
The German-Jewish Legacy: An Overstated Ideal

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The principal contribution of modern Judaism in Germany to world Jewry was made long before the arrival of the refugees during and after the Nazi period. That was the reshaping of Judaism from its pre-Emancipation understanding, impervious to outside influences, to a way of life fully compatible with modern culture and civilization; in the catchword of Samson Raphael Hirsch, *Torah im derech erez*—Torah, however, defined by each thinker in his own way, covering the whole spectrum of views represented by such diverse figures as Samuel Holdheim, Abraham Geiger, Zacharias Frankel, and others. This all happened over a century ago.

I grew up in a home which in many ways was typical of those described by Professor Mosse in his work. Born in Stettin, Germany (now Szczecin, Poland), in 1918, the son of Max Wiener (1882–1950, cf. *Encyclopaedia Judaica*), a leading German liberal rabbi, I belonged to the fourth generation of a family with a secular education. My great-grandfather, Meyer Landsberg (1810–1870), was a rabbi with university training, officiating in Hildesheim, Germany (cf. *Jewish Encyclopedia*); my grandfather, Meyer Hamburger (1838–1903), a mathematician, taught at the Technische Hochschule (Engineering College) in Berlin (cf. *Neue Deutsche Biographie* and *World Who's Who in Science*). Other members of my extended family were public high school teachers, something relatively rare for German Jews; still others were in the more usual Jewish professions, such as physicians and lawyers, although most were business people with varying degrees of success. They represented all shades of Jewish ideologies, Zionist, anti-Zionist, Orthodox, and even the extreme German Reform in Berlin, one uncle belonging to the congregation originally served by Samuel Holdheim.

Culturally they all had this in common, their formal secular education predominated over their religious training, although there was always an emotional attachment to their Jewishness, yet some had

little Jewish background, in many cases less than those in this country who had attended the late afternoon Hebrew school. The relative imbalance between German and Jewish education was brought home to me in an address delivered by Rabbi Leo Baeck before the German Club of the University of Cincinnati around 1952. There he paid special tribute to the German *Gymnasium*, the high school, in his education. I do not believe it was simply politeness to his hosts on this occasion, when he reflected on conditions in the 1880s. The rigorous systematic course of study in such a school, which took up a large part of a boy's time, would naturally overshadow the home training in Jewish tradition, even that received in a rabbinic home from which he came.

In singling out at the beginning the major contribution of German Judaism, I was in part guided by the focus of my father's major work, *Juedische Religion im Zeitalter der Emanzipation* (1933). This work, very much praised, has been called the best book on the subject (cf. *Encyclopaedia Britannica: Macropaedia*, vol. 10, p. 329). Among the many fine insights displayed there is the time frame upon which he concentrated, as explained in the preface. After stating that the German branch of Judaism exercised leadership of religious life in the nineteenth century, he then considered the time span of this creative period. He started with Moses Mendelssohn and ended with the sixties and seventies of that century, because by that time all the significant ideas had found their expression.

These ideas had found their way to this country with the so-called German wave of immigration in the middle of the past century. They were reinforced by the influx of rabbis and teachers from the German-speaking areas infused with the new spirit. Among them was the son of Meyer Landsberg, Max Landsberg (1845 – 1927), pioneer Reform rabbi in Rochester, New York, one of the most radical representatives of that movement, who came to this country in 1871 and was the first vice-president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis at its establishment in 1889 (cf. *Jewish Encyclopedia*, with incorrect death date, and *Who Was Who in America*, vol. 1.).

It is my contention that his generation of immigrants was far more influential on American Jewry than our group, because by the time we arrived American Jewry was not all that much different from the German-Jewish community as I remember it. Increasing acculturation

and assimilation to the American environment was accompanied by relatively ineffective Jewish education, so that the secular training for most people outweighed that in the Jewish sphere. Now, this pattern repeats itself with each successive immigrant group, and the first American-born generation looks for rapid assimilation to the dominant culture, with a modest corner preserved for the Jewish heritage. This has been true throughout the modern period in every country of the diaspora where Jews were not completely rebuffed, as they were in Eastern Europe before the Russian Revolution.

Therefore, I fail to see whether we can speak of a unique legacy of German Jewry in its last decades that was brought over by the new immigrants. One distinction might be considered, however. In general there was a much higher level of education—at least in the upper classes—of Germany as compared to the United States. That also was reflected in the Jewish community of Germany, which like its counterpart here had even a higher degree of education than the average of the general community. (A popular Jewish saying was: “*Doktor ist der juedische Vorname*,” of course a gross overstatement.) Also in Germany academic education had much greater prestige than it used to have here. Titles like *Doktor* and *Professor* commanded enormous respect. Professor Mosse’s preoccupation with the word *Bildung* reminds me also of another German-Yiddish saying: Wenn du wirst sein *ausgebildet*, wirst sein *eingebildet*. (“Once you are trained for a specific vocation, you will be conceited”). Here we see the downside of this striving for *Bildung* with its accompanying boastfulness and snobishness.

