

## **Germany as Museum of Jewish History and Laboratory for Jewish-Christian Relations\***

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### 1. Heidelberg

Surely, there was no one among the poets of Germany who adored and praised the natural splendor of Heidelberg as did [Tchernichowsky] the Hebrew nationalist poet. For entire days he would climb the mountains and hike in the forests that surrounded the city and that were a distance of several kilometers from it--and his eye did not tire from seeing and his soul did not tire from enjoying. He knew many wonderful places, mysterious corners and hidden hiding places in the area of Heidelberg which not even the eyes of the local children had penetrated. Often he would suggest that I hike with him--and these were some of the happiest hours of my life. When the two of us walked together on the "Philosophen Weg" or would climb and go up to Gaisberg we would not tire. Every step – new beauty, every kilometer – exquisite scenery fading in its splendor. Often at the time of the hike, especially on a moon-lit night in the mountains, Tchernichowsky would suddenly grasp my shoulders with his two strong hands, turning my entire body towards a forest clearing illuminated by the light of the pure moon and deliver only one Hebrew word: "Look!" (We always spoke Hebrew between us.) And so we would stand and look for a long time without saying a word . . . because, in general, in the spectacular nature Tchernichowsky had few words, he would only look, his face radiant, his expression showed both much thought and inner turmoil . . .<sup>1</sup>

So wrote Joseph Klausner about Saul Tchernichowsky in 1947. Saul Tchernichowsky (1875-1943) was one of the two leading Hebrew poets in Eastern Europe at the turn of the century, where, especially in major cities such as Odessa and Warsaw, Hebrew was enjoying a

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\* My professional and personal life continues to reflect the significant impact of the brief time I taught in the Judaic Studies Program at the University of Massachusetts in the Spring of 1980. Judith Baskin, whom I was hired to replace for the semester, continues to be a friend and inspiration for many of my research projects on the history of Jewish women; Shmuel Bolozky and Jay Berkovitz vetted some of my earliest attempts at expressing myself in Hebrew in public. Other members of the Department, including David Wyman and Julius Lester, remained supportive colleagues after I returned to the Pioneer Valley several years later to teach at Smith College. And Leonard Ehrlich, the man who hired me, along with his wife, Dr. Edith Schwarz Ehrlich, are referred to by my children, Yonah, Eliahu, and Natan, as "Oma and Opa," grandma and grandpa. I met their daughter Karin in the course of the semester and we married shortly afterwards. Indeed, the story that follows, based on our family's expedition to Germany, is as much Leonard and Edith's story as it is mine, though, as usual, they would probably challenge both the substance and especially the tone. It was their son, Carl Ehrlich, Uncle Carli, also a distinguished graduate of the Program and colleague, who taught in Germany and helped arrange for me to hold a semester's teaching position, an experience in Germany which included an extensive opportunity for the entire family to be together, including a return to many family sites in Vienna.

period of renaissance as a spoken and literary language. This movement was encouraged by secular forces of enlightenment and nationalism which culminated in, but were not limited to, Zionism. As Jews had done for much of the century, in 1899 Tchernichowsky went to Heidelberg to study natural science, mathematics, and medicine as well as German literature. There he joined his friend Joseph Klausner (1874-1958), a leading figure in the revival of modern Hebrew in Eastern Europe, who had gone there in 1897 to study Semitics, and the two spent four years together at the University. Klausner, who saw himself as a historian of the Second Temple period, would become the first professor of Hebrew Literature at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, write some of the major histories of modern Hebrew literature, including a biography of Tchernichowsky, which, as quoted above, describes their relationship, serve as a mentor to other young Hebrew writers, and write in Hebrew modern historical studies of Jesus and early Christianity. At the same time Klausner became one of the leading figures in the Revisionist Zionist movement, the right-wing nationalist party of Jabotinsky, Benzion Netanyahu (who worked with him on several projects), and Begin. Klausner ran unsuccessfully against Chaim Weizman for the first presidency of Israel.

The spectacular natural beauty and the overwhelming charm of Heidelberg and nearby Odenwald (Wotan's Forest) inspired Tchernichowsky to write some of his most compelling Hebrew poetry, including many about "the land." The impact on Klausner of their sojourn in Germany was a lasting one, and continued even after almost fifty years, two world wars, the Holocaust, and his own extreme nationalist involvement in Palestine.

Klausner's description of Tchernichowsky's stay in Heidelberg provides a significant description of what being in Germany meant to at least two Jews – Jewish nationalists and Hebraists – at the end of the century, giving some evidence of little known aspects of the nature of the so-called German-Jewish symbiosis. Klausner stated that these four years were the best in Tchernichowsky's life and his own, due to the incredible natural environment and the beautiful women of Heidelberg. According to Klausner, Heidelberg embodied everything romantic about the middle ages, including extensive medieval ruins, as well as everything about modern culture in a small, quiet town with the facilities of a major city.

