West German Jewry: Guilt, Power, and Pluralism

by Anthony D. Kauders

Abstract

The essay will address the history of West German Jewry using the concept of guilt as its guiding theme. Jews in West Germany had a bad conscience on account of living in the “land of the murderers.” This bad conscience not only distinguished them from other Jewish communities, it also explains much of what characterized West German Jewry from 1945 to 1989: its particular economic structure; its especially close ties to Israel; its preoccupation with democratization; its power arrangements; and its communal life. The essay will address these issues, and trace a development that led from a close-knit, ideologically homogeneous group to one that became ever more pluralistic in the 1970s and 1980s.

A plain but urgent question stands at the beginning of any history of West German Jewry: how could Jews have continued living in the “land of the murderers”? Many answers have been proffered, all of which are equally true: some Jews had survived on account of their Gentile partners or could only imagine life within German language and culture; others had established small businesses or had fled anti-Semitic pogroms in Poland; yet others were too weak, too old, or too sick to emigrate to Palestine/Israel. If it was sheer chance that had left Jews as survivors in postwar Germany, it was personal convenience that caused many to flout immediate relocation. But whatever the motive, West Germany’s Jews resided in a country cursed among Jews everywhere. Their individual histories did not count in a post-Holocaust world that demanded a new Jewish consensus not only with regard to Israel, but also with respect to Germany. West Germany’s Jews were well aware of this consensus. They could not opt for pluralism at a time when the Federal Republic itself was neither pluralistic nor welcoming of Jewish “dissidents.” Indeed, Jews in Augsburg, Hamburg, or Cologne did not wish to be treated like “dissidents” in the first place. They had internalized the widespread view that Israel was the new Jewish homeland, and they had to find ways to combine this emotional and intellectual truth with the reality of their physical presence in Augsburg, Hamburg, or Cologne. The Jewish predicament in West Germany therefore demanded considerable work. First, Jews were forced to confront feelings of guilt for living in the wrong country. Second, they had to face Jews in Israel and elsewhere who reminded them of this violation. Third, they were compelled to deal emotionally with their precarious condition. Fourth, they felt obliged to...
develop justifications that would assuage their own guilt, mollify their Jewish critics, and command intellectual respectability at home and abroad. All this had to be done alongside the daily chores of life in a largely inhospitable land.

This essay will address the history of West German Jewry using the concept of guilt as its guiding theme. Many Jews suffered from a bad conscience because they had decided to remain in the “blood-soaked” country. This bad conscience not only distinguished West German Jewry from other Jewish communities, it also explains much of what characterized Jewish history in the Federal Republic from 1949 to 1989: its particular economic structure; its especially close ties to Israel; its preoccupation with democratization; its power arrangements and communal life. The theme of guilt will allow us to trace a development that led from a close-knit, ideologically homogeneous group to one that became more pluralistic in the 1970s and 1980s. With the immigration of Jews from the former Soviet Union in the 1990s the question of guilt no longer proved imperative to the course of German-Jewish history. It is here that our story ends.

**Money’s Charm**

Today it is hard to imagine the pressure exerted on Jews in Germany after 1945. Relatives in the United States, politicians in Israel, commentators throughout the Jewish world — all regarded a Jewish presence on German soil as inexplicable at best and profane at worst. Hannah Arendt’s comment to Gertrud Jaspers, the Jewish wife of the famous Heidelberg philosopher, was a restrained example of this ubiquitous approach to Jewish life in post-Holocaust Germany: “How one actually can bear to live there as a Jew, in an environment that doesn’t even deem it necessary to talk about ‘our problem,’ and that today means our dead, is beyond me.” Less restrained voices abounded, ranging from members of the Knesset calling for a boycott of Germany’s Jewish community to the publisher Gershom Schocken calling on the Jewish state to dissociate itself from Germany’s Jews. Less restrained voices abounded, ranging from members of the Knesset calling for a boycott of Germany’s Jewish community to the publisher Gershom Schocken calling on the Jewish state to dissociate itself from Germany’s Jews.

What is more, these and other critics blamed the refusal to emigrate on the “cash nexus.” Eliahu Livneh, the Israeli Consul in Munich, reported to the Israeli foreign office in November 1949 that Jewish concerns in Germany centered on “money and profit,” and that Jewish existence in the country was based on “insensitivity and the credit balance.”

