

Translated excerpt

Susanne Heim
Die Abschottung der Welt.
Als Juden vor verschlossenen Grenzen standen,
1933–1945

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The Sealing of the World.
When Jews Faced Closed Borders. 1933-1945

Translated by David Burnett



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“The refugee has left the land of his birth, but he has never left it behind. Even if he claims it no longer interests him.”

– Ilija Trojanow, *Nach der Flucht* [After Fleeing], 36

Paris was the first stop on philosopher Günther Anders’s flight in 1933. He described the situation of Jewish refugees there as follows: “Each of us (the exceptions are hardly worth mentioning) had to first fight for the bare necessities of life, to wit: a bed, a work permit, money, ration cards, illegal work, but especially his *existence permit* (commonly referred to as a ‘residence permit.’)” This struggle, Anders went on, basically amounted to “us being forced by the authorities, as it were, to circumvent the law, that is to say to work illegally, because without working illegally ... we would have lacked the bigger sums of money they were asking for a residence permit. They officially demanded the payment of sums it was officially prohibited to earn.”¹

Many of the refugees that form the focus of this book were in absurd situations like this. As legal emigration required countless documents, it was not uncommon for the first one to be expired by the time the last one was procured.

Not everyone experienced the makeshift nature of emigration as a loss of dignity and a challenge to their identity the way that Anders did. But for all of them it was a fundamental rupture in their lives, whether they left Germany right after Hitler’s rise to power, like Anders did, or were first disenfranchised and plundered in their homeland; whether they used the official channels of emigration or bypassed the controls of officialdom; whether they crossed the green border on their own or with the aid of escape helpers; whether, after the German invasion of Poland, they hoped their survival chances were better in the German-occupied western part of the country or in the Soviet-occupied east.

Many Jewish refugees put thousands of kilometers between them and their erstwhile homes and navigated numerous borders, often at great personal peril, before they reached safety, at least for the time being. Some spent months or even years behind barbed wire in refugee

¹ Günther Anders, *Der Emigrant* (Munich, 2021), 37f.

camps or in places of enforced residency, condemned to idleness and prevented from securing the visas, sponsorships, exit permits and other documents they needed for their onward journeys. A great many ended up in countries they never wanted to be in, where they weren't welcome, and that they often couldn't leave until the war was over.

Refugees were faced with ever-changing entry requirements and bans, with border closures, deportation and internment regulations, with bureaucratic caprice in consulates, and differing interpretations of visa requirements.

Although the Nazi state ultimately sought to drive out the Jews, their wholesale expropriation by German authorities and "Aryanization" profiteers actually impeded the emigration process. This had negative consequences on their chances of making a new start abroad as well as influencing the migration policies of sanctuary states, because refugees with no assets were not welcome anywhere. Apart from the search for suitable host countries the primary challenge of international refugee policy was how to pay for Jewish emigration. By the 1938 November Pogrom, the prospect of fleeing had become increasingly chaotic and efforts to secure an "orderly exodus" were fruitless. The start of the war completely rearranged the escape map for refugees, obstructed previously established routes while simultaneously multiplying the number of refugees and the dangers they were exposed to. In October 1941, Himmler prohibited the emigration of Jews from German-controlled areas. At almost the exact same time, the systematic deportation of Jews to ghettos and extermination camps in occupied Eastern Europe began. Fleeing had thus become a matter of life or death.

This book traces the history of mass exodus and refugee policies from 1933 to 1945, and does so from four distinct perspectives.

First the experience of fleeing from the perspective of persecuted Jews. About 80 percent of the refugees from Nazi Germany were persecuted because they were classified as Jewish according to Nazi race laws. Their experiences varied depending on when they fled as well as their transit and destination countries. Men fared differently than women, and those with money had better chances than those who were penniless when they fled. What Masha Gessen wrote about refugees in the twenty-first century was true already of the 1930s: "Class differences reproduce themselves among refugees more so than at home."² The decision to emigrate was often easier for the young than for the old. The earlier they left, the more

² Masha Gessen, *Leben mit Exil. Über Migration sprechen* (Berlin, 2020), 24.

opportunities they likely had to choose between various paths and destinations. From 1938 on, most were forced to take advantage of whatever options they had left, no matter how seemingly remote. But the boundary between emigration entailing a modicum of choice and forced migration was fluid. In the countries that Germany invaded militarily, millions of civilians fled the hostilities during the first weeks. Jews were a minority among them, but they encountered a disproportionate amount of resistance not just at border checkpoints, Nazi occupation policy having mobilized anti-Semitic sentiments and poisoned communal life in the countries they invaded, often for decades to come.

