Passing Through: A Review of 'Jewish Exile in India 1933-1945'

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German Jewish refugees (both of which groups incidentally were interned together!) and was instrumental in releasing most of the internees. But in late 1946, with the Allied fortunes facing a downslide in Europe, the Government of India re-introduced all German nationals along with nationals of other Axis powers in the subcontinent. The end of the War saw compulsory repatriation of most of the internees, though the Government of India, in a last minute attempt to save face, differentiated Nehru, and the nationalist press, these figures at least in the realm of rhetoric. In contrast, Shalva Weil’s article gives us a brief survey of the Jewish communities in India, and their interaction with the incoming European Jews. She identifies strains of antagonism in the economic sector, while in the fields of refugee relief the European Jews worked hand in hand with their Indian counterparts. What needs to be explored in more detail here, and which both Sareen and Weil miss out on, is the lukewarm nature of the response from the Indian Jews towards their European brethren. An idea of the diverse experiences of Jewish exiles in India is well brought out in the four biographical sketches of eminent Jewish refugees, which constitute the second section of the book. Many of us are familiar with the names of Walter Kaufmann, Margaret Spiegel, Alex Aronson and Willy Haas, though we know little about their years in the subcontinent. Walter Kaufmann, “a composer, conductor, pianist, and musicologist,” came to India in 1934 and stayed on for the next 12 years. As the director of All India Radio, Bombay, and the founder of the Bombay Chamber Orchestra, Kaufmann was instrumental in promoting Western classical music in the country. His points out that the government’s policies were governed not by the humanitarian needs of the refugees but “was more an exercise in the management of pressures”. The other two articles in this section deal with the Indian response to the Jewish refugees and the interaction between the European Jews and the Jewish communities already settled in India. The ongoing freedom struggle against colonial domination seems to have occupied the Indians more than the plight of the Jews in Nazi Germany. Though Tilak Raj Sareen presents a favourable Indian response towards the European situation, citing sympathetic reactions from Gandhi,