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head of the Jewish Agency in Munich, one Amos, voiced similar concerns in August 1950. Addressing Livneh, he summarized his impressions as follows: “The moral degeneracy that has been spreading among the Jews of Germany, especially among its businesspeople, makes its necessary to dissociate the Zionist movement and its institutions from the Jewish community in Germany, as we are not in the position to guarantee a continuation of an honorable Jewish existence” in the country. One year later, the New York-based newspaper Aufbau maintained that a swift emigration of Germany’s “opportunistic” Jews would be in the best interest of Germans and Jews alike. Most of these commentaries appeared at a time when Wiedergutmachung (restitution) was still heavily contested—and few Jews were actually benefiting from generous compensation payments. Indeed, in the early 1950s many Jews in West Germany barely made a living and relied on welfare from both Jewish and German institutions. Toward the end of the decade, however, the situation changed. Many of the 12,000 to 15,000 Jews who remigrated to Germany did so for economic reasons. Again, motives varied, but numerous Jews either hoped that the process of Wiedergutmachung would be expedited if they lived in the Federal Republic; that finding a job would be easier in Munich or Berlin than in Haifa or Tel Aviv — particularly at a time when Germany’s economy was in full swing; or that restitution of property and businesses demanded one’s presence in the country. The decision of the Bonn parliament to grant financial help to remigrants in the order of 6000 Marks per person led to a further wave of immigration in 1956.

Yet what was unusual about Jewish economic life in the Federal Republic was not what Zionist critics regularly insinuated: that Jews in Germany were bad Jews because they only had money on their mind.

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4 Anthony, *Im Land der Väter*, 170.
5 Ibid., 102, footnote 173. The extent to which this opinion took hold of the imagination was remarkable. As late as 1998 the co-founder of Germany’s Central Council of Jews (Zentralrat der Juden in Deutschland), Norbert Wollheim, repeated the same story in an interview with the well-known German-Jewish journalist Richard Chaim Schneider. Showing no compunctions, he asserted that many Jews had remained in the Federal Republic because of “Egypt’s pots of meat,” which they “enjoyed.” Norbert Wollheim, ‘Wir haben Stellung bezogen,’ in: Richard Chaim Schneider, *Wir sind da! Die Geschichte der Juden in Deutschland von 1945 bis heute* (Munich: Ullstein, 2000), 119.
On the contrary, Jews in West Germany believed they were being good Jews because they had very little else on their mind other than making money. Put differently, focusing on money allowed many Jews to claim that they did not have emotional, let alone sentimental ties to the country, that, aside from money, nothing at all attached them to their temporary abode.

The abstract nature of money allowed Jews, if they so wished, to leave the country as quickly as possible. In the first decades after the Shoah, few Jews had the intention to stay in Germany permanently. Many preferred to rent rather than to buy real estate, many favored work in import-export businesses over jobs in the civil service sector. Stores that could be sold swiftly and professions that could be pursued elsewhere were more in line with “Jewish” objectives than occupations that possibly precluded emigration.\(^8\) “Liquid” money, numerous Jews believed, would enable them to be in control of their destiny. Owing to their bad conscience, then, many Jews in the Federal Republic sought to avoid occupations and life-styles that would have entailed a long-term commitment to Germany. As the sociologist Y. Michal Bodemann has explained, “the preference for job qualifications that were relatively transferable, that is, not bound to the land or language” indicated that, initially at least, most Jews saw their future elsewhere.\(^9\) In some extreme instances, the pursuit of money was indicative of how certain Jews—in this case men who worked in Frankfurt’s real estate sector in the early 1970s—paid little heed to the concerns of society at large precisely because they did not intend to become part of that society in the foreseeable future.\(^10\)

**Absolute Loyalty: Israel**

In the immediate postwar period, Palestine/Israel became the real or idealized home for many thousands of Jews from war-torn Europe. When the State of Israel gained independence in May 1948, most Jews in Germany had to ask themselves with ever greater urgency what reasons might still exist to postpone a move that seemed all but inevitable—the emigration to the “Holy Land.” Whatever reasons they could muster in defense of their decision to stay, most Jews were united in their conviction that Germany offered neither an emotional *Heimat* nor a sense of security. As a result, Israel came to figure as a primary source of identity, or, in the words of Dan Diner, as an *Identitätsersatz*.\(^11\)

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10 This episode is discussed in Anthony D. Kauders, *Unmögliche Heimat. Eine deutsch-jüdische Geschichte der Bundesrepublik* (Munich: DVA, 2007), 79-88.

11 Dan Diner, *Negative Symbiose—Deutsche und Juden nach Auschwitz*, in: Micha Brumlik,
West Germany’s Jews made every effort to prove that this emotional attachment was genuine. In countless letters, articles, and public talks, Jewish representatives detailed the importance of Israel for the Jews of Germany. What is more, Jewish officials repeatedly claimed that they themselves were needed in the Federal Republic as mediators between Germans and Israelis. Karl Marx, editor-in-chief and owner of the Allgemeine Wochenzeitung der Juden in Deutschland, belonged to the most vocal advocates of this stance. In October 1951 he claimed that the Jews’ role in Germany should be that of an “outpost” (Vorposten), or, “of a mediator between the Germans (…) and the Jews of the world, particularly in Israel.”

Similar thoughts emanated from Leopold Goldschmidt, executive member of the Jewish community in Frankfurt and leading official in the Society for Christian-Jewish Cooperation (Gesellschaft für christlich-jüdische Zusammenarbeit). In May 1952 he submitted that the Jews in Germany could figure as the quintessential mediators, combining as they did a religious, historical, and “racial” attachment to all Jews on the one hand, and a civil bond with the West German state on the other.

