
Le Déraciné: Finding New Roots in Exile

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It was in my senior year in college, in the midst of the Korean “conflict,” that I encountered the concept that explained the essence of my past experiences, pinpointing the origin of my chronic restlessness, and setting the tone of my perspective on the future. After six initial years in a Germany that was convulsed out of the unstable Weimar Republic into the early upheavals of the Third Reich; after another three prewar years in Mussolini’s Italy; and then, after eight more years in wartime and postwar England, began the encounter with the United States. By the time I entered college—quadro-lingual and on my fourth national anthem—rebellion set in: what a later generation would dub an identity crisis struck with a vengeance. The Jewish outcast from Hitlerian Germany, the German refugee in Italy, the enemy alien in England, and now the immigrant from Europe looked around for permanence and stability and found neither, certainly not in a small far-western town where the solaces of urban civilization were studiously avoided by the post-pioneer generation. And then came the instant revelation, a sudden enlightenment embodied in one word—*le déraciné*, the uprooted one.

Life—history—had torn me from the familiar and counseled me to adjust, chameleon like, to each new country, to its society and its cultural variant. “Adapt,” it whispered. So I put on and discarded the conformist’s mantle as circumstances dictated. By the time I reached these shores, I had learned and unlearned with equal enthusiasm to speak street Milanese. London cockney, the rural brogue of Somersetshire, the clipped tone and mannerisms of the British public school, all superimposed on my hometown dialect of the central Rhine region, plus a smattering of the *Hochdeutsch* that had permeated the conversations of the bourgeois/bohemian German refugee circles that formed nuclei of *émigré-kultur* away from “home.” For, it must be made clear, the presumed temporary status of our condition, the assumption that there would be a return as soon as “the crisis had

passed,” was never questioned until the first glimpses of the death camps had their traumatic effect. Only then did the brutal fact of not going back begin to work its way into a psyche so long oriented towards a resumption of familiar ways in a post-Hitlerian Germany.

Until coming to the United States in 1947, every alignment had been a temporary tactic, a provisional device to survive in the unfamiliar among strangers. Now, established in the land of immigrants, I had to convert “in depth” as a strategy; becoming an American was the only future. Not only had a German mode of life to be readjusted; not only had a grating British accent to be jettisoned and all the finesses of the American language to be mastered; not only had Italian-acquired hand-histrionics to be tamed; but a new lifestyle embraced and loved. In the late 1940s in a “suburbia-town” in the state of Washington, this meant becoming “white,” with all the prejudices and idiosyncrasies associated with it. The attempt could only lead to abysmal failure, much sophomoric soul-searching, superficial guilt, and considerable overt and covert anger, until that moment of self-discovery, of recognition in the magic of one word, *déraciné*.

Instantaneously, what had transpired over the course of three and a half years of college life in the midst of an America barely touched by World War II made eminent sense. Befriending a Japanese-American—one of the “niggers” of the Northwest; starting a fencing squad on a football/boxing-obsessed campus; joining a debate team to assert language “supremacy”; founding a French club and newspaper with which to coalesce the foreign students into a lobby of the “dis- and malcontents”; pursuing three majors and not one; playing baroque chamber music on period instruments: these were all symptomatic of a determined refusal to shed one’s skin again and don yet another. My system had reached a point of assimilation-indigestion, and any imposition on this will to self-immunization against further identity-tampering simply led to more violent forms of rejection. There simply was no formulaic way of “becoming” an American by following the traditional edict to “do in Rome as the Romans do.” My Appian Way was to lead elsewhere; the way of *le déraciné* commanded and pointed in another direction, still unclear, except for the unswerving beckoning of New York City, the long-time metropolis of the refugee/immigrant, of the stateless, of those in but not quite of America.

