The Golden Age of German Jewry, 1871-1933: Remake or Mission Impossible?

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Dr. Josef Joffe is one of the most respected contemporary voices on international affairs. He is the editor of the influential German weekly newspaper Die Zeit and has taught international relations at leading universities in the US and Germany.


Affiliated with Stanford’s Institute for International Studies since 1999, he was appointed Senior Fellow in 2007. He is also Courtesy Professor of Political Science and Abramowitz Fellow in International Relations at the Hoover Institution. He has taught at Harvard, Johns Hopkins, the University of Munich, Princeton, and Dartmouth.

In 2005, he co-founded the journal The American Interest (with Zbigniew Brzezinski, Elliott Cohen, and Francis Fukuyama), where he serves on the Executive Committee. His most recent book is The Myth of America’s Decline (W.W. Norton, 2013). His Überpower: America’s Imperial Temptation (2006) was translated into German, French, and Chinese.

On December 3, 2014, he received the Leo Baeck Medal at the Center for Jewish History in New York and delivered the 57th Leo Baeck Memorial Lecture, which is reprinted here.
Dear Henry, dear Board, dear Billy Weitzer, dear guests and friends:

The following aphorism is ascribed to Bismarck: “People never lie more than before an election, after a hunt, and during a funeral.” Bismarck never said it, but it is a perfect motto for this occasion. Just substitute “prize ceremony” for “funeral.” Nobody has ever embellished more lovingly than Henry Kissinger when introducing me. I lapped it up nonetheless. And as the old saw goes: “I wish my parents had been here. My father would have been very proud of me, and my mother would have believed it.”

Winston Churchill once quipped about Clement Atlee: “He is a very modest man, and, indeed, he has much to be modest about.” But tonight, my habitual diffidence must yield to a dollop of pride, given the sterling company I share with previous Medal recipients: Joachim Gauck, the German president, Angela Merkel, the chancellor, Joschka Fischer, the foreign minister, Fritz Stern, the historian, Helmut Sonnenfeldt, the German Jew from Gardelegen who went to the Seventh Floor of the State Department, Daniel Libeskind, the architect, and a score of other luminaries in politics and in the arts.

Why did the Leo Baeck Institute give me the Medal today? Never mind. I’ll take it, before they realize that I am not the historical figure Adolf
Joffe, a good friend of Trotsky and the first Bolshevik ambassador in Berlin who was sent there to foment the next revolution. Or even Jessica Joffe, my daughter, who just started a much-hyped reality show on channel “E.”

So why me? It must be my lifelong, though somewhat indirect relationship with Leo Baeck. One of his last students, Albert Friedländer, officiated at the Bat Mitzvah of my daughter Janina. And Leo Baeck was the rabbi at the bris of one of my oldest friends, Max Warburg. So I can claim gilt—g-i-l-t—by association. But how does my own life fit into our larger topic: “The Golden Age of German Jewry, 1871-1933: Remake or Mission Impossible?”

Let’s start with the personal and then move to the general. The story begins in a dark school building in bombed-out West Berlin, September 1950—the backdrop for a classic immigrant experience. This six-year-old was the only Jewish kid. He had a perfect command of Berlin argot. Blond and blue-eyed, he looked like a poster boy for the Hitler Youth. And yet he was different as he found out when his first school day began with a prayer, Jesus and all. Refusing to join in, he felt a quick slap on the back of his head, coupled with the teacher’s rebuke: “You can pray, too, you know; it’s the same God.” Tell that to a kid who had grown up on centuries of Christian anti-Judaism.

Having survived the Vilna ghetto and two years in the primeval forests of what is today Belarus, my parents had drifted into Western Germany after the War. They could not go home again. There was no home, never again. Of course, these survivors, perhaps up to a quarter-million, hadn’t gone to “Germany,” but to “America.” The US was running the Western half of the occupied country, offering safety and succor on the way to a new life. Some 10,000 stayed in the “accursed land,” as one of the early community leaders put it, usually because they couldn’t snag a visa to the US or Canada. Alas, my mother’s x-rays had betrayed an earlier bout with tuberculosis, a deadly sin as far as US immigration was concerned.

