
Thoughts About the German-Jewish Legacy in the United States by a Man from *Aufbau*

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“The end of German Jewry has arrived,” said the great and wise Rabbi Leo Baeck, president and spokesman of the National Federation of Jews in Germany, in 1938, in the face of the unbelievable tragedy of the Nazi *Kristallnacht*, followed by anti-Jewish government decrees, one always more brutal than the previous one.

But was the great rabbi really right? Had the end of German Jewry really arrived? Today, fifty years later, with the benefit of today’s hindsight, and in recognition of the awesome Jewish will to survive, we might well have our doubts.

Yes, German Jewry did survive: in spite of unprecedented persecution and in spite of many, all too many victims who could not escape. It did survive in the United States, in Israel, in smaller groups in other countries such as Britain, France, and Canada—and even in Germany, where new Jewish communities, albeit very small ones, arose shortly after the end of World War II, and are today flourishing in a modest way.

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But, of course, the massive immigration of Jews from Germany and Austria in the 1930s and 1940s, the result of Hitler’s pressure and persecution, was not the first German-Jewish impact on American Jewry (which had been quite insignificant before the German-Jewish immigration in the first decades of the last century). Earlier, a hundred years before the arrival of the Hitler refugees, Jews from Germany had contributed enormously, maybe decisively, to create the impressive structure that is today’s American Judaism: its congregations, its theology (especially its Reform wing), its charitable and cultural institutions, its lodges, and its whole institutional superstructure.

The impact of the second German-Jewish immigration, the one which is the topic of our discussion here, was not quite as overwhelming, and its legacy, though also quite remarkable, is not as predominant. It should not be underrated, either; but it requires a somewhat more careful look to define clearly its values and its achievements.

Speaking of achievements: in this context here we do not mean individual achievements of outstanding personalities among those refugees whose fame and glory are a matter of general knowledge; but it is an undeniable fact that the general level of education and cultural background—what they might have called their *Bildung*—was even on the average superior to that of other waves of immigrants who have reached these shores, either before the Hitler-fugitives or after them. It is, of course, a huge overstatement to say, as has been said partly in jest, that it was an immigration of Nobel Prize laureates: but the sentence was not completely unfounded.

It is absolutely amazing what these people, counting generously and including their second generation, not more than half a million souls, have created and achieved in this country. Many have reached commanding positions of influence in all fields: in arts and letters, in business and public service, in the sciences and the media, in academic life and even in sports. Very often, fame and success crowned their lifetime's work. Incidentally: among those refugees who settled in Israel, in Great Britain, and elsewhere, the balance sheet was not much different.

However, one big question arises: have those individual achievements been exclusively due to individual qualities of strength, brainpower, and intelligence, or have they been propelled by the German-Jewish "legacy," the remnants of specific German-Jewish traditions which may have, as it were, traveled with them across the Atlantic?

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Of course, these German-Jewish immigrants of the 1930s and 1940s did not live entirely by themselves. There was a strong collective conscience of mutual responsibility alive among them from the beginning: they created their own congregations, their own charitable and scholarly institutions, and their own newspaper, which they called—*nomen est omen*—*Aufbau*, i.e., "Build-up" or "Reconstruction"; as President Kennedy once said, a little later: "they rebuilt their shattered lives, smashed elsewhere, successfully here in our country."

Even though in the beginning they mostly clustered in specific neighborhoods in the big cities (in Manhattan, people spoke of “The Fourth Reich” and “Frankfurt-on-the-Hudson”), the general trend pointed in the direction of rapid integration with the larger American Jewish community surrounding them. The older people largely stuck to themselves, especially in the beginning; the language barrier and the preoccupation with their own fate, plus the usual “greenhorn’s problems” prevented, except in rare cases, any closer social contact with English-speaking neighbors.

It was quite different with the second generation, which was born in this country or at least grew up here. There the language problem was of no (or only minor) significance, and there occurred, beginning already in the 1950s but increasingly so in later years, an inner-Jewish “melting pot,” bringing scions of German-Jewish immigrants in harmonious contact with youngsters from an American Jewish background.

One by-product of that development was what I might call a “negative legacy.” German Jews had had, in their old country, the hideous habit of looking down on the less educated, less assimilated, less established, and frequently less wealthy *Ostjuden* from Eastern Europe. This ugly habit disappeared gradually under the completely changed conditions of their country of asylum: certainly a highly welcome trend.

On the positive side, German-Jewish tradition still reveals itself in many instances of synagogue music, in tunes originally composed by some celebrated cantors in Germany and Austria, as well as in some forms and shapes of celebrating Jewish festivities, such as the formal Seder meal at Passover and the Simchas Torah services. And then there is the Leo Baeck Institute in New York (with branches in London and Tel Aviv), which is collecting and preserving a beautiful collection of books, documents, and art works on German-Jewish history—a very rich source for American students of history, both Jewish and gentile. And I would certainly be remiss in my duty if I did not point out once more the German-language newspaper *Aufbau*, published for more than fifty years in New York—a pillar of strength of its community even beyond the borders of this country, and still today respected and admired by many for the tenacity of its mission. In quite a few instances its influence has extended even to the second generation, the children of the original immigrants from Germany or Austria.

This writer can testify that in his parents' home, when he was a child in Germany, we had every winter in the living room a Christmas tree as well as Chanukkah candles, often simultaneously; and the older generation has very often continued this apparently illogical tradition after coming over to this country. The younger generation, however, seems to have radically broken with that habit.

Also in my childhood, I had of course some superficial contacts, so to speak onlooker-contacts, with the world of the *Ostjuden* residing in my hometown, mostly in their own quarters of town, like the notorious "Scheunenviertel" in Berlin—but those were exceptions without lasting consequences. It was only in the United States that I learned more about the Yiddish language and its literature, and it was only here that I became acquainted with American Jewish specialties like latkes and gefilte fish previously unknown to German Jewry.

To conclude, I would say that the greatest impact of the German-Jewish legacy consists of the harmonious melting pot of the Hitler emigrés, and especially their children and grandchildren, with the bulk of American Jewry. This merger, mostly in the form of inner-Jewish "mixed" marriages, is a very big and a very important event. That it could occur and continues to occur is a great achievement and holds the promise that Judaism in this country will, enriched and invigorated by the German-Jewish influx, be able to look forward to a bright and secure future.