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2008-11

*The Boat is Full: Swiss Asylum Denied.* Markus Imhoof, Director.  
**Switzerland: 1981**

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**Original Publication Citation**

Hacken, R. (2008). *The Boat is Full: Swiss Asylum Denied.* Markus Imhoof, Director. Switzerland: 1981. *Swiss American Historical Society Review*, 44(3), 26-29.

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**BYU ScholarsArchive Citation**

Hacken, Richard, "*The Boat is Full: Swiss Asylum Denied.* Markus Imhoof, Director. Switzerland: 1981" (2008). *Faculty Publications*. 1802.  
<https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub/1802>

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## Book Reviews

*The Boat is Full: Swiss Asylum Denied.* Markus Imhoof, Director. Switzerland: 1981.

*Das Boot ist voll* (sometimes translated as “The Lifeboat is Full”), directed by Markus Imhoof, is a notable accomplishment in Swiss cinema of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. It received the Silver Berlin Bear for Outstanding Single Achievement in 1981 at the Berlin International Film Festival, and the following year it was nominated for an Academy Award in the category of Best Foreign Film. These honors presumably sprang not merely from recognition of Imhoof’s courage in recalibrating the past, in putting an alternate face on the Holocaust, and in documenting Swiss refugee policies during the Second World War. These are all foundational aspects of the film, true enough, but Imhoof’s unique artistry lies in the crafting of these factors into a moving, personalized narrative. If we see a cinematic vision of unfeeling bureaucracy amidst vacillating societal cowardice and bravery, it is filtered through the lens of survival-or-Treblinka consequences for identifiably vulnerable characters. Fictional peril, even when rolled out in understated scenes free of sentimental treacle, still grabs us as viewers at a visceral level, since we know that any Jew turned away and deported to Germany is doomed. In its own fashion, this Swiss-German-Austrian coproduction is a powerful and revelatory film on the Holocaust. The production company’s name, Limbo Films, gives an apt description for the predicament of the protagonists.

World War II is raging as the action begins. The first image we see, a visual metaphor for the film’s central theme of exclusion, is of a train tunnel being bricked completely shut by Swiss army troops to prevent precisely the type of refugee flight



Photo courtesy of Deutsche Akademie der Künste, Filmarchiv

into neutral Switzerland that next occurs. A mixed group of four Jewish refugees, along with a German Army deserter and a French child, manage to escape from a train that has made an unscheduled stop near the Swiss border. The group finds temporary lodgings at the inn of Anna Flückiger (*Renate Steiger*) and her husband Franz (*Matthias Gnädinger*). Franz is not enthused at receiving the newcomers, and he sends for the village policeman, Peter Bigler (*Michael Gempart*), quoting radio reports that "there are already enough of these people around." Anna is sympathetic to the plight of the group and proactive in seeking out advice from the local pastor (*Klaus Steiger*) on how the refugees can remain in Switzerland. To maintain strict quotas (the year is 1942), the Federal Council had just legislated away asylum for anyone who might be a refugee "on strictly racial grounds." But families with children under six years of age, according to another statute, are allowed to remain in the country: thus a "family" is artificially constructed in which the "children" are the French boy – instructed to act deaf-mute – and a Jewish girl, while the unlikely "parents" are the German Army deserter (*Gerd David*) and Judith (*Tina Engel*), a Jewish woman who seems to be the group's *de facto* leader. Switching clothing, Judith's teenage brother (*Martin Walz*) poses as the German soldier. An unrelated elderly Jew from Vienna (*Curt Bois*) serves as "grandfather" for the children. In a more innocent time, this posing and plot twisting might serve as setup for a comedy of errors, but here the undertones become increasingly tragic. The fabricated family unravels under the suspicious gaze of Officer Bigler.

The fates of the asylum seekers are to be various, and the behaviors and attitudes of even the host couple fluctuate and evolve, affecting the outcomes. At the same time, the Swiss societal reactions portrayed in the film serve as an inventory of what asylum relations may realistically have looked like in wartime Switzerland. Individuals in the local village population take on positive, negative, indifferent and neutral stances through a wide spectrum of curiosity, callousness, anti-Semitism and selfless generosity. For one set of citizens gossiping about the "knife grinders" and questioning whether the strangers might be butchering cats, an elderly couple offers a kind voice and some of their strictly rationed groceries. Behind the local and social variables we see depicted in the film, though, stand the calculating imperatives of the wartime Swiss state, which mandated the return of an estimated 30,000 Jewish asylum seekers to Germany and certain death. These laws served as rigid pretext for unquestioning or xenophobic bureaucrats anxious to follow the letter of the law so as not to complicate their lives or disturb their neighborhood.

