A Jewish Woman's Account of the November Pogrom in Emden (Retrospective Account, 2000)

Abstract

In this retrospective account, an unnamed German-Jewish Holocaust survivor from the East Frisian town of Emden reports on the events during the November pogrom on November 9/10, 1938, and on her family's efforts to leave Germany.

Source

I was brought up in German culture, but also in Jewish culture, and that was my great good fortune compared to many who were expelled from the Third Reich. It was a great source of support for me, I had an identity, which most people simply didn't have, since many were very much on the margins of Judaism; you have to distinguish between Jews who want to integrate — I don't need to use the word "intention" since that went without saying — or to assimilate. There is a difference: assimilating is becoming the same, but you can't do that as a Jew, because being Jewish is not just a religion, it is a way of life, and it was my way of life. I attended the strictest Prussian school imaginable, boys and girls were separated in those days, they didn't go to secondary school together, and I attended the Empress Augusta Victoria Lyceum. Empress Augusta Victoria was our patroness, the empress, the wife of Wilhelm II, and to be honest it was a real brain barracks. […]

I experienced the terrible Pogrom Night [Kristallnacht], and anyone who did — you will speak to many ladies here who did not experience it; they have a different relationship towards Germany than I do — I went through it in the worst possible form. The East Frisians called in the Austrians because they were ashamed to go to decent Jews and arrest them when they hadn't done anything wrong. In the area where I lived, it was customary to celebrate Martin Luther's birthday on that day in November, it was the same day. And all of us children walked with lanterns from bakery to bakery and sang "When Martin was still a boy, many a year he sang 'fore other people's doors, he sang so beautifully and sweetly, it touched the heart." Then one child banged the drum. And although I was a religious Jew, I was so close to the children on my street – Emden was a small town in those days, now it is a mid-sized city – that I went with them and sang along. And that's how it was on the evening before November 10th; the song had just ended, and then my mother heard footsteps, goose stepping and the singing of the Horst Wessel Song: "When Jewish blood spurts from the knife, things will be even better" was always the refrain. We had sold our shop, this was in 1937 —Thank God — because we had inherited our customers, who were regulars, from grandfather; it used to work that way, the father … my husband would have been better off as a lawyer, but the eldest son had to take over the business, and in 1937 people were always standing opposite with signs reading "Don't Buy From Jews" and with cameras, and the people who entered were photographed and put in the newspaper. And because many of our customers were civil servants, who were very dependent on the government, they wrote us letters saying they could not come anymore, they were very sorry, and of course that was the end of our shop. We sold it under duress, a Nazi got it and naturally for a laughable sum — it was a shop right on the main street, on a corner where the two main streets intersected. It wasn't a large shop, a small one but quite lucrative since we hardly had to advertise, given our regular customers. We had a friend who was a non-Jewish architect and he was very much opposed to the regime and also, like many Jews (apparently also my husband — I had married a much older man, but it was a love match, I was determined to marry him), he said

very cleverly, it is a specter and will soon be over, don't emigrate. And so we kept our heads down, we were able to live from our income, and there was a bit of inherited money. On the edge of town, quite far from the center, but it didn't do any good. Anyhow: the Luther song had just ended, and this horde arrived, and then everything was quiet for a moment, and we actually thought that things had calmed down, it was a torchlight procession. But the reason was a booze-up for Dutch courage. After this booze-up they set off. It is unimaginable. They kicked at doors with their boots like madmen. They were armed with rifles and pistols. My brother-in-law and my sister were getting ready to emigrate to Ecuador the next day because that was the only country left, the others were full — either the boat was full or the quota had been exceeded, and in those days Palestine was under the British Mandate, they didn't let in any more Jews. So they wanted to leave the next day, husband, wife and two children had everything ready to emigrate to Ecuador, traveling to Bremerhaven, boarding the ship, etc. My brother-in-law had the Iron Cross First Class; if a Jew in Imperial Germany had the Iron Cross First Class he had really done something extraordinary, otherwise he wouldn't have it. My brother-in-law wanted to show these fellows his Iron Cross, but they threw it into a corner; he wanted to show them the emigration papers, they threw them in the corner, and arrested our two husbands on that ice-cold November night, and then they were driven through the town to a schoolyard. They had corralled all the male Jews there, one can't say "assembled." There were even a few women among them, but thank God they left us be. But we sat with crying children. I'm sure you can imagine. Everything was very improvised, my siblings were supposed to spend the last night with us, they had already given up their home. So first we had to comfort the crying children, then we saw a red glow in the sky, it was the synagogue burning and — what to do next? My sister had all the identity papers and travel documents, everything was temporary, it was very difficult to get ship's passage, so with heavy hearts we decided that she should travel alone with the children. And — at the time I didn't realize how difficult it would be — I said I would do everything to ensure that her husband followed her soon. I didn't know that I wouldn't be able to do anything. They spent the entire night in the ice-cold schoolyard, and not only that: they were forced to meow like cats and bark like dogs. But they seemingly didn't know what to do with them, and the next day we could bring the men blankets. Sachsenhausen concentration camp was where they were sent one day later, it wasn't quite completed yet. I went with blankets, under surveillance the whole time, of course, and we tried our best to be brave when we said goodbye. First there was no news at all, and the first news we got was that a very honorable 60-year-old man had collapsed and died on the way — it must have been awful, the way they were driven like cattle. Back then they still sent his keys and watch back to his wife. And then cards came from our husbands saying, "we are doing very well," but my husband also wrote "special greetings to Erna and Anna," my two sisters, one of whom had emigrated to the States, but she couldn't do anything to help, and the other to Ecuador. I understood these "special greetings." Then I tried to emigrate, to what was then Palestine; we received the news "it is overfilled, the Mandate is closed," the USA had already far exceeded the quota, but they could have taken in far more, they could have set conditions: You can't go to New York, you can't go to Washington, for all I know, you can't go to Cincinnati — or wherever, but there is all of Alaska, they could have done that but they sinned. And then my son, 12 years old at the time, was kicked out of school at the end of 1937. The teachers don't seem to have known much about education, I had trained as a teacher myself. In front of the entire class they had told two Jewish children you can't come back tomorrow, because you are Jews, you are not allowed to step onto German soil. Can you imagine what that means to a 12-year-old boy? He came home white as a sheet. He was a gifted boy. What do you do with a 12-year-old who has been kicked out of school? While my husband was still at the camp, not a well man, with a weak heart, I received a telegram from Paris, where a brother-in-law of mine had moved in 1929, they hadn't really emigrated but simply wanted to live in France, he sent a telegram and said that a French school had asked for 100 children, Jewish children, and he had registered my son right away, and I should send my son. I couldn't bring myself to do it, you can't take a child from his father without his knowledge. […]

Source: A. Kruse, E. Schmitt, *Wir haben uns als Deutsche gefühlt. Lebensrückblick und Lebenssituation jüdischer Emigranten und Lagerhäftlinge.* Darmstadt: Steinkopf, 2000, pp. 102-8.

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