

# How the Welcoming of Jewish Refugees Fleeing Germany for France Evolved through Time (1933–1938)

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## Introduction

A man without a passport is a dead man on leave. He barely has the asset to kill himself, and it is all that's left to do. And with a passport? A passport will not grant you a work permit abroad. Of course not. But at least it allows you to starve easily. Without being constantly alert. And that is already something.<sup>1</sup>

Eric Maria Remarque based his book, *Les exilés* in French, on his own story. He started being attacked by the German nationalist press back in 1929, and as of 1932 he was harassed by the judicial proceedings plotted by the Nazis, he chose to exile. His words echo those of Abbé Glasberg, a historical figure known for his help to refugees in France. In 1946, he clarified what is entitled by the word refugee according to his vision. He explains that:

The refugee is not only a foreigner, he is a compounded foreigner. Outlawed or fugitive, he is a victim of

primarily political circumstances; deprived of governmental protection [...], it lacks what a jurist called the third constituent element of the modern man, after the soul and the body: the passport.<sup>2</sup>

These two texts, published in 1939 and 1946 are milestones of a story that has continued since then, on other grounds. Millions of men and women, yesterday coming from Germany, Poland, and Russia, and nowadays from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan were and are still forced to exile to flee repression, discrimination, incarceration, and even murder. Until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was simply no term that properly defined these people. It is only during the two last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that awareness was raised. In the wake of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the aftermath of the First World War, the phenomenon grew due to the dismantling of Empires, the creation of new Nations, and the inherent alterations of borders. In Russia, the Revolution, constant famine and the collapse of the White armies have dispelled more than a million and a half

of citizens between 1920 and 1921. They became “stateless due to a global, forced and automatic deprivation of their nationality based on ideological and political grounds”.<sup>3</sup> In December 1921, Fridtjof Nansen, a Norwegian academic and explorer, was named High Commissioner of problems related to Russian refugees in Europe. Free movement was inherently crucial to these people, such that the Nansen passport was created in 1922. It is the equivalent of a travel document specific to exile population. Remarque’s book quotes one Russian who had this type of passport: “A Nansen passport? [...] Well then you belong to the stateless’ aristocracy.”<sup>4</sup> It was in this international atmosphere that Hitler took power in the 30<sup>th</sup> January 1933.

As part of this contribution, I will demonstrate how the welcoming of Jewish refugees coming from Germany to France evolved with time, and how they shifted from being warmly welcomed to becoming “undesirable”, according to then terminology. Furthermore, I will explore the reasons that pushed France to preach the most extensive reception right before closing its borders. Hence, I will enlighten the measures taken by the French administration to restrict the hosting. Finally, I will acknowledge how the persecuted men and women, far from passively enduring their situation, actually reacted to find solutions which I call sidesteps and transgressions. These concepts will be explicitly highlighted based on concrete examples of life courses.

### **German Jewish refugees**

The first victims of the Hitlerian regime crossed the French border on the 16<sup>th</sup> March 1933. These refugees were mostly

militants from left-wing parties and many were intellectuals. They were fleeing Germany in the aftermath of the Reichstag fire which led to 4,000 arrests of potential suspects and regime opponents, conducted by the Nazis during the night of the 27<sup>th</sup> February 1933.<sup>5</sup> Even though Jews were numerous, they were nonetheless often distant from any feeling of identity. Following the boycott measures put in place on the 1<sup>st</sup> April by an anti-Jew nationalist campaign, and specifically aimed at Jewish shops, the first departures began as Jews realised that living a decently normal life in Hitlerian Germany would no longer be possible. Between March and August 1933, Parisian police headquarters registered 7,304 refugees coming from Germany. However, this number does not include the additional 2,500 illegal immigrants.<sup>6</sup>

This shows that Hitler’s rise to power had some nearly instant impact on the departures of some people who left the country immediately. However, the majority of those who were not as politicized began to leave Germany following the racial laws of Nuremberg enacted in September 1935. Chronologically, Austria’s annexation into Nazi Germany (*Anschluss*) in March 1938 led to another flood of refugees and indirectly triggered the violent outbreaks of the *Kristallnacht* between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> November 1938, therefore hastening more departures. In March 1939 Czechoslovakia, which had already lost the Sudetenland since September of that year, was invaded by the Hitlerian troops, hence further inducing the flight of Czech Jews and other refugees living in Czechoslovakia. To these population flows must be added those of the Ostjuden – essentially Romanian, Polish

and Ukrainian Jews. Thus, the Jewish population in France raised from 200,000 in 1933 to 300,000 in 1939.<sup>7</sup>

