

SWISS CUSTOMS MUSEUM

SCHWEIZER ZOLLMUSEUM
MUSEO DELLE DOGANE SVIZZERO
MUSEE SUISSE DES DOUANES

Federal Customs

Administration FCA

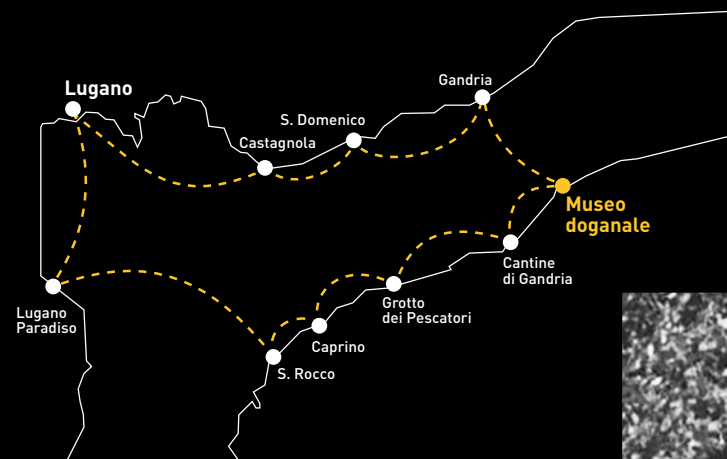
Swiss Customs Museum
Cantine di Gandria, Lugano
+41 58 463 49 22
customsmuseum@bazg.admin.ch

