The war years: A refuge. Part 1

Wars are very bad for the health of tourism, and so for the economic health of regions that depend on tourists – like Montreux and the Riviera. You can see from the hotel register of the Caux-Palace, how twice, in August 1914, and in September 1939, in the space of a few days, all the guests have left. With the outbreak of each of the World Wars, within a month all the staff have been laid off and the house is empty. It was now destined to become a place of refuge. A strange destiny for Caux, a place of luxury, a playground for the rich, an elite, in its glory years of the Belle Epoque, from its opening in 1902. At the start of this war that the hoteliers and everyone else hope will not last long, there was an unwillingness to welcome non-paying guests who might spoil the up-market reputation of the area. But quite quickly, opinions changed as the war dragged on, and soon the hotel-keepers were petitioning the federal and cantonal authorities to get some refugees to fill the empty hotel beds – while suggesting a bed-night tax to constitute a fund for publicity when these lower quality guests have gone!

If you turn right out of the front door of the Caux Palace and walk back towards the railway station, your eye reaches up to the snow-covered crest of the Dents du Midi. At the station, you can cross the lines – the trains from Montreux to the Rochers de Naye pass but once an hour, and from here you can look down to the end of the lake, the only bit of the Caux 'balcony' that isn't blocked by the massive old hotel. Turn back towards the station, and you may note a modest, inconspicuous plaque on the wall. It reads, 'To the people of Caux: this tablet is erected as a token of gratitude and remembrance from officers and men of the British Empire, escaped prisoners of war 1943-1944.' What fresh chapter of the building's story lies hidden behind those bare words?

In 1940, Switzerland became an armed island, surrounded by the Axis powers. The cliff face behind the Château de Chillon on the lake-side below Caux was hollowed out and fortified, becoming an important choke point in the plans for a national fortress in the Alps, designed to defeat a Nazi invasion. If you look carefully as you pass today you can still see signs of the well-camouflaged bunker within, and if you walk in the mountains further up the Rhône valley, you can come across more evidence of this massive defence effort around Saint-Maurice. In today's post-Cold War world, the Swiss Army is selling off surplus bunkers to those in search of holiday homes with reinforced concrete walls, tiny 'windows', and armoured steel doors.

At this distance after the events, there has been a major political and media debate over Switzerland's neutrality during the war, and the behaviour of its bankers. Her image has taken a savage battering. There was indeed a determined national will of the Swiss to defend their nation's neutrality, but there was also a profitable commerce with the Nazi powers – links and trade were inevitable, unavoidable and essential to survival. The Swiss are trying now to look more objectively at their history during the war, including their treatment of the tens of thousands of refugees trying to escape from the Nazis. Historians have been hard at work in more recently opened archives. Banking secrecy laws were lifted for an international commission of bankers and accountants. The Bergier commission (also known as the ICE, 'Independent Commission of Experts') was formed by the Swiss government on 12 December 1996 to examine this painful chapter in its entirety. It rendered its final report in 2002.

Some of the Jewish community have requested that there be an official memorial to the Jews who were turned back at Switzerland's frontiers, and who subsequently lost their lives in the concentration camps. In 1995, in a ceremony in the Swiss parliament marking the 50th anniversary of the end of the war in Europe, the Swiss President, Kaspar Villiger, made an official and public apology. In 1938, at the suggestion of the Swiss authorities, the German government started stamping the passports of German Jews with a 'J'. Villiger apologised to the Jewish community for this, while admitting that 'such an aberration is in the last resort inexcusable'.

Not all applauded the apology. One former President said that if Switzerland should apologise, then so should France for Napoleon's misdeeds. Several forgotten and unsung Swiss heroes have also been

remembered and honoured – better late than never – a police chief, a consul, and a Red Cross delegate, who all went outside the law or disobeyed orders to save lives, and who all paid a price for their courageous disobedience. Swiss historian André Lasserre, one of the experts on this period, quotes the credo of Colonel Eric Münch, the 'chef du service territorial'[1] and one of those responsible for the refugees : '*It is not enough to be just ; we must be good*,' and 'we can't change the refugees, we must accept them as they are'. Sadly though, Heinrich Rothmund, the chief of the Federal Police for Foreigners through the war period seems to have been clearly anti-Semitic. Yet it should not be forgotten that 295,000 refugees and escaped or interned prisoners of war did pass through this small beleaguered country during these war years, and did find a welcome refuge.[2]

The Caux-Palace played her part in this chapter of Switzerland and the region's history. The hotel closed after the summer season, and with the outbreak of war in September 1939 was moth-balled, like the ghostly fleets of ships and planes held in reserve in America for some future need, a war that we hope may never come. A strange sight it must have been, all the valuables stored away under lock and key. In May 1940, the board of the hotel company had hopes that the army might requisition the hotel for use as a hospital, or to house internees or refugees, but they were disappointed. The local newspaper noted that it would be a very quiet winter season, and asked why Caux wasn't being used to house war wounded.[3]

The minutes of the Commune (Municipalité des Planches) give some glimpses from this troubled period, alongside long-running local sagas like the building of public toilets in Glion. There is little about the war which seems very far away. Meanwhile the local newspaper seems to have been under censorship: there are full reports of the latest war news, from both sides, but with only the rarest mentions of internees or refugees in the area. At the end of 1941, the council decides, as in 1940, to exonerate the Caux Property Company of local taxes, given that the Palace has been closed throughout the whole year.[4]

In the autumn of 1942 we find the first references to Jewish refugees from Holland: 40 have been moved from Glion to the Hôtel Maria in Caux, and the Montreux (Planches) authorities ask the Glion and Caux village committees (Syndicats des Intérêts) whether they should approach the cantonal authorities to see if there are more refugees who could be housed in the empty hotels of the two villages.[5] They complain to the army a week later about the waste of time and money in twice preparing for the arrival of a fresh group of refugees in Glion that never turned up, but they are still keen to welcome further refugees in the two villages.[6] A month later, they have been told by the army authorities that the proximity to the national Alpine fortress makes housing refugees here out of the question, but they are determined to raise the question in the Cantonal Parliament, and to complain about 'the deplorable organisation of this department'. They agree again to exonerate the Caux Property Company of local taxes: 'the hotel is still closed'.[7]

The annual report of the municipality for 1942 notes that since the start of the war, 17 Montreux hotels, with over 1,500 beds, have been forced to close, with a further 9 hotels in the commune of Les Planches (where Caux is situated). The report also notes 'a camp for foreign refugees has been set up in Caux', but gives no further details.[8] There are further references to refugees interned in Chamby,

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[1] *'Frontières et camps: le refuge en Suisse de 1933 à 1945' by André LASSERRE, Payot, Lausanne, 1995, p.233, from a report dated 15.3.1944. The phrase underlined and in italics, is so marked in the original.*

[2] *Figures from LASSERRE.*

[3] *Journal de Montreux, 25th October 1939.*

[4] *Hand-written minutes of the Planches Municipality, 1st December 1941, p.11. Montreux Archives.*

[5] *Hand-written minutes of the Planches Municipality, 28th October 1942, p.74.*

[6] *Hand-written minutes of the Planches Municipality, 2nd November 1942, p.75.*

[7] *Hand-written minutes of the Planches Municipality, 14th December 1942, p.82.*

[8] *Montreux Archives, AA12, 1941-1945, Rapport de Gestion de la Municipalité des Planches, 1942, p.53 & 64.*

Les Avants, and to 'camps for interned political refugees' in Glion and Caux, but there is no hint of numbers, or the names of the hotels used to house them.[1] The local authorities however are keen to see if they can get a contingent of refugees for Montreux.

