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Refugee situation in Austria

Report
Committee on Migration, Refugees and Population
Rapporteur: Mr Marc-Antoine PIERSON, Belgium, Socialist Group

A. I. Draft Recommendation

The Assembly,

Considering that more than one-and-a-half million refugees have fond asylum in Austria since the end of the war ;

Believing that member countries of the Council of Europe should make a special effort, on the occasion of World Refugee Year, to give proof of their solidarity with other member countries which are experiencing a constant influx of refugees and to contribute towards the solution of the problems confronting those countries,

Recommends that the Committee of Ministers should invite Member Governments :

1. to comply with Recommendation 188 of 21st January 1959, by which they were asked to take in the Hungarian refugees in Austria, numbering at that time about one thousand, who have expressed the wish to settle in a member country of the Council of Europe ;
2. to accept financial responsibility for some of the refugees in Austria belongmg to the " hard core " , who are living in camps and whose age or state of health precludes them from qualifying as immigrants in the ordinary way ;
3. to lend their support, in the competent international organisations, to programmes for clearing refugee camps.

B. II. Explanatory Memorandum by M. PIERSON

1.

By Resolution 167, adopted unani-mously on 24th April 1959, the Assembly decided to lend its support to World Refugee Year. The Committee on Population and Refugees, having been instructed by Order No. 141 to " watch over the implementation of the programme which is to constitute the Council's contribution to World Refugee Year ", thought it would be useful, at the autumn session, to draw attention once again to the practical aspects of the refugee question in one member country, namely Austria.

With that purpose in mind, the Committee obtamed the Bureau s consent to visit Austria from 21 st to 23rd May 1959. M. Helmer, Federal Minister of the Intenor, and his principal collaborators, gave them a detailed account of the position in that country and of the extremely complex problems which constant influx of new refugees was setting the Austrian authorities. The Committee were able to visit several camps for Hunga-rians and Yugoslavs in the neighbourhood of Vienna and Salzburg.

Further information was acquired by a visit to the important transit centre esta-blished at Salzburg by the Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration (I. C. E. M.) who, in conjunction with the Austrian Government and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (U. N. H. C. R.), have worked hard in recent years to enable a large number of the refugees in Austria to find a permanent home in a new country, either in Europe or overseas.

The visitors were deeply impressed by everything they saw and heard. They expressed to the Austrian authonties their admiration and gratitude for the material and psycho-logical help extended from both official and private sources to displaced persons, expellees and fugitives. They invite the Assembly and the Committee of Ministers to join m this tribute. Austria, in offenng asylum on so generous a scale, has established a tradition of which she can be proud. She has given the world, us other Europeans included, a splendid example of solidanty.

1,250,000 refugees were officially registered by the Austrian Federal Ministry of the Inte-rior between the beginning of 1945 and the end of 1958. But the same authority estimates that several hundred thousand escaped any form of census upon their arrival in Austria, especially in the years immediately after the war. We may thus reckon that over one-and-a-haff million refugees of various nationahties have sought asylum in Austria since hostilities ended.

Day after day during the past fifteen years the Austrian frontier has been crossed, in larger or smaller numbers, by men, women and children driven out by political upheavals and living conditions in their home country. They may be divided into three main groups :

2. 1. Refugees of long standing (1944-1947)

During the closing stages of the war one million foreigners?a figure equal to one-sixth of the native population?arrived in Austria, which was at that time in a state of extreme destitution. There were German refugees from the east European territories (the Sudentenland, the Banat, etc), fugitives from the new " popular democracies ", military refugees (Ustashis, soldiers of Vlassov's army, former prisoners of the German army, escaped prisoners from the Russian army), formel' French, Italian, Belgian deportees, and so forth.

The Austrian Government, despite their precarious situation, and in defiance of certain orders received at the time from the Occupying Powers, came to the assistance of all those refugees, whatever their origin or status. This was done, in the words of the Minister of the Intenor, both for positive humanitarian reasons and as a gesture of protest against man's inhumanity to man".

Help was also quickly organised at international level. The contribution of UNRRA was essentially material ; the I. R. 0. succeeded in moving nearly 200,000 refugees to overseas countries, while U. N. H. C. R. and I. C. E. M. continued this emigration policy by assistmg the inmates of the camps. Further-more, the office of the High Commissioner concentrates its efforts on resettling in Austria refugees who are unable or do not wish to emigrate, giving priority to those living in camps.

It was Austria herself, however, who showed the greatest generosity by subsequently granting all these refugees the benefit of Heimatrecht. In 1953, as soon as. the Act conferrmg that privilege was promulgated, 150,000 of them requested and obtained Aus-trian nationality simply by making an appro-priate declaration. 275,000 have now become Austrian citizens.

Unfortunately refugees, once natura-lised, unless they are already registered in a scheme of the Office of the High Commissioner, forfeit the advantage of international assistance, even if their needs remain as urgent as before. As a result, Austria has to bear alone the expenses connected with these " old " refugees to whom she has granted her nationality.

3. 2. Hungarian refugees of 1956

The Hunganan rising of 1956 caused a fresh wave of refugees. Whereas the Austrian authonties expected about 10,000 altogether, easily that number arrived in a single night. At one time, we are told, there were ten train loads of Hungarian refugees standing in various parts of the territory waiting for their destinations to be assigned.

