

From Swastika to Jim Crow: Jewish Refugee Scholars at Black Colleges

In January of 1933, Adolf Hitler and his Nazi Party legally and democratically rose to power in Germany. Almost immediately, Hitler began a systematic campaign of oppression and terror against Jews, who up until that point had been an integral part of German culture, commerce, and education. Jewish businesses were boycotted on April 1, 1933, but following an international outcry that boycott was limited to one day. Soon after, Hitler placed economic sanctions on Jews and limited their right to practice their trades.

On April 25, 1933, the Law for Preventing Overcrowding in German Schools and Schools of Higher Education took effect. This law restricted enrollment of Jews and soon thereafter Jewish professors began to be dismissed from universities. While few, if any, could imagine that by 1941 the Germans would begin the systematic slaughter of Jews – a slaughter that over the next four years would take the lives of close to six million souls – many of these scholars realized in the early 1930s that Jews had no future in Germany and fled to the United States. Most of the 1,200 refugee scholars who arrived in this country could not find work in their fields. A small number, however, would end up in the historically Black colleges of the American South.

In many ways, these scholars discovered that the American South was not unlike Germany in the mid-1930s before mass murder became the policy of the German state. Southern Blacks lived under the oppression of the Jim Crow laws, which legislated the strict segregation of Blacks from Whites. Forbidden from attending the same schools, eating in the same restaurants, playing in the same parks, Blacks were considered second-class citizens.

The historically Black private colleges represented a rare opportunity for educational advancement and were havens for aspiring young Blacks. Exempt from local segregation laws, they were one of the few places where Blacks could freely associate with Whites without being arrested under the myriad of ordinances enforcing segregation. Many of these colleges needed qualified teachers and saw in these refugees, prominent scholars to attract to their campuses, and who, having fled oppression themselves, might have special sensitivity to the experience of the Black students they would teach. For the scholars, employment at the Black colleges offered an invaluable opportunity to continue their professional work at a time when work in their fields was scarce.

Fifty-one refugee scholars would end up taking positions in 19 different institutions. Shunned by the White community for being both Jewish and foreign, unable to fully integrate with the Black community due to segregation laws, the experience of the refugee scholars would prove to be very difficult but, in many cases, very rewarding.

As Gabrielle Edgcomb writes in her book, *From Swastika to Jim Crow*, “The significance of this historical episode lies in the encounter between two diverse groups of people, both victims of extreme manifestations of racist oppression and persecution, albeit under vastly different historical conditions. The Europeans came out of a middle-class intellectual environment... African Americans at the time were two and three generations removed from slavery, under which even learning to read had been generally forbidden.”