



Europe

NIGHT FALLS: GERMAN JEWS REACT TO HITLER'S RISE TO POWER

Private letters to foreign relatives paint a harrowing picture of warnings largely unheeded

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When Adolf Hitler came to power in Germany on Jan. 30, 1933, he gained the authority to implement his racist ideology toward Germany's Jews, who then numbered 535,000 out of a general population of 67 million. After the Reichstag (parliament) elections on March 5, the new German government removed the constraints on violence against Jews, and assaults and vicious beatings of Jews in the streets of major German cities by Nazi thugs became commonplace. Within months, the Nazi government issued numerous decrees and regulations that effectively removed Jews from German economic life and the professions, the goal being to force the Jews to leave Germany.

German Jews reacted to these developments with shock and disbelief. Diaries and memoirs record their distress and utter bewilderment. Another primary source is the private letters that German Jews sent to relatives living abroad. These letters express the reactions and emotions of men and women to the horrifying events unfolding around them daily. One rarely used such resource is the letters written by German B'nai B'rith (Sons of the Covenant) members to relatives in the United States. Many of these letters were forwarded to B'nai B'rith's international headquarters in Cincinnati, where they remain part of the organization's archives.

Jewish men established the German B'nai B'rith in Berlin 1882 to combat a rising tide of anti-Semitism among the populace and in fraternal organizations. From 1882 onward, most German B'nai B'rith members belonged to business, industry, and the legal and medical professions. In general, B'nai B'rith members represented the most influential element within European Jewish society, and many of the leading personalities in Jewish life were members. At the time of the Berlin lodge's founding, the largest and wealthiest German Jewish elite lived in Berlin and occupied an important position in the city's cultural and intellectual life. By 1925, Germany contained 107 B'nai B'rith lodges with over 15,000 members.

While all German Jews reacted to these events with alarm and incredulity, the elite of the community experienced an especially deep dismay, having assumed that their economic and social position and contributions to German life and culture would shield them from danger. B'nai B'rith members came from this class, and many of them wrote personal and emotional letters describing the nightmare they found themselves in to family members living in the United States. The letters movingly express the consternation and terror the writers felt as the world they knew collapsed.

A letter written in April 1933 by an elderly physician to his daughter living in the United States expresses the author's anguish, disillusionment, and anger at what has befallen him and those in his profession.

Your dear mother owing to bad health is in danger of her life and this is the main reason why I left Berlin as fast as possible. Nothing had happened to me personally up till then ... I myself face a complete breakdown of my nerves. I surely could not have managed to keep quiet in case of a controversy. What that would have meant, other doctors have found out with their lives. Now after a few days in Paris where people do not look at you with eyes of hatred, where they are friendly and human, I can breathe again, which I could not do lately at home.

And for that I had to lose my father in the war; for that I had to leave wife and children to risk my life as a volunteer during the war. I had to lose everything and build up after the war an existence so that my family would not suffer hunger. For that I was proud when I was 60 years old to have only few enemies and many friends and to enjoy reputation and esteem – to now end my life as a second-grade citizen.

These methods are so much more cruel than anything in anti-Semitism up to now, because they did not kill in one day 13,000, after which the beast would calm down, but now in cold reasoning hundreds of thousands of Jews are being destroyed spiritually, physically, morally and now finally economically. And even if this present storm should subside, it will break out time and again as soon as economic difficulties make Hitler's success impossible. You cannot allow a big party of untamed youth to shout continuously "perish Jews." Then Jews simply have to perish. That is what these brutal elements now demand. I bespeak you to destroy this letter because I do not wish to contribute one iota lest Germany's reputation should be damaged by me. Indeed thanks to my friends and my position, I have not received anything but good from Germany so that I now do not wish to seem ungrateful. But now unfortunately everything is dark. And in this spirit I just wanted to open my sick heart to you to relieve myself. But I ask you to please be careful so that not through you anything may become known. For every attack in foreign countries, reacts in Germany on its Jewish citizens. They alone have to suffer for what others sin. ... Finally, be very careful when you write to us because after the inquiry at the American consulate every one of your letters has been opened.

