

INTRODUCTION



In September 2009, a group of former German Jewish refugees and their families visited Berlin. For most of them it was the first time they returned to the city, their birthplace or long-time residence, since they had fled Germany from Nazi persecution more than seventy years before. They came from various places in Israel, South America, Great Britain, and the United States at the invitation of the city government. Since 1969, West Berlin had run a program, launched in the spirit of *Wiedergutmachung*—literally meaning “making good again” and practically referring to a legislation for material compensation for victims of National Socialism—that sponsored trips for former residents who had fled because of Nazi persecution.

During their week in Berlin, the visitors met city and government officials at special receptions, went on sightseeing tours, attended the opera, and had time to pursue quests into their personal pasts. This could mean visiting the Jewish cemetery in Berlin-Weissensee or going to see their former home, but also finding out about the fate of family members. On this 2009 visit, Ralph Reuss from Portland, Oregon, for example, learned the date of the deportation of his paternal grandparents and uncles from Berlin and that they had been sent to Auschwitz. After his return to the United States, Reuss reflected on how he had felt visiting the station where the deportation trains had departed Berlin. “On the rainy gray and gloomy day when our group was standing on the railway platform I couldn’t help but think of the fear and hopelessness my grandparents and uncles were feeling on a cold December 14, 1942.”¹ Yet, even as he reflected on such somber matters, a few lines later he also wrote, “All in all Berlin seems like a very livable city about which I have very positive feelings—after all I am German!”

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Certainly, the Berlin of 2009, with its numerous memorials dedicated to the German persecution and murder of Jews and other groups, changed the image many refugees had of Germany to a more positive one. But why would Reuss identify as German? He had left Germany as a three-year-old child in 1939, spent the majority of his life in the United States, and had lost almost his entire family in the Holocaust. While it may not be too surprising that Jews who grew up in Germany and left several years before the Holocaust might call themselves German, what would motivate Reuss, who had hardly any personal memories of Germany, to do so? Did he just discover his Germanness on this trip, or had it played a role in his life before?

This book seeks to illuminate the apparent paradox that some of those grievously hurt by and driven from Germany, in spite of this experience, have frequently lived with their lives and identities inextricably connected to it. It traces the history of refugees from 1938, the high point of flight and immigration to the United States, up until 1988, when many refugees went to Germany to visit their former hometowns.

About ninety thousand German-speaking Jews entered the United States in the 1930s and early 1940s fleeing the Third Reich. They came not only from Germany but also from Austria, which Germany annexed in March 1938, and in smaller numbers from Czechoslovakia and other eastern European countries. These German-speaking refugees often came together in one organization, though Austrians also formed special Austrian sub-groups within some of the larger ones. The umbrella organization in the United States for all refugee groups from German-speaking Europe was the American Federation of Jews from Central Europe, with headquarters in New York City. Leadership positions in the federation were generally held by Jews from Germany. This book concerns itself solely with refugees coming from Germany, who are referred to here as German Jews.

The German Jews who came to the United States were so diverse that they were, as Herbert A. Strauss, the eminent historian of this German Jewish migration stated, “by any standard of social analysis . . . not a ‘group.’”² They differed in age and socioeconomic, political, religious, and cultural backgrounds. Most well-known are the stories of the famous artists, scientists, and intellectuals who came to the United States, such as Albert Einstein, Lion Feuchtwanger, Ludwig Marcuse, and Arnold Schönberg.³ However, most Jews who came from Germany were not famous, and this book examines the lives of these ordinary people who have mostly been neglected by historiographical scholarship on Jewish exile in the United States.⁴

While all of them experienced discrimination and persecution in Germany, the main protagonists of this book left Europe early enough to be spared the deportations to the concentration and extermination camps of the East. They settled all over the United States, with particularly high numbers in New York

City and Los Angeles. In many American cities, German Jewish refugees founded local institutions for the purpose of assisting each other in starting life in the new country, and these institutions, in turn, frequently joined together in regional and national organizations representing German Jewish refugees. In New York City, the German Jewish Club started the newspaper *Aufbau* (Reconstruction), which would soon become the major publication and nationwide mouthpiece for this group of immigrants. While the main purpose of these various organizational ventures was to assist the refugees in rebuilding their lives in the United States, they were nevertheless constantly occupied with questions related to Germany and the group's relationship to that country throughout the many years of their existence.

