
The German-Jewish Legacy: A Question of Fate

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“The end of German Jewry has arrived.” Those words were spoken by Rabbi Leo Baeck, in 1933, a short time after Adolf Hitler became the leader of Nazi Germany.

And while those words may have brought sudden shock and surprise to a German Jewry whose base was in the large cities of Berlin, Cologne, Hamburg, and Frankfurt, and whose cultural orientation embraced the concept of *Bildung* and a failed effort at interfaith dialogue,¹ they were not so much of a shock to the Jews of Oberwesel.

My Oberwesel (although I have never really thought of it in those terms) was a Rhineland town whose essential claim to an affinity with *Bildung* was its nearness to the community of Bacharach, the setting of Heinrich Heine’s famous story, *Der Rabbiner von Bacharach*. It was a Jewish community that had never even debated Heine’s famous comment about conversion as a passport to civilization. It was a community that did not and would not entertain intermarriage. The only scandals concerned certain Jews, who from the 1850s and 1860s onwards began to disappear to a far-off and crazy place called America.

As a child (I was born in 1930), until I was six or seven, my playmates were mostly Christian, since there was but one other Jewish child of my age in the town. Prior to public school, I attended a Catholic kindergarten run by an order of nuns who showed me inordinate kindness. As hostility toward Jews became increasingly unpleasant under the Nazis, some of these nuns came by our house from time to time to show their concern for the Jewish families. Many of my immediate neighbors were Catholics, and although they knew about Jewish custom and ritual with an intimacy hardly imaginable in today’s world, that knowledge did not keep some of them from joining in the burning and the ravaging which marked the destruction of our synagogue and stores in November 1938. It also did not keep them from evicting me, six months earlier, from Oberwesel’s public school. On that day a Nazi official suddenly entered our classroom and shouted,

"All Jewish children out." A little girl, Ruth Lichtenstein (who would later survive Auschwitz), and I, the only two Jews in the class, were unable to understand this sudden expulsion and were shouted out of the classroom while jeers of "Christ-killers" and Werner-scourgers" followed us.

We were called "Werner-scourgers" because Oberwesel had been, during the Middle Ages (1287 to be exact), the site of a ritual-murder accusation. For over six centuries the supposed scourging and murder of a little boy, Werner, by Oberwesel's Jews had haunted every Jew in the region.

Little Werner was canonized and in the neighboring town of Bacharach a church was built over his remains, while his memory was kept alive through local catechetical teachings with the story of Werner often enacted.

His purported crucifixion was linked to that of Jesus. "Holy Werner's" Chapel, with its relief sculpture depicting the story, became a tangible and permanent invitation to anti-Jewish sentiment.²

The Jewish reaction in Oberwesel was to make certain that we would never use red wine during Passover, because when we opened the door for Elijah we might have to let a non-Jew come in and he might become infuriated at the sight of red wine or "Holy Werner's blood."

The Christian reaction in Oberwesel was to beat me up on Saint Werner's Day, even though neither I nor those who hit me really knew the reason for the beating.

Hence, in Oberwesel, physical closeness and intimate knowledge of Judaism did not generate either the search for a German-Jewish dialogue or the belief that we Jews were simply "German citizens of the Jewish faith." I do not mean to imply that we ever felt less German because of the Werner libel. My own identity as a German Jew was formed as a young boy when I was told that I had been named for my uncle Alfred, who along with his twin brother, Berthold, had been two of the twelve thousand German Jews who died fighting for the "Fatherland" in the First World War. My own grandmother had, at one time, been president of Oberwesel's town council. But certainly the all-pervading intensity of the centuries-old Werner legend had kept our self-consciousness as Jews at the highest possible level.

There was an intensity in this Jewish consciousness which was demonstrated by the Jewish life in our community. A marvelous descrip-

tion of this life has been provided by Hugo Mandelbaum, although his description was meant for Jewish life in southern Germany:

“The Jewish families of the village were close-knit. They shared each other’s joys and sorrows, and a helping hand was readily extended whenever necessary. All the men who were home at the time attended the daily *minyan*. If someone failed to put in an appearance on Shabbath morning he was surely ill, and everyone would visit him. They also felt obligated to pay a visit to anyone who had a guest from outside the village over Shabbath. On these occasions visitors were received in the *gute stube*. It was better furnished and had an aura of dignity and festivity. It was . . . “the home’s Shabbath suit.”³

This comfortable and spiritually beautiful world ended for me on November 10, 1938. As I have written elsewhere, I remember running with my grandfather to the synagogue in Oberwesel in the hours after the great devastation had been visited upon every Jewish community in Germany. It was something the Nazis would call the “Night of Broken Glass,” but that Germany’s Jews would ultimately refer to as the “November Jewish Pogrom.”

There, at the Oberwesel synagogue, I found a blackened, destroyed synagogue interior whose ark was violated and whose *bimah* had been hacked to pieces. My grandfather and I found the sacred scrolls of the Torah in the freezing waters of a nearby brook. They had been desecrated into shreds.

In December 1940, the great Austrian novelist Franz Werfel, newly arrived in the United States, wrote the following words in an *Aufbau* column:

“I am one of the untold many who had a previous life dissolved in a painful fog: my homeland, my house, my possessions, my family, my profession, and my name. Then it is important to answer the question “what shall we do?” Yet, I can only try and sketch the elements of that other question: “how shall we make sense of any of this?”⁴

For Werfel and for his generation of emigre intellectuals from Hitler’s Germany the latter question was paramount. He and his colleagues were the uprooted legacies of the “Weimar Spirit,” which like its national, political, and social personification, the Weimar Republic, had been an “idea in search of its realization.”