New York, in 1951 the mecca of millions who spoke with an accent, where everyone was immigrant-related, the city that had become a

home to the homeless from World War II, this New York was a separate country, a Europe in the New World. It beckoned like a siren. In due course, during my first graduate years (1951–53), I became a New Yorker, though I did not grasp it fully until several years later. These included years as a reluctant draftee in the army, “occupying” West Germany and keeping back the “Iron Curtain”; a year after military duty exploring the utopian lure of remaining in Europe and forging a brave new condominium of national states along with other young idealists who were entranced with Schuman’s vision of a “new” post-war continental order; five years spent acquiring a Ph.D. in history—the only discipline to satisfy and fulfill after numerous misadventures with architecture, mathematics, the classics, and comparative Romance literature; and then years teaching in the trans-Hudson “wasteland”: in Washington State, in Nebraska, in Texas, in Louisiana, until fortune smiled and the Holy Grail of a position in New York made possible the return of a fully converted and naturalized New Yorker.

The Prodigal Son had come home to his “roots” after several abortive efforts to defy and circumvent what was truly his locus. A liberal illusion that Germany in ruins would “welcome back” one of the genuine loyal adherents of the “decent” past was shattered in Heidelberg in 1955 where my first encounter with murderous anti-Semitism, in the form of a German SS officer turned landlord, sent me literally fleeing the country a second time, this time as a young married adult and father. An offer in 1956 to assume a senior post with the promise of later full control in a leading Left-oriented publishing firm in England foundered on the shoals of ideology: my once, but since abandoned, socialist proclivities had assumed too many characteristics of American pragmatism. A naive gesture to volunteer to settle in Israel after completion of my studies was kindly but realistically rebuffed—Israel in 1959, I was informed, needed tractor drivers and businessmen, not another specialist on the Soviet Union. Attempts to blend into the fabric of U.S. college and university societies west of Manhattan always proved stillborn: my obvious lack of enthusiasm and glances eastward were rewarded with few promotions and no bestowals of tenure. By 1965, after a year “academically exchanged” in the Soviet Union, the unambiguous fact of being a New Yorker had sunk in. Peace at last in what had become the urban war-zone of the second half of the 1960s!

“Peace” in New York City meant having come to terms. The city, not accidentally, was situated mid-point, so to speak, between the new and the old, between the future and the past, between the fluid post-frontier west and the rigid but well-defined ways of the “east”—Europe. Here was an amalgam of the best and worst of both, of the tensions that once had forged Athens, Florence, and Paris and, ever so briefly, war time London. I had intellectually “teethed” in World War II London, whose refugee population contained the highest concentration of German-speaking, Central European Jews. Between 1939 and 1945, a flood of Jews from Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia momentarily inundated the capital of England, transforming it for the duration of the war into an international metropolis, a highly volatile intellectual and cultural cross road. Highly educated and experienced minds, nurtured by all the streams of thought and experimentation that characterized European culture in the decades straddling World War I, congregated in London, a haven from the barbarism that had engulfed the continent. Torn from their native environs, robbed of language, podium, lectern, stage, publishing outlets, they vented their creative energies while in exile in extraordinarily verbal social sessions, twenty-four-hour rounds of endless talk, fertilizing and cross-fertilizing one another, thrown together pitilessly, forced to find satisfaction from one another in a pressure-cooker London in which they were freely caged. For a young man living in a home in Hampstead, the epicenter of the refugee world, a home whose doors stood open to a constant stream of refugee visitors’ comings and goings, in which the kitchen never ceased to manufacture gallons of coffee and whose walls never stopped reverberating from the sounds of heated talk, always in German, about Kafka and Kierkegaard, Mahler and Monteverdi, Falada and Franz Werfel, about Epstein and Einstein, about Thomas and Heinrich Mann, about baroque music and the 12-tone system, about the latest manuscript find in the British Museum, a concert in Wigmore Hall, a lecture in Keats House, and on and on. The grave of Karl Marx was visited; Heine was recited, Schubert lieder sung from memory. Chamber music never ceased: everyone could play an instrument; all were passionate amateurs. Conversation never stopped, always focused, always engaged. Once it was about Kokoschka; then about Kaminski; then about Landowska; or, when his daughter was present—she never failed to sit cross-legged on the floor smoking a

cigarillo—the subject was Kurt Eisner and the Bavarian Communist uprising. For a young man in his teens, this exposure to the frenetic world of the Jewish refugees was nothing short of exhilarating, disconcerting, and discomforting.

