
My German-Jewish Legacy and Theirs

Anthony Heilbut

This German-Jewish legacy, how German is it? and how Jewish? Moreover, what kind of Germans? what sort of Jews? Who inherits this legacy, a Joseph or a Judah? What legacy do our Joseph and Judah select? Surely not the same one. It's typically German, typically Jewish, typically German-Jewish to stress the uniqueness of one's group, attended by an inexorable ambivalence, another specialty of the three groups in question.

A perfectly straightforward issue is posed, and immediately my tone seems captious. I have two explanations: a general one—I'm upset by any form of cultural nationalism—and one more immediate: A few months ago, I spoke with a young German. He was both effusive in his praise of German Jewry and obsequious in his apology for crimes committed years before his birth. (In Germany, wallowing in guilt and self-pity seems as timeless as bad taste.) Finally he revealed his agenda: "Let's face it," he said. "Germans are the best people, and Jews make the best Germans." Aha, I thought, there you go. We're either the best or not good enough.

Much about the German-Jewish legacy eludes facile generalization, starting with the question of Germanness. Consider my family's complicated roots. The son of a Hamburg father and a London mother, my father was born in Amsterdam. Maritime links between his parents' cities helped make the Hamburgers spirited Anglophiles. For Hamburg Jews as well, British connections added a whiff of cosmopolitan style, particularly during the nineteenth century when German—or German-Jewish—identity was newly formed and tentative. My father's English relatives were distinguished Jews. Two of them, the elder of whom had been born in Hannover, served as chief rabbi of the British Empire (a designation which links almost too well the pious and the imperial). Another was Elkan Adler, a scholar of Middle Eastern studies. Adler was very much an English character, as were my father's cousins, the Sharp brothers, "Mr. N. and Mr. C.," as their charwoman referred to them. All of them managed to combine Ortho-

dox worship and English eccentricity, a personal style that greatly impressed their German relatives. An overlooked truth about the famous German Jews is that although they lorded it over the *Ostjuden*, they knew that the classiest Jewish role models resided abroad.

When he was sixteen, my Amsterdam-born father moved to Berlin. His Berlin relatives owned N. Israel, where he would very shortly assume an executive position. (N. Israel, the oldest department store in Berlin, was attacked on *Kristallnacht*, almost one hundred and eight years after its founding.) The Israels' life was golden; they provided the models for the Landauer family in Christopher Isherwood's *Goodbye to Berlin*. It was all very high-style, not at all like the arriviste gaucherie satirized by Heinrich Mann in his mildly anti-Semitic novel *In Schlaraffenland*. The British-born Amy Israel conducted her soirées in English; the landscape architecture of their country residence was exquisitely British. Artists and writers partied with the most cultivated businessman. When Enrico Caruso serenaded Mrs. Israel, he did so incognito in her kitchen. (Old class tends to believe if you've got it, *don't* flaunt it.)

While the Israels were not the arbiters of Berlin society, they were a kind of Jewish royalty, and royalty had its obligations. With his joint British-German citizenship, Amy's son Wilfried was able to secure the safe passage of his Jewish employees (aided in his task by my father). He also sponsored the rescue efforts of Youth Aliyah. His death in a 1943 plane crash was a major loss, one immediately memorialized in the naming of my brother, Wilfred, born later that year. If anyone could exhibit German-Jewish snobbery, this family had a right. I'm glad to say they didn't. In the mid-twenties, they revealed another solidarity when Wilfried and my father played active roles in the rescue of Polish Jews threatened by anti-Semitic pogroms. Likewise in exile, my parents never exemplified any Ostjüdephobia. (They were not typical. After *Exiled in Paradise* appeared, several *Yekke* offspring confessed that their elders held eastern Jews in contempt.)

My mother, twenty years my father's junior—and think how that alone complicates any unified legacy—was born in Berlin. Her mother's people, old Berliners, made up the more refined family branch, while her father had migrated from Upper Silesia. With varying degrees of earthiness, both sides enjoyed that fractious, smart-alecky Berliner *schmauze*, a manner I always assumed unique to my family

until I visited Berlin and found the whole town doing it. My Polish-German grandfather was a lawyer, as was his son, as would have been his daughter had Hitler not closed law schools to Jews of either sex. While my father, as a Dutch citizen, always lived well in Berlin, my mother left Germany in 1933. But after finding no work in France she returned to Berlin, where they were married. In the late 1930s, while he was abroad soliciting affidavits for N. Israel employees, she hid some of those employees in their apartment.

