

Reverberations of Kristallnacht in the East Prussian province towns

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(translated by Philip Jacobs)

Preface

There is almost no information about the period between November 1938, when synagogues were burned as well in the small towns of East Prussia, and the final act when the last Jews were deported from those places. Up to this point the research as has shown little interest in these details. In her study about the Königsberg Jews, Stefanie Schüler-Springorum does recount the end of the Jewish community there.¹ Beyond that there are reports about this period from Michael Wieck², Hella Wertheim³, Heinrich Wolffheim⁴ and Nechama Drober.⁵ These are basically in relation to the situation in Königsberg, yet in Hella Wertheim's case to Insterburg as well. There has hardly been any inquiry into the circumstances of individual Jews in the smaller towns, let alone villages. In the meantime, the generation who witnessed those events has died off and it is solely the papers and documents left behind which shed some light on what took place. However, there have been a few people who have shown

¹ STEFANIE SCHÜLER-SPRINGORUM, *Die jüdische Minderheit in Königsberg, Preußen. 1871 - 1945*. Univ., Diss./94--Bochum, 1993, Göttingen 1996.

² MICHAEL WIECK, *Zeugnis vom Untergang Königsbergs: ein "Geltungsjude" berichtet*, Heidelberg 1989.

³ HELLA WERTHEIM, MANFRED ROCKEL, *Immer alles geduldig getragen. Als Mädchen in Theresienstadt, Auschwitz und Lening, seit 1945 in der Grafschaft Bentheim, Nordhorn* 1993.

⁴ ALFRED GOTTWALDT, *NS-Gewaltherrschaft. Beiträge zur historischen Forschung und juristischen Aufarbeitung*, Berlin 2005.

⁵ NECHAMA DROBER, UWE NEUMÄRKER, *Ich heiße jetzt Nechama. Mein Leben zwischen Königsberg und Israel*, Berlin 2012.

interest in the fate of the East Prussian Jews and they have collected material about it. The collection by the former citizen of Insterburg, Günther Ruddat, plays a significant role here. In the period between 1965 until approximately 2003, he asked many former citizens of Insterburg about the fate of the Jews there; he corresponded with emigrants; he collated the facts he gathered.⁶ Other important information was gathered together by Horst Leiber, a former citizen of Tilsit and later resident of Wuppertal. For his research project, he corresponded with numerous Jews who had come from East Prussia, either fleeing the Holocaust or surviving it.⁷ Other interviews were conducted by the author between 1999 and 2010.

In East Prussia, because of the unique geographical situation, the Reich's planned pogrom night and its aftermath took place somewhat differently from what happened in the rest of the Reich. For one thing, this was because of East Prussia's insular setting. Also, at the time it did not have a concentration camp available in its own province. The idea of sending through the Polish Corridor all of those who were to be taken into custody was dropped for political and financial reasons, with the result that the arrests and detention of people happened locally, being determined by decentralized decision-making. Furthermore, what also played a role was that there was a nearby border with Lithuania, which at the time was still considered to be a safe haven. After the events in November 1938, many Jews whose families had originally come from Lithuania fled from East Prussia to neighboring towns in Lithuania or to Kaunas.

⁶ Now the file is located in the documents in the archive of the Association of Jews in East Prussia (JOP).

⁷ The collection for Horst Leiber's scholarly project is located in the JOP archive. Mrs. Leiber has kindly made it and the research library available.

The goal of this article is to depict in word and image some of these regional peculiarities, and to show that the measures taken by the Reich in these local settings turned out in various ways.

Kristallnacht

In perusing the registries of the East Prussian synagogues, it quickly becomes clear that while the majority of the synagogues were set afire, some did in fact escape the flames, as was the case with the synagogues in Wartenburg, Oletzko, and Schirwindt. In a few places, there were people who reacted against the destructive intentions, one being the commissioner of the district of Schlossberg. What happened is recounted as follows in the Bredow family: “Wichard von Bredow put on his army uniform and told his wife, ‘I’m going to the synagogue in Schirwindt, where I want to prevent one of the greatest crimes in my district.’ When Nazi arsonists arrived at the synagogue, von Bredow was waiting for them with his revolver. The group left and the synagogue was saved, the only one in the district that survived. Von Bredow was never punished and remained the county officer throughout the war.”⁸

During the war, however, the surviving synagogue was used as kindergarten. Leo Direktor, born in 1927 in Goldap and who witnessed it at the time, remembers: “Kristallnacht was the night when the Synagogues in Germany were set alight. The Synagogue in Goldap was also desecrated, although it was not actually set alight, as far as I can remember. Each morning, when going to

