
Bildung and the Dilemma of Hyphenation

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The Vienna of my childhood during the late twenties and the thirties until the year of the *Anschluss* did not provide the necessary cultural milieu for the care and protection of my Jewish legacy. As a totally assimilated third-generation Jewish family living in the heart of *Mitteleuropa*, we were sufficiently aware of being of a different religion; but as the once “supranational” people of the now fragmented Austro-Hungarian empire, Viennese Jews especially cherished the cosmopolitanism of their city’s distinctive culture, preferring to identify closely with the ideological currents of the time. Depending on their degree of assimilation Jews, therefore, could be found supporting a whole spectrum of ideas and movements ranging from the very conservative to liberal and/or radical ones. Still it was generally recognized that the large majority of Vienna’s Jews felt very comfortable within the progressive liberalism of the Social Democratic party, which in 1922 had succeeded at the polls in making Vienna peacefully the first socialist-governed city outside the Soviet Union. My family, comfortably middle-class, could be heard to complain occasionally about new city ordinances designed to give domestic help the same rights and benefits as other employees, yet on the first of May, they joined happily in the festivities celebrating the achievements of this Social Democratic administration. As well they should; not before, and, of course, never again were Jews in Europe able to enjoy such complete equality and the opportunity to consider themselves an integrated part of the community. As has been documented and commented on by observers at that time and scholarly treatises later, Jews could be found at all levels of the city’s government and administration, dominant in its social and professional life, outstanding in its arts and sciences. Many of these achievements were the result of the open-minded, pragmatic, and innovative policies pursued by the Social Democratic party. Small wonder that the first of May brings back to me childhood memories of such joy and tranquility that normally

might have been reserved for religious holidays. There was no religious observance in my home other than the annual trek to a grandparent's home for the sumptuous breaking of the fast at the end of Yom Kippur; the day itself being spent, except for a short attendance to listen to the Kol Nidre or participate in the memorial service, in leisurely walks in the Viennese Woods or in one of Vienna's many beautiful public parks. Seders were observed only infrequently; there was, after all, that ritualistic bother, but my services as "the youngest" were occasionally called for by one of the many childless or one-child families of my parents' generation.

Youngsters of my parents' circle of friends joined the *Roten Falken*, the youth organization of the Social Democratic party, or, if less politically inclined, the Boy Scouts, and somewhat less frequently the Jewish sports club *Hakoah*; personally, I joined all three at one time or another. *Hakoah* by the way also fielded a team in Austria's national soccer league; it was not a very outstanding team, yet it had its solid group of fans who probably never thought of this as some outstanding Jewish cultural achievement! It was simply accepted by my generation that in Social Democratic Vienna Jews were not a "tolerated" minority but very much part of the establishment. Most likely, class identification—social and/or economic—preempted religious solidarity. Nobody I knew ever talked of religion as a defense against a strange or even hostile environment. The very fact that "religion" was taught in school made us even less aware of any special status; we treated it just like any other subject and without much reverence. I recall that my first instructor in religion during elementary school was a poised, friendly, soft-spoken young woman, in all likelihood a member in good standing of the Social Democratic party (how else could she have obtained this municipal job?), who in an easy, noncommittal manner informed us about the Old Testament. To this day I view this as a major component of my Jewish legacy, since I do not recall ever learning about the Old Testament from any other source at that time. Later, in the *Gymnasium*, the process was repeated, with some Hebrew lessons thrown in to help us read the prayer book. We were taught by a rather dry, scholarly, bearded type who could be distinguished from other faculty only by virtue of his keeping on a hat during class. He was replaced eventually by a younger, more modern but also openly Zionist teacher whose dedication to discipline probably further accelerated our secularization process. At least it did mine.

My Bar Mitzvah brought in a rabbinical type who drilled me for six months in the phonetics of the Torah passage but otherwise provided no inspiration to explore further the meaning of Judaism. Later, at the party at home following my uninspired reading of the Torah passage, I recited enthusiastically one of Schiller's classic poems which I had committed to memory with a lot less difficulty than the prescribed passage. In short, in the free-flowing, emancipated secular, cosmopolitan atmosphere of post – World War I, pre-*Anschluss* Vienna, "there was no importance in being Jewish"; one could cultivate one's Jewishness or one did not—most of the young people I grew up with chose not to!

