



The Holocaust and Wales – Episode 1: Life in Europe Before the War

Transcript

Morris Brodie: The year is 1933, the 10th of March. It is six weeks since the Nazis seized power in Germany. Dr Julius Siegel, a Jewish lawyer in Munich and father of Bea Siegel, is going about his business.

Bea Green: My father went to the police headquarters, I suppose [...] in order to lay a complaint on behalf of one of his clients who had been arrested [...] When he got to the police headquarters, somebody said to him “Dr Siegel, you’re wanted in room number so-and-so”, which happened to be in the basement, and my father said “Fine, I’m in good time, I’ll go there first”. And when he got there, he saw that it was full of Brownshirt thugs who proceeded to beat him up. They knocked his teeth in and bust his eardrums [...] They then cut off his trouser legs and took off his shoes and socks, and hung a placard round his neck with the legend “I’m a Jew, and I will never again complain to the police”.

Morris Brodie: March 1938. Germany annexes Austria.

Evelyn Kaye: First of all, I think what I’ve...remember most, is I’ve hated crowds ever since and won’t go near a crowd, and the marching of boots. It’s...when I hear marching now, I still get uptight.

Morris Brodie: Between 1933 and 1939, 90,000 Jews fled from Central Europe to Britain. Men, women and children targeted by the Nazis as racially inferior, forced to abandon their homes in Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia, to seek refuge in the UK. Many of them found sanctuary in Wales, some briefly, others for the rest of their lives.

In this podcast we look at the connections between the Holocaust and Wales. We listen to the stories of those who fled from Nazi tyranny to build better lives for themselves and their families in Wales. We learn about their contributions to Welsh life, culturally,



economically and politically. And we hear the testimony of Welsh people who bore witness to the barbarism of the Nazi regime. The Holocaust can seem like a distant event that happened a long time ago in another place, but it is a part of all of our history. It's a history that is more relevant now than ever, with the rise of the far right, antisemitism, racism and attacks on human rights becoming more common in many countries.

I'm Morris Brodie, historian at Aberystwyth University. The podcast has been created as part of Holocaust Resources Wales, a project between the Centre for the Movement of People at Aberystwyth University and the Jewish History Association of South Wales, and sponsored by the Association of Jewish Refugees. The voices you will hear are those of survivors, or their children, recorded as part of oral history interviews taken by the Centre for the Movement of People, the Jewish History Association of South Wales, and Imperial War Museums.

In this first episode, we look at Jewish life in Central Europe before the Second World War. The stories we will hear are those of refugees who fled to Wales in the 1930s. What were their lives like before they left? How did this change over the course of the decade? And what was the spark – the writing on the wall – that prompted them to flee?

Let's start with the story of a young German-Jewish boy. His name is Herman Rothman.

Herman Rothman: Yes. I was born on the second of September 1924, and I was born in Berlin [...] they sent me to a Jewish school, and I had quite a distance to travel. I travelled by train for what, half an hour. It was what they call a volkschule, and it was a Jewish one, and we had a Hebrew education. I had a Hebrew education early days. [...] I went to, also to a sports club [...] called the bar-kochba [...] The bar-kochba was, apart from doing gymnastics in winter and summer we did athletics, I liked it very much indeed, because when you're good at something then you like it more than anything else.

Morris Brodie: Evelyn Kaye's grandparents in Vienna ran a small theatre.

Evelyn Kaye: [...] and the nursery put on a play, and I was a lily, which had the...my mother made me the dress, and it had these leaves made of crepe paper. And it was quite saweet...it was a bit twee [...] there was a winter fairy, and she had a long trail, and all the flowers were hidden under the trail and as she walked offstage, each flower got up and had a little rhyme to say. And unfortunately, my...an uncle of mine who wasn't



much older than I was, taught me some naughty words to say, and I couldn't remember the proper words, so my grandfather pulled down the curtain rather quickly!

Morris Brodie: Renate Collins, whose name when she was born in 1933 in Prague was Renate Kress, had parents from both Germany and Czechoslovakia.

Renate Collins: Well, of course, my parents weren't born in Czechoslovakia, my father was born in Germany [...] cause his father came to Prague to work in the bank, and my father followed in his footsteps, and then my mother was born in Bohemia, and she has pictures, which everybody asks me, "was she an actress?" But no, because that's how they dressed in Bohemia, and I suppose now we look at people, and they dressed way out, and we think, oh, they're a bit bohemian, and so...she was a theatre sister in the Prague hospital, infirmary, whatever they called it.