When I accepted the invitation to teach medieval Jewish history at the Hochschule für jüdische Studien (College of Jewish Studies) in Heidelberg I was following, among many others Tchernichowsky and Klausner, to a city that held many levels of memory for Jewish history and to a country that constitutes a museum of Jewish history. At times, however, the exhibit was a private matter, mediated in my mind between written texts and geographical sites whose special qualities may go unnoticed by most observers. When I viewed these exhibits I sometimes felt that I was on exhibit making a spectacle of myself as I examined and photographed places, buildings, or small markers. Some sites, however, sometimes ones I did not think I would be able to find, turned out to be very public places, attracting bus loads of tourists. Either way, such experiences are not unique to Germany. People, including myself, regularly wander about mundane locations in search of remembrances of events and

personalities preserved often only in dusty history books and illegible manuscripts. The invitation to teach in Germany also provided me with an opportunity to function in a laboratory of history. A laboratory, the opposite of a museum, instead of being a place for preserving artifacts, is a place for experimenting with relationships. In and outside of the lecture hall, I hoped to meet students and faculty, Jews and non-Jews, Germans and others, all of whom not only shared my interest in Jewish history, but were living contemporary German Jewish history in ways that were only dimly reflected in books and articles.

First I had to learn German. American Jewish kids like me usually do not study German. It would be a *shande*, as their parents would say in Yiddish. My wife, however, the daughter of Jewish refugees from Austria, was raised with German as her first language both at home in the US and on many trips to Germany and Austria. My own American-born parents, whose families were untouched by the ravages of the Nazis, steadfastly shunned all things German. My trip to Germany was only possible with both the linguistic support of my *Schwiegereltern*, the Ehrlichs, especially my mother-in-law, Edith, who translated my English lectures into German, and the Smith College German Department which adopted me, encouraged me, and taught me enough German in six months so that I could at least read the lectures and reply to questions.

Language has always been important to German speaking Jews. The most famous German and Austrian Jews gained their fame because of their ability to write a beautiful literary German. These included Moses Mendelssohn, Solomon Maimon, Heinrich Heine, Hermann Cohen, and Theodor Herzl. Many rose to prominence as *Feuilletonisten*, newspaper columnists. One of the paradoxical features of the first Zionist Congress held in Basel in 1897 – a congress which constituted a major marker in the repudiation of a future for the Jews in Europe – was the high level of German style, called *Kongressdeutsch*. I, however, would not be able to advance German Jewish life with my German style.

I found that Heidelberg is like a big wedding cake – a puffy city on a hill, topped by a castle. Located on the bank of the Neckar River as it flows into the Rhine plain, surrounded by beautiful forests, the city rests between two mountains which offer dream-like views of it and the surrounding valley. On the mountain above the city are suspended the remains of the fourteenth century Heidelberger Schloss, an imposing castle, and on the other side of the river runs the renowned above-mentioned *Philosophenweg*, a path offering philosophers, tourists, and natives an inspired view of the castle. This spectacular, ancient castle was devastated by the French in their invasion of the city in 1693, a period when they attacked every other major city along the Rhine. Klausner noted that there were few such ruins as this in the world; and every summer, when there were many foreign tourists in the city, in commemoration of the destruction by the French, the Schloss would be illuminated with red flames until it looked like it was actually on fire, a sight that Klausner described as fantastic and indescribably magical – almost like a dream.

We did not live in Heidelberg. During the summer so many tourists as well as students come to Heidelberg that it is impossible to find an apartment in the city. (This was so also in the nineteenth century, as Klausner pointed out.) The Hochschule found us a house a half hour away in the Odenwald village of Heiligkreuzsteinach, a name that does not readily conjure up a Jewish presence. When I went to register at the town hall, I was only offered two choices for religious identity – Protestant or Catholic. When I told the clerk “*Jude*,” I realized that I may have been the first in the village to be thus identified.

The Odenwald has never had a substantial Jewish population outside of Heidelberg and some of the other larger towns. Michelstadt, which had a synagogue dating from the late eighteenth century, was home to “*Der Baalschem von Michelstadt*,” a wonderworking rabbi immortalized in a Judeo-German novella, and now has an Israeli-Yemenite giftshop run by German Christians. During the twenties and the thirties Martin Buber lived and wrote in Heppenheim and commuted to Frankfurt. Each day that I drove to Heidelberg along the Neckar through Odenwald villages such as Schlierbach, Gaisberg, Dilsberg, Neckarsteinach, and Neckargemünd, I took comfort in knowing that in these very villages Saul Tchernichowsky had wandered and had written Hebrew poetry a century earlier. This was also where during the 1870s Mark Twain had wandered and had written, but that is another story.

At the end of the 19th century about 40,000 people lived in Heidelberg, of whom about 1,000 were Jewish. The Jewish community, the *Kultusgemeinde*, maintained a synagogue, and a Jewish cemetery that dated back to the middle ages. Jewish students attended the University. Having just gone co-ed, the University attracted Jewish women from Poland and Russia. Klausner described these Jewish women students at Heidelberg as intense, serious, and diligent students who came to Heidelberg to learn. (As opposed to the Jewish men, he seems to imply, who came more for dueling and carousing.) Such Jewish women, Klausner noted, were of little romantic interest to Tchernichowsky – although Klausner himself found his future wife among them. According to Klausner, Tchernichowsky, the young poet “with a chip on his shoulder,” preferred uneducated, simple, beautiful German women – one of whom he called “a blond angel.” They in turn saw in him an opportunity to break free of the yoke of German peasantry that kept women in what Klausner considered almost medieval conditions. In several of his poems Tchernichowsky dealt with his affairs with the daughters of a baker and a farmer, and with a seamstress and a waitress. Klausner relates that once Tchernichowsky brought Maria Zimmerman, the baker’s daughter, to a lecture given by Kuno Fischer in the Aula, the main lecture hall. Her presence distracted everybody and even the professor’s wife was heard asking a neighbor, “*Wer ist diese Schönheit?*” Another romance ended with a young woman’s suicide. Tchernichowsky had a life-long affair with a woman from a Russian noble family, Melania Kalovna von Gozias Gorbatshevitch, who, despite her impressive family connections, had been arrested in Russia for her anarchistic activity. Together they had a daughter, Isolda or Issa, who, raised as a Jew, later settled in Haifa.

