

---

# Thoughts About My German-Jewish Legacy

*Tom L. Freudenheim*

In a certain sense, I only found out I was a German Jew after I left home and went away to college. The awareness of being Jewishly “different” gradually came into focus at that time, accompanied by my learning the word *yekke* (from college roommates)—not previously a part of my family’s vocabulary. I also found that other Jews, presumably non-German Jews, had a real hang-up about what they assumed to be my sense of superiority over them and their backgrounds.

Looking back on this now, over thirty years later, I am reminded again of the irony. My father had taught us that, after Hitler, there really were no more German Jews or Polish Jews, Litvaks or Galizianers. Hitler (I don’t recall that we ever used the term “Holocaust” in my post – World War II youth) had created a new kind of obsolescence, different from what the Nazis may have intended for us: we had all become simply “Jews” without additional hyphenations. When I was a child, young boys (not girls!) still dreamed of growing up to be President of the United States. But I knew that, being foreign born, I was clearly excluded from such a goal, even if I saw it as an annoying technicality: I was a mere nine months old when I arrived in this country. I knew I had a different background from other people, because our home was filled with foreign things, and we ate differently. I knew I was different from other kids in my neighborhood, because my parents had accents and theirs generally did not, or because most of them were not Jewish and I was. It would be naive to say that I didn’t know we were German Jews, and yet the notion that this involved a more subtle subethnicity was not a part of my consciousness, even when I was quite aware of my family history.

My parents did not generally associate with other immigrants, except in those situations where they were helping people to resettle (e.g., the singular and now-notable group of refugees who entered through official U.S. auspices in Oswego, New York, not all that far from Buffalo, where some of the Jewish social service activities took

place). In part, this standoffishness may well have been one aspect of their German-Jewishness. Yet I believe it was also because my mother and father sought their primary associations in relation to the deep Zionist commitments which occupied them so heavily in the forties and fifties. They were also committed to being Americans, and integrating themselves into the fabric of their new community. Socializing with other German Jews—being part of a *kaffee klatsch* circuit—would have been in conflict with this goal. I don't recall ever having a conversation about the meaning of being a German Jew; but I recall many about being Jewish. And no father could more eloquently assist his children in writing the standard Americanism school essays that were the required fare of my youth.

We were intensely patriotic. We flew the American flag on every possible occasion; the party my parents gave in honor of their becoming American citizens was the single most important event of my young childhood. The parties in our home to celebrate the partition of Palestine, in November 1947, and the declaration of the State of Israel, in May 1948, were the two other major celebratory events of my youth, eclipsing even my brother's and my own Bar Mitzvah celebrations. And yet, thinking back on it now, I recognize in the American national patriotism something akin to what we know about German Jews in an earlier Germany.

Into these values, others were also mixed. Among them I would include standing up publicly and visibly for beliefs strongly held. This could involve making certain that the entire family was sitting up front in the synagogue at a service when Zionism-related issues were sermon topics, and then marching the whole family out in the middle of a sermon in which the rabbi would not take a strong pro-Zionist stance. Or it could mean picketing the local British consulate to protest Palestine policies. Or it might involve taking strong and public liberal stands during the McCarthy era. These attitudes do not especially conform to the conventional "good citizen" German Jew image—and I'm proud of that. Indeed, it was to some extent the oddly selective family value system, different from much that surrounded us, that gave us a sense of difference on which we prided ourselves. Perhaps this has analogues in the assumed arrogance of the German Jew. But we certainly never had a family ethos of pride in the mere fact of being German Jews!

If language can be seen as a unifying factor in conveying tradition, then my family's relationship to German was again complex. I was brought up in a home where only English was spoken. My father had learned English in his youth, and spoke it with the vague atavistic British accent of the educated European. My mother learned English by using it in her daily life. They were in their mid-thirties when they arrived in the States, so it would have been natural for them to converse primarily in German. But my father said that he did not want his children to speak the language of murderers!

That we should be expected to absorb the language of Goethe, Schiller, and Heine, somehow seemed a separate issue. It was as though simple genetic factors would enable me to recite "Kennst Du das Land" or "Im wunderschönen Monat Mai." Obviously there were still subliminal messages that selected pieces of our inherited culture were legitimate. Could we permit the murderers to rob us of this as well? I don't know that this question was ever adequately answered in my family. But determinism has its ways. I wrote one of my very first college papers on a comparison of how Heine and Hauptmann handled the revolt of the Silesian weavers; stumbling through the German, I relied mostly on English translations.

If I have to look at other such matters from which there seemed no escape, I would have to include my father's interest in art—which he had learned from Hermann Struck, having lived in the same house in Berlin. Did this lead me into art history? Since my father also learned his Zionism under Struck's tutelage, did his sense of the unity of the Jewish people derive from Struck's depiction of *Ostjuden*? My parents' dining room was covered by Struck etchings of those bearded Jews, who didn't look anything like family photos of *my* ancestors. In the late twenties, when my father was in the *Juedisches Altkunst* business in Berlin, it certainly also must have taught him, even before Hitler could, that there was more to unify Jews than there was keeping them apart. Was it coincidence that I was handling some of those very same pieces of Judaica over thirty years later in my museum work? My father's diary from his first trip to Palestine, in 1928, discusses the concept of a Jewish state with a full array of the good and bad people that every country has. This vision could not have admitted the social separations among "kinds of Jews"—such as are now helping to undermine the Zionist ideal.

