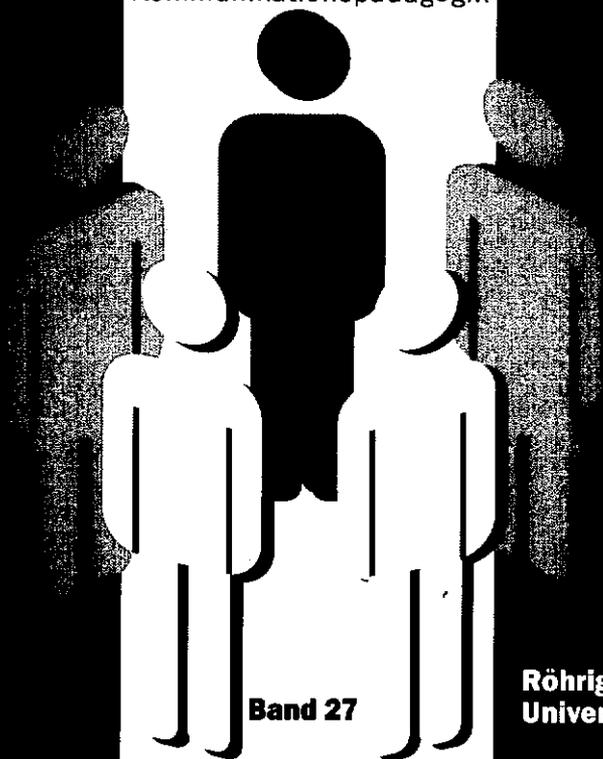


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# Applied Communication in Organizational and International Contexts

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## **Wulff Bickenbach**

### **The Role of Communication in Enlarging the Scope of Action in the Refuge Policy of St. Gallen, Switzerland, 1938-1939**

Between 1938 and 1939, St. Gallen government officials and border officials granted thousands of Jewish refugees from Germany immigration to this Swiss canton. This occurred against Swiss government rules and regulations, which did not allow Jewish refugees any access to Switzerland. The impetus for the behavior of the officials may have originated, among other reasons, from their specific knowledge about what happened to refugees who were denied access to Switzerland: prison, concentration camp, and death. This knowledge may in turn have resulted in a greater scope of action to help refugees.

Before 1942 the Swiss government officially denied any knowledge of cruelties committed by the German national socialists. However, if the media of St. Gallen did communicate information about the cruel treatment of the Jews and information about the beginning of the holocaust in 1938 already, that might have evoked pity for the refugees and encouraged state officials to resist orders. In other words: communication broadened the scope of action to help refugees.

#### **The historical significance of Paul Grüninger**

Captain Paul Grüninger was the chief police commander in the canton of St. Gallen from 1925-1938. In this capacity, he was also responsible for the refugees in the canton.

Following the Austrian "Anschluss" (incorporation) to the Third Reich in March 1938 and the pogroms against the Jews in Vienna, thousands of Austrian Jews crossed the Swiss border. Due to the systematic German politics of expulsion, numerous attacks on Jews and the confiscation of their assets, the flow of refugees intensified (especially after the "Reichspogromnacht" on November 9/10 1938.)

The Swiss government reacted in late March 1938 by introducing visa regulations for Austrian citizens. Only those who could present a

so-called “Arian ID” - or alternatively a visa of a third country for transit matters - received a visa from the Swiss consulate-general.

On August 18, 1938, the police department of the Swiss ministry of justice imposed the so-called “Grenzsperr” (closing of the border), leading to the rejection of all Austrian citizens without a visa. Those who nevertheless had succeeded in entering the country were ordered to go back to Germany. Refugees who entered Switzerland before August 18, were permitted to stay.

Grüninger and some of his colleagues had vehemently protested against the complete border closure during a conference of police directors on August 17, 1938, but without any success. Records prove that Grüninger subsequently granted access to hundreds of refugees or refused to expel them in the period from August 18 until his suspension on April 3 1939. In doing so, he had the full support of his superior, Valentin Keel, who was the member of the St. Gallen government, responsible for Justice and Police.

In order not to draw too much attention to these unlawful entries, Grüninger arranged to back-date the entry of many refugees before the key date of August 18, 1938. These and other actions to help those that had entered unlawfully were punished by the government and the court of St. Gallen and resulted in Grüninger’s dismissal without notice. He was also fined.

After Grüninger’s dismissal, the refugee policy of the government of St. Gallen changed fundamentally. Refugees were denied access to Swiss territory; some of those who were already in the country were expelled.

