
German Culture, Jewish Ethics

Guy Stern

German-Jewish artists, facing certain extinction, grafted their agony with make-shift materials onto the painterly style of German Expressionism. Poets, established as well as amateur, recorded death-camp dirges dedicated to themselves and to their fellow victims in heart-wrenching German lyrics. Exiled writers from Madagascar to Manhattan entombed voluminous novels, often autographical, within a language all but unpublishable in their country of asylum. As you look mesmerized at a stamp-sized watercolor in Sybil Milton's and Janet Blattner's stunning book *Art of the Holocaust*, discover a hitherto unpublished poem in the new edition of Manfred Schloesser's *An den wind geschrieben (Writ upon the Wind)*, or leaf through unpublished fiction at the New York Leo Baeck Institute or at one of half-a-dozen archives in Germany, you are likely to ask yourself: Was a cultural tradition ever put to a more terrible test or did it produce within its collective representatives a more desperate dying/undying commitment?

Such unswerving—some would add quixotic, even blind—loyalty calls forth a search for its origins. What made us, the majority of German Jewry, so enwrapped in and enraptured with the German and German-Jewish culture? What made virtually all of us, including even most Zionists, so attentive and responsive to all its manifestations? Growing up in that milieu, nurtured by it, observing for a while its progressive strangulation and, finally, lending a hand in its transplantation in a new soil, I can draw on some random perceptions, first-or second-hand, in trying to arrive at a practical answer.

Many of the contributors to this anthology will argue that the Jewish devotion to German culture, the perceived or real symbiosis with it, was predicated on an identification with the German precept of *Bildung*, perhaps mankind's last attempt to aim for an *Uomo Universale*. The concept of *Bildung* as a well-rounded education, resting on a knowledge of modern and ancient history, philosophy, and the sciences (both natural and social), indeed had a magnetic attraction for us, and we identified it, even as we read the classics—*nota bene* in

German translation—in the German tradition. But there was a difference in our, Jewish, reception of *Bildung* in comparison to that of gentiles.

Ours was an idealistic subgroup within the German cultural realm, a utopia that was a heritage of the Jewish ethic and ethos. True, most of us had turned away from Orthodoxy, and that departure had resulted in stages of belief or nonbelief that ranged from Reform Judaism to apathetic synagogue attendance to an occasional apostasy. But all of us of high school age, growing up in the medium-sized North German town of Hildesheim in the twenties and early thirties, came together in biweekly after-school religious classes, mandated by the state as surrogate for the religious instruction at Protestant or Catholic high schools. And what our teacher, Herr landrabbiner Dr. Abraham Lewinsky of Hildesheim, tossed at us in rapid-fire dictation were not exegeses of the Pentateuch or Haftarah, but the ethical teachings of Hillel, or the *Pirkei Avot*, or of Moses Maimonides or, occasionally, of Moses Mendelssohn or Martin Buber. And these we debated in our Saturday afternoon youth group meetings conducted by our beloved, boyish-looking cantor, Josef “Seppl” Cysner. As I found out, this totally enjoyable concentration on the Jewish ethic was widespread in the increasingly secularized German-Jewish communities. Jewish ethical humanism and humanitarianism, especially as it had been reshaped during the eighteenth-century Age of Enlightenment, became the filter, the detoxifier and, to change mood and metaphor, unfortunately also the rose-tinted glasses through which we viewed German *Bildung*. It is that aspect of the German-Jewish relationship which this essay addresses.

I remember the effects of that filter, implanted by my parents in my childhood, in full and paradigmatic operation as early as age six. They took me, as my introduction to opera, to the Hannover Opera House for a performance of Wagner’s *Lohengrin*—conducted, by the way, by a Jewish guest conductor, Karl Schuricht, whom I met forty-odd years later in Cincinnati. On the train ride home, I hero-worshipped Lohengrin’s chivalric championing of wronged Elsa and filtered out his desertion of her under the terms of a trivial and inhumane prior condition. Today, I am convinced that the German-Jewish Wagner-mania and patronage of the grownups of that and previous decades rested on a similar predisposition. If one looks through the rose-colored glasses

of Jewish humanitarianism, one will focus on the noble self-sacrifice of Senta, the altruism of Hans Sachs, the paean to compassion in *Par-sifal*. But those lenses also obscure Wagner's rival-bashing through the figure of Hunding, his mythophilia in many of his libretti, and his egregious anti-Semitism in his essays. One will revel then in his music while ignoring the pernicious side of his texts.

