

# Place of Birth<sup>1</sup>

*Rudolf B. Schmerl*



*Erwin Schepses, Fall 1966*

(Courtesy Rudolf Schmerl)

his best friend and brother-in-law, my uncle Erwin Schepses, seemed to me to exemplify the stability I lacked because, when they had been my age, they had had a single city to call home: Berlin. But their fates as refugees from Hitler's Germany were very different from one another, distinct not only because of differences in their professions and linguistic abilities, but also because of their places of birth. Identity turned out to be not only who they were but also who they were declared to be.

Identity is customarily associated with, among other critical variables, your place of birth. The assumption is that that is where you learned to walk and talk, learned who in the family was who, acquired a sense of familiar foods, smells, sounds, sights, and space—in short, where you began to become a person. If your place of birth was not the setting where you learned and acquired those things, the question is where you *did* grow up. That place—i.e., that society in its physical setting—is usually regarded as a formative influence on the development of character, talent, and opportunities. As I was growing up in various American cities in the 1930s and 1940s, the two most important men in my life, my father, Ernst Schmerl, and

## Personal History: Who We Were

Erwin Schepses was born on 14 June 1896, in Orizaba, Mexico. His father was Benjamin (“Benno”) Schepses, originally from Vilna, part of the tsarist Russian Empire when he was born there in 1865, the second son of Boris and Anna Abramowitz Schepses. Erwin’s mother was Elma Ernestine (“Tina”) Salinger, the third child and oldest daughter of Solomon and Lina Lichtenstein Salinger, born in Lyck, then in East Prussia, in 1871. Ashkenazi Jews have of course been peripatetic for most of the centuries of their existence, but Orizaba must have seemed a particularly exotic place to have been born, if and when Erwin ever thought about it later. He could not have remembered it. He left it when he was three, with his mother and little sister, Irma, after his father’s death on 29 November 1899. The family story was that Benno fell off a train, but his death certificate states that he died of tetanus “on the permanent way of the Mexican Railway.” Perhaps both were true, but the tetanus may have been regarded as embarrassing. At any rate, Erwin’s place of birth proved to be

of signal importance to him and his wife and daughter, just as Benno's status as a Russian at *his* birth in Lithuania later defined my mother, Erwin's sister Irma, at least in Germany.

Benno and Tina had met when Solomon—or Lina, more likely—had employed him as a tutor for the younger children in Lyck. Tina had been eighteen, Benno, twenty-four. Eventually Benno left to make his fortune in the New World and went to work for a coffee import/export firm based in Orizaba. Benno's fluency in several languages undoubtedly stood him in good stead. The young couple was married in 1895 in Cleveland, Ohio, at the home of one of Tina's cousins on her mother's side, a Maschke, who had emigrated some years earlier and was well on his way to becoming influential in local Republican politics—in particular, in the circle of Mark Hanna, who would become a U.S. senator. That connection did not become as significant as it was perhaps hoped, but it may indeed have been valuable. Some forty-five years later, on 22 March 1938, an affidavit was signed by Maschke's son, Dr. Alfred S. Maschke of Cleveland, ensuring the American Consul in Berlin of his willingness to provide for his “cousin” (Ernst Schmerl, Irma's husband, who was actually unrelated to Maschke) until Ernst could become self-supporting. A copy of the affidavit became part of the family archives—a testament to the age-old importance of networking in the Diaspora. Tina's wedding was the last interaction she had with the Maschkes, however, and Dr. Maschke's generosity was never tested.

Tina returned to Germany after her husband's death with the two small children, Erwin and Irma, and the money from Benno's life insurance. By that time most of her relatives had moved to Berlin. She entrusted the money to her two older brothers, Hugo and Eugen, who managed to invest it badly and run through it rapidly. Tina did the best she could, taking in boarders and no doubt accepting help from her parents. By the time Erwin was thirteen, he was contributing to his family's income by tutoring other boys. He was an excellent student himself, consistently ranking first in his classes.

It was a middle-class family that probably considered itself veering toward upper middle class, given its income, education, tastes, acquaintances, and social circle.<sup>2</sup> The latter was predominantly Jewish, although Erwin's friends included gentiles and at least one half-Jew, Richard Holländer, the son of Felix Holländer, who was director Max Reinhardt's associate and successor. (The connection resulted in a number of free tickets to performances at Reinhardt's theater over the years and strengthened the family's self-identification with Berlin's cultural milieu.) Adherence to formal Judaism was perfunctory at best, maintained largely for Lina's sake whose title, *die Mama*—no doubt Solomon's reference to his wife—resonated down the generations to great- and great-great-grandchildren, who knew her only in treasured anecdotes. But despite her grown children's pretenses of keeping *kashrut* when she visited, despite her Yiddish expressions echoing especially in kitchen conversations, despite the



*Erwin Schepses with his wife Ruth and daughter Renate (Renee), Koenigsberg, April 1939*  
(Courtesy Rudolf Schmerl)

patina of respect for old traditions, Erwin never became bar mitzvah and had little interest in the religion. His wife, Ruth Edelstein, was descended from a family prominent in the early Zionist movement—her grandfather had been a friend of Theodor Herzl’s—and a portrait of Herzl hung in Erwin’s and Ruth’s New York living room. And of course Erwin knew the Bible. But that knowledge was part of his German education, not, as was true of Ernst, the result of Hebrew school.

