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## *Bildung*: Was It Good for the Jews?

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Memories of my German boyhood are composed of a series of very concrete images which do not encompass an abstraction like *Bildung*. That can only be derived by interpreting those memories from hindsight. Happily as a boy I recall almost nothing of the Jewish obligation for *Bildung* which so impresses Professor Mosse. I recall parades in which I could hear the sound of hobnailed boots on cobblestoned streets long before I could see the columns of uniformed men. To me it was stirring, the kind of *Bildung* I most appreciated as a boy. I remember the interim period of freedom when the Jewish children were no longer able to attend regular school and the Jewish school had not yet been organized. Such happiness could not have come from a child much concerned about *Bildung*. I recall my father's twice-weekly sessions to teach my sisters and I to read Hebrew. Surely that was not part of the *Bildung* process, because I couldn't wait for them to end. Yet I do recall hearing the word *gebildet* even *sehr gebildet*. It was usually spoken with awe by my mother to describe someone she greatly admired.

I think I can be more helpful describing how that reverence for *Bildung* worked itself out among us children in America. I was about nine years old when we arrived in Hoboken. My father, who was among other things a good Hebraist, enrolled me in a yeshiva, I think less for religious reasons than to keep me out of my mother's hair. In Germany the ban on *shechita* served as a kind of final blow to their fragile Orthodoxy. Few families in Ludwigshafen could afford the kosher meat imported from the Saar, and my family was particularly hard-pressed. Unlike Chaim Potok, I found the world of the yeshiva alien and difficult to adjust to. It was automatically assumed that as a German I was a good fighter, which gave me a full year of unearned peace. It ended when someone sought to test the proposition and found me vulnerable. It may be those rounds of trouncing in which each classmate needed to separately prove his mettle which turned me to things cultural. I may literally have been beaten into it.

There is no precise one-word English equivalent for *Bildung*. The term “educated” or “cultured” does not yield its precise meaning, which relates to a process of cultural and educational self-actualization, of becoming, morally, culturally, and professionally, what one ought to be. My sisters and I were raised with such an “adoration” of culture and education, but I am not at all certain it that stems from our early German-Jewish background. We share none of the Middle European pretentiousness regarding *Kultur*. We are better educated, and so are my colleagues and friends who are the children of East European parents. They are quite as *gebildet* as we, although we had a headstart. It was in the air we breathed. We knew the works of various cultural carriers, instrumentalists, writers and thinkers, the way the others knew baseball statistics. But somewhere there was a great catching up, and today Jewish “culture vulturism” has no national label. It convinces me that the *Bildung* concept is not exclusively a German-Jewish value but is historically linked to the urban/urbane cosmopolitan “high” culture which developed among post-Emancipation Central European Jewry. Its principal nexus was in the remarkable cultural axis anchored in Berlin, Vienna, Prague, and Budapest which spun off cultural heroes like Freud, Einstein, Kafka, and Herzl. (My parents’ litany was much longer.) These represent only the tip of the iceberg. Today that Jewish cultural effervescence can be as readily located in New York or Washington (perhaps Moscow and Jerusalem too) as it once was found in the cities of Central Europe.

Even if it were possible to assign such a specific character to German Jewry, I would still be hard-pressed to discover to which segment it belongs. If one learns anything from a recent study of Washington Heights in New York City (Steven Lowenstein, *Frankfurt on the Hudson*) it is how dangerous it is to generalize about German Jewry. It was in fact a multilayered Jewry. On one level there were the Jewish scientists from Central Europe who made such a notable contribution to the Manhattan Project, on another there was the Breuer community, which became even more pious in America. In between there were thousands of ordinary people, many of whom, like my parents, had been declassed by a precipitous uprooting. If the children of such parents were ambitious, I suspect that the spirit of “catching up,” of recovering lost status, had as much to do with it as the spirit of *Bildung*.

Withal, there was something distinctive about the comparatively small Central European immigration coda of the thirties. In short order it furnished itself with a relatively complete organizational infrastructure which included a full complement of religious congregations, and social work and philanthropic agencies. It has done better in recording the history of a splendid lost community than have the eastern Jews through YIVO. But then the Leo Baeck Institute has received German reparations money and private grants from German firms. But one should take note that the new president of LBI is the son of eastern Jews who specializes in the history of Sephardic Jewry. Amalgamation has been the order of the day, and it has become increasingly difficult to identify a separate German-Jewish subculture.