Then early in 1944, we find the army looking for accommodation for refugees, and the local authorities suggest the former Caux-Palace. In April they are talking about '385 English in the Palace from 8th May, with 35 more in the Maria or Alpina Hotels, and 45 Americans expected in Glion around the 26th'. A Major Matthey will be coming at the start of May to make an inventory of the Palace/ Esplanade (the two names are both used in the minutes).[2] Finally, on 8th May 1944, the Caux Palace is requisitioned by the Swiss authorities, and handed over to the army, who were responsible for the day-to-day running of the internment and then refugee camp that was set up in the shell of the old luxury hotel. An accounts ledger notes a first expenditure dated 20th April 1944 under 'expenditures resulting from the military occupation'. The Palace remained in the hands of the Swiss army until 10th July 1945 (according to the Caux Property Company's own damages claim).

In the early summer of 1944, some 300 French civilians from the area around Saint-Gingolph, the border village close to the mouth of the Rhône river, below Caux, fled across the border to the safety of Switzerland. They were fleeing savage reprisals following an attack by the resistance on the occupying Axis troops. It is possible that some of them were housed in the village of Caux – another 'guest' arriving a little later recalls being told this story,[3] and himself remembers hearing the firing from skirmishes just across the border, but the local paper only reports 170 refugees, mainly women and children, housed in the Hotel Belmont in Montreux.[4] The first 'wave' of guests who have left clear archival traces were allied prisoners of war who had escaped to Switzerland, along with some airmen who had come down over Switzerland. Ted Faulkes, from Albany in Western Australia, was one of those 'interned' in the Caux Palace during this period. He writes: 'It was certainly magnificent, especially after 15 months in Prison Camps. Before going to Caux we were housed in a disused factory in Wald in Canton Zürich. There we slept on loose straw on the floor.' Faulkes recalled spending his 22nd birthday down the hill in Glion.

He had been captured at El-Alamein in Egypt in July 1942 by the German forces under Field Marshal Erwin Rommel. They were kept under appalling conditions in the open desert until November 1942, before being shipped across to Italy. 'Our shirts and shorts which we'd had on for 5 months were rotting away,' he remembered. In August 1943 they heard the Germans were starting to move out all prisoners of war to Germany or Austria – the Allies had landed in Southern Italy, and then in early September, the Italian government changed sides in the war. In the last week of August Faulkes escaped with three friends and headed North, thinking that they might be able to hide out until the Allies arrived. But there was little food, so they decided to make for Switzerland, 'little realising how steep and rugged the mountains would get'. After six days in the Alps they came down the Saas Tal where a group of Swiss frontier guards pounced on them – they must have come over the Monte Moro Pass, an impressive 2'868 metres, from the Val Anzasca. 'They had been waiting in ambush for us, as they had seen us for hours coming down the mountain. At their billets they plied us with hot chocolate drinks and plenty of bread and cheese. We said to each other "We are back in civilisation at last." It was like coming home again,' Faulkes recalled.

In April 1944 Faulkes got to know an English couple who lived in Glion. They had lived in Switzerland for many years and were running a college in the village. They invited him to work for them in the college kitchen. After getting approval from the Swiss authorities, he was allowed to go. 'After I had been in Glion a few days I met some other English soldiers who were internees and they

[1] *Hand-written minutes of the Planches Municipality, 28th December 1942, p.84, 11th January 1943, p.86, 21st September & 27th September, p.123..*

[2] *Hand-written minutes of the Planches Municipality, 7th February 1944, p.144, 17th April, p.150.*

[3] *Letter to the author, from Ted Faulkes, Australian prisoner of war interned in Caux, dated 13th June 1994.*

[4] *Journal de Montreux, 24th July 1944.*

said they were living in the Palace Hotel at Caux which was the next train stop up the hill. When I had my ½ day off work I went up to Caux and was amazed at the size of it and also its beauty. There were English who had escaped from Germany and Austria, Polish soldiers, French and some American airmen who had been shot down over Germany near the Northern Swiss frontier and made their way into Switzerland.'

Faulkes concluded: 'As the American forces came up from the South of France, internees such as myself who were working in the vicinity were told to report back to the Palace Hotel so as to be ready for evacuation when the Americans arrived at the Swiss border. I went up to the Palace from Glion and had the pleasure of living there for about two weeks.' Then, on 23rd Sept. 1944 they were all taken to Geneva, where they were handed over at the border at Annemasse.[1] From there, they were taken to Marseilles, and Faulkes reached home in November 1944.

Like Faulkes, Ted Pearson, from Hoylake in Cheshire, UK, was also serving in the Western desert. An acting sergeant in the Royal Army Service Corps, he too escaped from Italy.[2] A series of stark communications that his wife received trace his journey to Switzerland, leaving everything to the imagination. She received a standard Army Form B. 104-83, informing her that her husband was posted as 'missing on 13.4.41', but that this 'does not necessarily mean that he has been killed, as he may be a prisoner of war or temporarily separated from his regiment'. A full month later, another B. 104-83A form tells her without emotion that 'Pearson, George Edward is a prisoner of war, camp not stated'. In August 1943, a further form announces that he has been transferred to 'P.O. 21 -P.M. 3300 ITALY'. A final copy of the same form, dated 5th November 1943, has 'is a prisoner of war' crossed out, and in its stead is written 'has arrived in Switzerland'.

A sprightly 80-year old when I met him, he told me how, with a French Canadian friend, he escaped from a train carrying them to Germany. The two of them found shelter with an Italian engineer and his wife. They said they wanted to get back to the British lines, but the Italian told them that their best bet was to head for Switzerland. They had to travel on crowded trains, with German soldiers all around them. At one station they noticed a poster offering a 10,000 lira reward for anyone helping to recapture escaped British prisoners. They wandered in the streets of one town between trains, but after a close encounter with a German patrol, they decided that they were safer waiting at the railway station among the throngs of German soldiers.

Their Italian friend's gardener was waiting for them near Como, and guided them up into the hills towards the Swiss border. Their experience paralleled that of Faulkes: 'All of a sudden, a Swiss soldier stepped out and stopped us.' His French Canadian companion mistook the soldier for a German, because of the shape of his helmet. 'They gave us a big bowl of hot chocolate and big piece of Emmental cheese. It was absolute heaven,' he recalled.

In Switzerland, he and his friend were separated – the soldiers of different countries were kept together, and the army men were held separately from the air force personnel. For six months he was billeted with a family in Schönengrund (Ar), after first complaining when he and his companions were housed in sheds where they caught lice: 'The British officers were all in hotels, and the men were sleeping in straw,' Pearson remembered. Then he found himself with a very nice German family, whose son was fighting on the Russian front; they had a photograph of him in uniform on the sideboard. He laughed. 'It was ridiculous, but we got on very well, because I spoke German. They looked after us very well. It was very nice there – we skied in the winter, there was lots of snow.' Later, he was moved to the French-speaking part of Switzerland, and with some 600 other soldiers, mainly from 'the Empire' as it was still then called, Pearson found himself in the Caux Palace Hotel.

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[1] *This date is confirmed in the Red Cross Archives, ACICR, G2.18. Memo dated 22.9.44. This was the first group of Allied POWs released.*

[2] *Interview with the author, 6th February, 1995.*

In Glion there were Royal Air Force and American air crew, and he met up again with the French Canadian friend with whom he had escaped.

