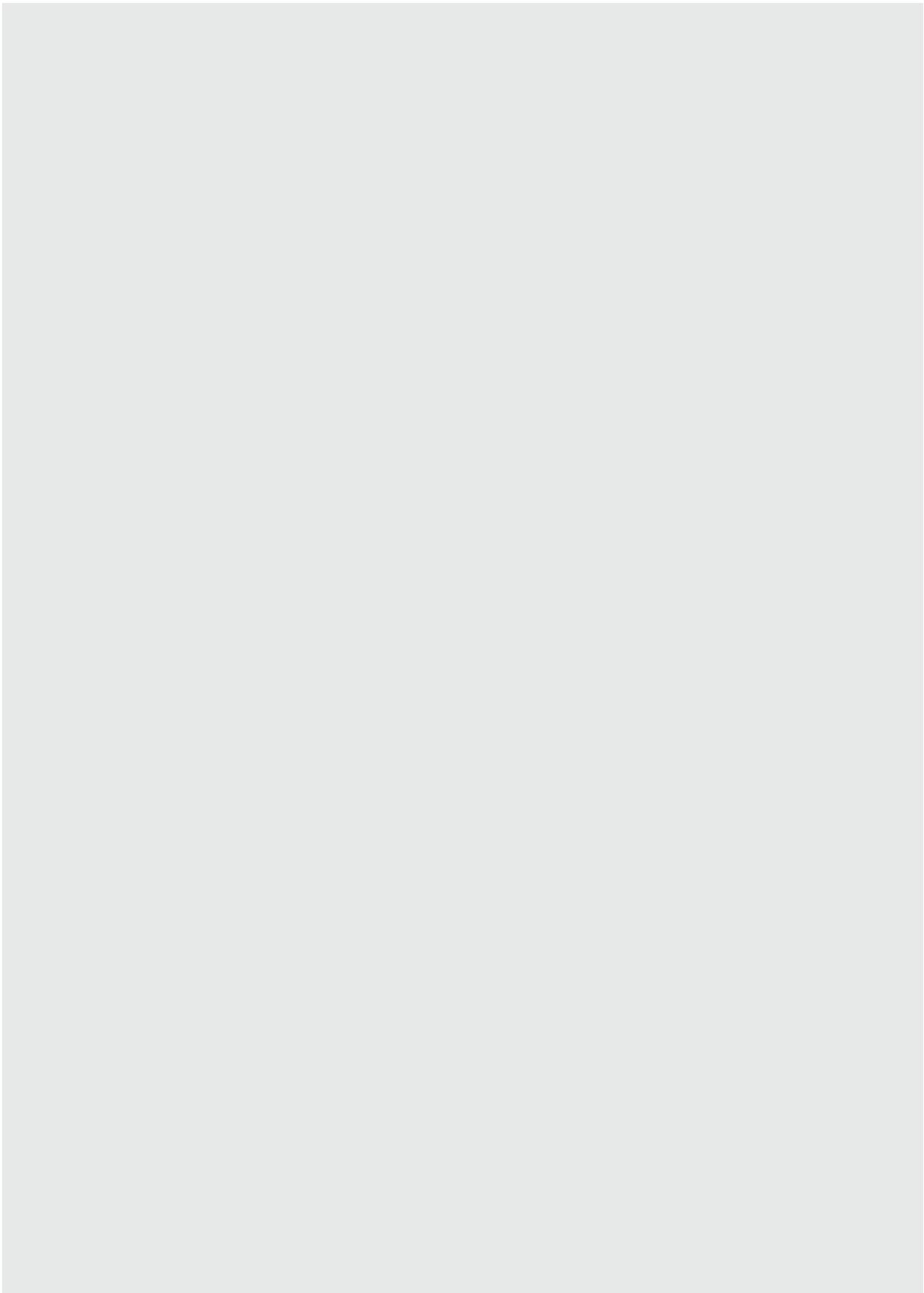


Futures That Never Were



TO FARM A FUTURE: THE DISPLACED YOUTH OF GROSS-BREESSEN

Sheer Ganor

Introduction¹

Eight days after arriving at Hyde Farmland near Richmond, Virginia, Ernst Löwensberg wrote to his friends back in Germany in June of 1938. He wanted to portray his new home to them in the most accurate way possible, describing in great detail the curvy roads leading to the farmhouse, the mailbox that was located at a distance of six miles from the residence, and the garden, where, among other things, he grew corn, cabbage, spinach, beans, cherry tomatoes, and potatoes. Löwensberg wrote of the horses, the mules, and the cows on the farm, paying attention to the quality of the hay that the animals were fed. He mused about the old Ford trucks that his neighbors, local Virginia farmers, were fond of driving; about the sweltering heat that melted his ice cream on his much-anticipated Sunday break from work; as well as about the six-foot black snake that had visited his bedroom one night. “With intensive labor,” Löwensberg assured his readers, “and backed by our short training in Gross-Breesen, we will cultivate the soil here and will reap great crops.”² In this letter, Ernst Löwensberg did not simply address his friends with news about his acclimation to his new home in the United States. Anticipating that they would soon join him on the farm in Virginia, he was preparing them for their own migration.

Löwensberg and his addressees were all members of an agricultural youth community based in Gross-Breesen, a small village in Silesia, close to the German-Polish border at the time.³ Established by the Reichsvertretung der Deutschen Juden (Reich Representation of German Jews) to shelter Jewish teenagers from Nazi persecution and to prepare them for life abroad, this operation sought to train youth at Gross-Breesen to emigrate as a collective, establish a farm, and start a new life together. At the time of Löwensberg’s writing, Hyde Farmland in Virginia was one option that the group’s leadership

1 I would like to thank Andrea Westermann and Onur Erdur for their helpful and insightful comments, as well as to the participants and audience

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US Holocaust Memorial Museum and to Michael Simonson of the Leo Baeck Institute, NY, for their help with the images used in this article.

2 Letter from Ernst Löwensberg, June 16, 1938, in “Erster Brief an die alten Gross Breesener,” July 1938; Jüdisches Auswanderungslehrgut (Gross-Breesen, Silesia) Collection; AR 3686; box 1; folder 1; Leo Baeck Institute. The newsletter was also digitized, edited, and partially translated by former Gross-Breesen trainees in a three-volume collection that they titled *A Testament of the Survivors, A Memorial to the Dead: The Collection of Gross-Breesen Letters and Related Material*. This collection is available in Word format on CD at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum under reference number 2006.302. When referring to newsletter issues from the CD collection, I indicate the title of the specific document and the volume it is located in. Translations are my own unless indicated otherwise.

3 The history of the Gross-Breesen youth farm has been studied in Werner T. Angress’s *Between Fear and Hope: Jewish Youth in the Third Reich*, trans. Werner T. Angress and Christine Granger (New York, 1988). For further information, see also Susanne Guski-Leinwand, ed., *Curt Werner Bondy. Psychologe und Strafgefangenenfürsorger* (Berlin, 2018); Walter Laqueur, *Generation Exodus: The Fate of Young Jewish Refugees from Nazi Germany* (London and New York, 2004), 17–18, 85, 215–16.

considered a potential place of settlement. But the radicalization of Nazi violence against German Jews foiled the Gross-Breeseners' plan to emigrate together as a group. The farm's trainees soon found themselves dispersed to all corners of the world. From their places of refuge — permanent new homelands as well as temporary shelters — Gross-Breesen trainees retained an ongoing lively dialogue and cultivated lifelong relationships.