Second, the perspective of sanctuary states. Most potential host countries were still struggling with high unemployment as a result of the Great Depression. Whether refugees were mainly viewed as a burden to the labor market or a security risk, whether their “foreignness” was made into a problem or the fact that they had evaded the laws and entered the country destitute, all of this depended on the prevailing domestic policy in the host country. In the conflict between humanitarian aspirations and the insistence on state sovereignty it was the supposed national interest in a restrictive migration policy that generally won out, even in democratic states. Host countries pushed back against an impertinent Nazi state that tried to flood them with its “deplorables” while at the same time not wanting to jeopardize their relations with the economic powerhouse of Germany.

Third, the perspective of international refugee policy. At international conferences, states negotiated a common policy for dealing with refugees and their permanent resettlement. There were efforts as early as the fall of 1933, when the number of refugees was still manageable, to create international institutions to “solve” the problem. But these efforts ran up against the limits of state sovereignty. From the establishment of the League of Nations High Commissioner on Refugees in the fall of 1933 to the Évian Conference in the summer of 1938 through to the Bermuda Conference of 1943, negotiations on the international level were marked by the competition among nation-states and their efforts to keep “undesirables” away from their own borders if possible. In doing so, however, fundamental questions were raised and rules and norms were debated that effectively laid the groundwork for discussions of refugee policy after the end of World War II.

Fourth, the perspective of aid organizations. Jewish organizations advised the refugees in their home countries while preparing their emigration, sometimes financed their outward journey, and offered legal, material and moral support in the states granting them asylum. On

the international stage as well they acted as independent and sometimes quite influential, albeit underappreciated actors. They understood themselves both as advocates of refugees and as mediators between them and state institutions. This often put them in an awkward position. Jewish organizations in Germany initially had to commit themselves to expediting the emigration of Jews. Once the ban on emigration was put in place, however, they were obliged to act as accomplices in the process of deportation. In the sanctuary states, these organizations generally had an interest in successfully integrating these new arrivals and not making waves in the process – though sometimes they had an interest in making sure that not too many of them stayed in the country permanently. Internationally, it was mainly the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee – the Joint, for short – and HICEM, with their years of experience, that acted as philanthropic organizations, whereas the World Jewish Congress primarily saw itself as a political lobby group for Jews. The Jewish Agency for Palestine pursued the objective of establishing a Jewish polity in Palestine when it came to supporting Jews driven out of German-controlled territories. Organizations like the Joint and HICEM offered a wide range of assistance to emigrants, from purchasing the tickets to leave their home countries to the establishment of Jewish settlements abroad, and yet they were not admitted as negotiating partners at international conferences on refugee policy.

The number of European civilians forced to flee during World War II is estimated at around 40 million.³ The Jews among them were in an especially precarious situation as they didn't have a state that championed their interests. By the time they escaped, Jewish refugees – much like those from Africa and the Middle East seeking asylum in Europe nowadays – were unwelcome in most countries, if only because they were impoverished. They were perceived as foreign, even as downright suspicious, and in any case were felt to be a burden to the states taking them in. Only in hindsight is it widely acknowledged that they were an especially successful migrant community, contributing to the economic and social development of the receiving countries. The refugee helpers of yore are now honored as courageous heroes whereas the sinking of refugee ships is considered an instance of the state having failed if not a consequence of brutal cynicism. How will future historians judge today's migration policies?

³ Philipp Ther, *Die Außenseiter. Flucht, Flüchtlinge und Integration im modernen Europa* (Berlin, 2017), 104.

“Germany has to be a country without a future for them”

Stay or go?

