

Two Myths About German Jewry

By: MORDECAI PLAUT

There are two common beliefs about German Jewry that are myths: 1) Most German Jews were Reform and those remaining observant were under the leadership of HaRav Shmshon Rafael Hirsch; 2) the German Jews did not leave Germany in time to escape the destruction of the Holocaust.

The Judaism of Small-Town German Jewry

My father grew up in a small town in Germany named Witzenhausen. He remembered the Jewish community of Witzenhausen to have consisted of about 40 Jewish families—about 150 people altogether. They were an organized community. There was a nice building for a *shul* and also a separate school for the Jewish children, both built by the German state, which provided for the Jewish needs of the community.

There was a *Lehrer*, whom he remembers as a prestigious and dignified man, who spoke in *shul* and taught some of the subjects in the school. He and another official were paid by the state to take care of religious functions for the community. On the other hand, the salary cannot have been overly generous, because the *Lehrer* also had a textile store.

One of these two state-employees led the services throughout the entire year and also read from the Torah, probably the second official. The *Lehrer* also blew the *shofar* and slaughtered chickens. My father did not remember it, but probably the *Lehrer* was also a *mobel*. Another *schochet* came around every week to slaughter other animals.

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The Jewish community was homogeneous and religious. For example, my father's family built their own *succah* every year and he recalled that most families had their own *succah*. The shul also had its own *succah*. Each family had its own *lulav* and *esrog*, and he did not remember the cost as having been particularly high.

This was a deeply rooted Judaism that did not know of the sicknesses of Reform and Haskoloh, and also did not know of the Frankfurt cure. It was a community that continued placidly along the life path that Jews in Germany followed since the time of the *Rishonim*.

It was a community of simple people who largely lived a simple life. Most were storekeepers or practiced a trade. Many dealt in cattle. The most common occupation given in our family tree which dates back more than 300 years is *Fiehandler*—cattle dealer. My father's father dealt in cattle hides, and his grandfather (Yaakov Plaut) who lived in Abterode, an even smaller town about an hour and a half away, dealt in cattle.

From 1575 (5335) when a yeshiva was founded there, and for about a century afterwards, Witzenhausen was the center of Torah learning in the area, but the Jews of my father's time were not learned. In fact the name of the town is traced to that period. *Witzenhausen* means "the home of wisdom," and it referred to the center of Torah learning that flourished there.

The Jews of Witzenhausen were even largely untouched by any winds of modernity, including non-Jewish learning. My father was the only one of his peer group to attend Gymnasium—formal study through high school. He attended as a means to achieve a career as a professional. (He later studied law.) Although he had 9 years of Latin and 7 of Greek at that school, the classics being the main material that was studied, he did not study Hebrew at the Gymnasium, even though it was taught there for those who were studying for a religious (Christian) career. Hebrew was not necessary for those hoping to practice law. He did study Hebrew but only in the Jewish school in Witzenhausen. (The Gymnasium was in nearby Munden.) The learning of the classics did not arouse any questions or challenges to his pure Jewish faith. He retained a strong and pure connection to his Judaism throughout his life, in all the countries and environments that he went through.

His loyalty to Jewish tradition was very deep-rooted. This attachment was not shaken by his worldly experience.

This life and mindset—a thorough, though simple, religiosity—was characteristic of a substantial part of German Jewry. Those who lived in the small towns were not exposed to the winds of modernity. As Professor Mordechai Breuer writes (*Modernity Within Tradition, A Social History of Orthodox Jewry in Imperial Germany*, p. 39), “Jewish life in numerous villages and small towns was influenced neither by Reform nor by Neo-Orthodoxy... Their piety was artless, there were few questions and even less philosophy. Their loyalty to the law was anchored in a rudimentary fear of G-d and secured by a deep respect for past and contemporary learned rabbis.”

Here is a description of the small community of Nordheim, written in the early part of the twentieth century by Rabbi Bernard Drachman (in his autobiography *The Unfailing Light*), an American who went there to visit his family: “... to me it was ... deeply impressive. The reason for this great impressiveness was that I recognized—and no one could fail to recognize—the utter sincerity of these simple souls, that to them their Judaism was a compellingly real and vital faith, an indissoluble part of their thought world, in fact, their very lives. Nothing there of the split and divided souls, ... which I had observed in the great metropolis of America and which I knew to exist not only everywhere in that vast continent but in the great cities of the Old World as well. The Judaism of Nordheim was simple, clear, and unquestioningly loyal. In the little synagogue on that first Friday evening and during the rest of the Sabbath observance on the morrow, I felt this genuineness and axiomatic loyalty, and the perception and appreciation thereof penetrated to the very depth of my heart. I began to understand what real Sabbath observance is and what a hallowing and uplifting influence upon one’s entire personality and life outlook it possesses.”

