

The Restructuring of a Jewish Gemeinde Into the “Prototype” of the Judenrat

Doron Rabinovici, *Instanzen der Ohnmacht. Wien 1938-1945. Der Weg zum Judenrat*, Frankfurt: Jüdischer Verlag, 2000, 495 pp.

Reviewed by
Beate Meyer

A few years ago I asked a Jewish man from Hamburg who had witnessed the pogrom of November 9/10, 1938, whether he felt those events constituted a caesura, a turning point in the persecution of the Jews. No, he answered, not as he saw it. In the spring of 1938, he had gone with his parents to Vienna, and a half year later they had returned to Hamburg. After all they had experienced in Vienna during those six months, the rowdy gangs of Nazis, the Jews being manhandled on the street, burning Torah scrolls, and synagogues set ablaze seemed to him quite everyday and commonplace.

Now a new study published by the Jüdischer Verlag unfolds a detailed picture of the developments in Vienna - a small segment of which my contemporary witness had lived through as a boy. According to his own admission, Doron Rabinovici's book deals with a topic that had preoccupied his thoughts and emotions from an early age: the genesis and evolvement of the “prototype,” the “trial run” or “test model” (Rabinovici) for Nazi Jewish policy, the blueprint for what was later copied and forcibly imposed in Berlin and in the occupied territories.

Rabinovici is well known to the Austrian and German public. An award-winning writer and popular spokesperson of the “Democratic Offensive” contra the shift to the right in Austrian politics, he has repeatedly been in the public eye, a recognized literary figure simultaneously standing up for the rights of the downtrodden and discriminated, speaking out against racism and for a multicultural society. The present study has benefited from both these professions; its polished style comes as a welcome relief to the parched

proximity of other historical works. Rabinovici's uncompromisingly partisan stance keeps him centered on the fact that he is dealing with people under extreme duress: the narrow latitude left to the persecuted and their strategies for action.

Rabinovici is never at risk of confusing the victims and their victimizers. This is despite the stratagem adopted by the National-Socialist murderers, even many decades after the war's end, to push the representatives of the Jewish Gemeinde to the fore and brand them as perpetrators. Indeed, presenting them as those who implemented the policies of plunder and deportation and stamping those policies with their imprint and physiognomy appears to have achieved its perfidious aim. There are still survivors who firmly believe in the culpability of senior or subordinate officials of the Viennese Jewish Community (Israelitische Kultusgemeinde Wien, IKG). There are courts that have handed down stricter sentences against Jewish defendants than members of the Gestapo and SS.

Rabinovici approaches his subject slowly, also including the period before Austria's *Anschluss* in his analytical sights. According to the 1934 census, there were 191,481 Jews in Austria; 176,034 of them (nearly 92 percent) in Vienna, making up 9.4 percent of the total Viennese population. The flourishing religious life of Vienna's Jews, irrespective of their various regional origins, was reflected in a network of 440 associations (seventy-nine of them societies connected with houses of prayer and synagogues), twenty-three synagogues, five kindergartens, two schools, a library, four orphanages, and many other institutions that watched over the community's members from cradle to grave.

Yet even years before the annexation, Austro-facism had moved to restrict the scope of action on the part of Jewish organizations. When the Germans marched into Austria on March 12, 1938, those institutions had already experienced four years under the boot of government agencies. The city's population also had evidently learned that they could regard Vienna's Jews as fair game, easy prey on which to vent their rancor. Rabinovici characterizes the "murderous agitation," burned so indelibly into the young memory of my witness from Hamburg, as that "special ambience of Nazi Vienna" (p. 57). The

eruption of unrestrained violence against Jews, whose savagery included public physical abuse, attacks and ransacking camouflaged as house searches, mass arrests and sadism, was so vehement that the German rulers decided to call a halt to the excesses after two days of mayhem. Their interest was to establish in Vienna the system of measures that had been repeatedly tested and implemented since 1933 in the *Altreich*: the exclusion of Jews from the professions and economy, their expropriation and plundering, their special marking, and ghettoization.

