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BACKGROUND TO THE SITUATION OF JEWS IN THE NETHERLANDS UNDER NAZI OCCUPATION AND OF THE FAMILY OF OTTO FRANK

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Understanding the situation of Jews in the Netherlands under Nazi occupation, like understanding any aspect of the Holocaust, requires suspension of hindsight. No one could know in 1933, 1938, or even early 1941 that the Nazi regime would soon embark upon a systematic program aimed at killing each and every Jewish man, woman, and child within its reach. The statement is true of top German officials no less than it is of the Jewish and non-Jewish civilian populations of the twenty countries within the Nazi orbit and of the governments and peoples of the Allied and neutral countries. Although it is tempting to look back upon the history of Nazi anti-Jewish utterances and measures and to detect in them an ostensible inner logic leading inexorably to mass murder, the consensus among historians today is that when the Nazi regime came to power in January 1933 it had no clear idea how the so-called Jewish problem might best be solved. It knew only that, from its perspective, Jews presented a problem that would need to be solved sooner or later, but finding a long-term solution was initially not one of the regime's most immediate priorities. Between 1933-41 various Nazi agencies proposed different schemes for dealing with Jews. At first those schemes concentrated upon removing Jews from positions of influence in public life, isolating them socially, and stripping them of their assets and ability to earn a livelihood. Until 1941, most Nazi leaders appear to have hoped that measures of this sort would induce masses of Jews to leave the territories under German control. It is possible that had such mass emigration proved feasible, Nazi leaders would not have decided upon a campaign to kill all Jews in all areas of Europe. It was not until mid-1941 at the earliest that hopes for mass emigration were scrapped and concrete plans laid for total murder. Actual indiscriminate mass killings of Jews began only in early fall 1941, and not until the end of that year did they extend beyond the territories of the Soviet Union. Killing operations were extended to western Europe only in March 1942 and did not proceed in earnest until the following summer.

That the Nazis eventually despaired of the possibility of mass Jewish emigration did not result from a lack of Jewish desire to leave. On the contrary, out of approximately 525,000 Jews living in Germany at the time of the Nazi accession to power, over 300,000 had departed before the invasion of Poland in September 1939. In Austria, which was annexed to Germany in March 1938, the pace of emigration was even greater _ 140,000 out of 200,000 Jews left the country during the next eighteen months. The problem was that as

Germany expanded territorially (adding the Czech lands and Poland in 1939, Denmark, Norway, the Benelux countries, and France in 1940), the number of Jews seeking refuge abroad grew beyond what potential receiving countries believed to be their absorptive capacity. The German occupied areas of Poland alone were home to over two million Jews. The prospect of a refugee flow of such proportions thus prompted most countries to tighten their immigration controls, hoping thereby to deflect the flow elsewhere. Moreover, many refugees from Germany and Austria had fled to European countries that Germany conquered following the outbreak of war. As a result, those countries were abruptly removed as possible destinations. According to the best available estimates, for example, the Netherlands took in close to 34,000 Jews from Germany between 1933-40, or more than 11 percent of the total number of Jews who left Germany during that interval. Over 7,000 more Jews from other Nazi-dominated countries fled there after 1938. Once Germany occupied the Netherlands in May 1940, however, Holland was eliminated as a potential place of refuge. Finally, once war began, the countries fighting the Third Reich, citing security considerations, proved by and large unwilling to accept migrants from enemy-controlled territory. In sum, by 1941 increasingly greater numbers of Jews were facing increasingly smaller emigration possibilities. The mounting disparity between the quantity of Jews to be extruded and the possibilities for extruding them no doubt played a key role in German decisions of August and October 1941 to ban any further Jewish emigration from the territories of the Third Reich. Those decisions signaled the Reich's intention to begin its murder campaign.

Nevertheless, more than half a million Jews left German-controlled territories before the onset of systematic mass killing. The overwhelming majority of them, however, cannot be said to have done so because they anticipated that they and their families would be targeted for death along with all other Jews if they remained under Nazi rule. On the contrary, they could not reasonably have anticipated such a fate, because the Germans themselves did not contemplate it before mid-1941, and once the Germans did so, they did not make Jews privy to their plans. The Jews who left took that action by and large because, after weighing the expected costs and benefits to themselves and their families of staying and leaving, they decided that, in their particular personal situations, emigration made more sense than trying to wait out the Nazi storm. The calculation was not a trivial one. Emigration bore a significant price: emigrants could not expect to be able to transfer their assets abroad; possibilities of making a living in a new location were circumscribed (especially in a world economy still feeling the effects of the Great Depression); family, friends, and home would be left behind; it would be necessary to learn a new language, become familiar with a new environment, and rebuild social networks from the ground up. On the other hand, before the actual onset of mass killing, those who had not run afoul of the regime because of their political activity or other unsuitable public behavior had little evident reason to fear for their lives. They could be certain that they would suffer hardship, but whether such hardship would be less bearable than those associated with emigration depended upon individual circumstances.

