
A Precious Legacy

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Besitz and *Bildung* defined the spirit of modern German Jewry. With some important modifications, to be sure, they may be said to define the legacy of German Jews here and now. Scion of a long line of rabbinical families, I believe as firmly as I did in September 1933, when I escaped from Nazi Germany, in the synthesis of Western Judaism, the proposition that Western civilization owes as much to its Jewish heritage as the emancipation of the Jews owes to the blessings of Western civilization.

Illustrative of the dominant mood among the great majority of German Jews from the time of Enlightenment and emancipation to the eve of their destruction are the words of Abraham Geiger (1810–1874), pioneer of the Reform movement: “Jerusalem is an honorable memory from the past, the cradle of the religion; it is no hope for the future, not the place from which new life will be developed. . . . honor to Jerusalem and its memory, as to all the great dead; but let us not disturb its rest!” The same mood, the same faith in the spirit of classical German literature and philosophy, found expression in the words of Geiger’s great opponent, Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808–1888), leader of Neo-Orthodoxy, spoken in commemoration of the centennial of Schiller’s birth, November 10, 1759:

It was man, the most human in man and the most divine in man, that found its proper expression in Schiller. . . . The fact that universal homage is here being paid to the spirit, in particular to the morally ennobling spirit of Schiller, that fact, my friends, would have been greeted by our Sages as the dawn of the day when all men will arise and let the blindfolds fall from their eyes.

The intimate passion that the relation to things German assumed for the Jews is, as Gershom Scholem has pointed out, connected with the specific historical hour in which it was born. The timing was fortunate. When the Jews turned from their medieval state to the new era, the overwhelming majority of them lived in Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Eastern Europe. Due to prevailing geographic, political, and

linguistic conditions, therefore, it was German culture the Jews first encountered on their road to the West. Moreover, says Scholem,

the encounter occurred precisely at the moment when that culture had reached one of its most fruitful turning points. It was the zenith of Germany's bourgeois era. One can say that it was a happy hour when the newly awakened creativity of the Jews, which was to assume such impressive forms after 1780, impinged precisely on the zenith of a great creative period of the German people, a period producing an image of things German that, up to 1940, and among very broad classes of people, was to remain unshaken, even by many bitter and later most bitter experiences. For the Jews this amalgamation of a great historical hour was defined and symbolized by the names of Lessing and Schiller, and in its intensity and scope it has no parallel in the encounters of the Jews with other European peoples. Due to this encounter, the first on the Jews' way to the West, because of this new image, a high luster fell on all things German. Even today, after so much blood and so many tears, we cannot say that it was *only* a deceptive luster. It was more: it contained elements of great fruitfulness and the stimulus to significant developments.

It may be hard to calculate precisely the importance of the German classics in the formation of Jewish attitudes to Germany. I was brought up to look upon "our poets and thinkers" as the spokesmen for pure humanity, the bearers of the highest ideals of mankind. Indeed, my encounter with them, it would seem to me in retrospect, was more real than my encounter with actual Germans, including my classmates in the *Gymnasium*. To people like my father, an Orthodox rabbi, who saw in the tenets of Western humanism points of contact with Jewish monotheism and the social ideas of Jewish law and lore, Lessing, Schiller, Kant, and Goethe provided welcome confirmation of the rightness and truth of Judaism. To put it in Hermann Cohen's words: "German classicism had this sense of world citizenship in common with Prophetic Judaism; its historical root lies in the Messianic idea of God."

The year 1935 was decisive for me. Columbia University had just awarded me an M.A. for a thesis on "The Social and Political Ideas of Lessing." I joined the German-Jewish Club (later New World Club), publisher of *Aufbau* (which still carries the Midrash column on the portion of the work that I started more than a generation ago, in addition to articles on Jewish philosophy and literature), and was asked to deliver the principal address at the unveiling of the Heinrich Heine monument in front of the courthouse in the Bronx. Paraphras-

ing Heine's prophetic pronouncements in his essay "On the History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany," I spoke with uninhibited passion about the universal importance of classical German literature and philosophy. Fate, I said, had destined us former German Jews to be the faithful keepers of a precious legacy, a powerful ally in our struggle against Nazism. I don't remember how many friends and/or enemies I made with my speech. It did, however, earn me the attention and respect of two people who have since played major roles in my life: a bright young woman named Alice Heumann, who two years later became my wife, and her boss, Professor Max Horkheimer, founder and head of the Frankfurt School, thenceforth my fatherly friend and teacher, who had just established the Institute of Social Research at Columbia University and gave me my first job—a job in the rarified atmosphere of his intellectual hothouse.