France's initial hosting attitude is known to be based on compassion from the Jewish community, as well as from other population groups, such as non-communist left-wing parties and unions, the Human Rights League, the International League against Anti-Semitism, the International Red Aid, some politicians and many academics. Edouard Herriot, mayor of Lyon, came forwards as part of this movement when he declared in April 1933:

We must respond to violence only with peace and kindness. I am pleased that no political speech serving hatred has been pronounced during this meeting. We must defend those who suffer, stay loyal to our duty as human beings, and therefore work towards the emergence of a universal confidence and trust.<sup>8</sup>

The nature of this welcoming can be questioned. The only plausible explanation regarding the opening of French borders, while immigration restrictions persisted in Great-Britain and the United States, lies in foreign politics. Indeed, at that time, France was diplomatically isolated. While the rest of Europe was seeking easing of tension, France welcomed thousands of refugees from Germany in an attempt to show the rightness of its uncompromising position against the Nazi system. It is in this mindset that the social deputy Jules Moch, speaking to the Minister of the Interior Camille Chautemps before the Parliament, on the 5<sup>th</sup> April 1933 declared:

I am certain that amid Europe's mad-

ness, France will wish to remain a refuge to all victims of persecutions. Orders, is that right Minister, will be given to all our borders, so that those who will have managed to flee Nazi rifles or Reichswehr machine guns, will find in our country the fraternal welcome that has always been the glory and pride of France.<sup>9</sup>

He even specified, in a ministerial circular to the Prefects dated 20<sup>th</sup> April 1933, that if refugees did not own a visa, they would nonetheless be "allowed to enter the country with a simple statement of their status", meaning declaring oneself as a refugee.

In fact, it is speculated that France was trying to regain a dominant position and therefore welcomed the oppressed without any restriction. The effects of such policy were immediate, as suggested by the French ambassador in Brussels: "It is justified for us to believe that the values advocated by our country will contribute to an improved international climate."<sup>10</sup> This obviously suggests a better position amongst other leading Nations as well as a restored prestige on an international scale. Moreover, a sudden shift in the English position can be noticed. In the English press, *The Guardian* reflects on the crudeness of the English position and declared: "No Frenchman, be he nationalist, reactionary, or even anti-Semite, would ever be indecent enough as to consider German refugees as undesirable foreigners."<sup>11</sup> France regained its former prestige. With such behaviour, France denied being a warmonger, a spoiler, underlined its pacifist position and demonstrated how crucial its security policy against the rising Nazi Germany truly was. Therefore,

refugees promptly became part of larger foreign politics led by the French. Meanwhile, within the government, President Edouard Daladier was in favour of closing the borders, while the Minister of the Interior Camille Chautemps argued that France must maintain the current hosting situation to its broadest. It seems that the consequences of welcoming all refugees without restrictions were not carefully evaluated, especially because it is highly unlikely that politicians had considered this hosting as only temporary. These internal conflicts generated an overall impression of profound chaos. Whereas visa demands were supposedly “examined in the largest and most liberal state of mind”, constraints and conditions were applied straight away. Finally, the official statement of the Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU) claiming that the Jewish community would take entire control of the financial responsibility for refugees may have had a questionably precipitating role regarding the decisions of welcoming.

