

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DB - 33
The Rabbit Cage,
And Some Survivors

Plockstrasse 8
Giessen, Germany
June 11, 1958

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Institute of Corrent World Affairs
522 Fifth Avenue
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

By the time the Wehrmacht attacked Poland on September 1, 1939, Germany's remaining 375,000 Jews were already total outcasts. The greater portion of their property had been confiscated, and they were social pariahs. Two months before the war began, the Reich Union of Jews was created, completing the ghettoizing of these persecuted people. Few were allowed to continue working. Thousands were condemned to poverty.

Only a quarter of Germany's Jews had been able to escape the growing National Socialist oppression.

It is difficult to tell how many were able to get away from Giessen. Herr Bitsch, of the City Government estimates five per cent. This would leave over 700 families as victims of the ultimate Nazi "Final Solution".

A much more conservative estimate was made by Ludwig Stern, who survived Konzentrationslager Theresienstadt. Stern drew up a list of the deported Giessen Jews he had known who died or disappeared in the death camps. It numbers 145 individuals. However, I have received letters from many Giessen Jews listing scores of relatives from this city who were caught by the Gestapo and sent to their deaths. Many of these names are not on Herr Stern's list. Presumably, some were picked up during raids in other cities.

Finally, there is the calculation of a former Giessen Gestapo employee, Ludwig Keiner, who had charge of the Secret Police card file on local Jews. Keiner says there were roughly 600 Jews in Giessen at the beginning of the war - "800, counting half-Jews and mixed-marriage Jews," he recalls.

A year after the war began, most of Giessen's Jews officially lost their German nationality. The declaration had little immediate effect on their limited lives, but this was the sinister Nazi method of "legally" making them fair game for further assaults. Already, they carried special blue identity cards, with the word "Jude" stamped on the outside. The men were obliged to add the name "Israel", and the women, the name, "Sara" to their signatures as a further humiliation.

In 1941, nearly all of the city's Jewish families were forced to move into specially prepared houses in the Walltorstrasse.

They were crammed together like rabbits in a cage. This was "the ghetto without walls", the local version of the sealed off ghettos that had been erected in Poland by the SS.

Here, the Jews were under constant police control. They were permitted to buy only at certain stores, and their rations were limited. They were forbidden to have any contact with "Aryans". They were subject to an early curfew.

Nevertheless, at night, some managed to carry on forbidden transactions with trusted neighbors. They would sell them furniture, bedding, and jewelry, in order to get enough money for food. Sometimes they turned over their possessions to these neighbors on the promise that they would be returned after the war. As might be expected, there were a few "Aryans" who took advantage of the Jews' plight and simply robbed them in this manner.

Such were the last hours of Giessen's shrunken Jewish Community. Their fate had been decided already. The gas chambers of Birkenau had begun to operate in the summer of 1941. In January, 1942, the Main Office of Reich Security (S.S.) under the leadership of Reinhard Heydrich issued the orders determining the "Final Solution" to the "Jewish Question". Heydrich, who was of partly Jewish descent, was appointed to this task by Hitler in 1939.

Before dawn on September 14, 1942, Gestapo bureaus throughout Gau-Hessen-Nassau received orders to arrest all the Jews in their ghettos and prepare them for deportation to the S.S. camps. Immediately the wolves pounced on the rabbit-cages.

Police entered the "Jew Houses" in the Walltorstrasse and ordered the inhabitants to pack their suitcases. The Jews were also told that they could take silver table cutlery with them. This was confiscated while they were still in Giessen. The Jews were then marched to the Goetheschule, where they were kept under guard for several days. Meanwhile more Jews were driven in from surrounding villages.

Then the whole group was loaded into sealed trains, which ground haltingly to Darmstadt, the collecting-point for all Jews of the People's State of Hesse. They were penned up in schools again. Another search followed, during which all money and valuables were confiscated. The Jews were also forced to sign a slip which willed all their property to the Reich. A weird piece of German bureaucracy.

