

Norderney: A Jewish Beach Resort (1930)

Abstract

Since the nineteenth century, many Germans who could afford to take a vacation chose to spend the hot summer months at one of the many beach resorts that dotted the country's North- and Baltic Sea coasts. Many of these resorts discouraged or prohibited Jewish guests from visiting, however, and the prevalence of such "resort antisemitism" (*Bäder-Antisemitismus*) increased over the course of the 1920s. One notable exception to this trend was the island community of Norderney, in the North Sea, whose relative tolerance attracted a growing number of Jewish holidaymakers. Norderney's reputation for welcoming Jewish guests dated back to the late nineteenth century, and the Jewish hotel-owner Heinrich Hoffmann had operated a hotel catering to the particular needs of Jewish customers since the 1890s. By the 1920s, Jews comprised around one-third of the total visitors to the island, roughly 15,000 per season, most of them German Jews, but some of them coming from abroad, as well. Two establishments in town maintained strictly kosher kitchens—the Restaurant Falk and the Restaurant Cohn—and Norderney also had a religious school and a synagogue. It did not have its own rabbi, but it could call on the regional rabbi in Emden, who served the smaller communities in this far northwestern corner of Germany. Construction had even begun in 1932 on a ritual bath for the community, although the Nazi seizure of power in 1933 prevented its completion.

These institutions served the town's permanent community of about 20 Jews in 1924 (out of a total island population of just over 4,000), as well as the many hundreds more seasonal Jewish visitors and resort workers who flocked to the island in the summer months. A Jewish children's retreat and recreation center, operated by the Hannover branch of the B'nai B'rith, also operated on Norderney, serving primarily children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The retreat had begun as just a seasonal operation, but it expanded to a year-round facility in the mid-1920s, after which time it drew 450 Jewish children to the island annually, for four to six weeks of education, recreation, and beneficial sea air.

The excerpts below come from a glowing two-part travelogue written by a Jewish spa guest who visited Norderney in late summer 1930, less than a year into the economic depression and a mere two weeks before the Reichstag elections in which the Nazi Party made its first substantial, and shocking, electoral breakthrough. The articles appeared in successive issues of *Der Israelit*, Germany's leading Orthodox Jewish journal, which served as a more tradition-oriented and conservative counterpoint to the liberal German-Jewish newspaper, the *CV-Zeitung* (which merited a passing mention in the article below). The writer, not identified in a byline, expounded on the special accommodations available on Norderney to the observant Jewish visitor as well as on the sheer pleasure of a seaside summer vacation. As one would expect in a travel piece, the writer made almost no mention of politics whatsoever, apart from noting that the resort enabled one to forget about the challenges facing the Brüning government.

Source

Part I (August 7, 1930)

[...]

... in a small, narrow lane [lies] a surprise for Jews: An oblong orange structure, whose narrow, colorful windows and neat front gardens fit so harmoniously and naturally into the streetscape that the creator of the world might have made it on the very first day, when he cast the little crust of earth that is

Norderney into the midst of the great sea. This synagogue already has a history and a tradition reaching back fifty years. Baron Willy von Rothschild and more than the “Five Frankfurters” [the name of a silent film comedy from 1922] came to take the cure back then, as well as important Berliners and Hamburgers and Breslauers, who saw to it that Jewish guests found sufficient intellectual and religious nourishment at the excellent local hotels founded here in later years. And so this handsome house of God was established with room for eighty-eight men and all of the sacred instruments that belong there. Many of the mantles and cloths bear well known Frankfurt names in gold letters on red velvet. A sign in the anteroom announces that the synagogue and community are sacred and extraterritorial, under the protection of a general board of trustees on which Frankfurt is well represented by Jacob Besthoff. The synagogue is no mere monument, but also leads its own everyday life. Services are held in the morning and evening. On Friday evening and Sabbath morning it is standing room only. The cabinet in the anteroom even contains a complete edition of the Talmud, which is also in use. The sacred room is kissed awake from its deep slumber by the first sun of springtime and reaches its apex during the high holidays, since the five locals from Norderney once again ensure a minyan service, only to spend six months in hibernation.

