

AJR journal

The Association of Jewish Refugees

Marriages of convenience as a survival strategy

The following article is an adapted version of a paper given in March 2014 at the annual conference of the Gesellschaft für Exilforschung (Society for Exile Studies) in Vienna.

For those exposed to persecution in Nazi Germany, marriage to a foreign national presented a means of emigrating to another country, where they were protected by their new citizenship from being deported back to Germany or from being rendered stateless if they were stripped of their German citizenship by the Nazi authorities. The advantages offered by marriages of convenience were primarily of benefit to women; this was due to the patriarchal cast of legislation relating to citizenship at the time, under which a woman, as a mere 'appendage' of her husband, automatically assumed his nationality on marriage. These marriages, which often existed only on paper, have in retrospect come to be seen as a form of assistance rendered to those under threat in Nazi Germany and are now judged positively. A number of people also married in order to secure a visa more easily, as was, for example, the case with entry visas for Palestine, then administered by Britain under a League of Nations mandate.



Erika Mann, 1905-69, Thomas Mann's elder daughter

Until now, this strategy of escape and of resistance to the Nazis has not been the subject of any academic research, a gap that Irene Messinger, a political scientist working in Vienna, is seeking to fill. It is her intention to raise the profile of marriages of convenience in research into the Holocaust and emigration and to anchor them firmly in the mainstream of historical research. Messinger's research aims to present the women persecuted by the Nazi regime as active agents, capable of exploiting their networks of contacts in order to enter into marriages of convenience, and also to investigate their marital partners, whose motives would have ranged from friendship and kindness and social and political commitment to straightforward financial gain.

In the course of her research, Messinger has to date unearthed more than 60 marriages of convenience, in works of scholarship, autobiographies and eye-witness accounts (interviews). There are many more such marriages than might appear at first glance. It will never be possible to discover exactly how many women attempted to save themselves by contracting marriages of convenience as this is a deeply private subject and, in many cases, a matter of shame, which only very few have spoken about publicly. Many women concealed the fact of their fictitious marriages on returning to Austria after 1945, fearing possible legal consequences or the loss of pension rights and the like.

Who were the people who entered into marriages of convenience? To judge by those cases that are already known, they were Jewish women who came from the middle classes or sometimes from the social élites and/or were members of political organisations with international connections. Among other factors, this is due to the high proportion of artists, academics and other professional women among those who emigrated to Britain. The individuals discussed in this article are known to us from biographies, autobiographies and other records that have been preserved. However, Messinger

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SPECIAL EVENT

The Last Train to Tomorrow

Sunday 9 November 2014, 3 pm
at The Roundhouse, London NW1

We are delighted to announce that a VIP will be the guest of honour at the AJR's London premiere of *The Last Train to Tomorrow* at The Roundhouse on Sunday 9 November 2014 and that Natasha Kaplinsky, the newsreader and television presenter, and member of Prime Minister David Cameron's Holocaust Commission, will be introducing the event.

Commissioned by the Halle Orchestra and composed and conducted by the internationally acclaimed artist Carl Davis CBE, *The Last Train to Tomorrow* tells the extraordinary story of the Kindertransport through a series of songs written by the children's author Hiawyn Oram.

The music will be performed by the Finchley Children's Music Group and the concert programme will also feature *The Marriage of Figaro Overture* by Mozart and Mendelssohn's *Violin Concerto* performed by the City of London Sinfonia together with an outstanding young violin soloist from the Yehudi Menuhin School.

This special and historic one-off occasion will begin with a commemoration of the anniversary of Kristallnacht and, as the event takes place on a Sunday afternoon, we particularly encourage members to bring along their children and grandchildren. The symbolism that the Roundhouse was formerly a turning point for trains and is located near Swiss Cottage, where many of the escaping refugees settled, should help make the concert memorable and historic.

Further information is on the flyer enclosed with this month's Journal.

Tickets can be purchased strictly through The Roundhouse Box Office – visit www.roundhouse.org.uk or telephone 0300 6789 222.

↪ Marriages of convenience as a survival strategy *continued*

is especially interested in cases of marriages of convenience among the 'ordinary' émigrés, which have hitherto remained unresearched. Little is known, too, about those individuals, for example members of Jewish youth organisations in Nazi Germany, who contracted marriages of convenience in order to improve their chances of securing a visa for Palestine by applying jointly as a married couple.

The most prominent examples of marriages of convenience among the emigrants to Britain occurred within the circle of friends around Klaus and Erika Mann, the children of Thomas Mann, where such marriages proliferated. Erika Mann, writer, cabaret artist and founder of the anti-fascist political cabaret ensemble Die Pfeffermühle (The Peppermill), was stripped of her German citizenship in 1935. Klaus Mann and his circle of homosexual friends assisted her in her efforts to find a British husband. In June 1935 she married the gay British poet W. H. Auden, whom she had never met, thereby immediately acquiring British citizenship.

