

'Hunted like rats'

ON 30 JANUARY 1938, Hitler celebrated the fifth anniversary of his coming to power. For five years he had rearmed Germany, and given repeated notice to the world that he considered himself responsible for German-speaking people wherever they lived, whether in his birthplace, Austria, in the Sudeten mountain borderlands of Czechoslovakia, in the Free City of Danzig, or even in the western provinces of Poland. As yet his growing armies had crossed no frontier. The Rhineland province of Germany had been remilitarized and the Saar had been reincorporated to Germany by the overwhelming vote of its population. Neither action had led to the death of a single foreign soldier.

Even Hitler's anti-Jewish record over five years was open to positive interpretation. German Jews had been allowed to leave, and to leave in their tens of thousands. No more than two hundred had been killed, most of them in the first fourteen months of his rule.¹ The number of Jews, as well as of political opponents, liberals and churchmen, held in concentration camps, had continually dropped. The negotiated release of the 120 Jews from Dachau had been a prelude to further negotiations and further releases.

But for those actually involved, the signs were terrifying. German Jews had been deprived of the rights of citizenship. The fate of the three hundred Jews still inside Dachau was not known until early in 1939, with the publication in Paris of an account by a former prisoner. He described his arrival in the camp on 4 February 1938:

The Jewish prisoners worked in special detachments and received the hardest tasks. They were beaten at every opportunity – for instance, if the space between the barrows with which they had to walk or even run over loose flints was not correctly kept. They were overwhelmed with abusive epithets

such as 'Sow Jew', 'Filth Jew' and 'Stink Jew'. During the working period the non-Jewish prisoners were issued with one piece of bread at breakfast – the Jews with nothing. But the Jews were always paraded with the others to see the bread ration issued.

This former prisoner's account continued:

In February, March and April there were a number of 'suicides' and shootings 'during attempted escape'. The Jew Lowenberg was horribly beaten during a works' task, and committed suicide that night. In March two men were 'shot while attempting escape'. The Jew Lowy was shot dead for approaching closer than the regulation six metres to a sentry who had called him up. Another was ordered by a sentry again and again to approach until he stepped on the forbidden 'neutral zone' outside the barbed wire, whereupon he was shot dead.

'When, during great heat,' the former prisoner added, 'it was allowed to fetch water for the working detachments, it sometimes happened that the Jews were forbidden to drink.'²

On February 15, eleven days after this eye-witness had been sent to Dachau, an ominous event took place in Austria. Local Nazis, confident that Austria would soon become a part of Germany, began to make preparations for the taking over of every Jewish office, shop and factory, with 'managing commissars', often someone employed by the enterprise, designated for each.³

On March 12 the German army entered Vienna. Independent Austria was no more: absorbed into a new entity, Greater Germany. The 183,000 Jews of Austria, most of them living in the capital, suddenly became a part of the Nazi hegemony. Numerically, they constituted an addition of outcasts and pariahs greater than the total number of German Jews who had managed to leave Germany in the previous five years.

The process of isolation and abuse had been a gradual one in Germany. More than two months had passed between Hitler coming to power and the April boycott. Two and a half years had intervened between the April boycott and the Nuremberg Laws. But for the Jews of Vienna, the torments and the discrimination were immediate. During the very first days, all Jewish enterprises were

branded with enormous red inscriptions such as 'Jew', 'Jewish shop' or 'Jewish coffee house'. Any non-Jew daring to enter such an establishment was at once caught by Stormtroops or SS men, and made to wear a placard around his or her neck: 'I, Aryan swine, have bought in a Jewish shop'.⁴

Overnight, the Jews of Vienna, one sixth of the city's population, were deprived of all civil rights: the right to own property, large or small, the right to be employed or to give employment, the right to exercise their profession, any profession, the right to enter restaurants or cafés, public baths or public parks. Instead they experienced physical assault: the looting of shops, the breaking of heads, the tormenting of passers-by. A British journalist, G. E. R. Gedye, wrote, after the suicide of a young Jewish doctor and his mother in his own block of flats, 'From my window I could watch for many days how they would arrest Jewish passers-by – generally doctors, lawyers or merchants, for they preferred their victims to belong to the better educated classes – and force them to scrub, polish and beat carpets in the flat where the tragedy had taken place, while insisting that the doctor's non-Jewish maid should sit at ease in a chair and look on.'