In the following article, I trace the ways in which they used this transnational network as a vehicle for knowledge-sharing, addressing a variety of themes and questions, from day-to-day agricultural tasks to localized experiences of the Second World War. But this conversation across borders served not only to circulate information to dispersed Gross-Breeseners. In a series of correspondences and in their circulated newsletter, the former trainees chronicled the story of their community, establishing their belonging to it as a life-long identity marker. In their communications, moreover, they found a forum for negotiating the place of their community in the broader arch of German-Jewish history. Outlasting the farm's short-lived existence (from 1936 until its dissolution in 1943), the decades-long relationships that were maintained after the trainees' removal became, in and of themselves, a defining feature of the Gross-Breesen community.

Two characteristics of the Gross-Breeseners' continued engagement make it noteworthy for the study of migrant knowledge. First, it compels us to look beyond the model in which migrants act as mediators, transmitting knowledge between their places of origin and the environments that they enter. In the case of the German-Jewish forced migration in the 1930s and 1940s, this paradigm has motivated a number of excellent studies devoted to analyzing the integration of refugees into various professional spheres of expertise and how they influenced knowledge development within these spheres.⁴ While the biographies of many Gross-Breeseners certainly would fit this paradigm well,⁵ this article is instead concerned with the diasporic connections they fostered with each other as a forum of transnational exchange. Thus, it links the phenomena of migrant knowledge and diasporic networks to examine the causes and interests that animated communications across this dispersed community.

Second, Gross-Breeseners moved beyond the dissemination of professional information related to their training in agriculture. In their communications, they fostered an exchange of knowledge that was

4 A few examples include Mitchell G. Ash and Alfons Söllner, eds., *Forced Migration and Scientific Change: Émigré German-speaking Scientists and Scholars after 1933* (Washington, DC, 1996); Julius Carlebach, Gerhard Hirschfeld, Aubrey Newman, Arnold Paucker, and Peter Pulzer, eds., *Second Chance: Two Centuries of German-speaking Jews in the United Kingdom* (Tübingen, 1991), especially 101-464; Andreas W. Daum, Hartmut Lehmann and James J. Sheehan, eds., *The Second Generation. Émigrés from Nazi Germany as Historians* (New York, 2016); Gerd Gemunden, *Continental Strangers: German Exile Cinema, 1933-1951* (New York, 2014); see also Josef Malherek's contribution to this volume.

5 Ernst Cramer offers perhaps the best illustration of such a biography. After his internment in Buchenwald together with other Gross-Breesen trainees, he emigrated to the United States in 1939 at the age of 16. He joined the US military and in 1944 was stationed on the frontline in Germany. After the end of WWII, Cramer worked for the US military occupation in Germany and eventually started a career in journalism and reached senior positions in the Springer Corporation.

deeply rooted in their experience of everyday life in displacement. Sociologist Avtar Brah has noted that the identities and principles shared across diasporic communities are not fixed but are rather “constituted within the crucible of the materiality of everyday life; in the everyday stories we tell ourselves individually and collectively.”⁶ The Gross-Breesen communications illustrate this continuous shaping of cross-border group affiliation particularly well. Combining practical information about agricultural work, daily anecdotes about living conditions in various countries, harrowing details about the seismic events of WWII and the Holocaust, and recurring inquiries into their shared past on the farm, the Gross-Breesen exchange did not merely maintain the bonds of a dispersed community; it helped shape how this community understood itself. From their new places of residence, the Gross-Breeseners contemplated the accomplishments and the unfulfilled promises of the agricultural-educational exercise they had been a part of. Often recalled by former members as a formative life event, the project as a whole was also viewed as a failed experiment by some: it aided in saving lives by securing paths of migration but did not succeed in creating a society of cultured Jewish farmers. Examining this paradox in perception, the article will address the peculiar legacy of the Gross-Breesen utopia as it manifested itself in the transnational dialog cultivated by dispersed former trainees.

Beginning with a brief account of the project’s history, which culminated in the farm’s demise, the article continues with an examination of the paths Gross-Breesen trainees took following their escape from Nazi Germany. Analyzing the lively exchange of letters they maintained across five continents, it then addresses the Gross-Breeseners’ reflections on their own commitment to the ethos of their community, and the prodding and questioning that characterized their continued conversations.

Rescue in Training: The Gross-Breesen Youth Farm in Germany

The idea of establishing an agricultural youth community emerged in late 1935, following the declaration of the Nuremberg Laws. With the future of Jews in Germany appearing increasingly bleak, the Reichsvertretung, in its capacity as the national representative body of German Jews, focused its efforts on facilitating Jewish emigration out of Germany.⁷ The Gross-Breesen youth farm was established in this context. A public announcement by the Reichsvertretung clarified that emigration was “imminent for large parts of the Jewish youth

6 Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London, 1996), 183.

7 On the history of the Reichsvertretung and its various permutations under Nazi rule, see Esiel Hildesheimer, *Jüdische Selbstverwaltung unter dem NS-Regime: Der Existenzkampf der Reichsvertretung und Reichsvereinigung der Juden in Deutschland* (Tübingen, 1994); on German-Jewish organizations’ emigration policies during the Nazi Period, see David Jünger, *Jahre der Ungewissheit: Emigrationspläne deutscher Juden 1933–1938* (Göttingen, 2017).

in Germany,” and that the program was designed to aid their quick and safe passage and their acclimation abroad. Aiming to prepare Jewish boys and girls between the ages of 15 and 17 for migration by training them in various agricultural tasks, the organization hoped that two years of versatile instruction on the farm would improve the trainees’ chances of obtaining immigration permits as well as secure employment in their new places of residence. Next to this chief goal of expediting emigration, the Reichsvertretung stated an additional important aim of the project: through a combination of labor, physical training, rigorous education, character building, and instilling Jewish values, life on the farm was supposed to cultivate the young trainees into outstanding individuals.⁸

The youth farm initiative was modeled on existing agricultural youth villages, known as *Hachshara* centers (Hebrew for “preparation”). These were established by Zionist Jewish organizations in both Western and Eastern Europe, with the purpose of training members for their anticipated immigration to Palestine and to cultivate them — both physically and mentally — to build a homeland for the Jewish people.⁹ The youth community that the Reichsvertretung sought to create, however, was explicitly non-Zionist. While no detailed immigration path was declared at these early stages, Palestine was not the intended destination.

To lead the project, the Reichsvertretung recruited Curt Werner Bondy (1894-1972), a prominent scholar and social reformer who specialized in youth pedagogy and psychology. Following the April 1933 legislation that removed Jews from professions in the civil service, Bondy was dismissed from his position as Honorary Professor of Social Pedagogy at the University of Göttingen. He then immersed himself in social work inside the Jewish community, focusing on educational programs, in particular.¹⁰ Bondy was the decisive figure in establishing the agricultural youth farm in Gross-Breesen and in developing its utopian vision. At a later stage, he would become central to sustaining communal bonds between the farm’s trainees after their dispersion. Deeply influenced by his own induction to the German Youth Movement shortly before World War I, Bondy saw in Gross-Breesen an opportunity to implement the movement’s most positive ideals, as he understood them.¹¹ He sought to create a self-sustaining collective of cultured farmers, connected to the earth through their labor and to the human spirit through their Jewish and German education.