Even the National Socialists were surprised by the ferocity of this outbreak of antisemitic violence. Within a short period, the German authorities implemented their *Judenpolitik*, resorting to measures more extensive and ruthless than in the *Altreich*. In the process, they opened the doors everywhere to the greed of the local population, tainted by social envy, eager to lay their hands on the property and possessions of their Jewish neighbors.

Despite years of discrimination in Austria and observing the course of anti-Jewish policy in Germany, IKG representatives still were taken completely aback when the Jewish Community Center was occupied and Jewish functionaries were arrested a week after the entry of German troops into the country. According to Rabinovici, Eichmann revealed a new face in Vienna, no longer the mere subaltern described by Hannah Arendt and the cold-blooded technocrat constructed in the film “*Der Spezialist*.” The opportune moment had come for Eichmann in his career; namely, the chance in Vienna to radicalize and revamp the German *Judenpolitik*. Here he ascended from the lower rung of a subordinate official to the manager of terror and expulsion. Nevertheless, this in no way prevented him from turning violent with Jewish representatives, bellowing at and humiliating them at will.

On August 20, 1938, Eichmann set up the Central Office for Jewish Emigration in the Rothschild mansion in Vienna; over the span of some eighteen months, it would displace (by forced emigration and other means) about 150,000 Jews. He remolded the paralyzed IKG into a tool of the Gestapo, an “implementation organ” whose structure was geared to his one overriding aim: the total and speedy expulsion of Viennese Jewry. Josef Löwenherz, executive director of the IKG, was appointed “Director”

(*Amtsleiter*), with sole authority, and assisted by several “non-assimilationist” functionaries co-opted from the now-dissolved organizations.

While thousands of Viennese Jews were interned in the Dachau concentration camp and thousands of others had lost all material basis for survival and were left dependent on Gemeinde assistance, this staff sought to provide care for children, the elderly and ailing, Jews prepared to emigrate, others unfit to leave, Viennese Jews, foreign Jews, stateless Jews, and so on. Right from the outset, the IKG officials were themselves “hostages,” constrained to represent the orders handed down by Eichmann’s office vis-à-vis their embittered clientele. As Rabinovici notes: “The helplessness of the Jewish institutions was interpreted as a lack of readiness to help, their impotence as indifference. The bitterness changed into mistrust and rage against the IKG” (p. 155).

This led to profound changes in the protagonists. Thus, to cite a well-known example, the young Benjamin Murelstein mutated “from a scholar into a manager of terror” (p. 166); he acquiesced to the system, suppressing any visible tinge of pity and all scruples concerning individual cases. At the time of the expulsions, he saved thousands of lives by this approach, though he also manipulated his success to elevate himself over others. From the spring of 1941 on, his undisputed skills as an organizer were then put to handy use in the policy of annihilation. Outside the IKG as well, there were a number of Jews who had come into the communal apparatus through a “side door,” so to speak, such as Berthold Storfer, a man with a dubious past. He organized emigration for the wealthy, who were then asked to give a contribution for poor emigrants. He allegedly also deposited funds for Eichmann in Swiss accounts. Storfer, distrusted by the IKG representatives, walked a thin line between assistance and collaboration, but in this way rescued many who would have been considered by Zionist criteria “unfit” for emigration to Palestine. By contrast, even in this situation, the Zionists continued to insist on selecting only those immigrants to Palestine who met certain mental, physical, and moral criteria. Storfer paid with his life. Deported to Auschwitz, he was later shot. Rabinovici credits him in this singular way with having resisted being relegated to the status of a mere victim.