Nordheim and Witzenhausen were typical of more than a thousand such small Jewish communities all over Germany.

The general impression that many people have, even people of German heritage, is that the vast majority of German Jewry was Reform or assimilated, with the notable exception of the Frankfurt community that was saved by HaRav Shamshon Rafael Hirsch. This impression is false at almost every step.

Jewish Life in the Large German Cities

Assimilation, Reform, Haskalah and the like were serious plagues mainly in the large German cities. They were virtually unheard of—or at most very weak—in the small towns of Germany. Even in the large cities, they did not overwhelm the community except in the famous and unique case of Frankfurt am Main.

How much of German Jewry lived in the small towns? It was clearly a substantial part. According to the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, in 1925 (according to an official census) a third of the 564,379 Jews in Germany lived in 1,800 places with organized Jewish communities (like Witzenhausen and Nordheim) and 1,200 places with no organized communities. Also, roughly a third lived in Berlin, and another third in the other large cities. At the beginning of the nineteenth century they lived almost exclusively in villages and small towns, but by 1900, the majority—though by no means all—of German Jews lived in big cities. According to Marion Kaplan (“Redefining Judaism in Imperial Germany: Practices, Mentalities, and Community,” *Jewish Social Studies*, Volume 9, Number 1), in 1871 only about 30 percent of German Jews lived in big cities. Whereas 60 percent of German Jews in 1910 lived in urban areas with more than 100,000 inhabitants, by 1933 more than 70 percent of German Jews resided in large cities. Only 10 percent of German Jews lived in the countryside by then, while 20 percent lived in smaller towns and villages (*Encyclopedia Judaica*, “Germany,” vol 7, pp. 480–487).

Even among the large cities, Frankfurt was probably the worst in terms of the assault on traditional Judaism, because of the unique circumstances in that community. As explained by Rabbi Eliyahu Meir Klugman in *Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, Architect of Torah Judaism for the Modern World* (Artscroll - Mesorah, pp. 112–117), Napoleon appointed Prince Primate Karl von Dalberg as regent of the Frankfurt area, and he in turn packed the governing council of the Frankfurt Jewish community with Reformers in 1808.

Though the regent’s reign was short-lived, the damage to the Frankfurt community was not, since he gave the council the power to appoint new members without holding community elections. This ensured that the entire power of the community was under the complete control of Reformers (many of whom were Freemasons as

well) and they were strong and ruthless in suppression of Judaism with nothing to stand in their way.

At the beginning of the 19th century the official Jewish institutions of Frankfurt warred openly against all aspects of Jewish tradition, but this did not happen in any other German Jewish community. Although at the end of the 18th century Frankfurt boasted the HaFlo'oh as its rov, and HaRav Nosson Adler and the young HaRav Moshe Sofer among its residents, from 1818 to 1838 it was illegal to operate a *talmud Torah* in Frankfurt, and anyone caught teaching Torah was subject to a civil fine of 50 florins. The *mikveh* was sealed and women had to use the facilities of neighboring towns that were open. There were many women who did. The Community Board declared that anyone who put on *tefillin* was ineligible to serve as a Board member. The pressures were enormous. Until HaRav Hirsch won the right of secession from the community in 1878, every Jew was a member of the community, like it or not.

This was unique to Frankfurt. As Rabbi Klugman writes, "In no other Jewish community did proponents of assimilation work so diligently, and for that matter so successfully, to achieve their aims." (p. 115)

In Hamburg, for example, even though it suffered the first steps of what later became the Reform movement, the Reformers never encompassed more than half of the community, and they did not have control. They had influence due to their numbers, but they did not have the dominance that the Reformers of Frankfurt had. The *kehilloh* of Hamburg encompassed great *ovdei Hashem* and *talmidei chachomim* until its demise, such as the Schlesinger family, from which HaRav Michel Schlesinger, founder of Yeshivas Kol Torah in Jerusalem, came. HaRav Michel Schlesinger's grandfather, known as Reb Getschlik Schlesinger, passed away in 1900. He was the only rov in Germany who was known as *hakodosh*, and people used to make special visits to Hamburg to get a brochah from him. Among those who came was a young R' Yaakov Rosenheim *zt'l*, who recalled in his memoirs that he was taken by his father to Hamburg when he was eighteen years old to see Reb Getschlik.

Nonetheless, there were many, like my father *z"l* and most of the third of German Jewry that lived in the small towns, who retained a deep attachment to their Jewish roots that did remain un-

changed in all circumstances. Even if the depth of their learning was minimal, their visceral commitment was very strong.

Although we do not mean to belittle the awful damage done by the Reform and their colleagues, as Hitler rose to power in what was to be the beginning of the end of German Jewry, somewhere upwards of a third of it was still steeped in ancient traditions, comprised of the majority of the residents of the small towns, and substantial proportions of the larger communities as well.

