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# German Jewry as Spirit and as Legacy

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It would be a pity if readers discounted the following remarks as made merely *pro domo* and perceived their author as the mouthpiece of certain vested interests. It is true that I write as a sort of guardian and professional purveyor of the German-Jewish heritage, for its spirit is very much in evidence in the thinking, teaching, and writing I have done during my nearly four decades on the faculty of Brandeis University, and my scholarly, pedagogical, and personal orientation has been aided, refined, and reinforced by the numerous distinguished colleagues from the German-Jewish orbit who have been associated with my university. Suffice it to mention Ludwig Lewisohn, Nahum Glazer, Alexander Altmann, Simon and Esther Rawidowicz, Aaron Gurwitsch, Herbert Marcuse, Rudolf Kayser, Erwin Bodky, Kurt Wolff, Marianne Simmel, Leo Treitler, Frank Jacoby, Claude Vigée (Strauss), Erich Heller, Edward Engelberg, and Egon Bittner. Several courses I have given at Brandeis have been dedicated in part or in their entirety to an exploration, distillation, and presentation of the German-Jewish cultural legacy: "The Literary Harvest of the German-Jewish Symbois," "Vienna at the Turn of the Century," "The Culture of the Weimar Republic: Berlin in the 1920s." When one considers that such broadly cultural courses include such dissimilar Jewish spirits—from Vienna, Berlin, Prague, Czernowitz, and elsewhere—as Suesskind von Trimberg, Moses Mendelssohn, Heinrich Heine, Arthur Schnitzer, Theodor Herzl, Richard Beer-Hofmann, Otto Weininger, Karl Kraus, Gustav Mahler, Sigmund Freud, Franz Kafka, Paul Celan, Joseph Roth, Alfred Doeblin, Jakob Wassermann, Max Liebermann, Martin Buber, Franz Werfel, Walter Benjamin, Max Brod, Friedrich Torberg, Elias Canetti, Walther Rathenau, Else Lasker-Schueler, Kurt Tucholsky, and Nelly Sachs, even a very liberal definition of what has been called the German-Jewish spirit may not be sufficiently comprehensive. There are, after all, enormous differences between Beer-Hofmann, the only *homo judaicus* in the "Young Vienna" circle of mostly Jewish-born writers in *fin-de-siècle* Vienna

on the one hand and Felix Braun, who became a Catholic writer, and Otto Weininger, the prototype of the self-hating Jew, on the other. What all those mentioned above and many others shared was the typically Jewish (and perhaps unholy) fascination with the German language and the cultural values embodied in it, which makes the much-discussed German-Jewish symbiosis the most tragically unrequited love affair in world history.

*Fin-de-siècle* Vienna, to whose culture Jews made such imperishable contributions, has been very much in the consciousness of today's American intellectuals, who near the turn of another century are searching for the roots of modernism and parallels to our troubled times, for the guidance and wisdom of a period of tremendous political, social, and cultural change through a better understanding of the problems and solutions (or non-solutions), the insights and ideas that have shaped the modern world—in literature, music, psychoanalysis, art, and architecture. Weimar Germany, which in its arts and politics was decisively shaped by Jews, has been of equal fascination. Contemporary critics like Walter Laqueur and Gordon Craig have faulted its greatest satirist, the lapsed Jew Kurt Tucholsky, for stunting the growth of the weak reed of German democracy with his satiric sniping—and yet present-day America, which has produced no satirist of the stature of Tucholsky or Kraus, is precisely in need of the “Tucholsky syndrome,” the radical criticism which Laqueur is sorry to see proliferating in some American-Jewish circles.

In his stimulating book *German Jews Beyond Judaism* George L. Mosse attempts to define the German-Jewish spirit in terms of a fervent faith in *Bildung*—the kind of moral education, character development, and buoyantly optimistic, humanistic mode of thought and feeling that was intended to validate Judaism as a religion and protect the Jews' wholehearted participation in German culture. As Mosse points out, for the critic Walter Benjamin “the road to a knowledge of Hebrew and to Zionism passed through the study of German culture,” and Buber's Hasidism had close ties to German mysticism. In light of the sad failure of the German-Jewish symbiosis, particular poignance attaches to the reflection that Friedrich Schiller (and, to nearly the same extent, Goethe and Wilhelm Humboldt as well) became the “rabbi” of German and even Eastern European Jews as far as their egalitarian, libertarian, humanitarian, and assimilationist aspirations

were concerned. German Jewry increasingly became a *Bildungsbuergertum* that clung to the noble ideals of the Enlightenment and German Classicism long after other Germans had abandoned them. The utopian vision expressed in Lessing's play *Nathan the Wise* sustained generations of German Jews and, ironically, the play became their sole property, as it were, when the Nazis banned it from the general German stage.

