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## Introduction

“The end of German Jewry has arrived.” Rabbi Leo Baeck spoke these words not long after Adolf Hitler came to power at the beginning of 1933.

But the meaning of Baeck’s words was demonstrated to German Jewry with a furious and destructive finality over five years later on the night and day of November 9 – 10, 1938. The end of German-Jewish life had indeed arrived.

Fifty years after the fateful November 9 – 10 pogrom of 1938 (*Kristallnacht*), *American Jewish Archives* has decided to ask what it all meant in terms of the spirit that defined more than a century of German-Jewish existence and its transfer to the United States of America.

Yet can one define that spirit? In its modern form at least, according to Professor George L. Mosse,<sup>1</sup> such a spirit was centered in the concept of *Bildung*, a post-emancipation notion that included character formation, moral education, the primacy of culture and a belief in the potential of humanity.

Professor Mosse also explains that *Bildung* became to large portions of German Jewry, an important, if not central, expression of their Jewishness.

And even if, by the time of the Weimar Republic of the 1920’s, *Bildung* had reached its most fruitful cultural expression in the form of “Weimar Culture,” and had become, as Professor Mosse characterizes it in his provocative opening essay to this issue, “an inner-Jewish dialogue to which few gentiles listened,” it had left its mark on German society.

Perhaps that mark had more negative than positive overtones. One can already see, from the very creation of the German nation-state in the 1870’s, a growing anti-*Bildung*, anti-Jewish environment. Indeed, the “Ideas of 1789,” of the French Revolution and the Enlightenment, the foundations upon which *Bildung* was based, became the code word (along with anti-Semitism) for all that was thought to be in opposition to “true” German ideals. As one German nationalist wrote

before the outbreak of World War I, “the old terms have to be changed: instead of religion, language and artistic intuition; instead of humanity, the race.”<sup>2</sup>

The outbreak of the First World War solidified the anti-1789 feelings into a coherent philosophy. The “Ideas of 1914,” as this philosophy came to be known, sought to contrast every aspect of German life with that of its military enemies. With one quick stroke, the “Ideas of 1914” would sever all alien influences from the German people. What the “ideas of 1789” had done to make Germany morally and intellectually impure, the new concept, with its uniquely German vision, would readily undo. The spirit of the Enlightenment and its legacy to German Jewry, *Bildung*, with its accompanying concepts of democracy and humanity, would finally be broken in the “German” war.

Adolf Hitler’s triumph in 1933 and the events of November 1938 destroyed the belief that *Bildung* could be used as a means of creating in Germany a more modern and democratic environment. And German Jews, who became “primarily associated with the democratic, universalist outlook,”<sup>3</sup> represented by *Bildung*, found themselves leaving the Third Reich for places which would be more suitable environments for their particular ideas.

In its transatlantic crossing from Europe to (primarily) America, the German-Jewish spirit, as represented by the notion of *Bildung*, became the German-Jewish legacy.

Our symposium, and the nearly forty essays which comprise it, seeks to understand the very nature of this German-Jewish legacy in its American context. The editor has suggested a number of questions that might be addressed:

How may one interpret the German-Jewish legacy?

How has that legacy expressed itself in the authors’ values as an American and a Jew?

What does the legacy mean for our time and what happened to it in its American context? Has it found a home in America or does the German-Jewish spirit remain in exile?

Is this legacy important to the continuation of a democratic American society? To the future of American Jewry?

Which elements of the legacy are worth preserving for the next generation and which are not?

To try and most fully understand the German-Jewish legacy in its American context, two groups of contributors were invited to participate. The first group was made up of Jews born in Germany but who reached their professional maturity in the United States. The second group was made up of primarily American-born individuals whose Jewish parents had either fled Nazi Germany or who, as German Jews, survived the Holocaust.

We believe that this special issue of *American Jewish Archives* will be an important addition to the history of the German-Jewish experience and to that of American Jewish life. Most important, it is an effort to commemorate the end of one of the greatest communities in Jewish history and to explore those elements of that greatness which may still be relevant and useful in insuring that our own Jewish community remains a vibrant and productive part of a free and democratic American society.

Abraham J. Peck  
November, 1988

### Notes

1. *German Jews Beyond Judaism* (Bloomington and Cincinnati, 1985).
2. Quoted in Abraham J. Peck, *Radicals and Reactionaries: The Crisis of Conservatism in Wilhelmine Germany* (Washington, D.C., 1978), p. 134.
3. Jarrell C. Jackman and Carla M. Borden, *The Muses Flee Hitler. Cultural Transfer and Adaptation 1930 - 1945*. (Washington, D.C., 1983) p. 17.