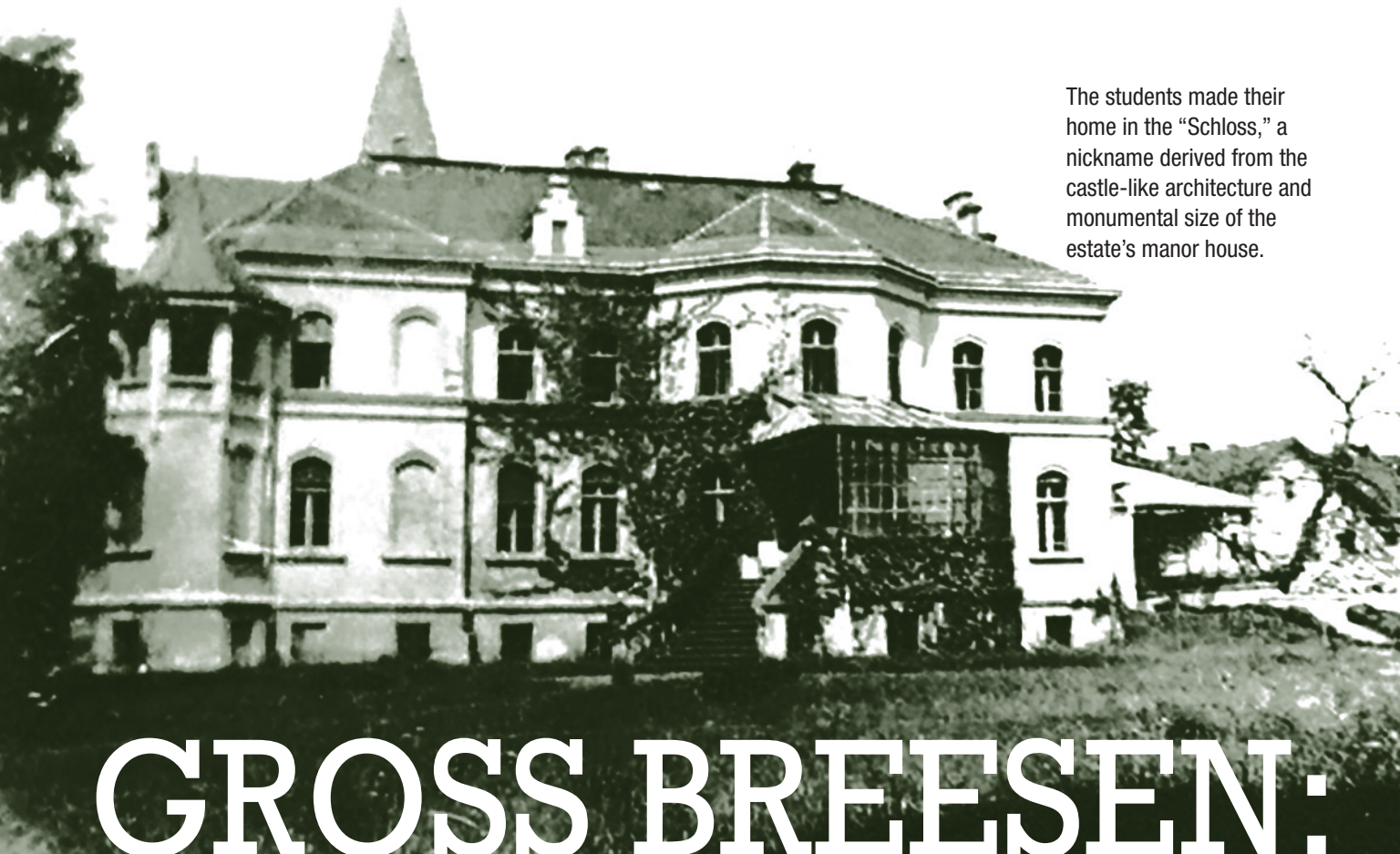




The students made their home in the “Schloss,” a nickname derived from the castle-like architecture and monumental size of the estate’s manor house.

GROSS BREESEN: A Temporary Haven From Hitler

By Heidi Landecker

In May 1936, my father, George Landecker, arrived at Gross Breesen, a manor farm in Breslau, Silesia, then in Germany. The farm occupied a former nobleman’s estate on 567 acres, and it had just become an agricultural training school for Jewish teenagers, established because the few countries accepting refugees from Nazi Germany wanted farm workers. Dad came from a small town outside Königsberg, a day’s train ride to the north. He was 17.

Breesen had been owned by Willi Rohr, a Polish Jew who leased the estate at no charge to the Reichsvertretung der Deutschen Juden (National Council of German Jews), which was setting up such facilities for teenagers no longer allowed to attend German schools.

