

"The Topography of Exclusion"

By Robert H. Gillette, author of *The Virginia Plan: William B. Thalheimer and a Rescue from Nazi Germany*.

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"Pop, Pop. I have something to tell you." My daughter-in-law, Jodi, pulled me aside to tell me her story. A co-worker in Massachusetts had attended a college graduation at Hampden-Sydney College near Farmville, Virginia. He stayed at a B&B named Hyde Park Farm. At breakfast, he noticed ten well-built structures on the hill behind the B&B. He asked the young waitress: "What are those buildings?" She answered: "Those are the Jew huts. There were these people called Jews who lived here." Jodi was shockingly intrigued. She and my son moved to Lynchburg, Virginia soon after the incident was told to her and she copied the name of the inn and the telephone number into her yearly calendar. She was going to find out the complete story, but family and working distracted her. She never called, but amazingly, she copied the inn's name and telephone number into her yearly calendar for almost fifteen years before she told me the story.

"Jew huts. There were these people called Jews." What was that all about? I was hooked. My research began, and five years later, I now know what the waitress was talking about.

In 1930, William B. Thalheimer, a successful owner of the prestigious department store in Richmond, Virginia, traveled to Europe with his family for several months on a business/family trip. While in Germany, he experienced the revolution of the National Socialist Party and its toxic infiltration into every aspect of German society. One night, while visiting friends, a Nazi rally converged just below the open window. The drumming

and screaming of anti-Semitic slogans reverberated against the stone buildings and cobblestone street. In Thalheimer's mind, the Nazi volcano had erupted spewing its noxious lava of hate and poison. The violent rhetoric so seared and scarred his soul that he promised himself to help the Jews of Germany. That very night, he decided to take his family home. It was time to get out of Germany.

Three years later, in the summer of 1933, a group of the most prominent Jews in Berlin met to listen to Rabbi Leo Baeck, the leader of Berlin's Jewish community. He minced no words. Hitler had now been instituted as the Dictator and the Nazi party was in control. By 1933, there were 500,000 Brown Shirts, Hitler's private army, and the party had developed the most extensive organization ever to be created in Germany. Anti-Jewish laws and activities were proliferating with devastating effectiveness. The Jewish Community was being crushed with each new Nazi edict. Baeck saw the hand writing on the wall. The atmosphere at the meeting was uneasy and tense. The muted conversations of those assembled suddenly stopped when Rabbi Baeck began to speak in almost a stage whisper. His words reverberated in the room and then exited to the world much as smoke ascends a chimney and disperses into the air: "The end of German Judaism has arrived!" Rabbi Baeck saw with prophetic insight the horrible end of the Jewish People in his beloved homeland.

By 1936, the Jewish Community fully realized that there was no future for German Jewish youth. They had been banned from universities, and even if they had been able to graduate into professions, they were restricted from ever practicing them. Attendance at government-sponsored schools was intolerable. Therefore, agricultural institutes were developed to teach Jewish adolescents agricultural and technical skills. The rationale was that if the teenagers were trained as farmers, they might have greater opportunities for immigration to countries that needed agriculturists. One of those training schools was Gross Breesen, located near Breslau on the border with Poland, and it was the only non-Zionist training institute. The program of study and training would last two years and was headed by Dr.

Curt Bondy, a prominent social psychologist who had been banned from teaching at the university. It would be co-ed and it could house approximated 100 students.

