
Emancipation and Post-Emancipation Identities: Reflections on On-Going Research

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One cannot reflect on the German-Jewish legacy in America without being conscious of the basic *avelut* of our generation of survivors. The assignment has a positive ring: “legacy,” says the Oxford Dictionary, “II, 2: fig., anything handed down by an ancestor or predecessor F(1586).” One cannot celebrate this legacy without “playing marches for conquered and slain persons . . . Battles are lost in the same spirit in which they are won,” in Walt Whitman’s words.

Fifty years ago, the final night descended on Jewish culture in Germany and Austria. Of institutes of higher Jewish learning, only the Lehranstalt (Hochschule) fuer die Wissenschaft des Judentums, presided over by Rabbi Leo Baeck in Berlin’s Artilleriestrasse 14, was allowed to endure until June 1942. It wrote the last chapter of unbowed and unshaken *Wissenschaft des Judentums*; a fact widely unknown and unrecorded to this day.¹ On a moral plane, the books do not balance between culture passed on and humankind destroyed. Still, between 450,000 and 500,000 German-speaking Jews managed to escape from Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia before the *Shoah* began. They carried with them one of the most articulate forms of modern Jewish culture. Today, the generation that saved what could be saved has almost passed from the scene. The Jewish émigré culture they created in the major countries of their dispersion is fast disappearing. Buber’s injunction that Judaism does not have a history, that it *is* history, lives on in the minds of the survivors. Reconstructing a legacy destroyed asserts the legacy for the future.

II

To reflect on the legacy of German Jewry (I shall confine myself to Jews from Germany proper)² means asking about the significance of Judaism in the late phase of emancipation for post-Holocaust Jewish

consciousness in the period of Israel's statehood.

American public attitudes towards ethnic strains in American life have changed considerably since I arrived penniless at a less than memorable pier of the city of Hoboken in 1946. It is easily forgotten today, as verbal patterns of Jewish national identification pace signs of cultural debilitation, that the imperatives of the "Anglo-Saxon superiority" and "melting-pot" theories had been the dominant force behind the "Americanization" paradigms of immigrant and minority life, including the Jewish immigrant minority. The polls right up to the late 1940s suggest that American Jewish perceptions of widespread anti-Jewish stereotypes were not unrealistic. Restrictionism in immigration law and practice reflected not only the attitudes of congressional committees dominated by senior Southern congressmen, but also of public opinion. A bill to admit Jewish refugee children outside the quota (Wagner-Rogers Bill, 1938–1939) died in committee, lest its reporting to the floor might decrease the number of quota immigrants admitted. By now, this story has been told and retold.³ The most comprehensive study of refugee immigration ever undertaken by a broad spectrum of immigrant aid organizations conveys much of the friction under which Jewish immigrants from Germany labored—the urge, ideological as much as tactical, to slough off the edges of foreignness and make them "fit in."⁴ The literature and practice of Jewish social work for "refugees"—post-Depression universalism and social radicalism imposed on a Jewish ethnic base—conveyed the message.

German Jews responded at several levels to this situation. Economically, linguistically, in dress, leisure time, reading habits, the liberal loyalties and identities of the Roosevelt period—these lower middle and middle classes reached prior social levels thanks to the war economy and the postwar boom, even if the higher rites of baseball had to be acquired through the children. First-generation refugees responded in middle-class ways. If Jewish immigration is perceived as the immigration of Jews, i.e., persons professing the Jewish religion or persecuted on account of Jewish ancestry, one facet of the legacy is revealed: a Jewish subculture at mature stages of postindustrial re-orientation had anticipated the turn to a service society in the Western world, and had nurtured a professional, university-trained class and world-level artists and intellectuals. Approximately four-fifths of the scholars and artists meeting the high standards for inclusion in the *International*

Biographical Dictionary of Central European Emigrés 1933 – 1945 were Jewish or had Jewish “backgrounds.”⁵ Their significance for Jews in America was obvious if hard to quantify: it ranged from the “Einstein-syndrome” in the public relations efforts of numerous Jewish causes, including good will for Israel, to being the first Jewish appointments in colleges and universities that used to be “*judenrein*” as a matter of agreed prejudice. There were numerous such “secondary effects” derived from the primary set of events—having been persecuted as a Jew in Germany. Research in this field, carried on since 1983 at the Zentrum fuer Antisemitismusforschung in Berlin, Germany, will supplement on an international level the pioneering studies produced in this country during the last two decades.⁶

Today, the not infrequently hostile anti-Jewish animus of the actual period of arrival has given way to mellow reappraisals of this Jewish group as “Hitler’s gift to the country.” Three out of every four prominent artists and scientists included in the selected sample of the *Biographical Dictionary* and persecuted for “Jewish background” by the Third Reich professed the Jewish religion.