Despite Tchernichowsky's exalted position in the canon of modern Hebrew literature, religious leaders managed, for a long time after his death in Palestine in 1943, to prevent streets from being named in his honor because of his liaison. Today every city in Israel has a Tchernichowsky Street.

Tchernichowsky's poetry in Heidelberg increasingly exhibited the influence of pantheism, classicism, and Nietzscheism. At this time he joined the ranks of other young Hebrew writers, such as Hayim Nahman Bialik, Y. L. Gordon, Micha Yosef Berdichevsky, and Yosef Hayyim Brenner, who were engaged in a *Kulturkampf*, a battle against traditional Jewish culture and values, influenced by the Nietzschean trends in German society at the time.<sup>2</sup>

In many of his powerful poems we find the forces that shaped his life in Heidelberg. In "Before a Statue of Apollo," about a Jew coming upon a statue of Apollo, the Greek God of the sun, medicine, and poetry, he speaks to the pagan deity of the beauty and joy of his life in Heidelberg. Judaism, however, represents the opposite to the poet. The ancient God of strength and vigor was strangled by the Jews with a *tephilin* strap (the leather straps put on each morning during prayer). For Tchernichowsky, the passionate Jewish writer living in Germany at the turn of the century, the death of Judaism comes from within Judaism itself. Incidentally, recent archaeological and manuscript discoveries have confirmed Tchernichowsky's Nietzsche-inspired fantasies about ancient Judaism. Mosaics representing Helios, with Hebrew inscriptions, have been found in several ancient synagogues in the land of Israel, and ancient Hebrew manuscripts contain prayers to Helios.<sup>3</sup>

In Germany, Tchernichowsky explored the traumas of Jewish life in medieval Germany. One of his most famous and longest poems, "Baruch of Mainz," describes the violence against the Jews of the Rheinland during the First Crusade in 1096 and their response to it. Tchernichowsky began this poem in Odessa in 1896, exactly eight hundred years after the events and a short time after the first publication of three medieval Hebrew chronicles that describe the violence against the Jews and their reaction to them, and he worked on it during his first year in Heidelberg.

Tchernichowsky's epic poem is based on reports, in the Hebrew Crusade Chronicles, that a Jew, Isaac the Pious of Mainz, converted in order to save his two daughters from the hands of the enemy, and then, after the violence had subsided, seeking a way to atone for his sin, had ritually killed his children. After asking them if they wanted to be sacrificed to God and they told him to do as he pleased, he took them at midnight to the synagogue, slaughtered them before the ark to sanctify God's name, and sprinkled their blood on the pillars of the ark as a memorial before God and as atonement for his sins. He then set his father's house on fire, killing his mother, without asking her permission, to sanctify God's name, and returned to immolate himself in the synagogue. Christians tried to save him, but he refused. The narrator assures us that his soul was among the righteous in paradise.

This shocking historical narrative had been long neglected, and is still often omitted from popular published editions of the Hebrew Crusade Chronicles. Tchernichowsky crafted an exquisite modern Hebrew epic that was widely read and translated, adding a Nietzsche-inspired reading of medieval Jewish culture and a poignant call for vengeance against Christians filled with vitriolic curses – themes with authentic but often ignored medieval Jewish pedigrees.

Tchernichowsky's poem begins with the narrator addressing his dead wife in the graveyard after all the events had transpired. He begins by asserting that the terrors were a result of the Jews having been abandoned by God and suffering from their own impotence, and also turns against Christianity as a religion of idolatry. When he describes his sacrifice of his children, they are less compliant than the two children were in the medieval chronicle. The bloody description of the death of the daughters is extremely graphic. Baruch then curses the Christians with tremendous passion and fantasizes that the Jews will become the monsters that they have always been accused of being, and will seek vengeance and suck the blood of the Christians of Europe who have victimized them for so long. The poem then shifts to a description of the conflagration which he had set and which now engulfs the entire town. Baruch gloats over the loss of life and property that he has caused. It is at this point that he killed his children with fire although it seems that earlier he had killed them with a knife. Stressing the novelty of the act, the poem points out that these were the first sacrifices since the Temple had been destroyed. The description of the fire engulfing the walls and towers of the town seems suspiciously like the annual reenactment of the burning of the Heidelberg Schloss each summer.