Of all the waves of immigration to the United States, ours was one of the smallest, comprising no more than 140,000, but its impact on American culture was, we may say with due modesty, probably the greatest. These immigrants were mostly Jewish. Others were not, but like Thomas Mann, his brother Heinrich Mann, Paul Tillich, Bert Brecht, to name only a few of the most famous, were close friends of Jews and/or married to Jews. They had hardly arrived, when, in the words of a professional observer writing in *Commentary*,

They began to exert an influence far disproportionate to their numbers on American science, social thought, the arts, the academy, and intellectual discourse in general. They quickly rose to prominent positions as writers and professors, fashion and news photographers, psychoanalysts, movie directors, orchestra conductors, and eventually presidents of academic associations. Remarkably, in many of the fields they entered they quickly began to produce cultural products that stood out as representative expressions of the American spirit and style.

Yes, indeed, this sums up what happened to one part of the German-Jewish legacy in the American context. It had found a home in this country.

There is no question in my mind that this legacy will continue to be as important to the future of a democratic American society, and the future of American Jewry, as it has been to their defense in the past. My long apprenticeship with the principals of the Frankfurt School during their years on Morningside Heights, with Max Horkheimer,

Friedrich Pollock, Theodor W. Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Leo Lowenthal, Erich Fromm, Henryk Grossmann, Franz Neumann, Otto Kirchheimer, while at the same time pursuing graduate studies in philosophy and sociology with the luminaries in these fields at Columbia, decisively shaped and sharpened my sense of the special role of the academic professions as practitioners and guardians of free inquiry and circumspect judgment, vigorous critics and resolute defenders of democratic institutions and values. When the time came to do their job in the war against the Nazis, Marcuse, Neumann, and Kirchheimer joined the OSS, even as Lowenthal served with the Voice of America and I with the OWI, first in New York, from D-Day until after VJ-Day in London, and finally in the Office of the U.S. Chief of Counsel at the Nuremberg trials against the major war criminals.

Or the many scholarly projects the American Jewish Committee sponsored in the interest of American Jewry, none had made a stronger impact than the *Studies in Prejudice* series conceived and directed by Horkheimer. *The Authoritarian Personality* volume was certainly a special event in American social science, occasioning further research on the psychological and political causes of anti-Semitism and fascism and providing the stimulus for a veritable avalanche of secondary literature, the like of which was unequalled before or since. So highly, indeed, did the American Jewish Committee esteem Horkheimer's scholarly resourcefulness and political savvy that, after his return to Germany to reopen and direct once again the famous Institut fuer Sozialforschung in addition to assuming the presidency of the University of Frankfurt, it made him its principal on-the-spot adviser on a whole number of educational and political initiatives in the Federal Republic. He continued in that capacity almost until his death in 1973.

Regarding our group's contribution to the religious life and learning of Jews in America, we can say that its members are now among the leaders in all branches of American Judaism, even as their forebears were the inventors of Reform and Neo-Orthodoxy. Whatever their ideological differences, the spark of the *Hasidei Ashkenaz*, the Devout of Germany of the Middle Ages, continues to be discernible in their peculiar combination of love of God, devotion to learning, and sense of social service. In colleges and universities as well as rabbinical seminaries throughout the land, they continue to add to German Jewry's

greatest achievement and proudest legacy—the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, the Science of Judaism, the creative merging of enthusiasm for the timeless message of Judaism with critical scholarly investigation of its changing historical forms. It was this synthesis of Western Judaism that has facilitated the transformation of the traditional into the modern rabbi, university educated in philosophy, history, Semitic philology or classical languages, in addition to his rabbinical training. We might say that the German *Rabbiner Doktor* was the model for the professor at the Jewish theological seminaries, if not the rabbi in all branches of American Judaism.

