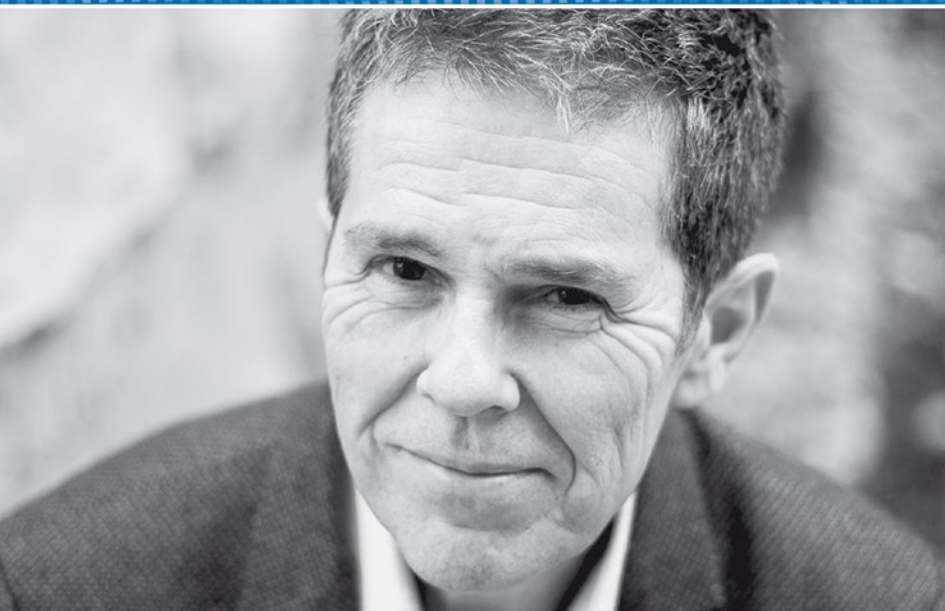


Mark Roseman

ÜberLeben im Dritten Reich

Handlungsräume und Perspektiven
von Juden und ihren Helfern



Jena Center

Geschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts
20th Century History

Wallstein

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The Barbarians from Our »Kulturkreis«

German Jewish Perceptions of Nazi Perpetrators

Anyone who reads Jean Améry's essay on torture will be unable to forget the dispassionate precision with which Améry conveys his tormentor's »fleischige[s], sanguinische[s] Gesicht«, his »bärbeißig-gutmütig« temperament and above all the genial statement »jetzt passiert's«, with which this figure signaled, »rasselnd und gemütlich«, that the assault on Améry's body was about to begin.¹ Améry renders this man as a real human being, one for whom inflicting pain on another's body was both a routine and compelling task, and it is the juxtaposition of routine normality and horrible intensity that is so gripping and authentic. Few survivors could hope to possess Améry's quality as an observer or his literary skills but his account still invites us to reflect more generally on the victims' view of the perpetrators.²

More particularly, as an assimilated Viennese Jew (only after the war did Améry trade in Hanns for Jean and Mayer for the French-sounding anagram Améry), his knowledge of the culture and language of his antagonists was crucial to his ability to recognize social cues and types. Were German and Austrian Jews able to »capture« their captors in a way non-German Jews could not? Were they privileged observers in the unenviable sense that by dint of their proximity and background they possessed special insights into their tormentors? Were they, for example, able to recognize in Hitler's henchmen particular social types or see them as representatives of particular milieus? Could they glean a sense of motive or even discern how far the regime's representatives were mere executors of orders rather than agents in their own right? Or, like those of their co-religionists elsewhere, did the German Jews' increasingly confined existences render it impossible for them to see beyond the »ghetto walls«? Moreover, did their very

possession of German culture preclude making sense of their countrymen who had turned against them?

