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

Part II

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**Part One of this article can be found at
http://www.acpr.org.il/nativ/0811-2_ebirnbaumE1.pdf**

In the wake of the reports regarding the humiliation and sufferings to which Jewry was exposed under the heels of the Nazis, (President) F.D.R. called for an international conference with the bold intent of finding a solution for those wretched people. The plan for the conference was announced on March 22, 10 days after the Anschluss.

Hitler's response to the intended conference was immediate and full of scorn. Addressing himself to the OTHER world as opposed to the Nazi world, he said:

I can only hope and expect that the other world, which has such deep sympathy for these criminals, will at last be generous enough to convert that sympathy into practical aid. We, on our part, are ready to put all these criminals at the disposal of these countries, for all I care, even on luxury ships.

It took a full three and a half months to organize the conference to be held at the French luxury resort, Evian, on Lake Geneva – though the newspapers reported virtually daily shocking episodes of Jewish humiliation (See for example, *London Times*, June 19, 1938).

No one caught more clearly the impact of the moment than Anne O'Hare McCormick who wrote in the *The New York Times*:

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It is heartbreaking to think of the queues of desperate human beings around our consulates in Vienna and other cities waiting in suspense for what happens at Evian... It is not a question of how many unemployed this country can safely add to its own unemployed millions. It is a test of civilization... Can America live with itself if it lets Germany get away with this policy of extermination? (July 4, 1938)

We ought to note: This was not the year 1944, or the year 1942, not even the year 1940. In the beginning of July 1938, the *The New York Times* wrote about ***the policy of extermination*** formulated by the Germans against the Jewish People. The tip of the iceberg began showing above the waves; those who were ready to face facts with a grain of realism could tell. The indicators were unmistakable.

On July 6, the Conference opened. Its declared purpose was to seek a solution to the problem of the refugees who wished to leave Germany. Thirty-two nations participated. There was much flamboyant rhetoric. Territories such as Kenya, British Guiana, and Madagascar, whose locations most participating delegates would have difficulties to pinpoint on the map, were generously proposed for refugee settlement – always territories belonging to another party.

Australia, with vast, unpopulated areas, announced: “As we have no real racial problem, we are not desirous of importing one.”

France stressed that it had reached a saturation point.

The Peruvian delegate pointedly remarked that the United States had given his country an example of “caution and wisdom” by its own immigration restrictions.

Central American states issued a joint statement saying that they could accept no “traders and intellectuals”.

Brazil said that every visa application would have to be accompanied by a certificate of Christian Baptism.

Canada was prepared to accept only experienced agricultural workers.

Britain, while prepared to accept Jewish children (some 9,000 eventually arrived), was not willing to accept their parents, because “a sudden rush of Jewish refugees might arouse anti-Semitic feelings”.

The United States would not go beyond its usual annual German immigration quota of 25,957 – although it had allowed only a total of 27,000 German Jews to enter in the six years between Hitler’s rise to power and the Evian Conference. Inexplicably, the US Government demanded of the Jews desiring to migrate to the United States certificates of good conduct from the German police, a cruel and inhuman demand, in the full knowledge that the Germans at the time viewed the Jews worse than vermin.

The Swiss representative, Dr. Heinrich Rothmund, spoke about the threatening refugee inundation of Switzerland. Three or four thousand Jewish refugees had already crossed the frontiers. Rothmund reported. “Switzerland, which has as little use for these Jews as Germany has, will herself take measures to protect Switzerland from being swamped by the Jews”, he declared.

As a result of the Swiss stand, the Conference, whose avowed purpose was to help Jewish refugees, had a disastrous consequence. All German passports of Jews were henceforth stamped by a large red “J”, further curtailing the already limited Jewish freedom to travel.

When Nazi observers at the Conference returned to Berlin they told Hitler: “You can do what you like with the Jews, nobody is interested in them”.

Hitler was triumphant. Didn't he challenge the democratic world when the Conference was proposed that it be at least generous enough to convert its sympathy into practical aid? Didn't he make it clear: "We, on our part, are ready to put all these criminals at the disposal of these countries, for all I care, even on luxury ships.?"

The German *Danziger Vorposten* wrote:

We see that one likes to pity the Jews as long as one can use this pity for a wicked agitation against Germany, but that no State is prepared to fight the cultural disgrace of Central Europe by accepting a few thousand Jews. Thus the Conference serves to justify Germany's policy against Jewry.