Karl Marx not only owned the main Jewish newspaper in the country, he also headed the Zionist Organization in Germany (ZOD). In this capacity, too, Marx was adamant that West Germany’s Jews be treated as equals rather than pariahs in the Jewish world. In 1957 he sent a combative letter to Jewish community institutions and organizations throughout the Federal Republic, claiming that “the entire Jewish community in Germany, with only a few exceptions” had demonstrated its loyalty to Israel and continued to be willing “to do everything for Israel.” These exertions, however, had been to no avail in international Zionist circles. The Zionist World Organization in particular had refused to admit the ZOD to membership in its association, thereby signaling that it was not ready to take German Zionism seriously. After countless futile appeals to the contrary, Marx announced that he would have to refuse all publications by Zionist organizations in the Allgemeine Wochenzeitung, including ads and petitions coming from the Keren Kayemeth L’Israel (Jewish National Fund), Keren Hayessod (United Israel Appeal), and Youth Aliyah. Zionist organizations were thus banned from publishing in Germany’s principal Jewish periodical. That being not enough, Karl Marx reacted to further slights by canceling his membership in the Keren Hayessod in 1957 and stepping down from

Doron Kiesel und Cilly Kugelmann und Julius Schoeps (eds.), Jüdisches Leben in Deutschland seit 1945 (Frankfurt am Main: Athenäum, 1988), 243.
12 Allgemeine Wochenzeitung der Juden in Deutschland (AWJD), 5.10.1951 “Jom Kippur—Tag der Versöhnung—Tag der Besinnung,” 1.
13 Ibid., 16.5.1952 “Jüdische Aufgaben in Deutschland,” 1.
14 ZA (Zentralarchiv zur Erforschung der Juden in Deutschland) B. 1./7., 581, 9.8.1957.
his chairmanship of the ZOD in 1959.\footnote{Ibid., letter of 19.8.1957. These developments were not mentioned in the 1965 Yearbook of the Keren Hayessod. Evidently Marx had become a member again or he had never left the organization. Karl Marx, “Israel und Wir,” in: Mendel Karger-Karin (ed.), *Israel und Wir. Keren-Hajessod-Jahrbuch der jüdischen Gemeinschaft in Deutschland 1955/1965* (Frankfurt am Main, 1966), 97-99 and ibid., Marx to Dr. Rosenthal and H. Alroy, general secretary of the ZOD, 26.6.1959.}

These may have been somewhat rash reactions to Israeli indifference and hostility, but they illustrate how much trouble even vocal advocates of West German Zionism had in dealing with rebuffs, all the more so when these snubs coincided with the extraordinary efforts on the part of West Germany’s Jews to support the State of Israel. It would not have taken these rather unpleasant experiences to force Marx and others to engage in yet further pro-Israeli activities, this time on the financial front. When the economic situation of West Germany’s Jewish communities improved in the 1960s, financial assistance to Israel followed as a matter of course. Even without outside pressure, Jews in the Federal Republic helped the young state, not least because Israel was suffering from severe economic turmoil during this period.

Zionist organizations did not only rely on the goodwill of potential donors. Instead, they instructed agents to collect funds from communities and individual community members. These agents were not at all averse to comparing the sum totals raised during the campaigns, lauding those who had given beyond the “call of duty” and castigating others whose contributions fell short of expectations.\footnote{ZA B. 1/2., 51, Mendel K. to “Magbit-Askanim, Gemeindevertreter und Magbit-Komites in Deutschland,” 3.3.1967, 3.}

Facing their watchful eye, West Germany’s Jewish leaders felt obliged to praise the accomplishments vis-à-vis the Jewish state more than ever. The Central Council of Jews in Germany (*Zentralrat der Juden in Deutschland*) therefore drew up league tables to prove how much its Jews had contributed to the Zionist cause. In August 1967, some two months after the Six-Day-War, General Secretary Hendrik van Dam informed his then assistant Werner Nachmann that West Germany’s Jews stood all the way on top, inasmuch as one tallied total donations per community member. According to his calculations (which are difficult to verify), Jews in the Federal Republic contributed $ 250 per head, as against $30 for the United States. Van Dam did not fail to add that despite its “great (...) wealth,” British Jewry had only approximated the US figures.\footnote{ZA B. 1/7., 466, van Dam to Nachmann, 1.8.1967.} What is more, van Dam could not help to report these findings to an envoy of the Israeli embassy in Bonn, claiming that the results for West Germany were quite excellent indeed and unsurpassed by any other community in the world. He went on to say that all this had been achieved despite the financial burden brought about by East European
Jewish immigration to West Germany.\textsuperscript{18} Whoever composes league tables in the fashion of van Dam hopes to show that specific norms have been met. In this case, the addressee was not only the Jewish public abroad or Zionist representatives in Berlin, Munich, and Frankfurt; the addressee was also one’s own conscience. In fact, certain community officials did not stop here: so as to placate their feelings of guilt, they were willing to intimidate and even shame members of the community whose behaviour appeared to threaten the reputation of West Germany’s Jewish community and, by extension, that of its élites.