Finally, the Jews were divided into two groups. The first included all who were under 65. The second included those so-called "privileged Jews" who were over 65, plus war wounded, and veterans who wore the Iron Cross from World War I. The first group was deported to Isbiza in Poland, the second to Theresienstadt in Czechoslovakia. In many cases, parents were torn away from their children.

Ludwig Stern reported that 72 Giesseners were among the 850 Hessians transported to Isbiza. They were later transferred to Auschwitz, where they perished. Theresienstadt, was not an annihilation camp, like the Polish ones. It was a transit camp. But the forced labor was so exhausting there, and the food so short, that up to 250 prisoners died every day. It too, became a death camp.

Herr Stern listed 80 Giesseners among the 1,287 Hessian Jews in the September 1942 deportation to Theresienstadt. Eleven of these were later sent on to Auschwitz. But 62 died of hunger, typhus, and cold in Theresienstadt. Only seven of these Giessen Jews survived the war. Three of them died soon afterwards.

The Giessen Gestapo continued to seize local Jews throughout the following years - usually in Grossaktionen ("big actions") wherein a hundred or more persons were abducted. As late in the war as February, 1945, the secret police picked up a dozen Giesseners who were living in so-called "mixed marriages". Under the Nazi laws, they were Jews, and accordingly they were deported to Theresienstadt. It was only a month before American troops arrived in Giessen.

These last twelve managed to escape death in the concentration camp. Russian troops captured Theresienstadt a week before S.S. troops were to have exterminated the remaining inmates.

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However, in the case of Giessen, the Final Solution was final for the Jewish Community. The Gestapo had been very efficient. Thus the only survivors of the National Socialist "racial policy" remaining were a few persons of Jewish decent who were no longer Jews. Still, they can tell a lot about Giessen - before, during, and after the Third Reich:

Frau Dora Scheurer came to Giessen from her native Darmstadt in 1922 to teach school. During the late Twenties, she met Adam Scheurer, (DB - 2) also a schoolteacher, and fell in love with him. Dr. Scheurer is Catholic. In 1931, Frau Scheurer converted to Catholicism, and a year later they married.

Both she and Dr. Scheurer were fired by the Nazis shortly before the war. Dr. Scheurer had to go to work at a war factory in Frankfurt. But they stuck it out together, hoping for the best even when Dora Scheurer was snatched away by the Gestapo. Today, this woman is a bright-eyed pretty little creature, very animated, and looking much younger than her 57 years. The devotion between Frau Scheurer and her husband is touchingly deep. Of the Hitler Era she said: "It was a paradox. I never cried as much as in those years. But they were the most beautiful years in my life." Said it, and gazed at her husband. She recalled other things:

"Jews couldn't go to market. Friends came at night with vegetables. They were the good ones. After the war broke out, we were issued Jewish ration cards.

We had to buy at certain shops at certain times. After 1943 there was no more meat, eggs, white bread.

"In that year I went to the ration office to try to get a meat ration card. The clerk refused. He yelled at me: 'Jew stays Jew!' I got nothing. On the first day I got back from concentration camp in 1945 I went to the ration office for new tickets. I was skin and bones, and I had a shawl to cover my shaved head. The same clerk jumped up and said: 'Gnädige Frau' (Dear Lady) bowed and scraped, and pushed a chair out for me. That was disgusting. It happened again and again, but it was still shocking."

The Scheurers also had housing difficulties. Several times Gestapo men arrived with their wives to see whether they wanted to take the Scheurer apartment away. Then, one day, another "mixed-marriage" couple moved in on them - the Daniel Goldschmidts. Both husband and wife came from simple homes and were hardly prepared for the Scheurer bathroom. They refused to bathe more than twice a month. Frau Goldschmidt explained to Frau Scheurer: "You can't make a flower garden out of a potato field."

In December, 1944, the Scheurers were bombed out of their Gartenstrasse home. "This may surprise you," she said, "but we were taken in by a woman I knew who joined the Party in 1933. She had been an enthusiastic Nazi."

