

*Between Sorrow
and Strength*

WOMEN REFUGEES OF THE NAZI PERIOD

Edited by
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Introduction

SIBYLLE QUACK

“It all depended on whom you met after your arrival.”¹ These words, written by Hertha Leab, a German–Jewish woman who had fled Nazi Germany for the United States in 1938, show the importance of outside help given refugees, whether by private individuals, fellow immigrants, relatives, or refugee aid organizations. Hertha Leab, a cosmetician from Berlin, did not find such help: With unfriendly, even hostile relatives and no assistance from any organization, she and her family struggled for a long time with illnesses, isolation, and desperation. With great tenacity, Leab finally succeeded in selling one of her products to other women refugees. With time, her cosmetics became well known among a wider range of customers. Despite all the hardships, including several nervous breakdowns, she made it possible for her family to survive.

The case of Hertha Leab, thoroughly documented in the archives of the Leo Baeck Institute in New York, is a good example of the problems of refugee women of the Nazi period. Traditionally, the history of European refugees of the 1930s and 1940s has been associated with the image of the famous or “illustrious immigrant,” usually a man.² Most studies in this field emphasize the lives and experiences of men and do not focus on the lives of refugee women.³

In November 1991 the German Historical Institute in Washington,

1 Letter from Hertha Leab to Dr. Taterka, Feb. 12, 1956, in Hertha Leab (Liebeskind) Collection, box 7, folder 6, Leo Baeck Institute, New York. Translated by author.

2 Laura Fermi uses this term in her study on refugee academics: *Illustrious Immigrants: the Intellectual Migration from Europe, 1930–41* (Chicago, 1968).

3 Most material on women can be found in the studies of Maurice Davie, *Refugees in America. Report of the Committee for the Study of Recent Immigration from Europe* (New York and London, 1947) and Ruth Neubauer, *Differential Adjustment of Adult Immigrants and Their Children to American Groups. The Americanization of a Selected Group of Jewish Immigrants of 1933–1944* (New York, 1966). During the past 15 years, there has been a growing number of studies on émigré women writers. For an

D.C., organized a conference on “Women in the Emigration After 1933.” Its purpose was to take a new look at the social history of Jewish and non-Jewish emigration and immigration after 1933, focusing specifically on the lives of women. For three days, anthropologists, historians, and political scientists, as well as contemporary eyewitnesses, discussed and analyzed the life stories of women refugees during the Nazi period. The participants explored how gender affected women refugees’ opportunities for work and how it shaped their emotional world. In addition, the conferees studied the impact of exile, emigration, and immigration on refugee women’s future lives and career patterns. Reports of eyewitnesses were introduced into the scholarly debate and contributed to very lively discussions in all sessions. The encounter between researchers from the United States and Europe – among them several children of German–Jewish emigrants – and members of the older generation of eyewitnesses created a unique setting for reconsidering the results of historical research.

The papers read at the conference, presented in this volume, broaden considerably our view of the history of refugees from Europe after 1933. Starting with Marion Kaplan’s prefatory essay and ending with an epilogue by Peter Gay, the volume contains two main parts. Essays and reports in the first part document the worldwide search for refuge. The authors discuss the situation of women émigrés in France (Rita Thalmann and Elizabeth Marum Lunau), England (Marion Berghahn and Susanne Miller), Palestine (Rachel Cohn), the Netherlands (Ursula Langkau-Alex), Canada (Wilma Iggers), Shanghai (David Kranzler and Illo Heppner), and Brazil (Katherine Morris and Eleanor Alexander).

Altogether, the contributions – scholarly essays and eyewitness reports – provide us with a rich variety of fascinating experiences, feelings, and attitudes of émigré women seeking refuge in different parts of the world. Each author describes the difficult living conditions that refugees faced and how women refugees were able to adapt to various types of hardships. They did so by actively cultivating solidarity among themselves, coping with unsettling and degrading situations, and comforting their husbands and other family members.

These essays contain many diverse experiences, revealing “different worlds,” as one participant of the conference put it. They show that the category *women* of itself does not mean that all women refugees had the

same experiences. It is important to differentiate among women with regard to age, marital status, number of children, when they left Germany, whether they could take anything with them, their professions (if any), their religious backgrounds, and their political opinions.

