Julius Meyer: A Jewish German Compares his Experiences as a German Soldier in the First World War and as a Jew in the November Pogrom of 1938 (Retrospective Account)

Abstract

Julius Meyer was a Frankfurt lawyer who was persecuted as a Jew and deported to Buchenwald during the November Pogrom of 1938 (also known *Kristallnacht*, or the Night of Broken Glass). After his release, he and his wife fled to London. Later, he recorded his recollections of Buchenwald, comparing his time there with his experiences as a German soldier in France during the First World War. The preparation and execution of the November pogrom reminded him of pre-planned hostage takings in wartime France and brought to mind the lists of prominent citizens that were drawn up in advance during World War I, in order to facilitate arrests or deportations to forced labor camps, in the event of actual or suspected attacks on the German military.

Source

[...]

Peacetime. Only a few gentlemen from the board give any sign of the alarm messages that occasionally arrive outside. The entire evening, Dr. Blau sits in his seat thinking. He has an inkling or knows what is to come. The meeting comes to an end. Hugo Hoffmann takes me with him in his car. We drive across Opernplatz. There is an SS assembly outside the Opera House; the square is in darkness. We are told that this is a mourning vigil for the murdered diplomat [Ernst vom Rath].

The next morning, November 10th. I leave home at 9 o'clock for an appointment at the District Court. Near my house I meet Dr. P. I want to speak to him about yesterday evening. He is usually quite taciturn, even more so today. Short, precise sentences, spoken too softly, not intended for other ears. "There is a new wave of arrests." Apparently, the community board and council are the targets. "We passed you a poisoned chalice when we elected you to the community council." After a few steps: "The synagogues are on fire." He mumbles this, I could not understand him very clearly, and can make no connection between fire and the synagogues. He repeats: "The syna-gogues ... are burn-ing ..." Now I understand. Now I know that I am back at war. They have declared war on us, after already rendering us defenseless years ago. We have no press; we must keep our mouths shut or the terror will immediately target each one of us. Now our nerves are strained in a way that otherwise occurs only in battle. Let somebody else deal with my court appointment today. First, we call our friends from a phone booth. We learn in the process that police have also been searching for a colleague who used to belong to the community board and emigrated some time ago. The list they are using was therefore prepared long ago, since people who only joined the community organizations recently have not yet been arrested.

This all feels so familiar: in Douai in 1917 I was tasked with preparing a list of some forty prominent citizens of the town. I compiled it as ordered, with the help of municipal officials, who very diligently assisted me in my work and were very proud of being able to name so many important fellow citizens. The list then sat in a drawer for months, until one day the order arrived to send twenty of those mentioned to Milejgany camp between Kovno [Kaunas] and Vilna [Vilnius]; this was in reprisal for measures taken by the French in Alsace. At the time, a mourning list of the twenty "hostages" was extracted from our list. My heart was heavy, because I knew most of those involved. Wherever possible, the head was selecting younger people or those who were unemployed. I recall going to the barber and seeing a man being served whom the rest of those present regarded with respectful admiration. The barber then told me that he was one of the hostages. Three weeks later he died of pneumonia in the camp, and his family received a photograph of his grave, and in Douai another two women walked through the city veiled in black, their heads held high. And the other man who never returned from Milejgany was the presiding judge at the court of appeals. He suffered from a bladder condition and was the only person for whom a petition was submitted requesting that he be spared the transport. His superior came to the Kommandatura to plead for him in person, but in vain, since the Kommandatura doctor who examined the patient was of the opinion that he could catheterize himself. But the others who went to Milejgany returned after a few weeks, after the reprisal had served its purpose. I still see them before me, with their pride at having been there. I also recall how all the Kommandatura men involved in the matter were pleased when the hostages finally reported back in good health; how clear the distinction was at the time between those who took political measures as armchair decisions, assigning numbers to living human beings, and those who saw these people as individuals who incidentally belonged to the enemy nation, but who, precisely because they were living in occupied territory and currently enjoyed no political support, were regarded more or less as wards in need of protection. How vividly this memory was stirred as we realized that the list of those being arrested today must have been prepared well in advance and that the authorities were only waiting to push the button that must unleash the effect. And at the same time, I remember another action I experienced: The assembly of battalions of civilian laborers in occupied France. The Kommandatura employment office had compiled lists of the men whom the municipal administration had reported as having criminal records or hanging around unemployed. Some genius bureaucrat must have conceived the clever idea that these people could only be caught by force and a sort of sudden assault, and for that reason the order was issued for squads of soldiers to pick them up at night. I wanted to see that too and received permission to accompany such a detachment to the suburb of Dorignies. Each one of these detachments was assigned a French police officer who had to drag the men out of bed. Brigadier Ledoux came along with our squad and I can still hear how, speaking in the harsh dialect of northern France, he shouted in front of one of the houses whose inhabitant he was calling out: "Geniteau" — the final syllable drawn out with an open O ending with a U. I can still see the sleepy people, torn from their slumber, peeking out of windows and doors, unable to grasp the spectacle presented to them: That suddenly this or that man was lifted out of their midst and forced to go along; how the squad of the arrestees grew; how the identical houses of the mineworkers' settlement stood dark in the torchlight, with their steep, uninterrupted external staircases; how I ascended one of these staircases with the Brigadier and entered a bedroom in which the arrestee, in bed, tore himself from the arms of his wife. ..; how he got dressed and how his wife silently wept and could not understand ...

Back to the present:

A squad of men walks down the street, recognizably divided into those who lead and those being led in their midst. We meet the office director of the Israelite Community. He is rushing home and only tells us hurriedly: "They" entered the community building and gathered up all the men who happened to be there and took them away. They let him go because he has serious diabetes. They didn't take the community chairman because of his

advanced age. So now we have spoken to the first eyewitness. If we like, we can immediately act as eyewitnesses ourselves, for on the corner just opposite is Café Falck, one of the few Jewish cafes still allowed to serve Jewish customers. There must be all manner of things going on there. About twenty people are standing outside, some of them probably curious onlookers. So this is the "angry mob" necessary in such cases, already familiar to Nero, whom the Bonapartes always kept at the ready for their own purposes, and who can be described so splendidly in newspaper accounts. It is more expedient for us, however, not to inflate them and, as we have just learned, not to expose ourselves to the danger of being snatched away. So we hurry around the next corner.

Over there, my neighbor Kaufmann is being led away to the police station. He seems not to know what is actually going on; he was probably just picked up at his home.

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Source: Eyewitness account by Julius Meyer of the November Pogrom in Berlin and his experiences in Buchenwald concentration camp. Collection Reference: 1656. Reference Number: 1656/2/4/77. Courtesy of The Wiener Holocaust Library. The document is reprinted in *From the "Seizure of Power" to the Outbreak of War (1933–39): The November Pogrom. Eyewitness Accounts. Collection: Testaments to the Holocaust.* Documents and Rare Printed Material from the Wiener Library, London, pp. 6–9.

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