How comfortable were Erwin and Erwin’s circle in Berlin with their Jewishness? More, surely, than historian Fritz Stern’s family in Breslau (now Wrocław in Poland), which had begun to convert to Christianity and to intermarry with gentiles two or even three generations before Stern’s birth in 1926.<sup>3</sup> The comparison is of course arbitrary. But as remarkable as the Sterns’ achievements were, and as deserved as their prominence was, the fact is that no Salingers, Lichtensteins, Schepseses, or Schmerls are known to have converted or intermarried with gentiles until Erwin’s generation, when two of his cousins did so. Later, when the refugees in the United States referred to the phrases formerly used by their semiassimilated coreligionists in pre-Hitler Germany to identify themselves—for instance, *Deutsche bürger Mosaischen Glaubens*, “German citizens of Mosaic faith”—they always used a certain tone, fraught simultaneously with irony about the pretense and sadness about the naiveté. The reference to Moses was itself a euphemism for Jewish. The Nazis’ rule was that one Jewish grandparent, no matter how identified, was sufficient to establish racial contamination.

Erwin was conscious of his ambivalence—by no means unusual among German Jews of his generation—about the topic. In one of his last letters to me, written when he was eighty, in July 1976, he wrote that “[w]e, of course enjoyed the Israeli raid on Entebbe very much though I was not surprised to see that the Arab-African states would accuse Israel of aggression.” But he also reported that he had

begun to read [Jehuda Reinharz’s] *The Dilemma of the German Jew* [I had sent it to him for his birthday]. It is undoubtedly a carefully researched book as far as the history of Jewish organizations in Germany is concerned. Still, I don’t think that it is a very profound book. I had hoped to find an analysis of Jewish prominence in the fields of German literature, theater, journalism among others. One has spoken of a fruitful German-Jewish symbiosis but this only states a fact and does not explain anything. So, I guess I shall have to live for a while with my pro-German prejudices.

Despite my awareness of his love of the German language and German literature, of his allegiance to the personal and civic virtues of the Germany of his youth, to the vibrancy and creativity of German culture before and after World War I, I could not repress my irritation with his “pro-German prejudices”—and told him so. As far as I was concerned, the Nazis had obliterated that Germany forever, and if we refugees needed to think of Germany at all, we should think of Auschwitz. He chastised me properly, the only time he ever did so:

I am unhappy to see that a somewhat pointless discussion seems to evolve from my remarks about the book you gave me for my birthday. First of all, you did not have to remind me of Nazi atrocities. I am not that insensitive. After all, some of my best friends and close relatives of mine have been killed. I was in jail myself. I have been deprived of a job which I loved, and I had to come to this country as a beggar. On the other hand, I lived in Germany for over 30 years before the Nazis came to power, and I have different memories which I prefer to cultivate. To me, Germany remains the country of Lessing, Goethe and Schiller, and in more recent times of Thomas and Heinrich Mann and Ernst Wiechert. I refuse to see a Nazi in every German though I admit that the majority of Germans, including those that were presumed to be anti-Nazis, did not cover themselves with glory. So, if you will do me a favor, let’s discontinue this argument which does not get us anywhere. If you wish, you can look at our difference of opinion as a manifestation of the generation gap, with your senile old uncle representing the older generation, and you, young, bright, and personable as spokesman for the avante garde. It is probably more accurate to say that we are products of different cultures. I think I am right [in] assuming that the names mentioned by me above do not mean a blessed thing to you while they, at least the older ones, have been of decisive importance in my education.<sup>4</sup>

In 1914, when Erwin was eighteen, World War I broke out, and he joined the Kaiser's army as a volunteer. (Ernst was drafted.) Erwin became a telegraph operator and served on both fronts throughout the four years of the war. When he got out, he went to the University of Göttingen and studied jurisprudence. The legal system of western continental Europe was largely derived from the Napoleonic code and Roman law, unlike English common law, the system that evolved into the criminal, civil, and administrative laws of this country. Erwin's training at Göttingen and experience as a judge in the Weimar Republic thus proved of little use to him when he arrived in New York as a refugee in 1939. However, he was reasonably fluent in English, in contrast, for instance, to his brother-in-law, Ernst, an ophthalmologist, whose professional opportunities were minimal until he learned English.

### The Struggle for Self

Ernst, a third-generation Berliner, was qualified for entry to the United States only under the quota set for Germans. There was none for Jews. The U.S. Department of Labor's Immigration and Naturalization Service's Form 560 identified his "Nationality (Country of which citizen or subject)" as "Germany" in Column 9 but his "Race or people" (Column 10) as "Hebrew." Germany had declared Jews to be stateless, but Form 560 did not acknowledge that condition. By contrast, Erwin's birth in Mexico meant that he could enter this country under the much more generous provisions that U.S. law extended to "natives" of the Western Hemisphere. His sex conferred another benefit: He could bring his immediate family with him. His sister Irma, as Mexican as he, had no such privilege. She would have been allowed similar entry but only if she had abandoned her mother, Tina, and her two children, who were as German as her husband in the eyes of the Immigration and Naturalization Service. But her marriage to a "German" (in 1923, Ernst was still a German) did not obviate her status as a "Russian" (or as a stateless Jew) as defined by the Third Reich's Foreign Office, which complicated her passport even more.

