

1700 YEARS OF JEWISH LIFE IN GERMANY: The Story of a Prejudice

10th BUCERIUS LECTURE

Dear friends of our University, it is my great pleasure to deliver this year's Bucerius Lecture, albeit I can reach you only via the zoom screen.

For me, three important events mark this year. The so-called "Jeckes Museum", the museum of German Jews who came to Palestine and to Israel is moving from Tefen to our campus and will find its new home in the realm of the Hecht Museum. A heartfelt "Toda raba" to all those who have contributed to this welcome development! Furthermore we are remembering 1700 years of Jewish life in Germany. That is reason enough to make this event the topic for my lecture. And finally an upsurge of open antisemitism in my country can be observed, especially in the wake of the latest conflict between Israel and Hamas.

Please allow an introductory remark: I will not speak about the Nazi period and the Shoah. There are two reasons for it:

We all know about the unique crimes and horrors of that period. I assume that we are well informed about those years of terror and the attempted extinction of the Jewish people. So, let us just remember Paul Celan's words: "Death is a master from Germany".

This evening I want to stress that Jewish life in Germany has always been a life of apprehension and discrimination. Practically all the elements of Nazi ideology had been in place before Adolf Hitler came to power. They did not fall from heaven. That is why a view on Jewish life in Germany and the historic responsibility of the non-Jewish Germans has to encompass the long centuries before 1933.

The Origins

1700 years of Jewish life in Germany? Well – the date has been chosen because of the first documented mention of that life in an edict of Emperor Constantin which is dated December 11, 321. It is addressed to the city counsellors of Colonia Agrippina, today's Cologne. It allows Jews to enter the City Senate. By the way: that was a gift of doubtful value since it obliged those Jewish citizens to fully advance the tax - payments imposed by the Emperor's treasury.

Thus – there have been fully taxable Roman citizens of Jewish religion in Cologne by then. Let us be clear: We are talking about Jews in the Roman Empire, not about Jews in Germany. Germany did not yet exist. We may conclude that Jews have dwelt in the Roman provinces on the Rhine and the Moselle a lot earlier.

Followed a period of some four hundred years after the end of the Roman Empire about which we have no direct, no documented testimony of Jewish life in Germany. However, we may conclude indirectly that there must have been a Jewish presence on the banks of Rhine and Moselle during the Great Migration of the Germanic people as well.

The Middle Ages

Follow the Merovingians and the Franks, follows Charlemagne. This great Emperor and Statesman has placed his Jewish subjects under a specific imperial protection. There is a striking similarity between Constantin and Charlemagne: Both have acted out of a rational calculation, not out of tolerance or magnanimity. For Charlemagne the Jewish merchants with their wide-spread contacts and experience were indispensable to organize international trade. And – of particular importance:

The Jews offered a highly welcome counterweight against the Christian monks via whom the Church incessantly tried to influence the politics of the Empire.

Later on, the “Heilige Römische Reich Deutscher Nation” – the Holy Roman Empire of German Nation – came into being under Emperor Otto I. and his followers. During that period the influence of the bishops grew as well. They had become important worldly powers. And they could not do without Jews, neither. The bishops of Augsburg, Regensburg or Salzburg have invited Jewish merchants to settle in their cities already at the end of the 9th century. The Jewish community in Cologne built its new synagogue in 1021, closely followed by Mainz, Worms, Speyer and Trier.

Jewish communities did not only flourish in Imperial cities or bishops’ residences, but in many places in the wider Rhineland. Names like Ahrweiler, Bacharach, Oppenheim or Landau date from this period. In this way a large community of Jews in Germany has grown over a relatively short time. Since then we are talking about the Ashkenazim. And Jewish life was marked by the first version of Yiddish. Its vocabulary was composed by Germanic, Latin and Hebrew elements.

In the earlier medieval period a power structure gradually developed, which should become decisive for the fate of the Jews and which has had its effects well into modern times. I am speaking of the power triangle of State, Church and Society. The structure of the states was authoritarian. It was rather rational, however. Those in power made their judgement dependent on the practical usefulness of their subjects, not that much upon their religious convictions. On the other hand the Church tried everything to realize and to solidify her power aspirations. To this effect, it used shameful ideological dogmas like the one of the Jews as the murderers of Christ.

The weak side of the above mentioned power triangle –well, it was the normal people or what we would call society today. Most of the townships had not yet developed their own personality. Middle classes did not yet exist. A grey and difficult everyday life prevailed, essentially marked by the Christian creed and by pseudo-Christian superstition. No wonder then that the Jewish communities could not find a secured place in those structures.

