

JEWISH RECONSTRUCTION IN GERMANY SINCE 1945

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(Review Article)

HARRY MAÖR, born in Munich in 1914, emigrated to Palestine in 1933. He returned to Germany in 1953 and, for three years, was in charge of the Youth Section of the *Zentralwohlfahrtsstelle der Juden in Deutschland* (Central Welfare Organization of Jews in Germany). During this period he worked for a doctor's degree and wrote a thesis (accepted by Mainz University in 1961) entitled *The Reconstruction of Jewish Communities in Germany*,* a subject concerned with the immediate past. While this fact may preclude an entirely unbiased approach, it does on the other hand add to the topicality of the work. The varied personal experiences of the author and his statistical and sociological researches—by means of questionnaires, letters, conversations and observation of day-to-day life in Germany—endow this thesis with the importance of first-class historical source material. No future student of Jewish reconstruction in Germany since 1945 will be able to ignore this work; and it is possible to subscribe even now to certain general conclusions, either plainly stated by the author or implicit in the sociological data supplied by him (where, as he puts it, he confines himself to a description of the facts).

Jewish reconstruction in Germany is an incontrovertible fact, though there are differences of opinion regarding both its significance and its likely duration. It already has a history: there was an initial impetus during 1945 to 1948, followed by a downward trend (until 1952); a third stage of renewed progress began in 1953, bringing us to the present stage which started about 1959 when this impetus was again checked (though, outwardly, reconstruction seemed to have achieved more impressive results than ever before). At the beginning of the period under review, the Jewish community of Germany consisted of two distinct groups: the German-Jewish remnant of some 15,000 survivors who after 1945 re-established communities and on 19 July 1950 set up their overall organization, the *Zentralrat der Juden in Deutschland* (Central Council of Jews in Germany), prompted partly by devotion to Judaism and partly by the need for protection, support, and compensation; and in addition, the 'East European Jewish refugees' or 'Displaced Persons', altogether some 200,000 Jews, for whose sake world Jewry had to deny itself the satisfaction of breaking off relations with Germany altogether after 1945.

* *Ueber den Wiederaufbau der jüdischen Gemeinden in Deutschland seit 1945*, vi + 246 pp., Mainz, 1961, DM. 20 (obtainable from the author, Freiherr von Steinstrasse 9, Frankfurt am Main).

While there were hardly any 'German Jews', there were 'Jews in Germany' who, as such, were entitled to pursue a Jewish way of life, and who implemented this right with the tenacity of people who had survived the tortures of the concentration camps.

The establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 made possible the dissolution in Germany of the East European Jewish communities whose members, in their vast majority, had in any case looked upon their stay there as merely transitional. As a result, we find that in 1952 there were no more than 17,427 Jews left in the country. But by that time we also encounter the phenomenon known as the 'German economic miracle', a boom in which the Jews participated; besides, also in 1952, the German-Israeli Reparations Agreement was signed, soon to be followed by a return movement of Jews to Germany. Though only a few thousand Jews were concerned in this return, it meant an increase of one-third for the small Jewish community left in the country. By today—1961—the number of these returned Jews has increased to such an extent that they now account for half of the approximately 25,000 members of all German Jewish communities. But around 1959 this re-immigration (63 per cent of it composed of Israelis) came largely to a halt. The check, together with other factors, contributed to a process of disintegration the significance of which has not yet been properly grasped; a process which has hardly been affected by the so-called reconstruction and by no means been halted. It should be added, of course, that this disintegration, which continues to affect and erode Jewish life, is not only rampant among German Jews but among Jewry everywhere today.

