

Dealing with Jewish Refugees during World War II: Conflicts and Cooperation

Veranstalter: Barbara Häne / Sarah Hagmann / Catrina Langenegger / Olga Pollack, Basel Graduate School of History

Datum, Ort: 14.11.2018–15.11.2018, Basel

Bericht von: Kathrin Schwarz, Technische Universität Berlin

Taking the MS St. Louis as an example, a ship which set off from Hamburg in 1939 with over 900 Jewish refugees who were denied entry to Cuba, the United States and Canada in spite of valid landing certificates, OLGA POLLACK (Zurich) opened the workshop indicating the key questions. The example proofs how liberal states, individuals and Jewish organizations were interconnected and interdependent when facing Jewish refugees during World War II. This framework and their agents, that often acted unnoticed behind the scenes, were stressed in this workshop. The workshop showed that the refugees' point of view is a crucial source but for a deeper understanding of the history of Jewish flight and exile it is also important to understand why and how Jewish organizations or national actors dealt with refugees. In short: what were their agendas, ideologies, mind-sets and personnel, and what role did refugee camps play?

The first panel focused on Switzerland. The position Switzerland was holding internationally, was determined by two factors. First, the role Geneva played as a seat of many international organizations and as a center for worldwide diplomacy, with the *League of Nations* settling between the World Wars. Second, Switzerland being a neutral state during the Second World War, spared from direct war actions. International Jewish organizations tried to use this position for rescue attempts. The closing citation of BARBARA HÄNE (Basel): „This is a lousy world and it seems that everything is still rather messy“¹, written 1956 by VSIA's president Otto Heim, describes in general two problems, that occurred in the institutional organizations as well as in others: (Inner) personal conflicts and financial dependencies. Häne analyzed the relationship between the Swiss Federa-

tion of Jewish communities (SIG), the Association of Swiss Jewish Refugee Aid and Welfare Organizations (VSIA/VSJF) and the American Joint Distribution Committee (AJDC) during the Second World War. The SIG decided to centralize the refugee aid work when the Swiss government instructed them to take the financial responsibility for Jewish refugees. The most important partner for funding was the AJDC, which created a highly dependant position for the VSIA who worked under the SIG. Together with inner personal conflicts between the local Jewish communities and the SIG's president Saly Mayer, this dependency was highly recognizable in spring 1940 when the inner conflicts broke out. Saly Mayer had a double function as president of the SIG and the AJDC's representative in Switzerland, but lost his function in the SIG. Communication between the organizations became complicated, which had a negative effect on the public perception of both Saly Mayer and the refugee aid which was later tried to be improved.²

ANDREA KIRCHNER (Frankfurt/Jerusalem) and ANNE LEPPER (Berlin), regarding other cases, found similar reasons for conflicts or cooperation. Andrea Kirchner presented other organizations with a Zionist agenda based in Geneva. Her talk shed light on how many organizations took part in the refugee aid. Her focus lay on the „Jewish Agency“ representation, led by Richard Lichtheim. Mainly focusing on organizing Palestine Certificates, he tried to make plans for the time after the end of the war, as he presumed that there would be a Jewish refugee problem coming. For this, he joined a private inter-confessional circle, called „Geneva Study Group for Post-War Refugee Problems“, whose members were representatives of Churches, Jewish and non-Jewish aid agencies. Inner and outer disputes built up, as different agendas and expectations about how and where the refugees should be saved and whether some refugees should be prioritised in saving or not.

¹ Otto H. Heim. Brief an Charles H. Jordan. O.o. 05.12.1956. Signatur: AfZ:IB SIG-Archiv/2377.

² Hanna Zweig-Strauss, Saly Mayer (1882-1950). Ein Retter jüdischen Lebens während des Holocaust. Köln 2007.

Anne Lepper showed the conflict between the experienced head and founder of the Relief Committee for Jewish War Victims (RELICO), Adolf Silberschein, and the considerably younger Gerhart Riegner. Both worked in the office of the World Jewish Congress in Geneva. Divergent basic conditions, like different mindsets and levels of pressure, age and experience, affected their work and they positioned themselves along main conflict lines. While Silberschein bent the legal framework and got briefly arrested in 1942 for helping fabricate and smuggle illegal passports, Riegner tried to work within the legal possible framework and cooperate with other organizations. In the lively response of ERIK PETRY (Basel) he provokingly asked whether there was anyone saved at all. By all conflicts, there was the unifying motive beneath it, which drew those persons to work and to argue, namely rescuing as much as possible. It was claimed that dealing with international organizations meant that one should look at the biographies beneath it as the position of the representatives and the personal narratives are closely entwined