Their status in Germany had entailed jail for both men as Jews and, in Erwin's case, as a former official of the previous German government (reflected in the disparity of the time spent in jail: a night for Ernst, six weeks for Erwin). As veterans of the war, however, both were treated with comparative leniency. But that did not extend to their immediate families. Erwin, as stated, could and did take his wife and daughter when they were finally cleared for emigration in the spring of 1939. Ernst came to the United States by himself in October 1937, looking not only for suitable work but also for understanding of his circumstances. He found the first in an offer from The Johns Hopkins University but not the second—the offer had to be accepted at once or not at all, and he was no more ready to abandon his family than his wife was to abandon hers. Eventually the adults—Erwin and his wife Ruth, Irma and Ernst—found a

place to live in Manhattan, entrusting their children and Tina to the care of a cousin (Elisabeth Salinger, the elder daughter of Hugo) who had married a real German and converted to his version of Christianity, which he taught at Princeton Theological Seminary. (He was Otto Piper, a minister and theologian who achieved considerable fame in his profession.) Ruth went to work in a garment factory, Irma became a housekeeper/maid for various American Jewish families, Ernst got a job as a medical assistant at Union Hospital in the Bowery, and Erwin looked for some sort of suitable employment.

In the meantime he had to subsist. Somehow he found his way or was referred to the Emergency Committee in Aid of Displaced Foreign Scholars in Manhattan, one of the numerous organizations newly set up for the provision of assistance to the refugees arriving from Europe or adding such assistance to their previous responsibilities.<sup>5</sup> And that is how he eventually met David Riesman, then a professor of law at the University of Buffalo and secretary of the American Committee for the Guidance of Professional Personnel. Riesman was almost thirty<sup>6</sup>; Erwin was forty-three.

I do not recall that my uncle ever told me that he had known Riesman, and, considering how famous Riesman became, and how early (*The Lonely Crowd* was first published in 1950), I find that strange. I do, however, know what Riesman thought of Erwin. His initial impression may have been influenced by notes from an interview between Erwin and Betty Drury, executive secretary of the Emergency Committee, on 27 December 1939. Perhaps reflecting her own ethnicity, Drury had written that Erwin was “a tall unhumorous man; looks like a dominie. Has tried everything and fears final failure.” Erwin was tall, but “unhumorous” he was not; on the contrary, his quick wit and capacity for irony had produced a large share of the family’s favorite anecdotes. That he was not in a mood to crack jokes when he appeared in Drury’s office is not surprising. Riesman’s notes from his initial interview (15 January 1940) stated that:

Dr. Schepses has the tall thin head and erect bearing associated with the Prussian officer, but none of the latter’s aggressiveness. He is, instead, a quiet, scholarly, intellectually esthetic person, very humble, very attractive, or rather very appealing, since he is not a person of outgoing charm.

He spent his life in Germany as a Municipal Court Judge in small communities, and is a small town person, rather lost. He has obviously suffered a great deal. His wife works in a factory, but he is not of the complaining type. On the contrary, he is remarkably stoical. Like Rosenwald, he went to Italy after 1933, where he specialised in Roman law, writing several articles which the conservative judgment of Professor Levy thought showed ability and promise. He lacks the force and flexibility I think to make a success of practice, and indeed he does not wish to practice, but wants a position as law school librarian, where he can pursue his studies on the basis of an American background.

Riesman's acquaintance with Prussian officers was surely insufficient to justify the first observation—one thinks of Hindenburg, whose head was hardly tall or thin—and the notion that Erwin, who had grown up in Berlin, had traveled to France, Italy, and other countries, and was fluent in several languages, was “a small town person” strikes me as bizarre. A lover of good restaurants, theater, and classical music, Erwin never owned a car and never had a driver's license. But it is Riesman's approval of what Erwin was not—“not of the complaining type”—that suggests what was at work, whether or not Riesman—an assimilated American Jew whose father, a physician, was on the faculty of the University of Pennsylvania—was aware of it. Erwin was neither an obnoxious Prussian nor an obnoxious Jew, neither aggressive nor whiny. The code would certainly be understood by whoever Riesman's readers would be.

In time Riesman softened his description somewhat. In “a letter of introduction to university and college authorities for the purpose of [Erwin's search for] employment as a teacher,” dated 13 June 1940, Riesman, after summarizing Erwin's academic and professional background, wrote:

Dr. Scheps has the tall and erect bearing associated with the Prussian officer, but none of the latter's aggressiveness. He is instead a quiet scholarly person, modest and attractive. Although he has suffered, he is remarkably stoical and not at all of the complaining type. He is the type of European scholar, whom it seems to me it is most desirable to help, and who would be an asset to any university or college.

Erwin was naturally reserved, a characteristic undoubtedly reinforced by his circumstances, and if these were hardly different from those of most of the other supplicants with whom Riesman dealt, Erwin's discomfort in that fact was surely noticeable. And however often Riesman and his fellow committee members may have referred to Erwin and his cohort as applicants, they were supplicants, and the distinction is not minor. But there *was* a difference between Erwin and those whom Riesman was able to help: Erwin did not fit the committee's definitions of eligibility, or, to put it somewhat differently, he did not fall within the scope of its self-assigned responsibilities.

