

National Days of Remembrance

SELECTED READINGS: **EARLY WARNING SIGNS**

Voices of the Victims

Dr. Gerhard Kann

“My dear Heinz! Your letter was simultaneously an expression of encouragement, hope, and resignation for us. Kind words that are a balm for this feeling of abandonment, of resigning oneself to an unavoidable fate. It is truly very difficult to avoid being overwhelmed by a feeling of unending passivity. Each day we see the walls around us grow higher, and each week brings new obstacles to leaving the country. Hopes and plans are buried, and the number of fellow sufferers in Central Europe grows ever greater. ... The fate of individuals has become unimportant, trivial. ... Our plans and hopes have more or less come to naught. Despite registering at the consulate here, America seems like a very remote possibility, something you have said. There now appears to be some chance of going to Peru. In any event, entering the country would cost 4,000 French francs per person, which would need to be raised for us abroad. Then we could get visas. I still have no idea how I could pull this off. Is there some chance that you might look into this? Perhaps there are some organizations or important people who could provide some assistance? ... Take care of yourself, Heinz. With warmest wishes to you and all friends over there, ‘Your Gerhard.’”

Letter of October 24, 1938, from Kann in Berlin to Heinz Kellermann, New York. Two weeks later, after the Kristallnacht pogroms, Kann was sent to Dachau for over a month. He managed to emigrate before the war, first to Palestine and then to Bolivia. From Jewish Responses to Persecution, Vol. 1: 1933–1938, ed. Jürgen Matthäus and Mark Roseman (AltaMira Press, in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2010), 321–24.

Rudolf Bing

“We, my wife and I, were rudely awakened around three in the morning. We heard a frightening racket in front of the door of the building and saw a crowd of people standing outside in the dark. They were ringing all the bells, and we heard voices screaming, ‘Open up! Open up right now!’

“I immediately phoned police headquarters and after giving my name told them, ‘A mob is trying to push its way into my building.’

“‘Are you Aryan?’ asked a female voice.

“‘No,’ I answered, whereupon she broke off the connection without further comment. ...

“We heard pitiful cries on the steps; a Jewish neighbor—we recognized his voice—was evidently being beaten up. ... We locked the door to the apartment, then the door of our bedroom, which has an adjoining dressing room, tied linen sheets together, and fastened them to the crossbars of the window frame. . . . We could already hear them breaking down our apartment door. The window of the dressing room overlooks a narrow alley, with storage rooms for hops on the other side. Across from the window and in front of the warehouse was a front section of roof, somewhat lower than the rest, which left an opening in the alley of around two and

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half meters between the warehouse and the window. In an instant I decided to throw a mattress down on the ground and jumped down. My wife decided that the window frame and linen sheets would not hold her weight. Suddenly she was hanging by her fingertips from the window ledge, let go, and fortunately fell into my arms, for I had been standing right under her on the mattress that I had thrown down. Of course, I fell down in the process, but the mattress broke our fall. We were saved.”

Account by Bing, a Nuremberg lawyer, who fled to Palestine with his wife in the late 1930s. From Jewish Responses to Persecution, Vol. 1: 1933–1938, ed. Jürgen Matthäus and Mark Roseman (AltaMira Press, in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2010), 351–52.

Hedwig Jastrow

“Nobody should attempt to save the life of someone who does not want to live! This is not an accident or an attack of depression. I am leaving life as someone whose family has had German citizenship for over 100 years and has always remained loyal to Germany. I have taught German children for 43 years and have helped them through all their trials and tribulations. I have done charity work for the German Volk for even longer, both in times of war and times of peace. I don’t want to live without a Fatherland, without a homeland, without an apartment, without citizenship rights, ostracized and reviled. And I want to be buried with the name my parents both gave me and passed on to me, which is untainted. I do not want to wait until it gets defamed. Every convict, every murderer keeps his name. It cries to heaven!”

Suicide note left by Jastrow (1862–1938), Berlin, November 29, 1938. From Jewish Responses to Persecution, Vol. 1: 1933–1938, ed. Jürgen Matthäus and Mark Roseman (AltaMira Press, in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2010), 369.

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Newspaper Headlines

The following newspaper headlines provide a snapshot of what the US public would have read in 1938.

'Yes, But --' Attitude Perils Progress at World Refugee Conference: Nations Fear Flow of Jews From Europe.