Your Father

The letter illustrates the extreme caution Jewish letter writers had to exercise when voicing criticism of the government because doing so could cost them their lives. The writer also reminds his daughter to exercise caution in what she writes to him because the Jews were under constant surveillance. He explains that her letters are being opened after he made inquiries at the American embassy. He also mentions the unpleasant truth that German Jews would pay a heavy price for every negative action against Germany instigated by Jews living abroad. This comment reflects the harsh reality that the German government blamed Germany's Jews for the anti-German rallies and demonstrations undertaken by Jews in other countries. He purposely did not date or sign the letter, and he mailed it from Paris where he was on a trip with his wife because letters mailed outside Germany were not opened, scrutinized, or censored.

On April 2, 1933, the wife of another Berlin physician and B'nai B'rith member wrote to a relative in the United States movingly describing what she witnessed during the April 1 national boycott against Jews in Germany and her reaction and emotions regarding what she saw.

I will try to give you an idea of my experiences of yesterday—Saturday, April 1st....I have had many experiences in my life, but nothing I have ever gone thru can compare with this Nazi boycott in retaliation of "the atrocity propaganda" against Germans. No blood was shed, that is true, but the humiliation to the Jews—the absolute helplessness of their position—the cowardliness of these brutes in carrying out to the last vestige [sic], the most intimate details on orders from above (Goebbels and Goerring [sic]) beggars description.

I wanted to see for myself just what was happening and so went down the Kurfurstendam [sic]—a street much like 5th Ave. in N.Y.—very long, block after block of both large and small exclusive shops interspersed by large coffee houses and movies. Here on a Sat. afternoon it is a sort of promenade and window-shopping, but the site that met one's eyes yesterday! On the large windows of all shops bearing even the semblance of a Jewish name these brown shirts had pasted plain colored posters about 3 feet long bearing the words, "Deutsche Whart Euch—Kauft nicht bei Juden" (Germans beware do not buy from Jews). On office buildings where Jewish lawyers, notaries, or doctors have their small signs ... they smeared over the signs of the Jews and pasted smaller placards. "Jews—geht nicht hier" (Jews—do not enter)....

These young devils like a lot of hungry wolves let loose ... with buckets filled with red paint and with large paint brushes, rushed from one shop window to another and not satisfied with having put huge posters against the Jews thereon, printed in huge letters at the side of the posters JUDE [underlined in the original]. These were followed by other troops with white paint buckets who hastily painted a large Shield of David [underlined in the original] on the same windows. It was a concerted action, completely organized so that one atrocity followed upon the other. Up and down these devils flew, across the wide streets over to the opposite side while the crowds of people (there was scarcely a Jew to be seen on the streets, they were mostly at home, being afraid to venture out), looked on, some with serious faces—many (and mostly the bourgeois type, the kind of women one could imagine in France during the revolution) grinning and smiling approvingly as though it was a huge joke! Can you imagine my feeling? Large shops and small ones, shops that no one ever knew that they were owned by Jews... lace houses that have been in the same shops for 50 years—coffee houses and fine restaurants. Hundreds and hundreds of stores, delicatessen shops, the finest Berlin has, were all, without exception smeared up in this way. And what a sight! And what deep misery in the wake of this dastardly, cowardly outbreak. On some stores which from the name one would never think owned by Jews they had smeared "Geborener Jude" [born a Jew]. And on many, oh so many, in large white letters they printed "Ich bein Jude" [I am a Jew]... The ready-to-wear shops—and there are many—on the main street, Leipzigerstrasse, were all full of these signs. Well, my dears, my heart ached and bled and it was all I could do to keep the tears back. ... Throughout the entire breath and length of this long, long, Kurfurstendam [sic] we never saw one single policeman [underlined in the original], not one officer of the law to protect any outrage that might have occurred. ... Can you imagine a civilized land condoning such atrocities? Can you imagine in the twentieth century that troops of young snips should have the right to perpetuate such horrible deeds as the smearing of respectable shops with all these dirty epithets? Juda-Juda everywhere. Kauft nicht bei

Juden-kauf nur bei Deutsche. (*Don't buy from Jews buy only from Germans*).

