Refugee aid worker Paul Grüninger tells FokusIsrael.ch: “Too often, the law gives in to pressure from those in power”

About the Person

Paul Grüninger (October 27, 1891–February 22, 1972) was born in St. Gallen, the second of four children of Oskar and Maria Grüninger, and was raised as a Protestant. After attending the teacher’s college in Rorschach, he worked as an elementary school teacher and served as a second lieutenant during World War I. In 1925, he became the cantonal police commander in St. Gallen. Five years earlier, in 1920, he had married Alice Federer; the couple had two children. Grüninger was a member of the FDP. His outlook was shaped by a Christian worldview and a sense of humanity. Following the annexation of Austria by Nazi Germany and the border closure ordered by the Swiss government in August 1938, he refused to deport persecuted individuals who had fled illegally into Switzerland. He allowed an estimated 3,600 Jewish and other refugees to enter the country and legalized their stay in Switzerland using forged documents. In doing so, he violated directives from Bern. In March 1939, Grüninger was suspended and dismissed without notice in May—without a pension. In 1940, the St. Gallen District Court fined him 300 francs for breach of official duty and forgery of documents. From then on, he lived in poverty, working as a sales representative and a substitute teacher.

It took more than five decades for Paul Grüninger to be exonerated. The push for his rehabilitation came, among others, from his daughter Ruth Roduner, historian Stefan Keller (author of the book *Grüninger’s Case*, 1993), and SP National Council member Paul Rechsteiner (see his blog post from August 11, 2026). In 1993, Paul Grüninger was politically exonerated by the Government Council of the Canton of St. Gallen. A year later, in 1994, the Swiss Federal Council also declared that Grüninger had acted in accordance with ethical values “that later became the basis of international and Swiss asylum law. (…) He deserves unreserved respect for his selfless conduct.” In 1995, the St. Gallen District Court posthumously acquitted him. In 1998, the Grand Council of the Canton of St. Gallen, the cantonal parliament, awarded his family compensation of 1.3 million Swiss francs. This led to the establishment of the Paul Grüninger Foundation. The Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial in Jerusalem had already honored Paul Grüninger as one of the “Righteous Among the Nations” in 1971. With the help of AI, FokusIsrael.ch spoke with Paul Grüninger about his convictions, his actions, his family, and his later fate.

By Sacha Wigdorovits

Paul Grüninger, why did you become a police commander?

Paul Grüninger: I was a teacher and an officer. In September 1919, I was offered the position of police lieutenant in the Landjäger Corps. I hesitated, but gave in to my parents’ urging and was selected from among many applicants. In 1925, I became a captain and commander. I wanted to serve Switzerland and my uniform—and remained a civil servant until my conscience outweighed my orders.

When did you first become aware of what was happening to the Jews across the border in Germany and Austria?

Paul Grüninger: After Austria’s annexation by the German Reich in March 1938, at our border on the Rhine. People came at night, destitute and desperate. We knew what fate awaited them across the border. Turning them away was a difficult thing to do. The refugees fought back desperately. That’s when I saw what was happening on the other side—not in reports, but right before my eyes.

What was the deciding factor for you in helping these persecuted Jews?

Paul Grüninger: Anyone who, like me, repeatedly had the opportunity to witness the heart-wrenching scenes—the breakdowns of those affected, the wailing and screaming of mothers and children, the threats of suicide—and to see suicide attempts, could ultimately no longer stand by and do nothing. The goal was to save people whose lives were in danger.

In doing so, you acted in defiance of the explicit order of the Swiss federal government, the Federal Council, which had closed the borders to Jewish refugees in August 1938. What motivated you to disobey this order?

Paul Grüninger: Turning the refugees away was out of the question, if only for humanitarian reasons. We had to let many of them in. How could I have concerned myself with bureaucratic considerations and calculations under those circumstances? My decision to help was rooted in my Christian worldview. I couldn’t have done otherwise. All too often, the law yields to the pressure of power.

Did you have contact at the time with the head of the Swiss immigration police, Heinrich Rothmund, who played a decisive role in shaping Switzerland’s anti-Semitic refugee policy?

Paul Grüninger: Yes, on August 17, 1938, in Bern, when Rothmund convened the cantonal police directors. There I objected and said, “For humanitarian reasons, we

cannot turn them away. It’s impossible to completely seal the border; if we turn them away, they’ll come in illegally and uncontrollably.” Few people listened. After that, I acted at the border based on what I saw—not on what had been decided in Bern.”

The Swiss authorities justified the rejection of Jewish refugees, on the one hand, by arguing that Jews were being persecuted for racial, not political, reasons, and were therefore not “true” political refugees. Furthermore, they claimed that accepting too many Jews would lead to a “Judaization of Switzerland” and thereby foster anti-Semitism. What was your opinion on this?

Paul Grüninger: To me, they were people whose lives were in danger—not just a category on a form. We had to let many of them in. My decision to help the Jews was based on my Christian worldview, not on racial ideology or fear of numbers.

How did you actually manage to ensure that the Jewish refugees who had entered the country illegally could stay?

Paul Grüninger: I backdated their entry dates to a time before the border closure of August 18, 1938, so that they would be considered to have entered legally. I issued identification documents that were inaccurate and fudged the numbers in the reports. Certainly, I deliberately exceeded the limits of my authority and often forged documents and certificates with my own hands, but I did so solely to grant persecuted people entry into the country.

