Introduction

Prior to the Nazi era, there were three important centers of Jewish life in Germany: Berlin, in Prussia; Frankfurt am Main; and Breslau, in Silesia. The Jewish communities of Frankfurt and Breslau are approximately equally old. But only the Jewish community of Breslau may claim, based on a gravestone from the year 1203, that one of its forebears, Rabbi David, son of Rabbi Sar Schalom, was the very first inhabitant of the city for whom we have a name. Willy Cohn, the author of this diary, made that startling discovery. Over the centuries, the Jewish community of Breslau was subject to alternating periods of recognition, exile, and toleration. Only under Prussian rule were the Jews of Breslau granted permanent settlement rights, and as a result, the Jewish population grew rapidly during and after the nineteenth century. Membership in the synagogues of Breslau totaled 24,503 in 1930.[1] Naturally, this did not include non-observant Jews who did not belong to a synagogue or people of Jewish origin who had converted to Christianity.

Breslau's synagogues, of which only the Zum weissen Storch Synagogue remains, were central to the life of the community. In his diary, Cohn reports the destruction of the magnificent New Synagogue. But the crown jewel of the Jewish community was perhaps its renowned rabbinical school, the Jewish Theological Seminary.[2] Here was devel-

1. Official information, dated August 26, 1930, sent to Willy Cohn by the administrative director of the Breslau Jewish Community, Dr. Ernst Rechnitz. It is housed in the Breslau Community Archive, now the Żydowski Instytut Historyczny [Jewish Historical Institute], in Warsaw.

2. Guido Kisch (ed.), *Das Breslauer Seminar. Jüdisch-Theologisches Seminar "Fraenckelsche Stiftung" in Breslau* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1963).

oped the concept of a "Science of Judaism," which became the model for later rabbinical schools in Berlin, Budapest, and New York. Thanks to the patronage of education-minded philanthropists, Breslau developed a flourishing culture of Jewish schools, evening schools for adults, hospitals, old-age homes, lodges, societies, museums, and foundations.[3] Among other things, this environment provided fertile ground for a number of Nobel Prize winners. This history has been more than well described by others.[4] Nonetheless, it took only a few short years to eradicate this culture. Willy Cohn's diaries describe with incomparable intensity the destruction of Jewish Breslau between 1933 and 1941.

For many years, Willy Cohn (1888–1941) was known only to historians specializing in the Middle Ages or Silesian Jewry. These were both areas in which he published. It had, in fact, long been his dream to become a historian; however, the times in which he came of age were not favorable. Instead, he became one of the most important chroniclers, not only of the history of the Jews of Silesia, but of Germany as a whole. Cohn never sought this role; it was thrust on him by fate and his own intellectual leanings. Cohn was an *homme de lettres* who had kept a diary most of his life. He did it for himself alone, without any view toward later publication. At the same time, he was a sophisticated researcher and scholar who formed independent judgments about his life, his environment, and world events. Only during the last years of his life, as he increasingly came to understand the implications of the Nazi regime's persecution of the Jews, did he become a conscious witness of the terrible times in which he lived. Future generations must be informed about what happened. And so, Cohn's diary entries became increasingly dense and detailed. In the end, he chronicled the mounting evidence that he and the Jewish community as a whole were in mortal danger. This increasing awareness led him to discussions with acquaintances in Berlin, and with the director of the Cathedral Archive, in Breslau, about how his manuscripts, and especially his many diaries, could be saved from destruction by the Nazis in the horrors that were

3. Mirosława Lenarcik, *A Community in Transition: Jewish Welfare in Breslau-Wrocław* (Opladen and Farmington Hills, MI: Barbara Budrich Publishers, 2010).

4. Abraham Ascher, *A Community under Siege: The Jews of Breslau under Nazism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007).

about to be unleashed. In these plans he succeeded. The rescue of his intellectual legacy may well have been the only consolation that Cohn took with him to his death, in November 1941.