In Caux there was a Swiss colonel with a few women clerks, but the prisoners cooked for themselves. They had beds, with proper sheets and blankets. There were lectures on Switzerland. There were also film shows, roller-skating, and rock climbing courses.[1] There were problems finding an adequate football pitch on this mountainside, and then the Americans in Glion wanted a baseball pitch. Pearson remembers watching gliders being launched off the top of the Rochers de Naye with a great elastic rope. 'We used to walk along those lovely mountain tracks.' The minutes of the Commune also record work parties, with 70 volunteers working on a ski run, the piste de l'Ange, with the railway company carrying them for free, up the mountain at 7 in the morning – we're in Switzerland all right – and back at 13.00.[2] There is a reference to a file of unspecified complaints about their behaviour.[3]

They were allowed to travel freely in the area, and they even got vouchers for the odd meal out. He recalls that those who'd 'had a bit of fun down town' had 'quite a task getting up that terrible mountain again'. He was in Switzerland for a year to the day. He remembers lying in bed listening to the radio, to a German station, and hearing that allied troops had landed in the South of France. 'We won't be here much longer,' he thought. The day after the Americans troops reached Swiss border they were on their way home. It all happened in a mad rush, but there was enough time for him to borrow some money, and buy his wife the Swiss watch that she was still wearing when we met. He repaid his debt after returning to England, but remembered with amazement that they trusted him enough to advance the cash. He recalled a ceremony to set up the commemorative plaque at the station. 'I can remember that there was a Swiss officer was there, the British officer, and myself, quite a lot of the men,' he said.

The Federal Archives give a few glimpses of the wartime life. An unfortunate RAF Flight Lieutenant from Glion goes missing again, but the officer in charge notes that it's more a problem for the psychiatrist than the police. There's a sudden thunder storm, and the internees in the former Caux Palace fail to close the windows, 18 are left open and several broken, while the floors and ceilings are damaged by the rain. M. Auberson, the Swiss guardian of the hotel complains to the Swiss army that he has been threatened, and that the escaped prisoners of war are wild men. He expresses the opinion that a good number of them must have been taken out of the Empire's prisons to go to war! There is a sense of pre-war Swiss order desperately trying to impose itself on the chaos spilling in from outside. But after the soldiers leave, the local authorities are still keen to undertake approaches 'so that they are replaced by other prisoners of war'.[4] Nevertheless, civilian refugees who have the means should be allowed and encouraged to stay in the local hotels.[5]

The Commune's end-of-year report notes, 'Despite increasing difficulties in every field, Switzerland has managed to survive... Tourism, on which the prosperity of Montreux depends, has made a very modest come-back, though it continues to suffer from the lack of foreign guests.' The hotels that have been closed, the report continues, have been taken over since the autumn to house interned soldiers and then to serve as refugee camps. 'Though the financial resources of the refugees are minimal, their presence in Montreux has nevertheless produced an upturn in business, with positive effects for the local economy,'[6] and adds that there has been a significant increase in the number of civilian refugees during the course of the year.

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[1] *Swiss Federal Archives files in Bern, E27 and E5791.*

[2] *Hand-written minutes of the Planches Municipality, 3rd July 1944, p.159.*

[3] *Hand-written minutes of the Planches Municipality, 21st August 1944, p.166.*

[4] *Hand-written minutes of the Planches Municipality, 19th September 1944, p.170.*

[5] *Hand-written minutes of the Planches Municipality, 11th October 1944, p.173.*

[6] *Montreux Archives, AA12, 1941-1945, Rapport de Gestion de la Municipalité des Planches, 1944, p.53 & 59.*

The International Committee of the Red Cross[1] record three internment camps being opened in Caux on 23rd October 1944, in the Regina (formerly the Grand Hotel), in the Esplanade (the former Caux Palace), and a hospital in the Maria. The previous day, the local authorities note that '1,200 civilian refugees will shortly be placed in the hotels of Caux, but the Hotel Bellevue (in Montreux) is reserved for military internees'.[2] Ten days later, the Commune is stressing that the food for the refugees should if possible be bought locally – through all the records of the local archives, humanitarian motives are less apparent than the needs of the local economy. Nineteen large soup kettles have been supplied by the Commune, but the army should refund them.[3] Ten days later, they have been in touch with one of Rothmund's collaborators in Bern, to discover that there is a possibility of a further 500 Hungarian Jews being sent, out of a reported total of a further 13'500 refugees that the Swiss authorities expect to welcome.[4]

A report from a delegate of the Red Cross records his visit on 7th November.[5] On that date, the Esplanade housed 1,086 persons (922 men, 138 women, and 26 children), of Italian and French nationality, mostly Catholics, by religious denomination. There were 1,600 refugees in all in the village. Twenty beds in the old Palace were reserved for those in quarantine. A priest offered regular church services in a chapel temporarily installed in the concert hall/ball room. There was a second-hand clothes store, a police office and a little shop selling newspapers and tobacco in the entrance hall. The food was cooked over wood fires. On the ground floor, the rooms giving directly into the garden were reserved for children's games.

A third wave of 'tourists' in Caux were Jews, released by the Nazis, after negotiations with Adolf Eichmann himself, in a bizarre and little-known attempt to set up a profitable commerce in Jewish lives. Perhaps these Nazis saw the way the winds of war were turning, and hoped to build up a modest capital of humanitarian credit and/or funds to disappear with. It is one of the most extraordinary episodes in the nightmare of radical evil that was the Shoah. The refugees were to stay in Caux until they were able to return home or travel further – to Palestine or elsewhere. The arrival in Switzerland of these groups marked a major turning point in Swiss government policy: up until then, the administration had tried to treat each case on an individual basis. The tide of the war was decisively changing, and as Lasserre notes, the Swiss government was increasingly aware of the Allies mistrust for a Swiss neutrality that 'had not stopped them from excessively favouring German interests'.[6] International law did not at this time recognise the crime of genocide, or that an entire race could be a category at risk, but for the first time, the threatened groups' interests outweighed the Swiss fear of overpopulation by foreigners.

The Swiss authorities decided to accept some 12,000 Jews, but they were unready to pay the bribes or ransom that the SS and the Gestapo hoped for. The authorities did all that they could to keep the refugees out of touch with the civilian population – there was considerable fear of Switzerland being overwhelmed by the flood tides of humanity in misery, and fears that the Swiss population would react to the competition for jobs in a situation that threatened unemployment if the refugees were encouraged to put down roots in their temporary home. They were clearly given to understand that they should leave Switzerland again as soon as possible – one of the arguments being given was that they would make room for further waves of refugees. The village of Caux, with its hotels, had been conceived as a world apart: it was ideal.

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[1] *Archives du CICR, G3.225.53A1, rapport de visite du Dr Emile Exchaquet, délégué, daté 7.11.44.*

[2] *Hand-written minutes of the Planches Municipality, 22nd October 1944, p.175.*

[3] *Hand-written minutes of the Planches Municipality, 1st November 1944, p.176.*

[4] *Hand-written minutes of the Planches Municipality, 10th November 1944, p.177.*

[5] *Archives du CICR, G3.225.53A1, rapport de visite du Dr Emile Exchaquet, délégué, daté 7.11.44.*

[6] *LASSERRE, p. 208*

There is a certain ambiguity in the discussions of the local authorities: with so many hotels empty and closed, rather welcome refugees than have no clients at all. But there is the danger that such a class of client will scare away paying guests of the pre-war sort. The Princess of Piedmont is now staying at the Hôtel des Alpes in Glion, so no refugees in that village, please.[1] The superior authorities (the Canton or the Confederation) should impose a bed-night tax on refugees, so that the region can build up a fund in order to make some publicity when the refugees finally leave![2] There should be a daily per capita contribution by the Confederation to cover the costs of refugee children in local schools – there are 9 in February 1945, but by the end of April, there are more than 80. The number of refugees also put an added strain on the garbage removal services.[3] Each refugee should be called to appear before the 'foreigners' office' in Vevey, to be sure that they have paid all their local taxes before they leave, another minute coldly records.[4]

Swiss historian André Lasserre records a first group of Jews arriving in Basel from Bergen-Belsen, abandoned at the frontier by the Gestapo with scarcely any warning on 22nd August 1944.[5] Heinrich Rothmund, the Swiss responsible for the administration of the Confederation's refugee policy called for an official protest to the Germans, but the Federal government declined. In December, a further group was released, and contrary to the standard wartime practice of separating the women, the men and the children into different camps, they were all housed in the two big hotels in Caux as one large group.