The eyewitness reports are unique documents of individual experiences and stand for themselves. In their directness and closeness to the events in question, they are highly valuable sources; they also prove the multifaceted picture of this emigration. Thus, this volume shows in an unusual way, “not only the records of women’s past but also their own ‘voice.’”⁴ We are fortunate to have the voices of those who are at the center of the historical investigation combined here with the fruits of scholarly research. To provide the reader with the context for these reports, I have located the biographical information for the eyewitnesses at the beginning of each of their respective chapters.

Immigration to the United States is the theme of the second part of this book. Essays on women in the German–Jewish immigrant community (Steven Lowenstein), in refugee help organizations (Gabriele Schiff, Linda Kuzmack, and Jack Jacobs), and in various occupations and professions provide a detailed picture of refugee women’s social activities, work patterns, and expectations. Atina Grossmann reports on women refugee physicians, Mitchell Ash on psychologists and psychoanalysts, Joachim Wieler on social workers, Frank Mecklenburg on lawyers, Catherine Epstein on historians, Christl Wickert on politicians, and Guy Stern and Brigitte V. Sumann on writers. In concentrating on the life stories, educational backgrounds, and career opportunities of female refugee academics – as well as the disruptions caused by emigration and immigration – the authors have done pioneering work.

We are especially grateful to be able to include Eva Neisser’s eyewitness report on her work at chicken farms in Vineland, New Jersey. We would have liked additional reports and essays from refugee women who worked in nonacademic fields, such as textiles, offices, sales, nursing, or domestic service. Much more research needs to be done in these areas. We hope that this volume will inspire other historians to investigate these challenging subjects.

Most of the essays in this volume apply the methods of gender history, enabling us to make important distinctions between men and women refugees and to discover the relationships between gender, ethnicity, social

4 Karen Offen, Ruth Roach Pierson, and Jane Randall have used this expression in their introduction to *Writing Women’s History. International Perspectives* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1991), xxxi.

status, class, and other important factors. Did men and women perceive their situations differently? Did their attitudes, feelings, and reactions to the needs and challenges of persecution, emigration, and immigration differ, and if so, how? Did they cope differently? As Peter Gay states in his epilogue, reading these essays and eyewitness reports is like “putting together the pieces of a sizable and complex mosaic with more and more pieces in place . . . to glimpse the outlines of the portrait . . . of the refugee woman.”

In her contribution, Marion Kaplan analyzes the increasingly difficult situation of the Jewish population in Germany during the years from 1933 to 1939. She points out gender differences in the family and discusses how Jewish women tried to create an atmosphere of normalcy in a highly abnormal and threatening environment. Kaplan argues that women had to absorb much of the family’s stress and as a result were the ones who pressed hardest for emigration. Nevertheless, although many Jewish women recognized from an early date the necessity of emigrating, for large numbers of these women leaving Germany was in fact very difficult. Overall, it seems that fewer women than men were actually able to do so.

Kaplan offers a number of compelling reasons for this phenomenon, including the fact that the employment situation for men and women within the struggling Jewish community was different. For example, women, especially young women, could still find jobs in the Jewish sector of the German economy. In addition, Kaplan writes, many women did not leave Germany because they had to care for elderly parents or relatives and were expected to stay. Moreover, Jewish parents and organizations were afraid to let single girls or women emigrate alone. Thus, Jewish women from Nazi Germany were much more reluctant than men to emigrate. The lower rate of female emigration during those years caused a growing disproportion of women to men in the German–Jewish population – a disproportion already apparent before 1933 that was mainly a result of the large number of Jewish soldiers who had been killed in World War I. Ultimately, more women than men, particularly elderly women, remained behind and perished in the Holocaust.⁵

Several factors influenced Jewish women’s decisions to leave Germany or stay behind, including personal and public attitudes toward emigration,

5 See also Marion Kaplan’s article, “Jewish Women in Nazi Germany: Daily Life, Daily Struggles, 1933–1939,” *Feminist Studies* 16, no. 3 (1990): 598. Rita Thalmann writes in her book, *Frauen im Dritten Reich* (Frankfurt/Main and Berlin, 1987), 229, that among the Austrian and German Jews deported to concentration camps almost two-thirds were women.

