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# The German-Jewish Legacy After Auschwitz

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As a survivor of the Holocaust as well as a Jew from Germany I find it somewhat difficult to discuss the concept of a German-Jewish legacy. If by legacy we mean the act of passing on certain values to people, whether they deserve them or not, then I have difficulty recognizing the continuation of that legacy in America.

There are several reasons for such a feeling. I must admit that I have been critical of the German-Jewish establishment in this country for failing to pass on that legacy with consistency or success. I found this to be the case when I came to this country in 1952 and I find it more or less the same today.

I do not mean by this that German Jews who came here from Nazi Germany have not made individual contributions of an important nature to the life of America, but they have not done it as a collective group.

There are reasons for this as well. America is a melting pot society. German Jewish life in Germany was based on strongly ideological grounds. That is hardly the way in which our American Jewish organizational life works today, a life that is based on American pragmatism and the ability to pull strings.

I have been told that German Jews did not make contributions to American life as a group because we did not enter the United States on the Lower East Side. Perhaps there is some truth to this. Our Yekkishness is a recognizable trait, and perhaps not a trait that fits into the American Jewish style, which, after all, was developed by an East European Jewish community, at least since the end of World War II. And that style is not our style.

And yet I do not find such answers totally convincing. I still struggle with the question of why our German-Jewish refugee organizations and their successors have made little or no contribution to American Jewish life. Rabbi Joachim Prinz, one of the great German-Jewish rabbis of the 1920s and 1930s, was president of the Conference of Presi-

dents of Major American Jewish Organizations but not as a leader of German Jews in this country. Indeed, our organizations have never even joined the Presidents Conference.

There is yet another problem with regard to this German-Jewish legacy. That involves the psychological gulf and the historical gulf that separates those German Jews who left Germany before the implementation of the Final Solution and those who did not. That of course is understandable. For those who were not there it is not easy to understand, perhaps we can call it a kind of mental barbed wire between those who survived Auschwitz and those who did not have to.

And one of the great ironies of the Holocaust is that such a difference cannot and does not exist between the German Jewish survivors and those from Eastern Europe, the *Ostjuden*, who always made us so uncomfortable in our pre-Holocaust German existence. But what we German-Jewish survivors learned from Auschwitz has remained. Whatever prejudices we had against the *Ostjuden* were burned out at Auschwitz. Today we form with them a survivor community of fate based on love and on tears.

Have we Jews from Germany really done enough to transmit the darkest part of our legacy, to educate our children and grandchildren and to bring to them the message of those who went their way *al kiddush hashem* together with the six million we mourn? Has enough been done to bring into the consciousness of German Jews, of American Jews, the legacy of our martyrs, for which names like Otto Hirsch, Julius Seligsohn, Heinrich Stahl, Paul Eppstein, Hannah Karminski, Cora Berliner, and others are the symbols of the sacrifice of all the victims of German Jewry?

Our grandchildren, the grandchildren of Jewish refugees from Germany, are now part of the American experience. And I think, despite our legacy, we will have to settle for that. We German-Jewish survivors talked to them, tried to make them aware of their past and ours. But I do not know if we have been successful.

We German Jews understand that America is not a country of continuities. We know that America is a different part of the world and is not suited to continue our heritage. That is why I do not believe that the concept of *Bildung* can offer very much in its American environment.

*Bildung* flourished among German Jewry in that special environ-

ment that allowed it to blossom. It was a certain attitude, a certain approach to life. It included a sense of *Herzensbildung*, to have a responsibility for the community, for those who were in need. It also meant that Jewish parents saw to it that their children became *gebildet*.

For German Jews *Bildung* meant both an acceptance of what was good in German culture and what they possessed as Jews. I, for example, was proud of the library at my parents' home. It contained books by Heine, Goethe, and Schiller but also books by Dubnow, Graetz, Buber, and Franzos.

Those of us who tried to live Jewish lives lived according to what was good in Jewish tradition and what was good in the German tradition. It was a life based on education and knowledge. We thought that sticking to our own religion and our own holidays would make us different but not separate. We lived for the idea that because of the Enlightenment and its teachings, we German Jews could live in Germany on the same basis as non-Jews but with our own values.

It took me a bit longer than others to believe that all of this was in vain.

When I saw synagogues burning in Berlin on November 9, 1938, I asked myself: Is this being done by the people of Goethe and Schiller?

The day before I reached Auschwitz I did not believe that such a place could exist and be built on scientific principles to destroy a people, my people.

All of this, too, is part of the German-Jewish legacy. It, too, is part of the history of German-Jewish life and of its death. It is the most tragic part of our legacy as German Jews, but it may serve to save humanity from having to experience that which we human beings, Jews or otherwise, should never have to endure again.