These Jews were not released from the camps by the arriving, liberating Allied troops, but delivered by the SS, as a proof of their 'good faith' as part of a vast complex of secret negotiations aimed at exchanging Jews for either cash or goods to help the German war effort. A Romanian Jew, Kasztner, was the key player in this complex 'game'. According to Yehuda Bauer[6], the author of *Jews for Sale? Nazi-Jewish Negotiations, 1933-1945*, Himmler saw no contradiction between his Nazi convictions and his desire to murder Jews, and a readiness to make tactical concessions that could bring advantages for himself or Germany.

Rudolf Rezsô Israel Kastner (or Kasztner), a Transylvanian Jew, is the principal actor of this amazing and little-known chapter. A strange and controversial character, he was a brilliant young lawyer, sure of himself, perhaps a little arrogant, a lady's man. Hungary was allied to Germany, but it was the last country in the Nazi orbit to start applying the anti-Semitic laws and the 'Final Solution'. So in 1944, there were Jews from all over Europe in Hungary and in Budapest. And that was where Kasztner started negotiating with the devil himself: Adolf Eichmann. Himmler, Eichmann's SS boss, along with other leading Nazis, could by then see the writing on the wall: the Second Reich was fast heading for disaster and defeat; some were trying to prepare their futures. We will never know all that went on in those chaotic months, nor be able to weigh the motives of all those involved. Some Jews were able to buy their safety, and Kasztner played on the Nazi fantasy of Jewish wealth, of a nebulous world power that could provide cash and trucks and oil...

Kasztner was a tragic figure, aware of the scale and horror of what was going on, but unable to convince the Allies, the Swiss authorities or the international Jewish community to support this trade in human lives. In July 1944, he wrote in a desperate letter to a Jewish colleague in Geneva : 'The dream of the big plan is finished ; the hundreds of thousands went to Auschwitz in such a way that they were not conscious until the last moment what it was all about and what was happening. We who

[1] *Hand-written minutes of the Planches Municipality, 20th November 1944, p.181.*

[2] *Hand-written minutes of the Planches Municipality, 26th December 1944, p.189.*

[3] *Hand-written minutes of the Planches Municipality, 19th February 1945, p.197, 30th April, p.207.*

[4] *Hand-written minutes of the Planches Municipality, 19th July 1945, p.219.*

[5] *'Revue Suisse d'Histoire', an article by André LASSERRE, Vol.40, 1990, pp.307-317.*

[6] *This section is based on 'Jews for Sale? Nazi-Jewish Negotiations, 1933-1945' by Yehuda BAUER, Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 1994.*

did know tried to act against it, but after three and a half months of bitter fighting I must state that it was more like watching the unfolding of a tragedy and its unstoppable progress, without our being able to do anything of importance to prevent it.'[1] Through the spring and summer of 1944 in a meticulously planned and executed operation some 475,000 Jews were deported from Hungary to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Four trains a day, 3,000 people per train, 12,000 a day, seven days a week, most to die within a day of arrival. And this at a time when the German army was engaged in Homeric struggles with the Red Army on the Eastern Front. Precious scarce resources that could have been supporting the war effort and evacuating the German wounded were diverted to this massive programme of murder.

Adolf Eichmann offered to allow a train-load of Jews from Budapest to leave for Spain – demanding first $200 then $500 a head. Kasztner hoped that this first train would be followed by others. It might be a Nazi trick, but to convince other Jews, he put his own family on the train. 150 rich Jews bought their places, but the vast majority couldn't pay for themselves. 'In the end, 1,684 persons took the train, and it was indeed, as was said at the time, a Noah's ark.' Representatives of all communities, trends, opinions, ages, and origins were included on the train, anti-Zionists and Zionists, Polish, Slovak, Romanian and Hungarian Jews. The train left Budapest on 30th June. Rail traffic through France was already close to impossible – the Allies had already landed in Normandy – and the train was diverted to Bergen-Belsen. They were housed in a part of the camp reserved for hostages, and so treated relatively well, were allowed to keep their own clothes and didn't do forced labour.

Bauer notes that after the war, Kasztner was accused of failing to warn people of the deportations, and secondly of saving his own family and friends – but he rejects both these charges. Kasztner himself estimated that his efforts had saved another 18,000-20,000 Jews. Bauer continues, 'The release of a trainload of Jews makes sense if we combine it with the hesitant steps taken by Himmler two months later in Switzerland to start negotiations with people whom he thought were representatives of World Jewry... Given a Nazi empire in deep trouble militarily, the principle of total murder could be bent if the passengers of that Noah's ark landed in Switzerland and were not shipped from Bergen-Belsen to Auschwitz.'[2]

Here another shadowy character enters the story: Saly Mayer, a Swiss citizen, with contacts with the US administration, and international Jewish organisations. He was forbidden to offer ransom payments or goods, but to save lives, entered into a game of bluff with the Nazis. On 21st August 1944, in the middle of the border bridge at Saint Margarethen, Mayer met with Kasztner and three senior SS officers. The Nazis brought with them 318 (Lasserre talks of 320) of the Kasztner train-load from Bergen-Belsen, and asked for 10,000 trucks and agricultural machinery in exchange for further releases of Jews. Negotiations continued, but the truth was that Kasztner and Mayer couldn't deliver either the goods or the millions that the Nazis demanded. Kasztner argued that the continued imprisonment of the Bergen-Belsen transport was to blame for the problems that he was having in releasing further funds. On 6th December, the remaining 1,368 Jews of the Kasztner train from Bergen-Belsen crossed the border into Switzerland (Lasserre talks of 1,352 Jews), with SS demands that they be paid the further 15 million Swiss francs that they'd been promised.

The Federal Archives in Bern refer to Hungarian civilian refugees: on the 29th of December 1944, there were 894 refugees and 92 army personnel in the house. There are complaints about the food, and quarrels about the allocation on the rooms, vandalism, and moving furniture without permission. Light bulbs, sheets and blankets go missing. An army report notes that since these refugees were special guests of the Federal Government, they were to receive rather special treatment, and were at first allowed to organise themselves. But after a fortnight of chaos, the army were forced to take over the running of the camp, and re-impose a just distribution of the rooms, 'almost provoking a

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[1] *op. cit. p.196*

[2] *op. cit. p.200*

revolution'.[1] The local authorities also report a file of complaints transmitted to the police.[2] There are considerable problems with the heating. The officer in charge (a Major Imobersteg) complains that before the war it took 5,000 kilos of coke daily to heat the house; now they have to make do with peat, and the temperature barely reaches 13-14 degrees...

Dr Emile Exchaquet, the extremely busy Red Cross delegate responsible for visits to the civilian internees and refugees in Switzerland, came to the Caux camp five times, and reported the ups and downs of camp life. On his first visit, he notes that although the camp has only been in operation for a few days, 'given the perfection of the installations, it's ideal, especially for pregnant women, small children and the sick'.[3] The internees receive the same rations as the civilian population, and the only work they have to do is cleaning the house, and helping to prepare the vegetables for the meals. He judges the complaints about the quality of the food to be unfounded. Then there's a complaint following an accident where a refugee, Barbara Denes, has her finger crushed in a door, and her husband insists that it is the deliberate anti-Semitic act of one of the staff.[4] Exchaquet talks of ill-will and bad faith, but in two memos written in February 1945, he notes a marked improvement in the atmosphere – the army commandants in Caux and in some of the other camps 'have shown themselves incapable, or useless', but Colonel Curchod, the new commandant in Caux is a great improvement, 'elderly, he shows great interest in his work, he's extremely courteous and shows the greatest concern for the refugees'. This has created 'a spirit of trust on their side, and the desire to find a modus vivendi satisfactory to both parties'. There is a committee to represent the refugees with the authorities, and it's working well.