The German-Jewish legacy has been extensively studied and interpreted in recent decades, and such important books as *The Intellectual Migration: Europe and America, 1930 – 1960* (Donald Fleming and Bernard Bailyn, eds.), *Jews from Germany in the United States* (Eric Hirshler, ed.), *The Legacy of the German Refugee Intellectuals* (Robert Boyers, ed.), *The Refugee Intellectual* (Donald Kent), *German Exile Literature in America, 1933 – 1950* (Robert Cazden), *Exile in New York* (Helmut Pfanner), *Exiled in Paradise: German Refugee Artists and Intellectuals in America from the 1930s to the Present* (Anthony Heilbut), and *Refugee Scholars in America* (Lewis Coser) have been devoted to it. It is difficult to conceive of a time when the scholars, thinkers, teachers, and artists discussed in these and other studies will no longer influence and inspire new American generations. In connection with a modern polymath and rare spirit like Erich von Kahler one thinks of Schiller's words *Denn wer den Besten seiner Zeit genug getan, der hat gelebt fuer alle Zeiten* ("a person who has lived up to the best of his time has lived for all times"). If a Viennese-born singer and actress like the late, lamented Martha Schlamme can inspire her pupil Belle Linda Halpern to bring to life the fabled Berlin cabarets of the 1920s and interpret the chansons of Brecht-Weill and Tucholsky for American audiences, one need not fear that the German-Jewish heritage is in imminent danger of becoming merely historical.

As a teacher, lecturer, writer, and translator I have long regarded myself as a cultural mediator, and in this orientation and such endeavors I have been guided principally by Stefan Zweig, the subject of my doctoral dissertation, and his first wife Friderike, my beloved mentor during her decades of residence in Connecticut. In a centennial talk delivered at Beersheva, Israel, in 1981 I raised the question whether cultural mediatorship may be regarded as an eminently Jewish trait and answered it with a qualified yes. In his autobiography *The World of Yesterday* Stefan Zweig discusses the mediating zeal of Jews eager to

be active among their host nations in an effort to improve their position by increasing the store of understanding, tolerance, and humanitarianism in the world. Certainly the ethical rigorism of Judaism was an inspiration (albeit, alas, one that could not sustain him in dark times) to Zweig as he strove to translate in a wider and higher sense across national, literary, and personal boundary lines and struggled to maintain his integrity and artistic freedom in a world out of joint. Raphael Patai has pointed out that in the process of cultural transmission Jews played "a crucial role as mediators between East and West, especially in medieval Spain and in pre-Renaissance and Renaissance Italy." In the past two centuries this tradition has been strengthened by Goethe's concept of *Weltliteratur*. When Moses Mendelssohn translated the Hebrew Bible into German, he enabled his fellow Jews to take the giant step from the ghetto into Europe. Heinrich Heine was almost forced to become a mediator between his native land and his country of exile, France. Martin Buber not only collaborated on another Bible translation but also felt impelled to introduce his host people to the *Kalevala*, the Finnish national epic.

In his study of German-Jewish leftist intellectuals, Paul Breines views Woody Allen's character Leonard Zelig as a prime example of Jewish self-surrender and self-alienation for the sake of an ideal of *Bildung* and humanitarianism and goes on to say: "In their reckonings with the dialectic of universal (human) and particular (Jewish, German, emigré), the Tollers, Einsteins, and their scattered kindred spirits recognized that self-surrender cuts several ways; that just as the consistent assimilationists repressed their Jewish particularity, the more Jewish Jews who opted for the synagogue or for Jewish statehood repressed some of their universal humanity." Lucy Steinitz, the daughter of the Berlin-born former editor of *Aufbau*, reports (in *Living After the Holocaust: Reflections by Children of Survivors in America*) that her father reacted to Emil Fackenheim's statement that one can't give Hitler posthumous victories by giving up one's Judaism by saying that one can't give Hitler the credit for having changed our lives, for *making* us Jewish. I, for one, have not minded letting my experience of expulsion, flight, and exile increase and enhance my Jewish awareness and identification. I feel that American Jews ought to heed this adaptation of Terence's celebrated dictum: *Homo judaicus sum; judaici nil a me alienum puto*. If they do, the rather unsavory and unproductive

conflict between *yekkes* and *yiden* will finally come to an end. As a counterpoise to the selfishness, careerism, and crass materialism rampant in our age, Goethe's words *Wo ich nuetze, ist mein Vaterland* ("My fatherland is where I can be of service/do some good") should supplant the ancient Roman adage *Ubi bene, ibi patria* ("One's fatherland is where one is well off").

Anthony Heilbut has pointed out that Freud's assertion that Jewish identity was discovered not in religious ritual or folkloric custom but in sustained critical resistance matched the attitude of many emigrés, who evinced no desire to return to the faith of their fathers but wanted to belong in the line of Heine, Marx, Luxemburg, and Einstein. In his discussion of both left-wing intellectuals of the Weimar Republic and more traditional academicians, Mosse discerns a "process of intellectual questioning and debate that is still with us." What Mosse says about German-Jewish intellectuals of the 1920s surely applies to American-Jewish scholars of the 1980s as well: they "sought to use scholarship and their intellectual authority as a weapon to stem the tide which threatened to engulf all rational and cultivated minds."

In the final analysis, I believe that the most important and most enduring legacy of the German-Jewish spirit, as refined in the light of decades of experience and altered conditions, will or should be, in addition to the mediatorship, criticism, and Jewish rededication and self-assertion delineated above, an insistence on excellence and the highest intellectual and moral standards, a concern with purity of language in what Karl Kraus has described as a "language-forsaken" age, a principled opposition to mediocrity, a refusal to yield to the blandishments of panaceas or facile solutions, and—last but not least—an informed vigilance.