The Irish Context of *Kristallnacht*

Refugees and Helpers

Gisela Holfter (ed.)

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Editor/Herausgeber/Eagarthóir

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Foreword I

Thomas Nader, Austrian Ambassador to Ireland

Seventy-five years on, in 2013, we are still trying to grasp how it could have happened, to explain the unexplainable. We have an obligation towards the victims to remember them and to make sure that the Holocaust is never repeated.

Allow me to do my share by doing something I have never done before: by telling you how those events that started seventy-five and a half years ago affected my mother and her Jewish family.

Vienna, 1900: The world's fourth largest city with 1.67 million inhabitants, of which 147,000 are Jews (8.7%). My grandmother is born, gets an education, finds a job, becomes one of the chief accountants of the Austrian social security system. She marries late. In 1931 my mother is born.

Vienna, 1933/34: The conservative government gradually abolishes democracy and after a short but bloody civil war establishes the Austro-Fascist dictatorship. The first detention camp is built in Wöllersdorf, south of Vienna. My grandmother, being an active social democrat, loses her job but manages to retain her small apartment in a semi-detached house behind Schloss Schönbrunn.

Vienna, 1934: The census shows 1.93 million inhabitants, of which 176,000 are Jews (9.1%).

March 1938: For the world at large, World War II started on 1 September 1939; for my family it started on 12 March 1938. With the invasion and annexation of Austria, the infamous Nuremberg Laws became applicable in my country. Arrests started immediately. In the first days after the invasion, 72,000 people were arrested. The first transports to Dachau left Vienna shortly afterwards. My grandmother, already jobless, a divorcee and single mother, now loses her apartment. The new owners leave her in no doubt: should she dare to take any of the furniture with her, she will be taken to court for theft and – of course – lose the case. She finds refuge with one of her brothers, a dentist with a big apartment and his office in the 9th District. My mother, who had started school in September 1937, is forced to change school to one of the *Judenschulen* in the 1st District.

The November pogroms in Vienna did not last for one night only, but for several days. The excesses were such that even the Nazis got worried. My mother has no memories of the pogroms at all, but it seems that the apartment of my grand-uncle was left in peace.

The situation was different for the man who was to marry my grandmother during their exile. He was also a Jew and social democrat. His younger daughter, born in 1932, remembers that one evening a group of men, among them at least one man in uniform, forcibly gained entry to their apartment. At that time her mother was still alive, but very sick and in a wheelchair. The men wanted to take my step-grandfather-to-be with them, but seeing the severely handicapped woman, even the ruthless could be shamed. They left without him. My step-grandfather's wife died in hiding in southern France in 1943; she is buried in Auch.

The November pogroms were a very clear signal, and whoever read it correctly, was young enough, healthy enough and had the means left the country. Two of my great-grandparents were murdered in the concentration camps. A great-aunt committed suicide. She was married to a Christian. She believed rumours claiming that she and her Christian husband would be transported to the camps. To save him, she killed herself. Most of my granduncles and grand-aunts survived, scattered around the globe.

My grandfather, who had divorced my mother's mother before the war, obtained an entry visa to Shanghai. With this visa he got a British transit visa. He entered England and lived there until he died. He never tried to find my mother after the war. In the 1970s my mother attempted to find him. She only managed to meet him once before he died, forty years after they had last seen each other.

My mother and her mother managed to get to Paris. They obtained visas for Australia. Everything was ready, their belongings on the ship, when my mother got critically ill, with scarlet fever and, later on, typhoid fever. When she left the hospital, the ship had left and the Nazis had entered Paris. They managed to flee to southern France and survived there in hiding.

My grand-uncle, with whom my mother and grandmother had stayed after being thrown out of their house, managed to get to Paris as well, with his two daughters and his wife. They hoped to get visas for New Zealand. The answer from New Zealand was only partly positive: his wife and two daughters were welcome, but they had no use for a thirty-eight-year-old dentist. Increasingly desperate, they continued to look for other possibilities. When help came it was in the person of a young Chilean diplomat who gave them visas. Later he would become world famous. His name was Pablo Neruda.

Some afterthoughts

My grandmother, my mother, my step-grandfather and his two daughters returned to Vienna in 1947. One day, my grandmother wanted to show my

mother where they had lived before the war. My mother describes the scene as eerie. When they arrived at their former home, the neighbours came out, looking worried. The thieves and robbers were obviously afraid that the former owners would come and claim what was rightfully theirs. Suddenly, one neighbour came up to my grandmother, greeting her in a very friendly tone, remarking how nice it was to see my grandmother again and that her appearance "had not changed a bit". Upon which my grandmother remarked to my mother in a bitter voice when they were alone again: "How dare she say I look the same, after what we have been through."