Willy Cohn came from a family of businessmen who moved to Breslau from what was then the Prussian province of Posen. His father, Louis Cohn (1843–1903), worked himself up from modest beginnings, eventually founding a sizable business dealing in textiles and fabric trimmings, in the central business area of Breslau. His mother, Margarete Hainauer, came from a well-known family of music publishers in Breslau. His parents, having become rather well-to-do, visited the World's Fair in Paris in 1889, and in 1902 they constructed a building to house their business, which to this day is impressive for its grandeur and workmanship. They saw themselves as German Jews, and there was little question but that they would name their son, who was born in 1888, the so-called Year of the Three Kaisers, after Kaiser Wilhelm. At Christmastime, they lit both a menorah and a Christmas tree. They were members of the Reform New Synagogue, located in the Schweidnitzer Stadtgraben, and it was here that Willy Cohn celebrated his bar mitzvah, in 1901.

Cohn followed more in the footsteps of his mother when, in 1906, he took up his studies in history. When he sat for his doctoral examination in 1909, in Breslau, he was not yet 21. His dissertation was about the history of the Norman Sicilian fleet.[5] He continued to be interested in Norman and Hohenstaufen history throughout his life, and it was a matter of some pride when he heard colleagues refer to him as "Cohn the Norman." He continued his studies, but ultimately gave up his plans for an academic career when it became clear that, as a Jew, the other historians on the faculty of the University of Breslau rejected him. His attempts to gain a professorship at the Pedagogical Academy of Breslau were also thwarted. Cohn turned to teaching because he had gotten married in 1913 and needed a steady income. When the war broke out, in 1914, Cohn was drafted and sent to the front. He learned about the birth of his first son, Wolfgang (Louis), in 1915, while in France. His second son, Ernst (Abraham), was born during the politically turbulent

5. Willy Cohn, *Die Geschichte der normannisch-sicilischen Flotte unter der Regierung Rogers I. und Rogers II. (1060–1154)* (Breslau: M. & H. Marcus, 1910).

year 1919. Cohn was awarded the Iron Cross for his bravery in the field. Never could he have imagined that his services to Germany would one day count for nothing.

Nonetheless, it was sobering to realize that, even during the war, Jewish devotion to duty was valued less than that of other Germans. This increasingly caused him to doubt the wisdom of Jewish assimilation. He began to move away from the Reform Judaism of his parents, turning instead to "positive Judaism," which confirmed him in his Jewish faith. Cohn came to see Zionism and the construction of a Jewish Palestine as the wave of the future. Politically, he became a Social Democrat, joined the party, took part in their associations, and wrote several socialist books for young people. Cohn taught at the Breslau Free Evening School for Adults from its inception, in 1919, to its closure, and he was an engaged member of the Lessing Lodge and other Jewish lodges in Breslau. In 1924 the Lessing Lodge elected him president for a year.

The Johannesgymnasium, in Breslau, remained the center of his teaching activities. What set the school apart from other gymnasiums in Breslau was that it was completely integrated. The faculty was split more or less evenly among Protestants, Catholics, and Jews, and the same held true for the student body. Cohn taught history, German literature, and geography from 1919 to his firing in 1933. By all accounts he was a good and very well-liked teacher. The historian Walter Laqueur was one of his students. Political problems or anti-Semitism had for years been virtually unknown. Christian religious teachers taught alongside rabbis. Cohn continued his scholarly work throughout his career as a teacher. He attended historical conferences and carried on correspondence with other scholars in his fields of interest. A stipend in 1927 allowed him to pursue studies in Sicily, which vastly increased his contacts. When his book about the Hohenstaufens appeared in 1923, in an Italian translation, the Società di Storia Patria per la Sicilia Orientale, in Catania, elected him a member.[6] In early 1933 Cohn's reputation and output were at their height. By this time, he was 44 years old, had married a second time, had two sons from his first marriage and two daughters from

6. Willy Cohn, *L'età degli Hohenstaufen in Sicilia*, translation by Guido Libertini (Catania, 1932).

his second. And he continued to be full of plans for future scholarly work. That came to an end, on January 30, 1933, with Hitler's seizure of power, which cast a dark shadow on everything he had built up.

