
Fifty Years After Crystal Night and Forty in America

Werner Weinberg

In writing down my thoughts on this topic I cannot suppress the disturbing feeling that each contributor to this volume of my age group and background will of necessity come up with practically the same story. But this is really something for the editor to worry about, and I may even be wrong.

I agree with Professor Mosse's idea about German Jews and *Bildung* with the following modification: If one wants to express one essential trend of the spirit of middle- and upper-class pre-Hitler German Jews, this would be *Bildung*. Moreover, pride in our *Bildung* was, among liberal Jews, one of the strongest pillars of pride in our Jewishness, simply because percentagewise more Jews possessed it than German non-Jews. Another such pillar was being proud of Jews of high achievement in the sciences, in literature, music, the theater, and also in commerce and industry and politics—especially, of course, of the Nobel Prize winners among them, again for the same reason: percentagewise we had a leading edge.

This pride, incidentally, was always tempered by some uneasiness; doubtlessly a number of vestiges from the pre-Emancipation time (which was not all that far remote) dwelled still in us. It was good to keep somewhat in the background. "*Keinen Risches machen*"—Don't bring on anti-Semitism! was still a valid slogan, don't rub their noses in our achievement of almost equal opportunity.

(Regarding our Jewishness it must be added that it certainly did not rest on the pillars of *Bildung* and pride alone. A good deal of *Yiddishkeit* [may my co-German-Jewish brethren forgive me the word] came from within also with *Westjuden*.)

I do not go along with the notion that we believed our *Bildung* "could be used as a means to support a German-Jewish dialogue." First, because we did not acquire *Bildung* for any other purpose than (*lehavdil*) *lishmah*, rather than as a "spade wherewith to dig." And second, because I do not remember a "German-Jewish dialogue" in

any organized form or shape. There was nothing to dialogue about. Jews were Jews and Christians were Christians. I am just as uninformed about, say, a Catholic-Protestant dialogue. One took each other for granted. There was no missionizing to speak of, and our much-decried assimilation stopped at the door of most Jewish homes and at the portals of the synagogue. Sure, there was anti-Semitism; but then, many Jews did not exactly love Christians either, nor did Catholics Protestants and visa versa.

Another suggested potential effect of our *Bildung*, namely that we should have considered it as a means to tame the National Socialist beast, is pure fantasy. One the contrary, in times and places of crisis we Jews rather hid our *Bildung* before them, because it made them furious. This self-denial was different in the case of German groups and individuals who were themselves *gebildet*. They often accepted *gebildete* Jews as their equals and even socialized with them.

When I played down the “*bekovete rishes*,” as we called “the good old pre-Hitler anti-Semitism,” and likewise did not acknowledge *Bildung* as an instrument of dialogue with German Christians and of causing Nazis to change their idea about Jews being subhumans, there was one phenomenon that possessed a good deal of realism, and that is the likewise often cited Jewish-German symbiosis. “Living together”—with now and then a genuine friendship or a bad case of mutual contempt thrown in—but at any rate coexisting in a live-and-let-live atmosphere and absence of xenophobia can form a solid platform for a social order. Even the most Orthodox Jews took part in this quite comfortable symbiosis under the motto *Torah im derech erez* and with the reservation of *chukat goyim*. The Zionists extended the phase of symbiosis even beyond 1933 because of their declared goal to emigrate; which agreed with the Nazi goal for us during the first half of the twelve-year period history had assigned to them.

So what did we bring with us to these shores after leaving Germany? Above I called German *Bildung* only “one essential trend” of German Jews. Some of the others are well-known; we brought them along to America as we did to Israel, but also to Uruguay and Shanghai, and to every place that offered an emigration loophole. I am referring to those other “essential trends” that may be summed up as the “*Yekke* syndrome.” As everyone knows, among its symptoms are: a sense of duty, responsibility, and dependability, of punctuality, exactitude, or-

derliness, obedience to authority, neatness of attire, politeness, pedantry and, perhaps, especially, of dignity.

