

Passports, Profiteers, Police – A Swiss war secret

By Tom Topol 16 May, 2021

Not often we find books with solid content on passport history—the following book displaying such documents in crisp and large format. The topic is most fascinating as it brings us back to a time were passports made a difference in life and death.

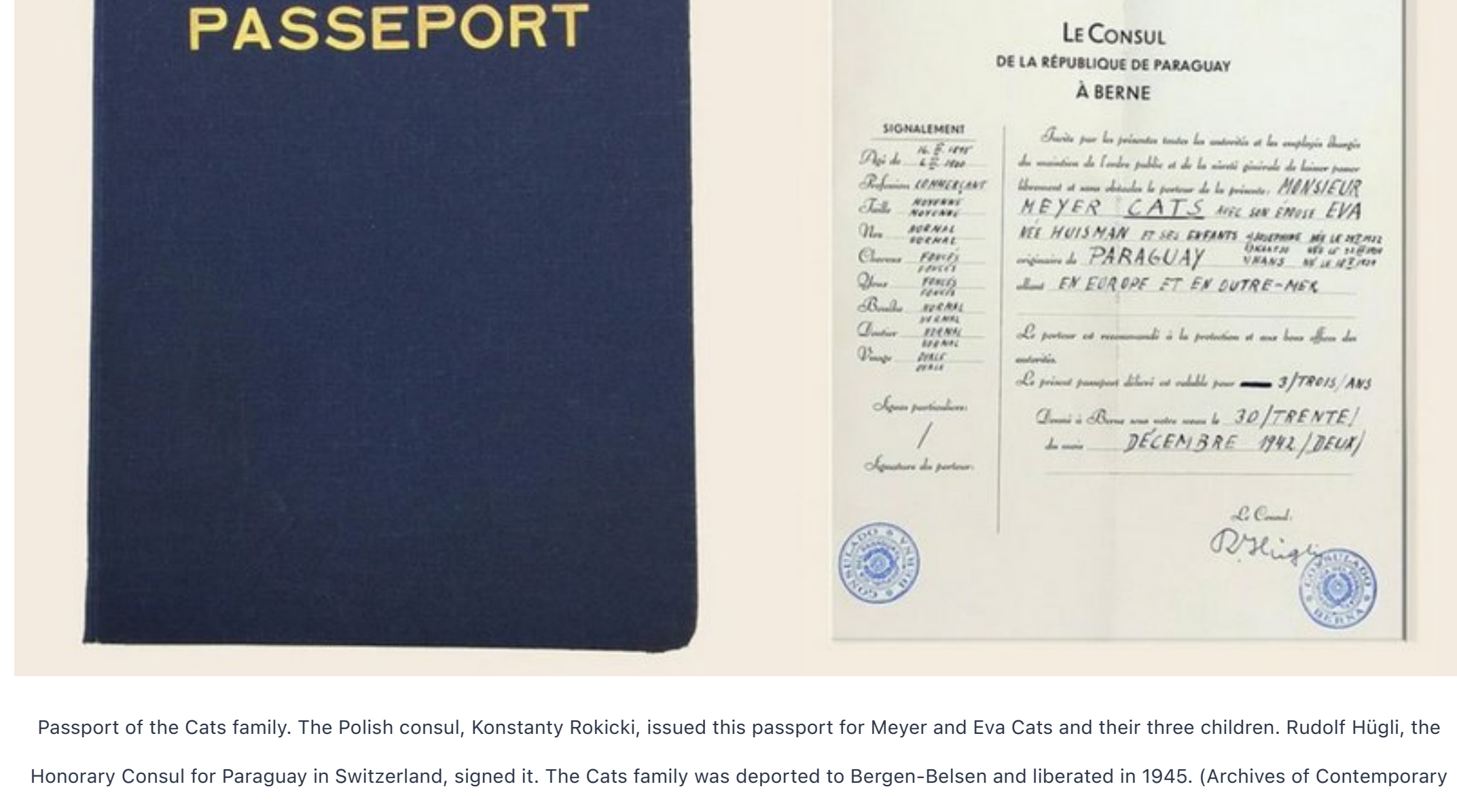


The year is 1938. Germany has been under National Socialist rule for five years. Nuremberg laws were passed three years before protecting the «purity» of «German blood.» The majority of Jews in Germany were searching for ways to flee. However, their chances were dwindling. **Rudolf Hügli**, a Berne notary and Honorary Consul of Paraguay, was “literally stormed” with visa and passport applications. German Jews who were being persecuted approached him, finding refuge for themselves and their families. Hundreds of thousands sought to emigrate to the United States and different European countries, some to Palestine and others to Argentina, which already had a quarter-million Jewish residents.