Outside the home was the bland and constrained British society: boarding school and its frozen rituals, aloof imperial London, the gentle countryside were in stark contradiction to the whirlpool activity that took place behind the doors of home. Home was exciting, stimulating, disturbing, irritating, always interesting. Within the walls of home, no one committed the sin of boredom. Life there consisted of urgent issues, imminent problems, questions that had to be answered. Everyone seemed driven, in a hurry, eager to make a statement, to argue, to contradict, to disagree, never to be “polite” (the restraining and dampening hallmark of disquisition in the company of the British). Whenever they visited and participated, they seemed remote, *dégagé*, disinterested, emotionally removed from the fray, and, of course, polite. They seemed to crave a certain neatness of thought, reflected in their well-groomed attire, quietly offended by the aggressive, untiringly combative manner of their German-Jewish hosts. Their discomfort was apparent; and yet they were fascinated, even mesmerized, by the frantic activity of the *déracinés* refugee minds, who, had they been returned to their former state, would have happily redonned the veneer of bourgeois respectability that had once characterized their former lives in Berlin or Vienna or Prague. But time was too precious; the crisis dictated a new agenda and hence a commensurate behavioral pattern. Denied being journalists, editors, authors, playwrights, critics, poets, sculptors, academicians, and lawyers—only musicians escaped spiritual unemployment, and that is why music supplied the ultimate consolation to so many—they concentrated all their creative powers into endless talk, and thus, unwittingly, supplied the young man in their midst with a total education.

Immersed in their talk, unknowingly, I inherited the last of Habsburg *fin-de-siècle* Vienna, pre – World War I Prague, and, of course, the spirit of post – World War I Weimar Berlin. Through total immersion, I became fluent in Central European *Kultur*: the names of its personalities rested on the tip of the tongue, become second-nature, common reference points like comic strips or baseball scores in the America I entered a few years later, except for New York, where in

1967 so many still spoke the same “language.” I did not know then that I had been the beneficiary of a crash-course in an era that had been wiped off the map by two world wars and genocide. I had not been aware that I had inherited an almost extinct mentality from the remnants of a once-thriving intellectual community, survivors who had managed, by force of circumstances, to keep alive in London, for a few more years, a way of life whose environment and practitioners—the majority Jews—Hitler had irrevocably stamped out. The products of *Gymnasia*, the assimilated German Jews, were briefly compressed into the hot house that was London at war. By 1947 they were dispersing; the “Weimar Ghetto” quickly broke up, and its “graduates,” such as myself, were left to fend for themselves, condemned to speak a foreign language wherever they stopped to speak, to be only partially understood and all too-often to be misunderstood, strangers in a modern world, cursed with a modernity that outstripped that of their neighbors. The graduates such as myself who immigrated to the United States found tiny oases of kindred souls in Seattle, in New Orleans, in San Francisco, even in Boston; but the largest nucleus, much dissipated by the immensity of the city, clustered in New York. The grandchild of Weimar reared in London found accommodation, at long last, in New York, but only imperfectly, in the mid-sixties.

A large but fast-aging number of German Jews, ensconced in Washington Heights or its equivalent, continued the process of assimilation that had been so rudely and inhumanely interrupted by the Nazis. Whereas they had been forced to recognize that the century-old flirtation with a symbiosis with German *Kultur* had been a false dream, and emancipation a cul-de-sac, their disenchantment with Western liberalism had not been sufficient not to begin the process anew in the United States, this time proudly patriotic in the land of quotas, whose democracy had cruelly and tightly closed its doors to tens of thousands of their co-victims seeking to save their lives from the fury of a murderous racist anti-Semitism. Blinkered by their typical German bourgeois apoliticism, they myopically gave thanks to the new *Vaterland*, were the last to lend open support to Israel, and congregated around their homemade Parthenon, the Leo Baeck Institute. (Rabbi Leo Baeck, it should be recalled, upon his release from Theresienstadt, during his first visit to the United States, expressed his unqualified gratitude to the United States before the assembled members of Congress, includ-

ing those who had supported the turning back of the *St. Louis*.) With these *gemuetlichen* souls, this recent arrival to New York, originally “baptized” in London by the yeast that had for so long quickened life in Europe, had little mental patience with their quest for Americanization.

