

## Aufbau-Excerpts

In the long history of American immigration—Irish, German, Italian, Polish, Greek, Hungarian, Japanese, Chinese, Latino—one generation has rarely been portrayed in the larger narrative. While there are countless books and articles about the European intellectuals and artists who fled to America in the 1930s and early 1940s, the broader story of the Hitler refugees and the displaced people and concentration camp survivors who arrived after the war is a major chapter in the history of immigration that deserves far more attention. Not all were Jews, even by the Nazis' racial criteria. The largest numbers were Germans and Austrians; others came from virtually every country in Europe. America was not the first place of refuge, nor sometimes was it the last, for many of those fleeing the Nazis who had once thought they'd found safety in Belgium, Luxemburg, Czechoslovakia, Holland, France, or North Africa. Between 1933 and 1945, roughly 130,000 German and Austrian refugees immigrated to the United States—the figures in these categories are a little uncertain, even the definition of “refugee” was unclear—and some 150,000 came from other European countries.

In the eight years after the war (1945–53), while many went to Palestine, 140,000 Holocaust survivors arrived in America, most of them Jews, in addition to the thousands of other displaced people, many of them fleeing communist dictatorship in Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Russia, and Romania. Compared to the millions in prior generations of immigrants, those were small numbers, due to the tight U.S. national origins immigration quotas—quotas that, though low, were rarely filled. Between 1929 and 1965, immigration, as a percentage of the total population, was the lowest in recorded U.S. history. But because of their education, skills, and cultural background, and because of the circumstances that brought them, their impact was far greater than their numbers suggest.

Some émigré names were already famous: scientists, academics, writers, and artists with international reputations who found posts in American universities and other institutions. Most were less well known: small businessmen and craftsmen, many of them, proud professionals in Europe who, if they wanted again to practice their profession, had to start all over, and some never could. For lawyers, certification in America was harder than for physicians, since U.S. law was totally different from German law; medicine, in comparison, was similar. But little was easy. After Pearl Harbor, there were a variety of jobs. In the Depression years before the war, things were worse for immigrants than they were for Americans citizens. Many struggled, and it was not just in finding jobs. But the Hitler refugees were not like the huddled masses of classic American immigration history.

By and large they were an urban middle class: from petit to haut bourgeois, from little shopkeepers and notions salesmen to proprietors of large department stores, from cabaret musicians, clerks, and nurses to corporate lawyers. And for them, the thousands of people who were not celebrities and had few connections, one of the most accessible introductions to their

new world and, subsequently, to Americanization, was the New York-based German-language paper *Aufbau*, which, as Will Schaber, one of its former editors, later said, became “a document of a culture in exile.” Or as Tekla Szymanski, another former *Aufbau* editor, put it, “It was home, helper and support—the speaking tube—for German Jews in America.”<sup>2</sup> For formerly provincial Jews from different parts of the German-speaking world, it also helped forge a common identity.

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In its early years, the editors, like many of their German émigré readers, were troubled by uncertainties about, and conflicts over, identity, which sometimes generated heated arguments: How German, how Jewish? How German, how American? And there were arguments about the future: a possible return to a post-Nazi Germany or a future in Palestine, as against whole-hearted Americanization; between complete assimilation into American culture or retention of a German or Jewish cultural identity, which in turn raised questions about the melting pot and conflicts between Zionists and anti-Zionists. Hannah Arendt later recalled that in the early Hitler years, Zionism seemed to some German Jews to dovetail nicely with the Nazis’ efforts to get rid of them—“dissimilation” as an antidote to “assimilation.” In the spring of 1933, shortly after Hitler became chancellor, the Zionist Berlin editor Robert Weltsch even urged his readers to wear the yellow Jewish star, the Mogen David, “with pride.”

Sometimes there were ex-post facto recriminations from individual writers, as from Bruno Bettelheim and Raul Hilberg: if upper-class Jews hadn’t been so unrealistic about assimilation in Germany, or so ready to get along, maybe they would have been more ready to resist the Nazis and help their fellow Jews before it was too late.<sup>7</sup> But by the late thirties, the paper would unequivocally celebrate American ideals: democracy, religious tolerance, due process, and civil liberties. In a piece in *Aufbau*’s tenth anniversary issue in 1944, editor Manfred George wrote a “letter” to his son who was then serving in the military in Italy outlining his conviction that *Aufbau* and its readers embrace “the freedom of American society and its democratic world view, and the freedom to be what our forefathers were: sons and daughters of the Jewish people.”<sup>8</sup> Americanization therefore was the only reasonable course for the Hitler refugees, and *Aufbau* encouraged Americanization in countless ways, not least by trying whenever possible to highlight the best of the nation. Anyone who wants to cause trouble for himself, in the words of one item on a list of “commandments for new immigrants” in 1936, need only begin a sentence with the words “in our homeland in Germany.”<sup>9</sup> For a time *Aufbau* carried the phrase (in English, no doubt as a counter to American nativists and xenophobes) “Serving the Interests and the Americanization of the Immigrants” at the top of its front page. At the same time, it dedicated itself to “saving the values of our European past from destruction.”

