

---

# The German-Jewish Heritage: A View from 1988

Hans Juergensen

## I

On January 30, 1933, at 5 p.m., all of Germany was informed that Adolf Hitler had been appointed Chancellor of the Reich.

I still vividly recall the bitter shock I felt at the announcement.

I was just thirteen years old.

Despite the warning signals sent out by the Nazis over the years, with the slogan "*Die Juden sind unser Unglueck*" ("The Jews are our misfortune"), far too many of the approximately 600,000 German Jews refused to believe that, in Rabbi Leo Baeck's words, "The end of German Jewry had arrived." Hitler could not last, they argued. The German people were too sensible, *too cultured* to follow such a leader. Moreover, the Jews had proved their patriotism again and again, especially during the World War, in which 12,000 of their number had sacrificed their lives for the *Vaterland*. And: had they not—since their emancipation in 1812—and even before—contributed their share to that shibboleth of the middle and upper classes, *Bildung*? They proudly reminded their non-Jewish countrymen of the great poets, scientists, statesmen, et al., who had helped make German culture and civilization respected—and envied—across the globe. They were, in the official phrase, Germans of the Mosaic faith, bred on Goethe and Schiller, Kant and Hegel far more profoundly than on Maimonides and Ibn Ezra. And many had remained *Kaisertreu* during the Weimar Republic years. Not all, of course, for the artists and intellectuals yearned for democracy. Yet, it is a curious fact that many of the famous writers—Jakob Wassermann and Alfred Doebelin, to name two—did not address the growing anti-Semitism while profiling the economic and social problems of the working classes.

Theodor Herzl's Zionism was loudly repudiated by the vast majority of German and Austrian Jews.

My personal experiences were totally German. And my religious training was perfectly in tune with conservative Jewish practices. All

the Jews I knew were Germans first.

As a boy, I was exposed to some anti-Semitism, but only at the hands and voices of ignorant proletarians. My middle-class friends and schoolmates—all but two non-Jewish—accepted me as “one of theirs.” I certainly did not consider myself to be “an alien element.” In truth, with few exceptions the Jews in Schwiebus (now Polish) were ardent nationalists. Among the few exceptions, however, were my adoptive parents, Herrmann and Dora Juergensen. As active members of the Social Democratic party they stood out and were looked upon as “dangerous” by the more conservative Jews. My father, originally Danish, had become a naturalized citizen (like Hitler!); he had fought in the German Army from 1914 to 1918, and had converted to Judaism upon being married.

He was a highly cultured man, a fine amateur pianist, and a pacifist. My mother, less cultured, was a courageous fighter for the underprivileged. Thus, I became aware of poverty and social injustices early in life. But the educational environment made me into the young nationalist who belonged with the middle-class friends with whom he went to school in that small provincial town.

In 1924 my parents' dry-goods store was vandalized by Nazi hoodlums, then known as Werwolf. As a result, my family went bankrupt, not once, but three times. Finally, in 1927, my parents and I moved to Berlin. We were desperately poor at a time when Germany was recovering economically. For two years my father was without work; my mother and I became very ill in the Berlin slum where we barely existed in one room.

Our experience of 1924 was blamed on my parents' political activities. No one really thought of anti-Semitism at the time.

During the winter of 1927–28 I was taken back to Schwiebus, on the orders of our physician, to live with my mother's sister, Mrs. Ulricke Riesenfeld. My mother, worn out by illness and poverty, died in 1928, at the age of fifty. I remained with my aunt until I left Germany in 1934.

In 1930, I started *Gymnasium* on a scholarship. The school was co-ed, since a town as small as Schwiebus could not support segregated high schools. The education I received was typically German, and excellent as well. My teachers turned out to be atypical in that they did not conform to the Prussian rigidity practiced elsewhere. Most of

them had been soldiers in the 1914 war; yet they were no martinets. Several members of the faculty were politically liberal. Thus, I and the other four Jewish students felt completely at ease and fully integrated into all school activities.