Unfortunately there was an upheaval after Hitler rose, and many were jarred out of the ancient habitats and habits. They moved, or fled, to Israel, America, and many other places including South America. Many of them proved no better at holding on to their heritage when they encountered modernity elsewhere in the world than their Eastern European counterparts. But our next point is precisely this: that most of them in fact had fled from Germany by the time the war broke out and the “Final Solution” was hatched.

Second Myth: German Jewry Ignored the Clear Signs of Impending Doom

The notion that European Jews ignored the clear signs of impending doom that were building up in the 1930s, which has become so widespread as to be a historical truth that “everyone knows,” was started by those whose agenda certainly placed very little emphasis on historical truth. That is clear since there is no truth to that “historical truth.” It is not true of German Jewry, most of whom fled, and it is not true of Polish Jewry, most of whom were murdered.

According to the census of June 16, 1933, the Jewish population of Germany, including the Saar region (which at that time was still under the administration of the League of Nations and not Germany itself), was approximately 505,000 people out of a total population of 67 million, or somewhat less than 0.75 percent. That number represented a reduction from the estimated 523,000 Jews living in Germany six months earlier in January 1933 when Hitler first took control; the decrease was due in large part to emigration following the Nazi takeover that January. (An estimated 37,000 Jews—about seven percent of the total—emigrated from Germany during all of 1933.)

Some 80 percent (about 400,000) of the Jews in Germany held German citizenship. The remainder were mostly Jews of Polish citizenship. Many of the Polish Jews had been born in Germany and had permanent resident status.

About 70 percent of the Jews in Germany lived in urban areas, with 50 percent of all Jews living in the 10 largest German cities. The largest Jewish center was in Berlin (about 160,000 in 1925), though Jews were less than 4 percent of the city's entire population. Other large Jewish population centers included Frankfurt am Main (about 26,000), Breslau (about 20,000), Hamburg (about 17,000), Cologne (about 15,000), Hannover (about 13,000), and Leipzig (about 12,000). Nevertheless, in 1933 more than one in five German Jews still lived in small towns.

Starting in 1933 and without letup for the next six years (until the outbreak of open fighting in September 1939) German Jews tried, with increasing desperation, to leave Germany. The question of whether or not to go was on everyone's lips. How could it not be? My father, who left within about a year of Hitler's rise, remembered anti-Semitic marches in Kassel, where he worked. Hitler Youth marched through the streets shouting anti-Jewish slogans. It was not subtle and it was not ignored by the Jews. It was clear to them that they had no future in Hitler's Germany.

About a month after *Kristallnacht*, at the end of 1938 in a program known as the Kindertransport, the United Kingdom admitted 10,000 unaccompanied Jewish children on an "emergency" basis. These were youngsters: the rule for eligibility was that they could be no older than 17. Many were much younger. Still parents sent their young children away to an unknown but safe country to escape the clear threats evident in Germany. It is not a move that would be made by anyone who was not desperate, but by then the situation was very serious and everyone knew it.

1939 was the first time the United States filled its combined German-Austrian quota of immigrants. The limit did not come close to meeting the demand: by the end of June 1939, 309,000 German, Austrian, and Czech Jews had applied for the 27,000 places available under the quota. These were the late movers. Many, many German Jews left earlier.

By September 1939 when Hitler invaded Poland in a bold stroke that completely stunned the entire world, approximately 282,000 Jews had left Germany—considerably over half of those who were counted in June 1933—and 117,000 from annexed Austria. Of these, some 95,000 immigrated to the United States, 60,000 to Palestine, 40,000 to Great Britain, and about 75,000 to Central and South America, with the largest numbers entering Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Bolivia. More than 18,000 Jews from the German Reich were also able to find refuge in Shanghai, China.

At the end of 1939, about 202,000 Jews remained in Germany and 57,000 in annexed Austria, many of them elderly—and many others ultra-assimilated Jews, most with non-Jewish spouses, who were convinced that when he railed against the Jews Hitler surely did not mean to include them. By October 1941, when Jewish emigration was officially forbidden, the number of Jews in Germany had declined further to 163,000. The vast majority of those Jews still in Germany at that late date were murdered in Nazi camps and ghettos during the Holocaust. It is worth noting that by the late 1930s, the definition being used was the Nuremberg Laws racial definition, which counted assimilated Jews and apostates. Thus the remaining 163,000 Jews in Germany apparently included many who were not counted as Jews in 1933 when the more traditional definition of those affiliated with the Jewish community was used.

This emigration was reflected in Witzenhausen on its own scale. My father recalled the Jewish community of his youth as numbering about 150 souls. Today in Witzenhausen there is a memorial plaque that reads: “After inhuman cruelty, 55 men, women and children of the *Jüdischen Gemeinde* of Witzenhausen lost their lives in Concentration Camps.”

