

REMNANTS OF THE CATASTROPHE

German Jews in Belgium

After seizing power in Germany, National Socialism began the systematic persecution of all Jewish life and it became increasingly impossible for Jews to earn their living. Thousands of those who had to leave Germany understandably sought refuge in the neighbouring countries of Holland, France and Belgium.

What the Belgian people, its Government, authorities and leading men of all parties did for Jewish refugees from Germany between 1933 and the German invasion and later during the hard years of persecution will always be a glorious page in Belgian history. In its economic structure, Belgium is not a country suitable for the reception of immigrants. Although industry and commerce maintain a large part of the population in this small country of about eight million inhabitants, a considerable number of Jews from Germany were allowed to establish themselves before the war. Several industries were founded or expanded by German Jews in Belgium. This country, which more than any other depends on exports for its existence, is indebted to many a Jewish business man from Germany for an expansion of its export trade.

Many thousands of others found a temporary refuge in Belgium, enabling them to organise their emigration to overseas countries.

It will never be forgotten that the Belgian Government, and the Belgian authorities, aided, of course, by the great Jewish organisations, made great financial sacrifices for the Jews from Germany and later for those from Austria. It must also be remembered that despite the many problems besetting her own countrymen, Belgium spontaneously declared her readiness to receive a large proportion of the emigrants on the "St. Louis" who had been refused permission to land in Cuba in 1939. Belgian welfare authorities have always applied the same rates of relief for the needy German-Jewish refugees as for their own people.

Soon after the German invasion of Belgium, anti-Semitic persecution began. On April 22, 1942, the Gazette of the Military Commander in Belgium and Northern France published a decree which represented the first act in a whole series of measures of persecution and was exclusively directed against German Jews. Paragraph (1) says that "every Jew residing abroad on November 27, 1941, has lost German citizenship," and paragraph (2) that "the capital of every Jew who loses German citizenship is forfeit to the German Reich as a result of the loss of German citizenship."

A few months later, the great process of extermination began. All Jews were summoned to the barracks of Dossin near Malines, from where they were later deported to Auschwitz. The outlook for those who did not answer the summons and did not find refuge with a Belgian friend somewhere in town or in the country was black

indeed. They were caught in the streets like mad dogs and sometimes almost beaten to death in the cellars of the Gestapo. Whole streets, even whole districts were sealed off and all houses searched for Jews, and all were taken: women, old men, children. No pen, however powerful, can describe that scene.

There is reliable evidence about the first four transports (each of which numbered 1,000 Jews) leaving Malines for Auschwitz between August 4 and 18, 1942. Only eighteen of all these men, women and children escaped extermination and returned to Belgium. Among these four thousand Jews there were 535 children, not one of whom escaped the gas chambers. Out of a total number of 25,441 Jews who were deported from Malines, only 1,156 returned, just above four per cent. Of these 25,441 victims, about 8,000 were German Jews.

Thousands of German-Jewish refugees, who had lived in Belgium until May 10, 1940, were arrested in France and deported from there. Hitler's executioners were always thorough in their work. Only about 4,000 German-Jewish refugees in Belgium escaped extermination. Belgians, in defiance of all danger, gave these men and women shelter and enabled them to live. Their magnificent daring, their great act of human solidarity with the victims of the worst barbarism in world history will never be forgotten.

Organisation of Nazi Victims

In September, 1944, while war was still continuing on Belgian soil, a few Jews from Germany founded the *Comité Israélite des Réfugiés Victimes des Lois Raciales (COREF)*, following the initiative of Erich Gompertz, who did so much for German-Jewish refugees. Many hundreds of people turned to this organisation in their great distress, because the times were very difficult for Jewish refugees from Germany, who risked being considered *allemands ennemis* and treated as such because of their German origin.

All those who worked in COREF in those days recoil at the memory of what they saw. People came to them, sick, broken, starved, emaciated. Many of them hardly had a shirt on their backs. They were not only Jews from Germany and Austria, but also German political refugees who had been constantly engaged in an active struggle against the Nazi regime.

Apart from providing relief and medical care, COREF organised a legal aid centre for all problems concerning refugees, instituted inquiries about the fate of deported and missing families and did everything humanly possible to induce the Belgian authorities to introduce a Bill cancelling the sequestration of property belonging to those German nations who had taken refuge in Belgium for racial, political or religious reasons. Later, fulfilment of these tasks was eased for COREF by important sums which the International Refugee Organisation (IRO) made available. COREF was now enabled not only to increase relief scales, but also to grant loans to many refugees, amounting to a maximum of 40,000 Belgian francs in each case, with a view to helping them re-establish themselves.

Many years have elapsed since then. A number of those who were in Belgium in 1945 have gone to other countries, others have returned to Germany. The number of deaths is particularly high as a result of the privations and the material and psychological suffering during the years of persecution.

To-day, ten years after the collapse of National Socialism, hundreds of sick and old people from Germany, who are no longer able to work, are still waiting to have their compensation claims acknowledged. The word "compensation" is particularly out of place in a country formerly occupied by the Nazis, such as Belgium, because there is hardly one family among the German-Jewish refugees which has not lost some of its members: children, husband or wife, brothers or sisters, through deportation and in the gas chambers.

Of about 220 needy persons under the care of COREF, the following have suffered through deportation: 34 married couples have lost 27 children; 24 men have lost 3 wives and 22 children; 126 women have lost 52 husbands and five grandchildren.

More than 60 per cent. of those cared for by COREF are of an advanced age, i.e. between 60 and 95.

Among those *seriously ill* there are: 29 cases of heart disease, 15 cases of cancer, six cases of almost total blindness, 12 cases of tuberculosis, 14 cases of debility caused by old age.

Almost all of those under the care of COREF are still accommodated in dwellings unfit for human habitation. Many occupy attics or basements, and almost all dwellings have serious defects, not having been repaired for years and showing all the signs of continuous wear and tear. Water and toilets are from one to three flights of stairs higher or lower than the dwelling, sometimes even outside, which is a great hardship for old and sick people.

Thanks to the "Leo Baeck Charitable Trust" of the Council of Jews from Germany, COREF was enabled to make these impoverished and sick people a modest special grant in 1954, which provided some measure of relief in many a case.

COREF will continue its work until the day when all needy Jewish men and women from Germany enjoy a modest subsistence minimum.