

German-Jewish refugee children in Het Zeehuis

FC Zeehuis

From Wednesday 4 January 1939 until Wednesday 22 March 1939, exactly eleven weeks, a total of 96 unaccompanied Jewish refugee children from the Third Reich stayed in Het Zeehuis in Bergen aan Zee. How did these children end up in Bergen aan Zee and what is known about their stay in Het Zeehuis and of their fate afterwards?

After the National Socialists came to power in Germany in January 1933, many German Jews decided to flee. Yet some Jews chose to stay in Germany. The reasons varied: some could not believe that the Nazis' power would last, others had a business or a sick family member who was unable to emigrate. Even though the Nazis saw emigration at the time as the solution to their 'Jewish problem', legal emigration from Germany became increasingly difficult as both the Nazis and the receiving countries tightened the regulations on emigration and immigration respectively.

Kristallnacht - the night of 9-10 November 1938 in which thousands of Jewish homes and businesses were destroyed, men and boys murdered or imprisoned and synagogues set on fire - changed the situation of the Jews still living in Germany. Especially mothers, who in many cases suddenly found themselves alone after the arrest of their husbands and who had no income or accommodation, were desperate. Their first priority was to get their children to safety. Shortly after Kristallnacht, many children crossed the border illegally. The newspapers described these harrowing scenes. The parents hoped to be able to travel after their children soon thereafter.



Figure 1: Hajo Meyer and Gerd Weinberg

International cooperation to organise the so-called children's transports soon got underway. Jewish organisations in Germany and Austria collected names and arranged for their departure. Aid organisations in the Netherlands (as well as in Belgium, France, Sweden and England), mainly comprised of Jewish volunteers, made sure the children could be taken care of. In total, almost two thousand unaccompanied children would come to the Netherlands.

In March 1938, the Dutch government had decided to close the border to Jewish refugees. After all, there were already so many of them, estimated to be around 25,000. The 'Anschluss' with Austria caused a new wave of refugees, while the economic situation was still very bad, with unemployment rates of around 15%. People feared that more refugees meant more unemployment. But public opinion was that the Netherlands had to do something. It was easier to take care of children: after all, for the time



Figure 2: Refugee children in the Zeehuis

being, they would not be taking their place in the labour market.

The Dutch government came up with a compromise: a limited number of children would be admitted, on condition that they would travel on to other countries as soon as possible. In practice, this was not so easy, because those other countries were certainly not waiting with open arms. The British kept the door to both England and Palestine basically closed, the Americans used their quota, already introduced in the 1920s, to limit the influx of refugees. Nevertheless, 29% of the almost 2000 refugee children had left the Netherlands when the

Germans invaded our country in May 1940. In retrospect, the lack of mercy saved lives. But no one could have foreseen this in 1938. After all, the hope and expectation was that, should war break out in Europe, the Netherlands would remain neutral, just as during the 'Great War' (1914-1918).

The first children's transport

On 4 January 1939, the first major children's transport, consisting of 248 children, arrived in the Netherlands. A group of 115 boys travelled to Eindhoven where Philips had made the Dommelhuis available. A group of 44 girls went to Losser. One group, who had travelled via

Oldenzaal, arrived in Bergen at 11 p.m.; the other group, who had come into the country via Zevenaar, arrived in Bergen at 1 a.m., after a long delay. The total group consisted of 50 girls and 39 boys. The oldest was a girl of almost 18, the youngest were two boys of almost 4 years old. Among them was Hans Joachim (Hajo) Meyer from Bielefeld. Hajo was 14 years old when he arrived in the Netherlands on that cold winter day. Between 6 January 1939 and 29 January 1943, Hajo wrote many letters and cards to his parents in Bielefeld during his stay in the Netherlands. In May 1943, his parents had to leave for Theresienstadt. Before their departure they gave all their letters to non-Jewish neighbours for safe keeping. After the war, one of Hajo's brothers tracked down these people and the letters were handed over to him. The letters, published in 2014, give a unique insight into the life of a refugee child in Het Zeehuis.