- 8 Bruno Sommerfeld, “Erziehungsplan für die Jüdische Auswanderungsschule,” February 24, 1936, in *A Testament of the Survivors*, Vol. 1, file “1. R’schr’n 1-p39-’36 new,” 14-15; Angress, *Between Fear and Hope*, 43-44.
- 9 On the Zionist program of Hachshara (youth training villages), see Israel Oppenheim, *The Struggle of Jewish Youth for Productivization: The Zionist Youth Movement in Poland* (Boulder, 1989); Jehuda Reinharz, “Hashomer Hazair in Germany (II): Under the Shadow of the Swastika, 1933-1938,” *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 32, no. 1 (January 1987): 183-229.
- 10 Angress, *Between Fear and Hope*, 44-45; Julian Bondy, “Curt Bondy — ‘A Giant in the Family,’” in *Curt Werner Bondy*, ed. Guski-Leinwand, 13-24, here 15-16.
- 11 On the German Youth Movement in the Wilhelmine and Weimar periods, see Robert-Jan Adriaansen, *The Rhythm of Eternity: The German Youth Movement and the Experience of the Past, 1900-1933* (New York, 2015); Joachim H. Knoll and Julius H. Schoeps, eds., *Typisch Deutsch. Die Jugendbewegung: Beiträge zu einer Phänomengeschichte* (Opladen, 1988); Walter Laqueur, *Young Germany: A History of the German Youth Movement* (New York, 1962); Peter D. Stachura, *The German Youth Movement, 1900-1945: An Interpretative and Documentary History* (New York, 1981).



Curt Bondy with his horse at the Gross-Bresen farm, ca. 1937-1938; © United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Eric F. Bowes

While the urgent need to rescue young people by promoting their emigration from Germany was clear to Bondy, his approach to recruiting trainees reveals that it was not his sole motivation. He believed that only select individuals could be allowed to take part in the initiative, and one of the first steps he took as its director was to begin the application and screening process of potential trainees. Applicants were requested to write an essay describing their educational aspirations, their cultural habits, their familiarity with Jewish history and religion, and the social circles in which they traveled. Among other questions, applicants were asked about their reading preferences, which youth movements they were affiliated with, and whether or not they smoked.¹² Successful candidates were invited to an interview with Bondy, which he utilized to determine whether

¹² Sommerfeld, "Erziehungsplan für die Jüdische Auswanderungsschule."

they would make a good fit. Werner Angress, himself a former trainee who had experienced these selection methods, explained that, in Bondy's eyes, "a trainee with character deficiencies could become a danger to the community that was to be built."¹³ With hundreds of applications coming in and space for only about 120 trainees in each cohort, Bondy had to be highly selective. This resulted in a sense of chosenness among the trainees who made the cut but also prompted accusations of elitism that they continued to grapple with on the farm and even later in their lives. Bondy, it appears, did not merely try to engineer a *Schicksalsgemeinschaft*, a community of fate that revolved around a common set of circumstances, but rather something that would resemble what Ludwik Fleck has termed a "thought collective" (*Denkkollektiv*), wherein members of the community share a commitment to a set of questions and methods.¹⁴ In the case of Gross-Breesen, this was a commitment to solving the supposed challenge of leading a confident and productive Jewish life inspired by nature and steeped in humanist values.

Gross-Breesen opened its gates to the first cohort of trainees in May 1936. A year afterwards, ninety-two young members were living and working on the farm, seventy boys and only twenty-two girls. The gender disparity — which extended beyond these numbers to include ongoing discrimination in the division of labor — continued until the farm was forcefully shut down. The female members' work was limited to small animal farming, gardening, and housekeeping, while male members were trained in a larger variety of tasks and professions. This inequality was to some extent an outcome of Bondy's own prejudices but also his response to concerned parents. In his efforts to recruit more female trainees to join Gross-Breesen, Bondy encountered the opposition of parents hesitant to send their daughters away from their middle-class family environment to an agricultural training program. In his pleas to these parents, Bondy had to emphasize not only the cultural education offered on the farm but also the availability of training in tasks traditionally seen as more suitable for women.¹⁵

The daily routine in Gross-Breesen was spartan. Trainees rose at 5 a.m. and performed various tasks — from milking cows to ploughing fields and construction work. With the exception of the laborers who worked in the cow barn (and had a strong odor afterwards), trainees were allowed cold showers only.¹⁶ Twice a day they performed a military-style roll call with Bondy as inspector. After completing their work duties, they attended classes in a variety of subjects, including

13 Angress, *Between Fear and Hope*, 46.

14 Ludwik Fleck, *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact*, ed. Thaddeus J. Trenn and Robert K. Merton, trans. Fred Bradley and Thaddeus J. Trenn (Chicago and London, 1981).

15 Letter from Bondy to a concerned mother from July 3, 1936, in "A Testament of the Survivors, Vol. I," file "1. R'schr'n 1- p39-'36 new," 29-30.

16 Hot showers were allowed once a week, on Friday evening. Angress, *Between Fear and Hope*, 51-52.



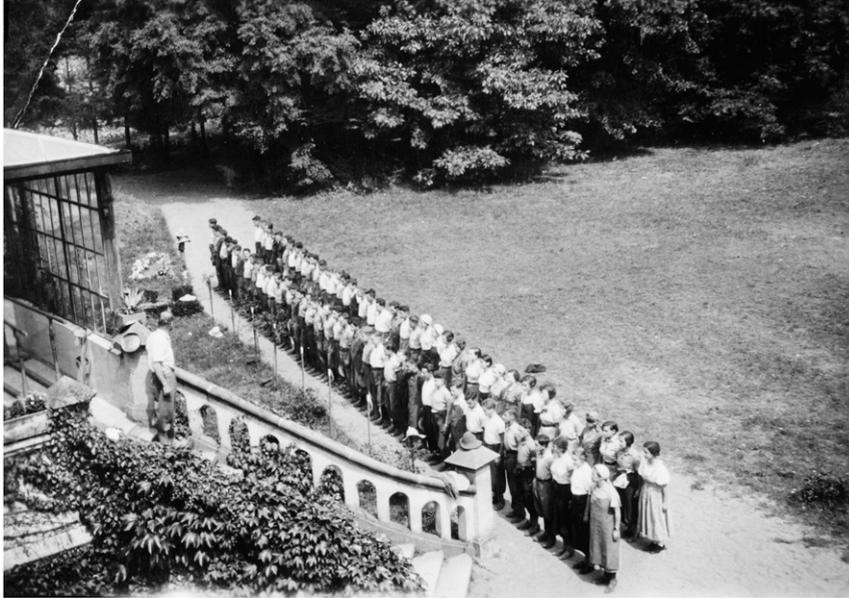
Trainees unloading a hay cart, ca. 1936-1938. © United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of George Landecker

history, geology, foreign languages, biology, physics, Jewish history, and religion — all topics on which they were also examined and graded. At the end of each work day, following a communal dinner, a short concert of classical music took place, performed by Bondy and a group of students. Attendance was mandatory.

In addition to this regiment of labor and learning, Bondy's pedagogical philosophy was embedded in everyday life on the farm. He held routine *Lebenskunde* (life-teaching) sessions, in which he sought to impart his moral lessons upon trainees. When needed, he arranged individual or small-group consultations that he termed *Klärungen* (clarifications), in which he aided trainees in achieving clarity in light of a problem or a concern. Bondy's chief goal in these introspections was to spark in his young audience a strong and honest desire for living consciously — *Bewusstleben* — and the continued strive for self-betterment. Attaining this goal, Bondy reiterated to the Gross-Breeseners again and again, depended on four pillars: agricultural labor, the Jewish spirit, German culture, and a sense of community. Decades after their escape from Nazi Germany, these four pillars continued to animate discussions among dispersed Gross-Breeseners throughout the world.¹⁷

Initially, each cohort of trainees was expected to complete two years of education on the farm. Trained together as a community, the cohort would then emigrate together and establish

¹⁷ For a detailed description of the four pillars, see, for example, "Verkürzte Niederschrift einer Ansprache von Curt Bondy," September 7, 1937, in *A Testament of the Survivors*, Vol. 1, file "2a. R'brief 3- p125-'37new," 95-97.