What "Jewishness" there was, however, did not manifest itself in faith but rather in the recognition of a cultural bond that expressed itself primarily in the Yiddish language, with its own set of values which, whether humorous, critical, or lyrical, always provided some trenchant insights into the human condition. My circle of young friends experienced no crisis in self-perception with respect to their role as Jews and/or as citizens of Vienna; we all spoke the leveling Viennese dialect affected by both aristocrats and proletarians, liberally sprinkled with Yiddishisms (just as today *chutzpah* and *maven* find their way into American usage). For us Yiddish was truly a lingua franca that seemed well suited to a Social Democratic ethos of internationalism, progress, and respect for a humanist tradition. We read, in German translations, Sholem Asch, Shalom Aleichem, and occasionally saw films such as *The Golem* or *The Dybbuk* without feeling that such preferences imposed some inescapable choices on us. The Jewish bourgeoisie accepted Yiddishness with the same nonchalance it reserved for anti-Semitism; both conditions were a fact of life but one had overcome them somehow, *man muss sich darueber hinwegsetzen*, that is, neither fact was important enough to get in the way of a normal, rational, orderly, and upwardly mobile way of life! Obviously, those of us whose early socialization took place in the Vienna of the 1930s considered ourselves neither flawed nor particularly discriminated against and shared in the uneventful, yes, happy, childhood of middle-class children everywhere in *Mitteleuropa*.

When Hitler happened, he reminded us rudely that we were different, but it was our social status rather than our religion that became the target of initial Nazi violence in the first months following the *Anschluss*. During those early uncertain months some Jewish "work-

ing-class" families were not molested by marauding bands of freshly uniformed, formerly illegal Nazis if they were known to them as neighbors (which happened frequently in workers' housing projects erected by the Social Democratic party). Nor were these months particularly tragic ones for myself and friends who were in the process of enjoying the unfolding of teenage exhilaration. We continued with our dances, listened to the latest hit records (paradoxically "Bei Mir Bist Du Schoen" was sweeping Europe then), went hiking, swimming, and waited with rather joyful anticipation for the day of emigration. We also were more than ready to bid farewell to the dreary classical education, which, as the events of that year seemed to prove, could no longer serve to orient us in the modern world that lay beyond the borders of this small, inland country.

So that when I arrived eventually in New York and went to register at George Washington High School on Audubon Avenue and 185th Street in Manhattan, the last thing on my mind was how to nurture my Jewish legacy. What did reassert itself, with a vengeance I might say, was that very "classical" education we had so gladly left behind. For the hundreds of German-Jewish refugee kids who passed through GWHS, the great bond was not their Jewishness but the very sold *Gymnasialbildung* most of us had been exposed to. Our teachers loved us for the seriousness and dedication we brought to our studies. Less so our American, whether Jewish or not, contemporaries, with whom we very soon acquired the reputation of "grinds". During those early years I do not recall any discussions of Judaism and/or Jewishness, and the idea of belonging to a congregation or simply visiting a synagogue on High Holidays was very far from our concerns. If we were undergoing some kind of cultural transition, it would never have occurred to us to view this as leading from a German-Jewishness to an American-Jewish identity! On the contrary, at the time we had little doubt that we were the bearers of a venerable European tradition of true intellectual knowledge that put us way ahead of the greedy commercialism around us. In that respect also, our future was always very clear to us; as writers, artists, and professionals would we make our mark in this crassly materialistic culture. In principle we were not different from any other immigrant youths who had come before us, wanting to make something of themselves, shedding their ties to the old culture and become "Americanized". Only we were steeped in the

chauvinistic intellectualism of *Mitteleuropa*, and the characterization *Er amerikanisiert sich* (He is becoming American) was reserved for those who had lost their intellectual *Drang* (fervor). Not that we didn't work hard at some very nonintellectual occupations, e.g., laundry sorter, messenger, delivery boy, etc. Only the thought of entering some business or other practical occupation rarely, if ever, entered our minds. I recall how surprised I was, together with my group of friends, when we learned that the pharmacy clerk in the local drugstore had actually gone to college! "Going to college" carried entirely different connotations for us. We gloried in our intellectuality, the result of that *Bildungsdrang* that had been drilled into us since early childhood. We did not regard our being foreign-born as a handicap; most of us were conversant with at least another language other than English, very likely French, which many had picked up while waiting for American visas in France or Belgium. I don't doubt that we were perceived as arrogant by our American peers. Some native-born Jewish students made the effort to get to know us better but eventually drifted away, unable to find some common ground between us, least of all our Jewishness. In what direction our expectations would have led us without the war and the subsequent G.I. Bill is impossible to say; but there is no doubt in my mind that without these two key events many doors would have remained closed to us. Henry Kissinger, one of GWHS's more famous graduates, can easily serve as a prototype for that purpose. Together with other refugee youths he graduated with an outstanding record that did not carry one much further than CCNY, but once the war came, those with education and a fluent knowledge of German soon made it into more interesting jobs in the military, possibly in intelligence first, later with the occupation authorities in the European theater. From there, talent and ambition could carry one as far as hard work and good luck would permit. Most of us went to Ivy League or Big Ten universities, and though Henry is probably the only one who made it to that stage where he merited being addressed as "His Excellency," many of us joined the ranks of successful professionals, academics, scientists, and government bureaucrats. In the course of this socioeconomic ascent it was not uncommon also to acquire a non-Jewish spouse and, in a rather curious way, this could be interpreted as making that part of a German-Jewish legacy complete!