Gedye also saw the Nazis 'gloating over the daily suicide lists'.⁵

Among those who committed suicide were Dr Kurt Sonnenfeld, a well-known Viennese author and journalist; the distinguished lawyer, Dr Moritz Sternberg; and one of Austria's leading playwrights and historians, the sixty-year-old Egon Friedell, whose important *Cultural History of the Modern Age* had been published six years earlier. Friedell's suicide was the result of a tragic misapprehension. Unknown to Friedell, his maid was having an affair with a Stormtrooper. One evening, this man and another Stormtrooper, both in uniform, came to the block of flats. Friedell, seeing them outside, and then hearing them knocking, believed that they had come for him, and threw himself from his third-floor window.⁶

Under the Treaty of St Germain in 1919, Austrian Jews had been guaranteed minority rights. These rights had now been swept away, and in their place the Jews suffered all the humiliations of a puerile and sadistic imagination. 'I was given a bucket of boiling water,' Moritz Fleischmann, a senior representative of the Jewish Community of Vienna, later recalled, 'and I was told to clean the steps. I lay down on my stomach and began to clean the pavement. It turned

out that the bucket was half-full of acid and this burned my hands.' Fleischmann added that while he was lying down on his stomach cleaning the pavement, 'the SS sentries threw out the Chief Rabbi, Dr Taglicht, a man of seventy, and he, like myself, was ordered to brush these pavements. In order that he should feel the full force of the degradation and the humility of it, he was thrown out wearing his gown, and with his prayer shawl on.'⁷

Such cruel pastimes gave pleasure to the perpetrators. Dozens of passers-by also watched these scenes of humiliation, laughing and mocking as Jews, having been forced to put their sacred prayer bands on their arms, were then made to clean unflushed lavatory bowls.⁸

Inside the main Vienna synagogue, while SS men lolled about smoking pipes and cigarettes, Jews were forced to perform physical jerks, knees bending and stretching, holding a chair in each hand. The older and feebler ones, who stumbled or collapsed, were brutally kicked and beaten by their Nazi taskmasters. Outside the synagogue, G. E. R. Gedye watched as 'here and there a victim would be flung out, grey-faced, with trembling limbs, eyes staring with horror and mouths they could not keep still'.⁹

Within a month, more than five hundred Jews had committed suicide in Austria. 'A family of six Jews', a British dental student wrote to London on 18 March 1938, 'have just shot themselves, a few houses down the street. They are well out of it.'¹⁰

These scenes received wide publicity in the British, American and Western European press and radio, and in the newsreels, where they were seen with shock and disgust. But some of those who followed events in Austria were encouraged to imitate the Nazi course. In Poland, beginning on April 5, anti-Jewish riots spread from city to city, including Vilna and Warsaw. Nor was the torment ended for the Jews of Vienna. Saturday April 23, was the Jewish Sabbath, a day which the Nazis were beginning to choose for these indignities. On that Sabbath, groups of Stormtroops, patrolling the streets of Vienna, seized as many Jews as they could find, put them into lorries, and drove them out to the Prater, Vienna's amusement park. There, the Jews were thrown to the ground and ordered to 'eat grass'. As they ate, Stormtroops trampled on their hands, or forced them roughly to climb up into the lower branches of the trees and to 'twitter and croak and gibber like birds'.¹¹

At a command, men and women, including even pregnant women, were forced to run in circles, and to continue running until they fainted or collapsed. Those whom the Stormtroops felt had only pretended to faint in order to escape the order were beaten until they got up and ran again. Other Jews were strapped into the carriages of the Prater's scenic railway, and then driven at top speed until they lost consciousness. Hundreds of elderly Jews suffered heart attacks during these activities – activities which were dubbed by the Nazis as 'pleasure hours' – and several Jews died.¹²

On Easter Sunday, in the Austrian province of the Burgenland, fifty-one Jews, stripped of all their possessions, were taken from their homes, put into boats, and pushed out into the Danube. All night they lay stranded on a sandbank in mid-river. Their cries for help were heard across the river, in Czechoslovakia, whose government gave them asylum.¹³

In the Austrian provinces, where small numbers of Jews had lived in more than seven hundred towns and villages, almost every one of the seven hundred raised a white flag to tell the world that no Jews remained.¹⁴ Thousands of Jews flocked to Vienna, homeless, and deprived of their possessions. Thousands more crossed the borders into Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland. This new wave of refugees roused worldwide fears of an endless flow of the dispossessed. One by one, the countries which for more than five years had accepted German Jews almost without restrictions now imposed new rules and regulations.

