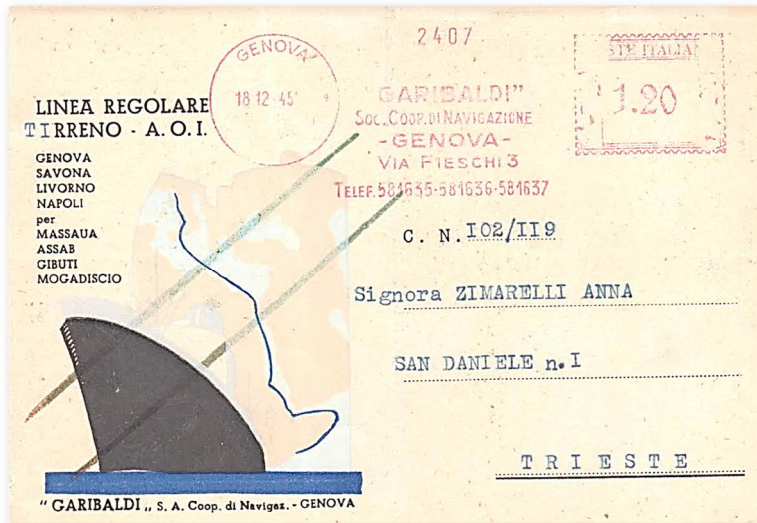


The flight of the rats to South America



The Second World War has ended in Europe and thousands of National Socialist offenders are trying to escape punishment. There are several routes, many of which lead via the Vatican or the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) via Italian ports (including **Genoa**) to South America, the Middle East or Spain. Prominent people could be found on the passenger lists: Adolf Eichmann, the organizer of the final solution to the Jewish question, the concentration camp doctor Josef Mengele, Franz Stangl, the commandant of the Treblinka extermination camp.

In 1945, the Allies had different ideas about determining guilt or innocence. They

decided on the process of denazification, a complicated process under the rule of law involving elaborate court proceedings. Everything could have gone differently, as in Italy, for example, where there was also judicial de-fascination (**epurazione**), but also vendetta, revenge killings, as spontaneous cleansing: it was carried out around 12,000 times.

At the instigation of the USA, the International Military Tribunal is established in Nuremberg and surviving leaders of the Third Reich are tried. Industrialists, diplomats, SS officers, doctors, lawyers and generals have to stand trial before the court in 12 subsequent trials up to 1949. Other war crimes trials against party members and Nazi party functionaries run in parallel.

Millions of people, concentration camp survivors, refugees, forced laborers, prisoners of war and displaced persons are in Central Europe as "displaced persons" (DP); they seek refuge or want to

cross the Alps to Italy and from there overseas to find a new fortune. War criminals also took this easy and short route, usually to Genoa (Genova) - from the end of 1945 there were hardly any Allied controls. The border region of South Tyrol became a loophole for many Nazi perpetrators; they could hide, disguise themselves and wait for new identities.

The International Refugee Organization declares itself not responsible for the 12 million displaced ethnic Germans. This humanitarian emergency prompted the ICRC to step in: Refugees without passports and unclear citizenship can receive documents from the Red Cross. These documents are issued by ICRC delegations in Rome and Genoa in the tradition of the good Samaritan. Around 120,000 such documents

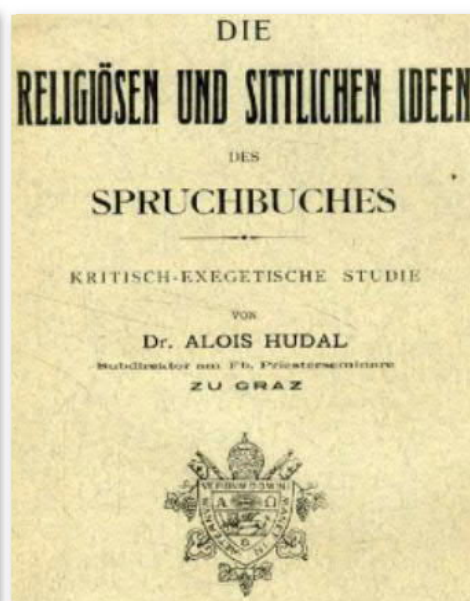




are issued - there are hardly any checks; the gates are wide open to abuse. Nazi perpetrators used this route to obtain valid papers.

In Italy, there is close cooperation between the Red Cross and the Pontifical Commission for Assistance to Refugees (**Pontificia Commissione di Assistenza - PCA**), which issues letters of recommendation to applicants. The head of the Austrian section of the PCA is the Bishop of Graz, Alois **Hudal**; anti-Semite, anti-communist, Greater German activist and Catholic theologian - he sees himself as a

bridge-builder between National Socialism and the Catholic Church. He is one of the most active escape



helpers for Nazi war criminals from a clerical background. Alongside him, there are other clerics who knowingly and willingly helped the perpetrators to escape. **Pope Pius XII** was against the Nuremberg trials and denazification processes: anti-communism and a gullible attitude of forgiveness were the reasons. There are interventions, testimonials, petitions for clemency and amnesties from bishops and also from the Pope himself. Hudal boasted in the media; he became a burden for the church, but it now also had a "black sheep".



Most Nazi perpetrators fled between 1946 and 1950. After the Berlin Blockade, the upheaval in Prague in 1948 and finally the Korean War in 1950, the Cold War enters a hot phase. The new enemy is now communism and the Soviet Union. The movements of refugees ceased and the perpetrators were able to integrate into post-war societies. Interest in punishment wanes sharply from 1947. In 1950, Adolf Eichmann managed to flee from **Tramin (Termeno)** via Genoa to Argentina as



Richard Klement with ICRC documents, although the multiple abuses had long been known. The opening of the **Vatican archives** (2020) could bring new insights to light. The takeover of Nazi technicians by the USA (Operation Paperclip), Great Britain (Operation Matchbox) and the USSR (Aktion Ossawakim) was less complicated; professional qualifications guaranteed a carte blanche.



Literatur: Steinacher G.J. 2023: Wie NS-Täter fliehen konnten. – in: Andreas Raffener (Hrsg.) Aspekte Vorarlberger Landesgeschichte. ISSN 2569-0787.