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# The Elusive German-Jewish Heritage in America

W. Gunther Plaut

When German Jews awoke on the tenth of November 1938 their lives had been radically and irretrievably changed. Their nearly two-thousand-year-long sojourn in Germany had come to an end. From here on theirs was the age-old cry: *Rette sich wer kann!* Jews scrambled for the exits, only to find few countries willing to receive them. But some still managed (or had already managed) to come to the Western Hemisphere and primarily to the United States. I was amongst them.

This article will attempt to discuss two questions: one, is there still a recognizable German-Jewish heritage in America?<sup>1</sup> and two, what are its components?

## I

In 1988, fifty years after *Kristallnacht*, the traces of German-Jewish influence on the American continent are no longer as clearly visible as they had been fifty years before that seminal event. In 1888 there were three identifiable Jewish communities: the Sephardim on the East Coast; the Germans spread throughout the country all the way to the West Coast; and the East Europeans now arriving in ever larger numbers and for the time being preponderantly concentrated in the East. There was no question then that the German Jews were dominant; they had already “arrived” and had joined the middle class; and their rabbis were the spokesmen for all of American Jewry. Their local institutions were highly developed, their national organizations firmly in place, and their thought patterns clear transplants from the old country. They were mostly (though not exclusively) Reform Jews; integration into the American pattern was a basic aspect of their striving. The way in which they described themselves provides a key to their goal: while other ethnic groups would put their ethnicity first and their American identity second (German-American, Spanish-American, Irish-American) Jews from Germany called themselves American Hebrews and not Hebrew Americans—a direct mirror of their past. For in the land of the Kaiser too they had been *deutsche Juden* and not *juedische Deutsche*.<sup>2</sup>

Today the role and identity of these Jews have become nearly invisible, and without the events of *Kristallnacht* and the attendant emigration of German Jews to America they would have become an historical footnote only. Yet they are still there, though one needs to look rather closely to detect them. Two contrasting incidents will illustrate this point.

I remember the day when the Beth Ha-Tefutsoth museum was dedicated on the campus of Tel Aviv University and Abba Kovner and Nahum Goldmann cut the ribbon. Goldmann, of course, was the *spiritus rector* of and prime fund-raiser for the institution, and when I had once asked him how he would define his own cultural identity he had answered without hesitation: "German." But it was Kovner, the East European Jew, who was responsible for the content of the Diaspora Museum. It was evident then (though this may have changed since) that in Kovner's view German Jews had played no worthy role in European Jewish history and that in America too the likes of Isaac M. Wise and David Einhorn had paled before the Lubavitcher rebbe. No mention of the fact that the chief religious movements of our time—from Reform to Conservatism to Orthodoxy, all the way to the Agudah—had been invented and shaped by German Jews; and though of course Herzl, Wolffsohn, and Shapira received their due as founders of political Zionism, they appeared disconnected from their own background.

Contrast this with the year 1983 in America. In Los Angeles, at the annual convention of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, a German-born president (Herman Schaalman) was yielding the gavel to another president of like origin (the writer); and at the same time the presidents of the other three Reform institutions were all German-born as well: the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (Alexander Schindler), the Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion (Alfred Gottschalk), and the World Union for Progressive Judaism (Gerard Daniel). Since that time the president of the Jewish Theological Seminary (Ismar Schorsch) has also joined this surprising constellation of German-Jewish influence. One might be tempted to apply the well-known words coined in a different context: *anachnu ka'n*, we are still here.<sup>3</sup>

Was this mere coincidence? Possibly, yet the confluence was startling enough to make one wonder. Perhaps there is a heritage which

exerted a motivating influence and which in this late moment surfaced long enough to pose the question. But while its traces are still there, its characteristics are like covered tracks which await the discovery of the searcher.

