

Travelling with Nazi party members

It seems that Western sympathies for the Third Reich deepen in the year after the Olympic Games. Reuel Lochore's attitude has at least some resemblance to Great Britain's policy of appeasement: in May 1937 Neville Chamberlain becomes Britain's Prime Minister and promotes a policy of peace and appeasement towards Germany. German–English naval talks are resumed: Hitler Youth groups travel frequently to Britain and English young people reciprocate and travel to Germany. The Duke and Duchess of Windsor go on a twelve-day trip to Germany in October. They visit firms, donate to the Winter Relief Fund and receive a welcome from the *Führer* in Obersalzberg. The couple return to the British Isles impressed. A visit by the Lord Privy Seal and former foreign minister Lord Halifax ensues the following month. Göring and the Reich's Foreign Minister, Baron von Neurath, speak about the Anglo–German relationship in a tenor of friendship.

New Zealanders from Cape Reinga to Bluff learn via the BBC that six million Germans have found work again and things are looking up in Germany – one stage after another of the *autobahn* has been opened, and 400 million Reichsmark donated to the Winter Relief Fund. In Berlin, peace rallies are held, with 100,000 war veterans and fourteen foreign delegations present. The more positively the British media portray Hitler's regime, the harder it is for warnings by the regime's critics to be heeded in New Zealand.

It is not only England that helps Germany to strengthen its position internationally; all manner of statesmen pay their obeisance to the '*Führer*'. A German–French trade pact is concluded and also a second German–English naval agreement. Belgium receives a German pledge of assistance should its country be the object of an invasion. The agreement is reciprocal.

There are also critical observers. The American journalist William L. Shirer writes in his 'Berlin Diary':

Much of what is going on here and will go on here could be learned by the outside world from Mein Kampf, the Bible and the Koran of the Third Reich. But – amazingly – there is no decent translation of it in English or French, and Hitler will not allow one to be made, which is understandable, for it would shock many in the West. How many visiting big-mouthed know-alls have I told that the Nazi goal is world domination? Their response was only laughter.

In 1937 Hans Jottkowitz, the young Jewish dyer from Berlin, profits from Germany's professed love of peace and openness to the outside world. Hans likes to travel; he saves the money he earns as an apprentice for this purpose. He has been to Sweden with a Jewish tour group and was in Switzerland two

years ago. He feels a desire to travel again and this time, foresightedly, he is going to look out for possible work opportunities in exile. His father hears of a German freighter that is going across the Baltic Sea and gets a ticket for his son. So Hans begins his journey in Stettin; from there he is to go to Reval (now called Tallinn) and afterwards to Vjborg and Kottka.

Initially he is quite uneasy because there is a Nazi *Gauleiter*, a regional party leader, amongst the passengers. Hans has to share his cabin with an *SS* man.

I didn't exactly lay it on the line that I was a Jew, nor did anyone ask me. In 1937 the J was not yet stamped in passports. So there I was with staunch party members around me the whole time. In Vjborg, we took a taxi together and we crossed over into Finland for the day. I did go to the Jewish Congregation in Reval to find out what the situation was like for Jews in Estonia. I had a look around a textile dyeing business there.

After his return, Hans exchanges photos by mail with the Nazi party members.

Hans Jottkowitz is an optimist. Naturally he feels the changes in his daily life but he believes one just has to take things calmly. The number of invitations his parents receive to balls and parties falls off dramatically yet the family still has the cinema, opera, theatre – they have just seen Gustaf Gründgen's *Hamlet* together as a family.

The family realise that the situation is deteriorating. There is no knowing what will happen next and so his parents start making plans for their son to emigrate. Again the question arises – 'Where to?' Relatives of theirs have gone to South Africa and the United States would also be a possibility. A cousin whose wife has influential relatives in New Zealand wants to emigrate there. Everything needs to be taken into account.

Peter Dane, grandson of the lawyer Bruno Marwitz, is also thinking of leaving Germany. The 16-year-old school boy cannot forget the old man who sat weeping in his grandfather's legal chambers after the *SS* had tortured him for days. He pictures his beloved grandparents suffering in this way. He has a close relationship with them and spends more time in their garden in the Berlin suburb of Friedenau than he does at home. He has recently been nominated by his high school to take part in a national sports event – but is then deemed ineligible to compete because of his Jewish descent. The teachers finally ask him to be ill the day of the competition. No, he doesn't feel at home in Germany any longer.

Gabriele Herrmann weeps when she goes past the Stormtrooper display cabinet after school and sees the Jews pictured there with such hatred and in

such a distorted way. Her mother tells her not to look. How can she avoid doing so? When the family cycles through the Grunewald forest, ‘Jews not welcome’ is scrawled on the toilets. What kind of people would describe her beloved mother as ‘vermin’? Thirteen-year-old Gabriele begins to read the Bible, even the New Testament. After an inner struggle, she finally decides to get baptised and confirmed. At this time, however, there are very few ministers who are prepared to baptise a person of German-Jewish descent. Only one minister from the churches nearby dares to do so – he baptises Gabriele as well as her mother.