In the seemingly sterile atmosphere of archives, names speak down the years of the sufferings not of an anonymous mass but of individuals. In the Red Cross Archives, you can read the faded letters of mothers searching for their sons, or trying to get them freed from camps, of wives searching for husbands. I have in front of me a photocopied certificate, shown long after the war by one of the 'guests' of the Caux-Palace who came back with some of his family for a visit. Dated 21st January 1945, it is signed by the Commandant of the 'Esplanade civilian refugee camp', Col. Curchod. It is made out in the names of Dionis and Sophie Ladany, and their children Susanne, then aged 13, Paul, 9, and Martha, 4, 'arrived in Switzerland 7th December 1944, from the German concentration camp of Bergen-Belsen, declaring themselves to be of Yugoslav nationality, Jewish by religion, and claiming to have no financial resources'. Professor Shaul Ladany, when I first met him a professor of Industrial Engineering and Management at the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev in Israel, twice represented his country at the Olympics, surviving the Palestinian terrorist attack in Munich that left 11 of his fellow-athletes dead. He still holds the world record for the 50 kilometre walk. He was 8 years old when he arrived in Switzerland with his parents and sisters. They had been four days on the train, and one stop was so long that the rumour spread that they were being turned around and taken back to Bergen-Belsen.[5]

They didn't immediately realise that they had crossed the border; the men in blue-grey uniforms who came through the train spoke German, but they were pleasant and polite. It was the first time that the young Shaul had heard German from people in uniforms not shouting and not giving orders. Then they all received a cup of cocoa, and the children got a piece of chocolate. 'We had arrived in paradise,' Ladany thought. After a stop for showers in St. Gallen, they were all taken on to Caux, to the grand old hotel, where they were crammed into the bedrooms on camp beds. 'We were very happy, and we children played wildly in the snow,' he recalled.

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[1] *Archives du CICR,G2.21, a report dated 3.1.45 of an inspection 27/28.12.44.*

[2] *Hand-written minutes of the Planches Municipality, 3rd April 1945, p.203.*

[3] *Archives du CICR,G3.225.53A1, a memo from Exchaquet to Col.P.E.Martin of the ICRC, dated 9.11.44.*

[4] *Archives du CICR,G3.225.53A1, report by Exchaquet to Col.P.E.Martin of the ICRC, dated 12.3.45.*

[5] *From a letter to the author, dated 31st January 1996, with a translation of extracts from Ladany's autobiographical account in Hebrew.*

Ladany's father, a research chemist, had been able to smuggle out some money into a Swiss bank account before the war, and since he could prove that he could look after himself, he and his family were exceptionally allowed out. The father was allowed to do unpaid research work in Basel – once he had repaid in full a bill from the Swiss authorities covering all their expenses, including the rail fare from the border, the cups of cocoa, and the pieces of chocolate, Ladany claims.

In 2008, on another visit to Caux, Ladany wrote in the visitors' book in the CAUX-Expo, the little museum in the Caux Palace, 'For some reason – probably clear to psychologists – whenever I get to visit Switzerland, some inner power draws me here, to "Hotel Esplanade". Yes, here, after a long Odyssey, and a lot of hunger and suffering, and just after being released from Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, it was the first time that I felt happiness of a free and joyful childhood. I am always upset and happy when I visit this place.' In conversation with me, he used a phrase that always deeply moves me: 'Caux was the first time in my life that I could be a child.'

In July 1981, a couple called Salomon timidly asked if they could visit the house where they had been housed at the end of the war. They too had been deported to Bergen-Belsen from Hungary. He had been 19, she 13, from a wealthy family. Since he was so hungry, in Caux he had volunteered to work in the kitchen. He recalled lighting the wood fires at 4 in the morning to heat the cocoa for breakfast. Some 80% of the Jews in Caux were able to emigrate to Israel. There the two of them had married and raised a family. 'We wanted to come back and see where God had touched our lives,' they said.[1]

There are other snippets of this chapter of Caux's history in the Expo guest book, dated 26.12.2003, and written in Hebrew: 'Today I am closing a circle. My parents, my brother, uncle and cousins, members of the Kuders and Stainer families, lived here as refugees, after being in Bergen-Belzen camp, and arrived here 59 years ago on 12/1944. They lived in Hotel Regina up on the hill and stayed there until 8/1945. My parents are not with us anymore, but I am here with my husband Alik Baner, and in the name of all my family, we entered the room where they stayed and went down on the stairs where my brother Gabi Kedar and my cousin Dr. Rachel Har-Even ran up and down as 3-year-old children. Everything is so exiting. I am proud to be the second generation of survivors of the 'Kestner Train', and in my view and others, the only man – Jew – that did something to rescue Jews during that horrible war. For that, he will be remembered. Zehava Kuders-Baner, Haifa-Israel.'

And a few pages further on: 'These words are devoted to the memory of my parents and my family, with great thanks to Kastner, that if not his action I was not be born. I am Rachel Har-Even-Stainer born in Budapest. Together with my parents and my sister Hanna Winter we here transported to Bergen-Belzen. From there we were where rescued by Kastner and arrived here in December 1944. We stayed here in Hotel Regina for almost half a year.' And, 'I was here, as a baby, about 2 years old, in 1944-'45, among the Jews who had come from Bergen-Belzen as refugees and survivors. Now I am here, pride to be Jewish and Israeli, sorry about so many losses created by extreme evil of the Nazis, and hopeful for a better world to emerge. Naomi (Noemi Waldmann) Kasher.'

In 2002, one hundred years to the day from the official opening banquet of the Caux-Palace Hotel, Egon Mayer, a professor of sociology in New York, and director of a centre for Jewish studies, who was born in Caux in December 1944, spoke at a round-table on 'Learning from the past for the sake of the future'. 'No, my parents were not here on some poorly planned skiing vacation,' he joked, going on to detail the amazing tale of how some 1,600 Jews found shelter in the former luxury hotel. He spoke of 'that small bridge from the darkness of the Holocaust on one side to the light of freedom on the other,' between Switzerland and Germany. He concluded, 'For my family and me, and by now thousands of Jews the world over whose parents and grandparents found safe haven in this place, Caux was and will always remain that magical place amidst Alpine peaks where salvation was found.

[1] *Notes from Lucie Perrenoud, dated 17th August 1981.*

May the work of this centre for Initiatives of Change continue to hold out hope to others in distress today that we found here in the foreboding years of 1944-1945.'

Elisabeth du Pasquier, a grand-daughter of the Dr. Chatelanat who with Ami Chessex was one of the pioneering hoteliers in the region, was one of the Swiss mobilised to look after this flood of Jewish refugees. With ten other women, she was responsible for looking after some 4,000 in the Hotel Belmont in Montreux. She heard that some had refused to join the transports heading for Switzerland, fearing that the story was a lie and that they would be taken to an extermination camp instead. On the train, the Nazis had given them bread rolls, but forbidden them to eat, so that when they arrived in Switzerland, the Swiss would have the impression that they hadn't been too badly treated. The local newspaper, in February 1945, headlines '1,200 civilians coming from Germany' from the Theresienstadt concentration camp.[1] These Jews have been released, the paper says, thanks to the efforts of former Federal Cabinet Minister Musy, who told Von Steiger, the President of the Confederation, that he had personally negotiated with Himmler himself. Musy had been working on behalf of the European Executive Committee of the Union of Orthodox Rabbis in the United States, and 'Agudas Israel'. Five or six hundred are Dutch Jews, the rest from a wide range of countries, and further groups of refugees are expected.

