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# The German-Jewish Legacy in America: A Second-Generation Perspective

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What remains of the postwar German-Jewish legacy in America has largely become embedded in the classic flow of American immigrant history. This transformation occurred quickly. For example, in the 1950s and 1960s the dinner conversations at my parents' home still dealt with immigrant-related topics like *Wiedergutmachung* (German reparations), the politics of Willy Brandt, and the board meetings of the Leo Baeck Institute in New York. By contrast, just one generation later, my own family's dinner table conversations—at least when they reach above the din of our two-year-old—tend to focus on issues of environmental pollution, U.S. public policy, and problems facing the American Jewish family. Moreover, whereas my parents' conversation included inflexions of German (particularly when they did not want me to understand), our discussions are usually in English, replete with American expressions.

The impact of my parents' German-Jewish legacy has diminished and blurred over the years. Moreover, I cannot easily distinguish between the effects of my parents' Holocaust experience and the influence of their prewar cultural heritage on my life, nor can I separate my own identity as a Jew with a Western European background from most of my Jewish contemporaries whose ancestors stem from Eastern Europe.

At first I thought that perhaps this is because I have become consumed by the day-to-day demands of work, parenting, and community life, and lack sufficient time for introspection and intellectual pursuits. (I am reminded here of Natan Sharansky's point in his recent autobiography, *Fear No Evil*, that it is in the prison cell—where one is bereft of all choices and freedoms—where it is easiest to contemplate the deeper, philosophical questions of life. With the innumerable choices and distractions of Western affluence, one tends to live more superficially, with neither the time nor motivation to pursue these crucial questions.) But I do not think this is the only reason, nor is it

simply that my parents tried to raise me as *ein amerikanisches Kind*, without the burdens of their own losses and immigration experiences. Rather, a philosophical shift has occurred from my parents' generation to mine. Despite a lifetime subscription to *Aufbau* (the German-Jewish weekly newspaper my father edited for over thirty years), I have come to view the German-Jewish heritage more as a great contribution to America (with its scientists, philosophical precepts, and communal leaders), than as a personal legacy which will directly guide my own family's values, orientation, or future identity. With a husband and children who do not share my own German-Jewish background (our children are adopted from Guatemala, which heightens the cultural differences), the passage of an in-depth German-Jewish legacy to the next generation would be difficult, if not impossible.

Some personal history will help emphasize my point. I was born in 1952 in New York City. My father comes from Berlin, and spent the war years first in the French army, then in two concentration camps, in hiding, and finally in an internment camp in Switzerland. My mother—technically a refugee and not a Holocaust survivor—left Germany for England in 1939 as a chambermaid and worked her way to the States in 1940. Seven years later, my parents met in New York and married. I am their only child. As we lived in the heavily immigrant section of Washington Heights, with many of my parents' friends also coming from Germany, I felt comfortably surrounded by a subculture of liberal thinking, largely nonobservant German-American Jews. This was New York City shortly after the war, with its distinct and often eclectic immigrant neighborhoods, when the scars of the Holocaust were still fresh and big-city life could tolerate many subdivisions within its large and growing Jewish community.

Thirty years later and living in middle-class suburbia outside of Baltimore make all the difference in the world. Culturally, I still feel very tied to the history, traditions, and future survival of the Jewish people. But the direction of my involvement has changed radically: I have come to focus on the Jewish community as a whole, rather than on any one segment. Equipped with a master's degree in Jewish communal service and a Ph.D. in social work, I now serve as the executive director of Baltimore's Jewish Family Services, which is dedicated to strengthening Jewish family life, and to alleviating the pain and suffering that persist in our community. Daily we confront the effects of

domestic violence, chronic depression, disability, and death. As the need arises, we also work with Holocaust survivors and their families as they confront normal life-cycle stresses or more severe problems which have been caused—or augmented—by Nazi terror and devastation. But I have learned that most of the tragedies we face know no boundaries between Jews of Eastern and Western European background, or between former immigrants and the American-born. In my work, these cultural and historical differences have become largely irrelevant. Similarly, in the broader debates within the meeting rooms of Baltimore's Jewish Federation—be it on domestic politics, the Middle East, or a preferred curriculum for Jewish education—there is no separate, distinctive German-Jewish perspective which is considered. In fact, except for the charity funds and occasional gatherings sponsored by the *Landsmannschaften* of German Jews themselves, in most American communities there is little organized activity left to mark the German-Jewish immigrant experience of the 1930s and 1940s.

One cause for the dissolution of a distinctive German-Jewish legacy in American life pertains to the sociology of a minority-within-a-minority. Particularly outside the big urban centers of Jewish life, where there are not many Jews concentrated to begin with, any further subdivision of the Jewish community is often regarded as antithetical to the unity needed for us to survive as a people. Increasingly, the American melting-pot mentality seeks to fuse us together into a single American Jewish community. Other issues in contemporary Jewish life related to the Middle East, the changing Jewish family, or the newest Jewish immigration from the Soviet Union, seem more important and have dominated our attention.

In some ways, this saddens me. As the immigrant generation dies, all of us will lose the texture, insight, and living testimony this group brought to the American experience. Soon there will be no more Holocaust survivors around to speak with young schoolchildren and community groups and “tell what really happened.” No more first-hand accounts will be available to vividly portray the complexity and richness of German-Jewish life before the war. The responsibility to “witness” for each other and our society at large will fall to second- and third-generation Jews, to museums, literature, and films, and to formal community commemorations determined to keep the memory of our collective past alive.

This will be a difficult task, despite all good intentions. As a result, whatever efforts we undertake to preserve the legacy of German Jewry will probably focus on the years of Nazi terror and destruction, rather than on the philosophical or cultural mores which preceded the war. The Holocaust still overpowers and numbs us; it overshadows pre-war history and binds all Jews together in a single destiny.

In a sense, Hitler successfully destroyed the prewar German-Jewish legacy in America. Like most other German-Jewish children of survivors, I identify much more closely as a child of the Holocaust than as a descendant of Goethe, Schiller, or the German-Jewish *Bildung*. The lessons of the war dominate my thinking and my religious practice much more than the thinking and practices with which my parents were raised. Specifically, it is to the war—not the cultural or philosophical precepts which preceded it—that I look for my rationale for political or social acts of conscience. Thus, my past volunteer work on behalf of Indochinese refugees and the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa stems more from the lessons of my parents' oppression under the Third Reich than from their ideology or political orientation before 1933. My family's Holocaust and post-war experiences have also helped propel my commitment to professional social work and service to the Jewish community as a whole.

What was lost as a specific legacy of German Jewry among its survivors and their families has become a common heritage for world Jewry, for all of us to share. To keep alive our German-Jewish past, local Jewish communities must develop school curricula, public forums, and historical exhibits from which to build our common future. Despite its terrible destruction, the war forged new bonds and a new sense of unity. In the postwar generation we have all become *amerikanische Kinder* whose joint legacy in the Holocaust has created a new spirit and commitment to life. Fifty years after *Kristallnacht* this dedication is just beginning.