

Vanishing Point Munich: The Jewish Trade School 1937 - 1942



Fred Buff at the workbench in Munich's Jewish Trade School

(photo: private)

At the same time as official Munich decorated itself with the honorary title “The Capital of the Movement”, this metropolis on the Isar was paradoxically also the destination of many Jewish youths from Germany. They did not come to visit the sites of interest, but to attend the Jewish Trade School to learn the carpentry or tool maker trade, which as trained craftsmen would give them a better chance when applying for an emigration visa. In 1938, Willie Glaser from Fürth and Fred Buff from the Swabian town of Krumbach found themselves in an whirlpool of events marking the start of the “Final Solution” in Munich.

Between Lehel and Schwabing

Towards the end of 1937, Willie Glaser received the much desired training vacancy to become a tool maker in the trade school led by the qualified engineer Fritz Sängler. The trade school was located in a former leather factory owned by the Jewish Hesselberger brothers. The picturesque building complex, which used to be an aristocratic seat during the 18th century, has disappeared. Today nothing is left of Biederstein castle, which stood there, only the name Biedersteinstraße. In its place a villa complex, surrounded by high walls was built.

On workdays, Glaser cycled from his lodging, which was an apartment converted to a hostel, located in Galeriestraße (today Unsöldstraße). He made his way through the famous park “Englischer Garten” via Leopoldstraße to reach Schwabing. Also there, protected by a Jewish institution, the coming misfortunes were already closing in: Just a few meters away a SS riding school was located.

Persecution and Solidarity

The first act of barbarism experienced by the 60 apprentices of the trade school was the demolition of the liberal synagogue in Herzog-Max-Straße. "Münchner Neueste Nachrichten" newspaper triumphantly declared in its issue of June 10, 1938: "The building renovation of the Künstlerhaus [Artists' House] is reaching the final stage in connection with the demolition of the synagogue in Herzog-Max-Straße. The demolition work carried out by the construction firm Moll started Thursday morning, as of Monday the dismantling and clearing of furnishings of the synagogue was completed."

The mentioning of the dismantling of furnishings of this house of God connects Glaser to a recollection, which is still with him in all its details: At that time the youths of the trade school received an order from the Jewish community leadership to salvage as many ritual objects and furnishings as possible from the synagogue building. He and another apprentice were given the task to remove the heavy bronze memorial plaque for the fallen Jewish soldiers. This plaque was located beside the main doors. They had to use a welding torch to cut loose the plaque from the heavy metal bolts anchored deep in the masonry. While this was accomplished, Glaser witnessed one of the very few gestures of solidarity by the non Jewish population. The apprentices could not believe their ears when they heard a scattered applause of approval from the masses of people congregated in front of the synagogue watching the rescue attempt. Again, there were members of the Munich population who were not blinded with the raving Nazi anti-Semitism. They held on to the honorable memory of the Jewish soldiers of the First World War.

A Lucky Accident

In 1938, Fred Buff was sent to Munich by his parents, because in Swabia he could not find a place for his education. He took a room with a Jewish family and like the Franconian Glaser attended the tool maker class.

Even though the fall weather was not inviting for an outing, Buff and some of his friends from the trade school preferred not to stay in Munich during November 9. They wanted to get away from the annual parade of the Nazis celebrating the attempted uprising of 1923. They mounted their bicycles and cycled to the surrounding countryside to play soccer, far away from the brown spectacle. There something happened to Fred, that can only be described as luck in an accident. While playing, he stepped into a hole in the ground and suffered a sever muscle tear in his upper thigh. Endless painful hours passed, when finally an ambulance found the way to the remote meadow and transported the injured to the Jewish hospital in Munich's Herman-Schmid-Straße.

Until around midnight when the SS stormed the hospital, Buff had no idea about the course of events which later were described untruthfully by the local press as "people's anger which had to blaze up particularly high in Munich, the city that had witnessed November 9 [1923]."

In the Jewish hospital the SS wanted to know from the attending doctor, how long it will be till the young man will be able to stand on his feet again. The physician was able to convince the Nazis, that this was a long lasting injury, which called for at least four weeks bed rest. This saved Fred the fate of his father who was for one month incarcerated in Dachau.

In the Lion's Den

During that night the trade school was destroyed. The Gestapo came to the hostel, where Willie Glaser lived and arrested the head of the hostel. After the attack the youngsters sat around with nothing to do and no help, a condition, which Glaser could not tolerate. With the naiveté of a 17 year old, he decided on the crazy intention to visit the Munich Gestapo headquarters at Brienner Straße. This plan was even more dangerous for him than his colleagues, because as a Polish citizen (his family arrived in Germany in 1880), he belonged to a group within the Jewish population hunted since October by the Nazis. Nevertheless, he marched past the destroyed Jewish stores to the portals of the Gestapo building, there he was asked for the reason of his appearance. Openly forthcoming, Glaser answered he would like to effect the release of the director of the youth hostel. After his personal particulars and the reason for this visit were registered in the visitors book and waiting a while, a SS orderly opened the door to a large office, behind an imposing desk a man in a SS officers uniform was sitting.

The guard whispered something into his ear and handed him a slip of paper with all the details. The officer measured Glaser from head to toe and asked harshly: "What do you want?" Willie repeated his request. The Nazi looked at him with great amazement and finally muttered: "Willie, you are a crazy guy to come here, but your director will be released tomorrow."



The building at the corner of Wagnmüllerstraße and Unsöldstraße which in 1938 housed a provisional hostel for Jewish trainees

(photo: Susanne Rieger)

Indeed, the director was released the following day, perhaps not only through the intervention of Glaser at Brienner Straße. The real miracle was, that a courageous and naive 17 year old youth was able to go there and return without being harmed.

The End in Munich

After “Kristallnacht”, Glaser and Buff left Munich to return to their families. Both were able to flee Nazi Germany in 1939. Willie Glaser’s parents and three of his siblings perished in the Holocaust. His little sister Frieda was just seven years old.

During the November pogroms the trade school at Biederstein was severely damaged, but later patched up again. This allowed the plant to operate till September 1939. After that date the building was taken away, and the school had to move to the fire damaged rooms of the synagogue at Reichenbachstraße. The trade school was finally closed in 1942, as the deportations from Munich were swinging into high gear.

For Willie and Fred the technical knowledge gained in the Jewish trade school was very valuable in order to get a job in their new homelands. Fred Buff for example worked as a tool maker in the USA. He joined the navy in 1944 and served as a machinist on a warship with the Pacific fleet.

Both of these eyewitnesses still connect Munich with very special recollections from their past, far away from the clichés of “Pinakothek” or “Hofbräuhaus”.

Original German text by Susanne Rieger, translation by Willie Glaser

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