On April 5, 1933, four days after the nationwide boycott against Jewish businesses in Germany, law student Heinrich Marx, writing in his diary, described the daily briefings he and his friends held every evening: “There’s a lively back and forth about whether to stay or go. As for me, I’ve always taken the view that it’s better to grin and bear it here in Berlin . . . leaving only makes sense if you’re able to burn all your bridges behind you, if you have a reasonable prospect of starting a new life abroad, without ever having to come back to this country [under] this regime.”¹

Most of the ca. 500,000 German Jews thought and felt the same in the spring of 1933.² The boycott of April 1 was a clear signal that the new government had declared a war on the Jews. It had rocked the Jewish community and led to widespread discussion of the sort described by Marx. Just a few days later, the Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service resulted in Social Democrats, Communists and many Jews losing their jobs in the civil service sector. But burning all their bridges behind them was inconceivable for most of them. There was simply too much uncertainty about whether they could keep their heads above water in exile, not to mention their concerns about leaving loved ones behind. For many of them their ties to Germany were more important than their Jewishness. Moreover, their experience of frequent changes of government in the preceding years only strengthened their belief that Nazi rule would likely be short-lived. It was only a matter of time, however, until Heinrich Marx would have no choice but to leave. He had had to terminate his law studies because he was Jewish, and subsequently began an apprenticeship at Arnhold Brothers, a private Jewish banking house. In the summer of 1934 he was detained for several months in Lichtenburg concentration camp for allegedly sharing a critical newspaper article. Finally, in

¹ Heinrich Marx, *Tagebuch II, 9. 3. 1933 bis November 1934*, entry from April 5, 1933, DEA, EB 96 /160, Estate of Henry Marx, reprinted in *VEJ*, vol. 1, 26.

² Konrad Kwiet, “Gehen oder bleiben? Die deutschen Juden am Wendepunkt,” ed. Walter Pehle, *Der Judenpogrom 1938. Von der «Reichskristallnacht» zum Völkermord* (Frankfurt am Main, 1988), 132–145.

1937, he emigrated to the United States, where he began a career as a journalist and edited the *New Yorker Staats-Zeitung* until 1969.

Gerhart Riegner, on the other hand, belonged to those who left their homeland early on, in 1933. A politically engaged student in the Weimar Republic, he witnessed Nazi classmates cudgel Jewish students and professors. If you didn't want to be beaten up you had to jump out the window, recalled Riegner. In early 1933 he was a junior lawyer at the Berlin Supreme Court, but he lost his job on the day of the April boycott – as did his older sister, who worked as a probationary teacher in Frankfurt am Main. His father, a lawyer, was kicked out of the bar association, while his younger sister was expelled from elementary school. “In other words, the life of four people in a five-member family was turned completely upside down ... in the course of a single day.”³ It immediately became clear to him, Riegner said in an interview, that a dignified life for Jews in Germany was no longer possible. And yet many of his friends and acquaintances thought he was making a hasty decision by leaving the country as quickly as possible.⁴

[photo]

In the face of increasing anti-Semitic pressure, Jews began to consider emigrating to countries they knew almost nothing about, at best which continent they were located in.

In 1933, about 60,000 Jews left Germany. About 23,000 of them returned just weeks or months later, assuming that things had calmed down or not having seen any possibility of getting a foothold abroad. From 1934 to 1937 between 21,000 and 25,000 people considered Jewish under Nazi race laws – regardless of their self-identity – left Germany each year. In 1938, what had previously been a reasonably predictable emigration process morphed into a refugee movement. The Anschluss of Austria, the annexation of the Sudetenland by Nazi Germany in line with the Munich Agreement in September, and finally the November

³ Interview with Gerhart Riegner, July 21, 1997.

⁴ Gerhart M. Riegner, *Niemals verzweifeln. Sechzig Jahre für das jüdische Volk und die Menschenrechte* (Gerlingen, 2001), 38–41.

Pogrom made clear to people who were initially hesitant or had rejected the notion of emigration that their lives were no longer safe in Germany.⁵

The fact that the anti-Jewish boycott was officially lifted after just one day seemed to prove those people right who believed things wouldn't get that bad. Only gradually did ever more Jewish businesses notice the creeping effects of the boycott and that regular customers were staying away. Jewish organizations and leaders of the Jewish communities called upon their members to remain confident and take a stand against discrimination. The Jewish community in Berlin demanded that the city council repeal regulations that disadvantaged Jewish businesses in the awarding of contracts and that withdrew municipal support from community-run social institutions such as soup kitchens and preschools.⁶ There were also instances of newspapers expressing cautious criticisms of these anti-Jewish measures or of non-Jews standing up for their Jewish colleagues, as did patent attorney Richard Wirth, who protested in April 1933 that Jewish lawyers were being disbarred and that Christian colleagues were taking over their law firms.⁷ The Centralverein deutscher Staatsbürger jüdischen Glaubens⁸ (Central Association of German Citizens of Jewish Faith) and the Reichsvertretung der Juden⁹ (Reich Representation of German Jews) tried despite the many discriminatory regulations to negotiate a tolerable status quo with the regime. Jewish attorneys endeavored to exhaust all legal options for defending the position of German Jewry. And at times they even succeeded in getting a Jew released from police custody, forcing the reinstatement of Jewish employees who had been dismissed or at least securing them some compensation.

