

Conclusion

GERMANY ON THEIR MINDS?



This phrase, minus the question mark, is a chapter title in a recent work by Hasia Diner that tells the story of the centrality of the Holocaust in the consciousness of American Jews after World War II. In their postwar discourse on the Holocaust, American Jews remained conscious and vocal not only about the murder of six million Jews but also about the role of Germany and the Germans as the perpetrators. The Germany that most American Jews had on their minds was the ultimate villain. For the many Jews from Germany who had fled the country before the outbreak of the war and settled in the United States, however, the image of their former home was more complicated. Whether Germany should be on the minds of German Jewish refugees at all was itself not a given but was a highly contentious and often debated subject among them. Could one engage with German matters without losing Jewish self-respect? Could one be a good American while adhering to German culture or taking an interest in the country's postwar political direction? If so, how should one balance these things?

The German Jewish refugee relationship to Germany, then, had to do with who the refugees imagined themselves to be in the aftermath of Nazi oppression and flight, and later with the discovery of murdered family and friends among millions of Jewish dead, and it was a major factor in how they identified themselves and their community.¹ Germany was "on their minds" and agendas so frequently not simply because they particularly did or did not want to engage with it, but often because broader political circumstances somehow dictated that engagement, or because West Germany initiated contact, or both. Because of the close and strategically important postwar relationship between the United States and West Germany, German Jews who came to America faced many situations

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in which they were confronted with Germany directly or indirectly, and the U.S. relationship to Germany was always a significant factor influencing their own image of Germany, as well as relationships and interactions with Germans. This was particularly apparent when the refugees were classified as enemy aliens after the United States joined the war. During that time, their German background was the basis for their legal classification as German enemy aliens, which forced them to engage with their German identity. In response to this, many, especially politically active refugees on the West Coast, politicized and foregrounded their particular German Jewish identity and connection to Germany—as victims of Nazi persecution and prime enemies of the Nazis—in order to cast themselves as loyal to the United States. During this time, then, due to external pressures that differed from the East to West Coast, where the enemy alien act was far more stringently applied, community members drew closer to their identity as German Jews, paradoxically in order to make themselves better candidates for becoming Americans.

When changes in the enemy alien classification allowed it, German Jewish refugees supported the Allied military campaign against the Nazis as soldiers in the U.S. Army and on the home front. For refugee soldiers, this position of belonging to the United States radically changed their relationship to the Germans they encountered because they were now in a position of power. Refugees on the home front, meanwhile, engaged in slightly less immediate questions of retribution for Nazi crimes and were able to use some of their knowledge of these crimes to incriminate perpetrators through various U.S. government channels. In these ways, belonging to America transformed refugees' identity: they were no longer merely victims of the Nazis but now had some direct or indirect empowerment in relation to Germany and were able to “settle” with the Germans, gain some level of satisfaction, or simply fight (and win) against their former oppressors if they wished.

Toward the end of the war, as German Jewish refugees joined discussions of larger American organizations on the topics of reparation and restitution, they once again foregrounded their German Jewish identity. Instead of blending in with greater American Jewry, which some refugees hoped to do, refugee community leaders projected a German Jewish voice to advance their specific claims against Germany, as well as to assert their moral authority to make them. The formulation of these demands for restitution for the crimes committed against them meant that Jewish refugees foresaw engagement with Germany in the post-war period if the Allies won the war. However, there was no agreement over what the character and extent of this engagement should be. In their participation in the public debate in America during 1943 and 1944 over Germany's postwar future, German Jewish refugees did not present a unified voice. Nevertheless, they shared the view that they could legitimately engage with Germany only in the Jewish interest.

Under this presupposition, the German Jewish refugee press watched developments in Germany during the early postwar years very carefully. While the same may be said about the broader American Jewish press, German Jews took a particular interest in details, looking at developments on the federal and the local level, and judging with an expertise borne of close acquaintance and inside knowledge. They were not slow to voice their displeasure whenever the West German government misstepped or misspoke.