Erika Mann's close friend, the actress Therese Giehse, who had also been active in the Pfeffermühle ensemble, found refuge in Switzerland in 1933 but was not secure there. Marriage to the novelist John Hampson-Simpson secured a British passport for Giehse, who, however, remained in Switzerland. She later became famous for her performances in the plays of Bertolt Brecht; cinema fans will recall her last role, in Louis Malle's *Lacombe, Lucien* (1974). Sybille von Schoenebeck was another friend of Klaus and Erika Mann. After the German authorities had frozen her bank accounts, and with her German passport about to expire, emigration became an urgent necessity for her. In 1935 she entered into a marriage of convenience with Walter Bedford, an English homosexual, and retained his surname out of gratitude. As Sybil Bedford, she became famous as a novelist; her first novel, *A Legacy* (1956), was dramatised for television by the BBC

in 1975.

The radical left-wing Internationale Sozialistische Kampfbund (International Socialist Combat League, ISK), which had been banned by the Nazis in 1933, also brought a number of its female members to safety in Britain through marriages of convenience. One of them was Susanne Strasser, born in 1915 and brought up in Vienna, who was later to become a historian and a leading authority on the German Social Democratic Party. As a student, she had travelled frequently to London and, after the annexation of Austria by Germany in 1938, she remained in London, where she rapidly came to play an active role among the women refugees. In order to remain permanently in Britain, she entered into a marriage of convenience with a British citizen, Horace Miller.

Viennese-born Hilde Meisel had joined the ISK at 15. From 1932 she had been a student in London, where, under the pseudonym Hilda Monte, she published a number of articles in magazines and books and made radio broadcasts calling for resistance to the Nazi regime. Through a marriage of convenience to John Olday, a gay artist, cartoonist and anarchist, she acquired British citizenship in 1938. She was killed in April 1945 attempting to cross the border to Austria from Switzerland, where she had been sent on a secret mission. Similar cases are those of the mathematician and philosopher Grete Hermann, who married Edward Henry, and of Maria Saran, the future women's secretary of the Socialist International. ISK member Liesel Mayer entered into a fictitious marriage with Charles Bruckner but this developed into a love relationship, from which four children were born. After 1933 the ISK continued its activities in Britain, publishing critical texts and news articles; this would not have been possible had its female members not been able to employ the option of a marriage of convenience.

Networks consisting of friends or politically like-minded people were not the only ones to play an important part here. Families and extended circles of relatives also exploited every means to bring endangered women to safety, including marriages of convenience. Rosl Ebner, a student of medicine in Vienna, was able to contract a fictitious marriage in 1938 through her brothers, who were living in Paris. Her brothers were members of the Communist Party and used its networks to arrange a husband for their sister. The husband, who was paid, was a French hatter of Polish descent. Her sister provided a bouquet of white lilies for the wedding so that it did not appear

ANNUAL ELECTION MEETING OF THE ASSOCIATION OF JEWISH REFUGEES (AJR)

The Annual Election Meeting of The Association of Jewish Refugees (AJR) will take place at **11.00 am on Tuesday 18 November 2014 at Belsize Square Synagogue, 51 Belsize Square, London NW3 4HX.**

Agenda: Annual Report, Financial Report, Discussion, Election of Trustees

The following have been nominated for re-election as Trustees: Eleanor Angel, Gaby Glassman, Frank Harding.

All questions for the chair should be submitted by **Monday 10 November 2014** to the Chief Executive at Jubilee House, Merrion Avenue, Stanmore, Middx HA7 4RL.

suspicious. Ebner was thus able to emigrate on a French passport, arriving in 1939 in Britain, where she was active in the organisation Austrian Self Aid. The art collector Jenny Steiner, one of Vienna's wealthiest women, exploited her private networks to organise marriages for her twin daughters Anna and Clara, so that they were able to leave Austria without any difficulty in 1938, one with a British and one with a French husband. Anna married Charles Weinberg, a British subject, and escaped a few days later as a British national – but without her husband – via Paris to Brazil, where she was reunited with her mother.

These examples of women whose lives were saved by marriages of convenience underline the importance of pre-existing networks, whether of family members or politically like-minded people, in the acquisition of British citizenship, with all its attendant advantages. But marriage was not a quick and simple solution in every case. There were also husbands who sought to exploit their new status; for women dependent on their husbands, the consequences could be violence or rape or blackmail extending over years. A further danger was that of betrayal by a third party, of being forced to live a double life, as well as the general insecurity inherent in such marriages.

Irene Messinger is continuing to research this topic in Vienna and would be pleased to receive any information about further cases of fictitious marriage. Such information will be treated confidentially, if required, and should be sent to irene.messinger@univie.ac.at

Irene Messinger
(adapted and translated from the German by Anthony Grenville)

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