Nazism not only made anti-Semitism socially acceptable in Germany, it was integral to the movement's program. The Jewish community of Breslau responded to this challenge with a renewed sense of purpose. The synagogues and other community institutions became even more central to Jewish religious, cultural, and economic life. Jewish schools experienced a short-lived renewal, gathering together Jewish students who had been forced out of other schools. The Jewish Museum was reopened with a gala event, and Cohn was a member of the museum board. Jewish journals and newspapers, lodges, and the cultural sphere in general seemed, briefly, to flourish. Cohn, who had been forced into retirement in 1933, was even able to eke out a living for a time on the modest honorariums paid to him on his lecture tours through Silesia and elsewhere in Germany. The crash, however, was rapid. When Cohn was fired from his teaching position, the official reason given was "political unreliability"; not only was he a Jew, he was also an active Social Democrat. As a result of this stigma, not even the Jewish Community, the administrative body of the community as a whole, was willing to put him on the payroll. They were unwilling to risk accusations of harboring the politically suspect. It was not long before Jewish businessmen were forced to sell the fruits of their labors to "Aryans" and the harassment of all Jewish professionals began in earnest. Understandably, Jews throughout Germany sought to emigrate, with almost any country deemed suitable as long as it accepted Jews.

These excerpted diaries leave out much of the daily life of the Cohns, his family, and their relatives in Breslau and Berlin chronicled in his diaries as a whole, although the texture of the diaries is largely intact. We see Cohn's increasing efforts at emigration. Although he initially believed that he could stay in Germany, he made sure that his children got out as soon as they were able. His eldest son fled to Paris immediately after taking his school-leaving examination (Abitur). Ernst and Ruth came to share their father's Zionist dreams, and in March 1935 16-year-old Ernst joined a youth group leaving for Palestine. From there he did all he could to bring his parents over. In 1939 Cohn's second wife, Gertrud (Trudi), enabled her 14-year-old daughter Ruth to go

to Denmark on a Youth Aliyah. Even though Denmark was occupied by Germany in April 1940, Ruth nonetheless made her way, hazardous as it was, via Moscow and Istanbul to Palestine.

And in 1937 Cohn and his wife made an exploratory trip to Palestine, where they spent some weeks with Ernst. This "peaceful interlude" in Germany saw a large number of German Jews visiting Mandate Palestine, to explore the possibilities of emigration. To Cohn's amazement, he often ran into old acquaintances from Breslau. And although Cohn would gladly have stayed in Palestine, the couple had two daughters waiting for them back in Breslau. But more than that, Trudi, always more practical and down-to-earth than her idealistic husband, expressed deep misgivings about the regimentation and discomforts of kibbutz life. And it slowly began to dawn on Cohn himself that an aging intellectual of his cut might have a hard time providing for his family in a frontier society. His diary entries from this trip, which are included unabridged, movingly depict his deep attachment to the Promised Land, and the growing realization that his intended emigration was not to be. It was the shattering of his hopes and dreams. Upon his return to Breslau, Cohn plunged into his work, beginning new book projects and plans—all in an effort to numb himself. A sense of resignation becomes evident in his writings.

The *geserah* of November 9, 1938, what we now refer to as Kristallnacht, cleared away any illusions he might have harbored. The New Synagogue was in flames; most synagogues and Jewish institutions, both sacred and profane, were demolished, and many that were not were confiscated. Relatives and friends were dragged off to the concentration camp at Buchenwald, including his own brother and brother-in-law, along with more than two thousand Breslau Jews. Cohn himself avoided arrest, but as he noted, "In my opinion, these days are among the blackest not only in Jewish, but also in German history, and I believe that many Germans are ashamed of what is happening."

Cohn's sense of sitting in a "mouse trap" increased after the pogroms of November 1938, and the outbreak of war, in 1939, as did his realization that he had been too slow to act to get himself and his family out of Germany. One after another, Jewish institutions were confiscated or banned on the flimsiest of pretexts. With Jewish newspapers shuttered, conversations after services at the synagogue became the most impor-

tant source of information. In some cases, Cohn was extremely well informed about the fate of Polish and other Jews. Despairing, he asked why civilized humanity did not intervene even as Jews in the Warsaw ghetto were dying like flies.