All Assert Willingness to Help but Stress Own Inability.

Say Immigrants Would Unsettle Economics and Populations.

U.S. Prestige Is Staked at Evian Parley. Having Originated Idea, Failure Would Be Heavy Blow.

This Country Received but 11,000 Hebrews Last Year.

Headline, Washington Post, July 10, 1938, B7.

REICH AGAIN URGED TO ASSIST EMIGRES: Earl Winterton Asks That They Be Allowed to Keep Funds for Departure.

DOUBTS MASS ADMITTANCE But Briton Believes Nations Will Be More Liberal in 'Selected' Cases.

Czechs Free Austrian Emigres. Argentina Tightens Bars.

Headline, New York Times, July 30, 1938, 5.

Foreign Policy Association Sees Refugees Lost for Lack of Plan: Cites 'Enormous' Obstacles to Resettlement Financing.

Removals Called Crux of Problem.

Headline, Washington Post, November 7, 1938, 5.

Quota Change To Let Jews In Held Unlikely: Borah Hits Refugee Plan, Cites Congress' Views.

Brandeis in New Plea.

Headline, Washington Post, November 20, 1938, 4.

REFUGEE BODY AIMS TO AID YOUNG JEWS:

Hitler Said to Agree to Ease Drive on Elderly if Their Children Will Emigrate.

150,000 WOULD BE MOVED.

Britain to Admit 600 Children Stranded at German-Polish Border, Warsaw Hears.

Headline, New York Times, December 30, 1938, 1.

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International Voices of Conscience

James G. McDonald

“When domestic policies threaten the demoralization and exile of hundreds of thousands of human beings, considerations of diplomatic correctness must yield to those of common humanity.”

McDonald, chair, Presidential Advisory Committee on Political Refugees, in his December 30, 1935, letter of resignation as League of Nations Refugee Commissioner. McDonald resigned in protest against the unwillingness of member countries to accept refugees.

Anne O’Hare McCormick

“A great power free to act has no alibi for not acting. Its unique position of comparative immunity invests it with unique obligations. It is well within the bounds of possibility that it may devolve upon this country to save the ideas embodied in the Declaration [of Independence]. ... It is heartbreaking to think of the queues of desperate human beings around our consulates in Vienna and other cities, waiting in suspense for what happens at Evian. But the question they underline is not simply humanitarian. ... It is a test of civilization. How deeply do we believe in our Declaration of the elementary rights of man? Whatever other nations do, can America live with itself if it lets Germany get away with this policy of extermination, allows the fanaticism of one man to triumph over reason, refuses to take up this gage of battle against barbarism? Here is a battle that can be won without fighting. For its own sake the civilized world must meet the problem Germany foists upon it.”

Anne O’Hare McCormick, “The Refugee Question as a Test of Civilization,” New York Times, July 4, 1938.

Jacques Maritain

“Millions of human beings cannot be expelled to become wanderers, men without a country. Are they to be driven to die of hunger? Are they all to be massacred? The more public opinion everywhere is informed and awakened, the more one can hope that persecution will lose ground. ... And it is up to the governments of countries to whom the word justice still has some meaning, to act, supported by public opinion, to compel respect for treaties which bear their signatures.”

Maritain, in a fall 1938 lecture in New York (published as A Christian Looks at the Jewish Question, New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 79). A French Catholic philosopher, Maritain spoke out against antisemitism and was active in helping refugees. After the war, he was one of the drafters of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

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Henry L. Feingold

“A simple searing truth emerges from the vast body of research and writing on the Holocaust. It is that European Jewry was ground to dust between the twin millstones of a murderous Nazi intent and a callous Allied indifference. It is a truth with which the living seem unable to come to terms. Historians expect that as time moves us away from a cataclysmic event our passions will subside and our historical judgment of it will mellow. But that tempered judgment is hardly in evidence in the historical examination of the Holocaust. Instead, time has merely produced a longer list of what might have been done and an indictment which grows more damning. There, are after, all six million pieces of evidence to demonstrate that the world did not do enough. Can anything more be said?”

Historian Henry L. Feingold, “Who shall bear guilt for the Holocaust: The Human Dilemma,” in Bystanders to the Holocaust, ed. Michael Marrus (Westport, Connecticut: Mecklermedia, 1989), 121.

