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# A Non-Jewish German Looks at the German-Jewish Legacy

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Postwar Germany, a geopolitical entity tarnished by a recent, infamous past and, at the same time, a state of mind laid into a vacuum, void of any recognizable trace of Jewish life: this was the country where I grew up.

What did not exist anymore was easy to forget, and those who did not want to forget, those who actually wanted to learn, had to ask questions, to read, until the facts finally trickled down. Yet it wasn't until twenty-five years after the end of the war that I met Jews for the first time—at a Bar Mitzvah in Lakewood, New Jersey, to which my wife, the German teacher of that student, and I had been invited. A non-Jewish newcomer from Germany, I felt somewhat apprehensive about the way in which I would be approached at this uniquely Jewish festivity. Would I be avoided, would I be lectured about, if not accused of, the German past? Would other guests feel insulted about my presence? Much to my surprise, I was welcomed like an old friend of the family—no stiff faces, sharp looks, scrutinizing questions. When it became known that I was from Germany, an old lady, a German-Jewish refugee from Frankfurt, insisted that I be introduced to her and welcomed the opportunity to converse in her native tongue; she told me of her early days in New York, the stroke of homesickness in alien surroundings.

My next encounter with a Jewish person also occurred in Lakewood, New Jersey, in a bookstore whose clerk was a young man of my age; his parents had come from Poland after the war. He shared with me the interest in the written word, and even our political views were similar (at that time, the Vietnam War was raging).

It seemed as if, in my first Lakewood year (1971), all the Jews I did not meet in Germany had been waiting for me on this side of the Atlantic. Suddenly, I came in contact with Jews in all walks of life: teachers (colleagues of my wife), doctors, lawyers, repairmen, bakers, stationery salespeople, etc. Most of them, as far as their denomination

was concerned, were Reform; however, I also met members of the Conservative and Orthodox branches.

Since my immigration papers were still being processed, I had spare time during which I tutored German free of charge to students of my wife. With an advanced group, I also took excursions into the German past, thus being here probably one of the early teachers of the history of the Holocaust.

In the mid-seventies, I made—due to my editorial work at the German-American *New Yorker Staatszeitung*—my first regular contacts with German-Jewish emigrants, mainly authors whose readings in New York City I attended, whose books I reviewed, and whose poems I published. (Three of those exile writers eventually became the subject of my Ph.D. thesis.) It was those authors who brought my attention to another German-language newspaper: *Aufbau*, to this day—as the subtitle states—*America's Only German-Jewish Publication* and indeed the only exile publication still in existence. After five years with the *New Yorker Staats-Zeitung*, I joined the *Aufbau* in 1978, and became its first non-Jewish editor-in-chief in 1985.

*Aufbau*, established in 1934, on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the German-Jewish Club of New York (called New World Club since 1939), has been, and still is, the most prominent and most widely read newspaper representing the cause and satisfying the needs of the German-Jewish emigrants of the thirties and forties.

*Aufbau* became a tool of survival by providing the refugees with information about employment and housing, with legal advice and English courses. After the war, it helped to reunite relatives, friends, and other “displaced persons” (too often, though, the obituary page brought the irrevocable news). A special page regularly reported about West German restitution efforts and new compensation laws (*Wiedergutmachung*). Since the paper adhered to the native language of the refugees, it helped them to maintain their cultural roots. Moreover, *Aufbau* became a highly intellectual and literary magazine by continuously publishing contributions of the most prominent writers in exile. Thus, *Aufbau*, last but not least, preserved the German-Jewish concept of *Bildung* for the new conditions of life in America.

Much has been published about the history and the achievements of this journalistic institution. Instead of repeating it, I would like to insert a short bibliography of the most recent “secondary literature.”

On the occasion of *Aufbau's* fiftieth anniversary in 1984, several newspapers ran articles about this event and its background: the *Daily News Bulletin* of the Jewish Telegraphic Agency (August 3, 1984), the *New York Times* (November 16, 1984), the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (November 24, 1984), *Die Zeit* (November 30, 1984), *Der Spiegel* (February 18, 1985). Most recently, the German magazine *Wiener* addressed the subject on February 2, 1988. In addition, an anniversary exhibition was organized and went on display both in the United States and in Europe. In connection with this year's commemoration of the November pogrom, the German television station Suedwestfunk (SFW) has dedicated a feature film to the German-Jewish newspaper and its readers in New York.

An assessment of the German-Jewish heritage in America would probably be incomplete without a look at *Aufbau* today. The newspaper that once could draw its articles from a galaxy of German-Jewish emigrés is today largely produced by non-Jews. While on one hand the children and grandchildren of the German-Jewish refugees have been successfully integrated into the American mainstream, these same generations, on the other hand, are no longer readers of *Aufbau* because they (at least most of them) do not read, write, or speak German and because they simply do not depend on news in German like their parents of grandparents when they first came to this country.

Therefore, the newspaper must turn to other tasks and challenges. As far as Jewish matters are concerned, *Aufbau* has recently dedicated more print space and editorial effort to foster the Jewish-Christian dialogue with the German postwar generation(s). While its original readership is dwindling in the United States, circulation has increased in Germany. By ironic twist or by historic justice, *Aufbau* is returning to that very country from which its original readers and supporters were forced to leave under most inhuman circumstances—indeed a most remarkable form of Jewish survival.