They left Germany in 1938, hoping to acquire British citizenship, but were encouraged instead to return to Holland. America became for them, as for so many other refugees, a second choice. How could it be otherwise? To men like my father, England was the citadel of quality, America merely a nation of naive upstarts. (The historian Hans Kohn was similarly enamored of British political traditions, almost without reservation, despite British treatment of Jews during World War II.) While some German Jews were famously more German than the *echt Volk*, others admired Great Britain past reason or good sense.

So which German legacy do I claim? My father's: noble, socially correct, good-humored, Anglophiliac? Or my mother's: street-smart, good-humored, Berlin-based? Their peers didn't regard the backgrounds as similar. In fact the "Jewish community" found my mother, daughter of non-Orthodox parents, insufficiently kosher. My parents were obliged to marry three times, as if each ceremony would further mitigate the heresy. Thanks to the Israels, they enjoyed access to the most *raffiné* precincts of German-Jewish life. Yet when I review their history, I see considerable divisions in class and culture—a range extending from a scholar of Middle Eastern languages to an aspiring Berlin Portia—and at least three national components beside the German.

Having alluded to my parents' experience, let me generalize a bit about my own as the American offspring of German Jews. An uncomfortable truth is that despite the refugees' celebrated disdain for American ways, they frequently knocked themselves out in emulation. I mentioned that my brother and I never experienced any *Ostjude* prejudice while growing up. Quite the contrary. My mother was bemused to find ex-Berliners less concerned about their darlings' *Bildung* than whether they had pledged the proper Greek-letter organizations. At Forest Hills High School, refugee children were basketball stars,

cheerleaders, presidents of the student organization. You might say they were rehearsing the shift in Jewish identity from scholar/poet/*luftmensch* to businessman/hustler/maker-and-shaker, and that emigration had encouraged their most bourgeois tendencies. (Or, at least, their chameleon qualities. Marion Kaplan feels the behavior I describe doesn't match her experiences, which suggests refugee culture as a function of neighborhood.) Yet what a sea change! German-Jewish feminists honor the uncompromising positions of Hedwig Dohm, and are fascinated by Rahel Varnhagen's career. Wouldn't both women shudder at the prospect of their descendants turning out Prom Queens?

On a more serious note, I think the German-Jewish legacy was at least initially a vexed one for children born here. Our parents carried themselves differently from our peers'. Also they were frequently much older, the vintage of our friends' grandparents. The psychic costs of beginning the world again were tremendous, even for the matchlessly resilient German Jews. Precisely because this group was so cultivated, so proud of its legacy, there was an added component of bad faith not evident in groups less given to self-conscious reflection. In the blunt terms of American culture, one was either a winner or a loser, and with their curious accents, unfamiliarity with American habits, and inescapable sense of the Holocaust—nagging fears before 1945; a far worse certainty afterward—the German-Jewish parents simply didn't appear winners. The familiar dilemma for immigrants' children—loyalty to the parents' culture versus the wholesale assumption of American mannerisms—was that much more complicated for our bunch, particularly during the monolithically conformist era of postwar America. Not that some German-Jewish children didn't hate their American lives, and retreat to the consolations of their parents' culture. I've met a few like that, but while they attend all the Self-Help concerts and maintain a family subscription to *Aufbau*, I don't know how much their succor is some hallowed German-Jewish legacy, and how much the familiar traits of one's own "soul people."

* * *

The myth of Jewish exceptionalism is a notable theme of German literature. It's found in Goethe and Nietzsche, and more recently in Thomas Mann, who saw himself as the custodian of their proper leg-

acy, including their qualified philosemitism. But if you detect xenophobia lurking beneath any form of chauvinism, is a legacy more acceptable because such men endorsed it? Or do you echo Heinrich Heine's remark that he came from an even older tradition, three thousand years of schlemils?

I'm American enough to want my legacy put to practical use. The chief rabbi's descendant won't join a German-Jewish synagogue. But surely there are other ways of honoring one's ancestors. Let's say I look for political role models. I find that the story of German-Jewish politics is more mishmash than midrash. In preparing a critical biography of Thomas Mann, I learned that Mann remains unforgiven by certain radicals for his silence during the early years of exile. The fact is that Mann had noisily denounced the Nazis as early as 1921, and would do so up to 1932. However, for the next few years, he had the not unreasonable idea that he could propagate his humanist principles by continuing to publish in Germany. The author of this scheme was his Jewish publisher Bermann-Fischer. (Likewise his American Jewish publisher Knopf would advise him not to attack Hitler in 1940 or Senator McCarthy in 1950.) German Jews have often been overly cautious, particularly the establishment figures: this left them open to attacks from gentile radicals like Brecht, which were in turn either disingenuous or insensitive to the Jewish plight.