Few people decided to move to Paraguay because of its weak infrastructure. An international visa from a neutral third-party country like Paraguay, on the other hand, aided refugees attempting to enter France, Spain, or Portugal. Hügli gave those seeking to escape Paraguayan passports. He behaved in the midst of a legal quagmire. He should have told the Paraguayan government, which, as Hügli admits, “had prohibited the immigration of Jews to Paraguay since around the beginning of the war.”

Hügli wasn’t the only one. Honduran Consul General **Alfons Bauer**, Haitian Consul General Max **Alfred Brunner**, and Peruvian Consul General **José Mara Barreto** all distributed passports, copies of passports, and citizenship certificates to Jews in Berne, Zurich, and Geneva. They were also notarized in some cases. The consuls requested large sums of money. Hügli, who handled most of the passports, asked 500 francs per passport, which was around a month’s salary for a secretary.

Others had taken more: The cost of citizenship documents in Honduras, Haiti, and Peru ranged from 700 to 2000 francs. However, in Geneva, **György Mandl**, El Salvador’s Jewish Consul, and Consul General **José Arturo Castellanos Contreras** volunteered their services without charge.



Passport of the Cats family. The Polish consul, Konstanty Rokicki, issued this passport for Meyer and Eva Cats and their three children. Rudolf Hügli, the Honorary Consul for Paraguay in Switzerland, signed it. The Cats family was deported to Bergen-Belsen and liberated in 1945. (Archives of Contemporary History of ETH Zurich / NL Marcus Cohn / 15.)

Huegli claims he charges 500 Swiss Francs for passports, visas, and citizenship but claims he does so out of sympathy for “poor emigrants.” His enrichment at their cost is inversely proportional to his wealth. In mid-1943, Alfons Bauer, the Consul General of Honduras and the Dominican Republic asked for 700 Francs and a pledge not to inform anyone. A Zurich lawyer asked up to 600.000Fr. For documents to help families in sudden danger. However, several of these live-saving passports did not arrive in time – with grave consequences.

Basel rescuer and attorney **Dr. Marcus Cohn** saved 44 passports (including copies) which went into The Archive of Zeitgeschichte in Zurich and built the basis for the exhibition and the book.

This rescue operation became so famous that **Wladyslaw Szlengel** from Warsaw even wrote a poem about these papers. Here an extract...

Paszporty, 1942

I'd like to have an Uruguayan passport
 Oh, what a beautiful country
 Oh, how nice it must feel to be a citizen
 Of Uruguay

I'd like to have a Paraguayan passport
 The land of gold and freedom
 Oh, how nice it must feel to be a citizen
 Of Paraguay

I'd like to have a Costa Rican passport
 The sky aquamarine... eternally May...
 Oh, how nice it must be to say
 That Costa Rica is my land...

I'd like to have a Bolivian passport
 Like a number of my friends...

Szlengel died in the Warsaw Ghetto uprising of 1943 at age 29.

Help also came from four members of the Polish legation in Berne. The book displays some fascinating documents, including a Polish diplomatic passport 1940 belonging to a Councillor of the government in exile or a passport issued by the Polish exile government in Berne. Significant documents of Polish passport history.



Diplomatic passport 1940 of councillor Stefan Ryniewicz from the Polish government in exile in Berne.

Dr. Abraham Silberschein was a Polish lawyer and parliamentarian, took part in the 21st Zionist Congress in 1939 in Geneva. He will play 1943 a significant role in providing passports for Jews in Geneva. He said, “It was a real black market for passports, and the gentlemen of the legation expressed their wish that I should take responsibility for this matter, and I agreed.”

