

England

An Eyewitness Report

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Born in 1915 in Sofia, Bulgaria, Susanne Miller was raised in Vienna. In 1935 Miller emigrated to England, where she worked with the Internationaler Sozialistischer Kampfbund (ISK) and the British Labour Party. After World War II, she went to Germany with her future husband, Willi Eichler. In 1952 she began working for the National Executive Committee of the Social Democratic Party (SPD). She headed the SPD's Historical Commission from its establishment in 1982 until 1990. Miller received her Ph.D. in history in 1963. She subsequently joined the Commission for the History of Parliamentarianism and Political Parties. Together with Heinrich Pothoff, she wrote A History of German Social Democracy from 1848 to the Present (1982). She has published widely in the field of German and Austrian labor and political history. This report was written in 1991.

Perception is determined not only by its object but also by its subject, by the person who perceives, experiences, judges, and remembers his or her observations, impressions, and feelings. I think, therefore, that I should first introduce this person – myself. I wish to state from the outset that my biography, my motives, and my experiences cannot be regarded as typical for women émigrés in England.

I was brought up in Vienna in a rather well-to-do and conservative family of Jewish descent but was christened as a small child and learned practically nothing about the Jewish religion. Born in 1915, I went to the University of Vienna in 1932 to study history, English, and philosophy. I joined the Socialist Students' Union, was more interested in attending political meetings than university lectures, and watched with anguish the agony of the Austrian Social Democratic Party.

In February 1934 parts of the Schutzbund, the paramilitary organization of the Austrian Social Democrats, rose up against the increasing pressure put on left-wing organizations by the clerico-fascist government of Engel-

bert Dollfuss.¹ After a short, violent fight, the uprising was crushed by government troops. The defeated were persecuted, and many were arrested or put in prison or in concentration camps. Some leaders of the revolt were executed, and left-wing organizations, including the social democratic trade unions, were outlawed. British and American Quakers sent financial aid to Vienna to help the victims and their families. These relief activities were organized by socialists, mainly those belonging to youth organizations, and I took part in them. I had to visit many families, mostly working-class and unemployed, to hand over small sums of money. This was my most important early apprenticeship in politics.

A few months after the events of February 1934, which had turned Austria into a fascist country – although without the extreme racism of the German Nazis – I had a chance to spend some time in England. I had successfully applied for an au pair job in an institution called Bermondsey Settlement, which was owned by Methodists in the East End of London. I was happy about this opportunity to improve my knowledge of the English language, to leave the oppressive atmosphere of Vienna, and to get acquainted with life in a free, democratic country. My duties in the Bermondsey Settlement were connected with the Children's Country Holiday Fund, which sent children from poverty-stricken districts to families in the countryside where they spent holidays. I gained an insight into the social conditions of this part of London, populated mostly by dockworkers, much worse than most of those I saw in the council houses for working-class families in Vienna.

In London, I made contact with British Socialists, and with some of them our friendships lasted until their deaths. But my most important encounter was with German refugees. It influenced my whole life. I met a Jewish couple from Magdeburg, Jenny and Walter Fliess, who were members of a small, extremely active socialist organization called *Internationaler Sozialistischer Kampfbund* (ISK).² They had relatives in London who helped them financially so that they could open a vegetarian restaurant in the West End. Thus, Jenny and Walter Fliess found a livelihood for themselves, but their main aim was to earn enough money to support their political group's

1 Engelbert Dollfuss (1892–1934) was chancellor of Austria from 1932 to 1934 and leader of the Christian Social Party. In 1933 he disbanded the *Republikanischer Schutzbund*, an Austrian paramilitary organization founded in 1922 in opposition to the right-wing *Heimwehr*. After 1933, the *Schutzbund* went underground until it was finally destroyed in the uprisings of February 1934.