⁸ MITCHELL GEOFFREY BARD, 48 hours of Kristallnacht. Night of destruction/dawn of the Holocaust : an oral history, Guilford, Conn 2010, p.162; Cf. as well: HASSO VON BREDOW; CATHERINE VON BREDOW; DAGMAR, MALLETT, In einem Augenblick. Eine wahre Geschichte über Schicksal, Tapferkeit und Liebe, Augsburg 2013.

school I would pass the Shul.”⁹ But on that day, Leo Direktor did not go to school. He had other things to do: “On Kristallnacht all adult Jews were rounded up and put into prison. I remember, on the following days, going to the prison, which was in the centre of the Marktplatz, to take food to father.”¹⁰ Direktor was not able to add much more to this recollection. Another contemporary witness, Ernest Cohn (born in 1920 in Gumbinnen) told the following story about his father who was still living at the time in Gumbinnen, although already retired. On the 10th of November, his father Joseph Cohn proceeded unmolested through Gumbinnen to the train station and travelled to Goldap (about 40 kilometers away) in order to see whether there had also “been trouble” there. When he arrived, all the women relatives clapped their hands above their heads over how he had been able to get there. The men had all been arrested and sat in the small firehouse (of the local fire department). Cohn did want to travel back home without having done something. He spoke with the policeman on guard and was allowed to go inside. The men there had passed the time for a few days by telling stories and playing cards. Twice a day meals were brought by family members, and clean laundry as well. His father on that same day sent a postcard to his wife in Gumbinnen saying that his visit was going to take somewhat longer. After a few days, all the men in Goldap were let go again and father returned home.¹¹ Not everyone got through it so easily. In many other towns, the police arrested the Jewish men and took them to a labor camp, for example, to Lauknen (Hohenbruch), where they had to dig

⁹ LEO DIREKTOR, My Recollections, JOP archive.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Interview with ERNEST COHN (Gumbinnen/New York), 4. March 2003.

out trenches for draining the swamp.¹² In fact, November 1938 went more leniently for Goldap Jews than in other places. Still, in 1940 they were commanded by the local authority to leave the town, since the administration wanted to have a “locale free of any Jews.”¹³ Heinz Finke from Insterburg reports on the event as follows: “On Kristallnacht from the 9th to the 10th of November 1938 we were also taken from our home during the night and marched by the synagogue with its roof in flames and taken to the police. In the morning, my mother, grandmother, my brother, and I were let go, but my father was detained for 4 weeks in the Insterburg jail. (They called it ‘protective custody.’)”¹⁴ Later on, all the Insterburg Jews were re-housed and some of them had to move to the old castle, meaning that they were being displaced from their homes right in the town where they lived.

Decisions

There were Jewish families who had already planned to leave the country, with some waiting on visas, but now the events forced them to hurry. Other families, primarily with fathers who had been active participants in the First World War, had never seriously considered leaving the country. The sudden arrests of these men and the threat of a long imprisonment forced them into emigrating. However, financial reasons made it such that it was seldom possible to actually flee. While many before 1938 would have declined to go

¹² Alltag in Ostpreußen 1940-1945. Die geheimen Lageberichte der Königsberger Justiz, edited by CHRISTIAN TILITZKI, Leer 1991, p. 51 ff.

¹³ This is according to the Direktor family from Goldap, who went to Berlin and then were deported from Rykestrasse 4.

¹⁴ HEINZ FINKE, Letter from 8. April 1998 to Günther Ruddat, in the JOP archive. Bestand Ruddat.

into exile to Palestine, South America, or Shanghai, now any destination was fine.

Ernest Cohn recalls how he and his siblings brought their parents to Palestine: “That was the time of the ‘Haavara Agreement’. If you had 1,000 English pounds, you received a certificate – automatically. It was called a capitalist certificate. 1,000 pounds was a large amount of money back then, 5,000 U.S. dollars, and if I am not mistaken, the exchange then was 52 marks for every pound – that was a lot of money.”¹⁵ All four children, who had come to Palestine with the Ha-Shara, then pooled their resources and borrowed money. He continues:

“I was in a kibbutz at the time and on the 9th of August 1939, my sister wrote to me: ‘My dear little Ernest, hurrah, hurrah, hurrah, the certificate for our parents has arrived. That is all I wanted to tell you today. I received the confirmation today from Jerusalem. I am sitting at the typewriter writing feverishly to our parents.’ And of course three weeks later, the war broke out, and we knew that is the end.”¹⁶

He goes on to say: “But then the parents did receive the certificate, and things went rather well for them in Gumbinnen. Hitler and no Hitler....there were a few Jews left in Gumbinnen and they were not in a rush. Four months after the outbreak of the war they (the parents) arrived with a container holding all their furniture from Gumbinnen, with the piano, with all kinds of things. I asked: ‘How is it that the Nazis let you out?’ They said ‘Well, the man, the customs officer, came when the container was being packed with all our things. And

¹⁵ Interview with ERNEST COHN (Gumbinnen/New York), 4. March 2003.

