

Exhibit reveals fate of Jewish Lawyers without Rights during Holocaust

By Linda Chase
Editor

More than 75 years after the Holocaust ended, “Lawyers Without Rights: Jewish Lawyers in Germany under the Third Reich” exhibition reveals an aspect pertaining to the darkest era in human history that many people are still not aware of.

This invaluable presentation uncovers the fact that there are many stories and lessons related to the Holocaust that still need to be shared. The traveling exhibit was recently on display at the Jewish Museum of Florida-FIU in Miami Beach. Take the opportunity to bring this important exhibit to your synagogue, JCC, school or other South Florida venue.

I recently had a conversation with Stephan Göcken, executive director of the German Federal Bar. The organization cosponsored “Lawyers Without Rights” with the American Bar Association (ABA).

I asked Stephan if the book “Lawyers Without Rights: The Fate of Jewish Lawyers in Berlin after 1933” was the first publication to document the story of the Lawyers Without Rights?

“Published in 1999, this first book told the story of Jewish lawyers in Berlin who were purged through a series of Nazi laws. Subsequently, two additional books have been produced in cooperation with regional bar organizations, including the Berlin Bar.”

Stephan explained why the book and exhibit is an important addition to Holocaust-era awareness.

“You really don’t appreciate the rule of law until it doesn’t exist. The Lawyers Without Rights project — the exhibit and book — is about how one government — the Third Reich in Germany — systematically undermined fair and just law through humiliation, degradation and legislation leading to expulsion of Jewish lawyers and jurists



Munich lawyer Dr. Michael Siegel (1882-1979) had complained to Munich Police Headquarters in early 1933, when one of his clients was taken into “protective custody.” He had the legs of his trousers cut off and was led through Munich’s inner city streets barefoot with a board around his neck that read: “I will never complain to the police again.” HEINRICH SANDEN/LAWYERS WITHOUT RIGHTS/BUNDESARCHIV

from the legal profession for no other reason other than they were Jewish or had Jewish ancestry. As the rule of law comes under attack today in both developed and Third World countries, the Lawyers Without Rights story tragically portrays what can happen when the just rule of law disappears and is replaced by an arbitrary rule by law that sweeps aside the rights and dignity of selected populations. As our website says, this story is more than a historical footnote; it is a wake-up call that a system of justice free of improper political considerations remain fragile and should never be taken for granted.”

I asked Stephan how many lawyers were affected by the ban?

“A total of about 5,000 Jewish lawyers throughout

Germany, with slightly less than half in Berlin.”

Stephan continued, “Some lawyers who survived the Holocaust practiced later in other countries, although it is difficult to say how many. In the United States, some took law-related jobs but did not practice per se because you had to go to a U.S. law school and get licensed through the process of individual states. My friends at the ABA like to point to the story of Hanna Katz, one of three women whose fate is portrayed in the exhibit as a success story. Ms. Katz appears to be the only woman of the 40 or so Jewish lawyer consultants who practiced law after 1938. She left Germany in 1941, eventually landing in the U.S. There, she earned her law degree, became a member of the American

Bar Association and practiced law.”

Stephan expressed why the rise in antisemitism makes this aspect of the Holocaust so important to present.

“It reminds us how antisemitism, or unfair discrimination against any group or groups, can lead a society down a disastrous road. Ben Ferencz wrote the foreword in the book ‘Lawyers Without Rights: The Fate of Jewish Lawyers in Berlin after 1933,’ and said ‘The failure to enforce law and time-honored principles of justice still poses increasing threats to people everywhere. ... For those lawyers who were persecuted or had to flee Nazi tyranny because of their religion, (this book) demonstrates that their suffering has not been forgotten. Nor has it

been in vain.’ Justice Breyer sends a similar message in his foreword. ‘As Nazi atrocities fall further into the past, direct recollection becomes more difficult. But recollection does not become less important.’”

I asked Stephan to explain the goal of the Family Remembrances program.

“This is mostly the agenda for the future. We have received numerous inquiries from descendants (children and grandchildren) of these lawyers and judges who were purged from the practice of law for the sole reason because of their religion. As we get funding for this project, we hope we can somehow use these descendants to better chronicle their descendants’ stories and more fully capture the past.”

In concluding our conver-

sation, I asked Stephan to share what he hopes viewers take away from seeing the exhibit?

“This exhibit is about the rule of law told through the lens of one important aspect of the Holocaust. We hope that the lesson of how the Nazis undermined the rule of law helps people better understand how fragile democracy can be while we, as a society, can still do something about it.”

For more information on the exhibit visit <https://lawyerswithoutrights.com> and to learn how to bring “Lawyers Without Rights: Jewish Lawyers in Germany under the Third Reich” to your community, contact Bill Choyke, senior strategist, at the American Bar Association <https://www.americanbar.org> or call (202) 662-1864.