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"The Situation of the Jews in Today's Germany"

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which he devotes uncommon energy in his teaching, public lecturing, and published writings. His lecture, the text of which follows, provides interested readers with an opportunity to learn in detail about the place of the Jews in today’s political developments and the special problems this remnant community experiences as it faces both the German past and its own future.

We are extremely grateful to Dorit and Gerald Paul for their generosity in establishing the program that bears their names. It will enable us in the years to come to continue a research program of the highest quality in one of the most compelling areas of modern cultural history.

Alvin H. Rosenfeld
Director, Jewish Studies Program
The Situation of the Jews in Today’s Germany

— I —

Whoever takes up the question of the status and identity of Jews in Germany today, in 1990, will not be able to avoid considering the impact and consequences of the process of German unification. However, we have research findings only on the Federal Republic of Germany and, at best, sparse data concerning the small number of Jews in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), so that we can confidently speak only about Jews in the Federal Republic. The future chapter of a new Jewish community will, of necessity, be written only later on. Conversely, a glance at the history of the Jews both in the Federal Republic (Richarz 1988) and in the GDR assumes the character of a review of a historical epoch that is now nearing its end.

With these considerations in mind, I would like to develop my topic based upon the following five theses:

1. Jews living in the Federal Republic of Germany consider themselves as Jews in Germany and not as German Jews.

2. The subjective and objective conditions for the establishment of a Jewish community were nowhere so unfavorable as in post-war Germany—with the possible exception of Arab and Islamic dictatorships.

3. Until 1985, Jews in the Federal Republic of Germany were not able to develop a reasonable sense of self-consciousness or a self-image because their leadership was grounded in the fatal tradition of “Schutzjudentum,” or “protected Jewry,” and Jews willingly acceded to its symbolic use.

4. Jews in the GDR found themselves in a similar, symbolically exploitable dependence on the dominant regime, although, by comparison with the Federal Republic, in a still deeper, inward dependence upon that regime.

5. The future of Jews now living in the Federal Republic and the GDR is uncertain. A situation that one could unpleasantly describe as an inner ghetto—characterized by excessive demands by the non-Jewish environment and internal weaknesses of the Jewish community, coupled with the increasingly open appearance of anti-Semitism—results in a continuing paradox, a state of abnormal normality between Jews and Germans. In addition, the expected immigration of East European Jews, primarily of Russian Jews, might alter the situation of Jews in Germany in an unforeseeable manner.

— II —

One immediately discovers an anomaly in viewing the demographic development of Jews living in the Federal Republic of Germany. For the past thirty-five
to forty years this community has not changed in numbers from its early base of approximately 30,000 officially registered members. (The community's actual size may include an additional 20,000 or more unregistered persons.) How is this possible given a higher than average death rate? The following is a short historical overview on this point.

Of approximately 500,000 Jews living in the pre-war German Reich, until 1933, about 15,000 still were alive and living in Germany at war's end in 1945. These people survived by hiding (cf. König 1967; Maor 1961; Richarz 1982; Benz 1988), or were spared as "privileged persons," or as "starbearers," or as "half-jews" who were simply not caught up in the extermination apparatus. Moreover, between 1945 and 1948 about 200,000 Jews were in internment camps on the territory of the western occupation forces. Pursuant to international usage these persons were designated as "DPs." These displaced persons ended up in the Western Zone owing to a variety of causes. For one, they were freed by the allies during the last months of the war from concentration camps, such as Bergen-Belsen or Dachau, located in the Reich's interior. We know that the SS, faced with the advance of the approaching Red Army, evacuated a portion of the camps in Poland forcing the remaining prisoners into the Reich's interior under conditions of shocking agony, where they very often died of hunger or disease. Other Jews in Eastern Europe, primarily in Poland, were freed by the Red Army and attempted in 1945 and 1946 to reach their former homes. Naturally, these people were forced to flee to the West, given the political conditions in post-war Poland. One of the main reasons for this exodus was the fact that returning Jews often enough were received with disdain, hatred, and sometimes outbursts of violent anti-Semitism among the Polish population. During the Polish civil war between nationalists and communists there took place, for example, an event of horrifying proportions. In Kielce in July 1946 a bloody massacre was carried out by anti-Semites against Jews returning from the Soviet Union. Approximately fifty persons were murdered then (Hillel 1985). However, this act was not the only one of its kind. These and other events were taken up by Zionist emissaries and used to increase political pressure, primarily on the U.S. administration of the internment camps and hence on the U.S. government. The purpose was to bring the U.S.A. to finally approve establishment of a Jewish State in Palestine (Zerial 1989). In internment camps located in the Western Zone, particularly in the American and British Zones and, to a lesser extent, in the French Zone, a somewhat autonomous Jewish camp administration arose—often in conflict with the military governments—in which the DPs not only established historical commissions for research of Nazi crimes but also formed political parties, professional organizations, and a system of general education (Bauer 1970; Peck 1988; Jacobmeyer 1988; Wetzl 1989).