We are left sensing both Tchernichowsky's feelings of revulsion towards Germany as well as his powerful attraction to it. Klausner's commentary on this poem includes the following: "After the annihilation of six million of our brethren, this is not surprising, and we would not seek a justification for it. For their throwing infants into the furnace, the hope for vengeance is not strong enough. It is only surprising that it was as if Tchernichowsky had seen in a vision during the years 1899-1903 what would happen to our people in the years 1943-1945".<sup>4</sup> Yet Klausner had earlier described the years 1899-1903 as the best years in Tchernichowsky's life – as well as his own. Moreover, if Tchernichowsky had had such a horrible vision, why did he return to live in Berlin from 1922 to 1931?

Klausner's ambivalence in describing Tchernichowsky's ambivalent feelings towards Germany and Germans is not unique to these two writers. Such feelings are at the heart and soul of Jewish life in Germany. Many Jews look at Jewish history in Germany as the shortest distance between two massacres. They see the Holocaust as a reflection of the entire history. Clearly there were massacres; but I think that to understand Jewish life in Germany we must see the carnage – and it has been vast, particularly in the century from the 1290s until the 1390s – as episodic, irregular, and unusual, but consistent with larger patterns occurring in Europe. Violence was part of life in all countries and among all peoples. After periods of

violence Jews returned to live among their Christian neighbors. American students always ask how the Jews could go back; German students did not understand the question and could not see how the Jews could not go back. Jews in Germany did not live in ghettos during the middle ages. In fact, a rule of thumb for finding remnants of medieval Jewish communities in Germany is simple: Go to any city, follow the signs to *Zentrum* or the *Dom*, get as close as you can to the main cathedral, and within a few steps you can find the former synagogues, cemeteries, baths, and even a dancehall.

## 2. The Rhineland

Many historians have offered conflicting interpretations of the violence against the Jews during the First Crusade: economic, psycho-social, religious, and legal. A particularly useful explanation identifies the crusaders as pilgrims in both physical and spiritual motion attempting to reform society and to reach new levels of personal piety as *societas christiana*.<sup>5</sup> The attempt to purify space both public and private constitutes the key element in this formulation that seem to me to be crucial for understanding attacks on Jews and others in Germany and elsewhere, in the middle ages and in the modern period.

One of my goals in Germany was to visit the remains of the three major Rhineland Jewish communities, Speyer, Worms, and Mainz, which were devastated in May of 1096, and to do so precisely in May so that I could feel the air and weather just as they had been almost 900 years earlier. I encouraged my German students to do so as well and was surprised that, given their intense interest in things Jewish, most had never done this.

I went to Mainz to experience as much of the city as had remained from the time of the Crusades and the period of Tchernichowsky's visit there. I wondered how he had traveled there, was it by train, by horse, or by boat? I wondered whether he actually went to Mainz since so much of the poem seems more like Heidelberg. Mainz, now a sprawling modern city where very few traces of its past survived Allied bombing, is nothing like it had been in 1096 or even in 1896. I had to settle for what Jewish artifacts had been preserved in the municipal antiquities museum.

I arrived there on a Friday during the museum's posted hours and asked the receptionist about the Judaica exhibit. She told me that that wing of the museum was closed for the day. When I asked when it would be open she said it was supposed to be open, but maybe it would be open the next day. I tried to pin her down, but it was difficult. I tried to buy at least the published catalogues of the Judaica materials from her. Meanwhile a man who worked there came by and she brought the discussion back to the question of when that wing of the museum might be open. He was equally tentative. I tried to say that I had driven for several hours and that it was frustrating to arrive at the proper time only to find part of the museum closed. His insensitivity to my frustration prompted me to add a degree of emotion, apparently too much for him. He became very upset with me and responded

with a strident, but bureaucratic response about vacations, illnesses, and government cuts. I realized that I had turned up the heat too high and that he had taken my comments personally. My German was still pretty much a blunt instrument that could not always be wielded with precision. At this point the woman with whom I had begun the conversation put down on the counter the Judaica brochure I had ordered. He looked at it and his whole mood instantly changed. He became totally calm and warm towards me. As soon as he realized that it was the Judaica exhibit I wanted, he showed not only sympathy for my plight but an overwhelming desire to accommodate me immediately. He told me to wait and he would be right back. He returned with the *Hausmeister* and the two of them whisked me up to the closed Judaica room for an awkward private viewing which they would not let me cut short – even though the tombstones I wanted to see were actually in the hall outside the room itself.

Speyer was nothing like Mainz. There was a sign to the *Judenbad*, the *mikvah* or ritual bath, at almost every intersection. To get there I walked down the Judengasse and past the ruins of two medieval synagogues – the *Männersynagoge* and the *Fraünsynagoge*. I learned that the ritual bath had lain in ruins for centuries and that these synagogues had not been destroyed by rioters but by upscale Jews in the nineteenth century who wanted a more modern synagogue. The guidebooks told me where to ask for the key to the *Judenbad*; however, when I arrived a friendly man greeted me, collected a small fee, gave me a brochure, and told me to feel free to ask any questions. It took a while to get in because there was a tour bus ahead of me, the first of several in the course of a brief visit. The outside of the *Judenbad* looked like a miniature of the *Dom* at the other end of town and was probably built by the same workmen. I went inside and down a long flight of stairs. The construction of the staircase, the Gothic windows, the curved stone arches, were very beautiful. At the end of the first landing was a niche in the wall for removing clothing. The stairs from that room down to the water had been worn down by centuries of traffic. The water, fed by an underground stream, was clear and beautiful. Skylights illuminated the chamber with a mystical calm. I was back in the middle ages: Jewish women, men, and pots and pans had been ritually immersed here for centuries. Back outside, I spoke with the man. An architect with a practice in town, he had been involved in rebuilding the site and volunteered there a few afternoons a week. He was not Jewish, but felt that this ritual bath was part of the heritage of his town and wanted it preserved.

