
The German-Jewish Legacy—and I: Some Personal Reflections

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This invitation to submit some autobiographical thoughts on the German-Jewish legacy in the United States, of which I am a beneficiary and (I suppose) a representative, is at once flattering and disturbing. The flattering quality is obvious, the disturbing one requires some explanation. What I mean to say is that for me, at least—and I am speaking only about, and for, myself—the very idea of a German-Jewish legacy contains something of an irony. I strongly suspect that among the wide diversity of responses you are likely to get to your invitation, mine will be something of an exception, though hardly unique, and will stand at one end on the spectrum of the German-Jewish experience. That spectrum included numerous Germans of Jewish ancestry for whom Jewishness was invisible and who accordingly, after living in the United States, have judged the “German-Jewish legacy” quite differently from most of their fellow refugees.

I

For a closer look at this irony, I must begin with my German childhood. My parents saw themselves as wholly assimilated into German society. Both were principled, and in the case of my father, aggressive, atheists. The earliest “information” I got about religion was anticlerical humor, and since the only religious people my father, who had grown up in a small town in Upper Silesia, had known were Jews, his stories were anti-Jewish stories. Indeed, I recall the very first time I heard the name of Karl Marx: my father told me that there was someone named Marx who had once said, “Religion is the opium of the masses”—and added that Marx had been right. Not surprisingly, my parents had officially left the Jewish faith, and lived in the Weimar Republic as “*konfessionslos*.” So, of course, did I, and without difficulties. Only Hitler made me into a Jew and, it turned out, not a very good one.

It is true that while we had gentile friends, most of our social life revolved around our large family—my father and my mother each had

four siblings, and a number of them lived in Berlin, or came to visit us there. Two of my cousins, Hanns and Edgar, were my intimate companions, especially on Sundays, when we went to cheer our soccer teams. But this did not make me Jewish. Now, since on soccer hangs more than one significant tale—significant to me—I shall stay with this apparently trivial theme for a while.

My cousin Hanns, three years my senior, was like me a supporter of Hertha B.S.C. while his younger brother Edgar, who was my age, stuck loyally with Tennis Borussia. Anyone who knows anything about the history of German *Fussball*—and I suspect that it is likely to be mainly other contributors to this symposium who do—will recall that some half a century ago, Berlin was a respectable soccer city. The principal local rivalry was between the two teams that my cousins and I supported, and while Tennis Borussia never really achieved national prominence, it proved an interesting, at times upsetting, competitor to “my” team. On the other hand, Hertha B.S.C. was in the nation’s eye. It fielded a sensational team in the late 1920s and early 1930s, when I was growing up. Four times, from 1926 through 1929, Hertha had managed to fight its way into the finals, only to be defeated. And then twice, in 1930 and 1931, they broke through and became German soccer champion. I listened to these last two triumphs on the radio, and then, from about 1932 on, as the glory somewhat faded but the team remained fairly competitive, I attended Hertha B.S.C.’s home games at the Hertha Platz, in the north of Berlin—attended them faithfully.

This fidelity did more than just provide entertainment for me. For one thing, it tied me to my father. All of his adult life, he had been an enthusiastic sports fan, both of soccer and of track and field. As a young man, when he had lived in Frankfurt for a time, he had supported the Frankfurter Eintracht, which in the years I followed the sport, boasted several players regularly called upon to represent Germany in the national team. I vaguely recall more than one visit from one of these players, none of them Jewish, in our apartment in Wilmersdorf. After marrying and settling in Berlin, my father had shifted his allegiance to Hertha B.S.C. In those years, when amateurs were amateurs, teams depended on voluntary helpers who could be counted on to do small chores for the club, and to accompany it as a welcome cheering section, on away games. My father did all that, and by adopting his interests—and his team—I came closer to this undemonstrative man

than I could have in any other way. Mine was a liberal, which is to say cool, rationalistic, German upbringing.

