

her house for laundry or bathing purposes.¹⁹ When a baby was born, Recha was always the first to arrive at the new mother's house with offers of help, even after she gave birth to her first child, Avrohom, in 1929. She also poured herself into charitable causes, and word of her work quickly spread beyond St. Gallen.

In 1933, five weeks and 4000 miles apart, two men assumed the leadership of their respective countries. Adolf Hitler was appointed chancellor of Germany on January 30 and Franklin Delano Roosevelt was inaugurated president of the United States on March 4. The elevation to power of these towering figures would soon have profound effects on the world. But in Switzerland, the Nazis' ascent at first registered barely a ripple, least of all in the Sternbuch household.

In the immediate aftermath of Hitler's rise to power next door in Germany, two categories of refugees had begun to stream into Switzerland: political activists opposed to the regime—Communists and Social Democrats—who were already subject to persecution and physical violence at the hands of the Brownshirts even before the Nazis took power; and a small but steady number of Jews who had seen the writing on the wall early on.²⁰ In response to the influx, the Swiss federal government passed a law in 1933 distinguishing between political refugees and others. Only a select few fell into the former category, such as leaders of left-wing political parties, high state officials and well-known authors. Communists were the most unwelcome, and Swiss authorities let it be known that they would not be granted political refugee status under any circumstances. In all, fewer than four hundred applicants would be granted this status before the start of the Second World War.²¹ All other refugees were simply designated as foreigners, and as such they fell under the Federal Law on Residence and Settlement of Foreigners. Many of the early refugees intended

simply to pass through on their way to England and France, but the possibility of large numbers of Jews pouring into the country prompted Swiss authorities to impose a series of measures to ensure that Switzerland remained a *Transitland* (transit country), where foreigners were to be prevented from taking up permanent residence. Among the new rules was a ban imposed on any “professional activities.”²² Most refugees during this period, if they were lucky, would be issued “tolerance permits” by the cantonal government, permitting them to stay a few months at most.²³

The various Jewish relief organizations active throughout the country had pledged to shoulder the costs for the care and accommodations of this first wave of refugees, thus relieving any burden on the state. Between 1933 and 1937, fewer than six thousand Jews were granted refuge in Switzerland. Of these, a significant number had made their way to St. Gallen. Word had spread of a woman living there who personified the Torah principle of *hachnasas orchim*—the welcoming of guests. During these years, the Sternbuch house was teeming with refugees. “The house was so crowded,” observes Joseph Friedenson, who later tracked down a number of the guests, “that it was not uncommon for refugees to believe at first that the Sternbuch home simply *had* to be a small hotel—for no family home could be that open, crowded, or busy. Some neighbors complained and said, ‘What’s going on?’ It was a quiet family and all of a sudden there were tens upon tens of people coming in and going out.”²⁴ Recha worked tirelessly to locate temporary homes for the travelers, often finding safe houses in Zürich, home to nearly half the country’s Jewish population at the time. It was here that Isaac maintained his factory, and his business contacts proved useful in helping Recha establish her underground network along with her own extensive Agudah contacts and close ties to the city’s religious community.

When those accommodations filled up, the refugees simply stayed with the Sternbuchs, many for months at a time. One of those guests, Zecharia Reinhold, who had entered the country illegally, later recalled his arrival: “When I came in, there were tables surrounded with people as if at *simcha* [a festive occasion] where they ate and drank. . . . It was an open house . . . people coming and going all day. . . . The floors of the house were covered with mattresses for the people. . . . There were all kinds, not all *frum* [devout] . . . she helped everyone. A Yid is a Yid.”²⁵ At one point, recalled Reinhold, the Orthodox refugees attempted to set up a temporary synagogue in a back room but were prevented from doing so by the less religious guests worried about disturbing the neighbors and provoking a potential anti-Semitic backlash. Recha settled the controversy by establishing a daily *minyan* (a quorum for prayer). Reinhold recalled the gentile neighbors coming by during Yom Kippur and staring wide-eyed at the refugees clad in *tallit* (Jewish prayer shawls). “They had never seen anything like it,” he remembered. Although it took a while for the neighbors to warm to the Sternbuchs and their strange religious ways, stories would eventually circulate of gentiles climbing trees to cut down branches to help cover the traditional Jewish *sukkah* during the harvest festival of Sukkot.

