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# The German-Jewish Legacy: A Past with No Future

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My contribution to this symposium on the German-Jewish legacy will differ from most others because the type of German-Jewish culture to which I have been exposed since childhood is very different from the usual stereotype of German-Jewish life. In fact one of the main motivations for me to devote my main research interests to the study of German Jewry has been the dichotomy between the German-Jewish immigrant community in which I grew up and the German-Jewish community to which I have been exposed in the literature.

The usual picture of the German-Jewish community as highly acculturated, indeed assimilated, with elite economic, social, and educational features, did not fit the immigrant community in the Washington Heights section of Manhattan in which I was raised. The community of my childhood was first and foremost a “typical” immigrant society, with its language, customs, and style of personal interaction heavily influenced by the Old Country. Although German in language and style, the members of the Washington Heights community of my childhood identified primarily as Jews, not as Germans. Jewish religious life was strong and expressed itself in synagogue attendance, celebration of the Sabbath and holidays, and in a high level of religious observance. Most of the people with whom my family socialized were “plain people,” many of them blue-collar workers or small businesspeople. Many had not completed high school. This was certainly not “Our Crowd.” Rather, it was a traditional Jewish community with a German ethnic twist.

The section of German Jewry from which my community derived is probably the least known of all German-Jewish groups—the *Landjuden* (small-town Jews) of South Germany. They were neither highly acculturated and religiously indifferent like the bulk of big-city Jews in Germany, nor militantly Orthodox and anti-Zionist like the “Breuer Community” of Frankfurt am Main. For them, Judaism was primarily tradition passed down through the family and community without

great learning or analysis, but with respect for its hallowed age and sanctity. In some ways it was the German version of the *shtetl*.

Because of my background, I have always thought of German Jewishness not as a specific ideology or set of values, but as a tradition or an atmosphere. Therefore, I do not see the German-Jewish heritage as a "spirit" or ideal which should be exported to other groups or influence them. Certainly there are elements of the traditional German-Jewish way of life which might provide useful models for others, but the German-Jewish heritage as a whole cannot be carried over intact into future generations.

For me the German-Jewish heritage is like a family heirloom which I was brought up to cherish. Therefore I regret what I believe is the inevitable disappearance of a separate German-Jewish community and culture within a generation. This is especially true because German Jewry is the most ancient part of Ashkenazic Jewry and preserves some practices of the early Ashkenazim which have disappeared elsewhere. Nevertheless, I believe that the appearance and disappearance of Jewish subtraditions is an inevitable result of the historical process. The German-Jewish community in America (and most other countries of emigration) is far along in the process of merger into the general Jewish community. Overall, I feel this is a healthy phenomenon, however much I might regret the loss of some distinctive practices.

Having admitted that mine may be the last generation to feel a sense of connection with the German-Jewish tradition, I still feel that my connection with that tradition has given me personally certain valuable perspectives which might have a broader application.

First of all, having been raised in a "subethnic" variety of Judaism, I have been made aware that Jewish tradition is not homogeneous. The Eastern European tradition is an important element of Judaism, but it is not the only one. I regret that this single strand within Judaism has pushed aside the other traditions to such an extent that Sephardic rabbis in Israel feel impelled to dress in Hasidic dress to appear authentic. I believe that interest in, and preservation (at least for the historical record) of all Jewish ethnic traditions is a positive value. Although German Jewry may soon go out of existence, the awareness of Jewish geographic variety will enrich Judaism greatly. In this case it is not the specifics of German Jewry but the general value of folk tradition and geographic variation which is worthy of preservation.

German Jewry has also produced other things of value. Perhaps most important is the ability to remain Jews without denying the value of the culture and peoples among whom we live. This is an especially important contribution of the German trends within Orthodox Jewry and is one which, unfortunately, Orthodox Judaism is in danger of losing. Less vital, though I think still of some value, is a certain type of a esthetic sense as expressed in the liturgy, folk customs, and way of interaction. Certainly there is much that is stiff and overly formal in the German-Jewish style. Yet, the devotion to structure, to rules, and to a certain style of formal dignity might perhaps benefit a Jewish community which has gone too far in the direction of the informal, the unstructured, and the unadorned. Of course, there are negative values in the German-Jewish approach as well. Clearest among them is a sense of snobbishness and superiority to other Jewish groups. This has been a long-standing criticism of German Jews by others. Although the accusations were sometimes exaggerated, they certainly included more than a grain of truth. Judaism will not miss the disappearance of such attitudes.

The views expressed here are very much personal ones arising out of my own upbringing. I see a certain danger in trying to characterize a German-Jewish "national character" or type. German Jewry, like all groups, was complex and variegated. One important lesson we can learn is to recognize the variation within all groups and not to construct ethnic stereotypes (even relatively benign ones like that of the *yekke*). What one person sees as characteristic of a population group may not be the same as that seen by another. German Jewry, like Jewry as a whole, was not uniform. Perhaps the greatest legacy we can learn from it is that we can preserve Judaism without imposing upon it a uniformity and homogeneity which is not inherent in it.