

# GENEVA: 500 YEARS OF IMMIGRATION AND REFUGE A HISTORY IN BRIEF & TODAY'S CHALLENGES

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for the **Greycells Intergenerational Dialogue**,  
**“Refugees and Migrants in Geneva:  
Constructing New Lives, from Hopes to Realities”**  
**Geneva (6 December 2022)**

*In the strict sense of the word, we are basically all immigrants: until 1848, Switzerland had only cantonal citizenship rights. At that time, a Valaisan who moved to Geneva was a "foreigner". The Swiss passport has only existed since 1915.<sup>2</sup>*

## Introduction

This brief is a work in progress, an initial review of the city's history and practice on receiving, welcoming and integrating with immigrants and refugees. It brings together data, perspective and analysis from numerous works and sources, as indicated in the extensive bibliography. The author did not find any existing comprehensive historical review of Geneva migration.

Its intention is to provide background, context and perspective towards shaping law, policy and practice to maintain Geneva as an inclusive and sustainable city. Its immediate purpose is to provide a well-founded basis for the Greycells Inter-Generational Dialogue event *Refugees and Migrants in Geneva* and discussion (December 6 2022). Testimony from civil society organizations and immigrants and refugees will highlight multiple realities of lived experiences, support obtained –or not, and inclusion and integration in the city.

This story thus provides a brief profile of Geneva's contemporary migration and refugee situation highlighting the centrality of immigration to the city's economic success and prosperity, a summary of Geneva migration over 500 years, a review of key features of Switzerland migration intertwined with that of Geneva, an outline of contemporary policy and practice in Geneva, and key points for the *way forward* to meet current and future challenges.

This initial brief overview is far from complete; contributions and corrections are most

welcome! **Geneva migration in brief profile**

Geneva is, and has been for more than 500 years, a city of immigration. Geneva became known as a *city of refuge* during the Protestant Reformation in the early 1600's. It emerged as a city of immigration and emigration in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, although migration was part of the city DNA since its origins as a European and Roman trade and military crossroads 2,000 years ago. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, 40% of the Geneva population was foreigner, accompanying the industrial boom that saw Switzerland become a foremost industrial producer-exporter, for a time exceeding Germany and Great Britain!

Immigrants –and *frontaliers*-- alongside Swiss *Genevois/es*-- make up the city and make it work. Today, 41% of the Canton of Geneva is foreign-born, and 61% of the population is “immigrant origin” with parent, parents and sometimes grandparents foreign-born. Furthermore, a considerable number of Swiss Genevans or their ancestors immigrated from other Cantons of the Swiss Confederation.

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1 <https://greycells.ch/intergenerational-dialogue-2022/>

2 *Brève histoire de la migration en Suisse*, [https://sev-online.ch/fr/le-sev/was\\_machen\\_wir/le-sev-active-en-faveur-de-ses-membres/ohne-uns/geschichte.php/](https://sev-online.ch/fr/le-sev/was_machen_wir/le-sev-active-en-faveur-de-ses-membres/ohne-uns/geschichte.php/) Valeriana. *A short (im)migration history of Switzerland*. Online magazine. <https://valeriana.ch/en/magazine/immigration-in-switzerland>

In numbers, the total population of the Canton of Geneva was 514,321 at June of 2022,<sup>3</sup> more than 203,000 foreign born,. The active population (employed, self-employed, engaged in remunerative activity) was 236,839, of which 140,408 Swiss nationals and 96,431 foreign nationals –the latter 40.7% of the active population, by 2021 figures.

Two thirds of foreigners resident in Geneva are from European Union (EU) and European Free Trade Association (EFTA) countries, 8% from another European country, and 28% from another continent: Africa, Asia, the Americas North and South, or the Middle East.<sup>4</sup> In 2020, foreign-born residents from France and Portugal were the largest groups, about 70,000 persons each. The numbers of Portuguese have been diminishing modestly since 2015<sup>5</sup>

A large portion of the Geneva work force as well as its economic activity straddle the border with France; currently 97,008 cross-border '*frontalier*' workers<sup>6</sup> – equivalent to 40% of the Geneva resident workforce-- work in the Canton. Some *frontaliers* are Geneva/Swiss nationals. The foreigner active resident population plus frontaliers comprise together **58%** of the workforce of Geneva! (All are *migrant workers* by international normative definition.)

While the net *solde migratoire* of foreign immigration/emigration was 4,280 in 2021, the net *solde migratoire* of Swiss nationals was 3,016 emigrants (departures). The annual population growth of Geneva in 2021 was six tenths of one percent.

## Refugees

According to Cantonal statistics, the total of recognized refugees was 4,330 at 2021, while 369 demands for asylum were presented last year. So far in 2022, some 7,000 Ukrainian war evacuees/refugees have been welcomed in Geneva.<sup>7</sup> The City has received refugees from Tibet after 1951, from Hungary in 1956, from Greece military rule 1967-74, from Czechoslovakia in 1968, from Chile after the 1973 military coup, Vietnamese and Cambodians post-1973, Sri Lankan Tamils from civil warfare, refugees from break-up of Yugoslavia and ensuing Balkan wars of the 1990s, Syrians after 2012, and over time from repression and warfare in Afghanistan, apartheid South Africa, Colombia, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Iran, Iraq, the Soviet Union, Turkey, and elsewhere as well as from repression against Kurdish people in several Middle East countries.

An immediate challenge is to ensure fairness, non-discrimination and equality of treatment for all refugees and asylum seekers: responses to the *Greycells* questionnaire as well as other reports observed that arriving Ukrainian war evacuees/refugees received privileged treatment upon arrival in both immigration status and generous reception, accommodation and inclusion support. This is perceived as differentiated from that accorded other arriving refugees and migrants, notably for refugees and asylum-seekers of color arriving from countries in Africa and the Middle East.<sup>8</sup>

## Its the economy.

Since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century, the economic growth, success and prosperity of Geneva directly corresponded with immigration enabling industrial and commercial development and export production.

