



Excerpt of a Letter from Erwin Hirsch to Stefan Jakobowicz, January 31, 1942

Hirsch, Erwin. "Excerpt of a Letter from Erwin Hirsch to Stefan Jakobowicz, January 31, 1942," January 31, 1942. Papers of Georg and Max Bredig, Box 9, Folder 12. Science History Institute. Philadelphia.

<https://digital.sciencehistory.org/works/jd3onzn>.

Courtesy of the Science History Institute, prepared December 23, 2024 11:01 UTC

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English Translation

Image 1

Excerpt of a letter from the chemist Erwin Hirsch, currently in Saint-Juery (Tarn), dated January 31, 1942, addressed to Stefan Jakobowicz, New York

We find ourselves in a melancholic situation. I do not want to tell you about things that you have already learned there, be it from the press or from consumer reports. Moreover, my personal worries and hardships should not be mentioned. On the other hand, I would like to draw your attention to the fate of a small group of people who are with me and find themselves in a situation that corresponds to mine.

As you probably learned at the time, I was actively employed at the "Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique" (National Center of Scientific Research) in Montpellier until the end of June 1940. We had 50 employees there, who were all scientists, especially chemists and physicists. This community was abolished. However, a small group of colleagues, all of Jewish descent and in the same situation, remains.

Our common plight is that we have been deprived of the right and the opportunity to pursue our profession. Many of us – including myself – have still not been removed, i.e., we have remained employees. Moreover, if we want to avoid being sent to a concentration camp, we have the possibility to do agricultural work, road construction, or other things from 2-3 months at a time. Although this kind of work gives us the right to be badly fed by the employers concerned, it does not allow anyone to feed their wife or family. Those who were not employees or are no longer - this depends more or less on chance - live from their last penny, or from other means of financial support. Whoever does not receive this support must come to terms with it or be placed in a concentration camp. In addition to the material hardships, moral woes exist. Despite everything, after having been robbed of our profession and our scientific and economic work for years and years, we do not see when and how we should resume normal employment one day.

For us intellectuals, it is downright tragic to feel how we are increasingly losing contact with our field of expertise every day. As our intellectual powers lie idle and our skills and knowledge become obsolete, we are aware that outside of our purview, research continues every day in the fields of chemistry, physics, biology, medicine, etc. In addition, new discoveries and inventions are made every day, in which we cannot participate or even know about. Again, our plight is in full swing. We are forced to live in small villages far from the centers of intellectual activity. We also do not have the necessary means to obtain the scientific literature, which could teach us about the current work in our fields.

Can you imagine what concerns we have for the future? To put it simply: we feel that we are becoming older, poorer, and dumber every day. If it were just a matter of surviving the current war, we would simply have to “persevere.” However, we ask ourselves, and certainly not in vain: what should become of us after the war? Of course, a great deal depends on the outcome of the war itself. If all our knowledge, scientific skills, and economic abilities are to be saved,

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and our once secure livelihoods are not to be simply destroyed, then we must at least - despite all the current hardships and deprivations - as they say here, “preserve our future.” In our case, this means we must ensure that our knowledge is not completely out of date and that on the day we are permitted to re-enter the working world, we will not be standing in a junk yard ripe for scrapping.

What could be done to help us? Of course, my colleagues and I are all inspired by the desire

to come to where we know we can use our manpower and skills. However, we are all too aware of the difficulties of the present time to ask you to advocate for us in this sense. On the other hand, we could perhaps be helped in a different, simpler way through financial assistance, which would of course be very welcome, and the procurement of scientific literature (journals and new publications) in English, German or French in the fields of chemistry, physics, medicine, biology, etc. Despite the aforementioned difficulties, which are affecting us adversely here, perhaps one of my colleagues or even I could provide translations or reports on what is currently being worked on and published here in various fields of interest. Although this is quite dubious compared to the scientific work that is done there, such things could be considered by one of the publishers or institutes there.