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# German Historical Institute London Bulletin

Review of Joachim Schlör, *Escaping Nazi Germany: One Woman's  
Emigration from Heilbronn to England*

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*German Historical Institute London Bulletin*  
Vol. XLIII, No. 2 (Nov. 2021), 125–129

ISSN 0269-8552

JOACHIM SCHLÖR, *Escaping Nazi Germany: One Woman's Emigration from Heilbronn to England* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 272 pp. ISBN 978 1 350 15412 4. £85.00

I have to start this review with a disclaimer: I am not in any way related to Alice Schwab, whose story of emigration from Nazi Germany to England is at the centre of the book reviewed here. Nevertheless, the vivid description of her life made her seem familiar to me by the time I had finished reading. The book tells the story of the emigration of Liesel Rosenthal, who later called herself Alice Rosenthal and whose married name was Schwab. Liesel, daughter of a local wine merchant, was born in Heilbronn in 1915 and escaped Nazi Germany for England in 1937. Working first as a domestic servant and then for Marks & Spencer, she managed to bring her younger brother and her parents over to England as well.

Joachim Schlör, Professor of Modern Jewish/Non-Jewish Relations at the University of Southampton, had the good fortune that Julia Neuberger,<sup>1</sup> Alice Schwab's daughter, granted him access to the extensive collection of personal letters she inherited from her mother. Alice collected and kept many of the letters she received during the turbulent times of her emigration (roughly between 1937 and 1947). As is often the case, however, her own letters are missing. It is Schlör's great achievement that he manages to convey an impression of Alice, her personality, and her choices in this difficult period of her life despite the lack of her own voice in the source material. He does this by not glossing over the apparent gaps and openly acknowledging the contradictions between different documents. He complements the autobiographical sources with archival material, further biographical material, and interviews with Alice's friends and acquaintances. This results in a tone that is sometimes very personal, which might surprise readers expecting a purely academic book. But he never drifts off into speculation or pathos, and the insight into the author's reasoning

<sup>1</sup> Julia Neuberger, DBE, is an influential public figure in the UK. A member of the House of Lords, she was Britain's second female rabbi and the first to lead her own congregation. She has held many positions in the public sector, especially the National Health Service, and in numerous voluntary organizations.

allows the reader to develop a close but deeply reflective connection with the main protagonists.

In recent years, a few comparable autobiographical studies have been published that are similarly written in a style appealing to both an academic and a wider, interested audience.<sup>2</sup> As Lars Fischer has already pointed out in his review of the German edition of this book, one might ask: why another one?<sup>3</sup> An answer might be that this is a story of an emigrant's fate that is typical, yet also very individual. Moreover, there are a number of reasons that make *Escaping Nazi Germany* absolutely worthwhile reading.

The first of these is the personality of Liesel Rosenthal/Alice Schwab herself. Detailed biographical insights into the life of an 'ordinary' woman living outside the norms of what was traditionally expected of a Jewish middle-class girl are rare. Alice's story is one of emancipation as much as of emigration. Trained as a bookseller, she was a free-spirited and liberated woman for her time, and maintained contact with a wide group of intellectual friends in Germany, Britain, and worldwide via letters. The extent of her network is best seen in the extensive index of names provided at the end of the book. Especially interesting is her love life. Relationships with various partners – some married – before her happy marriage to Walter Schwab repeatedly led to conflicts with her parents, especially her mother. Her parents wanted her to marry, and their hopes for new prospects of emigration through marriage took her as far as India, where she was to marry a German-Jewish entrepreneur. Much to her parents' anger and dismay, she rejected this type of quasi-arranged marriage.

<sup>2</sup> Working on Jewish emigration to South Africa, I can recommend two books that take a similar approach. Both also analyse individual collections of letters and share a more personal tone. See Steven Robins, *Letters of Stone: From Nazi Germany to South Africa* (Cape Town, 2016) and Shirli Gilbert, *From Things Lost: Forgotten Letters and the Legacy of the Holocaust* (Detroit, 2017). Similar, but more on the popular history spectrum and focusing on letters and the theft of intellectual property by the Nazi regime, is Karina Urbach, *Das Buch Alice: Wie die Nazis das Kochbuch meiner Großmutter raubten* (Berlin, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Review by Lars Fischer of Joachim Schlör, 'Liesel, it's time for you to leave.' *Von Heilbronn nach England: Die Flucht der Familie Rosenthal vor der nationalsozialistischen Verfolgung* (Heilbronn, 2015), in *Journal of Jewish Studies*, 68/2 (2017), 436–8, at 436.

In the long run it was precisely her unconventional and wide group of friends and contacts – above all with the Jewish Refugees Committee in Woburn House, London, where her future mother-in-law Anna Schwab held an important position – that enabled her to bring her brother and her parents to England, thus saving them from persecution in Nazi Germany.