Cohn was able to derive some emotional relief (not to mention needed income) from a scholarly commission that Chief Rabbi Leo Baeck, in Berlin, was able to steer his way, writing articles for *Germania Judaica*, an encyclopedic reference work chronicling Jewish life in Germany up to 1349, the time of the Black Death.[7] This work led to several meetings between Baeck and Cohn in Breslau. But in order to do this work, Cohn would have needed access to the libraries of Breslau, from which Jews were banned by decree, on January 15, 1939. Only the archive and library of the Catholic diocese continued to allow him to work freely. In fact, from May 1939 to his deportation in November 1941, he was an honored guest in that library. This was virtually the only place where he could meet with like-minded scholars, exchange information, and derive some consolation. Among other things, the personnel there had much more detailed information about the crimes committed against Jews in Poland. This is where Cohn learned that some twelve thousand Jews had been shot in Lemberg (now Lviv, in western Ukraine), an unfathomable and extremely ominous piece of news.

In this hopeless situation, Cohn took out his older diaries and began to write his memoirs, something that he had long planned to do. In October 1940 he noted, "It will be a thick book that will bear witness to what German Jewry once was." He finished this project barely a year later. The memoir, published in German under the title *Verwehte Spuren* [Faded Traces], in 1995, runs to 776 pages—thick indeed.[8] Just how this manuscript was salvaged amply demonstrates Willy Cohn's sense of desperation in 1941, and how important it was to him that his testimony be available to future generations. At the time, he kept work on this book, of which he prepared several carbon copies, completely secret. One of these

7. Norbert Conrads, "Die verlorene Germania Judaica. Ein Handbuch- und Autorenschicksal im Dritten Reich," in *Berichte und Forschungen. Jahrbuch des Bundesinstituts für Kultur und Geschichte der Deutschen im östlichen Europa*, vol. 15 (2007), pp. 215–254.

8. Willy Cohn, *Verwehte Spuren. Erinnerungen an das Breslauer Judentum vor seinem Untergang*, ed. Norbert Conrads (Cologne: Böhlau, 1995).

he kept. He gave another copy to the director of the Diocese Archive, in Breslau, and he deposited a third copy in the General Archive of the Jews in Germany, in Berlin. It is not known whether there were other hiding places, but these three manuscripts survived. Willy Cohn, probably the most important witness to the destruction of the Breslau Jewish community, became more widely known only with their publication in 1995.

The deportations of the Breslau Jews were accomplished in accordance with regular bureaucratic protocol. The deportees were informed by mail when they were to vacate their dwellings. Everyone knew that this meant "relocation." Cohn received his notice on November 15, 1941. A year earlier, his family had already prepared an emergency suitcase for this eventuality. Cohn used the time remaining to save his most important manuscripts. He packed up all of his diaries and other writings and sent them to an address in Berlin. On November 21, earlier than expected, Cohn and his family, and about a thousand other Breslau Jews, were rousted out of bed and brought to a prepared assembly place, where they were forced to remain for four days. That is how long it took the Gestapo to record and catalog the assets of the deportees. Everything that remained behind was declared the property of the German Reich. On November 25 these thousand people were led to the nearby Odertor railway station, where a train was waiting to take them to an unknown destination. That destination was Kovno (Kaunas), in Lithuania. We now know much about the terrible events that occurred here and elsewhere. More than 67,000 human beings were murdered in Kovno. At the same time as the train from Breslau arrived in Kovno, another train, again carrying exactly a thousand Jews, from Vienna, arrived as well. Shortly after their arrival, they were taken to a pre-dug pit at Fort Nine, in Kovno, where, on November 29, 1941, they were mowed down by machine gun fire. SS-Standartenführer Karl Jäger oversaw this "action." His written report gave the precise body count: 693 men, 1,155 women, and 152 children, all "resettlers." Willy Cohn, his wife Gertrud, and their daughters Susanne and Tamara were among the victims. Tamara Cohn was barely 3 years old. It comes as a shock to realize that only twelve days elapsed between his last surviving diary entry, on November 17, and the family's grisly murder, on November 29. It is our good fortune that he acted as quickly as he did.