Only by the time we had reached those plateaus of our success about

which we could only dream during the intense years of the immigration, Jewishness had lost its confining character. The war had also socialized a new generation of Jewish-American youths out of their ghetto mentality and into a more positive attachment to Judaism. Israel had become a flourishing state, the Holocaust provided the blood-bond, and the menace of "atheistic Communism" left little room for the secular kind of Jew who was indifferent to his religious heritage. Even those children who had been brought up in an atmosphere of bland, tolerant, liberal secularism began to show their dissatisfaction with the draining off of their religious roots. Some literally turned away from the diluted Judaism of their parents to an altogether new religion or they found a spiritual home in a more orthodox Judaism.

In my own case the desire to escape the ghettoized existence among German-Jewish refugees in New York was overwhelming. I wanted to know about life in the "interior," discover America on that other side of the Hudson, and when the opportunity came I chose a college in the "distant" Midwest. It was easy enough during the forties not to feel the need to be Jewish in America; the war against Nazism had ended in victory, the world of higher education had been opened up completely to all regardless of color or creed, so what reasons could there be to renew one's religious bonds? I was part of an intellectual consensus that viewed religion as an antiquated form of absolutism no longer suitable to the conditions of a modern age. Progress meant to jettison it as an unnecessary ballast that only served to impede the further evolution of liberal democratic ideas and practices. Even the choice of political science as the centerpiece of my academic career was an idealistic one motivated by a desire to help in the building of a better post-war world. Today such an attitude might have probably led me in the direction of a more religiously oriented movement. At the time neither Zionism nor any other kind of ism held my interest, and for thirty years I pursued my professional goals without the slightest urge to confront my Jewish heritage. Then an abrupt change in my personal life brought me to a small midwestern college town where my family found refuge and comfort in the circle of about a dozen Jewish families. When we gathered in the small, simple, yet tastefully constructed synagogue on the edge of the prairie to celebrate holidays and rituals that I had either long forgotten or never experienced, it brought to me a reawakening, literally, of the meaning of the "temple community".

There in the heartland I felt as if I were experiencing the joining of the original American tradition of simple religiosity with the unadorned faith of the "world of my great-grandfathers"! Without the services of a rabbi, but with complete and dedicated participation by everyone in the community, I was able to discern again some fundamentals of the Jewish faith that had gotten lost somewhere in the pressure of solicitations for the obligatory trips to Israel.

I have long since departed the atmosphere of that small Jewish community, but the infusion of Judaic spirit which it gave has stayed with me. All the magnificence of our suburban synagogue will not suffice to nurture that spirit unless it is accompanied by a willingness to confront basic ethical questions that transcend the narrow interests of the State of Israel, or for that matter, those of the United States of America. Maybe that is the lesson of the "German" or "Viennese" Jewish legacy; to find and renew our faith apart from national, ethnic or, heaven help us, racist considerations!

We already know that Yiddish and Yiddishkeit are in the process of disappearing; we have left behind the stigma of the wanderer or pariah, no doubt as a consequence of the creation of the State of Israel. But even Israel's existence has not been settled in a way that will continue its character as a Jewish state rather than a state for Jews. If it will be no longer possible to validate one's Jewishness in "the world of our fathers" or in the identification with Israel—where and how can Jewishness acquire the necessary strength that will assure its survival into the next century and beyond? There is a point beyond which even affluence and the respectability that comes with being absorbed into a national community may not be sufficient to sustain a faith. Wasn't that the point reached by the German-Jewish community when Hitler came upon the scene? Doesn't the mere replacement of German-Jewishness with Jewish-Americanness carry with it the same risks that were part of the very German-Jewish experience?

It does not take any great leaps of imagination to visualize a time when a change in the configuration of world politics—a much closer rapprochement between the USSR and the United States in certain regions of the globe—no longer identifies Jewish-American goals and issues with new policies and strategies of the United States. This need not be the result of a rise in anti-Semitism, the appearance of a racist demagogic leader, or of a decline in the importance of Israel—but

simply the outcome of change in the ever evolving relationship between nation-states in general and the two superpowers in particular. Then it must be possible to remain true to one's Jewish faith without having to worry about the significance of hyphenation or dehyphenation.