The stay in Het Zeehuis

The Dutch government was initially hesitant about what to do with the admitted refugee children. At first the idea was to house the children with relatives as much as possible, as this would not cost the government anything. But it was soon decided that it would be better to place all children in homes after all. This way, the children and their further emigration could be better supervised. Moreover, it was feared that the children would like it so much with their families that they would not want to leave. The relatives, who had previously in large numbers expressed their willingness to take in their nephews and nieces, were asked by the government to contribute to the 'nursing costs': f 50 per child per month. Most family members reacted with anger and indignation: not only could they not afford this amount (a worker in those days earned about f 30,- a week), they also did not want the children to go to a home.

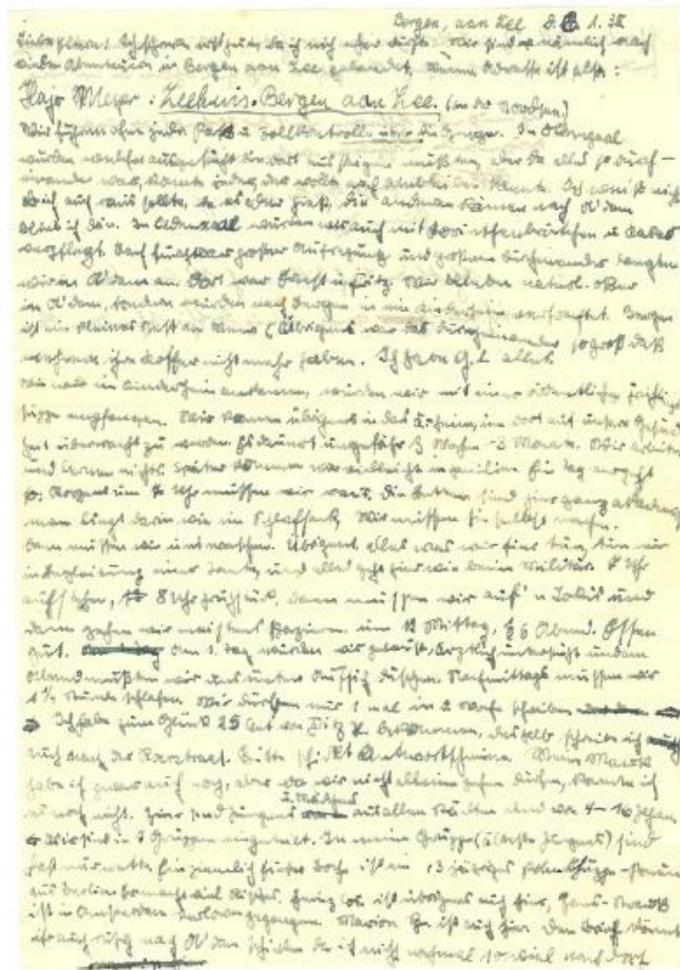


Figure 3: Hajo's first letter to his parents

On 7 December 1938, the Central Society for Infant Recovery and Holiday Colonies had offered, among other things, Het Zeehuis in Bergen aan Zee to the Ministry of the Interior for the reception of child refugees. The Zeehuis would be available from early December 1938 to late March 1939 for ninety children. Incidentally, Villa Russenduin (the present Huize Glory) in Bergen aan Zee could also be used for ninety children, but this never happened. The colony houses were always empty in the winter anyway. There was no heating either! Heaters were used for the refugee children, at the expense of ten accommodation places.

The stay in the Sea House

Hajo also ended up in Het Zeehuis. Two days after his arrival he wrote his first letter to his parents. He mentioned that the children were not allowed to write more than once a week. This rule was apparently abandoned later, because especially during the last weeks of his stay in Bergen, Hajo wrote almost daily. The censorship, already mentioned in Hajo's first letter, was maintained, although there were doubts about its legal basis.