¹⁶ Ibid.

then we put him a box of cigars and cognac and then he said: 'Listen carefully Mr. Cohn, I have to tell you what my instructions are. You are not permitted to take any gold, any jewelry and I don't know...any other things. But you can pack up everything else. And when you are finished, then let me know and I will stamp it.' [In the meantime he was busied with the cigars and the cognac.] That was December 1939... This moving container arrived four months after the outbreak of the war."¹⁷

In most of the cases the only option for families, because of the regulatory pressure, was to go to Shanghai, which did not require a visa. Among those who fled to Shanghai were Julius Markowski from Insterburg¹⁸ and the scrap metal dealer Arthur Markus.¹⁹ The Salomon Echt family, with its four children, left from Groß Kuhren and also went to Shanghai.²⁰ Arthur Rowelski from Tilsit, who had earlier been in a labor camp in Lauknen (Hohenbruch), went to Shanghai as well as the family of the furrier Abraham Leiserowitz, who together with his son Herbert had been detained in 'protective custody'.²¹ Others obtained emigration papers to Argentina, for example, Moritz Neumark from Groß-Kakschen who with his wife and four children left on an emigrant steamer sailing from Hamburg harbor.²² The son recalls that his mother, Hertha, went directly onboard the ship with the four children, and his father, Moritz,

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Notes of Günther Ruddat in the JOP archive.

¹⁹ Notes of Günther Ruddat, in the JOP archive.

²⁰ Included in the census from 17. May 1939.

²¹ ERIKA HELDT (Daughter of Abraham and sister of Herbert Leiserowitz), letter from 20. November 1967 to Hans Leiserowitz, original in the JOP archive.

²² BEATRIZ BERG (Wife of Martin Meumark), email on 27. April 2009 to Ruth Leiserowitz.

was taken straight from the jail onto the boat in handcuffs.²³ What is striking is that none of these persons lost their citizenship, in that they were not put on the denaturalized lists for the German Reich.²⁴

Kindertransport

Leo Direktor goes on to say: “The morning after Kristallnacht I started off to go to school as usual but Tante Meta came to intercept me, since there had been a decree that Jewish children were not allowed into “Aryan” schools. The result was that I had no schooling for about three months until my parents were able to arrange for me to be accepted in the Jewish Day School in Königsberg, attached to the Great Synagogue there (or what had been the Synagogue), and which had been allowed to reopen.”²⁵

Many children were now confronted with the problem that they were no longer permitted to attend school. While other Jewish school children had had to leave their German schools after the enactment of the Nürnberg Laws (such as Ernest Cohn and his siblings, who for that reason quickly decided to flee), it was the case that the children of soldiers who had served on the front in the First World War had been allowed to attend school normally up until November 1938. But then the expulsion from school that happened on the 10. November 1938, was

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ HANS G. LEHMANN, MICHAEL HEPP, Die Ausbürgerung deutscher Staatsangehöriger 1933-45 nach den im Reichsanzeiger veröffentlichten Listen, München [u.a.] 1985. Here it would be important to research the files of the respective German foreign consulates. For Shanghai it is known that there is documentation up to the arrival date of 27. June 1939. See: CHRISTIANE HOSS, Abenteuer. Wer waren die Shangai-Flüchtlinge aus Mitteleuropa?, in: Exil Shanghai. 1938 - 1947 ; jüdisches Leben in der Emigration, edited by GEORG ARMBRÜSTER, Teetz 2000, pp. 103–132, p.. 105.

