The Memoirs of Cantor Joseph Cysner. A rare testimonial of the Polenaktion

SOURCE DESCRIPTION
During the final days of October 1938, the “Third Reich” implemented its first systematically organized deportation of Jewish residents from German cities in an event known as the Polenaktion. Cantor Joseph Cysner was one of 900 Hamburg Jews deported at that time. His memoirs offer a rare testimony of an event obscured by history.

Sometime following his deportation from Hamburg and during his six month detainment at the Polish border town of Zbaszyn, Cysner began writing down his memory and impressions of the events. The original German manuscript has no dates, but from the paper, the language, and the penmanship, we can deduce that he began the memoir while he was detained at Zbaszyn shortly after he arrived at the end of October 1938. He dated his memoir October 30, 1938. The memoir was written on at least three different occasions, possibly more. The typewritten English version was composed from the German memoir by Cysner after his Philippine rescue and immigration to Manila in May 1939, possibly with the aid of a translator and certainly before the Japanese occupation of the Philippines in January 1942, when the Japanese confiscated all typewriters.

Cysner’s biography before 1938
Joseph Cysner was the youngest of six children born into a very religious Jewish Orthodox family. His Ostjuden parents had fled from Czechoslovakia to Vienna, Austria at the end of the 19th century, and then from Vienna to Bamberg, Germany where Joseph Cysner was born in 1912. His father, Aaron Cysner, was born in a small town near Prague, Czechoslovakia, and his mother, Chaja, was born in Oswiecim, Poland. Cysner entered the Jewish Theological Seminary in Würzburg, Germany in 1929, graduating in 1933. After serving as a Cantor in Hildesheim and Hannover, Cysner began serving at the Temple Association’s[1] Synagogue in Hamburg in 1937, the same year his father died. This life-time appointment ended within the year with his deportation during the Polenaktion on October 28, 1938.

A rare testimonial
Cantor Cysner’s memoir is a rare testimonial to the events of the Polenaktion from an actual survivor written just weeks, maybe even days, after the incident. While there are numerous sources from American journalists, members of various consulates in Germany and Poland, along with accounts from German
officers who witnessed the deportations, written documents by actual deportees themselves only number a few, and even then most of those are recorded from interviews of the survivors conducted years later.

In the first three pages of the German memoir Cysner records his arrest by the Gestapo when he was taken to Altona where hundreds of other Jews of Hamburg were already being detained. He describes the pathetic scene of crying children, the old and sick praying, as it was Shabbat. He recounts being herded with hundreds of others into police wagons, taken to the station, given a piece of bread, and then forced into passenger trains. One of the most vivid descriptions he gives is seeing the fearful faces of his earlier congregants from Hannover and Hildesheim in other train cars passing them on the tracks and hearing a familiar voice from one of those trains call out his name.

**Historical background: the “Polenaktion”**

Immediately following the Anschluss of March 1938, thousands of Polish Jews living in Austria swarmed Polish embassies seeking return visas to Poland. To halt this mass return of its unwanted Jews, Poland revoked the citizenship rights for its populace living abroad, aimed at stopping the repatriation of Polish Jews from those areas of Europe being annexed by the German Reich. Nazi leadership feared this action would impair their future expulsion plans of all Jews from Germany, as other nations of the world would follow Poland’s lead in denying their Jews re-entrance back into their homelands. The Nazi government waged anti-Jewish measures against its Polish Jewish residents in an effort to drive them out before the new Polish laws went into effect. An urgently marked Schnellbrief from Berlin to all state police offices dated October 26, 1938 from the Office of the Reichführer SS [Schutzstaffel] gave implicit instructions that the Gestapo should immediately terminate residency rights of all Polish Jews living within their jurisdictions. All Polish Jews were to be expelled from Germany on or before October 29, 1938, prior to their Polish citizenship being revoked by the Polish Government.

The Gestapo, as directed by the German Foreign Ministry, arrested nearly 17,000 Jews of Polish national origin throughout the whole German Reich on October 27, 28 and 29, 1938, and transported them en masse to the Polish border. The Polish government responded immediately with expulsions of German citizens from western areas of Poland. Immediate negotiations between the German Foreign Ministry and the Polish government halted any further deportations, on either side.