In Het Zeehuis, a strict daily schedule was followed: the children had to get up at 7 a.m., after which they had to make their own bed (in the military manner, according to Hajo). At 8 o'clock they had breakfast, after which the children went for a walk. At 12 and 17.30 they had a meal again. Unfortunately, Hajo did not say what time the children had to go to bed.

Hajo's letters

The refugees, including the very young ones, realised that it would not be easy for their parents to read that their children were not happy, for whatever reason. Therefore, they often practised self-censorship. For example, Hajo wrote to his parents that the food was good ("Essen gut"), but in an interview with me in 2008 he said that it was not very good at all: "In Bergen we had 'Zwiebel Gemüse', I don't know what that was. Fried onions with some meat in it. Tough meat that had not been simmered long enough and was still tough. I had learned that you had to eat everything that came on the table, but a lot of children had trouble with that." It is noteworthy that the food in Het Zeehuis was kosher, although only 23 children lived orthodox lives. In the afternoon, the children had to sleep for an hour and a half, but the older children did not have to keep to this strictly and were also allowed to read. Ten 'sisters' were hired to look

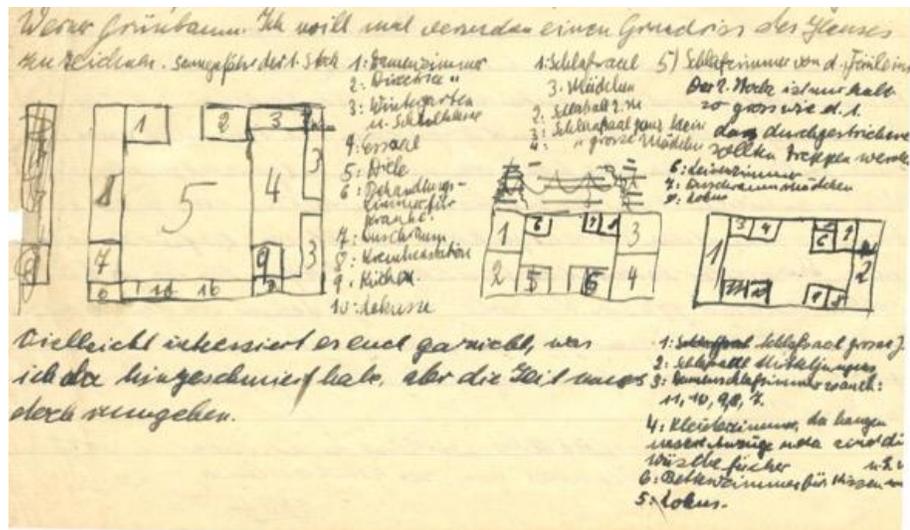


Figure 4: Hajo's drawing of the Zeehuis

after the children, all of whom spoke German. According to Hajo, one of them was a German anti-Semite, who, whenever the children did not immediately do what they were told, exclaimed "Warum seit ihr nicht in Deutschland geblieben?" (Why did you not stay in Germany?).

Already in the first letter home Hajo complained about the fact that he did not have to do anything and did not learn anything. The importance of a good education was instilled in the Meyer household. The responsible committees struggled with the question if and how they should organise the education of the refugee children. But in a letter dated 25 January, Hajo reported that they had English lessons. Two weeks later the list had expanded to include Dutch, and "perhaps history, mathematics and geography". Hebrew was also taught, but as the teacher had no time to come to Het Zeehuis, the children travelled to Alkmaar "mit der Bahn". That would mean that Bello (the famous tram connecting Alkmaar and Bergen, running to Bergen aan Zee in the summer) was in service, even though it was the middle of winter. Hajo and his friend Werner Grünbaum had explicitly asked for mathematics: on 2 March Hajo wrote that mathematics was now taught once a week

in Het Zeehuis. Hajo urged his parents to send his maths material, such as his books, compasses and set square, to Bergen.

On one of the first nights Hajo climbed on the roof. That was not appreciated, just like a ride through Bergen aan Zee on the 98cc Miele

kickstarter motorbike of the English teacher. Both Hajo and the teacher were rebuked for this by the headmistress.

