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Life under Nazi Rule

The Jewish Community of Breslau 1933-1941

Based on Documents and the Diaries of Dr. Willy Cohn

The present study regarding the Jewish community of Breslau during 1933-1941 examines the manner in which the community as well as individuals coped with the new reality created under Nazi rule. The question is particularly interesting in light of the fact that German Jews had experienced more than a century of emancipation and civil equality, during which time they were integrated in economic and cultural life in Germany and their world view and sense of belonging to the German nation became an important part of their identity. What was the weight of the Jewish-German partnership at a time of crisis, what was the quality of the relationship between past partners friends and colleagues who had suddenly been placed on opposite sides of a racial dividing line. How did the Jewish community, and individuals within it, react to the enormous change occurring in Germany? These questions are examined in this article through observation of one community's reaction – the Breslau Jewish community.

Breslau, the second largest city in Prussia and an important economic hub, was a center of Jewish life in Germany during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Between 1800 and 1933, the Jewish community of Breslau was one of the three largest communities in Germany. In 1925 23,452 Jews lived in Breslau, constituting 4.2% of the general population. The existence of a relatively large Catholic "minority" (approximately 35%, side by side with 60% Evangelicals and 4%-5% Jews) and the three-group method of municipal elections (favoring property owners) in effect until 1920, which strengthened the liberal left and Jewish political positions, contributed to the atmosphere of tolerance and pluralism in the city in the 19th century. The Johannesgymnasium set up in 1872 – the unique tri-religious school whose teachers and pupils were composed of Evangelists,

Catholics and Jews in equal proportions, the joint club and association memberships and the central role Jews played in the city's cultural life during the Kaiserreich and the Weimar period, are good examples of this.

Tolerance was also an internal community characteristic. Breslau boasted one Jewish community (Einheitsgemeinde) . Religiously speaking the community included two unions (the Liberal-Reform and the Orthodox), each with its own Rabbi and synagogue, but in the domain of welfare it acted as one body. Thus there was cooperation between the Orthodox and the Liberals and opponents such as the C.V and the Zionists. The Rabbinate Seminar, which took in students from both German and Polish Jewry and trained both Orthodox and Liberal Rabbis, also had a moderating influence. These characteristics, as well as the existence of Willy Cohn's extensive diary, raise interest in examining the public and individual reactions to the new reality created during Nazi rule.

The issue of Breslau's Jewish community's reaction during the 1933-1941 period was examined based on Jewish resources (documents from the Breslau Jewish community archive, the Breslau Jewish community newspapers) as well as on the archives of German civic and national bodies. The diary of historian Dr. Willy Cohn (1888-1941) also served as an extremely important source. Cohn, who was not granted a lecturer's position at the university due to his Jewish origin, taught at the Johannesgymnasium while continuing to publish research. During his military service in World War I he became a Zionist, grew closer to Orthodox Judaism, and became an active member of the SPD. He was active in the Breslau Jewish community, as well as in German cultural life and political action. His diaries present an important source of information regarding the events taking place in Breslau and the internal life of the Jewish community. They also reflect his subjective position as a German-Jew regarding the changes in Germany, the violation of human rights, expelling the Jews from daily life and their persecution. They allow us a peek at the inter-personal relationships between Jews and Germans, and at the perception of events by someone actually living them.

The study deals with the period beginning with the Nazi rise to power in January 1933 and the first deportation of 1,000 people from Breslau to extermination in November 1941, in which Cohn and his family members were also murdered. Steps taken against the Jews and the community's actions in the domains of welfare, education and culture are examined. German-Jewish relationships are also examined, as well as different points of view regarding events and the immigration question. During this period the community reached the peak of its action in the domains of economic aid, welfare,

education and culture, but towards the end control was gradually taken away from it, till it unwillingly became a government tool. During this period Breslau Jews discovered that the society they considered themselves full partners in did not exist anymore.

