Exodus. Die Juden Europas nach dem Holocaust

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The origins of this volume lie in a conference held at the Berlin Topography of Terror museum in January 2017 under the auspices of the museum’s associated foundation, together with two other Berlin-based organisations: the Foundation Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe and the Institute for Prejudice and Conflict Research. Following a brief Introduction by co-editor Wolfgang Benz which, after outlining many of the themes of the conference, ends with a positive reference to the revival of Jewish life in Germany since unification, the volume consists of eleven essays divided into four sections entitled ‘Uprooting and New Start: Displaced Persons’, ‘After Exile’, ‘Expulsion as Collective Fate’ and ‘Bitter Balance’. The main emphasis is on the immediate post-war situation, although there are references in some of the essays both to earlier periods and more recent developments.

The most striking feature of this collection is the way it shows that the tribulations of Jewish communities did not end with the defeat of Nazi Germany. Anti-Semitism continued to manifest itself in a number of locations with the 1946 Kielce pogrom in Poland being one extreme example. In her essay ‘Flight to Berlin’, Angelika Königseder quotes from an anonymous letter which captures the mood of many Polish Jews after the death of forty-two Jews in this pogrom. It begins with the pointed questions: ‘Why must I leave my homeland? Why is there no place for me in the country to which I dedicated all the years of my youth?’ (p.22) This is just one example of a quotation from an individual affected by the events described, a feature of the book which reinforces what is stated in the title: that it is about the fate of individual people. Not all such testimonies are negative, as examples from the chapter on Australia show. Although many struggled with the trauma of their past and the early days in an unknown country were difficult, many of the quotations included by Konrad Kwiet reveal both gratitude to the country of immigration and pride in individual achievement.

These testimonies show how Jewish survivors could be both active subjects and objects of situations beyond their control. In fact, the early chapters illustrate how unwelcoming the post-war atmosphere could be. Until the foundation of Israel in May 1948, no country or authority was unreservedly welcoming to Holocaust survivors. This left some with no option but Palestine/Israel, hence the ironic question that did the rounds in Israel, quoted by Wolfgang Benz: ‘Did you come from conviction or from Germany?’ (p.11) This question reflects the assumption that many German Jews were not Zionists. For many, however, Palestine/Israel was the goal,
but one that was initially difficult to achieve. As the mandated power responsible for Palestine, the United Kingdom sought to limit Jewish immigration. This led to the creation of the Zionist organisation 'Bricha', the Hebrew word for flight and rescue, which sought to arrange illegal emigration routes from Europe to Palestine, in particular through Austria. Israeli sources speak of as many as 300,000 Jews from east and southeast Europe passing through Austria between the end of the war and the summer of 1950. Although ‘Bricha’ was an example of Jewish self-help, some were excluded. In his essay entitled 'Flight through Austria', which clearly explains a particularly complicated situation, Thomas Albrich points out that some refugees from Romania were regarded as ‘unsuitable material’ (p.55), that is to say not fit and healthy.

Compared with Britain, the United States was less obstructive. Given the large Jewish community, that country was an attractive alternative to Palestine. Yet here, too, Jews faced strong opposition. In her chapter on immigration from Germany to the USA, Juliane Wetzel refers to the Republican senator Alexander Wiley, who said that his country did not need 'rats' (p.81). This disturbing kind of comparison, which has resurfaced in recent comments about immigration by President Trump, is reminiscent of the notorious Nazi anti-Semitic film 'Jew Süß', which equated Jews with vermin. By contrast, some American bodies, not least the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, supported refugees. President Truman was also sympathetic; Wetzel speaks of up to 40,000 Displaced Persons moving to the USA between 1945 and 1948, with two thirds being Jewish. She adds that the amendment to the Act in 1950, although intended to facilitate the immigration of Holocaust survivors, made little difference since many potential candidates had already sought out another destination.