2 The ISK (Militant Socialist International), an outgrowth of the *Internationaler Jugendbund* (International League of Youth) was formed in 1926. Its members, who were leftists, played a significant role in the anti-Nazi resistance. See Werner Link, *Die Geschichte des Internationalen Jugend-Bundes (IJB) und des Internationalen Sozialistischen Kampf-Bundes (ISK). Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung in der Weimarer Republik und im Dritten Reich* (Meisenheim/Glan, 1964).

resistance work against the Nazis. Their restaurant had a good start, but they had difficulty finding suitable staff, because jobs in the catering trade were badly paid and unpopular. When the refugee restaurant owners met me, I was a strong, healthy, young girl, eager to take part in the struggle against fascism, no matter where or in what capacity. Although I had no idea how to cook, or about any other practical things, they asked me to work with them. Overcoming my own doubts and the strong objection of my parents in Vienna, I left Vienna and its university for good in 1935 and became an employee in the vegetarian restaurant in London. There were some legal difficulties, but somehow I managed to stay.

The restaurant became a flourishing business. Some days it catered to a thousand customers, and in the course of time I became familiar with most jobs that had to be done. It was hard and strenuous work, and during the first years I had hardly any energy left to devote myself to political and intellectual matters. The frustration I sometimes felt was outweighed by my satisfaction in knowing that I could help to make profits that were used for the antifascist struggle both inside Germany and in the centers of socialist exile. Before the annexation of Austria by Hitler in 1938, I visited my family in Vienna several times.³ After Austria had been incorporated into the Nazi-dominated Reich, I became a genuine refugee, and Great Britain became my country of exile.

At this point I should make a remark about semantics. In England the general term for those who left their own country to live outside the reach of Nazi persecution was "refugees." It had an adequate meaning and connotation. In Germany, however, a differentiation has been made recently, both in academic work and in political discussions, between emigrants and exiles. The distinction between these two words was pointed out by Bertolt Brecht, himself a refugee in several countries, in a poem from which I quote in an English translation:

I always found the name false which they gave us:
Emigrants.
That means those who leave their country. But we
Did not leave of our own free will
Choosing another land. Nor did we enter
Into a land, to stay there, if possible for ever.
Merely, we fled. We are driven out, banned.
Not a home, but an exile, shall the land be that took us in.⁴

3 March 11–12, 1938.

4 Bertolt Brecht, "Concerning the Label Emigrant" [1937], in John Willett and Ralph Manheim, eds., *Bertolt Brecht Poems 1913–1956*, trans. Stephen Spender (London, 1976), 301.

It would have been difficult to find out, and it never was done, who among the German and Austrian refugees deserved the name "emigrant" according to Brecht's definition. There can be no doubt, however, that many politically and intellectually active antifascists hoped to return to their own country one day to resume the activities they had been forced to give up. Referring again to Brecht, their legitimate name should be "exiles." With them, female and male, I had the most contact, as I had joined the aforementioned organization, which was partly financed by the restaurant in which I worked. But for simplicity's sake, I shall use the general term "refugees."

Before World War II it was very difficult to gain entry to England as a refugee. Restrictions against the influx of undesirable foreigners, against their staying and working in Great Britain, were rigorous, and they were applied efficiently, even mercilessly. There was, however, a loophole in this insurmountable legal wall, and this loophole was used by women. Because Great Britain was very short of domestic servants, one could apply to receive maids from abroad, and a number of families did so. That was the way my sister, several of my friends, and many other German and Austrian women came to England.

Their lot as household servants depended on chance. As far as my personal experience goes, I found that the treatment they received was independent of whether the maid was Jewish, and of whether the family who employed her was Jewish. I knew Jewish girls in Jewish families who were shamelessly exploited. A close friend of mine who had been a student of economics at the Berlin University left Germany as early as possible, being Jewish and a socialist, to work for a rich Jewish family in London. She had to take care of the two-year-old grandchild of her mistress. Thereafter, I stopped believing that all little kids were sweet and lovable. Besides looking after the little girl, my friend had to clean rooms, help in the kitchen, and be at the beck and call of numerous members of the family. When she asked to be relieved of some of these duties to have a little time to rest and recover, she was refused, and she was told that she should be grateful to have work in England, as otherwise she might have been put in prison by Hitler.