Today 1,895 multinational companies present in the Canton count 95,128 employees –many of them foreigners. 41.2% of added value created in the Canton is thanks to Swiss or foreign multina-

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3 These and following figures from the Office Cantonal de Statistiques – OCSTAT, at [https://statistique.ge.ch/domaines/apercu.asp?dom=01\\_01](https://statistique.ge.ch/domaines/apercu.asp?dom=01_01)

4 Canton de Genève. Informations Statistiques. Bilan et État de la Population du Canton de Genève en 2020. Mars 2021. [https://statistique.ge.ch/tel/publications/2021/informations\\_statistiques/autres\\_themes/is\\_population\\_03\\_2021.pdf](https://statistique.ge.ch/tel/publications/2021/informations_statistiques/autres_themes/is_population_03_2021.pdf)

5 Ibid.

6 OCSTAT: [https://statistique.ge.ch/domaines/apercu.asp?dom=03\\_05](https://statistique.ge.ch/domaines/apercu.asp?dom=03_05)

7 Friends of Ukraine Refugee Assistance Center Geneva website (viewed 22 Nov. 2022) <https://www.friendsofukraine.ch/refugee-assistance-center-geneva>

8 See article for analysis at European level: Cantat, Céline. 2022. “The reception spectacle: on Ukrainian displacement and selective empathy at Europe’s borders.” Focaalblog, 28 June. <https://www.focaalblog.com/2022/06/28/ce-line-cantat-the-reception-spectacle-on-ukrainian-displacement-and-selective-empathy-at-europes-borders/>

tionals –19.4 billion Swiss francs in 2015.<sup>9</sup> Industrial Geneva –heavily dependent on international skills and labour. These companies produced in 2019 more than 60% of the value of exports that totaled 37.9 billion francs; they generated 15% of the Canton’s GDP-gross domestic product and they accounted for 27,000 jobs. (The five major sectors are horology, information and computer technology - ICT, *mechatronics*, life sciences, and specialized chemicals.) The private sector as a whole accounts for 319,394 jobs in Geneva –a majority performed by foreigner residents and *frontaliers*-- and it pays 1.8 billion francs in taxes annually, a major source of cantonal and city budgets, including for social expenditures.

The ‘international sector’ counted 36 international organizations (not including NGOs) in the Canton in 2019 with 26.645 jobs, plus 4,203 employees in accredited international missions. The sector spends 3.5 billion francs annually in Switzerland, most of that in Geneva. Not merely coincidentally, Geneva is home to the main international organizations concerned with migration and refugees, namely the ILO, IOM, OHCHR, and UNHCR as well as others on whose agendas migration figures highly: WHO as well as UNESCO, UNICEF, UNODC, UNWOMEN liaison offices in the city. Also, the supervisory bodies for the normative International Conventions on migration governance/migrant workers and on refugees all hold their meetings in Geneva.<sup>10</sup>

Limited space and concerted policy of restricting urban sprawl to preserve rural, forest and agricultural zones –and to protect environmentally sensitive areas-- has pushed the Geneva urban region into a considerably larger area well beyond the Canton. That urban region of interconnected and integrated economic activity, population and workforce residence, and commercial activity incorporates neighboring towns and communes in France in both the Ain and Haute Savoie Departments as well as stretching to the city of Lausanne in the Canton of Vaud.

### **Complex challenges**

*Accueil* and integration in Geneva have to deal with a large array and complexity of different situations and needs between high-skilled immigrants, other *migrant workers* –most with secondary or above schooling and most are long term residents; international organization personnel—including local staff; and the large frontier work force, originating in nearly all countries and territories in the world. This includes refugees and asylum seekers of all class, educational and skills levels coming from different countries in different regions.

A fundamental concern is providing adequate and appropriate *welcoming* assistance and support for all arriving refugees and migrants/immigrants as well as facilitating prompt *inclusion* in the city and integration among immigrants, refugees and the Geneva population. The evolution of the *city* into a large, cross-border urban basin and integrated economic and population zone has also to be factored. That means cooperation and coordination to ensure, among other concerns, inclusion of newcomers to the Geneva region and welcoming treatment of *frontaliers* in the Geneva workforce.

The rise in armed conflicts, brutal repression and violations of human rights worldwide compels Geneva to uphold and enhance its long tradition as city of refuge by keeping the door open to welcoming and accommodating refugees and asylum-seekers. Current numbers –refugees and asylum-seekers are less than one percent of the population-- manifest that Geneva can welcome more refugees for resettlement as well as ensuring full and fair consideration of all asylum requests.

A growing challenge for Geneva is to attract and retain its work force as global competition for skills and labour intensifies and availability diminishes. The success, indeed, viability, of Geneva depends on whether international talent comes and stays here ...or businesses feel compelled to migrate

9 This and following figures from: *Portrait de l’économie genevoise Nos entreprises, notre avenir*. CCIG - Chambre de commerce, d’industrie et des services de Genève. <https://nosentreprisesnotreavenir.ch/geneve-en-chiffres-1/>

10 (UN) Committee on Migrant Workers for the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families; the ILO Committee of Experts on Application of Conventions and Recommendations for ILO Convention 97 on migration for employment and ILO Convention 143 on migrant workers (supplemental provisions), and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and its Standing Committee for the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol on the Status of Refugees.

elsewhere. (Some did after the anti-immigration national referendum in 2016 imposed a Constitutional exit from the European free movement regime. However, that exit was subsequently left in limbo because of its cost to the national economy, especially to cities including Geneva.)

*“The head of the Swiss Employers’ Association has warned that Switzerland is facing a shortage of 700,000 workers in ten years’ time – and that immigration was key to plug the gap”*<sup>11</sup> 56,000 in the Geneva region by its 8% share of the national economy. UBS earlier estimated need for up to 500,000; a million ‘baby boomers’ retire over the decade while Swiss entrants to the workforce will be half that. (The employers added projected creation of 200,000 new jobs over the decade). But the global shortfall of skilled workers and professionals is estimated at 85 million qualified persons today and increasing. Competition is intensifying among developed and developing countries –and cities-- to attract and retain talent as shortages get worse in much of the world.

A related serious concern is the aging population pyramid: 20% of the Geneva population is aged 0 to 20, while the population over 65 is reaching nearly 20% of the total. By rough calculation, that translates to only 3 persons of working age for each person past retirement age.