During the first weeks of the refugees’ afflux, the French Jewish community seemed to be fully committed to their cause. The AIU has assured that the entire cost of their hosting would be taken upon by the Jewish community to avoid refugees becoming an extra charge to the French state. However, the optimism of the first weeks was followed by deep concerns. One of the main reasons was that the leaders of the Jewish community in France had not considered the extent of the refugee flow and had not imagined that it would persist on the longer term. In other words, they only thought of it as temporary. Yet, very rapidly, fundraisings could no longer compensate for the ever-increasing financial need necessary for the refugees’

arrival. Faced with this urgent situation, the national French National Emergency Relief for German refugees threatened by anti-Semitism [*Comité national français de secours aux réfugiés allemands victimes de l’antisémitisme*], acknowledged by the French government as the main speaker of the Jewish community, was forced to seek help from the French government itself. Another reason lies on a sensitive issue – namely, the too pronounced Germanity of the German Jewish refugees. It is undeniable that in France, even amongst the French Jews, a very strong anti-German attitude persisted. Indeed, a journalist described:

At first, it’s true; they [German Jews] were warmly welcomed. But much has changed since. French Jews complain that the newcomers have brought along with them flaws that are specific to Germans. Too loud, too convinced of the superiority of German civilisation. In sum, true Fritzie [Boche].<sup>12</sup>

Finally, another factor contributing to the anxious climate originated from political tensions emerging between the elite of French Jews and Jewish refugees. Indeed, some felt very strongly politically involved and urged the others to protest Nazi anti-Semitism. However, some leaders of the Jewish community in France advised these German Jewish activists to stay low in order to not stir up more anti-Semitism, implying no more protests. Hence, towards the end of 1933, the relationship between refugees and the National Emergency Relief had significantly deteriorated. Both parties felt ill towards each other; the former blamed the latter for insufficient

financial aid and condescending attitude while the latter criticised the former for its ungratefulness and irritation. At the same time, while the refugee situation evolved to becoming a “problem”, the meaning of the word itself was being clarified. It soon appeared that it differed significantly from the notion discussed earlier in the introduction where the refugee was defined as a person banned from his/her country in the name of Freedom.<sup>13</sup> Danièle Lochack, a law professor, demonstrated this precisely by referring to Hannah Arendt, who wrote in 1951 that from now on, refugees were no longer persecuted, “neither solely or mainly based on their former actions or thoughts, but because there are born forever into the wrong racial or social category.”<sup>14</sup> In addition, they were no longer perceived individually but rather as a collective whole due to the fleeing phenomenon that they were a part of. In other words, the logic was reversed, and one was collectively considered a refugee depending on the population group to which one belonged. One direct and immediate consequence was that French authorities began to treat refugees depending on their identity and on whether they were political refugees or Jewish refugees. Aurélie Audeval associated the former with a romantic vision and with the “very foundations of the French state inception”, while the latter “triggers [...] an attitude of charity and an irritation due to the burden represented, as well as suspicion regarding the reasons that led other States to get rid of this population.”<sup>15</sup> This type of suspicion can be linked to the extreme right’s attempt to radicalise the French’s hostility. Indeed, according to these extremists, nine Frenchmen out of ten were “anti-Semites by nature, or by

reason, although none will publicly claim it”.<sup>16</sup> It was not long before anti-Semites began to insinuate that Jewish refugees from Germany were blowing their horror stories out of proportion and that they were not in such a bad place after all, as Robert Brasillach wrote in 1941:

In Lyon ..., I saw the first German Jews arrived. They were not so scared, they still had connections with some rich relatives in Frankfurt or Berlin. They were farsighted and anticipating the tough times ahead, yet their exile, which was at the time painless and without real persecution, was already amplified by the press of both continents as a tremendous lament.<sup>17</sup>

To reach the French public opinion, partially receptive to the popular anti-Semitism movement, still “diffuse, unorganised, instinctive”<sup>18</sup> at the time, the far right systematised its actions. Since anti-Semitism could only be expressed within a legal frame, all the ways that could potentially reach the population and its social activities were exploited, to win over the widest support possible in the goal to disregard Jewish German refugees: “Booklets, leaflets, newspapers, flyers and cartoons are the media most commonly used by Judeophobic movement.”<sup>19</sup>

It is in this context that the Great Depression – initiated in 1929 – finally hit France. The shock was particularly significant since the French had thought they could avoid it and because the economists had not managed to read the foreshadowing signs. Between 1929 and 1936, unemployment raised by a factor of four, partial unemployment drastically increased, while working time decreased.

