



The deportation of Polish Jews residing in Germany: The events in Munich, October 1938

by

Willie Glaser

October 26, 1938

In 1938 I was in Munich, attending the Jewish Trade School learning to become a tool maker. I was living in a Jewish youth hostel.

At suppertime on October 26, 1938 a policeman came to the youth hostel. He was asking for Willie Glaser. I identified myself and he told me to take my passport and go with him to the police station to check my residence status.

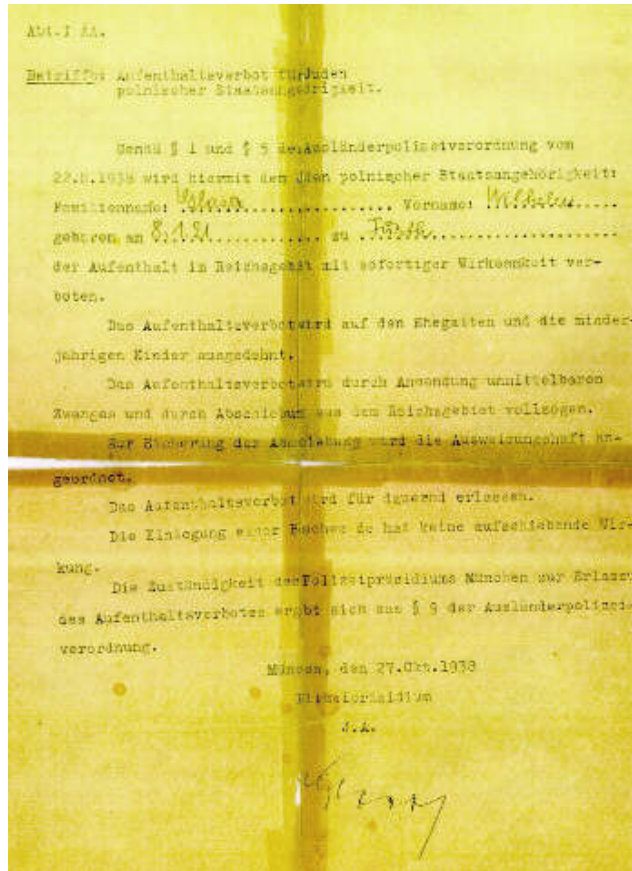
Arriving at the police station, I found some 20 - 30 Jewish men, women and children assembled there. Everybody was asking "Warum hat man uns verhaftet?" (Why were we arrested?) I believe the lower rank police did not know the reason.

October 27, 1938

It was close to midnight, when we were ordered to board a bus. After a short ride, we arrived at what must have been the Munich jail. We were escorted to a cellblock, the individual cells were open. We were allowed to move around the cellblock.

Everybody sort of settled down. In short time a group of regular prisoners arrived with food and buckets of tea. I estimate there were about 250 Polish Jews assembled in this cellblock. It was about one o'clock in the morning. I was tired, so I went into a cell and laid down on a cot.

Around 2.00 AM two regular prisoners carried a table and several chairs into the cellblock, followed by several higher ranking police officers and an official in civilian clothes. He placed a pile of papers on the desk and sat down. Everybody was called to the cellblock. The man in civilian clothes addressed us with this message: "In einigen Stunden werden sie alle mit dem Zug nach Polen abgeschoben." (In a few hours all of you will be deported by railway to Poland.) He continued: "Die polnische Regierung hat ein Gesetz erlassen, welches Juden, die in Deutschland leben, die polnische Staatsangehörigkeit entzieht. Deutschland braucht keine staatenlosen polnischen Juden, wir haben genug deutsche Juden." (The Polish government issued a decree canceling the citizenship of Polish Jews living in Germany. Germany does not need stateless Polish Jews, we have enough German Jews.)



Cancellation of the residential permit for Willie Glaser
(Photo: Willie Glaser)

We were told to step forward to the desk with our passports when our name was called. One police official handed me the “Aufenthaltsverbot” (cancellation of my residential permit). Another official took my passport and with a red pencil crossed out the residential permit issued to me by the Munich police headquarters:



(Photo: Willie Glaser)

Options

I returned to the cot in the cell, it was already late at night. I knew there was little time left. I wanted to get some sleep in order to be alert for the ordeal about to happen. Around me people were in a state of deep shock, great dismay everywhere. I tried to be calm, cool and collected. I started thinking about the options available to me.

Option A: I go with the flow. I will get to Poland and go to my aunt Helene in Krakow. I assumed (and was proven right), that the same deportation actions were carried out in my hometown Fürth and in many cities in Germany. I would meet my parents in Krakow and my father would look after us there.

Option B: While on the train, to look for an opportunity and try to run away from the train. It was obvious to me, that the train will have to stop somewhere between Munich and the Polish border, even to take on water for the locomotive. I had just received my monthly allowance of 50 Reichsmark from my father. I had 10 Reichsmark left from the previous month. No valuables were taken away from the deportees. That was enough to buy a train ticket back to Munich. There I would take stock of the situation. From Munich I would go to Fürth, assuming my parents were also deported from Fürth to Poland. My main concern was the contents of our apartment. I would try to settle this problem. I was keenly aware, that eventually I would have to join my parents in Poland. Most of the people in the cellblock were able to take their valuables with them, I was sure my parents also took care of that.

