IN GLOBAL TRANSIT: JEWISH MIGRANTS FROM HITLER’S EUROPE IN ASIA, AFRICA, AND BEYOND

Conference organized by the Max Weber Stiftung India Branch Office at Loreto College, Kolkata, India, February 14-18, 2018. Conveners: Andreas Gestrich (GHI London), Simone Lässig (GHI Washington), Anne Schenderlein (GHI Washington), and Indra Sengupta (GHI London). Participants: Tobias Brinkmann (Penn State University), Anuradha Chatterji (independent scholar, previously Loreto College, Kolkata), Maria Framke (University of Rostock), Atina Grossmann (Cooper Union), Sarah Hagmann (University of Basel), Susanne Heim (Institut für Zeitgeschichte Munich-Berlin), Pragya Kaul (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor), Razak Khan (Hebrew University), Amit Levy (Hebrew University), Shail Mayaram (CSDS Delhi), Sebastian Musch (Hochschule für Jüdische Studien, Heidelberg), Flora Roberts (University of Tübingen), Kenneth X. Robbins (collector and author, Washington DC), Jael Silliman (independent scholar, Kolkata), Swen Steinberg (TU Dresden), Tapati Guha Thakurta (CSSS, Kolkata), Gerhard Wolf (University of Sussex).

This was the first of three conferences focusing on new directions in the history of migration and refugee movements. Each conference is being organized in collaboration with one of the three branch offices that the GHI London and Washington and the Max Weber Foundation have opened in recent years.

The first panel of the first day was chaired by Indra Sengupta. Maria Framke delivered the first paper titled “India: A Safe Haven for Jewish Refugees? Exploring the Entangled Web of Indian Anti-Fascism, Anti-Colonialism and Humanitarian Solidarity in the Inter-War Period.” Notwithstanding antifascist leanings by several of its influential members and widely existing sympathies with the persecuted Jews, the Indian National Congress did not provide any concrete help to them primarily due to domestic considerations. By contrast, the dispatch of the Indian medical mission to China occurred in an internationalist antiimperialist context, which allowed the Congress to take a prominent stance against British politics without jeopardizing its own interests in India. Framke’s paper showed that the implementation of anticolonial humanitarian initiatives in India did not only depend on different domestic and foreign policy parameters but must be understood in the context of wider imperial and international entanglements. The second presenter was Pragya Kaul, who delivered
a paper titled “Between Colonizer and Colonized: Nationalism, the War and Refugee Identity Formation in British India.” European Jews seeking refuge in British India in the mid to late 1930s entered a profoundly colonial space. Here, opposing pro-German and anti-European sentiments on the part of the Indians, and pro-white and anti-German sentiments on the part of the colonial administration abounded. More significantly, however, refugees entered a space where the dominating reality was a nationalist struggle for independence, and a counter-struggle to ensure the maintenance of the colony, especially as its resources and armies were fundamental to British survival and success in the Second World War. Integrating traces left by Jewish refugees with narratives from records of the colonial government of India, this paper explored how the context of colonialism and nationalism determined how Jewish refugees were perceived and received by the local population of colonists and colonized. The paper highlighted the degree to which the structures of colonialism and nationalist rebellions are integral to understanding the perceptions which shaped the space in which Jewish refugees constructed their identities.

The papers successfully inaugurated the theme and scope of the conference, which dealt with the concept of transit inviting the notions of uncertainty and fluidity. The discussion following the presentations ranged from Gandhi’s notion of the Jewish state to questions regarding the Jews’ “whiteness.”