In October 1939, some 3,000 Jews were deported to Nisko - in Rabinovici's words, the "dress rehearsal" for the later deportations from Austria and Germany. Exceeding in brutality the vicious expulsion of Polish Jews from Germany in 1938, the deportation to Nisko was already marked by the basic features of later practice, both in many of its organizational details and in the active inclusion of the Jewish community. Löwenherz, Murrelstein, Storf, and several others were summoned. Eichmann ordered Löwenherz to select between 1,000 and 1,200 destitute young Jewish males fit for emigration to be "resettled" in an autonomous Jewish settlement area south of Lublin. He was told to prepare a list of their names, to complete an official form, and to equip this and any future transports with the requisite tools and gear. The IKG was to be responsible for passing on information; it would appoint those in charge of transport and provide marshals.

Since, in their initial naiveté, the IKG representatives had only provided a list of Jews who had volunteered, Eichmann's Central Office put together its own supplementary list, assigning the others for resettlement as well. Ultimately, several transports, totaling some 3,000 Jews, left Vienna. At the very last minute, Löwenherz managed to have Murrelstein removed from the list the Central Office had prepared.

The Nisko camp was to be constructed by the new arrivals in war-ravaged swamps. Their luggage and tools were not handed over to them; marauding local bands attacked the Jews; the SS harassed and beat them. Finally, they began firing at their prisoners, scattering the Jews in every direction in a bid to be rid of them. In April 1940, of the original 3,000 (approximately) deportees, some 200 men remained. They were returned to Vienna and thus, back home, were able to reveal the grand deception of their "resettlement."

In the meanwhile, the situation of the Jews in Vienna deteriorated, and, contrary to the assurances, new transports were announced. By May 1941, 10,000 persons were slated to be deported to the *Generalgouvernement*. Now it was the Central Office that put together the lists; the IKG was responsible for channeling orders and for two collection camps. Thus, over the span of some eighteen months, the practice of deportation evolved parallel to the still ongoing emigration.

The operating strategies of Jewish functionaries also took on concrete form: in order to keep emigration functioning, they accepted their assigned part in the deportations. It is worth noting that, during this period, another 6,000 managed to leave Vienna as emigrants; representatives were also repeatedly able to intervene on behalf of individuals. But from November 1941 on, after the transports had begun to roll eastward from cities in the *Altreich* as well, the authorities rejected all requests for leniency, return or release of deportees.

In February 1942, Löwenherz and Murrelstein were ordered to Berlin, where they and the German functionaries were informed that all Jews in their area of jurisdiction were to be deported. As on many previous occasions, Löwenherz protested against this unreasonable demand, arguing that there were thousands of so-called protected Jews in Vienna. But the transports continued to roll toward Lublin, Sobibor, Minsk, Izbica, and Theresienstadt. In December 1944, 5,799 Jews remained in Vienna. Most were in mixed marriages; only about 1,000 were bona fide Jews by religion (*Glaubensjuden*). Six hundred had gone into hiding underground. In November 1942, the IKG was dissolved and replaced by a Council of Elders (*Ältestenrat*) of the Jews in Vienna.

The list according to which the Central Office “rounded up” deportees originated largely from the IKG: the lists of standing welfare recipients, those with ration cards, Jewish residents, IKG staff workers, etc. Even if the Central Office assembled the lists, the IKG did the spadework. An IKG functionary was responsible for the technical organization. A card file of protected persons was kept up to date. Marshals exempted from deportation for this function became baggage carriers and assisted with gathering information. When it became clear that the existing lists were insufficient for locating all Jews, Löwenherz was ordered to put together a force to “round up” deportees, a so-called “*Aushebertruppe*.” He refused. The notorious Alois Brunner then cobbled together a force of some 400 to 500 men, led by Jewish informers and especially brutal in the field. After several days, Löwenherz reluctantly gave in and decided to cooperate. The members of this “Jewish police” continue to haunt the memories of their surviving victims as “Jewish swine,”

or, as fellow sufferers, who, their own lives in danger, managed to rescue others. Like the welfare workers and marshals, they were forced to face the moral dilemma of having to choose between risk to themselves (and their families) and the threat to other, perhaps unfamiliar, Jews.