Gross-Breeseen trainees standing in formation while Curt Bondy inspects them from the stairs, ca. 1936–1938. © United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of George Landecker

18 Dozens of Gross-Breeseen trainees would find their way to Hyde Farmland, whence Ernst Löwensberg wrote to his fellow Gross-Breeseeners in June 1938 (as cited in the beginning of this article). See Robert H. Gillette, *The Virginia Plan: William B. Thalheimer and A Rescue from Nazi Germany* (Charleston and London, 2012).

19 An account of the events of *Kristallnacht* as they transpired in Gross-Breeseen is available in Angress, *Between Fear and Hope*, 61–64. On the imprisonment of the group in Buchenwald, see Curt Bondy's article, "Problems of Internment Camps," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 38, no. 4 (1943): 453–75. In this scholarly article, Bondy discussed the experience of internment without identifying himself as the subject of research.

an independent agricultural collective somewhere abroad. Bondy and the Reichsvertretung considered several possible destinations where such a plan could be fulfilled, including Brazil, Argentina, and the United States, and were able to proceed with the early stages of raising funds and implementation. The founding of Hyde Farmland in Richmond, Virginia, was perhaps the most successful of these.¹⁸

The plan to build an agricultural community in a new homeland was nevertheless shattered when the *Kristallnacht* attacks transformed circumstances for Jews in Germany. Until that point, Bondy and his staff had been able to shelter the farm's population from the distress and anxiety that reigned in Jewish communities in the country at the time. On November 10, 1938, the rampant violence arrived at their doorstep. SS men stormed the farm and, with the help of some of the non-Jewish hired workers, wrought destruction across the premises. About twenty young men and boys, including Curt Bondy, were arrested and sent to Buchenwald. They were released upon the condition that they leave Germany immediately. The farm's trainees and staff could no longer afford to wait for the fulfillment of collective departure and made plans for an urgent escape.¹⁹

The majority of Gross-Breeseners living on the farm during the *Kristallnacht* events were able to emigrate in the coming months, some of them following the few who had already left in pursuit of suitable locations for the desired collective farm. Bondy himself left immediately upon his release from Buchenwald, first to England and then to Virginia, to join Hyde Farmland. After this first wave of migration, Reichsvertretung representatives continued to house Jewish youth in Gross-Breesen, attempting to continue the program to the best of their ability under increasing pressure from the Nazi regime. Eventually, the farm was transformed into a forced labor camp, and the remaining trainees were gradually deported to death camps in Eastern Europe.²⁰ Out of a total of approximately 266 trainees that lived in Gross-Breesen between 1936 and 1943, when the farm was officially dismantled, it is estimated that about 158 were able to leave Germany before the deportations had started.²¹

A Community in Dispersion

Despite the distance that now separated them, many Gross-Breeseners remained invested in preserving the links that had been formed on the farm. To that end, Bondy established a newsletter that circulated updates from dispersed members in Kenya, the Netherlands, the United States, Palestine, Argentina, Chile, Canada, Australia, and other countries. The first of these circulars appeared even before *Kristallnacht* and was intended to forge contact with the early “pioneers” from Gross-Breesen who, like Ernst Löwensberg, had already left the farm and immigrated overseas in the attempt to prepare the grounds for the arrival of other group members. But with the hastened flight that followed November 1938, and with the outbreak of the Second World War thereafter, the newsletter soon attained a new meaning for their readers.

The transnational conversation that emerged out of the Gross-Breesen newsletter fostered a unique channel for knowledge transfer. This transfer evolved over time, contingent upon the historical developments unraveling worldwide in the 1940s and in the aftermath of the Second World War. In the early stages, the newsletter exchanged elaborate information about agricultural practice and technologies in various geographic contexts. Corresponding to the belief — shared by Bondy but also by many of his former pupils — that Gross-Breeseners could still fulfil their dream of becoming cultured agriculture laborers, these early reports celebrated the efforts of trainees who had found work on farms. Bondy, who edited the early issues, collected and

20 The last months of the Gross-Breesen farm were recorded in the diary of Günther Marcuse, one of the youth trainees who arrived at the farm in early 1939 and was one of the last to be deported in the winter of 1943. Translated excerpts from his diary are available in Joseph Walk, “The Diary of Günther Marcuse: The Last Days of the Gross-Breesen Training Centre,” *Yad Vashem Studies* 8 (1970): 159–81.

21 This is Herbert P. Cohn’s assessment in *A Testament of the Survivors*, Vol. 3, file “38. 1537– 2006 new,” 1526.

then circulated lengthy descriptions of the responsibilities they were given, the challenges they had encountered, and the innovations they discovered in their new places of residence and work.

In the newsletter published in March 1939, for example, Alexander Neumeyer published a letter from the Avigdor Colony in Argentina, located in the province of Entre Ríos, that included lengthy details about novelties and difficulties he encountered there.²² Neumeyer joined the farm not as a trainee but as an employed intern and left for Argentina together with his wife already in the summer of 1938. Among other things, his letter described the harvest of wheat, oats and flax — the crops most significant to the colony's economy. To give readers a point of reference, Neumeyer wrote that the combine harvester used in Avigdor was pushed from behind by horses rather than pulled from the front, like the devices they had been accustomed to in Germany.²³

In the same issue, Heinz Kahn wrote from the farm in Virginia that one important task their budding agricultural community faced was the integration of market considerations into their farming work so that it could increase profitability. His suggestions included, for example, extending egg-production later into the wintertime, or growing the type of small cucumbers that reach the length of two inches only, which were apparently very popular with local consumers.²⁴

Gerhard Pifngst's letter from Njoro, Kenya, described the Anthrax virus that had spread on the farm where he was employed, which had resulted in the death of three bulls and had caused a serious panic. Immunization, Pifngst explained, was far more important on the Kenyan farm than "at home," and higher dosages were being used on the cattle. He took the opportunity to inquire with Herr Scheier, who instructed the dairy workers in Gross-Breesen, how he would recommend mixing whole and skim milk when feeding eight-week-old calves. As these examples illustrate, the Gross-Breesen newsletter thus provided an opportunity for dispersed community members to compare farming techniques in new places of residence to the ones they were familiar with from their farm in Germany, and also constituted a forum in which they could continue the instruction and learning process that was cut short by their forced migration.²⁵

The exchange surrounding agricultural labor in unfamiliar environments also reflect the ways in which Gross-Breeseners adapted to life in particular colonial settings. The trainees who had emigrated

22 Avigdor was one of the settlements established by the Jewish Colonization Association, or ICA. One of the Gross-Breesen emigration plans focused on establishing an independent farm within the Avigdor Colony. On the ICA, see Yehuda Levin, "Labor and Land at the Start of Jewish Settlement in Argentina," *Jewish History* 21, nos. 3/4 (2007): 341–59.

23 Letter from Alexander Neumeyer (Wastl), undated, in "Vierter Brief an die alten Gross Breesener," March 1939; AR 3686; box 1; folder 3; LBI.