German Jewry in emigration did not consist of a *Who’s Who* group of professionals. When World War II broke out, whoever could had emigrated, a cross-section of the community, including most of its religious and lay leaders. They transferred their communal structure, to an astonishing extent, to such major countries of settlement as Great Britain, the United States, Latin America, and, to some extent, Palestine. German Jewry had never been monolithic in any aspect of its legal position, culture, religious orientation, politics, population, or any other area. It represented a plural world of differences. About 100,000 of the 500,000 Jews living in Germany in 1933 had been immigrants, primarily from Eastern Europe, not including Jews originating in the formerly Polish, then Prussian and German, eastern border areas. The large majority of Jews in Germany had been concentrated in cities; yet a sizable percentage were removed only by a generation or two from their original rural habitats, and those rural areas, especially in southern, and northwestern Germany or in Hesse, retained a strong Jewish flavor of their own. Culturally and religiously, Jews had shared Germany’s double cultural pressures: rural Jews and Jews in Eastern Europe contributed the vitality of a communitarian folk frontier to the urbanizing and cosmopolitan dynamics of the cities. Immi-

gration from abroad, and *Binnenwanderung* (migration within a country) within, paced ever-renewed integration and upward educational and cultural mobility. The tensions so created were certainly not unique to German Jewry alone: they occurred (and occur) wherever peripherally modernized groups are attracted by post-folk civilizations and social subsystems. But Germany was different from France or England because of the intensely nationalistic environment in which these exchanges took place after 1871, and because of the extent and thus centrality of these processes for Jewish identity.

Thus, the more the distorted stereotype of German-Jewish culture dims into history and memory and loses its usefulness as a counter-symbol, to ban what keeps tempting us in ourselves, the more clearly emerges its paradigmatic value for the paradoxes of the present. By the grace of its peculiar polarities, it created viable Jewish identities and embodied them in a structure of public activities filled with the tensions of Jewish life. Their majority self-understanding as German citizens of the Jewish faith reflected not only their never-ending struggle for full civic and political equality; it also demanded that Jews in Germany remove the repressions imposed on them by their mono-nationalistic environment as trustees of Jewish tradition and existence. The facile image of the German Jew barely restrained from jumping into the baptismal font, however much truth there was in it for some, missed the essential quality of this late-emancipation community. When the Third Reich threw Jews in Germany back on their Jewish existence—identity is the present fad word—German Jews had long begun the process of casting themselves as an ethnic community, whatever the words used at the time to describe their communal realities. The implications of this legacy for the changed circumstances of American-Jewish culture are well worth contemplating.

III

The last chapter in the history of German-Jewish culture was written in emigration, and emigré culture, thus the methodological axiom of migration history, embodies an encounter between the old and the new. Research concerning the impact of individuals and groups of Jewish professionals—scholars, artists, scientists, engineers, doctors, architects, writers, etc.—on their countries of settlement, and vice versa, has been given primary attention, for a variety of scholarly and political motives. The social history and, above all, the Jewish com-

munal history of the about 278,000 Jews who managed to leave Germany and escape the *Shoah*, including about 132,000 Jews who arrived here before World War II, is still inadequately known.⁷

On one level, the network of organizations German Jews set up in the United States and other major countries of resettlement belongs in the context of immigration history everywhere and in all epochs: they express not only the minority consciousness of immigrants in a foreign country, but serve also as launching pads for the acculturation process of successive generations. For the present context, however, it is not the form that is of interest here, but the contents: here, a community had been forced to migrate, and had been able to reproduce the quality of its communal history almost in its entirety. Its ethnicity was not imposed by its immigrant status; it revealed its original ethnic quality.

On the religious level, all directions except extreme *Reformgemeinde* were represented. At one point, over thirty immigrant congregations gave about 40,000 members a religious home in New York City alone. For many congregants, this was sacred ethnicity, proof of the strong communal cohesion and *Lebenswelt* of many rural and regional *minhagim* and *nigunim*. For many rabbis, acculturation meant joining the tradition of high-level teaching of Judaism to new concepts of synagogal social service, interfaith work, and congregational sociability—sisterhoods had been unknown in Europe, although religious instruction for children had been considerably more continuous. Rabbis made significant contributions to Jewish political, denominational, and rabbinical life—many continued publishing as they had been wont to do as *Rabbiner Doktors* in Germany. Major efforts went into social services, in part on a nondenominational basis. German *Wiedergutmachung* (restitution) payments and the Great Society program of the 1960s permitted considerable expansion in developing a model social-service system further. Numerous Jewish social and political groups reproduced the organizational patterns of the homeland, faithfully and at times with tinges of absurdity. The most representative (and at times most literary) émigré weekly appeared in New York, in the German language, promoting American patriotism for the war effort. A social service agency serving concentration camp survivors claiming compensation from the German government employed over 200 lawyers and secretaries at its peak. One international research organization, the Leo Baeck Institute, succeed-

ed in placing German-Jewish history of the pre-Hitler period on the agenda of international scholarship, while another, the Research Foundation for Jewish Immigration, began research on Jewish (and other) emigration and resettlement from German-speaking Central Europe in cooperation with scholarly institutes in other countries. A central coordinating agency of German-Jewish émigré organizations in the United States, affiliated with a world-wide Council of Jews from Germany, proved very effective not only in articulating political and intellectual issues but, for several decades during its peak, in functioning as an international representation and lobby in Bonn, Washington, and other centers of postwar Jewish politics. It continued the Reichsvertretung der Juden in Deutschland in a free political atmosphere, realizing a design of representation that was denied to Jews in Germany to the very end.