Were you acting alone at the time, or did you have helpers?

Paul Grüninger: I made the decisions at the border and in St. Gallen regarding whether to allow people to stay or send them back. Yet I was not alone. The Jewish Refugee Aid took people in, and a camp was set up in Diepoldsau. Farmers, innkeepers, young people, and individual civil servants helped out. Some brought the refugees at night. Without this network, many would have been lost. I reviewed the cases and made sure they could stay.

What was the mood among the Swiss public at the time: Did the majority side with the Federal Council, or did they agree with you?

Paul Grüninger: The majority went along with the authorities. Bern wanted to close the border, and many people said, “We can’t take everyone in.” I saw it differently.

But not everyone thought the way I did. Otherwise, we wouldn’t have had to secretly help those people cross the Rhine.

You paid a high price for your compassion and courage: you were dismissed from the police force, your pension was revoked, and from then on you lived in poverty. Have you ever regretted your actions?

Paul Grüninger: No. I often found myself in extremely dire situations. Nevertheless, I would act the same way again. I am not ashamed of the district court’s verdict. On the contrary, I am proud to have saved the lives of many people in dire straits.

Were there also people who stood up for you after you were dismissed from the police force?

Paul Grüninger: Yes, mainly out of gratitude. The textile industrialist Elias Sternbuch, Recha Sternbuch’s brother-in-law, set me up with a raincoat shop in Basel in 1942. Rabbi Lothar Rothschild wrote me a letter of recommendation. And the refugees I saved wrote me letters, such as Felix Bauer from the Diepoldsau camp: “On behalf of all my fellow camp inmates, who will never forget all the good you have done for us.” Later, I also received a letter of thanks from the St. Gallen government for my “humanitarian attitude.”

The rehabilitation by the St. Gallen government and the Federal Council’s declaration of honor didn’t come until decades later. Did that make you bitter?

Paul Grüninger: Bitter? No. I never waited for fame or recognition. I didn’t sell my conscience, and that was enough for me. The letters from those I saved meant more to me than any official document.

You were married and had two children: Did your wife know back then what you were doing in secret?

Paul Grüninger: Yes, my wife Alice knew about it. She supported me. It was important to her, too, that the refugees who arrived under cover of night and fog were brought to safety and well cared for.

How did your wife react to your dismissal from the police force: Did she reproach you?

Paul Grüninger: Accusations? Never! Alice stood by me from the very beginning.

She shared my hardships with me—the lean months, the meager income. I remember her words: “Paul, you did the right thing. I would have done exactly the same.” That’s what kept me going when the world let me down.

In the 1930s and 1940s, Jews were threatened by anti-Semitism from the right. Today, in addition to Islamic anti-Semitism, they are threatened above all by anti-Semitism from the political left. Does that surprise you?

Paul Grüninger: Yes, in a way. It doesn’t surprise me that hatred has taken on a new guise. Hatred always finds a new justification when the old one no longer holds. But it saddens me that, of all people, those who see themselves today as the guardians of humanity have forgotten what it was all about: people whose lives were threatened.

You witnessed the founding of the State of Israel on May 15, 1948. What were your thoughts at the time?

Paul Grüninger: I have never spoken publicly about this. But for years I saved Jews who were in mortal danger, and my efforts to help them were rooted in my Christian worldview. A separate state for the persecuted—that was, for me, the logical consequence of what I had seen at the border.

Note: This interview is based on statements and recordings by and about Paul Grüninger, which were identified and reproduced with the help of AI. In our series “Conversations with Legends,” we speak with deceased figures from the worlds of politics, religion, science, and culture who were significant to Judaism and Israel. Our aim is to bring them and their ideas closer to today’s audience. Interviews published so far include:

Theodor Herzl, the founder of modern Zionism

Chaim Weizmann, Israel’s first president

David Ben-Gurion, Israel’s first prime minister

Golda Meir, Israel’s only female prime minister to date

Anwar Sadat, the Egyptian president who traveled to Jerusalem in 1977 to make peace with Israel

Moses, who led the Jewish people out of slavery in Egypt and into freedom

Maimonides, the great Jewish scholar who lived in the 12th and 13th centuries

Lord Jonathan Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom

Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis

Albert Einstein, the founder of the theory of relativity

Robert Oppenheimer, the “father of the atomic bomb”

Hedy Lamarr, the Hollywood icon and inventor

Estée Lauder, the entrepreneur and founder of a global corporation

Milton Friedman, Nobel laureate in economics

Levi Strauss, the inventor of jeans

Elie Wiesel, writer and Nobel Peace Prize laureate

Primo Levi, the Italian chemist and writer

Theodor Adorno, the German philosopher and sociologist

Martin Buber, philosopher, scholar of religion, and writer.

Hannah Arendt, journalist and outspoken thinker

Carl Lutz, the Swiss diplomat who saved tens of thousands of Jews

---

Sacha Wigdorovits is president of the Fokus Israel und Nahost association, which operates the website fokusisrael.ch. He studied history, German language and literature, and social psychology at the University of Zurich and has worked, among other roles, as a U.S. correspondent for the SonntagsZeitung, served as editor-in-chief of BLICK, and was a co-founder of the commuter newspaper 20minuten.