²⁵ LEO DIREKTOR, My Recollections.

something everyone found outrageous.²⁶ Leonore Echt from Insterburg (born in 1929) left the town with her parents and waited at her grandfather's in Guttstadt to leave the country for South America. Other children were sent to England in what was called Kindertransport.²⁷ How many East Prussian children were among them has not yet been determined. There is only scattered information available. Leo Direktor from Goldap departed for England at the beginning of May 1939.²⁸ Gerd Wolfgang Matheus left from Tilsit in June 1939.²⁹

The exact date when Helga Fein from Tilsit began her journey is not known. Heinz Finke from Insterburg left his hometown on 25. June 1939. He later thought that there had been only one Kindertransport from East Prussia, with 20-30 children from the province.³⁰ The fact was that there must have been at least two (one in May and the other in June 1939) and until the outbreak of the war, the hope remained that there would be additional ones in which one could send along younger siblings.³¹ What was also essential for that was a personal involvement in order to find accommodation for each individual child. In the case of Leo Direktor, his grandmother remembered that back in her day, shortly after her own wedding, all the relatives had given her sister-in-law money so that she could go to England and get married. Through the International Red Cross it was

²⁶ Heinz Finke, Letter of the 8. April 1998 to Günther Ruddat in the JOP archive: Bestand Ruddat; Hella Wertheim, letter of the 5. May 1998 to Günther Ruddat in the JOP archive.

²⁷ *Kindertransport* was the designation for an exception provision given by the British government allowing from time to time the immigration of Jewish children between the ages of 14 to 17 from Germany to Great Britain from the period of December 1938 to 1. September 1939. REBEKKA GÖPFERT, *Der Jüdische Kindertransport von Deutschland nach England 1938/39. Geschichte und Erinnerung*, Frankfurt a. M./New York 1999.

²⁸ LEO DIREKTOR

²⁹ DEBBIE MATHEUS, email from the 3. July 2009 to Ruth Leiserowitz.

³⁰ HEINZ FINKE, letter to Horst Leiber, Birmingham 1995.

³¹ Ibid.

possible to find that family, and their daughter agreed to be a host for Leo.³² Leo Direktor himself remembers his departure from Goldap: Early in the morning of May 1st, 1939, just when the workmen were busy erecting the Maypole in the Marktplatz ready for the day's celebrations, I walked across the Marktplatz for the last time, carrying a little suitcase containing my essential belongings in my hand, on my way to the railway station to catch the train to Königsberg – the first part of my journey to England. Other than some family photographs, I had in my suitcase only two things of sentimental value, to remind me of home: one was a dessert spoon which had the name of “Hugo” engraved on it – the name of a brother who had died in infancy and whom I had never known; the other was a serviette ring. To these two things I have become very attached, and I use them to this day. Of course, I also had my passport (and I still have it with my papers) with a big red “J” for “Jude” stamped across its title page.”³³

Other Pathways for Leaving the Country or Fleeing

Another group of Jewish citizens emigrated on their own at the beginning of the war and went to nearby Lithuania. Often this choice of destination was made because of relatives living there.³⁴ The preferred places there were either the former Lithuanian capital Kaunas or the hometowns of relatives along the border.

³² LEO DIREKTOR.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ http://www.statistik-des-holocaust.de/stat_ger_emi.htmlJüdische Auswanderung in Europäische Länder und Regionen, bis Oktober 1941, 2012. http://www.statistik-des-holocaust.de/stat_ger_emi.html (last visited on am 24.07.2012). The number of Jews officially emigrating to Lithuania between 1.1.1933 and October 1941 totaled 2,995. That was 1.94% of the total number of Jews who emigrated into other European countries.

From Tilsit: attorney Dr. Max Sandelowski with his wife and son as well as Manfred Bassmann and the salesman Abraham Chassmann with his family.³⁵

It was these very Jews, having gone to these areas near the border, who in the summer of 1941 were to become the victims of the mass executions carried out by the Tilsit Einsatzkommando. ³⁶ In the documents of the German legation in Kaunas there is a list from the autumn of 1940 on which Jewish citizens of the Reich are registered – among others, Jews from East Prussia.

Among the Jewish activities which stand out in this period in East Prussia is the agricultural training for youths interested in emigrating. This was organized by a former front officer and activist of the Reich Association of Jewish Fighters at the Front (RjF), ³⁷ Walter Sandelowski, on his property in Norgitten. In this way, he enabled dozens of youths to escape the German extermination policies.³⁸ In May 1939, there were still 20 youths staying with him awaiting training.³⁹

³⁵ TRUDE LOEWENSON, LETTER OF THE 25. JUNE 1947 TO MRS. NAUJOKS, Orselina/Locarno.; CHRISTIAN GRUSDY, email from 9. Februar 2009 to Ruth Leiserowitz.

³⁶ RUTH LEISEROWITZ, Sabbatleuchter und Kriegerverein. Juden in der ostpreußisch-litauischen Grenzregion 1812 - 1942. Humboldt-Univ., Habil.-Schr.--Berlin, 2007, Osnabrück 2010.

