The End Is Not Yet: A Personal Memoir of the German-Jewish Legacy in America

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As I have given my own definition of the German-Jewish legacy in *German Jews Beyond Judaism*, I want to confine myself here to some personal observations of how its spirit seems to have survived in the United States when it had long been pronounced dead in Europe. I will have to reach into my own past in order to explain how I came to experience this revival of the German-Jewish legacy in America, and what I think it meant to those who have continued its history. It may seem odd in retrospect that it was the rediscovery by young Americans of this legacy which led me back to some of my own intellectual roots. But I had been educated at a boarding school which did not particularly nurse that heritage, and left Germany at a relatively young age in order to continue my education in England and America. Still, in some manner this German-Jewish legacy did pervade my family setting in Germany and in exile, centered as it was upon the so-called "mission of Judaism" with its emphasis upon *Bildung* as self-cultivation, cosmopolitanism and a rational attitude towards life. Yet because of my education I never experienced that depth of the German-Jewish heritage which, for example, made it difficult for refugee parents to understand their American children, who seemed to grow up without any culture or proper comportment. For the German ideal of *Bildung,* which required self-cultivation as a process of inward development and the acquisition of aesthetic taste, was unique—after all, the word *Bildung*, representing the moral universe itself, has no equivalent in any other language.

When I started teaching at the University of Iowa, directly after the war, I first came face-to-face with the differences between a European and an American education and outlook upon life. Here I shared an experience with many much-older refugee professors, who had been educated in Germany, and who often commented upon the ignorance of their students, their lack of aesthetic judgment and sophistication, and at the same time their freshness, their eagerness to learn. At that

point I had little interest and almost no knowledge of a German-Jewish legacy, and instead pointed to the lamentable state of the American high school and of departments of education devoted to the notion that school was not an instrument of learning or of personal development but an engine for socialization. Many U.S.-born colleagues joined the fight in order to save so-called subject matter from being drowned by the emphasis upon method, upon "how to do things," then the staple of teachers' training.

Perhaps such conflicts with American educators were a preparation for things to come, for they can be seen in retrospect as a struggle against an American pragmatic tradition which had worn thin. While originally *Bildung* had served to help integrate German Jews into the educated German middle class, in America it led to their isolation from the mainstream of educational and intellectual thought. It was the attack upon the dominant system of thought from an entirely unexpected direction which was to bring about change and to awaken my own consciousness to the lasting importance of the German-Jewish intellectual tradition. The student generation of the 1960s threw down the gauntlet as part of their unease about the promise of American society, and this before the so-called student revolt turned into mindless rage and the use of force. I was then teaching a course on European cultural history at the University of Wisconsin which necessarily emphasized different social theories and approaches to life, such as those deriving from Marxism, liberalism, or the German philosophers. There was no special emphasis upon the German-Jewish legacy, and courses in modern Jewish history, where this heritage could be displayed, had not yet been introduced into most universities. And yet, whenever certain ideas closely related to part of this legacy were discussed, the students, most of whom were not Jews, felt a new excitement of discovery, and this, in turn, led me to reconsider my own heritage.

Why students searching for new approaches and meanings in life should have felt a special attraction to ideas which derived from this legacy is difficult to say. The failure of high school or even the university in transmitting a meaningful American heritage is important here; students turned to Lukacz, Gustav Landauer, the Frankfurt School, or the left-wing intellectuals of the Weimar Republic rather than stand on a native ground which had never been made relevant to their needs.

Marxism was central, at first, as a means of protest and as a theory which explained and put order into the totality of their lives. But Marxist orthodoxy was rejected as a straitjacket and the Soviet Union held no attraction at all. Teaching European cultural history to ever larger classes (by the mid-sixties some 500 students took this course), interest peaked whenever attempts to loosen Marxist orthodoxy were discussed, theories which emphasized the use of a critical mind within a revolutionary dynamic. It was the search for a left-wing identity which led back to the German-Jewish tradition.