Morris Brodie: Des Golten used to attend Jewish services with his grandparents in Žilina, which is now part of Slovakia.

Des Golten: My grandfather, and my maternal and my paternal grandparents, were reasonably religious, not overly, but reasonably. And they went every Saturday to the service. And they took me, so I went there also. And many of my friends, my school friends, my school colleagues, came also to the service.

Morris Brodie: Others, like Evelyn Kaye, remember a secular, non-religious Jewish life.

Evelyn Kaye: And I lived in the Prate, the Leopoldstadt, which was a Jewish district [...] my parents weren't terribly Jewish, they weren't kosher, they never went to synagogue, and we didn't keep any of the festivals. Funnily enough, my father's sisters were very religious, and one of them got a bit apprehensive cause I was being brought up in this very godless way.

Morris Brodie: Soon, however, these children became targeted because of their Jewish heritage. When the Nazis seized power in Germany in 1933, open antisemitism became a state-sponsored policy. Let's hear Bea Siegel, who became Bea Green, again.

Bea Green: I think it was in my second year at primary school, at the state primary school, that, unlike the first year, we had a teacher whom I still remember, she was called Fraulein Felner, and she was antisemitic [...] I didn't know what it meant, of course at the time, but she said when I asked for, I think it was an exercise book – “Can't you Jew kids get your own exercise books?” And I thought, yes, I'm sure we could, and I went home to my mum, and said “Fraulein Felner thinks that we Jew kids could – or should get our own exercise books”, and it was only then – when I noticed that my mother was angry – that I thought, well maybe she shouldn't have said that.

Morris Brodie: Lore Confino was in Frankfurt, in Germany, during the Nazi rise to power.

Lore Confino: As far as I remember, I enjoyed going to school, and I had friends and it was all very nice. And at that time, my mother was still alive. And she and my form teacher were very good friends because they were both very interested in books and so on. And so it...it was a very nice atmosphere. But then as Hitler came into power, it...things started to change. And that is that the teacher, whose name was Herr Knaupf, I remember, sort of absented himself. He didn't...gradually, he didn't want to know my mother or my father anymore. And at school itself, every morning, when we turned up in class, there was the picture of Hitler on the wall, above the pulpit, and we had to stand there with outstretched arms and say 'Heil Hitler'. And the atmosphere changed completely. And friends, I had been sort of going to their houses, and we were always together playing, and suddenly, they didn't want to know me anymore. And so obviously, you found it very hard to understand – why should it happen that one day we were good friends, and the next day, they didn't want to know anymore.

Morris Brodie: The Nazis began arresting their political opponents and Jews and sending them to detention centres known as concentration camps. These camps were outside the German legal system, meaning detainees could be held indefinitely. Herman Rothman remembers his first encounter with them after a family friend was arrested.

Herman Rothman: We had friends who were of German extraction, but Jewish. And they were very, very friendly. He was an architect. And [...] Then on one occasion, the door opened and the woman came in, and she cried. And my parents asked her in and



so on, gave her a drink and so on. What happened? And she said they arrested her husband. And they took him to a concentration camp. Now, my parents consoled her and said, now, well, perhaps after a time they would release him and everything will be alright. And she left. And then shortly afterwards [...] then there was another knock on the door, and she was in...absolutely in tears, burst into tears, and she showed them a letter, which they received from the person in charge of the concentration camp, saying [...] we inform you hereby that your husband has had a heart attack and he died. Would you send us eight marks so that we can bury him or cremate him? That's the letter she showed us. And of course, she was in tears. And [...] so there I felt the first effect of death by the Nazis.

Morris Brodie: The Nazis soon had designs beyond the German borders. In 1938, they invaded Austria and proclaimed it a part of Germany – this was the Anschluss. Hans Albrecht remembers soldiers walking past his house in Linz.

Hans Albrecht: Yes, they passed my house, and I remember the Weinlichs, and there were many people raising their hands, lifting their hands, then throwing lots of flowers to the Nazis. And Mrs Weinlich, the Nazi, she told, she told the lady who came to wash for us, she said, “Don’t wash for these dirty swine, the Jews”, I remember that as well.

