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# An Autobiographical Approach to the German-Jewish Legacy

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I believe that it is difficult to reduce the "German-Jewish legacy" to a common denominator and therefore would like to take an autobiographic approach which will illustrate what aspects of this legacy affected me most directly.

We tend to identify the German Jews in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries too generally with the *Bildungsbuergertum*. My family, like very many German Jewish families, laid claim to being cultured *Buerger* without being able to justify this claim either in terms of education or income. Our bookcases were lined with the German classics, which my father had received as Bar Mitzvah gifts in 1907, but I was the only one in my family who read them, and there were original paintings by little-known artists on the wall. My parents rarely went to a play or a concert. They were proud of the fact that they had completed their schooling to the *mittlere Reife*. Religiously, they were Jewish but came from two different directions. My father came from a practicing Orthodox family. He received his entire formal education in the schools of the Orthodox Breuersche *Gemeinde* in Frankfurt, but after his marriage to my mother, who had come from a very secularized family, gradually ceased practicing Jewish ritual.

I entered public school in Hamburg in April 1933, at the age of six, on the Monday after the Boycott. For the next several years until our emigration to the United States in October 1938, German and specifically Jewish impulses were important in shaping my consciousness, impulses which even in this period were closely interwoven. In contrast to many of my German-Jewish contemporaries with whom I have compared notes, I was fortunate to be in a school where both my teacher and the children, who came for the most part from working-class families, shielded me against the growing official anti-Semitism. Still in October 1936, when my parents transferred me to the Talmud Torah, at a time when I wanted to attend a Jewish school, the teacher tried to persuade my parents that I was perfectly safe in the school as

long as he was there. At the same time, he was an ardent nationalist. I do not know whether he was a member of the NSDAP, but he inspired his pupils with a good deal of the spirit of the *Jugendbewegung*, including enthusiasm for nature, hiking and singing, the return to the countryside and the crafts, and a nostalgia for the comradeship and heroism of the First World War, which he—he was born in 1904—had experienced only as a child. At the school I felt like a German. At the same time, in part undoubtedly as a reaction to the anti-Semitism of the Nazis, I became increasingly aware of my Jewish, not only my ethnic but also religious identity. At the age of six, I began to have private Jewish instruction, which must have been much more meaningful and imaginative than that which my father had received. In 1934 I for the first time went to a Jewish summer camp. I began to accompany my uncle to religious services and joined the Bar Kochba athletics club. In the Jewish youth circles I found a good deal of the idealism and the enthusiasm of the youth movement culture similar to that which I had experienced in the German school. I became Orthodox, a Zionist and, without knowing the term, a communal socialist who saw the synthesis of his ideals in *aliyah* and in the *kibbutz*. All this caused problems with my parents, who shared none of these ideals. The fact that I insisted on *kashrut*—which at this time in Nazi Germany meant vegetarianism—and wanted to observe the Sabbath created an awkward situation for my parents. Secretly, against the wishes of my parents, I joined a Jewish *Bund*—it must have been Mizrachi—and participated not only in hikes but also in study groups. All this at the age of ten. In December 1937 my parents sent me to the Juedische Waisenhaus und Erziehungsheim in Esslingen since they did not know how to cope with me, a remarkably progressive school for the time, where I stayed until a few weeks before our emigration.

The transition to America was therefore probably more difficult for me than for many of my contemporaries. After three months in and near New York City, I came to Richmond, Virginia, in January 1939, a city which at that time was still very Southern in its attitudes. There was a good deal which I welcomed in this new environment, the democratic ideals which I immediately accepted and the relative openness in the school and generally in human relations, which contrasted with the rigidity and tensions which marked much of German life. Yet almost immediately I became painfully aware of the stark contrast be-

tween democratic pronouncements in Virginia and the racial policies and practices, which even as a twelve-year-old reminded me of anti-Semitism. I found it difficult to accept the consumerism which appeared to me so much in conflict with the attitudes I had acquired in Germany and was taken aback by the lack of intellectual sophistication of my teachers. I was also very much aware of myself as a German and a Jew, or more specifically a German Jew. The fact that I continued to practice my Orthodoxy throughout high school and college in Richmond marked me as someone who was different, although it did not isolate me. Incidentally, despite my Orthodoxy, I had no close Jewish friends but several very good non-Jewish ones. With my American friends I shared a concern with contemporary social problems—we were already then involved in the civil rights movement—and an interest in literature and philosophy. Much of the instruction in school seemed very simple to me; thus I was able to complete high school, which at that time in Virginia ended with eleventh grade, by the age of fifteen and received my B.A. from the University of Richmond at the age of seventeen. At the same time philosophy, literature, history, social studies, and social science classes provided much greater freedom for critical discussion than had been possible in Germany, I majored in French in college but at the same time read extensively in German literature and philosophy. I subsequently completed an M.A. in German literature at the University of Chicago. From 1945 to 1946 I spent the most fruitful year of my career as a student in the Graduate Faculty at the New School, where I studied with Horace Kallen, Albert Safo-  
mon, Felix Kaufmann, Carl Mayer, and Frieda Wunderlich. Thus I was thoroughly steeped in the German intellectual heritage, with a particular interest in the German Jews.