During the first five years following the Nazis’ ascension to power, many refugees managed to find their way to the Sternbuchs. The accumulating dark clouds of 1938, however, soon meant that henceforth Recha would have to go to them.

When Austrians woke up on March 12, 1938, they discovered German troops marching through their streets in what became known as the Anschluss. Instead of offering resistance, large crowds greeted the Nazi invaders with raucous cheers and Nazi salutes, leaving little doubt

that most were eager to join the Reich. Carl Mogenroth, a German who had moved to Vienna in 1933 to escape the Nazis, later recalled watching the scene. “The Germans marched in to the jubilation of most of the Viennese,” he recalled. “They went wild with joy.”²⁶ Three days later, Hitler himself rode triumphantly through the streets of Vienna in an open-air convertible, acknowledging the cheers of the thousands of overjoyed Austrians. “It was like everyone all of a sudden became Nazi,” recalled a Jewish Viennese resident, Herbert Jellinek.²⁷

As they had watched the persecution of their brethren next door, most Austrian Jews had believed they were safe from a similar fate. The events of March 12, however, caused an overnight upheaval. William Shirer notes that the treatment of Jews in Vienna following the Anschluss was far worse than anything he had seen during his years as a Berlin-based foreign correspondent covering the Reich during its formative years. He describes the behavior of the Nazis in Vienna following the Anschluss as “an orgy of Sadism.” In the immediate aftermath, Jews were forced to scrub election signs from the former regime off the walls and sidewalks. “While they worked on their hands and knees with jeering storm troopers standing over them, crowds gathered to taunt them,” he observed. “Hundreds of Jews, men and women, were picked off the streets and put to work cleaning public latrines and the toilets of the barracks where the SA and the SS were quartered. Tens of thousands more were jailed. Their worldly possessions were confiscated or stolen.”²⁸ The terror accomplished what may have been its goal. Between the Anschluss and the start of the war, almost 100,000 Jews fled Austria. Of this total, between 5500 and 6500 made their way to Switzerland.²⁹

The prospect of thousands of Jews pouring across Swiss borders and swelling the ranks of Jews in the country set off immediate alarm bells, not least in the offices of Alien Police Chief Heinrich Rothmund.

In September 1938, Rothmund was invited by the German government to tour the Sachsenhausen concentration camp outside Berlin, along with two prominent Swiss pro-Nazi figures: Robert Tobler, a member of the Swiss parliament, and Benno Scaepi, a propagandist for the pro-fascist National Front party. Upon his return from inspecting the camp, Rothmund wrote the Swiss minister of justice and police a telling memo, reporting on conversations he had just had with Nazi officials: “I attempted to make it clear to the gentlemen that the people and government of Switzerland had long since become fully cognizant of the danger of Judaization and have consistently defended themselves against it. . . . The peril can only be met if a people constantly protects itself from the very outset against Jewish exclusiveness and renders that quite impossible.”³⁰

Soon afterwards, the Swiss would implement an infamous policy that would come to be known by its French name, *réfoulement*—the practice of turning away Jewish refugees at the border and returning them to the Nazis. Exploring the consequences of this policy in 2002, the Swiss commission investigating the country’s wartime refugee policy observed, “The measures agreed in August 1938 to turn back unwanted immigrants were implemented ruthlessly; despite their awareness of the risk refugees ran, the authorities often turned them over directly to the German police. It even happened that border guards struck refugees with the butts of their rifles to bar them from crossing the border.”³¹ There were exceptions enshrined for children under sixteen, the elderly and the sick, but most others were to be turned away.