So which reasons can be identified for Grüninger’s behavior? There was room for an alternative scope of action in the canton of St. Gallen that was used to grant access to Swiss territory to many refugees, despite the Swiss federal government’s regulations and laws. In general, one’s scope of action may originate in:

- personal convictions, such as firm moral values and ethics, which collide with government orders;
- acquired knowledge through communication on the wrongdoings of the government, strengthening one’s own moral values;

- education and social position enhancing independent thinking and action;
- social reinforcement that strengthens the feeling of behaving properly;
- a new codification of moral standards by the state that does not correspond with international law and is rejected by the individual's convictions;
- laws, orders and behavior codes contradicting themselves.

The following facts support the hypothesis that there was scope for alternative action:

- the federal system with its conflicting legislation – the cantons had specific rights the federal government could not interfere with (i.e. Federal Law on the residence of foreigners)
- the different kinds of border patrols, such as the cantonal police, the customs officers and the military, all of which had different responsibilities;
- the existence of mass communication provided by the media at St. Gallen that contradicted official statements (German broadcasting programs could be received as well);
- close to the German border, there was personal communication between refugees, border patrols/ officers and the population, which originated in conflicting views of the border officials concerning the official orders from the Swiss government;
- there was direct communication between Grüninger, his superior and Jewish aid organizations;
- Grüninger's personal religious and social convictions conflicted with official views.

Mass communication may have influenced Grüninger and thereby enlarged his scope of action. One disputed issue in the historical debate in Switzerland was the Swiss government's point of view that knowledge on the atrocities committed by the German National Socialists was acquired too late. If Swiss officials would have known the truth earlier, they could have reacted differently, for example, by

granting access to Switzerland to far more Jewish refugees from Austria.

This was the official Swiss point of view until the late 1960s. Today there are controversial discussions at what point of history this very knowledge started really. So what can be said about the situation in 1938, when refugees from Austria came to Switzerland in large number? Was information on the threats, ill-treatment, deprivation and murder of Jews communicated in 1938 already in St. Gallen and could Grüninger's actions have been influenced by that? Could such information have enlarged his scope of action and paved the way for alternative ways of acting?

## **Communicated information in the St. Gallen press**

In order to answer this question, this paper empirically analyzes the coverage of four major political events in 1938 in 207 newspaper issues in St. Gallen. Media coverage of the refugee problem in 1938 focussed on four major events:

- the "Anschluss" (incorporation) of Austria to the Third Reich (March 12, 1938, coverage from March 12 to March 31);
- the international conference on refugees in Evian (coverage from July 12-16 1938);
- the full closure of the Swiss border (coverage from August 18-25);
- the incidents of the so-called "Reichskristallnacht" (November 9-10, coverage from November 10 – 24, 1938).
- The intensity of the coverage determined the time frame of the analysis. To find out whether the coverage of the mass media in St. Gallen could have influenced Grüninger, I analyzed the issues by searching for the following key words that might reflect a pro-nationalist or a pro-refugee tendency: border, refugee, emigrant, transit, visa, entry, escape, Jew, Jewish, Austria, Vienna, concentration camp, foreigner/alien, neutrality, over-alienation, "Fremdenfeindlichkeit", (i.e. "a

hostile attitude against foreigners/ aliens”) asylum, emergency, mental defence of the homeland, deportation.

I found 350 articles containing these key words.

Articles considered to be pro-refugee (PR) are defined by statements on:

- the duty or willingness to take in refugees;
- resisting from turning back refugees at the border;
- an anti-expelling attitude; an attitude expressing the unwillingness to see aliens/foreigners/Jewish refugees be expelled out of Switzerland
- a positive approach on those refugees who were already staying in Switzerland;
- information on concentration camps, murder and suicides of Jews and the harassment of Jews;
- the refugees’ reasons for fleeing Austria.

Articles considered to be pro-nationalist (PN) are defined by statements on:

- adherence to the idea of neutrality;
- adherence to national security;
- measures against “over-alienation;”
- the country’s self-definition as a mere “transit country;”
- strict border controls;
- the sovereignty of the state;
- “mental defence of the homeland;”
- worries about the protection of the country.

Articles defined as being neutral are those containing the key words but lacking a viewpoint, or clear support for one side or the other.

I analyzed the following leading St. Gallen newspapers publishing political communication:

*Die Ostschweiz*, two issues per day, conservative and Catholic-dominated;

*Die Volksstimme*, one issue per day, social democratic;

*St. Galler Tagblatt*, two issues per day, liberal outlook (in the European meaning of the word).