By now I had given up my Orthodox practice without, however, feeling less Jewish, even in a religious sense. The aspect of the Jewish religious legacy which now appeared important to me personally was the universalistic, ethical note which I believed expressed itself in a long tradition from Isaiah, Amos, and Micah to the secularized social reformers of recent times, although I recognized that this was only a minority current in Judaism. I viewed Judaism less in ethnic terms than as a cultural heritage which existed not apart from modern culture but as a part of it, as it had in post-Enlightenment Germany. My attitude towards Zionism changed too. I basically agreed with the Brit

Shalom movement. I continued to believe that Jews were entitled to a national home but was disturbed as early as 1948 about attitudes among Zionists which insufficiently acknowledged the needs of coexistence between Jews and Arabs.

I believe that my German, and specifically my German-Jewish, experience very deeply affected my career as a citizen and as a scholar in America. At graduate school at the University of Chicago I met my wife, Wilma, who came from a Jewish farming family in western Bohemia, also emigrated in October 1938, and took her Ph.D. in German in Chicago with a dissertation on Karl Kraus. In 1950, while we were in the final stages of our dissertations, my wife and I went to Little Rock, Arkansas, to teach in a small black college. Almost immediately we became involved in the NAACP and did a good deal of the research and planning which went into the suits challenging legal segregation in Arkansas. Arkansas demonstrated to us not only one of the negative sides of America, the racism which permeated Southern and to an extent American society, but also the strength of voluntary associations, the undogmatic interchange of various segments of the population, black and white, in which unfortunately the Jewish community played very little of a role in Arkansas. In 1957 we went to Dillard University, a black university in New Orleans, where with the exception of a two-year leave of absence in Europe from 1960 to 1962, we stayed until 1963 and also were active in the NAACP. Beginning with the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, we became increasingly active in the peace movement, first in New Orleans, then briefly in Chicago, and after 1965 in Buffalo, where both of us have been teaching since then, I at SUNY, my wife at Canisius College, and where, since early in the Vietnam War, I began to counsel conscientious objectors, first civilians and after the end of the draft men and women in the military.

My wife's scholarship increasingly turned to Central European Jewish themes; mine to the political context of the German tradition of historical thought. Her extensive studies of the German- and Czech-language literature resulted in 1986 in a book, *Die Juden in Boehmen und Maehren*, published in West Germany, which seeks to recreate the life and culture of Jews in the Czech lands from the Enlightenment to the present, not only of the Prague intellectuals but also of the Jews in the small towns and the countryside. My work has always had a broad international and comparative scope, but in the years after 1960 I

began to examine the role which historical scholarship played in the formation of anti-democratic attitudes in Germany's democratic and humanistic legacy. The resulting volume, *The German Conception of History*, which appeared in several paperback editions in West Germany, was intended as a contribution to the critical discussion then taking place in West Germany on the German historiographical tradition. Since our first lengthy stay in Germany in 1961 and 1962, my wife and I have established close contacts with scholars in West Germany, and since 1966 in East Germany as well. Goettingen, where we have spent several sabbaticals and many a summer, has become in a sense a second home to us. We have increasingly published in German. In both West and East Germany we have had close contacts with groups interested in a Christian-Jewish dialogue. In Buffalo, I have been instrumental in organizing an interdisciplinary program of modern German studies. This has been accompanied by an extensive student exchange with West Germany and most recently with East Germany.

Once more, in conclusion, I remain cautious about defining the German-Jewish legacy or its expression in American life in abstract terms. The legacy has been as multifaceted as has been its impact on America. Therefore I have chosen the autobiographical approach. Until now studies of German Jews have largely concentrated on the elites. There is a good of justification for this because of the tremendous impact of persons of Jewish background or at least ancestry on German thought. This thought in turn has had a tremendous influence not only on thought and culture in America but in the world generally. But in America this influence, transmitted by the post-1933 emigres, was greatest. One should, however, be careful in attempts to define the importance of the German-Jewish legacy to the "continuation of a democratic American society." Politically Jews in Germany have represented the entire spectrum of opinion from monarchists to Marxists, although their intellectual and cultural heritage, which is very difficult to define, contributed to their being frequently more often associated with critical and humanitarian positions than other groups of the population. The German-Jewish legacy in its many expressions deserves to be studied as one of the creative highpoints of modern culture. Increasingly it is being studied as such in America, Israel, West Germany, and in most recent years East Germany and elsewhere. All

this is encouraging. So far it has been largely the study of elites. German Jewish society and culture should, however, be studied more broadly than it has been until now, to include a much wider segment of German-Jewish life, including the more humble settings from which many of those who made names for themselves were only one or two generations removed.