

by Alfred Bodenheimer [i](#)

In July 1938, a conference was held in Evian on the French shore of Lake Geneva, convened by US President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Roosevelt had convened. Alarmed by the disenfranchisement and persecution of the Jewish population in Nazi Germany and in Austria, which had been annexed three months earlier, the American government had called together delegates from over thirty countries to find a solution and new ways of life for the oppressed Jews.

The fact that the conference was under a bad star was already signaled by the venue. It was supposed to take place in Switzerland, but the topic was already too controversial for Switzerland, which was afraid of offending its big neighbor to the north. In fact, the conference was to show that – despite all the general expressions of sympathy – hardly any country was prepared to open its doors even a crack wider to Jews seeking help.

## Nobody prevented the big murder

Not even the USA, the initiator of the conference, could bring itself to relax its strict quota system for Jewish immigration. The governments' fears were not least due to an increase in domestic political tensions. For in the populations of most states, including those governed democratically, if not in the governments themselves, there was a manifest anti-Semitism that generally lacked the extermination impetus of National Socialism, but was certainly based on a wealth of prejudices and conspiracy theories.

The immediate consequences of the Evian fiasco are disputed among historians. What is certain is that the debacle showed the Nazi regime that even in the democratic world, no one was prepared to lift a finger in favor of the Jews, and that certain Eastern European states were practically begging the Western states to take their Jewish population off their hands.

In view of the extermination work of the Shoah, which was set in motion shortly afterwards, this was a portent: no one would do much to prevent the great murder, and in countries such as Poland or the Baltic states, the hunt for Jews was even likely to involve the active participation of local collaborators.

From a Jewish perspective, the Evian Conference has since become a cipher for the



overturning of a general certainty: the realization that the Jewish community as a whole is no longer protected in the security of its existence by an intrinsic self-commitment of civilized societies.

This means that it is no longer fundamental moral values, but rather opportunistic reasons, subjective assessments or party bickering that decide whether Jewish people can still feel welcome or safe in a society.

This is still a long way from a pogrom atmosphere or even open persecution – but it creates an insecure ground. No Jew is sure whether they can still rely on their guaranteed rights, or whether society will continue to make these guaranteed rights the guideline for their behavior, even if they still officially apply.

When it comes to targeted acts of bloodshed against Jews, such as the recent attack outside a synagogue in Manchester or the [attack on a Hanukkah celebration on Bondi Beach in Sydney](#), politicians are quick to make bland statements. However, such extreme events are only the outgrowth of a much broader process that makes anti-Semitism socially acceptable.

## No illusions

When the rector of the University of Lausanne admits in a letter that he is ultimately carrying out a de facto boycott of Israeli universities for purely opportunistic reasons, this is the tiniest sign of moral capitulation, a cascade of aggression and suspicion, distancing and open rejection.

We live in a world where Jews now know pretty much who is openly willing to take up arms against “Zios” (the new hate-fighting term for “[Zionists](#)”), but are no longer so aware of whether the prevailing social consensus guarantees their integrity.

This is a new edition of the Evian moment, and no one is under the illusion that the enemies of the Jews and all those who support their action groups and fill their propaganda channels with content are not registering this as accurately as they once did.

If the states gathered in Evian on Lake Geneva in 1938 had made a clear commitment to Jewish existence as part of their community and opened the gates wide to those wishing to emigrate, it would hardly have been enough to harm them

- just as a larger number of Jewish citizens has hardly ever harmed a country. They would have saved many lives, and perhaps even prevented the Holocaust, at least in part.

It is hard to imagine that things could get as bad as they were back then. However, even in July 1938 there was a lack of imagination in terms of what people were capable of doing to other people in their hunger for power, hatred and racial mania.

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