

## A Visit To Germany, Austria and Poland in 1939

### Report of Mitzman, Member of a British Jewish Organization

Date: June 1939 Author: Mr. M. Mitzman Recorded by: The Author, secretary of the Women's Appeal Committee of the Central British Fund reports on his impressions during a visit to Germany Austria and Poland in 1939.

He was particularly interested in the work of the Youth Aliyah and the measures taken by other Jewish bodies to prepare the emigration of young people to Palestine. He mentions the Youth Aliyah camp at Gut Winkel (Germany) with over 200 children, the numerous workshops for instruction in handicraft in Vienna, the preparatory camps at Mossbrunn and near the Semmering (Austria) and the agricultural training establishments in Poland. The author states that in Poland even then many Jewish shops were boycotted and that the Jewish population there was, on the whole, very poor.

Berlin: One of the first sights to be seen on arriving at the Bahnhof Zoo is the burnt out Synagogue on Fasanenstrasse. It was horrible to see the interior of the synagogue with the ark exposed to the view of the casual passer-by, the rafters bare and the windows smashed - and workmen in the process of demolishing the building. This is common all over Germany, and incidentally the Jews have to pay the cost of the demolition. This being my third visit in recent years to Berlin I was quite prepared to see the words " Juden Unerwünscht " [Jews unwanted] and " Juden Verboten" [forbidden to Jews], but it did give one a very horrible feeling when we saw Kempinski's (one of Berlin's famous hotels) big restaurant in the Kurfuerstendamm and were shown a very neat notice in a glass case stating "dogs may only be brought into the restaurant on leashes" and immediately below "Jews forbidden to enter here". The sign "Member of the Reichspartei " [party] is displayed in every window, and also there is a notice in many windows "Jews not desired here". I understand that our friends in Berlin had difficulty in finding a hotel for us, but they reserved a room at the Hotel Am Zoo, which did not have a notice

on the doors as we entered "Jews forbidden"; this was, however, displayed in the restaurant. The offices of Youth Aliyah are now in the building of the Palestina-amt [Palestine Office], and we were taken around the building and shown seals that had been placed by the Gestapo on many of the doors in September last; in many of these rooms were safes where money had been placed, but they were not allowed to enter these rooms, and did not know for how long these seals would have to remain unbroken....it is quite an uncanny feeling to see these doors sealed with paper stamped with the Swastika. We went through all the offices of the Youth Aliyah organisation, where they keep an elaborate card index system of each child, and attended the sittings where the parents come for advice. As many as a hundred applications a day are received from parents who wish their children to go to Palestine through Youth Aliyah. The questionnaires which have to be completed have been designed that the parents will have the least possible difficulty with the Gestapo, and are really remarkable in the concise manner in which the multitude of details and information are collected... We were taken into the office of what is called the Sonder - or special Aliyah; this is an illegal method of getting people to Palestine; it is connived at by the Gestapo who are anxious to get the Jews out, although they know there will be difficulty in getting these people into other countries. They harass and worry the officials to get as many people out as possible, and it is with the knowledge of the Gestapo who provide these permits that Jews are taken by illegal methods to other countries, which they then find very difficult to enter.... We visited the offices of the Gemeinde (community) who are housed in a very big building wherein there are many departments; one floor is a department for people who wish to immigrate; they are interviewed in separate offices, each one alone, and are advised how to set about immigration. In another department help is given to people in filling in the questionnaire provided by the Gestapo; these amount to some 15 to 20 pages; they have to be filled in triplicate; exact details have to be given of every article that the person proposes to take with him. Stipulations are made as to the number of articles that can be taken. I wanted to bring a set of these forms away with me, but they would on no account permit this, as if these forms were found on me it would mean severe punishment. It may be of