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Aufbau tried to cover everything of interest to its émigré readers, from Wall Street to the Nuremberg laws, from all the aspects of immigration and naturalization regulations to events in Europe and Palestine, much of it in signed analytical essays. It was staffed primarily by émigré journalists, many of them political liberals (in the American meaning of that term) from the Weimar era, but occasionally featuring pieces by other well-known immigrants, among them Albert Einstein, Hannah Arendt, Lion Feuchtwanger, Franz Werfel, Oskar Maria Graf, a socialist, who was Manfred George's brother-in-law, and the Nobel laureate in literature, Thomas Mann, probably the biggest name in European letters of his time.

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Part of the story was the hard work of fitting in while still holding on to something of the past. "Americanize yourself," said an Aufbau ad from Richard Lippmann tailors. "Also your wardrobe."<sup>31</sup> At about the same time, Aufbau ran a piece headed (in English) "Swim American" that urged its readers to learn the crawl—the breaststroke favored by Europeans was slower and harder to learn (and in any case, though the ad didn't say so, embarrassingly European).<sup>32</sup> By the end of the war, a restaurant on the West Side that claimed "First class Viennese and Hungarian cuisine" also advertised a "Special Thanksgiving Turkey Dinner" (in English) for \$1.75. Coffee and sweet shops such as Café Vienna on West 77th Street and the Éclair on 72nd Street, boasting genuine Viennese pastry on New York's West Side, advertised regularly. As one sign of assimilation, Aufbau would later carry recipes, complete with a detailed calorie count, for the Thanksgiving Day turkey dinner: "Truthahnbraten zum Thanksgiving Day."

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In the words of one team of scholars, "the transatlantic vantage point—and the forced nature of their migration—helped European migrants in postwar America to transcend parochial and national perspectives and to regard Europe as a more encompassing social, cultural, and political entity." It may even be possible to suggest that the transatlantic perspective nourished and helped shape the idea of a postwar European union. What European migration certainly did was to leave a deep and lasting impression on American civilization—made it more cosmopolitan and worldly—one so deep and now so integral that it's rarely noticed at all.

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The way not to be a German—either present or former, West or East—and to celebrate your historic Kultur was to be, or have been, a European. Pan-Europe promised to do away with many of the horrors associated with the prewar period: the terror of national borders and the layers of officialdom and documentation associated with them—the passports and visas, the douaniers,

the stops at every frontier post, the inspection of baggage, eventually, maybe, even to end the need to change francs, French, Belgian, Luxembourg, into deutschmarks, or lire into guilder in entering every new country. That the last, as it was finally established—a single currency without the fiscal institutions to manage it—might become a dubiously and possibly dangerous excessive economic indulgence didn't dampen the enthusiasm of the European leaders that led to it. "Europe with its military customs officials and passport scrutinizers," Thomas Mann had written during a brief vacation in Holland in 1939, "seems to us narrow, overcrowded and ill-tempered."

What was certain is that even as they were Americanized and assimilated into American life (with, in the words of one contemporary, "a speed and thoroughness unparalleled in the history of immigration"),<sup>27</sup> the refugees and their children became voices both for a new cosmopolitan outlook in America and Europe and evidence of the terrible damage that xenophobia and provincialism could inflict. Because they were seamlessly part of so many other things—as Americans, as Holocaust survivors, as former Europeans, as mainstays of the Western culture that they helped bring to the New World—there is no way to isolate their impact from all the other things they are part of. But there can hardly be much doubt that, as much as any prior generation of American immigrants, and perhaps more, they enlarged that New World, and often the old as well. For America, as for many other parts of the twenty-first century neonationalist world—the world of ISIS, of Brexit, of Trump, Assad, Putin, Mugabe, Duterte, and the world's other despots—perhaps the most urgent hope is that the sensibilities and outlook that Hitler's refugees brought to the world and the lessons of their time will never be forgotten.