Ut the 180,000 Hungarian refugees who arrived in 1956, about 160,000 have managed to emigrate, 82,000 to overseas countries and 78,000 to different parts of Europe.

4. 3. Recent refugees

Apart from the mass exodus of 180,000 Hungarians towards the end of 1956, 34,000 (of whom 13,000 came within the province of the High Commissioner) crossed the Austrian frontier between 1955 and 1958. They came mostly from Yugoslavia, with a sprinkling from Rumania, Czechoslovakia and other Iron Curtain countries.

Whereas the number of Yugoslavs reaching Austria annually from 1945 onwards hovered around 2,000, it rose abruptly to 5,300 in 1956 and 14,300 in 1957, falling back to 4,700 in 1958.

For those Yugoslavs Austria is generally only a transit country, a stage on the road to emigration. Thus, out of 646 Yugoslavs registered from January to April 1959, only 23 % gave a political reason for their escape. It would be more correct, therefore, to speak of them as " migrants ". This explains why the percentage of those who return to their country has steadily risen in recent years.

The position at the beginning of 1959 was that there were still 67,000 refugees (of whom 56,000 came under the mandate of the High Commissioner, comprising 15,000 Hungarians and 41,000 others) in Austria who did not possess Austrian nationality, viz :

51,500 of long standing, including about 32,000 Germans from the eastern terri-tories (Volksdeutsche) and some 20,000 refugees from eastern Europe ;

12,000 Hungarians ;

3,500 recent refugees, including 2,500 Yugoslavs.

Of these 67,000 refugees who had not been naturalised, about 11,000 (of whom 10,369 came within the mandate of the High Commissioner, including 5,000 Hungarians) were living in camps, viz. 4,400 refugees of long standing, 3,400 Hungarian and 3,200 recent refugees, including 1,100 Yugoslavs.

Besides the 11,000 just mentioned, about 13,000 naturalised refugees, in other words, Austrian citizens, were still living in camps at the beginning of 1959, bringing the total up to 24,000.

The problems confronting the Austrian authonties as a result of the presence and constant influx of refugees are difficult and involved.

Their first objective is to clear the camps. Much has already been done with the High Commissioner's help. At the beginning of this year there were only 52 official camps in Austria, i. e. camps administered by the State, 25 of them accommodating Hungarian refugees. There were nearly 300 just after the Hungarian rising.

1,400 new dwelling units had been built by the beginning of 1959 for refugees of long standing, and about the same number are now under construction. Although the High Commissioner contributes between 30 and 50 %, the Austrian Government have so far spent .250 million schillings on the programme.

Similar action has been taken on behalf of the recent refugees. 150 new or reconditioned dwellings have been made avail-able to them, and about 100 more will soon be ready.

The Committee visited some former barracks which had been converted into a residential quarter at Kaiser-Ebersdof, a suburb of Vienna. Several of the dwellings are occupied by Hungarian refugees, and the Committee was most favourably impressed by the arrangements.

Another possible way of enabling the camps to be closed is through emigration. Here, it must be remembered, the Austrian authorities are entirely dependent on the outside world. We have already mentioned that 160,000 out of 180,000 Hungarian refugees have managed to emigrate either to a European country or overseas. But equally spectacular results have not been achieved?far from it?for other classes of refugees.

It is of interest to note that the Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration alone, since they began operations in Austria in 1952, have, up to 30th June 1959 moved 145,549 migrants, including 123,000 refugees.

It is to be hoped that dunng World Refugee Year the international community will make a renewed effort to satisfy all those refugees who have been asking, some of them for several years past, to settle permanently m an adoptive country of their choice.

There remain those who cannot quality for immigration?old people and the sick and infirm, those who are classed as "difficult cases or, more graphically, hard core cases". They number about 4,000 together with their near relations some of whom, be it said, are perfectly capable of earning their living.

Here too, a special effort to mark World Refugee Year is desirable so that the old, the blind and the tubercular, who are regarded as "non-absorbable " and of whom some have been draggmg out their wretched existence in camps for ten and even fiteen years, may at last find a home.

We have already said that the presence of refugees in Austria is a permanent pheno-menon. That is because of the geographical situation of the country and the spirit of helpfulness of the population. When a tile drops off the roof of the European edifice, we Austrians usually get it on our heads " , we were told.

The problem today is summed up in these figures : 67,000 refugees, of which 56,000 are under the mandate of the High Commissioner, including 15,369 in camps and 22,000 unsettled but not living in camps.

How can we give proof of that Euro-pean solidarity which wo would wish to see particularly productive in World Refugee Year ? The Committee on Population and Refugees are of the opinion that the Council of Europe's contribution might take several forms : facilities to Austria for obtaining long-term loans from the Resettlement Fund ; accept-ance by member countries of financial respon-sibility for a certain number of hard core cases ; adoption of those Hungarian refugees, numbering about a thousand, who in 1958 asked to settle in a member country [1] ; participation in the support of emigres, including Yugoslavs, who are not refugees as defined by the 1951 Convention, so that Austria will not be obliged to turn them back ; assistance m the construction or equipment of dwellings for refugees who are still in camps.

Some of these suggestions are taken up in the draft Recommendation attached to this report. The Committee on Population and Refugees intend in due course to submit to the Assembly one or other of these plans for aid to Austria based on the results of the campaign for World Refugee Year, to which the Council of Europe has shown a keen desire to contribute.

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