The synagogue is run with love and zeal by a reliable man well versed in the Torah, who, as a trusted representative of the Emden rabbinate, has also overseen the kosher meals at our hotel (Hoffmanns Hotel Falk) every summer for three decades, and also deftly satisfied all of the resort guests’ religious needs. A somewhat imperious man, who does not take matters of ritual and ceremony lightly. The man’s prudence and energy also offer the greatest security for even the most anxious. He occupies a prominent position, like a religious lighthouse out at sea, and also deserves respect for that.

In the Hotel.

Our hotel is characterized by a varied and wholly Jewish life. On the Sabbath, all of the tables on the veranda that winds around the beautiful structure were set for a good two hundred persons. On Friday night, Sabbath candles burned on nearly every table. The song “Shalom Aleichem” whirred around some of the lights. Each table was a separate family, a cozy Sabbath home complete with lights, songs and love. Before the table blessing, the song of Zion rises to three different melodies, which intertwine in an apparent musical battle between Zionism and Aguda. But the blessing is said together... On the men’s heads sit hats, beneath which some of them sport luxuriant three-week beards. Everything is properly Jewish.

Naturally the good Sabbath meal as well. The apparatus, served by trained personnel, functions flawlessly. And the hotel owner, like a captain on the bridge, with a practiced eye and a firm hand, guides the little ship safely and unerringly through the waves and past all the rocks of the peak season. To run a hotel, especially a Jewish one, demands not just knowledge and technique but also a heart. It has long-since become a foolish — and malicious — fairy tale to speak of the “incompetence of Jewish hoteliers and the inferiority of Jewish hotels.” First-class Jewish hostleries can now be found everywhere in the town and spa. In Norderney, too, no Jew, however pampered, can rightfully claim that he was forced to take up residence in non-Jewish establishments by the lack of comfort in Jewish hotels.

[...]

“We’re building a castle ...“

The loveliest thing about Norderney are its children. Norderney is one giant children’s home. Children shout, laugh, hoot, sing and jubilate from every corner, from every lane and hallway, garden, forecourt and playground. They dominate the streets and the beach, they rule the island with their pennants, balls, shovels and pails, with their noise and laughter. Those who complain of the falling birthrate in Germany should come to Norderney and see how wrong they are. Deeply tanned, in Eskimo garb, gymnastic garb or no garb at all, they emerge from the many children’s homes and parade through the streets with home-made flags, singing and noisemaking. Many pale, sickly little faces are bronzed after just a few

days. Jewish children from the homes of the Zion lodge, from private children's homes, for example that under the tested directorship of the Frankfurter Mrs. Gold e, from schools and holiday colonies are also fresh, merry and free (we shall remain politely silent on the other "f" to which children on holiday have a certain right...) frolicking on the beach, playing with balls and the waves. Children, children everywhere!

...

[...]

Down with politics...

Who is Brüning? What is the point of the "emergency decree" and the newly established [German] State Party? Is the Reichstag falling apart? They built it poorly! "Why Merge?" stood in large letters in a heading in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* from Tuesday, which we only received on Friday. "Why?" we ask as well. None of us read beyond the heading. The people out there are doing something to one another. And still, like us here, they are but a tiny heap of nakedness in the great, mighty and endless sea...

[...]

Source: „Aus dem Reiche der See und Sonne. Das große Wunder“ (Teil 1), in *Der Israelit. Ein Centralorgan für das orthodoxe Judentum. Organ der Aguda*. Frankfurt am Main, Nr. 32, August 7, 1930, pp. 1, 10.

Available online:

https://www.alemannia-judaica.de/norderney_synagoge.htm#Anzeigen%20und%20Berichte%20zu%20j%C3%BCdischen%20Kureinrichtungen

Part 2: “Morgengebet am Meere“ (Morning Prayers by the Seaside, August 28, 1930)

When the number of Jewish Jews [sic] in Norderney gradually waned in the last week there was no more minyan service in the small synagogue. I then went to the beach in the morning and the little hut on four wheels sunk into the sand like a gypsy caravan became a house of G*d.