The contextual situation has worsened due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Features across the industrialized world include contraction of economic activity and growth; reduction, diversion or overwhelming of social budgets, institutions and personnel –health in particular; large numbers of people leaving employment altogether; and rising inflation since 2021 currently 10.2% in the Euro-zone. Geneva has remained somewhat an exception, with still positive job creation, enterprise start-ups, and very modest population growth –albeit by immigration-- to an expanded urban area.<sup>12</sup> However, that context makes all the more urgent determining and taking now the policy and measures to ensure an inclusive and sustainable Geneva in years and decades to come.

### **A half-millennium of migration and refuge**

Geneva has a more than 500 year history of immigration and of bilateral emigration/immigration both between other Swiss cantons –distinct States until 1848-- and with adjacent France, as well as other European lands and kingdoms, later nation States. Until World War I, there was little formal ‘migration control’ in Switzerland or at borders.

Geneva’s durable reputation as a city of refuge was established in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century period of the Reformation. Thousands of *refugees* (in today’s terms) from religious persecution arrived from the early 1500s onward when Geneva established itself as a Protestant city in a then predominantly Roman Catholic Europe.

But not only, in fact considerable ‘labour and skills’ migration took place both ways between Lyon and Geneva since the 1600s. “Geneva and Lyon are situated a hundred kilometers from one another and they shared over the 17<sup>th</sup> Century similar and competitive economic activities that nourished systematic exchanges of men and women.”<sup>13</sup> Their overlapping geographic and economic space comprised a population providing work force for both cities. Despite the political-religious polarization between Roman Catholic Lyon and Reformed Protestant Geneva, hundreds if not thousands of people moved from one to the other and sometimes back, drawn by evolving economic and commercial development and emergence of industrial activity in the respective cities and beyond.<sup>14</sup> Both cities were producers/processors of goods as well as commercial market hubs for trade reaching across Western Europe and beyond.

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11 *Switzerland could ‘lack 700,000 workers’ in decade’s time.* SWI [SwissInfo.ch](https://www.swissinfo.ch) January 24, 2020.

[https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/politics/labour-market\\_switzerland-could-lack-700-000-workers-in-decade-s-time/45515066](https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/politics/labour-market_switzerland-could-lack-700-000-workers-in-decade-s-time/45515066) See also: *Skilled worker shortage worsens in Switzerland.* SWI [SwissInfo.ch](https://www.swissinfo.ch) November 28, 2019  
[https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/job-market\\_skilled-worker-shortage-worsens-in-switzerland/45398580](https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/job-market_skilled-worker-shortage-worsens-in-switzerland/45398580)

12 See data and discussion in: *COVID-19, Migrants, Refugees, Mobile Workers: Global Assessment and Action Agenda.* Taran & Kadyshva <http://www.rte.espol.edu.ec/index.php/tecnologica/article/view/889>

13 Monica Martinat (2015). *Genevois à Lyon, Lyonnais à Genève: itinéraires de migrants et de convertis (XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle).* / *Between Geneva and Lyon: The itineraries of migrants and converts (17th century).*  
<https://doi.org/10.4000/rhr.8344> <https://journals.openedition.org/rhr/8344>

14 Ibid

The city religious, civic and economic authorities were not necessarily strict about enforcing immigrants' conversion to the official city-State religion, nominally required for permission to reside, conduct business and obtain social support. Instead, artisan or commercial activity by immigrants was often tolerated while social service support was provided by both city and faith-based institutions. Notably, faith-based service entities were at the forefront of providing assistance to immigrants in Geneva –whether 'refugees' or not-- a feature remaining prominent today by Protestant, Catholic, ecumenical, and Muslim entities. Research found numerous stories of immigrants to the respective cities who continued to quietly practice their religions of origin.<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, *selective enforcement* took place in judicial proceedings and expulsions of some immigrants, allegedly for blasphemy and/or petty crimes.

Many of Europe's migrations over the last 500 years touched Geneva, better said, contributed to building the strength, economic success, diversity and population of the City-State. Geneva has received immigrants and refugees from virtually every other part of Europe, and many places elsewhere in the world.

Even English refugees found refuge in Geneva –some 140 Marian protestant families who fled to Geneva in 1555, after Queen Mary Tudor restored Catholicism as the State religion in England.<sup>16</sup>

During the Reformation, several prominent Italian Protestant families - among them the Michelis of Crest and the Burlamaquis - settled in Geneva to escape religious persecution. Descendants marked Geneva history: Theodore Turretini presided over Geneva Expo 1896, constructed the Bâtiment des Forces Motrices, transformed Lake Geneva harbour, and set up the world-famous Jet d'Eau.

Some of the most famous figures associated with Geneva were born elsewhere. Jean Calvin, the city's most emblematic personality, was born in Picardy, immigrated, was expelled from the city and immigrated again. Other famous historical figures who have been refugees and/or residents of Geneva include Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Voltaire, and Lenin, among others.

### **Geneva in Switzerland : a Century of vast immigration and emigration 1815-1914**

Geneva's role as a city of immigration dramatically expanded from the mid-1800s onward as industrialization literally mushroomed in cities of the Confederation Helvétique (which Geneva joined in 1812). Geneva emerged as a center of industrial activity in watchmaking, precision instruments, electrical equipment, machine tools, railway equipment, and textile and clothing manufacturing-- all highly labour-intensive at the time-- as well as specialized chemicals.<sup>17</sup>

*"The turn of the 20th Century was an era of sustained and rapid economic growth. The value of Swiss exports doubled between 1887 and 1912. A third of the population derived an income, either directly or indirectly, from foreign trade. Per capita, Switzerland was the world's leading exporter of machinery and, for a time, was even the top export nation, outstripping the United Kingdom and Germany."*<sup>18</sup>

In parallel, immigration rapidly expanded from the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century accompanying – and enabling—rapid industrialization. Immigration was primarily from the neighboring Austro-Hun-

<sup>15</sup> Ibid

<sup>16</sup> **N.M. Sutherland**. The English Refugees at Geneva, 1555-1559, in [History Today Volume 27 Issue 12 December 1977](https://www.historytoday.com/archive/english-refugees-geneva-1555-1559) <https://www.historytoday.com/archive/english-refugees-geneva-1555-1559>