It is striking that despite the huge amount of research on the Holocaust there has been so little work on the victims' perceptions of the perpetrators. For a long time, historians of the Jewish experience and chroniclers of Nazi policy had very separate agendas, and indeed often wrote in different languages. The most important English-language historian of the Holocaust, Raul Hilberg, was skeptical whether victims could tell us anything much beyond their own suffering.³ Literary scholars and psychoanalysts called into question the victims' ability to provide witness at all, or drew attention to the crucial gaps in their experience.⁴ Recently, though, victims have figured more centrally in major accounts of the Holocaust, and Saul Friedländer's *magnum opus* has attracted most attention in this regard.⁵ Other historians have reasserted the facticity of survivor testimony.⁶ My effort to see the perpetrators through their victims' eyes can thus be seen as part of a trend towards writing a more integrated history of the Holocaust.⁷

But this analysis should also be understood as testing the limits to such integration. At stake in the present piece is not only whether victim testimony, in this case German Jewish testimony, constitutes an under-used resource for historical understanding of the executors of Nazi policy; it is also if by looking at it, we can learn in fact more about the victims themselves. Améry conveys both the intensity of experience and the challenge of discerning anything, when he writes that »Alles versteht sich von selbst, und nichts ist selbstverständlich, sobald wir hineingestoßen werden in eine Wirklichkeit, deren Licht uns blind macht und bis ins Mark versehrt.«⁸ Were certain classes of action too threatening and horrible for the victims to understand them? Is it possible that the victims, if they survived to record their experiences, were capable of precise description of actions but not of useful analysis of motives – because no analytical framework

could contend with the overwhelming rejection of one's own humanity and the threats to one's own existence? Despite the victims' superhuman efforts to be cool and precise recorders of events, should we be thinking less of the »objective« observer, capable of seeing things how they were, than of men and women caught in an extreme predicament and struggling to find meaning in what was happening?⁹

Let me say a few words about methods and sources. Améry's account was written well after the war, in the 1960s. While the final section of this chapter briefly analyzes such retrospective testimony and returns once more to Améry, it relies as far as possible on contemporary wartime sources or immediate postwar accounts.¹⁰ Fascinating as the later memoirs are, the movement of survivors to new locations in the postwar Diaspora often fundamentally altered their perspective. German Jews became American, Israeli, or British Jews. The victims' distinctive experience began to cross-pollinate with other vantage points – victims became historians, and victims read historical accounts. We should recognize, however, that for all the virtues of immediacy, contemporary materials raise questions of their own.¹¹ To analyze the way perpetrators are represented in victims' writings, we need to read between the lines.

We should not expect to find just one German Jewish view. Not only did German Jews form as colorful a mix as Jews elsewhere, but their opportunities to encounter their persecutors varied greatly too. Many distinctions – of gender, for example, or between *Ost-* and *Westjuden* – can barely be touched on here. Because men wrote so many of the contemporary German Jewish accounts that have been published, this account is therefore very dependent on a male perspective. We can dwell only briefly on the important differences between the generations or on the implications of the fact that so many of the richest chroniclers were not practicing Jews, who indeed in some cases had been brought up as Christians or had converted to Christianity and in one

case to Buddhism. But despite all these important variations and nuances, we can legitimately ask whether there were particular shared contexts within which German Jews were able to observe their co-national perpetrators and whether there were distinctive, recurring experiences, insights, or values that informed or colored German Jews' observations.

The term perpetrator or *Täter* is not one that contemporaries used. In the entire two volumes of Victor Klemperer's wartime diaries the term occurs to my knowledge only once, and then not to describe the Nazi activists, but to refer to the instigators of the bomb plot against Hitler. (Klemperer used the term in its criminological sense, i. e., in the context of the Nazis' search for the culprits, and certainly not to vilify the plotters.¹²) Thus, we need to make some heuristic decisions about whom we understand the »perpetrators« to have been. Broadly, the term is treated as including all those agents of Nazi policy who were centrally involved with the most injurious and distinctive aspects of Nazi persecution – dispossession, deportation, coercion, violence, and murder. But at the other end of the spectrum, deploying a term not used by contemporaries means being ready to accept that victims perhaps divided up the human terrain in different ways than we do now.¹³ How did Jewish victims of Nazi persecution understand the collective of those who were acting against them? We know, for example, that for many Eastern European victims the aggressors were called the »Germans«, and that little distinction was made between their inhumanity and their »Germanity«.¹⁴ We might expect that German Jews would be more nuanced, indeed that the blanket condemnation of Germandom would place them in something of a dilemma as to their own heritage and identity.

