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# Reflections on the German-Jewish Legacy: North American Style

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In mid-November of this year, the small town of “Sonderburg” in the Nahe Valley of Germany is commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of *Kristallnacht*.<sup>1</sup> A group of civic and historic minded citizens, aided by the town council is sponsoring this important event. To mark the occasion, the town has bought the old Jewish synagogue from the furniture dealer who had acquired it after the war. He had been using it to store furniture and other household goods. Only a small plaque tells the visitor, who must look closely at this old warehouse filled with sofas, lamps, and chairs, that it was once a house of God. Now, the synagogue is to be made into a Holocaust and Judaica museum. The committee has been busy collecting old photographs and other memorabilia about its former Jewish population. But since most of that group of about 150 persons died during the Holocaust, that has not been easy. Some Jews managed to migrate in time and these survivors have been asked to donate materials about their families.

The dedication of the museum will take place during an ecumenical service to be held in the synagogue. A number of people have been invited to participate in the event, including the granddaughter of one of the town’s former Jewish families. She has been asked to read from her book which describes the relationships of Jews and their gentile neighbors in Sonderburg before and after the thirties. The events marking *Kristallnacht* from the perspective of the Jewish victims and their watching but passive neighbors are dramatically described in the book.

I was moved to receive this invitation from the citizens of Sonderburg. I consider it an honor that I was asked to attend this important and historic occasion. I could, of course, be cynical about it and suggest that who better to ask than a Jew whose origins are in the community and who has lived to write about the tragic events which took place there and in the rest of the country?

This occasion has another, even more personal meaning for me, because my grandfather spearheaded the move to make the small town of Sonderburg into a Jewish *Gemeinde*. He was also instrumental in getting the synagogue built in 1924 and now, fifty years later, his granddaughter returns for its rededication. What began for me in Germany so long ago, now many years later, takes me back to participate in its rededication. The country that chased me out because of my Jewishness now invites me back to publicly celebrate that Jewishness! Indeed, for me the circle has closed.

What have the intervening fifty years brought in terms of the “spirit of the German Jewish legacy”? If I were to attempt to apply Mosse’s concept of *Bildung* to my own personal and professional life, I would have to admit that my values as a former American—and now for many years a Canadian—and a Jew have been profoundly affected.

In Sonderburg, I discovered a few good neighbors, those who supplied remaining Jews with food, who helped some of them get away and, in general, performed what I called “small acts of kindness.” Had more people performed such acts, had more people behaved well—had they been what Germans call *anstaendige Leute*—perhaps some of the tragedy of the period might have been averted. It is quite easy to say that people should have acted well, that they should have been more altruistic. How many of us in similar circumstances would risk our lives to help endangered neighbors? I often discussed with the remaining older Germans in Sonderburg the question of why more help was not given to the Jews. The main reason they offered was that they felt powerless—“What could we do? We were only poor powerless people” was a refrain I heard over and over again. This compelling argument came particularly from working-class people in low-paying jobs who lived far away from the centers of political power. Many of them were women with small children. They feared for the lives of their husbands and the economic security of their children. They could not afford to take risks to offer help or protection to the Jews. People also noted that they did not know what to do even if they wanted to help. How could they have intervened in a process that was so effectively doing away with their Jewish neighbors?

These arguments can easily be translated into the events of today. For example, how many persons, Jews in North America or gentiles for that matter, go out of their way to help the disadvantaged in their

society? Are Jews in the forefront of altruistic activity? It is probably true that North American Jews have done more to aid in the development of Israel than any other group, but aside from philanthropy to their own kind, formerly victimized Jews have not been eager altruists. While many Jews were in the forefront of the civil rights movement in the United States, it can hardly be said that they have been overly concerned about the plight of Black or Hispanic Americans. In recent times, in fact, relations between Jews and Blacks have deteriorated to the point where the two groups have little to do with one another.

For me, the spirit of the German-Jewish legacy revolves around the need to be generous and helpful towards people who are victimized and jeopardized by the society in which they live. This need stems from the recognition that the concept of equality is, or perhaps more accurately, should be, the central theme in the organization of human society. The essence of being a modern Jew is, for me, the simple and clichéd notion that all persons are equal and should share equally in the benefits and resources of society. As a former victim, I have become inordinately sensitive to the plight of other victims and my experiences in growing up in the United States and even my later years in Canada convince me that the simple value of equality and equality of access is still denied to so many citizens in these rich and endowed countries. Fighting for the rights of others, especially minorities, has become central to my professional and personal life. To understand the culture, history, and values of former slaves in the New World has been dominant in my research as a social scientist. More recently, advocacy and applied research designed to overcome the plague of racism and denial of equal access to the resources of society has occupied my attention. I do what I can with my specialized form of expertise. Doing advocacy research, consulting with governments and with other institutions in society in an attempt to make life better for victims of racism occupies much of my time.

At the moment, the world is again standing by, just as many Germans did in Nazi times, as a cruel, racist, and oppressive regime in South Africa tortures people for the sin of being black. Unfortunately it does not appear as if the Jews in that country are leading the struggle for equality. Quite the contrary, they are either participants or bystanders or just in a hurry to get out before the economic and political climate in that country becomes worse. It would appear that the expe-

rience of victimization does not always lead to a concern with the less fortunate in society. Selfishness and self-interest and, in the case of the Jews, the need to retain their cultural ethnicity and religion often prevail over the need to help others.

If I have learned anything as a result of my earlier experiences in Germany, it is not to be overly judgmental about the values and behaviors of others. I sometimes criticize the passivity of North American Jews in the continuing battle to safeguard the rights and privileges of all citizens, because they, more than any other group, know the results of prejudice and discrimination. But perhaps, they can do no better. I believe, however, that if the Jews are indeed a chosen people, what then have they been chosen for if not to try to make the world a better place for all people regardless of religion, race, and other cultural differences? That, for me, sums up the “spirit of the German-Jewish legacy” and hopefully that spirit will prevail during the *Kristallnacht* commemoration in Sonderburg’s old Jewish synagogue.

### *Notes*

1. “Sonderburg” is a fictitious name used in the book *Victims and Neighbors: A Small Town in Nazi Germany Remembered*.