Refugees

People fleeing from the land of their birth because of war or political, social, religious, or economic persecution.

As soon as the Nazis rose to national power in 1933, Jews began fleeing Germany en mass. Between 1933-1938, about one-quarter of Germany's 525,000 Jews left the country. In 1934 and most of 1935, emigration slowed down some; it accelerated again after the Nuremberg Laws were passed in September, which stripped Jews of their German citizenship and excluded them from many aspects of economic and communal life.

Most of these Jews went to nearby countries, such as France, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Czechoslovakia, and Austria. Sometimes, immigrants found it hard to cope in the new country, prompting them to return to Germany. However, the Nazis did not want any returning Jews, so in 1935 they decreed that all returnees would be imprisoned in concentration camps. Some Jews stayed in Germany because the emigration taxes were too high, or because they were forbidden to take any substantial amounts of money out of the country with them.

In 1938 Nazi persecution got even worse. In March 1938 Germany annexed Austria, bringing approximately 200,000 more Jews under German control. From April - November 1938, 50,000 Jews left German-occupied Austria; in all about 150,000 Jews fled the Reich after the *Kristallnacht* pogrom of November 1938. More would have left had the countries of the world been willing to take them in. The American-initiated Evian Conference of July 1938 had done nothing to enlarge the world's immigration quotas. Many western countries enacted further immigration limitations at the end of the 1930s as a result of their deep-seated antisemitism; their concern that the tens of thousands of Jews from the Reich would soon be joined by millions of refugees from Eastern Europe; and their desire, after the Great Depression, to keep their countries' jobs for themselves.

World War II broke out in September 1939. At that point, 110,000 Jewish refugees were spread out all over Europe. Some 71,500 more Jews fled the Reich before the Germans totally forbade Jewish emigration in October 1941.

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As the German army moved across Europe, Jews continued to flee persecution. About 300,000 Polish Jews left German-occupied Poland for Soviet territories. However, when the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941, most Soviet and Polish Jews living in Soviet territories were murdered by *Einsatzgruppen* and other units before they had a chance to flee. Italy protected many Jews who entered its domain. Some Jews were able to escape to neutral countries. About 21,600 Jews reached Switzerland, but thousands more were turned away during much of the war. Others reached Spain and many were immediately sent on to Portugal, from which thousands left for America. Sweden served as a refuge for many Scandinavian Jews, including the 7,200 Jews who were saved by the Danish people in October 1943.

The United States, despite its long-held reputation of a safe haven for refugees, did not open its doors to Jewish refugees during World War II. The Bermuda Conference of April 1943 was just an attempt to quiet public opinion, without having to actually make a serious effort to save any Jews. Only in January 1944, with a scandal looming after it was discovered that the United States State Department was sabotaging rescue efforts, did President Franklin D. Roosevelt establish an official government agency, the War Refugee Board (WRB), to deal with the Jewish refugee problem. It managed to save thousands of Jews---but began its good work too late, when most of European Jewry had already been massacred.