

Expelling Jews From Pre-War German Society

Excerpt from interview with Dr. Susanne Heim

Max Planck Institute for the History of Science in Berlin

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Interviewers: Amos Goldberg, Amos Morris-Reich

Q- To continue in another area, Jews were very much involved in the elite of German society during the Weimar Republic — in the press, the arts, academia, some economic aspects — yet it seems that it was very easy to expel them from German society altogether during the course of a few years in the 1930s.

H- It worked over a few years, but with an enormous propaganda effort as well. I think it has also to do with the same attitude they had towards Eastern Europe. One main point was to redistribute resources and opportunities in society. I wouldn't say this explains how it could happen so fast, but I think it was an important factor, at least, to give certain privileges to the non-Jewish Germans, to the disadvantage of the Jews. For instance, the scholars we spoke about were very young. Most of them studied during the 1920s or early 1930s, with the prospect of being unemployed afterwards. The German law for the restoration of the professional civil service of April 1933 threw the Jews, communists, and socialists out of their jobs in administration and state affairs. This law was one of the first career opportunities for the young professionals, because they were able to take over the positions that Jews had beforehand. The whole question of "Aryanization" works that way.

There was of course an enormous amount of antisemitic propaganda, and at the beginning, an atmosphere of fear and intimidation. Many Germans had, or thought they had, good reason to agree with the new government, and to take advantage of it, because unemployment was reduced, and they could take over certain jobs, or shops, or property from the Jews. It worked like that even

throughout the first years of the war, when the non-Jewish population was proud of what had come out of Germany. They had felt so humiliated after World War I, as we can see from the diaries of Viktor Klemperer who describes it more as opportunism than as an initiative taken over by "ordinary Germans." He says that they agreed with the anti-Jewish policy, but it was not their main concern. They didn't protest because for other reasons they found the new government at least acceptable, or else they actually agreed with it, or were even happy about it. Later on, according to Klemperer, the really vigorous and brutal antisemitism came out during the last years of the war, when Germany was no longer successful. At that point many Germans were afraid that if Germany lost the war, the Jews or the Allies or whoever would treat them the same way they treated the Jews, and so they stuck to their government because they were afraid.

Q- You said that German society profited from the Jews being expelled from their society. But wouldn't you then conclude that Jews were not really integrated into German society before 1933, so it was very easy to expel them after 1933?

H- I'm not sure about that, because the Jews considered themselves to be part of German society, and not just part of another religion. For many of them, their main identity was German and not Jewish.

Q- Some people comment that it was a one-sided love affair.

H- Yes, a love affair, because I think they were accepted in large parts of the society; in other parts of society they were still considered to be a problem, or aliens, or it was embarrassing to be Jewish, or to marry a Jew, or something like that. But if you use the term "love affair," I really don't know who of the non-Jewish Germans really loved the Jews as Jews, in the same way as many of the German Jews loved Germany and suffered very much from being thrown out of society. Who really defended them? Very, very few people, and mostly not on an ideological basis, but very often on the basis of personal

relationships.

Q- Do you think there was something special in the relationship between Germans and Jews from the end of the nineteenth century and during the Weimar Republic that in one way or another led to the events of the late 1930s and the 1940s?

H- Of course there is a continuity, but I think not in a way that there were no alternatives. Of course, antisemitism and the Nazi movement didn't just fall from the sky, but had its roots in German society and in the history of antisemitism in Germany. But I do think there were alternatives. At this point we can say it was an illusion to believe that the Nazis wouldn't remain in power for long. This is what kept many Jews from emigrating, because they thought, governments were coming and going, so why not the Nazi government as well? At the very beginning, during the first weeks and months there was this illusion. And I think there was a real chance that Nazi rule wouldn't have lasted twelve years but maybe only until 1934.

You can see the continuity in the history of antisemitism and also perhaps in certain authoritarian tendencies in German society, but it also required the policy of intimidation and terror for the Nazi government to remain in power.

You can see this throughout the 1930s, but with regard to some questions and political problems, the Nazi government attempted certain solutions, and only continued with them after seeing how well they worked. For instance, with regard to the euthanasia program, they tried to find out if people would accept their "unfit" relatives being killed. Would they feel released to be rid of them, or would they really protest against it? Also, for instance — and I don't want to over-emphasize this — there was a very interesting reaction towards the non-Jewish wives of Jewish husbands who protested in the Rosenstrasse in February 1943 and succeeded in getting their husbands released. It was the consequence of a very complicated and very specific political situation at that moment of the war. But it was also a ray of hope. If this had happened

more often, you can't know what might have resulted. I don't know if the Germans really had the ability to force the government to resign by public protest. Maybe there would have had to be a real riot to do this, or maybe only the army could have forced the government to act differently. This is speculation, but I think it was not a one way street.

Source: CD Multimedia, 'Eclipse Of Humanity', Yad Vashem, 2000.