No wonder either that they became a welcome target of rude prejudice and grim hatred when the crusades directed their irrational ire not only against the Muslim occupiers of the Holy Land but as well against the Jews, the “Murderers of Christ” at home. More than 5.000 Jews in the Rhineland fell victim to the first crusade of the years 1095/1096. Fifty years later the terrible mass suicides of the Jewish communities in Mainz and Worms left dead respectively 1.100 and 800 people. Very important in the longer term: Christian merchants drove their Jewish competitors out of the international trade. Jewish traders were forced into a corner: dealing in money and credit, an activity which at that time was forbidden for Christians.

For quite a while Jews had been an accepted, at least a tolerated element of the cultures in which they lived. Now they became the marked ones. I mean this literally. The 1215 Lateran Council stated that Jews should wear the ill-famed “yellow spot”, fixed to their clothes.

Thus, what we have to remember: Many of the elements which should then mark anti-Jewish hatred and anti-Semitism well into our times were in place in the Middle Ages already: an unbelievable superstition, which was not or only scarcely fought by the Church, xenophobia, the irascible enmity of pious Christians and –more and more - the fight against Jewish competition.

And yet: there is convincing proof that the Jews in Germany have produced impressive examples of strong cohesion and great intellectual achievement. There was a problem, however: the deep spiritual sources of this achievement remained hidden to Non-Jews, a problem which has not disappeared even today. We have to add to it the fact that Jewish scholarship expressed itself in Hebrew, a language nobody understood outside of the communities. All that appeared to Non-Jews – combined with strange habits and traditions – as mysterious, if not outright as weird.

Followed the abominable crimes committed against the Jews in Germany during the years of the Great Plague in 1348/1349. Already at that time the world was full of “fake news”, which spread with lightning speed. The poisoning of wells, the desecration of consecrated wafers, the ritual murder of children – there had to be a scapegoat with which to explain the pandemic. And the Jews were the traditional scapegoat. Almost everywhere in Germany they became helpless victims of a wild mob and in many cases Christian authorities willingly supported the killing.

It was during this period that many Jewish families left their traditional homesteads in Germany and emigrated to the East - to Poland. King Casimir III. had started a large welcome campaign in his Polish-Lithuanian territories. This far-sighted ruler had appraised the important role of a strong Jewish population in the modernization of his backward provinces. And that is how the Ashkenazim have contributed decisively to the development of a big and splendid Jewish community in Eastern Europe.

The narrow-minded authorities in German lands not only let those families emigrate. They kicked them out as many examples show us. And the others, those who remained were more and more cooped up in secluded quarters of the cities. The term „Ghetto“ became a questionable trade mark for those quarters.

You would have easily found a „Judengasse“ in almost every German city. This changed the situation of the Jews considerably. They were separated, they were excluded. And that is why the notion of “Ghetto” not only designates a locality but a state of mind as well.

However – it was here, in the „Judengassen“, that the Jews built impressive communities which could have served as examples for their Christian neighbours as well. A community council, most often of seven men, managed communal institutions such as the synagogue, the cemetery, the mikwe, the slaughterhouse and the hospital. It was here, in the “Judengassen”, that they were able to organize and to exercise those activities which the worldly authorities or the Church had not or not yet forbidden. Almost all craftsman’s professions were forbidden, which fostered a concentration on trade and banking. With talent, luck and a lot of work you could become a supplier of a person of authority or even found your own banking business. However – the “Schnorrer” outnumbered the well-to-do people; basic material conditions were hard for the great majority.

One thing has to be remembered in this context: The unique Jewish system of education. Yes – it was closely linked to religion and did not leave much space for worldly matters. Yes – formal education clearly centred on boys. However, Theology was the mother of all education for the Christians as well, and schools did not open to girls, either. On the other hand the education system of the Jewish communities comprised almost all boys and young men; and that has immensely fostered many, many examples of impressive intelligence and creativity. And as far as the girls and young women are concerned: Yes – they may have been regarded as the minor children of their parents or subject to their husbands. However – most of them learned at least to read and many of them to write as well. The often cited and famous Flicker von Hameln may have been an exception, but it has not been an isolated case.