Pressure was exerted in two ways. During the first stage, functionaries and Zionist activists either appealed to the “Jewish conscience” or focused on individual community members, exhorting them to contribute to the cause — and that usually meant donating what the collectors judged appropriate. These attempts were usually confined to general pleas or one-on-one encounters, allowing the process of soliciting and pledging money to remain anonymous. The second stage followed from the first whenever community members refused to submit to the pressure. In such cases, officials informed the Jewish public of this intolerable behaviour and called on community members to ostracize the offender(s).

In Dortmund, the committee organizing the “Hilfe-für Israel Aktion” (Help for Israel Action) asked all community members to consider whether they had participated in the endeavor by pledging money and, if so, whether the donation was fitting given the needs of the Israeli people and the financial capacity of the individual benefactor. Since the committee was neither able to assess the “real possibilities of each person” nor willing to “sanction stubborn sinners,” it suggested that all members deal with the issue in a conscientious manner.\textsuperscript{19}

We can discern a similar approach, namely individual arm-twisting as against collective shaming, in a letter to community members whose financial resolve had allegedly left something to be desired — in the eyes of Zionist activists, that is. Henry O. of the Keren Hayessod censured their miserliness and wrote: “Some time ago you donated 2500 Marks (the sums varied according to the addressee, A.K.), which in no way corresponds to your economic means and lies well below the sum paid by people of much more humble backgrounds. The committee regards the sum of 2500 Marks as absolutely inadequate and inappropriate. Therefore I have been authorized (…) to refund the sum and transfer it to your account.”\textsuperscript{20}

When these measures failed to do the trick, community officials decided

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{18} Ibid., van Dam to A. Iden, 25.8.1967.
\item \textsuperscript{19} ZA B. 1/2., 170, Komitee “Hilfe für Israel,” Kultusgemeinde Groß-Dortmund, 3.8.1967, “Liebes Mitglied (…)”.
\item \textsuperscript{20} ZA B. 1/7. 466, Henry O. to Oskar F., 11.12.1967.
\end{itemize}
to put the screws on the “transgressors,” hoping that shame might work better than guilt. On 19 June 1967, the Solidarity Fund for Israel published a statement demanding that representatives of Jewish communities and institutions in West Germany whose involvement had been insufficient be prohibited from holding an “honorary office in the Jewish community in Germany.”21 The Frankfurt community board was equally dismissive of these “black sheep,” comparing their “treacherous” behaviour to that of “aiding and abetting murder.”22

Collective shaming reached its apogee in the spring and autumn of 1969, when the Jewish communities of Munich and Frankfurt, in consultation with the Keren Hayessod, passed the following resolution: “All donors to the Solidarity Fund should 1. not accept any invitation to social events (organized) by persons who did not participate in the Solidarity Action of 1968 and who thus abandoned the Jewish people and the State of Israel in times of need, 2. not request these people’s company, 3. not attend gatherings to which these persons have been invited. 4. This resolution also pertains to social functions (…) taking place in Israel and abroad.”23

Concern for Israel’s wellbeing was crucial here. Even so, some Jews in the Federal Republic constructed communities of shame in order to demonstrate their unequivocal allegiance to the Jewish state. These Jews were concerned about their standing in the Jewish world, as well as that of the West German Jewish community as a whole. Their feelings of guilt for living in the “wrong” country ran deep, so deep, in fact, that they were ready to isolate members of the community whose comportment had supposedly threatened their own status. Shaming others, then, promised to appease one’s own bad conscience. Most Israelis, however, were quite oblivious to these disputes and remained hostile to the idea of Jewish life in Germany.

**Guardians of West German Democracy**

The refusal to commit oneself economically to a land that one did not and could not love came naturally to most Jews in the first decades after the Holocaust; the enthusiastic support for Israel was also to be expected. Inasmuch as both skepticism toward Germany and the commitment to Israel were perceived to be the only possible answers to the question of Jewish existence on German soil, they did not require great intellectual feats to be related to the outside world. But Jewish representatives also wished to show that, beyond helping Israel and championing its cause vis-à-vis German officials, there was a further raison d’être for Jews in the Federal Republic: to oversee West

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21 Ibid., I.E. Lichtigfeld to all communities in Germany, 21.6.1967.
Germany’s democratization. This argument transpired over the course of many years, and its genesis owed much to the continued accusations from Israel and the rest of the Jewish world.24

