

Positions and arguments of the other delegates

Nearly twenty-five speakers participated, reading one by one statements referring to the particular character of their countries, existing immigration legislation, the necessity of negotiating with Germany concerning some kind of transfer of capital and belonging of the emigrants, and the fact that they were not in a position to make any commitment with regard to future immigration.

a. Positions of the European countries

(Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland)

Almost all countries were referring to the “tens of thousands” of refugees they had already admitted. Some were inflating the figures by reverting to refugees of WW1. Often economic reasons, also caused by the great depression, were listed, referring to the present situation that their country reached the point of saturation. Offers as the only possibility were transit visas for short periods, if the person is in the possession of immigration visas to overseas countries.

The **Swiss delegate, Dr. Heinrich Rothmund**, Chief of the Police Division in the Swiss Justice and Police Department, made an ambiguous statement: On the one hand, in Evian, he recurred to his country’s liberal tradition in receiving political refugees, but underscored the argument, that something had to be done “in order to protect Switzerland from the immense influx of Viennese Jews”; everyone would henceforth need a visa, the authorities in Vienna had to do something, and “Switzerland, which has as little use for these Jews as has Germany, will herself take measures to protect Switzerland from being swamped by Jews with the connivance of the Viennese police.” One the other hand, right after the conference, Rothmund pursued his negotiations with German authorities with the result, that German passports of Jews were marked with a big red “J”.

b. Positions of the British Commonwealth countries

(Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand and the United Kingdom, and also South Africa, Rhodesia)

Even if there were of course different backgrounds and argumentations during the conference, what these countries had in common was their huge areas of land that was sparsely populated. One sentence was conspicuous and revealed in an exaggerated way some ambivalences of the conference's atmosphere:

Lt. Colonel Thomas Walter White, the delegate of **Australia**, on the second public meeting on 7 July 1938 argued as follows:

“As we have no real racial problem, we are not desirous of importing one by encouraging any scheme of large-scale foreign migration...”

Even though Australia later softened its stance slightly and extended its quota after the so-called Kristallnacht in November 1938 when the Nazis burned Jewish synagogues and businesses; from previously 1,800 per year to 15,000 refugees over three years, White’s statement hints at the underlying feelings of Anti-Semitism at the conference.

The position of the **British Empire** has already been mentioned, the reflection in the British media can be summarized as follows:

“It [the British press] did not seem to see the difference between re-settlement and asylum, the fact that the choice was not between a difficult but fairly stable life under the Nazis and dependance on charity elsewhere, but between rescue and destruction. This inadequacy was partly a result of an innate incapacity to understand phenomena for which there was no modern European precedent. But it was also the result of something more practical, which cannot be too often repeated. It was the result of a conviction that the refugee was a danger to British standards of living.” Andrew Sharf, *The British Press and the Jews Under Nazi Rule*, London 1964

Before the conference, the USA and the UK had made a critical agreement: the British promised not to bring up the fact that the USA was not filling its immigration quotas, and any mention of Palestine as a possible destination for Jewish refugees was excluded from the agenda.

It was only on the last day of the conference and only because the importance of Palestine as a country of refuge was referred to so often at the meetings and hearings, that **Lord Winterton** felt the need to explain Britain's position by refusing that the whole question could be solved "if only the Gates of Palestine were thrown open to Jewish immigrants without restrictions of any kind. [...] First, Palestine is not a large country, and apart from that there are special considerations arising out of the terms of the mandate and out of the local situation which it is impossible to ignore."¹

c. Arguments of the bloc of the American Republics

Many of the delegates of the American states had difficulty to grasp the emergency-situation with which they were asked to deal in Evian. Most of them were still mainly agricultural countries and felt no need for German and Austrian "intellectuals and traders". There were great sympathies for the humanitarian efforts of Roosevelt, but most of them were pointing to existing laws and restrictions as obstacles to the admission of political refugees.

The only exception was the representative of the **Dominican Republic** [Virgilio Trujillo, brother of the dictator Rafael Trujillo], who hinted at possibilities for large-scale agricultural colonization:



"The Dominican Government, which for many years past has been encouraging and promoting the development of agriculture by appropriate measures and which gives ample immigration facilities to agriculturists who wish to settle in the country as colonists, would be prepared to make its contribution by granting especially advantageous concessions to Austrian and German exiles, agriculturists with an unimpeachable record who satisfy the conditions laid down by the Dominican legislation on immigration.

For colonisation purposes my Government has at its disposal large areas of fertile, well-irrigated land, excellent roads and a police force which preserves absolute order and guarantees the peace of the country. The Department of Agriculture could give colonists, in addition to land, seed and the technical advice which they need.

The Government which I have the honour to represent here would also be prepared to grant special conditions to professional men who, as recognised scientists, would be able through their teaching to render valuable service to their Dominican colleagues."

Another speaker, Mr. **Jesus Maria Yepes** from **Columbia**, deserves to be mentioned here for his courage in pointing to the roots of the problem [...] He was also the only one among the speakers who was warmly applauded when he addressed the Conference in the following words:

¹ By 1936 the increase in Jewish immigration and land acquisition, the growing power of Hajj Amin al Husayni, and general Arab frustration at the continuation of European rule, radicalized increasing numbers of Palestinian Arabs. Thus, in April 1936 an Arab attack on a Jewish bus led to a series of incidents that escalated into a major Palestinian rebellion. An Arab Higher Committee (AHC), a loose coalition of recently formed Arab political parties, was created. It declared a national strike in support of three basic demands: cessation of Jewish immigration, an end to all further land sales to the Jews, and the establishment of an Arab national government. See <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/History/riots36.html>

“Can a State, without upsetting the basis of our civilization, and, indeed, of all civilization, arbitrarily withdraw nationality from a whole class of its citizens, thereby making them Stateless Persons whom no country is compelled to receive on its territory? Can a State, acting in this way, flood other countries with the citizens of whom it wishes to get rid, and can it thrust upon others the consequences of an evil internal policy? The whole tragedy of these thousands of unfortunates who are bandied about from country to country, at the caprice of the alien police and exposed to the boorishness of frontier officials, the whole tragedy lies in the fact that this preliminary question was not settled in time. It would be useless for us today to find homes for the present political refugees and to hear the grievances – well-grounded, as I freely admit they are – of those who have come to voice their complaints before this modern Wailing Wall which the Evian Conference has now become. So long as the central problem is not decided we shall be doing merely ephemeral work, work that will last but a day and which will have to be begun over again tomorrow... The worst thing is that the bad example of the Old World may be copied in other continents, and the world will then become uninhabitable.”

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