The correspondence between Erwin and Riesman consisted, on Erwin's side, largely of his inquiries and submission of forms, documents, and references to any possibilities Riesman was able to suggest; and on Riesman's side, it consisted of those suggestions and expressions of sympathy when, inevitably, nothing resulted. It took a while to establish the sympathy. Riesman had evidently taken on Erwin as a “case” even before they met. They were originally introduced through an inquiry by a mutual acquaintance, Erich Hula of the *Notgemeinschaft deutscher Wissenschaftler im Ausland*, also located in New York and in the same business as the Emergency Committee and the American Committee. On 4 December 1939, Hula wrote to Riesman reporting that Erwin had been offered

a research assistantship at Columbia University for one year if he could find outside funding and asked if the American Committee could help. Riesman replied almost at once:

Thank you for your letter concerning Dr. Schepses. When I received it I was on the point of writing you to know whether the *Notgemeinschaft deutscher Wissenschaftler* had any resources or means of raising funds to help Dr. Ehrenzweig for whom I have been trying to arrange a program of retraining at Chicago. I see from your letter that on the contrary you have no funds but would like some.

Our committee, whose resources are very meager, was set up only to arrange for retraining in American law schools, and it cooperates with these law schools on the basis of their furnishing free tuition and raising some additional funds. Accordingly, Dr. Schepses's case would come outside our program. However, I am sending him an application blank on the chance that something may turn up which will enable me to help him.

If Dr. Schepses should not be able to take up the research assistantship but should decide to apply for retraining, he would run into the difficulty of his age of forty-three, which is somewhat beyond the limit set by our committee. This is an obstacle that might be surmounted in exceptional cases, as Dr. Schepses' case apparently is, from his Curriculum Vitae....

Erwin filled out the application at once and, on Riesman's advice, sent it to Professor C.J. Friedrich at Harvard's Littauer Center in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Then, of course, he waited for a response, something no amount of practice makes easier. On 26 December, Erwin sent Riesman a handwritten note:

Dear Professor Riesman,

Please, excuse my troubling you.

As I am getting relief from the National Refugee Service, I am bound to keep this institution informed about all I do in order to get an occupation or a position. I, therefore, should be very grateful if you would kindly let me know when I may expect a decision to be made upon my application for a retraining fellowship.

Most sincerely yours,

Riesman, obviously annoyed, replied two weeks later, on 8 January 1940:

I cannot answer your question as to when you may expect a decision. The awards must be approved both by the selection committee and by the law school concerned. The selection committee will not meet until sometime

in the spring and even if approval is then secured there may be some delay before arrangements can be made with a school. The study would then begin in the fall of 1940.

Riesman was the secretary of the selection committee and was presumably in a position to expedite matters. But Erwin, no doubt understanding Riesman's tone, waited until 9 June to write again to ask for news, if any, about his application and also to request Riesman's advice about a possibility that had emerged separately: a grant Erwin might get from the Oberlaender Trust in Philadelphia if he could find a college or university that would employ him and, after some time, indicate willingness to make his position permanent. Could Riesman suggest institutions to which Erwin might apply? Would it be possible to provide letters of introduction? Once again Erwin hoped for "an early reply": "in view of the imminent summer recess there is, in my opinion, no time to be lost in presenting myself to the presidents or deans of the institutes in question."

Riesman wrote the letter of introduction ("To Whom It May Concern") on 13 June. In it, he summarized Erwin's professional qualifications and wove in compliments on Erwin's publications that other professors serving as his references expressed. "On the basis of his application filed with me," Riesman wrote, "of letters of recommendation received concerning him, and on the basis of an extensive interview, I am glad to recommend Dr. Schepes as unqualifiedly competent to undertake teaching or research work." But his penultimate paragraph, describing Erwin's "tall and erect bearing" and quoted earlier, echoed his initial impression more fully.

Riesman made at least one inquiry on Erwin's behalf on his own, to W.H. Cowley, president of Hamilton College in Clinton, New York, whom he knew socially. The letter inaccurately identifies Erwin as a lawyer in its very first sentence but corrects that mistake in further description:

One of the refugee lawyers who has applied to our Committee, Dr. Erwin Schepes, has decided to seek a position as a teacher in a college or university rather than attempt to pursue the course of legal retraining which falls within our Committee's programs. He has made this decision partly on the basis of my judgment, but owing both to his age of forty-three and his background and personality, he is better adapted to teaching than to retraining as a practicing lawyer. He has never been a practicing lawyer, but has served as a judge and student of law since the completion of his German studies and his quiet temperament, unsophisticated and stoical, seems to make him better fitted for an academic life, particularly in a small college.

However, [save] for several years in Berlin, he spent his judicial career in small towns, and he is a small town person. I do not know whether you have any possibility for such a man at Hamilton, but perhaps you will have some suggestions as to where he can be placed. The most tragic cases that come to

me are those of these men, slightly older, well qualified and brave, but lacking financial resources or the youth to enable them to undergo the hardships of a retraining programme. If some use is not made of their competence, they are utterly destroyed and the waste is evident.

Cowley replied a week later, on 19 June 1940:

I wish it were possible to consider adding to our staff next year Dr. Erwin Schepses, but unfortunately there isn't any place in our budget which is terribly limited. At the moment I know of no sure place for him, and I suggest that you might write President Moody of Middlebury and President King of Amherst. Rumor has it that they may be interested in helping able men from abroad.