To sum it up: In the period of the Late Middle Ages the power triangle of State, Church and Society had changed insofar as the urban society was structured in a much clearer way. Social strata had consolidated. All that influenced daily routine, the choice of a partner or clothing habits. But they all had one thing in common: Christian religion and the strong links to its representatives and preachers. And the so called “reformation” in Germany has not changed that a bit. The Dominican monks indoctrinated from the pulpits and so did Martin Luther. Towards the end of his life he has published some disgraceful pamphlets, one of them titled “About the Jews and their lies”. He was absolutely clear in how Protestants should deal with Jews: Burn down their synagogues and schools, take the Talmud and their other holy scriptures away, condemn them to forced labour. Yes, this side of Martin Luther is a part of German history as well.

Basically these structures of the Late Middle Ages have remained predominant well into the 18th century. We like to talk about and to remember the few who made it out of the Ghettos. We like to talk about the bankers and the court suppliers.

But even someone like Mayer Amschel Rothschild was not in a position to definitely leave Frankfurt’s “Judengasse”. In 1785 (Rothschild by then was a famous and widely recognized personality) he asked the city’s authorities permission to walk on the green walls in order to strengthen his health. This permission was outright refused – in 1785! At that time Lessing had died already and Goethe was serving as a Minister in Weimar.

And as far as the so-called “Hofjuden” (court suppliers) are concerned: They might have enjoyed a protected, privileged and luxurious life at the princely courts. However, this protection ended when the prince died or simply withdrew his support. In the early 18th century, Joseph Süsskind Oppenheimer is an especially dramatic example.

„Enlightenment“ – an all too short interlude

Let us start our glimpse on the period of “enlightenment” with the great Moses Mendelssohn. He followed his teacher from Dessau to Berlin in 1743, when he was 15 years old. In the capital of Prussia he won fame by an absolutely extraordinary intellectual performance. Later on he created a German translation of the Torah, which was completely printed by 1783, albeit in Hebrew letters. The orthodox rabbis were outraged. Yet - Mendelssohn stood fast by his convictions. These included a limited integration into non-Jewish Western culture. His friendship with Gottfried Ephraim Lessing, the latter’s essential theatre piece “Nathan der Weise” and the famous “parable of the rings” are proof of these convictions.

“Limited integration” I have said. In his main work titled „Jerusalem“ Mendelssohn states his fundamental belief. It is the Law revealed by God, which constitutes the unchanging, the eternal element of the special position of the Jewry. Based upon this firm belief and other thoughts he formulates one of the central ideas of the “Enlightenment”: A Jew can be – no, a Jew is a fully equal fellow human being while maintaining his beliefs.

Wilhelm von Dohmen, the Prussian chief archivist, went a step further. He accused the prejudice – ridden Non-Jews to be responsible for the deplorable circumstances under which their Jewish neighbours had to live. The “Edict of Emancipation” becomes a part of the Hardenberg reforms in 1812. At the same time: there is movement on the Jewish side as well. David Friedländer, a pupil of Mendelssohn, had founded the first Jewish “Freischule” (free school) already in 1778. This type of school, which quickly found successors in other Jewish communities, offered a secular education next to the traditional Jewish one.

So far, so good.

However, if we raise the idealizing curtain, we have to acknowledge that the Enlightenment has not really reached the broader German society. Enlightenment – as important as it is for all of us until today – has been a brainchild, not a revolution. And if I say “broader German society” that includes the Jewish communities as well. The great majority of them continued to live in isolation and in poverty.

No wonder then that a forceful antiliberal reaction came soon to the forefront. The fight of the Germans against Napoleon contained the fight against “French imports” as well. For many Germans this included the fight against the basic values of the French revolution. And another important problem arose – the quest for a “German nation”. Influential thinkers such as Fichte, Arndt or the ill-famed “Turnvater” Jahn defined the German nation on a populist and romanticizing basis. For them and many others the Nation was not a community of values but a community of descent, of origin.

This turning point is of decisive importance. It has defined the seed of secular antisemitism. The traditional prejudices have been enriched by new ones: Cultural, nationalistic, ideological and – a little later - racist prejudices as well.

Well - there have been liberal counterweights, of course. That is why. We should remember and honour Gabriel Riesser from Hamburg. This Jewish member of the 1848 Paulskirchen Assembly has been decisively influential for a “Proclamation of Basic Rights”. We may read in Article V of that declaration: “ Legal and civic rights are neither defined nor limited by religious creed”. Nowadays, it has become a good tradition to remember 1848, the Paulskirchen Assembly and this proclamation of basic rights. However, we are not allowed to forget 1849. The counter-revolutionary reaction of the kings, the princes and the nobility as a whole fought back. And that is why the full equality of rights for the Jews in Germany has been realised only in 1871 – after the foundation of the German Reich.