If there was any doubt about which refugees Switzerland considered undesirable, it was dispelled when the Swiss legation in Berlin—on Rothmund’s recommendation—entered into negotiations with Germany to stamp the passports of German Jews with a *J* to make it

easier for Swiss border officials to turn away “non-Aryans.” It was long believed in Switzerland that the *J* stamp had been instituted by the Nazis as just another of their notorious anti-Semitic measures. But when the documents finally surfaced in the 1950s, it emerged that it was not the Germans who initiated the policy but the Swiss authorities themselves. On September 7, 1938, a directive was circulated to Swiss border officials instructing them to refuse entry to any refugees who attempted to cross without a visa, “Especially those who are Jewish or probably Jewish.” Their passports were to be marked “Turned Back.”³² As part of a reciprocal arrangement, each country agreed that it would turn away Jews without the necessary “authorization” to cross each other’s borders. The Swiss Federal Council adopted the new protocol on October 4, 1938. As the Swiss justice minister would later declare in response to the influx of refugees, “The lifeboat is full.”³³

TWO

THE SWISS SCHINDLER

Shortly after the first immigration restrictions were put in place in August 1938, the Sternbuchs received word from contacts in Austria that Jews were being turned away at the border in large numbers. Not for the last time, Recha's long-standing connections with the Agudah served as an informal network whereby Orthodox Jews throughout Europe functioned as a trusted clandestine intelligence and transportation network to facilitate an underground railroad devoted to rescue operations. A key element of the network—one that would later become an essential element of their rescue efforts during the Holocaust—was identifying and organizing sympathetic gentiles. Although many *Haredim* led insular lives, others such as Isaac Sternbuch and his brother Eli, were businessmen who interacted with gentile clients on a daily basis. Through these business connections, the family would cultivate an increasingly valuable list of contacts. Soon, a network of helpers—including farmers, truckers, taxi drivers and police officers⁴—was mobilized. Recha and others also used their own money to pay professional smugglers (*passeurs*) when necessary, though their services were expensive, some charging as much as 3000 francs per person. Willi Hutter preferred to call himself a “guide.” His

daughter later recalled his arrangement with the Sternbuchs, who would present him with 20 francs for every refugee he brought to them.² In 1938 currency values, it took just under 4.5 Swiss francs to buy a U.S. dollar, so this was not a great deal of money.³

Jewish refugees fleeing Austria were given instructions about the routes and rendezvous points that would provide a safe haven in Switzerland. Once over the border, they would be brought to St. Gallen, less than twenty miles away. One of the most popular crossing points was located at Diepoldsau in the Rhine Valley. Here, a bend in the river had been removed at the beginning of the twentieth century to prevent flooding. After the Rhine was redirected, it left an area of swampland covered by bush and shrubs. That made it easy to wade across from Austria without detection by border authorities.⁴

Back on land, the hapless refugees were often surprised to encounter a cheerful Orthodox woman waiting for them with coffee and a smile. They were then spirited away in a vehicle, often under a hay bale or a pile of produce. More often than not, Recha would be accompanied by a helper to drive, but on many occasions, she traveled alone. “When I arrived over the border, I was driven to St. Gallen by a woman dressed in black,” recalled one Austrian refugee.⁵ Recha’s sister-in-law Gutta Sternbuch would later recall these early rescue missions. “She got word every night that there are Jews trying to get across the border, there are Jews that can’t come over, the Swiss don’t let, they throw them back. They throw them back to the Germans.”⁶

Recha was hardly the only Swiss rescuer working to smuggle Jews into the country during this period. Throughout Switzerland, scores of political groups and religious organizations took advantage of contacts in Germany and Austria to smuggle thousands of Jews and political activists across the border. These rescuers included countless gentiles who defied their country’s policies to save refugees fleeing

from the Reich. Among these was a nineteen-year-old Swiss factory worker named Jakob Spirig-Riesbacher, who is estimated to have saved between 100 and 150 Jews by leading them across the Rhine from Germany or through Austrian forests.⁷

