

From the Testimony of Benno Cohn about His Meeting With Eichmann, March 1939

The representatives of German Jewry were called to the office of the Gestapo at Prinz Albrecht street sometime beginning of March 1939... Present on the Jewish side were: Paul Eppstein and (probably) Arthur Lilienthal as representatives of the Reichsvertretung, Heinrich Stahl and Philipp Koczower of the Jewish Community in Berlin and myself representing the Palestine Office (Palaestinaamt)... Facing us were Eichmann in civilian clothes and another Gestapo man in the uniform of an Untergruppenfuehrer ... The meeting began with a strong attack by Eichmann on the representatives of German Jewry. He had a file with newspaper items from abroad, describing Eichmann as a bloodhound who wants to kill the Jews. He read us articles from the Paris Tageblatt and asked us if this were true. He said the information must have come from us...

Then he changed the subject: 'you went to Vienna. You were strictly forbidden to contact Austrian Jews. You acted against our explicit order. You have had meetings with the Austrian Jews although this was not allowed.' Stahl or Eppstein said: 'It is a grotesque situation. Our brothers over there are being persecuted by you and we are not allowed to even talk to them. This goes far beyond what we can bear. We did not go to them. They came to us to hear from us, because we had been in the same situation several years before.' Eichmann said it was strictly forbidden. If this happens again, you will get into "concert" camp.

Now it was Heinrich Stahl's turn to attack. As head of the Jewish Community in Berlin, there was great political strife between us during the years 1933 and 1938. He was somewhat primitive in his political thinking, but certainly a man of character. He said: We are all for emigration. But you yourself, in your actions, are destroying the course of emigration. By expelling masses of people across the border you render emigration into neighboring countries impossible. Neighboring countries now refuse to issue us visas.' After this

criticism Eichmann yelled: you disgusting creature, you old sack of shit; you probably were not in a "concert" camp lately; what do you think you are doing?' Stahl became pale and fell silent.

Then Paul Eppstein stood up and said: 'The gentlemen sitting here are representatives of German Jewry, not of the Gestapo; they regard themselves as chosen by German Jewry and not as those who are to execute the Gestapo program; you, gentlemen, are at a historical crossroads for the German people; our people too are at a historical moment, even though it is a tragic one. We have to answer to our people; if you chose to speak to us in that way, we cannot work together. You can send us to a camp if you wish; you can do whatever you want with us; but as long as we are free, you have to respect our human dignity and treat us accordingly'. This speech must have impressed the other Nazi deeply. But Eichmann screamed: it is we who will decide what will happen after these outrageous words. Get out. Wait outside.'

We waited outside the office for half an hour.

... After 30 minutes, we were called back. Nothing more was said about the incident. The other Nazi must have talked some sense into Eichmann. Now the only subject on the agenda was the creation of the Central Office for Emigration. They said: we have decided to establish this organization as of Monday (the meeting took place on a Thursday). The office will be at 16 Kurfuersten street ... You have to submit a certain quota of Jews every week for preparation for their emigration. We will notify you every Wednesday how many Jews you have to forward for emigration the following week. Should you not supply the quota, the harshest measures will be used against you. You must report by 8 a.m. tomorrow, and notify us as to the number of Jews for the following week. By tomorrow you must inform us of the number for next Monday.'

We were in deep silence. We did not expect this to be so imminent.

I said: 'I am responsible for emigration to Palestine. We are very much interested in large scale emigration to Palestine, but the British Mandate Government is creating obstacles for us. We cannot guarantee any numbers of emigrants.' Answer: You have to guarantee.' I: 'We expect the Jews to be treated with respect by this office.' Eichmann yelled: 'this is the spreading of horror propaganda. It must be you who were spreading horror stories about us abroad. Everything is to be done tomorrow morning.'

Following this meeting, we met that evening in a private apartment. It was clear to us that we had to co-operate. The demand for emigration was enormous. Would-be emigrants had to run around in different offices. It was a terrible ordeal, as all those offices were crowded and over-burdened. The concentration of all those stations in one place would be practical.

We spoke on the phone with Otto Hirsch, director of the Reichsvertretung of German Jews, using routine code words. Decision: Eppstein will go to Prinz Albrecht street tomorrow morning and declare that we are interested in the creation of the Central Office for Emigration, and wish for a normalisation of the emigration process. We understand that the expulsions across the border will be brought to a halt. We cannot guarantee any numbers, and reiterate that we are working solely on behalf of the Jewish side.

These decisions were reached late at night. A written declaration was drafted and submitted the following day to the leading Nazi. We knew there was a new world war in store and feared the worst for the Jews. Emigration was rescue.

Eppstein was received the following day not by Eichmann, but by the other Nazi. He read the declaration to him. The man listened without making any comment.

Source: Yad Vashem Archive 0.1/215

