

Still within Borders?

TWENTIETH-CENTURY FILM DIRECTORS understood the power of borders. “Don’t shoot; they’re in Switzerland,” cry the German Stalag guards in *La Grande Illusion* as French prisoners of war flee across the snow. We hold our breath lest the prisoner exchange across the “bridge of spies” between West Berlin and East Germany in the adaptation of John Le Carré’s novel break down in a hail of bullets. The tension in these scenes reminds us how remarkable it remains that crossing a border can radically change our rights and security. Few institutions so fundamentally structure our legal and sometimes physical existence as a frontier. This hardly stops border crossers, indeed often incentivizes their efforts. Wars and brutal regimes in particular set people in motion across frontiers, that is, from one territory to another. An estimated twenty million refugees had been uprooted by local turmoil as of early 2016. Migrants in search of work and even tourists have added to the flux of humanity and the need to create national and international responses.

For the last third of the twentieth century the responses tended to be in the direction of openness. Before Schengen referred to the removal of boundaries within the EU, it was just an unimposing village on the Moselle River where the southeastern corner of Luxemburg nudges the French and German frontiers. In 1985 delegates from Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, France, and Germany convened at this common vertex to eliminate border controls and visa requirements between their countries. Over the course of the next dozen years, “Schengen” grew to become a noble country of the mind that notionally overlays the European Union (less Ireland and the UK but with the addition of Switzerland and Norway), enclosing it in a common external frontier while abolishing

frontiers within.¹ Americans cross the Schengen border when their passport is stamped at their first EU airport.