Prologue

My Father Leaves His German Homeland

The story that I intend to tell in this book, the story of the Jews of Germany, can only be told backwards. It is a story that must begin at the end. And the end is that singular event in which European Jewry, millions of men, women, and children, were led to their death, gassed, and massacred in all manners of unnatural death. Hitler and his followers may have indeed known all too well how they were going to "solve" the "Jewish question"; or perhaps the "final solution" was crystallized only gradually, out of partial, local action, taking on its true proportions at some later stage. We shall probably never know for sure. But outside the small circle of Nazi leaders and a number of staunch, ruthless antisemites, hardly anyone could imagine that *this* would be their policy – simple, and total. Many of the Jews in Germany regarded the transformation that their country was undergoing as the Nazis took over the government on January 30, 1933, as a transient affair, disturbing but temporary. But even among those who *did* understand that "their" Germany would never be the same again, only a few, fewer than it seems in retrospect, anticipated the force of the blow that awaited them.

Signs were abundant. Once the Nazis gained control of the central government in Germany they promptly began imposing restrictions on Jews. Emergency orders and legislation concerning German citizens of the "Jewish Race" began pouring in from the various official authorities of the Third Reich, even during the early months of its existence. The boycott on Jewish businesses was scheduled for April 1, and its limited success did nothing to dampen the enthusiasm of the new regime. On April 7, the law excluding officials of Jewish origins from public service was pronounced,

followed by decrees restricting the employment of Jewish lawyers and medical personnel. A strict *numerus clausus* (restricted number or quota) designed to prevent what was seen by the Nazis as the flooding of Germany's universities by Jewish students was announced. And while the rate of excluding and isolating Jews slowed slightly during 1934 and 1935, the pressure put on them continued unmercilessly. Restricting regulations issued by the bureaucracy came in quick succession, and supposedly peace-loving citizens found ways of their own to abuse and harass their Jewish neighbors. The Nuremberg Laws, which were put into effect in September 1935, at first seemed to be aimed at the completion and consolidation of that ongoing process of exclusion. But economic prohibitions and the various manifestations of social ostracism were becoming ever more severe. Those who refused to acknowledge the gravity of the situation up to that point were finally shaken out of their illusions when violence was given free rein across Germany during the so-called *Reichskristallnacht*, the landslide pogrom that occurred on and immediately after November 9, 1938.

Yet even at that time it was difficult to grasp the dimensions of the impending horror. Although the majority of German Jews had by then realized that it was pointless to expect things to improve, surely not in the foreseeable future, many still failed to anticipate the true scope of the Nazi threat. Understandably, those who were observing the events in Germany from afar could not grasp the scale of the imminent catastrophe. It remained beyond the capacity of human imagination.

From our vantage point some seventy years later, this combination of hopefulness and tenacity with which so many Jews hung onto their German identity and the evaporating reality of their past existence seems disconcerting. People of my generation, in the relative shelter of Israel at the time, during the 1950s and 1960s, had often encountered German Jews in their little shops and coffee houses in Tel Aviv, in the streets of the northern town of Nahariya, or on the shaded paths of some of Jerusalem's new Jewish neighborhoods. Although we could not understand what was being said in these immigrants' living rooms, which were crowded with old furniture and rugs that somehow had found their way across the Mediterraniean, we knew they were often preoccupied with the affairs of the world they had left behind. Even more so – they were involved in issues related to that highbrow, wondrous, and for us unattainable culture that they brought with them from that world. Its fruits decorated every naked corner on their walls with fine paintings and elegantly bound volumes. They were busy with poetry, literature, and music, cultivating

the treasures of their lost homes. On their part, they seemed to regard us forgivingly, somewhat suspiciously, and with apparent reservations. It seemed as if they were judging us from afar or from within that strange bubble in which they lived among us, under the scorching sun of their new land. Those were the days during which the scope of the atrocities perpetrated on the Jews in Europe were only beginning to dawn upon us.