The archives hold no other such correspondence, but later Riesman did let Erwin know of his effort.

At about the same time, in late June of 1940, A.H. McCormick, executive director of the Osborne Association—"combing the National Association of Penal Information, Inc., and The Welfare League Association, Inc."—wrote to Betty Drury at the Emergency Committee seeking funding for Erwin to conduct a study of New Jersey's correctional system. "We believe," McCormick had written to Wilbur Thomas at the Oberlaender Trust, "it would be very useful to have a person of Dr. Schepses's background make a microscopic study of a state system of this type and write a report on it from the background of European practice." But of course the Oberlaender Trust was "not in a position," Thomas wrote to McCormick, "to make a large enough contribution toward what is considered a living salary." Could the Emergency Committee help? "Dr. Schepses says that he could get along on \$60 or \$70 a month," wrote McCormick. "I have made it clear to him that it will be impossible for us to contribute any money as the contributions to this Association have been very seriously affected by the European situation." Betty Drury replied on 2 July, "The Emergency Committee . . . found itself unable to make the desired grant for Dr. Erwin Schepses. . . . The difficulty. . . was this, that the European crisis had brought us many urgent applications for funds and the Committee was obliged to try to make its limited resources stretch as far as possible." Then came the more bureaucratic reason: "Dr. Schepses, as a former Judge, does not come within that group of scholars whom this Committee is able to assist. For a number of years our grants have been quite strictly limited to the cases of professors and Privatdozenten."

Riesman's note to Erwin (10 October 1940) concerning his exchange with Cowley asked whether Erwin had found anything yet. Erwin replied at once:

Thank you very much for your kind letter of October 10. I was very glad to see that you are still thinking of helping me. Unfortunately, I am, indeed,

still in need of assistance. I seemed to have a good chance when the Osborne Association which is devoted to prison work, probation, juvenile delinquency, and similar topics wanted me to make a study on the correctional system of New Jersey, but until now, we did not succeed in financing this project. Applications made to the Oberlaender Trust, the Emergency Committee in Aid of Displaced Foreign Scholars, and the Rockefeller Foundation were rejected because the Osborne Association is not in a position of promising me a permanent employment. There is still a possibility of getting a fellowship from the Social Research Council in New York City, but the grants of this foundation are given as late as April 1<sup>st</sup>, 1941, and I am very much afraid that I cannot wait so long a time, so much the more as my wife on whose earnings we are now living will lose her job in December; the factory where she is employed only does season work. So, if you learn something about a job of any kind for which I might be fitted I should be very grateful if you informed me about such an opportunity. I thought of perhaps accepting some small intermediate job until I could start working with the Osborne Association, though, in New York City at least, it seems to be rather hard to find even this kind of situation. On the other hand, the Oberlaender Trust is still prepared to assist me if I find a position in a college or a university with some prospect of permanency. Thanking you again very much,

I am, most sincerely yours,

Riesman replied on 31 October:

I am sorry to hear of your difficulties in securing employment under the auspices of the Osborne Association. I should be very glad to inform you of any position which comes to my attention for which you are fitted, although my chief problem is usually locating positions for men, rather than finding men to fit particular positions. I hope that your efforts will be at last successful, and would like to hear what progress you make.

Sincerely yours,

Occasionally hope flickered. On 3 December 1940, Erwin wrote to Riesman again:

Dear Professor Riesman,

May I ask for your kind assistance in the following matter?

One Mr. Kenneth Morgan in Ann Arbor Mich., a person, I am told, of great influence,<sup>7</sup> is negotiating with the University of Michigan about employing me as a research worker or an instructor. My employment very probably will be financed by the Oberlander Trust in Philadelphia Pa. and the National Refugee Service in New York City.

If you happen to know somebody in Ann Arbor whose intervention on my behalf might be helpful, will you kindly write him a letter recommending me? It will be advisable, in my opinion, to mention in this letter that Mr. Morgan is already working for me.

Thank you very much! And, please excuse my troubling you.

Most sincerely yours,

Only to be quenched:

December 13, 1940

Dear Dr. Schepses:

I am delighted that there is a chance of your placement at the University of Michigan. Unfortunately with no university you could pick do I have less [*sic*] contacts. I know no one there. My previous efforts to place one of our fellowship men there did not even receive the courtesy of a reply. Consequently I don't see much point in writing. I am very sorry that I can't help you there. Do let me know what transpires.

Sincerely yours,

Not all appeals for help went unanswered, although the answers seem to have followed a far more circuitous route than had the appeals. On 9 December, a Mrs. Julia Neely of Southern Illinois University in Carbondale transmitted a check for one hundred dollars to Stephen Duggan, chairman of the Emergency Committee, from "the local committee in Aid of Intellectuals," requesting that the money be turned over to Dr. Schepses, from whom they had received "several distressing appeals." She left the final disposition to Duggan, however.<sup>8</sup> The request was approved—handwritten notes on Neely's letter read "OK" and "(to go to Mr. Stein eventually)." (Stein was apparently the Emergency Committee's lawyer.) Drury then sent a typewritten office memorandum to a Miss Lisowski: "We have sent the check for \$100 from Southern Illinois Normal University down to Mr. Stein's office for deposit, accompanied by the attached correspondence. Ultimately the auditors will want to see the original letter. In the meantime, we are sending a copy to Mr. Stein." Then she added, in pen: "Erwin Schepses' curriculum is attached. He is a thoroughly nice man. (Anna Selig considered him at one time for research.) Professor Otto A. Piper of Princeton Theological Seminary speaks highly of him. But not a Privatdozent." Next she wrote to Stein to ask whether the money could be paid "right over to" Erwin "on an Emergency Committee check" or whether the committee's action was necessary. "I bring up this question because the Committee has in the past been unwilling to pay over money to individual scholars, as in the case of Arthur Rosenberg. This case seems somewhat different, however." She added, perhaps in