24 Heinz Kahn's (Haka) letter from January 10, 1939, *ibid.*

25 Gerhard Pifngst's letter from October 25, 1938, *ibid.*

to Latin American or African countries, as white Europeans, largely separated themselves from the native population, while, for the most part, they themselves were not accepted into the established white-elite classes in those countries. Writing from Contulmo, Chile, Walter Lebrecht described how an audience of locals gathered together to watch him tame a horse, fully expecting that “the Gringo” would spectacularly fail at the task. Lebrecht was happy to report that he had been spared public humiliation: “[T]hey did not get their money’s worth,” he wrote with glee but continued to confess that “I was very lucky. The foal was really, exceptionally tame.”²⁶

Alexander Neumayer, in his letters from Argentina, mentioned the indigenous population as yet another novelty of his new home environment: with curiosity he reported to his fellow Gross-Breeseners, for example, that native residents rode their horses in a galloping style, and that they often had parrots as pets. Neumayer was judgmental of the locals’ approach to combating the swarms of locusts that regularly threatened the crops in the region. He reported that the Jewish farmers of the Avigdor Colony were zealous in battling the locusts with blowtorches, and he claimed that the native farmers were “generally unbothered and rather let everything be eaten than work hard fighting it.”²⁷

If Neumayer’s letter shows that indigenous farming habits in Argentina did not meet the standards that he, as a European farmer, believed to be superior, and that he chastised local farmers as indifferent, the racialized berating of native populations was even more prevalent in the case of trainees who settled in Kenya. Several letters depicted the native Kenyans as lazy, dirty, and unreliable. Writing from the town of Songhor, Jochen Feingold lamented that “our natives have not yet got it into their brains, that with [live]stock not quantity but quality counts They look still to their stock as their ‘money’ with which they buy their wives and get it, when they sell their daughters.” Feingold concluded that “people will realize before long, that the ‘old fashioned’ farming methods of Europe are still the soundest and in the long run also the most economic.”²⁸ Employed at a farm owned by a British white settler, Max Neumann described the bitter reality of colonial rule in Kenya in a series of letters that was reprinted in the newsletter. On one occasion, after witnessing his employer confiscate a herd of goats and have the herdsmen arrested for not possessing the proper licenses, he explained that every white man could be sworn in as an auxiliary constable and had the freedom

26 Walter Lebrecht’s letter, May 19, 1938, “Erster Rundbrief an die alten Gross-Breeseners.”

27 Alexander Neumeyer’s (Wastl) letter, undated, in “Vierter Brief an die alten Gross Breesener.”

28 Translation by Bondy. Once the United States entered WWII, he published the newsletter in English to avoid aggravating censors in his new country of residence. Though he translated many of the letters himself, letters sent from trainees who settled in English-speaking countries may have also been written in English by the authors. After the war had ended, most letter-writers resorted back to writing in German, though many switched to English at a later point. In letters that were published in English in the newsletter — either translated by Bondy or written in the English in the original — I chose not to correct punctuation or spelling mistakes. Jochen Feingold’s letter, April 5, 1942, in “Gross-Breesen Letter 12,” November 1942, AR 3686; box 1; folder 11; LBI.

to police the local population. Though the native herdsmen tried to retrieve their goats, they were helpless when his employer threatened them with his shotgun: “[o]f course, they do not dare to do anything against a white man.”²⁹

Neumann’s narration of this event transmitted the brutality of colonial racial hierarchies to the Gross-Breesen readership, without condemning or commenting on its inherent injustice. In their studies of the German-Jewish refugee population in Kenya, Jennifer Reeve and Natalie Eppelsheimer have described the curious position that the refugees filled in that colonial space, where they both benefited from the power granted by their whiteness and endured antisemitic exclusion and discrimination. British colonial officials, Reeve has argued, feared the arrival of Jewish refugees in the colonies, since their presence could potentially upset the rigid racial hierarchies that the British Empire relied upon. Ethnically, the refugees’ Jewishness situated them outside of the acceptable realm of white British society. Socially, their impoverished status threatened the image of the white settler as a superior — and, therefore, justified — ruler. To integrate into this setting, refugees had to adapt quickly to the strictly defined racial order, which entailed upholding white superiority over the native black population but remaining subordinate to the British settler elite.³⁰ Max Neumann internalized the ladder of white colonial rule quickly and effectively, as evidenced by his professed irritation at the need to closely inspect the work of the “boys” during dairy production at the behest of his employer: he wrote, “well, you try teaching a negro the importance of cleanliness. Impossible.”³¹

From the early 1940s, the newsletter added an additional dimension of knowledge-sharing to its pages. With the Second World War extending beyond Europe, former trainees all over the globe found themselves involved in various ways in the events of a total war. Being German nationals, several Gross-Breeseners found themselves imprisoned as enemy aliens and shared their experience from the internment camps in their letters to the group. Goetz Weiss wrote in August 1942 from the Sherbrooke camp in Canada, where, he was happy to report, conditions were improving and “the new commandant is a very sympathetic person.”³² Inge Fischman wrote from Wiltshire, England, that after nearly twelve months of internment on the Isle of Man, she was “finally declared harmless.”³³ Writing about everyday experiences in the city of Dulwich, England, Anneliese Fraenkel revealed the conditions of war on the home front.

29 Neumann originally authored these letters to his mother. It is not clear how Bondy received them and then included them in the newsletter. Letters from Max Neumann (Edda), undated, “Zweiter Brief an die Alten Gross-Breesener,” August 1938, AR 3686; box 1; folder 2; LBI.

30 Natalie Eppelsheimer, *Roads Less Traveled: German-Jewish Exile Experiences in Kenya 1933-1947* (Oxford, 2019); Jennifer Reeve, “‘No Common Mother Tongue or Fatherland’: Jewish Refugee Children in British Kenya,” in *The Young Victims of the Nazi Regime: Migration, the Holocaust and Postwar Displacement*, edited by Simone Gigliotti and Monica Tempian, 113–31 (London, 2016). See also Patricia M. Lorcin, *Historicizing Colonial Nostalgia: European Women’s Narratives of Algeria and Kenya 1900–Present* (New York, 2012), 121–22.

31 Max Neumann’s letter, June 15, 1938, “Erster Brief an die alten Gross Breesener.”

32 Goetz Weiss’s letter, August 22, 1942, in “Gross-Breesen Letter 12.”

33 Inge Fischmann’s letter, September 20, 1942, *ibid.*

Working as a nurse, Fraenkel described how the top floor of the hospital she worked in was out of use due to the constant fear of air raids.³⁴ And Gerd Tworoger, writing from Virginia, explained that the war had increased the need for local farm products, since importation of produce had decreased significantly. Tworoger predicted that, as a result, agricultural industries would continue to grow during the war.³⁵

An examination of the Gross-Breesen dispersion during the war underscores the significance of age groups in shaping life in displacement.³⁶ Being of military service age and eager to take part in the battle against Nazism, many Gross-Breeseners sought to join the military forces in the countries they had settled in. Bosi Cohn wrote from Australia that he was twice rejected from service because he was classified as an enemy alien. When he was finally admitted to the military, Cohn was deeply disappointed to discover that he was assigned to a labor company and not to one of the fighting ones.³⁷ Werner Angress asserted that it was not revenge that had driven him to volunteer for overseas service with the US military, rather, he did so out of “certainty that we are fighting for a world in which human beings are allowed to live as human beings again.”³⁸ During the war years, letters from the front filled the pages of the Gross-Breesen newsletter, relating experiences from Italy, France, Algeria or from the Pacific.