We were not proud or even cognizant of these trends, it was simply the way we were brought up. This *Yekke* syndrome gave rise to much teasing and joking, especially in Israel but also in America; but I do not think that it made us a laughingstock. Rather did we have many occasions to sense that some admiration and perhaps even a little envy were hidden behind the *Yekke* jokes and cartoons. One ancillary feature of the syndrome, though, was sure to stir up resentment in the countries of immigration: the inclination of some of our group to boast about the country which, it is true, had thrown us out, but also had been conducive to our *Yekkut* to develop. (Hebrew has no difficulty in forming an abstract noun from a word whose etymology is still escaping us.) Possibly, because this happened mainly in France, or because the French term for *bei uns* (i.e., in Germany), *chez nous*, lent itself to grammatical inflection, we, the refugees, did oppose the “*chez-nousen*,” as we had opposed the “*rishesmacher*” among us.

I do not think that the second wave of German Jews, those catapulted here by the Crystal Night, was essentially different from the first, of between 1933 and 1938. They were still traumatized and often could not quite believe that they had gotten out of Germany before what many thought would be the closing of the gates, and to a choice emigration land such as the United States, at that. But this was soon overcome by the necessity to catch up with those who had arrived between 1933 and the Crystal Night. Those Johnnies-come-early helped them in many ways, even though the relationship was occasionally strained by some gloating that they had seen it coming and had not lingered because of a foolish hope or belief that Hitler would go away. After a few years, when the war had started and the third wave, the survivors of concentration camps, was still to arrive, the two groups had pretty well merged, and like the Russian Jews before them, or for that matter, like the Irish, Italians, and all other immigrant groups, strove for cohesion and preserving certain features of their way of life within the melting pot.

While Washington Heights in New York City became the prototype settlement of the pre – and post – Crystal Night Jews—they formed their own congregations, and social institutions, and opened their delicatessen, wherever there was a sizable group of them in the country.

They socialized mainly among themselves.

Again, like most or all immigrant groups, these German Jews were eager to find work, to seek advancement, to obtain their American citizenship, and to become integrated as soon as they could in the existing Jewish-American welfare and community organizations, ambitious to pay back what had been expended on them. But—once more, like the other immigrant groups—their real Americanization, at least that of the first generation, remained on the surface. Most of them switched to the English language also for home use within their first decade. They sent their children to public school in addition to Hebrew school or a yeshiva, and did all in their power to give them a college education. Possibly the percentage of individuals who became outstanding in the professions, in commerce, even in politics, was higher than the average of other immigrant groups. But for all this, most held on to their German *Bildung* plus *Yekkut*; they did not assimilate to Americanism wholeheartedly and without reservation, much as their assimilation to the former German surroundings had never been “all the way” (with some exceptions, of course, in either situation).

Fifty years after the immigration to the United States, elderly German Jews may still speak of “real Americans” or even only of “the Americans,” not necessarily critically but at any rate as different from themselves, from a way of living with which they differed in a dozen respects, beginning perhaps with white bread and soft rolls.

Therefore, if the question of a German-Jewish legacy is being raised, as well as that of a possible influence of this legacy on American Jewry and on America altogether, this writer can only observe—again, and for the last time—that like other immigrant groups, the first generations of German pre- and post-Crystal Night Jews (and now we may add the “third wave,” post-1945 escapees) hold onto and live out this legacy. They pass on a very small portion of it to their children (eager not to put anything in the way of *their* Americanization), and for their fully Americanized grandchildren, they are what they are in every immigration country: the grandparents who came from the old country—nothing less, but also nothing more.

Speaking about legacy-influence on America as a whole: some individuals from any of the three German-Jewish Holocaust immigration waves may have left or may still leave an impression or make an im-

portant contribution here and there, but this has to do with those individuals—not so much with any legacy.

Is not the process the same in the State of Israel? From the time when the first *olim* were unfairly asked, “Do you come out of conviction or out of Germany?” through a few decades of their considerable influence on the political, economical, cultural, and educational scene, any possible German-Jewish legacy has been integrated in the total fabric of Israeli life, of which the individual threads are now difficult to tell apart.

For the United States, with its exclusive history of most divergent immigration waves, this process is still more outspoken. In the all-American quilt there may be stitches of German-Jewish *Bildung* and *Yekkut*—but except for a few monuments, such as the Leo Baeck Institute, the New School of Social Research, the Rabbi Breuer complex in Washington Heights, there is no distinctive legacy. The hard-to-define spirit of “real Americans” has swallowed it up, and like Pharaoh’s lean cows, did not become appreciably fatter for it.