<sup>17</sup> For a historical review of industries in Geneva, see: [Encyclopédie de Genève. Les industries. https://encyclog.org/les-industrieshans-boeckh-jean-pierre-etter-roger-firmenichdaniel-gardiol-blaise-junod-cather-ine-santschi-jean-de-senarclensfabien.html#7d2p53Pf](https://encyclog.org/les-industrieshans-boeckh-jean-pierre-etter-roger-firmenichdaniel-gardiol-blaise-junod-cather-ine-santschi-jean-de-senarclensfabien.html#7d2p53Pf)

<sup>18</sup> Roman Rossfeld. *Swiss Companies in World War One*. 1914-1918 Online Encyclopedia of the First World War. 2020. <https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/pdf/1914-1918-Online-swiss-companies-in-world-war-one-switzerland-2020-11-26.pdf>

garian empire, France, Germany, and newly-established Italy to the cities of Basel, Geneva and Zurich in particular. Over 600,000 foreigners (outside of CH) resided in the country by 1914, 15% of the 3.8 million population, providing the skills and labour underpinning national industrial development. In 1914, 40% of population of Geneva was 'foreign born.'

## **BOX**

**World-renowned companies founded by immigrants headquartered or with major operations in Geneva:**

**Brown Boveri & Company** - now ABB after merger with a Swedish company, founded by Charles Eugene Lancelot Brown, son of English immigrant Charles Brown, and German-born Walter Boveri (family of Savoyard origins) Charles Brown (father) founded **Swiss Locomotive and Machine Works**, constructor of many of the world's mountain railways, locomotives and rolling stock.

**Favarger Chocolates**, built up in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century by Samuel Favarger, born in Geneva of Neuchatel 'foreigner' parents (citizenship was cantonal pre-1848). The majority share of the company is now held by a Croatian entrepreneur. <http://www.genealogiesuisse.com/LesFavargerunedynastiedechocolatiers.pdf>

**Patek-Philippe:** watchmaking company founded in 1845 by Polish immigrant Antoni Patek and Frenchman Adrien Philippe. <https://polishhistory.pl/antoni-patek-and-the-most-expensive-watches-in-the-world/>

**Rolex** – German born immigrant Hans Wilsdorf worked in Swiss watchmaking in Neuchatel, went on to found the Wilsdorf watchmaking company in Britain, then moved with the company to Geneva in 1918 and renamed it Rolex. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Rolex>

**SGS** world's leading testing, inspection and certification company, headquartered in Geneva, founded by a Latvian immigrant to Paris who moved the company to Geneva in 1915. (CHF 6.4 billion revenues 96,000 employees worldwide in 2021).

**Other emblematic Swiss companies founded by immigrants include:**

**CIBA** (Gesellschaft für Chemische Industrie im Basle) founded in 1859 by French silk weaver Alexander Clavel ("by 1900 Ciba was the largest chemical company in Switzerland... Early in the century both Ciba and Geigy established factories in Germany, due in part to a labor shortage in Switzerland, but also to avoid enforcement of environmental laws designed to reduce pollution in the River Rhine.") <http://www.fundinguniverse.com/company-histories/ciba-geigy-ltd-history/>

**Karl Garaventa & Sons** – the world's premier cable car-making company, founded by the son and grandsons of Italian seasonal laborer Guiseppe Garaventa who came to Switzerland in the 1850s. <https://houseof-switzerland.org/swissstories/society/garaventa-swiss-cable-car-pioneers;>

**Maggi** founded by Julius Maggi, son of Italian-born immigrant Michale Maggi;

**Nestlé**, founded by German-born immigrant Henri Nestlé;

**Wander AG** (inventor-producer of world-famous *Ovalmaltine* and *Caotina*) established in 1867 by George Wander, German-born immigrant to Bern. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Georg\\_Wander](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Georg_Wander)

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## **Emigration**

Switzerland --Geneva included-- has long been a land of emigration. *It is only since comparatively recently that Switzerland has been able to feed all its inhabitants, and this inevitably led to a continual stream of emigration over the years. The more recent waves of emigration were after the great famine of 1816/1817, between 1845-1855, and between 1880-1885.*<sup>19</sup>

*Between 1500 and 1850, some 850,000 to 1 million Swiss served in armies abroad. Until the American and French revolutions, soldiering was a profession for hire in Western culture, and troops often included fighting men from every corner of Europe. Well-to-do people invested their money in establishing companies or regiments, the services of which were then sold to the highest bidder, be it the French or Prussian king or the Dutch East India Company. Young men of the elite*

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<sup>19</sup> S. von Allmen. *Emigration from Switzerland*. Webpage. 1998.

<https://www.iro.umontreal.ca/~vaucher/Genealogy/Documents/Emigration1.html>

*gained valuable experience as officers away from home and later might return to occupy positions of economic or political leadership. Commoners would be recruited for agreed-upon wages in the service of a given owner of the troops. Over three and a half centuries, some 660 Swiss-owned units, partly staffed by Swiss men, served in armies of France, Holland, Great Britain, the Papacy, or other nations on all continents. Such service intensified after leading European nations fought wars not only to attain European hegemony but also to subjugate peoples in Africa, Asia, the Western Hemisphere, and Australia in order to create exploitable colonies.*<sup>20</sup>

Between 1650 and 1917, an estimated 45,000 Swiss went to Russian urban centers such as St. Petersburg and Moscow or to the Volga region and the Crimea as farmers, tradesmen, and cheese makers; between 1917 and 1921, about 6,000 people of Swiss descent returned from Russia to their [ancestral] homeland.<sup>21</sup>

More than 1 million Swiss emigrated between 1815 and 1914, equivalent to more than a quarter of the country's population at 2014. Emigration was primarily from rural areas –displaced by combinations of ever-rugged conditions of the mountainous country, unsustainable competition with mechanization of farming elsewhere, rising costs of inputs versus declining farm produce prices, etc.