family situation, age, economic position within the Jewish community, and Nazi policies. Gender-based immigration regulations of the various countries also played a role in whether or not women were able to escape the Nazi terror.⁶

Beginning in 1937, the United States started to surpass Palestine as the destination of the largest number of German refugees. The approximately 130,000 German and Austrian refugees who immigrated to the United States during the Nazi period included more women than men. Between 1934 and 1944, 53 percent of all adult émigrés from Germany were women, and 47 percent were men.⁷ One reason for the preponderance of women

6 As part of any future research agenda, scholars should gather immigration statistics of different countries of emigration and analyze them according to gender. For example, immigration statistics for Palestine, which took the most refugees from Germany between 1933 and 1936, show 52 percent men and 48 percent women. See David Gurevich, Aaron Gertz, and Roberto Bachi, *The Jewish Population of Palestine. Immigration, Demographic Structure, and National Growth*, Dept. of Statistics of the Jewish Agency for Palestine (Jerusalem, 1944), 27. Clearly, the immigration policies – as to who received an immigration certificate, for example – of the British Mandate government and the Jewish Agency for Palestine were, in part, based on gender. Single mothers and their children were excluded, and, at least during the first few years, fewer certificates were issued to girls than to boys. According to an article in the contemporary press, the reason for this policy was the fear of a surplus of women. Later on, the number of certificates given to girls rose, and in 1936 the League of Jewish Women, which had been critical of the process, called it an “almost balanced relation between male and female juvenile émigrés.” See “Palästina als Einwanderungsland,” *Blätter des Jüdischen Frauenbunds*, Dec. 1936: 36. But, as statistics show, equity in immigration for men and women was never fully reached.

7 Statistics from the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service provide us with demographic characteristics of the group, including data on their marital status and their age. They show that during the early years of emigration, between 1933 and 1936, the proportion of unmarried and younger women from Germany who entered the United States was much higher than in later years. In 1935 and 1936, when comparatively few individuals from Germany immigrated to the United States, unmarried women even outnumbered married women. But from 1937 onward, when the United States became the main destination for refugees, the number of married women émigrés rapidly increased. Of all female immigrants from Germany in 1936, single women comprised 47.6 percent of the total; married women, 41.8 percent. But by 1940, the percentage of single women had dropped to 21.5 percent, whereas that for married women had risen to 65.2 percent. Although figures on male refugees show a similar development, the marital structure of men and women differed because of the greater number of divorced or widowed women. With the overall increase in refugees, the age structure of the whole group changed as more and more older women and men immigrated. In 1941 the percentage of women over forty-five outnumbered the middle group (ages sixteen to forty-four). This trend was even more so in the case of men. That same year, the percentage over sixty years was 18.5 percent for women and 25 percent for men.

Contemporary immigration statistics dealing with the occupational structure of the refugees unfortunately were not gender-based. Considering the high rate of old people among the refugees, it is not surprising that the group of those who said they had no gainful occupation was very high, more than half. Women who had been housewives prior to emigration, and children, also belonged to that group. By and large, the immigrant occupational structure mirrored that of the Jewish population in Germany: a middle-class group with a high percentage of skilled workers, clerks, those engaged in commerce, and professionals.

All numbers are calculated from unpublished data provided by the Immigration and Naturalization

was that immigration regulations in the United States favored married women and children.⁸ In addition, the growing pressure on the Jewish population in Germany accelerated the emigration of whole families. With increasing urgency, the Jewish community itself realized that single women, too, should emigrate in greater numbers.⁹

The economic situation facing German–Jewish women after their arrival in the United States was extremely difficult. On the one hand, the country was still struggling to throw off the effects of the Great Depression; on the other hand, most refugees, especially those who could leave Germany only in the later years, brought with them no visible means of support. Refugee aid organizations, such as the National Refugee Service (NRS), the Hebrew Sheltering and Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), the National Council of Jewish Women, and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), thus played a critical role in settling refugees. These and other organizations helped refugees financially and advised them in visa matters and in finding a job, an apartment, a doctor, or a school. Women were vital to the operation and activities of all these organizations. The activities of only three organizations are discussed in this volume, and although not necessarily representative, they illustrate the variety of groups that helped the refugees: the large National Council of Jewish Women, which had existed before 1933; a small organization founded in the 1930s by the American Jewish labor movement; and a self-help agency founded by refugees.