In his letter of 16 March, Hajo included a drawn map of Het Zeehuis.



Who is in FC Zeehuis?

There is a photo of the FC Zeehuis team. On the bottom row in the middle is Hajo himself. He still remembered the names of some of the guys: Werner Strauss (front row on the right), and on the back row his good friend Werner Grünbaum (behind Hajo), and further to the right Gert Weinberg and Arthur Adler (see photo).

A thorough study of the group photo of the refugee children in Het Zeehuis, on which many children have been identified in recent years, reveals two more names: Alfred Heinemann (back left), and Walter Otto Dreyfuss (next to Hajo). That leaves four boys of whom nobody knows who they are. The boy at the front left may be Hermann Grünthal, and the goalkeeper may be Alfred Heinemann's older brother Walter. He is difficult to recognise, partly because of his cap.

Besides walking, other outings were also planned. On 2 February, the children saw a film in "an orphanage with a swimming pool". This must have been the Bio-Vacancy Resort on the Russenduin. The film, "The Little Colonel" with Shirley Temple, was shown in English: Hajo was disappointed that he did not understand everything.

On 5 March it was Purim. In the afternoon the Megillah, the role of Esther, was read and in the evening the boys of Maccabi Hatzair (a Zionist youth movement) came by bus from Amsterdam to entertain the children. The evening meal was apparently special too: Hajo writes that it consisted of meat and liver pate.

On Tuesday 14 March a group of twelve children travelled by train to Amsterdam, where Hajo visited acquaintances. Friday 17 March the older children took the bus to Alkmaar, where they first visited a wholesale business and then the cheese market. At 11 o'clock the children were on top of the tower of the Waag. According to Hajo, the bell ringer was Jewish and played the Hatikva (song of hope, now the national anthem of Israel). After that, they visited an old mill and ended the day with a cup of coffee in a café. Hajo described everything enthusiastically and even sent a brochure about Alkmaar to Bielefeld. On 18 March one of the boys became Bar Mitzwe in the synagogue in Alkmaar (Bar Mitzwe is the religious coming of age of a Jewish boy on his 13th birthday). Although Hajo wrote on 17 March that he would go to Alkmaar for this, together with the headmistress, he later reported that he had not been there after all. It was probably Walter Otto Dreyfuss (born on 13 March 1926) who became Bar Mitzwe.

A visit to Mrs. De Kat in Bergen, who, although she had a car accident and was therefore bedridden, gave English conversation lessons to the children, was described in detail. Hajo and three other children were picked up by Mrs De Kat's driver. He was impressed by the driver, the

large house "on a high hill" and the luxury in the house, about which he wrote extensively to his parents.

Hajo often wrote about his clothes. He thought he had grown very fast and that his clothes were becoming too small, but when he was measured it turned out not to be so bad. "Dass mein Anzug kleiner ist, ist Einbildung" (that my suit is too small is just my imagination) he wrote, when it turned out that he had grown 1,5 centimetres in twelve weeks. But he had gained three kilos! But then again, he always ate his "Zwiebel Gemüse".

FC Zeehuis

On 1 February, Hajo informed his parents that the boys had received football boots and standard scout uniforms as club outfits for their football team. On 2 March, the first results were communicated: FC Zeehuis had won 9-4 on 26 February, with Hajo playing at left back. Hajo did not mention against whom the match was played, but it was probably against a club from Bergen-Binnen (BSV or Berdos). Because on 16 March, the news was that that Saturday, the 18th, they would play 'Bergen' again, from whom FC Zeehuis had already won twice, as Hajo proudly reported. The next day, the team would travel again 'mit dem Zug' to Alkmaar to play against Alcmaria Victrix. In any case, Hajo still played at left back. That Sunday was also the farewell party: on 22 March, all refugee children left Het Zeehuis. The entire Bergen football team would be present at the party.

