

From the Testimony of Hillel Shechter about Jewish Life in Leipzig During the 1930's

...The boycott started in 1933.... Leipzig was a centre for furs. There were three centres in the world: Paris, London and in those years also Leipzig. Almost the whole sale and production of furs, the sewing of fur coats for ladies etc, were mostly in Jewish hands... Most of the selling was done by Jews of Polish origin... The goods were of good quality, the service was good and the gentiles loved buying there. [This was] until the Nazis came and it became influenced by politics. They put up vigils in front of those shops, with signs. There were also many publications of non-Jews who went shopping. At the beginning they mentioned mainly Germans who had a public position.... When they caught people in the public service, or not them but their wives, they would publicize the names. Generally speaking, the boycott intensified and the result, of course, was a very troublesome atmosphere. In general I would like to say that we suffered already at the beginning of the 30's, not only from 1933, but even earlier. We suffered a lot. At least I personally suffered from a lack of feeling of security when I was among non-Jews....

Q: These years and the boycott on Jewish businesses, how - if at all - did it effect the economic situation of your family?

A: It had a very serious effect. My father's ability to make a living gradually diminished, as well as that of all of the people like him. They hesitated to go out to the smaller towns because of the Antisemitism, which was becoming active. My older sister started to work after she finished her studies and we lived off her pay. We were also helped by relatives whose situation was a little better than ours. They were independent and their situation was better than ours... I started going to high school. Antisemitism increased and I simply could not go on, so I switched to the Jewish high school - the Carlebach School. There was another reason: the tuition at the high school was very high and my parents, due to their deteriorating economic situation, could not afford to pay the high school any longer. This was the economic reason, but it was not the main reason. The main reason was the persecution. At the

Carlebach School, the atmosphere was totally different.... First, the school also taught Jewish studies. The general studies were taught by non-Jewish teachers who did not hide their Nazi party affiliation. I remember a biology teacher who even came in uniform.

Q: To the Jewish School?

A: Yes, he had a rank in the Hitler Youth, and there were days when he would come in his Hitler Youth uniform... There were some more non-Jewish teachers who did not come in uniform, but they did not hide their loyalty to the Nazi party and would express it during the lessons. They did not use blatant anti-Jewish expressions.... In addition to my studies at school, I had a private teacher for Jewish studies who helped me bridge the gap because I had been in a non-Jewish school. The school, especially the teachers, some of whom were rabbis, gave us strong support and encouragement to continue life normally as far as possible, and to maintain some of the joys of being youngsters. Our adolescence was of course not like that of normal kids. The school was one factor, and the other strong factor was the youth movement.... I was a member of the Young Maccabee, a Zionist youth movement that was based on morality, tradition, allegiance to Judaism and the Zionist Ideal. These were three very strong elements that strengthened us in our confrontation with the general atmosphere that became more and more burdensome. We went on trips, according to the instructions of the Ministry of Interior that told us what we could and could not do. The Movement's activity took place in a clubhouse that was shared by all the [Jewish] youth movements of Leipzig. There were six such youth movements. I don't remember until what year, I think until 1936, we could go to the cinema, but we almost never went. There was quite a large park in our area, and we would take walks there with our families on Saturdays. We were not allowed to use the park benches.... This went on until 1938. The radical change came in 1938. Until 1938 we could mingle in the large crowds. We learned to keep a distance. I had the advantage that I did not look Jewish. We were warned not to walk around with a yarmulke , and if one wanted to cover one's head, to wear a hat. Not to provoke the gentiles in any way... I remember we used to go on trips with the youth movement.... One such trip was to the south of

Germany. We stayed with a farmer in a small village, sleeping in his barn. He did not know that we were Jewish. We only told him we were Jewish when we left. He then told us that had he known we were Jewish he would not have taken us. But he admitted that this was the first time he had seen Jews. He only knew Jews from the media, the picture of the distorted Jewish face of the Stuermer or the boycott signs that presented the Jew in an extremely distorted way so as to cause revulsion within the population. We also went on a trip in 1935 to Czechoslovakia, the Sudeten region. I bring this as an example for the fact that in the early 30's we could still live rather normally. One had to be careful, of course, not to create difficulties, not to provoke, but it was possible...

