

## Stumbling Blocks

Dear Mrs. Shatil-Prager, dear Mr. Pragai, dear members of the Pragai und Shatil families, Mr. Steger, Ladies and Gentlemen

Over the last two years, both my colleague, Mr. Zimmermann of the Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation and I, have studied Eugen Prager's life. Mrs. Shatil-Prager, Mr. Pragai and Mrs Lemberger have given us a great deal of support in this undertaking and we would like to use this opportunity to express our sincere appreciation.

In the course of our work, we have come to know your father as an extraordinarily impressive person, a man of honour with a balanced judgement on the political issues of his day. Eugen Prager, who was born in 1876, spent his youth in Wroclav (Breslau). He became a commercial apprentice and like many young white and blue collar workers at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, he also committed himself to the trade union movement and social democracy. The SPD (German Social Democratic Party) fought against the exploitation and deprivation of rights of the workers in the German Empire; it was also the German party which most strongly condemned anti-Semitism. Eugen Prager worked as an editor on various SPD newspapers, e.g. in Cologne, Leipzig and eventually in Berlin. During the First World War he was a committed opponent of German war policies. For some years he joined the Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany when the SPD broke apart in a debate over war loans. However turbulent and full of conflict these years may have been; they were a happy period in Eugen Prager's private life: in 1915 he married Gertrud Friedländer who shared his intellectual and cultural interests. Over the next few years, they had three children: Ruth, Irene and Michael.

These were not easy days for social-democrat editors. The German middle classes considered them to be "unpatriotic scoundrels". Censorship of newspapers and prison sentences had to be accepted. Eugen Prager was spared nothing; even his call-up in 1917 was an act of revenge on the part of officialdom. In 1919, after the First World War, Eugen Prager moved to work for the central party newspaper of the USPD, "Freedom". During this period he wrote the book which even today is considered a standard modern history book: "The history of the USPD". In 1924 Eugen Prager was given a job which took him right to the heart of political Berlin: he was appointed secretary and editor of the SPD parliamentary party in the Reichstag. From 1928 onwards, he was also responsible for the evening edition of "Forward" ("Vorwärts").

Reading the many, more than one thousand articles, written by Eugen Prager during his professional career, makes clear what mattered to him personally: promoting the interests of workers in reading about education and culture, overcoming destructive nationalism and building a peaceful political system in Europe. Until the end, Eugen Prager opposed the increasingly powerful Nazi movement in his writings and articles. Here in Berlin, he witnessed the destruction of the first German democracy and had to look on as Nazi hordes took over the streets. As the secretary of the SPD parliamentary party, he witnessed the dramatic hours in the Reichstag before and after Hitler was named Chancellor of the Reich.

The Nazi takeover of power and the ban on the SPD meant more than the end of his professional career for Eugen Prager. As German Jews, he and his family experienced systematic exclusion and isolation from German society. Gertrud and Eugen Prager tried to carve out an existence for themselves and their children by taking a variety of jobs. For a while, Eugen Prager provided news from the Reich to Social Democrat papers in Czechoslovakia. In addition, he was in contact with party colleagues who belonged to émigré or resistance circles. This required courage. These contacts remained undiscovered, but in the following years he and his family were increasingly affected by the gradual deprivation of the rights of Jewish Germans. Let us simply consider the growing number of acts of harassment and humiliation – forced moves, boycotting Jews from certain parts of Berlin by means of the “Judenbann” (banning of Jews) or the ban on using public transport or having a telephone. Nor should one forget the years of financial exploitation and theft from German Jews, which was even extended to cover intimate personal items. This also reduced the chances of being able to leave Germany and start a new life abroad.

It was Eugen and Gertrud Prager’s wish to emigrate to Palestine. In 1937 they were able to visit their children who were already resident there, but had to return to Nazi Germany. Their daughter Ruth submitted a request for a travel permit on behalf of her parents, but in 1937 this failed to overcome bureaucratic hurdles. In early 1940, German emigrants and friends of the family in the US attempted to help Gertrud and Eugen Prager to emigrate to America. The requisite requirements had not been fulfilled when, in the autumn of 1942, the National Socialists decreed that no Jews would be allowed to leave the country and started preparations for transporting the Jews to the conquered territories in the East. In the icy winter of 1942, on 25<sup>th</sup> January 1942, Eugen and Gertrud Prager were deported to Riga together with 1049 other

Jewish inhabitants of Berlin, suffering dreadful conditions on the way. They were murdered on arrival.

What made Eugen Prager a special person, was his intellectual honesty and his unequivocal stand for a peaceful society, based on humane values. Another characteristic feature was that he had the courage of his convictions; even if he suffered disadvantages as a consequence. The National Socialists brutally destroyed the life plan of the Pragers which they had trusted the positive forces of German society would help them fulfil. But the Nazis could not stop their children from keeping their memories alive, nor could they exterminate Eugen Prager's thinking which survived in the form of his writing.

Before I conclude, I would like to let Eugen Prager speak for himself and I will quote, in slightly abbreviated form, from a New Year's letter he wrote to his daughter Ruth 68 years ago, in September 1938:

“[...] At any rate, the human species or what we call mankind is said to be several million years old – how short by comparison, is a lifetime. And life lived with complete awareness in what we call culture and civilisation [...] has only been around for a few thousand years; in other words, we only know the history of mankind which has been handed down to us in writing or in other forms, which is but a fraction of its actual existence. This is what I tell all those who lament the fact there is still no absolute justice, nor “eternal peace”, despite the Jewish Ten Commandments, despite Christian and many other ethics. It is already progress that evil-doing is longer outside good and bad as in the primeval origins of man and throughout much of ancient history, but that anyone committing a crime has to defend himself, even if he claims to have acted for good reason. And no doubt, there will be a day when even this pretext will cease to be valid.