Rabinovici dedicates his book to two persons who, their own lives at risk, nonetheless sought to help others, rescuing them or providing the needy with devoted care: Franzi Löw-Danneberg and Willy Stern. Franzi Löw, a welfare worker, was particularly devoted to fulfilling her assigned tasks in the community, caring for the indigent while also assisting those who had gone underground - the so-called submarines - with food provisions. She likewise cared for deportees from Greece, Croatia, and Hungary who were transported via Vienna en route to the extermination camps.

Rabinovici also explores the question of at what point in time did the Jewish protagonists become aware of the reality of the mass annihilation. His conclusion: down to 1943-1944, knowledge was partial or non-existent, particularly since all communications within the Jewish organization were under total control. The intent was to deceive the victims. And they let themselves be deceived, because the idea that all Viennese Jews could be annihilated contradicted the accepted axioms of human reason and all historical experience. They did not develop any counter-strategies, because the Jewish community was poor, with many elderly wards and “encircled in enemy territory” (p. 340). The tragic consequence was that “in order to be able to continue to care for its members,” the community “had to take a hand in the deportation” (p. 340).

Yet those who cooperated were also deported; hardly anyone was spared. The selection within the organization had to be carried out by its own leaders. While the (obligatory) membership believed their leaders had power, the functionaries themselves - from Löwenherz down to the lowest echelon of marshals - had no political power of their own. They were ensnared proxies and simply borrowed what power they exercised from the system. Functionaries such as Murrelstein tried to anticipate the Nazis’ thinking and to act as he believed they wished: in his own case, that continued right down to his incarceration in Theresienstadt, during which he tried to convince the

camp commandant of the benefit of a “beautification action” to improve the “exemplary camp.” Löwenherz, who courageously intervened for others again and again, while nonetheless letting himself be co-opted, preserved his loyalty to legality in a bid to assure the continued survival of the Gemeinde down to the end.

The IKG and its *Ältestenrat* successor were, as Rabinovici convincingly demonstrates, a prototype of the Judenrat, which was not invested with any power of its own. To compound matters, the constant threats and deceptions clouded the eyes of the functionaries, rendering them incapable of fully perceiving the policy of annihilation. And their perception of its reality was also dulled by the long transition, the parallelism between deportation and destruction, the apparent success in individual interventions - and their abiding illusionary hope that they would be able to save at least a part of the community.

While the representatives tried in their impotence to decelerate the dynamics of the annihilation, to save individuals where possible, or to achieve a modicum of mitigation for a clearly defined group, those dependent on them developed a definite impression that the Jewish functionaries were on the other side, with the perpetrators. Referring to postwar trials, proceedings in courts of honor, and memoirs, Rabinovici demonstrates just how much the survivors, even after the passage of decades, still regarded the leading and subordinate functionaries with a sense of mistrust, embitterment, and, at times, even hate. That extended even to social workers, such as Franzi Löw, who, as can be shown, repeatedly risked her own life to save others. Yet even in retrospect, Rabinovici admonishes,

when faced with the dilemma of that time, no alternative for action emerges ... Under similar conditions, no group of victims would have been able to act differently; none could act differently today. The present analysis does not allow for findings more comforting and comfortable (p. 426).

With this statement, Rabinovici discharges his readers. The voice in these closing lines is more that of the politically engaged orator than the historian who has masterfully understood his craft, combining hundreds of pages of empirical data and theoretical constructs into a fruitful whole. Rabinovici does not depict history one-to-one, exhaustively; his narrative is selective, concentrating on the events essential to his topic. Thus, for example, the author is uninterested in the rapid rise in religiosity among Jews under Nazi rule as a means of coping and the search for transcendental meaning. Yet he is all the more intrigued by the daily practice of persecution and how the functionaries saw and presented themselves.