This topic of discussion was grounded in the centuries-long history of German Jewry. As long as Jews had lived in German-speaking lands, they felt the need to negotiate their position in and relation to the majority Christian society. Their status and self-representation was highly dependent on state and clerical authorities.⁵ In the United States, these discussions continued, not always because the Jewish refugees wanted to engage with Germany, but often because the broader political circumstances of their lives in the United States during World War II and the Cold War demanded some sort of engagement, or because Germans in the Federal Republic initiated contact with them, or both. In this way, German Jewish refugees frequently constructed their individual and communal lives and identities in relation to a real or imagined Germany, to the German nation-state and its political systems, institutions, and people, which themselves changed over the period, as well as to memories and imaginaries of Germany. They debated how, as a Jew from Germany living in the United States, one ought to view and position oneself vis-à-vis the German state, non-Jewish Germans, and German culture—concepts that also changed over time. Discussions about Germany, and any kind of engagement with it, were in many ways connected to the refugees' understandings of themselves: for many refugees these considerations centered on who they were and where they stood in the world. While East Germany (the German Democratic Republic, GDR) appeared in refugee discussions about Germany—particularly in the context of visits to West and East Berlin and in communications with Berliners—the book focuses on the community's postwar relationships to the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). The GDR did not seek official relations with German Jewish refugees, did not offer reparations, and played a relatively small role in the refugee community's discourse on Germany.⁶

In the United States, depending on the situation, Jews from Germany called themselves refugees, émigrés, immigrants to the United States—but rarely exiles. Many scholars have used the term “exile” indiscriminately for everybody who left Germany because of Nazi persecution, but this description neither matches the lived realities nor the self-identification of most German Jews.⁷ “Exile” is a description that fit many of those who fled primarily for political reasons, such

as Thomas Mann and Theodor W. Adorno, who considered the United States a temporary safe haven and who returned to Europe after the war, never having fully adjusted to the American way of life. While Thomas Mann was involved in American institutions, such as serving as a consultant to the Library of Congress, he did not make great efforts to familiarize himself and engage with American culture; instead, as one historian has said, he remained “German to the core.”⁸ Mann’s famous words, “Where I am is Germany,” demonstrate both his belief that the Third Reich was a temporary aberration of German history and that his role in the United States was that of a representative of a better, humanist Germany.⁹ For him, a future return to Germany was both an option and a goal.

In contrast, John Baer, a Jew from Breslau, explained in his memoir that when the Nazis came to power in 1933 “and made [him] a pariah in the land of [his] birth,” he had felt like an exile in Germany. In the “New World,” however, he felt accepted and was determined to build a new life there.¹⁰ The majority of Jews who fled from the Nazis had a complicated relationship to the country of their birth. They arrived in the United States as Germans, sometimes with only a recent consciousness of being Jewish, having just suffered the experience of their fellow Germans becoming Nazis and their persecution in, and exclusion from, German society. A profound sense of their Germanness, on the one hand, and the deep injury that non-Jewish Germans had inflicted on them, on the other, were opposing psychological forces that many refugees tried to reconcile or comprehend after their arrival. Returning to Germany was not what they primarily hoped for nor planned for the future. In a strictly legal sense, being a refugee is often a transitory category. Depending on the circumstances and consequences of flight, however, it can become an integral part of a person’s life. I use the designation “refugee” because it describes the majority’s situation most accurately, even over the long term and through changing political and personal circumstances, and because the subjects of this study most commonly used it themselves.

Nevertheless, at one time or another, different designations could prove more appropriate or advantageous. In the 1980s, for example, when people in the United States and certain Western European countries began to pay increasing attention to the Holocaust, German Jews who had been able to escape before the beginning of deportations to ghettos and camps in the East sometimes also identified as “survivors.” The “Holocaust survivor” became a central figure in the history and memory of the Holocaust in the 1980s. Nevertheless, what defines a person as a survivor has varied in the eyes of those who so designated themselves, as well as among historians and people who became active in Holocaust memorialization.¹¹ For the most part, the refugee community in the United States reserved the designation of survivor for those, mainly eastern European Jews, who were in Europe between 1933 and the end of the war and thus wound up in some form of concentration camp, in hiding, or were partisans, and who came

to the United States after 1945. When the “survivor” became a person to whom respect and honor was bestowed, German Jewish refugees also began using the designation for themselves more frequently.