The self-definition of these nearly 250,000 persons is expressed in the name that they conferred upon themselves: "She'erit ha-Pelelah," which means both "the surviving remnant" and "the saving remnant." This term comes from the Bible (Haggai 1,12) and denotes that group of persons who survived the Babylonian exile and returned to Jerusalem. The survivors' political leaders were similarly convinced that Judaism would not have a future in Europe, and particularly not
in Germany, and that future Jewish life could only be maintained either in Israel or in the United States (Gringauz 1947).

The psychological condition among survivors was characterized, on the one hand, by a tremendous will to live—the birth rate in internment camps was at that time the highest among all of Jewry—and, on the other, by mental distraction, authoritarianism, and immense emotional tension (Pinson 1947; Kugelmann 1989). The founding of an Israeli state meant the end of a last final flowering of a Jewish-Yiddish culture in Germany. Although several internment camps had been disbanded—the last in Bavaria in 1956—the camps dramatically emptied in 1948. Most people immigrated to the United States or, primarily, to Israel.

Of the 250,000 internees, only a small fraction of 15,000 remained in Germany. This number included those who physically or psychologically were simply not able to migrate onward. In addition, there were a few, who, despite the best of intentions, were not able to see themselves coping with a life of hardships in Israel. It was these Jews and a few German Jews who had been in hiding or those Jews who returned directly after the war who founded the first Jewish communities (Maor 1961; Wetzel 1989; Bodemann 1988). Initially these were not thought of as permanent establishments but rather as temporary institutions, which should guarantee those Jews asserting reparation claims against Germany a minimum of Jewish religious services and facilities. With the exception of a few returning leftist-oriented Jews or conscious German nationalist Jews (Schoeps 1990), no one could imagine or in any case even wish that a Jewish community would again arise on German territory.

The process of establishing communities, achieved primarily through the entry of DPs into religious congregations formed by German Jews, did not run its course without problems. Cultural contrasts, political antitheses, and the lack of a common language impeded the formation of coherent communities. A small minority of extremely assimilated German Jews, who in no way had been especially close to the Jewish community prior to the war, represented the cadres of the first post-war communities. They were often opposed by a majority of East European Jews, who in their own way had often likewise assimilated (in Poland, Hungary, etc.) yet who did not naturally belong to German culture. In other words, the basis of the Jewish community in post-war Germany consisted of East European—primarily Polish—Jews and not German Jews. Thus, one may state that the Jewish community residing today in the Federal Republic of Germany, which is largely made up of the offspring of DPs, represents a community of Jews in Germany and not a community of German Jews. At least not German Jews in the sense conveyed by the poets Heinrich Heine and Else Lasker-Schüler, the philosophers Moses Mendelssohn and Martin Buber, the writer Jakob Wassermann, and the painter Max Liebermann when they speak of “German” Jews. Instead, Jewry in the Federal Republic of Germany developed upon the initial base of a remnant community of DPs augmented by subsequent episodes of immigration and reimmigration. The first instance of immigration or reimmigration occurred when those German Jews who, by 1938 at the latest, had migrated to Palestine—owing more to Nazi coercion than their own political will—returned to the German Federal Republic in the early 1950s, induced by reparation settlements.
As we shall see, waves of immigration occurred commensurate with political rejection and developments in communist East and Central Europe.