By the end of 1938, hundreds of refugees—mostly Jewish—had made their way to St. Gallen.⁸ Having reached the safety of a neutral country, however, they still had one significant obstacle to overcome. Most of the new arrivals—especially the Orthodox—were conspicuous by their appearance. In a city as small as St. Gallen, newcomers stood out immediately. The Swiss authorities had already made it clear that they had no compunction about sending back Jews who had entered the country illegally. Among the many sympathetic gentile contacts that Recha had cultivated over the years, the most important proved to be the St. Gallen police commander, Captain Paul Grüninger, a much beloved local figure and former soccer star who had once played for the national team that won the Swiss Cup. Grüninger had been brought up as a Protestant, though his father was a Catholic. His parents ran a local cigar shop and were fixtures in the town. Following his discharge from the Swiss army after the First World War, Grüninger obtained a teaching diploma and worked for a time as a teacher at a primary school outside Zürich, where he would meet his future wife, Alice. During this period, he joined the country's powerful center-right Liberal Party, where political connections landed him a job back home as a lieutenant at the St. Gallen police department. The couple's only child, Ruth, was born in 1921. Four years later, he was promoted to captain and handed command of the cantonal police. The captain was widely known in St. Gallen for his compassion, especially among the less fortunate, to whom he and Alice would often bring food or clothing for the children. Grüninger had been horrified when he first received orders from his

superiors in the spring of 1938 to be on the lookout for fugitive Jewish refugees. When Recha approached him with her plan, he didn't even hesitate. "I could do nothing else," he later recalled.

"As soon as she had one person or two or three persons or a whole family," recalled Gutta Sternbuch, "she went to Grüninger and Paul Grüninger wrote in a sort of a passport that they came legally. It was unbelievable for a Swiss to do this."⁹ Despite this account, versions of which have been repeated for decades, Grüninger rarely put his own signature on the falsified documents. Instead, it was Jewish relief officials who issued the documents when Recha or even Grüninger himself brought them to the local refugee processing camp at Diepoldsau—set up on the site of an old embroidery factory—where they awaited permits authorizing a temporary stay.¹⁰ After the war, many of the refugees who had been saved by Grüninger's actions described their interactions with the police captain.

Hilde Weinreb, born in Austria's second largest city, Graz, fled her homeland as a child in 1938. She remembers holing up for an entire day with her parents near the Swiss border, waiting for night to fall. "We were all wet from the rain when it finally grew dark. We sneaked out of our hiding place and warily approached the border. The closer we got, the muddier the terrain became and we could not see the path any longer. There was deathly silence, except for the noise our feet made in the mud and the beating of our hearts. Suddenly a man in uniform appeared out of nowhere. He held a [flashlight] in his hand, shining the light into our faces. We must have looked ashen and were convinced that this was the end. But the man greeted us with a kind smile on his face. I looked at him as if hypnotized. He told us not to be afraid but to come with him to Switzerland, and everything would be okay. It was as he said. Later on, I learned the name of the man. It was Paul Grüninger, the police commander from St. Gallen himself."¹¹

There are no accurate records to assess how many of the refugees saved by Grüninger were brought to him by Recha Sternbuch, but the number was significant. Among these was Moritz Weisz, a Viennese merchant who later remembered crossing the Rhine near Hohenems in September 1938, along with his wife and seven other members of his extended family. Before setting out, they had been instructed to find the home of Recha Sternbuch in St. Gallen. Upon their arrival, Recha let them hide out in her apartment because they were in the country illegally and were afraid to emerge. Weisz recalls Recha heading out one day to arrange for Grüninger's assistance. "Soon afterwards, we got documents allowing all of us to stay in Switzerland," he recalled.¹²

Recha's daughter Netty, seven years old at the time of the Anschluss, remembers frequently giving up her bed and sleeping on the floor in favor of the refugees who passed in and out of the apartment.¹³ All the while, Isaac remained supportive of his wife's activities, even as she went out until all hours of the night, frequently exposing herself to grave danger. "Isaac not only supported what Recha was doing, he worked harder at his factory to finance her operations which had a lot of expenses," recalls their niece Ruth Mandel.¹⁴

