

Issue 28 (2021)

Book Review

***Hitler's Jewish Refugees: Hope and Anxiety in Portugal,***  
**by Marion Kaplan, Yale University Press, 2020. 376 pp. \$45.**

Matthieu Martin

University of Waterloo

How to Cite: Martin, Matthieu. "Book Review: *Hitler's Jewish Refugees: Hope and Anxiety in Portugal*". *focus on German Studies*, no. 28, 2021, pp. 231-238. DOI: 10.34314/FOGS2021.00018.

***Hitler's Jewish Refugees: Hope and Anxiety in Portugal,***

**by Marion Kaplan, Yale University Press, 2020. 376 pp. \$45.**

Matthieu Martin

Marion Kaplan's latest scholarly project began with an unopened ensemble of 207 letters and 76 postcards at the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York. Sent to Jewish refugees in Lisbon during the Second World War, they portrayed stories and emotional dialogues of refugees fleeing Nazi persecution. Situating her work within the broader scholarly framework, Kaplan notes that little Holocaust historical work to date has focused on the emotional affect that fleeing and the desperate attempts to survive had on refugees. To contribute to this somewhat unattended area of research, Kaplan focuses attention on the intersection of geography and emotions in the context of Jewish refugees' flight into and through Portugal. Composing an "emotional history of fleeing" this book is one of contrast: both the hope and anxiety experienced by refugees, generosity despite poverty among the Portuguese people, and the numerous Catch-22's of refugee policy within and outside of Portugal (2). Even successful escapes were not without contradictions as many felt relief at escaping yet guilty to be so fortunate while the family and friends left behind perished. Kaplan also notes that "escape was not free of sorrow" (195) and quotes Viennese Jewish author Arthur Schnitzler, saying, "a departure always hurts, even when one has long looked forward to it" (211).

Both the chronology and geography of several refugees' journeys guide the book's structure. Early chapters describe the obstacles refugees heading to Portugal faced in the early years of fleeing around 1933-1939 and then after the fall of France in 1940. Border crossings were one of several sites of anxiety, effectively involving two inspections. The border into Spain, for example, required passing first the French side of the border and then making it past the officials on the Spanish side. Some refugees were forced to cross into Spain illegally in a backcountry trek over the Pyrenees. Chapter 3 then details the work done by various organizations helping refugees, the presence of Nazi Gestapo in Portugal, and the experience of a different kind of dictatorship under Salazar. In the fourth chapter, Kaplan provides more detail on one of the book's contrasts, namely, the differing dominant emotions between adults and children; fear and anxiety to get all of the necessary red tape aligned among the former versus the latter's hope for what would lie ahead. Chapter 5 hones in on the nerve-wracking sites that were the embassies, consulates, and prisons. Moving on to written correspondence Chapter six places particular emphasis on the desperate attempt for parents to maintain relationships with their already emigrated children through epistolary spaces. Finally, Kaplan closes with "Final Hurdles," expanding on the trials of getting onto one of few boats leaving Portugal, the experience of a crowded ship, and the mixed feelings of leaving.

Several recurring themes shine through throughout the book. Emotion, of course,

acts as der rote Faden —the red thread— woven throughout. For example, Kaplan highlights early on that feelings are important as they have the potential to influence our decisions. As well, as human beings we are connected to the places we visit and inhabit. From that point of departure Kaplan’s claim that “emotions were intertwined inextricably with spaces” seems logical (5). Many German Jewish and non-Jewish refugees wrestled with the yearning for Heimat —the German feeling of home— even as it seemed their country betrayed them in many ways. And while refugees felt “the emotional trinity of anxiety, fear, and hope” spaces such as cafés provided emotional stability (159). Kaplan also writes on some of the intriguing gendered aspects of the refugee experience in Portugal. Gendered café cultures between Portugal and central- and eastern Europe clashed, men and women coped with the loss of social status differently, and a female body at borders could evoke empathy or danger. A highly significant part of fleeing present at every stage of the journey was the astounding bureaucracy. Refugees felt dehumanized by the obstacles imposed by seemingly endless paperwork, feeling as though passports and applications were more important than their individual selves. In contrast with the humanity of Portuguese citizens, the changing and contradictory policies and additional paperwork once refugees reached Portugal represented “one more link to the chain of dehumanization they endured” (2). Furthermore, each bureaucratic hurdle was accompanied by some form of state official who had a great deal of power in deciding the fate of those seeking refuge. Embassy

ambassadors, consulate officials, border guards, social workers, and political leaders kept the gates of refugees' passage to safety. While some broke the law to allow those in need to escape, others turned many away to face forced labor or death. Unfortunately, the experience of refugees facing dehumanizing bureaucracy and anti-immigration prejudice in the 1930s and 1940s parallels the experiences of many refugees escaping war and terror today.

To begin each chapter, Kaplan has inserted epigraphs, quoting the words of today's refugees. The words contained in each epigraph correspond with bewildering accuracy to the picture painted of refugees before and during and even after WWII. The striking relevance of this work to current and more recent times suggests we have not progressed as far we might be led to believe. Wading through "oceans of red tape" to escape Nazi persecution was a significant consequence of the Nazi regime, yet we find ourselves in an era of similarly resistant borders amid rising right-wing populism and anti-immigration. Why haven't we learned from this crucial aspect of the Holocaust? I would argue that part of the solution lies in changing our language surrounding refugees. Kaplan writes according to the current paradigm, which characterizes the flight of the persecuted and endangered as a "refugee crisis". This so-called "refugee crisis" is also often embedded in the natural disaster metaphor, whereby a "flood of refugees" ensues (10). But as Allison Phipps reframed it in a CAUTG presentation in Regina in 2018, it is in fact a crisis of hospitality. Change in how we

perceive refugees and respond to their pleas for help may begin by changing the discourse, reframing the issue to more accurately point to where the problem truly lies.

Finally, I would like to point out one minor detail which could do with clarification in the final chapter. Kaplan writes, “many refugees remembered the ships that made the most trips, such as the Nea Hellas, Nyassa, Guine, and Serpa Pinto, all Portuguese” (222). But on page 218 the Nea Hellas is described as a Greek vessel, on which refugees could no longer hope to board once Germany invaded Greece in April of 1941. Clarifying this incongruity would better explain the cause of an individual’s emotional associations with the vessel. For instance, did Carla Pekelis believe that the Nea Hellas “oozed a gloomy exhaustion” because of her experience on the boat or because her hope of boarding it to begin with was lost along with Greece’s autonomy (222)?

The emotional history Marion Kaplan has written between the covers of this book represents a scholarly *œuvre d’art* that humanizes the numbers, reminding us that behind refugee statistics are people with stories and emotions. Her brilliant work enhances our understanding of the extent of the Holocaust’s influence and holds a mirror up to our present selves to incite reflection and change on how refugees are treated today. Upon reading Hitler’s *Jewish Refugees: Hope and Anxiety in Portugal* I felt inspired to replicate, in my own life, the incredible display of humanity demonstrated by aid organizations and the Portuguese people of the mid-20th century. I also better understand the urgent need to

critically resist the anti-immigration sentiments, xenophobia, anti-Semitism and prejudices at times both causing flight and preventing refuge among those fleeing unrest today.

### Works Cited

Kaplan, Marion. Hitler's Jewish Refugees: Hope and Anxiety in Portugal. Yale University Press, 2020.