interest to detail the articles allowed to be taken for a baby of six months old - the following are the only things which the Gestapo allowed the parents to take: 6 napkins 1 knife 1 fork 1 spoon 1 feeding bottle 2 dresses In the case of a girl we noticed she was allowed to take a nail file, a pair of tweezers, a pair of scissors and so on. I mention these two cases in order to show how meticulous these people have to be in filling in their forms; they could not possibly do it without the experienced assistance of the officials. There is of course a form to be filled in with regard to the financial position; this is based on the fortune of the individual in 1935 and today. The form we saw was that of a woman who possessed in 1935, 60,000 RM; this had dwindled in 1939 to 40,000. Her "flight" tax was assessed in every case on the money she possessed in 1935, and not in 1939. 20% of her fortune in 1936 had to be paid to the Gestapo, and she had also the tax imposed by the Gestapo on the Jewish community amounting to 3%. When all these documents are completed they are taken to the Zentralstelle [Central Office], which is the offices of the Gestapo, for examination. At the Gestapo offices there are a large number of departments for dealing with the various details. Three Jewish officials, representatives of the Jewish community, work in this building, and to these the documents are first taken. Then they go through every department until at last they reach the passport department of the Gestapo., and if everything is in order a passport is then issued. All these negotiations take months before they are finally completed. There are, however, still a great many formalities to be gone through. The Gestapo visits the house of the immigrant, and examines every article that it is intended to take abroad. He then assesses what he thinks is the value of these articles, and an amount equivalent to the value has to be paid in taxes. In September when the synagogues were burnt down all the jewels, silver and even in many cases the books of the Jewish community were confiscated, so that they are left today without even cutlery. In some cases where people had a good library the choicest works were taken. We all know from the papers that the Jews have been ordered to leave their apartments in houses which are owned by Aryans, and to move into Jewish quarters; this has created dreadful hardships for people who have been used to comfortable homes, and now

have to live in one room. Up till now a number of families have been living together in one flat; but here again the Gestapo objects and has stipulated that only a certain number of people may live in one flat; how the others are to live does not concern the Gestapo. The fact that Jews are not allowed to carry on business of any nature is known to all, but what this actually means, cannot I think be visualized - one must see it for oneself. I visited some people - relatives of refugees now in this country and found three or four men and women sitting round a table; This was in the middle of the day, and I was very puzzled, and said surely if you have a Jewish shop or deal exclusively with Jews, you are allowed to do a certain amount of trading, and they told me they were not, and they just sat there day after day, week in, week out, afraid to go out into the streets, dreading to hear a ring at the bell; just sitting there and eating up their little bit of money; they had no hope of anyone guaranteeing for them to come to this country, and seemed to have no chance of escaping. This enforced idleness with its awful demoralising effect is terrible. I do not think that we here quite understand what it means when Jews are not allowed to go into the parks, not to go into restaurants, not to go into hotels, not to be allowed sleepers on trains or in the dining cars on trains. It is a fact that when people find they really need some fresh air and to get away from the streets they go with their children to the Jewish cemeteries - the cemetery being the only place to which they are allowed to go. In many parks there are big yellow notices stating that Jews may enter, but may only sit on a yellow bench marked with a large "J", and naturally people do not wish to make themselves conspicuous and they therefore do not go to these parks. We did not see much of the scarcity of food, as this is not apparent to the casual visitor; we did eat at the Eden Restaurant where there was no sign that Jews were forbidden. It was probably in another part of the hotel. The bread we had was very dark gray - worse than the bread here during the war, the butter was 80% margarine and very yellow, and the coffee was simply undrinkable - and of course no cream to be had anywhere, and this is in an hotel which is much frequented by foreigners. We went to the Youth Aliyah camp at Gut Winkel, which I had visited some years ago; it has grown tremendously, and there are now over 200 children in this camp; they are housed in barracks which the

community bought from the Olympic Stadium after the Olympic Games last year.... Breslau: on the way to Vienna I spent a day at Breslau, where the state of affairs is particularly bad, as there are many Poles in staatenlos [Stateless]. Here we had the experience of not being allowed at all into any decent hotel because we were Jews; our friends in Breslau tried to reserve a room in better hotels but were asked in every case whether it was for Aryans or non-Aryans; when told we were English the clerk insisted on knowing whether we were Jews and were not interested in the nationality, and accommodation was refused. Eventually after great difficulty accommodation was found for us in a tenth rate place where the proprietor was a Jew and his wife was not, and she was allowed to run the business. In Breslau, apart from the community we visited the mother of a refugee living now in England. From her we obtained some idea of living conditions there. She herself had been very wealthy and had had a beautiful home. The apartment house in which she had her flat belonged to her, but there were three vacant flats; she was not allowed to advertise these or to take Aryans, and Jews could not afford to pay the rent. She was continually under pressure to do all sorts of unnecessary repairs and alterations, which were insisted upon by her Aryan caretaker, and which if she refused to carry out she would be arrested. The community itself is absolutely poverty stricken; visiting the communal building was like going to the offices of the Jewish Board of Guardians here, except that there were hundreds of people there - we were run after in the streets by people simply begging us to take their children away, and the leaders of the community there implored us to do all we possibly could to get their children out. The children of the Staatenlos were being arrested daily in the streets and boys of 13 and 14 being sent over the frontier. I cannot describe the terror in people's faces and their absolute despair at not knowing where to go and to whom to turn. We were taken to the Jewish school where they were having some sort of celebration and a visitor from Berlin was speaking to the children; afterwards they sang songs in Hebrew, but were very careful to keep the windows closed in order that passers-by should not hear. We were also shown the synagogue in Breslau, which was one of the oldest in Germany; it was absolutely gutted and what remained was being pulled down. We were