Jewish children and young people are increasingly subjected to seemingly insignificant but nevertheless hurtful experiences. Hansi and Fred Silberstein go to the Jewish middle school in Joachimsthaler Strasse. Hansi is now 13 years old – the same age as Gabriele Herrmann – and she is also increasingly exposed to nasty incidents. The staff in her parents’ shop, the *Kaufhaus Boga* by the Botanical Gardens, left a year ago – there are no saleswomen any longer. Hansi wants to become a doctor but this is inconceivable now. The worlds of ‘Jews’ and ‘Germans’ are drifting further and further apart. ‘The German girls went to the *BDM*, the German Girls’ League, where a picture was painted of Jews as the enemy. We Jewish children had our own groups, sports clubs etc. That went on at the same time – in 1937 I hardly had any contact with non-Jewish children. One day I encountered my former girlfriend in the street – she spat at me in the middle of the street.’

Her brother Fred, who is three years younger, has similar experiences. His former playmate has totally changed since being in the *Jungvolk*. Sometimes she stands in front of the shop and yells ‘dirty Jews!’ The little girl spouts out what she has been taught to potential customers – ‘Don’t buy from Jews, who want to harm our German nation!’ Fred sees his former friend through the window, standing there shouting and does not know why she is saying these things.

With growing apprehension, Jews in neighbouring countries watch the state’s removal of their fellow Jews’ citizenship rights through the Nuremberg Laws.

A Jewish wedding is held in Moravian Brno: Alice Loewy, a 25-year-old medical student, and Frank Briess, a businessman’s son, exchange marriage vows. Frank’s bride comes from Lindenburg, a small town near Brno. Alice’s father, a well-known doctor, died in 1934 and his daughter wanted to follow in his footsteps; she has been studying medicine for four years in Prague but gives up her studies shortly before her exams to marry Frank. The couple settle seventy kilometres away in Olomouc in the new family home that Frank’s

father has built. The whole family lives together here – the parents on the ground floor, the young couple on the next and Frank’s brother under the roof. The family’s spice and grain business, which is renowned beyond the borders, is situated nearby.

The Briess family enjoy a high standard of living and have considerable assets and household help but none of this seems assured any longer. Things are coming to a head politically. The Sudeten German Party is demanding an *Anschluss* (union) with Germany. If this happens, it is feared that German troops could march straight through to Prague.

The atmosphere around them has also deteriorated; non-Jewish friends start to distance themselves. Friends abroad encourage them to leave Czechoslovakia before it is too late. Should they say yes or no to the idea of emigration? The family is split over the issue. The parents don’t see it as an option. Frank’s cousin and his wife have already left for London. His two siblings want to stay; they have a more optimistic view of the situation.

And Frank Briess personally? He wavers. He and Alice are young; they could establish themselves again anywhere in the world. Alice has just completed a cosmetics course but Frank is part of the flourishing family business founded by his grandfather – he would have to leave it all behind.

Stopping places in Palestine and Europe

The whole of Germany seems to be obsessed about ethnicity in 1937. Questions of ancestry and proving one’s ‘Aryan’ background dominate daily life. Resistant political elements are scarcely evident. Anyone who has found safety is grateful – like the young 13-year-old Jewish boy from Berlin, Dieter Adam. After being at boarding school in Scotland, he is now living with his family in London. No one here asks about his family tree.

However, the family’s standard of living has dropped dramatically. After emigrating, Dieter’s father tries to set up an import-export business in London but he dies suddenly in 1936, within two years of their arrival. His mother, a person with great strength of character, lets rooms in their home in order to provide for the three younger children.

Ernst and Herta Neuländer from Breslau still live in the Arab quarter of Jerusalem. A container of household goods has just arrived from their Upper Silesian homeland. In contrast to German Jews who emigrate to other countries, those going to Palestine enjoy a not insignificant advantage: after secret negotiations between leading Zionists and the Nazi leadership in 1933,

they are allowed to take some of their possessions to the 'Promised Land'. The Nazis' motives for these negotiations are to make emigration to Palestine more palatable to Jews. Although items were damaged through deliberate rough handling at the wharves, the arrival of their pots and pans, curtains and furniture is a great relief for the young couple, as they are still living hand to mouth. Herta is giving singing lessons virtually for nothing and Ernst is earning a modest income as a land surveyor.

But are they really safe in Jerusalem? In the interim they have both come to feel that they have not landed in the Biblical land of Canaan but in the tension-filled *Eretz Israel* of the twentieth century. The magical feel of the place, with its Christian, Jewish and Muslim populations, is fading; their romantic enthusiasm for the Middle East wanes. Amidst the monasteries, synagogues and roadside inns, a sobering and frightening situation develops. The Jewish–Arab conflict touches the young couple. Ernst in particular experiences the bloody dimensions of the unrest during his land surveying near the Dead Sea borders.