In January, 1938, Friedrich Borchardt, as an agent of New York's Joint Distribution Committee, was charged with the enormous task of finding countries that would accept Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany. A letter from his dear friend and colleague in Germany, Julius Seligsohn, a chief aide to Rabbi Baeck, reminded Borchardt that time for the Jews of Germany was running out: "I do not need to emphasize, dear Borchardt, to what an extent all of us who struggle greatly with the solutions of these difficult problems, count on your prudence and activity." In the words of a Jewish Committee memorandum, "If the future of adult Jews in Germany is hopeless, what shall we say of the future of Jewish children?" By chance, Borchardt was reviewing his files when he came across a letter sent to the Joint from William B. Thalhimer who suggested that refugees "be settled upon farms in the rural communities of this country in order to relieve their increasing concentration in the cities and in addition...hasten the process of rehabilitation." Borchardt was guardedly hopeful, and after communicating with Thalhimer and Dr. Bondy, he brought the two together to consider such a farm for the students of Gross Breesen. Bondy and Thalhimer clicked; their personalities were similar as was their commitment to save Jewish youth. So, the effort to bring 25 students from Gross Breseen to America began. In February, William and his cousin, Morton, set out to find a farm in Virginia that could serve as a new home for the potential immigrants. They found a perfect farm, Hyde Park Farm, in Burkeville, Virginia, a rural town in Central Virginia, a few hours drive from Richmond. Even though Burkeville was in the center of KKK activity, William purchased the farm for \$15,000.00 and added \$10,000.00 for tools and machinery. Now he awaited the arrival of the young immigrants. He purchased the farm without any guarantee visas would be issued to the students of Gross Breesen.

Who was William Thalhimer?

Thalhimer was a savvy businessman. He was also an extremely significant player in the resettlement of refugees from Germany. Since his return from his 1930 trip to Germany, he became an active member of the Jewish Committee and an eventual Board member. He rose to become the national chairman of the Refugee Resettlement Committee of the National Coordinating Committee (NCC), the umbrella organization for Jewish immigration to the United States. He travelled all over the country meeting with local and regional committees to set up the apparatus for integrating immigrants into communities. He became well known for his practical solutions to strategic matters. He could cut through red tape. He streamlined the rather cumbersome social work model of interviews and multiple layers of paper work. Along with his cousin, Morton, who focused on the Middle Atlantic states, he dealt with refugees who already had successfully immigrated, but he soon learned about the innumerable stumbling blocks that German Jews encountered in their efforts to emigrate from Germany. It was not so much that Jews could not get out of Germany; rather, the difficulty was being admitted into other countries. Thalhimer was an idealist, one who believed the myth that America opened its doors to the oppressed, the "hungry and poor." His idealism would be nearly smashed by the granite walls of the State Department.

"The Topography of Exclusion" is the topic for this panel. That sums up the American immigration policy during the 1930's. In this country, depression had dealt a brutal blow to our economy. Labor clamored for immigration restriction so immigrants would not compete for the few jobs that existed. If we think the anti-immigrant voices of today are shrill, the calls in the '30s drowned out any semblance of rational discourse. In addition, anti-Semitism rose to its highest level in American history as the 1930's progressed. Keep out immigrants, and particular, keep out unwanted Jews. This kind of sentiment was not only prevalent on "Main Street." The State Department beat its own drums, though admittedly, they were subtly muted. The Roosevelt New Deal administration collided

with the hold-over, conservative Republicans of Hoover persuasion. New Deal appointees, especially in the Labor Department, clashed with the members of the State Department's "old boy" club mainly comprised of Ivy League frat brothers and old moneyed families. In addition, the State Department and the Labor Department were waging battles for territorial survival. Issues of immigration became the foot soldiers on the battle fields, and the students of Gross Breesen were caught in the cross hairs of institutional conflict.

A memo from Wilbur Carr, assistant secretary of State, dated April 20, 1933, encapsulated the State Department's orientation. The Memorandum is entitled, "The Problem of Aliens Seeking Relief From Persecution in Germany." His first sentence set the tone: "The immigration laws of the United States contain no provision for the benefit of aliens who seek refuge in the United States to avoid religious or other persecution in foreign countries in which they reside...." In other words, there was no such word as "refugee" in the State Department's lexicon. Carr interpreted the Immigration Act of 1924 with clarity and intention. All immigrants could obtain visas only from American consular officers. Immigration into the U.S. began and ended with the consulate. The Consul had complete power to grant or withhold visas. In short, the visa records of the 1930's tell the story succinctly. Germany was allotted approximately 26,000 potential visas to the United States per year. For the years since Hitler assumed the dictatorship in 1933, out of the possible 130,000 openings, only 44,033 received visas. Within the visa process, the State Department was blocking immigration. Exclusion was the motto.