Nor was the West German government deaf to the criticism. The Western Allies had made it clear that postwar Germany would be judged, among other things, by the way it dealt with the group of people it had so recently tried to exterminate. Additionally, the new West German government sought to secure a solid position in the West and a close bond with the United States in particular. This, combined with more general public relations and an anti-Semitic narrative of great influence of Jews on U.S. policy, caused West German officials to take the opinions of the American German Jewish community very seriously. While a major change in the relationship took place at that time because West Germany was pressured to change, I have demonstrated that the refugees contributed to this change. The critical perspective from outside the geographic territory of the Federal Republic was an important factor in its re-engagement with German Jews. This was the first point at which the relationship between the organized German Jewish community in the United States and West German officials became mutually constitutive in the postwar period. One sees this in West German government decisions made with German Jewish positions and reactions in mind, and even with the input of German Jewish refugees. In the pursuit of good relations, the West German Foreign Office appointed officials who represented the projected ideal of a new Germany to areas with large Jewish—and particularly German Jewish—constituencies. These appointments, in turn, then contributed to change in the Foreign Office itself.

For German Jewish leaders who had demanded restitution, the West German restitution legislation, while not without its difficulties, was an acceptable point of engagement with Germany, being directly in refugees' interest. It was through this engagement and the interactions surrounding restitution, however, that fundamental change in the relationship took place. German government officials who were interested in making restitution work not only for the sake of promoting a positive image of Germany, but also to make up for the past and for the sake of the people it was intended to help, effectively communicated to the refugees that they mattered to them. In the interactions that developed in the 1950s, then, we see the development of a relationship between West German officials and the organized refugee community in the United States in which both sides looked to each other and affected each other's self-understanding. The contact allowed refugees, in a discourse of alternating praise and criticism (as they saw fit to comment on West German actions and policies), to see themselves as moral

guides in relation to Germany and to be acknowledged in this role. On the side of the Federal Republic, the sensitivity to the Jewish refugee position, even if only present in select individuals, contributed to a more accepting political climate and facilitated further improvement in the relationship.

Thus, the postwar relationship between German Jewish refugees and Germany was initially driven significantly by pragmatism, but also by the existence of leaders from both sides who did not want to see the Holocaust as the endpoint of relations and who desired reconciliation. The re-establishment of trusted relationships, which had survived the Holocaust, between individual German Jewish refugees and local West German citizens was tremendously important to facilitating a dialogue and promoting that dialogue in the respective communities. Many of those who drove the relationship had been politically active together before the war, and some on the non-Jewish German side had also suffered under the Nazis. From the German Jewish community, rabbis were frequently important mediators, as they were often knowledgeable about German conditions, having been invited to West Germany by the Jewish community in their former hometown or, as we have seen, by the West German government.² *Aufbau*, however, was highly influential in this process of “bridge building” through its general reporting on German developments and in its publishing of personal recollections from ordinary refugees who visited Germany.

Only small numbers of refugees visited Germany in the 1950s and came into contact with Germans working in the country’s diplomatic missions in the United States. For the most part, the relationship between most German Jewish refugees and West Germany was mediated by proxies until at least the 1960s: refugees who had interactions with Germans or traveled to West Germany reported on it, and developments in Germany were observed and debated from the United States. At the same time, only very few West Germans had interactions with refugees living in the United States. Beginning in the 1960, the visitor programs changed this and brought more immediate contacts for many more German Jewish refugees with West Germany and Germans. This major change in the relationship resulted from, on the one hand, the initiative of the few German Jewish refugees who had connections to and an interest in Germany and proposed such visits, and, on the other hand, West Germans who had an interest in reconciliation. Important drivers in this process were teachers and local historians, as well as members of Christian reconciliation movements, in particular the society for Christian Jewish cooperation, and Social Democrats. While the number of West German citizens who had such interests and interactions with German Jewish refugees remained comparatively small, more and more people from outside official government circles and those working at restitution offices got involved over time.

