A Heritage Freighted Across the Abyss

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On *Kristallnacht* I was too young to be aware of what was happening. My memories are only of tales my parents told me later. Fortunately, we had been warned that all Jewish men would be rounded up and held in concentration camps until the Jews paid a collective fine of a billion marks to compensate insurance companies for the damage Nazis had done to Jewish property. My father fled the house, rode around Berlin on buses and subways, and finally found an office where he could safely sleep. During the day my mother stayed out of our apartment as much as possible. She sat on one of those few benches in the Tiergarten that were reserved for Jews while I played nonchalantly at her feet. In the middle of the night the Gestapo came to our house. My mother told them her husband was out of town, in Hamburg. For hours they waited to make sure. Finally, they left. Some days later she wrote to friends in Palestine in German words disguised as decorative Hebrew script at the edge of a letter: *"Karl wurde gesucht, aber nicht gefunden"* ("They looked for Karl, but they didn't find him").

They did find my grandfather, though. He opened the door himself and proudly showed the Gestapo an Iron Cross with which his commander had decorated him in World War I. They laughed and took him to Sachsenhausen, where he languished until he could get a visa to Chile.

My parents remained in Berlin up until the summer of 1941. By now my father was doing forced labor for the huge Siemens electrical company. My mother was desperately trying to get a visa from the stingy American consulate in Berlin. Bribery finally did the trick. We were fortunate since we had relatives in America who signed an affidavit, and my father had a foreman who, when asked to sign an emigration release for him, supposedly said: "Let Karl Meyer too see better times some day."

Later on, in Los Angeles, my parents did not speak much of *Kristallnacht*. More often they talked about the *anstaendige Leute*, the

decent people, among the Germans, who continued to treat us as human beings down to the time of our departure. And they remembered the better days—before Hitler came to power.

My grandmother, who raised me in Southern California, was persuaded that I would never amount to anything if I lacked the capacity to read and appreciate Goethe and Schiller. She spoke German to me and read me stories from the Kasperle books—adventurous, humorous, fantastic tales set in the atmosphere of eighteenth-century German courtly life. Later came piano lessons, not because I had any talent for music, but simply because the bourgeois German-Jewish culture from which she came demanded it. In retrospect, I can see how my grandmother was desperately trying to transplant her own German cultural identity into her American grandchild. She was fighting a battle against my Americanization with the weapon of German *Bildung*. Very little of the heritage she wanted to convey was Jewish. It was German literature and German music that she wanted to implant. In my family, it was the grandparents who were more assimilated than their progeny.

Bildung was an important element for my parents too, but less so. They were younger when Hitler came to power and could more easily tilt to the Jewish side of their identities. We became a synagogue-going family in America and made occasional gestures toward *kashrut*. The Reform temple opened the possibilities for new relationships with non-German Jews. But that came only slowly. What my parents appreciated about Temple Israel of Hollywood was its German-born rabbi (who had married them in Berlin) and the familiar music of Sulzer and Lewandowski. What remained strange in synagogue was the pronunciation of Hebrew and some of the Jewish vocabulary. Only at home could my parents sing familiarly "Ki *lau* no-eh" on Pesach and call challah by its proper name of *Barches*.

My parents' closest friends in America remained German Jews who were refugees like themselves. There were organized circles and informal ones. In Los Angeles the "Jewish Club of 1933" long remained a social focus. Even more important for my father was the local circle of survivors from his old German-Jewish fraternity, the KC. They met regularly, ate the same foods and drank the same wine punch that they had enjoyed as students back in the twenties. Before my father died, he asked that his fraternity colors be draped across his chest in death as

they had been many years earlier in German student days.

Informal gatherings were just as heavily laden with the pre-Hitler German past. My father's favorite card game remained the German skat. At gatherings of friends he would sing the old lieder, and when the recordings of the famous German baritones became available in America, he was among the first to buy them.

I suppose my parents brought with them to America some of the ancestral prejudices against the *Ostjuden*. In America it was the East European Jews that were in the majority, even in most Reform congregations by the forties. German Jews arriving in America as refugees from Nazism had to adjust to a situation where the tables were turned. They were the penniless immigrants who sought aid from Jewish charitable organizations largely supported by American Jews of East European ancestry. That required some adjustment of viewpoint. In addition, they found they had little in common with the prominent, established German Jews whose grandparents had made the voyage to America seventy-five and more years earlier, and who were wholly Americanized, separated from Jews of East European origin only by prejudice, social class, and family ties.

The German-Jewish refugees' clinging together was largely a matter of shared pleasant and unpleasant memories, a nostalgia that grew with the years. But was there any more to it than that? Did they feel there was something in their legacy as German Jews that was worth passing on? My parents were quite ambivalent about it. They were revolted by the crassness in much of American Jewish practice, especially the gaudy displays at Bar Mitzvah and wedding celebrations. German Jews possessed a modesty and a penchant for understatement that seemed very un-American. And there was that untranslatable quality of *Gemuetlichkeit*, a kind of warm at-homeness which was German to be sure, but also had its Jewish coloring: it reigned where a small company of fellow Jews gathered intimately, unpretentiously among their own, with no need for pretense of any kind. German Jews absorbed some of the formality of German class society, but they managed to bend its stiffness with Jewish humor.

The German-Jewish sense of family was both powerful and exclusive. Birthdays of family elders were invariably commemorated with original verses and songs performed by the children. But along with that veneration went an insistence by parents to control the marriages

of their children, to assure that they married into the "proper" families. In America, in most instances, it was only the sense of extended family that remained—the more Jewish and less German-bourgeois element.

Although they participated for many years in a "Great Books" discussion group, neither of my parents considered themselves intellectuals. They would have had difficulty in formulating the German-Jewish legacy in terms other than the personal ones I have already mentioned. From the historian's perspective it is easier to see how much American Jewry has been shaped by ideas that came from Germany. If there is modern scientific study of Jews and Judaism in America today, we owe it to the invention of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* by German Jews in the 1820s. If religious Jews in America are nearly all modern Orthodox, Conservative, or Reform, they are so because the ideas of Samson Raphael Hirsch, Zacharias Frankel, and Abraham Geiger were transported to America from their point of origin in Germany of the 1830s and 1840s. Only anti-modern Orthodoxy and Reconstructionism lack German roots. Yet this, of course, is a heritage from earlier times. We would possess it whether or not a new German-Jewish exodus had occurred with the rise of Hitler.

The more recent immigration brought to America great minds, of whom Einstein is simply the most outstanding. The contributions of Jewish refugee scholars to the sciences and humanities in America are legion. They transmitted new ideas and invigorated the university departments that they joined. Those that worked in Jewish disciplines brought with them the tradition of rigorous scholarship that made the efflorescence of Jewish studies on American campuses in the 1970s more than ethnicism turned academic.

It is fatuous to believe that the manners, customs, and values of German Jews will outlast the generation of the refugees' children. These require personal inculcation from someone steeped in them from childhood. What will remain are those elements mentioned last: the German-Jewish contributions to Jewish religion and to the study of the Jewish heritage. The bridge of personal memory can stretch across the Holocaust abyss only for those who themselves bore German Jewishness from Europe to America. For their children it is mostly memories told them and experiences of customs transplanted. For the third generation it must be the broad, more ambiguous legacy: of a

Jewish community that felt rooted in a land until it spewed them out; but also of pioneers in Jewish modernity, who set a pattern for Jewish religious and intellectual life in America; and of convinced believers that reason, culture, and quiet dignity are keys to a human life worth living