Morris Brodie: In November 1938, the situation for German and Austrian Jews worsened dramatically. A Polish Jew living in Paris, Herschel Grynszpan, assassinated a German official. In response, a wave of violence was unleashed against the Reich’s Jewish population. Shops were smashed, synagogues burned down, and 30,000 Jews were rounded up and sent to concentration camps. The night of the 9th and 10th November became known as Kristallnacht, the Night of Broken Glass.

Lore Confino: And then, for me, personally, the climax came at Kristallnacht, which was the 10th of November ‘38, when they came to us with long iron bars and my father stood at the front door, and he had pinned his Iron Crosses and all his decorations on his lapel, and he thought that would show them that he had fought in the war and they would leave us alone. But they pushed my grandparents and my father and myself, my brother had left by then to France, into the kitchen. And they started smashing up our home. And obviously, there was a lot of noise, and we were all frightened and my grandmother thought we were all going to be killed. And then after they’d finished what they wanted to do, they left and suddenly it was all quiet. And we sort of came out of the



kitchen and when I saw what our home looked like, and it was all cluttered up and smashed up and it looked awful. And I remember I looked around, and I said to my father, “I’m not going to stay here.” And I walked out. And he...they tried to keep me back because they didn't know what was going on in the street and so on. But I just felt I can't stay here.

Morris Brodie: The pogrom took place all over the German Reich, including Austria.

Evelyn Kaye: Well, I remember the boots again, we lived on a second-floor flat, and the knock came on the door, and they took my father, and then they marched up in the block of flats and they took other people who never came back.

Hans Albrecht: Well, I remember the Nazis came to my house to arrest my father, and when they came to my house, I said to mother, “Are the wicked people here again?” [...] And they took all the jewellery out of the house.

Morris Brodie: Julius Weil had celebrated his bar mitzvah at a synagogue in Cologne just two weeks earlier. It was the last bar mitzvah to take place at the synagogue before it was destroyed.

Julius Weil: Well I, I wasn't out and about when it happened, but all the sort of Jewish businesses in, in Cologne were smashed up. Windows broken, more or less closed down. My synagogue, well, all the synagogues, were trashed, burnt, and smashed up. The school I went to, which was sort of attached to one of the synagogues, was also completely destroyed.

Morris Brodie: Herman Rothman's family had been hiding with a relative on the outskirts of Berlin on the night of the pogrom.

Herman Rothman: We came back and we went...we travelled to Berlin, and we saw the havoc which was made of Jewish properties. We saw the shops being, the glass destroyed, thing, the...everything looted from these, from the shops and so on. It was a dreadful sight for a child...I was a child really, to see all this and to observe it.



Morris Brodie: In a bid to humiliate them further, the Nazis made Jews clean up the mess. Evelyn Kaye.

Evelyn Kaye: But my mother, who never learned any sense, the Nazis got hold of the Jews, you know, when there were scrubbing the street with toothbrushes, I tried to pull her away, and she wouldn't come, so they got hold of her to scrub. And all these people were then deported to a concentration camp.

Morris Brodie: Terrified Jews began fleeing the German Reich. Kristallnacht was the clearest indication yet that Jews were no longer safe in Germany or Austria. Soon, Jews in Czechoslovakia were also under threat. The Munich Agreement in September 1938 had handed the Sudetenland in the northwest of the country over to Germany. In March 1939, the Wehrmacht marched into Prague. The Nazis now controlled the whole of Czechoslovakia.

Des Golten: A few days later, the Germans actually marched in. And I could see the columns of the German[s] marching into Prague. And there was, where we were living, a boarding on a wall, and there were various posters placed there, and the German[s] used to use it to give, to write posters. And I remember that they used the Czech language, but it was particularly badly written. So, I think they went out of the way to humiliate the Czech people by writing Czech notices in a bad language, because there was no shortage of people who could have written it in a perfect Czech.

Renate Collins: Well, no I don't, honestly remember anything, but I know the school kitchens were taken over by the Germans [...] and it was the only building on the hill that had two windows at pavement level, so I knew where the school was, and they took over our kitchens, and they used to catch hold of my hand, take me down the corner, see me across the road, until my aunt opened the flat door, and then they'd go back.

Morris Brodie: Less than six months after the invasion of Prague, Europe was in flames. Once the Second World War began, escape from the German Reich became almost impossible. Jewish communities were trapped, with little hope of rescue. The voices you have heard in this episode were able to flee to Britain, and to Wales, before this



happened. In the next episode, we discover how these refugees made their journey, and how they were welcomed to their new homes. Until next time, thanks for listening.