One aspect not evident for English-language viewers relying on the subtitles alone – an effect that strongly differentiates the would-be exiles

from the local residents – is the use of language. The Swiss-German dialect used by the village residents is folksy and geographically limiting, while the refugees speak a standard High German that could be understood widely. Not only does this demarcate citizens from “strangers,” it also serves socio-linguistically at one point to underscore the gravitas of the Law: when the village policeman iterates the paragraphs and points of asylum statutes, he abandons his Swiss German for the legalese of High German.

Despite the melodrama and high pathos that Imhoof could have stirred – given the potential for viewers’ identification with innocents at risk – the director chose a sober directness that functions well. The film tends more to historical exposé than to Anne Frank romanticism. Emotions are addressed but not manipulated. There is no musical score designed to reach for the heartstrings or to telegraph dramatic highpoints. Narrative action, camera angles, believable dialogue and reactions are enough to tell the story, even when Judith is torn from the arms of her gentile husband (*Hans Diehl*) for the last time in a Swiss detention camp. Gruesome acts are prefaced but not shown. Finger pointing and moralizing voiceovers are avoided.

This reviewer is tempted to call forth Brecht’s sense of epic theater to explain the effect of *The Boat is Full*. This is not a stretch of the imagination, since Imhoof did write his dissertation on Brecht. At times we find ourselves wondering if the acting has turned a bit wooden or if an alienation effect is being attempted. Certain scenes offer contrapuntal comic relief that crosses the wires of emotion and logic: ham offered to the refugees, the pastor’s tailoring needs, training the French boy not to speak, the old man’s reasons for leaving on his yarmulke. While the film does not utilize extreme Brechtian staging measures to calm catharsis, it does tend to guide viewers to a similar place, leading them to question how the story might have ended differently. The head becomes as involved as the heart.

Imhoof’s first film teacher, Leopold Lindtberg, himself a Jewish refugee to Switzerland from Austria during World War II, had made a 1945 film, *Letzte Chance* (*Last Chance*) with a parallel theme: multinational refugees to Switzerland. Shortly after his own film’s appearance, Imhoof revealed – thirty-seven years after the fact – that *Last Chance* had been censored one day before its premiere to remove the implication that refugees had experienced any difficulties in being accepted by the Confederation. *The Boat is Full*, the screen version of a book by Alfred Häsler, can thus be seen as a correction of cinematic as well as political history.

At least two stages of reception for the film can be traced. Initial controversy came following the film’s release in 1981. There was stupefaction, acceptance, but also widespread and often hostile reluctance

by the Swiss to admit to complicity with Nazi Germany or to regard their country – by whose flag the Red Cross had been inspired – as having broken a long tradition of relief for the oppressed. Initially, the Swiss Film Promotion office refused financial support. The second phase of reception came at the turn of the millennium in the wake of the Bergier Commission, which studied Switzerland's wartime past and issued a final report in 2002 condemning, among other things, the country's deportation of Jewish refugees. By this time, partially as a result of the film, the Swiss were confronting their past, and historical truth was trumping denial.

Between the two stages, in 1990, the last master copy of the film's negative had been discovered in Rome, and a restoration process enhanced colors, removed scratches, and, though unable to adjust completely for excessive graininess, did make long-term digital preservation possible. The currently available DVD features an interview with the director and a short demonstration of the preservation results. A further wish would be to have documentary material, such as video interviews with surviving Swiss witnesses from the time.

For further reading, see Dennis Mahoney's review of the film, "Personalizing the Holocaust," in *Modern Language Studies*, vol. 19, no. 1 (Winter 1989), pp. 3–11. Also see the Max Frisch play, *Andorra*, which treats the topic allegorically. For a cinematic parallel, see Louis Malle's masterful *Au Revoir, Les Enfants*.

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