



Introduction

On the day after Adolf Hitler's appointment as Reich Chancellor on January 30, 1933, the *Jüdische Rundschau* wrote: "A power which is hostile to us has seized control of the government." Nevertheless, few of the some 450,000 Jewish Germans were ready or able to see this event as the end of all emancipation and assimilation, let alone as the beginning of a process of persecution that would end in the murder of millions. Just like many non-Jewish Germans, many Jews also believed that, despite his strong words, Hitler would soon be done for. At the same time, they hoped that Hitler's coalition partners would have a moderating influence on him and at least cushion the blow. They listened eagerly to rumors of an impending military coup against the new regime.

After a long struggle for their political and social emancipation, German Jews finally believed they had achieved their goal: a guarantee of equal rights under the law. Just how firmly they believed this is shown by the numerous lawsuits Jews initiated against the injustice they experienced in the early years of the Third Reich. Jewish front soldiers particularly hoped for protection from Reich President von Hindenburg. They assumed that the former general would honor the Jewish veterans of World War I. Of course, the Jews also recalled the centuries of persecution they had suffered in Germany. In early 1933 they still hoped that the new government's anti-Semitism would soon run its course and that, as so often in German history, the phase of persecution would be followed by a phase of calm. After all, many of them argued, over the generations the Jews had amassed a wealth of experiences and skills which would help them survive these difficult times as well.

Most Jews felt themselves to be German to the core and wanted to remain German. This explains the various offers of cooperation and declarations of loyalty to Germany on the part of Jewish institutions and associations following the Nazi seizure of power—statements that sometimes outdid themselves in their servility. For instance, just days after the Centralverein Deutscher Staatsbürger Jüdischen Glaubens (CV) [Central Association for German Citizens of Jewish Faith] proclaimed: "The cultivation of German convictions in our ranks must be continued at all

costs!" the Reichsbund Jüdischer Frontsoldaten (RJF) declared in October of 1933: "We shall stand with our German fatherland to the last!" And also in 1933, the Jewish congregation of Berlin actually sent a personal petition to Hitler stating, "In this hour, we once again declare our bond with the German people, whose renewal and elevation is our most sacred duty, our right, and our deepest desire."

Without a doubt, such statements expressed the feelings of a majority of German Jews who could not understand why they were being excluded as "alien elements." These assimilated and liberal Jews, who vocally distanced themselves from the Orthodox eastern European Jews and who were highly skeptical of Zionist demands to create and emigrate to a Jewish state in Palestine, believed that they had gained a legal foundation by virtue of the fact that many of them had already lived and worked in Germany for many generations and had even gone to war for their country. They saw themselves as Germans first and only then—if at all—as members of the Jewish people or of the Jewish religious community. They were proud that Jews had achieved great things for their fatherland as entrepreneurs, scientists, artists, physicians, lawyers, and teachers, among many other professions.

Because they felt emancipated and equal within the state and the society, they systematically combated all symptoms of a new anti-Semitism. The CV was founded already in 1893. It rejected the idea of a distinct Jewish nationality and increasingly transformed itself into a lobby for the liberal Jewish majority. Just how powerful this nationalist fervor was among many Jews, and how little these people differed from other German nationalists, became apparent in two organizations that arose following World War I, namely the RJF, founded in 1919, and the Verband Nationaldeutscher Juden (Association of German Nationalist Jews). This latter group was founded in 1921 as an offshoot of the CV, which even sought to cooperate with the political right. Like other Germans, Jews joined fire brigades and political parties, chess clubs and sports associations. As politicians, they rose to the highest positions and assumed nationwide responsibilities. One proof of how firmly Jews were integrated in Germany was the fact that the number of "mixed marriages" between Jews and non-Jews was on the rise. Many of the approximately 37,000 Jews who fled abroad immediately after the Nazi seizure of power or following the first Jewish boycott on April 1, 1933 returned after the situation had quieted down.

In any case, scarcely any of the Jews living in Germany could imagine that soon they would have to abandon overnight everything they had built up with such effort and hard work, that they would have to leave their homes and struggle to make a fresh start in a foreign country. For this reason too, the numbers of emigrants declined again after 1934. In that year 23,000 left and only 21,000 in 1935. By mid-1938 only about 140,000 German Jews had emigrated.

But in reality, the process that would soon transform Jews into “strangers in their own country” had already begun in 1933. In retrospect, the speaker of the German Jews at that time, Rabbi Leo Baeck, called this process a “martyrdom in life” that preceded the “martyrdom in death.” After the Reich Pogrom Night in 1938, this first phase of a new persecution of the Jews in Germany moved smoothly into the second phase of the extermination of German Jewry. Anti-Jewish policies in the first years of Nazi rule were to some extent still unsystematic, selective, arbitrary, regionally varied, marked by chance, and fraught with contradictions, so that many Jews embraced the illusion that their situation was not entirely hopeless after all. During the first boycott measures against Jews, former front soldiers believed that they could appeal to reason by wearing their war medals. Repeated announcements by Nazi functionaries that the anti-Jewish laws had come to an end nourished such illusions. But this was pure wishful thinking. Within just a few years, the Nazis’ “separation” of the Jews from the non-Jewish population was practically complete.

