

Jewish Emigration Training Gross-Breesen

Type of Hakhshara

vocational retraining

Founded

1935/1936

Opened

May 1936

Closed

August 31, 1941

Operating Area

207 hectare

550 acres of farmland, 160 acres of mixed forest, 75 acres of meadows and pastures, 10 acres of gardens

Areas of Training Offered

horticulture, home economics, woodworking, agriculture, animal husbandry gardening (fruits and vegetables); livestock production (cattle, pigs and goats); farming (grain, potatoes and beets); poultry farming (chickens); dairy production; carpentry; blacksmithing; forestry; home economics (sewing, cooking and baking)

Description

Already before the end of 1935 it was decided to found a non-Zionist emigration training center for German-Jewish youths, which would offer an alternative to the Hakhsharot. On January 16, 1936, the inaugural assembly was held at the Reich Representation of German Jews (Reichsvertretung der Juden in Deutschland or RV). Representatives from all of the major Jewish organizations in Germany were included on the board of trustees and the working committee, with the exception of the Zionist Federation of Germany (Zionistische Vereinigung für Deutschland or ZVfD). Besides the RV, it was mainly the Central Association of German Citizens of Jewish Faith (Centralverein deutscher Staatsbürger jüdischen Glaubens or CV), the Reich Association of Jewish Front-Line Soldiers (Reichsbund jüdischer Frontsoldaten or RjF) and the Association of German-Jewish Youth (Bund deutsch-jüdischer Jugend or BdjJ) who were crucial in establishing the training farm estate. Curt Bondy, a highly qualified psychologist who had made a name for himself in the Weimar Republic with his efforts to reform the juvenile penal system and who himself was involved in youth movements and the progressive education reform movement, was entrusted with the management of the estate and the intellectual, spiritual and character-building education of the young participants. The plan was to train up to 125 young people between the ages of 15 and 23 in agriculture, horticulture and the trades, or home economics for the female participants. The actual number of participants, however, varied greatly over the years. At the end of 1936, for example, just 70 trainees were living on the farm; by the summer of 1937, their number had grown to around 100. The intended goal was a communal settlement overseas, and therefore, establishing a long-term commitment to agriculture in the trainees.

After a long search, and for a lack of better alternatives, the RV leased the Gross-Breesen estate in the former Lower Silesia, around 30 kilometers (19 miles) north of Breslau. It was owned by the Polish-Jewish Rohr family, who had fled to Poland in 1933. The estate had already been used as a Hakhshara center by HeHalutz in 1930/31. The first trainees arrived at the estate training farm in early May 1936. The estate included a stately mansion, called the "castle" (Schloss), which housed the trainees and staff. It was surrounded by a large park, a spacious farm with stables, barns and

living quarters for non-Jewish farm workers (Instwohnungen), gardens and a secluded hunting lodge. Beyond that were the fields and forest. Despite initial concerns that the estate was too large and in poor general condition, the farming was so profitable that from June 1938, no more financial assistance was necessary.

Practical training in agriculture and horticulture was supplemented by theoretical lessons in animal husbandry, fertilization or crop rotation. Field work was reserved for the young men outside of the harvest. The instruction for male trainees also included training in carpentry, forestry and animal husbandry (cattle, pigs and goats). Young women were mainly trained in home economics, which included chicken farming. Work in the gardens was also mainly the responsibility of the female participants. Working in the cowshed, however, was mandatory for all trainees. Already in the first years of the training farm there were discussions about this unequal distribution of work, as well as the role of women in the planned settlement overseas. This may also be one reason why the intended goal of having an equal number of male and female trainees was never reached. While the majority of the younger trainees had never had any experience with everyday farm work, the older trainees were familiar with it through previous experience on farms or on other estate training centers and supported the teaching staff in both practical and theoretical training. The original training program also provided for the cultural and intellectual education of the participants so that they would not become "too countrified". In addition to lessons in foreign languages, math and biology, this also included introductory courses in classical music and literature—the canon of the educated middle class. To this end, there were musical evenings, discussions of current and world political events and the daily papers were available in the common area. Bondy's educational program also included weekly lessons in life skills, where questions of (everyday) co-existence and moral views were discussed and shared. Further central aspects of the educational program were character-building and a consciously "Jewish education", with these being closely linked together. It was hoped that a mindful relationship to Judaism and the Jewish community could serve to empower the young people, who generally had little to no Jewish religious background, in a threatening time of upheaval and change. Starting in 1937, external teachers temporarily came to the estate to teach Hebrew. Older interns and Ruth Scheier took on the task of organizing Shabbat and important Jewish holidays. Despite these efforts, it was not possible to establish a firm "feeling of Jewish community" in Gross-Breesen.