Because so little has been written on these issues, this chapter can only raise questions and offer some tentative hypotheses. The first two sections revolve around the striking fact that perpetrators are so often absent from German Jewish accounts. The chapter shows that for the 1930s this reflects

a distinctive German Jewish experience of pervasive social exclusion, on the one hand, and few direct encounters with »evil« perpetrators, on the other. The richness of German Jewish testimony from the 1930s lies above all in revealing the many shades of societal participation in the exclusionary effort. But at the same time, as I show, German Jews allude to many more nasty encounters than they actually describe in their diaries. This mode of marginalizing the unpleasant was, I argue, a conscious or unconscious response to the central trauma of the 1930s, namely, the challenge to their writers' identity as *Germans* posed by the violent assault on them by their countrymen. The existential threat in the 1930s for German Jews was to their social status and national identity, and not so much to their physical existence. The chapter then moves to the experience of Kristallnacht and the ensuing internment of many German Jewish men in concentration camps. Here some outstanding accounts offer real insights into the behavior of guards and Kapos, but again they also show how central the experience of social and national exclusion was in determining what the victims saw, and how they evaluated their antagonists. As we enter the war years, the question of exclusion becomes less and less central, because new laws and public opinion made exclusion and discrimination a foregone conclusion even as mounting direct threats to life and limb made questions of status and identity secondary. By then in any case the older generation – again with the exception of the Theresienstadt chronicles and those few who remained behind on German soil – was either already in exile or had perished, and so the chronicles and memoirs of deportation and camp life stem from a younger generation with little experience of pre-Nazi Germany. Finally, the chapter briefly explores the complex reopening of a dialogue with Germany after the war. While some German Jews seeking a connection with postwar German audiences initially chose to represent the perpetrators as marginal and not mainstream figures, and thus not representative of German society, others

indicted ever wider circles and Améry's rewriting of his early postwar essays is a poignant and powerful example of this.

Perpetrators or Fellow Travelers?

We should begin by noting the striking feature of German Jewish diaries and postwar memoirs alluded to above, one that helps to explain why we have not looked much at the victims' perceptions of the perpetrators, namely, that in many accounts, the perpetrators barely figure. Even if we interpret the term liberally to include not only those dishing out physical violence but, say, practitioners of verbal abuse against Jews or purposeful bureaucrats enforcing anti-Jewish policy, many months and indeed years pass in Victor Klemperer's diary and in the equally voluminous compendia of his compatriot, the Breslau Jew Willy Cohn, in which such portrayals are limited or absent. In Klemperer's diary one has to wait until 1942, and a nasty round of encounters with the Gestapo, for any kind of sustained account of ruthless protagonists of Nazi policy.

When it comes to ghetto diaries and camp memoirs written by German Jews during the war, this absence is often a function of the increasingly organized character of Nazi persecution – and indeed the use of intermediaries and auxiliaries, which meant that for long periods in the ghettos and even in the camps, the oppressed experienced little or no direct confrontation with the oppressors. Intense contact tended to come – in so far as the victims lived to report on it at all – in times of transition to and from the ghetto or camp, far more than in the collective holding areas themselves. Oskar Rosenfeld recounted the brutal expulsion from the train when they arrived in Lodz: »Feldgraue Gestapo trieb an. ›Vorwärts! Lauf! Lauf!‹ schrien blonde gutgenährte Jungens. Unvergeßlich der eine, mit rötlichem borstigem Bart, rötlichen Augenbraunen, stechendem Blick schnarrender Stimme. Er schrie die ›Neuansiedelnden‹ an: ›Lauf, du

Judensau«, stieß gegen Frauen, die nicht wußten, wohin sie sich wenden sollten.«¹⁵ But after that, there are whole pages and sections of his famous notebooks in which no Germans appear, and when they do, often at a great distance, as in the grey-uniformed figures that attended a public hanging. Or at even greater remove, as when Rosenfeld reports on rumors and stories brought into the ghetto by new arrivals.

Sophisticated survivor-chroniclers, reflecting on their experience in later years, are at pains to convey this system of »remote« oppression. Thus, the young Austrian teenager in Auschwitz, Ruth Klüger, offering three vignettes from Auschwitz, allows the guards to appear only towards the end, conveying how distant they were from much of her remembered day-to-day experience (this separation was particularly marked in the »family camp« where she was quartered in 1944).¹⁶ There was nothing unique to German Jews about this experience.¹⁷ Also not unusual was the fact that those who risked keeping a wartime diary often hesitated to actually identify their tormentors, or they did so only in code.¹⁸ Jews writing in German had even more reason to fear that a discovered diary would be understood by the German elite. In a final postwar entry, the Theresienstadt diarist Hugo Heumann noted helpfully for the reader (he had his son in mind), that »Much had to remain unsaid« during the war because of his fear of searches and their consequences.¹⁹ Klemperer, with a loyal Aryan connection to look after his notes, is unusually brave in this respect. And even years after liberation, a German observer, in this case the non-Jewish Hermann Langbein, wrote that it was not until seeing a shrunken Joseph Klehr at the Frankfurt Auschwitz trial that he felt able to see the feared SS as the contemptible figures that they were and to paint verbal portraits of them on paper.²⁰