*

This introduction would be incomplete without some comments about the author's personality and attitudes, and about the manuscript itself. Willy Cohn's diaries are frequently compared to those of his contemporary, Victor Klemperer.[9] Perhaps the greatest difference between the two is in their attitude toward religion. As a young man, Klemperer left Judaism and became an agnostic. Nor did he return to Judaism during the persecutions. Cohn, by contrast, was a faithful and devout Jew for whom regular prayer was a necessity. This is clearly reflected in his diaries, in which the name of God is never spelled out, and which is full of Hebrew words and phrases, sometimes in Hebrew script. He found his religious home in the small Abraham Mugdan Synagogue close to his apartment. He valued its intimacy and the sermons of Rabbi Louis Lewin. Cohn sought to understand the Torah through his own experience. He took Hebrew lessons and began to "study," that is, engage with the text in theological exegesis. He admired the piety and textual knowledge of the eastern Jews, even as he shared with other German Jews certain widely held prejudices against his eastern coreligionists.

Cohn's political judgments are occasionally so self-contradictory that they confound the reader. What must be borne in mind is that Cohn so loved German culture that he was unwilling to relinquish his sense of patriotism and belonging merely because Germany happened to have an anti-Semitic government at the moment. This was the country for which he had risked his life in World War I, and which had awarded him the Iron Cross. Like many Germans, he considered the provisions of the Versailles Treaty to be unjust, and so he agreed with some of the revisionist goals of Hitler's foreign policy. He also applauded the "annexation" of Austria and the end of Czechoslovakia. The latter, he noted, merely reestablished a reality that had existed for centuries. He was also sympathetic to Nazi propaganda about "living space" because as a Zionist he advocated the same for the Jews in Palestine. Even more problematic, however, was when he tried to understand the arguments Hitler used in his incitement speeches. Cohn still viewed Hitler as a

9. Victor Klemperer, *I Will Bear Witness: A Diary of the Nazi Years, 1933–1941*, translated from the German by Martin Chalmers (New York: Random House, 1998).

"head of state" who represented his Fatherland. In 1939, when the Wehrmacht quickly quashed all resistance on the way to victory over Poland, Cohn actually praised Hitler's military success: "We must recognize the greatness of this man, who has given the world a new look." It is difficult to understand such a statement coming from a man who, not a year earlier, had lived through the organized destruction of November 9, 1938. It would have been impermissible to suppress such statements, because they are part and parcel of Cohn's contradictory personality. We can see more from today's perspective than could an observer in 1939, trying to make sense of the welter of confusing and contradictory social and psychological impulses and filtered news reports. Cohn had no idea where events were leading, nor could he have known what happened at Auschwitz. In some sense, Cohn's inner conflict between his sense of injustice and his political sympathies is representative of a certain Jewish mindset of the times, and defines the dilemma facing many of his contemporaries.

Anyone who reads this history as Cohn set it to paper will understand that such statements taken out of context are not what is essential in this book. His subject matter is the fate of the Jews of Breslau, and of their important and rich cultural and intellectual community. No document describes as comprehensively and feelingly the progressive disenfranchisement and despair of the Jewish community in his home city as do these diaries. Within a brief few years that community went from merely being "different" to stigmatization to total elimination. The author and his family shared that fate. Cohn must have recognized that something fundamental was changing when, in 1933, he wrote, "Nowhere in Germany is there justice any longer! Nowhere." The title of the German edition of this book is taken from that quote.

