
A German-Jewish Legacy

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In order to speak meaningfully about a German-Jewish legacy and its presumed impact on either the American Jewish community or the United States as a whole, we must posit the existence of a definable "German-Jewishness." We must further assume that this German-Jewishness consists of more than some common attitudes, perceptions, and values of Germans who also happen to be Jews, or of Jews who also are, or at least have been, Germans. In short, we must consider the German Jews as a distinct religio-cultural group which could have a definable impact on its original environment and retain its identity sufficiently to have an impact even after transplantation. Such assumptions are debatable. But only if they prove true can studies of German Jews as a religio-cultural group yield a definition of a German-Jewish legacy.

My contribution to such a process must, perforce, be a modest one: to use my personal experience as a partial definition of German-Jewishness, and to consider its possible impact from this micro-perspective. Since my experience may well not have been remotely representative, this approach is certainly open to challenge. But it can, perhaps, add a small reality-based element to a highly speculative enterprise.

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My parents and paternal grandparents lived in a small town in western Germany, my maternal grandparents, whom we visited often, in a small city less than 100 kilometers away. A substantial part of the family had earlier come from rural villages, where its members had been tradesmen. Those relatives of whose existence I had any great awareness were largely "in business," in some fashion. My father was part-owner of a small winery, my maternal grandfather dealt in scrap metal and animal products, one of my uncles in shoe leather. Others I knew were shopkeepers, or salesmen of some description. One not too distant relative was a "banker," though in what capacity I do not know. All were literate and, except for some in the very oldest generation, had completed some sort of secondary education. Most had cul-

tural interests—literature, the theater, music, art—and considered themselves both educated and cultured, but none had attended a university. My mother, who had wanted to study medicine, had been denied the chance by her father.

To the best of my knowledge, everyone thought of himself as both German and Jewish: German in nationality, Jewish in religion, acculturated in both. I certainly did. At the time of the 1936 Olympics, I could still be found rooting for the “home team” and collecting pictures of its heroes, though by that time I had reason to know that Jews were not Germans in the Third Reich. My mother still read Schiller and Thomas Mann (but also Shaw and Stendhal), and admired Wagner’s music.

Not until after we had emigrated to the United States did we encounter persons who, to our astonishment, identified themselves as Jewish in the same fashion as those from County Cork called themselves Irish. We did not do so even then. Our nationality remained German, though we used the term “refugee” to suggest that we had none at the moment. Jewish it was not.

Being Jewish in religion and, especially, in culture was very much part of my consciousness, however. No one whom I knew well could be described as a fully observant Jew. Even my maternal grandfather, chairman of the local congregation, kept no kosher house and did little more than put in obligatory appearances at synagogue functions. Outward signs of Jewishness were limited to “family traditions,” such as the lighting of Sabbath candles, annual seders (one), synagogue attendance on the High Holy Days, and the consumption of various “ethnic” foods (German-Jewish, to be sure, not “Eastern-Jewish”). And these limited observances were more prevalent with my grandparents and their generation than with my parents’ and my own—at least until 1933.

Despite this, my parents always regarded themselves as Jews, and in that sense somehow different from most of their neighbors. They occasionally had a gentile friend and knew more than a few non-Jews quite well. My mother reminisced, on occasion, about non-Jewish boyfriends (my grandparents would surely have been aghast), and my father about gentile schoolmates, but the vast bulk of their associations were with Jews, inside the family and out. Much the same was true for me, even before 1933. Since the small town in which I grew up

had only a handful of Jewish families with small children, most of my playmates were, in fact, cousins of some description. Two of these had non-Jewish neighbors with children of their respective ages. They knew these children, of course, but were not friends, and rarely played together. After 1933, they did not play at all.

Jewishness, while not considered *the* central element of existence, was certainly accepted as a given. Passing or converting were steps which no one in the family considered. Others who did, or tried to, were regarded as weak, dishonest, or even sick. We were in some ways quite proud of being Jews, and felt culturally and, indeed, morally superior to "goyim." But we also distinguished between ourselves and East European Jews in these respects, and thus our cultural Jewishness was German-Jewishness.

Hitler's accession to power in 1933 brought some changes in behavior. On the theory that if we were to be ostracized and persecuted for being Jews we should at least understand our Jewishness better, my parents became active in the synagogue and began to promote my Jewish education. My mother collected money for tree planting in Palestine, and my father thought seriously about emigrating there. We became more Jewish—but not more religious.

For me, school began in April 1933. As one of only two Jewish children (the other was my cousin) in the first grade of the town school, I suffered both from a teacher who was a prominent local Nazi and whose son (also in the class) was one of the earliest *Jungvolk* recruits, and from classmates who had been encouraged to believe that beating up Jews made one a better German. A sympathetic principal advised my parents to take me out of the school, and by the following year I was in the newly established Jewish school of the nearest major city, an hour's train ride away. At age seven, my cousin and I now lived during the week with two unemployed Jewish teachers, and enjoyed the freedom of the big city, where nobody knew us and where our streetcar passes were passports to adventure.