Swiss nationals and descendants live in the U.S., Canada and Mexico in North America, Peru, Bolivia, Argentina, Bolivia Brazil and Peru in South America, Ghana and Liberia in Africa, and elsewhere, as well as neighboring France, Germany, Italy and Austria.<sup>22</sup> For example, there are 90,000-100,000 Chileans of Swiss origins, the majority from 19<sup>th</sup> century rural development immigration colonizations and some 30,000 from WW II and postwar Swiss emigration.

Already before 1820, an estimated 25,000 to 30,000 Swiss arrived in North America, most settling in Pennsylvania and North and South Carolina.<sup>23</sup> Approximately 50,000 emigrated to the USA between 1860 and 1880, some 82,000 between 1881 and 1890, and an estimated 90,000 1890-2020.<sup>24</sup> The large majority of Swiss emigrants over the 19<sup>th</sup> century settled in rural areas, joined farming communities, and engaged in agricultural activities.<sup>25</sup>

This author has not yet found data on emigration from Geneva, but given the largely rural character of the Canton up to the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century with farming and wine-grape growing (continuing to this day), it can be assumed that there was some emigration from Geneva in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century –as there is today.

### **WW I and change in Swiss policy on migration**

The First World War both military warfare that devastated millions of lives economic warfare. Warring nations needed vast quantities of weapons, equipment and ammunition. At the outbreak of war, Switzerland was one of the most highly industrialized countries in the world. Geneva was an industrial hub for manufacture of precision instruments, mechanical and electrical equipment, and even vehicles and motorcycles, all highly in demand for war use. During the war, the Swiss economy profited from the great demand for war material and other goods; some branches also benefited from the lack –or wartime destruction-- of competitors in other countries,

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20 Schelbert, Leo: *Swiss emigration history*. /Historical Dictionary of Switzerland/. The Scarecrow Press, Inc., Lanham 2007; S. 99-102.

21 Ibid

22 This and following figures from: *Switzerland Emigration and Immigration*. n.d. Online Family Search service.

[https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Switzerland\\_Emigration\\_and\\_Immigration](https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Switzerland_Emigration_and_Immigration)

23 Some, including a great-grandfather of this author, were subsequently invited to migrate from Pennsylvania to develop farming in Ontario, Canada.

24 Ibid: *Switzerland Emigration and Immigration*

25 See for example discussion in: *Swiss Americans, Neuchâtel and the Slave Trade*, by Jaap Harskamp, in New York Almanak (2022). <https://www.newyorkalmanack.com/2022/09/swiss-americans-neuchatel-and-the-slave-trade/>

From early in the war, some Swiss politicians and the bourgeois press evoked the specter of hordes of poor refugees flooding across borders from all sides – the disintegrating Austro-Hungarian empire, France, Germany and Italy, all engulfed in warfare that cost millions of lives civilian and military, Swiss authorities and some cantons began implementing then-unprecedented border and immigration control measures, despite large numbers of foreign workers needed for booming wartime industry.

### Refugees, internees and expellees

Nonetheless, some 30,000 *refugees* in today's terms –including leaders from labour and social change movements, pacifists, draft resisters, and military war service refusers and escapees from countries across Europe including the Balkans, Poland and Russia, -- found refuge in Switzerland, notably in Geneva and Zurich. Also, civilians, including families with children and elderly people from Armenia, Belgium, Italy, Romania and Serbia were provided refuge in the country during the war<sup>26</sup>. Numbers were apparently unreported, but the figure of 4,350 Belgian refugee arrivals is cited in the Anja Huber article referred in footnote. As well, 67,600 injured and sick combatants from all sides were interned in Switzerland over the course of the war under humanitarian arrangements. Significant numbers of these groups arrived and remained in Geneva, but data remains to be found.

At the same time, nearly half a million French women, children and aged people expelled by Germany from occupied French territories to the north were transited by special trains (two full trains a day!) through Switzerland to the French 'interior' via Ain and Haute Savoie Departments,<sup>27</sup> Most passed through Geneva Cornavin Station –where they received donations of food and clothing and expression of support from local charities, church-based organizations, other civil society groups and volunteers.

*“A Genève, à l'école de la rue de Berne et aux Cuisines populaires de la rue Pécolat, des dames offrent «du thé et de la sympathie». De toute la Suisse parviennent vêtements, chapeaux et chaussures qui alimentent de gigantesques vestiaires. Les dons en argent affluent. Sur les quais des gares, tôt le matin ou tard dans la nuit, on distribue des collations, des friandises, des biberons de lait pour les nourrissons, des jouets pour les enfants et du tabac pour les hommes. Des banderoles sont déployées : «Bienvenue en Suisse!», «Vous serez bientôt en France!» “*

*Par dizaines de milliers, les rapatriés de la Grande Guerre traversent la Suisse:* Françoise Breuillaud-Sottas

However, by 1917, unfettered wartime profiteering by export manufacturers, inflation, and rising shortages of food and other goods due to cutoff of supplies from surrounding countries drove a combination of miserable pay, abysmal working conditions, and increasing privation --even hunger-- for urban populations and rural areas.

Protests, labour strife and strikes naturally resulted. However,, wartime refugees were perceived – and scapegoated-- by industrialists, employers and other elites as subversive threats promoting 'unrest' in the population. As the war wound down, anti-foreigner resentment was provoked in local populations blaming foreign workers for rising unemployment and food shortages, in reality consequences of devastation across Europe of production and trade in food and other goods and diminishing war material production in Switzerland.

