
Reflections on the *Kristallnacht* and the End of German Jewry: Some Transcendent Thoughts

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For Jews in Germany emancipation was a slow, painful process. It proved to be a rather lopsided love affair. Whether there was ever a symbiosis, whether Jews ever had equal rights or just a license, will remain an academic question. The fact is that during the 150 years of emancipation, the Jews in Germany used the opportunities of liberalism to give free rein to the creative forces accumulated and suppressed in ghetto life. It is to the credit of German Jewry that the vast majority refused to pay the price of conversion for the privileges and enticements of emancipation. The greatest contributions of German Jews in all sectors of human endeavor were made during the fourteen-year period of the Weimar Republic, in the face of the ever growing confrontation with the growth of racial anti-Semitism, *Voelkische Bewegung*. Just as it reached its height, emancipation came to an abrupt end, and with it all the achievements of emancipation. There followed the years of systematic deprivation of property and civil rights, of humiliations and persecution, of the creation of the torturous institution of the concentration camps and of the degradation to pariah status under the Nuremberg Laws. The end of German Jewry was finally sealed by the bestial government organized pogrom of November 10, 1938, whose flames destroyed the synagogues of Germany, and at the same time signaled the beginning of the *Endloesung*, the destruction of the majority of European Jewry. While those German Jews who escaped to the United States did not come as a political unit, they came here endowed with a great Jewish and European cultural heritage. They came with the conviction and appreciation of democracy as the only form of government where Jews as individuals and as a group could live, thrive, and exist; where the concept of pluralism permitted them to immediately take their place in the community, to become part of the mainstream of American life and—after the difficult task of

settling down—to begin again making their contributions towards and for the benefit of society out of their rich cultural heritage and sad political experience. True, they came here deprived of their worldly goods; but their spirit and their will to rebuild had not been broken. They were not satisfied just to survive, they were determined to find new roots. Once they had learned to take care of basic necessities, they unpacked the only valuable luggage they had been able to bring along: their heritage. And as these lines are concerned with the contributions made to the American community and especially to American Jewry, the following is the author's attempt to describe some of them in a summary fashion:

It was the Jewish philosopher Professor Julius Gutmann who, in his book *The Philosophy of Modern Judaism*, stated that Germany had become the birthplace of modern Judaism. He advanced the view that all religious, cultural, pedagogic, scientific, and even political problems and concerns facing world Jewry today have their origin, their basis of discussion, their orientation, in the German-Jewish creativity of those years of emancipation. German Jewry, in particular, opened new avenues for Jewish religion, away from the strict rabbinism and rabbinical talmudic adherence, thus paving the way for the modernization of Judaism.

- The liberalism which led to the Reform movement.
- The modern Orthodoxy where Samson Raphael Hirsch had found a way to combine the authority of Jewish Law with the progress of social and scientific development of the outer world, a synthesis between the religious law and secular culture.
- The Conservative movement, represented by the Breslau Rabbinical Seminary.
- The Hochschule fuer Juedische Wissenschaft, emphasizing the Science of Judaism.

Even the German Zionist movement—though prior to Hitler shared only by a minority of the German Jews, yet led by an elite of Zionist thinkers—participated effectively in paving the way for the Jewish state. It should be noted that the important literature on Zionism of the time was published in the German language, and the *Juedische Rundschau* in Berlin was a strong voice for Zionist hopes and aims.

Through their own example and experience, these Jews from Germany brought along a historical message in our time—and, if you so

want—a variety of lessons:

The Weimar Republic failed; democracy needs an educated citizenry; the Germans were not prepared for it. Hitler's rise to power—achieved without revolution and in a pretended parliamentary procedure—has proven that democracy can be undermined by its own tools. Democracy must be guarded against abuse. It is the only form of government protecting the individual and providing an atmosphere in which Jews can live and prosper.

Culture and civilization are no safeguards against barbarism and human madness, as has been shown in Germany, the land of poets and thinkers.

The Jews from Germany have proven that there can be *Bewahrung im Untergang* (Reaffirmation in Destruction). Flames may destroy physical structures, they cannot, however, extinguish the spirit to survive and to rebuild.

Hitler has taught marginal Jews—as paradoxical as it may sound—that there is no escape from one's identity. Awareness of Jewish values, learning, and education as prerequisites for self-respect is the most effective shield against Jew-hatred. Jewish defense organizations are important; their program cannot, however, be the core of the Jewish agenda. We have experienced that anti-Semitism is a problem for the Jews. It is not a Jewish problem, however; the others must solve it.

When crimes against humanity are committed, when millions of human beings are slain, the silence of governments and church becomes a sin of omission.

The synagogue is the symbolic center of Jewish life. The *Kristallnacht* has taught this truth. Even the most remote Jew, the one who had not or had only rarely made use of the synagogue, felt that something important was taken away.

For the sake of Jewish continuity there must be unity in our midst and no divisiveness. No guarantee for the diaspora without Israel, but also no guarantee for Israel without a loyal diaspora.

Auschwitz should have done away with any discrimination in our midst. Any walls which once may have existed between Western and Eastern Jews must be removed.

The Holocaust is not the unique experience of any singular Jewry. German Jews were the first to experience the humiliations and the destruction; they were the first victims of Hitler's barbarian innova-

tion: the concentration camp. Therefore any attempt to advance the beginning of the Holocaust to the year 1941 appears to be a distortion of Jewish history.

The world and humanity have a short memory; later generations assign the most tragic events to history as a matter of fact; emotions are quickly forgotten and only historical knowledge and understanding protect against intentional and unintentional forgetfulness. In the interest of the self-preservation of present and future generations, we must never allow the Hitler period to be written off as an episode.

And finally, when Hitler's dream of a 1000-year Reich came to an end after twelve years, leaving death and destruction to an extent the world had never experienced before, for a moment the conscience of humanity became moved. Israel's creation is largely the result of the world's guilty conscience. We must never allow that conscience to fade.

Throughout history we Jews have played the role of the monitors of world conscience, too often at great sacrifice. Let us keep our own house in good order so that we can effectively continue our role as monitors with conviction and dignity, for the sake of the world and all mankind.