**The situation at the border**

The first of the Polenaktion transports arrived at the border and crossed without incident into Poland, taking the Polish officials by complete surprise. Then, fearing Polish reprisals, the Germans emptied the next trains on the German-side of the border and drove the deported on foot across the fields into Poland. Cysner gives an accounting of the horrific scene at the border in his memoir. He recalls the masses arriving in the morning and being forced to march for hours in the shivering cold to the border while being driven and beaten by German military police with fixed bayonets. That which happened upon their arrival at the border can only be described as chilling. Cysner recounts the amusement on the faces of the German soldiers as they took pictures of the threatened Jews being forced to enter the No-man’s-land of the border, while the bewildered Polish border police, with raised rifles, ordered the advancing column of refugees to halt. Cysner relates the panic of those moments which seemed to go on forever as each armed row of border troops tried
to drive the terrorized Jews with their weapons to the other side of the border. At one point, Cysner saw an opportunity to escape through the trees and as he ran, one of his young students who was separated from her parents, ran with him. They encountered a vehicle approaching on the roadway and called out for their help. He and his young charge joined this group of Hannover deportees heading for the Polish border town of Zbaszyn. Those whom Cysner left at the border with his flight through the woods remained there for another 24 hours before police allowed them to travel further into Poland to find respite.

**Forced confinement in Poland and immigration to the Philippines**

Polish authorities forced the internment of the hastily deposited Jewish refugees at Zbaszyn because of its proximity to the border. They hoped negotiations would result in their eventual return to Germany – something that never happened. Cysner spent six months of this forced confinement at Zbaszyn with thousands of other displaced refugees until he received a telegram from his friend, Rabbi Josef Schwarz, who had immigrated to Manila in September 1938, offering him a job with the Jewish congregation in the Philippines. While the German memoir ends with his description of surviving the winter with packages from “Poldi,” his brother Leopold, the very first page of the German memoir appears to be a handwritten outline on printed stationary from “The Jewish Refugee Committee” of Manila, showing Cysner making notes in German for filling in some missing information in the memoir, perhaps in preparation for composing the English version. The English version converted his numbered list of events into a personal narrative, expanding on the earliest parts of the German memoir and extending past the last recorded events of the original memoir by including his experiences in traveling to Warsaw in April 1939 to obtain his travel papers and visa from the American Consulate in Warsaw allowing him to immigrate to the Philippines.

**Life and internment in Manila - immigration to the United States**

He was allowed to return to Hamburg before his emigration to the Philippines in order to settle his affairs and to make provisions for his mother who was able to remain in Bamberg, their hometown, before he boarded the Scharnhorst, sailing out of Bremen and arriving in Manila in May 1939. He eventually brought his mother to Manila to join him in 1940. Cysner lived out the remainder of the war in Manila, where he once again was arrested as an enemy alien, this time by the Japanese, and imprisoned in the Santo Tomas Internment Camp in Manila in 1942. He survived the reconquest of the Philippines by US Forces in 1945 and became an integral part in the post-war rebuilding of Manila until his immigration to the United States in 1947. Cysner went on to become Cantor for synagogues in San Francisco and San Diego, until his untimely death at the age of 48 in 1961.

**After the “Polenaktion”**

None of the Polenaktion victims ever returned as residents to Germany as most eventually migrated out of Zbaszyn into other parts of Poland, some only days before the invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939. Only those who had secured visas that allowed them to emigrate out of continental Europe had any chance of surviving the war and the Holocaust that murdered nearly 90% of all Jews in Poland– and most of the deportees of the Polenaktion.
Cysner’s memoir confirms that the Nazis made no attempts to hide these actions from the eyes of the German public or from the world. This aspect of the Polenaktion demonstrates that the “conditioning” of the German people by that time, as well as observers worldwide, as bystanders to Nazi atrocities had progressed far enough that hiding this brutality from witnesses was no longer necessary. This expulsion established a precedent for future deportations.

Select Bibliography


Selected English Titles

“Germany Deports Jews to Poland,” in: NY Times, 29.10.1938, Ghetto Fighter’s Museum Archives, Akko, Israel, Zbaszyn Clippings Collection.

Notes

[1] Tempelverein

About the Author

Bonnie Harris, Dr. phil., received her doctorate in 2009 for her work "From Zbaszyn to Manila: The Holocaust Odyssey of Joseph Cysner and Refugee Rescue in the Philippines." She teaches at the history department of San Diego State University.

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