Worms was the highlight of my medieval wanderings. There, off the old Judengasse, stood not only an eleventh century synagogue – restored after its demolition by the Nazis, but also a magnificent museum, and another ritual bath. The synagogue contained the seventeenth century Rashi chapel, built to house the chair on which the famous eleventh century medieval rabbinic scholar may have sat. The chair and the chapel had centuries of Hebrew graffiti carved into them. The museum had a very impressive collection of artifacts and also sold many books. The entire complex attracted a regular stream of tourists. I



traveled across town to the medieval and modern Jewish cemetery, one of the most beautiful places in the world. The tombstones seem to stand as they had been placed in the middle ages, with the exception of a few that the Nazis had used for target practice. Some, especially that of Rabbi Meir of Rothenberg from the thirteenth century and Alexander ben Solomon of Frankfurt, the man who ransomed Rabbi Meir's body from captivity, had become shrines where pilgrims light candles, leave slips of paper with prayers, and pile pebbles as a sign of respect. This cemetery seems always to be open for strollers and many people wandered about freely enjoying a vista that has not changed much in 900 years.

### 3. Berlin

I had hoped to get to Berlin, mainly to see Berlin. I knew that the Wall was down, but wasn't sure what that meant, and that there may be places of interest from the point of view of modern Jewish history. On the way, there were so many cities about which I had studied, such as Leipzig, Dessau, Passau, and Dresden. I wanted to see them all. It was, however, a long drive so I had to settle for getting gas in Weimar and stopping to see the cathedral in Wittenberg where Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door in 1517. In my work I had almost developed a fondness for Luther's feisty polemic and spirited engagement with Judaism which, in its vitality and attractiveness, clearly posed a threat to him. I had defended him, both in class as well as in the *Jewish Advocate*, against the charge of having a genocidal program. He certainly could not be tied in with the Holocaust as so many, including Nazis in the docket after the war, such as Streicher, had tried.

I was totally unprepared for a city as large and as vibrant as Berlin. In my youth it had always been associated with one form or another of deprivation – the ravages of the war, airlifts, the Wall, and people smuggled in suitcases and under trucks past Check Point Charlie. On arriving in Berlin I was totally lost. The one-way streets, many construction projects, and the peculiar numbering system – up one side and then back down the other – made it impossible to find my way. I finally abandoned the car and tried to find the way on foot. I soon realized that I had parked the car around the corner from Check Point Charlie and had to walk east. In my youth, only spies coming in from the cold walked in that direction. This was the same week that Nelson Mandela won the presidency of South Africa and Yassir Arafat made the final arrangements for control of Jericho and the Gaza Strip. It was a week of momentous change. I had never expected to take this walk into East Berlin. However, now the route was marked by United Colors of Benetton and fancy outdoor cafes with Italian food and American jazz.

For me, Jewish history in Berlin began with the attempt of Moses Mendelssohn, a young enlightened Jew from Dessau, to gain permission, at the end of the eighteenth century, when the number of Jews allowed was limited, to live in Berlin so he could study philosophy there. My trip to Berlin turned out to be an opportunity to conjure up many images and feelings of Jewish history during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Usually

this is done in books or in museums, where the circumstances are controlled. In Berlin I was on my own.

I explored several Jewish cemeteries. I started by finding Mendelssohn's grave, the one remaining grave in a Jewish cemetery that had been entirely destroyed by the Nazis. Next in the Schönhauser Allee Jewish cemetery, a very beautiful and secluded place in what was once East Berlin, I sought out the graves of some of the leading figures of nineteenth century German Jewish life. I found the graves of Abraham Geiger, a leader in the Reform movement and a scholar of Jewish history; Samuel Holdheim, a radical Reformer; and Leopold and Adelheid Zunz, pioneers in the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, modern Jewish studies. The cemetery was in reasonably good shape and not much different from the old Jewish cemeteries in other European countries. Lush vegetation covered old trees and knocked over, sunken graves. Silence prevailed except for chirping birds and scampering squirrels. The near-by city almost vanished from consciousness. One jarring discovery at the cemetery was that all the metal had been removed, including brass letters and plaques, iron chains and fences. I tried to imagine when and by whom: Was it in the thirties? Was it during the depths of the war? Was it after the war? Was it done by children, gangs, or municipal workers? Was it done during the day or under the cover of darkness? Was there much shouting and equipment or just quiet vandalism? What did people think while they were hacking away at a grave? Were the Christian cemeteries also looted for metal? – Later I found out that, as in the case of other Jewish cemeteries in Europe, the metal had been methodically pried and cut loose by the Nazi regime, and the salvaged material was used in war industries. – I followed the custom of putting stones on the graves of those whom I visited. None of these nineteenth century graves, unlike those in the medieval cemeteries, had any trace of visitors. After all, who visits the graves of historians and liberal rabbis in these times?

