



Not of Bread Alone

How Jewish Holocaust refugees helped each other to integrate into Sweden

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Helmut Müssener & Michael F. Scholz: *Die jüdische Emigrantenselbsthilfe in Stockholm (1939-1973). Hilfe durch Selbsthilfe*, De Gruyter, Oldenburg, 2023

WHAT DO REFUGEES NEED when they arrive in a new country? Help, of course. But what kind of help? From whom? And for what?

These questions are still relevant. In different societies, even in different phases of modern Swedish history, they have been answered in different ways. Some methods have proved more disruptive than actually helpful – refugees have been detained, sometimes for generations, in a state of dependency, in special housing areas, or even in refugee camps.

Other ways have proved effective: those who came as refugees have, after a relatively short time, been able to manage on their own and support themselves, and have become integrated into society and responsible citizens in their new homeland.

How it turned out for many of the Jewish refugees who managed to get to Sweden from

the German-speaking areas of Europe in the years immediately before the Second World War is described in detail and fascinatingly by two Swedish non-Jewish professors of German descent in their book about the now forgotten organization *Emigranten-Selbsthilfe* (Emigrants’ Self-help).

The organization was founded by German-speaking Jewish refugees in Stockholm in 1938. Within a short time, it became one of the most active refugee organizations in Sweden; and also one of the Jewish organizations in Stockholm attracting many members during the war period. The Emigrants’ Self-help operated here until 1973, when the activity closed down, since there was no longer a need for it.

The organization had a motto: *Von Hilfe zur Selbsthilfe* (Through help to self-help).¹

1 This was at the time a common and traditional principle for relief activities, in particular among Jewish communities and organizations. See further: Salomon Adler-Rudel, *Jüdische Selbsthilfe unter dem Naziregime 1933–1939*. Schriftenreihe Wissenschaftlicher Abhandlungen des Leo Baeck Instituts

The goal was that the refugees (who used the term ‘emigrants’ to describe themselves) would support each other in their transition through their efforts from being emigrants to becoming immigrants. The aim was to become able to stand on their own two feet in the new country.

Today it can be stated that the self-help emigrants, through the extensive social, curative and, not least, cultural activities they carried out, succeeded to a large extent in reaching that goal.

Several factors contributed to this. A network was built up that included most of the German-speaking Jewish refugees in the Stockholm area. Care was taken to maintain a kind of ‘Jewish popular front policy’, i.e., that those who were active Zionists, whether communists (as one of the leaders in the organization, Dr Wolfgang Steinitz, was) or social democrats, could cooperate by keeping the contradictions and tensions that latently prevailed between them away from the daily interactions. There was an openness which meant that even some non-Jewish anti-Nazi refugees, such as the director and actor Curt Trepte, could be members. However, those who were accepted to enter Sweden as ‘political refugees’ usually did not join – even if they were Jews or of Jewish descent. For the most part, members were social democrats who came to Sweden through the care of ‘Arbetarrörelsen’s flyktinghjälp’ (Swedish Labour Movement’s Refugee Aid) – as my parents did.

29 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1974); Paul Siebeck, 1974. *Jüdische Selbsthilfe unter dem Naziregime 1933–1939. Im Spiegel der Berichte der Reichsvertretung der Juden in Deutschland*. Vorwort Robert Wélsch (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 1974). Heinz-Dietrich Löwe, ‘From charity to social policy: The emergence of Jewish “self-help” organizations in Imperial Russia, 1800–1914’, *East European Jewish Affairs*, 27/2 (December 1997): 53–75.

The fact that some Jewish activists already established to some degree in Sweden supported and sponsored the Emigrants’ Self-help activities in the background contributed to the success. Such, for example, was the legendary Fritz Hollander, who came to Sweden as early as 1933. To him is dedicated a separate section in the book. Also prominent figures in Jewish Stockholm such as Gilel Storch, former chairman of the World Jewish Congress in Sweden, Norbert Masur and Jacob Ettlinger figure in the background.

But crucial to the Emigrants’ Self-Help’s success to such a large extent in its intention to get the emigrants to cope on their own and thus become integrated citizens of society was the idea that formed the backbone of the organization: to help emigrants to self-help through emigrants.

Why? And how?

By promoting and supporting each other in basing their existence and building their future in the new country on their own initiatives, they avoided falling into a victim role. Instead of being made passive recipients of the expected aid efforts, they assumed agency and became actors in their own survival and integration projects. Rather than indulging in lamentation, they began to act.

Social work was the core of the business and its most burdensome part financially and in terms of work. But it was the cultural programmes that lifted, united and motivated the refugees, kept their morale up and gave them some perspective on existence. If the social activities, which consisted among other things of helping each other find jobs, housing and other necessities of life, were the support legs of the Emigrants’ Self-help, the extensive and varied cultural activities they arranged – often in cooperation with other organizations affiliated to the Jewish Community, not only for their members but also for the Mosaic congregation and the wider Swedish Jewish, Zionist and

partly also non-Jewish cultural scene – were its dancing legs.