That the idea had succumbed to the demonic spirit of Adolf Hitler only made the dilemma of refugee German-Jewish intellectuals doubly painful. The failure of the Weimar Spirit meant for them an even great-

er tragedy: the failure of *Bildung* as a way of supporting a German-Jewish dialogue and as a way of “humanizing” the rampant nationalism of German society.

But back to Werfel’s first question: “What shall we do?” For my own family, which had emigrated in 1939, this question of practical survival was paramount. We German-Jewish refugees were fish out of our linguistic, economic, and cultural waters. And while the participants in the (by now clearly) one-sided German-Jewish dialogue tried to make sense out of it all in the pages of *Aufbau*, the majority of German-Jewish refugees sought to rebuild the shattered sense of our Jewishness. And because *Aufbau* was written in German, it made a statement to us that our German roots—cultural, linguistic, and historical—were positive elements of our identity. There was no need to jettison them simply because the brown-shirted criminals claimed those similar roots in an illegal and gruesome manner.

If we can in some way define the German-Jewish legacy I imagine we can do it in terms of describing what the German-Jewish refugees brought with them. I would describe it as a sense of “big-heartedness,” of refusing to despair even though they had been through the worst. I would further describe it as a work-and-worship ethic where no sacrifice was too great and where the festiveness of the Jewish home was maintained in its highest and most beautiful religious form.

And no, my father did not quote Goethe and we had in place of our obligatory set of great German classics numerous *siddurim* and *machzorim*. In America, during the war years, my father worked on Shabbat. The reason this *shomer Shabbat* (Sabbath observer) worked on the Sabbath was because he was employed in a defense plant. The salary for the day’s work went to charity. To work on the Sabbath to help defeat Hitler was a necessity but not one from which he chose to profit. That was part of his German-Jewish legacy.

Although we lived in Brooklyn, my mother and I would travel to Washington Heights on the weekend and visit family. We would exit the subway at 168th Street and walk to 180th Street and Fort Washington Avenue, where our relatives and friends lived. It would sometimes take hours for my mother and me to walk the relatively few blocks because she would stop along the way every few yards to greet people, have a cup of coffee in a cafe, and discuss in German the events

which masked the discontinuity of upheaval in her life and theirs: births, deaths, bar mitzvahs, and marriages.

There was an ethnic world in Washington Heights where, as the saying went, "You could tell a Yankee from a Yekke." On the Sabbath the men strolled in formal dress with hats, canes, and umbrellas.

My mother is still a part of this world at eighty-two years of age, although most of it is gone. She and the survivors of the German-Jewish refugee experience have recreated the consciousness of a kind of German-Jewishness but it has an American flavor to it. She and her friends will discuss their *Kaffee und Kuchen* sessions in German, but will discuss their synagogue service in English, because that is the language of the service.

And it is to American Judaism that, I believe, the German-Jewish legacy has contributed in a most significant way. I can address myself specifically to Reform Judaism, where not long ago the four heads of our movement were all German-Jewish refugees.

In the last analysis I would say that the German-Jews brought a certain style to the Reform movement, a way of looking at the value of something. Because of our experience as refugees, we brought a certain humanizing effect to Reform and American Judaism as well as a distaste for intellectual shabbiness and flashiness, so characteristic of the American style. Perhaps that is an extension of the *Bildung* concept.

Hans Steinitz, the former editor of *Aufbau*, has written that German-Jewish refugees are part of a *Schicksalsgemeinschaft*, "a community of fate." Indeed, that was the designation which united the diverse strands of German-Jewish life during the darkest hour of its existence under National Socialism and replaced the need for *Bildung*.

In the five decades since the end of German-Jewish life and its dependence on the notion of *Bildung* it has become apparent that all Jews are part of this *Schicksalsgemeinschaft* and that we all share in that sense of community and in its fate. That realization may be German Jewry's only lasting contribution and its most important.

1. For an excellent discussion of the effort at interfaith dialogue in the Weimar Republic, see Paul R. Mendes-Flohr, "Ambivalent Dialogue: Jewish-Christian Theological Encounter in the Weimar Republic," in Otto Dov Kulka and Paul R. Mendes-Flohr, *Judaism and Christianity under the Impact of National Socialism* (Jerusalem, 1987), pp. 99 – 132.

2. For a description of the Werner legend, see Willehad Paul Eckert, "Der Verhaeltnis von Christen und Juden in Mittelalter und Humanismus," in *Monumenta Judaica. 2000 Jahre Geschichte und Kultur der Juden am Rhein* (Cologne, 1984), pp. 158 – 159.

3. Hugo Mandelbaum, *Jewish Life in the Village Communities of Southern Germany* (New York, 1985), p. 48. For a highly interesting analysis of relations between Catholics and Jews in a southeastern German village, see Alice Goldstein, *Determinants of Change and Response Among Jews and Catholics in a Nineteenth-Century German Village* (New York, 1984).

4. Franz Werfel, "Unser Weg geht weiter," in Will Schaber (ed.), *Aufbau. Dokumente einer Kultur in Exil* (New York, 1972), pp. 265 – 269.