Ours was definitely not the traditional world of *Bildung*, with its sure sense of higher levels of being. *Our* family culture was elsewhere. When we stood around the piano singing songs together, they were never Brahms or Schubert lieder, but rather the *z'mirot* we imagined *chalutzim* to be singing in Palestine at the same moment. My mother's favorites, George Gershwin and Cole Porter, were then (and remain now) carried over from when she had first learned to love them—in Germany. Can I trace my own interest in this music, not updated via Sondheim, to these roots?

*Bildung* smacks to me too strongly as part of the world of the privileged, who are born into their status. (Was it a construct to vie with the Renaissance notion of *virtù*, suggesting that we, too, might become Medicis?) Indeed, as I have learned in my travels, many Europeans believe they don't really have to know culture. They are considered cultivated, by themselves and by many Americans, simply because they are European. I reject that. Culture and education come from immersion and work and commitment, not from some geographic or genetic superiority. If genetics is an unacceptable determinant for those who almost succeeded in exterminating us, why should we buy into it? I don't know that the Frankfurt Jew can necessarily be considered any more *gebildet* than his Warsaw cousin. Even as a code word for "the right degree of assimilation" it would still pose problems; on whose judgment will we rely to figure out how far that assimilation ought to go?

My skepticism about these issues must be viewed alongside an extensive family archive, mostly from my father's side, including not only the usual funky photos, documenting the appropriate *bürgerlich* nature of the family, but also papers and diaries, and a detailed family history which my father wrote over the past sixty years. I don't know that any of it testifies to the primacy of *Bildung* as a significant issue. My grandfather writes about his business supplying veneers for the new Reichstag a century ago; about being in a restaurant with Johann Strauss, who played the piano while people danced. And he uses that strange German-Jewish mix of words that assures us he did not speak Yiddish (God forbid!). Our loyalties were not toward the concept of *Bildung* or any specific set of German-Jewish values, but rather toward the immediate family and *k'lal Yisrael*.

In enumerating those overriding values which guided my parents in this country, and continue to guide me, I am struck by their being

Jewish, rather than specifically German-Jewish. Perhaps that is only a reflection on my parents, who were probably conflicted about these matters, even when they could articulate opinions about them with great clarity. A list might include:

- A concern for history and the past, not to play at nostalgia, but out of a genuine conviction that this is an essential part of self-knowledge (my father often quoted the Delphic oracle's *gnauthi seauthon*—"know thyself").
- A commitment to working with the Jewish people. For my parents' generation this meant primarily the establishment of a Jewish state, and concern for its continued viability. For me it involves reasserting the intellectual and cultural potential of the Jewish diaspora, which has been weakened by an exclusive concern with Israel.
- Involvement with the community at large. My parents gave of themselves to all kinds of community organizations, from the old Community Chest to hospital work to the Urban League. Sharing of yourself, not only financially, but also giving of your person, was always a central family value.
- Maintaining a commitment to the validity of the American liberal political tradition—both for its own value, and as heir to the most essential ethos of the Jewish tradition.

I don't know that any of these values can be especially claimed by the German-Jewish legacy to which I am heir, even while they may conform to the concept of *Bildung*. Yet I care deeply about conveying them to my children, who are now emerging as adults. Pride in who I am and in my personal/family history has to be without a sense of superiority to other Jewish traditions. Which is why I remain interested in my German-Jewish roots, while also concerned that they be viewed in a larger context.

Three of my grandparents (and all of their ancestors) are buried in Europe. The exception is my paternal grandmother; arriving in the States at the age of sixty, she also learned English and spoke it most of the time; she is buried in San Francisco. Her husband, who died long before the Hitler time, is buried in a peaceful grave in the Weissensee cemetery in Berlin (along with lots of other relatives.) Despite their current Berlin venue, most of these ancestors came from East Prussia, from a town near Posen. Now it's Poznan! My mother's parents both predeceased extermination possibilities, and are buried in the Jewish cemetery in the city where they lived, Beuthen (O/S). Now it's Bytom!

I've been to Weissensee several times; the last time (November 1983), I was there with my then-twelve-year-old son. I also visited Dachau with him. I've been to Beuthen a couple of times; the last time

(March 1988), I was with my then-eighty-one-year-old mother. I also visited Auschwitz with her. Does it really matter whether East Prussia and Upper Silesia are German or Polish? I know that it matters to the Germans and Poles. But need I care?

One of Gaughin's great Tahitian paintings is called, "Who are we? Where do we come from? Where are we going?" It's a good summary for the sense of values transmitted to me by my parents. Accompanied by my wife, I expect to continue conveying similar values to my children. But I don't know whether they are German-Jewish or Jewish, American or Western, humanistic or human. And I'm not certain that I care. That probably sounds like a kind of ignorance of which one ought not to be proud. Yet I'm quite convinced that Goethe would have approved. And I know my father would have. Which is why this essay is dedicated to his memory.