⁵ Herbert Strauss, "Jewish Emigration from Germany: Nazi Policies and Jewish Responses," *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book*, XXV (1980), 326. The numbers of emigrants and/or refugees are strictly estimates, as only those who emigrated with the help of aid organizations were registered. If not indicated otherwise, the numbers used here are from Herbert Strauss. In 1938 about 40,000 Jews managed to leave the country, followed by another 78,000 in 1939. With the outbreak of the war, however, fewer and fewer people succeeded in finding refuge elsewhere – in 1940 only 15,000. By the time emigration from Germany was prohibited in October 1941, another 8,000 people had managed to flee the country.

⁶ Der Vorstand der Jüdischen Gemeinde Berlin, gez. Stahl, an den Staatskommissar z.b.V. Lippert, May 29, 1933, reprinted in *VEJ*, vol. 1 /47.

⁷ Richard Wirth an verschiedene Patentanwälte sowie an Reichsaußenminister Konstantin von Neurath, April 3, 1933, reprinted in *VEJ*, vol. 1 /24.

⁸ The members of the Centralverein (CV) understood themselves as Germans *and* Jews, and were generally not willing to abandon this self-conception even after the Nazis came to power.

⁹ The Reichsvertretung was founded in September 1933 as a tent for various Jewish organizations and communities, including the Centralverein, the Hilfsverein der deutschen Juden (Aid Association of German Jews), the Zionistische Vereinigung für Deutschland (Zionist Federation of Germany) and the Jüdischer Frauenbund (League of Jewish Women). On the history of the Reichsvertretung, see Otto Dov Kulka, ed., *Deutsches Judentum unter dem Nationalsozialismus*, vol. 1, *Jerusalem* (Tübingen, 1997), 10–35.

In the early stages of Nazi rule, emigration was not a priority for Jewish organizations, whether these were Zionist, liberal, German nationalist or Orthodox. Their goal was “redeployment,” i.e., retraining Jews for other professions. Instead of becoming doctors, lawyers, businessmen or civil servants – professions Jews were increasingly being excluded from – young people were encouraged to take up vocational or agricultural training. Emigration seemed like backing down in the face of anti-Semitism, giving up their hard-won standing as German Jews. Even if their retraining entailed a loss of status, as was generally perceived to be the case, this was still better than having to leave the country on account of being Jewish. Only gradually did this conviction begin to waver. In January 1934 the Reichsvertretung presented a memorandum to the government. It was no secret, the memorandum went, “that the previous occupational structure of German Jews, their preponderance in academic professions and in big cities, was unhealthy,” which is why they were making a concerted effort to change this. The organization was forthright in its articulation of what they expected from the government: to support these redeployment efforts and prevent the exclusion of Jewish youth from training in other lines of work.¹⁰ But even then “many Jewish people will have to emigrate under the pressures of the current situation.” Their emigration, if unavoidable, should at least be well prepared so as not to create a panic and have people fleeing precipitously.

A critical factor in the decision to emigrate was often economic pressures: businessmen no longer got contracts, customers avoided Jewish shops, occupational bans – as in the case of Riegner – destroyed the livelihood of entire families. But also growing social exclusion played a role in the decision to leave the country behind. The more family members, friends and acquaintances emigrated, the more those who stayed behind were harassed by the authorities and subject to the treacheries of anti-Semitic neighbors in surroundings that no longer felt like home to them. Family or professional contacts in potential host countries increased the likelihood of emigrating.

In the countryside and in smaller towns circumstances often quickly turned sour, which prompted many to seek refuge in the anonymity of the big city. From the mid-1930s on this resulted in the disappearance of many rural Jewish communities. Gertrude Kahn, for example, lived with her family in the Hessian village of Eich. Starting in 1933 she was teased and harassed by her schoolmates. Non-Jewish friends suddenly kept their distance from her.

¹⁰ Memorandum der Reichsvertretung der Juden, January 1934, reprinted in *VEJ*, vol. 1 / 99.