Suddenly the couple have to leave their home in the Arab quarter, which is being passionately defended by the Arabs and the question crops up again – Where are they to go? To Tel Aviv? They would possibly be safer there but they would have fewer work prospects. Ernst and Herta decide to stay in Jerusalem but move to Rechavia, one of the Jewish suburbs. Danger has not been eliminated by any means as a result of the move and so Ernst Neuländer, the former medical student, now has to learn to use a gun. A civilian defence force has been set up in Jewish areas of the city for self-defence; men are trained for policing duties and fending off Arab attacks in the *Haganah*. Guns and ammunition are distributed to the men who patrol in small groups. At night they are responsible for ensuring that there are no incursions and attacks on the settlements. Ernst also works as an assistant police officer for the British and goes on patrol two to three times a week. During this time he loses his job as a land surveyor. He is not the only one affected: the greater the unrest, the greater the number of surveyors who are given notice. Jews cannot go into the country without risking life and limb.

The situation for Jews in Italy, where Karl Wolfskehl and Peter Muenz still feel safe, is nowhere near as dire as that of Jews in Germany. Mussolini's regime with its 'Black Shirts' has seen its best years – during the 1920s when there is a crackdown on corrupt administrative practices, industrial production increases by 50 per cent. However, for a considerable time the population has been regimented by a hierarchy of organisations, the labour force has been

squeezed into a fascist mould and even leisure pursuits are conducted along the lines of *Kraft durch Freude*, 'Strength through Joy'. Despite restrictions on press freedom and a ban on opposition parties, the majority of people still support the regime.

Jews who have fled from Germany are not yet penalised by this but what is worrying them is Mussolini's obvious *rapprochement* with Hitler: in 1934 there was little indication of any fellow feeling. The *Duce* declared his willingness to stem the growing influence of his rival from the German Reich with military force if necessary. However, on 1 November 1936, Mussolini spoke openly about a 'Berlin–Rome Axis' for the first time – a few weeks after their joint intervention in the Spanish Civil War.

Karl Wolfskehl carefully watches the change in German–Italian relations: it seems that Germany and Italy have discovered common ground and this does not bode well for the future. Wolfskehl has been living with his secretary and lover, Margot Ruben, in his magical place of refuge, Recco, for the past two years – she, too, is from a Jewish home. Visitors are a welcome distraction. He needs contact with the outside world. Wolfskehl goes off occasionally to neighbouring Switzerland and to Genoa and Florence. When he is not travelling, he dictates long letters to friends.

The German poet accepts the inevitability of being outcast as a Jew but he suffers emotionally from it and tries to work through this hiatus in his life in his writing. In particular, Wolfskehl works on his renderings of medieval poetry. He works from literal draft translations sent to him from Palestine, however postal problems and other external factors hamper this project from the outset and he will abandon it in 1938.

The half-blind poet is one of the few Italian immigrants who are not plagued by constant worry about how to make ends meet on a daily basis: he is able to retain German citizenship and has some financial reserves in Germany still. What is hard for him is being parted from his library, which he left with his family in Kiechlinsbergen (Baden) and which has been sold to his Jewish publisher. Wolfskehl knows it is in good hands. He lives modestly but his financial means are slowly being eroded.

Being treated as anathema as a Jew and excluded from public literary life in Germany weighs more heavily on the poet than material needs. The loss of many friends, who have either died or have been dispersed throughout the world, distresses him. What does the future hold? For some time he has been thinking of resettling elsewhere. Europe as a possibility is gradually fading from the picture, as '*Faszism*', as Thomas Mann terms it, spreads; European culture

seems doomed. However, he feels too old for Palestine – so Wolfskehl asks a friend about Mexico.

Sixteen-year-old Peter Muenz, who is now attending secondary school in Florence, feels completely at home. He has made friends, speaks fluent Italian and he is living with his mother and sister. Of course he, too, follows the change in the German–Italian relationship apprehensively. As a pupil, he does not experience any negativity because of his Jewish origins. On the contrary: ‘That was the strange thing, in the Italian school the teachers and pupils liked me because I was German – they liked all Germans and when Hitler and Mussolini joined forces, I was celebrated even more for being German. Then I sang those fascist anthems in the school. I wasn’t a fascist of course but it didn’t bother me. Deep down I continued to be a Communist.’

His Greek language tutor, a German student called Immerwahr, reinforces his convictions after school by introducing him not only to Plato but also to Karl Marx. Peter wants to fight for his personal beliefs and take up arms in the Spanish Civil War – just like his aunt! His mother manages to prevent him from fulfilling his intentions.

One day an unexpected letter, which has far-reaching consequences for the Muenz family, arrives. A Florentine post office manager who is friendly with them knows that the family speaks English and so he drops by with a letter from a girl in Methven, New Zealand. Methven is a small place near Christchurch and the girl is seeking a pen-friend. Peter’s mother asks his sister, Eva, to answer the letter.

During 1937, Hitler and Mussolini come progressively closer to an alliance. In September a triumphal welcome, replete with busts of Roman emperors and rows of laurel trees, is prepared for the short Italian with his imperial gestures during a state visit to Berlin. The first wave of Jewish immigrants to Italy begin to think seriously about changing their place of refuge. At this time, Karl Wolfskehl decides that he will definitely leave Europe.