The second session was titled “Local Interactions and Anti-Semitism” and chaired by Anne Schenderlein. Flora Roberts spoke on “Jews in Wartime Central Asia: Locals, Refugees and the Specter of Anti-Semitism.” She argued that anti-Semitism took new forms in Central Asia during the Second World War. While this adversely affected the existing local Jewish population, the newly arrived Jewish refugees were the most vulnerable targets. Their integration into the existing Jewish communities alleviated that effect. The second paper, “Trauma, Privilege and Adventure in Transit: Jewish Refugees in Iran and India,” was delivered by Atina Grossman. It examined the intensely ambivalent and paradoxical experiences, sensibilities, and emotions of bourgeois Jews who found refuge in the “Orient” after 1933. Relying on an extensive family archive of correspondence and memorabilia as well as material from British colonial and international Jewish aid agencies’ archives, she focused on her German Jewish father’s internment experience and, more generally, on the role of
Jewish aid agencies during the Second World War as well as the early postwar period. These uprooted Jews navigated complex and unfamiliar terrain; as her father’s letters from a prison in Quetta, an internment camp in Dehradun, a “parole center” in Purandhar, and finally cosmopolitan Bombay on the verge of independence and partition reveal. Homeless and stateless, they had lost their livelihoods and professions and were unsure of their families’ fate or what their future held, yet they were also privileged as adventurous Europeans in the racialized hierarchy of “exotic” non-western, colonial spaces. In volatile colonial British India, Axis nationality Jews faced the particular paradox of internment as “enemy aliens” or occasionally “suspect enemy agents” while struggling to prove their anti-Nazi credentials. At the same time, the Bombay Jewish Relief Society worked on sometimes conflicting fronts to assist interned Jewish refugees and to support the British war effort against the Nazis. After the war they sought to enlist wealthy Indian Jews (in Bombay and Calcutta) and prominent independence leaders like Gandhi and Nehru in campaigns to support desperate Jewish survivors in Europe. The paper probed the refugees’ understanding of their own unstable position and their efforts to come to terms with emerging revelations about the destruction of European Jewry, narrating a family story folded into a larger historical “remapping” of war, the Holocaust, empire, and displacement with India as a key site.

The first day of the conference concluded with a roundtable on “Jewish Refugee History outside the University: Archives, Collections and Exhibitions” chaired by Tapati Guha Thakurta. Jael Silliman delivered a visual treat with her work “Recalling Jewish Calcutta: Jewish Portraits, Indian Frames: Women’s Narratives from a Diaspora of Hope.” Using material from the archives of Jadavpur University and Dublin University along with personal archives across the world, she showed numerous images representing broader narratives like the relationship between Jews and Muslims in Calcutta, Jewish integration in Calcutta, how Iraqi Jews became Anglicized, etc. She also presented specific case histories of a Jewish magician, various actresses, beauty queens and politicians. Moreover, she narrated a visual saga of Jewish heritage buildings located in the city. Kenneth X. Robbins’ paper was titled “The Reception of Jews in Calcutta: The Wonderful Sojourns of European Jewish Refugees and Baghdadi Jews in Calcutta.” He began with the question why only a small number of Jews came to India and how they managed to achieve so much despite the small size of their community. What was their relationship with the Indian population
and how did the British officials treat the Jews? He also examined why Jewish immigrants did not choose to settle in the port city of Cochin although it had been a safe haven for Jews for ages. Anuradha Chatterjee’s presentation was a unique one as it talked about a school project run as part of the British Council International School Award in 2016. Her students worked on a project on the Jews of Calcutta between 1933 and 1945. Students attended workshops on Anne Frank, prepared a questionnaire for interviews, went on excursions to Jewish heritage sites, had email correspondence with students in the USA and finally prepared 60 charts. They studied how Calcuttans fared as hosts to the Jewish population in distress and learned about the ordeals the Jews faced in the process of re-settlement. Finally, they drew conclusions on the relationship between these two groups. The discussion mainly revolved around the question of the archive, its character, location, availability and, most importantly, its ownership as it is closely related with the interrogation of memory. The need for larger diasporic archives also requires scholars to become global citizens in order to record such histories of displacement and transit and diasporic networks. The session also sparked interesting discussions on why the Jews chose to migrate again from Calcutta since most of them were living comfortably. Finally the need for community historiography along with professional writing was duly recognized.