In the late summer of 1951, an intriguing piece appeared in the Allgemeine Wochenzeitung der Juden in Deutschland, West Germany’s main Jewish newspaper. Penned by Hendrik van Dam, General Secretary of the Central Council, the article addressed the thorny issue of Jewish existence in the Federal Republic, and it did so in a way that would exemplify much subsequent thinking on the matter. The Jewish official was not one to revel in Geschichtsphilosophie. He avoided the question of whether Jews should abandon the country for good, dismissing comparisons with Spain’s Jewish community after the expulsion of 1492 as unnecessarily speculative. Instead, van Dam focused on the 30,000 Jews still living in the Federal Republic, whose role, he avowed, would be moral in spirit: “the criterion for the will of the Germans to renounce its anti-Jewish tendencies.”25

For van Dam and most other Jews, foreshewing antisemitism was coterminous with democracy. In the post-war years, it had become a habit of West Germany’s Jews to establish a causal connection between democracy and restitution, between the return to a Rechtsstaat and the remembrance of genocide, and between the newly created order and minority rights.26 But that was not all. For in attempting to ensure that democratization go hand in hand with the struggle against prejudice, West Germany’s Jewish representatives were changing themselves. Indeed, in the process of engaging with Germany’s Nazi past and post-Nazi present, many of them came to identify with a role that proved too compelling to be discarded, namely that of guarantor of West German democracy.

Let us return to Karl Marx. Writing in April 1953, he opined that the Allgemeine had realized earlier than many others “that the thesis of collective guilt” was untenable and indefensible, massive critique from “large groups abroad, particularly in Israel” notwithstanding.27 Two weeks later, Marx contended that Germany had done everything in its power to make amends, adding that, on the subject of collective guilt, it was the “duty of every cultivated Jew” to counter all those “extreme groups” who were in the business of using methods that had already led to much suffering among the Jews themselves.28 Marx was not alone.

24 For this development see chapter 4 in Kauders, Unmögliche Heimat.
26 This point is argued in Anthony D. Kauders, Democratization and the Jews, Munich 1945-1965 (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2004).
28 AWJD, “Gedanken zum 5. Jahrestag,” 24 April 1953. His comments touched on incidents that had taken place in Israel, where the violinist Jascha Heifetz had been assaulted for his decision to perform the music of German composers. On further
Hendrik van Dam, among others, denounced the “ideological observers of the German situation,” for whom the “state of barbarism” was endemic in this “part of the world” and who abhorred “any kind of development” that would “contradict this prognosis.” van Dam concluded his ruminations with the assertion that the Jewish community in Germany had every right in the world to exist, dismissing Israeli press statements that had suggested that only a “colony of diplomats” and a few “loners” seeking restitution or commercial contacts ought to be found in the country.

In all of these cases, misrecognition of the Jewish predicament in Germany led prominent Jews to reflect on the actual state of German-Jewish relations. That state had changed to such an extent that endorsing West German democracy was becoming feasible. This did not mean that Jews now looked upon the country through rose-tinted glasses. Rather, it meant that Jews were increasingly being forced to evaluate the Federal Republic and its citizens in response to the unrelenting critique from abroad. And this in turn produced results that had not necessarily been anticipated.

Let me briefly illustrate this point. From the outset, Jewish representatives in Germany backed General John McCloy’s famous declaration of 1949 that Jews had to be accepted as equal citizens in order for any people to stand the acid test of democracy. For them, liberal democratic values implied an effort to allude to the symbolic link between human rights, memory of violations thereof (the Holocaust), and a healthy democracy. But where this approach initially only related to how Germans were supposed to act, it would later also designate the rationale for Jewish existence. In other words, where many Jews as far back as the 19th century had understood the relationship between their well-
being and the success of liberal democracy, after 1945 prominent Jews combined this position with one that established a connection between their very identity and the success of West German democracy.

Initially, this connection was remarked upon only sporadically — we have already encountered van Dam’s hope that a Jewish presence would force Germans to disown antisemitism. Subsequently, however, this idea gained in popularity. On the occasion of the Momenta Judaica exhibition in Cologne in March 1964, for instance, van Dam recalled the resentment that the Jewish world had expressed toward Germany’s Jews, despite the fact that these same Jews had helped create the Federal Republic, not least by ensuring that democracy would thrive in the country. Heinz Galinski, head of West Berlin’s Jewish community, was even more explicit. Writing in the aftermath of the World Jewish Congress meeting in August 1966, his words could hardly conceal the frustration that came with the incessant compulsion to legitimize his very existence: “The opponents of a dialogue between Jews and non-Jews in Germany,” Galinski began, “should from time to time consider that the political development in Germany — democracy or dictatorship — is a decision that is also not without significance for them.” On a more personal note, Galinski mentioned how people “in different Jewish communities and institutions” had seen it as their duty to assist Germany in “taking the democratic path and sticking to it.” He then continued along similar lines, reminding those “who have nearly written us off” that “we Jews are engaged in pioneering work that is neither opportunistic nor demanding of gratitude, but is subordinate to the goal of human understanding (Menschlichkeit).”