In addition to the viewpoint, I analyzed the journalistic form of presentation and the length of the articles:

Period of evaluation: March 12-31, 1938

Event and media reception: "Anschluss" (incorporation) of Austria

	Viewpoint			Media Reporting				Length		
	PN	PR	N	R	A	C	LE	S	M	L
<i>Ostschweiz</i>	22	6	7	23	1	11	0	16	8	11
<i>Volksstimme</i>	14	16	1	11	11	9	0	23	3	5
<i>SG Tagblatt</i>	21	24	18	39	12	5	1	20	22	21

**Pro-Nation; Pro-Refugee; Neutral / Report; Agency; Commentary; LE:** Letter to the Editor / Small (up to 10 cm); **Middle** (10 to 30 cm); **Long** (More than 30 cm)

Period of evaluation: July 12-16, 1938

Event and media reception: international conference on refugees in Evian

	Viewpoint			Media Reporting				Length		
	PN	PR	N	R	A	C	LE	S	M	L
<i>Ostschweiz</i>	1	1	4	5	0	1	0	2	3	1
<i>Volksstimme</i>	4	4	4	4	8	0	0	8	4	0
<i>SG Tagblatt</i>	2	1	3	2	4	0	0	4	2	0

Period of evaluation: August 18-25, 1938. Event and media reception: Complete closure of the Swiss borders on August 18, 1938

	Viewpoint			Media Reporting				Length		
	PN	PR	N	R	A	C	LE	S	M	L
<i>Ostschweiz</i>	5	12	0	13	0	2	0	7	5	5
<i>Volksstimme</i>	5	14	0	16	0	5	0	10	5	4
<i>SG Tagblatt</i>	8	10	5	22	0	1	0	17	4	2

Period of evaluation: November 10-24, 1938

Event and media reception: "Reichspogromnacht", November 9, 1938

	Viewpoint			Media Reporting				Length		
	PN	PR	N	R	A	C	LE	S	M	L
<i>Ostschweiz</i>	7	38	0	24	0	18	1	18	16	11
<i>Volksstimme</i>	18	31	0	38	0	7	0	20	24	5
<i>SG Tagblatt</i>	7	38	0	43	0	6	0	17	17	11

By comparing three of the periods under review - I will leave out the International Conference on Refugees (12-16 July 1938 at Evian) as its coverage does not allow any significant judgement, the following can be said about the viewpoints expressed.

The pro-refugee coverage had an overall share of 58%. Even more important is the fact that the pro-refugee coverage increased significantly during the total period of evaluation, namely from 36% during the first, 61% during the third to 75% during the fourth period under review. The Catholic-dominated conservative *Ostschweiz* took a clear pro-nation position only during the first period (79% pro-nationalist compared to 21% pro-refugee). The other two newspapers reflect a balanced view during the first period.

Concerning the "journalistic presentation", there are some significant findings:

- the dominant form of presentation is the report;
- the newspapers rarely incorporated information provided by news agencies;
- commentaries were of significance only in the first period under review;

- only two letters to the editor on the refugee topic were found in the 207 issues under review.

In only 43 of the 207 issues under review, the leading front page article corresponded with the pro-nation or pro-refugee topics, which is a mere 21%. Why “only”? One could see this as “remarkably” or “many” as well. Generally, it can be said that the overall media coverage on the events under review is relatively small in relation to the complete newspaper output. It slightly increases in the last period under review. Some examples on the media coverage:

- on March 17<sup>th</sup>, the *Ostschweiz* published a report titled “Tragedies” reporting on numerous suicides among Austrian intellectuals and industrialists, many of them Jewish. This front page article concludes by noting that “the concentration camps are starting to fill up;”
- the *Volksstimme* published a front page article on March 23 “Nazi terror in Austria” saying “thousands arrested in Vienna - suicide epidemic among the Jews. Austrian army arrests two bishops;”
- on August 18, the *Ostschweiz* “the emigrant question,” writing about the steadily increasing flow of illegal refugees from Austria. On the same day, the *Volksstimme* describes the consequences of the border closures: “Switzerland closes the borders for emigrants without a valid passport - suicide seems to be their only way out of the Nazi hell;”
- between August 23-25, all three newspapers reported intensely on the refugee situation both at the cantonal border and in already established refugee camps;
- an article that was published on November 24 in all three newspapers which explicitly announced the holocaust: *Ostschweiz*: “Anti-Semite action - new threat: complete extermination;” *Volksstimme* and SG Tagblatt: “Facing the murder of all Jews in Germany?”