asked by the leaders of the community there to send representatives of the Jewish community here to stay there for a while and to see with their own eyes the conditions under which they have to live. Vienna: In my opinion the conditions in Vienna are much worse than in the old Reich. Here were whole streets of shops closed with notices up "to let". They had not had time to allow these to be taken over by non-Aryans, but had just been closed down street upon street. In Leopoldstadt, which was a flourishing part of the town, we saw nothing but shuttered shops, and it looked like going through the City on a bank holiday. Streets that had been blocked with traffic were now quite empty, and it looked to us just like a dead city. Over all the former Jewish shops we could still see the names in German and in very large letters in Hebrew, which the Jews had been compelled to put up at their own expense. The offices of the Youth Aliyah are now in the building of the Palestina-amt, with also houses the WIZO. They were all thronged with people waiting for help and advice. Here, too, the work is carried on by young people, and as a matter of fact these young people seem to have no homes at all - they have a bed put up in the office for sleeping. The Youth Aliyah people in Vienna have organized an excellent curriculum for their children. They have opened workshops all over Vienna where the boys and girls receive instruction in all forms of handicrafts, such as smithy, locksmiths work, carpenters shops, church and hospital work, bed making and so on, and the work has been based not only on giving them a through training in all these handicrafts, but also in order to teach them how to hold tools, how to put in an electrical circuit, how to solder, and so on, so that when they reach Palestine, they would have some experience in handling tools and doing all the various odd jobs required in a settlement. We called on Mrs. Loewenherz, the head of the WIZO and also on the head of the Kultusgemeinde (community), who all told us the same story. There are 8,000 children in Austria who must be brought out; thousands of them are Staatenlos (stateless), and are in daily peril of being arrested and sent across the border; this actually happened to ten children whilst we were in Vienna.... After spending a pleasant day in the country we returned to Vienna, and when we came into the office a great change came over the people who had accompanied us and we could not understand the

reason; I asked what was wrong and they said they had not wished to tell us, but there was a great meeting of the Nazi party taking place that evening which was being addressed by the Gauleiter of Vienna, and always after such meetings some new blow fell upon the Jews. They said it was dangerous for Jews to be out in the streets that night, and it would be best for us to go back to our hotel. I had been anxious during my stay in Vienna to visit the mother of a refugee girl who came to see me in London and for whom we had obtained permission to come to this country. The father had since been arrested. Our friends in Vienna absolutely refused to allow us to go to see this woman, and they said it was very dangerous for us to go to that district and we would certainly be followed.... The Jewish population of Vienna was 180,000; today it is 80,000, and of this 80,000, 60% are receiving relief. We saw people going to the special kitchens from all directions, where they received food for the day, and in the Krugerheim some 1600 meals are served a day to children. They can only give them one meal a day, and sometimes this is the only meal that they get. We had our lunch there and it was very good food. In another part of Vienna there are gardens and allotments where the children and adults learn agricultural work. Here again the poverty of the Jewish community is so great they can only afford the fares in one direction, and the children have to walk back - a distance of something like five miles. Of the whole Jewish community of Vienna only 3000 people are in employment, and these are nurses, doctors, etc., at the Jewish hospitals, teachers at the Jewish schools, officials of the various communal offices, etc.... We were also told that Jews are not allowed to go to the markets in order to buy food until about 11 a.m. but as the markets are open about 6 in the morning, by the time the Jewish people may get there, the best of everything is gone and the Jews have to be content with what is left.

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