Galinski’s words bespoke a self-understanding that was gaining ground during this period. Increasingly, Jewish public figures in the Federal Republic associated their own place in society as well as that of the larger Jewish community with the success of West Germany’s democracy. While showing growing appreciation of the country’s transformation, Galinski and others arrogated to themselves the role of assisting this

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32 For the German-Jewish predilection for liberalism in the 19th and 20th centuries and the German-Jewish propensity to vote for liberal democratic parties before Hitler, see Peter Pulzer, Jews and the German State: The Political History of a Minority, 1848-1933 (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002); Martin Liepach, Das Wahlverhalten der jüdischen Bevölkerung: Zur politischen Orientierung der Juden in der Weimarer Republik (Tübingen: Mohr, 1996); and Anthony D. Kauders, “Weimar Jewry.”


34 Ibid., “Ein Nachwort zum Kongress,” 19 August 1966. van Dam reiterated this point at about the same time: “It is logical that the existence of a Jewish community in Germany after 1945 represents a historical factor that is of considerable significance to the development of democratic institutions.” Abraham Melzer (ed.), Deutsche und Juden—ein unlöshares Problem. Reden zum jüdischen Weltkongreß 1966 (Düsseldorf, 1966), 55.
process by offering special expertise. This Jewish know-how was a gift — and I would argue for three main reasons. First, it implied Jewish willingness to be interested in Germany’s future, despite the heinous crimes of the past. Second, it suggested that Jews would benefit the country by demonstrating that change was indeed occurring. Third, it meant that the Federal Republic, in its dealings with other countries, could point to Jewish involvement in the affairs of the state. But West Germany’s Jews were also receiving something in return. Both vis-à-vis Israel and the wider Jewish world, van Dam, Marx, and Galinski could point to their significance in upholding German democracy. This self-declared function boosted their own self-confidence, claiming as they now could to play a “pioneering” rather than an “obdurate” part in post-war Jewish history.

This interpretation reached its climax in the speeches and writings of Werner Nachmann, the Central Council’s controversial chairman from 1969 to 1988. In numerous remarks, Nachmann elucidated the need to strengthen relations between Germans and Jews, so much so that some of his statements came very close to fusing the interests of both sides. A good case in point is his interview with the Allgemeine of December 1975. Asked to comment on why he had been invited to join Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher to Israel, the Zentralrat official surmised that it owed much to the way in which the Jewish community had enabled West Germany to “return to the family of free nations.” That not being enough, Nachmann put forward the rather contorted but revealing observation that the “Jewish community in Germany evinces much attractiveness, both as citizens of the Federal Republic with its government and with the Federal government regarding the efforts to act on behalf of Israel.” The activity of the Central Council, he concluded, “proved that the Federal Republic is today one of the most democratic countries on earth.”

Nachmann was seconded one year later, when his Secretary-General, Alexander Ginsburg (1973-1988), recounted the Central Council’s recent trip to Israel. Unusually and naively optimistic about Israeli perceptions of West Germany, Ginsburg claimed that many Israelis had “appreciated the achievements of democratic society in post-war Germany” and acknowledged how much the Jewish communities had “contributed to the conditions” for democracy in the state. Accordingly, the words “Germania toy” (Germany is good, actually: Germania tova), which Ginsburg claimed could be “heard everywhere,” summed up the

35 AllJFJ, “Werner Nachmann: Die jüdische Gemeinschaft der Bundesrepublik wirkt an der Friedensarbeit der Bundesrepublik mit,” 12 December 1975, 2. At the general meeting of the Zentralrat in February 1976, Nachmann reported on a meeting with Defense Minister Julius Leber. It was essential, he declared, that the Jewish community ensure that the young soldiers be educated as “democratic citizens.” AllJFJ, “Unveränderte Grundsätze und Aufgaben,” 13 February 1976, 1-2.
“prevailing opinion” within Israeli society. These lines, it will be appreciated, addressed two audiences. Ginsburg was certainly appealing to his Jewish readers, for whom Israeli sentiment toward Germany’s Jews remained a source of continuous apprehension. Every little sign of hope, then, would help. Equally significant, however, was the overture to the non-Jewish public: the Jews had endorsed West Germany’s democratization, made the state more respectable in the eyes of Israel’s Jewish population, and provided the Federal Republic with ever-important credibility.

But it was left to the chairman of the Zentralrat to adopt a maximalist position. On the 25th anniversary of the consecration of Düsseldorf’s synagogue in 1983, Nachmann spoke on the subject of “Jewish responsibility in the Federal Republic.” In his speech, the chairman recapitulated most of his previous programmatic statements, though this time around the “exchange of gifts” in the shape German-Jewish relations was particularly evident, even if the language remained as stilted as ever: “Unfortunately it is today rarely noted that through the foundation of the new Jewish community so soon after the end of the Hitler tyranny the political trust of the free world in the young Federal Republic was strengthened and this state…. was very quickly accepted into the family of nations. This was also a prerequisite for the economic boom that brought this country prosperity. We have contributed to this development. We showed responsibility also toward this state, whose citizens we have again become. We are respected as a religious community and enjoy the same guaranteed rights as the Christian churches. We cultivate regular contacts with state institutions. We are in touch regularly with the representatives of the political parties, unions, and industry. We talk openly with the churches. We take part in public life.” Toward the end of this section of his speech, he returned to the theme with which he had begun: “Of course it also belongs to our duty and to our responsibility to represent to the outside world the image of this Federal Republic that corresponds with the facts and does justice to the efforts of the politicians in charge. We can and wish to acknowledge that they have consolidated, through their politics, democracy and thereby the freedom of each individual citizen.”

