hasty *Kiddush* (blessing over wine) and blessing over the *Challah*, all attention was focused on the radio again.

About eight o'clock in the evening the Chancellor of Austria, Schuschnigg, gave his final radio address. "Because we did not wish to spill German blood, we have ordered the Austrian army to offer no resistance... I take leave of the Austrian people with a German farewell and the greeting: God protect Austria." Till midnight we listened to martial music, with occasional excited announcements by the radio reporter about the Fuhrer's progress.

At midnight excitement reached fever-pitch as Hitler's motorcade entered the capitol. The bells of the capitol's revered St. Stephens' Church were peeling hymns of warm welcome. The delirious crowds cheered, shouted and cried in rapture. The German-speaking Austrians, humiliated by the breakup of their extensive empire at the end of World War I, released their pent-up frustrations in a rapturous welcome to the Fuhrer who dared to say "no" to the Versailles Treaty. Few saw it as a moment of humiliating defeat and the demise of Austria. The masses chose to see it, instead, as the genesis of a new and great German Empire.

By midnight, as the bells of the St. Stephen's Church in Vienna were triumphantly sounding their hymns, my father quietly remarked: "This is the beginning of the end."

The Anschluss, as the annexation of Austria by Germany was called, added over 200,000 Jews to Hitler's Reich, to whom all the Nazi anti-Jewish legislation was promptly applied at an accelerated pace. Adolf Eichmann was placed at the head of the office of Jewish Emigration in Vienna. The complete ruin of Jewish life came a month later when all Jewish holdings and wealth above \$2,000 were confiscated by the Nazis. Three quarters of a million Jews now under German rule were reduced to the status of paupers and became fully dependent upon aid from philanthropic agencies abroad. By comparison, other crippling decrees of that year, such as Judaizing one's name by adding "Israel" or "Sarah", the loss of tax-exemption by all Jewish charitable and cultural institutions, the transfer of supervision over all religious community organizations to the local Gestapo agents, seemed bland and insignificant.

As the world watched the goings-on, as it received information and pictures of respectable and dignified Jews being driven into the streets of Vienna to wash its pavements and scrub its roads on all fours, it did not utter a sound. There were some formal protests and clicking of the tongue on the part of leading statesmen and diplomats at the League of Nations – nothing more.



The Jewish Quarter of Leopoldstadt was invaded by triumphant crowds that called families from their houses and forced them to kneel and scrub the pavements...shouting "Perish Jewry", "Out with the Jews!"

We can read of the world being amply informed of what was going on in Austria. On March 16, *The New York Times* wrote:

This afternoon the Jewish quarter of Leopoldstadt was invaded by triumphant crowds that called families from their houses and forced them to kneel and scrub the pavements...shouting “Perish Jewry”, “Out with the Jews!”

Two days later, *The New York Times* reported storm troopers “entering Jewish-owned shops and carrying off whatever goods they fancied as well as money, and going into private homes and demanding large sums of money...personal jewelry and other valuables.”

Suicides among Jews of Vienna – in the past negligible in numbers – rose to 200 daily.

These resulted from a sudden total loss of orientation, the Viennese Jews finding no way and nowhere to escape, and the ground opening up under their feet. Simultaneously Italy, Switzerland and Czechoslovakia closed their borders to the Jewish citizens of Austria. All this was reported in the world press.

**Part Two will appear in the next issue of *NATIV*.**

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