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# The Less Than Total Break

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I remember *Kristallnacht* very well.

The consciousness of something wrong, something sinister, had come to me only quite gradually. My parents had kept me sheltered as best they could, concealing their growing worries about the evolution of events. During the first few years, for that matter, the deterioration of the atmosphere was not so obvious in Berlin, that sarcastically sophisticated capital where the Nazis never really felt at home. My great youth also helped; chronologically, my natural period of dawning awareness corresponded almost embarrassingly to the years of growth of the regime. I entered elementary school in 1933, when Hitler came to power. I never heard anything about either the Reichstag fire or the Night of Long Knives, and only remember the Saar referendum as a joyful occasion that made me engage in enthusiastically patriotic conversations with other children in the street. True, there were disharmonies in that best of worlds. The uniformed bands of the Nazi party were vaguely conceived as unpleasant, and I realized early that somehow they were not my friends. And in 1935, my mother told me with precautionary discretion that she was going to send me to a Jewish private school, where I would have more in common with my comrades. However, I initially failed to grasp the significance of this move. I did know that my parents were troubled by the unspeakable Berlin cockney in which I had come to express myself after two years in public school, and considered it only natural that they would turn to a Jewish school to steer me back to the use of New High German. All this cast few shadows on those early years, during which I still spent idyllic weekends at my uncle's Wannsee estate—my own garden of the Finzi Contini. As for the 1936 Olympic Games, I distinctly recall them as a time of cheerful excitement.

In 1936 I was ten years old, and the fall from grace began soon thereafter. The Games were the regime's propagandistic apotheosis; the ensuing deterioration was rapid and ominous. I took private English lessons because it was increasingly obvious that our future, if a

future there was, could not lie in Germany. The possibility, the necessity of emigration arose, moved to the foreground, finally became paramount. At the same time, I sensed growing problems and harassments surrounding the family business. By 1938, that parallel process of historical development and personal education had reached a climax (though only a provisional one, as we were to find out). My memories of that year are very clear. The *Anschluss* no longer enthused me, as the Saar referendum had done: a sure sign of heightened insight and maturation. The war scare in the Sudeten crisis stands out in my memory, with the installation of anti-aircraft guns on rooftops. My father, on a business trip in England, hurriedly tried to rejoin us in Berlin but got only as far as Holland, where friends and relatives forcefully put him on a plane back to England: he, not my mother, was the Jewish member of the family who had everything to fear. That crisis passed, and my father returned to the Continent, to his ultimate undoing. Then, in November, came *Kristallnacht*—not yet, as we now know, the culmination of that diabolical course of events, but a symbolic and traumatic breaking point.

We did not witness any depredations in our residential neighborhood. We stayed indoors, and on the late afternoon, after everything was over, went on an exploratory walk. We came upon a sizable crowd of people reading a notice posted on a wall. It was Goebbels' manifesto, commending the German people on their healthy and natural anger but asking them to desist from further demonstrations so as to avoid the destruction of German property. The readers' faces were stony, the quiet was absolute—we heard no reaction, not a word. (We already knew that in Berlin, there had been nothing spontaneous about the outbursts that had been organized by party personnel and joined by other riffraff, avid for plunder.) As we turned away, we ran into one of our neighbors, a retired official of the old Prussian school. I will never forget his clenched fists, the hissing whisper in which he spoke to us: "This is scandalous, abominable; Red Spain and Soviet Russia are nothing compared to it!" My father's business had remained undamaged (factories do not lend themselves to the pettier forms of plunder), but he did not return there for some time, spending the night (together with his brothers) at a sister's home: there were arrests, the fathers of several of my school companions were taken away. But it was still a hit-or-miss affair, and for unknown reasons the

Holdheim brothers seemed not to have made the blacklist as yet. A relative normalcy returned thereafter, but the screws were being drawn ever tighter, especially in the economic domain. Our factory was forcibly “aryanized” to a Turk who specialized in “buying” Jewish businesses for next to nothing. Our attempts at leaving became desperate. A Melbourne tycoon, a business friend of my father, repeatedly tried to bring us to Australia, guaranteeing everything, including employment—in vain: Australia wanted only Anglo-Saxons. At last in April 1939 we left for Holland, our fortune reduced to the permitted 10 marks per person, with the support of an aunt who had settled in Amsterdam. The refuge proved too close by, the Nazis were to follow us thirteen months later—but that is the beginning of a much more horrible story which here I do not have to tell.