It is thought that in the early 1935, 2 million out of 12.5 million of employees were left with no job. Anti-Semites were quick to draw direct conclusions from this economic situation and used it to spread their ideas while the far right insisted that Jews were threatening the jobs of French. This disastrous economic situation in France, due to the Great Depression, prompted all governments (set up from 1933 to spring 1936) to give in almost entirely to the protectionist measures demanded by the extreme right. These measures were taken over by all moderate politicians, as well as by journalists, but were rejected by the majority of the centre-right and centre-left, who despite little ambivalence stood strongly against xenophobia.<sup>20</sup> The measures then put in place by the successive governments aimed to restrict the hosting of refugees in France. For those already settled in France, the policy of national preference rendered their living situation materially difficult.

### **Evolution of the hosting situation**

In 1933, following the short liberal period that only lasted a few weeks, the restrictions concerning the access of the French territory cannot be seen as a simple step back, as they were in fact part of the establishment of an even more severe regime, further worsened by the decree-laws of 1938. Vicky Caron recounts how France, despite its promise of never closing its borders, installed a policy in total opposition to its status as an asylum nation.<sup>21</sup>

Back in July 1933, the Minister of Foreign affairs declared that refugees arriving from any country other than Germany would not benefit from the refugee status.

The only ones who would have the possibility to try and obtain one were German citizens and stateless persons. This caused the French Minister of Foreign affairs to announce in September 1934 that Jews from Eastern Europe would not benefit from any specific refugee status.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, from the 2<sup>nd</sup> August 1933 onwards, the border police were instructed to forbid anyone from entering the French territory unless they possessed a valid visa. Meanwhile, the French consuls in Germany and in Europe were told to reduce the number of delivered visas. On the 19<sup>th</sup> October 1933, the liberal regime that was put in place in April regarding the delivering of visas, was repealed. Instead, the previous regime was restored, with even further restricting measures, such as financial ones, where only those with sufficient financial funds would be given a visa. Finally, in February 1934, one could actually be asked to prove his/her status as a political refugee. In other words, consular authorities and border control officers were only allowed to hand visas or identity cards to those “capable of proving that they were physically threatened and that their life was in danger”.<sup>23</sup>

In 1938, some decree-laws were endorsed and hereinafter not only determined how refugees were hosted but played a pivotal role in the conditions under which refugees would live in France. This legal arsenal attempted to limit and control the presence of refugees, and on a larger scale, of foreigners in France. The decree-law of the 2<sup>nd</sup> May 1938, despite discussing the refugee situation, more importantly reflected how much the mindset of the French population and the French state had evolved: moving away from the compassionate hosting

of the victims in 1933, they were now inclined to the idea of interning all the “undesirables”, as was planned in the decree issued on the 12<sup>th</sup> November 1938. From refugees to undesirables, this shift in terminology implies the change of public opinion as well as the state of mind of political parties.<sup>24</sup> Men and women arriving from Germany were initially considered as refugees (in March 1933), but a shift in discourse quickly occurred, such that the terms “fake refugee”<sup>25</sup> (in May 1933) and “so-called refugees from Germany”<sup>26</sup> began to emerge. From there on, the distinction between the true and the fake refugee became a heated debate. Thus, Edouard Herriot declared on the 29<sup>th</sup> January 1935 in front of the Parliament:

Reason, common sense, justice, and the French and Republican mindsets encourage us to distinguish the genuine political refugee who deserves the protection that France has always offered to the ones victims of their beliefs, and to disassociate him/her from those pretending to be political refugees in order to conduct certain activities that are conflicting the rules of politics and of common law.<sup>27</sup>

At the same time, the idea of a useful immigration progressed and Philippe Serre, head of the Sub secretary of State for the immigration, created on the 18<sup>th</sup> January 1938 following Edouard Herriot’s initiative,<sup>28</sup> considered that the distinction must be made between *useful* foreigners and what is then called the *undesirable*, mainly Jews from Eastern Europe who entered the French territory illegally. This notion is not new, as the law of the 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1849 already allowed the expul-

sion of *undesirable*, but the administrative discourse during the 1930s contributed to its generalization.