So in Witzenhausen the proportion of those who fled successfully to those who were murdered is about two to one, just like in the overall German community. Although we have no figures to support this and little prospect of being able to produce any, we think that based on the historical experience of other communities that experienced such rapid population shifts, it is reasonable to speculate that those remaining in Germany to the bitter end were disproportionately older and/or with other strong disincentives to travel, including those who felt that they were so assimilated as to

be “Aryan enough” to be acceptable to the Nazis. In fact, as we pointed out above, the numbers of Jews remaining in Germany as the Final Solution began to take shape and be implemented are not fully comparable with the earlier census figures. The earlier numbers counted those who were part of the Jewish community (*Gemeinde*), but the later figures followed the Nuremberg definition and included those who converted out.

Perhaps one reason that the idea that German Jews did not leave Germany arose was that towards the end, many more still wanted to leave, and there were several well-publicized incidents that dramatized the frustrated desire of German Jews to leave their country. One was the Evian Conference convened in July 1938 for the specific purpose of discussing the Jews who wanted to flee Nazi persecution in Germany and find new homes. The initiative for the conference, held in France, came from US President Franklin Roosevelt, but in the end the US was represented not by a government official but by a friend of the president. There was a lot of talk and Hitler even said that he was ready to send out German Jews: “We, on our part, are ready to put all these criminals at the disposal of these countries, for all I care, even on luxury ships.” (Quoted in Wikipedia from Ronnie S. Landau, *The Nazi Holocaust*.) However none of the major countries was willing to take in any substantial number of Jews, and the conference was considered a failure.

Another famous incident the following summer was the voyage of the MS *St. Louis* in May, 1939, later recounted in a book known as *Voyage of the Damned*. Almost a thousand Jews booked passage on the passenger liner to go to Cuba where they thought they had entrance visas. When they arrived, Cuba did not let them in. The Captain tried to get them admitted to the United States, without success. Eventually the ship returned to Europe and the Jews were admitted to various countries. However, about two thirds were admitted only to mainland European countries that were invaded by Germany less than a year later, subjecting many of them to Nazi persecution.

Even as German Jewry fled the oncoming Nazi Holocaust, the neighboring Jewish communities did not. For example, over 90 percent of the prewar Polish Jewish community was wiped out, *Hy”d*. Did they ignore a danger that was evident?

Hitler had been threatening war with Poland for years, under various pretexts. Nonetheless, no one really expected it. Many historians even doubt if Hitler intended to begin a war on the scale of what actually took place.

Britain and France had for years been following a policy of appeasement with respect to Hitler. They believed that his real desires were relatively modest and he could be sated at a reasonable cost. Our historical perspective makes it hard for us to fully appreciate the way things looked at the time. To us the British and French policy of the time seems grossly out of touch with reality and, indeed, “appeasement” has become a term of political invective as a policy that does not work.

But British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain certainly believed that his approach was correct and effective. He declared, in all evident sincerity, that with the Munich agreement he had achieved “peace for our time.” Moreover he was supported by the French government and hailed by many for his achievement. There was absolutely no general expectation of war among the professional politicians and diplomats of Europe.

Poland—the center of controversy and ultimately the beginning of the conflict—was actually preparing for a possible war with Germany. When Hitler attacked it in September of 1939 it had already started building up and modernizing its forces, but its assessment of the likelihood of war can be inferred from its target date for completing the project: 1942!

We must remember that we Jews had been the object of persistent, recurring, vicious and uncivilized anti-Semitism for as long as our collective memory of life in the European exile stretched. Poland had its share of anti-Semites, and there were serious anti-Semitic moves even as Jews were participants in the national government. Hitler’s rants against Jews, and even Julius Streicher’s virulent writings, were perceived as just another part of a long tradition, and not as something that could lead to a new form of extreme persecution. Nonetheless the German Jews apparently did see it as such—or at least as something intolerable—since so many of them decided to voluntarily leave their ancestral residence of hundreds and thousands of years.

Jews who lived in European countries outside of Germany could thus very reasonably have remained where they were, even if they followed world news very closely. Virtually all the leading politicians and statesmen of the day did not expect war, and a reasonable man would thus have concluded that any evil that Hitler would carry out on Jews would be confined to his countrymen. Why should a Polish Jew think he should leave Europe because of a German *rosbo*?

Even in retrospect, there is no reason to suspect that their lives were under the sword any more seriously than they would be in many other places in the world. Even living under a threat of annihilation is more or less within the bounds of what passes for normalcy in our state of *golus*.

It is only when Moshiach comes that we can truly expect real peace, may he come speedily, in our days. ❧