Responses to Kristallnacht

“The news which comes out of Germany can hardly fail to spread the deepest gloom. It is possible, of course, that the newspaper stories are exaggerations of the truth, but they are accompanied by photographs that are most convincing. Perhaps the most distressing was the picture of destroyed and looted buildings, with the faces of the passers-by wreathed in smiles. It is a terrible thing for a power-mad dictator to seek to ruin thousands of innocent persons, but it is a far more terrible thing for a great people to give wholehearted assent to such efforts, and to find brutality amusing. The smiles on those faces haunt us.”

Editorial, “The Necessity of Pessimism,” The Friend (a Quaker publication), December 1, 1938.

“There has been an ascending grade of injustices, political reprisal, concentration camps, religious persecution, calumny, purges, obliteration of speech and press, exile and expropriation. ... My individual protest, your individual protest, our mutual feeling of sympathy for those persecuted and outraged by the autocrats of Europe, will not change instantly the present issue, but the combined condemnation of all those who love freedom and justice throughout the world will channel itself into a flood of righteous indignation that will sweep away the barriers of censorship and will reach the minds and consciences of the rank and file of the German and Jew alike, and justice shall prevail.”

Bishop Peter Ireton, Catholic University of America national radio broadcast, November 16, 1938.

“We can no longer be silent. We cannot rely on private intercessions on our behalf. We are dealing here with an enemy which will not give up our sacrifices ... which begrudges us life and which misses no opportunity to embitter our existence ... let our leaders lead! Let them not delay and postpone.”

Samuel Margosbes, The Day (a Jewish daily), November 11, 1938.

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“At a moment when the terrible persecution of the Jewish population in Germany and in other Central European countries has come to a violent climax, it is our duty to remind ourselves of the stand which we have taken as an ecumenical movement against anti-Semitism in all its forms. ... We suggest that at this time all Churches should take immediate action based on these statements ... to further without delay the plan proposed by the Evian Conference for securing a permanent settlement of a large number of actual and potential non-Aryan refugees.”

Provisional Committee of the World Council of Churches, Geneva, November 16, 1938.

Voices in Germany

Franz Kaufmann

“When we see such things, should we live on as if nothing had happened?”

*Kaufmann, a Berlin lawyer who founded a small rescue group in the late 1930s after seeing Jews taken away by the Gestapo. In addition to hiding Jews, his group forged passports and helped Jews escape Germany. Kaufmann was shot by the Gestapo in 1943 when the group was discovered. Kaufmann’s statement was reported by Helene Jacobs, a member of the resistance group who survived, in Victoria Barnett, *For the Soul of the People* (Oxford University Press, 1992), 154.*

Julius von Jan

“Today we truly have every reason to hold a day of repentance, to speak of our sins and the sins of our people. ... [H]ouses of God that were sacred to others have been burned to the ground without punishment, the possessions of strangers plundered and destroyed, men who served the German people loyally and fulfilled their obligations conscientiously have been thrown into concentration camps.”

Sermon preached by Lutheran Pastor von Jan, Oberlennigen, Germany, November 16, 1938. This is one of the few sermons preached in German churches that protested Kristallnacht. Von Jan was attacked one week later by storm troopers and imprisoned from November 1938–June 1943, when he was sent to the eastern front. Translation by Victoria Barnett.

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Dr. Elisabeth Schmitz

“I don’t know whether you recall that I visited you several weeks ago to discuss with you that the church must say something to its congregations about the treatment of Jews in Germany. On your advice I wrote about this to N. The word from the church did not come. For that reason we now have gone through this gruesome event and must now live with the knowledge that we are to blame for it. When we were silent on April 1, 1933, when we remained silent about the showcases for the storm troops, about the demonic incitements in the press, about the poisoning of the soul of the people and our young people, about the destruction of peoples’ existences ... about the methods of Buchenwald—there and a thousand other times we became guilty for what happened on November 10, 1938. And now? It appears as if this time too, where the very stones are crying out, the church will leave it up to the insight and courage of individual pastors as to whether they will speak up and what they will say.”

Letter from Dr. Schmitz of Berlin to Pastor Helmut Gollwitzer, November 24, 1938. Schmitz taught at a girls’ high school. She resigned her position after Kristallnacht, saying that she could not remain a civil servant under a criminal regime. As a member of the Confessing Church, she urged church leaders throughout the 1930s to speak out against the Nazi measures against the Jews. She helped hide Jews during the war. Her story is told in the film Elisabeth of Berlin.