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A Community Under Siege

The Jews of Breslau under Nazism

By Abraham Ascher

(Published by Stanford University Press, September 2007)

“Professor Ascher's pioneering study describes in minute detail how the Nazi authorities, over a number of years, systematically ‘liquidated’ the Breslau Jewish community. He also relates on the basis of much hitherto unknown or unused material how the Jews reacted individually and as a community. It is a tragic story repeated many times over in Germany and other European countries, but it has never before been told in such authoritative detail. It is much more than local history and will serve as a model for the historiography of this dark period.”

—Walter Laqueur

A Community Under Siege (published in September 2007) begins with an account of the author's flight from Breslau with his mother in the summer of 1939.

Ascher describes the terrible shock felt by the Jewish community of Breslau upon witnessing the triumph of Nazism in their city, which was regarded as one of the more liberal in Germany. In the preceding half a century and until 1933, Breslau Jews had integrated themselves into German society. Even if they could not truly be considered insiders, they had become an important part of the professional, cultural and educational life of the city. Yet early on Breslau turned into one of the more ardent centers of Nazi power, giving Nazis a higher percentage of votes than any other large German city. Ascher remarks that, “Leading officials pursued Hitler's policies so avidly that during the first year of Nazi rule even some party leaders in Berlin worried that Breslau was moving too fast in implementing government policies, especially those designed to rid of the economy of Jews.”

Blending personal narrative and historical investigation, *A Community Under Siege* provides a vivid and often harrowing account of the city's transformation. Ascher documents the increasing atrocities faced by the Jewish community as the Nazi government consolidated its power: economic deprivation, the destruction of synagogues, interrupted education, endless humiliations in the streets, the disappearance of 2,400 men during *Kristallnacht* (night of crystals). It would be later discovered that they were herded into the concentration camp at Buchenwald.

The book also describes how the Jews of Breslau dealt with the fascist transformation and destruction of their city in their daily lives. They started a school for children evicted from public schools, established additional cultural institutions, placed a new emphasis on religious observance, and maintained a range of desperately needed welfare services for the increasing number of Jews who lost their livelihood and their homes. The community paid for these

services through a self-imposed system of taxation. These were powerful acts of solidarity and defiance.

Ascher also resolves missing links in his own story. He tracks down the American consul who in the summer of 1938 was bribed into granting a visitor visa to his father (which Ascher, then age 10, picked up from the consulate). "Certainly, my mother and I would never have reached the United States had my father not preceded us. Moreover, if my father had not left in November 1938, my parents and I would probably not have been able to emigrate at all and would have been murdered by the Nazis, as were twenty-two members of my extended family. Was the American consul in Breslau motivated solely by mercenary considerations? Did he sell visas to other Jews? What happened to him?"

Roughly forty percent of the Jews remained in Breslau (by choice or for lack of resources) after 1940 when the Nazis began to liquidate the community by force. While it has been well documented that racial ideology was a powerful motive for the extermination of the Jews, Ascher finds that sadism, greed, envy, and sheer thuggery were just as powerful incentives for "bestiality in the service of ideology." By the same token, Ascher also reports individual acts of sympathy and kindness on the part of Germans in Breslau.

Ascher returned to Breslau (now Wroclaw, Poland) in April 2004 to conduct the research that culminated in this book. *A Community Under Siege: The Jews of Breslau Under Nazism* draws on a rich collection of sources: personal reminiscences, photographs, journals, letters, Nazi propaganda, and publications by Jewish communities in Germany and around the world. This book is the first comprehensive account of how a Jewish community – in this case, the third largest and one of the most affluent in Germany – coped with Nazi persecution.

Abraham Ascher is Distinguished Professor Emeritus, Graduate Center, City University of New York. His recent works include P. A. Stolypin: The Search for Stability in Late Imperial Russia (Stanford, 2000) and The Revolution of 1905: A Short History (Stanford, 2004).

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