

Women Protest against the Deportation of their Jewish Husbands (March 1943)

Abstract

On February 27, 1943, the SS and Gestapo began deporting 11,000 Jews and their families from the “Old Reich” to Eastern Europe to work in forced labor camps. Most of these Jews already worked as compulsory laborers in munitions factories throughout Germany, but those Nazi officials ordering the “Factory Action” argued that these men were now a liability to the Reich’s war effort and must be relocated. The majority of the targeted population lived in Berlin, which at the time still had a population of 7,000 Jews. When the Gestapo set out to arrest these men, many of the officers found their targets possessed papers which disqualified them from deportation – almost 2,000 Jews in the action were married to Aryan women and were considered “privileged.” Not anticipating this, the 2,000 men were arrested and temporarily detained at Rosenstraße 2-4. These men’s wives, in protest, gathered in front of the old building demanding the release of their husbands for two days in a row. The SS granted the release of these men but refused to allow them to return to their work in the munitions factory in the capital. These two excerpted diaries, one from Ursula von Kardorff and the other by Ruth Andreas Friedrich, revolve around the “Factory Action” and the Rosenstraße protests.

The overall effectiveness of the Rosenstraße protest is still debated by historians. While it is clear that the protest saved lives and was an impressive display of anger at the regime from people who fell within the Nazis’ accepted racial categories, other evidence suggests that the SS and Gestapo had decided before the protests occurred that these men would not be deported. However, Goebbels wrote of his regret over the arrests in his diary because of the public protest they elicited.

Source

I. From the Diary of Ursula von Kardorff

3 March 1943

Frau Liebermann is dead. They actually came with a stretcher to carry this old lady of eighty-five off to Poland. When they came she took veronal. She died next day in the Jewish Hospital without regaining consciousness. What monstrous wickedness this is. Why should it be our people who are guilty of it? What transformation can have taken place, that normally decent, good-hearted people become servants of the Devil? Everything is done in a cold-blooded, bureaucratic fashion by these parasites, who began by battenning upon the body of the nation and have now become a part of it.

Bussy, the compositor, told me that in his neighborhood, around the Rosenthalerplatz, working-class women had gathered and protested noisily against the deportation of the Jews. Armed SS men with fixed bayonets and steel helmets were dragging miserable figures out of the houses. Old women, children and terrified men were loaded into trucks and driven away. The crowd shouted, “Why don’t you leave the old women alone? Why don’t you go out to the front, where you belong?” In the end a fresh detachment of SS appeared and dispersed the crowd.

One never sees that kind of thing in our neighborhood. There the Jews are fetched away at night. If it were not for Bärchen, who works tirelessly for the Jewish families in her apartment house, I should not even know what was happening. How quickly we have all got used to seeing the Jewish Star.

Most people's attitude is one of complete indifference – like that of T., who said to me the other day, "Why should I care about the Jews? The only thing I think about is my brother, at Rshev, and I couldn't care less about anything else." I think that the ordinary people are behaving much better than the so-called educated classes or the half-educated.

There is a typical story of a workman who got up and gave his seat in a tram to a Jewess, wearing the Star. "Come on, have a sit-down, my old doll!" he said. When a Party member protested, the workman simply said, "I'll do what I like with my own ass, if you don't mind!"

A heavy raid yesterday. A roof was on fire near us, in the Augsburgstrasse. People formed a chain of buckets and Mamma and I helped. When we got home, rather exhausted. Papa met us in pajamas, with a lighted candle in his hand, because there was no electricity, and Proust's *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* under his arm. He simply could not understand why we had lent a hand. "Let the AGP get on with it," he said. He meant the Party (NSDAP), but he hates them so much that he deliberately refuses to mention the initials. I couldn't help laughing.

Today we heard that 1,700 fires had been started and the Prager Platz, quite close to us, is completely destroyed. The Rathes lost everything they possessed, including their photographs of their son Ernst, who was murdered, and of the son who was killed in the war. Everyone in Berlin is saying that the raid was a reprisal for the deportation of the Jews.

Source: Ursula von Kardorff, *Diary of a Nightmare: Berlin, 1942-1945*. New York: John Day, 1966, pp. 36-37

II. From the Diary of Ruth Andreas Friedrich

Sunday, March 7, 1943.

At least a few have come back—the so-called privileged ones: the Jewish partners in racially mixed marriages. They were all segregated from the others, and taken to a collecting point last Sunday for examination and final determination. That same day the men's wives set out to find their arrested spouses. Six thousand non-Jewish women crowded around the portals of the building in the Rosenstrasse where the "Aryan-connected" ones were being held. Six thousand women called for their husbands, screamed for their husbands, howled for their husbands, and stood like a wall, hour after hour, night and day.

SS headquarters in the Burgstrasse are only a few minutes away from the Rosenstrasse. The incident was extremely disagreeable to those in the Burgstrasse. It was not considered an opportune moment to open up with machine guns upon six thousand women. Conference of SS leaders. Debates, back and forth. The women are rebelling in the Rosenstrasse, threateningly demanding the release of their husbands.

"Privileged persons are to be incorporated in the national community," SS headquarters decides at noon Monday. Anyone who chances to have been lucky enough to marry a non-Jewish wife can pack up his things and go home. The rest are shipped off in freight trains, direction unknown.

Farewell, Peter Tarnowsky, lover of Kant, Hegel, and Schopenhauer. Farewell, German, man of honor from head to foot. Farewell—farewell forever!

Source: Ruth Andreas Friedrich, *Berlin Underground, 1938-1945*. New York: Holt, 1947, pp. 92-93.

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