For those refugee women who had been housewives in Germany, emigration made it necessary for the first time in their lives to take up work outside the home. Coming to America during the Depression years, these women shared hard economic times with many American women. They were likewise thrown into poorly paid jobs, lost their identity as housewives, were separated from their children, and had few opportunities to choose their own work. They also had to adjust to a new country and culture, and thus were torn by the need to adapt to the new surroundings

Service in Washington, D.C. A gender-based analysis of these data is available in Sibylle Quack *Zuflucht Amerika: Zur Sozialgeschichte der Emigration deutsch-jüdischer Frauen in die USA, 1933–1945* (1995).

- 8 For a general discussion of immigration regulations, quota laws, and how they influenced the immigration of women to the United States, see Donna Gabaccia, "Women of the Mass Migration: From Minority to Majority, 1820–1930," a paper read at the conference "Continental European Migration and Transcontinental Migration to North America. A Comparative Perspective," Bremerhaven, Germany, Aug. 15–18, 1991. See also Gertrude D. Krichesky, "Relation of the Quota Law to General Characteristics of Immigrants," *Immigration and Naturalization Service, Monthly Review* 3, no. 6 (1946): 265–70.
- 9 See, for example, the article "Mehr Frauen für die Auswanderung!" *C.V.-Zeitung*, no. 3 (Jan. 1938): 5.

and the desire to look back to Europe, where family members and friends were in mortal danger and needed their help. Many of the refugee women developed strengths despite their great sorrow; they played a decisive role in getting themselves and their families situated. The difficulties they faced and the high price they paid are related in memoirs, autobiographies, and interviews, of which the essays in this volume make extensive use.

But not all émigré women were former housewives. Many of them had been employed before emigration, either in Germany or in other countries where they had awaited their American visas. Although it was hard for refugee women to find anything better than menial employment, many succeeded in improving their job situation in a very short time. According to a survey from 1946, 48 percent of all women refugees from Europe were gainfully employed. Of these, 11.4 percent worked in unskilled and service jobs, compared to 32.7 percent of employed American women. Twenty-eight percent of employed women refugees worked at skilled jobs or held clerical positions. Semiskilled workers – that is, factory operators, dress-makers, and saleswomen – made up 25.1 percent of the total. The percentage of professionals, 18 percent, was especially high when compared with that of American women, 13.2 percent.¹⁰

The essays that discuss professional women refugees show how gender – among other important factors in their lives such as age, marital status, and the number of offspring – influenced refugee women's career chances, working conditions, and their adjustment to American life or to American academia. Professional women shared many of the problems experienced by other immigrant women: the struggle of working mothers, including the need to find good daycare; the double and sometimes triple burden on women's shoulders during the first years after arrival; the interruption – or dissolution – of their careers when they had to work as cleaning women, domestic servants, or private nurses. Many refugee women looked to other fields of work or found niches in their own or related areas of expertise, sometimes creating jobs not only for themselves but also for other immigrants. Social work was one of the fields to which many refugee women who had been trained as teachers, doctors, psychologists, or therapists turned. But, as some of these essays demonstrate, despite the tendency to change their professions, quite a few refugee women succeeded in continuing their professional occupations.

Many middle-class refugee families strove to avoid financial dependence on refugee aid organizations or relatives. But it seems that women more

10 Davie, *Refugees in America*, 40.

than men were prisoners of this attitude. The ability and flexibility needed to preserve the family's income in the short term meant that they had time neither to find suitable positions for themselves nor to prepare the ground for their own professional adjustments. Social workers reinforced the existing tendency of women to sacrifice their personal goals for the good of the family by emphasizing the need for refugee men to adjust first.