Q: You said all this changed in 1938. Did this happen during the Kristallnacht or even before?

A: It changed in 1938. There were two important dates...the expulsion of the Polish Jews and 10 November. 1938 was significant not only because of the severity of those two events. Until 1938 one could somehow manage, but as of October 1938, our distress became extreme.

Q: Economically speaking?

A: Both economically and mentally. The second thing was that we understood that the time had come. We had been a family with a strong Zionist awareness.... My sister left for Palestine in 1936. We were members of the Zionist youth movements.... My mother's family believed that one could remain in Germany, that the Nazi regime was temporary and would go away and everything would return to normal. This feeling did not leave them until the very end, and they paid the full price. The [29th] of October was a decisive date and represented a turning point in communal life. The Jews with Polish citizenship were the first victims.

Q: Do you remember that day?

A: Yes, I remember it well. In the early hours of the morning we heard unusual noises in the street. We saw whole families accompanied by police and SA with parcels in their hands marching to the railway station. Our house was close to the railway station. We didn't know what had happened and my father went out to investigate. He returned a short while later and said: we

have to run away from home because they are deporting all the Polish Jews.... He said the Polish Consul was willing to take in the Polish Jews if they get to his house... We all got up quickly. I remember my mother didn't even take off her apron.... We managed to get to his villa. During that day about...2,000 Jews gathered there, not only from Leipzig, but Jews came from Chemnitz and Dresden. The rumor had spread... It was terribly crowded. The older people were in the house and the children in the garden... If someone went out, he was caught and put in a police car. There were so many people, and they had to eat. This was the first time there was co-operation between the Polish-Jewish community and the German-Jewish community. Before there had been a social gap between the two, but the common fate...united them. Those Jews who could move about freely brought us food, tea and other things. They looked after us. We stayed there for almost three days... After three days the Germans realized that they could not keep up the siege on the Polish Consulate. In addition they knew already that the Poles won't let the deported Jews into Poland.... At any rate, after three days the Polish Consul announced that there was an agreement with the Police Chief of Leipzig. He had received an order from the highest authority in Berlin that the deportation of Polish Jews was to be discontinued, and we could all go back home. This, of course, was very traumatic, we understood that we do not know what tomorrow may bring. The second, even harder event was the night of 9 November - the Kristallnacht . I did not know what had happened, and was going to school on my bike. I was already near the school when I met a Jew who asked me: what are you doing out in the street? I answered: I am going to school. He asked: don't you know what is going on?... go back home. There is a pogrom against the Jews. Fortunately I was not far from home and managed to get back. I could see everything that was going on in the neighborhood.

Q: What did you see?

A: The general picture was of shouting and yelling of SA and SS, including some in civilian clothes.... They went into one house after the other. They knew the neighborhood was mostly Jewish. At this point they did not differentiate between Polish and non-Polish Jews, we were all the same. We