Space limits even this entirely inadequate enumeration of a subject now being researched in several ongoing projects.⁸ Some of the organizations listed above have gone the way of other immigrant organizations when the founders had faded away. Others have refined their purposes and maintained distinct functions within larger American or American-Jewish systems. Still others have merged with parallel groups or attracted new members giving new directions. The legacy it leaves behind will emerge as differentiated as the community that created it.

The process is about to be completed: a mature Jewish culture of the emancipation period found that the systems of meaning it had created, in conformity or protest, faced the supreme test of uprooting and resettlement and demonstrated its existential and intellectual vigor precisely in its displacement. For the long run, some shortcomings also emerge clearly: the last phase of German-Jewish scholarship or theological thought was transmitted also, even though not primarily, with the help of émigré scholars or theologians, not by the émigré congregations: an attempt to establish a Lehrhaus at a German-Jewish congregation foundered on the rock of German-Jewish and American Jewish eclecticism. Outside of Hebrew Union College, American-Jewish theological institutes proved less hospitable to Wissenschaft des Judentums than, say, Hebrew—or, for that matter and at a later stage—Brandeis University. German-Jewish émigré institutions have, on the whole, failed to share the concern with the *Shoah* that has moved our

colleagues here and abroad. Living in an organizationally mature Jewish society, we have not sufficiently insisted on better training for Jewish communal functionaries, especially in the field of Jewish learning and international relations, have not bequeathed enough of our experience and training. But we are leaving the insight that even in its supreme hour of need, under persecution and faced with the problems of uprooting and resettlement, the paradox polarities between the new ethnic consciousness and the facts of successful integration need not be resolved by a return to an earlier stage of communal existence and cultural identity.

Notes

1. The history of the Hochschule for the entire period (1872–1942) or for its last phase has never been written, and its graduates have not issued a memorial volume comparable to those issued for other institutions (e.g., Juedisch-Theologisches Seminar, Breslau, or Israelitische Lehrerbildungsanstalt, Wuerzburg). Attempts to locate relevant archival materials have failed as recently as 1987–1988. At this writing, a doctoral dissertation based on whatever materials are available is being prepared at the Zentrum fuer Antisemitismusforschung, Technische Universitaet, Berlin, in cooperation with the department of Jewish studies at the Free University, Berlin.

2. A comprehensive study of the transfer of Jewish scholarship (*Wissenschaft des Judentums*) from Germany and Austria is being prepared, at present, by Dr. Christhard Hoffmann, Zentrum fuer Antisemitismusforschung, Berlin, in cooperation with Prof. Daniel Schwartz, department of Jewish studies, Hebrew University. In its early stages, the study was sponsored by the Research Foundation for Jewish Immigration, New York. It is now supported by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, Bonn.

3. Cf. Henry L. Feingold, *The Politics of Rescue: The Roosevelt Administration and the Holocaust, 1938–1945* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1970. For other studies to 1988) see *Classified, and Annotated Bibliography of Books and Articles on the Immigration and Acculturation of Jews from Central Europe to the USA since 1933*, ed. H. Friedlander et al., vol. 2 of *Jewish Immigrants of the Nazi Period in the USA*, ed. Herbert A. Strauss (New York, Munich, etc., 1981).

4. Maurice R. Davie et al., *Refugees in America: Report of the Committee for the Study of Recent Immigration from Europe* (New York 1947, reprinted 1975).

5. *International Biographical Dictionary of Central European Emigrés 1933–1945 / Biographisches Handbuch der deutschsprachigen Emigration nach 1933*, eds. Herbert A. Strauss and Werner Roeder. vol. II (Munich, and New York 1983), Introduction, p. lxxviii–lxxvi.

6. Research on the transfer of scholarship through emigration in the disciplines political science, medicine, physics, and Jewish studies (*Wissenschaft des Judentums*) has been underway since 1985 at the Zentrum fuer Antisemitismusforschung, Berlin and Muenster University in cooperation with the Gesellschaft fuer Wissenschaftsgeschichte. An extension of this area of research is now being supported for other disciplines at other institutions in the Federal Republic of Germany by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, Bonn.

7. Cf. the author's "Social and Communal Integration," in *Essays on the History, Persecution and Emigration of German Jews*, vol. 6 of *Jewish Immigrants of the Nazi Period in the USA*, ed. H. A. Strauss, (New York and Munich, 1985), pp. 317–336, and Steven M. Lowenstein, "The German-Jewish Community of Washington Heights," in *Year Book of the Leo Baeck Institute*, vol. 30 (1985), pp. 245–254. A forthcoming book by this author on this subject was not available to me at the time of writing.

8. American Federation of Jews from Central Europe, History Project, sponsored by Research Foundation for Jewish Immigration and Jewish Philanthropic Fund of 1933, New York, 1987–date. Research is carried out by Judith Marcus-Tarr and Joseph Maier.