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# The German Jew in America: The Last Wave of Immigrants

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The German-Jewish legacy in America was represented a century ago through pioneer immigrant efforts which led to the establishment of many American Jewish institutions; these became the basis of Jewish life in most major communities throughout the United States. They played a dominant role, as the earlier Sephardic Jewish community was very small.

The German-Jewish immigrants of the 1930s added only a small percentage to the total Jewish population and played a less significant role, as institutions and patterns of life had already been well established. Yet they too made major contributions, as this small, very well-educated, elite frequently represented intellectual leadership in the sciences and arts. Scores of individuals in every field made an impact nationally and in some instances revolutionized their field. Men and women like Einstein, Franck, Steinberg, Lewin, Fromme, Ludwig, Zweig, Walter, Arendt, Schonberg, Weill, Kreisler, Schnabel, Mendelsohn, Reinhardt, changed the scientific, musical, literary, and artistic life of their adopted land.

In the next generation many of the descendants of these German Jews may be found in leadership positions both in the general intellectual world and in the Jewish world. For these reasons the German-Jewish legacy is significant. German Jews through their century and a half of acculturation created a symbiosis between German culture and Jewish values. This proved, for the first time in the modern world, that it was possible to create such a union without the loss of Jewish identity and that this could enrich Jewish life. This symbiosis was accomplished for liberal Judaism by individuals such as Hermann Cohen, Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, and Leo Baeck; for Orthodox Jews by Samson Raphael Hirsch, David Hoffmann, and Anton Nobel. Each of these individuals in their specific field demonstrated that Jewish thoughts could be interwoven with ideas from the surrounding modern world. In other words, as the world was no longer hostile to

Judaism, one could safely adapt to certain elements from it and in turn also influence the larger world of Jewish thought. The isolation of Jewish studies which had occurred in the nineteenth century, when modern Jewish studies began, was no longer desirable in the twentieth century, nor was there a need to create a dichotomy between one's Jewish identity and one's intellectual identity.

In every area of Jewish learning, efforts to bridge the gap between the general and Jewish world were made. Let us look at two or three examples from widely disparate fields. Martin Buber along with Franz Rosenzweig created a new philosophy whose structure was dependent upon the surrounding world, yet the thoughts expressed are specifically Jewish. Benno Jacob, the great German-Jewish biblical scholar, did not feel it necessary to isolate himself from modern linguistic and scientific approaches to the Bible. Yet he brought to his commentaries a specific Jewish understanding which led him to polemicize vigorously and successfully against the documentary hypothesis and many misunderstandings of the biblical text which had developed due to an ignorance of the Jewish tradition. His commentaries demonstrate a vigorous symbiosis.

Whole fields of Jewish endeavor which had not been explored at all before or only in a meager way were developed by German-Jewish scholars who combined Western techniques and methods with Jewish learning. Gershom Scholem opened the world of mysticism and established an entire school. Earlier Franz Landsberger did the same for Jewish art and its historic sources. Eric Werner has conducted pioneer studies in the realm of Jewish music which have brought an entirely new understanding of our musical heritage and will influence succeeding generations.

The German-Jewish legacy therefore is one of creative symbiosis which leads to new paths and to creative survival. This has become an essential element of American Jewish intellectual life, as demonstrated through the efforts of hundreds of professors of Jewish studies.

The German-Jewish legacy has emphasized intellectual curiosity and illumination of the past. The Eastern European tradition emphasized spiritually, while the Western European tradition stressed abstract investigation and philosophy. Neither, of course, as exclusive. Both of these trends have found fertile ground on the American Jewish scene and have played an influential role in forming contemporary

American Jewish life. It is no accident that the president of the Hebrew Union College, Alfred Gottschalk, and the chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, Ismar Schorsch, are descendants of the last wave of German-Jewish immigrants. They and a whole host of other leaders have helped to change American Jewish life in this generation and will continue to influence it in the years to come.

These efforts of the German Jew have been attractive to the disaffected intellectual American Jews, who have frequently found that the Judaism of the normative community is not sufficiently deep or challenging for their intellectual needs. Although some of these individuals will never affiliate formally with a synagogue or find their way into the organizational structure of the Jewish community, they will nevertheless respond to the efforts at symbiosis which continue to be made.

Like all immigrant traditions the German Jew brought a large number of incidental trappings which have been discarded and are hardly likely to survive beyond the immigrant generation. As German Jews who emigrated to the United States make a real effort to become part of the American Jewish scene, they also acclimatized quickly, and this differentiated them from earlier immigrants.

The legacy of the last wave of German-Jewish immigrants is one of successful symbiosis and thorough intellectual inquiry. It is worth preserving and will continue as a creative portion of American Jewish life.