In the meantime, Jews have actively pursued their fight for emancipation and equality. Yet – this fight has not necessarily followed the postulates of Moses Mendelssohn or the already mentioned Article V of the Paulskirchen constitution. Many Jews have fostered their distance to the synagogue because that seemed to be the necessary entrance ticket to the prevailing German culture. And the clearer this move towards the prevailing culture has been, the clearer was the distancing from the traditions of the forefathers, which were perceived as old-fashioned and limiting. This was a fascinating development within the German Jewry, linked to names like Abraham Geiger or Samson Raphael Hirsch. Finally, others have tried to find a solution in a conversion to the Christian religion. This has been a small minority, however.

The German Empire – A heyday for Jews in Germany?

The period of the German Empire, which lasted from 1871 to 1918, is often described as a heyday for Jewish life in Germany. I believe that a more cautious look is needed.

Yes – this period is abundantly rich with great Jewish achievement. There are several reasons for it:

- The industrial revolution played a preponderant role. It offered chances hitherto unknown to Jewish entrepreneurs.
- And they have grasped them resolutely. Let me mention only Emil Rathenau, the father of the legendary AEG, great Jewish bankers such as the Rothschilds or Bleichröder, Bismarck's personal banker. Let us remember important Jewish publishers such as Rudolph Mosse, who founded "Berliner Tageblatt", Germany's first mass publication. Let us not forget Albert Ballin, Europe's biggest ship-owner and personal friend of Emperor Wilhelm II.

However, we cannot ignore that the secular antisemitism of that time equated the Jews with capitalism, that “destroyer” of a pretended venerable, pure German way of life. It was easy to incite the little German shop owners against the big department stores of Tietz, Wertheim and the like.

- And then the Jewish community itself underwent a sweeping sociological and demographic change. In the middle of the 19th century more of half the Jews in Germany had been desperately poor. One would have found “Schnorrer” at almost each street corner. But now a new Jewish middle-class came into being. A rapid urbanization engulfed Jewish families as well. Whereas in 1870 only 20% of them had lived in big cities, more than 60% did so only forty years later.

The majority of these people thrived for more than a formally equal position. Strange as it seems - they wanted national identification as well. Already in 1870 the magazine “Der Israelit” had written: “We, the German Jews are Germans and nothing else”. One considered oneself as a part of the young German nation, albeit of Jewish or (later on) Mosaic confession.

And nobody has taken German culture and science more seriously than the Jewish middle-classes. They conquered the liberal professions: medical doctors, lawyers, journalists, theatre people or musicians. Quite naturally the piano was part of a solid household and so were the season tickets for the opera or the concert hall. “Bildung” – education – that was the magic word. No wonder then that 10% of all university students in Berlin were Jewish, compared to less than 1% of the total population.

However – and this is important to note:

Despite of a far-reaching integration of so many Jews into the culture of the non-Jewish German majority, the societal and cultural separation remained stubbornly strong. Large parts of the German society kept their distances, persisted in their discrimination.

This may have been one of the reasons why a new movement came to the forefront – Zionism. The dynamic urge with young Jews to develop their own specific personality had been the initial force behind it. Their question was as simple as it was ground-breaking: Why shouldn't there be a Jewish nation with its own history and culture? And so a Zionistic Union for Germany was formed in 1897. The sufferings of the Jews in Eastern Europe became a pressing topic and more and more Jerusalem and with it Palestine became the place of the Zionist's yearning. However, the majority of the Jews in Germany, many important Rabbis included, shook their heads and remained sceptical. They were afraid that Zionism would strengthen the hands of the anti-Semites and nothing else.

Back to this anti-Semitism. For the normal non-Jewish German bourgeoisie its prejudices and clichés had remained a firm element of thinking and of feeling. They were part of their cultural code. We are accustomed to cite Richard Wagner in this context, and that with good reason. Let me choose another German darling – Wilhelm Busch, who remains immensely popular until today. He has composed a poem called "Plisch und Plum" in 1882 of which I offer a clearly clumsy translation:

"Short trousers and a long mane, a hooked nose and a hooked cane,
The eyes are black and the soul is grey, the hat lop-sided and the
smiling wry. That is Schmulchen Schievelbeiner. (We others look a lot,
lot finer)".

