SWITZERLAND: A SAFE HAVEN FOR CIVILIAN REFUGEES AND MILITARY INTERNEES DURING THE NAZI ERA

SUMMARY/SYNOPSIS

Objective: This DISPLAY exhibit of 128 pages should demonstrate with philatelic items, historic descriptions and personal historical documents the many problems encountered by and in neutral Switzerland during the Nazi Era, when dealing with everyday life and correspondence of Emigrants, Refugees & Military Internees who sought asylum in Switzerland while the country ultimately was completely surrounded by Nazi Germany and its allies.

Historic Facts: The title page serves as introduction to the longstanding tradition of “Save Haven”.

Organization & Outline: The exhibit is subdivided into various groups closely related to the theme. It is impossible to have balance among groups because in some cases little material was issued, while in others a lot of items are available, sometimes only changed by the camp name but with the same cancel in which case the inclusion was omitted to prevent “stacking” the exhibit.

The Outline on page 2 follows the groups. Since there were various types of refugees in Switzerland who were either under the jurisdiction of the Federal Police and Justice Department or the Swiss Army, a special explanation was developed.

* **Mail from/to Emigrants & Refugees who are under Federal Police Department jurisdiction**: The “Nazi Era” remark indicates that civilian refugees entered Switzerland legally already between 1933 & 1938. They were called “Emigrants”, but after 1938 they were called “Refugees”. To identify their mail is sometimes very difficult, especially that of Emigrants and only content, sender or receiver would identify such mail since it was not censored as long as it did not come from or go to a refugee home or camp under military jurisdiction. To demonstrate this, one page with common, regular, every-day mail from/to known Emigrants is shown as is also, a German citizenship certificate, used on the back by Swiss authorities for residency permission. Not present in the exhibit is the extremely elusive blue “Z” Swiss cancel which is connected with Jewish refugee mail in Switzerland.

* **Swiss Army Mail Service, Internment Camp Mail, Internee Mail Service**: Examples show Swiss postal clerks and military Internees worked side by side and states the administrative rules for Swiss guard units and camp cancellation of mail.

* **June 18, 1940 - the first Internment Camp Cancels**: These are the very scarce 31 mm ø cancels with large Swiss cross or camp name but no "franc de port" inscription. They were only one week in use when replaced by those without large Swiss cross or camp name but now with "Franc de port" inscription

* **June 25, 1940 - Censorship of Internee Mail under Military Jurisdiction**: No general mail censorship ever existed in Switzerland. It was invoked during WW II for military reasons on
that date for both military and civilian internees in camps under military jurisdiction but escaped prisoners of war mail (Evadé mail) was excluded as was mail for civilian refugees in camps not under military jurisdiction. Censored military camp mail was indicated by three-digit numbers (4 mm high & beginning with # “3”). When letter was opened, it was closed with white or brown (elusive) tape. Two different tape inscriptions were used and a red "Zuzustellen, Feldpostdirektion" stamp was applied on front. For reasons of national security or possible violation of legal tender transfer, every now and then also civilian mail was "accidentally" censored.

* **July 1940 -The 2nd Group of Internment Cancels (28 mm ø) without Camp Name** shows cancels in French, German or Italian languages combined with various inscription combinations

* **The 3rd Group (Definitive) of Internment Camp Cancels (28 mm ø) with Camp Name** are cancels with many variations of camp name inscriptions in French, German or Italian languages. Basically these were all the same cancellations of which more than 600 exist, a large majority in French language. Only Adelboden had two identical cancels one in German & one in French.

* **Interned, Escaped Prisoners of War Mail** was indicated by the remark either by rubber stamp or type-written on the front of postal items containing the word "EVADE" or was mentioned in the sender’s address. Confusion arose when mail not indicated as such was mixed with civilian mail and not censored, in which case this item was returned to the sender, indicated by another stamp.

* **Special Military Security Camps & Special Purpose Camp for Internees.** There were many "Special Internment Camps" which had no special cancels except for the regular camp cancels in use at that time and location. The largest camp and the only one heavily fortified was Büren an der Aare which had two cancels, the mentioned one and Büren a. d. Aare. The only Penal Camp was at Wauwilermoss and can only be identified as such by the knowledge of being such a camp. A special camp was established for so-called "Partisans" who were Italians and did not fit into either the category of civilian or military Internees, hence, they were in this special camp under army jurisdiction and a special cancel "Speciallager 1, Portofrei" was issued.

* **Higher Education Camps for Internees** were established for foreign soldiers who had to interrupt their higher education. These camps too are often only identifiable by the address from or to the sender and not by regular military camp cancel.

