**Jews and Refugees**

**BY FREDA KIRCHWEY**

LAST July the Evian conference set up an intergovernmental committee to tackle the refugee question on a scale to match the magnitude of the horror itself. The committee is still in existence; it has done some work and issued a report or two, but as far as refugees are concerned—what, actually, has happened?

What has happened is that in this past year the numbers of refugees and would-be refugees has multiplied. The fall of Czechoslovakia and the November pogrom buried the intergovernmental machinery devised to care for refugees under an avalanche of new suffering. It is still functioning but so feebly, so slowly, so cautiously that its proposals fall on the ear with the unconvincing sound of a lead nickel on a counter. The British government’s offer of the interior of British Guiana for settlement by Jewish refugees may have been made in simple good faith or it may have been intended to balance the restrictions on Jewish immigration contained in the new plan for Palestine. But in either case Guiana offers no immediate relief. It is not at all certain that white settlers can live there, and even if they can, Mr. Chamberlain has made it clear that the responsibility for colonizing the territory “must rest primarily with the Intergovernmental Committee and with the private sources the government expects to finance it.” This means, in plain language, that if Guiana proves to be fit for settlement, and if the Jews will put up the money as they have for Palestine, refugees will be allowed to go and live there.

The truth is that the Jews are carrying the main burden of the refugee problem. The American Committee for Christian German Refugees and the Catholic Refugees Committee are doing effective work, but for the most part the Jews in America—and probably in Britain and France and the smaller democracies as well—have shouldered the job of salvaging as much as they can of the human wreckage of Central and Eastern Europe. What they are able to accomplish is relatively little, because the task is far beyond the most ample private resources. But the effort they are making is a stupendous one—a credit to the Jewish people and a shame to the rest of us.

In this one year the United Jewish Appeal has set itself a goal of $20,000,000 in the United States. Jewish groups are beating the bushes in every sizable community to bring out the last available dollar. The men and women running this great campaign have not allowed the magnitude of the job to inhibit their efforts. A man in Detroit said to me the other day: “Sometimes it looks hopeless. Even now we can do little enough; and if the millions of Jews in Poland and Hungary and Rumania are driven out in these next months, what will happen to them? But we can’t stop to think about that now. We have to do what we can for the millions already on our hands.”

This is a gallant attitude and one cannot argue with it. But one can and must argue with the assumption that the problem is, in reality, a Jewish one. First, one can demand that the Intergovernmental Committee get busy. Are the Jews and other oppressed minorities of Europe to wait till the brush is cleared in the uplands of Guiana before they can escape the tortures of ghetto and prison camp? Governments can move fast when they want to. An agreement between the democratic powers, great and small, to accept in numbers proportionate to their resources all the refugees from Central Europe and then to work out a plan of gradual redistribution and settlement, would prove that the capacity for statesmanship and decency still exists. The present procrastination of the non-fascist powers is only a little less inexcusable than the overt acts of oppression committed by Hitler.

Somehow, the idea has taken root that because a majority of non-political refugees are Jewish, the burden of their care should fall on the Jews. This monstrous idea contradicts every humane impulse and should be rooted out as a menace to the ideals of democracy that most of us—despite Father Coughlin and Senator Reynolds—still cling to. If not a single Gentile were to be counted among the persecuted millions in Europe, the responsibility for their relief would still rest upon all Americans.

It is a truism to say that the United States is a refuge nation, but it must be repeated every time this question comes up. Who of us today would be in this country—relatively safe—if the United States had not opened its doors to the refugees from Europe’s earlier tyrannies? I wouldn’t be here. My father’s father fled from Prussia with the rest of the voluntary exiles of ‘48. And the United States welcomed him without question, although he came without money or friends—without even an affidavit!—as it welcomed the thousands who came at the same time and in the years that followed. Was the country poorer for that influx of energy and rebellious spirit and love of democracy?

I am not suggesting any such simple, early American solution of the present refugee problem. I am urging a revival of the spirit that made the right of asylum a genuine part of our legacy of democratic ideas. I am insisting that a wise and generous solution of the problem is essential if democracy itself is to survive. The job belongs to the non-fascist governments, in the end. But today and tomorrow and until we can galvanize those governments into action, the job belongs to all the people—not to the Jews alone. It is a gauntlet thrown at our feet by the fascist dictators. If we refuse to pick it up or pretend we don’t see it, we shall have agreed in advance to the annihilation of every decent and humane value in life and have given Hitler his greatest bloodless victory. Democracy cannot afford that surrender.