



German History in Documents and Images

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Raymond Geist's Report to George Messersmith on the Interministerial Meeting at the Reich Aviation Ministry and the Nazi Regime's Future Plans for the Jews (April 4, 1939)

After the interministerial meeting on November 12, 1938, Göring ordered the establishment of the Reich Central Office for Jewish Emigration within the Ministry of the Interior. Following Adolf Eichmann's (1906-1962) Austrian model, this office was supposed to facilitate the expulsion and dispossession of Germany's Jews by coordinating all government emigration offices and coercing Jewish communities into cooperation. But the Nazi regime's plan to exploit the Jews economically before expelling them from the German sphere of power collided with most countries' immigration regulations, which prevented the entry of massive influxes of impoverished Jewish refugees.

Back in July of 1938, delegates from 32 countries and about 40 private aid organizations had come together in the French town of Evian to participate in a conference on refugees initiated by the American president Franklin Delano Roosevelt (1882-1945). Although the conference produced general declarations of sympathy for German refugees, it did not lead to the liberalization of immigration restrictions. Still, the final resolution prompted the establishment of the Intergovernmental Committee on Political Refugees (IGC), and the chairman of this committee, George Rublee, quickly began negotiations with the German government. In February 1939, Rublee and his German negotiating partner Helmut Wohlthat agreed on an emigration plan worked out by Hjalmar Schacht (1877-1970), the president of the Reichsbank. According to the plan, Jewish emigration was to be partially financed by confiscated Jewish assets. In this report to Assistant Secretary of State George S. Messersmith, the American consul Raymond H. Geist expresses his doubts about the Schacht plan and offers a gloomy prognosis for those Jews still living in the German Reich.

CONFIDENTIAL.

Berlin, April 4, 1939.

The Honorable George S. Messersmith
Assistant Secretary of State
Washington, DC

Dear Mr. Messersmith:

I have your personal and confidential letter of March 17, with which you sent a copy of the confidential report issued by the Jewish Telegraph Agency under [the] date of March 6, 1939.

You call attention to statements made in the report, under the section headed "Jewish Situation", which you think refers to me.

It is true that I did have a talk with Mr. Bernstein, the correspondent of the Jewish Telegraph Agency who has been operating here in Germany for the last year or so, ever since the expulsion of Ben Smolar, and with whom I have been in fairly close touch. Bernstein has done a very fine piece of work in Berlin and in Vienna and, to my astonishment, during all this time he has in no way run amuck with the Secret Police. He is a man of unusual intelligence and indefatigable energy. When he was about to leave Berlin, he informed me that he was going, and I invited him and Mrs. Bernstein to tea, and discussed the general situation with him, particularly for the purpose of giving him some information confidentially which I thought he might constructively use on behalf of the potential Jewish refugees in Germany. I wanted also to give him some background of the negotiations which the Intergovernmental Committee had here and, if possible, convey through him an interpretation of the situation which might be constructive.

It is very difficult for me in a letter to explain what I consider to be the realities of the Jewish situation in Germany. The whole problem is bound up closely with our own immigration policy, and I have been very anxious that the work of the Intergovernmental Committee succeed, for two reasons, firstly, to relieve the pressure upon us, both in and outside of Germany; and secondly, to relieve the distress of thousands of innocent people in this country. I have been very anxious that the negotiations started between the Intergovernmental Committee and the Germans continue, for I am of the opinion that as long as this relationship is kept up, some degree of moderation at least will be exercised by the Germans, and the lot of the refugees [will] become easier. It is for this reason that I took the opportunity to have a final talk with Bernstein, as I believed that, going back to the United States and having had so large an experience in this country during the last year, he would report his impressions and convictions to many important people in the United States whose attitude towards the Intergovernmental Committee and its work would very much count, and I was exceedingly anxious to impress upon Bernstein the importance of not starting a campaign in the American press of such a character that the Germans, out of revenge, would break off the negotiations with the Intergovernmental Committee and start physical persecutions more violently than heretofore. The pressure upon us increases through physical violence, although the truth is that the Jews are more horribly ground down through measures applied on account of legislative restrictions, and so forth.

I am taking the opportunity now of correcting the statements made by Mr. Bernstein, and you will perceive that I have been misquoted, though I am very sure that Bernstein had no intention whatever of misquoting me; he made no notes of what I said, and probably endeavored to record as faithfully as possible the points which I made.

Mr. Bernstein reported as follows:

(1) The agreement which Mr. Rublee took away with him is the best that the Nazis can be expected to offer.

(2) The Nazis will live up to whatever they promised.

(3) American Jewry ought to cooperate fully with the plan, no matter how distasteful some of its terms may be.