Frau Scheurer was arrested several times by the Gestapo before she was finally deported to Theresienstadt. She recalls one arrest by the Gestapo man, Heinrich Lutz. "He snarled at me, 'You must come right away!' I told him no, I must pack my things. I don't know how I had the nerve to answer him like that. I was terrified. He went away for a few minutes and came back bellowing, 'Los, Los!' (Get going). He was nasty." Tears came to her eyes as she recited.

Not long ago, Herr Lutz knocked again on Frau Scheurer's door. (They live only half a block apart. He said to her.) "My conscience hurts me. I had to come and apologize to you. Tell me that I treated you decently." Frau Scheurer said: "No you didn't treat me decently. But I forgave you long ago." Lutz trembled.

This seems a very significant incident to me. It is an indication that those persons who were powerful under Hitler are troubled by nightmares today. I doubt that many attempt to apologize like Herr Lutz - as if an apology could mend the Nazi crimes - but the past weighs heavy on them.

Frau Scheurer has another story to tell from those days; a gruesome one: "Frau Rudolf was a Jewess who had married a Christian as I did. I didn't know her very well, but I knew that her husband had divorced her after the Nürnberg Laws came out, in order to escape difficulties with the Nazis. That was like signing a death warrant for her. She became a "full Jew". The judge, who was a friend of Jews, made him pay alimony. But the Gestapo seized her in 1942 and she was gassed at Auschwitz.

"After the war, I was on a committee which examined claims of Nazi victims to see whether they were eligible for aid.

By accident, I came across a certain Herr Rudolf. It was the same man. He wanted compensation for his dead wife, whom he had divorced. Not only that, he had perjured himself. He was an old Nazi, had been in the Stahlhelm (veterans organization) and the Freikorps. After the war he joined the Communist Party. The scoundrel denied all his Nazi connections. I saw to it that he didn't get any compensation for the woman he murdered."

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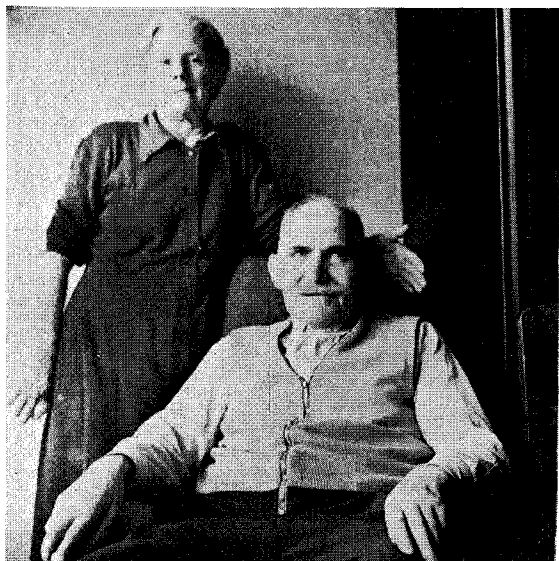
Daniel Goldschmidt comes from an ancient Hessian family. He was born 70 years ago in the village of Stockheim, not far from here. Goldschmidt came to Giessen as a tailor. But, in 1912, his interest in the stage attracted him to the newly-founded City Theatre. For the next 32 years he worked as scenery-maker there - "on the right side," as he puts it. He took time out to serve in the Archduke's 116th Infantry Regiment as a musketeer in World War I.

Then, in 1944, Goldschmidt was fired by the Nazis and put to work in a uniform factory. He was made to wear the Star of David. A year later, he, Frau Scheurer, and 10 other "mixed-marriage" Jews were nailed into a cattle car and deported to Theresienstadt.

Of course Goldschmidt had experienced earlier persecution by the Nazis. When he walked to work along the Asterweg, Hitler Youth toughs would push him off the sidewalk yelling "Jew-boy" at him.

Not long ago, this husky, red-nosed man with the bushy mustache went into an Asterweg tavern. One of those same H.J. toughs was sitting at a table. As Goldschmidt entered, the man sneered, "Ha, you're one of those they forgot to gas."