For the period before the war, and certainly before 1938, however, German Jews were in a distinctive situation. While anti-Jewish policy and persecution was being ratcheted up with alacrity, most German Jews were not yet encountering

the systematic atrocities that made »perpetration« the human and social conundrum it was to become. Uniquely among the Jewish victims, German Jews began to gain an insight and form a view of the Nazis at a time when the anti-Jewish assault operated through laws and societal, administrative pressures that only hinted at the social and cultural exclusion and the physical removal, much less the widespread extermination yet to come. Even in the early weeks of considerable street violence in 1933, insightful Jewish commentators were much more likely to encounter a complex and wide-ranging societal process rather than the single-minded agency of a particular set of antagonists.

Consider the entries of the Breslau grammar school teacher, Zionist, and World War I veteran, Willy Cohn. On March 3, 1933, he learns of a possible (undefined) threat against his son Wölfl.²¹ A vague social network of danger was evident, but he was unsure who the perpetrators might be. On March 8, traveling by bus through the city, Cohn, a convinced socialist, noted »Es fiel mir auf, wieviel Hakenkreuzfahnen selbst in dieser proletarischen Gegend wehen! Es ist bei den Leuten eben ein Glauben aus ihrer Verzweiflung heraus, daß ihnen das noch helfen kann [...]«. ²² A couple of weeks later, again on public transport, he recorded that he had been annoyed »über eine antisemitische Bemerkung [...], die allerdings nicht mir galt, aber man wird sich ja an allerlei zu gewöhnen haben!« And two days later Cohn describes »ein unangenehmer Brief vom Finanzamt, da merkt man jetzt auch sehr, daß ein anderer Wind weht und daß sie einem Juden gegenüber zu keinem Entgegenkommen bereit sind.« Though Cohn noted on March 24 that all kinds of things had been going on with people beaten up in the Party houses, he went on »für sehr viel schlimmer als diese Ausschreitungen halte ich ja die Existenzvernichtungen, Schächtverbote, Kündigungen.« Cohn's world was thus already being transformed – but at this stage we hardly meet any Brownshirts.²³

To a certain extent this paralleled the later situation in the ghettos: the actual instigators of persecution were well out of the victims' sight. But in other respects, the German Jewish experience in the 1930s told a different story than that of later experience, one in which »perpetrators« were far less significant than »policy« and a more diffuse participation. German Jews were far more conscious than their Eastern European counterparts of a societal, legal machine that was much larger than the cruelty or agency of any particular set of players (except, perhaps, Hitler and his immediate circle as they imagined them). They could see how neighbors or former colleagues became »transmission belts« of persecution without necessarily initially having supported it. Sophisticated observers of the stamp of a Klemperer or a Cohn saw the full gamut of opportunism, cowardice, adaptability, and conviction that prompted participation in, or acquiescence with, the machinery. On one day in 1935, Klemperer made notes about the »getreue« und »tapfere« Fräulein Mey, who still came to visit them, the »laue« Frau Kühn, not unkind, but still believing in the idealism of the regime, and the horrible Frau Fischer, a »schmutzige Kreuzung aus Schaf und Schwein«, who had cut off »die lieben, guten Kaufmanns« while still claiming to be »die Alte«. ²⁴

German Jews, often with good reason, believed that many who ended up enforcing policy against them did so reluctantly. Even in December 1938, the city librarian, an old *Stahlhelm* man, »war in fassungsloser Erregung« and unable to hold back his tears when forced to forbid Professor Klemperer access to the library, a banishment he tactfully conveyed in a back office. With their old contacts in the ministries, and their shrewd understanding of what lay between the lines of official pronouncements and press articles, Jews in leading positions in the Centralverein (henceforth CV) or the Reichsvertretung der Juden in Deutschland were often well informed even about individual Nazi officials' positions on specific policy matters, even if they were sometimes mis-

led by fake assurances.²⁵ The German Jewish understanding and experience of the 1930s, therefore, taught them that the Nazis indeed depended on widespread *participation* – but not that the Nazis had mobilized an army of »perpetrators«. Indeed, for a long time, Klemperer was far more conscious of anxious fellow travelers than of enthusiasts: »Aber alles, buchstäblich alles erstirbt in Angst.«²⁶

