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**Steven E. Aschheim: Beyond the Border**

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## INTRODUCTION

All such writing is an assault on the frontiers.

—Franz Kafka, *The Diaries, 1914–1923*

In 1956 Hannah Arendt wrote: “The German-speaking Jews and their history are an altogether unique phenomenon; nothing comparable to it is to be found even in the other areas of assimilation. To investigate this phenomenon, which among other things found expression in a literally astonishing wealth of talent and of scientific and intellectual productivity, constitutes a historical task of the first rank, and one which, of course, can be attacked only now, after the history of the German Jews has come to an end.”<sup>1</sup>

The Nazi rise to power did indeed brutally cut short the compelling and complex story to which Arendt was alluding. Yet, in another sense the history of German-speaking Jewry did not, in her words, “come to an end.” Albeit in splintered and fragmented form, that legacy remains palpable. In manifold and often quite surprising ways its—always ambiguous—influence continued (and continues) to be widespread and pervasive, mediated and incarnated by those intellectuals (such as Arendt herself) who departed from their Central European settings and moved beyond their borders mainly to Palestine/Israel, Britain, and the United States.

Few topics have been as exhaustively studied, and institutionally supported, as the history of German Jewry and its interactions with German society, politics, economy, and culture. But, viewed from the present standpoint, its legacy continues to be most resonant and immediately felt beyond its historical environment, in its outward movements. The current need, it seems to me, is to grasp in greater detail some of these twentieth-century migratory moments and to analyze the dynamics, interconnections, continuities, transformations, and problematic sides of these German-Jewish impulses as the dispersion from Central Europe took

effect. This work is offered as a modest contribution toward that aim. It is certainly not intended to comprise a comprehensive, or even vaguely systematic, critical history of the German-Jewish intellectual migration. This has been, more or less well, done in a wide variety of studies.<sup>2</sup> Significantly, one of the subjects of this work, Walter Laqueur, has recently sketched a collective portrait of his entire generation and told the larger story of how refugees from Nazi Germany, with varying degrees of success and difficulty, made their way in different parts of the world.<sup>3</sup>

My aim here is far more limited. It is to examine three case studies in which, I believe, this transplanted and always complex hyphenated identity has played a crucial, and as yet insufficiently examined, role in issues and predicaments that continue to engage and perplex us. Chapter 1 examines the ultimately doomed (but still remarkably pertinent) odyssey of a fascinating group of German-speaking Zionists who, very much against the grain, sought to bring about a binationalist solution to the Arab-Jewish conflict in pre-Israel Palestine. Chapter 2 analyzes the emergence of a new kind of cultural history created by German-Jewish émigré historians against the background of their exile from Nazi Germany. In related fashion it seeks to analyze the—often unacknowledged—tensions and differences between them and those writing social history in Germany at the same time. Chapter 3 documents the background to, and thus far little understood reasons behind, the remarkable contemporary canonization of a group of Weimar Jewish intellectuals (Theodor Adorno, Hannah Arendt, Walter Benjamin, Franz Rosenzweig, Gershom Scholem, Leo Strauss) within Western academic and cultural life. These at times surprisingly intertwined cases will, hopefully, illuminate not merely the nature and dynamics of this intellectual sensibility and the migratory moment but also aspects of our own condition and predilections.

The title of this book refers, of course, to more than geographical mobility. German-Jewish intellectual dispersion, at least in its more potent moments, did not merely entail the self-evident movement of people and ideas across physical spaces. More significantly, it resulted in the imported questioning and reshaping of conventional and normative conceptual borders, numerous projects to reconfigure cultural and historical boundaries of thought and knowledge, and manifold attempts to remap the contours of political—and sometimes religious—possibility. In that sense it both continued and (under conditions of adversity, novelty, and

crisis) sharpened the cultural and intellectual proclivities characteristic of the wider postemancipation German-Jewish historical experience.