Thus there was a disproportionate number of academics or academically inclined people among the “newcomers,” as the Jewish community in Cincinnati liked to call them, which brought it about that a relatively large number tried to reenter their professions and raised their children with this bias toward these occupations. The large number of prominent figures in American Jewish religious leadership of German birth comes to mind, like the current presidents of the Hebrew Union College and the Jewish Theological Seminary, two recent presidents of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, a past international director of the Hillel Foundations, and many others. A recent issue of the *Hebrew Union College Annual* listed among the twelve members of its board of editors four that were born in

Germany. My impression is that this is not limited to the field of Jewish religious leadership, but that this group is also represented to a greater extent than their number in the whole spectrum of academic and professional endeavor. A more in-depth study can be made now regarding this phenomenon, since a biographical dictionary of the German emigration during the Nazi period has been published (*Biographisches Handbuch der deutschsprachigen Emigration nach 1933—International Biographical Dictionary of Central European Emigrés, 1933—1945*). This should be compared with the various *Who's Who* and professional directory publications that seem to proliferate.

I happen to belong to the less prominent group, yet am still represented in the former dictionary as well as in *Who's Who in American Jewry* and *Who's Who in World Jewry*. I came to these shores in 1934 to stay with relatives in Syracuse, New York, finished high school there, and then attended the University of Cincinnati (B.A., 1940) and the Hebrew Union College (rabbi, 1943). After a few years in the rabbinate I went into Jewish library work, first at HUC under the guidance of the head cataloger, Moses Marx, (1885—1973) a self-taught bibliophile from Germany, with special interest in the Hebrew book, a brother of the better-known Alexander Marx. I succeeded him for a while before becoming associated with the Library of Congress, now serving as senior cataloger of Judaica in the Subject Cataloging Division.

With regard to my personal involvement in the transfer of Jewish lore from Germany, I have a few modest contributions to record. As a student at Hebrew Union College, I write the articles "Theism," "Theophany," and "Theocracy" for the *Universal Jewish Encyclopedia*, under the guidance of Professor Samuel Cohon. Originally they were to be translated from the *Jüdische Lexikon* (1927—30), whose American rights the publishers of the *UJE* had acquired. Of course I used German sources to carry out this work. My two other works in this area are "The Writings of Leo Baeck, a Bibliography," in *Studies in Bibliography and Booklore* (1954) and "Jewish Refugees at the Library of Congress," in the festschrift for Leon Nemoy, *Studies in Judaica, Karaitica, and Islamica* (1982). In addition my articles in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, "Biographical Lexicons," "Festschriften," and "Encyclopedias," also utilized German sources, especially the last article, which built on the same entry in the earlier incomplete German

EJ. My principal other “literary” activity over the years has been the feature “Jewish Literary Anniversaries” in the *Jewish Book Annual* since 1959. I confess that in selecting many of the entries I may have been biased toward the German-Jewish scholarly fraternity with whose names I am most familiar.

My father, who came to this country in 1939, also helped on a much more scholarly and enduring scale to transmit the German-Jewish heritage to this country. His most important work was the posthumously published *Abraham Geiger and Liberal Judaism* (JPS, 1962; reprinted by HUC Press, 1981). This is an anthology of Geiger’s writings in English translation with an extensive biographical introduction. In 1944 there appeared his “Aufriss einer juedischen Theologie” in the *HUC Annual*, his personal understanding of Judaism. Just before his death he wrote “Judah Halevi’s Concept of Religion and a Modern Counterpart” (*HUC Annual*, vol. 23, part 1, 1950–51). There he compared the *Kuzari* with the work of the German Orthodox leader, Isaac Breuer (*Der neue Kusari: Ein Weg zum Judentum* [Frankfurt, 1934]).

In spite of our personal efforts in attempting to enrich the American Jewish community with our insights from Germany, I cannot pinpoint the exact Jewish component that was brought to this country, but I rather think that the relatively large number of Jewish professionals (rabbis, teachers, organization executives, etc.) was in part the result of the higher educational level referred to above and also was induced by the impact of persecution, which forced many people to look back to their Jewish roots, however tenuous they may have been before Hitler.

I believe that the German-Jewish spirit was tied to the German soil with the cultural values of Germany. It was an integral part of the German environment and could not be transferred to this country. The immigrants came here and tried to find their niche as best they could in a community that was fundamentally not so much different from their original home. Jewish learning in recent years has taken an upswing. But I believe that it has occurred because of the impact of the Holocaust, the establishment of Israel, and the new emphasis on ethnic studies. Thus, many different influences flow together to propel American Jewry into the next century. No element in that largest of Jewries can claim particular credit for the success or failure of its endeavors.