The visitor programs for Jewish refugees must be understood as both a driver and a symptom of West German processes of confronting the Nazi past. Propelled

by a growing climate of Holocaust memorialization nationally and internationally, these programs became most widespread in the late 1980s. During this period, the drive for change in the German Jewish relationship came primarily from West Germans, motivated by attempts to come to terms with the Nazi past, to demonstrate their good will, and to behave like “good Germans.” The refugee contribution to this effort, as survivors and witnesses of Nazi persecution, cannot be overestimated.

For visiting refugees, as we have seen, the visitor program deeply affected and intensified their German Jewish identity, though in highly variable and not always positive ways. While German organizers’ goal was to reconcile and reach a good relationship with refugees, some visitors suffered from homesickness, regret, or anger at what had been destroyed in Nazi Germany. Reconciliation with Germans of the present, even if it happened, could not undo the damage—repatriation for refugees who might have wanted it was not possible unless they could pay for it themselves, visits were limited and short, the dead could not be brought back to life, and terrible memories sometimes overpowered good ones.

However, most refugees seem to have accepted the visits as “gestures of reconciliation.”³ In their reports, visitors said that the trip provided them with a sense of closure, was therapeutic, brought back positive memories, and in many cases gave their past a meaning because they were able to bear witness to younger generations of Germans. While individual reactions varied, the organized community broadly welcomed these programs, as one of their strongest consequences was an intensified connection to refugees’ German Jewish heritage. At the 1956 annual meeting of the American Federation of Jews from Central Europe, chairman Max Gruenewald had lamented the fading group identity of German Jewish refugees:

What brought us together, what ought to keep us together, is the common heritage and our sharing in a historical experience of ghastly proportions. In a very short time this joint experience has lost much of its suggestive power, and the stock of common thoughts and joint memories has been all but spent. The talent of assimilation, one of the characteristics of German Jews, has developed in this country into an artistry of forgetting what lies behind us.⁴

German Jewish refugees’ relationship with Germany significantly revived their consciousness of common heritage. Heritage is intrinsically connected to notions of present and future identities. While the connection with Germany was based in their past, the refugees’ relationship to their former homeland went beyond the retrospective. Over the course of the fifty years mapped out in this book, their relationship to the concept and country of Germany changed from something one related to only in terms of the past to something important for their future—the future of individual families and the viability of the organized refugee community in the United States as a whole. For many refugees, it was important to

share stories of their German past with their children and grandchildren so that their own history would not be forgotten and their descendants could feel like a part of a distinct community, something that held and holds considerable significance especially in the United States. At the same time, future-oriented relations with Germany went beyond the focus on their own community. Feeling a responsibility toward educating young Germans so that they would not repeat the mistakes of their parents and grandparents, some refugees made it their mission to speak to them of persecution, flight, and murder, hoping that it would make the world a better place for generations to come.

In the history of the relationship between German Jewish refugees in the United States and Germany, each side contributed significantly to the other. The relationship changed as Germany changed, and the refugees played an important part in bringing this change about. Because of the history of persecution and murder, the relationship was never a happy or uncomplicated one. Yet, despite it constantly being questioned and fragile, the relationship between German Jewish refugees and Germany remained continually entangled, for good or ill, each affecting the other.

Notes

1. For American Jews, this was similar in that the way they spoke about Germany was a “memorial obligation.” Diner, *We Remember with Reverence and Love*, 217.
2. Cornelia Wilhelm is currently researching the history of German Jewish (refugee) rabbis in the United States. Her work promises further insight into their role in this process.
3. Henry Marx, “Fast 120 Städte laden ein,” *Aufbau* 60 (28 October 1994): 2.
4. Max Gruenewald, “Opening Address,” in American Federation of Jews from Central Europe, Inc., *Annual Meeting: Reports and Addresses*, 1956, 9.