October 28, 1938

Very early in the morning our group was taken to the train station and boarded several cars at the end of the train. We were supplied with basic food. The fact, that the Munich people had to occupy cars at the end of the train indicated to me, that many other people originating from other cities were on this train. Perhaps the train originated in the west with a stop in Nuremberg-Fürth and going south, destination Munich. Could it be possible, that my family was on this train?

After I settled in my seat, I started to investigate. I found two policeman at either end of the car. I was told in no uncertain terms "no visiting between cars." In a short while the train started to move and everybody became very quiet. My journey into the unknown had started.

October 29, 1938

We journeyed on, the clicker-de-clack of the wheels lulling most of us to sleep. Around midnight a higher ranking police officer walked through our car, what seem to be an inspection trip. I think he was in charge of the train.

By that time we had passed many stations and we knew we were going to Poland. Suddenly, the train stopped at a small station. Looking out the window, I noticed a lot of talking going on amongst the police escorts. There was coming and going of police officials from the small station master's office.

Our police guard was standing on the platform, talking to other guards. "Well, Willie here is your chance," I said to myself, "you have nothing to lose, let's go for the door leading to the other side of the platform." I pushed the handle, it did not open. I ran to the other end of the car and tried that door. "Donnerwetter," also locked! Very disappointed I walked back to my

seat, consoling myself, that there will be another chance. After standing around for a while the police guards boarded the car again and the train started to move.

After rolling for a short distance, the train stopped, backed up and stopped, this went on for several times. It was about 2 AM and I looked out the window. I could only see trees on both sides of the tracks.

When I was a little boy I liked to watch the freight trains near the Fürth railway station and the freight cars being coupled together and shunted to a side spur. I understood at once what has happened now. We were shunted to a side spur, but why? We did not have to wait long for an answer. One of the police officials came to our car, positioned himself in middle of the car and announced: "Leute, wir fahren zurück nach München, die Polen haben die Grenze vollkommen abgeriegelt." (People, we are returning to Munich, the Poles closed the border completely.)

The excitement, the joy, the tears, the crying was something to see. I also cried. All restrictions on movements between the cars were lifted. The first thing I did was to run through the whole train, calling "Glaser, Glaser!" I did not find my family. In fact nobody from Fürth or Nuremberg was on this train. I could only surmise my family having been deported on another railway transport.

Around noon our train pulled into a large station and stopped. I do not remember the name of this town. By that time we were allowed to lower the windows, but not to go out on the platform. Tables were set up on the platform, laden with food and drinks, which were handed through the windows by nurses of the Red Cross dressed in their light grey uniforms.

After a snack I stood on the doorsteps, watching what was going on. A young women in Red Cross uniform carrying two heavy bags came up to me and ask me: "What is your name?2 I answered "Willie. What is your name?" She smiled radiantly at me and answered: "Caroline." This short conversation is burned into my memory.

"Please help me with these bags," she asked me, "I am checking the children, are there any babies in this car?" I told her of two very young babies and several young children. She also took care of several old people. I watched this Red Cross nurse unpacking the two bags, which contained diapers, little blankets, baby powder, ointments and several little cloth dolls. After she had worked her way through, the Red Cross nurse disembarked at the other end of the train.

The train moved again. Late in the evening we arrived in Munich. I walked from the train station to the youth hostel, there was no public transportation at that hour at night. I was very tired and went to sleep.

October 30, 1938

The next morning I cycled to the post office, because neither the hostel nor my parents had a phone. From the post office I called a store, which was on the street level of the apartment house my family lived in Fürth, Schwabacherstraße 22. I asked the owner who was friendly with my parents to ask my parents to phone me at the post office, I would be standing by. Within a short while the post official called me to take the call in the telephone cubicle.

My father was on the line. The crux of our talk was, that every single Polish Jew living in Fürth was taken away and deported, but no police officials came to take away the Glaser family, which to this very day is a great mystery to me.

My father received two telegrams from his brother Max, who also had lived in Fürth before and was deported with the Fürth transport. He was staying in a Polish town close to the border.

My father told me to stay put in Munich and carry on with my studies at the Jewish Trade School, which I did till the events of “Kristallnacht” on November 9, 1938, when the school was partially destroyed. After that date I returned to Fürth.

Backgrounds and reflections

I believe this deportation served as a template for co-ordination between railway and police authorities for later mass deportations of Jews to the ghettos and concentration camps.

In March 1938, after the Polish government passed the law withdrawing the citizenship of Polish Jews residing in Germany, the German government established it would be difficult to compel stateless Jews to emigrate to other countries. The German government had to take action. The German and Polish foreign ministries negotiated the status of the Polish Jews residing in Germany. The deportations on October 28, 1938, are proof of the impasse between the two governments.

A few days later this mass deportation resulted in a very great disaster for the Jews in Germany. Amongst the Polish deportees were the parents of Herschel Grynszpan from Hanover. Herschel, who was my age and living in Paris, was very upset with the deportation of his parents. He obtained a gun. On November 7, 1938, he went to the German embassy, shot and mortally wounded the embassy official Ernst vom Rath. Vom Rath died a few days later. This was the trigger for “Kristallnacht”. The Nazis were looking for an excuse to start more vigorous persecution of Jews - and they found it.

What many Jews in Germany did not see at that time, were the thickening black clouds of an imminent catastrophe, the Holocaust.

August 2002

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