Even as a young girl, the peculiar combination that Jews of German origin had projected – an enduring admiration for German culture on the one hand, and a burning hatred for this modern-day oppressor on the other – was a constant source of discomfort for me. My father immigrated to Palestine from Germany in the summer of 1933. Our apartment contained the familiar German bookshelf, including ornamented editions of the writings of Goethe and Heine, first editions of Thomas Mann's novels, some Schiller and Nietzsche, and even Bismarck's memoirs in three gold-trimmed volumes. However, at home we spoke only Hebrew. On Saturday nights, when Pinchas Rosen, Israel's first Minister of Justice, would come up from his next-door apartment to smoke a cigar with my father and attempt one of those uneasy conversations in German, my father would always respond in Hebrew. Of course he retained the unmistakable German-Jewish, the so-called Yeke accent, but he was proud of his eloquent, fluent Hebrew. *His* story, we have always believed, was the Zionist story at its best: Dad was "there" when Nazi students raised their flag on the central building of the Kaiser Wilhelm University in Berlin. He immediately realized that there was no place for him there anymore. The preparations took a few months, as several matters had to be taken care of, but he had no doubts about the right course. Going to *Eretz Israel* was clearly the only solution. In any case, that is what the family story always implied, though others did not always see it that way. It was always understood that "the parents," that is, my grandparents, would not hear of it. Their elegant villa, adjacent to the multistory sanitarium that they owned on the wooded slopes of Baden-Baden, a lively resort town in Southern Germany, was their only home. Their children were raised there as genuine Germans. The desert town to which their young son had sailed away to them seemed menacing and alien. They could not fathom what this offspring of a typical Jewish bourgeois family – of successful bankers and businessmen, scientists, physicians, and lawyers – a family that had been rooted in German soil for generations, would be doing in the dunes of that remote country. We did not discuss the matter too often at home, but we were always proud of our father, the only Zionist in his assimilated family – our kind of man.

And we had never questioned this story. The first cracks appeared unexpectedly. One morning, my father was rushed straight from his office in the Ministry of Justice in East Jerusalem to the Sha'are Tzedek Hospital in a coma. The next morning, as he began to recover, I was at his bedside when a young doctor interviewed him, trying to assess the damage. The patient was not sure of his whereabouts, nor could he give his name, his date of birth, or any other personal information. Then the doctor, in a seemingly offhand manner, asked him when he had immigrated to Israel. "Nineteen-thirty-three," my father promptly replied, and I suddenly grasped how central this date must have been for him. This indeed was the watershed in his life. It was a watershed even for those German Jews who had not yet sensed the magnitude of the imminent catastrophe at the time. It was a moment of great inner shock that would sooner or later require each and every one of them to perform a complete reassessment of their existence. The basis of their self-image had been completely shaken. Their personal and collective expectations were shattered. They were now forced to reexamine all the assumptions – social, cultural, and ideological – underlying their daily lives, their personal connections, their past experiences, and all of their economic and professional plans for the future.

Though my father's condition slowly improved, he never recovered completely. Interestingly, his relationship with the treasures of German culture, which he had apparently relinquished on immigration, became more accentuated now, in the twilight of his life. I noticed, too, that he was getting slightly softer on the use of the German language. It seemed that he was even pleased to help me in my first steps as a student of German history, though he was apparently rather perplexed at my new interest. He spoke German more often now with his old friends, and the connections with other members of his family, the ones who had opted for immigration to the United States, their children and grandchildren, grew warmer and more genial. Father passed away on November 29, 1985. During the week of mourning, in search of old photos, we found in the attic a wooden box containing an entire archive, of which we had had no inkling: hundreds of letters written to him by his parents and friends after he left Germany. Among them, one packet, held together by an old rubber band, immediately captured my attention. The packet contained thirty-seven letters my father had written to his future wife, my mother, between April and June of 1933. He was still in Germany then, while she, a "Palestinian" who had come to Germany as a student a few years earlier,

was already back at her parents' home in Tel Aviv. When the Nazis came to power, my mother had just managed to obtain her physician's diploma, and by the end of March she was sailing back to Jaffa. With a clear and steady hand and in fine German prose, this young man of twenty-five tried to tell his sweetheart what he was going through during those days. When we found the letters, my mother was as curious as I. Yet when she glanced through them, she seemed upset. "Had I been less certain that he actually wrote them," she pointed to the meticulously numbered pile, "I would not have believed it." She could not cope with the pain. That night I tightened the old rubber band around the letters again and placed them back in the wooden box, now temporarily shoved under one of the beds. My mother never asked what happened to them.

It was only after her death that I went back to the wooden box and fished out my father's letters again. The more I read, the more I understood my mother's displeasure. Surprisingly, the letters did not support the story we had been telling ourselves all those years. Only the basic "dry" facts matched. Mother had gone to Germany to study physics in Berlin, the science capital of Europe in those days, and later switched to medicine. Her father was a pioneering Zionist. This enlightened autodidact had been a Hebrew teacher even back there in Berditschev, and his mastery of Hebrew grammar served him well when he immigrated in 1912, along with a pregnant wife and seven young children. Shmuel-Chaym Berkus soon became a teacher at the first Hebrew Gymnasium in the by-then barely established town of Tel Aviv. The children grew up there and were naturally staunch Zionists. From my mother's point of view, there were indeed no doubts: Nazi Germany left only a single alternative to Jews. She promptly returned home. In his letters to this energetic and clear-sighted woman, young Otto Rudolph Heinsheimer could probably express just a fraction of his conflicting emotions. Nevertheless, the shock he had suffered was clearly reflected in his writing: the pain, the confusion, the imminent depression, the disorientation, and, finally, the hesitant decision to sail after her to Palestine forthwith.

