

The Opening Public Session

In his statement, **Myron Taylor** explained the purpose of the Conference and urged the establishment of a permanent intergovernmental committee to deal with refugee problems:



“Some millions of people, as this meeting convenes, are, actually or potentially, without a country. The number is increasing daily. This increase is taking place, moreover, at a time when there is serious unemployment in many countries, when there is a shrinkage of subsistence bases and when the population of the world is at a peak.

Men and women of every race, creed and economic condition, of every profession and of every trade, are being uprooted from the homes where they have long been established and turned adrift without thought or care as to what will become of them or where they will go. A major forced migration is taking place, and the time has come when Governments – I refer specifically to those Governments which have had the problem of political refugees thrust upon them by the policies of some other Governments – must act, and act promptly and effectively in a long-range program of comprehensive scale [...]

You will have noted that my Government’s invitation to this meeting stated specifically that whatever action was recommended here should take place within the framework of the existing laws and practices of the participating Governments. The American Government prides itself upon the liberality of its existing laws and practices, both as regards the number of immigrants whom the United States receives every year for assimilation with its population and the treatment of those people when they have arrived. I might point out that the American Government has taken steps to consolidate both the German and the former Austrian quota, so that now a total of 27,370 immigrants may enter the United States on the German quota in one year...

The problem is no longer one of purely private concern. It is a problem for intergovernmental action. If the present currents of migration are permitted to continue to push anarchically upon the receiving States and if some Governments are to continue to toss large sections of their population lightly upon a distressed and unprepared world, then there is catastrophic human suffering ahead which can only result in general unrest and in general international strain which will not be conducive to the permanent appeasement to which all peoples earnestly aspire.”

Myron Taylor (1874–1959) was an American steel industrialist and a close friend of Roosevelt. Though not a member of Congress, he represented the USA at the Evian Conference. Between 1933 and 1938 the USA could have admitted 130,000 refugees from Germany without any change in its immigration Laws. Not more than one-fifth of the quota in the entire period has been admitted.

Mr. Taylor was followed by **Lord Winterton, the British delegate:**



“For His Majesty’s Government in the United Kingdom and for the British people, this problem is mainly a humanitarian one. It has been the traditional policy of successive British Governments to offer asylum to persons who, for political, racial or religious reasons, have had to leave their own countries. The United Kingdom has never yet had cause to regret this policy, and refugees have often enriched the life and contributed to the prosperity of the British people. But the United Kingdom is not a country of immigration. It is highly industrialized, fully populated and is still faced with the problem of unemployment. For economic and social reasons, the traditional policy of granting asylum can only be applied within narrow limits. [...]

Many overseas territories are already overcrowded, others are wholly or partly unsuitable for European settlement, while in others again local political conditions hinder or prevent any considerable immigration. These factors impose strict limitations on the opportunities for offering asylum to European refugees, but His Majesty’s Government are not unhopeful that some of their colonial territories may in their turn be able to take a part, if only a relatively minor part, in assisting to solve the problem. His majesty’s Government are, in particular, examining the possibility which may exist for settlement in certain of the East African territories. [...]

There is a second matter which cannot be ignored in considering this problem of emigration. This meeting will endeavour to find an orderly solution of the difficulties before it, but its tasks will be immeasurably complicated and even rendered insoluble unless the country of origin is prepared to make its contribution, and unless emigrants which other countries may be asked to accept have some means of self-support. No thickly populated country can be expected to accept persons who are deprived of their means of subsistence before they are able to enter it. Nor can the resources of private societies be expected to make good the losses which the emigrants have suffered. If countries of immigration are to do their best to facilitate the admission of emigrants, then they are entitled to expect that the country of origin, on its side, will equally assist in creating conditions in which the emigrants are able to start life in other countries with some prospect of success.”

In the opening session, the next speaker was **Senator Henri Bérenger**, French representative on the governing body of the High Commission for German Refugees, who had on several occasions defended the rights of religious and racial minorities in Geneva. Since 1933, he had also been involved in the work for the relief of refugees from Germany.



“France already takes part in the work of the Nansen Office, of the Office of the High Commissioner for German refugees, and of the League of Nations Committee. And it has been unanimously admitted that that part is a most active one. Thus, France continues to be true to the long-standing tradition of universal hospitality, which has characterised her throughout all her history. She will maintain this tradition so far as the limits laid down by her geographical position, her population and her resources permit. Though she has herself reached, if not already passed, the extreme point of saturation as regards admission of refugees, France understands the new effort proposed by President Roosevelt. [...]

Like America, France considers the refugee problem to be an international political problem, which can only be finally solved by the joint and collective action of the Governments of the world. In regard more particularly to German and Austrian refugees, France is prepared to discuss how their emigration can best be controlled and their settlement effected. There are various territorial, shipping, financial, monetary and social measures which will first have to be closely and carefully considered in executive sub-committees. That, it seems to me, should be the real object of our meeting here...”

Source: Salomon Adler-Rudel, The Evian Conference on the Refugee Question, in: Leo Baeck Institut Yearbook (1968), 235-276.