Another newspaper, the *Nationalsozialistische Parteikorrespondenz*, states that Evian had revealed "the danger which world Jewry constitutes".

But it wasn't government policy alone that led to the disastrous Evian stand of the nations. The British Medical Association declared that "no member of the medical profession wishes to see the country inundated by émigrés."

The *Evening Standard* put it rather sharply:

It is felt by many people that we hear too much about the trouble of the Jews. They shout too loudly. They make too insistent a demand upon the compassion of the world. Compassion they get – and deserve – but annoyance is apt to accompany it.

Evian was a definite turning point in modern Jewish history. By the time the Conference took place, the Nazis had persecuted the Jews for six years. There were economic boycotts. There were book-burnings. Jews were deprived of their wealth and financial security. They were fired from their jobs. They were declared second-class citizens with dubious protection by law. They were forbidden to sit, shop, and visit in certain places, to employ Christians and associate with them. There were physical harassments and occasional attacks. But there were no mass-deportations and large-scale brutal assaults on a country-wide basis against Jewish residents. These began *after* Evian.

Evian clearly signaled the world's indifference to the fate of the Jews. As one newspaper put it, "The Conference serves to justify Germany's policy against Jewry." No nation was ready to extend a helping hand to the drowning Jew, when it actually would have been so easy to do so. No country wanted the bother of the Jew. The reasons offered were in some cases no less shattering than the refusal itself. We don't want a racial problem said one. We don't need those traders and intellectuals, in other words those parasites, said another. And, verbatim, "we have as little use for them as has Germany," said a third.

Since it was so unmistakably clear, the Germans caught the signal. The world may, on occasion, issue a formal protest and pay lip service to Christian charity. But underneath the mask of humanitarianism and Christian compassion, the Western world does not want to be troubled by Jewish concerns. Mankind had no interest in the fate of the Jews.

In that sense Evian was a crucial turning point. The Nazis understood that their hands were no more tied by fear of any possible adverse reaction from the civilized world. They caught the consenting nod of the democratic USA, of England, France and Switzerland; altogether 32 countries that met, ostensibly, to help the Jews out of the jaws of the German beast and, instead, threw the Jews to the sharks.

Soon after Evian, deportations began, leading up to the first concerted large-scale brutality known by the name of *Krystallnacht*, the "Night of the Broken Glass". Most certainly the Jews would have been better off without Evian. It may have kept the Germans on their toes,

never knowing how deeply felt, or how shallow, the humanitarian sentiments of the Western world were. With Evian all confusion and uncertainty evaporated. Nazi Germany was given the green light.



The Evian Conference – Hitler's Green Light for Genocide

This was the true meaning of Evian. What counts is not what it **intended** to do, but what it **actually** did: It utterly betrayed the Jews who placed their trust in civilized humanity.

A brief epilogue need be attached to the gargantuan oversight and callousness of the nations of the world at the splendid lakeside resort of Evian 70 years ago. Not only the encyclopedias (as noted in the beginning of this article), but the present-day political leadership of the nations of the world are doing their best to bury their heads in blissful forgetfulness in the sands of history. There is no other way of explaining the thunderous silence of the United Nations and its many-faceted agencies to the threats of genocide repeatedly uttered by the President of Iran, Ahmedinejad, against Israel, a fellow member State in the United Nations. The Secretary General of the United Nations had recurrent opportunities to indict the Iranian President before the World Court in The Hague. The opportunity is still present and should be exercised without further delay.

It ought to be remembered that barely 13 months after Evian the world was dragged into the abyss of World War II. One-third of world Jewry found itself trapped in the Nazi murder machine. At the time of Evian, all doors were potentially open. A mere consenting nod of participating nations at the fateful Conference could have saved a lion's share of six million Jews. A year later, all doors of escape were sealed in the face of a desperate people.

However, not only the Jews suffered as a result of the grotesque Evian fiasco. The world was exposed to carnage the like of which it had not experienced since the dawn of human conscience. The philosopher, Santayana observed once wisely: "He who doesn't learn from history is doomed to repeat it." Evian should serve as a reminder to the leaders of the world that the time has come to learn from history and not sit on their hands.