

“Jewish refugees welcome to an extent.” Ambivalent Swedish refugee policy during the Holocaust.

In the spring of 1945 there were 185,000 refugees in Sweden. The majority of refugees were not Jews who numbered only about 20 000. This can be seen in the context of the Jewish Community in Sweden which numbered about 8 000 people in the 1930s. A number of these Jews had come to Sweden before the outbreak of war while others arrived after the war thanks to various efforts on their behalf. The large number of refugees, some 185,000 people, came to Sweden during a relatively brief period of time and were temporarily housed in schools, hotels and special camps. They must have been very apparent to the majority of Swedes.

At the end of the war, when the concentration camps were liberated and photographs of emaciated prisoners and piles of corpses spread across the world, the news must have come as a shock to many people regardless of what they had known of this previously. And so it is not surprising that it was the image of Sweden as a “morally righteous” country that was spread after the war and that helped to construct a self-image of the country’s behaviour during the war as being positive. What opportunities did Sweden actually have for acting differently during the war? What was the framework or the conditions applying to Sweden’s refugee policy?

Geography and timeframe

One important factor in all this was Sweden’s geographical position. The fact that Sweden was not at the heart of Europe with a border on Germany but a distant, northern country meant that initially the numbers of refugees was not particularly large. When war broke out, the fact that Norway and Sweden had a shared border, was naturally important to Norwegian refugees. Danish refugees were aided by the fact that the Sound between Denmark and Sweden is quite narrow at some points. It was not only geography but also the timeframe that was important. The map during the war was substantially different from what it had been prior to the conflict with the land borders being repositioned. Norway and Denmark were occupied by Nazi Germany on 9 April 1940, while Finland fought on the side of Germany against the Soviet Union. Like Switzerland, the Irish Republic, Spain, Portugal and Turkey, Sweden was one of the relatively small number of neutral states in World War II. This meant that Sweden was still able to act with regard to refugees but the situation was not entirely simple, partly

because it was difficult for refugees to get to Sweden and partly because they could not proceed from Sweden to some other country.

The spirit of the times and the birth of immigration laws

In order to understand Sweden's refugee policy during World War II and the Holocaust we need to understand something of how Swedish society was organized about the turn of the century 1900. At that point in time, just as in the case of most European countries, Sweden saw itself as a country from which people emigrated. This meant that there was no reason to regulate immigration. Accordingly, the years 1860-1914 are described as a liberal era in which people were able to move freely across Sweden's borders as well as those of other countries. Towards the end of the 19th century nationalistic ideas began to sweep across Europe, bringing with them notions about "one country, one people, one nation". Sweden suddenly became a land of Swedes while immigrants were "strangers". Groups of "foreign elements" that the Swedish government wanted to get rid of were singled out. Among these were Jews from Eastern Europe. In order to prevent this group of people from entering Sweden a law was passed in 1914 giving the authorities the right to refuse entry. The groups that were specifically listed included beggars and non-domiciled persons as well as Roma. During World War II the law of 1937 was in force. This was based on the original law pertaining to foreigners from 1927. The law spoke of foreigners, not of refugees. The aim of this law was to protect the Swedish labour market and to "preserve the purity of the Swedish race". The law of 1927 no longer spoke of "race", but this was still an important issue for the Swedish authorities. The Swedish authorities specifically concerned with refugees, The National Board of Health and Welfare's foreigners' bureau and the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs. However, they were not the only organizations dealing with the so-called refugee problem during the 1930s. The Jewish refugees were seen as a separate problem since there was a notion in society that Jews brought Anti-Semitism with them. At this time, most countries only granted asylum to political refugees. The key question was whether Jewish refugees could be classed as political refugees or not. In Sweden, socialist and liberal politicians sought to maintain that Jews could also be included within this definition, but neither in Sweden nor in any other European country were Jews accepted as political refugees. Swedish refugee policy was notably restrictive. As was a notion that Sweden was not a society of immigration.

Sweden operated a “selection policy” for refugees. Jewish refugees were, to an extent, welcome to Sweden but it was far more difficult for them to gain permission to enter the country than for non-Jewish refugees. Extant source materials make it difficult to calculate exactly how many refugees were granted entry to Sweden and how many were rejected. But existing data shows that Sweden discriminated Jewish refugees during the years from 1938 to 1941. Applications for residence permits from non-Jewish refugees were only refused in 5% of cases whereas applications from Jewish refugees were refused in more than 45% of cases. Anti-Semitic background noise