The other major power involved was the Soviet Union, since many Holocaust survivors originated from or found themselves in countries where its armies had driven out the Nazis. Several essays refer to the general willingness of the Soviet Union to allow Jews, many of whom held negative views about communism, to leave, in other words cross borders for which they were responsible. Albrich suggests that allowing mass migration was a weapon in the Cold War and a way of exporting both a social and political problem. If this explanation is plausible, Ladislau Gyémánt in his chapter on Romanian Jews after the Holocaust is less convincing when writing about the same phenomenon: Having spoken of nearly 30 per cent of Romanian Jews emigrating between 1948 and 1952 because of rising anti-Semitism, he adds that the Soviet Union's policy was based on its confidence that communism would soon spread to the Middle East. This surely requires further explanation, as Soviet anti-Semitism was hardly likely to endear communism to its recent victims settled in this region, even though the Soviet Union had supported the creation of Israel in the expectation that the new state would be pro-Moscow. Finally, in the case of the Soviet Union, it is important to note that some Holocaust survivors were welcome in its sphere of influence. In his chapter on German Jews in Latin America, Patrik von zur Mühlen refers to the situation in Mexico, where the numerically small number of communists enjoyed a dominant position in Jewish life in a way not found in other parts of the region. Among them was the writer Anna Seghers, who returned to Germany via New York, whilst some others were taken by a Soviet ship to Vladivostok whence they continued their journey westward by the Trans-Siberian Railway.

Viewed as a whole, this collection of essays provides a wide range of relevant information, which will be interesting to all those interested in the subject. It is unlikely that many readers will be aware of all the places where Holocaust survivors found refuge and what became of them. Mühlen concludes his chapter with a
section on Chile, Brazil, Uruguay and Argentina, countries where German Jews settled permanently. Here, with the exception of Brazil, German-Jewish communities also maintained their cultural traditions, including in some cases the use of German, until the 1980s. By contrast, the German-Jewish community in Shanghai disappeared with the communist victory in the civil war. According to Miriam Bistrovic, all that remains is the Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum where some restored German-language signs have been preserved.

It goes without saying that one book cannot include detailed reference to every country of Jewish emigration. Two, the absence of which nevertheless stands out, are the United Kingdom and Canada. If Canada, which has only a few brief mentions, had been included, the whole of the American continent would have been covered. Another regret that might be felt by some readers is that the contributions are quite short. Obviously this reflects their origins in conference papers but sometimes editors do allow these to be expanded, which, given the contributors' expertise as shown by publications elsewhere, would have been possible. By contrast, excellent indexes of names and locations together with a list of abbreviations are provided. It is particularly good that the names of places are often given in more than one language, a poignant reminder of the upheavals dealt with in the volume.

Finally, it is important to mention two chapters which do not deal directly with the main subject of the book but clearly relate to it. Markus Bauer writes about the German-speaking community that settled in the Bukovina region of south-east Europe after it came under Habsburg rule in the eighteenth century. With Hitler's accession to power it largely succumbed to nationalism; the Nazis, however, wanted it to resettle in occupied Poland, a policy which was executed when Bukovina was occupied. This displacement turned out to be temporary, as a second move was required when the occupation of Poland ended. In some quarters, the expulsion of Germans is equated with the fate of the victims of Nazism. Bauer underlines the specious nature of such comparisons by concluding his piece with a quotation from a priest from the region: 'What we sowed, we have now reaped.' (p.134)

In the second essay with the angry title 'Christian mercy for Jew murderers', Wolfgang Benz examines the shameful role played by forces within the Catholic Church in helping Nazi war criminals to escape justice. Sometimes they escaped by the same clandestine route over the Brenner Pass as that used by Jews on the way to Palestine. Benz quotes a story related by Simon Wiesenthal that on one occasion Jews and their persecutors slept in the same guest house near Merano without one group being aware of the presence of the other. Thereafter he cites examples of aid given by prominent Catholics, with particular emphasis on the Austrian bishop Alois Hudal, who for many years was close to the top hierarchy of the Church. Besides referring to individuals he helped, Benz quotes statements from the bishop that show unrepentant Nazi sympathies. His convincingly argued thesis is that Hudal was not a misguided individual but a symptom of a wider malaise that made Holocaust survivors with little choice but to emigrate and thereby both experience and shape the events so expertly presented in this volume, which can be recommended to both specialists and general readers.

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