My favorite subjects were German, history, and art. I thrived on literature and read beyond the level of my class. The teachers encouraged me. And since I discovered that I was physically agile, I became an athlete who won prizes in the annual games, particularly in track.

German *Kultur* governed by boyhood. Even then, everybody prophesied an academic career for me—that is, until January of 1933. After that date life became increasingly difficult for Jews in the provinces. We were isolated and frequently demeaned by the Aryan citizens.

In my case, the teachers and schoolmates remained loyal; but early in 1934 I was forced to leave school because my scholarship had been terminated. For the last months of that school year, my fourth, the faculty paid my tuition; this was a most unusual action by a German school. And I remember my teachers' generosity with gratitude.

Already in 1933 I knew that Jews had to emigrate and voiced this knowledge publicly, to the dismay of my elders.

I was fortunate to be selected as one of fourteen boys to constitute the first children's transport to America. I landed in New York on November 9, 1934.

## II

The German heritage still remains strong in my life as well as in the life of my wife, who is a refugee from Frankfurt am Main. Steeped in the arts of Germany, we refer to them constantly. The best works, both classical and modern, influence us. This is natural since I am a professor of humanities who has taught German history, literature, and philosophy as well as English, ranging from freshman composition to graduate courses in British and American literature. However, I have also become profoundly involved in Judaic studies ever since I arrived in the United States. And my participation in the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council as special consultant has certainly deepened my awareness of the Jewish experience.

Being a product of three cultures—German, Jewish, and American—I can attest to the lasting influence of German thought. Goethe

and Kant are as important to me as Maimonides and Buber. The development of democratic philosophy and practices, starting with John Locke and reinforced by Spinoza, governs my personal beliefs and actions. Add such names as Durer and Beethoven, and the reader will recognize the importance of German greatness that may be termed universal. Add further my long American experience, including my frontline years in the U.S. Army against the Nazi forces, and the sum comes to a very rich and often dangerous personal drama.

I am, therefore, the result of a symbiosis. It has been my personal privilege and professional duty to select the highest values from three cultural entities and to communicate them to Americans for forty years.

German-Jewish liberalism, imported into America nearly 150 years ago, gave rise to the Reform movement, which left its mark on American democracy. But I hasten to add that the immigrants from Central Europe contributed materially to advances in American social betterment. They, more than the German Jews, worked toward the betterment of the working class. For it is a fact that the German-Jewish immigrants, even those from Hitler, considered themselves an elite.

There is no doubt that the German-Jewish legacy remains active and has its effect on succeeding generations. My daughter's attitude is ambivalent, especially after her visit to Germany in 1980. She admires German art, particularly the theater, but is still disturbed by her experience in Dachau.

My older grandson has been informed about the Holocaust and elected to write a term paper on the subject two years ago when he was eleven.

Certainly, the Jewish experience in Europe over the past hundred years has strongly affected American attitudes, culture and, very importantly, its politics and economics.

One result of the horrors initiated by the Germans during the Hitler era is the opening of the gates to newer victims than myself.

Undoubtedly, the most significant legacy left us of the German-Jewish experience is the need for constant vigilance concerning the constitutional rights of all Americans and the active amelioration of the fate of the oppressed all over the world.

DACHAU: LEST WE FORGET

The grief will not be assuaged!

—even though these infernal gates  
spewed out the surviving shadows  
in 1945;  
and the mounds of bone-wreckage  
were summarily bulldozed—  
by retching liberators—  
into the reeking loam

upon which ruthless hyenas  
—some *yet* among the breathing—had coldly, viciously executed  
satanic orders on human flesh.

(What words are sufficiently cruel  
to itemize total depravity?)

\* \* \* \*

When I saw the country again  
after more than forty years  
of my deliverance,  
it *did* stir flashes of nostalgia,  
for there was once a boyhood  
worth recalling.

But the wrathful pity for my dead  
blazed doubly high—  
and will keep burning  
as long as I live.