The conflicts with her parents are the second thing that sets Schlör's book apart from others. At one point he even wonders why Alice kept their letters to her, some of which are so full of criticism and reproach that they make the reader feel uncomfortable even many years later. Schlör notes that there has been increasing interest in conflicts and estrangements in family and friendship circles in migration studies (pp. 42 ff.). These were as much part of the experience of emigration as more personal struggles with loss, identity, and integration. In my own research on emigration from Nazi Germany to South Africa I have come across many newspaper articles addressing problems and conflicts between older and younger generations of emigrants. However, the personal aspect and the emotions coming to the fore in the letters from Alice's parents add yet another layer, and provide a painfully clear illustration of the emotional experience of emigration.

In the later chapters dealing with the time after the Second World War the focus of the book moves away from the network of letters and friends around Liesel Rosenthal/Alice Schwab and her family. The new centre of the narrative is a place: the city of Heilbronn, where both Alice Schwab and Joachim Schlör were born. This book is the translation of an earlier German version that was published in co-operation with the Heilbronn City Archive.<sup>4</sup> Schlör traces the relationship between 'Heilbronn timers' and the city's former citizens who were forcefully expelled by the Nazis and investigates their perceptions of each other. How did the refugees see their former hometown and its inhabitants, and what kind of relationship was the municipality aiming for? The very diverse and deeply moving personal statements dive deep into questions of belonging, *Heimat*/home, and remembrance. Thanks to various dedicated individuals both within the administration and among the city's population, Heilbronn confronted its past earlier

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

than other German cities and managed to establish close contacts with refugees around the globe. For example, Alice's parents, Ludwig and Hermine Rosenthal, corresponded with Heilbronn's mayor from as early as 1950. The municipality's efforts to reach out to emigrants culminated in a series of group visits by former 'Heilbronnians' in the 1980s – certainly not organized with entirely altruistic motives. However, the divisions created by having to leave one's home could never fully be closed, as demonstrated by various ambiguous and deeply moving statements by people who took part in these visits, and by Alice Schwab's reluctance to return to her birthplace. Schlör's insights into this process of gradual, cautious, and never complete rapprochement are highly interesting. These developments do not yet form part of the public culture of remembrance, at least not in Germany – but they should. Schlör documents both the negative aspects of the process (the bureaucracy, uncooperativeness, and unwillingness that left the Rosenthal family without fair restitution or compensation for their property) and the positive sides (the possibility of exchange and gradual rapprochement). This broad understanding of the experience of emigration and its effects on emigrants over a lifetime, on their new homes and their places of origin, is one of the best aspects of the book.

Schlör is also well versed in recent developments in the field of migration studies in general and Jewish refugee studies in particular. He uses some of the newer approaches in his book, such as the 'mechanics of flight and emigration',<sup>5</sup> and the aspect of materiality. In the author's own words, he 'treats emigration and immigration as cultural practice and performance and gives an interdisciplinary view of the transitions and distances inherent in migration processes' (p. 5). For example, he devotes significant sections to Alice's mother's worries about their belongings, which are at first sight typical of a 'Swabian housewife'. Her preoccupation with things that in hindsight appear very mundane, like furniture or bed-linen, may seem superficial. Yet for many refugees, their personal belongings – shipped to their new homes in large containers known as 'lifts' – were of great importance for their identity, which had been questioned by the experience of being forced to leave their home countries. Drawing on Hermine Rosenthal's letters

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 437.

to her daughter, Schlör convincingly shows the strengths of this focus on the material aspects of emigration.

The same holds true for the 'mechanics of emigration'. This term refers to the complicated procedures involved in organizing emigration, both in Germany and in the destination country. Seemingly never-ending trips to embassies, town halls, and, in London, the Jewish Refugees Committee at Woburn House; the booking of tickets; and the compiling of lists for customs were pressing demands that shaped the refugees' experience of emigration. Again, Schlör is in the privileged position of being able to show both sides: the experience of the Rosenthal parents in Germany and Alice's involvement with Woburn House.

However, these two aspects also show that the first part of the book could have benefited from a little more abstraction, linking Alice's personal story and experience to broader developments. This is done in the second half of the book, which allows for more generalizations. It would also have been interesting to follow up the aspect of 'materiality' for the period after the Second World War, especially given Schlör's personal connection with Alice's daughter. What happened to the 'emigrated' items and what meaning do they hold for the family and Alice's descendants today?

To some degree, I also missed longer quotations from the German source material. The footnotes contain a few, giving a better impression of the individual tone of the letters, which is extremely difficult to translate. Readers with a knowledge of German should therefore consider reading the German version. Nevertheless, the uniqueness of the material and quality of writing outweigh this by far, and the English translation gives a wider audience the chance to read a book that is both academically and emotionally compelling.

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