Now, it could be very plausibly argued that Nachmann was an extreme case, whose actions many Jews in West Germany disowned — and especially so when it became known, shortly after his death in 1988, that he had embezzled restitution monies in the order of 29.4 million marks so as to save his various firms from bankruptcy. None the less, Nachmann as a representative of Jewry in the Federal Republic belonged to a tradition of leaders who had imbibed the belief of Jewish importance for West German democratization. What is more, those younger Jews who dissociated themselves from Nachmann, Galinski, or Ginsburg appropriated the democratic ideal in their discussions of Israel and the wider world. A classic example of this assumption can be found in the first editorial of Babylon, the Jewish journal put out by Susan Heenen-Wolff, Getrud Koch, Cilly Kugelmann, and Martin Löw-Beer. Although adamant that the publication would transcend the traditional concerns of the West German Jewish leadership, the editors embraced a core understanding of the latter in their emphasis on universalistic morals: “Not so much as representatives of a religious/social/ethnic minority do we want to make ourselves be heard, but as universalistically oriented intellectuals that want reflectively to go beyond the particularly of origins (Herkunftspartikularität) without wanting to deny it.”

Power and Pluralism

In fact, there had been calls for change well before Nachmann’s death. The 1970s and 1980s, it can be argued, were an intellectual turning point in West German Jewish history precisely because of the growing importance of second-generation critics like Dan Diner and Micha Brumlik. To be sure, these young Jews were not alone in their calls for renewal. As early as 1970 van Dam had noted the need for change, given that West Germany’s Jews were becoming ever more part of Christian mainstream society. The incessant talk of living on “packed suitcases,” he noted, could no longer be sustained after more than twenty years of uninterrupted Jewish existence on German soil. And in light of the fact that approximately two-thirds of Jews married non-Jews between 1973 and 1981, references to “packed suitcases” seemed rather reckless indeed.

But it was the generational conflict emerging in this period that set the tone for future debate. Like their Gentile counterparts, Jewish youths

sought to pluralize society and its institutions. Unlike many of their Gentile peers, early conflicts with the establishment were not meant to threaten the (Jewish) status quo: young Jews did not demand new leaders and did challenge the role of Israel within community life. Prominent representatives such as Munich’s Hans Lamm or Düsseldorf’s Paul Spiegel confirmed that most Jewish students, during this early phase, neither questioned Zionism as an integral part of Jewish education nor disowned the Jewish community in Germany as a whole. Nevertheless, Jewish officials did concede that something had to be done against the general indifference among younger Jews, who often showed little or no enthusiasm for the goings-on in synagogues and community centers. In the early 1970s we therefore have a situation in which young Jews expected the leadership to take seriously the concerns of a more liberal and critical generation, and in which older representatives wished to stave off the slow demise of community institutions whose very existence was under threat. Yet the interests of the one group (renewal) did not necessarily coincide with those of the other (survival).

The latter often reacted bureaucratically. Late in 1970 the Central Council set up a special committee for youth questions, whose aim it was to discuss current problems and whose (young) members were to meet regularly. The first such gathering took place in December 1971, with further ones to follow. Although the committee discussed sensitive issues such as intermarriage or Zionism with much openness and dedication, the communication with both rabbis and officials proved difficult, to say the least. Having set up the group, the Central Council had obviously hoped to be left in peace, and there is little evidence to suggest that Nachmann and his colleagues took seriously the discussions they had initiated in the first place. From 1977 onward, Youth and

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\[47\] ZA, B. 1/7., 391 Ben Klar, Ben Prinz, Michael Bock to the Zentralrat, 18.6.1974; ZA, B. 1/7., 391 Michael Bock, Ruwen Isser, Ben Klar, Benno Reicher, and Ralf Spier “Ist die jüdische Jugend aus dem Dornröschenschlaf erwacht? IGJZ—gestern—heute—morgen,” no date.
Culture Conferences (Jugend – und Kulturtage) replaced the committee meetings. Again, while there is no extant material detailing the rationale behind this initiative, the subsequent dialogue between the Zentralrat and the conference participants indicates that the former was more interested in addressing the various issues pro forma than in adopting recommendations springing from the conference proceedings. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the ongoing debate on intermarriage. Whereas most members of the younger generation advocated an accommodating stance — allowing non-Halakhic children to join communities, integrating Gentile partners wherever possible, accepting the reality of mixed marriages as a fact of life —, the Central Council under Nachmann moved in the opposite direction. In Frankfurt am Main, for example, a New Jewish List (Neue Jüdische Liste) took part in the community elections of 1986. Micha Brumlik and Susann Jael Heenen-Wolff, among others, not only spoke in favor of greater transparency and more democracy, they also demanded that non-Halakhic children be accepted in the community as equal members and that their mothers be taught Hebrew, Yiddish, and Jewish history. Otherwise, the party activists maintained, the tiny Jewish community would be unable to survive in the long run.