All of these considerations are evident in the behavior of the Frank family before it went into hiding in July 1942. German Jews _ Otto Frank was from Frankfurt, where his two children, Margot and Anne, were born; his wife Edith, née Holländer, came from Aachen, near the Belgian border _ the Frank family was among the first to flee Germany following the Nazi takeover; Otto left for Amsterdam in August 1933, with Edith and the

children joining him in December. Several factors appear to have influenced both the decision to leave and the choice of destination. The family business, a small private bank, had suffered serious losses following the 1929 stock market crash and had never recovered; by late 1932 the family was unable to pay its rent. Around the same time a business opportunity presented itself in Holland, thanks to Otto's brother-in-law, a director of a company that distributed pectin (a thickening agent used mainly in the production of jams and jellies), who helped him establish a pectin supply firm in Amsterdam. Otto had worked briefly in the Netherlands before and was familiar with the Dutch language. His children were young (Margot was seven years old, Anne four) and not yet closely attached to their surroundings. As a result, the costs of emigration were relatively low compared to the potential benefits. Little provocation was thus needed to induce him to move. According to a postwar testimony, the provocation came when, in accordance with one of the Nazi regime's first anti-Jewish decrees, Margot was forced to sit apart from her first-grade classmates. Nevertheless, it appears that emigration was a step that Otto Frank might well have considered even without this decisive push.

In contrast, seven years later, following the Nazi conquest of the Netherlands, the cost-benefit analysis evidently led to a different operative conclusion. Otto was doing well in the pectin business; his family was living comfortably; and his children had put down roots in their new home. In these respects his experience was rather more favorable than that of most German Jewish refugees in the Netherlands, who often felt alienated from Dutch Jewry even as they depended upon Dutch Jewish organizations for political and material support. Nevertheless, perhaps because of fears for Holland's political future following Germany's remilitarization of the Rheinland in 1936, he appears, beginning in 1937, to have investigated business opportunities in Great Britain and elsewhere. Nothing came of his efforts in this direction, however, so that it was not nearly as easy for him to leave the Netherlands as it had been to leave Germany in 1933 (although by his own account he did file an application to immigrate to the United States in 1938). Moreover, during the first nine months following the Nazi occupation little happened to suggest that Jews in Holland would be subjected to more than minor discrimination. On the contrary, the situation of Dutch Jews (including refugees) appeared far more favorable than that of Jews in other Nazi-occupied countries. There were no immediate bursts of terror and physical violence like the ones that had accompanied the Nazi takeovers in Austria, the Czech lands, and Poland; instead, Jews were pretty much able to go about their business as before. When Otto Frank began to investigate possibilities for emigration to the United States in April 1941, the German administration in the Netherlands had yet to strip Jews of their citizenship, prohibit sexual relations between Jews and non-Jews, restrict the practices of Jewish physicians and lawyers, segregate Jewish schoolchildren, expropriate Jewish property, or mark Jewish passports _ all measures that had long been in effect in Germany proper. In October 1940 an ordinance had been enacted requiring registration of businesses having Jewish owners or directors, but Otto Frank believed that he had found a way to circumvent any possibility that his business would fall into German hands. Measures forbidding Jews to employ non-Jewish domestic servants or to attend cinemas, enacted in January 1941, did not affect the Frank family's daily life in any material way. Raids on Amsterdam's Jewish quarter, initiated in February 1941, were quickly suspended in the wake of vigorous protests from Dutch organized labor; and in any event the Franks did not live in the Jewish quarter and were under no pressure to move there. In other words, in Otto

Frank's case neither the push nor the pull factors were as strong in 1940-41 as they had been in 1933. Hence he preferred what seemed to him like the nuisances that encumbered an otherwise comfortable life under Nazi occupation in the Netherlands to the insecurity of life as a double refugee in a new country, even if a new country could be found.

What appears ultimately to have tipped the balance in his case and led him to search actively for a new country was not any change in his assessment of the overall prospects for Jews in the Netherlands but his personal subjection to blackmail by a member of the Dutch National Socialist Movement (NSB), one of two Dutch pro-Nazi political parties. Significantly, the pretext for blackmail did not stem primarily from Otto Frank's Jewishness; it lay rather in a casual remark that Otto had carelessly made to the husband of one of his employees, who turned out to be a Nazi sympathizer: in March 1941 he had expressed doubt in an immediate German victory. The husband had decided to inform the Gestapo of Otto's politically suspect tendencies; the blackmailer, who served the Gestapo as a courier, had intercepted the denunciation letter and decided to turn it to his personal advantage. On 18 April 1941 he made his first demand for payment; on 30 April Otto wrote to Nathan Straus, Jr., asking for assistance in meeting one of the conditions for obtaining a visa to the United States. (The blackmailer was most likely the one who later discovered the Franks' hiding place and betrayed its location to the German authorities.)

There is thus little point in asking why Otto Frank did not wake up to the mortal danger facing his family sooner than he did; neither he nor anyone else could reasonably have predicted what would befall Jews in the Netherlands beginning in 1942. His actions become intelligible only when viewed within the context of his individual experience, without benefit of hindsight.

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