How did the consulates block the granting of visas? There were two considerations, which would play prominent roles in Thalhimer's efforts to secure visas for twenty-five Gross Breeseners. The first obstacle confronted was the infamous LPC ("likely to become a public charge"). This was the weapon most often used in consular decision making. LPC became lethal, a veritable fire-spouting dragon that stood guard outside of America's gates. If a visa applicant could not produce a verifiable "first preference" affidavit

of support or was not independently wealthy, LPC was used to deny the application. Even if such evidence was produced, the consul could and did reject the application; it was a judgment call, subjective, and most often, malicious. The huge American Jewish effort to provide affidavits helped soothe American consciences, but they were largely ineffectual in helping those seeking visas.

The second way the consulates stifled immigration was by invoking the Contract Labor Law. If an applicant for an immigration visa possessed a contract for work, he could not be admitted. Here was the Catch-22. If an individual could prove that he could support himself because he had a job waiting for him in the United States, would not that counter the LPC charge? One would think so, but the State Department utilized strange, but effective logic. I cannot discuss Carr's entire memorandum because time is limited, but, in light of his other writings, it is a frightening indictment of the callous and often anti-Semitic sentiments of some prominent officials in the Department.

One Consul General, however, in my mind, rose to the "righteous gentile" category. He was Raymond Geist, of the Berlin Consulate. He was instrumental in saving Jews from concentration camps and devising a plan to get Jews out of the country to await U.S. visas in Holland. Early on, he and his predecessor, assistant secretary of State George Messersmith, hated the Nazis and served as the most influential intelligence conduit for the U.S. Government. It was Geist who presided over the granting of visas to the Gross Breesen students.

William B. Thalheimer selected Leroy Cohen of Richmond to be his chief negotiator with the State Department. Cohen was an excellent choice. He was a Jew and committed to the cause of German refugees. He possessed a mind that was a veritable, intellectual trap; he was articulate and so sociable that he could have passed the scrutiny of restricted country clubs. Thalheimer and Cohen devised immigration strategies that included the issuing of shares. They fought the State Department from

April of 1938 until May of 1939 when twenty-five visas were finally issued to Gross Breesen students after they had endured the horrors of Kristallnacht, Buchenwald Concentration Camp and the long, maddening uncertainty of waiting.

The story of how he won the confidence of State Department officials through sheer stamina and the power of his personal integrity, and how the students, along with Curt Bondy, created new lives on the red soil of Hyde Farmlands, their American home in a small Virginia town, is inspiring. It took me five years of research, two and a half years to locate the State Department records that dealt with the Hyde Farmlands cases. On the very last day I was going to spend at the National Archives, discouraged because of my failure to locate essential papers, a researcher's miracle happened. The chief archivist took me into the penetralia of the archival stacks, and together, we hunted for the precious box of missing documents. He unlocked door after door, reminiscent of how Jack Benny descended into his legendary vault. After several unsuccessful attempts at numerous locations, he dropped to all fours and from the very bottom shelf, he handed me a box. "I don't know, but open this box." I opened the box and shuffled through the files, and in the very back, there it was: "Hyde Farmlands," two hundred and ten pages of all the State Department records dealing with the immigrants from Gross Breesen involved in the Virginia Plan. I jumped, hugged the archivist, who was a bit startled, and then he motioned with a sweeping gesture of his arm, pointing to the thousands of boxes sitting on the shelves. He was serious. "Every one of these boxes tells a story, and nobody comes down here. Your box has not been opened in seventy years. You now know more than anyone else in the world!" I was startled: such a responsibility to tell the story.

Everywhere I speak, people are fascinated. Even the Thalhimer family did not know the facts of the complete story. At my talks, I end my remarks by imploring the audience to read between the lines, to read the "white fire" of Midrashic origin, to ask what the story means, then and for today. I ask them to consider the saying from the Shulchan Aruch: "Every

moment one delays his efforts to redeem captives, when he could have helped them, is considered as if he had shed blood himself.”

The Virginia Plan: William B. Thalhimer and a Rescue from Nazi Germany certainly explores the “Topography of Exclusion,” but it also tells the triumphant story of the immigration of twenty-one young immigrants (four never made it for they were trapped in Holland and later perished) and how they succeeded and started their new lives in freedom. It is a story of courage, patience and hope. Excluded they were from their German life, their homes and families, but eventually, they were rescued, included, saved, and welcomed by both American Jews and the good hearts of neighboring farmers.