During the first days of the Nazi regime, Berlin must have been a very disconcerting place for this young man. On April 25, despite his dark mood, so he wrote, he decided to go to the opera: "In the intermission – foyer: the public of a new Germany – completely uniform. Income between 250 and 1000 marks per month. Social position between chief clerk and government counselor. Not more than one percent Jews. I was dumbfounded as I have not been in a long time: because of the complete

transformation, because of the incredible uniformity. . . ."[1] A few days later he had a similar experience when he heard – and he must have made a special effort to hear – "a particularly weak speech" by Berlin University's new rector, anthropologist and race scientist, Professor Eugen Fischer. "It became clear to me, that in this new university [sic!] there was no room for us Jews," the young Heinsheimer dryly wrote, "no, no room at all." And on a more personal note he added: "Do you remember how I always used to go to the university and how I used to come back?"[2] How he must have loved to go there and how he loved the city opera!

In the atmosphere of those days, Heinsheimer found it difficult to write: "Not a thought is being formed," he complained, "not a word. Inside me – a kind of dark, powerful, strangely exciting vibration, unrest and silent agitation."[3] The words most commonly repeated in his letters from these days were "wilderness," "a dead-end desert," "darkness," and "uncertain darkness." "Inside me – utter darkness," he wrote to his beloved, "and thoughts, sensations, feelings and everything else scramble in confusion like ghosts. It all seems like a play of shadows on a half-lit wall, one cannot recognize the people responsible for it, nor grasp them." "Not yet," he adds with a sudden gust of youthful hope, "but soon it will all be fine."[4]

The depth of despair of this young man was finally fully revealed in his letter of May 2, written after hearing on the radio the speech that Hitler gave the previous day at the Tempelhoferfeld in Berlin. The letter is brimming with enthusiasm, even a sense of exultation vis-à-vis the slightest, albeit far and vague possibility, one that would soon slip away forever: a glimmer of hope that maybe, just maybe, he could still be a part of Germany again. The personal context of Heinsheimer's life in Berlin only serves to highlight the message of this letter. At the time, many of his close friends were hard-core Zionists. My mother, too, surely had no doubts. Here was a man who was just one step away from a decision to join her and her friends and draw all the necessary consequeces. Indeed, he probably was then, as he had always been, a slightly introverted, withdrawn person, strictly rational, and very hard to impress. And this was only days after the passage of the *Arierparagraph*, which virtually destroyed any chance

[1] Here and throughout the Prologue I am quoting from a collection of my father's personal letters in my possession, all numbered chronologically by him. The passage quoted here is from letter number 4.
[2] Letter number 9.
[3] Letter number 3.
[4] Letter number 4.

for him to advance a professional career in Germany. Yet Hitler's speech had an immense impact on him. It was not the text itself that so deeply moved him, but primarily that sparkle of new hope, the hope of joining a course that had seemed totally obstructed before. But then, soon enough, came another wave of confusion, paralyzing indecision, and finally, again, just "darkness."

According to his own testimony, Heinsheimer listened to Hitler's speech in a somewhat reserved and generally unsympathetic milieu, at a friend's home. Yet it was an overwhelming experience: "The shocking, crushing – yet at the same time uplifting – thing about the speech . . . was certainly not the details of the program; not the elegant, organic structure, the flawless eloquence, but the sheer expression of a gigantic force of nature, a brilliant testimony of an unshakable belief, a direct communication with a visionary and the thunderous call of a colossal personality."[5] From these heights, Heinsheimer was once again thrown into the existential abyss in which he found himself: "Is there really no possibility at all for a Jew to take part in this thing here? Or, if not now, when would it be possible again? Can one perhaps wait through this time of transition? Should one?" Then came the unavoidable disillusionment. He was engulfed by doubts and rhetorically addressing himself he wrote: "And what exactly are you giving up here? What awaits you outside? Where do you belong? How and where can you set yourself up? What do you look for, after all? What is really important for you? Where and what are your values, your talents, your aims, your ideals? Where, who, how, what?" "At times it seems to me," he concludes in despair, "that I can no longer live nor die."[6]