The second day of the conference began with a panel entitled “Knowledge” and chaired by Simone Lässig. The first paper, “Jewish Migrants from Germany to British Ceylon and Their Networks of Knowledge 1933-1950,” was delivered by Sebastian Musch. Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany who went to Ceylon met Buddhists of German descent who had arrived there back in the 1920s. Musch explained that some of the most canonical Buddhist texts in Sri Lankan Theravada Buddhism go back to Buddhists of German and German Jewish descent like Siegmund Shlomo Feniger, Anton Gueth, and Else Buchholz. During the war this group split over their diverging political views. Swen Steinberg then presented his paper on “Destinations in Asia and Africa in Newspapers and Journals of the German Political Refugees.” It analyzed the coverage of escape destinations in Asia and Africa in newspapers and journals written by political refugees from Germany and Austria, which were published in Czechoslovakia and France between 1933 and 1940 and later in the UK. Of particular interest was the information that came from refugees living in these Asian and African countries and regions — often in the form of letters to newspaper editors, for example. Yet these letters contained more
than information: they relayed concrete knowledge that had been acquired in the experience of migration and recommendations to the reader based on these experiences. Since the newspapers were also distributed in the adopted countries of the letter writers, processes of knowledge circulation were at work as well. It is essential to note that from 1935 on global escape increasingly became a topic within various dissenting political groups (socialists, social democrats, communists, democrats / liberals) and their newspapers. In addition to conveying specific knowledge, which came partly from the destination countries and regions, the reporting was always embedded in political and mostly colonial-critical contexts.

The discussion afterward revolved around the “Orient” as a destination of Jewish migrants, whether it attracted them due to a prior fascination with oriental “exotica” or whether they simply headed there out of desperation. Did the Jews want to be represented specifically as European Jews or simply as European survivors of Jewish origin? Whatever their stance might have been, survival in the tropics for a European came with hazards of health and hygiene, which also varied by gender. Participants felt a keen interest for a deeper discussion on religious conversion among the German Jews. Similarly interesting nuances were developed regarding the political migrants and their experiences in exile — such as the role of the Comintern, whether the immigrants harbored any political ambitions in their new homelands, and whether there was any discussion in the letters to the editor about the Jewish future or to what extent a Jewish way of life could survive in these circumstances. The first part of the panel ended with an in-depth discussion of the concept of knowledge, its relation with skills, its expression in language and its orientations during transit and different experiences, both at specific and universal levels.

The panel continued with Razak Khan’s paper, “Migrant Lives and Ideas: Jewish and Muslim Intellectual Entanglements in Colonial India.” It delved into the “minority connection” that was forged between German Jews and Indian Muslims in Weimar Germany and traced its journey and afterlife in colonial India. Khan focused on individual biographies and accounts and situated them within the larger Jewish-Muslim intellectual dialogues that resonated in the interwar period. In particular, this paper followed the entangled lives and thoughts of four Jewish figures in colonial India. While Josef Horovitz (Arabic and Islamic Studies visiting scholar at Aligarh University) and Magnus Hirschfeld (a German sexologist) sojourned briefly through India, two
Jewish women — Lubow Derczanska and Gerda Philipsborn — made India their permanent home in times of discrimination and persecution in Europe. The contrast afforded by the different duration of their stay in India sheds light on the refracted knowledge and experiences shared by Indian Muslims and German Jewish migrants, particularly in the areas of religion, culture and education. This paper juxtaposed the broader brushstrokes of history and archival collections with the delicate hues of personal relationships and friendships that were forged during the subjects’ stay in India and that are narrated in affective archives of autobiographies and memoirs. Amit Levy’s presentation, “Meeting in the Intellectual Sphere: German-Jewish Émigré Orientalists in British Mandate Palestine and Culture Rapprochement with the Arabs,” showed that while Jewish refugee Orientalists may have dreamed of peaceful coexistence with the Arabs, they themselves failed to facilitate it partly because of their deep entrenchment in German ideals of Bildung (education). Some of the eminent German-Jewish Orientalists at Hebrew University wanted to only teach classical Arabic, grammar, and translation, thinking that this knowledge would make Arabic scholars accept and look up to them. Focusing on knowledge of the distant past, they did not have knowledge of the present, leaving this to mainstream Zionists and military officers who had different ideas of rapprochement.

