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

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Passing through

Jewish Exile in India 1933-1945

Edited by Anil Bhatti and Johannes H Voigt

Manohar in association with Max Mueller Bhavan, New Delhi,

1999, 195 pp., Rs 300

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The brutal persecution of the Jews during World War II by the fascist regimes, and their consequent flight from Europe to escape Hitler's "Final Solution" have given rise to a rich body of literature which is as vast as it is diverse. Social scientists, in their turn, have grappled with the whys and hows of this meaningless racial repression and have debated at length on the Jews' poignant search for a homeland in Palestine. The *en masse* migration of the Jews (while it was still possible, till 1939 when, with the outbreak of World War II, all shipping came to a standstill) to different countries like America, Australia, China, and England, seeking refuge and rehabilitation, while it has always had particularistic importance, as in documenting the history of the diaspora, also fits current-day concerns with broad issues of ethnicity, emigration and studies of impact and response in multi-cultural societies.

It is not a widely known fact and indeed, to many it may come as a surprise, to know that British India was the chosen destination for many German and Central European Jews in search of refuge from the atrocities of Nazism. What is more surprising is that only about a 1000 Jews were allowed into India in the dozen years following the assumption of power by the Nazis in Germany—a truly minuscule number if one considers that almost 6 million Jews perished in the Holocaust. The publication of *Jewish Exile in India 1933-45*, attempts to fill the many lacunae in our knowledge of this brief episode of Jewish history 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 question of Jewish emigration. The essays in this section help to bring to focus the Government of India's ambiguous definition of what constituted refugee identity in the backdrop of World War II, in addition to the xenophobia which tinged all of their policy formulation in this regard, and the almost apathetic response of many prominent sections of Indian society to the problems faced by the Jews.

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 in India dealt with Jewish exiles. With the outbreak of World War II, all German nationals, including Jews, began to be regarded as 'enemy aliens' by the colonial government. Oesterheld, basing himself mainly on archival documents, details how, in late 1939, all male German nationals above the age of 16 (including missionaries), were confined in internment camps at Ahmednagar, Purandhar and Satara. Fears of retaliatory action on British nationals in Germany led to the release of most of these persons. The Darling Committee for Interrogation of Alien Internees (1940), attempted to distinguish between the pro-Nazi German nationals and genuine

German Jewish refugees (both of which groups incidentally were interned together!) and was instrumental in releasing most of the internees. But in late 1940, with the Allied fortunes facing a downslide in the war, the Government of India re-interned 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 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 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

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between the persecuted Jewish refugees and other parolees, and allowed them to stay on in colonial territories or be transported to the country of their choice.

In this context, Majid Siddiqi'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 attitude 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 in regulating British responses. 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 Indian response to the Jewish crisis 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,

response from the Indian Jews towards their European brethren.

An idea of the diverse experiences of the Jewish exiles in India is well brought out in the four biographical sketches of eminent Jewish refugees, which form 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 interest in Indian music led him in search of the different schools of music, efforts which later crystallized into two standard reference books—*The Ragas of North India* (1968) and *The Ragas of South India* (1976).

Both Martin Kampchen and Johannes H. Voigt, have captured the precarious nature of the life of the exiles, through their essays. Martin Kampchen, in chronicling the life of Alex Aronson, the German academic who taught at Tagore's Santiniketan, notes "His journey through the years has been one through many countries, in none of which he was able to establish deep roots. His multi-

cultural and multilingual existence was not something he chose consciously...". The fact that he had to suffer internment, in spite of Tagore's plea on his behalf, highlights the helplessness of the Jewish refugee in India. Anil Bhatti in his essay examines the literary attempts of Willy Haas, who he describes as "one of the greatest classic feuilletonists in the German tradition". Bhatti shows how Haas's epiphanic constructions on India provided a window to the exiles' awareness of the country as a place of exile and its rationalization through an "achieved awareness between individual choice and inevitability". 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 "Receptions and Reflections" concentrates on the Indian literary response to the situation of the Jewish refugees in India. Rainer Lotz and Rekha Kamath analyze Anita Desai's *Baumgartner's Bombay* in an attempt to view the existential aspects of migration and exile "through the prism of literary aesthetics". They argue that Desai's novel treats migration as a modern condition and undermines the distinctions between different cultural identities "by being ignorant of their applicability". In this context of literary response to the theme of Jewish exodus, Rajendra Dengle's essay examines the reaction in Marathi literature, through analysis of *Ranangan* (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 implicit and at times explicit insecurity that accompanied refugee life in India. The British government's policies towards the German Jews, 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 imbibe 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 journey to present day Israel. Therefore the process of assimilation was a half-hearted one both from their side as well from the Indians.