After all, identity formation is not an unconscious process entirely driven by its own free-flowing dynamics but one that is also consciously negotiated, fashioned, and performed, producing changing, contingent, and possibly contradictory narratives.¹² Depending on various circumstances, the Jewish refugees in the United States—individually and as a community—actively shaped their belonging and frequently policed identity presentations of the community.¹³ At one time or another, it was more beneficial to see or present oneself as German, German Jewish, Jewish, or American, as a refugee, an immigrant, or a survivor, for example. The degree to which this happened and the forms this took could also vary by geographical region.

At the center of this book is the refugee community in Los Angeles, which was the second largest in the country after New York. By 1942, around four thousand German Jewish refugees had taken up residence in Los Angeles.¹⁴ About half of them joined the Jewish Club of 1933, Inc. Because the major refugee organizations, the American Federation of Jews from Europe and the newspaper *Aufbau*, had their seats on the East Coast in New York, the Jewish Club of 1933 soon came to represent *all* German Jewish refugees in Southern California, and in some instances on the entire Pacific Coast. At times, the immigrant experience there differed significantly from that on the East Coast. Living conditions on the West Coast were different due to basic factors like climate, physical environment, and the greater distance to Europe. Some have contended that a distinctly Western form of Jewish community life developed there.¹⁵ The Hollywood studios, which had drawn a number of famous German cultural figures to the shores of the Pacific, also created a cultural scene unlike that of any other city in the United States. During World War II, regional wartime legislation had unique consequences for the German Jewish refugees there, which affected their lives for years to come. This study’s focus on Los Angeles, which is contextualized with examples from other places in the United States, complements the existing scholarship on German Jewish refugees, which has hitherto almost exclusively been told from an East Coast perspective. It does not attempt to be an in-depth study of Los Angeles but highlights differences, particularly to the East Coast and other places, while paying specific attention to the refugees’ position within the United States as it dominates their overall life and relationship to Germany.

The postwar period saw numerous direct and indirect interactions between German Jewish refugees in the United States and West Germany. The majority of studies on the refugees have focused on persecution, flight, and immigration, and on the ways the newcomers adjusted to life in the United States. The relationship to Germany is frequently framed as an immigrant story of letting go in order to integrate. This integration is mostly depicted as happening in

a linear way. The longer the refugees were in the country and the more they were involved in American life, the argument goes, the more tenuous their connection to Germany became, and their lives and identities were less and less affected by it. The point when most refugees became socioeconomically integrated into American life and received American citizenship, generally after the end of World War II, is frequently taken as a sort of completion of the refugee experience.¹⁶ However, expanding the temporal frame reveals that both the refugee experience and German Jewish refugee identity resonated long after the war. This happened in the context of a general rise of ethnic orientation and identity politics in American life over the second half of the twentieth century, when Jews in America began to emphasize their ethnic and religious traditions. While this American context motivated reflections on *Jewish* belonging, refugees' identification with their *German Jewish* refugee identity was largely conditioned by their relationship to Germany—not only by their own recurring awareness of their German past, but also significantly by interactions with West Germans in the postwar era.

In direct or indirect interactions, refugees, together with representatives from major Jewish organizations, demanded justice, restitution, and compensation for the ways they had been treated by Germans under Nazi rule. Thus, reasons for refugees' initial engagement with postwar Germans went far beyond nostalgia. Rather, they negotiated their connections with Germans from a perspective of present and future interests. Officials and members of the general public in West Germany, on the other hand, believed it important to cultivate positive relations with the refugees for a variety of political, strategic, and educational reasons, geared toward improving West Germany's image after the Holocaust.