In order to achieve this, the state’s legislative and administrative machinery was kept running at full tilt. As early as 1933 a total of 319 laws, directives, and proclamations were issued against the Jews. These included such regulations as the “Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service,” the expulsion of Jewish students and disbarments from various professions, the first laws banning Jews from public beaches and swimming pools, and the ban on spelling out Jewish names on telegrams. In their eagerness to anticipate the new regime’s wishes, and in the subservient tradition of their forebears, non-Jews complemented government-sponsored measures with anti-Jewish activities in nongovernment spheres as well. Thus as early as April 1933 Jews were excluded from the matches of the German Boxing Association, and in July of the same year they were banned from the Greater German Chess Association. In 1934 the government issued 177 additional laws, directives and proclamations. By the time of the Nuremberg Laws of September 15, 1935—which among other things stipulated that Jews were no longer “Reich citizens” and thus no longer possessed any rights, and which banned mixed marriages—a further 140 were added. This trend continued until 1938, ultimately leading to such absurdities as the November 1938 ban on Jews’ possessing homing pigeons.

In the economic and social sphere as well, the years 1933 to 1938 saw the development of a policy of excluding and displacing Jews. By the time of the Reich Pogrom Night, the destruction of the Jewish economy and numerous livelihoods had gone so far that now only “remnants” were left. As soon as April 6, 1933, the *Jüdische Rundschau* wrote, “Tens of thousands of us have been forced out of our livelihoods and our professions, and many independent businesses have been uprooted.” On April 20 of the same year, the newspaper wrote: “The distress of dismissed Jewish employees, workers, and craftsmen is immense.” In the private economy

as well, more and more Jewish employees were fired, and Jewish companies themselves were put under increasing pressure. According to official statistics, in July 1938 only 9,000 of the 50,000 Jewish retail businesses that had existed in 1932 were still in Jewish hands. Out of approximately 8,000 Jewish physicians, only 3,000 were still practicing their profession, and only 1,750 out of 4,500 Jewish lawyers. According to a different set of statistics, in April 1938 more than 60 percent of all Jewish businesses no longer existed after having been “Aryanized” or liquidated altogether. For most Jewish congregations, this development was impossible to bear. Already in 1936, one out of five Jews was considered to be indigent. The greatest suffering could only be eased by donations, which other Jews in these troubled times were ill able to afford.

Many Jewish Germans were particularly embittered that the government’s and Nazi Party’s exclusionary and isolating tactics became increasingly noticeable in daily life. Non-Jewish friends and acquaintances faded away: old neighbors eventually stopped saying hello. Jews were asked to resign from clubs and associations or their membership was simply terminated, a step that longtime members only learned of in an impersonal form letter—if anyone bothered to inform them at all. In public, the Jews—to the extent that they were recognized as such—were exposed to insults and abuse. They were occasionally beat up. They usually waited in vain for assistance or even moral support from non-Jewish Germans. Even their children were affected: friendships collapsed when “Aryan” parents forbade their sons and daughters to associate with “Jewish brats.” Jewish children were often beat up and were submitted to constant discrimination and insults from their teachers and fellow pupils.

German Jews were also increasingly excluded from cultural life between 1933 and 1938. Jewish artists were no longer permitted to work, and Jews chose to avoid attending cultural events, to the extent that they were not prohibited from doing so in the first place. In reaction to all of this, the first Jewish cultural association developed in Berlin around 1933, followed by numerous other such organizations in other German towns. They joined together in the Reichsverband der Jüdischen Kulturbünde [Reich Association of Jewish Culture Leagues] in 1935, which safeguarded the livelihood of some 2,500 Jewish artists by sponsoring numerous concerts, opera and theater performances, readings, and lectures until its dissolution in September of 1941. If nothing else, it provided many Jewish Germans with a feeling of security, consolation, common experience, and cultural gratification in a difficult period. It provided them with relaxation and restored a fragment of their human dignity. To be sure, the National Socialists restricted the activities of the culture leagues by banning some authors and composers and censoring the rest. And yet, even under this pressure the culture leagues became centers of intellectual resistance and a new Jewish self-awareness.

Without friends and allies at home and without effective support from abroad, Jews closed ranks, developed their own self-help networks, and often discovered a new Jewish identity as they were forced to face their Jewishness. Back on April 4, 1933, the editor-in-chief of the *Jüdische Zeitung*, Robert Weltsch, discussed the first anti-Jewish boycott three days earlier with its shop windows smeared with yellow paint, and proclaimed the slogan: "The yellow star—wear it with pride!" Under such outside pressure, a central Jewish umbrella organization was founded after internal conflicts had prevented this step beforehand. On September 17, 1933, the Reichsvertretung der Deutschen Juden [Reich Agency of German Jews] was formed. In 1935 it was forced to change its name to Reichsvertretung der Juden in Deutschland [Reich Agency of Jews in Germany], and it was replaced by the Reichsvereinigung der Juden in Deutschland [Reich Association of Jews in Germany] in 1939. This representative Jewish central authority, which encompassed almost all branches of German Jewry, became the mouthpiece of the Jews. It was also the opposite number in negotiations with government and Nazi Party agencies. At the same time, it organized a network of Jewish self-help facilities, including a Jewish business promotion center, a Jewish job exchange, and retraining and educational programs. In addition, at great financial sacrifice, it helped oversee the creation of a Jewish welfare and school system.

And yet the final result of all these efforts was a dream world where Jewish Germans sought to lead an at least partially normal life. But this had long since ceased being an option for them, as became dramatically visible in November 1938, when the Reich Pogrom Night introduced phase two of the extermination of German Jewry.