When one views German culture through a Jewish filter, other examples come to mind. The libraries of my parents and of the parents of my Jewish friends—all of them impressive collections—differed subtly from those assembled by the elders of my Christian friends. No, there was no strict “confessional” segregation on either side. My parents owned a novel by Stehr with a Christ-like figure as hero and a fictionalized biography of Nicholas of Cusa; and all “non-Jewish” libraries included books by such German Jews as Stefan Zweig and Jakob Wassermann. But only Jews, even before the arrival of the Nazis, owned the works of the Jewish expressionists, though I also caught a glimpse of them in the house of a friend whose father was a newspaper editor. And there were books, prominently displayed on the bookshelves in gentile homes, which my parents would not let into our house, the folk novels, often with anti-Semitic plots or subtexts, of Gustav Freytag, Hermann Loens, and Willibald Alexis. In fact, I recall how my parents, tactfully but uncompromisingly, insisted that my aunt and uncle exchange the latter's slightly anti-Semitic *The Trousers of Mr. von Bredow* “for a present somewhat more suitable.” I ended up with a German-begotten Wild West story—and with the opportunity to observe how my parents (like many other middle-class German Jews) beheld German *Bildung* selectively.

In short, the widely shared Jewish ethos spawned, in conjunction with the best elements in German culture, a German-Jewish mood of considerable optimism and an idealistic philosophy. We dismissed the opportunists, materialists, and scoundrels in our own ranks with ostracizing aphorisms and the Nazis and anti-Semites, whom we routinely encountered, as antediluvian curiosities to be studied under the microscope.

The Jews of Germany frequently fell short, of course, of their self-imposed ethos, yet they never failed to uphold and to canonize it. It is therefore a canard that needs refuting from time to time that the Jews, perhaps aside from a few demented individuals, would have embraced

Hitler if they had been given the chance. As Franz Werfel has his hero Jacobowsky declaim as a credo: "No I could never be a Hitler—not until the Last Judgment Day."

The danger of extremism lay elsewhere for us. We strove to be Germans as good, patriotic, and cultivated in the best eighteenth-century sense as the non-Jewish *Bildungsburger*. Here lay the challenge constantly before us. We were not to be deterred from that goal even when our admired culture heroes, Thomas Mann, for example, maintained for a good while, before he became a spokesman for exiles in America and an advocate and helpmeet of German Jewry, that acculturation was beyond our grasp.

That unfulfilled challenge became, to my mind, another mainspring in the Jewish quest for acculturation. Obviously it spurred on German-Jewish artists and writers: few painters rivaled Max Liebermann in his landscapes and portraits of Imperial Germany; few poets commanded a more powerful, evocative vocabulary than Karl Wolfskehl; few critics were better judges of German usage and style than Karl Kraus. But the challenge also was driving the average German-Jewish citizen with equal force. My grandfather, a small businessman, said very quietly to my mother, when being serenaded by his fellow volunteer firemen upon his twenty-fifth wedding anniversary: "*Wir haben's geschafft!*" ("We have made it!") An impulse, communally so deeply imprinted, may sustain—or delude—a person till the very end.

My own utopia was no different, and my idealistic and idealized vision of German culture did not immediately break down with Hitler's seizure of power or with my arrival in the United States, in 1937, as the sole survivor (as it turned out) of my intimate family. The last sparse fibers of that comforting filter were finally swept away on April 12, 1945. I had returned to Germany via the Normandy beachheads and in the khaki uniform of the U.S. Army and with the six stripes of a master sergeant.

That day in April, beyond marking for me the death of a revered president (Roosevelt had died that day), also dealt me the interrogation of one Dr. Schuebbe who, under the shock of capture and the torpor of a self-administered morphine injection, conversationally admitted to a fellow interrogator of the U.S. Military Intelligence and me that he had killed or supervised the killing of 25,000 people during a two-year tour of duty in occupied Kiev.

Our intelligence report of that week, widely disseminated by the media until overshadowed by horrors even more grisly, reflected, as I remember, less our sense of outrage and contempt for one individual than the monstrosity of a totally dehumanized system. Hundreds of individuals—not only party officials or paid butchers but average citizens—had cooperated and connived, so that Dr. Schuebbe and his henchmen in Kiev could wield their syringes. There were many among them, as I was later able to confirm, who like me listened to Beethoven, enjoyed Goethe, or admired the woodcuts of Albrecht Durer.