Dear reader, have you ever said your morning prayers by the sea, utterly alone, just G*d, you, and the waves? Far and wide, not a soul on the beach at this early morning hour. The sea a cauldron of boiling lead, silvery along the edges. Waves storm forward from behind, one after the other, like monstrous beasts attacking each other, enemies penetrating the land over the corpses of those in front of them, and yet breaking their necks on the hard dyke. And above it all a sky, pale gray with white and red edges, which on the near horizon bow down to the watery cauldron like a wall of clouded glass. And here, where clouds, water and earth wrestle and writhe, you stand quite alone; a stiff breeze blows you, blows the threads that bind you in prayer to G*d, at all four ends, and the signs of the covenant with G*d rest upon your forehead and arm. And you gaze into gray-green eternity and praise Him, who “created Heaven and Earth, the sea and everything within it, and abides in loyalty evermore — “. “Thou, G*d, the grandeur, the power and the glory and eternity and beauty, like everything that is in Heaven and on Earth... Thou createst them all — — — and Thou animatest them all, — and the heavenly host bows before Thee— — —“ It is the place and the time, when the waves of worship can experience their peak...

If you have a little Tehillim or Mishnah with you, take it out at the right moment, and some of the obscure meaning of the words will now become clear to you.

Then you go to breakfast. At this hour the hotel veranda is still empty, and you are served quickly and well. The hotel is gradually stirring. Children run screaming down the stairs, nightshirts push between them like sandbags. Bathrobes and pajamas shine in every color. The tables are occupied by Effendis, Mandarins, Maharajas and their wives. Everyone asks everyone else what they think of the weather, whether they have slept well, whether they are traveling to Helgoland. Then it is time for you to go where

the waves rush and “abyss speaks to abyss” more loudly yet more discretely.

The beach is still quiet. The one-eyed servant sweeps the detritus of human culture into the waves with a large broom: sheets of newspaper, little pennants, empty chocolate boxes, and offers the resort guest information about the weather in the dry East Frisian manner: “Wind turning to the East. If it doesn’t rain today, it will be the finest weather!...” At the gate the porter writes on the board in chalk: “High tide 9:20 am, water temperature 17.5 degrees C.” A nurse in a white cap, herself still half a child with big eyes, leads a colony of pale, hollow-cheeked boys and girls to the water’s edge and tells them to raise their arms and breathe deeply. The boys open their mouths and, astonished, forget to close them again.

A few fishing boats leave the port in full sail. On the stage reaching far into the sea stands a thin boy in a school cap, fishing. An idyll, still-life with rushing waves.

But then, around eleven, a wave of life sweeps up, a crowd has gathered on the north beach, rolling in the sand, dancing with the waves; the gypsy camp has set up in the sun outside the bathing machines. Indian war cries vie with the waves. Balls roll through the air and the sand and into the lenses of myopic beachgoers and bathers. Then the time has come for you to disappear from here as well.

You walk through the spa garden to your warm bath or, if you wish and need to, to your silent work until lunchtime.

In the Afternoon.

In the afternoon the people catch up thoroughly with everything they neglected in their morning toilette, just as at noon on the ninth of Aw one catches up with the blessings left out in the morning... The beach is a parade with a grand fashion show. Saxophones roar and drums beat from the beach cafes. Wild jazz band waves and blonde permanent waves, and the sea, somewhat bemused, withdraws slowly and majestically ...

This is the time to go to the spa park, where an orchestra is playing good music, comfortable club chairs invite you to a tranquil rest and a reading room with its distinguished silence cradles the wave-dazed senses in soft cushions.

The shelves provide select newspapers to read, a second, paper memorial to the cities. The “Frankfurter“ lies next to the “Lokalanzeiger,“ Ullstein rests alongside Scherl and Hugenberg. “Der Stahlhelm“ and the “C.V. Zeitung“ often share the same pigeonhole. The extremist papers are absent.

[...]

In the bushes outside I often had the opportunity to listen to children at play, children from the homes and the Golde circle [*Rosa Golde’s private Jewish children’s home*]. I always admired how children of various ages and social backgrounds were guided and protected here with a firm hand, without feeling the restriction of the house rules unavoidable in official homes. Air, light, song and love create a magic world for the little ones in which there is no room for homesickness and the like...

[...]

Source: „Aus dem Reiche der See und Sonne. Das große Wunder“ (Teil 2), in *Der Israelit. Ein Centralorgan für das orthodoxe Judentum. Organ der Aguda*. Frankfurt am Main, Nr. 33, August 28, 1930, pp. 1, 10. Available online:

https://www.alemannia-judaica.de/norderney_synagoge.htm#Anzeigen%20und%20Berichte%20zu

[%20j%C3%BCdischen%20Kureinrichtungen](#)

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