I also went to the Jewish cemetery in the Weissensee neighborhood, on Herbert-Baum-Strasse named for the leader of a communist Jewish resistance group murdered by the Nazis. This cemetery had also been stripped of much of its metal. It too has an honor row which includes the nineteenth century Jewish Kantian and opponent of Jewish nationalism, Hermann Cohen; the Jugendstil grave of the Nietzschean Hebrew writer Micha Yosef Berdichevski; and the graves of many other German-Jewish scholars, artists, musicians, scientists, and politicians. There are also Orthodox Jewish cemeteries in Berlin as well as Christian cemeteries containing many famous apostates such as the salonieres of the early nineteenth century including Rachel Varnhagen, Dorothea Mendelssohn, and Rachel Levin.

On the way to synagogue on Friday evening I stumbled upon Kurfürstendam. I had read about it in the guidebooks but was not prepared for something as huge and so full of life. There is nothing like it in America. The closest I had ever experienced was Dizengoff Street in Tel Aviv. There, too, people at sidewalk cafes sit only on the side of the table

facing the street so they can see and be seen by the people walking by. That Tel Aviv was modeled after Berlin is an amazing phenomenon to which I shall return.

In the Pestalozzistrasse Synagogue on Friday night, I returned to the Reform Judaism of the nineteenth century and of my youth. The Reform movement had begun in Germany during the nineteenth century, as a way to incorporate German aesthetics, decorum, and nationalism into Jewish worship and to remove anything that would offend these sensibilities, such as Jewish nationalism, messianism, Hebrew, particularism, and God forbid, vengeful remarks against gentiles. Thus Tchernichowsky stood for almost everything opposed by German Reform Judaism. There was an outstanding choir, an organ, a cantor, and, to my great surprise, separate seating for women in the balcony.

The Reform movement has recently been presenting itself as egalitarian; however, the fact that women never received equality in Germany and still cannot sit with the men or lead the service undermines such claims. I also learned that the rabbinic heir apparent for this congregation was removed from consideration when he suggested egalitarian possibilities. At the service a young girl was celebrating her Bat Mitzvah, her coming of age to observe the Commandments in the Torah. However, rather than reading from the Torah, as a boy would on Saturday morning, she came to the microphone after the service and sang some Hebrew folk songs, hardly a traditional part of the worship service. In spite of this unequal treatment, the women constituted about two-thirds of the congregation. In Heidelberg, I taught a seminar on medieval Jewish women's history and my moderate feminism – the attempt to document both the oppression of women and to find precedents for their empowerment – was distressing to many of the students. These students, all women, told me on a few occasions how uncomfortable anything that challenged tradition made them. At this time there were major battles in the *Jüdische Kultusgemeinde* in Heidelberg, led by my brother-in-law, for equal participation by the women in religious services. Such activities, and any historical resonances that I evoked in class, were held in contempt by my students, and eventually cost my brother-in-law his positions at the Hochschule and as President of the Heidelberg Jewish Community. And these were the students who had signed up for a course on women. I found it ironical not only that women opposed my egalitarian spirit, but that Christian women felt the need to be protective of what they felt was the tradition of Judaism from onslaughts by Jews whose loyalty apparently seemed suspect to them.

In Berlin, when the cantor chanted kiddush, the blessing over the wine, a huge number of children were marched into the synagogue to join him on the dais. He was surrounded by children. It was a beautiful sight to see so many children in the Berlin synagogue. Each child then received a candy bar and left. I began to wonder, what if these children had been born earlier . . . what would their lives have been like? And what role would they play in the future of Jewish life in Berlin? When I returned to the US and to my own synagogue, a Jewish man, originally from Berlin, who had heard where I had been,

asked me if the children still came up for kiddush. In his youth, he told me, they would give all the Christian children in the neighborhood a candy bar if they came to help fill up the room. In Germany, a percentage of each citizen's taxes goes to support her or his religious community, in the case of the Jews, the *Kultusgemeinde*. Since most Jews in Germany do not attend religious services, the funds received by the institution are enjoyed by fewer individuals, often in the form of sumptuous lunches and special benefits for families, which creates a strong disincentive to make the Jewish communities appealing to a broader constituency. Since the government will usually recognize only one Jewish *Kultusgemeinde* per town or district, those in charge control the communities with rigorous discipline. It is thus safer to bring Christian children to the bimah in exchange for candy bars than to attract Jewish children who, with their parents, might place demands on the community and its resources.

During a Saturday afternoon stroll I caught sight of the Reichstag building. Its two fires, in February of 1933 and in April of 1945, frame the period of the Third Reich's rule in Germany, the first marking the rise of Hitler and the second his end. As I got closer, by the Brandenburg Gate, where Hitler's underground bunkers still lie, huge crowds were strolling and many were going inside the Reichstag. Nothing in Germany is ever open on Saturday afternoon, but I went in. Inside there was a vast exhibit about German history and politics from about the year 1800. It was a fascinating walk through thousands of old pictures, historic videos, and occasional glimpses of the new hall of deputies. As I made it through the exhibit, I reached the rooms about the Holocaust. I had not yet been to any exhibits in Germany about that period. While the other rooms had a moderate flow of people, these were packed. Most of the people were Germans. There were also a few Russians in uniform – I had never seen Russian soldiers other than in cold war movies like "The Russians are Coming." Despite all the books I had read, these pictures were very poignant, nothing was held back. The exhibit scored very high in one litmus test of Holocaust history – the number of people reported killed on Kristallnacht in 1938. The figure given was in the 90s, much higher than in any Jewish history book. (I've since realized that most of the books are wrong because they don't count those who died later or those whose deaths were attributed to suicide.) It was interesting to see that in almost all the pictures of Hitler people had gouged out his eyes.