Yet today, forty years after my encounter with Dr. Schuebbe and my traumatizing visit to Buchenwald the day after its liberation, I teach and lecture about all three of those German cultural luminaries, write often about eighteenth- and twentieth-century German literature, and have assumed, at various times, professional leadership positions in the United States and guest professorships in the Federal Republic of Germany. Have I, members of my family and friends have asked me, if in different words, returned to past ideal or idyll, or tried to resurrect a shattered utopia? I have attempted to answer that question, for the sake of my friends as well as for myself and my American-born wife, in a variety of ways, mostly orally, and once in the pages of *Columbia Magazine*, published by my alma mater. I argued then, and continue to argue, that to forgo my particular heritage would constitute an act of intellectual self-mutilation, that my expertise on the writers expelled by Hitler and on earlier German-Jewish artists and writers may help rescue them from an oblivion the Nazis had intended for them. But in the context of this essay a different, more sweeping rationale must be invoked.

In times past, as I have contended above, we distilled from the German cultural heritage what was good and valid while ignoring its ignoble aspects, both in keeping with the spirit of an ennobling and creative, if secularized Jewish ethos and, let it be said in retrospect, with the unquenchable, sometimes unpardonable optimism wrenched from a dolorous diasporic history. Our inability to see the flaws in the German cultural tradition, our misplaced optimism were, however, sloughed off in transit to the American asylum; the adherence to the Jewish ethos stayed with the Jewish exiles.

The immense contribution of the German-Jewish cultural confluence, once it was diverted by *force majeure* to America, will contin-

ue to fill volumes, recording achievements in fields ranging from music to physics and medicine, from Jewish theology to art and art history. In fact, many essays in this anthology enlarge upon just such achievements. My focus, however, remains with the implantation of Jewish ethos upon German culture and with how that combination became manifest in America.

Shorn now of its utopianism, this configuration became all the more effective. Whereas German-Jewish intellectuals of the Weimar Republic, with some notable exceptions, often ignored or suppressed the illiberalism, latent hypernationalism, and autocratic thinking in the German heritage (a case in point: the Austrian-Jewish editor of the prestigious journal *Der neue Merkur* [1917–25] allowed only two mentions of National Socialism in its pages), once in America they or their younger successors became far more conscious of these flaws. What was said of one American-exiled Jewish writer, Alfred Polgar, applies to many intellectuals: “The misery [of exile],” observed the German literary and cultural historian Paul Stocklein, “imparted to him the profound insight that ethics—and ethics alone—can lead to an understanding of the world’s condition.”

After the war, when I was allowed to sit in on the heady, often night-long debates of one of the exile circles, I was struck by the acuity and fairness with which they separated the gold of German culture from the dross, the dross from the dirt and the toxin. The novelist Hertha Pauli, the translator and historian E. B. Ashton, the poet Walter Mehring, the biographer Karl Frucht, the dramatist and historian Paul Frischauer: they were not, of course, a noble breed apart (though I idealized them at the time), but never did they allow themselves to espouse an autocratic thought or to lapse into the jargon of the Nazis. They watched themselves and each other in their speech and their writing, which, of course, was still largely German. One evening Paul Frischauer chided me because I had used a word that had become mildly trendy during the Nazi years. And they followed, if not always, a kind of ethical imperative. My friend Hertha Pauli, the “half-Jew” from Vienna, who had never seen a black before coming to America, undertook out of a moral impulse and in recognition of a parallel minority fate, to write the first, ultimately widely acclaimed, biography of Sojourner Truth, the black woman who fought for her people’s emancipation and equality.

In fact, the German-Jewish refugees in America have been consistently in the van as detoxifier of the corrosive poison made in Germany. Outstanding philosophers, psychiatrists, and historians such as Hannah Arendt, Bruno Bettelheim, Fritz Epstein, Peter Gay, George Mosse, Fritz Stern, and Herbert Strauss, each in his or her own way, have traced the origins and early manifestations of Nazism and modern dictatorships, and they have alerted their new homeland, America, "that the lap is fertile yet from which those sprang," to quote Bertolt Brecht. Ruth Angress (together with the American-born scholar Sander Gilman) has sounded the alarm against lingering anti-Semitism in recent West German fiction, I also have pointed out similarities between German literary anti-Semitism in the past and its counterpart in contemporary American literature. But the element common to all these writings, no matter how different their approaches and conclusions, is their philosophy. A rationalistic Jewish ethic, brought over from Germany in the spiritual luggage of these scholars and now applied more realistically, is being set as a foil against its illiberal antithesis.