Thus began a typical immigrant’s tale. You are in, and you are out. You master the cultural tools of the “new country,” but your
parents—speaking Yiddish, Polish and Russian—never quite do. By the age of twelve, their son was their cultural superior, interpreting their new surroundings for them and typing out grammatically correct letters to officialdom over their signatures. He looked and acted like a native, and yet he wasn’t quite, with one foot planted in the old world, and one in the new.

This has been the fate of tens of millions in the 20th century, and it continues in the 21st. Just look around: Africans, Syrians, Iraqis, Kurds, Christian Arabs. So, too, continues the classic pattern whereby immigrants turn into locals and eventually into citizens. Tightly knit families dissolve. Religion loses its hold, as does the authority of fathers and clerics. Exogamy creeps in. “Kosher” yields to “traif,” and “halal” to “haram.” Children understand, but no longer speak, the language of their elders. In the Hollywood vernacular, this tale is called *Hester Street*, *Avalon*, and *The Godfather*.

How is the Jewish experience different? At the risk of sinning against the tenets of post-modernity by asserting the cultural advantages of some groups, I believe that Jews stand out on two counts. One is the obsessive pursuit of learning. My parents never made it past the eighth grade, but hired a tutor to teach me to read and write by age four. The other is “mobility,” both horizontal and vertical, the very essence of modernity.

In his dazzlingly original book *The Jewish Century*, Yuri Slezkine divides the historical world into “Apollonians” and “Mercurians.” The Apollonians, he argues, lived in and off the land as herders, peasants, and craftsmen. Their unchanging lives were beholden to hierarchies both feudal and ecclesiastical.

The Mercurians, by contrast, were fleet-footed service nomads, exploiting “arbitrage” between various cultures by disseminating novel techniques and sources of knowledge. The Jews, excluded from land ownership and the trades, were the classic Mercurians: “urban, mobile, literate, articulate... and occupationally flexible.” No wonder, when so many professions were closed to them and when they might have to run tomorrow.
Because the Jews chipped away at ancient dispensations, they were the spearhead of modernity, which did not endear them to the Apollonians. Naturally, the Mercurian advantage required a special role: the outsider-as-insider. To thrive or even survive, Jews needed to understand the host culture even better than the embedded Apollonians.

In fact, any newcomer has to do better than the locals in order to overcome myriad obstacles: insider networks, market barriers, religious resentment, xenophobia, and outright discrimination. “I must beat them at their own game” is the classic motto of the Intruder who wants to make it. Either that, or he must invent a new game, as did those Russian Jews who could not break into banking and industry and so went off to build Hollywood a hundred years ago.

Nor is the Mercurian life necessarily a conscious choice. Given the exigencies of the Diaspora, Jews had only one “country” from which they could not be driven: literacy and learning—at first grounded in Torah and Talmud, then in knowledge-based careers: law and medicine; literature and journalism; the sciences, both social and hard. Jewish children used to grow up with two commandments: “Ess, ess, mein kind” (because there may be no food tomorrow) and “what you have in your head, nobody can take away from you.”

All his life in postwar Germany my father was an obsessive hoarder of canned foods. With his eighth-grade schooling, he instilled in me a no less obsessive quest for learning—first Gymnasium, then university. Success, Jewish parents preach, resides not in pedigree or possession, but in the brain. Naturally, nothing but A’s counted; naturally, this kid ran for student council president, making it all the way into the Berlin Student Parliament. And ultimately to Harvard and Stanford.

“You must do better than them” is classic immigrant lore. In that respect, Jews are like other Mercurians, but only more so. Which takes us from the personal to the historical, the “Golden Age of German Jewry” between Bismarck, when Jews gained complete civic rights, to Hitler, when they became “subhumans,” Untermenschen.
Let me introduce the Golden Age with a Jewish joke from the old days. In a Berlin school, the kids were asked to name the Minor Prophets. Little Hans rattled off: “Reuben, Simon, Benjamin, Asher, Ephraim...” Those, of course, were the tribes of Israel, and so the teacher interrupted: “Stop, Hans is confusing the Minor Prophets with whom?” Little Moishe proudly responds: “With the Chefärzte, the chief physicians, at the Berlin Charité!”