Taken together, it can be concluded that all St. Gallen newspapers reported in detail on the incidents of and reasons for people - mainly Jews - to become refugees and look for asylum in Switzerland in 1938. Though this topic was not the main interest of the print media,

those articles dealing with the subject mostly reflected a viewpoint evoking sympathy and understanding towards the refugees.

To put it another way: the newspapers presented the citizens of St. Gallen were presented with information about the refugee crisis. Everybody had access to the information. However, this does not mean that people used the available information. One reason may have been that for average St. Gallen citizens, the refugee subject was not in the list of their day-to-day problems. The other reasons may have been that despite the coverage on cruelties against Jews communicated in the mass media, people were not able to believe that this would really happen to refused or expelled Jewish refugees.

Paul Grüninger had subscribed to the “St. Galler Tagblatt”. But he informed himself by reading all three newspapers of St. Gallen, as his daughter confirmed in a conversation in 2006.

In a statement on January 26, 1939, Grüninger explained his reasons for taking refugees in the country against the orders of the Swiss government:

First of all, we acted in accordance with pure human considerations. We could not stand the idea of turning people away who had been badly abused in Germany and to possibly hand them over to death. Hereby, we were supported by the convictions of the majority of the Swiss population, the press and the political parties.

It can be assumed that Grüninger discovered that it was vital for Jews to be granted asylum in Switzerland. This knowledge possibly encouraged him to act by granting access and helping refugees against government orders.

### **Communication at the Border and between police officials**

Another situation linked to communication which could have enlarged the scope of action for Grüninger developed at the Swiss/German border of the canton of St. Gallen in 1938. Due to its federal past as an asylum-granting country, Switzerland represented the ideal place for refuge. However, the Swiss government stated that it was the prerogative of Switzerland to grant asylum to refugees, but that refugees were not entitled to get asylum in Switzerland. Refugee

policy of the federal government clearly aimed to function as a transit country only.

When the situation got out of hand in August 1938, because hundreds of refugees invaded Switzerland illegally, the government ordered the complete closure of its borders for Austrians who could not present a visa from a Swiss consulate. All refugees who succeeded in entering the country illegally, had to be refouled. Many authors described the discrepancy arising from the distance between the legislative body in the calm center of the country and the executing officers at the violent border of St. Gallen.

In 1969, the former chief of the federal customs border control unit in the late 1930s stated in a newspaper article that all border officers knew about the refugees' situation, the reasons for their escape and their probable deportation to a concentration camp if they were turned away (Wyss, 18. Folge, 6/69). Refugees who were not allowed to cross the border told the officers about their reasons for escape, they cried and begged to be given access, and they pointed to the consequence of dying in a concentration camp if they were rejected. So there was a rather intense personal communication between the refugees and the border officers. Some people living close to the border accused border officers of treating refugees cruelly. People living there witnessed attempted border crossings, arrests of illegal refugees, as well as border rejections and deportations on a daily basis. All files available show that the civil population always supported the refugees and opposed the border officers (to put it academically: they had a personal critical-negative dialogue with the officials.)

Problems also arose from the fact that once in a while superior authorities in the far away capital Bern granted exceptional entry permissions when refugees asked them for help. Due to strict orders, the border officers were not permitted to act likewise. They had to reject entry and to expel refugees. "The border officers often felt like the ones who led the people to their execution," a member of the border patrol remembers (see, Wyss, 18.Artikel, 214 - 218. Many of them stated that they wished to quit work because of these inner conflicts.

As mentioned earlier, captain Grüninger was the canton's chief police officer and therefore responsible for the border officers. He spent

much time at the border, constantly met the population living there and his border officers, and read their reports. Refugees would approach him directly as they knew about his human attitude. So he was influenced by face-to-face communication with the refugees. The information he received at the border was in clear contrast to the statement of the federal government and the federal justice and police department, that they did everything for refugees who needed help.

Finally the relationship between Grüninger and his direct superior, member of Canton government, Valentin Keel has to be mentioned. Keel and Grüninger communicated on a permanent basis. Their offices were next to each other and they used the same telephone number. Keel also permitted illegal border crossings against the orders of the Swiss federal government. Knowing this, Grüninger gained an enlarged scope of action for himself through the social backup of his superior. A greater scope of action encouraged him to follow his convictions and act accordingly.

## Summary

This paper has shown how various means of communication opened additional ways for Captain Paul Grüninger to act along his personal convictions and aid Jewish refugees in St. Gallen. The political events communicated in the mass media, personal communication with refugees as well as the population living along the border, and last not least communication with his direct superior provided possibilities for Grüninger to act against federal laws and save the lives of thousands of refugees.

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