## I I

The nature of German-Jewish influence has been described in terms of *Bildung*, a view of priorities which gave to education in the broadest sense a place of primacy. To be called *ein gebildeter Mensch* was a greater accolade than being described as rich or successful. A German doctor or lawyer was not just a good specialist in his field; he was expected also to be *gebildet*, and usually was. He would be conversant with Homer and Vergil, and would know the difference between Aristotle, Archimedes, and Aristophanes. He would properly quote the date and significance of the French Revolution. He would have studied Racine and Shakespeare along with Germany's own poets and thinkers. (To be sure, he would also think that Germany was the heart of the world, but that kind of self-perception was paralleled in other nations.) In addition, he would have a sense of order and obligation. In this respect the Jewish heritage with its emphasis on *mitzvah* blended perfectly with its German counterpart, as Moses Mendelssohn had tried to show long ago. Not surprisingly, almost all German rabbis obtained their doctorate in some field before they assumed congregational posts.

One is therefore safe in describing German-Jewish influence abroad by this kind of cultural apprehension. In Israel, the *yekkes*, though they have all but disappeared in person, survive as popular characters who are ridiculed and admired at the same time. While their pedantry gives rise to jokes, their constancy is held up as a worthy goal worthy of imitation.

And in America? Here too the traces are all but gone, but the aforementioned confluence of "presidential" office holders gives rise to a fascinating inquiry: What was it that propelled these men—who after all were but a few brands plucked from the fire—to their positions of leadership in their new environment? The answer is not as easy as it might appear, for several of the men, while born in Germany, were not raised there. Yet they too give evidence of this German-Jewish inheritance.

A hundred years ago the question did not arise, for there was a predominantly German constituency in our congregations. In a few of them, as in Baltimore, the rabbi<sup>4</sup> had to be able to preach some of his sermons in the German language, and his listeners would likely be less patient with bad German than with faulty English. Their culture was still German-based, and in a number of communities such fraternal orders as B'nai B'rith and the Free Sons of Israel conducted their meetings in German. Isaac M. Wise, Bohemian born and German speaking, had come to America in the late 1840s, and when in Cincinnati he began to plan a national journal he decided on a German version (*Die Deborah*) and an English one (*The American Israelite*). Both publications were replete with *Bildung*—literary references and academic discussions and a pervasive belief that knowledge and moral education would bring about not only a higher level of Jewish commitment but also a readier integration with and acceptance by the gentiles, for they would see the Jews in their true role: as a light unto the nations. In many ways David Einhorn and his two sons-in-law, Emil G. Hirsch and Kaufmann Kohler,<sup>5</sup> put their stamp on what has become known as “classical Reform,” with its emphasis on the spirit rather than the form of Jewish existence.

But in the 1930s, when the first five refugees from Nazi Germany arrived at Hebrew Union College, the constituencies of their future congregations had already changed drastically. Men of East European background were now in the majority and the control of the old German founders and their offspring had already disappeared or waned drastically. Yet what these five men brought with them still had relevance in America and would afford them and those who followed them from Germany in the next few years a disproportionate influence on American Reform and the larger environment.

What then precisely did they bring with them? The answer I propose is two-pronged: those who had gone to school in the old country had been shaped by their high school education; and they, as well as those who had never attended a German educational institution, had been raised with a set of identifiable expectations.

I mention the German high school and not the university, for the latter (as I can testify from my own experience) served as a trade-and-technical training institution rather than one which would create and foster a broad appreciation of the liberal arts. These were taught in

high school, which began at an age when in America students would go into grade five of their elementary schools and lasted for nine years of a six-day school week. High school ended with comprehensive written and oral examinations in all subjects and proffered the so-called *Abitur*, or “going away” diploma. Possession of the *Abitur* meant readiness to go into law school or medical school or whatever further training one chose to pursue. On the average, we were nineteen years old when we graduated and had been exposed to a wide spectrum of knowledge. Its details depended on which of the three major types of institutions one had attended: the old-type *Gymnasium*, which specialized in the classical humanities and taught its students a thorough knowledge of Latin, Greek, and ancient history; the *Realgymnasium*, which combined the classics with some natural sciences; and the *Oberrealshule*, which stressed the sciences as well as a knowledge of French and English. All three school systems had extensive courses in literature and history, and in my time they still insisted that memorization was a worthwhile part of education, for it would allow a person to cite many literary passages from memory and lace one’s speech with them. That practice extended also to the biblical text. In the rabbinical seminary over which Rabbi Leo Baeck presided,<sup>6</sup> we had to learn fifty Hebrew psalms by heart, as part of our first-level requirements.