During the autumn of 1938 Swedish newspapers claimed that Sweden had been “invaded” by Jewish refugees and, at the beginning of 1939, a rumor circulated that some ten German-Jewish doctors were to receive permits to migrate to Sweden to work there. This led to a lively debate among students. How should one regard these protests? Were the students expressing a point of view that they shared with Swedes in general? There are no existing studies of what Swedes thought about refugee policy, but we know that newspapers claimed that Sweden was being overrun with Jewish refugees and that, to calm the population, the National Board of Health and Welfare’s foreigners’ bureau conducted a census of foreigners. The census of foreigners took place from 10-17 February 1939. All foreigners in Sweden had to give their name, age and nationality but also “whether the foreigner’s parents, or one of their parents, was Jewish”, together with a declaration of the creed. It is evident that the issue concerned which type of foreigner Sweden wanted particularly to control and that in categorizing this the authorities used the notion of “race” just as in the Nazi Nuremberg Laws. Why did the Swedish refugee authority distinguish Jewish refugees from other refugees and why were Jews in particular seen as a problem? This was a parallel to the perception that Sweden was not a country of immigration and that there was no Anti-Semitism in Sweden but that this could develop if “too many” Jews came to Sweden. Jews were regarded as a “foreign element” that would be difficult to assimilate into Swedish society. Many people maintained that such “moderate” Anti-Semitic views were not necessarily regarded as Anti-Semitism and, accordingly, one may claim that Anti-Semitism was apparent

as a sort of background noise in Swedish society. All of these attitudes led to Sweden maintaining a restrictive policy with regard to refugees. Who was classed as a political refugee? There was nothing in the Swedish legislation pertaining to foreigners that discriminated against Jewish refugees. On the other hand, the law did not stipulate who was to be considered as a “political refugee” but left this to the authorities to decide. But how could these authorities know who was a Jew and who was not? As early as August 1938 an anti-Jewish law was passed in Germany forcing Jews to add the name “Sara” if they were women and “Israel” in the case of men. On 27 October 1938, the foreigners’ bureau issued a circular to all passport controls containing instructions about dealing with people with a J stamp in their passport. According to Swedish law, Austrian and German citizens enjoyed the right to enter Sweden without a visa but the circular stopped entry for Jews from these countries unless they had applied for a residence permit or had a so-called border recommendation from the embassy. Besides the J stamp in their passports the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs also required information about their “race”. At the various Swedish embassies in Europe the ambassadors were encouraged to add the ethnicity in the applications. Those classed as Jews were marked with an “M” for belonging to the Mosaic faith in the protocol and other documents.

Change of direction in Swedish refugee policy In April 1940 both Norway and Denmark were occupied by Nazi Germany. Initially, the Jews in these countries were left largely in peace. But during the autumn of 1942 the Nazis decided that it was time to effectuate the Nazi policy in Norway too and to make the country “Judenfrei”. Norwegian Jews were deported in several actions by boat or, later, by rail to Auschwitz-Birkenau. These deportations caused an outcry in Norway and gave rise to even greater notice in Sweden. The Swedish press broke the self-censorship that had been in operation and started to report the events. The powerful opinion contributed to a change in Swedish refugee policy so that the Swedish authorities began to take measures to assist the refugees. There are two explanations as to why Swedish operations changed. Swedish diplomats had collected enough information about what was happening in Norway and about the Holocaust in Poland to want to change their approach. The Holocaust began to affect Scandinavia too. The Norwegian Jews were not

so much regarded as Jews, but rather as Norwegians. And as Norwegians they were our brothers. Denmark was occupied by the Germans on the very same day as Norway, though deportations did not start until almost a year later, in 1943. But knowledge of the deportation plans leaked out and the great majority of Danish Jews managed to flee to Sweden in Danish fishing boats. A massive effort in October 1943 to protect the Danish Jews led to some 7,000 Danish Jews being saved. 481 Danish Jews were deported to Theresienstadt, most of whom survived. Thus the numbers of Danish Jews that were saved is large. The figures are quite the reverse with regard to Norwegian Jews. When the Holocaust struck and deportations began to hit Denmark in the autumn of 1943, the Swedish policy had already changed which led to many Jews being saved from Denmark. In connection with the flight of Danish Jews to Sweden in October 1943 Karin Kock, who was an economist and a supporter of refugees raised the question as to why the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and the foreigners' bureau employed the term "race" as a statistical category. She argued that it ought to suffice just to ask for the person's religious affiliation and she posed the rhetorical question as to how people working in the department would, themselves, answer point No. 9 "race": "I do not believe that they know, but they undoubtedly know what answer they want from the rest of us: Jew or non-Jew. Or, translated into a different language, Arian or non-Arian. It would be more honest and straightforward simply to ask: Are you Jewish? Remove question No. 9 of the ministry's questionnaire with all possible haste! The translations from the German questionnaire are neither necessary nor desirable in our country." Neither the foreigners' bureau nor the Ministry for Foreign Affairs answered Karin Kock's accusation of Anti-Semitism but the division between Jews nor non-Jews disappeared from the country's official statistics. But what actually happened to the Danish Jewish refugees? Was this division also applied to this group which was regarded as a fraternal people, almost like Swedes? Both yes and no. Danish Jews were not discriminated against in practice. All those who manage to reach Sweden were allowed to stay. And the Swedish authorities stopped separating out Jewish refugees. Though unofficially this specification continued up to February 1944 even with regard to the Danish Jews. Accordingly, one can describe the Swedish refugee policy as a Janus

figure with two rather different faces that existed in parallel. In practice the policy resulted in a range of behaviors from actively restrictive to large-scale reception, but the Anti-Semitic background noise meant that categorization and separation of Jews continued in spite of the fact that there was no practical need for this.

Karin Kvist Gevert