Nachmann, however, did not appreciate such advice. From 1982 onward he and his supporters repeatedly demanded that Jews married to Gentiles be not admitted to leadership positions in communities, especially when these positions touched on questions of religion and education. Nachmann argued, without providing any evidence, that offspring from such marriages rarely received a Jewish education; he added that it was hardly impossible to find Jewish spouses in West Germany. In October 1984 the Directorate of the Zentralrat passed a resolution advising Jewish communities throughout the country to only send representatives to the Central Council who were married to Jews.

Similar conflicts emerged with regard to Israel. A few examples must suffice. In 1980, Dan Diner, Micha Brumlik und Cilly Kugelmann founded the Frankfurt Jewish Group (Frankfurter Jüdische Gruppe); at

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52 ZA, B. 1/7., 836 “Protokoll der Sitzung des Zentralrats am 21.10.1984 in Frankfurt am Main,” 3.
about the same time, the Federation of Jewish Students published the Munich-based journal Cheshbon. The need for a new beginning, Micha Brumlik maintained, was evident in all walks of Jewish life. He added that because the “Zionist experiment had failed,” “Torah, Talmud, and Tanakh” would have to replace the undue fixation on the State of Israel. Heschel Freudig, a member of the Cheshbon editorial board, agreed with this assessment. Not only had Israel ceased to be as important to Diaspora Jews as in the past, this erstwhile pre-occupation had also blinded West Germany’s Jews to the fact that Israel’s occupation of Gaza and the West Bank was undemocratic. Brumlik and Freudig were no exceptions. At the preparatory seminar for the fifth Youth and Culture Conference at Wiesbaden in December 1981, a majority of the participants rejected the concept of unconditional love for Israel (Ahavat Israel) as an unrealistic position to adopt in view of recent developments. “Love makes you blind,” was how one woman summarized her thoughts on the matter.

The Lebanon War of 1982 occasioned a further radicalization of this form of anti-Zionism. Diner hoped that the military victory of Israel would not lead to a psychological defeat of the Palestinians, and called on everyone to support the resistance of the PLO in the Occupied Territories. Brumlik went one step further. He not only condemned the Israeli army for its “pogrom-like actions,” he also compared the massacres of Sabra and Shatila with the murder of tens of thousands of Ukrainian Jews in Babi Yar.

Astonishingly, the Central Council did not lose the upper hand, though it was losing its purpose and appeal. In the first decades after the Shoah, the Zentralrat had represented most Jews in West Germany. At the time, men like van Dam and Galinski promoted the economic, political, and legal interests of the Jewish community vis-à-vis various German authorities — and in so doing, fulfilled their function in an exemplary manner. Matters looked rather different in 1984 or 1988, however. Now the Central Council lacked specific objectives most community members could unequivocally embrace. Now both young and old Jews increasingly contemplated the future of community life in the country as opposed to ensuring Wiedergutmachung or West German democratization. Now the Central Council had a much more difficult time suppressing controversy; determining the course a given controversy might take; or co-opting

inexperienced youth to do its work. That being the case, Nachmann and others retained their authority even in this difficult and intellectually challenging period, mainly for two reasons: first, the Jewish community was too small in size to allow for formidable alternative factions or serious counter-publics; and second, the most vocal and intellectually commanding figures critical of the Zentralrat preferred to become involved in German politics and/or pursue academic careers to becoming immersed in the high politics of West German Jewry.

The Zentralrat held on to its power because of habit and the particular make-up of West German Jewry. But this power was becoming hollow as liberalism, individualism, and pluralism were taking hold of the Jewish public. Gaining ground in many areas of life — marriage patterns, sociability, consumption —, the new pluralist paradigm was equally present in the ideological sphere, as the debate on the relationship with Israel testifies. If the critique of Israel initially reflected the desire of the second generation to emancipate itself from the first, the content of the critique prefigured the road ahead: more and more Jews would ignore Zentralrat pronouncements, indeed dissociate themselves from their official representatives. The culmination of this trend can be seen today, where the President of the Central Council, Charlotte Knobloch, resorts to language strangely reminiscent of the 1970s and often removed from the concerns of new immigrants and the third generation alike. Just as guilt is no longer the guiding force in Jewish life — most Jews are at home in Germany —, so the Zentralrat has lost much of its raison d’être.

Pluralism, it can be argued, has bred a new generation of Jews whose interests are too diverse to be embodied by members of a generation still in the throes of a post-Holocaust world.


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