He was doubtless bolstered in that approach by the advances in research on Nazism in Austria. Thus, Hans Safrian has investigated the special detachment of the Sicherheitsdienst (SD), in particular the activity of Eichmann and Herbert Hagen.¹ There are a number of studies on expropriation and deprivation of rights.² Rabinovici bases his arguments *inter alia* on Dan Diner's Judenrat theses, developed in several essays though never rigorously tested against the empirical historical data.³ By careful selection of his topical foci and the integration of biographical materials, Rabinovici succeeds in elucidating the self-image of the protagonists at each stage of the process, strung between external coercion and their aim of rescuing at least some segment of the Jewish community. In this way, Diner's abstractions are given a concrete armature: namely that the functionaries attempted to "adhere strictly to maintaining the enemy order" (p. 423) in the

¹ Hans Safrian, *Die Eichmann-Männer* (Vienna and Zurich: Europa Verlag, 1993).

² See the extensive references in Rabinovici, pp. 431f.

³ For inexplicable reasons, Rabinovici's book contains no bibliography. In the footnotes Rabinovici refers to Diner's introduction to his edited volume *Zivilisationsbruch. Denken nach Auschwitz* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1988); idem, "Beyond the Conceivable. The Judenrat as Borderline Experience," in idem, *Beyond the Conceivable: Studies on Germany, Nazism and the Holocaust* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), pp. 117-129; idem, "Die Perspektive des 'Judenrats'. Zur universalen Bedeutung einer partikularen Erfahrung," in Doron Kiesel, Cilly Kugelmann, Hanno Loewy, Dietrich Neuhaus, eds., *Wer zum Leben, wer zum Tod ... "Strategien jüdischen Überlebens im Ghetto"* (Frankfurt am Main and New York: Campus, 1992), pp. 11-35. Another relevant essay is Dan Diner, "Historical Understanding and Counter-rationality: the Judenrat as Epistemological Vantage," in idem, *Beyond the Conceivable*, pp. 130-137. See also idem, "Historisches Verstehen und Gegenrationalität. Der Judenrat als erkenntnistheoretische Werte," in Frank Bajohr, Werner Johe, Uwe Lohalm, eds., *Zivilisation und Barbarei. Die widersprüchlichen Potentiale der Moderne* (Hamburg: Christian Verlag, 1991), pp. 307-321.

hope that the adversary would at least stick to his own rules. “In order to preserve the ghetto, they surrendered it over to destruction” (p. 423), thus turning against its members. For their part, those individuals could no longer clearly perceive the dividing line between the Nazi regime and the Jewish organization. The Jewish functionaries reaped the aggression and wrath of victims they were actively trying to aid.

Along with his elucidation of the historical events on the ground in Vienna, Doron Rabinovici also deserves particular merit for blazing a path here in opening up a discussion on the Judenrat in the *Altreich*; he has the retrospective vantage of looking at the end-product of a deadly chain of developments and tracing it back to its beginnings. His study sharpens our sights for the way in which the construction of the Judenrat – the focus of much scholarly discussion and debate since the 1960s – evolved. This was a process of constraint and practical implementation, a stepwise intensification, marked by spurts, with ruptures and continuities (in personnel) in peacetime, war, and the conflict’s closing months.

Naturally, the Austrian “prototype” did not spring *ex nihilo* into historical time and must always be interpreted against the background of the preceding and concomitant developments within Germany. Yet the few works on the comparable Reichsvereinigung (National Union of the Jews in Germany) brackets off that question. Otto Dov Kulka’s instructive essay focuses on the continuity of Jewish self-identity and communal work under the Nazi regime. The only larger study on the organization’s history, Esriel Hildesheimer’s *Jüdische Selbstverwaltung unter dem NS-Regime*,⁴ touches briefly on the Reichsvereinigung’s involvement in the deportations. Rabinovici’s study thus points implicitly to a lacuna in the research. Its examination will allow us to analyze more precisely the mutual interactions between the anti-Jewish measures in Germany and those tested on the proving ground of Austria.