The fourth panel, chaired by Shail Mayaram, commenced with Susanne Heim’s paper entitled “Resettling Jews.” Heim surveyed different plans and initiatives for Jewish resettlement in the 1930s and early 1940s, asking why most settlement projects failed even though they were based on realistic plans and institutions. She commented on U.S. and British government initiatives like the Evian conference, “Project M.” and settlement plans for British Rhodesia. The Soviet Union did not take part in the Evian conference but started an unsuccessful resettlement project of its own in Birobodzhan, which was supposed to use Jews as a bulwark against Japanese expansionism. Aside from governments, Jewish organizations also surveyed the prospects of Jewish resettlement. Heim concluded that governmental and non-governmental institutions often contradicted each other and that their plans had little to do with the ideas of the Jews who were supposed to settle in different places. Gerhard Wolf focused on how the U.S. government grappled with the escalating refugee crisis from the Evian conference until the end of the war. Wolf suggested to consider Evian as a turning point in evolving U.S. planning that saw the future political stability of Europe tied to finding a solution to the
continent’s alleged demographic problems like population pressure and ethnic conflict, among other things. Seen from this perspective, we might better appreciate the radical departure that the proposed mass resettlement of Jews around the world meant when compared to the approach of the League of Nations, for example. Subsequent wartime planning only solidified this approach, leading to a concerted effort after the war to assist Jews, other national minorities and those who were seen to contribute to overpopulation to emigrate overseas.

The fifth panel, chaired by Andreas Gestrich, was called “Non-governmental Networks and Organizations during and after the Holocaust.” The first paper, titled “Shaping New Global Places in Times of Transit: Relief Organizations in Shanghai during World War II,” was presented by Sarah Hagmann. The topic of her paper was the translocal network of Meyer Birman (1891–1955), manager of the Shanghai-based Far Eastern Bureau of the Jewish relief organization HIAS-HICEM during World War II. She examined how the bureau’s activities were influenced by the particular situation of a temporal and spatial transit, which meant being disconnected from its headquarters in Europe and the USA. She argued that there is a strong connection between experts in international organizations, the dissemination of knowledge, and the flexibility of international organizations. Birman’s network of Jewish communities and HIAS-HICEM bureaus in neutral countries such as Switzerland, Sweden and Portugal as well as his cooperation with the International Red Cross shaped temporary global spaces which increased his agency for the organization of relief on a local level for the about 20,000 Jewish refugees. The second presenter, Tobias Brinkmann, titled his talk “Stranded in Between: Jewish Refugees in Shanghai and Other Treaty Ports after 1945.” He focused on the little-known postwar history of the Jewish refugee community. Between 1918 and 1945 Shanghai served as a safe haven for Jewish refugees, initially from Eastern Europe and after 1933 primarily from Germany and Austria. After the Japanese capitulation in August 1945 it proved difficult for Jewish refugees to find a way out of the city. The displaced persons camps in the American and British occupation zones in Germany constituted the only viable option for larger groups. However, in 1945/46 few refugees wanted to return to war-ravaged Central Europe. In May 1948 the founding of the State of Israel opened up a new perspective, but evacuation proved to be challenging. In late 1948, as Communist forces were advancing towards Shanghai and Nanjing, more than 5,000 Jews remained in the city. In 1950 the International Refugee
Organization (IRO) was able to move a group of over one hundred Jewish refugees to San Francisco. However, U.S. officials refused to admit the refugees and transported them on a sealed train to Ellis Island. After several weeks of internment the group was taken to DP camps in West Germany. The last Jewish refugees only left Shanghai in the early 1950s. The fear of communism and little-disguised anti-Semitism made it exceedingly difficult for representatives of Jewish aid organizations and the IRO to secure new homes for Jewish refugees. The paper also draws attention to the importance of extraterritorial spaces for stateless refugees. The post-1945 Jewish history of Shanghai also shows that the founding of a Jewish state did not completely “solve” the Jewish refugee problem. The question what to do with Jewish refugees who did not want to settle in Israel sheds light on the relations between Jewish diaspora organizations such as the World Jewish Congress, the state of Israel in its formative phase, and international humanitarian NGOs such as the IRO.

The concluding discussion was led by Anne Schenderlein, who summarized the main points of the conference. During the subsequent open forum, one of the participants stated that the focus on transitory states of refugees reminds us that ideas of citizenship and belonging are often being constructed in a transnational frame. Among the themes that were mentioned and deserve further discussion in future conferences are objects and material culture, generation and age, class, and the question of how to usefully combine micro- and macrohistorical perspectives.

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