Many famous names appear in the intense cavalcade of events organized by Emigrants' Self-help. And many attended the events. They usually consisted of classical music, a talk or a discussion evening – mainly with one of their own as a participant. Among those who performed music and also arranged choir and orchestral exercises for the members were the composers Hans Holewa and Moses Pergament, the pianist Herta Fischer and the cantor Leo Rosenblüth. Lotte Laserstein, who is now again on the screen in Sweden as an important painter, gave art and drawing lessons. In January 1939, Chief Rabbi Professor Marcus Ehrenpreis gave a lecture to the emigrants on the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, and the philosophy professor Ernst Cassirer a month later gave a lecture on Kant and Rousseau. Another month later, the title of the lecture was Kafka – a Jewish poet of our time. And so it went on in a steady stream of musical evenings and lecture evenings. A few examples: Rabbi Dr Emil Kronheim – Friedrich Nietzsche on Jews and Judaism (12/12/39); Professor Oscar Klein – Albert Einstein (1/4/39); the music educator Dr Hans Eppstein – Jewish musicians. The works of Mendelsohn and Mahler (12/12/39); Associate Professor Hugo Valentin – The great catastrophes in Jewish history (12/12/40); high-school teacher Wulff Fürstenberg – Strindberg and the Jews (26/5/42), and so on in that style.

At a 'Künstlerischer Abend' (An Evening Devoted to the Arts) in the Jewish Assembly's session hall in the late summer after the end of the war (26/9/45) under the auspices of the Emigrants' Self-help, the poet Nelly Sachs's poems under the title 'Judiskt öde' (Jewish fate) were recited for the first time in front of the Swedish-German-Jewish audience.

For me, who have spent much of my time in the last twelve years shaping the programmes

for Jewish Culture in Sweden (J!), the insight into the extensive and high-level cultural activities Emigrants' Self-help offered its audience is like looking deeply into the rear-view mirror of our own times and activities. Then as now, Jews live in times of vulnerability and crisis. Then, as now, the desire to deepen one's understanding and find explanations is strong. Then, as now, Jews and other vulnerable people feel the need to review critically the state and developments of the world.

Man does not live by bread alone. Especially not the person who has been forced to become a refugee (or lives as a cultural minority). She does not survive, in any case not as a complete individual, if she is not offered opportunities from time to time, in vulnerable situations perhaps often, to be strengthened in her cultural identity, confronted with its complications and fascinated by the multi-faceted riches of the culture in order, through it, to both deepen the sense of life and rise above the annoyances of everyday life.

But it was not only for the sake of the art and the intellectual content that the members of the Emigrants' Self-help and other Jews and some non-Jews so diligently came and took part in the rich cultural offering. It also created an opportunity for them to meet and exchange words with each other. The social side of the cultural activity was then (as now) just as important as the intellectual.

How did it go for the emigrants/refugees?

In the annual report from 1951, the association states that, with 415 members, it was still the largest Jewish association in Stockholm apart from the Mosaic Congregation, but that the number of members was steadily falling. Emigration and death explain part of the decline in membership, but above all, it was the case that almost everyone at that time spoke good enough Swedish 'to also be able to participate in the cultural life of their new home country'. Most of them had

already obtained Swedish citizenship, achieved a decent standard of living and settled into Swedish conditions – and this so thoroughly that the emigrants/refugees’ characteristic *Teetisch* (tea-drinking) towards the end of the organization’s activities had been replaced by the typical Swedish *fika* (coffee).

Most of the German-Jewish refugees from the Holocaust who enrolled in Emigrants’ Self-help in Stockholm quite quickly became active and involved in Swedish society in various ways. Some even became successful. A very few, especially some who were communists, returned to Germany (GDR). At the same time, many of the emigrants who had now become immigrants maintained some kind of – sometimes problematic – relationship with ‘the Jewish’. My now deceased colleague, Mirjam Sterner Carlberg, coined the concept of ‘double-integration’ in her doctoral thesis ‘Community and survival: about the Jewish group in Borås and its history’ (1994). That is precisely what was at stake for the Jewish refugees who took part in the Emigrants’ Self-help: by helping each other when needed, they became socially and culturally both strengthened and anchored in their Jewish sense of belonging. At the same time, through their

own initiatives and efforts, they would in different ways enter and find their place in Swedish society. They were strengthened both in being Jews and in becoming Swedes.

The deeply ingrained Jewish experience of living in the diaspora probably also contributed to these refugees’ relatively quick and smooth adaptation to and integration into the new society they came to. Through the long Jewish diaspora, Jews have developed a culturally rooted readiness to make themselves at home without being territorially at home.

Müssener and Scholz’s detailed presentation of what they found through persistent and thorough work with overlooked archival material not only documents a unique part of Swedish Holocaust history. The book by its comprehensive registers of persons and events is valuable as a source for further research. At the same time, their work sheds a clarifying light on important but overlooked aspects of the history of Swedish organization, migration and integration. ■

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