(4) Germany has learned to respect America, it is time for Ambassador Wilson to come back to his post, and American Jewry ought to do nothing to prevent this development.

What I said was as follows:

(1) The agreement which Mr. Rublee took away with him was undoubtedly the best that anybody could obtain from the Germans and represented the limit of cooperation (if one might even call it cooperation) which the radicals would agree to. Göring made these concessions, but I have reason to know that the Secret Police were not in favor of going so far.

(2) I did not say that the Nazis would live up to whatever they promised. That is a general statement which nobody knowing the German situation could possibly make. I said to Mr. Bernstein that I was very sure that they would carry out the general scheme of the plan, providing that the Intergovernmental Committee were able to arrange for the emigration of substantial numbers of people. I said that the general arrangement of the plan would be carried out because I personally knew that both Göring and Hitler were agreeable to the scheme and therefore such persons as Himmler, Streicher and Goebbels would not dare to go back on it; that there would undoubtedly be chiseling and that the refugees would be victimized, but that they would certainly carry out those parts of the plan that were to their advantage.

(3) I do not remember having said that American Jewry ought to cooperate fully with the plan, no matter how distasteful some of its terms might be. The purpose of my speaking to Bernstein was of course to get him to use his influence in the United States to see that the plan, if the details should be published, should not be rejected, as in that case I saw only chaos.

(4) With regard to the fourth point - as you know, I have held the view that in times of crisis and great stress it is advisable to be as well represented abroad as possible, and at the time of the conversation I thought that it would be generally in the interest of all concerned to have Ambassador Wilson return. I was particularly anxious to impress upon Mr. Bernstein the inadvisability of leading members of the Jewish community in America doing anything to prevent the return of the Ambassador, as the National Socialist leaders were inclined to blame the Jews for the Ambassador's retention in America. I thought that Mr. Bernstein was in a position to

present an interpretation of the situation which might be most advantageous and helpful for all concerned.

I agree with you that any statement to the effect that the Nazis will live up to anything they promise would be a very wild and hazardous one for anybody to make who has had long experience in Germany. With respect to all transactions involving National Socialists I have no illusions as to the manner in which they may be kept.

I am not disturbed about the bulletin, because I do not believe that Bernstein had any intentions of misquoting me, and particularly in view of the fact that the conversation I had with him was arranged by me and held for the purpose I have explained above. I may say, in this general connection that Jewish leaders here are of the opinion that since Mr. Rublee's visit there has been a distinct detention in the general atmosphere, and I am very anxious that this shall continue.

The Secret Police has set up, in conjunction with the Jewish Community, certain immigration offices which are preparing in Berlin 180 - 200 people a day for emigration. The greatest factor in the preparation consists in giving these people passports. Receiving a passport is tantamount to a stern warning to leave the country. Since the system began, I estimate that 10 - 15,000 people have been so prepared in Berlin, and this is going forward at the rate of about 200 a day, according to most accurate information I have received from leaders of the Jewish Community. I am very apprehensive as to how the pressure is going to be applied. I would not at all be surprised if this pressure was applied in such a way as to make orderly emigration impossible. I think the Germans will not consider themselves in any way obligated to regard any of the commitments made in the agreement with the Intergovernmental Committee as binding until there is tangible proof of the number of emigrants which foreign countries will be prepared to take. Up to the present time, the report which Mr. Pell has promise[d] to let the Germans have in this respect has not been forthcoming. Dr. Wohlthat is waiting to see Mr. Pell again and has invited him here for Thursday of this week. I have had no news from Pell, however, that he expects to come. I am afraid that in the end the Germans will consider that the efforts of the Intergovernmental Committee have produced so few results that they will consider the agreement off and will proceed to handle the Jewish problem entirely in their own way. There can, of course, be only an internal solution of the Jewish problem in Germany, and I believe they are preparing to solve the problem in this way. It will, of course, consist in placing all the able-bodied Jews in work camps, confiscating the wealth of the entire Jewish population, isolating them, and putting additional pressure on the whole community, and getting rid of as many as they can by force.

With regard to the immigration work, I am satisfied to see that everything is moving along smoothly and that the registrations are drawing slowly probably to an end, and I hope, in the course of time, that it will be possible to reduce staffs. I shall have an opportunity to write you more about the problems connected with the visa departments at another time.

With very kindest regards,
Yours faithfully,
[signed] Raymond [Geist]

Source: George S. Messersmith Papers, Item 1187, University of Delaware Library, Newark, Delaware. Raymond H. Geist, Berlin, to G.S. Messersmith, Washington, DC, April 4, 1939.