There is surely a measure of general malaise in these lines, an expression of the existential agony of a young man. But it is also the voice of a person whose world was shattered, undergoing a deep crisis, seeking a way out of a real catastrophe. Heinsheimer was twenty-five years old then, gifted, hardworking, and energetic. Within a couple of months he gathered his strength and left for Palestine. "As much as it seems attractive – in theory – to participate in this new and wonderful project that is apparently being built here . . . " he writes, "so it seems inexorably certain – in practice – that our cooperation is unwanted, prohibited and rejected; and so the conclusion that we should turn our back to this country is inevitable."[7] His friends, who as in many other cases were mostly

[5] Letter number 8.
[6] Letter number 8.
[7] Letter number 9.

of Jewish origin, went each their own way: During those very days one of them married a non-Jewish woman, moved to Hamburg, and later on made his way to the shores of the Pacific Ocean and the suburbs of San Francisco. Another always had a liking for all things English, and that summer he sailed off to England without much reservation or sentimentality. A third was determined to stay. Eventually he even joined the *verband Nationaldeutcher Juden*, the organization of German-Jewish nationalists. But he too managed to escape the inferno in time. They were all in their late twenties, from well-to-do and highly cultured families, dynamic and resourceful – exceptional in that atmosphere of general "lethargy" among Jews, of which Heinsheimer reported in his letters. Yet how difficult this extraction must have been for them! One had to be freed, my father wrote in another letter, from so many ties that were "unshakable and unquestionable. . . . From the country and your sense of belonging to it – something that was taken for granted; from the language and the culture – which are still your natural foundations; from the profession of German law and its surroundings" – and here he stresses his own personal experience – "in which I grew up and which has been my legacy," and also from the "urban milieu of Central Europe, the practices and lifestyle of the intellectual petit bourgeois, from the climate and the seasons of the temperate zone, etc." After all, he comments elsewhere, one should never forget nor underestimate that self-evident certainty with which, despite everything, "I had been a German – even if it were a thousand times an error."[8]

The depth of disillusionment cries out from every sentence. It was a personal tragedy. Moreover, this tragedy must be viewed in contrast to that sense of success and satisfaction that had inspired so many Jews in Germany in previous years. In a 1988 article, historian Jacob Toury reminded us of the "sense of security of being German" that prevailed among the leadership of most Jewish organizations during the Weimar Republic.[9] This sentiment was not limited to the fully assimilated, negligible margins; it was the sweeping sense of an entire community, even of those who maintained their Jewishness openly and explicitly, who developed close ties almost exclusively among themselves and held themselves responsible for sustaining the uniqueness of their separate social world.

[8] Letter number 15.

[9] See Jacob Toury, "Gab es ein Krisenbewusstsein unter den Juden während der 'Guten Jahre' der Weimarer Republik 1924–1929?" *Tel Aviver Jahrbuch für Deutche Geschichte* 17, 1988, 145–68.

In that difficult hour, even they were faced with a crucial choice. "I am speaking here about the good German bourgeois Jews," my father wrote on the eve of his departure from Germany, already looking at them as if from outside, "not only about the loss of everything, about the new exile. No, this is a real collapse. A hard and terrible fall. People who have been moving safely on a wobbly scaffold are now realizing that everything is falling apart. And into what? Into nothingness . . . " As my father saw it, these Jews found themselves, suddenly and without warning, "sailing on a ghost ship which can no longer be saved from drowning."[10]

He himself arrived in Jaffa in July 1933. With surprising agility he adopted a new identity – Jewish, national, and eventually Israeli. Perhaps his young age, and maybe his wife's loving family, which immediately embraced him, facilitated this transition. After all, a new national community was being built here as well. Here, too, it was possible to take part in a great, exciting nation-building project. And my father ardently joined in. When he went to Germany to visit his parents two years later, he was already writing home long letters in high, standard Hebrew. After some searching, he found his way back to the law, passed the bar examination in its British version, and began to work in his profession, both in the private and in the public sectors of the Jewish *Yeshuv*. When the State of Israel was declared, my father was among the founders of the Ministry of Justice. He was among those who drafted the various versions of the Charter of Independence, the Law of Return, and other fundamental laws needed by the emergimg State – he was one of the forefathers of Israel's corpus of civic law. Our family story about his road from Berlin to Jerusalem perfectly suited this new identity. The days of "darkness," the shame, the indecision concerning emmigration – all of these were suppressed. His memory – and ours – has been adapted to the new reality.

[10] Letter number 33.

PART I

INTERPRETING THE DANGER SIGNS