

Read by A. N. Richards at the Memorial Meeting for the late
Professor Otto Meyerhof, December 6, 1951

My task is to describe briefly, and as accurately as my knowledge permits, the events connected with Professor Meyerhof's departure from Germany in 1938 and his coming to this country in 1940.

From 1929 to 1938 he was, as you all know, Director of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute of Physiology at the University of Heidelberg. During the later years of that period, political developments in Germany were such as to make life in that country intolerable for a scientist of such qualities of mind and spirit as Meyerhof possessed.

In 1937 he visited this country, encouraged to believe that a suitable position for the continuation of his work would be found for him. This hope was not realized and he returned to Germany.

In the summer of the following year, 1938, it was made apparent to him by Dr. Bosch, President of the entire group of Kaiser Wilhelm Institutes, that it was vital to him that he leave Germany. The government, which had denied him permission to attend the International Physiological Congress in Zurich in August 1938, did give him a passport which, a little later, permitted him to enter Switzerland. After a brief stay there he proceeded to Paris where, through the good offices of his former pupil, Dr. Nachmansohn, aided by the physicist Jean Perrin, a post had been arranged for him in the Institute Rothschild, as Director of Research in the Institute of Biology. His work there was aided by support from the Josiah Macy Jr. Foundation; the conditions for work were good until the outbreak of the war in 1939. From then on the scale of his support became small and the future exceedingly dark.

Early in June of 1940 the conquest of France became inevitable and the German occupation of Paris imminent. The necessity of leaving Paris became evident and, as did thousands of others, he decided to make his way to the South of France. He and Mrs. Meyerhof and their son Walter drove by taxi from Paris to Toulouse. The difficulties of the journey were lessened by the skill and experience of the young woman taxi driver.

Dr. Meyerhof found friends in the Medical Faculty of the University of Toulouse and was able to busy himself in the library and laboratories of that institution.

It was from Toulouse that he wrote to Dr. R. A. Lambert, Assistant Director of the Medical Division of the Rockefeller Foundation (July 5, 1940) as follows:

"As I judge from the political situation, there will be in future no chance for me to keep my Paris position, even if I should escape from imminent danger. Therefore, I would accept any position in U.S.A. which would allow me to get a non-quota visa to live on a modest scale with my wife and my youngest son."

A copy of that letter was sent to me by Dr. Alan Gregg; it reached me on Saturday, July 13, 1940. With it came a copy of a cable to Gregg from A. V. Hill of London, reading:

"Could you get Meyerhof, wife and son away from Toulouse. Impossible from here."

Gregg's letter inquired whether there was any chance that a position might be created for Meyerhof at the University of Pennsylvania and stated that the Foundation would contribute one half of an annual salary if the University would match it with an equal amount.

Dr. Wilson, head of our department of physiological chemistry, was in Michigan at the time. I at once wired him and he replied giving enthusiastic approval of the suggestion that Meyerhof be offered a Research Professorship in his department. On Monday the 15th I was able to tell Gregg officially that the University would meet the terms of his proposal and that formal offer of the professorship would be made.

On July 18, President Gates cabled the offer to Meyerhof and confirmed it by letter of the same date. He was advised that he should make his travel arrangements through the Rockefeller representative in Lisbon, Alexander Makinsky.

This cable and the confirming letter guaranteed to Meyerhof the non-quota visa for entry into the U.S. At that time it appeared that that visa would be the sole sine-qua-non for his departure.

The spirit in which the offer was being made can be inferred from one sentence in another letter sent July 18 from the University to Meyerhof:

"Inasmuch as our chief desire in connection with our offer to you is that your researches shall be promoted to the best advantage, we would be guided by your wishes with respect to other activities (i.e. teaching) than those of research."

Makinsky in Lisbon began at once to try to arrange passage for Meyerhof, his wife and son, Lisbon to New York. There was a possibility that they could get on a Greek ship, July 30, or American Export ship August 18, -- nothing earlier. But it soon appeared that transatlantic travel arrangements were the least of the difficulties to be overcome.

Article 19 of the terms of the Armistice signed at Compiegne, June 23, contains these sentences:

"The French Government is obliged to surrender upon demand all Germans named by the German Government in France as well as in French possessions, Colonies, Protectorate Territories and Mandates.

"The French Government binds itself to prevent removal of German war and civil prisoners into French territories or into foreign countries."

Those paragraphs -- particularly sinister are the words "surrender on demand" -- were made applicable to political refugees or indeed any German nationalist whom the German Government wanted to lay hold of. They were the basis of the danger which hung over the heads of all German nationalists who had taken refuge in France -- danger of concentration camps or worse.