The school we attended was itself a product of the events of 1933 and of German-Jewish consciousness. Staffed by teachers fired from the public schools, it was Jewish in its personnel more than its curriculum. It had a Zionist orientation and required us to study *Iurit*, presumably as practical preparation for emigration to Palestine, but the course of study was certainly secular and decidedly German, with

some “Sunday School”—Jewish history and Jewish ethics—added for good measure.

My father had thought of emigrating soon after Hitler came to power, but had been dissuaded, primarily by his brother. A World War I sergeant (rare rank for a Jew), and member of the Reichsbund Juedischer Frontsoldaten (a quintessentially German designation that reflects both the extent and limits of assimilation) who treasured his Iron Cross, my uncle could not believe that Hitler’s attacks on good Germans like us were anything but a temporary aberration. He held to this theory until 1938, when he was temporarily imprisoned in Dachau. My father never shared that view, and by 1936 was determined to leave. Our destination was to be the United States, to where a visa could be obtained. But when an emigration inspector went through our baggage prior to departure and questioned the source of the World War I decorations he found, my father not only produced the citations which had accompanied them, but added with some bitterness that he still awaited the promised “thanks of the Fatherland.”

The United States, where we arrived on Armistice Day 1937, certainly had greater impact on us than we had on it. And in various ways it altered not only our perceptions of ourselves as Germans, but also as Jews. Thus clearly our German-Jewishness was transformed.

First and foremost, of course, we became Americans. We had come not to find a temporary refuge but a new home, away from the Germans who had betrayed us. (My parents, who traveled widely in Europe after the war, never visited their old home again. I did so several times, but then I had grown up as an American.) Though we lived for years in a neighborhood inhabited largely by other “refugees,” and socialized mainly with them, we—and they—were not as interested in building a German-Jewish community in America as in assimilating to the larger surroundings. English became our language of choice in short order, and application for American citizenship was made at the earliest possible date. And we sought—and found—American (largely American-Jewish) friends.

If America as a whole replaced most of our Germanness, our Jewishness was affected by contact with an established Jewish community comprised largely of Jews from Eastern Europe. Less assimilated than we had felt ourselves to be in Germany, more self-consciously Jewish than we were and, on the whole, more observant as well, the nature of

our initial contacts with them was most clearly symbolized, perhaps, by our amazement that they spoke Yiddish, and theirs that we did not. Our prejudice against "Eastern Jews" did not evaporate at once, nor did their reciprocal one. But over time a degree of mutual adjustment took place which reinforced, as it reshaped our Jewishness.

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On the basis of such considerations, what can we say about the possible impact of German-Jewishness in the United States? The most accurate answer is, of course, "not much." The German Jews who came to the United States became only a very small drop in a very large pond—even of Jews. They were not entirely homogeneous, their "German-Jewishness" was almost immediately altered, and the primary aim of most became adjustment to the new surroundings, not changing them. But that may not be the whole story.

If, as my experience would suggest, German Jews brought with them a nationalism (German—but transferable) created by assimilation, a partially secularized religiosity which put knowledge, understanding, and morality (not unlike George Mosse's concept of *Bildung*) at the core of their Jewishness, and a cultural sensibility which placed them squarely within the Western tradition, they may well, by their existence as well as by their actions, have made an impact in their new home.

The fact that the German Jews were a relatively educated and assimilated group helped, without question, to focus American attention on the plight of the Jews everywhere, to lead—however slowly and inadequately—to American policies which sought to alleviate this plight (including, ultimately, the prompt recognition of the State of Israel), and to create a better climate for Jews, even in the United States. For the same reason, both the example and the practice of the Jews from Germany probably speeded up the already ongoing process of assimilation for American Jews, which peaked in the war and post-war years.

Because many came with some professional qualifications, because most sought to reproduce in America the assimilation they thought they had achieved in Germany, because they did not, on the whole, carry their Jewishness like a badge and, to be sure, because they were relatively few in numbers, German Jews were able to penetrate American society more effectively and more rapidly than many other immi-

grant groups. They were aided by world events which conferred upon them the status of innocent victims, but that too owed something to their German-Jewishness. They quickly appeared in respectable numbers in the arts, the media, and the universities, and they joined social, cultural, and even political associations in surprising numbers.

Such activity translated itself into influence—not directly, for German Jews had little power, but indirectly through the process of acceptance and through the relevance of German-Jewish concerns to the events of the time. That influence was probably slight. But both the United States and the American Jewish community moved in the direction in which that influence was exerted. The greater openness of the society to “Jewish concerns” and the greater assimilation of all American Jews followed.

Can that be regarded as a legacy? Indeed it can, for the changes that German Jews helped promote were both significant and beneficial. But to speak of a continuing legacy seems to me far more problematical. The “German-Jewish spirit,” whatever that may mean, has found a home in this country, has helped to make this country more congenial to itself, and has thereby lost much of its distinctiveness. Though it may not have fully disappeared, it is now so much a part of an American, and indeed an American-Jewish, amalgam that to search for its future impact would be an exercise in futility. Many of the ideas and values which it encompassed are, of course, enduring values that can and should be nurtured, but at least in the United States, something definable in significant ways—i.e., in ways likely to have an impact—as German-Jewishness seems to me a thing of the past.