Let us look at a few figures. What is the present numerical 'significance' of the Jews in Germany for the country as a whole? We find that they amount to 0.05 per cent of the total population; only in Yugoslavia and Finland (0.03 per cent), Norway and Albania (0.02 per cent), Spain and Portugal (0.01 per cent) do the Jews form an even smaller proportion of the population. As to distribution, there is a pronounced discrepancy between the sexes: a great preponderance of men over women, owing to the fact that more men than women survived concentration camps; as to age groups, 66 per cent of the communities are composed of people over 40 as against the already no longer 'normal' age distribution of German Jewry in 1933 when those over 40 accounted for 37 per cent. In consequence, a total of only 2,478 Jewish men and 889 Jewish women got married in the period 1951 to 1958; of these, 72.5 per cent of the men and 23.6 per cent of the women contracted mixed marriages. The comparative figures for German Jews between 1901 and 1930 were 19.6 and 12.2 per cent respectively—already fairly high figures. According to official statistics, 496 children were born during 1955 to 1958 to parents of whom both were Jews, and 516 to parents of mixed marriages; but only a total of 222 births were registered with the Jewish communal organizations. 'One must inevitably come to the conclusion', Maör writes, 'that the majority of the children of mixed marriages and a considerable number of those with purely Jewish parents were deliberately not registered with the community.' This and other evidence points to the conclusion, Maör adds, that

it is only too obvious that the present condition and development of the Jewish community in Germany has reached a point where the community's disappearance as

JEWS IN GERMANY

an independent entity within less than a generation can be foreseen, even though a downward trend in a genetic group does not necessarily imply a concomitant lack of social viability.

Maör's detailed analysis of present-day communal organization is also very revealing. He shows that the communities are unrepresentative and fail to instil a feeling of pride and strength in their members. Of the trinity upon which, according to Simon the Just, the world is based, i.e. doctrine, religious observance, and welfare work, only the last-mentioned pillar remains standing. No less than 77 per cent of the communities' total budget is spent on welfare and administrative expenses. Under the circumstances, it is not surprising that one finds an 'almost complete absence of Jewish intellectuals of any stature' in the Federal Republic.

There are individual Jewish actors, a few Jewish producers and publishers, hardly any journalists, and not a single editor of an important West German newspaper. . . . One of the three Jewish members of the Bundestag has left Judaism. In mid-1959 there was one Jewish City Councillor each in Cologne, Berlin, Duesseldorf, and Fuerth. The Jews play no part whatever in the leadership of the political Parties.

And 'when we examine the "statistical success" of Jewish appeals, we find that the "upper ten thousand" of German Jewry number—two thousand', Maör observes with some irony.

We also find that the Jewish community in Germany today is

largely led by men who did not arrive on the scene until 1945. . . . Only the vestiges of a continuity exist between the erstwhile and present-day communities. . . . What dynamism is found at all in the new communities is motivated chiefly by the modern principle of a community of interests shared by a group of people who have suffered losses and been wronged. . . . German Jews, in their vast majority, live by trade or on pensions. They do not exercise any particular 'economic function' in Germany. The fact that many communal officers are connected with trade must be regarded as harmful since this lowers the prestige of communal work, and those carrying it out have hardly any status, nor can they act as a stabilizing factor or an impartial authority. . . . Since the existence of communities (even when their existence is not, as is frequently the case, fictitious) must be safeguarded, if necessary without any organizational 'apparatus', we find in Germany the phenomenon of paid communal leaders who alone guarantee the functioning of the communities. . . . Such communities are bound to fail in efforts to foster a social sense among the many rootless Jews, unattached and without relatives, who have settled in Germany, a fact which is particularly tragic for the older generation. There is a great danger that the Jews in Germany will fail even in their ultimate aim, an aim approved even by Jews outside and inimical to German Jewry: to offer a refuge to the old and unintegrated re-immigrants. . . .

As against these gloomy conclusions may be cited the titles of two of my own books, *Das Vermaechtnis des deutschen Judentums* and *Die Botschaft des Judentums*. The universal significance of Judaism which is again being acknowledged, the indomitable living reality of the Jewish people, must, in the final analysis, be an inspiration for German Jewry too. But the basic and universal strength of Judaism can, by the very stimulus which impels it forward, also lead into error, as happens when there is an insufficient realization of the dangers facing it, as at present. We are indebted to Dr. Maör for a challenging picture and a clarification of the dangers which menace the infinitely precarious Jewish existence of our day.