In the “annexed” *Ostmark*, the Nazi regime implemented laws, instructions, rules, and procedures that had already been standard practice in the *Altreich* over the previous five years, along with other legislation the SD

⁴ Esriel Hildesheimer, *Jüdische Selbstverwaltung unter dem NS-Regime. Der Existenzkampf der Reichsvertretung und der Reichsvereinigung der Juden in Deutschland* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 1994).

considered necessary. The latter had as yet not been implemented in Germany, since the SD (and RSHA, established September 27, 1939) did not take over authority for Jewish policy until the end of 1938. Thus, for example, Eichmann's brainchild, the Central Office for Jewish Emigration, was a novel institution, first established in Austria; its work was considered highly effective in advancing the regime's racial policies. Transposed back to Germany, a directive of January 24, 1939, provided for the creation of a Reich Central Office for Jewish Emigration; by the end of that year it found itself superseded, now merging with the general *Judenpolitik* of Himmler's RSHA.

Though Jews were also deported early on from localities in the *Altreich* as well (such as Stettin, Baden, and East Friesland), there was no concomitant parallelism over nearly eighteen months in the policies of emigration and deportation. Yet it is certain this parallelism had an impact on the IKG functionaries and beyond. It also influenced the Berlin representatives of the Reichsvereinigung who now, in light of the events in neighboring Austria, were apprehensive that further groups of German Jews would be deported if they did not redouble their efforts to locate additional options for Gemeinde-member emigration. Among the mutual influences that should be examined is the *informal* information flow between the Jewish representatives from Germany and Austria (the formal flow was, after all, largely prohibited).

During the deportations, the Reichsvereinigung and Viennese Kultusvereinigung (Cultural Association) evidently were assigned similar tasks.⁵ The SS men around Alois Brunner responsible for the deportations from Vienna intensified and radicalized the practice of selecting Jews for deportation, transformed collection camps into prisons and, modeled on the example of the Viennese *Judenpolizei*, set up the "grabbers" in Berlin.

Judgments on the Jewish representatives in Germany resembled those among their fellow Jews in Austria. The Berlin and Viennese functionaries were joined together in the Theresienstadt Ältestenrat. It is likely that both Paul Eppstein of the Reichsvereinigung Executive and Benjamin Murelstein may somehow have relished their exposed and contradictory positions.

⁵ See Beate Meyer, "Gratwanderung zwischen Verantwortung und Verstrickung - Die Reichsvereinigung der Juden in Deutschland und die jüdische Gemeinde zu Berlin 1938-1945," in idem and Hermann Simon, eds., *Juden in Berlin 1938-1945* (Berlin: Philo Verlag, 2000), pp. 291-337.

Rabinovici stresses that the prevailing circumstances activated new abilities in the functionaries. Indeed, they most certainly demanded another type of functionary, different from the conventional Gemeinde staff worker of an earlier era.

They suffered a similar discrediting in the public eye. Like several others, Walter Lustig, the last Gestapo agent of the residual Reichsvereinigung in Berlin, was executed by Soviet soldiers in the summer of 1945, after infuriated Jews had denounced him. Subsequent to being held in internment for five years, the petty official Heinrich Koplowitz, a marshal in a collection camp, was sentenced to death during the Waldheim show-trials in the Soviet occupation zone. The responsible Gestapo man had vanished from sight and was never called to account.

This review will not expand on the long list of shared features, differences, non-simultaneities, and parallels. Rather, the reader should leave this review with a new sense of the research desiderata: that it is imperative to expand on Rabinovici's successful study, pushing forward to be able to see the "construction of the Judenrat" not just in terms of its final result, but as a dynamic process.

Translated from the German by William Templer

Source: *Yad Vashem Studies*, XXX, Jerusalem, 2002, pp. 451-464.