From his distance in dispersion, Curt Bondy interjected his own commentary in these reports to firmly state his own position towards war and the atmosphere that it cultivated. “During the last few months,” he wrote in November 1942, “I often thought about the problem, how far hate, genuine hate is generally necessary to get a soldier to fight and kill.” Incorporating his famous *Lebenskunde* into the pages of the newsletter, he informed his former trainees: “I don’t know the answer yet but I know that the conscious man, and especially you in your particular situation, who know exactly what you are fighting for, don’t need to hate. Hate can never be brought in accordance with our education to consciousness and friendliness.” Seeking to guide his former trainees to adopt his moral expectations, he reassured them that the experiences of war and expulsion had the potential to lead them to personal growth, but simultaneously warned them of the risks inherent in such traumas: “It depends on you — soldiers and civilians — whether you may become debased or become greater on account of this war.”³⁹

34 Anneliese Fraenkel’s letter, September 4, 1942, *ibid.*

35 Gerd Tworoger’s (Dackel) letter, undated, *ibid.*

36 On the generational dimension of displacement, see Simone Gigliotti and Monica Tempian, eds., *The Young Victims of the Nazi Regime: Migration, the Holocaust and Postwar Displacement* (London, 2016); Walter Laqueur, *Generation Exodus*, especially 1–28, 268–305; Simone Lässig, “The History of Knowledge and the Expansion of the Historical Research Agenda,” *GHI Bulletin* 59 (Fall 2016): 29–58, esp. 31–32.

37 Bosi Cohn’s letter, April 5, 1941, in “Gross-Breesen Letter 12”; translated by Bondy.

38 Werner Angress’s (Toepper) letter, undated, *ibid.*

39 Essay by Curt Bondy, November 1, 1942, *ibid.*

In November 1944, Bondy distributed a special newsletter in commemoration of Gerhard Buehler, a former Gross-Breesen trainee who had died in battle in France. Bondy included some of Buehler's recent letters, in which he had shared experiences from his work as an interpreter for the US military. In this role, he had met many German prisoners of war, and concluded that there had been little enthusiasm for the Nazi ideology among the simple soldiers, while the officers were "convinced of the 'mission of Germany' and were saying that they were winning the war anyway, even if they were losing this one [battle]." Buehler had further shared with Bondy his belief that while morale was low and motivation was waning among German infantry soldiers, "the control on the homefront is still very rigid, largely because Nazi party members are not fighting on the front."⁴⁰ Gerhard Buehler's first-hand experience from the front was thus further communicated to the dispersed Gross-Breesen community, circulating to different corners of the world while the war was still ongoing.

Towards the end of the war, when the magnitude of the devastation caused by Nazi violence was gradually revealed, the Gross-Breesen newsletter continued to serve as an intimate transmission apparatus. Former trainees wrote about their own experiences of witnessing or living through internment, forced labor, and mass murder; the letters they shared in this platform revealed the daily, individualized machinations of the Holocaust. Heinz Kahn, stationed with the US military in Europe, wrote in July 1945 of his visit to the Mauthausen concentration camp and the miserable conditions of the prisoners found there: "One of the former prisoners, a Polish Jew, led us through the camp and gave us a vivid description of the camp, the tortures, the killing. Most of his family have found their death in camps" Kahn added that he himself was frantically searching for signs of life from his parents and concluded that "there is little doubt left that they have shared the fate of so many millions and have perished in one of the Nazi concentration camps."⁴¹ Heinz Wolff, who survived the war by performing forced labor for the fire brigade at the Dutch transitional camp, Westerbork, wrote: "With an anxious heart I saw weeks after weeks, transports after transports of all towns and villages come to Westerbork. After a few days the men, women and children went further to their unknown destiny."⁴²

Alfred Cohn, who was deported to Auschwitz and from there to forced labor camps in Germany, succinctly summarized his experience as follows: "I came to Poland with a thousand men and women in '43.

40 Several of Gerhard Buehler's letters were printed (presumably translated by Bondy) in "Gross-Breesen Letter 14," November 1944. AR 3686; box 1; folder 13; LBI

41 Heinz Kahn's (Haka) letter from July 8, 1945, in "Gross-Breesen Letter 15," September 1945. AR 3686; box 1; folder 14; LBI.

42 Heinz Wolff's letter, August 18, 1945, *ibid.*

January 45, before we were evacuated from Poland to Germany on open lorries twelve days without food, there were still living about twenty; after the transportation of course less.”⁴³ When Bondy asked Cohn about the fate of other Gross-Breesen trainees who had been deported, Cohn responded with the following account:

You ask me particular news about the [Gross-Breeseners] in the camps. In Monowitz I met Heinz Berne, Lothar Krakauer, Guenther Marcuse, Hans Rosenthal, Alfred Brauer, also Bernstein. Heinz Berne suffered sometimes from Dysentery, by this he became ‘Muselmann’ and is ‘überstellt nach Birkenau’ what means gas chambers. Lothar Krakauer died in Monowitz from pneumonia in the winter 43/44. I saw Guenther Marcuse until April 44. I don’t know what happened to him later on. Hans Rosenthal and Alfred Brauer were in good condition when we were evacuated on Jan. 18, 1945. I don’t know what happened to Brauer. In March 45, I saw by chance Rosenthal in the camp of Mauthausen, he might be killed by the air raid on April 6. 1945; 3,500 prisoners lost their lives. I saw Bernstein twice in Monowitz, he told me that Alco and Heinz Baehr, both married and with children were in the camp of Birkenau. I am sure Alco is dead, because I got [a] postcard for him from his relatives in East Prussia. The women, one of them is Ruth Schwarz, were as I am sure immediately gassed, because of the children. Bernstein told me also that Claus Peter Raphael had left Breesen in 1941 to be deported together with his parents from Dortmund. Bernstein himself was beaten to death about Nov. 20, 1943 in Monowitz. There is no possible way for me to find out, if anybody of our boys has returned to Germany.⁴⁴

These and other letters with similar content did not simply offer information on the fate of individuals. They provided an unmitigated account of the systematic annihilation of Jews, an account of the implementation of genocide that was shared and disseminated in its immediate aftermath. Compiled in this way, they pieced together a collective fate of destruction and loss. What started as a bulletin for maintaining contacts between a small community in dispersion thus transformed into a forum where the cataclysmic events of World War II and the Holocaust were laid bare.

43 Alfred Cohn’s letter, July 29, 1945, *ibid.*

44 Alfred Cohn’s letter, January 20, 1946, in “Gross-Breesen Letter 16,” June 1946. AR 3686; box 1; folder 15; LBL.

Interrogating the Shared Past in Displacement

While some forms of knowledge that traveled across the Gross-Breesen exchange are to be expected (the details of various farming techniques or the tales of day-to-day life in unfamiliar surroundings, for example), personal experiences of total war and the witnessing of genocidal violence break the otherwise standard themes of conversation, offering a somber reminder of the events in world history that structured the Gross-Breeseners' dispersion. In addition to this stream of knowledge-sharing, however, their communications opened an unexpected discussion, one that focused on the ongoing probing of their group's legacies and its impact on their diasporic lives. This collective grappling linked their formative experience of life on the youth farm with the persecution, forced migration, and dislocation they later endured. It celebrated but also questioned the project's achievements, and in so doing, created the opportunity for reflection on the history and the future of German Jewry more broadly.