A first group of Rumanian Jews came to the Federal Republic of Germany in the early 1950s in the wake of the Israeli-Rumanian emigration treaty. In 1956, Hungarian Jews fled to Germany fearing an anti-Semitic right-wing backlash from the Hungarian uprising. Liberal Czechoslovakian Jews emigrated to the Federal Republic following the failure of Prague Spring in 1968. Anti-Semitic violence in communist Poland in 1968 moved many Polish Jews to seek asylum in Germany. Since the outset of the 1960s, there has been—with intermittent interruptions—a continually growing immigration from the Soviet Union. This immigration increased in the first months of 1990 due to revived anti-Semitism provoked by the Pamajt movement. I have not mentioned in the foregoing the immigration for pragmatic reasons of Israelis who come to the Federal Republic for commercial or educational purposes and then remain. Also worthy of mention is the reimmigration of older German Jews, who, having attained pension age, wish to spend their retirement years in the Federal Republic amidst Germany’s material security.

These several instances of immigration explain the fact that the number of officially registered Jews, namely 30,000 persons, has not changed for more than thirty-five years, despite a rise in the average lifespan of older persons within the Jewish population and a relatively low birth rate. It may be gathered from this short demographic overview that the Jewish population living in the Federal Republic of Germany today constitutes a multifariously differentiated and heterogeneous community which, for reasons yet to be considered, was nevertheless outwardly represented by “German” Jews well into the 1980s.

— III —

In 1492, when the Catholic regents Ferdinand and Isabella resolved to drive the Jews out of Spain, a country in which Jews had evolved a long and rich tradition, Jewish religious leaders imposed a ban on this country. For nearly four hundred years Jews actually avoided Spain. Of course religious bans no longer have any obligatory power in the twentieth century. Yet at the same time a kind of ban on German territory is embedded in the consciousness and psyche of Jews today. Germany, the land of the murderers, was a country in which Jews, at least in the 1950s and 1960s, were always forced to reckon that the neighbors, streetcar conductors, or bakers could have been former concentration camp henchmen or simple soldiers who had participated in deportations or mass shootings. Moreover, until recently a number of high office bearers (including former ministers, chancellors, and federal presidents) had once been Nazi party members. One recalls as well that there were waves of anti-Semitism in post-war Germany, primarily in the 1950s, which were definitely more vehement than any present anti-Semitic statements (Wetzel 1989; Jacobmeyer 1985). These and the conditions to be described below have made it difficult for Jews to gain a foothold inwardly and outwardly in Germany.
short time, already reached their end.

New polls and interviews divulge the fact that Jews in the GDR suffer from considerable identity conflicts (Ostow 1988). In this connection it is not so much the question of the self-image of the small group of avowed congregation members which is of interest but rather the "genealogy movement" among former communists or their children, who have taken up the search for their Jewish roots out of a strengthened opposition to the communist SED regime. The short stories of Barbara Honigmann illustrate this state of mind precisely. Interestingly enough, the SED has definitely promoted this new establishment of Jewish identity in recent years in the interests of reaching a better settlement with the West. Before the fall of the Berlin wall the East German government had stated its willingness to limit anti-Zionist propaganda and to pay reparations to victimized Jews. This positive turn toward the Jews is by no means a result of the 1989 revolution. Rather it was a conscious political strategy, introduced by the SED, to gain worldwide recognition. This strategy found expression in the reconstruction of the former synagogue in Oranienburgerstraße as well as in plans to better preserve the famous Weißensee Jewish cemetery and the new formation of the pre-war orthodox Adass Jissroel congregation. Naturally the establishment of groups in which children of Jewish communists discuss their self-identity have not resulted in the expected bolstering of small congregations which are overaged and dying out. Interest has been very minimal in Judaism as a culture and in Judaism as a religion among these groups. Hence on the whole, the Jewish community in the GDR is a "shrinking minority" (Mertens 1988). It can not be predicted how this community will develop within the framework of a unified Germany.