In emigration, the political range of German Jews extends from Albert Einstein to Immanuel Jakobovits, the Berlin-born chief rabbi of the British Empire. As I wrote in *Exiled in Paradise*, Einstein played an heroic part in defense of American radicals, counseling them to risk jail in defense of their principles. The chief rabbi's politics can be gauged by his role as Margaret Thatcher's favorite theologian (think of it—a German Jew outdoing the archbishop of Canterbury). Meanwhile currently important descendants of German Jewry in American politics include the ineffable Henry Kissinger, Senator Rudy Boschwitz, a Republican loyalist (his Rudy a German-Jewish reply to the American Bobs and Jimmys), and Max Frankel, editor of the establishment's house organ. After *Exile* appeared, several German Jews complained that I had misrepresented their group as a bunch of Marxist malcontents, when instead they were exemplary American citizens. Like those Christian converts who call themselves "completed Jews," they'd say that their legacy culminated in American patriotism.

Yet can't German Jews claim Karl Marx, even as they do Freud? Marx may betray an anti-Semitic bias, but his very method instructs us to disentangle the wheat from the tares. Forget the rather disingenuous claim that Marx's ethical concerns are positively Old Testament—like in their reach. He's German-Jewish enough without seeking to make him kosher. The world knows it, friend and foe alike, but to admit him into a German-Jewish pantheon is to considerably, attractively expand its borders. Combine Marx's alertness to the economic underpinnings of every social action with Heine's irreverence—now there's a legacy. Add to that the more contemporary efforts of émigré film directors like Max Ophuls or Fritz Lang, and I become almost chauvinistic myself.

I also like that a few, admittedly fringe figures anticipated the major sexual conflicts of our time. The feminist/gay slant has reformed our views of matters as basic as the family: those who live outside the institution have hastened its reimagining. Hedwig Dohm, the nineteenth-century journalist, lamented that when they stuck a cooking spoon in her hand, they killed a human soul; she never forgave her grandson-in-law Thomas Mann for ending his wife's academic career or expressing a desire for sons. She lived until 1918, despairing over the conventional lives of her daughters. Even more than Rahel Varnhagen, she seems the ancestor of modern women intellectuals. Although she too ran a Berlin salon of artists and radicals, she would side with those who feel no need to be the hostess (Varnhagen) when they can be the guest (Goethe).

An overwhelming sadness of our times is the AIDS epidemic. While comparisons with the Holocaust and genocide seem to me ill-considered, there is an ironic parallel in the gratuitously horrible destruction that befell two pariah groups—Jews and gays—exactly when they seemed to have liberated themselves, socially and politically. Meanwhile the reality is grim enough, particularly as it illumines medical politics and the transparent bigotry toward drug addicts and gay people. In seeking out the origins of that bigotry, some of the best guides are German Jews. Magnus Hirschfeld was the foremost sexual libertarian of the 1920s; disallowing his own flights of cultural nationalist rhetoric (e.g., "the third sex"), he was strikingly prophetic in his analysis of the pathology we call homophobia. Hedwig Dohm's half-Jewish great-grandchildren, Erika and Klaus Mann, idolized Hirschfeld.

While their father would irrepressibly deconstruct traditions German and Jewish, his children hoped to abandon the exhausted strictures of religion and nationalism. They learned that this wasn't done so easily. But isn't their attempt, sixty years afterward, still admirable? And doesn't it constitute a legacy too, a kind of lodestar during the era of AIDS?

I remain confused. What I value, what I need seems so tangential to any record of German-Jewish culture. (As one woman assured me after a lecture, the achievement of émigré film directors wasn't truly "serious"). Yet I'm convinced the good German-Jewish allergy to *Quatsch* (nonsense) steered those ancestors I would claim. The allergy made them recoil viscerally from whimsy and sentiment, and made them very hard to fool. It may seem a poor legacy, this *Fingerspitzengefuehl*, but it's undeniably German-Jewish.