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COUNTRY WITHOUT "REFUGEES"

Shortly before the war the South African publicist and editor, G. H. Calpin, wrote a book entitled "There are no South Africans." Borrowing his title, to-day one might say "There are no refugees in South Africa."

There were plenty of them in the thirties. Nobody knew—and nobody really knows now—how many. No complete census of the immigrants from Germany and Austria has ever been taken, and estimates vary between 7,000 and 11,000, the higher figure being far more likely. Whatever the figure, it was regarded as sufficiently disturbing by Nationalist spokesmen to urge the Government of the day—the Fusion Government of Hertzog and Smuts—to curb this immigration by the passing, in 1936, of the Aliens Act.

Prior to 1936, immigration into the Union of South Africa was a simple matter, at least for those born in a "non-quota country"—a category that included the whole of western Europe. As a result, many who would not normally have thought of moving as far afield as Africa chose this haven of refuge. At a time when all the world was closed to foreigners, when the aftermaths of the great depression forced even the most liberal-minded countries to reserve for their own nationals the cherished right to work, the Union of South Africa proved not perhaps a land of unlimited possibilities but of very substantial chances.

It is very largely as a result of South Africa's being an *early* immigration country that to-day "there are no German refugees" in the Union. They have been more fully absorbed than in most other countries; so much so that very little is known of them as a community since the end of the war.

The type of immigrant that was ready as early as the first half of the thirties to leave the confines of Nazism was young and enterprising and demographically valuable. He had not yet or only just begun to found a family and, almost immediately earning a living and perhaps a little more in the new country, soon set about rectifying this omission. Thus by the time the war broke out the refugee community numbered a fair proportion of young children either born in South Africa or having entered the country as toddlers or babes in arms. When recently I spent two years in England what struck me most was the almost total absence of fifteen-to-twenty year olds in the ranks of the refugees—the grown-up children of those days. It was only then that the social significance of the entirely different demographic composition of the South African refugee community dawned on me. For a small child that speaks the language (or, as in South Africa, the languages) of the new country as "his" or "hers" is a much closer bond with the new environment than even the most outstanding social or economic achievement. It is largely to the credit of our "South African" children that the refugees in South

Africa have become so completely identified with the country of their adoption. But there are other reasons as well.

One was the situation in which the refugees found themselves during the war years. This differed rather sharply from their experience in most other western countries. True enough, we too had to endure a wave of "Intern the Lot" agitation, especially from the jingo press in Natal. But it soon became obvious to even the most chauvinistic that such an agitation lacked point in a country in which over one-third of the indigenous population was—to put it mildly—disinclined to take up arms against the enemy. If "the lot" had indeed been interned, there would not have been enough room to intern even the most active Nazi sympathisers among the Afrikaner population. It was only natural for the agitation to die of its own accord, and gradually more and more ex-enemy aliens were accepted for service in the armed forces of the Union.

The third major reason for the far-reaching assimilation that has taken place has to be treated with some delicacy. In most countries that admitted Jewish refugees from Germany, the newcomers were not exactly popular. They were unpopular (a) because they were Jews and (b) because they were Germans. In these respects South Africa was at one with the world. But German or not, Jewish or not, the newcomers at least had a white skin—and therefore automatically became worthy of all the privileges that white South Africa reserves for itself. Under the prompting and influence of Nazism attempts were made by such movements as the Greyshirts and Blackshirts to have all Jews treated as "Asiatics," but nothing came of these efforts in a country that has real race problems to cope with and therefore cannot squander its energies on trumped-up ones. South African anti-Semitism is not racial—it cannot afford to be.

And thus we have the ironical position that the oppressed and persecuted of one country smoothly and without visible effort became an integral part of the ruling community in another. This is not to say that German refugees have joined the extreme Nationalists or are openly advocating apartheid. But I know a good few who, in their attitude toward the Native population, vie with the most rabid Afrikaner on the platteland; and hardly anybody who would stick out his neck on behalf of the non-European population. The majority are no doubt slightly uneasy about it all and to ease their conscience are doing all they can in the way of charity. They maintain that it cannot be their job to change the South African way of life even if they wanted to, and that, by accepting South African hospitality, they accepted South African (white South African) standards.

These, then, are the forces that have helped to obliterate the identity of the German refugees as a group. As a result of this development no reliable data as regards age and sex composition, social and economic activities, financial position, etc., of the erstwhile refugees are obtainable. What is known is that a great number of refugees have done extremely well in South Africa, and that on the whole they are likely to have prospered more than in any other country. How well they have done remains a matter for conjecture and speculation.

What is known are the results of a very incomplete and entirely out-of-date inquiry into the economic status of the refugees which the South African Jewish Board of Deputies carried out shortly before the war, largely with a view to counteracting the charges that the refugees constituted a burden on the South African labour market. Even at that early stage—and to-day the position is undoubtedly more favourable—it was found that for every 10 refugees employed with South African firms, direct employment had been created for 13 white South Africans and 25 natives through the establishment of industrial and commercial enterprises by refugees. Many of these were non-competitive, introducing as they did new lines of manufacturing into an industrially young country. Among the lines specially mentioned at the time were the manufacture of tube-mills for the mines; road metal and bitumen products; the smelting of antimony alloys; the manufacture of type metal for printers; the storage and treatment of furs; and the manufacture of an infinite variety of toys, fancy goods and the like.

However, the greatest contribution made by the refugees to South African economy lies in the field of aesthetics. For many years commercial art was an almost exclusive reserve of this group. Tourists who to-day admire the displays in the shops of Adderley Street, Capetown, or Eloff Street, Johannesburg, may not believe that a short twenty years ago a "big" businessman told a refugee window-dresser "Whether you put my stuff this way or that way in the window won't bring me a quarter of the salary I have to pay you!" Window dressing, poster designing and all the advertising arts owe a great deal to the newcomers; and this was accompanied by a general rise in the level of taste in many other fields. Music was one of them, appreciation of films, especially Continental films, another. Johannesburg—which to-day, at a rough estimate, contains at least two-thirds of all German refugees in the Union—benefited most. On its hectic journey from mining camp via dull British provincial town to Americanised metropolis it stopped to absorb some of the graces of the Continent.

To-day both the indigenous population and the refugees themselves take this development for granted. The latter have become part of the former and look askance at the artificial discrimination between the two. Even in their communal and organisational life a certain assimilation is noticeable. It is true that the refugees are still very proud of "their" Parents' Home—a magnificent Old Age Home conceived and built at their own initiative to solve a pressing communal problem; and that some of them cling to their own religious organisation, the Hebrew Congregation Etz Chayim. But where it is a matter of wider cultural interests, they have lost their identity almost completely.

The refugees of twenty years ago are busy with their careers, their families and the political problems of South Africa. Germany is a small country six thousand miles away in which they happened to live a generation ago till they were driven out. To-day they are South Africans.