The initial emigration plan envisioned the Gross-Breesen trainees establishing a communal settlement in South America. In June 1938, six people from Gross-Breesen traveled to Argentina to settle in Avigdor, a colony founded by the Jewish Colonization Association. The hope that other trainees might follow these first settlers had been almost completely dashed by the summer of 1938, due to the restrictive immigration policies of the Argentinian government. In the end, only the settlement in Hyde Farmlands, Virginia (USA), where a group of nearly 30 trainees found refuge, lasted for several years (1938–1941).

Like many Haksharot, Gross-Breesen was destroyed in the November Pogrom in 1938. All male trainees over 18, Curt Bondy and the Jewish employees were imprisoned in the Buchenwald concentration camp for several weeks. The younger trainees along with the women and girls remained on the estate, which was temporarily managed by Ruth Hadra, group leader and Bondy's secretary, and Ruth Scheier. Although the training center was able to continue operating for the time being, the structure and conditions changed dramatically over the course of 1939. Formally under the auspices of the Reich Association of the Jews in Germany, Gross-Breesen was under the control of the Gestapo and the SD, and the Reich Security Main Office, created in September 1939. The pedagogue Walter Bernstein took over the management of the training center as Curt Bondy's

successor. In the summer of 1939, Gross-Breesen was at full capacity. With the start of the war in September 1939, the working hours were expanded and the training, theoretical lessons and free time were massively reduced. Nevertheless, Bernstein and other older trainees did their best to maintain community life. The discussions about religious and secular questions continued, the library was expanded and there were still occasional musical evenings. However, the Nazi's control became evident as small groups from Gross-Breesen were repeatedly ordered to work on other farm estates or forestry camps. On August 31, 1941 the Gestapo finally ordered the official dissolution of the Gross-Breesen emigrant training estate and its transformation into a forced labor camp. In October 1941, Walter Bernstein was relieved of his position as the director of the former training estate, and, together with his wife and child, assigned to the forestry labor camp Kaisermühl which he was to manage until he was deported to Auschwitz in April 1943, where he was murdered at the end of the year. The management of the forced labor camp in Gross-Breesen was taken over by a Mr. Hildebrandt starting in December 1941, who was renowned for his harassment of the remaining trainees. Food rations were severely reduced and work on Sundays introduced. In October 1942, the last residents were evicted from the "castle", and they now had to live in extremely cramped quarters in the farmyard. At the beginning of 1943, a Wehrmacht hospital was set up in the "castle". With the arrival of the first wounded, the remaining 25 trainees were permanently forbidden to enter the "castle". The last inhabitants of Gross-Breesen were deported to Auschwitz at the end of February 1943.

During the collectivization at the end of the 1940s, the estate became a state-owned agricultural enterprise of the Polish People's Republic. The current owner bought the property in 1999.



Ansicht des Schlosses vom Park aus (Kleinbildabzug). (unbekannt, ca. 1940)
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Auszubildende in Groß-Breesen bei der Gartenarbeit (Kleinbildabzug). (unbekannt, ca. 1940)
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Ausschnitt des Kuhstalls (Kleinbildabzug). (unbekannt, ca. 1940)
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State of Conservation
partially preserved

The estate and surrounding area were subject to extensive renovations and newly designed. Under the name of "Pałac Brzeźno", there is now a golf and spa hotel in the castle and surrounding buildings.

The castle and the park are now considered cultural heritage landmarks. See:
<https://www.palacbrzezno.pl/>.

Related Organizations

[Bund deutsch-jüdischer Jugend](#) (associated)

[Central Association of German Citizens of the Jewish Faith \[Centralverein deutscher Staatsbürger jüdischen Glaubens\]](#) (sponsor)

[Reich Association of Jewish War Veterans \[Reichsbund Jüdischer Frontsoldaten\]](#) (associated)

[Reich Association of the Jews in Germany \[Reichsvereinigung der Juden in Deutschland\]](#) (sponsor)

[Reich Representation of German Jews \[Reichsvertretung der Deutschen Juden\]](#) (sponsor)

Related Persons

[Angress, Werner T.](#)

[Bondy, Curt Werner](#) (director)

[Bernstein, Walter](#) (director)

[Cramer, Ernst](#)

[Scheier, Erwin](#) (director)

[Scheier, Ruth](#) (director)

[Weinberg, Albrecht](#)

[Wolff, Arthur](#)

Sources and Notes

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