* **Search for Military Internees in Switzerland:** With the constant influx of foreign soldiers their where-abouts were often problematic because of the hundreds of internment camps in existence; therefore, the Swiss Information Office for Internees was established in Bern which had world-wide, free franc privilege. Often mail went from camp to camp until an Internee was found thus creating items with many camp cancels.

* **Stamp-like Labels and Postcards to Replenish the Welfare Fund for Internees:** One stamp-like label and postcard each were issued for the French and Polish Internees in order to replenish funds in the “Welfare Fund for Internees”. It was administered by the Federal
Commission for Internment. The Army Mail Service relaxed the “no-cancellation order” for civilian mail or camp cancels of such items and even furthered it.

* **1940 - Camp for Hospitalized Foreign Soldiers** in clinics in LEYSIN. At first, regular camp cancels were used but later the word "hospitalization" was indicated in the Leysin cancel.

* **1940 - The International Bureau of Education (BIE) – Office for Intellectual Assistance to Prisoners of War, Geneva** had postage-free privilege & played an important role in everyday life of these people in regard to communication with their home country and the International Red Cross Office in Geneva. One souvenir sheet each with four different colored stamps with Pestalozzi and the same with Père Girard were issued and officially sanctioned for valid postage in connection with this institution. These stamps must be treated as forerunners.

* **Special Mail Service for Camp-detached Internees** - Great need for help especially in Agriculture. Many military and civilian Internees were permitted to work on farms and in other professions due to severe labor shortage in Switzerland, conditioned by mobilization of all able-bodied men. The military Internees could send their mail postage-free via their "home camp" or also direct through regular civilian mail but here postage had to be paid and no censorship. This was also the case for Refugees working on farms whose mail was never censored. Farm production was essential for Switzerland, since food import became minimal. This so-called "Wahlen Plan for more cultivation" involved everybody and there was total food rationing in Switzerland. A cover promoting this plan, meal coupons - part of the rationing and a ruling of the Federal Police permitting a refugee to work on a farm are included.

* **Mail from or to Military Internees in Swiss Camps**: The Internees were permitted to write to and receive mail from their families and friends from all over the world, providing the international mail service functioned. Their mail was "postage free" as long as regular mail (sea mail to overseas) was used. Airmail required additional postage which had to be paid by the Internee. Many combinations exist with Swiss and foreign country censorship marks and closing tapes on the same postal item.

MORE ELUSIVE ITEMS (green frame) in the exhibit:

1918  - Special Military Postcard for World War I Internees in Switzerland

1940  - Covers with the scarce Internment camp (31 mm ø) Kienthal, Lenk, Wengen and Gstaad without "Franc de port" in cancel but applied by special rubber stamp.

1940  - Covers with Swiss Internment Camp cancel (31 mm ø) with large Swiss cross, without "Franc de port" in cancel but applied by special rubber stamp.

1940  - "Militär-Intenierung, Schweiz" cancel with misspelled "Portorfei" instead of "Portofrei"

1940  - Censored cover with seldom used Swiss closing label on brown paper.
1940 - Covers cancelled "Speziallager 1", "Hospitalization militaire en Suisse, Leysin", "Bureau de renseignements"

1940 - Seldom seen Italian military unit cover with "Camp d'Internes Italiens Chiètres" (Kerzers in German) and rubber stamp "Savoia Cavalleria".

1941 - Cover with rubber stamps "Grangeneuve/Hauterive, Course universitaires", "Contraire au règlement"

1942, 1943 - Covers from/to Polish Internees in Switzerland and P.O.Box 260, London EC 1, (the Polish connection), with different rubber stamps applied in England.

1944 - Cover from the former Byelorussia to a Russian Internee in Switzerland, censored by OKW in both Königsberg (a) and Frankfurt (e) as well as in Switzerland.

1945 - Regular postcard from a Jewish refugee just liberated from Concentration Camp Theresienstadt, now in Refugee Camp Aldliswil, with military censor mark “Zensuriert” since the camp was guarded by military. Also shown is the Nazi insignia JUDE” still worn on clothing when arrived in St.Gallen with this special train.

MAJOR REFERENCES:

It must be mentioned that the exhibitor was living in Switzerland between 1936 and 1946 as an "Emigrant" and was permitted by the Federal Police & Justice Department, because of his educational background, to work on farms during the war where also "detached" Italian and Polish Internees were permitted to work.

Bergman, Ernest L. Special Envelope FP 513 of the Swiss Military Service. Tell 13: (3) 81, 92, 97, June 1987

Bergman, Ernest L. Civilian Internee Mail in Switzerland during WW II (1938-1945). Tell 29: (3) 8-10, May 2003

Civil Censor Study Group (CCSG). Various pertinent bulletins

Ganz, Felix. Postal Cancellations and Markings in Switzerland. American Helvetia Philatelic Society, P.O. Box 666, Manhattan Beach CA 90266, pp 264, 1994