*“In autumn 1917, the economic situation in Switzerland became more and more difficult, especially in relation to the supply of food and raw materials. As early as mid-1917, reports about food short-*

<sup>26</sup> This and data below drawn primarily from: Anja Huber. *Exile and Migration (Switzerland)*. in 1914-1918 Online Encyclopedia of the First World War. [https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/exile\\_and\\_migration\\_switzerland](https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/exile_and_migration_switzerland)

<sup>27</sup> *Par dizaines de milliers, les rapatriés de la Grande Guerre traversent la Suisse* article by Françoise Breuillaud-Sottas in *Passé simple, Mensuel Romand d'histoire et d'archéologie*. No 7, Septembre 2015. <http://www.passesimple.ch/Extrait7.php>



ages, protests against inflation and food smuggling appeared daily in Swiss newspapers. Social tensions increased as a result of the lack of social welfare institutions to support the needy population. These culminated in the general strike of November 1918. Foreigners in Switzerland were generally suspected of food smuggling by the Swiss population. In addition, they were perceived as competitors in terms of food supply and employment. After the revolutions in Russia, the bourgeois parties fuelled fears of a revolutionary upheaval in Switzerland. Protectionist views, xenophobia and a nationalist discourse began to dominate the public space in Switzerland and the way in which the Swiss perceived themselves.... Representative of this xenophobic movement was a loose conglomeration of members of the rising New Right, which was comprised of conservative intellectuals, scientists, political exponents and members of newly formed cultural protectionist associations and societies<sup>28</sup>

Unprecedented restrictions and controls were put on immigration and on refugee reception, especially in 1917, when what is today the Federal Migration Department was established with a control mandate. These restrictive measures were further tightened following the Russian revolution and outbreak of widespread (un)civil warfare in 1917-18 coupled with fear of imminent sequels in other war-devastated European countries,

However, export industry and trade-dependent Geneva apparently resisted imposition of radically restrictive Federal immigration control; such measures were applied with a 'light touch' and sometimes ignored by the city's large industrial and commercial sectors highly dependent on foreign workers.

### **Between the wars**

During the 1920's and 30's, restrictive policies continued, --in fact intensified in concert with economic privation resulting from the Great Depression of the 1930s and growing threats of radical fascist governments in neighboring Germany and Italy and large-scale support in Austria.

While documentation remains to be researched, this author suspects that tight restrictions on immigration constricted the supply of skills and labour needed to sustain the country's --and Geneva's-- industrial activity, tightly restricted migration may have been a contributing factor to economic contraction that accelerated during the 1930s. There are mentions of Swiss-based companies moving some operations to Germany and elsewhere 'due to labour shortages' during the 1920s.

### **World War II**

The official posture of Switzerland during the war was *neutrality*, although with understandings that allowed the Confederation and its businesses to do considerable business supplying warring neighbors, namely Nazi Germany, Austria, Italy and occupied France. In the name of both neutrality and, it was said, to prevent direct Axis military intervention in Switzerland, the official position taken was to deny access to refuge in the country by Jewish people and others fleeing persecution in the Axis states or occupied countries.

*Information about the Nazi mass murder reached the West in the summer of 1941. It became widespread knowledge among the Allies, the Neutrals, and the European populations in general in the course of 1942. Very little was done to help the victims, until it was too late for all of them. Decades passed until these facts were openly acknowledged. ... it was widely known after the summer of 1942 at the latest, that refugees who had been turned away would almost certainly be deported and killed. Nevertheless, thousands were sent to their deaths.*<sup>29</sup> Expelled from inside Switzerland or turned away at Swiss borders.

While large numbers of refugees were ultimately admitted over the wartime period, more than 20,000 Jews were returned to Nazi Germany or to the Vichy occupation regime in France and another 10,000 Jews were refused visas. However, many citizens and some authorities --particularly

28 Quoted from: Anja Huber. *Exile and Migration (Switzerland)*. in 1914-1918 Online Encyclopedia of the First World War. [https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/exile\\_and\\_migration\\_switzerland](https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/exile_and_migration_switzerland)

29 Independent Commission of Experts Switzerland – Second World War: *Switzerland and Refugees in the Nazi Era*. (The "Bergier Report") Bern, 1999. [https://www.swissbankclaims.com/Documents/DOC\\_15\\_Bergier\\_Refugee.pdf](https://www.swissbankclaims.com/Documents/DOC_15_Bergier_Refugee.pdf)

in Geneva-- helped Jews, other refugees, and on occasion injured resistance fighters enter and receive shelter and care, sometimes clandestinely in conscious –and conscientious-- contradiction to federal policy at the time.

### Postwar period 1940s to the 80s

In the postwar period of modernization and renewed expansion of industrial and export activity, foreign workers were needed in large numbers. But officially a restrictive temporary guest-worker regime prevailed from the late 1940s. From the early 1950s to the late 1980s, hundreds of thousands of guest workers per year came to Switzerland from Italy, and then Spain, Portugal and Yugoslavia, always on temporary permits of less than a year, although a considerable portion of the guest-workers came back year after year, some for decades.<sup>30</sup>

The regime had severe –indeed cruel-- conditions that “*destroyed families and left many traumatised*” as a BBC report last week put it, dividing families, thwarting lives of hundreds of thousands of children of guest-workers, most left ‘at home’ although thousands came in secret but were obliged to live in hiding, denied even the right to attend school.<sup>31</sup>

As well, the formal guest-worker restrictions tolerated abusive working conditions, prevented freedom of association and union rights and left workers in situations of perpetual exclusion. That regime lasted until after Switzerland joined the EU-EFTA free movement system in the late 1980s.

Geneva was a major location for guest-workers from the immediate post war industrial reconversion onward. The city’s Industries, commerce, banking and finance, cleaning and maintenance, health, construction, and service sectors, along with seasonal work in agriculture in rural areas, all were and remain a huge draw for foreign workers –at all skills levels.

### Refugees

Over the postwar decades, Switzerland has provided refuge –in limited numbers-- to refugees from Tibet after takeover by China in 1951, from Hungary in 1956 after military suppression of popular uprising, from the Greek military coup and dictatorship 1967-74, from Czechoslovakia in 1968 after Soviet military intervention, from Chile after the brutal military coup in 1973, Vietnamese and Cambodians post 1973, Sri Lankan Tamils from 20 years of civil warfare, refugees from the break-up of Yugoslavia and ensuing Balkan ethno-religious massacres and wars of the 1990s, Syrians since 2014, and over time from repression and warfare in Afghanistan, apartheid South Africa, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and elsewhere. Refugees from these situations were welcomed in cities of Switzerland, with significant numbers landing or ending up in Geneva.<sup>32</sup> As is the case in 2022 with war evacuees/refugees from Ukraine.