More than anything else, what makes the German Jewish accounts so distinctively valuable is the insight they provide on the different patterns of participation in German society. This is true not just of the daily observations they are able to make about neighbors who crossed the road and averted their gaze or the few who maintained some kind of contact. Beyond directly recording what they see, the Cohns, Klemperers, Reichmanns, and others offer sophisticated assessments of the popular mood, society's relationship to the regime, and the mechanisms and degrees by which their neighbors had been prevailed upon to embrace Nazi ideas. Drawing on the published diaries of non-Jewish Germans, Peter Fritzsche offers a telling and sensitive portrait of Germans' intellectual and moral adaptation to the Nazi era. Among other new behaviors and values, he writes, for example, that »antisemitism was tried on, and it often fitted.«²⁷ German Jews also help us see individuals trying on new behavior as conditions allowed or demanded it, and also the sorts of underhand actions that non-Jewish Germans did not necessarily confide to their own diaries.

Something rather shattering for the so law-abiding German Jews, for example, was that while they were being accused of all sorts of venality and shady dealing, those pursuing them proved ever more corrupt. For many German Jews, the willfulness of their antagonists was indeed first evident in avarice and profiteering, and it was thus here that the perpetrator as agent often begins to be visible beyond general societal mechanisms of acquiescence. Just released from Sachsenhausen in December 1938, Hans Reichmann, for ex-

ample, found himself like many German Jews in dispute with his local tax office, which was assessing his contribution to the post-Kristallnacht »Jewish levy« on the basis of outdated property lists and property he no longer owned. No amount of argument was helping his case – but a backhand payment of 500 Reichmarks did the trick. Policemen, he noted, now openly demanded money – to desist from chicanery that they were in any case not required to engage in.²⁸ According to Artur Prinz, a leading figure in the *Reichsvertretung der Juden in Deutschland*, corruption had become so widespread by 1938 »even down to the lowest level, that some officials – in our own case, e. g., one of our district policemen – would tell emigrants about to break up their households just what they wished to have and expected to get ›for free.«²⁹ This was a very different picture to the rule-bound, process-oriented story emerging in much of postwar, non-Jewish historiography. It would be more than four decades after the war before the non-Jewish historiography came to recognize the wanton degree of license, willfulness, and profiteering.³⁰

Another sign of individual engagement and liberty-taking, which German Jews were increasingly experiencing, was the verbal abuse of various kinds, and not just from Gestapo officials or cheeky Hitler Youths. Consigned to forced labor in 1941, the assimilated German Jew Elisabeth Freund noted the loathsome sarcasm and abuse dished out to the hapless Jewish draftees from an official in the labor administration, the oily *Regierungsinspektor* Alfred Eschhaus.³¹ For the first time in their lives, he sneered, they would learn what real work was. The most important phrase they had to learn was »Arbeitssabotage«, and he would be on the lookout for it. It was well known that all Jews were mortally sick and thus not suitable for work, and all had a fine medical assistant (*Krankenbehandler*, as Jewish doctors were now required to be called) who would attest to their unfitness. But he, Eschhaus, was now putting an end to all that. »Es wird mir das größte Vergnügen

machen, diese Gesellschaft im KZ noch ein bisschen zu vergrößern.«

A question that remains is whether German Jews' travelogues from the lower foothills of persecution offer us much insight into what would later become the great Himalayas of murder and mayhem. (This question itself is, of course, outside the ken of contemporary Jewish accounts, accounts whose precision and authenticity benefit from the very lack of knowledge of the savage landscape to come.) In part it will depend on our own model of the mechanisms by which men and a few women came to perpetrate genocide. But if we see participation as an evolutionary process, and particularly if we believe the response of bystanders and fellow travelers was an essential part of that evolution, perhaps as essential as any specific feature of the mentalities, selection, or training of the central protagonists, then we will profit from spending time with the German Jewish accounts from the 1930s.