1933-1935. The clearest characteristics of Willy Cohn's diaries is shock, insult and a feeling of betrayal regarding the strong national propaganda against the Jews, standing out particularly in the endless marches of S.A in Breslau. The shows of violence, dismissal from public service and the continuing boycott on Jewish businesses, particularly by national organizations and bodies, strengthened these feelings. Alongside the feeling of injustice directed towards those whose devotion to the motherland during peace as well as during wartime had been a most important value, he sees dismissal as corruption of public service by replacing professional devoted civil servants by Nazi followers. He reports the shock among the Jewish public expressed by suicides of academic Jews. "There is no justice anywhere", he writes (24.2.1933), after one of his students was murdered and the suspects released. He waited in vain for the general public to rebel. Cohn, who as a member of the SPD belonged to two persecuted groups (Jews and the party), saw on the one hand the distress of Christian colleagues and on the other phenomena of moral corruption, opportunism, integration into the new regime and turning one's back on colleagues and friends. Cohn held on to the civil-national identity perception, and was a Zionist at the same time. He lived both these national identities intensively and actively. He felt the pain of democracy's collapse and betrayal of humanistic values in Germany, as well as the blow to the German-Jewish partnership. At the same time, the feelings of distress and offense did not overcome his feelings of duty to and loyalty towards the German motherland. Social ties with non-Jewish colleagues provided him with the illusion that a large German public does not identify with Nazi policy.

The Jewish community invested much effort in dealing with the situation, and until the fall of 1938 it had the means to do so. It attempted to deal with the distress of many breadwinners hurt by the general dismissals and the boycott practiced by institutions and organizations against Jewish businesses. Setting up a framework for business consultation and accompaniment, a fund for lending money to businesses in trouble, and professional retraining courses all attest to an attempt to safeguard economic existence and staying in Germany in the hopes of a political change. Reports from the community's Representatives Assembly meetings reflecting growing budgets for economic aid and welfare show a feeling of solidarity and ability to deal with the

situation by raising funds within the community and using more and more volunteer work.

The deep rift regarding the issue of Jewish identity and the affinity to Germany created by Nazi policy was reflected in the argument between the Liberals and the Orthodox regarding educational content. The need of many pupils, some from liberal homes belonging to the C.V, who were formerly opposed to separate Jewish education as it presented in their opinion a barrier to their integration into German society, to leave the general schools in the city due to the hostile atmosphere, the demand of the municipal board of Education and finally legislation, and enroll in the only Jewish school in Breslau, owned by The Orthodox School Union which boasted a Zionist orientation, started an argument which continued till the end of 1938. The stance of the Liberal majority, that the younger generation must continue to be educated towards German nationality and citizenship rather than towards Zionism, expressed the attitude that the new regime will be short-lived, and there is a future to the continued Jewish-German partnership. This stance was opposed to the Orthodox Zionist stance, which group owned the license to operate the school.

The diverse community cultural activity developed during this period (an orchestra, a choir, a theater, lectures), which began as a response to the exclusion of Jewish artists from the German stage and expressed a trend of remaining in Germany, created new formats of integration between general and Jewish cultural content. This resulted in bringing people who had cut themselves off from Judaism closer to it once again. Cohn, who took part in this trend as a lecturer on varied historical, Jewish and Zionist topics, was pleased with it. This was a cultural renaissance which almost managed to make people forget that it was operating within a hostile environment.

1935-1938. Even following the Nuremberg Laws, many people thought that Jewish existence in Germany can be continued, albeit separately, side by side with German society. Cultural activity in Breslau peaked at the beginning of this period. Strengthened economic pressure beginning in 1937, following stronger "Aryanization" processes and new regulations in the summer and fall of 1938 signaled the dying of economic and cultural activity and speeded immigration efforts.