The Vichy Government lived up to these terms all too well. During the three months which followed our cables to Meyerhof, appeals for issuance of French exit visas to the Meyerhofs were made by both the Rockefeller Foundation and the University of Pennsylvania to the Secretary of State, to other officials of the State Department and finally by Mr. Orville Bullitt directly to his brother, Mr. William C. Bullitt, then the U.S. Ambassador to France, but ^{apparently} all to no effect.

The confusions and uncertainties of the times made changes of base advisable. At one time, chances of help seemed better in Bordeaux and on advice from their friend Professor Soula of Toulouse, the Meyerhofs went there. Then the Germans moved in and back they went to Toulouse. Later it seemed necessary to be near an American

Consulate and that took them to Marseille. From there they went to the near-by coastal town of Banyuls-sur-Mer where there is a small Marine Biological Laboratory in which Meyerhof undertook some work; it was from that village that he finally made his escape.

The futility of his and our appeals for the issuance of a French exit visa led to the exploration of irregular means of escape. At one time it appeared that they might be able to get passage by boat from Marseille to Lisbon. That proved to be illusory. At another, a French official in Perpignan agreed, for a consideration, to conduct a party including the Meyerhofs across the border to the Spanish frontier town of Port Bou. They were conducted as far as the French frontier town of Cerbere and there deserted.

Finally, in early October, through Mr. Varian Fry, representative of the Emergency Rescue Committee of the Unitarian Service Committee in New York, arrangements were made to escape on foot across the frontier. A guide who knew the trails agreed, again for a consideration, to conduct them over the Pyrenees.

I quote the following description of that adventure from a letter to me from Walter Meyerhof:

"They were to go to a hotel in the neighborhood and take a room there and the smuggler would get them shortly after midnight. Just a small handbag was all that was allowed as far as luggage was concerned.

"There were two or three other persons in my parents' party. They went in a single file and were not permitted to talk. As they approached the border line they once had

to hide in the bushes because the smuggler thought he heard somebody coming. After that everybody had to take off their shoes until they were in Spain. Then the guide showed them the way to the Spanish border control house and left them. This was early in the morning.

"The Spanish border officers were extremely arrogant and generally returned people to France if they did not have a French exit visa, although they had a Spanish visa. People without Spanish visas were jailed. On that Sunday, too, when my parents had to wait in line to be examined, everybody was returned to France. By pure coincidence, though, an American Vice-Consul was passing through Spain in his car and happened to stop at this border patrol house. My mother begged him to influence the Spanish officer on their behalf and the Vice-Consul did what he could. When my parents were called in to the officer he refused to let them pass. Indeed he refused about twenty times whilst my mother tactfully and insistently invoked all arguments from the United States to the Nobel Prize. Then suddenly the officer said they could pass.

"My parents went to Barcelona by train and rested for a few days. From Madrid they flew to Lisbon and there were no further difficulties."

Otto Meyerhof and his wife sailed from Lisbon on October 16, and arrived in New York the 25.

On November 5, I was able to write to Alan Gregg that Meyerhof was then with us and that his appointment had been formally approved.

It was a source of deep distress to Professor and Mrs. Meyerhof that their son Walter was unable to escape with them. He proved, however, well able to take care of himself and reached this country in April of the following year. He continued his training in physics in our Graduate School.

Never, but once, did Otto Meyerhof's serenity forsake him. That, for a brief time only, was in Bordeaux after a most exhausting ride from Toulouse in a train over-crowded with soldiers and refugees. At all other times he maintained complete confidence in a happy outcome. "Whatever happens, they can never reach our souls." He solaced himself by reading in the libraries at Toulouse, Marseille and by work and reading in the little Marine Biological Laboratory at Banyuls-sur-Mer.

He felt a deep sense of indebtedness to the Unitarian Service Committee and in a letter to its Executive-Secretary written from Philadelphia on Christmas day of 1942 he wrote:

"When the history of the American liberation of Europe from the Nazi yoke will once be written, the role played by the heroes of humanity in the Unitarian Service Committee in France shall not be forgotten."

He signed himself "with greatest admiration and deepest gratitude".

The University of Pennsylvania counts itself fortunate in having had the privilege of acting as intermediary in his escape and particularly blessed because of his presence and influence here during 10 good working years.

Note (not mentioned): At the end of the year 1940, word came from Marseille that a French exit visa had then been authorized.