Finding Havens to Save Lives:
Four Case Studies from the Jewish Refugee Crisis of the 1930s

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In the late 1930s, few countries or individuals were willing to rescue Jews from Nazi Germany. There were exceptions and their efforts deserve attention: Premier Albert George Ogilvie of Tasmania intervened to bring a small number of Jews to Australia; United States Commissioner to the Philippines Paul V. McNutt, in tandem with Philippine President Manuel L. Quezon, helped 1200 Jews come to Manila; and President Rafael Trujillo of the Dominican Republic accepted about 800 Jews who formed a refugee colony at Sosúa. These leaders – all wielding varying degrees of power – acted for different reasons. Ogilvie and McNutt were left-of-centre politicians in developed democracies who assisted refugees in accordance with the laws and the prevailing opinion of their countries. Quezon and Trujillo, by contrast, exercised greater control of their countries’ domestic politics and faced fewer constraints with respect to accepting refugees. They were motivated chiefly by self-interest, that is, the desire to boost their countries economically, Europeanise their populations and curry favour with their mutual international patron, the United States.

By comparing the motivations and actions of these four men, each from a different country, one gains insight not only into the refugee crisis of the 1930s but also into how lives might be saved in the future. Appeals to self-interest, as well as to lofty ideals, may encourage (or allow) leaders to justify extraordinary measures, such as establishing havens, in order to rescue people from genocide. How such appeals might be pitched is beyond the scope of this chapter. Its concern instead is to explore the refugee crisis of the 1930s from international as well as biographical perspectives by examining the measures taken by Ogilvie, McNutt, Quezon and Trujillo to allow some Jews to escape Germany. Their efforts thus illustrate the potential of individual agency under
trying circumstances and serve as a reminder that genocide in general and the Holocaust in particular must not be seen as historically inevitable events.

Nazism and the making of the refugee crisis, 1933–39

Upon taking power, the Nazi Party began to persecute Jews with the aim of driving them from Germany. In 1933, the Nazis staged a boycott of Jewish-owned business, burned books by Jewish authors and took steps to exclude Jews from the civil service, medical profession and enrollment in universities. Two years later, the so-called Nuremberg Laws defined Jews as non-Aryans, relegated them to the status of a subject class and prohibited them from marrying Aryans. In 1938, Hitler’s regime intensified its policy of economic strangulation by requiring the registration of Jewish-owned property. The Decree for the Elimination of Jews from German Economic Life, also issued in 1938, forbade Jews from owning enterprises engaged in the retail and export businesses. ‘By the end of 1938 the economic position of Germany’s Jews was untenable’, the historian David Wyman (1985: 29) has observed, ‘for the most part employment was available only in performing services within and for the Jewish community, a community whose resources were rapidly diminishing.’ In response, 150,000 Jews left Germany between 1933 and 1937. By the beginning of 1938, the international community had resettled about 100,000 of them in neighbouring European countries as well as in Palestine, the United States, South America and the Union of South Africa (ibid.: 33).

The refugee issue reached crisis proportions in 1938. After Germany annexed Austria in March, Viennese Jews endured humiliation, violence and forced expulsion to other countries. In November, Hitler’s government sanctioned attacks on synagogues and Jewish-owned businesses during Kristallnacht (the ‘Night of Broken Glass’). Thereafter most Jews wanted to flee Germany. Unfortunately, because of the Anschluss (union) with Austria, Germany had a larger Jewish population than five years earlier. ‘There were still possibly some 360,000 Jews left in Germany at the beginning of 1938’, the historian Paul Bartrop has noted (1995a: 130), ‘and the Anschluss added another 180,000, making a total of 540,000 – a figure which was about 40,000 higher than in 1933.’ During 1938 alone 140,000 Jews left Germany. Yet potential émigrés faced diminishing options for resettlement. The Jews who had departed between 1933 and 1937 had been prosperous economically and modest in number. While the countries that accepted them did