The council was an umbrella group of Orthodox, Zionist and progressive Jewish organizations, formed in September 1933 to represent German Jewry to the Nazi government. At its head was Rabbi Leo Baeck, president of B’nai B’rith in Germany, who immediately wrote to Adolf Hitler requesting a meeting to discuss the Jewish situation under National Socialism. Baeck received no response.

The council raised money from wealthy members and state and international Jewish organizations to help those who had



The red marker on the map indicates Gross Breesen’s present-day location in Poland. Before World War II, the town and the estate were situated in the same place, Silesia, which was then a part of Germany.

lost employment. After the Nuremberg laws of 1935, which stripped Jews of German citizenship and their children of the right to public education, it built schools for Jewish youngsters and centers like Breesen for German Jewish youth. By early 1936, with no hope of education or jobs, tens of thousands of Jewish teenagers like my father could only try to emigrate.

Members of the “cow barn team.” The author’s father, George Landecker, grasps the ox’s rope.

Baeck and other leaders, including Otto Hirsch and Julius Seligsohn—who would both die in concentration camps—established some 30 training farms across Germany by 1937, funded by Jewish donors and agencies from Germany and America. Most were Zionist, teaching agriculture and Hebrew for resettlement in what was then Palestine. Breesen was non-Zionist.

The Breesen my father knew ended on Nov. 10, 1938. As part of the Kristallnacht pogrom that began on Nov. 9, the Gestapo arrested all Jewish males over 18. They were sent by train to Buchenwald. My father was by then working on a sheep farm in Bavaria, awaiting papers that would take him and 36 other Breeseners to a farm in Virginia, but while visiting his girlfriend in Frankfurt, he was arrested on the street.

Headmaster Curt Bondy, a professor of education who had been kicked out of the University of Göttingen in 1935, was arrested at Breesen, too. He and the others arrested there that day would survive.

Back in 1936, when the Reichsvertretung chose Bondy to teach farming to 100-plus teenagers in the countryside, he was a 42-year-old social psychologist who had directed a juvenile prison in Hamburg. That April he began selecting about 130 young people, ages 15 to 17, to learn farming.

A large pool of applicants

Bondy interviewed more than 400 candidates, mostly urban kids from across Germany, asking grueling questions about character, religion, moral values and goals.

My father had grown up in an East Prussian village and was also forced to leave school. Dad had captained his soccer team; suddenly, at 15, he wasn’t allowed to play. He found work in a clothing factory in nearby Königsberg—now Kaliningrad, in Russia—and joined a Jewish youth group established by the Reichsvertretung. There he read about Gross Breesen, which might help him settle in another country. The road to becoming a teacher, his dream, was now closed, so he applied.

Most applicants were the children of doctors and lawyers who paid tuition. Dad did not. My grandfather worked for the railway, ferrying goods by horse cart from the train station to Nordenberg’s merchants. Even though Opa, as I called him, earned an Iron Cross fighting for Germany in the First World War, Germany forced him to stop working in 1935. My father was the oldest of five; the family could never have afforded tuition.

At Gross Breesen, the students lived in the manor house, which they called the “Schloss” (castle). The sprawling estate’s livestock, crops and produce were maintained by non-Jewish



laborers whose families had worked there for generations. These “Instleute,” or permanent farmworkers, were paid in housing and produce from the estate and given a small wage. It was almost a feudal arrangement, according to Werner T. Angress, a Breesener who became a historian.

The kids in the manor house had plumbing and electricity; the “Instleute,” living above the cow barns, had neither. In “Witness to the Storm: A Jewish Journey from Nazi Berlin to the 82nd Airborne, 1920-1945,” Angress writes that the adult workers had an outhouse; their children used a collective dung heap.

A Jewish farm manager, Erwin Scheier, supervised the trainees’ farming lessons; a gentile boss, Herr Gamroth, managed the workers. Dairy cows, horses and mules had to be fed. A Jewish master carpenter taught the boys to build. A non-Jewish blacksmith taught them to shoe the animals that hauled machinery. The 25 female students handled cooking and laundry, as expected everywhere of women in the 1930s. A few escaped to work in the cow barn, and in summer everyone pitched hay.

Scheier managed the haymakers, somehow preventing injury among novices wielding pitchforks and scythes. His wife, Ruth, oversaw the women, who baked bread, gardened, canned vegetables, darned socks and washed clothing—by hand—for a community of at least 140, which included “interns,” the students’ slightly older counselors.