It would not be fair to base generalizations on the case of my friend, but her treatment was not a rare exception. I remember how shocked I was when I heard that some of the girls who worked as maids used their afternoons off to sleep because they were completely exhausted. I should add that many of these female refugees who escaped the horrors and dangers of Nazi dictatorship by serving as household maids in Britain had no prior experience in such work. Their inexperience and their loneliness increased

their misery. It must be admitted, however, that their employers sometimes had reason to be disappointed and dissatisfied with their refugee maids.

There were, on the other hand, also instances of happy relations between employers and their employees from abroad. I wish to point to one, as it also concerns friends of mine. In this case the new housemaid came from a German working-class family. She had been an active socialist during the Weimar Republic and joined the underground resistance movement after Hitler came to power. When some members of her group were seized by the Gestapo, she fled from Germany and got a job with an English lady in the countryside who was very kind to her. Later, she was employed by the family of a Jewish doctor from Germany who had settled near London. In this family she found much understanding for her situation, she loved the baby who was entrusted to her care, and she could discuss political matters with members of the family. They became and remain friends. Although her experience was not unique, it was by no means the rule.

The outbreak of war changed the situation of the refugees. The restrictions against their accepting employment were lifted, but they had to work in industries or businesses that were essential for the war effort. The restaurant where I worked belonged to this category, and thus the number of German and Austrian refugees working there increased. Although they were labeled "enemy aliens," I never noticed enmity against them on account of their nationality. Our British colleagues took it for granted that we wanted Great Britain and her allies to win the war. And, of course, they were right. But as the "phony war" ended and the German armies went from victory to victory, a certain difference between the attitude of the British people and that of the German refugees became noticeable.⁵ Whereas the British never had any doubt that they would ultimately win the war, we refugees were not so sure and were terrified by the idea of what might happen. We expected the worst when the German troops marched through France without meeting any effective resistance.

The fate of England's closest ally naturally also alarmed the British people, but generally they controlled their thoughts and feelings better than we did. During those fateful weeks of the spring and summer of 1940, as one of the waitresses in the restaurant, I could watch the reactions of many people to the dramatic events. Among our customers were some high officials of the Foreign Office. I had just served soup to one of them when he looked at me with despair in his eyes and said, "Paris has fallen."⁶ I went to the kitchen

5 The period between September 1939, when Great Britain and France declared war on Germany in response to the invasion of Poland, and May 1940, when fighting broke out in Western Europe.

6 June 13, 1940.

and spread the terrible news. Thereupon a young girl, the daughter of a miner from Yorkshire, started to sing, "Rule Britannia, Britannia rule the waves. . . ." Such a reaction may seem to us today, after more than half a century has passed, ludicrous or absurd. But at the time it happened we took it as a spontaneous and natural expression of genuine patriotic sentiments.

The fall of Paris was a terrible blow to Britain and a turning point in World War II. For us refugees, it meant that we had to prepare ourselves for the possibility – some thought even for the probability – of German troops invading England and German authorities ruling the country with the Gestapo. We knew that German and Austrian refugees, Jewish and non-Jewish, would then be among their first victims. A German doctor, a refugee herself, fulfilled our wishes for pills that would enable us to commit suicide should we be in danger of falling into the hands of the Nazis. I shall never forget the evening when the female members of our group sat together to sew these pills into the shoulders of the jackets of our male comrades. We thought, not quite rationally, that they would be in greater danger than we women. Fortunately, developments made it unnecessary to use these pills.

After the German occupation of France, the great wave of internment of "enemy aliens" set in.⁷ Most of the internees were men, but a number of women, some of them good friends of mine, were also interned in camps on the Isle of Man. This treatment of people who had been driven from their country by the Nazis and who had no greater political desire than to contribute to their defeat caused hardship and bitterness among the refugees. But soon we were impressed by the campaigns led by prominent British women and men, especially by some members of Parliament, against the indiscriminate internment. And they were successful. Within about a year all nonfascist internees were released.