In early 1945, from 25th February to 1st March, a national refugee's conference took place in Montreux, including those responsible for the administration of the camps, but also including delegates of the refugees themselves. This represented a major shift in attitude. The Montreux newspaper reports this conference at some length, but makes no mention of the fact that refugees resident in the area were taking part. The conference, according to the journalist, is a complete success, and 'the whole of Montreux is happy to play a part in this work of reconstruction'. Rothmund, the head of the Federal Police Department responsible for refugees is present, and with notable insensitivity offers 'a detailed picture of the flow of foreigners into Switzerland, and the measures taken by the Federal Police over the last 25 years to reduce it'.[2] Is he still unaware that most of those turned back at the frontier, or later arrested in Switzerland and handed over at the border by his services and on his orders are now dead and cremated? But a spokesperson for the refugees expresses their gratitude to the region, and the journalist reports – the first public reference – that Montreux, with its population of some 16,000 inhabitants, is sheltering nearly 4,000 refugees.

At a later meeting at the end of April, the representative of the Bergen-Belsen Jews noted with some bitterness that if they were forced to leave against their will – there was talk of sending them to a transit camp at Philippeville in French Algeria – 'that our destiny as Jews is decided, as previously, toughly and without mercy, on the free soil of Switzerland as well'. They threaten to resist what they see as a new deportation, and demand to be treated as free subjects, not as objects. 'We demand justice,' they wrote.[3] The first groups only left for Palestine in May and August of 1945, in part because of problems with travel papers and plans – the British authorities were not at all keen to encourage further emigration. Some of the refugees were waiting to see how events would turn out with a view to returning to Hungary or the countries of Europe where they might still have friends or family. Finally in August 1945, Exchaquet notes that 'the resort of Caux will be empty again', and that 167 occupants will leave by the end of the month for Palestine, and a further 160 will be transferred to Champéry. The Esplanade had already been closed again on 20th July, he notes.[4] It is only at the end of April 1945 that I have found the first mention in the local press of the existence of Nazi extermination camps.[5]

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[1] *Journal de Montreux, 8th February 1945.*

[2] *Journal de Montreux, 28th February 1945.*

[3] *LASSERRE, p.316.*

[4] *Archives du CICR,G2.21, report 180, dated 6.8.45.*

[5] *Journal de Montreux, 23rd April 1945.*

Kasztner was reunited with his wife and father-in-law in Caux – and there was a party to thank him and celebrate. There is a tragic end to this tale. After the war, Kasztner emigrated to Israel in 1947. There he was accused of being a corrupt traitor to the Jewish cause, and in 1957, he was assassinated by right-wing extremists. A happier footnote – or perhaps it is just part of the continuing story of the old lady on the mountain – was added in 1997 when a tree was planted on the terrace of the Caux-Palace during an 'hour of remembrance'. Parts of this history above were related. Rev. Heinrich Rusterholz, President of the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches acknowledged his 'feelings of immense shame, deep mourning and helpless anger about the fact that people were turned away at the border to certain death' just across the Lake of Geneva from Caux and Montreux. People have a self-justifying side and a side that fights for justice, Rusterholz went on, admitting that he saw both tendencies in himself. He warned that people and nations harm themselves if they play off one side against the other, 'especially if there is a strong emphasis on the self-justifying side. That is why I cannot remain silent. I want our country to accept both the light and the shadows of our history. Any attempt to bargain over the amount of guilt denigrates those who were sent into darkness and death. This kind of comparing and calculating strangles justice and kills love.' The Swiss reformed churches were committed to a continuing dialogue with the Swiss Jewish community, he said.

American Rabbi Marc Gopin referred to the accusations against Switzerland. The Swiss had 'a strong sense of being a singled out, shamed victim'. Jews had had a similar feeling over the past 1,400 years, Gopin said. 'Many Israelis today feel the same way as the Swiss right now, about the establishment of the Israeli state: they know there were things in 1948 which they do not want to talk about, but they also know that most of them did not do those things, and that they themselves were victims. This can help us to think about how we all get past the ways that we collectively assassinate each other.' Gopin hoped that the 'conversation' on such issues could continue and widen, 'even as people who were victims deservedly get reparations for what they went through'.

He continued, 'For me it is important to realise that the strange relationship between the Jews and Christians since the third and fourth centuries is not unique. The way in which majorities and minorities relate to each other, and the way persecution is passed on, is something we see around the world. It often has to do with a deflection onto the other person, the other group, of the things that you dislike most about yourself.' He warned that 'sometimes the process of both feeling victimised and accusing the other is so intense that it becomes one's identity.' His people had now gone through fifty years from the worst moment in their history to military and economic success, but 'we are not a happy people inside', he said. 'We need the rest of the world to help us out of the hell that is still going on inside since the Holocaust.' He saw the Christian-Jewish rift as 'one of the deepest and darkest of European society'. It needed to be transformed on a deep level, 'not an official level, not on the level of rights or politics, but on a level of spiritual faith'. If not, European culture would repeat its mistakes and these would 'continue to be a poison unless we heal this rift, and understand the mistakes of past centuries and move beyond them'.

The duty of remembrance, and refugees past and present were recalled in Caux again in 1999. A plaque was installed at the foot of an oak tree planted in 1997 to mark the Jews who had been housed in the Caux-Palace in 1944 – and in memory of those who were turned back at the frontier. The simple plaque looks out over the breath-taking view over the Lake of Geneva to the Franco-Swiss pre-Alps. The text on the plaque reads: 'In remembrance of the Jewish refugees who stayed here, and of those who were not admitted to enter Switzerland during World War II. We shall not forget.' The youngest of those turned away that we can find a trace of was a girl of five who was gassed 48 hours later in Auschwitz.

Claude Ruey, the President of the Vaud Cantonal Government sent a message as he was unable to attend in person: he was held up by a press conference on the sadly still recurrent problem of refugees. Ruey described memory as 'one of the most noble, the highest virtues of man'. Speaking to the Jewish people, he stressed that theirs was 'a destiny so exceptional, so cruel, that it now belonged, like an emblem, to all mankind. A destiny that had left deep and terrible marks on our history, despite monstrous and dishonest attempts' to blur or deny it.

History needed to be looked straight in the face, without blinking, Ruey went on. The duty to remember was ‘a painful virtue for the Swiss’. The past should not be recalled in order to condemn the present, but the memory of the elders ‘should serve to instruct the younger generations’. The Canton of Vaud would not prove lacking in the courage to do this. For him, the past revealed both the grandeur and the weakness of mankind, ‘the mean and contemptible behaviour of some; the courageous, determined and uncompromising actions of others’. He concluded, ‘Truth is a constant quest, made up of looking ahead and of memory.’

The Mayor of Montreux, Pierre Salvi, spoke, noting that in early 1945, his town, with its population of 16,000 inhabitants had sheltered 4,000 wounded, deported and refugees, including those Jews housed in the Caux-Palace. It was important to face past wrongs, he went on. ‘Mankind is inclined to forget, and so repeat past errors,’ he continued, but one shouldn’t surrender to discouragement. Today the region again sheltered several hundred refugees. He wished the Caux conferences success, and described their aims as: ‘Healing the wounds of the past, and so allowing us to envisage a more peaceful future of tolerance, forgiveness, of amity between peoples. All of us are concerned.’