³⁷ Der ehemalige Hauptmann Leo Löwenstein (1879–1956), who had been a Captain, founded in February 1919 the “Reich Association of Jewish Soldiers on the Front” (RjF) to recognize the efforts of all the Jews who participated in the war. The society, which in the middle of the 1920s had about 40,000 members, was oriented toward providing information about the service of about 85,000 Jewish soldiers who had fought at the front in the First World War and the 12,000 who lost their lives. The RjF stood for a German-national Jewry and was close to the “Central Association of Citizens of the Jewish Faith”, a group that rejected Zionism and expressed its allegiance to the German nation. In 1938, the RjF was disbanded.

³⁸ Interview with ERNEST COHN. Likewise, Doc. 116. Bericht des Geheimen Staatspolizeiamts Berlin vom April 1934 zur Überwachung der jüdischen Organisationen und ihrer Tätigkeit in Deutschland, in: Deutsches Reich 1933 - 1937. (Die Verfolgung und Ermordung der europäischen Juden durch das nationalsozialistische Deutschland 1933 - 1945.) edited by WOLF GRUNER, München 2008, pp. 326-336, here p. 332.

³⁹ BA (Berlin) Datenbank. Sandelowski and his family emigrated at the last moment to South America.

Documents

The November pogrom and its aftermath had numerous ramifications – affecting the personal documents of the Jews as well. When Erna Echt from Groß Kuhren applied for a passport for herself and her children in early 1939, the arbitrary decision of the registrar was that the first name of the 10 year-old daughter must be changed from Erna to Ruth. Even Jews who were fortunate to have fled Germany were not safe from the reach of the National Socialist authorities. The war widow Ida Leiserowitz emigrated in autumn 1937 from Königsberg to Palestine. Because she was receiving a pension as a war widow, she was able to point to regular income and in that way received an entry permit from the governing office of the British Mandate. After the November pogrom, she had to report to the German consulate in Haifa at which time the “J” was stamped in her pass and “Sarah” was added to her name.

Summary

Despite the regional particularities, the November pogrom represented as well in East Prussia the precursor of the ultimate extermination of the Jewish presence there. After the November pogrom, many Jews in Königsberg, Tilsit and Insterburg had to abandon their ancestral homes and move into what were called Jewish houses. With that, a further phase began of displacing them even as they remained in their own home area. As a rule, it was just older women who stayed behind. Often they moved in together with an acquaintance or relative who was also alone; this was in those cases when they were not hosted by a family. In Tilsit, in May 1939, among the 311 registered Jewish persons, one counts seven

men living alone, but 40 women were on their own.⁴⁰ Jewish families from many small towns went to Berlin, because they thought themselves safer there.⁴¹ The dismemberment of the Jewish families was complete. The younger generation had emigrated; the children in part had been brought to safety by the Kindertransport. This experience of being forced to leave and of having to leave behind a portion of the family, stayed with the migrants for the rest of their lives. Those who were left behind were families with small children with meager means and the elderly, all later murdered by the National Socialists. In the whole of East Prussia, on the 17. May 1939, 3,169 Jews were counted; by the end of August 1941, just barely 600 were still living in the administrative district of Gumbinnen.⁴² In June 1942, the deportations began in East Prussia.⁴³

⁴⁰ That the Nazis murdered a larger number of older women is something referenced by MARION KAPLAN, *Der Mut zum Überleben*, p. 17.

⁴¹ An example: the Finkelstein family went from Gumbinnen to Berlin in 1935; KERSTIN EMMA SCHIRP/WERNER MAX FINKELSTEIN: *Jude, Gringo, Deutscher. Das abenteuerliche Leben des Werner Max Finkelstein*, Berlin 2002.

⁴² KOSSERT, p. 292.

⁴³ See as well: ALFRED GOTTWALDT/DIANA SCHULLE, *Die ‚Judendeportationen‘ aus dem Deutschen Reich 1941–1945*. Wiesbaden 2005. Specifically to the arrival destinations of the first transport, see CHRISTIAN GERLACH, *Kalkulierte Morde. Die deutsche Wirtschafts- und Vernichtungspolitik in Weißrussland 1941–1944*, Hamburg 1999, pp. 756-791. The deportation was the topic of discussion in East Prussia: *Alltag in Ostpreußen 1940–1945. Die geheimen Lageberichte der Königsberger Justiz*, edited by CHRISTIAN TILITZKI, Leer 1991, pp. 209-210.