The almost 600,000 Jews living in the Reich were an extraordinary bunch. They had intruded from everywhere—from Vilna and Lemberg, Odessa and St. Petersburg, Minsk and Pinsk. With the civil service, the officer class, and the industrial corporations closed off, Jews went into the Wissensberufe, science and the professions, as well as into the “word industry,” like the media, publishing, and entertainment.

The numbers are astounding. In Prussia around 1900, less than one percent of the population was Jewish, but more than five times as many were university students—and 17 percent at the University of Berlin. In 1925, 16 percent of all the doctors and one-quarter of all lawyers were Jewish. In turn-of-the-century Vienna, the numbers were even more spectacular. Sixty-two percent of the lawyers, half of the doctors and 45 percent of the medical faculty were Jews. One-third of Germany’s Nobel Prizes up to 1932 went to Jews.

Sounds like America, doesn’t it? Indeed. For all their anti-Semitism and authoritarianism, the German-speaking lands in the sixty years between Bismarck and Hitler were what America would become later in the 20th century. Why? In a nation on the rise, the future beats the past, while talent and ambition dwarf faith and ancestry. It is a perfectly serendipitous market situation, where growing demand meets ample supply. This is why the comparison between Germany and the United States is so apt.

The difference is that the Golden Age of German Jewry ended in 1933, while the American Golden Age took off in earnest after World War II, when the US became the one and only global power, and the demand for talent overwhelmed ancient barriers to achievement. Take my friend Henry Kissinger who went from Washington Heights
to Harvard, and thence to the White House and the Seventh Floor of the State Department, which recalls Walter Rathenau, the Jewish German foreign minister in the early 1920s.

Helmut Kohl once asked Kissinger: “Henry, what might have become of you if your parents had not been driven from the country?” Henry responded in his usually self-deprecating way: “I would have become a Gymnasium teacher, like my father, but I would have gone one better, making it from Fürth to Nuremberg.” “Oh, no,” retorted Helmut Kohl, “you would have made it at least to Munich.”

In the US, though, it was Washington and the White House. And in the US, the Golden Age continues unabated. Why, for instance, was Joe Lieberman, an Orthodox Jew, tapped for the vice presidency? The answer comes in three parts.

First, everybody here comes from somewhere else, and what you can do is more important than what you were. A degree from Harvard or Stanford beats birthplace and faith any time.

Second, typically Mercurian traits like restlessness, ambition, hustling, and “making it” are as American as apple pie. America’s can-do culture was a perfect fit for the Jews who came flooding in from Eastern Europe, then from the Nazi lands, then from the Soviet empire.

A third critical factor is religion. What distinguishes America from the rest is the absence of a state religion. Instead, as Thomas Jefferson famously put it, an “iron wall of separation” stood between Church and State. This unique American career produced a free market for religion, where Jews were not the eternal outsiders, but one of many faiths, not even counting myriad Protestant denominations. This was “God’s Own Country,” yet owned by many Gods. But the divide between the New and the Old World was deeper still.

What is the decisive difference between English Puritanism and European Christianity? Luther became a rabid anti-Semite later in life, Roman Catholicism turned against the mother faith early on, and both could not stand the Jews because they kept refusing Christ. But the
Puritans rediscovered Christianity’s roots in the Hebrew Bible, naming their children Abraham, Sarah, Amos, and Rebecca. “The God of Israel”—Israel!—“is among us,” wrote John Winthrop in his sermon “A Model of Christian Charity” during the Atlantic voyage of the Arbella in 1630. The city of the Puritans’ longing, Yuri Slezkine recounts, was not Rome, but Jerusalem. This poem by William Blake puts it a nutshell:

*I will not cease from mental fight  
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand  
Till we build Jerusalem  
In England’s green and pleasant land.*

This is the “Cittie uppon a Hill” John Winthrop wanted to establish in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, this is the “New Jerusalem” Americans wanted to build in the New World. What serendipity! No state religion, and, if you will, a Jewish version of Protestantism. And more. The values of Puritanism—hard work, deferred gratification, earthly success, Jerusalem on earth and not in heaven—dovetailed very nicely with the Jewish spirit. You might say: Judaism is Puritanism without pork, as Slezkine quips. Or without foreskin, I would add.

