Bildung: An Agenda of the Soul

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Is there a German-Jewish legacy here in the United States? If there is, its avatar was my father, born in Cologne early in the century to parents who had come there from Austrian Poland. My mother, too, is German-born, but the intellectual interests which preoccupied so many German Jews have never meant a great deal to her. Younger than my father, she was scarcely more than a teenager when she left Germany—shortly after the Nazis came to power—for *hachsharah* (agricultural training) in Czechoslovakia and settlement in "Eretz" (British Mandatory Palestine). Neither my father nor my mother had much formal education, but *Abba* and *Ima*—that is how Eli, my younger brother, and I have always spoken to and of them—were most at home in German; whether in Tel Aviv or, later, in San Jose, California, they gravitated to German-speaking Jews, and German was my language, too, until I went to kindergarten in Tel Aviv.

I think German was an outlook as well as a language for my father. For much of his life, and especially during the years he spent in Tel Aviv, he was an avid reader. The street on which he maintained his carpentry shop—Yona Hanavi—also housed a German lending library, and *Abba* was a regular user of the library. He would never miss an opportunity to read—even at the dinner table, which was not altogether agreeable to his family. Now I can understand that books, the German books he loved, Goethe, Schiller, et al., offered him escape from the memory of an unhappy, poverty-stricken childhood in the Rhineland and from the knowledge, when it came in 1944, of what had befallen his parents and other relatives in Nazi-occupied Europe and from the unromantic reality of the embattled Yishuv (the Jewish community in the land of Israel). Even as a child, he had loved and lived in books, which offered him a way to satisfy his eager curiosity about the world. I am told he read by candlelight after his mother had turned off the overhead light, and often enough he would be the last to leave the nearby public library.

It was serious literature which attracted him; I have the impression that he did not turn to these books for entertainment, he turned to

them for spiritual survival. He knew Hebrew, too, and Yiddish, his parental language and the language of many of his customers in Tel Aviv, but German was and remained the language of his soul. Not that his relationship with German was uncomplicated. On the one hand, it was through German that he shaped his understanding of humankind and, indeed, his own inwardness. On the other hand, German was the language in which the Nazis condemned his family to death; it was the language in which Hitler polluted all of Europe. *Abba* loved German and was terribly wounded by German.

German was also the language into which he translated his mother's Yiddish letters. From Tel Aviv, he corresponded with my grandmother Sarah, back in Cologne and then in her Belgian exile. None of his letters to her have survived, but a number of her letters have been preserved—in German translation, as I said: he wanted Eli and me to be able to read them; that is why he put them into German. In one of them, written shortly before her flight to Antwerp, she consoled him for her unavoidable absence from his wedding: ". . . my dearest Joseph, everything does not turn out the way one wants or wishes it. But everything passes. After one has had a good cry one goes on." As *Abba* and *Ima* would have to do even after they learned that Grandmother Sarah had been deported to Auschwitz and that Grandmother Hannah, my maternal grandmother, fleeing from Mannheim, had been done to death in the South of France.

When, in the early 1950's, the *tsena*, the economic insufficiency which gripped the new Israeli republic, rendered it quite difficult for my parents to earn a living, they decided reluctantly to join relatives in San Jose, California. There, too, years of economic struggle awaited them, but there was a sense of opportunity in San Jose, and they could hope there to realize the middle-class aspirations which they had brought with them from Germany and found so difficult to maintain in Tel Aviv of the Second World War, the postwar contest with the British and the Arabs, and the *tsena* of the early 1950s. In San Jose, *Abba* and *Ima* both worked; *Abba* was no longer self-employed as he had been in Tel Aviv, and *Ima* worked long, hard hours as a laundress—but San Jose ultimately meant a home of their own with a lovely, lovingly cultivated garden, and it meant educational opportunity for Eli and me—both of us graduated high school there and went on to study at Berkeley and, in time, at the Hebrew Union College in

Los Angeles and Cincinnati. And San Jose meant immersion in English. My parents always sought friends among German-speaking Jews—how well I recall their conversations both in Tel Aviv and in San Jose, their talk of whom and what they had lost in Nazi Germany—and the New York *Aufbau* was often seen in our home, but increasingly English became our language, the language in which Eli and I spoke with each other and with *Abba* and *Ima*.

Abba, as I say, was not self-employed in San Jose; he worked as a cabinet maker in union shops, and his time was not his own. He read less—he was forty-eight on his arrival in San Jose, and the long hours he worked there left him too exhausted to carry on the reading regimen he had created for himself in Tel Aviv. Still, *Bildung*—education as a way of life and thought—certainly meant no less in San Jose than it had in Cologne or Mannheim or Tel Aviv. It was simply taken for granted in our home that Eli and I would finish high school and go on to university degrees.

Neither *Abba* nor *Ima* had ever paid much attention to religion; *Abba* had attended High Holy Day synagogue services in Cologne, but neither had done so in Tel Aviv; *Ima*'s father had been indifferent to religion: he had never sought to dejudaize his household and had looked forward to the Jewish holidays, but not for their religious significance—rather for the culinary opportunities they offered! This grandfather, unimpressed by his wife's pious family, had in fact chaired a cremation society: what could more emphatically have bespoken his distance from Jewish tradition? And *Ima*'s brothers, though each had become Bar Mitzvah in Manneheim, joined staunchly anticlerical left-wing kibbutzim in Palestine. In San Jose, however, *Abba* and *Ima* decided to affiliate with the Reform congregation, Temple Emanu-El, and for Eli and me this would be a significant connection.

Both of us, I speculate, chose to study for the Reform rabbinate because we somehow saw in the rabbinate an answer to our quest for *Bildung* and a way to repair the ruptured Jewish life we had inherited. In the Reform rabbinate, we could combine Jewish values with modern culture, we could wed emotion and reason, and we could empower ourselves to resist the painful discontinuities of contemporary Jewish history. None of this was ever a spoken agenda; it was an agenda of the soul, planted there by our parents.