Many, but not all, refugee men tried desperately to find a job in other fields or at lower professional levels not in their academic specialties. But often, social workers could not help them. The reasons for this lay in the continuing effects of a depressed economy as well as in the reluctance on the part of social workers to place a middle-class man in a menial job. A contemporary article described, for example, a German-Jewish businessman as a "dignified, statesman-like looking man with iron gray hair and a special knowledge of finance – German finance" who tried unsuccessfully to find a job – any job. "Silently, we Americans thought," the article's author wrote, "what employer would feel comfortable giving orders to a middle-class office boy who looks like a combination of Paul McNutt and a college president?"¹¹

Meanwhile, the wife, not so favorably characterized as an "untrained, middle-aged woman in not very robust health," took care of older people, mended clothes, baby-sat, and read to blind people. This situation changed after the husband found part-time jobs in his field and, despite being poorly paid, made more money than his "frail wife had earned." The story ends: "With a poignant relief which all who know them shared he began once more to be the provider of funds while his wife went back to homemaking." It occurred to the writer of this article that "perhaps this purgatory of waiting lasted just long enough to finish his acquisition of English and his wontedness to American ways."¹²

As the quotation from Hertha Leab with which we began suggests, during the first years it was important to get help from fellow immigrants, Americans, relatives, or organizations. The essays in this collection extensively document the private and institutional help given these refugees. In interviews, refugee women talked about their experiences; they did not fail to mention people who had helped them to adjust, to get back into an academic or other job, to find employment for their husbands, and schools and kindergartens for their children. The women were sometimes pro-

11 See Dorothy Canfield Fisher, "Meet Two Families," in *Pilgrims in Our Times*, reprinted from *Survey Graphic* (April 1946) by the National Refugee Service, New York.

12 Fisher, "Meet Two Families," 3.

moted even in such hostile environments as medicine, where being a woman *and* a refugee was especially disadvantageous.

As Atina Grossmann relates in her essay, for Alice Nauen, a refugee physician from Germany, it was absolutely critical to find a sympathetic female mentor, a pediatrician who was willing to let a refugee join her practice, or to find a women's college to which she could take her young son for care while she worked. These and other stories highlight the importance of individual or institutional support.

In urban neighborhoods and refugee communities, women played a significant role in establishing communication among refugees, neighbors, and other mothers. Together they went shopping, looked for schools, kindergartens, and jobs, made contacts, learned the language and customs. Like other immigrant women in America, they felt the need to restructure the household, to build up "survival networks," to learn English as fast as possible, and to adjust to the new culture, all while retaining tradition and familiar customs.¹³ Thus, they played an important part in the acculturation process of their groups. And although we have to consider a great variety of experiences and to differentiate according to age, knowledge of English, religion, and so on, one commonality emerges: Refugee women were better able to cope than refugee men were.

What accounts for such a conclusion? Was it because women had played a more subordinate role in their country of origin, had less to lose, and therefore had fewer problems with a change, especially a deterioration, in their status? Was it because they did not identify themselves exclusively as professionals? Was it because their identity as mothers or daughters was more significant for them than their occupations? Or was it because, at the very least, their gender roles were something they could hold onto, whereas men identified with and derived their status from work, their native country, and values specific to a certain culture? Was that why men found it difficult to regroup and rebound in exile? Anthropologist Margaret Mead wrote in 1932 in *Changing Culture of an Indian Tribe*:

[T]he breakdown of culture is almost always a more vital concern to the men than to the women. The old religion, the old social values, the old bravery, and the old vanities may be taken away . . . but the women must continue to bear and nurture children. . . . It is impossible to strip her life of meaning as completely as the life of men can be stripped.¹⁴

13 See Dolores M. Martimer and Roy S. Bryce-Laporte, eds., *Female Immigration to the United States: Caribbean, Latin American, and African Experiences* (Washington, D.C., 1981), 360.

14 Margaret Mead, *Changing Culture of an Indian Tribe* (New York, 1932), 318.

Although these lines were written for another culture – a different world – they have resonance for the refugee men and women who were forced out of their middle-class European culture by the Nazis.

Most of the essays in this collection are based on individual life stories or are themselves life stories. All these stories are unique, and, as Heinrich Heine has written: “Unter jedem Grabstein liegt eine Weltgeschichte” (under every tombstone lies a history of the world). As historians and political scientists, the authors of the scholarly essays have searched for patterns and trends and have tried to generalize. A challenge for future research lies in the comparison of these refugee groups. As much as their particular German-Jewish experience needs to be emphasized and their immigration experience included in the history of Jewish women, it is also important to compare commonalities with and differences from other refugee movements in America and throughout the world.