Naturally I pricked up my ears, when he told of this. Only a few weeks before, a schoolteacher in Baden, Ludwig Zind, had been sentenced to a year in jail and the loss of his position for almost the same remark. "What did you do?" I asked Goldschmidt. "I said, 'You old Nazi swine', and left the tavern," he replied. The "half-Jew" whom Zind had insulted in this manner had fought his case through several courts for 12 whole months to seek retribution.



Goldschmidt told me of another incident which occurred while he was still working for the theatre a couple years ago. A fellow worker snarled at him, "You with your Judemus (Jew slop)!" What did Goldschmidt do? "I punched him and there wasn't any more trouble." In a country where "Jew" is still a word spoken either in a pious whisper or an angry shout, I find this reaction remarkable. Ironically, when asked what should be done with the Zinds, Goldschmidt said, "They ought to hang such people."

Although reared in the Jewish faith, Goldschmidt became a convert to the Lutheran Church at his marriage. His brother, who remained a Jew, was killed in Auschwitz along with his whole family.

Since his sons counted as "half Jews" all four of Daniel Goldschmidt's boys were drafted into the Wehrmacht. As he recalls it, "They wanted to join because then they wouldn't be treated as Jews." After the French campaign, the four boys were dropped from the Wehrmacht, as were almost all soldiers of Jewish descent. Three of the Goldschmidt boys were later put in forced labor camps. The fourth, who had an "Aryan girl-friend, was sent to Auschwitz and nearly gassed. Three of the sons now live and work around Giessen. The fourth is an employee of the East Berlin Magistrate. Of his sons, Goldschmidt says, "Under Hitler they were ashamed of their Jewish ancestry. Now they are proud."

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Frau Johanna Schmidt is a pink-cheeked little old lady who snaps her eyes and her fingers when she talks. She came to Giessen in 1926 with her businessman husband. For awhile, they were members of a "Free Religious Community", but gave it up later. Since she had never officially withdrawn from the Jewish faith, she was deported to Theresienstadt. She was put to work cleaning latrines. Frau Schmidt recalls: "There was a young girl who wanted to hang herself. I told her 'we're in a struggle. They might gas us, but we've got to hold out.'"

It was curious to remark that Frau Schmidt's acid commentary on the National Socialists never touched on the racist policies or on anti-Semitism. Always, it was the "rabble" who attacked the "good citizens".

"We were esteemed burghers," she said, "and we had to put up with these vulgarities." "They threw the piano out of our house on the Kristallnacht." Or, "They put us in cattle wagons, The best people; professors, music teachers..."

Frau Schmidt doesn't think much of religion, but she does subscribe to the Allgemeine Wochenzeitung der Juden in Deutschland. The newspaper is clearly committed to the principles of Zionism, so I asked this vigorous woman what she thought of Israel.

"I'll tell you, I have a nephew in Tel Aviv, a respectable person from an educated family. He lost father, mother, and sister in Riga, (where Nazi "action groups" committed some of their most fearful crimes against Jews). He swears by his country and I have respect for him. But they will have no peace, I fear. Always war.

"I couldn't live there (Israel). This piety! I can't grasp that. I don't think Zionism is right, naming us one Volk and race. I'm staying in Germany. I went to school here. My friends are here. Despite the many insults, and humiliations, I'll die here. I'm a German, not a Jew."

Speaking of neighbors, Frau Schmidt said: "The people who looked past us then take their hats off now and make big bows.

One of them was a professor. He was in the gang too. After the war, I told him, 'You academics aren't worth spitting on either.' The ones who bow and scrape today, they had the brown shirts on then."

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The relationship between these people and their home town has certainly changed in the last decades. On the one hand, they regard Giessen as home. On the other, they can never forget what their own next-door neighbors did to them. Goldschmidt says: "They're still anti-Semitic here." Fräulein Schneider (DB - 31) senses it too: "I don't feel it's directed toward me. But I feel it." Frau Scheurer points out that many many Germans still use the phraseology of the Nazi racists without being conscious of it - "Half-Jew," "Mixed-Marriage Jew," and the like.