While the administration debated the economic benefits and side effects of foreigners, the status of political refugee then required an administrative proof. It initially remained rather random, because the policy was not based on any established procedures, and thus no criteria had been clearly defined. The ultimate decision hence depended on official in charge of the case. Claire Zalc refers to the case of a refugee from Germany who provided a document to the French authorities clearly stating that he was explicitly threatened to be forced sterilized; yet the document was not considered sufficient evidence for an actual threat and he was denied the status of refugee. Therefore, it could be assumed that the decree-law of the 2<sup>nd</sup> May 1938 was a step forwards as it mentioned in Article 2 that “political refugees who, upon their arrival in France, at the first border post, claim their status according to the determined forms and conditions, will be subject to an administrative inquiry. The Ministry of the Interior will be the one in charge of the final decision.” These conditions were later made more specific in a praefectorial document stating that to benefit from Article 2 from the decree-law of the 2<sup>nd</sup> May 1938, one must:

Provide proofs to the status of political refugee by bringing forward the following supporting documents:  
1° certificates from French consular authorities potentially inclined to testify on behalf of the person;  
2° testimonies from groups, French or international figures, whose moral value is unquestionable;

3° press clippings relating the events that have led the person to expatriate, as well as documents (letters, registration of residence, etc.) proving that one was indeed temporally and spatially present when and where the events took place. The clips must demonstrate that the person was affected, either individually or as part of a larger category of people concerned by these same events;

4° documents that may establish that the individual was an opponent of his country's regime and that this hostility exposed him to abuse or to property damages (press clippings, membership card, etc.);

5° documents testifying pursuit, prosecution, custody due to political events, etc. Furthermore, the individual will need to prove that he is not able to leave our country, by producing visa denial letters from consular authorities of at least three countries that could potentially host him. Failing that, one must prove that he indeed did request the consular authorities. Besides, please complete and return the leaflets attached and advise me on the chances of his expulsion.<sup>29</sup>

The decree-law from the 2<sup>nd</sup> May 1938 mentioned the term "political refugee" for the first time (Article 2), but this term did not withhold any promise of protection. Instead, it reflected the desire to control, and to eventually deport, as shown in the above document, which begins by demanding proof that one is indeed a political refugee and ends with the word "*expulsion*". This decree-law was inherently aimed to monitor and control

flux of foreigners, and it established the first step towards internment as it allowed house arrest for those who could not leave France. The decree-law from the 12<sup>th</sup> November 1938 worsened this clause, because it added the establishment of internment centres. The first one was opened in Rieucros, in Lozère, at the beginning of the year 1939.

The notion of "concentration camp" is explicitly expressed in the ministries.<sup>30</sup> It was also planned that in case of mobilisation due to war, all male foreigners aged from seventeen to fifty years old needed to be gathered within the shortest time possible in gathering centres specific to foreigners. When the war broke out, German nationals and former Austrians were therefore interned during many months in dreadful camps. Hence, it is clear that these decrees-laws left no solution to the problem concerning the refugee status and they were far from guaranteeing them the right to asylum.<sup>31</sup> On the international scale, an international convention, issued on the 1<sup>st</sup> February 1938 and inspired by the one of 1933, was drafted and signed in favour of the refugees coming from Germany. France refused to sign it. The emigrant's nationality remained the determining factor when deciding on the obtention of the refugee status. Therefore, Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe could not benefit from the international aid promised by the conventions of 1933 and 1938. In July 1938, during the Evian conference, France failed to pretend that it intended to remain an asylum nation. From then on, during the year 1939 until the beginning of hostilities on the 1<sup>st</sup> September, the French policy towards refugees was subject to many contradicting forces, drowning it into the most profound



confusion.

Regarding refugees, while the decree-laws insisted on being stricter, not only did refugees continue to arrive, but the number of illegal migrants kept increasing. In the beginning of the year 1939, out of 60,000 refugees present in France and coming from Eastern and Oriental Europe, 42,000 are thought to be illegal.<sup>32</sup> Since the detention centres supposed to be in place following the decree-law of the 12<sup>th</sup> November 1938 were simply inexistent, illegal migrants were accused of violating the decree-law of the 2<sup>nd</sup> May 1938 and massively ended up in French prisons.