In the words of the organisers of the event, ‘the installation of the commemorative plaque and the modest ceremony are an expression of the desire to learn the lessons from the past and build a shared future less weighed down with the baggage past’. One of the Protestant church ministers from the parish of Montreux, Olivier Fonjallaz, read a prayer, and one of the organisers read Psalm 70 at the request of Rabbi Hervé Krief, from Lausanne, who was unable to attend in person. Also present were participants at a conference entitled: ‘A Conversation on aims and values for the 21st century’. In solidarity with the refugees of today, representatives of the five continents lit candles.

The Swiss pioneers of the Moral Re-Armament/Initiatives of Change conference centre in 1946 were struck by the poor state in which the refugees left the old hotel that had given them shelter, though Elisabeth du Pasquier blames equally the Swiss soldiers responsible for the camp. One of the first articles in 1946 about the new conference centre talks bluntly about the ‘deplorable state of the building’, the ‘indescribable filth’. ‘The refugees used the furnishings as fire-wood, tore up planks from the floor, smashed doors... in short showed by their behaviour their lack of gratitude and indeed their unworthiness of our country’s hospitality.’[1] Lasserre remarks with more justice that the Swiss authorities in the war years were confronted with deeply disturbed people who had only survived by breaking the laws (of an unjust, evil system) and ignoring normal rules of morality. Moreover, then as now, it was all too easy for newcomers to have illusions about the freedom and comfort that they might enjoy in Switzerland. Indeed, Swiss efforts to impose order on the new arrivals might for them have echoes of the ‘bureaucratic depersonalisation and the rigidities of an anonymous discipline that recalled other camps’.[2]

Lasserre goes on to comment on the change of tone he finds in the closing months of the war in *Über die Grentzen* (‘Across the Borders’), the monthly magazine produced by and for the refugees in Switzerland, a change that strangely prefigures the new destiny that the Caux Palace was about to find. The magazine ‘looks towards a different future, one that is hardly Swiss at all. It is rooted in trust in peace and a reconciliation between peoples across the frontiers that have caused their ruin. At long last, hope returns. The approaching end of the war helps them to turn their minds towards repatriation or lasting immigration to a country as yet not decided. It is no longer enough to entertain after absorbing manual work, but they must needs morally re-arm themselves for a difficult future.’[3]

There is one major unresolved mystery in this story: all the records of Jewish refugees housed in the area have vanished from the local archives, and the Federal Archives in Bern only record the

[1] *‘Journal de Montreux’, 9th July 1946.*

[2] *LASSERRE, p.232.*

[3] *LASSERRE, p.277. English translation by the author.*

complaints and problems that were passed on to higher authority, no dates of arrivals, names, nationalities. The only numbers recorded are after an inspection following a complaint. The Montreux archivist doesn't know when, or by whom, the local archives were purged, but it is clear that there were more detailed records, and it is equally clear that they are there no more. 'Switzerland has destroyed the trace of the Jews turned back in '39-'45' headlined the *Journal de Genève*,[1] over a front-page article. A more recent major research effort in the Federal Archives in Bern, at the request of the State of Israel and Yad Vashem (the centre responsible for research into the Holocaust), found only 300 names of those turned back.

Historian Guido Koller estimates that the true figure must be over 10,000, while Rolf Bloch, president of the Swiss federation of Israelite communities, estimates the number at 14,-15,000. There's a hole in the archives, in Montreux, in Bern, all across the country. Were they destroyed because of lack of space, lack of interest, or to hide a murky chapter of Switzerland's past? In 1997, the Canton of Vaud appointed the historian André Lasserre to look into the question, and produce a report, which has been unable to lift the mystery. The list that I have on my computer of 1,354 refugees in Caux, dated 23 January 1945, and clearly typed by the Swiss army, comes from the Central Zionist Archives in Jerusalem. Several times a year, I now show returning children and grandchildren from the Kastner train their parents' and grandparents' names. With the passing years, some of the passions around Kastner and his story have found a certain pacification, and his papers are now in Yad Vashem, and this story is now told there.

One of the important moral, philosophical and practical questions is how to tell the story of the Shoah to new generations, as the first-hand witnesses grow old and die. In 2014, I was asked by a friend and neighbour in the village to do a guided tour of the Caux Palace for a Geneva lawyer, a good friend of his son, and I met Marc Isserles. His grandparents found refuge in Caux in 1944, and his visit fanned the flames of a passion for his family's history. He has now written a one-man show, with Klezmer music (he has a fine singing voice), and he has already given his show in schools. We plan to present the play in the Caux Palace.

An equally strange, but less tragic story concerning Caux during the war first appeared in a series of articles in the *Gazette de Lausanne* in early 1949 and is confirmed in the book *La Guerre a été gagnée en Suisse*[2] ('The War was Won in Switzerland'). A British spy called Alexander Foote, working in Switzerland throughout the war for the Soviet Union, talks of visiting a chalet in Caux where another spy code-named 'Sonya' maintained a secret radio transmitter – the aerial was disguised as her washing line ! According to Foote, they were part of a network plotting to assassinate Hitler, and they tested a home-made bomb in Sonya's garden. The story might easily be classed as fiction, were it not for the fact that the articles also quote Humbert-Droz, head of the Swiss Communist Party, who admits to knowing Foote and having met him in Communist Party circles. Accoce and Quet in their book reveal that Sonya's real name was Ursula Schultz (she had a good half-dozen other names and aliases). Like her husband, she was a German communist, and they spied together in China for the Soviet cause, until she was sent to Switzerland in 1938, where she set up home in a large rented chalet in Caux with her two children. I have recently localised the chalet in question, and tracked down her autobiography, *Sonya's Report: the fascinating autobiography of one of Russia's most remarkable secret agents*[3]. Born in the German Jewish family living in Berlin, she joined the Communist Party at the age of 19, as the only effective opposition to the rise of Hitler and fascism. She spied in China and Poland before the war, and was trained in Moscow as a radio operator. In October 1938, she came to Caux with her two children (by two different fathers), and stayed in the appropriately named old farm-chalet, *La Taupinière*, the mole-hill (spies in English are colloquially referred to as moles!).

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[1] *Thursday 9th November, 1995.*

[2] *by Pierre ACCOCE and Pierre QUET, Librairie Académique Perrin, 1971, p.141-146.*

[3] *'Sonya's Report: the fascinating autobiography of one of Russia's most remarkable secret agents' by Ruth Werner, Chatto & Windus, London, 1991. First published as 'Sonjas Rapport', Verlag Neues Leben, Berlin, 1977.*

'Soon we knew every cow personally and the children gave them names. At night the chime of a cow-bell or the sleepy lowing of the cattle echoed in our dreams,' she writes. 'In spring, tourists came from far away to admire the renowned wild narcissus field behind our house. The flowers were so heavily scented that at night we had to close the windows. In winter, novices in skiing from the hotels in Caux practiced on the gentle slopes of our hill. If they were thirsty, we gave them drinks; if they were tired they rested on the bench in front of our little house. At other times of the year it was very lonely up there.'[1] She set up her aerial and her clandestine radio transmitter, found a good place to conceal it in the coal shed, and started making regular visits to Geneva to collect information from other members of her network (Sandor Radó's 'Dora ring' also known as the 'Red Orchestra') for encoding and transmission to Moscow. She trained Foote and a second Englishman, Len Beurton, who had both fought in the International Brigades on the Republican side in the Spanish civil war. She and the children were soon fluent in French – and she boasts of speaking Russian, Chinese, Polish and English, as well as her native German.