The Trauma of Exclusion

But how accurate was the German Jews' representation of what was happening around them? Any group of observers will vary in frankness, perspicacity, insight, and diligence. Few diarists in any time or place will offer the laconic, sometimes scorching honesty about self as did Victor Klemperer. However, just as their Eastern European counterparts in the ghettos would soon prove to be (though informed by different intellectual traditions),³² many German Jewish diarists were at great pains to be objective observers, eschewing so far as they were able emotion and bias, and often preferring to record observations rather than to elaborate on reflection or analysis. At the same time, like everyone else they also viewed the world through particular spectacles, and it is often the reflected light from their own concerns and imagination that leaves its mark on the page.

We can see this initially by looking at what is *not* said in the diaries. For, while the absence of »perpetrators« in German Jewish accounts reflects the reality of an institutionalized and societally transmitted system of persecution in the 1930s, many observers also chose to ignore or marginalize the very real presence of radicals and violent activists. The long periods of silence in German Jewish diaries where there is no comment on Nazi behavior are, on closer inspection, *not* simply a statement about the possibility of living in Nazi Germany without directly encountering the »enemy«. A few days after the Night of the Long Knives on July 4, 1934, for example, Willy Cohn explains, »Das Straßenbild ist ohne die braunen Uniformen ein so ganz anderes wie man es sonst gewohnt war!«³³ Yet he had barely wasted a word on the portrayal of that street experience until then. In April 1940, after a trip to the tax office, Cohn noted, »Man ist jetzt schon immer froh, wenn man auf einer Behörde gut behandelt wird.«³⁴ Yet with one or two exceptions, the encounters he had actually described until then had been generally civilized. In other words, while the total picture painted was indeed cognizant of the threats faced by German Jews, those threatening them are excluded in the detail. Many of Cohn's encounters with officials are barely even mentioned; a brief visit to the Gestapo on July 22, 1939, is described, but simply as an afterthought.³⁵ Yet we know that visits to the Gestapo were always an alarming event for German Jews, and certainly by 1939. In Klemperer too, until 1942, with one or two exceptions, most of the encounters with officialdom he describes are courteous or at least correct.³⁶ Yet in 1941 he cites as a given among the German Jews: »Man hat keinen Anspruch mehr, kaum noch Hoffnung auf anständige Behandlung.«³⁷

In some respects, this parallels the anxieties and choices we can find also in non-German Jewish memoirs, choices that relegated the perpetrator to the margins of the text. But in this case, it does not seem that the figures lurking between

the lines at this stage embodied mortal terror for the writers. Klemperer, Cohn, and others were for the most part not in fear for their lives before the war – the »frightful hints and fragmentary stories«³⁸ from Buchenwald notwithstanding. Rather, even before they were clearly threatening life and limb, the Nazis embodied a terror for German Jews that differed from that later faced by their brethren abroad. The perpetrators' power lay for a long time less in their ability to enact violence (though that was always considerable) than in their real and symbolic ability to *exclude* the victims. On a social plane, middle-class German Jews were threatened with loss of status and recognition. The perpetrators – by their actions, by their lower middle-class social background, and by their power to expel – personified the threat to a social order in which a great many German Jews had enjoyed good standing, albeit one called into question by the post-World War I resurgence of antisemitism.³⁹ On a national plane, by denying the victims citizenship and by redefining what the nation stood for, the perpetrators also personified the legal and symbolic exclusion of German Jews from the people's community. The central question raised by the actors and encounters in the 1930s was thus different from what we conventionally associate with the Nazi perpetrators. Not how is it possible for a human being to do this? But what does it mean that I, a respectable and patriotic German man (since the accounts we are using are mostly written by males), am being treated like this, by this person? We see both elements repeatedly in Willy Cohn's account. The following, his March 31, 1933 entry, is Cohn's powerful description of »den entwürdigendsten Gang meines bisherigen Lebens.« He went to the police: »den Paß abzustempeln, der für uns Juden nur nicht für das Inland gültig gemacht worden ist. Der Beamte war in der Abfertigung sehr nett und freundlich, aber man mußte sich reihenweise anstellen, was sehr anstrengend war, selbst so alte Leute wie der Geheimrat Rosenstein! [...] Degradiert unter jede menschwürde! Aber auch das muß