25 pages showing the location on Swiss maps of people involved and named in the book. I guess these pages were somehow a book filler and unnecessary to this extent—my only critique of the book.

«The passport is the noblest part of a man. It's not so easy to create as a man is, and a man can come into being in the most reckless way and without good reason; a passport never can. A passport is recognized when it's good, while a man can be so good, and yet not recognized.»

-Bertolt Brecht, Refugee Talks, 1940s-

Brechts' statement was never more valid than during these times.

In 1941, the rescue mission was betrayed. **Walter Meyer**, Paraguay’s General Consul, and Huegli’s supervisor informed that his employee was charging irregular fees. But his letter to the Chief of Police, **Dr. Heinrich Rothmund**, went missing...

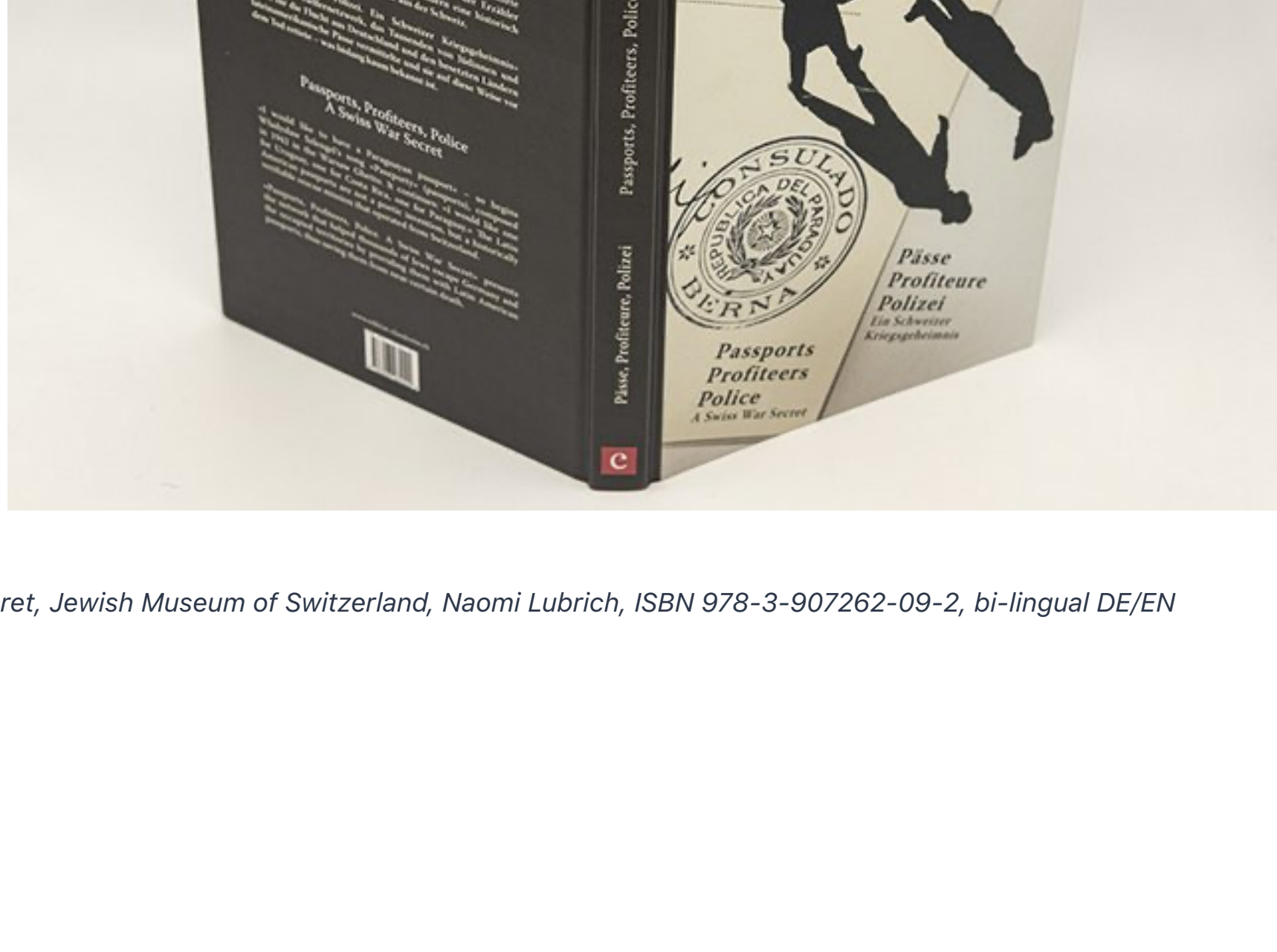
Why such passports were still issued and saved thousands of Jewish lives until 1943, you have to read in the book yourself. Plus you will learn many more facts and background information on this Swiss war secret. The book shows their testimony as well.