Teaching followed a rigorous schedule with lots of demanding homework. All subjects save athletics were academic, and once one had chosen the type of high school to which to go (a choice usually made by parents for their children) all courses were compulsory. Failure in any two of them meant that the whole year had to be repeated. The school day lasted from eight until two, and on Saturdays until one o’clock, with a twenty-minute break at ten o’clock to consume the “second breakfast” one had brought along.<sup>7</sup>

I mention these details because my education outside the home was fashioned in high school.<sup>8</sup> All five of us carried this background to the United States. It meant, *inter alia*, a respect for ideas and the conviction that education had salvational aspects.<sup>9</sup> To be sure, the Nazis had shown that this was not enough, for they had turned the “land of poets and thinkers” (as the Germans liked to call themselves) into an obscene caricature of the ideal. Education could be perverted, they proved, unless it had its moral component. For us this was provided by our own Jewish tradition.<sup>10</sup>

But what of those leaders who had been born in Germany but had not gone to school there? They shared with us a home background in which there were certain standards and expectations. They might not have been to a German school but they were taught by parents who brought up their children in an atmosphere where *Bildung* had a primary place. Add to this the “immigrant factor”—the added incentive to make it in the new world—and you have the ingredients which may help to explain the role which German Jews played in their new environment. Quite aside from rabbis who achieved positions of leadership there were scores of German-born academics who contributed significantly to American thought and the national polity, from the likes of Kurt Lewin, Hans Jonas, and Hannah Arendt to Bruno Bettelheim and Henry Kissinger.

In this way the final destruction of German Jewry which was set in motion on *Kristallnacht* made its unplanned contribution to the New World. Hopefully history will judge it to have been worthy of the opportunity. As for me, my own fate was inextricably intertwined with the event. For during that very day when in Berlin my father was hiding from the enemy, my bride and I—not knowing of the events in Germany—were married in Cincinnati.

### Notes

1. The article will use the terms “America” and “American” as a shortcut, to stand for “North America” and “North American.”

2. In part this may also be a reflection of the fact that Jews saw themselves not so much as an ethnic but as a religious group and compared themselves to American Protestants and American Catholics. This self-perception tended to reinforce the integrationist thrust of their cultural and religious life.

3. I might cite another example. In 1961/1962 in Toronto—a city where only a handful of German Jews were to be found—the rabbis of the leading Orthodox and Reform congregations were German-born, and so were the rabbinical heads of two of the four major Conservative synagogues.

4. He was David Philipson, member of the first graduating class at Hebrew Union College.

5. Einhorn began his American rabbinate in Baltimore, in the 1850s, and his German-language prayer book *Olath Tamid* became the model for the *Union Prayer Book*. Hirsch was rabbi at Temple Sinai in Chicago, a bold social reformer as well as a brilliant and erudite preacher. Kohler became president of Hebrew Union College and the author of the widely read *Jewish Theology*.

6. Originally called Hochschule fuer die Wissenschaft des Judentums, it was later (at the behest of the Nazis) renamed more modestly Lehranstalt.

7. One of the four Jewish students who graduated with me was Orthodox, and he was excused from writing on Shabbat and could take his examinations at another time. This, of course, was the era of the Weimar Republic (we graduated in 1930); shortly after the Nazis came to power all Jewish students were shifted to Jewish schools.

8. In law school I learned very little and like most other students attended only those courses which either were seminars or had outstanding teachers. I was prepared for my examinations by a professional *Repetitor* who drilled his charges with subject matters tailored to the questions that would be asked. Law school was, for me, a chance to do what I wanted; the basics of *Bildung* were provided by high school and home.

9. This idea had strong antecedents in Jewish tradition, best exemplified by the rabbi who, upon visiting a schoolhouse, declared its teachers and children to be the true guardians of the city.

10. Readers may wish to read more about this whole subject in George Mosse's *German Jews Beyond Judaism* (1985).