lieu of or as an explanation of the difference, “Dr. Schepses is forty-four years of age, a judge and specialist in German and Roman law. The Committee declined an application from the Osborne Association, Incorporated, for his services at its 27 June meeting.” Stein seems not to have bothered to reply. Exactly one month later, on 14 January 1941, Drury sent him the same letter, even though, as Duggan informed Neely on 18 January, the executive committee had voted on 13 January to give the money to Erwin. Duggan continued:

We were very glad indeed to carry out your wishes. May I add our sincere thanks to those which you will undoubtedly receive from Dr. Schepses for this generous action you and your colleagues have taken on behalf of a displaced scholar. The members of our Committee were deeply touched by the fine spirit which animated this gift.

Duggan sent the check to Erwin (who by that time was in Cambridge, Massachusetts) on 3 February. He accompanied it with a note telling Erwin that he had informed Neely that the check had been sent, and concluding: “I am sure that she will be glad to hear from you that you have received it.” Erwin responded at once, thanking the Emergency Committee, stating that he had written to Neely, and returning the signed voucher as instructed.

The experience proved salutary for the committee as well as for Erwin: A subsequent contribution from the same source, this time for fifty-four dollars, took only three weeks to reach him.

Erwin’s hopes to be admitted to Harvard’s Graduate School of Public Administration were eventually disappointed, but he also applied to Columbia University’s New York School of Social Work, listing Riesman as a reference. On 21 February 1941 Elizabeth Speare, secretary for admissions at the school, sent Riesman a form letter, asking three questions:

1. How long and in what connection have you known the applicant?
2. Please evaluate his intellectual and personal capacities considering such factors as independence and clarity of thinking, habits of work, purposefulness, handling of social relationships, maturity, potentialities for growth.
3. What limitations has the applicant presented in your experience with him which might affect his qualifications for social work training and about which we should be aware?

About a month later, on 26 March, Drury wrote to Erwin in Cambridge: “I am wondering if you have a position at the present time? It would be pleasant to hear from you again and to learn how you are getting along.” Erwin replied immediately:

Thank you very much for your kind inquiry.

At the present time I am doing rather interesting work making excerpts from German and Italian books for a Cambridge writer and translating them into English. But it is not too well paid and, unfortunately, it is not a steady job either. Moreover, I applied for fellowships with the New York School of Social Work and with the Harvard Graduate School of Public Administration; of course, I do not know how these things will work out.

If you happen to know about an opening which might be interesting to me, in such fields as Criminology, Penology, Comparative Government, European History, Ancient History, Latin, Roman Law, or if you have any other suggestions, I should be very grateful if you let me know about it.

Most sincerely yours,

A week later Riesman wrote to Erwin, apologizing for but not explaining the delay in providing letters of reference to, among others, the New York School of Social Work: "I hope that something good will result for you," Riesman concluded. The wish is evident in his letter to Speare, which was for once devoid of the sort of reservations he had expressed in previous such recommendations:

I should like to state in answer to your letter concerning Dr. Erwin Schepeses that I met him about a year ago after some correspondence with him concerning the possibilities of his receiving a fellowship from our committee for the retraining of refugee lawyers in American law schools. Since you have a record of his academic work and legal experience, I need not tell you that his intellectual qualifications are unusually good. I think that his adaptability and resourcefulness are indicated by the fact that in 1933, after being forced to leave Germany, he took up the study of Roman law in Italy and wrote several articles there.

I found Dr. Schepeses to be a quiet, scholarly person, very modest and charming, and apparently untouched by his sad experiences. I should think that he would be successful in the field of social work, for he is not only ambitious and resourceful, but also appealing and sympathetic; so that he could probably do any academic work without difficulty, and his personal attractiveness would be an asset in the social relationships entered into in this type of work. I hope very much that you will be able to assist Dr. Schepeses for I think that he well deserves any help that it is possible to give him.

Riesman's letter appears to have been effective, but Erwin's problems were not over. On 20 July he wrote to Riesman once again:

You will remember that, some months ago, you had the great kindness to send a letter recommending me to the New York School of Social Work. I think you will be interested in hearing that my efforts had a partial success at least. The School is prepared to admit me for the Fall Quarter, and, moreover, it has provided part-time work for me with the New York City Department

of Correction through which my maintenance, room and board, would be secured. On the other hand, I have not been granted a fellowship so that the problem of financing the study still has to be solved.

I have made an application for a loan to the Capital Outlay Fund of the National Refugee Service in New York but I am, of course, not quite sure of the success, and since the amount I need is rather large—\$1200 for tuition and additional expenses—I have to find out other sources, at any event. If you could advise me to whom else to apply in this matter I should appreciate that very much.