The next day at Wannsee, site of the famous conference where, in January 1942, the Final Solution was discussed in detail, I visited the museum which had recently been opened by the German government. One of the striking features of this famous, gruesome conference was that it was held in an upscale neighborhood on the banks of a beautiful lake. As I walked through the rooms looking at pictures of those who attended the conference, copies of their notes, and further exhibits on the Holocaust, the mood was the same as at the Reichstag the day before, total spontaneous silence.

The biggest question that confronted me in my travels was the same that I have been raising in my course on the Holocaust at Smith for many years – the question of continuity between the Nazi era and earlier periods of history. I developed my course during the *Historikerstreit*, the German historians' controversy, and our discussions were filled with questions of intentionalism, functionalism, uniqueness, and comparability. I had been an arch-functionalism, arguing that the Holocaust was not the culmination of previous history, antisemitism, or the intentions of Hitler, but a unique configuration of unpredictable, contingent events that tortuously developed in the course of a horrible twelve year period.<sup>6</sup> Two findings in Germany led me to question this position, but not yet reject it. The first was that every time I looked for medieval Jewish communities, 1349 marked a vanishing point. The seemingly thoroughness of the massacres and the expulsions during the Black Death was striking. The 300 communities that were wiped out represented a much vaster devastation than that wrought by the crusades and a step towards a complete annihilation. However, I also realized that many countries in Europe had expelled all their Jews. It was an amazing aspect of Jewish life in the Germanic lands that not all Jews were expelled, and that, after the upheavals, they eventually returned. The other aspect of my travels that confounded my basic sense of history was the evidence at these museums that Kristallnacht had been planned with great ferocity and precision. On the night of November 9-10, 1938 the Nazis destroyed almost every synagogue – 287 of them – and every Jewish communal building in Germany, which is almost the same as the number of communities destroyed during the plague years. Until then I hadn't fully appreciated that the event had not been a spontaneous popular outburst but had been coordinated by secret Nazi memoranda, now prominently displayed in the museums. Even the hidden synagogues in every obscure small town and hamlet throughout Germany were destroyed simultaneously. For those synagogues that were too close to other buildings, careful calculations determined that the building could not be destroyed but the contents were gutted and then burned. Many of these burnings were photographed and the photographs are on display as well. The sense of calm and acceptance on the part of the bystanders, usually leaning on their bicycles, is in stark contrast to what must have been the overwrought emotional state of the mobs that destroyed the Jewish communities during the plague.

#### 4. Jews and Christians in Germany: Today and Tomorrow

Many have noted that Germans are either philosemites or antisemites. There does not seem to be a middle ground, and Jews have become an obsession. Items dealing with Jews and Jewish matters fill the news, way out of proportion to the number of Jews or even the significance of the events. My being Jewish was sometimes enough to suck the air out of an interaction. Usually, being Jewish was an advantage, so much so that it was a burden.

About three quarters of the students at the *Hochschule* were not Jewish – which is true of most Jewish studies programs in Germany. I could not, however, tell which students were

Jewish and which were not. Their parents, often German Christians and German Jews, had met and married after the war. Often, for very different reasons, both parents had fled, and felt that as Germans, what they had in common was greater or more important than the differences that separated them, either from each other as Jewish and Christian Germans or from other non-German Jews and Christians abroad. Thus students could easily have been related to both Nazis and Jews. The Jews in Germany have not adopted any customs or mannerisms that would make them appear different, and many of the traditional signs of Jewishness are being adopted by German Christians. Significant numbers of German Christian men don Jewish ritual garb such as black hats, yarmulkes, and *tzitzit*, fringed garments worn under their shirts such that the strings hang out of the top of their trousers especially at synagogues, Jewish student groups, and Jewish schools. Many German Christians study in Israel, often advanced Judaica, in Hebrew, without letting on that they are not Jewish. Some German Christians have converted to Judaism. I found that the wannabees often had the most concern for preserving what they viewed as traditional Judaism and the most contempt for innovations, particularly in matters of gender and ethnic equality, that are supported by Jews like me. One German Jew told me that the attempt by German Christians to control discourse among Jews is one of the reasons that Jewish schools, such as the Hochschule, are trying to hire only Jews, even heretics like me.

Early in my stay some students invited me to a party for the minor Jewish holiday of Lag Be-omer. The students mixed languages when they spoke, using many technical Hebrew ritual terms, phrases in Modern Israeli Hebrew along with German. I felt as if I were among suburban American Jewish kids as they experimented with ethnic and religious posturing when studying at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem or at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. In the middle of my flashback, one of the students handed me a bottle of wine and told me that I had to open it. This was a very revealing request. According to many, but not all, Jewish legal authorities, non-Jews are not supposed to touch Jewish wine. As idolaters they could render it ritually unfit for Jewish consumption. By their asking me to open it, it became clear to me that there were virtually no Jews at this polyglot gathering who could open the wine or would drink it. They also indicated that they were aware of and accepted such a seemingly anti-Christian aspect of Jewish law. Before obliging their request I felt the need to jest that there would be some in the Jewish community who would feel uncomfortable with my opening their wine. One of my many jokes lost on Germans.