The internal dialogue on Gross-Breesen's success or failure was manifest already in the very first issues of the newsletter, and it continued to develop after *Kristallnacht*, when the immediate flight of so many of the farm's residents rendered the goal of collective immigration obsolete. As they scattered across the globe and struggled to build their lives anew, Gross-Breeseners began interrogating their experiences from the farm, their commitment to each other, and the values that Bondy sought to instill in them. Their evaluations varied. While some felt that Gross-Breesen had given them a life-long moral compass,⁴⁵ others believed that the ideals promoted on the farm were at odds with reality.⁴⁶ Some former members acknowledged that their training on the farm enabled them to emigrate from Germany faster and more safely; others claimed that Gross-Breesen could have prepared them better for life as immigrants. Language skills, in particular, should have been prioritized, according to several letters. A few writers complained that the cultivated habitus that Gross-Breeseners were required to uphold had brought them nothing but ridicule in their new places of residence. Nor did former trainees shy away from criticizing Bondy himself for his actions as director.

These exchanges revealed tensions that, while perhaps present already on the farm, were exacerbated by the blunt shock of forced migration. After his arrival at a farm in Argentina in 1938, Hans Werner Abraham wrote Bondy that in following the Gross-Breesen habits and teachings in his new residence, he was treated like an

45 See, for example, Hans Schiff's letter, October 23, 1938, in "Vierter Brief an die alten Gross-Breesener."

46 See, for example, Leo Schiffan's undated letter in "Gross-Breesen Letter 14."

outcast by his fellow workers, who did not shave every morning and had no interest in learning who composed the “Heroika.” But while Abraham, troubled by the alienation he felt from the Argentine farm workers, perceived it as a flaw of the Gross-Breesen education program, Bondy saw it as a sign of its strengths. “We do aim to maintain the desire for a spiritual life [*nach einem geistigen Leben*], even if it cannot be satisfied in the foreseeable future,” Bondy wrote in response. Although he acknowledged that his pedagogy in Gross-Breesen had garnered ridicule — “People accuse us of applying ‘princely education’ and call us ‘Hachshara d’Or’ as an insult,” he remarked — he nevertheless contended that the group’s commitment to seeking a higher, conscious form of living should grow even stronger in light of these attacks. Despite this defense, Bondy assured Abraham that he took his criticism to heart and discussed it with other members of the group.⁴⁷

Throughout the years, critical voices continued to circulate on the pages of the newsletter. In 1944, one former trainee wrote Bondy from Australia that “you forced your ideas into us more drastic than necessary and when we came into the different countries we only realized that we had followed only your ideas blindly without knowing of any others.”⁴⁸ As former pupils gained distance from the farm’s insular environment, they increasingly doubted Bondy’s authority and, in light of the day-to-day reality of life in displacement, they also called the value of his ideas seriously into question. Herbert Kaminski, also writing from Australia, described the difficulties he first encountered with his coworkers in a Sydney factory. Initially, Kaminski was appalled by their cursing and swearing, as well as by their preoccupation with horse races, women, and drinking. Over time, he wrote, he learned how to converse with them and found them to be good-hearted people. “If I had stuck to my Gross-Breesen attitude,” he wrote, “I wouldn’t have had a chance with those men I dropped my ‘Sunday-Church manner,’ as they scornfully called it, and became one of them Now they have accepted me as one of them and that gave me a chance to tell them about my ‘Sunday-Church manner.’”⁴⁹ Bondy’s teaching, Kaminski suggested, was useless in the environment that he had entered as a refugee.

Marianne Regensburger, in her critical letter, addressed Bondy’s failure to recognize and resolve gender inequality on the farm. Writing from Richmond, Indiana, she admonished him for the discriminatory treatment female trainees had been subjected to under his guidance:

47 See Bondy’s response to Abraham, undated, in “Erster Brief an die alten Gross Breesener.”

48 Quoted in Bondy’s essay “Our Attitude,” undated, in “Gross-Breesen Letter 13,” April 1944. AR 3686; box 1; folder 14; LBI.

49 Herbert Kaminski’s letter, undated, in “Gross-Breesen Letter 14.”

If you remember, there always was a demand to work in the garden or in the fields on [the] part of the girls in Gross-Breesen, but if there was any response to that demand at all, it had the nature of a **privilege** granted. There never was any question as to whether the girls after all did not have the **right** to do the same kind of work and acquire the same skills as the boys. If a girl ever ventured to claim that right, there was envy and violent attack on [the] part of most of the boys.

The girls' demand for equality, Regensburger wrote, was never taken seriously, and, ultimately, she and the other girls had left the farm as "unskilled labor."⁵⁰ Though records from the mid-1930s reveal that Bondy tried to battle the demographic gender imbalance and recruit more girls to Gross-Breesen,⁵¹ Regensburger's indictment shows that he neglected to support the female trainees that did find their way to the farm. More than a decade after Regensburger wrote to him, Bondy came to admit that he agreed with her verdict.⁵²

Disagreements and friction among former Gross-Breeseners occasionally surfaced on the pages of the newsletter. For example, when Gerd Braun, who was living and working on a farm in Kenya, learned from the newsletter that so many of his comrades were pursuing a college education, he feared that this signaled a return to patterns of *Bildungsbürgertum* (the educated middle class) that they had hoped to escape. Gerd Tworoger, who was one of the trainees to move to Hyde Farmland in Virginia and eventually went on to study for a degree in agriculture, took offense at what he perceived as Braun's censure of this choice. He responded by arguing that if farming were to remain a real part of their lives, they needed to think of it first and foremost as a business, not as a mere interest.⁵³ At least Tworoger and Braun were both convinced of their dedication to agriculture. Some other former trainees, by contrast, were not. Bill (previously Goetz) Weiss, for example, wrote from Canada that farming was "a poor man's occupation." In a jab at Bondy, Weiss called it "unfair" to advise people to pursue this path.⁵⁴

Their relationship to the Jewish settlement in Palestine and later the State of Israel was another point of division among former trainees. While the vast majority of Gross-Breeseners settled elsewhere, and many continued to reject Zionism, several of the group's members who had immigrated there had come to embrace it. From her home

50 Marianne Regensburger's letter, February 25, 1944, in "Gross-Breesen Letter 13." Emphases in the original.

51 On the question of gender disparity, see note 12.

52 Bondy's letter, October 7, 1956, in "Gross Breesen XX," November 1956. AR 3686; box 1; folder 19; LBI.

53 Gerd Tworoger's (Dackel) letter, undated, in "Gross-Breesen Letter 12."

54 Goetz Bill Weiss's letter, December 4, 1943, in "Gross-Breesen Letter 13."

in Palestine, Alisa (previously Trude) Tworoger went so far as to claim that their former youth farm lacked an ideological backbone: “I am constantly pondering over what the Gross Breeseners have ... that fulfils their lives. The main thing is lacking an idea, for which they live and for which they strive.” In her new life in the Kibbutz, Tworoger wrote, she saw the ideological farmer at work.⁵⁵

Curt Bondy was not oblivious to these divisions, nor to the different paths his former trainees had taken and how far these had led them from realizing his dream of establishing a German-Jewish agricultural utopia. “Reality often proves to be stronger than our ideals,” he wrote in November 1942. Still, he pleaded with the readers not to abandon the pursuit of life on a farm: “We don’t want to forget that [Gross-Breesen] aimed to train and to prepare you for a life as Jewish agricultural pioneers, to prevent you from going back to urbanised vocations. We know that the unsound vocational distribution of Jews is one of the causes for the great Jewish disaster in Germany.” Here, Bondy articulated the erroneous belief that a transformation of Jewish life could battle antisemitism. Yet he also urged his former trainees to hold fast to their Jewish identity and not to shy away from it. Agricultural labor, he wrote, was the way to “fulfill one of our personal Jewish tasks.”⁵⁶