### Domestic policy

In terms of domestic policy, several steps were taken in the direction of a national preference policy. Back in August 1932, on the 10<sup>th</sup>, a law aimed to “protect national manual force” had already been unanimously passed and intended to do so by establishing quotas of foreigners. The eager enforcement of these new measures from 1934 to 1936 suggests that they satisfied most of the French population. The French State then took further action by constraining all industries hiring more than 10% of foreigners to put forward quotas. The number of decrees increased: from only 72 between 1932 and 1933, this number raised to 170 passed in only six months as from November 1934, and finally reached 383 in the eighteen following months, thus summing up to 553 in three years.<sup>33</sup> Edouard Herriot, during a public appearance at the city council in Lyon on the 21<sup>st</sup> November 1934 declared: “I will prove to you that I am convinced, as all of you are, that French workforce needs to be prioritized.

[...] We do not need to hit hard, but to put our affairs in order.”<sup>34</sup> Obviously, this measure was not meant to directly harm refugees, but they inevitably suffered from its consequences.

Simultaneously, the access to certain jobs such as lawyers and doctors was being restricted. *L'Étudiant français*, a monthly magazine part of the Students National Federation of Action française, a far-right movement, reported on the demonstrations that took place towards the end of January 1935 in the main French faculties of medicine, and wrote: “Against the invasion of métèques. All of France’s faculties are on strike to protest the invasion of the French medical community by foreigners.”<sup>35</sup> All sources clearly state that these demonstrations were anti-Semitic, which is explicitly confirmed by Doctor Louis Goubin:

All these Romanians, and these Poles settling in France, who are they, actually? Everybody seems to ignore it, but is it not an open secret? Who still ignores that all of those who we persist to call Romanians are simply Jews? [...] It would be more appropriate, when discussing the invasion of the French medical community, to speak in terms of Jews instead of foreigners.<sup>36</sup>

These demonstrations resulted in the Cousin-Nast law in July 1935. From then on, foreign students can no longer benefit from any exemption from examination, and all naturalized doctors must wait five years before carrying out his/her functions.<sup>37</sup> Lawyers have similarly managed to obtain the same restrictions within their sectors. Thanks to several

medical members who sit in Parliament, they obtained the vote in July 1934<sup>38</sup> of a law proposal which prevented naturalized citizens' access to the bar, or of holding a public office, during ten years after their naturalisation.

### Men and Women reacted

Initially welcomed but soon rejected due to the economic crisis and upheavals hitting France in 1935, Jews who had taken shelter in France inherently depended on the French administration, which turned this population group from an inclusive space into an exclusive one. Therefore, confronted to this exclusion, men and women actively try to find solutions which I chose to call *sidesteps* and *transgression*. These words are not synonyms, yet they both suggest the presence of limits, implemented by the successive governments of the Third Republic. However, these words imply some non-overlapping actions as certain actions are deliberately opposed to the law, hence *transgression*; whereas others suggest a shift of focus toward the limitation, which therefore refers to *sidestep*, bypassing and avoidance. Therefore, *sidestep* and *transgression* are not interchangeable in the sense that the first refers to situations of basic imperatives (such as food and housing, work, supporting one's family) while the second deals with vital imperatives (how to not be interned, to live, or at least to survive).

The difference between sidesteps and transgressions is a question of scale in which the unit of measure would be the degree of arbitrariness in the decisions taken by the French administration. However, we cannot and should not divide all behaviours solely based on these two categories, in as much as a strict line be-

tween sidesteps and transgressions cannot and should not be drawn. Indeed, many other factors can influence one's decision process, such as context, his/her identity and his/her journey. Moreover, according to Jacques Sémelin, it is highly possible that fear of punishment hinders the shift to transgression. Sanction, disobedience, and insubordination frighten everyone.<sup>39</sup>

I will here share only one life story, the one of Laja and her husband Ela Mielnik. They arrived in France on the 22<sup>nd</sup> May 1933 and were coming from Germany, where they ran a business for ten years in Frankfurt. Their business was boycotted, hence forcing them to leave. They were foresighted as they brought along with them machines and raw material necessary to start over their business. Moreover, they did not go to Paris, like most Jewish refugees from Germany did, but to Lyon. Why Lyon? First, because they were less visible there; and second, because Lyon was an important economic centre. They had clients in Switzerland, Alsace-Lorraine and Sarre, such that this geographic position seemed strategic. However, the prefect of Lyon was suspicious, and he wrote that they

