Germans, Jews, and Antisemites

Trials in Emancipation

The ferocity of the Nazi attack on the Jews took many by surprise. This book tries to explain why. Volkov argues that a new look at both the nature of antisemitism and the complexity of modern Jewish life in Germany is required in order to provide an explanation. While antisemitism had a number of functions in pre-Nazi German society, it most particularly served as a cultural code, a sign of belonging to a particular political and cultural milieu. Surprisingly, it had only a limited effect on the lives of the Jews themselves. Theirs was a remarkable success story. By the end of the nineteenth century, their integration was well advanced. Many of them enjoyed prosperity, prestige, and the pleasures of metropolitan life. This did not necessarily entail an abandonment of Judaism. This book stresses the dialectical nature of assimilation, the lead of the Jews in the processes of modernization, and, finally, their continuous efforts to "invent" a modern Judaism that would fit their new social and cultural positions.

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It is like a miracle! I have experienced it a thousand times and it remains forever new to me. One blames me for being a Jew, the other forgives me for it; the third even praises me on this account; but they all think of it. As if they were caged in that magical Jewish circle, no one can get out.

Ludwig Börne, in a letter from Paris, February 7, 1832

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Preface

This book addresses the great hope for equality, citizenship, and a life of partnership that had uplifted German Jews during the Era of Emancipation. It treats the various factors that caused the shattering of this hope. It also treats the Jews' extraordinary achievements – sometimes indeed against all odds – during that period. It is the story of success on the brink of destruction. However, I do not intend to tell it in full nor in a perfect chronological order. My purpose is to dwell upon some of the questions this story has raised for me, from my own, personal point of view. Yet this is not a private matter. My personal perspective is, in a sense, the perspective of an entire generation, a generation of Jews, in particular Israeli Jews, who seem to be still contemplating the strange life-experiences of their parents and grandparents, sometimes even their great grandparents, in Germany before Nazism. Mine, I believe, is likewise the perspective of a generation of historians, endeavoring to rethink what has traditionally been presented to them as a closed, reasoned, and sealed story. The questions I pose reflect my place in the generational chain of German Jewry as well as my position in the historiographical chain of writing about them. They also reflect, as always, the uneasy times in which we live. They reflect, or so I hope, something of the search for identity by those who were brought up, as I was, on Zionism without doubts, or, in any case, on Zionism that felt unable to openly discuss doubts; of those who were brought up while the extent of the catastrophe in Europe was being revealed but also while Jewish life was being reconstructed within the confines of a new world, with different and changing parameters.

The history of the Jews in Germany has all too often been regarded as a mirror of Jewish fate in general. Zionists on the one hand, and

non-Zionists, or even anti-Zionists, on the other, have repeatedly made ideological use of it. Even today historians continue to find themselves grappling with issues that were controversial among German Jews as long as a hundred years ago. Telling this story, historians find themselves all too often participating in debates belonging to past generations. We seem to be still entangled in that Jewish "magical circle," referred to by Ludwig Börne in the epigraph of this book. Equally complex and many-sided is the discourse about antisemitism, particularly in Germany, saturated by current political attitudes and dictated by positions taken on various current affairs. While I have not refrained from occasionally taking on explicit positions in this book, I tried to make at least some use of the relatively long historical distance now at our disposal. Even in dealing with such delicate issues, distance permits us, at long last, to detach ourselves from the circumstances of past debates and rethink them from our own angle. As a historian, I am committed to applying the full range of historical sources, concepts, and methodological tools. I am committed to the effort of searching truth about the past. However, I am well aware of my limitations. This history continues to bear upon my life. It touches my personal roots and the issues I am concerned with – not only as a historian. I have tried not to ignore this fact.

For more than two decades I have been preoccupied with the history of antisemitism in Germany and the life of the Jews in that country. Some of the essays I wrote in the process, such as my work on "Antisemitism as a Cultural Code," have had a modest influence on this field. Nevertheless, when I first began to compile these essays, I realized that they seem to form chapters of a single book and that the arguments in them stand out much better when presented together. The structure of the book, then, partially reconstructs the path I trod during the years of research and partly reflects my present understanding of the theme as a whole. It begins with the question that had initially driven me to work in this field: Why was it so hard to see the approaching disaster? What caused the "blindness" that afflicted so many Jews and non-Jews, in Germany and abroad? The premise underlying my answer to this question is that the difficulty was a result of the true complexity of the situation. Contemporaries did not suffer from a rare case of blindness or insensitivity. Matters were indeed so obscure and so multidimensional that it was practically impossible, even for many clear-sighted men and women, to see through and extract the ominous signs.