Soccer did even more for me than this. My parents and I did not finally manage to get out until April 1939, and during the six insane years I spent under the Nazis, my regular attendance at the Hertha games contributed, I am convinced, to my sanity. My father subscribed to not one but two weeklies wholly devoted to soccer, *Der Kicker* and *Fussballwoche*, and I studied these magazines thoroughly every Monday, obsessively fastening on their statistics and their exhaustive reports of games all across the world. This rather mindless reading helped me to escape to a playful reality by taking me, even for a few hours each week, away from the harsher reality of Nazi broadcasts, Nazi poster, Nazi teachers, Nazi fellow-students.

I attended these soccer games with my cousins, I said. But there were times in the fall when a high Jewish holiday would fall on a Sunday. What to do? It was understood that I would go to "important" games, but then I had no trouble proving to my parents that every game was important. In any event, my father and mother had no qualms about my going to see Hertha play on Rosh Hashana. My cousins, though, did not enjoy quite that much freedom. *Their* parents were what German atheist Jews used to call "three-day Jews." Wholly ignorant of Hebrew or of the Jewish religious tradition, they still felt obliged to buy tickets for the high holidays and attend synagogue three days in the year, understanding nothing. My parents poured scorn on such hypocrisy, and I was allowed to go to my game, if necessary alone.

But once, probably in 1935 when I was twelve, Yom Kippur fell on a Sunday, when there was another important game, probably a match between those archrivals, Hertha and Tennis. So my cousins conspired with me that they would go the synagogue while I waited for them outside, have their tickets stamped at the entrance and, pretending that they had forgotten their prayer books, came out again. To the important game we went. The episode caused a family crisis because my lovable and indiscreet cousin Edgar, who could not keep a secret, revealed our adventure on Sunday night. His parents were furious, but not mine. We three had no intention of having Hitler tell us who we were—or my aunt and uncle tell us what to believe.

Our alienation from Judaism, then, was absolute, and nothing the Nazis said, or did, changed that for my parents—or for me. We despised the Nazis as barbarians who had somehow taken power in Ger-

many and destroyed its culture. I know now, and need hardly be reminded, that this is a rather shallow view of the German past. Plainly, there was a good deal of denial in my view of things. But that is how I was brought up, and enjoyed being brought up. I found it gratifying, but not particularly remarkable, that in the desperate days of late 1938 and early 1939, when we needed help in every way (whether to hide our family silver or to obtain coveted passage on a ship that would get us out of Nazi Germany), it was several of my father's gentile friends who came to our rescue.

II

Coming to the United States from Cuba early in 1941, after more than a year and a half of waiting, I kept what I have called my alienation from Judaism firmly intact. There could be no question for me of converting to any branch of Christianity, for which my respect was no greater than it was for the Jewish religion. At the same time, though, there could also be no question of denying my Jewish origins. Too much had happened, too many had been murdered in the extermination camps, including my father's two sisters, to permit me such a craven evasion. But an acknowledgment of my origins was as far as I was willing to go. When I switched my "national" allegiance, I switched from being an atheist German to being an atheist American.

Again I proved my father's devoted son: he was vocally critical of those refugees who condescended to what they were pleased to call the thinness of American high culture, or had petty grievances against the country that had been willing to take them in. My father called such exiles, derisively, "*Beiunskis*"—that is to say, complainers who kept saying that "*Bei uns* in Frankfurt, or Breslau, or Cologne, things had been better." Under his guidance, I made my transition to being an American quickly—more quickly than he in important ways, for he never learned English very well. When, in 1976, I was asked to write a short autobiographical account for the *American Scholar* to celebrate the Bicentennial, I titled my contribution "At Home in America." This was not hyperbole.

Since my mother had a virulent case of tuberculosis, my father and I decided to migrate with her to Denver. Once there, I found associates outside the Jewish community. It seemed not without significance that while my mother was confined to the "National Jewish Hospital," the

principal donor to the hospital, whose picture hung prominently displayed in the front lobby, should be a gentile, William Randolph Hearst. In this spirit, the National Jewish Hospital conspicuously advertised its fundamental integrationist policy with a slogan proclaiming that it took patients who were unable to pay, regardless of race or religion. It was an attitude I could fully understand, and endorse.