What is alive and dead in the German-Jewish legacy? Whatever the differences among them, whether liberal or orthodox, Zionist or not, German Jews shared an essentially common ethos. Principal ingredients of that ethos were a firm belief in Western values, a strong sense of shared destiny, and a steadfast refusal to return to the ghetto or to betray the faith of their fathers. They continue to share that ethos. To be sure, they remember the past, but they see their future only in America or Israel. They have become acculturated, not assimilated, in America and in Israel. Kurt Blumenfeld, an early leader and highly articulate spokesman of German Zionism, confirmed to me on more than one occasion that he was *ein Zionist von Goethes Gnaden*, “a Zionist by the grace of Goethe.” He candidly described a fact which he felt no need to change or feel ashamed of.

Meanwhile I have lived and been schooled in America over half a century, long enough to recognize that there has always been something brittle and painfully deceptive about the notion of *Bildung* as a refining, moral-character-molding, ennobling and redemptive force. It was, no doubt, an important factor in the Jewish belief in mankind, but at the same time it was the occasion for idealistic self-deceptions and delusions, engendered by the relations of the Jews with the small sector of the *gebildete* German bourgeoisie. It gave rise to a dubious *Bildungsjudentum* whose language began to sound hollow as soon as it had taken off.

For some of us who were brought up in the belief that Latin and Greek, if not Hebrew, were the unique garments of the truth, it may be difficult to appreciate that our classical education was not, as they say in the vernacular, “all it’s cracked up to be.” It never was, nor will it be, the exclusive guide to a life of universal bliss and peace. I have learned

to look at such claims with a jaundiced eye. I observed that less than the whole truth can be revealed as easily in Latin and Greek, even Hebrew, as in German and English. I remember that *Bildung* has often led to a display of *Bildungsduenkel*, contempt for those who are poor and lack *Bildung*. I have come to note that it is so much more becoming and attractive to carry one's learning lightly, and forgo the compulsive invocation of Goethe and Schiller. Especially after a bitter discovery: "We know now that a man can read Goethe and Rilke in the evening, that he can play Bach and Schubert, and go to his day's work at Auschwitz in the morning" (George Steiner).

Of course, I do not mean to suggest that the liberal arts are no good and of no earthly use to a liberal democratic society. The devil, too, may be schooled in the liberal arts, even render the Horst-Wessel-Lied in fine Greek verse, and be quick to quote Scripture. But that's no reason to abandon either Scripture or the humanities. A free society thrives on free inquiry, diversity, and vigorous debate of viewpoints. Important skills and knowledge are generated on the playgrounds of the spirit. The humanities help to strengthen the societal enterprise, even as in turn it will be inclined to strengthen the humanities. Of course, continued institutional changes must be made to strengthen the stake of all groups in our liberal democracy. Yet, with this said and done, I fully share Sidney Hook's conviction:

In our pluralistic, multi-ethnic, uncoordinated society, no institutional changes of themselves will develop that bond of community we need to sustain our nation in times of crisis without a prologued schooling in the history of our free society, its martyrology, and its national tradition. In the decades of mass immigration in the 19th and 20th centuries that bond was sharply forged by the American public school. What I propose is that our schools, reinforced by our colleges and universities, do the same job today in a more intelligent, critical and sophisticated way.

Ever since the Holocaust and the emergence of the State of Israel, American Jews, including those from Central Europe, have been reaching toward a more explicit and meaningful Jewish identity. For our particular group that has meant shedding some elements of its heritage—its inordinate capacity for self-delusion and its thoughtless equation of the spiritual and cultural with the unpolitical. In foreign policy, we owe it to ourselves, to American Jewry, to America, to ally ourselves with groups opposing groups who are pro – Third World

and anti-American, pro-PLO and anti-Israel. In domestic policy, we owe it no less to ourselves to become concerned with small beginnings, such as the tendencies at Stanford and other universities and colleges to banish Western Civilization courses from the core curriculum as racist, sexist compendia of "European-Western and male bias" and institute instead courses with required reading of "works by women, minorities and persons of color." Maybe I'm too sensitive, but it causes me great distress when I see and hear hundreds of students joyfully chant, "Hey hey, ho ho, Western culture's got to go."

But let us take heart. We must not unreflectively think in the categories of friend and foe, view the political and ideological rival or opponent as our mortal enemy. Not in America. The democratic ideal is a composite of many images, including some I may not like. As an American citizen and educator, at any rate, I am committed to foster, by precept and practice, those habits of thought and conduct which assure the perpetuation and survival of this democracy.