In 2019, the Federal Council of Switzerland introduced a refugee resettlement admission quota of 1,500-2,000 refugees, every two years. In May 2021, the government announced it will take in up to 1,600 refugees for resettlement from ‘first asylum’ countries in 2022-2023.<sup>33</sup> Most beneficiaries will be persons from crisis zones of ongoing military conflicts or persecution in the Middle East and along the ‘Central Mediterranean route’. Criteria include holding refugee status recognized by UN-HCR, need for protection unavailable in the country of first reception, and willingness to integrate in Switzerland.

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30 See detailed discussion in *Brève histoire de la migration en Suisse*, n.d. Swiss National Union of Transportation Personnel.. [https://sev-online.ch/fr/le-sev/was\\_machen\\_wir/le-sev-active-en-faveur-de-ses-membres/ohne-uns/geschichte.php/](https://sev-online.ch/fr/le-sev/was_machen_wir/le-sev-active-en-faveur-de-ses-membres/ohne-uns/geschichte.php/)

31 BBC News: *Switzerland migrant children demand immigration policy apology*. By Imogen Foulkes. 12 November 2022. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-63542636>

32 As well, refugees from the overthrown of elected government in Iran in 1953 and others from Eastern Europe and elsewhere transited via Geneva airport en route to resettlement in the USA in the 1950s and 60s. See for example World Council of Churches Archives. <http://archives.wcc-coe.org/query/detail.aspx?ID=48147>

33 InfoMigrant: *Switzerland to welcome 1,600 refugees*. (Online) 26 May 2021. <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/32534/switzerland-to-welcome-1600-refugees>

## Geneva, *Welcoming City* for im/migrants and refugees

GMPA has been engaged in a 6 year *Cities Welcoming Migrants and Refugees* research effort with UNESCO and ECCAR –European Coalition of Cities Against Racism. In addition to a broad global review of city law, policy and practice, the work entailed detailed examination of 25 cities across Europe, notably Geneva and Lausanne, and review of actions in more than 40 cities.<sup>34</sup> We found that the critical content of the *welcoming city* approach comprises 8 essential elements:<sup>35</sup>

1. assertion of fundamental human rights of all and inclusive sustainable-city *values*;
2. an accurate and comprehensive grasp of the *reality* of migration to the city;
3. recognition, and acknowledgment of migrant and refugee *contributions* to a viable, sustainable, productive and cohesive city and its communities;
4. *inclusion* of migrants and refugees, and their participation in shaping city action and narrative;
5. ample and appropriate city government and other actor *policy, actions, activities, and results*;
6. convincing *discourse and action* by leadership;
7. clear *responses* to fears and apprehensions of natives and newcomers alike
8. ample whole-of-city *strategic communications*

Geneva has become an exemplary city on nearly all of these core elements of narrative, policy and actions. Both the Canton and Ville have taken numerous important initiatives to address individuals and groups at risk and to provide protection for all migrants and refugees in these times.

A few examples:

- Positing overall Geneva –both Ville and Canton-- as a *welcoming city* in legislation, policy, leadership discourse, and in concrete actions.<sup>36</sup>
- Amply supporting and cooperating with civil society, faith-based and migrant and refugee community organizations in reception, settlement, inclusion and integration measures, particularly for refugees and asylum seekers.
- Establishing and maintaining the *Geneva Welcome Center* to advise and support immigrants to the city –including international organization and diplomatic personnel-- and to facilitate contact and interaction between newcomers, internationals, and the Geneva populations. <https://www.geneve-int.ch/geneva-welcome-center-cagi-0>
- Mandating social protection enrollment for all domestic workers, regardless of nationality or status, with obligatory contributions by their employers
- Enabling enrollment of youth migrants regardless of status in vocational and technical training
- Providing for regularization of migrants and refugees –more accessibly than restrictive federal policy dictates.
- ‘Fire-walling’ of social, health, employment and other migrant/refugee personal data from immigration control authorities.
- Enabling immigrant and refugee enrollment to participate in local voting and elections (after 5 years residence in authorized status).
- Dedicating specific attention to LGBTI refugees and migrants, including supporting a *safe house* for those recently arrived who may need it. <https://asile-lgbt.ch/>

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34 See: Kadyshva, O. (2022). Cities and migration: comprehensive study of cities welcoming migrants and refugees. Revista Tecnológica - Espol, 34(1) <http://www.rte.espol.edu.ec/index.php/tecnologica/article/view/919>

35 Taran, Neves de Lima and Kadyshva (2016). *Cities welcoming refugees and migrants: enhancing effective urban governance in an age of migration*. UNESCO <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0024/002465/246558e.pdf>

36 As one example, see Geneva website: *Welcome ceremony for new inhabitants* <https://www.geneve.ch/en/themes/international-geneva/mesures-accueil/welcome-ceremony-inhabitants>

## **BOX**

### **Geneva: preventing discrimination, promoting diversity, equality of treatment, integration**

#### Purpose and objectives

Geneva takes an overall strategic approach to welcoming and integrating migrants and refugees with numerous actions promoting diversity and preventing discrimination. The City of Geneva is expressly committed to diversity,<sup>37</sup> to prevent discrimination, and to equality of treatment irrespective of physical characteristics, religion, nationality, ethnic origin, gender, sexual orientation or length of residence. Stated purposes for policies and practices are promoting the shared value of diversity; addressing negative public stereotypes and prejudices against refugees; and implementing a strategy of welcoming, accommodating, and integrating migrants and refugees, with the overall goal of achieving a united city of Geneva encouraging political, civic and associative participation of all residents..

#### Activities and Outcomes

Multiple activities highlight the efforts of many associations and citizens to prevent discrimination and encourage social cohesion, recognizing *Geneva's richness in diversity*. City actions include:

- (1) **International Week of Actions against racism**, organized in March each year by the City of Geneva in partnership with the Canton of Geneva and civil society organizations, aimed at decreasing stereotypes and prejudices particularly against arriving refugees<sup>38</sup>. The 2017 theme of the Week of Actions Against Racism focused on discrimination at work. Events appealing to adults, teenagers, children and families are held in libraries, schools, the ethnography museum, and other public spaces.
- (2) "**Genave, sa gueule**" ("Geneva, its face")<sup>39</sup> fights against stereotypes through photographs and narratives of people living in Geneva
- (3) "**Ma boîte à outils contre le racisme**" (My toolbox against racism): events and research on tools to fight discrimination and racism in everyday life, including workshops focused on refugees.
- (4) "**Nouveaux jardins**" (New Gardens)<sup>40</sup>, partnerships between cities and neighborhoods (active in Geneva, Neuchâtel et Vaud Cantons), providing opportunities for migrants and asylum-seekers to care for urban gardens together with other neighborhood inhabitants, to encourage social cohesion, enable people to interact in the local French language, and fight stereotypes.

