
The German-Jewish Legacy Beyond America: A South African Example

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I was born in South Africa, and it was in that shaping context, as a child of German-Jewish refugees who had come to the shores of that country during the 1930s, that I experienced the German-Jewish legacy. Over the years, of course, my understanding of the meaning of that legacy has changed and deepened as it became more conscious (and the task of this essay will be to briefly delineate that evolution). But from a child's emotional point of view, to the extent that one can distinguish the specifically German-Jewish components from the general experience of growing up Jewish, it was initially a rather embarrassing inheritance.

It was, no doubt, my parents' German accent, at once comfortingly familiar yet clearly foreign, which first alerted me to the "alienness" of my background. To the outside world (or so I believed) the fact of *German* foreignness was especially unforgivable in the years following World War II. In the first few weeks of primary school, when asked where my parents came from I murmured "Australia." How could a child, even around 1950, acknowledge German origins, admit that in some way *he* had been the mortal enemy? Of course, already at that age one intuited the difference well enough but it was well-nigh impossible to articulate that, no, one's parents were not the enemy but the victims, and that defining *them* as archetypal Germans was an obscene irony.

There was, in fact, a double-bind in such a predicament. For, if from the child's point of view being Jewish did not exempt one from the stigma of Germanness, very often in the eyes of our conventionally bigoted, lower-middle-class teachers, Germanness was a synonym for Jewishness. This was brought traumatically home to me when a particularly sadistic manual-training teacher descended upon me and scolded me for crude behavior (what exactly I had done remains a mystery to this day). He was fully aware that I was Jewish—in South Africa a finely tuned ethnic radar is indispensable—and it was this

animus which informed his question: "Where do your parents come from?" Upon hearing the answer he proclaimed loudly for all to hear: "That accounts for your manners."

At other times, the anti-Semitic intent was less veiled and the anti-German, anti-Jewish thrust explicitly fused. One day, in the middle of a science class, the teacher settled his gaze directly at me and asked why I believed the Second World War had been fought. Without waiting for a reply he himself provided the enlightening answer: "Because of the Jews, Aschheim, because of the Jews."

These kinds of incidents pushed me ever deeper into the Zionist Youth Movement (in South Africa—unlike the United States—a vibrant "counter-institution" expressive of an oppositional Jewish youth culture) and at the same time into an increasingly critical stance towards the overall system of racial injustice in South Africa.

To what extent was this sensitivity influenced by the cultivated liberal-humanism of German-Jewish *Bildung*, that inheritance to which this symposium is dedicated? Only, I think, in subtle, perhaps even subliminal ways. For that legacy (forged over a century-long struggle for emancipation) was largely the product and ongoing activity of the Jewish intelligentsia: like my parents, the overwhelming majority of the approximately 6,000 German Jews who immigrated to South Africa in the 1930s came from the (initially almost destitute) commercial, nonintellectual classes. Presumably the refugee German-Jewish intellectual elite carried out a voluntary selection process, rejecting even the possibility of going to what they probably conceived as the remote *kulturlos* jungles of Africa. The manifestations of German-Jewish *Bildungsideologie* in South Africa accordingly bore little resemblance to the cultural and intellectual productivity, the moral and critical acuity which, according to the recent work of David Sorkin [*The Transformation of German Jewry, 1780-1840* (1987)] and George L. Mosse [*German Jews beyond Judaism* (1985)], marked the tradition at its best.

When *Bildung* did manifest itself in South Africa, it did so usually in other, more familiar, ways: as the cultivating complement to successful commerce, the refining twin of Jewish *Besitz*. This is not meant disparagingly. As they rose up the economic ladder some German Jews did indeed become pioneering patrons and practitioners of music, theater, and the fine arts, contributing to South Africa's cultural development

(and here their European background doubtless stood them in good stead). But their numbers were not all that significant and, in any case, these kinds of activities, more often than not, served to tame and aestheticize the vaunted critical and moral edge of the *Bildung* legacy.

But the category of *Bildung*, this symposium's frame of reference notwithstanding, does not properly reflect the historical reality of the German-Jewish relationship to South Africa. For it was, quite simply, *gratitude* which was the most characteristic (and understandable) response of these German-Jewish immigrants to their adopted country. At a time when the gates of the world had been closed to them, South Africa had given them refuge. The warmth of the welcome and the gratitude they felt was reinforced by the professional and financial success many of them rapidly achieved in an expanding and industrializing economy: they too had acquired a vested interest in things as they were. This was a powerful combination limiting, if not entirely eliminating, any inclination to generalize from their own experience of racial injustice in Germany and protest against what was happening in South Africa.

For all that, I believe that this German-Jewish background did play a conditioning role in the larger sensitizing process. In the first place, the imprint, brutality, and mystery of Nazism and the Holocaust have been with me ever since I can remember. These were topics that were never really analytically confronted but they were, nevertheless, somehow omnipresent, palpably transmitted through my parents' revulsion for Germans and things German (my father adamantly refused reparation money), their reminiscences about the move from Germany to South Africa, and an unstated (but quite unambivalent) message about the fragility of the Jewish condition. Unlike my parents I was not beholden to South Africa, as a refugee and I could therefore translate this sense of vulnerability into quite different Jewish and general terms.