The pressures on Jews to leave Germany and Austria were intensifying. On May 28, scarcely a month after the day of indignities in the Prater, the Jews of Frankfurt were subjected to a similar day of intimidation. Their plight was witnessed by the British Consul-General in Frankfurt, R. T. Smallbones, who saw boycott scenes similar to those in Berlin in April 1933. 'On the windows of Jews' shops,' he reported to London, 'various caricatures of Jews were painted, such as Jews hanging from gibbets, with insulting inscriptions.' Jewish families were visited by gangs who told them 'to leave Germany quickly as, next time, quite different measures would be taken against them'.

For some time, Smallbones pointed out, it had been 'impossible' for Jews to go to the theatre or to have a meal in a restaurant. The Jew had become an outcast. 'A young Jew of my acquaintance', he

wrote, 'has had since infancy an Aryan friend.' Recently, this friend has been 'reported' to the Nazi Party officials, but had explained that he had known the Jew for fifteen years, liked and admired him, and could see 'no reason why he should terminate this friendship'. The party official then explained to him, as Smallbones reported, 'that segregation of the Jews was such a paramount duty that it had to override any sentiment of friendship or comradeship or gratitude'. The party official then instanced the case 'of Jews who may have lain in the same trenches with Nazis during the war and shared the agonies and perils of those days'. Even if a Jew had saved the life of a Nazi 'at whatever risk and at whatever sacrifice', Smallbones commented, that Jew 'is now to be looked upon as an accursed outcast with whom he who was rescued may have no truck'.¹⁵

Following the German annexation of Austria in March 1938, and the beginning of mass arrests in June, more than fifteen hundred Jews were sent to Dachau, and to a newly opened concentration camp at Buchenwald. The cruelties of these camps had not abated. As a former prisoner at Dachau recalled a few months later, 'In June a Jew was brought here under suspicion of "race pollution". He was so ill that we had to wheel him into camp on a wheelbarrow, and to wheel him to morning and evening roll-call, as the doctor would not put him on the sick list. In a week he was dead.'¹⁶

Among those taken from Vienna to Buchenwald was the Jewish opera librettist and satirist Fritz Beda, whose first volume of collected satires had been published in 1908 when he was twenty-five years old. In Buchenwald, Beda composed a song which ended with the words:

Whatever our fate,
We still say 'yes' to life.¹⁷

Beda remained in Buchenwald for more than three years. While in the camp he organized, as best he could, cultural activities and competitions. On 17 October 1942 he was deported from Buchenwald to his death.¹⁸

Emigration still offered a way out for those Jews of Germany and Austria who were at liberty. More than ninety-eight thousand Jews, nearly half of the Jews of Austria, left for other lands. They were, indeed, encouraged to do so by the Nazis, and a special emigration office, the Central Office for Jewish Emigration, was set up in

Vienna for them, headed by a thirty-two-year-old SS officer, Adolf Eichmann. At the same time, twelve thousand Jewish families were evicted from their homes, almost eight thousand Jewish businesses were 'Aryanized', and more than thirty thousand Jews were thrown out of their jobs.

On 9 June 1938 a new type of Nazi 'action' took place: the burning down of a synagogue. The synagogue was the main one in Munich. The burning was followed by the arrest of more than two thousand Jews throughout Germany. These Jews, Wilfrid Israel reported from Berlin, 'are now suffering the tortures of hell in one of the new concentration camps, the so-called quarries of death. They are mostly made to slave for fourteen to sixteen hours a day by hauling or carrying stones. Their supervisors use their whips only too willingly under this or that pretext. Discipline is enforced by lashing old and young to tree trunks and beating them while others are made to be eye-witnesses of their misery.'

Wilfrid Israel also reported that for many of those inside these camps 'the only way of escaping this torture is to run into wire entanglements loaded with high-tension electricity'. Deaths, he added, 'are frequent, for this and other reasons'.¹⁹

On the day that Wilfrid Israel sent this report to London, Bella Fromm witnessed, in Berlin, renewed scenes of looting and violence against the now impoverished Jewish community. The Stormtroops had created havoc, she wrote in her diary. 'Everywhere were revolting and bloodthirsty pictures of Jews beheaded, hanged, tortured, and maimed, accompanied by obscene inscriptions.'