Her father was a cattle dealer, her mother ran the household according to Orthodox Jewish customs. Needless to say, they regularly attended synagogue services. As a cattle trader Yosef Kahn had been a well-respected independent merchant in the area who earned a decent living. But once the political situation had changed his customers betrayed and denounced him. What's more, two of his brothers were temporarily detained in concentration camps. Like most of the other Jewish families in Eich, the Kahns left what to them had become an increasingly hostile place, initially moving to Frankfurt.¹¹ Gertrude's mother was able to secure her son, Ernst, an apprenticeship with a Jewish baker, while arranging for her fifteen-year-old daughter to train as a seamstress. A few months later the Kahns emigrated to the United States, where both Gertrude and Ernst were able to continue their training. Compared to many others who put off the decision to emigrate, the Kahns had it relatively easy. The family was able to stay together, emigrating along with a sister of the mother and her family. Relatives in Louisiana had secured an affidavit – the financial guarantee required for immigration to the United States – for the entire family and even paid the rent for the Kahns' first apartment in the New York City borough of Queens. For Yosef Kahn, however, who was 53-years-old at the time, being an immigrant was a drastic social downgrade. Arriving at Ellis Island, he barely escaped being sent back for health reasons. Having finally made it to New York, he first worked as a dishwasher until, in 1943, he found a job as an elevator operator. Even with fourteen-hour shifts and frequent nightwork the pay was lousy. The family mostly lived off the income of their two children.¹²

Denunciation, blackmail, physical violence or the threat of physical violence made life a living hell for many German Jews, particularly in small villages and towns where everyone knew them. Doctors were anonymously reported to the police for supposedly carrying out illegal abortions. Jewish businessmen could no longer collect outstanding debts since their non-Jewish customers claimed they were being cheated by “the Jew” and threatened to notify the police. In some places Jews were beaten up or intimidated by storm troopers,¹³ and did not always survive these attacks. Jewish lawyers representing the aggrieved in cases brought against Nazis were the frequent target of these assaults in the spring of 1933, and were often

¹¹ On the situation of rural Jews in Hesse, see Monika Kingreen, “Zuflucht in Frankfurt. Zuzug hessischer Landjuden und städtische antijüdische Politik,” in idem., ed., *Nach der Kristallnacht. Jüdisches Leben und anti jüdische Politik in Frankfurt am Main 1938–1945* (Frankfurt am Main, 1999), 119–155.

¹² Interview with Gertrude Halberstadt, née Kahn, February 28, 2022. Interview conducted by the Shoah Foundation with Ernst Kahn. My thanks go out to Sanford Jacoby for the information he provided about the Jews of Eich in general and his family in particular.

¹³ Michael Wildt, ed., *Volksgemeinschaft als Selbstermächtigung. Gewalt gegen Juden in der deutschen Provinz 1919 bis 1939* (Hamburg, 2007), 160–172.

severely maltreated while in “protective custody,” sometimes even murdered.¹⁴ Kassel lawyer Max Plaut, who represented many opponents of the Nazis during the Weimar Republic, often bumped heads with another Kassel lawyer, Roland Freisler, who subsequently served as presiding judge of the Volksgerichtshof, or People’s Court. On March 24, 1933, twenty storm troopers kidnapped Plaut, a hated figure in Nazi circles, and beat him half to death. He died of his wounds one week later.¹⁵

Those still able to flee after attacks like these usually didn’t have time to apply for a passport or visa or to deal with bureaucratic formalities. This frequently created problems with the authorities in host countries as well as with German diplomatic missions abroad. The latter could refuse to issue a passport or force an applicant to return to Germany. The Committee for Jewish Refugees in Amsterdam received numerous reports in the summer of 1933 of people who had fled to the Netherlands to escape an impending arrest after being denounced to the police or SA by former coworkers or neighbors. From there they tried, usually unsuccessfully, to apply for a passport at the German Embassy.¹⁶

¹⁴ Reinhard Weber, *Das Schicksal der jüdischen Rechtsanwälte in Bayern nach 1933* (Munich, 2006), 39–55.

¹⁵ Beate Meyer, “Protected or Persecuted? Preliminary Findings on Foreign Jews in Nazi Germany,” in Natalia Aleksion and Hana Kubátová (eds.), *Places, Spaces, and Voids in the Holocaust* (Göttingen, 2021), 87–114, 97.

¹⁶ Berichte aus Deutschland geflohener Juden an das Komitee für jüdische Flüchtlinge in Amsterdam, YVA, O.2 / 832 and O.2 / 834.