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**Homage to Hugo Rothenberg.  
A Humane Man in all Circumstances**

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It was the darkest hour, so it seemed to us, of German Jewry, when I had an idea. “Why not call Uncle Hugo in Copenhagen?” I said to my mother, “perhaps he can help things in some way.” We had deposited my father in a hospital the day before in order to get him out of the way of roving storm troopers who were rounding up Jewish men to be transported to concentration camps. This was the aftermath of the attempt to kill a German attaché by a Jewish refugee in Paris, an event which the Nazi organizations took as their cue to demolish homes, burn synagogues, manhandle the Jewish population in general, and take males of all ages away to camps. While our civil liberties had long been restricted and our personal freedom and safety been in danger at all times, never before had there been such an out-and-out effort to hurt, threaten, violate, if not completely destroy us. And so we were not only afraid, we were in panic. I was 19 years old at the time. I wanted to live, I wanted to help ... and so Uncle Hugo came to mind.

Who was this Uncle Hugo that he could be of help at this moment of despair? Who was he to be called on at this hour in time? Who was he to be able to exert influence on the all-powerful machinations of the Nazis. Well, Uncle Hugo had been a patron of Hermann Göring back in the year 1919 when the Lord of the German Airforce was a down-and-outer, an expilot of World War I seeking to recuperate his strength in Denmark. Uncle Hugo was a well-known business man in Copenhagen, of German Jewish origin. The German ambassador who had Göring on his hands seemed to have turned him over to my uncle for “rehabilitation”. I do not recall all the measures taken in pursuit of this objective, but a photo static copy of a letter which Göring wrote to my uncle is in my possession. The original is in Copenhagen where Uncle Hugo’s family is still residing. The letter can speak for itself. It is obvious that Göring felt grateful for the humane reception he had been given as well as for the actual efforts on his behalf. Little of course did Uncle Hugo know what kind of man he was helping at the time. I am sure that he regarded his attempts to get Göring on the road to recovery and re-assurance as nothing much unusual. My uncle was that kind of a person, always helpful, always ready to interest himself in you. I visited many times in Copenhagen when I was young. The trip from Berlin where I lived was not such a strenuous one that my parents wouldn’t let me undertake it on my own. And I was Uncle Hugo’s favorite. I remember one time when I was there and he was deadly ill my relatives warned me not to excite him. Sitting at his bedside I kept still but he turned to me and whispered, “Are you all right, Ruth, do they take care of you, and have you enough money?” I shall never forget that.

And so Göring became the recipient to this same kind of spirit. Not much is remembered by my family about him. But he is said to have been restless and

depressed. Yet he seems to have shown some tendencies that in retrospect exemplify his impulsiveness and his lack of respect for conventional standards. There is reference to the time Göring went on an outing with Uncle Hugo's family and their friends. It seems that they come upon a stream or small lake and wishing to go across they did not find a boat for hire. Göring, it is recalled, just took possession of a craft anchored nearby, crossed the waters and shoved the boat back. Later as they were sipping champagne at a lakeside restaurant he tossed empty bottles nonchalantly into the pond. He is also said to have entertained people around him with war exploits, and one story remembered is his account of an emergency landing that came as a result of a bunch of pigeons flying into his plane's propeller.

What "heights" Göring reached in Germany after the restoration of his health in Denmark is history. And I had not forgotten these events and neither the letter which in translation goes like this:

*My most respected Herr Direktor!*

*Before I say anything else here are most heartfelt thanks for helping me once again. I am ashamed that I have taken advantage of your kindness repeatedly without having an opportunity to show kindness in return. Should there be an opportunity, however, here or in Germany, to be of service to you, you must let me be at your disposal, I beg of you. You have shown such interest and sympathy for me that I claim the right to be able to show you my gratefulness in return. You must not forget me now. I should refer particularly to Germany where, after all, I do have connections. Here I am nothing. It would be an illusion to think that here I can do something for you. That's a laugh! Again my thanks, I mean it. I also hope that there is some evening that we can spend together. You work too hard. Too bad that I was busy the other day, you must have had a good time from all I hear. Please remember me to the ladies.*