The German-Jewish immigration of the thirties enriched the nations which received it, the United States, Britain, and Israel (Palestine). It gave them a population supplement uniquely equipped to handle the problems of modernity. Everywhere German Jews became, in disproportionate numbers, members of the existing modernizing elites without whom no complex modern society can operate. Some go as far as attributing the postwar American explosion in technology and culture to the intellectual capital carried in the baggage of the refugee scientists, scholars, and sundry cultural agents, most of whom, at least according to the Nuremberg Laws, were Jewish. Germany's loss was America's gain.

There may be some measure of truth in such self-aggrandizing assessments, but I suspect that the contribution was made after the German-Jewish spirit was altered so that it could work in America. It is only in that sense that we can think of it as still being alive in America. I find discomfort in speaking of the "German-Jewish spirit in exile." It gives that spirit an autonomy and particularity it did not possess in reality. For me German-Jewish civilization marks a moment in the millennial history of the Jews, a particularly brilliant one, although Jewishly not untroubled. It was another diaspora in a history full of diasporas. Its spirit does not vanish when that community is extirpated. It rejoins the larger stream of Jewish history, carried by survivors who bring those new ideas and behavioral modes which they have internalized. The host Jewish communities with which they have amalgamated do well to incorporate these ideas and modes as they have. They were learned at a terrible price.

Finally, we are all prisoners of history and do not have the power to choose which elements of a cultural legacy to bring forward. My parents, who adhered to a German-Jewish *Kulturgebiet* but were not German Jews, would nevertheless have been quite certain that there was a distinct German-Jewish culture whose assets they could have enumerated with pride. They would have spoken of their version of *Bildung*, self-discipline, will, energy, the crucial ingredients to gain mastery of a skill and complete the self. But alas, their son musters no such certainty. He is uncomfortable standing on the spongy ground of national character and detects an unhappy Teutonic ring to what they find so commendable. Discipline and “stick-to-itiveness” become in his Americanized mind identified with rigidity, humorlessness, and over-intensity.

I note among the survivors of my father’s generation that they are a distinct, recognizable type, similar values, walks, inability after more than four decades to distinguish between the *v* and *w* sounds. But the children are virtually indistinguishable from their American-born peers. Most remain intensely achievement-oriented but are somehow more comfortable in their skins.

They are “looser,” less German, and often more Jewishly Jewish. That brings us to the crucial question of whether *Bildung* was good for the Jews or Judaism. Professor Mosse may be on to something when he suggests that *Bildung* had become a normative and, in some measure, a central expression of the Jewishness of German Jewry. But I am uncertain whether that is “good for the Jews.” In my mind *Bildung* is related to Jews in that they cherished it. It was normative but not necessarily related to the traditional Jewish culture, which had its own aspiration for *lernen*. What we see is a new form of basically secular identity formation which gives high priority to intense individuation, autonomy, and the internalization of controls. That kind of person does not easily perceive himself as a member of a flock of which God is the shepherd. *Bildung* may yield civic virtue, but can it accommodate pious, believing tribalized Jews? Can the study of Jewish texts be accommodated? Can a demanding *Halacha*?

Finally, we need to come to terms with German-Jewish history. It was a community that was compelled prematurely to depart from the historical stage, so that we will never know whether the values on which it based itself, like *Bildung*, were sufficient to sustain a viable

Jewish culture. Because of the tragic nature of its demise there may be a tendency to idealize what was, to write a history which makes German Jewry in death what it was never in life. That would be a disservice to all, the living and the dead.

The cultural incubator which produced German Jewry no longer exists. Those fortunate to survive have had to adjust to other cultures. For some that adjustment has been full of pain. Many, like my parents, never again were able to live at ease in the world. But from a historical vantage, the greater tragedy is the destruction of a centuries-old cultural ambiance which produced a remarkably productive humanity. But before we berue what was lost in the transplantation, we do well to remember that it was a character fashioned by a host culture which also produced values which ultimately proved lethal to the Jewish enterprise. It places our loving talk of the German-Jewish symbiosis in limbo.

There is good reason to believe that the American Jewish achievement, which is based on an Americanized version of *Bildung*, will generate much more for both the host culture and for world Jewry and at a lower price. It does not require that the Jewish dimension of culture be so radically refashioned, although in some ways the solvent produced by an open American society is even more challenging for Jewish continuance. An easier America speaks, not of *Bildung*, but of pluralism. I think it offers a more workable principle on how Jewish life might be carried forward. *Wirklich, Amerika hat es besser* ("Really, America has it much better").