heard screaming, looked through a window and saw them beating Jews, pushing men around. They had lists of Jews with German citizenship and took them to concentration camps like Buchenwald. All my uncles were taken there. They went into houses, threw the furniture through the windows, beat up the people. A whole group of them came into our house. My mother hid me in a closet. She was afraid they would beat me.... [In our house] Jews lived on the first and second floors, on the third floor lived our landlord who was non-Jewish. We lived on the fourth floor and there were Jewish families on the fifth floor. When they got to our apartment, they started breaking the door.... What saved us was that above us was a Jewish family with three sons. They had resisted the SA men...and so the SA upstairs called the ones on our floor for assistance. This saved us. They fought upstairs for a long time until everyone had been arrested. They had beaten them all terribly. This is why they could not accomplish their mission to break into our apartment. During this whole event we heard screaming and crying. It was terrible. We saw how they were beating people furiously. It was very difficult to watch. They took some of the men. Not far from our house was a river that looked like a canal.... They took the Jews over there, put them up against the wall and beat them. We, thank God, did not suffer physically from the SA, at least not then... We sat in the apartment for three days. We did not dare put on a light. We had covered the windows. We did not know what was going on. We did not know if we could go out. We did not dare to leave. Here I can give you an example of a positive attitude of a non-Jew towards the Jews. It was on the second night.... We heard a knock at the door. We were naturally afraid that someone wanted to come in. The knocking continued and someone called out my sister's name. It was one of the employees of the firm she worked for, a non-Jewish accountant. He knew her address and came at night to see how we were and if he could help. This was an extraordinary man. He promised to bring us bread and some food. We asked him to find out what the situation was and if we could leave the apartment. We did not know what was going on. He came back on the third day and said it was quiet. He knew about the general situation and about the order of the Minister of Interior to stop the actions against the Jews. Jews could leave their homes. We then had to reorganize

our lives. The school was closed. The atmosphere was depressing. A part of the school building had been torched. All the synagogues, except two, were destroyed. In one of the synagogues only the inside was destroyed because on the second floor of the building was a non-Jewish family... They gave the order not to torch the building because it was German property.... A new era started.... Everyone attempted to find a way to get out of Germany.... We had already sought to emigrate before these two events.... Most of the emigration possibilities necessitated large sums of money, which we of course did not have. One could cross the border illegally into Poland, Belgium or Holland. One had to pay large sums to bribe the person who did it. One could buy a certificate [for Palestine] for 500 English Pounds.... My sister, who had meanwhile married, tried to get a certificate, which was called a certificate for family members. In order to obtain such a certificate from the British she had to prove she had enough income to provide for two parents.... As I had stopped studying, I devoted my time to two things after October. First, the community provided vocational training. They gave courses for becoming locksmiths, carpenters and another occupation. I entered the course for training as a locksmith to prepare for emigration, if not for Palestine then for another destination.... Every candidate for emigration to Palestine through Youth Aliyah had to go to a camp. There were several such camps in Germany under Youth Aliyah supervision.... They had agricultural farms in which we worked for half a day to examine our physical condition. The rest of the time was devoted to studies and social activity.... After the vocational training workshops were closed by the Germans, I devoted all of my time to helping my parents emigrate. I am now speaking of the year 1939. I was then 16 years old. There were rumors...that South American countries gave visas. There was Cuba, there was Peru, Argentina, I think Costa Rica too. One had to apply. I ran to all these consulates, stood in line, filled in the forms. But it was to no avail, because acquiring or receiving such a visa necessitated enormous costs. Everything was a question of money.... I think it was in March when Jewish residence was concentrated. They had to move out of their apartment.... Every family got one room. We had to liquidate our apartment. The apartment had been modest. We had to sell the furniture and

belongings, practically give it away for free. A room was allocated to us by the community for my parents, my sister and myself. All we had were two beds.... My sister and I slept on the floor on mattresses. We had a small stove to cook on.... There was the social aid organization of the community,...but there were certainly worse cases than ours. My uncle helped us more and more. He still had financial means. My sister had a part time job.... The British government agreed to take in children under the age of 14.... It was called Kindertransport (Children's transports). As I was registered as a candidate for Youth Aliyah, they agreed to have me included. Later they raised the age to 16.... I left Leipzig for London at the end of July 1939.... We were two, a friend of mine and myself, but I lost track of him on the train. There was no one from Leipzig on my train. I was alone.... We traveled through Holland. The parting from my parents and my sister was very difficult. We knew we had the feeling that we would never see each other again.... As far as I know all my family perished in the Holocaust. My late father died in Sachsenhausen at the beginning of the war, some time in 1940. My sister and mother were deported from Leipzig in May 1942 to the Belzec extermination camp, and they were never heard from again.... Uncles and aunts, my grandparents who were in Holland perished in Auschwitz. Most of my family was killed in the Holocaust....

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