The global approach of the second panel showed how organizations, even with a global network, were limited in their possibilities by national legal frameworks and networks of trust. SARAH HAGMANN (Basel) stated that by looking at organizations during the 1930s and 1940s as historical actors, additional value could be extracted regarding Jewish agency and perspectives. She focused on the cooperation between the Far Eastern Jewish Central Information Bureau in Harbin and the Hilfsverein der deutschen Juden in Berlin. In her example of a family's correspondence on their way to Shanghai and Harbin, she showed how the organization's worldwide close network functioned. Crucial information was provided that way about the conditions and circumstances of the different destinations to which emigration was still possible. KATHARINA FRIEDLA (Jerusalem/Warsaw) presented a case study about a group of Jewish orthodox Yeshiva students and their rescue. Their journey from Soviet occupied Vilna to Vladivostok via Kobe, Japan by train, then distributed in other countries, proved to be not only a rescue but an act

of self-assertion as they held fast to their religious tradition even under difficult circumstances. They had to develop surviving strategies to help cope with the strenuous escape by train as well as ensure that they could fulfill their religious obligations. In that way, emigration was not only surviving but an empowered way of keeping identity. Apart from this, it showed how many helping persons and organizations needed to be involved. The microhistorical way of approaching the global as one could alternatively call this biographical analyze of Jewish emigration during the Second World War illuminates another side of relief organizations' work: the flexibility they needed, as travel possibilities, political conditions and legal frameworks constantly changed.

In her paper, AMELIA ALLSOP (London) explained how the Hong Kong Jewish Refugee Society collaborated with the local authorities and which colonial prejudices they met and at the same time had themselves. The small Jewish community there was predominantly Mizrachi, coming from Baghdad. The Jewish refugees were treated like Chinese and other refugees by the authorities, rather than as a persecuted group, and from 1941 to 1945, all the stateless refugees had to live in a restricted area in Shanghai. Even with raised fund money and collaborations on local, regional and international scale, the Jewish Refugee Society remained powerless against the deportation policy and rescue attempts often failed. In Shanghai the „port of last resort“³ the Jewish refugees encountered a uniquely setting of British imperial and Chinese politics but yet, still the same prejudicial response as an alien group. The panel was commented by GABRIELE ANDERL (Vienna) who reflected on the experience those refugees made in Asia. Anderl referred to those countries as a mixture of compromise solutions and utopia. Another interesting remark was made to the Jewish social standing and self-understanding in colonial societies. Depending on the social standing, not regarding the actual background, Jews were

³ Amelia Allsop, *Refugee Memory of Shanghai*. In: *A Borrowed Place. Jewish Refugees in Hong Kong*, <https://hongkongrefuge.wordpress.com/2018/11/08/refugee-memory-of-shanghai/> (19.01.2019).

considered „wealthy“ Europeans or of „poor“ Sephardic or Asian origin. In newspapers, Jews were often simply Germans and not recognized as a persecuted group.

The keynote lecture of MARC PERRENOUD (Neuchâtel) focused on Switzerland in 1938 and 1948. His question was whether those were two crucial moments for the Jewish Refugees and for Switzerland as the Évian Conference took place in 1938. Perrenoud unfolded the historiography of Switzerland's role before and during the Second World War which was most famously researched by the 1996 established Independent Commission of Experts Switzerland⁴.

The following day reflected on a personal scale with refugees' experience of arriving on the one side (panel three) and on the political and national reaction on the other side. JOSEPH CRONIN (London) presented his current research project about German speaking Jewish refugees in India during the War. He reported about conceptional and methodical challenges while researching which shed enriching new perspectives on the whole workshop. Cronin argued that besides the refugee's view other approaches should also be taken into consideration. In Cronin's case, the political dimension surrounding the refugees in British India showed how colonial politics met with the British mind-set, as the British officials were mostly concerned about the refugees actually being German spies. They feared national socialist infiltration that could support the Independence Movement in India. PHILIPP STROBL (Innsbruck/Melbourne) collected and compared the experiences of Austrian Jewish refugees in Australia and tried to categorize their experiences and intercultural encounters. It showed that to explain the different experiences of members of the same group, the context of society in which their early formative years took place, has to be regarded. It is important not only to have the personal, biographical view, as is often put forward in this field, but to knot it to other approaches to gain insights and improve research. STEFANIE MAHRER (Bern) outlined in her response that further research needed to be done about refugees in Asia and Australia. The colonial system of the British empire already started to dissolve when the

Jewish refugees arrived. The impact of this critical time on the attitude towards refugees, besides antisemitism, forms an own narrative.

Arriving in a new country not automatically meant going back to a normal life. The national states followed different policies how to deal with Jewish refugees apart from the regulations entering the country. Some of these camp systems were presented in the fourth and last panel. CATRINA LANGENEGGER (Basel) showed how the system of camps was organized in Switzerland. The „reception camps“ were militarily coordinated from September 1942 as civil refugee camps were not able to handle the constantly growing number of refugees anymore. Langenegger managed to map 220 of those camps, some built up only for a few weeks, some for years, and explained the kind of buildings and the reporting system to ensure a certain order in those camps. Showing four examples of camps and their evaluation by an appointed commissioner for refugees, Langenegger outlined that the categories of gender, age and religion were important in the evaluation of the camps. KATRIN SIPP-PEL (Vienna) emphasized that gender issues played a role in Portugal, too, concerning Jewish refugees. Under Salazar's rule there was first imprisonment following different kinds of accommodations serving as camps. Not allowed to work, they were forced to idleness as Portugal, similar to Switzerland, regarded itself as transit country only. Depending on the location, the Jewish refugees met locals. Outstanding were the reports of female Jewish refugee behaving scandalously, meaning going alone to cafés or smoking, but also influencing the fashion of the local women as fashion icons. ANDRÁS SZÉCSÉNYI (Budapest) showed how approximately 1,500 to 2,000 Hungarian deportees of Bergen-Belsen came to Sweden in 1945. The camps resembled rather sanatoriums, as they were established for health recovery and medical treatment.