Soon I had an opportunity to practice it. After two years of working at menial jobs as a shipping clerk and as an office clerk, I finally managed to attend the local college, the University of Denver, living at home and on a generous fellowship. It was not long before I made friends there—Christian friends, in fact Methodists. One day the closest of these friends invited me to come along to a meeting of like-minded young Methodists who gathered regularly every Sunday evening with their pastor, a young, civilized, philosophically inclined minister, for good conversation and good music. I went, was made to feel at home, and rapidly became a regular member of the group—to the chagrin of the editor of a local Jewish weekly, who, hearing about me from the pastor, wrote a long column in his paper denouncing me for forgetting my experiences under the Nazis. As though I could forget them!

My parents met some of my new friends and were greatly pleased with the company I was keeping. Indeed, when my father died prematurely in January 1955 at the young age of sixty-two, he left a letter of instructions asking that he be cremated and given a secular send-off. And he listed two men either of whom he thought suitable to preside over the ceremony—one was a Reform rabbi (who, it turned out, was out of town), and the other the Reverend Harvey H. Potthoff, the Methodist minister with whom I had become good friends by then. Up to this point in my life, the idea of the German-Jewish legacy in the United States was abstract, anticlerical, and a little self-serving. I have already observed that, far from identifying myself with Germany, I promptly became a good American. But if there was any content in the very idea of cultural transmission enforced by Nazi barbarism, it was simply that we, the refugees, had taken artistic, academic, literary, musical culture with us when we went into exile, leaving our former homeland a wasteland.

III

It was not until 1946, when I moved to New York to attend graduate

school to study political theory at Columbia University, that the idea of a German-Jewish legacy in my new country began to acquire some concrete outlines for me. I began to meet refugee intellectuals, read books by refugees, above all observed refugee professors at work. Not all of these were Jews, though most of them were. I delighted in them and their ideas; I shall never forget, for instance, the excitement with which I read Erich Auerbach's great historical study of literary realism, *Mimesis*, in the summer of 1954. But I welcomed such scholars as scholars, not as refugees; it would take me years before I could begin to notice, let alone assess, the particular contribution—both to clarity and to confusion—of these exiles from Hitler's Europe.

I say "clarity and confusion," for I discovered that it was a mistake to sentimentalize the refugees whom I was meeting and reading. No doubt, some of them like the remarkable art historian Erwin Panofsky transformed American scholarly life beyond cavil, and indeed beyond compare. I first heard him lecture in 1955, and met him a few years after that, when he was a very old man, though still full of life and brilliant puns—two unforgettable experiences. It was only appropriate that the friend who took me to visit Panofsky should have been another great refugee scholar, the historian's historian Felix Gilbert. No doubt, the influx of emigres of this caliber proved an exhilarating force in American cultural life. There were others like them, who were leaving the United States different from, and more interesting than, the way they had found it. But others, no less prominent, aroused my skepticism. I recall that while I was at Columbia, both as a graduate student and young faculty member, the Frankfurt School, with its representatives on campus, was all the rage. But I found its heady mixture of aristocratic cultural conservatism and schematic Hegelian Marxism in the end uncongenial to me, and became somewhat troubled even about its intellectual honesty.

I came to know one of the "Frankfurters," Herbert Marcuse, a most amusing and good-natured companion, fairly well during the 1950s and 1960s. He lectured at Columbia often and was my teacher Franz Neumann's best friend. I liked him, but I had very mixed feelings about his work. No question, the first half of his well-known study of Hegel, *Reason and Revolution*, was a salutary influence on me, and on others who had, like me, naively identified Hegel's worship of the state with Nazi political ideology. But in the second half of his book,

which followed upon the persuasive demonstration that Hegel was not an ancestor of Goebbels or Rosenberg, Marcuse tried to make European positivists like Comte into proto-Fascists instead. And here I could not follow him.