In the first place, Zionism seemed almost self-evident, the obvious solution to the Jewish plight of victimization, the basic precondition for the recovery of a constantly threatened dignity. At the same time, it went naturally hand in hand with a postadolescent awakening to the fact that one's own society was based upon an all-encompassing racial victimization of its nonwhite inhabitants. Not all children of German-Jewish immigrants, by any means, saw things this way. But in my own

case these sensitivities were, surely, colored by the cadences and emotional texture, if not the overt ideology, of a first-generation German-Jewish home. This too presumably provided some of the affective background for a later awareness of the ironies of victimization implicit in my own chosen Zionist solution, an awareness made conscious in great part by discovering the writings of German Zionists like Robert Weltsch and Martin Buber—*Bildung* intellectuals who brought that critical humanizing tradition to bear on their own Zionism.

With all their distaste for Germany my parents, like other new arrivals, carried Europe with them in a way that the Litvak majority of the South African Jewish community never did. This went beyond any ideological stance and reflected, quite simply, inherited reflexes and childhood habits revelatory of the cultural tastes and preferences of almost all German-Jewish homes. It was transmitted in a variety of ways. My father would, for instance, effortlessly and quite unself-consciously, reel off reams of (to me, rather incomprehensible yet strangely attractive) poetry from the inevitable Goethe and Heine. Our house rang with the songs of Josef Strauss, Richard Tauber, and Marcel Witrich, marvelous tenors whose 78-rpm records we possessed in abundance and which set the foundations, no doubt, for a later, enduring passion for German classical music. (There was a hidden, compounding irony here. I always took my father's "Germanness" for granted. His great warmth and humor seemed, indeed, to point to the fundamental inaccuracy of the "stiff *Yekke*" stereotype. It was only years after his death that I discovered he was born an *Ostjude*, a Galizianer who had come to Kassel as a small boy and, like so many others, elegantly combined these two inheritances! The fact that he had chosen never to reveal those origins was made even more poignant by the fact that I learned all this as I was completing my dissertation on the problematic interdependencies between Eastern and Western Jewish identity!)

My receptivity to German and German-Jewish history and culture springs, then, from these domestic roots. I have never doubted that essentially biographical and existential impulses were behind my later scholarly interests—understanding the nature of the German catastrophe and the complexities of the German-Jewish experience. The impulse to study the German world flowed from the dual desire to

comprehend (and in some way perhaps perpetuate) the lost reality from which my parents came and, at the same time, to grasp what had made Nazism and the Holocaust possible. To a young mind, part of the fascination of German culture lay in its compelling, although at that stage still quite incomprehensible, combination of the profound and the demonic (I only discovered Thomas Mann's explanation of the *necessary connection* between the two in his *Dr. Faustus* much later). Not yet able to penetrate the esoteric language in which they wrote, to my uninitiated, adolescent ears, names like Kant, Hegel, and Nietzsche possessed a kind of magic, an alluring and almost evil ring, resonant with the promise of dark and dangerous brilliance. The questions and fascination persist to this day.

But there is still another level, pertinent to this symposium, which must be mentioned. Since student days I had, quite unconsciously, equated what I valued most in German thought with what I later understood to be the legacy of German-Jewish humanism. What was most attractive in German intellectual and moral life turned out, in most cases, to be linked to its German-Jewish component. Even if one had not really read them, the giants of this legacy (Marx, Freud, and Einstein) were heroic precisely because they were universal men, makers of modern secular thought and yet, in their different ways, quintessentially (or at least socio-psychologically) Jewish, embodiments of a humanizing, moral, and rational impulse. In a sense this was to be expected—everyone's formative intellectual experiences surely included these figures. But a similar elective affinity applied also (and still does) to the endless other examples of German (and Central European) Jewish cultural and intellectual creativity, to the bewitching names and works of people as diverse as Gershom Scholem, Ernst Cassirer, Theodor Adorno, Franz Kafka, Georg Simmel, Franz Rosenzweig, and Georg Lukacs (to name but a few from just the present century). These, rather than French or British thinkers, acted as magnetic, natural models. Similarly it was the work of post-Second World War German-Jewish or Central European exile-intellectuals such as Hannah Arendt, Jean Amery (originally Hans Meyer), Paul Massing, George Steiner, Raul Hilberg, Leo Strauss, George Mosse, and others that seemed to be most relevant: in the post-Holocaust era they were as much the incarnation of the German-Jewish spirit as they were chroniclers of its disappearance.

Rationally seeking the roots of irrationalism, clinging onto the humanizing fragments of an always vulnerable culture—this is what the German-Jewish legacy has come to mean. To be sure, the totality of the actual German-Jewish historical experience must not be romanticized as the undiluted expression of this spirit (it incorporated much that was simply human, all too human, and some things which were even mean and small-minded). But now that it has been physically extinguished, it is surely this fragile humanizing sensibility, independent of any particular time or space, whose legacy we should take care to preserve.