Vienna, 1951: The city was slowly being rebuilt. The census showed 1.62 million inhabitants, of which a mere 9,000 were Jews (0.6%). My family, having been christened during the war, were now officially "Protestants".

I asked my grandmother once: "Grandma, what did you do after the war if you were out and about in Vienna and suddenly a person you knew from before the war approached you on the street?" "I would change to the other side of the street," she answered, "and definitely not talk to him or her". "Why?" I asked. "Because we never knew what they might have done to our kind during those years."

Foreword II

Harald Seibel, First Secretary to the German Embassy in Ireland

This volume, which represents the preliminary conclusion of more than a decade of intensive research and which is a follow-up to conferences held in 2004 and 2008,[1] is a very special one since it reminds us of one of the darkest chapters in modern German history – the so-called *Reichskristallnacht* or – as historians more correctly prefer to call it – the *Reichspogromnacht*, or the *Novemberpogrome*. Seventy-five years ago, on 9 and 10 November 1938, more than 1,000 synagogues all over the then German Reich were burnt down, hundreds of Jewish people were murdered. Thousands of shops and businesses owned or run by Jews were destroyed. Jewish community halls, graveyards and chapels were vandalised or deliberately demolished. Thousands of Jewish people were dispossessed of their apartments.

The pogroms followed the assassination of the German diplomat Ernst Eduard vom Rath in Paris by Polish-born Herschel Grünspan (Grynszpan), a seventeen-year-old Jewish juvenile whose family had been displaced by the Nazi regime. Although neither Hitler nor his closest confidants, among them Minister for Propaganda Joseph Goebbels, gave direct order to the authorities to unleash these raids, the regime did not do anything to prevent them. On the contrary – any anti-Jewish action was publicly welcomed and all attempts to stop or interrupt the pogroms were suppressed.

Reichskristallnacht did not mark the beginning of the persecution as such of Jews in the Third Reich. Following a significant number of anti-Jewish laws and administrative reprisals that came into effect shortly after Hitler seized power in 1933, the November pogroms "only" represented another sad and tragic escalation in anti-Jewish policy. It was the prelude to spontaneous mass incarcerations, the unfounded imprisonment of tens of thousands of Jews in concentration camps and the deliberate displacement of the Jewish population. Many Jews were forced to emigrate, others preferred to leave Germany and Austria "voluntarily" before having to suffer hatred, violence or other forms of backlash.

Emigration of Jews in the 1930s and 1940s took place in a very detrimental environment. On the initiative of President Roosevelt, about forty

1 The 7th Limerick Conference in Irish-German Studies, on "German-speaking Exiles in Ireland 1933–1945" (10–12 June 2004), and the 10th Limerick Conference in Irish-German Studies, in cooperation with the Gesellschaft für Exilforschung, on "Emigration – Exile – Immigration – Re-migration" (30 May – 1 June 2008).

countries and an equivalent number of NGOs came together in Evian, France, in July 1938 in order to discuss the issue of increasing numbers of Jews fleeing Nazi persecution. Neither the United States nor Great Britain turned out to be willing to grant Jewish people the right of immigration. With the vast majority of the participating countries following the American and British example, all hopes for Jewish refugees to find escape outside the Reich were rapidly destroyed. The Evian Conference was considered to be a failure. Ireland participated in the conference but did not adopt a more favourable stance on granting the right of immigration to Jewish people either.

However, a small number of Jewish refugees found their way to Ireland. In this volume we will learn more about how they were received. We will learn more about the political, social and economic environment they encountered. We will learn about their personal experience and we will gather information on how the helpers felt. Of course, this volume is to be seen as part of a long-term research project. Of course, it has an academic background. But focussing strongly on personal experiences means putting people in the centre of the discussion. This is what makes this volume so special. By focussing on and listening to people who still carry a memory as contemporary witnesses, the volume reminds us that history never ends. It reminds us of our past, it helps us to understand the present and it warns us to avoid repeating past mistakes in the future.

This book helps us to understand the Holocaust better and to maintain its memory at a time when post-war generations tend to forget about it or to underestimate the effects that a policy can have which has no other aim than to defame, stigmatise, criminalise or persecute people just for being different. We need to make sure that the Holocaust never happens again. This volume and the 2013 Limerick conference on which it is based make an important contribution to that effort. I therefore wish to thank the Centre for Irish-German Studies for putting together this interesting collection. I also thank the contributors for their willingness to participate and share their thoughts and ideas with us. And I wish to thank the readers for the great interest they show in this topic.