#### How established and maintained

The Administrative Council of the City of Geneva established strong political commitments in terms of social cohesion, valuing diversity, and combating discrimination, with specific reference to upholding international standards on human rights. The City:

- defined six strategic implementation axes and translated these into action at a local level.
- established a focal point lead and coordination by the city "Service Agenda 21 – Sustainable City" with expertise including environmental protection, gender equality, diversity, sexual orientation/gen-der identity, local economy, citizen participation and professional integration<sup>41</sup>.
- took a 'sustainable administration' approach including public awareness-raising on sustainability.
- ensured coordination among programs within the municipal administration

#### Factors for success

- Recognizing the resources and dynamism of linguistic, ethnic, cultural and national diversity, while developing an identity around common values.
- Public commitment and resource allocation by both the City and the Canton/State of Geneva.
- Cooperation and partnerships with multiple actors: social partners (employers/businesses and unions), civil society, and migrants and refugees.
- Deliberate media, public relations and public opinion strategy, with good publicity and visibility – including website and social media pages, multiple participatory initiatives, and public events.
- Attention to addressing negative public stereotypes and prejudices.

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Box drawn from **City Action Profiles** for the *Handbook for Cities Welcoming Migrants and Refugees* (Taran & Kadyshева). UNESCO-ECCAR-GMPA. Forthcoming

37 <https://www.geneve.ch/fr/actualites/dossiers-information/geneve-ville-diversite>

38 <https://www.geneve.ch/fr/themes/developpement-durable/municipalite/engagements-societe/egalite-diversite/diversite/actions-sensibilisation/semaine-actions-contre-racisme>

39 [www.geneve-sa-gueule.ch](http://www.geneve-sa-gueule.ch)

40 <https://www.eper.ch/nouveaux-jardins>

41 [http://www.ville-geneve.ch/fileadmin/public/Departement\\_1/Publications/plaquette\\_a21\\_web.pdf](http://www.ville-geneve.ch/fileadmin/public/Departement_1/Publications/plaquette_a21_web.pdf)

## Where more may be needed.

The city approach has evolved in recent years, but there is inevitably room for improvement. The expert assessment done by a formal Council of Europe expert team review in 2011 provides useful guidance.<sup>42</sup> Its recommendations correspond to our and other assessments and were to a large degree subsequently addressed, others are in process of being so, and several merit ongoing attention.

**Public declaration** – *Geneva authorities refer often to the openness of the city to the world. They have done and continue to do so.*

**Transversal co-operation** – *The intercultural strategy of a city is by definition transversal and involves all departments of the local administration. If coordination is missing or is ineffective, initiatives taken by one department to encourage intercultural dialogue could be undermined by the policies of other departments.*

Geneva Ville and Canton have substantially increased consultation, cooperation and coordination both between administrative the departments and with external actors who contribute to strengthening the cohesion of the multicultural Geneva society.

**Expatriates and international civil servants** – *Geneva welcomes four types of people who seem to live side by side without really knowing each other: the Swiss, the foreign residents, the staff of international organisations and the employees of multinational companies. The city could consider ways of introducing innovative measures to encourage exchanges and communication between these groups.*

Indeed, the Canton in cooperation with the City established the Geneva Welcome Center mentioned above, which as a substantial budget and a wide array of programmes and activities to bring foreigners, international personnel and Genevan people together.

**Neighborhood contracts** – *Geneva has introduced an important participation scheme – the neighborhood contracts – in order to take into account the requests of local residents and respond to them through formal commitments.*

The city has involved encouraged the involvement of migrants and refugees in formulation and implementation of neighborhood contracts as well as local policy and activities.

**Participation** – *Civil society organisations in Geneva are numerous and dynamic. They enjoy a generous financial support.*

This has manifestly continued to be the case. Although such financial support tends to be the first to fall in periods of city and cantonal fiscal constraint.

The city has also encouraged registration and voting in local elections and referendums by immigrants resident for five years or more.

**Funding** – *Many associations receive municipal funding for the organisation of cultural events. It would be desirable to formulate a coherent and comprehensive local cultural policy... and give priority to projects which encourage intercultural dialogue.*

Much done over the last decade, but further attention to the cultural contexts of different migrant/immigrant and refugee communities in Geneva can be envisaged.

**Welcoming policies** – *An integrated welcoming service for all newcomers in the city could help reduce segregation or self-segregation between internationals and local residents. Professional organisations, trade unions and international organisations based in Geneva should be involved in the design of such a service.*

Done! With the *Geneva Welcome Center* referred above.

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<sup>42</sup> Council of Europe. *City of Geneva Intercultural Profile*. 2011. <https://rm.coe.int/1680482a3b>

**Staff training** – *The city should step up its efforts to provide diversity training to its employees... Training could be managed jointly with the canton, as in Lausanne.*  
Being done to our knowledge.

Another concern for Geneva international –for proper treatment of refugees and migrants—is ensuring that its own legislation, policy and practice are in conformity with the relevant international Conventions on migration governance, migrant workers and refugees (see footnote 8) as well as International Labour Standards (ILO Conventions), whether or not ratified by the Confederation. Local conformity appears to be largely the case, but there are still gaps, A detailed law and practice review in reference to the relevant Conventions is merited.

The testimony from immigrants and refugees in Geneva and civil society organizations at the December 6 Greycells *Intergenerational Dialogue* will certainly elaborate on what’s being done well and good and where improvements, better implementation and new initiatives are needed. This with the fundamental objectives of facilitating establishment and productive inclusion of refugees and immigrants to the city and strengthening Geneva as an inclusive and sustainable city today and tomorrow.

\* \* \*

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