Back to the other side of the Ocean. According to Gerschom Scholem, the much-celebrated German-Jewish “symbiosis” was actually a very “one-sided declaration of love.” Germans did not reciprocate, no matter how “German” the Jews became. They were so German that, as a bitter joke had it, the *Reichsbund jüdischer Frontsoldaten* put up posters in the Twenties propounding “Raus mit uns!” (Out with us!). Not quite as bitter is this joke about Germans who had left Nazi Germany for Palestine, where an old-timer, addressing a new arrival, puns: “Kommen Sie aus Überzeugung oder aus Deutschland?” (Have you come from Germany or from (Zionist) conviction?)

But now the surprise. Three generations after the Shoah, the German Jewish Community is the third-largest in Europe today, after Britain and France. In the Nineties, it was the fastest growing one, exploding from 30,000 to over 100,000. Why? Because of the collapse of the Soviet Union, followed by mass emigration. Could this happy turn foreshadow another Golden Age?
I am not sure. Let me give you two sets of numbers. One: The size of the community peaked in 2006 at 107,000. Ever since, it has been in soft decline—down to 100,000 today.

The second set adds up to an inverted pyramid, the opposite of a normal demographic distribution where the broad base is made up of the many young while the narrow tip is populated by the old. In the contemporary German case, fully 60 percent are in the 51 to 80-plus bracket. Children make up just 6 percent of the population. Add the teenagers and you get 12 percent.

So twelve percent young versus 60 percent middle-aged and old. These statistics paint a somber picture. Without immigration, the Jewish community in Germany, so dynamic in the Nineties, looks doomed. Why so?

You might also ask: Why do Germans, indeed almost all Europeans, have a fertility rate of 1.4, which is way below the replacement rate of 2.1? I will spare you the theories, but in the Jewish case, I suspect that the most Mercurial of the young leave the country or the congregation. Anecdotally, the march goes like this: boarding school in England, summers in Israel, university in Britain and the United States, a job in London, New York, or LA.

At any rate, the surfeit of high-achieving Jews in the Reich and the Weimar Republic is not a feature of present-day Germany. Why not? Perhaps the expanding European welfare state—regulated, munificent, and inclusive—does not deliver the best playing field for talent and desire. Strangely, indeed perversely, the Mercurians have flourished best in a setting where they were both in and out, unwelcome for who they were but wanted for what they had. Paradoxically, ambition and ingenuity demand barriers as well as opportunity, one acting as a spur and the other as reward. Neither of these two traits is a strong suit of the modern welfare state.

As this state tears down the walls of exclusion and discrimination holding back minorities, it erects new ones for each and all in the form of regulations, permits, and elaborate certification, which
constrain competition and act as brakes on initiative. At the same time, generous social support systems reduce the incentives for hustling and performance. In other words, yesterday’s fences spurred achievement; today’s hem in opportunity—the freedom to turn dreams into realities. At this point, New York and Palo Alto embody mightier magnets for the Mercurians of all colors and faiths than Berlin, Vienna, or Heidelberg.

What else might be in play? Perhaps Jewish life in Europe has again become an uneasy one, with the rise of Islamic anti-Semitism and terror threats that translates into heavily guarded Jewish schools and institutions. What an irony! Now machine-gun toting German police protect Jews instead of rounding them up. It is all for their good, but it is still armed men surrounding Jews—a sight as eerie as it may be reassuring.

The larger problem, though, is this: Growth and advancement depend on continuity. In pre-Hitler Germany, one-half of Jewish scientists had fathers who were in business. This data point reflects a classic feature of the immigrant experience, which is inter-generational upward mobility. The father acquires a fortune, the son an education. But what if these children leave? Then seedlings don’t grow into trees. Every successive wave of newcomers, like the Russians in the Nineties, has to start anew.