Opening hours

Tue – Sun, from 12 am to 5 pm

For further information see:
www.customsmuseum.admin.ch

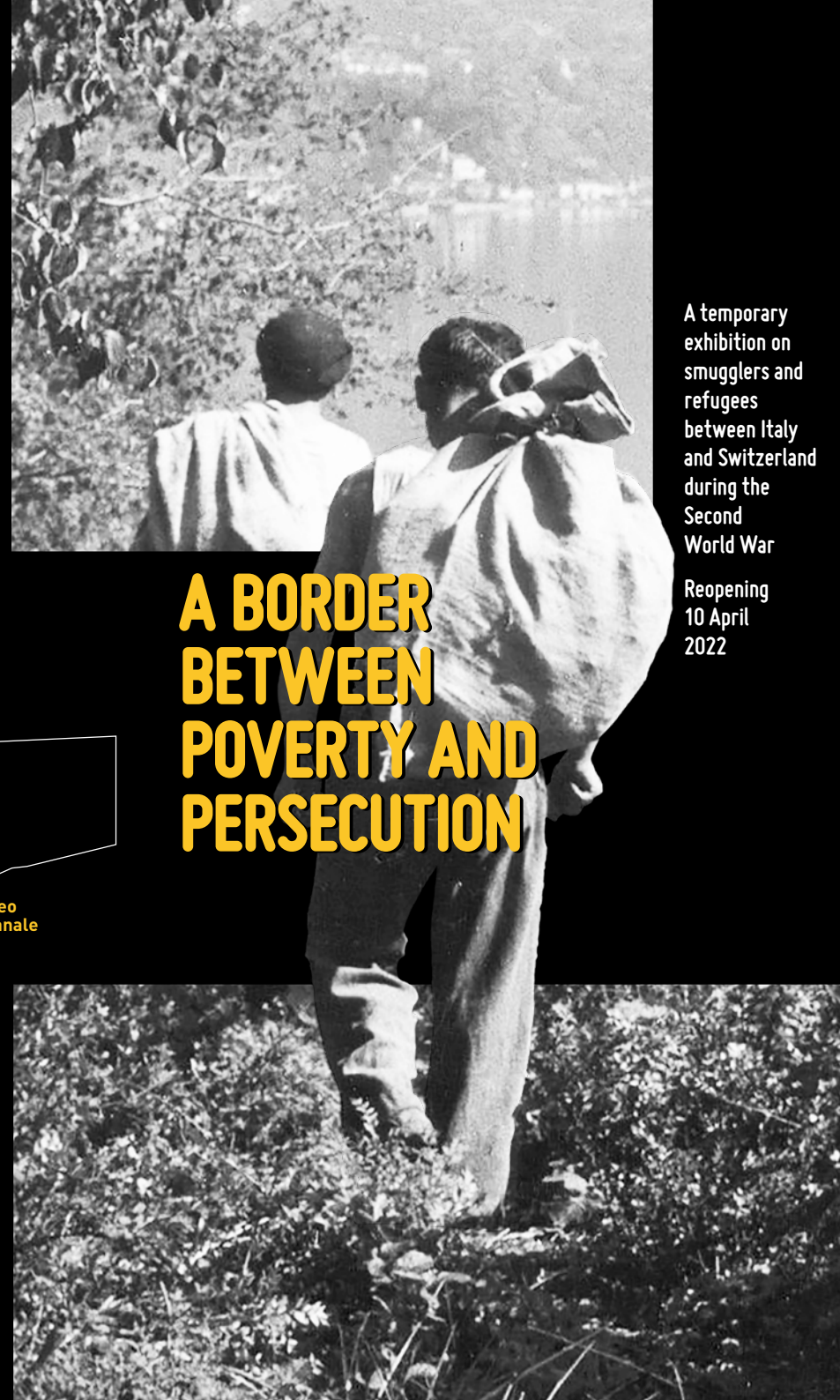
Free entrance



Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft
Confédération suisse
Confederazione Svizzera
Confederaziun svizra

Swiss Confederation

Bundesamt für Zoll und Grenzsicherheit BAZG
Office fédéral de la douane et de la sécurité des frontières OFDF
Ufficio federale della dogana e della sicurezza dei confini UDSC
Uffizi federal da la duana e da la segirezza dals confins UDSC
Federal Office for Customs and Border Security FOCBS



A BORDER BETWEEN POVERTY AND PERSECUTION

A temporary
exhibition on
smugglers and
refugees
between Italy
and Switzerland
during the
Second
World War

Reopening
10 April
2022





SMUGGLERS AND REFUGEES

The border with Italy was by far the area which saw the most intense levels of smuggling. The exhibition traces the history of smuggling, focusing on its most memorable period: the Second World War. Spared from the expansionist ambitions of the menacing Axis powers, Switzerland was literally invaded by an army of smugglers. Men, women and even children from the Italian border villages saw this tough and dangerous activity as a means of alleviating their difficult financial situations.



In those turbulent years, with the centre-north of Italy occupied by the Wehrmacht and ravaged by civil war, thousands of military and civil refugees, especially politicians and Jews, poured into Switzerland. Around 26,000 military and 12,000 civilian refugees were granted entry into Ticino and Mesolcina, of whom around 4,500 were Jews. But many people were also turned away. Some of the Jews who were refused entry were arrested and deported to Auschwitz, from where few returned.

THE INGENUITY OF THE SMUGGLERS

The creativity of the smugglers knew no bounds: in 1948, a homemade wooden submarine encased in metal was seized. It was three metres long and had a carrying capacity of 450kg. The “pocket-sized submarine of Ceresio” was powered by pedals!



THE CAPRINO REGISTER



The original register of refugees who arrived at the Caprino border post, where the Customs Museum is now located, is on display in one of the rooms. According to current research, this is the only document of its kind in Switzerland. It tells us about the refugees who sought refuge from persecution in Wehrmacht-occupied Italy. Dramatic, adventurous and moving stories that make us question and reflect on asylum in general and the Holocaust in particular.

THE BORDER FENCE

In order to combat smuggling, the Italian border guards built an impressive border fence network in the 1880s. The “ramina”, as it is known in Ticino, had an ingenious alarm system consisting of bells attached with special springs, ready to raise the alarm if anyone tried to cross the border illegally.



Smuggler dogs were introduced at the end of the 19th century. Man’s loyal friend was trained to cross specific routes carrying a small pack weighing between 5kg and 10kg. The Italian border guards had orders to shoot the poor animals and killed hundreds of them. From the 1930s onwards, however, many dogs were found working on the other side, alongside the border guards.