In *German Jews Beyond Judaism*, I saw such a left-wing identity as a climax of the German-Jewish legacy, for it emphasized the ideal of a common humanity based upon *Bildung* and the Enlightenment as essential for the autonomy of the individual. The primacy of culture as an instrument of social change, based upon individual consciousness, suited the actual situation of these students, and at the same time exemplified one thrust of the German-Jewish tradition. This meant seeing life as a totality in which aesthetics as well as learning had their place. Men and women's lives were not merely determined by class struggle or governed by the liberal division between politics and life which seemed to perpetuate alienation. Students at the time seemed especially taken by the aesthetic dimension of this worldview as over against American mass culture, which came to symbolize manipulation and domination. Herbert Marcuse was important, passing on a culture-oriented view of society in which the combination of *Bildung* and Enlightenment would lead to social equality. Even so, though the students liked Marcuse's (and my own) German accent, there was no one to link theories which had such a great appeal to a German-Jewish legacy which had managed to preserve the original link between Enlightenment and *Bildung* without the distortion of modern nationalism. Nor did the students realize that these views might have a much greater liberal than Marxist potential.

That this was not merely a chance revival became clear when it seemed to appeal to students regardless of whether they were Jewish or not or where they were born, and when a philosopher like Juergen Habermas became its champion (conscious of the German-Jewish tradition involved), whether or not one had personal ties to the German-Jewish past. However, some more years were to pass until I finally decided to write the book. The students made me think about the

implications of this tradition, but political concerns led me to undertake this task. From 1969 onwards I had taught at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem as well as at Wisconsin and had taken part in the lively debates about the nature of nationalism. There it seemed obvious that former German Jews were overrepresented in peace movements as well as in the movement for a binational state. Perhaps there was a certain German-Jewish tradition at work, which, if it could be rediscovered and articulated, might yet help to rehumanize modern nationalism.

What does this have to do with America? Such a heritage, as we saw, filled a need for young Americans ignorant of or disillusioned with their own heritage. The apparently lasting interest in Weimar—the many books which appeared in America on this subject—is closely related to the German-Jewish legacy. Indeed, what is generally regarded as Weimar culture has little bearing upon what the average middle-class German read or thought, but was (to quote the late George Lichtheim) an inner-Jewish dialogue to which few gentiles listened. The term "left-wing intellectual" current during the Weimar Republic not only described men and women in the past who had combined *Bildung*, Enlightenment, pacifism, and the quest for greater equality, but provided a new inspiration for young Americans who feared isolation and atomization and wanted to embrace the totality of life.

The hunger for totality was important here, and the dead-end of a world where war had become almost a way of life. Here also the optimism which the German-Jewish heritage retained from the Enlightenment had great appeal—not the American optimism about the future of society but that which emphasized the potential within each individual. Yet there was actually a great deal of American patriotism among such students, not connected to an American past, but to the United States as the nation which could build a new culture and therefore a new society upon the principles I have discussed.

But what of the present and future? Not only in Germany, but to a certain extent even in exile in the United States, German Jews had identified with this legacy. But such traditional support is vanishing with the passage of time. Nor could this heritage any longer address social needs as it had done in Germany. With its emphasis upon *Bildung* for all, the potential of each human being, it had suited a

minority reaching out for greater equality. Not only had the German-Jewish tradition become counterproductive as an instrument of Americanization, as I have pointed out, but in a society where anti-Jewish discrimination is at such a low ebb it can no longer fulfill any social need. Instead, it has found the kind of support it never had in Germany, from Jews and gentiles alike—articulate intellectuals regardless of their place of origin.

The specific consequences of this heritage in America are difficult, perhaps impossible, to trace, for they combined with various other influences. Perhaps the integration of aesthetic taste into a general outlook of life is one such consequence, and the increased interest shown in theoretical questions in the social sciences another. The notion that theory is not a useless ornament invented by Germanic professors has been gaining ground—indeed, that without a sound theoretical base any intellectual activity remains one-dimensional.

Many books have been written about the contribution of German-Jewish refugee intellectuals to the United States. My own observations lead me to provide a slightly different emphasis. One of the basic attractions of their intellectual outlook was that it could provide a congenial alternative to the existing order, based upon changed minds rather than class struggle, on the thesis that culture must be taken seriously. As such—irony of history—ideals once meant for integration with the establishment became directed against it.

Like all traditions, the German-Jewish legacy did not and will not remain intact, though bits and pieces will be taken up and combined in different ways as fits the need of the age. Yet more and more intellectuals, both in Germany and the United States, recognize that the heritage German Jews made their own still has a role to play as an attitude towards life, as a prism through which to view and humanize society. That it took young Americans to recall at least one German Jew to this legacy should itself testify to its strength and capacity for survival.