I can’t help but recall that most of my professors at Harvard would have taught in Riga, Vienna, Prague, and Berlin had the Nazi nightmare never descended. The consequences are still with us. Those who are dead cannot train the next generation. And those who fled sowed their seed elsewhere, mainly in the United States and the English-speaking world. Will the most recent newcomers, the Russians, stay rooted and sprout new branches? The problem is the enormously lopsided age distribution of the new arrivals. The “new blood” has been mainly “old blood,” not the young and prolific. Hence in 2013, there were 250 births and 1,250 deaths in the German Jewish community.

But let’s not overdo the biologism. When I talk about 100,000 Jews in Germany, I am counting community members only. Some would
double this number by including non-congregants and lapsed Jews. And there is a new, post-Russian source of immigration. Berlin has now become the place to be for Israelis—Mercurians coming to Germany instead of leaving it, just like at the turn of the last century. These new Jews just started their own magazine, called *Spitz*.

So I want to close on an appropriately agnostic note. Jews have been in Germany for 2,000 years. They have defied persecution and extinction, the Crusades and the camps. They have always come back. You cannot think about German science, literature, architecture, music, painting, and philosophy without Jews. Those Mercurians are a hardy bunch.

I can’t resist closing without another classic joke. It is about the Jewish orphan from Drohobicz in Galicia who had to work even as a child and so had never set foot in a school. But he had a beautiful voice and wanted nothing more than to be the *chazzan*, the cantor of the shtetl congregation. But the rabbi refused: “No way, you can’t even read and write.” So the young man absconds to Imperial Berlin where he soon amasses an enormous fortune, giving much of it away for orphanages, schools, and hospitals. Given this exemplary life, the Kaiser’s government honors him with the title of *Kommerzienrat*, His Majesty’s Commercial Counselor. When signing the document, he puts down three little circles, crosses being strictly forbidden to pious Jews. “My God, Herr Grienszpan,” the official exclaims, “what might have become of you if you had learned how to read and write!” Grienszpan sighs: “I can tell you, sir. Shtetl cantor in Drohobicz!”

Rebuffed as cantor in a Galician backwater and rising to Kaiser’s counselor is a quintessential Jewish experience. It has been repeated over and over again for 2,000 years. Why not again in Germany? Stay tuned.

Right now, though, I want to express my profound and heartfelt thanks to Henry Kissinger and to the Institute for this wondrous gift, the Medal, which honors one of Germany’s greatest Jews. I feel like the moon that shines only because it reflects the glorious rays of the sun that was Leo Baeck. Thank you for this exalted moment in his magnificent company.
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The history of Jews in German-speaking lands is a story of outstanding accomplishment and unprecedented tragedy, and the Leo Baeck Institute works to ensure that neither is ever forgotten. LBI was founded in 1955 by a circle of Jewish intellectuals who escaped the Nazi regime and resolved to document the vibrant German-Jewish culture that had been nearly extinguished in the Holocaust. For nearly 60 years, LBI New York has worked to fulfill that mission by building a world-class research collection that is now the most important repository of primary source material on the history of Jewish people in Central Europe over five centuries.

Our founders’ mission remains relevant today. The stellar individual achievements of German-speaking Jews in the arts, science, business, politics, and beyond have shaped our modern world and given us powerful critical tools for understanding it. Beyond the achievements of luminaries, LBI collections tell a powerful story of the dynamic role that minorities can play in society when granted opportunity and democratic freedoms, as well as a cautionary tale about how fragile their situation can be in the face of bigotry. German-Jewish history also has a special relevance for modern Jews throughout the Diaspora, as Germany was the birthplace of major branches of contemporary Jewish religious practice—including Reform, Orthodox, and Conservative Judaism.

As a new Jewish community begins to flourish again in Germany, global interest in the past preserved at LBI is growing. The Institute provides an intellectual home for both the brightest and the most tragic aspects of the 20th century, and we must ensure that its lessons for the 21st century are preserved. With your support, we can ensure that those who cherish the history of German-speaking Jews will be the ones to write that history.