Evian Conference, conference on the problem of Jewish Refugees that was held in Evian, France, on the shore of Lake Geneva, in July of 1938. From 1933 through 1937, about 130,000 Jews fled Germany. For the most part, this outflow was orderly; refugees were still able to take some property with them, and places for resettlement were generally available.

The extreme persecution that came in the wake of Germany's annexation of Austria in March 1938 rapidly erased all order from the refugee exodus. Within eleven days of the annexation, President Franklin D. Roosevelt proposed an international conference, (1) to facilitate the emigration of refugees from Germany and Austria; and (2) to establish a new international organization to work for an overall solution to the refugee problem. A primary motivation for the United States Department of State, which had first suggested the conference, was to blunt pressures in the United States for more liberal immigration legislation. Roosevelt made it clear from the start that no country would be expected to change its present policies significantly. The United States, he pointed out, contemplated no increase in its immigration quotas; but the German and Austrian quotas --until then far undersubscribed--would soon be opened for full use.

From July 6 to 15, 1938, delegates from thirty-two countries (the United States, Great Britain, France, six smaller European democracies, Canada, the Latin American nations, Australia, and New Zealand) met at the French resort town of Evian. In the opening public speech of the conference, Myron C. Taylor, the American delegate, stated that the United States' contribution was to make the German and Austrian quota of 27,370 per year fully available. As the sessions proceeded, delegate after delegate excused his country from accepting additional refugees.

The British representative declared that the overseas British territories were already overcrowded, were not suited to European settlement, or were unable to accept many refugees because of political conditions. Some areas, such as parts of East Africa, might offer possibilities, but only for limited numbers. He excluded Palestine from the Evian discussion entirely. England itself, being fully populated and in the throes of the current unemployment problem, was not available for immigration. The delegate from France stated that his country would do what it could, but it had already reached "the extreme point of saturation as regards admission of refugees." The Belgian emissary reported that the same situation prevailed in his nation. The Netherlands could receive more immigrants only as refugees presently there moved on to lands of final settlement.

Australia could not encourage refugee immigration because, "as we have no real racial problem, we are not desirous of importing one." New Zealand's representative maintained that on account of economic problems, only a limited number could be accepted into his land. He went on to characterize the Evian Conference as a "modern 'wailing wall.' " Because of the depression, Canada had almost no room for immigrants. For the Latin American countries, unemployment was the main factor in the need to keep immigration at a low rate. The tiny Dominican Republic, one of the last countries to report, alone offered encouragement, volunteering to contribute large but unspecified areas for agricultural
An American news correspondent accurately reflected the tenor of the conference: "Myron C. Taylor opened proceedings: 'The time has come when governments ... must act and act promptly.' Most governments represented acted promptly by slamming their doors against Jewish refugees."

Before adjourning, the Evian Conference established the Intergovernmental Committee On Refugees (ICR) and commissioned it to negotiate on two fronts. One task was to "approach the governments of the countries of refuge with a view to developing opportunities for permanent settlement." The other step aimed at persuading Germany to cooperate in establishing "conditions of orderly emigration," which particularly meant to permit removal from the Reich of a reasonable amount of refugee property.

The ICR, however, received little authority and almost no funds or support from its member nations, and it had virtually no success in opening countries to refugees. The coming of war in September 1939 cut short its efforts to arrange with Germany for refugees to bring some property out with them, and the committee soon slipped into inactivity.

Many months before the demise of the ICR, it was evident that the Evian Conference had accomplished virtually nothing. Even as the conference closed, most observers agreed that it had failed in its main task, of finding places where the refugees could go. An immediate consequence of the conference was that it crushed the hopes of hundreds of thousands of European Jews, people who had been looking to the nations at Evian to save them from an increasingly impossible situation.

The Evian Conference stands in historical perspective as a critical turning point. At the conference the Western democracies made it clear that they were willing to do next to nothing for the Jews of Europe. Soon afterward, Kristallnacht, which took place in the autumn of 1938, signaled to the world that Jews could no longer live where the Nazis ruled. At Evian, the world had shown that it would not make room for those Jews. Thus 1938 became the crucial year in the coming of the Holocaust. By its end, the world knew the Jews had to leave. Germany was still pressing the Jews to leave, and the Jews themselves were now anxious to do so. But the world's doors, closed at Evian, remained shut throughout World War II.

In the midst of the Holocaust, the United States and Great Britain held another conference to consider helping the Jews of Europe. The delegates to the Bermuda Conference of April 1943 knew clearly that the Jews were being systematically exterminated. They too decided to do next to nothing.

**Further Readings**

**Bibliography**


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