Grüninger's operation took care of the refugees whom Recha had personally smuggled in. But she was well aware that there were hundreds, perhaps thousands, of others scattered throughout the country, terrified that they would be rounded up and sent back to face the growing horrors of the Third Reich. Again, she activated her intelligence network to spread the word that she had discovered a way to normalize the status of Jews whose illegal entry put them in danger of imminent deportation. By day, she would race from town to town to gather the names of refugees, often driving as far as Zürich—a little over an hour's drive—where she had established dozens of safe houses and where Jews could more easily hide than in the tiny

community of St. Gallen. By night, she continued her incursions to the border to retrieve the ever-growing numbers of refugees. When she wasn't on one of her missions, she worked the phones, calling her extensive network all over the country. Her phone bill during these years often exceeded 1000 francs a month, an enormous sum.¹⁵

Even for those who had entered the country legally, the restrictions were severe. Under Swiss regulations, refugees were forbidden to work during their stay. The rules were meant to encourage the visitors to be on their way as quickly as possible. Under no circumstances would they be making Switzerland their home. For Recha, this meant two separate phases to her operation. The first goal was to help Jews flee the Reich over the Swiss border. Next, she was determined to find safe passage for them to another destination where they would find a more permanent welcome. To this end, she utilized contacts in the Chinese and Cuban embassies who were willing to sell visas that could be used to expedite the transport of Jews to those countries. Eventually, a middleman in Zürich would supply a substantial number of visas for passage to Italy or China for the rate of 400 lira—about 20 U.S. dollars—apiece, though these countries were not their intended destination. Although she did not consider herself a Zionist, Recha used the clandestine underground network the *Aliyah Bet*, to facilitate the passage of countless refugees to Palestine in defiance of the British blockade and the strict quotas that were imposed after Arab uprisings in 1936.¹⁶

While Recha devoted herself full-time to this rescue work, other members of the family were no less devoted to the cause. Zecharia Reinhold, who had been captured by Swiss authorities shortly after entering the country from Austria, recalls what happened while he was awaiting deportation. “In the beginning Mrs. Sternbuch tried very hard to have us legalized. It was not easy, but she finally

succeeded. They wanted to send us back. . . . We had been locked up as criminals—we were about twenty or thirty people. It was night and we were sitting in despair. We heard someone climbing up near the window and we were frightened. A voice at the window said, ‘Don’t be afraid.’ This was Eli Sternbuch [Isaac’s brother] bringing us the good tidings. In the morning we were taken to the police station, where they took our names and divided us among several villages.”¹⁷ By the end of 1938, Recha’s network was so widespread that a number of advocates were sending refugees from long distances to seek her services. An eighteen-year-old German refugee named Daniel Gromb, who had illegally entered the country on his own, recalls crossing Lake Constance from Austria and making his way to Zürich. There, a refugee lawyer referred him to a woman in St. Gallen who could arrange to legalize his status. When he reached the Sternbuch house, Paul Grüninger happened to be there meeting with Recha. “It was thanks to him that I could stay,” Gromb later recalled.¹⁸

In addition to securing their papers, refugees remember Grüninger—sporting distinctive pince-nez glasses and an impeccable uniform—arriving at the refugee internment camp at Diepoldsau to enquire about their welfare. Stories abound of the captain using his own money to purchase shoes or winter clothing. He even took a young girl suffering from a toothache to the dentist and personally paid the bill.¹⁹ By November 1938, hundreds of illegal refugees had already been “regularized” by the efforts of Paul Grüninger, the Sternbuchs and countless others. But if they already had their hands full keeping up with the steady demand, the events of November 9 and 10 would signal a desperate new phase.

On the morning of November 7, 1938, a seventeen-year-old religious Jew named Herschel Grynszpan walked into the German embassy in