Bondy continued to use the newsletter as a medium for imparting his spiritual guidance, though his emphasis shifted over time. In 1949, he urged readers to continue the legacy of Gross-Breesen by living consciously and not closing themselves off in their own private lives. Were they doing enough to work against injustice in their new home countries? In Kenya or in the United States, he asked, were they fighting discrimination against the black population? Were they doing something to battle anti-Arab sentiment in the Jewish society in Israel? What about the destitute German refugees from the Eastern territories, or the unfair treatment of German civilians by the Allied occupation powers? They, the former Gross-Breeseners, Bondy exhorted them, were ideally suited to fight for justice and peace, not just because they themselves had been victims of hatred and violence, but because they were adherents of the Gross-Breesen (that is, his own) ideology.⁵⁷ Bondy, a proponent of the German Reform Pedagogy movement, embodied in his commentaries the ambivalent position conferred to the leader or educator in the movement’s theories. On the one hand, he continuously sought to engage former trainees in evaluation and assessment of the group’s work in an effort to create

55 Alisa Tworoger’s letter, June 4, 1944, in “Gross-Breesen Letter 14.”

56 Essay by Curt Bondy, November 1, 1942, in “Gross-Breesen Letter 12.”

57 Curt Bondy, “Is there still Need for Circular Letters? November 1948, in “Gross-Breesen Letter 18,” April 1949. AR 3686; box 1; folder 17; LBI.

a sense of collective investment in its ethos. On the other hand, he believed thoroughly in his role as the clarifier of this ethos and the enlightener of the trainees.⁵⁸

It is difficult to assess how these pleas resonated with the former trainees, and to what extent they were interested in leading a life in accordance with what they had come to know as the Gross-Breesen-Gesetz (Gross-Breesen code). The letters they circulated, together with autobiographical writings, reveal ambivalent responses. To be sure, the vast majority of them had become disillusioned with the project of Jewish agricultural collectives, of self-sustaining and autodidactic communities in which Jews were meant to cultivate their minds and spirits as they cultivated the land. Werner Angress, who, as a historian, chronicled the story of the Gross-Breesen youth farm, declared it beyond a doubt “that Gross-Breesen failed in achieving its major objectives — its ‘ideal,’ so to speak.”⁵⁹ Not only did historical rupture prevent the group members from immigrating together; most of them abandoned agriculture shortly after their migration (though one farm called “Nova Breesen,” which was established by group member Hans Rosenthal in Brazil, actually achieved longevity and success). In terms of their cultural education and their codes of conduct, Angress wrote, former Gross-Breeseners did not display a particular propensity that differentiated them from many other German-Jewish individuals of their generation.

And yet, despite their acknowledgement of shortcomings, even failure, as well as open criticism and doubt, Gross-Breeseners were clearly marked by their experience on the youth farm in deeply meaningful ways, which the newsletter bears witness to. Many of them revered Curt Bondy as a person who had altered the course of their lives. In 1972, at Bondy’s funeral, a former trainee eulogized him, saying: “In those days, when one started to despair of the sense of life, Bondy showed and taught us the true essence of life.” The same former Gross-Breesener, Ernst Cramer, said in 2002 that “[t]o this day I personally am grateful to God that the man Curt Bondy existed, that he could help so many people and that he influenced my life.”⁶⁰ He made this statement at one of several international reunions organized by the Gross-Breeseners between 1984 and 2005.⁶¹ In addition to these gatherings, which brought dozens of former trainees together decades after their displacement, Gross-Breeseners continued to publish and distribute their newsletter until 2006, even though circulation dwindled.

58 On the history of the Reform Pedagogy Movement, see Marjorie Lamberti, *The Politics of Education: Teachers and School Reform in Weimar Germany* (New York, 2002). For an example of a Reform Pedagogy view of the role of the leader in learning environments, see Ralf Koerrenz, *Schulmodell: Jena-Plan: Grundlagen eines reformpädagogischen Programms* (Paderborn, 2012), 44, 61.

59 Werner T. Angress, “Auswandererlehrgut Gross-Breesen,” *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 10, no. 1 (January 1965): 168-87, esp. 186.

60 Speech given by Ernst Cramer at the Gross-Breesen reunion, Catskills, NY, September 2002. Reprinted in *A Testament of the Survivors*, Vol. 1, file “1. R’schr’n 1- p39-’36 new,” 3, 2-3.

61 At the same 2002 reunion, several interviews were conducted with the former trainees, who had reached an advanced age by that time. These formed the basis for a documentary film titled *Stones from the Soil*. The film’s director, Marc Caplan, is the son of one of the former trainees, Rudolph Caplan.



Former Gross-Breesen trainees gathered for a reunion in Shavei Tzion, Israel, 1986. Published in newsletter no. 50 (1986/1988). © Leo Baeck Institute, New York

What was it about the short time they had spent on this youth farm that left such a lasting impression? If they were not invested in following the Gross-Breesen tenets that Bondy promoted, what was it that kept them engaged? A close reading of the newsletter reveals that personal friendships, while important, were not the only factor. Gross-Breesen's influence went deeper. In 1985, former trainee George Tworoger reflected on the group's life-long attachment to the youth farm: "The whole Gross-Breesen period lasted just a little over two years for most of us; and yet fifty years later, we can't imagine what our lives would have been like without that experience. I don't believe that there is anyone who went through Gross-Breesen who would not agree that his or her life did take a different turn, because of that period Gross-Breesen seemed to us a secure island in the midst of a Holocaust."⁶² Werner Angress expressed a similar sentiment when he termed the Gross-Breesen experience a "*Zauberland*" — a wonderland in the midst of Nazi Germany.⁶³ The farm, according to these testaments, gave marginalized and persecuted youth a semblance of normalcy. At a time of increasing powerlessness, the youth that lived there structured their everyday lives around agricultural training, around preparation for life as productive farmers abroad, and around Bondy's principles of living in a collective devoted to self-improvement. In Gross-Breesen, they had the legitimacy to plan and shape their own future even as possible futures for Germany's Jews were rapidly being extinguished.

62 George Tworoger, "Gross Breesen and I," undated, in "Gross Breesen 50 — Rundbrief 1986/88," AR 3686; box 1; folder 23; LBI.

63 Werner Angress (Toepper), "Laterna Magica. Zwölf Bilder," undated, in "Gross Breesen XX."

This also explains why, in the years that followed, many Gross-Breeseners felt free to criticize the project or even to speak of it in terms of failure, even though it had facilitated safe passage from Germany for so many of the group's members. Gross-Breesen's most significant accomplishment, in a sense, was that it allowed the farm's trainees to evaluate it not according to the perverted categories of annihilation or survival but simply as a normal process of applying their judgement to the project's achievements and failings. This mode of collective reflection took the form of a transnational exchange of knowledge that was rooted in everyday experiences of displacement and violence. From the midst of catastrophe, Gross-Breeseners cultivated a dialog that reflected an abiding sense of continuation that was fundamentally affected but not desecrated by National Socialism's assault on Jewish life. Gross-Breesen gave its trainees a lens through which they could tell their history not merely as the story of pawns in a game controlled by sinister forces. In Gross-Breesen — and in their continued exchange in its aftermath — they remained individuals who made decisions and took actions, and they were at liberty to question these actions as well.

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