The non-Jewish workers labored alongside the young Jews, an affiliation that was largely peaceful if not—by Nazi race law—friendly. Breesen had a cranky old tractor that my father developed a knack for. The workers let Dad drive it; most of the trainees feared it.

Bondy’s three pillars

To settle the students abroad, Bondy taught “three pillars”: farming, German culture and Judaism. After a day in the field, students read aloud from German literature or staged plays.



Photos: © United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Eric F. Bowes

Dr. Curt Weiner Bondy (1894-1972), director of the Gross Breesen agricultural training school, with his horse, Edgar. Prior to the advent of the Nazi regime, Bondy had a successful career as a psychologist, scholar and educator. In addition to teaching his pupils the necessary skills for farming, Bondy attended to their literary education and their moral and spiritual development.

the Reichsvertretung was searching frantically for countries to accept them.

When Dad was arrested, he was deported east to Buchenwald. That he met the Breeseners there was fortuitous because they had blankets, and Dad had nothing. It was also easier to resist the Nazis as a group, practicing Bondy's life lessons. The trainees were strong from working outdoors, and helped one another in the camp, sharing food and helping the elderly to the latrine. Years later, Dad would call that meeting in the concentration camp the first Gross Breesen reunion. The happy pictures in the photo albums made by one Breesener, which many carried out of Germany, hide the reality of life beyond the farm and their uncertain fate.

Dad died at 93, in 2012. He rarely talked about his two months in Buchenwald, but my husband once asked him what the first night was like. Dad replied that he remembered being too frightened to go to the latrine, with inevitable results.

At Breesen there'd been many plans for resettlement as a group, to Brazil, to Australia, to Kenya. None succeeded, although small groups of Breeseners did eventually immigrate to those countries and to Palestine. But in January 1939, to get out of Buchenwald, they needed visas to another country to prove they could leave Germany, complying with Nazi policy. Angress, who had escaped to Holland before Kristallnacht, worked every channel with the Reichsvertretung to get Dutch visas for the

prisoners to immigrate to a refugee camp near Amsterdam. When they succeeded, the Gestapo freed the Breeseners, telling them to leave immediately or face rearrest.

With a college teaching job in Richmond, Virginia, Bondy was able to obtain a U.S. visa. He continued helping Breeseners emigrate. My father and Angress were part of a longstanding project with William Thalhimier, a Jewish businessman in Richmond, who bought a farm in Nottaway County. Thalhimier persuaded the U.S. State

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The young Jewish men who received training at Gross Breesen learned to handle and care for all livestock including dairy cows, pigs, horses and mules.

The philosopher Martin Buber visited and gave seminars. In the evening, a string trio performed. My father learned to love opera at Breesen. On the farm in Upstate New York that Dad bought in 1946, the cows in our dairy barn included Aida, Carmen and Tosca.

Religious teaching was part of Bondy's mandate, and students celebrated the Sabbath every Friday night.

On Saturdays, Bondy delivered "life lessons," lectures on values. He asked students what they had learned from daily incidents on the farm, discussing generosity, self-awareness and working with others. He stressed that the community was more important than the individual. By the trainees' accounts years later, he was a strict disciplinarian but a charismatic teacher.

Were the Nazis aware of Breesen? Of course. But Bondy encouraged discussion of current events and had a newspaper delivered every day, so the students knew they lived on an island of security, even if they didn't know how temporary it would be. Angress writes that, according to the Russian State Military Archives opened in Moscow after the Soviet Union fell, the Schutzstaffel, or secret service, knew the details of daily life on the farm. Perhaps the manager, Gamroth, had been the informer.

In 1936-38, well before the "Final Solution," to murder Jews on a massive scale, the Nazis allowed farm schools like Breesen to exist because they were helping Jews leave Germany—a goal of the government determined to make the country "Juden" free. And

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Department that these young German farmers on his land wouldn't be an economic burden, and Washington let them in. In 1940, when Dad arrived, only 4,000 Germans were admitted even though the quota was 26,000.

And Breesen? After Kristallnacht, some of the "Insleute" ransacked the castle, smashing the piano. The farm training continued under a new director until August 1941, when the Gestapo shuttered the school and converted it to a labor camp. By October, Jews were not allowed to leave Germany. This last generation of Breeseners was deported

to Auschwitz, where they died.

In 1984, my father organized the second Gross Breesen reunion, in Upstate New York, and helped arrange many that followed, including one in Israel. I attended those, and when I was in my 20s and 30s, Breeseners in Berlin, Costa Rica and the U.S. hosted me for visits and dinners.

Today, Breesen is Pałac Brzeźno, a golf resort in Poland, near Wrocław, the former Breslau. I e-mailed its owners some of my father's photos of their hotel's history, but they never replied. 🇺🇸