On the technical/issuing aspect of such passports, it is astonishing that such documents were not somehow suspicious to authorities. These documents were issued only abroad (in Switzerland) for complete families and relatives of up to six people, many even without a passport photo. Remember, we were in the midst of the Holocaust in 1942 when such documents were heavily restricted and controlled. A miracle that saved so many souls.

The number of survivors, as well as the number of visas, passports, and citizenship confirmations issued in Switzerland, was unknown. Silberschein reported that 10,000 people had obtained documents in 1944. Dr. Jakub Kumoch, the Polish Ambassador to Berne until 2020, and his Councillor, Jdrzej Uszynski, have listed 834 Latin American survivors, including Poles (347), Dutch (232), German (197), Austria (22), Czech Republic, and Slovakia (12), France (7), Switzerland (3), and Italians (3). The fate of 1457 additional people is unclear. 962 people were killed, some of whom were killed because they did not obtain reports in a timely manner.

The book is a must-have for anyone interested in the emigration of Jews from Nazi Germany, which was a life-saving matter back then. As well for everyone interested in passport history & collecting. The book gives you a most interesting insight into a “black market mechanism” for passports in those dangerous times during WWII and the Holocaust.

The Jewish Museum of Switzerland, with its exhibition and the book by its director, Dr. Naomi Lubrich, contributed significantly to the collective memory of the Holocaust and the role Switzerland had to rescue Jewish lives, even if not always only out of sympathy as we learn from the book’s content.



Passports, Profiteers, Police – A Swiss War Secret, Jewish Museum of Switzerland, Naomi Lubrich, ISBN 978-3-907262-09-2, bi-lingual DE/EN

www.edition-clandestin.ch
www.juedisches-museum.ch
Carl Lutz Society

Sharing is caring...



← PREVIOUS NEXT →
 A first hand GDR Service passport story Walther Ulbricht – The papers of the wall builder

Similar Posts

A Punk Rockers U.S. Passport – C.J. Ward – Ramones
 By Tom Topol 27 June, 2018

Very Interesting Austrian Post World War II Passport
 By Tom Topol 25 January, 2016

Very Rare German Passport 1940 Tientsin, China – Melchers & Co.
 By Tom Topol 9 July, 2018

6 Comments

Brian Turner says: 16 May, 2021 at 16:42 Reply

Excellent article as always!

Tom Topol says: 16 May, 2021 at 16:57 Reply

Thank you, Brian. The book is indeed most interesting. That’s why I made the article and for the top itself. Stay safe, Tom

Chris Scott says: 16 May, 2021 at 14:02 Reply

Hello Mr Topol
 Where can I get this book please ?

Thank you
 Chris Scott

Tom Topol says: 16 May, 2021 at 14:19 Reply

Hi Chris, there is a link to the publisher’s website where you can order the book, at the end of the article. Best, Tom

Martin Weise says: 16 May, 2021 at 11:19 Reply

thanks for publishing!

Tom Topol says: 16 May, 2021 at 11:38 Reply

My pleasure, Martin.

Leave a Reply

Your email address will not be published. Required fields are marked *

Comment *

Name * Email * Website

Save my name, email, and website in this browser for the next time I comment.

Notify me via e-mail if anyone answers my comment.

Yes, add me to your mailing list