Bella Fromm went to see an elderly couple, both of whose sons had been killed in action in the First World War. 'Killed for Germany!' she wrote. 'We went to find out whether they had suffered. Their shop was in ruins. Their goods, paper and stationery, trampled into the gutter. Three SA men, roaring with obscene laughter, forced the trembling old man to pick up the broken glass with his hands that were covered with blood.'

On the following day Bella Fromm returned with food for her two friends, hoping to comfort them. 'We found two coffins, surrounded by silent neighbours. The faces of the old couple seemed peaceful and serene amid the broken glass and destruction. As we put down our basket and stood there wretchedly, a young woman spoke to me. "It is better for them. They took poison last night."' ²⁰

In his official report from Berlin for June 1938, Captain Foley summed up the events of the month. In Berlin, as well as elsewhere in Germany, there had, he wrote, been 'systematic house-to-house searches for, and arrests of, Jews'; cafés had been raided and cinema halls emptied of Jews 'so that they could be arrested in concentration camps'. In Berlin, the 'methods of persecution' had been particularly severe. It was 'no exaggeration', Foley concluded, 'to say that Jews have been hunted like rats in their homes, and for fear of arrest many of them sleep at a different address overnight'.²¹

The Germans who carried out the atrocities and cruelties had already become corrupted by their tasks; laughing when inflicting pain, and drawing in passers-by to laugh with them. Gradually entire populations became immune to feelings of outrage, and learned to shun compassion.

On 6 July 1938 an international conference opened at Evian, a French resort town on the shores of Lake Geneva, with the purpose of discussing the future reception of refugees. More than 150,000 Jews had already been taken in from the torments of Germany, and now of Austria. Of these 8,000 had been admitted to Britain, 40,000 into Palestine, 55,000 into the United States, 8,000 into Brazil, 15,000 into France, 2,000 into Belgium, at least 14,000 into Switzerland, several thousand into Bolivia, 1,000 into Sweden, 845 into Denmark and 150 into Norway.²²

Not all the delegates at Evian were sympathetic to the Jewish plight. 'It will no doubt be appreciated', the Australian delegate, T. W. White, told the conference, 'that as we have no racial problem, we are not desirous of importing one.' The conference agreed to set up an intergovernmental agency to examine what could be done. But, as the number of Jews seeking to leave grew, the restrictions against them also grew: Britain, Palestine and the United States each tightened their rules of admission. Four South American countries, Argentine, Chile, Uruguay and Mexico, adopted laws severely restricting the number of Jews who could enter; in the case of Mexico to a hundred a year.

The situation inside Germany made the search for escape even more urgent. Every day, more Jews sought the escape of suicide. On July 29, in Worms, Dr Friedrich Gernsheim, a sixty-six-year-old physician, committed suicide together with his wife Rosa.²³

In Nuremberg, on August 10, the synagogue was destroyed by fire, two months after the synagogue in Munich had been burnt down. Hitler, without having made war on any of his neighbours, and having avoided war with the European powers, seemed oblivious to outside indignation and protest. The six months which had passed since he celebrated his first five years in power had seen an acceleration of violence against the Jews, but no ill-effects abroad as far as German national interests were concerned. For five years his anti-Jewish actions, although always severe, had been tempered with moments of caution. Since the annexation of Austria, and the Evian conference, he seemed to have thrown caution to the winds.

The international community, which at Evian had been presented with an opportunity to keep open the gates of refuge, chose that moment, so desperate for the Jews already under Nazi rule, to signal its own hesitations and reluctance. It was a neutral stance, not a hostile one, but this neutral stance was to cost a multitude of lives.

The hardening response of the European powers towards Jewish refugees was typified on August 13, when the Cabinet in Finland held a secret discussion about 'the arrival visas' of Austrian refugees. An official in the Finnish Embassy in Vienna had apparently been giving entry visas to Austrian Jews 'without requesting permission from Finland first'. It was decided that all future visa applications should be submitted for approval, not only to the Finnish Foreign Ministry, but also to the German Foreign Ministry. Four days later, on August 17, fifty-three Austrian Jews reached Helsinki by sea. They were refused permission to disembark, and the boat which had brought them was ordered to Germany. Several of the passengers had the necessary papers to enter the United States, and sought only transit rights through Finland. But no exceptions were made to the new policy. A pregnant Jewess, who was about to have her baby, was allowed to leave the ship and go to a hospital, but after the birth, the mother and child had to rejoin the other passengers. On the way back to Germany, as the ship was sailing past the Porkkala peninsula, three of the rejected refugees threw themselves overboard and were drowned.²⁴