Still, it was a pleasing discovery that there were German-Jewish refugees with whom one could disagree and yet learn from—immensely. I am thinking particularly of my teacher Franz Neumann, who exercised such a powerful influence in what used to be called, a little grandiloquently, the department of public law and government. Almost everybody studied with Neumann. My official thesis adviser was the eminent political theorist Robert Morrison MacIver, with whom I was supposedly writing a dissertation on the political thought of the revisionist German Social Democrat Eduard Bernstein (another German Jew who had left Judaism behind). But MacIver was indifferent, even lazy, and gave me virtually no advice. Neumann was my man. He did not care for Bernstein, for he struck Neumann, a rigid philosophical left-wing Marxist, as too feeble, too accommodating a thinker. At the same time Neumann, who, with his bald head, hooked nose, and severe look strongly resembled a Roman senator—one could easily visualize him in a toga—was an intellectual democrat. If I wanted to work on Bernstein, and show him that Bernstein was indeed an interesting thinker, why not?

Neumann's impact, then, was marked even on those who, like me, did not share his political orientation. He was a gold mine of bibliography. His lectures were sprinkled with references to Max Weber or Wilhelm Dilthey, and it was virtually law among the graduate students in the department that if Franz mentioned a writer, we would have to read him. Here was an instance of what refugee scholars could do for Americans: bring to bear the legacy of European culture in American universities.

Yet it was a most varied legacy. While in the public law department Neumann was disparaging positivists from his particularly European perspective, in the sociology department, the Austrian refugee Paul Lazarsfeld was brilliantly presenting European positivist social science to *his* students. Another refugee, Hajo Holborn—not a Jew—would come down from Yale to offer exciting seminars in the history department, from a viewpoint different at once from Marxism and positivism. It was an electric atmosphere.

This kind of teaching was by no means a strictly one-way affair. One cannot read the often touching and always informative little book by refugees, *The Cultural Migration: The European Scholar in America* (1953), with autobiographical essays by Franz Neumann, Erwin Panofsky, Paul Tillich, and others, without recognizing that America's teachers were also America's students. Their assertions were more than mere politeness. Neumann, Panofsky, Tillich, and the others cheerfully acknowledged that the German academic tradition, while it held much of value for empirical, practical-minded Americans, also suffered from grave defects: a certain arrogance, remoteness from experience, what a later generation would learn to call elitism. Indeed, it was this fruitful interchange between the newcomers—to repeat, not all of them Jewish—and their American hosts that I first witnessed and learned to value at Columbia University. Those of us not born in this country dare not slight this symbiosis between two cultures, however partial, as we reassess the German-Jewish legacy in the United States. That legacy, impressive as it was on its own, did not survive without some drastic alterations.

IV

These observations, I am aware, offer a highly personal, hence necessarily somewhat restricted, perspective on the German-Jewish impact on the United States. Late in the 1960s, I had an opportunity to widen that perspective. I was invited to write a long prefatory essay on Weimar culture for a collective, edited by Donald Fleming and Bernard Bailyn, *The Intellectual Migration: Europe and America, 1930–1960* (1969). The editors collected fascinating reminiscences by great physicists like Leo Szilard and controversial social theorists like Theodor Adorno, no less fascinating memoirs about modern sociology by Paul Lazarsfeld, and illuminating papers on German and Austrian psychologists and psychoanalysts, literary historians and literary critics, architects, art historians, and philosophers at work in the United States. The volume, though bulky, does not pretend to be an exhaustive account, and it is grounds for a measure of pride, though not of complacency. Not all the legacy was, as I have noted, a productive one, but much of it transformed American culture, did America lasting service, and we all know the names of those who performed them. It gives me much poignant pleasure to think of them. In one matter, though, they failed, regrettably. They never managed to persuade Americans that soccer is a sport worth watching.