In the first part of the book I therefore attempt to reconstruct what men and women living in that era saw, to tell their story by getting closer

to their own world of vision and associations from a variety of perspectives. Only then do I proceed to form my own interpretation of what I believe was the essence of their experience, discuss the external forces that influenced them, their individual and collective motivations, and above all, the various dilemmas they were forced to confront. I open with a re-evaluation of the history of modern antisemitism in Germany. This is the focus of Part II of the book. Considering the tragic end of this story and my insistence on keeping alive today's point of departure, discussion of this question could not be deferred. Here I mainly address the antisemitism of the second half of the nineteenth century, while exploring the role it then fulfilled in the functioning of German society and its connections with a variety of other, related issues at the time. This part is intended as a contribution to German, not only to German-Jewish, history. Again, the underlying assumption may not be entirely self-evident: Coping with antisemitism, I would argue, was no doubt an integral part of the life of German Jews. It was central to their lives even in that "semi-neutral society," to use historian Jacob Katz's fitting term, within which they then learned to move and act. Undoubtedly, in order to properly appreciate their experience, we must understand its history. But the story of antisemitism, despite its paramount importance for Jews, despite the giant shadow it casts on every aspect of their life, is mainly the story of the non-Jews, in this case the other Germans, including but not exclusively the antisemites among them. It is the peculiarities of German society and culture that inform the arguments in this part of the book.

As for the Jews, antisemitism in this period was not really the focus of their existence. Part III of the book turns to tell their story. It often dwells, indeed, upon that seam connecting Jews with other Germans, but its focal point lies in issues that concerned Jews alone. As the discussion develops, I try to show that modern German Jewish history revolved around neither antisemitism nor Jewish efforts to be accepted, "Germanized" or assimilated. Jews were busy doing many other things at that time. Following an excursion into the problem of minorities in the modern nation-state, Part III describes first Jewish efforts to climb up the socio-economic ladder and then some aspects of their acculturation. It then turns to deal with the process of Jewish modernization and explain its tactics of exploiting old advantages and devising new ones. After taking a closer look at one area in which Jewish success was, indeed, phenomenal, namely in the natural sciences, Part III moves on to observe the limits of assimilation. By the late nineteenth century, "entry" could still be only partially achieved, but by then Jews were once again preoccupied with

other matters, now mainly with the debates among themselves concerning the ways in which to reshape their identity under the new circumstances. This had to be done within a complicated context, within a society that simultaneously accepted and rejected them, that appreciated and resented them at the same time, that opened some gates for them and locked, partially or fully, some others. Thus, the story gets more intricate as we move along. The questions raised get thornier; the answers become, alas, less conclusive.

There is a broad historiography on German Jewry. In much of it German history merely serves as a background. In this book I tried to present Germany and its Jews within a single perspective. Jews, antisemites, and "ordinary" Germans formed a whole that could not be untangled. Theirs is a single history. In addition, I reject the historiographic convention according to which various historical genres must never be truly mixed. This book is conceived as both a cultural and a social history. In writing it I used sources considered characteristic of intellectual history, such as the works of philosophers, literary figures, and a variety of social observers. I also used sources deemed typical of social history, such as newspapers, memoirs, and some quantitative, statistical data. I maintain that historians must utilize all the sources at their disposal and that only by doing so can they begin to offset their major professional "drawback," namely their inability to interrogate and poll contemporaries, to fully decipher their symbolic and associative world. Moreover, within the book I have placed together findings based on extensive reading of the secondary literature with results based on my own primary investigations. These investigations, such as the one constructing a demographic profile of one particular Jewish community in Germany, that of the city of Altona, or the one concerning a small yet important group of outstanding Jews in the natural sciences, were conceived in an effort to explore and expound very concrete questions raised in the course of my work. Although such studies may also be read separately, I try to place them in their proper context, within an overall framework. Hopefully they enrich the story.

An earlier version of this book was published in Hebrew by Am Oved Publishing House in Tel Aviv, 2002. Orit Friedland has prepared a full English translation of this version with much care and sensitivity. I am deeply grateful to her. The final text, however, has undergone numerous stylistic reformulations, as well as some changes in structure and organization. A warm thank-you goes to Aya Lahav, too, who rewrote the notes with extreme care, rendering them more useful for the English reader,

and in the process corrected and improved them considerably. I have also attempted to update my bibliography, but despite the continuing stream of works on German Jews, some of which are of the highest standard, I decided to make only slight revisions and a few sporadic additions to my own text in response to these works. I hope my arguments hold within this rich and ever-changing historiographical context, too.

I cannot possibly mention here all the people who have contributed to my work along the way – teachers, colleagues, friends, and students, in Israel and abroad. But I cannot conclude this preface without invoking the memory of my parents, both of whom have passed away during the years I was working on this project. They both followed with some amazement my interest in the history of Germany in general and its Jews in particular. I, on my part, never understood why they were amazed. After all, it was my father who had epitomized for me all the generosity and dignity typical of the German Jews, and it was my mother who had taught me, in her own way, to think critically even about those I loved. This book is indeed related to my parents and interwoven in their lives by many strings, both obvious and subtle. But finally, it was only Alik Volkov, who shared with me the journey itself, the years of research, writing, and rewriting. He always believed, even when I had my grave doubts, that this was a worthwhile effort. It grieves me immeasurably that he will not be able to see the finished product. This book is dedicated to his memory with love.