Jews who fought and died for their Fatherland should not be looked upon as Germans? And then, when one thought they had finished with their dirty work—to see them wild with glee and victory heaped upon helpless Jews, (and oh how helpless) this handful of people is against the infamous mob backed by the government of tyrants and Jew haters—to add the finishing touch—the Shield of David painted in white on all the windows. Well, that Shield has led Jews throughout centuries and protected them from greater atrocities than those that are being heaped on them today by this barbarous country.... God has never left us yet and my faith in Him has never been shaken.

The blood-thirsty army which Hitler and his cohorts have been building up have had their first outlet. ... The protests of the Jews in the foreign countries played right into their hands and they used their already prepared and fully organized “boycott” as THEIR protest to the lies [underlined in the original] about Germany which, as they claimed, the Jews [underlined in the original] over here broadcast. These demons say, “this is your own work—now take your medicine.” ... I am now worried until Pesach is over, for I can't help thinking, in the face of the placards announcing that the Jews need Christian blood for the Passover feast, that some horrible thing is brewing. Let us hope not. I also am afraid now as many others are, of confiscation of the property belonging to the Jews... I doubt if anything I have written you in such minute detail will come into the press, and that is why I have written my personal account of it.

The letter makes evident that the writer is a member of the middle or upper-middle class. She wrote the letter in English and translated the German phrases she uses into English. The shock she evinces relates to the fact that she never encountered this kind of action and violence against Jews of her standing and class. She cannot grasp that such an action took place in an upscale district of Berlin and not in some lower-class and poor area of the city. She fears that this is not the end, but that the government has plans for additional and more horrible actions against the Jews. Her letter also makes evident that Jews owned most of the stores, restaurants, and cafes on Berlin's most exclusive shopping street.

The following letter, dated March 23, 1933, was written by the wife of a physician and B'nai B'rith member in Vienna to her cousin in the United States. Although she lives in Vienna, she describes the conditions in Germany that affect Jews of the “intellectual” class. She asks her cousin Severna to “please consider this letter as one from my husband, whose secretary and spokesman I have become in this emergency.”

Aside from the daily violence and the daily threats and menaces of more persecutions to come, which the highest officials have openly said, we can report that the most dangerous threat of all which overhangs German Jews is as follows: (my report is very condensed and

stresses the situation of the intellectual workers, since my husband is a physician).

All Jews exercising so-called free vocations as lawyers, physicians, artists, etc. are placed under what is called "exception rules." In plain words, that means that Jewish lawyers are not allowed to plead cases before German law courts, that Jewish doctors have been removed from the staffs of hospitals and cooperative health institutions more or less violently, and the actors and orchestra leaders are no longer permitted to act or to lead.

A highly organized boycott system is being carried out against Jewish tradesmen of all kinds so that our coreligionists in Germany find it absolutely impossible to earn a living.

In our country the same movement is spreading rapidly and we can foresee a coalition with the same German system in the near future.

I beg of you, dear cousin Severna, to hand this S.O.S. communication to the authority you think should see it. For the sake of caution I am not mentioning my address in this letter. Should you be unable to find it, I am sure your father will have it. I will not write you any personal news for we feel so depressed and downhearted that I could only repeat the theme of this letter.

Ever yours affectionately

Steffy

P.S. When replying, please be very careful not to be too explicit and keep in mind the fact that the letter will possibly be opened and read by officials.

As in the first letter, the writer of this letter is also afraid to write her address. She is worried that German officials may trace the letter to her and she and her family will be in danger for what she wrote. She also fears that what is happening in Germany will happen in Austria as well.

As all the letters indicate, by the end of April 1933 few Jewish members of the middle and upper middle classes had any illusions that conditions under the Nazis would improve. With hindsight, we know that the Jewish situation only worsened. But none of the letter writers could have imagined that in 10 years they or their families would be reduced to ashes by a state-run industrial killing machine and that the long continuum of Jewish life in Germany would be broken.

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