Thanking you again for your kindness and helpfulness,

I am, most sincerely yours,

Riesman replied on 28 July. It is his last letter in the file:

I am glad to learn that you have made some progress with your efforts at retraining, and I wish I knew some source of possible financial help for your study, but I am at a loss to know what to suggest. Loans and grants are, as you no doubt know, extremely elusive, and our committee has not had much experience in this direction. I regret that I can be of no help to you at this stage of your efforts.

If you do succeed somehow in getting around this obstacle, I would be interested to hear from you.

### **Adaptation: Replacing Oneself**

Somehow—I do not know the specifics—Erwin found his way. He became a youth parole worker at the reformatory in Warwick, New York, in 1942. The following year he obtained his master's of social work from Columbia University and eventually rose in New York State's Department of Social Welfare to assistant youth parole director. He continued to publish articles and reviews even after his retirement in 1966. And Riesman was right: Erwin was "not of the complaining type." Only once did I glimpse what he had lost.

To discover, as exiles do, that you are no longer who you thought you were must be very disconcerting. You may have to reconcile that recognition, first, with the new person you see reflected in your interlocutor's eyes—shabby, nervous, ill at ease, unfamiliar with even the most common expressions, the most ordinary gestures—and, second, with the inextinguishable sense of your "real" identity, which now has to be hidden, even suppressed. Many, perhaps most, refugee professors, scientists, and physicians eventually seem to have built a new identity subsuming their previous selves, as did some artists (but by no means all: Some of the exceptions are well known).<sup>9</sup> But others, like Erwin,

whose American profession in social work was never the fit for him that the law had been in Germany, never achieved that. And he knew it.

“Mark the Loss,” which I published in *Judaism* in 1967 as “Memoir of a German Jewish Father,” was drafted in 1966, some years after my father’s death. I sent the draft to my uncle, my father’s best friend since they had been six years old. The essay stimulated Erwin to reveal more of himself to me, at least in writing, than he had ever done before or did again. I had told him that I would send him the draft and that I wanted him to critique it, and he answered: “I am looking forward to reading your article about your father. I have no doubt that we are not going to agree about everything. As a rule, parents and children are too close to each other to have an undistorted picture of each other. On the other hand, one may argue that objectivity is not the highest goal.” But when, a week or so later, he received it and read it, he changed his mind:

I want to thank you as soon as possible for sending me the paper on your father. . . . It is very moving, and it agrees in all important aspects with my own ideas about your father. . . . The only quarrel I have with you is that you make your father a petit bourgeois. Bourgeois is all right but a professional who, in addition, in numerous publications had shown that he was an independent scientific thinker, is never petit. By American standards which probably use the size of income as the only yardstick he may have been lower middle class. But in this case you might have applied European definitions.

He extended the thought, obviously not limited to my father’s identity, in his next letter two weeks later, after I had written to tell him how much I admired him:

For your kind words about me many thanks. Though I am not particularly fond of talking about myself I may say briefly that I, too, have suffered a great deal from the break caused by Hitler and emigration and changes connected with that. I don’t want to go into any details but I have never been able to accept Social Work as an adequate professional substitute for Law. Social Work is still much too hybrid a discipline and, besides, it consists of gabbing to a degree which is uncomfortable to me. I began to be reasonably happy with social work when my responsibilities became mostly administrative. All in all, I probably have made an acceptable adjustment, to talk social workese.

Most Americans born in this country have a sense that your place of birth—the region if not the precise town—confers an identity that, however attenuated by time and events, lingers forever. They might dismiss Erwin’s birth in Orizaba, considering his departure some three years later, as a meaningless accident, of no significance in the formation of his mind and character, not nearly as important as Ernst’s in Berlin. But that was not the perspective of U.S. immigration law of the 1930s, which surely played an important role in Erwin’s return to the Western Hemisphere, if not as important as Benno’s

untimely death had played in his departure from it forty years earlier. Of course his birth in Orizaba had no influence on his development as a German Jew of his generation. But its indelible record on his German citizenship papers and, later, his passport and American naturalization certificate linked him forever with his ancestors from “Russia” (whether they were from Poland or Lithuania or still other places, even Russia itself)—linked him with those from the ghettos and the shtetls of eastern Europe, with the wanderers who, like him, had to flee not just from personal disasters but also from murderous mobs once mistaken for mildly tolerant neighbors. Orizaba turned out to be much less a Babylon than did Berlin.

Was that also Erwin’s perspective? Probably not. The enormous events in which he had been caught up—the war, the subsequent turmoil, the Nazis—had taught him that existence is generally precarious and unpredictable, that what matters is people’s loyalty to one another, not to abstractions from history. He said as much on the occasion of his nephew’s wedding in 1956, at which he was asked to make a few remarks between the dinner courses.

But jokes aside, this is basically an extraordinarily serious occasion, one of the most serious that occurs in life. During the course of my life I have sometimes gotten myself into this embarrassment of sending a young couple on their way with a few friendly words, and I remember especially how, almost thirty-three years ago, I addressed your parents, Rudi. Those were lousy times . . . : inflation had about reached its high point, nobody knew what the next day would bring, and nobody was talking about economic security, not even remotely. Nobody could claim that the union of that young couple had strong economic foundations. So if somebody should talk to you two of security and getting by financially, then you can reply that those don’t matter, that the main thing is to have the feeling that you belong together, that you will stay together for life, and that you want to go through thick and thin together. That worked in the case of your parents, Rudi, and I have no doubt that it will work for you.<sup>10</sup>

The optimism may have been not only avuncular but also, under the circumstances, obligatory. But the sentiment was surely genuine. It came from his experiences.