The filter of Jewish ethics has been applied, in short, to a great many questionable German cultural exports. In a remarkable speech before an international congress of Germanists, Richard von Weiszaecker, president of the Federal Republic of Germany, thanked the foreign scholars of German literature and culture for keeping both undefiled by the propagandistic exploitation practiced by the Nazis. The heroization of Germany's classical authors, particularly of Goethe and Schiller, which prevailed in many German schoolrooms even in the postwar period, and which has alienated countless German schoolchildren from their most celebrated authors, gained little ingress to the United States, because here, too, German-Jewish refugee scholars celebrated the humanity of Goethe and the love of freedom of Schiller in their teaching and writing. Many scholars, such as the late Oskar Seidlin, helped set the standards which were to secure the German classicists an accurate, if small, echo in the United States. And progressive German authors of our times have received a fair hearing among American intellectuals because of the brilliant reports that the English-based German-Jewish critic and author George Steiner has filed for the *New Yorker*.

In a modest way I can retrace, I believe, the conscious or subcon-

scious impulse which motivated such scholars to rescue the German heritage from its Fascist adulterators. In 1970, while at the University of Cincinnati, I approached my colleague Gottfried Merkel with the following argument: "No one in the history of German literature has fought as hard and consistently for human equality and mutual toleration as Gotthold Ephraim Lessing; no one was a better friend to Moses Mendelssohn; no one in Germany argued more persuasively for the equality of the German Jews." The *Lessing Yearbook*, which we, in consequence, founded at the time and is now published by Wayne State University Press, has become an international forum for the study of the German Enlightenment and has helped to spread on this continent Lessing's political philosophy, which is strikingly like that of our founding fathers.

The spirit that imbued many of the German-Jewish scholars, that particular interpretation of two heritages, will likely endure in America. Care has been taken that the testimony of its existence, its remaining cultural artifacts, its printed, handwritten, and oral documentation will be preserved. The Leo Baeck Institute, founded by Max Gruenewald and Martin Buber, and now directed by Fred Grubel with the help of a board drawn largely from three generations of German-Jewish refugees, is commanding ever wider attention from an American intellectual lay public. Other archives and institutes devoted to German-Jewish individuals, such as the Lion Feuchtwanger Archive and the Kurt Weill Foundation or the pages and files of the fifty-year-old German-Jewish newspaper *Aufbau*, serve a like purpose. The last-named resource, if read consistently, also reflects German culture filtered by a Jewish ethic. All of these repositories have come now to the attention, at ever more frequent intervals, of America's most prestigious newspapers and magazines. That fact may also help ensure the permanence of the German-Jewish impact on America.

Is there further evidence of such lastingness? Believing in the dictum of *scripta manent* or that literature has been and will continue to be the least ephemeral of written human records, I would like to cite a curious literary phenomenon as additional testimony. American writers have discovered the German-Jewish exiles and have set them down in their fiction and dramas. Susan Sontag discovered the Austrian-Jewish writer Hermann Broch, Christopher Hampton presented a whole galaxy of refugees in his drama *Exiles*, which he premiered in Ameri-

ca, Elly Welt created a "half-Jewish" survivor who finds peace at last in the United States when he says *Kaddish* for his dead. Ernest Hemingway, in his foreword to his Civil War film script *Spanish Earth*, celebrates the humaneness of a German-Jewish physician; Erica Jong's disturbed heroine receives caring treatment only from a Jewish psychiatrist. The list could be continued. But all the fictional or fictionalized German-Jewish exiles I have been able to identify in American literature embody the best of their dual German-Jewish heritage.

Of course they have no monopoly on being the purifying conduit for imported German culture. The "other," better Germany was represented in the United States as well by such German Christians as Dietrich von Hildebrand, Paul Tillich, Thomas Mann, and Erwin Piscator, to mention just a few. Someday their story, the motivation behind their humanity and acts of altruism must be recorded. This essay is meant to pay tribute, of course, to the German-Jewish cultural life as it once existed, and its continued impact on the United States.

At one of the last religious classes I attended in my hometown, Rabbi Lewinsky dictated one more saying to us: "The world rests on three foundations: truth, justice, and peace. To bring these three into harmony," he added, "is our constant task." I believe that admonition was upheld and applied by the rabbi's contemporaries and his spiritual progeny who succeeded, as he could not, in reaching the United States.