Departure

Three members of the Mannschaft left the Netherlands on 9 March 1940, heading for the United States: the Heinemann brothers and Arthur Adler. Walter Dreyfuss also left the Netherlands, but much later, probably in 1943. Together with some other refugees, who had

prepared themselves in Loosdrecht for a future in Palestine, they tried to cross the Pyrenees to travel to Palestine. But one night Walter sat on a stone, was bitten by a snake and died. Werner Grünbaum lived with a family in Amsterdam in the summer of 1942. He was deported to Auschwitz on the first transport from Westerbork, on 15 July 1942. Hermann Grünthal had lived at the Jewish boys' orphanage at Amstel since March 1939, from where he was deported to Auschwitz via Westerbork on 24 July 1942. Both were killed no later than 30 September 1942. Gerd Weinberg also lived in the Boys' Orphanage in Amsterdam since October 1940. He was gassed in Sobibor on 2 July 1943. Werner Strauss eventually lived in the Jewish boys' home in Arnhem. When the Germans evacuated the home in December 1942, Werner was no longer in Arnhem. On 9 April 1943 Werner came to Westerbork as a 'punishment case' and on 25 May 1943 he was deported to Sobibor, where he was gassed three days later. Hajo Meyer himself barely survived the war. He was one of the children who went to Ons Boschhuis in Driebergen. After his final exams in spring 1943 he went into hiding, but was betrayed. On 1 April 1944, he arrived in Westerbork and on 5 April he was deported to Auschwitz. There he was put to work, surviving the camp and the war.

How the other 87 children fared

In the other homes that were used for the reception of refugee children from the Third Reich, children came and left. This was not the case in Bergen aan Zee. In the eleven weeks that the refugee children stayed there, six girls came, two girls left for another home and two girls left for abroad; one boy was 'exchanged' for another boy and one of the youngest children emigrated to Brazil. Of the ninety children who were transferred on 22 March, 83 had spent the full eleven weeks in Het Zeehuis. The children were divided over three other homes. Thirty-five went



Figure 5: Elfriede Ingenkamp, Collection Yad Vashem

to the Amsterdam Orphanage. In retrospect, this turned out to be a life-saving stroke of luck for eleven of them, because on 14 May 1940 Truus Wijsmuller managed to put the children who were in the orphanage at that moment on a boat to England. Forty-seven children, including Hajo Meyer, went to Ons Boschhuis in Driebergen. In Driebergen, too, football was played again, as surviving photographs show. Six older boys were placed in the Boys' Orphanage in Amsterdam.

Of the 96 children who were housed in Het Zeehuis, seven went back to their parents in Germany after the German invasion. One of them survived the war thanks to an Aryan declaration. Two children left for Belgium: one of them survived. As mentioned Walter Dreyfuss died of a snakebite on his way to Palestine in the

Pyrenees. Thirty-nine children emigrated to a country where the Germans did not come. Thirty were deported via Westerbork to concentration camps and murdered. Elfriede Ingenkamp's fate was particularly tragic. She was taken out of the Rotterdam orphanage just in time with the help of an Aryan declaration. To be on the safe side, she went into hiding afterwards. On the day of liberation, 5 May 1945, she was killed in Amersfoort, probably by a stray bullet.

Sixteen children survived, including six who managed to survive the camps.

Hajo Meyer remained in the Netherlands after the war. He died in August 2014 in his home town of Heiloo, six days after he had celebrated his 90th birthday in a grand manner.

All pictures from Hajo's Meyer's collection, unless otherwise stated

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	Total of children who came to the Netherlands	1822	
Before 15 May 1940	Back to Germany	7	0,4%
	To a safe country	457	25%
	To a non-safe country	57	3%
	With the SS Bodegraven to England	73	4%
	Still in the Netherlands after 15 May 1940		
After 15 May 1940	Back to Germany	80	6,5%
	To a safe country	31	2,5%
	To a non-safe country	39	3%
	Died in the Netherlands	9	0,5%
	Murdered in camp	550	45%
	Fate unknown	80	6,5%
	Survived	439	36%

Miriam Keesing, January 2021