Sonya's identity papers were a problem. She only had an expired German passport, and 'Moscow Centre' suggested that she might marry one of the two Englishmen that she was training. She was getting a divorce, but Foote hesitated to marry her: he'd been engaged before leaving to fight in Spain. Beurton agreed. What seemed like a marriage of convenience was in fact the start of a life-long love. She tells how 35 years later, when they were in East Germany, working for the Communist regime there, he confessed that for him it had been love at first sight. 'It is difficult to convey to the younger generation of today not only how devoted we were to our cause, but what sacrifices it demanded and how much we took them for granted,' Sonya says, writing in the 1970s. In 1941, she left Caux, on the instructions of 'Centre' and made her way with the children (but leaving her husband behind) through France and Spain to England, and a new home near Oxford. There she continued her clandestine radio work, and became the 'handler' for the vitally important Soviet spy Klaus Fuchs (a German refugee from Hitler, like Sonya). Fuchs left to work in the USA in Los Alamos on the 'Manhattan Project', the atom bomb.

Another more recent book gives perhaps a more objective view of Sonya and her network's importance. Sonya was a Colonel in the Main Intelligence Directorate (Russian: Гла́вное разве́дывательное управле́ние) abbreviated to GRU, which was the foreign military intelligence agency of the Soviet Army General Staff of the Soviet Union, and her book, printed and published in East Germany before the Fall of the Wall, will have been vetted and approved by her 'handlers'. *Nein! Standing up to Hitler 1935-1944* by Lord Paddy Ashdown[2] details senior Germans' resistance to the Nazis. After serving as a Royal Marine and Special Boat Service officer in the British Army, and as an intelligence officer, Ashdown went on to become a member of parliament and diplomat. He served as Leader of the Liberal Democrats from 1988 to 1999, and gained international recognition for his role in Bosnia–Herzegovina as its High Representative from 2002 to 2006.

When I took him to visit *la Taupinière* in July, 2018, he looked out over Lake Geneva, and noted the angle between the two trees that would have held the radio aerial facing towards Moscow, 2,300kms away. Ashdown writes, 'With this tiny pulse of contact in 1938 between a washing line on a Swiss mountainside and Moscow Centre began the assembly of what Russian intelligence would later claim – and with justification – was the greatest spy ring of the entire war.' He continues, 'Neither the Dora Ring nor Moscow was ever aware of the true sources of the intelligence it received. Nor did they know that, according to information whose significance has only recently been identified in the British National Archives, Swiss intelligence actively facilitated this crucial passage of intelligence to Moscow – and Britain's MI6 almost certainly knew all about it.'[3] So this little village may have played a totally disproportionate role in the defeat of Hitler and fascism. Was World War 2 won it Caux?

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[1] *Ibid. pp.189-190.*

[2] *William Collins, London, 2018.*

[3] *Ibid. p.133.*

Most of the sources within Germany for the Dora Ring's intelligence didn't survive the war. Many were tracked down and killed after the failed attempt on Hitler's life in July 1944. But Ashdown notes Sonya's 'happy end': 'Showered with honours, she was awarded the Soviet Order of the Red Banner in 1969, the National Prize of the German Democratic Republic and the Order of Karl Marx in 1978… She died in Berlin in 2000, aged ninety-three, and was posthumously awarded the Russian Order of Friendship. In an afterword at the end of the English edition of her book, written in 1991 post-German reunification, Sonya reflects, on her life and her commitment to Communism. 'You might ask what I, personally, have done against the growing dogmatism and deformation of socialism, of whose existence I was, after all, not unaware. And do I feel that my life was wasted? Do I feel guilty that I knuckled under to what I knew was wrong?' she asks. She concludes, 'Maybe I am now living through the most difficult time of my life, but I believe that Marx, Rosa Luxemburg and Lenin were great revolutionary figures. And for future generations I still want social justice, access for everyone to a good education, and most of all I want no one to starve, and peace in the whole world. As much as ever I hate the arrogance of the rich, the power of money. I hate racism and fascism.'[1]

But to come back to more local events, in 1945, the Caux Property Company produced a 4-page report of the damage that they hoped to claim from the Swiss government. The architect, F. Kurz, reckons that it would cost CHF78,000 to restore the building, but admits that if the building had remained unoccupied throughout the war, major restoration work would still have been needed before the hotel could reopen. Two directors of the Banque Populaire Suisse (holders of the shares of the bankrupt hotel company) from Montreux note on a rapid tour of the house several items damaged to add to the inventory produced by the army: in room 628, there's a cane chair that needs repair; in room 542, the handles on the cupboard door are missing. There is a great deal more damage to the hotel than the army cares to let on, according to them. The building has been handed back without being cleaned, which will take months, they say. But they admit 'The whole is so down-graded that even with repairs it will no longer be possible to welcome to the house the kind of guest who looks for a first class hotel. The house has slipped to the second if not third rank.'[2] But the owners of the Caux-Palace are nothing if not incorrigible optimists. In January 1946, they are informing the local authorities that they have plans to re-open the hotel, and have mandated agents in Paris and London to recruit clients[3] – they still have not grasped the massive destruction wrought by the war, and the disappearance of any hope of reviving the pre-war tourism, at least in the immediate future. The authorities in turn inform the army that they have no positive information to pass on about their experiences with either internees or refugees.[4]

Ironically, 1944 had been the first year since 1924 that the hotel company made a profit, and when the Caux Property Company requests a reduction of rates in 1946, the local authorities point out that they have been receiving income from the hotel for 1944 and 1945.[5] But of the massive investment of nine to ten million francs poured in since 1890, nothing now remained,[6] nothing but the view 'unique in all the world', as a prospectus dated March 1946 claims. The prospectus presents the Esplanade Hotel 'formerly the Caux Palace', and speaks poetically of the magic nights, with the lights along the lake-side merging into the stars above. It is only on the fifth page of the document that the hotel is mentioned, and then only as part of an interesting property, including skating rink and catholic chapel. The house itself is a strange blank, but the anonymous writer prophetically suggests that the building

[1] *Ibid. p.307-8 .*

[2] *'expertises des dégâts constatés après l'occupation par les réfugiés ', document of the ' Société Immobilière de Caux ', dated 23.8.1945.*

[3] *Hand-written minutes of the Planches Municipality, 14th January 1946, p.258.*

[4] *Hand-written minutes of the Planches Municipality, 4th February 1946, p.262.*

[5] *Hand-written minutes of the Planches Municipality, 15th April 1945, p.273.*

[6] *Philippe MOTTU, 'The Story of Caux, from La Belle Epoque to Moral Re-Armament', Grosvenor Books, London, 1970, p.48.*

would be ideal 'for a major institute, or to serve as a meeting place for international organisations or religious groups'.

All around Switzerland, Europe was in ruins. Millions were dead, and the wounds lay open in millions more spirits of those who had survived. The old hotel was in poor shape, and the tourists weren't going to be back in a hurry. The old lady's future looked bleak indeed, but unbeknown to her, another group of visionaries had plans for her.

Some further links and references:

- The link to the web site about the Kasztner train: http://www.kasztnermemorial.com/index.html (the site includes a full bibliography).
- See also this Holocaust site: http://www.nizkor.org/ (Kasztner and the train are not mentioned)
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- LADANY, Shaul P., 'King of the Road – From Bergen-Belsen to the Olympic Games, The Autobiography of an Israeli Scientist and a World Record-Holding Race Walker', Gefen Publishing House, Jerusalem & New York, 2008
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- http://journaldesidonie.blogspot.com/ Devoir de Mémoire. Journal de SIDONIE, ma grand-mère, traduit de hongrois (en français)
- Official Swiss government history site: https://www.eda.admin.ch/aboutswitzerland/en/home/geschichte/epochen/die-schweiz-in-der-zeit-der-weltkriege--1914-1945-.html