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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 downside in the war, the Government of India re­

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ternational Research Center for Emigration and Refugees.

World War II, all shipping came to a halt, permitting the Nazis to move their war machines across the seas. To document the history of the Holocaust, Oesterheld provides us with a starting point. The Holocaust, he argues, is the result of a long process of dehumanization and devaluation of the Jews by the Nazis in Germany—"a truly minuscule number if one considers that only about 1000 Jews were allowed into India in the dozen years following the outbreak of World War II." What is more surprising is that only about 1000 Jews were allowed into India in the dozen years following the outbreak of World War II. Oesterheld attempts to fill the lacunae in our knowledge about this period in the history of the Holocaust and put in perspective the perception in India, of the colonial state, Indian leaders and ordinary people, on the "Jewish Question" during those tumultuous times.

The book has been divided into three sections, the first of which outlines the government policies and the responses of the British and Indians in colonial India with regard to the Holocaust and its aftermath. The essays in this section help to bring to focus the Government of India's ambivalent treatment of the chosen refugee community. The essays cover the Jewish exiles in India in 1933–45, attempts to fill the lacunae in our knowledge about this period in the history of the Holocaust and put in perspective the perception in India, of the colonial state, Indian leaders and ordinary people, on the "Jewish Question" during those tumultuous times.

The first chapter, "British Policy towards German Speaking Emigrants in India 1939–45," by Joachim Oesterheld, provides us with a starting point to examine how the British Government dealt with Jewish refugees in India. Oesterheld, basing himself mainly on archival documents, details how in late 1939, the British were far more sympathetic to the persecuted Jewish refugees and other pariahs, and allowed them to stay on in colonial territories or be transported to the country of their choice.

In this context, Majid Siddiqui's essay tries to understand the complexities which lay behind policy formulation of the colonial government in India. In an essay, interspersed with interesting anecdotes, he argues, that while the xenophobic atmosphere adopted by the Government of India towards German nationals and Jews was influenced by the shared syndrome of European imperial dominance juxtaposed with national rivalries in the Continent, the war situation too was an important determinant of British response. Further, he 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 Jewish response to the Jewish communities between the European Jews and the interaction of the Jews with 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 T ilk Raj Sareen presents a favourable Indian response towards the European situation, citing sympathetic reactions from Gandhi, Nehru, and the nationalist press, this figure at best 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 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 cultural and multilingual existence was not something he chose consciously. The fact is that he had to suffer internment, in spite of Tagore's plea on his behalf, the helplessness of the Jewish refugees in India. Anil Bhatti in his essay examines the literary attempts of Willy Haas, who describes as "one of the greatest writers of exile literature of the German tradition." Bhatti shows how Haas's epiphanic constructions on India provided a window to the extent awareness of the country as a place of exile and its rationalization through an "achieved awareness" between individual and national identity. These essays bring out the complex dichotomy faced by the Jewish refugees, of living in a country where an anti-imperialist struggle was in full swing, directed against the very same British to whom they no doubt felt a measure of gratitude for securing their safe exit from Nazi Germany.

The last section of the book entitled "Reflections" centres on the Indian literary response to the situation of the Jewish refugees in India. Rainer Lotz and Rekha Relaker's essay "Baumgartner's Bombay" in an attempt to view the existential aspects of migration and exile as a "drama of literary aesthetics." They argue that Desai's novel treats migration as a modern condition and underlines the distinctions between different cultural identities "by being ignorant of their applicability." In this context of literary response to Jewish exodus, Ranjendra Dingle's essay examines the reaction in Marathi literature to the situation of Jewish refugees, and the works of Ranagam (1939) a novella written by Vishram Bedekar. Here too, one comes across instances of the protagonists' submission of their identities, which went hand in hand, with the realization of their human situation and its various implications.

This book is a welcome attempt at documenting the refugee politics and experience of the time and in capturing the complex and sometimes insecure nature of Jewish life in India. The British government's policies towards and treatment of the refugees were governed by utilitarian motives. Even though India offered refuge to some of the Jewish emigrants, their condition in the country was precarious, on account of their identification with a nationality they had discarded. What strikes the reader as peculiar is the fact that most of the refugees mentioned in the second section of the book, were not strictly political exiles at the time they arrived in India. Nearly all of them had come to India to fulfill a wish to see the country, and immerse its culture and would have travelled to India even if the political situation had not forced them to. Therefore it is imperative that the experiences of such refugees who came in the later years, as victims of Hitler's murderous repression, should also be documented in greater detail to provide a more complete picture. Further, what needs to be spelt out in clearer terms is the fact that India acted only as a transit point for the refugees on their ultimate destination to the new day Israel. Therefore the process of assimilation was a half-hearted one both for them and their side as well from the Indians.

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HISTORY

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