The camps as a space influenced the refugees and the population as a whole. Gender played a crucial role in the reception of

⁴Independent Commission of Experts Switzerland – Second World War (ICE). In: <https://www.uek.ch/en/index.htm> (27.02.2019).

refugees, and their arriving, in other countries. This aspect itself could form a workshop of its own and was also part of the finale round table discussion. The impression of CHRISTIAN HÖSCHLER (Bad Arolsen) was that a broader approach was used to developments and entanglements than was practiced previously. SUSANNE HEIM (Berlin) confirmed that the view on Jewish refugees shifted from victim to actor in recent years and that it was important that so much research was done in this field today. Refugees did not form a homogenous group, as was shown, but were very diverse, as were the Jewish organizations and their attempts of rescue. The current discussions about refugees lead the discussion to the practical side of research. It was stated that contemporary rescue aid organizations mostly are not aware of the historical situation. Attempts of bringing them together with historians did not lead to develop progress or strategies although the results could lead to a different public perception. Another point was that these organizations were so widespread that a single biography cannot cover all of the structures and aspects. Bigger research groups and other (digital) ways of doing research are coming in historiography and offer a solution for dealing with the great amount of information archives can provide, not only for Jewish refugee organizations.

Conference Overview:

Panel I: Individuals and International Organizations in Switzerland

Chair: PATRIK SÜESS (Basel)

BARBARA HÄNE (Basel): „The VSJF assisted these emigrants 100%, which (...) would not have been possible without the generous help of AJDC.“ - The relationship between the Association of Swiss Jewish Refugee Aid and Welfare Organizations (VSJF) and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (AJDC) during World War 2

ANDREA KIRCHNER (Frankfurt/Jerusalem): Richard Lichtheim (Jewish Agency/Geneva) and the Jewish refugee problem

ANNE LEPPER (Berlin): „Fire extinguisher and a Jewish Red Cross“ – Adolf Silber-

schein's RELICO and the Jewish Relief and Rescue activities in Switzerland during the Shoah

Respondent: ERIK PETRY (Basel)

Panel II: International Organizations between Asia and Europe

Chair: OLGA POLLACK (Basel)

SARAH HAGMANN (Basel): „Then he can emigrate to the Far East at his own risk“: Cooperation between the Far Eastern Jewish Central Information Bureau in Harbin and the Hilfsverein der deutschen Juden in Berlin, 1938–1939

KATHARINA FRIEDLA (Jerusalem/Warsaw): Lithuania – Japan – Shanghai: Jewish Refugees Trajectories of Survival and Rescue during the Second World War

AMELIA ALLSOP (London): „Shanghai's problem is Hong Kong's concern also“: Baghdadi Jews and the Hong Kong Jewish Refugee Society, 1938–1940

Respondent: GABRIELE ANDERL (Vienna)

Key note lecture

MARC PERRENOUD (Neuchâtel) 1938, 1948. Two crucial moments for the Jewish Refugees and for Switzerland?

Panel III: Arriving in New Countries

Chair: RHEA RIEBEN (Basel)

JOSEPH CRONIN (London): „I do not trust her protestations of life-long admiration for the British“: The rhetoric of visa applications, affidavits and responses to Jews seeking refuge in colonial India, 1938–1941

PHILIPP STROBL (Innsbruck/Melbourne): From „Dago“ to „Reffo“ – Ambivalent Experiences of Encounter of Jewish refugees in Australia (1938–1942)

Respondent: STEFANIE MAHRER (Basel)

Panel IV: Camps

Chair: LISA-MARIE ZOLLER-BLUNDELL (Basel)

CATRINA LANGENEGGER (Basel): „Housing in an Institution like this is in itself Humiliating for the Refugees.“ Reception Camps

in Switzerland 1942–1945

KATRIN SIPPEL (Vienna): Jewish refugees in Portugal 1938–1945

ANDRÁS SZÉCSÉNYI (Budapest): The Liberated Hungarian Deportees of Bergen-Belsen in Sweden (1945–1946)

Respondent: SIMON ERLANGER (Lucerne)

Roundtable Discussion

Moderation: STEFANIE MAHRER (Basel)

Participants: GABRIELE ANDERL (Vienna), SUSANNE HEIM (Berlin), CHRISTIAN HÖSCHLER (Bad Arolsen), SIMON ERLANGER (Lucerne), MARC PERRENOUD (Neuchâtel)

Tagungsbericht *Dealing with Jewish Refugees during World War II: Conflicts and Cooperation*. 14.11.2018–15.11.2018, Basel, in: H-Soz-Kult 05.04.2019.