... say they are political refugees from Germany. [...] These foreigners *would be* Israelites [...] their business *would be* boycotted, but there *were not personally molested* nor threatened by Nazis [...]. They entered France through Strasbourg on the 14<sup>th</sup> September 1933 [...]. They came directly to Lyon, where they run a factory of leatherwork. [...] I think it is wise to reject the MIELNIK couple.<sup>40</sup>

The use of the conditional tense and other

keywords express systematic suspicion. And indeed, the French administration sent them an expulsion order; they had 15 days to leave France. Yet, they had nowhere to go and they could not go back to Poland, where they have never even lived. They were therefore imprisoned for eight days for “breaching an expulsion order”, in other words, because they had not left France. At the same time the president of Lyon’s Chamber of Commerce answered:

I am honoured to announce to you that the Professional Union of Travel items and Leatherworks’ makers in Lyon [Syndicat des fabricants d’Articles de voyage et Maroquinerie de Lyon], [...] indeed agrees that a foreigner running a leatherwork factory in Lyon can only be detrimental to other businesses. Besides, the special travel objects supposedly manufactured by M. MIELNIK can apparently be produced and exported by the same trade union.<sup>41</sup>

Hereafter, the couple initiated several strategies. First, they demonstrated how they could not move to another country by providing denial certificates of the countries that they had contacted. In a letter written in French on the 21<sup>st</sup> September 1935, Laja asked for a reassessment of their situation as she argued: “My husband and I have invested our money in this factory and we do not know where to go.”<sup>42</sup> Second, they engaged with social networks to overcome the isolation and to increase their chances of being successful; these networks consist of the Committee of Assistance to refugees from Germany, the Polish consulate in Lyon and the Israelite cultural association. The last one

wrote to Laja and Ela’s five employees who then addressed a letter to the prefect in which they asked to not be deprived of their job as it would “help them to avoid the problems linked to unemployment, especially because finding another job in Lyon in their area of expertise is impossible”. This last strategy did not work because they were eventually asked to shut down their shop, yet the expulsion order was postponed periodically for three months. Complying with the administration helped them legalising their presence in France, yet they fell into a situation similar to the one evoked by Remarque, where one can “starve smoothly”, as Remarque sarcastically adds: “Keep your head up [...]! You are lucky to live in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the century of civilization, progress and humanitarian concerns.”<sup>43</sup>

### Conclusion

This paper opened with Erich Maria Remarque’s quote from 1938 and concludes likewise. The initial hosting attitude in 1933 did not last: “The Man, in its extremes, is capable of grandeur, [...], but, what Humanity misses most, is a certain medium goodness.” After 1938, the process of non-welcome of the refugees continued, in France and elsewhere. The public opinion, more concerned by itself than by the others, has seen those refugees as warmongers in a context of increasing tensions. Borders were all closed. Logically, the measures taken by the Third Republic paved the way. Indeed, the Vichy regime, which put an end to the Republic after the 1940 defeat, was an authoritarian and collaborationist regime. It maintained and then intensified exclusion orders. Since its initiation, the Vichy government has arrested, interned, and from 1942

onwards deported first adults, and then families, towards the Nazi extermination camps. However, to the inexorably dark and regular hammering of the steps of the exclusion, to this macabre ballet for life, respond *a pas de deux, a pas de biche, entrechats* and *pas chassés* before the grand *jeté*: strategies exist, shaped by men and women whose resilience lies in their desire to live. The exploration of these strategies of the everyday life is a promising field of research.

Finally, it is now the 21<sup>st</sup> century and refugees' luck has not evolved. They are still pointed at as a compact mass without individualities or identities, a threatening onslaught. The image of this little child who seemed to be asleep on a beach has launched compassion. Aylan Kurdi, a 5-year-old Syrian child, found lifeless on a Turkish beach in September 2015, moved the entire world. Nevertheless, his death and the ones of tens of thousands of refugees remain the print of our century: "The Neandertal Man was shot down with a sledgehammer blow, the Roman with a sword, the plague was killing the Medieval Man; us, a scrap of paper is enough to annihilate us."<sup>44</sup>

## Notes

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