*With the best of wishes I am your grateful  
Hermann Göring*

There I was, suggesting I call Uncle Hugo. My mother was against it. First of all she was not sure that our phone was tapped and that the call would land us in all sorts of difficulties. And then, did anyone really believe Göring had meant that and would still stand by it. At this time and under these circumstances! But I insisted and it was finally agreed that I could try but should use a phone booth. How can I forget walking to the booth, outwardly calm but trembling within myself. Of course, once I held the receiver my anxiety disappeared and I was all business. It did not take long for the operator to make the connection with Copenhagen, and as the coins rattled through I could hear first the Danish operator and then Uncle Hugo's voice so familiar and reassuring. I briefly stated my proposition. He seemed to be informed about conditions in Berlin and the rest of Germany that day. At least he didn't ask any further questions. Then I heard voices in the background. His family was inquiring about what was up and I heard him tell them what I asked him to do, to come here and see Göring. And I heard their protests sharply and clearly ... and my heart sank. But I should have had more confidence in my uncle. Promptly, there was his reply, a firm, "Ruth, I will be in Berlin in the morning. Get some of the leaders in the Jewish community together, those who

are still around, and tell them to meet with me. See you tomorrow.” That was Uncle Hugo, a man you could count on.

I hastily called a few persons of one of the Jewish organizations. They were indeed eager to see Hugo. The next day became an exciting one. Not that I can remember all the events that took place but I know that Uncle Hugo got an appointment with Göring, and I certainly recall the big, fat cigar he brought back from that interview, with a band around it that bore Hermann Göring’s name in huge letters. It was well known that Göring knew to live, but somewhere that cigar and the lettering seemed incongruous with the situation.

But did Hugo accomplish something? The answer is yes, though again I do not know exactly what transpired at the Air Ministry.<sup>1</sup>

I know that Jewish girls had been waiting to go to England where employment as household help awaited them. This promised to be one of the very few escape routes in the offing at a time when Jews desperately tried to flee their persecutors. The United States, the only country with a large immigration quota, did everything possible, but the waiting lists were long, and those fortunate enough to have sponsors in the U.S. had at least a year’s waiting ahead. Permits to some South American countries were for sale but only a limited number of people could afford them. A handful of other countries allowed another few people in, but never enough. So this offer by Great Britain was really a Godsend. But there had been no permission forthcoming by the German government to let those Jewish girls leave. This Uncle Hugo pursued, with the result that permission was granted, and groups of girls got to England and safety. Another accomplishment of Hugo’s was that those Jewish inmates of concentration camps who could bring evidence that their family had arranged emigration for them were released and could leave the country.

Whatever other arrangements were made between my uncle and Göring I do not know, but there is still a story to be reported that involved members of Hugo’s family. As mentioned earlier Hugo was of German birth and in 1937 two of his sisters still dwelled in a small town near the Rhine, called Kreuznach. I had spent many a lovely vacation at their house; they were sweet and lots of fun though unmarried, and working in the family business of producing wines and spirits. They, too, had wanted to leave Germany, a Germany that no longer wanted them. But no opportunity to leave had come. Shortly after Hugo’s visit with Göring a truck of the infamous S.S. (Death Head Division) drove up to their house and they naturally believed that a trip to a concentration camp was in store for them. While at that time extermination camps were not as yet in action, nevertheless concentration camps were feared and dreaded as only short of death. To the greatest surprise of Uncle Hugo’s sisters, however, these S.S. men treated them courteously, told them to pack their belongings, whatever they could carry with them, and told them that they had orders to take them to the nearest border. The passports they had along for the ladies were without the “J” mark, a device the Germans had adopted to brand Jewish passports. The passports did not contain the special names decreed by the

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<sup>1</sup> Bei Bent Blüdnikow finden sich ins Englische übersetzte Auszüge aus den Notizen, die Hugo Rothenberg von diesem Treffen gemacht hat. Für diese Notizen vgl. Anhang. (Anm. der Herausgeberin)

authorities as first names for Jewish men and women, boys and girls. All males were to be Israels and all females to be Sarahs. This was meant to be an insult, as biblical names were frowned upon in the Germanic culture. Unencumbered as they were then the ladies were brought to the frontier from which they made a beeline to Copenhagen where they reside to this day.

I made my way to the United States eventually but not before Uncle Hugo had managed to take out some of the family jewelry. The German government had prohibited Jews from taking along anything aside from clothing and household goods. Uncle Hugo was a natural to smuggle a few precious things out for us. He had still been able to travel in and out of Germany quite freely. How freely nobody really knows. Perhaps the archives of German, Allied or Neutral Departments of State contain information about his work. We know that with the war in progress later on he did maintain contact with the German government and made a number of trips to Switzerland. There – so tells his son, also a Copenhagen resident – he once was called to the telephone. A man was on the line who introduced himself as a Major in the British Intelligence Service and told him that they knew that he was traveling to and in Germany, named time and places, and told him that they just wanted him to know he was under surveillance. About the same time, either in 1940 or 1941, Hugo made a trip to Portugal where he met two English representatives from JOINT – the Jewish International Rescue Committee – and he even remembered their name, Throne and Troper. At that time a number of rescue operations were planned, among them the ill-fated one in which a ship, overloaded with Rumanian Jews, did not gain permission to land anywhere and went to the bottom of the Black Sea.