For over a half-century now, fascinated scholars have been chronicling, mapping, and variously explaining—at times in sophisticated, occasionally in equally celebratory and ideological, manner—why German-speaking Jewish intellectuals were particularly endowed with these qualities (and why, in their view, these qualities continue to be worth emulating).<sup>4</sup> It is not within the purview of the present work to elaborate upon this post-Enlightenment explosion of creativity as Jewish intellectuals and artists encountered (and co-constituted) modern and German culture.<sup>5</sup> It is, however, worth noting that many of the most prominent accounts derive from the work of the thinkers who form part of the present story (and who themselves embodied these qualities).<sup>6</sup>

For all that, in our context, it is worth noting a certain paradoxical characteristic of the modern German-Jewish experience. On the one hand, aware of the conditionality and vulnerability of their status, German Jews often demanded rather timid and inconspicuous behavior from themselves. Respectability became built into their comportment, restraint regarded as a key to well-being. “Stepchildren,” German-Jewish leaders stressed, “must be doubly good.”<sup>7</sup> Even that supreme dissenter Walter Benjamin warned that Jews endangered “even the best German cause for which they stand up *publicly*.”<sup>8</sup> German citizens of the Jewish faith were exhorted to take care not to go beyond the limits, not to tread across invisible yet clearly intuited lines.<sup>9</sup> In 1897 the young Walther Rathenau had railed against Jewish conspicuousness,<sup>10</sup> yet he himself later accepted the highly visible, vulnerable position of German foreign minister, and his 1922 murder sadly vindicated the warnings and imprecations of his friends to give up the office in the face of growing Weimarian anti-Semitism. One of these friends was Albert Einstein.<sup>11</sup> He later wrote: “I regretted the fact that he became a Minister. In view of the attitude which large numbers of the educated classes in Germany assume toward the Jews, I have always thought that their natural conduct in public should be one of proud reserve.”<sup>12</sup>

Yet at the same time (and who more than Benjamin and Einstein themselves better exemplified this tendency), the history of modern German Jewry was distinguished by the remarkably adventurous nature of its cultural, scientific, and intellectual enterprises, animated by an espe-

cially open, critical, and experimental sensibility bent on questioning cognitive, artistic, and political borders—on a radical crossing and refiguring of mental and social frontiers.

Perhaps, after all, there is no paradox here. Could it be that this iconoclastic sensibility represented, at least in part, a kind of (conscious or unconscious) compensatory reaction to, a protest against, the conformist and behavioral constraints imposed upon and by German-speaking Jews? Certainly these thinkers were all confronted with the ever more problematic issue of their own Jewishness, and the tensions that this entailed must have surely figured in the ensuing critical and searching modes by which they questioned, and often sought to go beyond, conventional borders and generally accepted ways of thinking.

Whatever the correct explanation, the majority of figures who form the mosaic of this work fit this pattern. Their lives and work, however, also reveal another important double dimension. They were not just participants in and products of the German-Jewish story; they also became its historians and critical anatomists. As they proceeded beyond the borders of their birth—whether in voluntary, idealist fashion or in forced exile—they became its prime analysts, explicators, and mediators. Not all would necessarily have agreed with Fritz Stern's statement that: "The historical enterprise aims to restore to German Jewry the dignity of its history."<sup>13</sup> But all were mightily impelled to come to explanatory grips with that past and transmit its "lessons" and "legacies" whether in condemnatory, celebratory, or more balanced critical fashion. In their migration they formulated highly charged, often opposed historiographies and accounts of that experience. At its extreme poles stand Gershom Scholem's Zionist narrative of a disfigured, deluded, and demoralized "assimilationist" project<sup>14</sup> through to Peter Gay's impassioned liberal defense of it.<sup>15</sup> (These were by no means the only accounts, and during the course of this work, we shall have occasion to discuss some of their major outlines.)

At the same time, and in various settings and modes, the thinkers who feature in the present study themselves embodied and put into play the very sensibilities and qualities of German-speaking Jewish intellectuals whose history they so masterfully and critically analyzed. In more or less conscious ways they acted as legatees and incarnations of German Jewry's cultural proclivities abroad, exemplified its strengths, strains, bi-

ases, and weaknesses, demonstrated again its accomplishments and conflicts, and analyzed, overcame, or replicated its blind spots. Certainly a crucial part of that (usually self-conscious) legacy corresponded to Kafka's notion of writing as an "assault against the frontiers," a felt desire to re-figure conventional cultural, political, and mental definitions and boundaries. It is to these border-crossing impulses and activities, to their ongoing transformations, strains, and resonances that we must now turn.