The discovery of Willy Cohn as a chronicler of the Breslau Jewish community began in 1975, when Joseph Walk, in Jerusalem, published excerpts of the diary from the year 1941.[10] A few years later, I got in touch with Walk, and it was through him that I met Cohn's surviving

10. Joseph Walk (ed.), *Als Jude in Breslau, 1941. Aus den Tagebüchern von Studienrat a.D. Dr. Willy Israel Cohn* (Jerusalem: Bar-Ilan University Institute for Research of Diaspora Jewry/Verband ehemaliger Breslauer und Schlesier in Israel, 1975).

children. It took time to gain their confidence, and I only gradually learned about the scope of the manuscripts that had been rescued, his memoirs and his many diaries.[11] In the end we spent very fruitful years collaborating to bring their father's writings to the attention of the public. Just in terms of sheer size, the 1,048 tightly typed pages of his memoir was astonishing. Only after its publication, in 1995, was I shown the entire diaries—all 112 "books" comprising approximately 10,000 pages. For my purposes, I elected to work with the 59 "books" (4,600 pages) covering the years 1933 to 1941. Chronologically, they proceed from the memoir, which stopped in 1933.

The volume of material was so enormous that the loss of a few "books," as Cohn called his diaries, hardly made a difference. The biggest problem was to extract what was essential. I attempted to retain unabridged what is of historical significance in the text, present both politically important and awkward or embarrassing material, but to leave out what I deemed inessential or of a wholly private nature. The large two-volume edition, available only in German, indicates clearly where abridgments were made. The first edition, with its lengthy introduction and personal and place indexes, was very well received.[12] Among other things, the diaries were the subject of a documentary on German television.[13] It also raised the need for a shorter volume, one that would condense the diaries by another two-thirds. Initially, I was less than enthusiastic about shortening the text even more drastically. In any such undertaking, it is unavoidable that certain information, and even persons, must fall by the wayside. I have added chapter headings for the convenience of the reader. These are obviously of an editorial nature and were not in the original because no diarist can know what the next day will bring. They are simply meant as a guide. Legibility has been improved by removing the brackets and ellipses that indicated

11. All of these manuscripts are housed under Signature P 88 in the Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People, in Jerusalem. Recently, Cohn's intellectual legacy has been available on-line. See http://sites.huji.ac.il/cahjp/RP088%20Cohn.pdf.

12. Willy Cohn, *Kein Recht, nirgends. Tagebuch vom Untergang des Breslauer Judentums 1933–1941*, ed. Norbert Conrads, 2 vols. (Cologne: Böhlau, 2006).

13. The documentary, by Petra Lidschreiber, *Ein Jude, der Deutschland liebte*, was awarded the Bavarian Television Prize in 2009.

abridgments. My primary goal was to concentrate on events within the city of Breslau itself, which largely eliminated Cohn's experiences and observations on his travels. The main exception is his important trip to Palestine, in 1937, which is presented in its totality. But these are mainly "Breslau diaries" as the title indicates. This shortened version again brought Willy Cohn to public attention. Two editions have appeared in Germany, another in the Polish language.[14]

This English-language edition is based on the shortened version of the diaries. It fulfills one of the last wishes of Cohn's son Louis, who died in 2009. Because the relatives of the family have made their lives in all corners of the world, and the younger members of the family do not generally speak German, they may now get to know their grandfather or great-grandfather through this edition of his diaries.

I have many people to thank for this opportunity. First, I wish to thank the historian Abraham Ascher, who put me in touch with Norris Pope, at Stanford University Press. I thank Norris Pope for publishing this book in the respected Stanford Studies in Jewish History and Culture. Gad Freudenthal, in Paris, was good enough to check and improve the Hebrew glossary. My work with my translator, Kenneth Kronenberg, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, proved fortuitous. Whenever there was a lack of clarity in the text, his perceptive questions often led to improvements.

Finally, it should be noted that publication of this edition of the diaries coincides with the seventieth anniversary of the death of their author and his family. In this sense, the book serves as a memorial.

NORBERT CONRADS
STUTTGART, NOVEMBER 29, 2011

14. Willy Cohn, *Żadnego prawa—nigdzie. Dziennik z Breslau 1933–1941*, selected and edited by Norbert Conrads, translated from the German by Viktor Grotowicz (Wrocław: Via Nova, 2010).