For German officials, the existence of the small Jewish community in postwar West Germany served as an important legitimator for the country's "new" identity after the Third Reich. While many German Jews who stayed in or returned to the country after the war referred to feelings of attachment to Germany as a major reason for staying, some stressed a certain sentiment of "Jewish resistance" to the Nazi project to rid Germany and Europe of the Jews. Heinz Galinski, chairman of the Jewish community in Berlin and of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, said in this vein, "I have always represented the point of view that the Wannsee Conference cannot be the last word in the life of the Jewish community in Germany."¹⁷ The choice to stay was not easy but was a matter of principle and thoughtful decision.

The presence of the Jewish community in Germany, as well as contributions of individual refugees who remained in the United States, shaped the Federal Republic in important ways.¹⁸ Through its actions in the United States and visits to Germany, the German Jewish refugee community in the United States was a vital element of German history, shaping West Germans' democratic ambitions and dealings with the Nazi past. Based on publications and records of refugee

organizations in the United States as well as West German federal and municipal governments, in combination with oral histories, letters, and memoirs, this study examines the transnational interactions between German Jewish refugees and West Germans to demonstrate how the histories of German Jewish refugees and Germany were deeply intertwined over a fifty-year period.

The newspaper *Aufbau* is a key source of the history of German Jewish refugees in the United States and one on which I consistently rely.¹⁹ After starting with a circulation of about one thousand papers the first year of its existence in 1934, *Aufbau* quickly became the main publication for the community, putting out fifty thousand copies in 1950. The paper's readership was estimated to be much greater than its circulation, as it was frequently passed around within the community.²⁰ Many of the journalists on the editorial staff, largely of a politically liberal persuasion, had been active participants in the cultural life of the Weimar Republic. Among its prominent contributors were commentators such as Thomas Mann, Lion Feuchtwanger, and Hannah Arendt. While non-Jewish émigrés also wrote for the paper and read it, it was primarily a Jewish publication and the principle forum for public debate on anything concerning the German Jewish refugee community at large. However, with its broad circulation conveying a representative character, and eminent contributors from both within and outside this group, it developed a reach beyond the German Jewish community, and thus also became an organ for the projection of refugee opinion. In this capacity it was used to send sometimes quite direct messages—announcing the patriotism of the community to the American public and officials, for example, or hectoring German officials over restitution.

Since the paper's editorial staff was closely related not only to the German Jewish Club in New York but also the American Federation of Jews from Central Germany, its general editorial stance reflected that of community leaders in New York. However, it included regular pages reporting from different localities, in some cases regional supplements, and letters to the editor columns, and thus displayed a variety of voices and opinions from this group. Consequently, it is the single most important resource for capturing general community sentiment and identifying topics of discontent. Inevitably, however, it also functioned as an opinion shaper within the community and may camouflage diversity of opinion to some extent. I have attempted to remain aware of this characteristic and bring attention to it when I observe it occurring.

Personal testimonies of German refugees make up a significant part of this book. Memoirs provided one source for these individual perspectives, but the greater resource was oral history interviews, conducted in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s by various researchers. In addition, I conducted a number of interviews with German Jewish refugees myself, at first in Los Angeles where I initially met a number of Jewish refugees from Germany and became interested in their stories. I subsequently met others; some had gotten in touch with me after a call I had

published in *Aktuell*, the magazine sent out by Berlin's Press and Information Office to Berliners who had left the city because of National Socialist persecution. Because these interviews were conducted only recently, they mostly feature refugees who were teenagers or younger when they left Germany, with the notable exception of Annelise Bunzel, who was born in 1912. While not all of their voices are found verbatim in this work, their memories and insights informed my writings in the most significant ways.

