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# A German Jewish Past, an American Jewish Future

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I was eight years old when I left my native Kassel, and eleven when I departed Germany for good in March 1939. By then I had enjoyed five years of education, at the elementary and *Gymnasium* levels, under Jewish auspices, including three at the prestigious Philanthropin in Frankfurt. Together with private tutoring in Hebrew and an active religious life at home, this provided a solid basis for my personal and professional interest in Judaism ever after.

Another formative influence that I took with me at emigration was the profound sense of stability—in retrospect readily described as bourgeois—which I encountered in the homes and offices of my grandparents and older aunts and uncles. This stability left a far more powerful impression on me than did their obvious vulnerability to the sporadic outbursts of disorder and violence that characterized the emergence and consolidation of the Nazi regime.

A third component in my pre-American phase was my one and a half year stopover in England. Coming as it did at an impressionable preteen age, it had an impact on my personal and intellectual development out of all proportion to its brief duration. Comparable experiences could probably be registered by those who stopped in French-, Spanish-, or Russian-speaking countries, however briefly, en route to their eventual destination.

Once arrived (in New York in 1940) I adjusted with relative ease to a new environment. Among major influences here, I would count Rabbi David de Sola Pool of Congregation Shearith Israel, as well as a number of my teachers, both at Boys High School in Brooklyn and at the Seminary College and Teachers Institute of the Jewish Theological Seminary. At Harvard (1946–1950), I spent much time with Professor Harry A. Wolfson, but majored in Roman history and wrote a bachelor's thesis, of dubious distinction, on Antioch in the Hellenistic period. A Fulbright grant allowed me to return to Europe, and I chose to begin my study of Assyriology in what I took to be a hospitable

climate for so arcane a field—Leiden University in the Netherlands. I avoided Germany, but included in my grand tour a visit to Switzerland and the first of several reunions with my great-uncle Otto Rubensohn, retired archaeologist and excavator, among other things, of the papyri from Assuan (Elephantine) in Egypt, published by him in 1907 and by Ed. Sachau in 1908–11. Meantime my newly forged ties to Holland and to the remnants of its Jewish community were permanently strengthened when I met the young woman, then studying at Amsterdam, who was to become my wife. And the year was rounded off with the first of many visits to Israel.

Returning to Chicago and its famed Oriental Institute, I found it dedicated to the “conceptual autonomy” of ancient Mesopotamia preached by Benno Landsberger, dean of the world’s Assyriologists. I eventually became his assistant, and for five years (1951–56) dutifully subordinated my Jewish and biblical interests to the mysteries of cuneiform. But I became a disciple of I. J. Gelb, and it was from him that I learned a research methodology.

My first teaching position, at Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion (Cincinnati, 1956–62), was in “Bible and Semitic Languages.” It gave me a unique opportunity to use and develop both my Assyriological and my biblical interests. At Yale, where I have taught since 1962, the latter have taken second place, but a new component has entered. Prodded by Maurice Friedman, and aided every step of the way by my mother (deceased 1986), I undertook to translate Franz Rosenzweig’s *Star of Redemption* (published 1971). This undertaking eventually led back to Kassel, and to the conference in 1986 which marked the 100th anniversary of Rosenzweig’s birth there. For me, a highlight of this first return in fifty years was the prominence given to the memory of my father, whose life had been cut short by illness in 1933 after an astonishingly productive career in the twin fields of Jewish and general art history and archaeology.

Rosenzweig liked to speak of the German-Jewish symbiosis as a *Zweistromland*, a blending of two cultural streams. But the term originally refers to Mesopotamia, the land of the two rivers Tigris and Euphrates. I have tried to blend my interests in that ancient land with my Judaic concerns. For the general public, I have collaborated on *Heritage: Civilization and the Jews* (both the television series and the two-volume study guide and reader accompanying it) and on the Re-

form movement's Torah Commentary. For the academic scene, I was a founder and incorporator of the Association for Jewish Studies, and am currently president of the American Oriental Society. At Yale, I organized the undergraduate major in Judaic studies, and have long chaired its department of Near Eastern languages and civilizations. Above all, I have been blessed with scores of graduate, postdoctoral and rabbinic students at Yale, Columbia, HUC, and JTS, many of them now occupying influential chairs and pulpits around the country and across the globe, and all of them to some extent committed to my "contextual" approach to biblical and ancient Near Eastern studies.

If I were to draw any general conclusions from my own experience, I would have to assign a sizable place in my personal and professional development to my past. This past, however, includes not only my boyhood in Germany but also my subsequent stays in England, Holland, and Israel, reinforced by sabbaticals in each of these three countries. I owe to these sojourns much of my linguistic equipment, as well as my regard for humanistic scholarship generally, and for the Jewish component in nearly every major segment of it. Perhaps my case belies some of the usual clichés about the German-Jewish experience of the twentieth century. Whatever the extent of assimilation in Germany, there were ample opportunities for religious identification and instruction to those who chose to avail themselves of them; whatever the disabilities under which Jews lived in and left from Germany, they did not outweigh the positive impact of the family traditions that had prevailed; whatever the hardships of adjusting to new environments, they could prove catalytic and constructive given the right age and a hospitable climate. I have incorporated the positive elements of my Old World heritage in my life and work. I'd like to think I have conveyed them to my children as well.