In contrast to the prewar years in England, during the war German and Austrian socialists developed public political activities. Some of the women played an important role in planning and organizing them. This was the case in the Austrian Labor Club, in the Union of German Socialist Organizations in Great Britain, in the group of German Trade Unionists, and in an organization called German Educational Reconstruction, which had the cooperation of prominent British personalities. Generally, political and

⁷ British tribunals divided "enemy aliens" into three groups: those to be interned, those who were exempt from internment but were subject to certain restrictions, and those who were exempt altogether. See Marion Berghahn, *German-Jewish Refugees in England. The Ambiguities of Assimilation* (New York, 1984).

national allegiances and loyalties proved to be stronger than understanding and solidarity on the basis of gender. The German socialists were regarded with distrust by the socialists from the Allied countries, and during the war there was no socialist women's organization accepting members of all nationalities. But individual contact between socialists from various countries – between British, "friendly aliens," and "enemy aliens" – did exist, and they were valuable for the men and women concerned, as well as for their postwar relations. Lucy Middleton, who was a member of parliament after the war, and her husband, a former secretary of the Labour Party, were shining examples. They did not discriminate between nationalities and offered their moral support to all of us.⁸

Members of my own political group were lucky to have British friends. They had known a few before they came to England, but they met most during their stay in Great Britain. These friends helped us to get in touch with people and institutions in their country. Mary Saran, formerly Maria Hodann, a social worker and well-known political figure in Berlin, soon became an impressive speaker in many institutions and public meetings.⁹ For a time she was the editor of the monthly journal *Socialist Commentary* and was later the secretary of the Women's Group of the Socialist International.¹⁰ I, myself, had an apprenticeship as a political speaker during the war years in London; I was often invited to talk on events in Europe at meetings of the Women's Cooperative Guild, which were held in the afternoon in various parts of London. Although I sometimes arrived there dead tired, having worked since early in the morning, I enjoyed these gatherings. I am sure that I learned from my audience at least as much as its members learned from me.

Toward the end of the war, when Hitler's defeat was in sight, the members of our group made plans for their future work. Women and men alike were determined to contribute to building a democratic society in a united Europe. I had no desire to return to Austria; for personal and political reasons I preferred to go to Germany. In England, during the last war years, I lived and worked with Willi Eichler.¹¹ Later, once in Germany, we got married. The remarkable measure of equality between men and women in

8 See Lucy Middleton, ed., *Women in the Labour Movement: The British Experience* (London, 1977).

9 See Mary Saran, *Never Give Up: Memoirs* (London, 1976).

10 Mary Saran began editing *Socialist Commentary* in 1942 and held the position for fourteen years. The journal originated as a publication of the Socialist Vanguard group.

11 Willi Eichler (1896–1971), a member of the executive of the *Internationaler Sozialistischer Kampfbund*, is credited with blazing the way for reconstruction of the German Social Democratic Party after World War II. See Sabine Lemke-Müller, *Ethischer Sozialismus und soziale Demokratie. Der politische Weg Willi Eichlers vom ISK zur SPD* (Bonn, 1988); *Willi Eichlers Beiträge zum demokratischen Sozialismus*, ed. Klaus Lompe and Lothar F. Neumann (Berlin and Bonn, 1979).

our group was reflected also by their postwar careers as members of parliament, state officials, political party and trade union representatives, college and university professors, and in other public functions. In this respect, however, our group was more the exception than the rule. Only relatively few women who returned from exile aspired to political or professional careers. Some of the former refugees who had had to fight so hard for their own and their families' existence when abroad were content with the role of housewife and mother once they were back in their own country.

Compared with the refugees from Nazi persecution in most European countries, those in Great Britain were privileged: They did not have to suffer the invasion of Hitler's troops and occupation by his authorities. Emigration and exile were generally easier for women than for men. They adapted themselves more quickly to changed circumstances, had better possibilities of finding jobs, were less concerned with having lost their former status, and often found social contacts and circles of friends.

Exile in England offered the opportunity to live in an environment with democratic traditions and virtues. These had a strong impact on public and private life during the war. They created an atmosphere of courage, dignity, and fairness, unforgettable for all who had the good fortune to experience it.