Another time, during an office hours' conversation with a student, I asked the usual question about what languages she could use for her research. It turned out that she knew modern conversational Hebrew and told me that she commuted between Israel and Germany, changing countries every three months as a gradual transition to living full time in Israel, where she had bought an apartment and had a roommate from South Africa. To be chatty I asked her if many German Jews felt this way about *aliyah*. She quickly corrected me that she is not Jewish. I was not yet intellectually prepared for the concept of a German

Christian making *aliyah*. She went on to tell me how the first time she was in Israel she had found her country and her people. She felt so much at home and so comfortable there – especially among Yemenite Jews – who, she felt, have so much in common with Germans, an observation I had also heard before from Yemenite Jews. Just as Tchernichowsky was happiest in Germany, this German Christian woman was most fulfilled in Israel.

Now it was my turn to talk. When I remarked to what extent Germany was copying Israel, she was very taken aback, and I almost detected a note of indignation on her part. I seemed to have threatened either her sense of historical sequence or German nationalism, or both. After I had made it clear that I had been joking, she confirmed my overwhelming impression that Germany and Israel are similar in many respects. Indeed, many aspects of German life that could be attributed to the German character are also present in Israel. It is one of the great ironies of history that when the state of Israel was established in 1948, the survivors of the Holocaust and the refugees from Europe adopted the Weimar electoral system, even though the constitutional crises of the Weimar electoral system were in part responsible for the rise of Hitler and the Nazi party during the 1930s. Israel, in many ways, is a tribute to German culture, with its influence on writers such as Tchernichowsky.

Germany has passed and is trying to enforce the *Auschwitz Lüge* law, a law which makes it a crime to deny that the Holocaust took place. Such a law misses the point insofar as it mistakenly locates the source of disaster on the fringes of society. To be sure, there are antisemites and neo-Nazis, but even healthy societies have always had and will continue to harbor lunatics. Democracies in particular pride themselves on their ability to protect the expression of even the most offensive ideas. The problem that faces Germany and every other society is how to keep these evil forces on the fringe. Concern for the Jewish future does not begin with the lunatics but with ordinary folk.

Each Friday, supermarkets and bakeries in Germany, even in Heiligkreuzsteinach, sell yellow, braided egg bread, which bears a striking resemblance to what is known in Hebrew, as *hallab*, and among German Jews as *Barches* or *Berches*, either derived from the Ashkenasi pronunciation of the Hebrew word for blessings, *berachot*, or from the ancient south German goddess of fertility and the hearth, Berchta. Blessing this bread constitutes a central component of the Friday evening ritual in Jewish homes, along with the blessing of candles, family, and wine. When my wife or I would ask what kind of bread this was we would be told that it was a *Hefezopf*, a yeast braid, a Swiss bread, or, in confirmation of our hunch, a few people did tell us that it was called *Barches* without further explanation. Sixty years after the first legislation against the very small Jewish community in Germany, the bakeries of Germany still produce *hallab*, even in places where there never were any Jews. The weekly production and distribution of *Barches* in Germany makes it more than an artifact preserved almost as if in a museum; it constitutes a weekly habit, void of any memory for most Germans, eerie for a Jew. The future of Germany's self-understanding of its national

character may well depend on how Germans are reconciled to recognizing *Barches* and similar vestiges of a lost Jewish presence as integral to their culture and identity.

For Germans, like Jews, struggle with the tension between universalism and particularism. They vacillate between the desire to see themselves as committed to the improvement of the world at large and their membership in an embattled nation whose unique mission and higher calling are in danger of dilution and dissolution. Certainly Tchernichowsky exhibited the extremes of both the universalism and the particularism with which Jews still struggle today. Germany, too, is currently going through a period of self-definition. There will be a period in Germany, I'm not sure how long, when we shall continue to see a range of attitudes, expressed and repressed, running the full gamut from universalism to particularism. Attitudes expressed by Germans will not make Jews comfortable; nor will the range of Jewish attitudes on many subjects, including Germany, make Christian Germans comfortable. Identity, unlike an artifact, is not fixed. Germany is a museum as well as a laboratory, and in it some very fragile relations are being tested. I am hopeful that the relations that are developing will not only be positive but will be creative and enriching for Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Germans for many generations. The experiences I had in Germany certainly point in that direction.



**Notes**

<sup>1</sup>Yosef Klausner, *Shaul Tchernichovsky: Haadam vebameshorer*, Jerusalem 1947, p. 56.

<sup>2</sup>Eisig Silberschlaag, *Saul Tschernichowsky: Poet of Revolt*, Ithaca 1968.

<sup>3</sup>*Sepher harazim*, Michael A. Morgan, tr., Chicago 1983.

<sup>4</sup>Klausner, op. cit., p. 91.

<sup>5</sup>Kenneth R. Stow, *Alienated Minority: The Jewish of Medieval Latin Europe*, Cambridge 1992, p. 102f.

<sup>6</sup>Charles S. Maier, *The Unmasterable Past: History, Holocaust, and German National Identity*, Cambridge 1988.