How, under such circumstances, could I be expected to relate to my cultural heritage? My family had its “patristic” antics: the Reform rabbi Samuel Holdheim was my great-granduncle; but he had been an extreme liberal for his time, a nonconformist—and it was this aspect of his legacy that has come down to me. As for the religious side, the family was completely secularized and assimilated. Our particular branch had consisted of businessmen for several generations, but my father (like Thomas Buddenbrook) was sometimes a reluctant businessman. He loved literature above all else, read voraciously, and was a gifted (although inevitably an occasional) writer and poet. He stood entirely in that German tradition which had been so astonishingly internalized by the German Jews: Goethe and Schiller, Heine and Lessing; the ideals of *Bildung* and of the Enlightenment, in whose capital, after all, we lived. It might have been expected that I would reject this all-too-German background, which seemed barely to be mine in any case; my secondary schooling was Dutch, my university education American. My feelings in 1945, understandably, were far from Germanophile. And there were indeed attempts at rejection. I ended up in the field of French literature in my studies, undoubtedly to counteract what I felt to be German in myself. On the other hand, I had abandoned philosophy largely because its study, in America, did not sufficiently concentrate on the German tradition. And in my new field, I could hardly fail to encounter the distinguished tradition of German *Romanistik*. I soon expanded into comparative literature, coupled with an increasing emphasis on the hermeneutic tradition in philoso-

phy, from Schleiermacher via Boeckh and Dilthey to the present day. In a broader and professionally intensified way, I had rediscovered and rejoined my father's cultural background; I am even teaching a course on the *Bildungsroman*. This development was experienced by me as a veritable process of self-discovery and self-elucidation. I do not know why this should be so. The German I speak is (thank heaven!) no longer Berlinian cockney, but I am told that it is strongly reminiscent of the Berlin of the Weimar Republic. This as well, considering that I was six in 1932, is somewhat odd.

I know, however, that such things cannot be seen in exclusively personal or psychological terms. One is not an isolated individual but a representative, the carrier of a tradition—even when one seems to have been totally uprooted. What I have acutely experienced, as I now realize, is the peculiar intensity with which the German Jews were grounded in the German cultural and intellectual tradition, and precisely in what is best in it. The question is not self-elucidation but elucidation: can this heritage furnish it, can it contribute to American culture; specifically, can it help to illuminate and advance the field of humane studies which I have chosen as my own? Of course it can—which does not necessarily mean that it will. Few would deny the importance of the German intellectual tradition, and of the Weimar period in particular. In my specific domain, that of literary studies, there has been a feverish philosophical, epistemological, and methodological activity in the last fifteen years. My background has enabled me to evaluate this development without surprise and (I believe) correctly. For one thing, it has helped me to recognize, sometimes with considerable amusement, how many of those supposedly revolutionary insights rested on inspirations that go back to the German philosophical tradition, and how many of the problems that were raised had occupied German thinkers long ago. There are some signs that the awareness of these German roots is growing; if so, this will help to place the entire phenomenon into a better perspective.

Perhaps more importantly, my heritage could also serve as a counterweight to some less desirable present-day tendencies. I am here thinking, above all, of the ideal of *Bildung* or cultivation, which George Mosse has singled out as the very crux of the German-Jewish heritage. In this late twentieth century (as indeed already in the Germany of the 1930s), the notion tends to be viewed as hopelessly out-

moded and bourgeois. But it has remained active for some of us, and one hopes that it can be reactivated in a more universal context. Not of course in its older, often naively idealized, overly aestheticized form, and surely not as the reflection of a supposedly existing state of affairs—but very definitely as an ethical postulate. The continued strength and value of the concept lies in its creatively *temporal* character. Contrasting the all-too-widespread modern proneness to view reality either in terms of chaotic dynamisms or of manipulable staticities, *Bildung* calls for a creative effort of coherent growth, an intelligent marshaling of the flux of time. As against contemporary tendencies literally to wallow in psychological insights into the discontinuity and the threatening fragmentation of the subject (an attitude that reflects ethical fecklessness and *laisser-aller*), *Bildung* would stand out as a volitional effort of personal identification and responsibility: the self, after all, is not a given fact but a demand. And finally, in its expansive openness to dialogue, to the recognition of otherness, *Bildung* counteracts that urge towards ideological reductiveness which is perhaps the most potent expression of the ethical feebleness that besets our age. I do not know whether my commitment to such views is still realistic. All I can say is that it better be.