— VI —

It has become an accepted custom of political culture in the Federal Republic of Germany to echo a "fatal" philo-Semitism. The fact that this philo-Semitism publicly no longer exists certainly became evident at the time of the obscene ritual at Bitburg (Brumlik 1990). Also, the "historians' debate" and the debates regarding the possible establishment of a memorial for all the dead of the Second World War—hence for Wehrmacht soldiers as well as concentration camp victims—indicate once again that a forced reconciliation and compulsive normalization have been intended by the West German government and circles close to it since the mid-1980s. These attempts have resulted in a new self-consciousness among Jews in the Federal Republic of Germany. These Jews have formed themselves into a self-conscious minority since the protests against Bitburg and the campaigns against the public performance of Rainer Werner Fassbinder's play "Die Stadt, der Müll und der Tod" (Brumlik 1988), as well as the lost battle over the remains of the former Frankfurt ghetto (Best 1988).

Yet the future of a self-conscious Jewry within Germany is also uncertain. On the one hand, it is rather clear—from a demographic viewpoint—that smaller communities are nearing their end due to overaging and that Jewish life will continue to exist primarily in the larger communities, e.g., Berlin, Frankfurt,
Munich, Hamburg, and communities in the Rhineland. The demographic balance is represented quite differently in these larger cities. In Frankfurt, over 45 percent of all registered members were born after 1945. On the other hand, the Jewish community in the Federal Republic is forced to grapple with the highest rate—nearly 65 percent—of mixed marriages among Jewish communities worldwide (Jüdische Pressedienst 1985).

Moreover, the known dynamics of the Jewish community in post-war Germany still exist: future survival will depend at least in part on continuing immigration from Eastern Europe. Henceforth, immigration from the Soviet Union could guarantee a consistent maintenance if not further growth of the Jewish population. In any event, Soviet immigrants will soon constitute more than half of all registered Jews in West Berlin. The question of the future of individuals poses larger difficulties. Jewish young people today feel strongly unnerved by a qualitative, if not by a quantitative increase of anti-Semitic statements. Yet these same young persons have begun increasingly to view Germany as a kind of home (Davidowicz 1989).

A continuing and even growing interest among Germans in getting to know Jews and in learning more about Judaism is to be noted in recent years. This interest can not be adequately met owing to the small number of organized Jewish communities. Moreover, given the nature of things, the Jews run the risk of being turned into something resembling a museum of Judaism, a people to be visited as if out of antiquarian interest. By contrast a new anti-Semitism is to be noted not only despite Auschwitz but rather because of Auschwitz. This is an anti-Semitism that sees in Jews a living memorial for the greatest disgrace of German history (Funke 1988). It is questionable whether the small community of Jews in the Federal Republic is in a position to carry this double burden of being both a valued and hated monument of German history.

In the future, we are going to be forced to reckon with the emergence of a new community of Jews in Germany whose characteristics we are not yet familiar with. This community will emerge as a consequence of the increasingly difficult situation in Israel and a sprouting anti-Semitism in France and even in the U.S.A., which are altering the usual pattern of emigration of Jews from Germany and also because of the influx of Soviet Jews into the Federal Republic, which is bound to create a new situation.

At this point, only one fact remains certain: An easy reconciliation over graves, such as that attempted at Bitburg, will not occur. Forty or fifty years is very little time in the historical memory of the Jews, especially when viewed against the backdrop of the shoah. Whether a unified Germany is willing to sincerely attempt to make a new beginning with the Jews living there will become clearer once we see if the temptation can be resisted to elevate November 9—the day of German disgrace and of Jewish suffering—to a national holiday, this despite everyone’s elation over the fall of the Berlin wall.
References