Where Erwin had been born turned out to be more important to his new country—eventually the third to grant him citizenship—than where he grew up, in Berlin, in the Kaiser’s pre-war Germany; more important than his middle-class upbringing, his service in the German army, his education at Göttingen, his brief career as a judge; more important even than his “race or people.” Those were among the facts comprising his identity, along with his father’s premature death and its consequences. True, his birth in Orizaba was irrelevant to all of that, however it was regarded by U.S. law. But in a sense U.S. law turned out to be doubly significant for Erwin, not only in its facilitation of his entry but also in

its structural and organizational impenetrability, blocking his every attempt to re-enter his chosen profession, or at least its American version. And that duality of relevance to the outside world of one's "place of birth" and its irrelevance to one's personal and professional identity was another link between Erwin and his ancestors, between him and Diaspora Jewry and its history. Surely that history is replete with similar stories of our wanderers among the nations.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Unless otherwise specified, the letters cited in this article come from Erwin Schepes's correspondence file, 1939–1942 (File 41, Box 111) of the Emergency Committee in Aid of Displaced Foreign Scholars Records, 1927–1949, 1B. Non-Grantees (Manuscript Collection 922), Records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations. I am grateful for permission to use these materials.

<sup>2</sup>In his "Fellowship Application for Refugee Lawyers," submitted to the American Committee for the Guidance of Professional Personnel on 9 December 1939, Erwin answered Item 6, "Explain briefly your family background, education of your parents, and any distinctions or achievements attained by members of your family, either present or past" by writing, "Middle-class family. My mother's father owned a factory and was very active in communal affairs. He was a councillor of the city of Lyck. My father was a well-to-do merchant, but died while he was very young." The form's inch of space for the answer did not allow an explanation of how Benno, a Jew from Vilna barred from Russian universities, managed to acquire an education. Nor would Erwin have provided it had he been free to append additional pages.

<sup>3</sup>See the introduction and the first two chapters ("Ancestral Germany" and "Weimar") of Stern's *Five Germanys I Have Known* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006). Stern, the distinguished Columbia University historian, came from a very prominent family in Breslau, with impressive connections. His godfather was Fritz Haber, the Nobel Prize laureate in chemistry in 1918, and himself a converted Jew. Manfred Kirchheimer wrote an excellent sketch of his own family (from Saarbrücken) and neighbors in Washington Heights at the end of the 1930s, which portrays people and a lifestyle that my family would have found comfortably familiar. See his "German Jew or Jewish German?: Post-Immigration Questions" in *German-Jewish Identities in America*, ed. Christof Mauch and Joseph Salmons (University of Wisconsin, Studies of the Max Kade Institute for German-American Studies, 2003), 154–162.

<sup>4</sup>Erwin returned to Germany more than once, first as a major in the U.S. Army in 1946 to work as a "welfare specialist" in the occupation and some years later, with his wife Ruth, to visit Bonn, Ruth's birthplace, and other cities. Ernst never went back and had no interest in doing so.

<sup>5</sup>Emergency Committee Chair Stephen Duggan and Executive Secretary Betty Drury published *The Rescue of Science and Learning* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1948), a fascinating account of the committee and its work. Their comparison of the impact of the refugees from central Europe on the West to that of the scholars who fled Constantinople in 1453 for the West of that time, helping to foment the Renaissance, is echoed by Lewis Coser (although

with an emphasis on difference rather than similarity) in, “The Refugees: Loss and Generation of Prestige,” the introduction to his *Refugee Scholars in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984).

<sup>6</sup>The January 1939 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly* included a contribution from Riesman to the magazine’s regular “Under Thirty” feature, a rather poetic and somewhat cloudy advocacy of reason and faith as opposed to “the stale, mad battle of Reds and Blacks”—communists and fascists. The letter shows no influence of his work as secretary of the American Committee. Nor is that work mentioned in the 2003 *Harvard Gazette Archives* obituary; nor in Martin Meyerson’s foreword to *On the Making of Americans: Essays in Honor of David Riesman*, ed. Herbert J. Ganz, Nathan Glazer, Joseph R. Gusfield, and Christopher Jencks (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1979); nor in *Culture and Social Character: The Work of David Riesman Reviewed*, ed. Seymour Martin Lipset and Leo Lowenthal (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1961).

<sup>7</sup>Erwin was misled. Morgan was the director (1937–1942) of Michigan’s Student Religious Association, surely not a position from which to influence employment of either faculty or research staff. I have been unable to locate any pertinent correspondence in the Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, where the association’s archives are maintained (Office of Ethics and Religion, Records, 1860–1991).

<sup>8</sup>The files of the Emergency Committee do not illuminate its relationship to the Southern Illinois University group, but it is clear that Neely’s letter did not come out of the blue: “We are very grateful to you for all the assistance you have given us in the past,” Neely told Duggan, “and we hope to do something for you in the future.”

<sup>9</sup>See Anthony Heilbut, *Exiled in Paradise* (New York: The Viking Press, 1983) and Helmut F. Pfanner, *Exile in New York* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1983).

<sup>10</sup>Originally in German; the translation is mine.