
The German-Jewish Legacy: One Man's Dilemma and Solution

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I am a musician, a violinist, born in 1923 in Germany. My early youth was spent in Dresden, a highly cultured city which especially emphasized music and art. My parents, business people, introduced their two sons—my younger brother and me—to this artistic world. Music belonged to our daily life, all members of the family being active players. My father played the violin and viola and so did I, my mother and brother the piano. Many friends joined us to play chamber music, which became part of my general education and led to my life's occupation.

In 1933, when Hitler came to power, all this ceased abruptly, and nothing progressed in normal fashion thereafter. For various reasons my family was unable to leave Germany in time and so we were all deported. Of a rather large family I am the only survivor of the Holocaust, having lost my parents, brother, and others. My life was spared, and after the Liberation I took up music again, first in Paris, where I lived for three years. Later on I went to the United States for further studies. In my new adopted country I was able to fulfill my life's desire: to play chamber music. Only the United States could provide the right opportunities for this to come about. I became a member of a quartet in residence, which means being attached to a university with professorial rank. It permits devoting full time to study and performance of the fabulous literature which exists for the string quartet. Now, why all these explanations?

The world's most appreciative chamber music audiences are, of course, to be found in the countries where all this literature came from: Germany and Austria, both countries with terrible records against humanity during the last war. The compositions involved are by the so-called First Viennese School—Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven—and the Second Viennese School—Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern. Our quartet has played them all. I have taught them and they are very dear to me. They are my legacy from these countries. But doesn't

this very legacy at times become a terrible burden? Would I really want to go back to Germany to play for the people who murdered my ancestors, even members of my family? My own brother, a child prodigy like me, was one of their victims.

Unfortunately, one can scarcely survive as a working chamber music group without playing in Germany. It is our best market. A string quartet has a hard enough time making it: expenses are fourfold and profits have to be quartered. In truth it must be said that I was, despite everything, drawn to return to see where I had lived and to meet certain old friends who had survived, mostly members of mixed marriages: half-Jews. But to perform there and bow to audiences which would surely include people who had done me harm—that was another matter. So how did I manage?

All survivors have found their own ways of dealing with this question. In postwar Germany I myself first played the kind of music which the Nazis called “Degenerate Art,” music which had been banned and consequently not heard in Germany. It gave me considerable inner satisfaction to be the one to reintroduce this to the German public. Our quartet entered the German musical scene by playing in modern music festivals. The music heard there was either written by composers condemned by the Germans or by young non-German musicians. These emerged only gradually a group of young Germans who composed music of the sort which also would certainly have been banned as “degenerate” by the Nazis. These were *young* people, younger than myself, and this is the key point.

I hesitated meeting anyone older than I was. Older people *had* to have been members either of the Hitler Youth or of the Nazi party, depending on age. There was hardly any alternative. And very soon, when Germans I encountered realized that I was a deportee who had survived, they didn’t even attempt denying a part in the Nazi scene because they knew I wouldn’t believe them. The younger generation behaved very well—I’m referring now especially to young people with whom I came in very close contact through musical involvement. But at times it wasn’t easy, as I was frequently reminded of the past by lots of things. And there were difficult situations, such as evenings when the flowing beer brought out stories about the Hitler era from people who revealed themselves as Nazis. But with the passage of time this is disappearing. I have had German students in the United States who,

knowing what their parents may have been guilty of, must not have had an easy time dealing with me, whom they actually liked.

This makes up my German legacy. I still speak the language very well. I still go to Germany. I have found myself a circle of very wonderful new German friends, partly met in the United States of course, whom I visit in Germany or elsewhere in Europe. I am at ease in Germany when I perform there, when I teach there. But to stay longer than about a month is not possible for me. I somehow become very edgy and have an overwhelming desire to go somewhere else. Naturally, not to Austria, which irritates me even more, but there still are Switzerland and France—the country where I lived after my liberation—and of course, the rest of Europe and the United States. Here in the United States I got my great chance to rescue everything which was denied me and nearly prevented altogether through the Nazi period. I was taken in, helped, and was still able to live a full and very fruitful life. Once again, what I have absorbed from Germany in literature, in music, and in art has ripened by living in another country, and this enables me to enjoy it to the fullest. Perhaps it has even helped me to forget that which it might otherwise recall. This is my story, my solution to the dilemma.