Notes

1. E-mail from Ralph Reuss (name is an alias) to the author, 18 September 2009.
2. Strauss, *Jewish Immigrants of the Nazi Period in the USA*, 6:319.
3. Various publications have explored the lives of these eminent refugees—both Jews and non-Jews—often stressing their contributions to the United States in their respective fields. Anderson, *Hitler's Exiles*; Heilbut, *Exiled in Paradise*; Taylor, *Strangers in Paradise*. “Driven into Paradise: L.A.’s European Jewish Emigrés of the 1930s and 1940s” was the title of a 2005 exhibition at the Skirball Cultural Center in Los Angeles. Other works include Gumprecht, *“New Weimar” unter Palmen*; and Bahr, *Weimar on the Pacific*. See also Aschheim, *Beyond the Border*; Goldschmidt, *The Legacy of German Jewry*; and a publication on the symposium “The German-Jewish Legacy in America, 1938-1988”; as well as Coser, *Refugee Scholars in America*.
4. Other books that have done that include Strauss et al., eds, *Jewish Immigrants of the Nazi Period*; Lowenstein, *Frankfurt on the Hudson*; Appelius, *“Die schönste Stadt der Welt”*; Wiener et al., eds, *Lives Lost, Lives Found*. See also Quack, *Between Sorrow and Strength*, which also includes non-Jewish women. Contemporary studies on refugees include Davie, *Refugees in America*; Saenger, *Today's Refugees, Tomorrow's Citizens*.
5. On German-Jewish relations, see, e.g., Morris and Zipes, eds, *Unlikely History*, which draws together some recent interdisciplinary voices. One of the most well-known pieces is Gershom Scholem's essay on the German Jewish dialogue and symbiosis—a symbiosis that he declared, writing in Israel in the wake of the Holocaust, never existed. Scholem, “Wider den Mythos vom deutsch-jüdischen Gespräch”; Schlösser, *Auf gespaltenem Pfad*. Historian Dan Diner adopted this notion of symbiosis and applied it to the postwar period, suggesting that by then the Holocaust had become the central element binding Germans and Jews together in a negative symbiosis. Diner, “Negative Symbiose.” Other scholars have recently departed from this analogy and instead characterized German Jewish history as one of entanglement, avoiding an essentializing binary conceptualization of the relationship and allowing for more complexity. E.g., Baader, “From the History of Integration to a History of Entanglements.”
6. East Germany was important in the Cold War context. An exploration of the refugee community's opinions on the GDR would be tremendously interesting.
7. See also Grossmann, *Wege in die Fremde*, 44ff.
8. Jackman, “German Émigrés in Southern California,” 103.
9. See Mann, “The Exiled Writer's Relation to His Homeland,” 263ff.
10. Baer, *Witness for a Generation*, 91.
11. Yehuda Bauer counts among survivors only those who physically suffered Nazi persecution in ghettos and concentration and labor camps, as well as those who hid or were partisans. People who fled are not Holocaust survivors in his opinion. The United States Holocaust Memorial

Museum and Yad Vashem use a broad definition, including anybody who lived under Nazi domination and was directly or indirectly affected by it. For a conceptual history of the term, see Bothe and Nesselrodt, “Survivor: Towards a Conceptual History.” See also Goschler, “Erinnerte Geschichte: Stimmen der Opfer”; Taft, *From Victim to Survivor*; Sabrow and Frei, eds, *Die Geburt des Zeitzeugen nach 1945*.

12. See, e.g., Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora.”
13. I draw here on Till van Rahden’s use of the concept of “situational ethnicity” and substitute ethnicity with identity as a more general concept of belonging. See Rahden, *Jews and Other Germans*, 8-9; see also 285n18.
14. Numbers from Thomas Mann and Bruno Frank, “Are Refugees ‘Enemy Aliens?’” Marta Mierendorff Papers, Collection no. 0214, Box 39, Feuchtwanger Memorial Library, Special Collections, USC Libraries, University of Southern California.
15. Eisenberg et al., *Jews of the Pacific Coast*; Moore, *To the Golden Cities*; Wilson, ed., *Jews in the Los Angeles Mosaic*; and ongoing projects at UCLA’s Center for Jewish Studies on Jewish Los Angeles.
16. Lowenstein goes beyond the war in his observations.
17. Brenner, *After the Holocaust*, 101.
18. Brenner, ed., *Die Geschichte der Juden in Deutschland*; Greenberg, *The Weimar Century*.
19. For accounts on *Aufbau*, see, e.g., Schaber, *Aufbau = Reconstruction*; Kotowski, ed., *Aufbau: Sprachrohr, Heimat, Mythos*; Lapp, “The Newspaper *Aufbau*, Its Evolving Politics, and the Problem of German-Jewish Identity, 1939–1955.”
20. It was also read by German-speaking refugees and emigrants outside of the United States. Kotowski, ed., *Aufbau: Sprachrohr, Heimat, Mythos*, 64-65; see an overview of yearly publication numbers in *ibid.*, 66.