This latter aspect reminds me of Albert Schädlich, the synagogue janitor. He made a remark which I have often heard from well-meaning Germans: "Don't forget, the Nazis persecuted many Germans just as much as they did the Jews."

That's the error.

You hear a sentence like that and it seems to make perfectly good sense. Then you hear it four or five times and suddenly it dawns on you: The point is that Jews were Germans. Those few (an estimated 45,000) who remain are Germans - no matter what the fuzzy-thinking people who accept racial definitions of Judaism say.

The Nazis persecuted German Jews and German Christians. They did not persecute "Germans and Jews."

At the same time, these and others took pains to tell me about non-Jewish friends who risked unpleasantness to help them. The wife of a Nazi smuggled bread to the Goldschmidts. A doctor took in the Schmidts after they were driven out of their house. Frau Scheurer told of several families who kept Jewish property for refugees until after the war. However, she also told of one other type: "They were so overwhelmed by the furs, and silver, and pearls that they thought they could keep it. Ludwig Stern came back for his things and they didn't have them anymore."

One wonders what the refugee Jews who settled in foreign countries think now about Giessen and Judaism.

There is one Giessen girl now in the United States who left here after an S.A. man deliberately ran her down with his bicycle. She writes: "It's going well in America. We like it. But home is still Giessen."

Irma Katzenstein writes: "I am Israeli. That I was accidentally born in Germany and even spent my youth there doesn't interest me. Although I suffered from homesickness in the first years of emigration, today I don't even want to go back for a visit."

Blondis asked Miss Lessard what she had told the policemen to make them believe that she intended to commit suicide on the afternoon of October 29.

"Well," she said, "I told them I might as well be dead. I said that. But I had no intention of committing suicide."

Judge Seraphim asked Miss Lessard what she had been doing hanging by her fingertips outside the window.

"There was a knocking at my door," Miss Lessard answered, "and no one would tell me who it was, and I did climb out the window. I went out and there was a kind of awning or whatever you call it. I went out on that awning, and I just dropped and let myself over, and there was a snowmobile down below, and I landed on the nice padded snowmobile. My feet almost touched the snowmobile, and I dropped down without any help from my landlord. I don't think I dropped more than a couple of inches to the snowmobile. I was that close to it."

"If you were released today," Blondis asked, "would you voluntarily seek psychiatric treatment?"

"I think I would go along with Dr. Kennedy because I do have a lot of confidence in Dr. Kennedy," Miss Lessard replied.

"And you would do that voluntarily?"

"I would do that voluntarily."

On cross examination county counsel George Rice asked about the caricature of Miss Lessard as a bubble dancer. She explained that sometime between 1948 and 1950 in the town of Mosinee, Wisconsin, a former friend and school teacher named Marge Emerson (now married with the name of Wilson) had pasted a photograph of Miss Lessard's face onto a caricature of a bubble

In this regard, it seems to me that few Germans have really come to grips with the basic matter when they think about Nazis and Jews.

Another indication of the same thing, in my mind, is the extra emphasis the Bonn Government puts on its relations with Israel. Certainly the restitution payments to persecuted Jews are a just and necessary thing. But the breast-beating and propitiatory moans which the Germans perform every time they have anything to do with Israel is excruciating. One asks, is this the true path to atonement?

Twenty-five years after Hitler came to power, thirteen years after Auschwitz and Dachau, you can still find plenty of anti-Semites in Germany. Naturally. But you can also find plenty of pro-Semites. I've met both here, and I don't think either group is on the right track. It is ironic that both these tracks come to a junction at the point where they claim that Jews are "Special" people.

Not until the Germans clean up the phrases that Frau Scheurer mentions, not until the old Nazis are dead, not until pro-Semites stop expiating themselves, not until the Germans (and some Jews) stop regarding the Jews as a separate race, will the "Jewish Problem" be resolved in Germany.

David Binder
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