By the time he reached New York in the mid-sixties, the last of those kindred of souls he so craved was dying. The New School’s corridors no longer echoed with their provocations. Symbolically, the scholar he had been hired to replace at CCNY, the venerable Hans Kohn, had died abruptly, prevented from serving as a mentor to his young successor for a few more precious years. To this day I reread his books to touch bases with his encyclopedic grasp, his wide-ranging interests, his multilingual readings. Only one man remained, the controversial but brilliant Karl-August Wittfogel, who, ten years earlier, while visiting the University of Washington from Columbia University, had taken me in tow and generously introduced me to the intricacies and convolutions of Marxism, the traps of Leninism, the egregious mendacities of Stalinism, and the inhumanitarian potentials of Maoism (this before the unleashing of the Red Guards and the *sonderkommando*-ism of Pol Pot). He opened up the dialectical world of discourse as practiced by a growing segment of the world’s intelligentsia, anticipating and, therefore, preparing me for the leftish fulminations of the 1960s which invaded every campus and whose anti-intellectualism sought to extirpate all that I saw as essential to a civilized life of the mind. Once, while we had been discussing his theories of bureaucracy—learning the lethal connection between the bureaucratic state and genocide policies—Karl-August warned me of the mindlessness of the left, especially its integral anti-Semitism, potentially even worse, he warned, than the anti-Semitism of the right, which had reached new heights during the Holocaust. But his was a fading voice, the last of the last men of letters, securely at home in universal knowledge, a European who had mastered Asia, for whom the pentatonic was as harmonious as the dodecanonic scale, who read classical Greek with the same ease as the Chinese of Confucius. The past was dying out before my eyes as this octogenarian giant, who had led Communist rallies in Leipzig in the early 1920s, had less and less strength to talk to me.

Third-generation New York Jewry from Eastern Europe provided some limited soul touching: but too many prejudices surfaced—the

Yekke versus the *Ostjude*, the Teutonic versus the Slavic. Its teeming masses had retreated to suburbia, and its vital elite, that of the *Partisan Review*, had aged and become peripheral, its humanitarian socialism preempted by the post – New Deal affluence. The Manhattan of old had also come to an end, having room only for ghosts, for sentimental reveries of what once was, almost making a neo-Proustian out of me as I searched the present for the past. I had arrived just in time to witness the burial of the few citizens of a world dead before I was born but whose dying whispers had made me a *post facto* fellow member, slated to live recollecting what might have been had those *temps perdue*s endured.

Karl Loewith, the historian, had sat out the war in London and then soon thereafter returned to Heidelberg, “to be understood,” as he explained to me in 1955 in the cluttered library of his home. In England, he smiled, everyone had agreed with him in Cambridge because they had not understood him; at least here in Germany, his colleagues and students would disagree with his thoughts because they grasped his meaning. “I need the land of my enemies; they appreciate my adventures of the mind carried on the sublime wings of the German language,” he confessed, fully aware of the bitter irony of his circumstances during the last years of his life. “I want to die in the shadow of a German university. That is my true home.” Those were his last words on my final visit. His advice to me had been not to try and make my home in Germany, despite the temptations. “Take what you have elsewhere,” he counseled, “even though you will never be content.” He failed, however, to fill in the blank that followed his rubric “elsewhere.” He left me a man without a country, a *déraciné*; a man who thinks German but speaks American with a British accent; a man more at home with Dostoyevsky and Bartok than with Bellow and Gershwin; one who looks back to days visiting the Pinakotek and reading *Simplicissimus* more fondly than looking forward to stopping by the Guggenheim or leafing through the *New Yorker*; a professor who tries to show his students beyond the parameters of required information, a historian poignantly aware that his past will fade but never enough to make the future welcome.