Hugo managed to see the end of the war and he died peacefully in his sleep. When the Germans had occupied Denmark, however, even he was not left alone. He received word that they were after him. So together with his family and other Jews he fled to Sweden, in fact was the leader of a contingent of about 100 Jews who crossed the straits in fisher boats. After the war Hugo and the others returned to Denmark, but even he with a protector such as Göring had not been safe from the barbarous attempt to wipe the Jews off the earth. He who had always helped others was forced to accept asylum himself.

I have a picture left of my Uncle Hugo. He is fishing at the banks of a stream. He looks tranquil and content. What a man he was! And how proud I was and am today to have been his favorite.

## **Anhang**

### **Aus Hugo Rothenbergs Notizen von seinem Treffen mit Göring**

(zitiert nach der englischen Wiedergabe in Bent Blüdnikowski: Göring's Jewish Friend. In: Commentary 1992, Bd. 94, Nr. 3, S. 51-52; Ausdrücke in eckigen Klammern kennzeichnen Hinzufügungen von Bent Blüdnikow)

*„(...) I had the opportunity to discuss the Jewish question with complete frankness. I pointed out that in the course of my numerous visits to Germany I had had plenty of opportunity to see for myself that the information trickling out with the Jewish emigrants was not exaggerated. I*

described to whim what I myself had been able to observe and quoted examples of atrocities perpetrated during the recent excesses [*Kristallnacht*]. I put the question of whether Goering himself was really convinced that the official German line was correct in maintaining that on that particular Thursday night three or four thousand Germans happened simultaneously and spontaneously to become so incensed about the Grynspan attack [in which a young Jew of Polish-Jewish extraction had killed a German embassy employee in Paris] that things developed as they did. By a movement of the hand, repeated several times while I was speaking on these matters, I inferred that Goering was conceding that I was right, but his only oral reply was: 'You must not forget that many of these people probably had a Jewish employer at one time or another, and have therefore seized the opportunity to take revenge for their earlier mistreatment. ...'

I then mentioned the concentration camps, opening with the remark that I could not really understand why he, Goering, had not long before seen to it that the camps were placed under the jurisdiction of his own people. I then told him what had happened and was still happening in the camps was the most atrocious thing ever heard of. I was able to relate to him some examples, for whose veracity I could personally vouchsafe, and particularly one I had only learned about the night before. He was very interested in that particular case, and asked me to ascertain whether the person in question had been mistreated. ...

Goering openly and without any constraint admitted that especially the last incident [*Kristallnacht*] had been harmful to Germany's foreign trade, and he mentioned specifically that Germany had lost the business of some big foreign department stores, particularly English and American ones. He repeatedly called himself the 'Führer der deutschen Wirtschaft' [leader of the German economy]. It was clear throughout this conversation that Germany's economy was of exceptional interest to him.

The entire conversation took two-and-a-half hours and slowly it turned into a lively discussion in which we both sometimes strode up and down his office. That the Jews had to leave Germany in any case was beyond question, according to Goering. I repeatedly pointed out to him that if so it was mandatory that emigration take place in a reasonably decent manner. He assured me he would have preferred that many of the events of recent times had not occurred, and he also said, 'I can assure you that these incidents cannot and will not be repeated here in Germany, and I am also willing to do my best to ensure a decent mode of emigration.'

We also touched upon Palestine as a destination for the emigrants. He expressed surprise at the fact that the Jews were still bent on this goal. He explained his personal views on Palestine, referring to the serious difficulties the English were experiencing in their Mandate territory. Only by including Transjordan in the prospective area of emigration – which he thought would be impossible – might there be a chance [of accommodating the influx of Jews]. His conclusion was that the best one could hope for was to maintain the status quo, that is, the approximately 500,000 Jews now living in Palestine would be able to remain there in peace, but any additional emigration should be resisted.

Among the gentlemen in Berlin, my closest contact has been with Wilfred Israel of the well-known department store N. Israel. Mr. Israel is, in my opinion, the leading person among German Jews, and has contributed on an enormous scale to German Judaism. ... During my talks with Goering I had occasion to mention Israel, and, at my request, Goering has consented to receive him. In my opinion, this visit will be of the utmost importance, since no German Jew has ever before been able to get into direct contact with one of the leading individuals in the German government. ..."