The study dealt with Cohn's stance during this period regarding the Nuremberg Laws and loss of citizenship, as well as his views of the continued economic injury which threatened continued Jewish life in Germany. His focus on the many lectures he gave to the community as well as other Jewish communities, contact with non-Jews limited to

chance meetings with former colleagues, students and acquaintances, and a change in his attitude towards his country's foreign policy all characterize this period. During this period he began to think that the Land of Israel was the road young people should take. His trip there in 1937 with his wife on a tourist visa to visit his son and look into the possibility of settling there was extremely meaningful for him. Due to the limited number of immigration certificates and his age he did not manage to immigrate.

The study examined community actions vis-à-vis the fact that many people became bankrupt as a result of the worsening "Aryanization" in 1937 and being cut off from national welfare services. Despite the worsening in the community's status in March 1938, which made tax collection difficult, the community was still able to make autonomous decisions, and had the resources to implement them. Larger community welfare budgets, setting up alternative frameworks for caring for the needy and the elderly, and a change in the content of retraining courses, now aimed mostly towards immigration, were the outstanding actions, side by side with continued cultural and educational activity.

The period between the November 1938 pogrom and the beginning of deportations (November 1941) witnessed a serious decline in all domains, leading towards the extinction of Jewish existence in Germany. All economic avenues were destroyed. The Reichvereinigung became the ruling authority for German Jews and the individual communities were subordinate to it.

The governmental regulations aimed at segregation, economic looting, insult and humiliation were supplemented by many local initiatives in Breslau. Immediately following the November pogrom, the Gestapo headquarters in Breslau ordered the community leadership to change from a representative elected body into an appointed body subordinate to the authorities, whose main activity was promotion of immigration. After the destruction and looting of shops exclusion of the Jews from all economic activity in the city was complete. During the first two years of the war all Jewish-owned real estate and businesses were sold by coercion. Immigration from the city became an escape to any possible destination. The number of community members became as low as 8,500 in October 1940. In order to carry on welfare activities, mostly caring for the many elderly people who could not immigrate, the community sold assets which had not yet been confiscated. Boycotting the Jewish hospital and old age home and the demand to evacuate it three days before the beginning of the war was the first in a series of confiscations of community welfare institutions to serve the army's needs, an act which caused the elderly residents to crowd together in different buildings still

owned by the community, and later on to leave the city. Even following the building's confiscation the Jewish school continued to operate elsewhere until closed by government order in 1941. Almost all Jewish cultural activity ceased.

During the war the Jews' isolation and distress grew worse. Cohn, who took upon himself the role of documenting events, reflected in his diary the difficult reality, the non-Jewish public's attitude, and his own views of the events. He felt as if he were in a mouse trap: death was certain, albeit delayed. A barrage of general and local regulations aimed at insulting, isolating and generally making life difficult for Jews was unleashed upon them. Among them was curfew for Jews, forbidding them from sitting on public benches, erasing items from food stamp cards, allowing shopping during certain hours and in certain shops only, forbidding them from purchasing clothing instead of torn items, etc. Refusal to sell coal to Jews in the winter of 1939-1940 in temperatures of -27° forming a death threat from freezing in one's home was the most difficult. Forced labor for Jews from the age of 14 beginning in May 1940, putting them to work in snow removal, construction or industrial plants, heightened the wall of seclusion. The study examines the behavior of neighbors and acquaintances vis-à-vis this reality. For the majority of them Jews became invisible. Only a very few lent a helping hand.

The evacuation of Jews' apartments for officers and civil servants who had moved to Breslau increased in July 1941. The community was charged with placing the evacuees in apartments still owned by Jews, and unwillingly participated in this action. When the apartments became overly crowded, the evacuees were sent out of the city by the government. Cohn describes people coming into his apartment to examine its suitability for themselves, clearly realizing that this would mean evacuation of the present tenants. On November 1st 1941 Cohn received notice that his apartment is needed for an inspector from Lignitz and he must evacuate it. One thousand people, including Cohn and his family, were placed on the first transport from Breslau and murdered by gunshots at Fort IX in Kaunas on November 29th 1941. The last transport that left Breslau on its way to Auschwitz on March 5th 1943 marked the final destruction of the