It couldn't be much worse. And the notion of "we others" marks the beginning of an antisemitism, which was not just the sum of anti-Jewish prejudice but became a firm and comprehensive ideology. The notion of "Race" became the cornerstone of that ideology. Heinrich von Treitschke, a star among German historians taught in 1879 : "The Jews are our disaster". From here it was only a short road to the national elections of 1893, which flushed 18 representatives of openly anti-Semitic parties into the Reichstag.

All in all the German version of antisemitism was complete well ahead of World War I.

WW I , the "Great War", determined the fate of the German Empire. In 1914 young men in the hundreds of thousands, many young Jews amongst them, had rushed eagerly to the battlefields. They had not given up their hope for respect and recognition. But then – in 1916 – Berlin ordered a so-called "Juden-zählung" – a census of Jewish soldiers in the army. Government and General Staff thus followed unfounded reproaches, according to which young Jewish men tried to avoid military service. This order resulted in a deep and in many cases traumatic disappointment. The country, which one was prepared to give his life for, seemed disposed to miserable treason.

The Weimar Republic – a Last Respite

1919, after the defeat in WW I, Germany had to find new structures for the State and new forms of Government. It had to do so quickly and in an absolutely radical way. One of the inevitable consequences: a deadly strengthening of totalitarian and reactionary forces. The breeding ground for a radical antisemitism flourished quickly. Beware: I am talking not only of the NSDAP, the Nazi Party.

The Deutsch Nationale Volkspartei DNVP for instance, which had excluded Jewish members very rapidly, proudly showed 950.000 members in 1923. The dominating circles of the defunct Empire adhered to this party. When the disgusting lampoon of the so-called "*Protocols of the Wise Men of Zion*" was published in a German version, hundreds of thousand copies were sold in a matter of weeks. The balancing powers in politics and society were too weak, a rampant inflation and then the big crisis of the World economy contributed to the weakening of democracy and the sense of decency. The antisemitism of the word became the antisemitism of the deed. Let us remember Rosa Luxemburg, Kurt Eisner and Walter Rathenau. Looking at that decade from a slightly different angle, the "Golden Twenties" were all but golden.

Those years of the Weimar Republic were a dream for the Jews in Germany, a dream, which would degenerate into a nightmare all too quickly. They had to serve as scapegoats once again, were accused of being the real reason for the defeat in the war, for economic misery and social disaster. A conscious Jew had to critically examine himself if he wanted to stay and not to emigrate. Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Buber are outstanding examples of this self-exam. Other equally outstanding men and women found a prominent place in science and culture. Who of us could forget Albert Einstein or Max Reinhard – to pick just two out of the multitude. They served as examples for all those who remained resolved to defend their place in German life and society – against all adversity. Well – latest in January 1933 this resolve turned out to be a cruel delusion.

After 1945

For Germany, both Hitler's coming to power and the end of his reign in 1945 have meant an enormous turning point. The country was demolished and destroyed – physically, mentally and morally.

Chaos was the rule of the immediate post-war years, a chaos in which those few Jews had to find their way, who had survived the years of the Shoah in a hiding place or in one of the concentration camps. Pressing material needs – food, shelter, clothing - have determined the daily lives everywhere.

The great majority of the Germans has needed much time to grasp the full dimension of the horrendous crimes against humanity, which had been committed in their name. Many of them didn't even want to grasp; they simply suppressed or denied reality. It was only in the Sixties, the period of the Eichmann- and the Auschwitz trials that a broader and more open discussion of the Jews in Germany, their horrible fate and their ill-defined future began.

Traditional antisemitism was pushed back although it never disappeared completely. With clear statements against Anti-Semitism both Churches, the Protestant as well as the Catholic helped in this push-back. Secular antisemitism, based on Nazi racism, was repressed by some, actively combatted by many. On the other hand it is only natural that Jewish life in Germany developed only hesitantly. However, a group of Jewish communities was founded with up to 40.000 members in total.

A new and decisive factor came into place at that time: The foundation of the State of Israel in 1948 and its heroic self-assertion in the Six-Days-War in 1967. Eretz Israel became a powerful anchor for the Jews in Germany. Very often the non-Jewish Germans were (and remain) incapable to differentiate between Jews and Israelis. And then, especially after the 1973 Yom-Kippur-War the so-called "Antizionism" shot up in the self-appointed German intelligentsia, an idea which very often equalled (and still equals) a crude antisemitism.

From 1990 onwards, the Jewish communities in Germany had to face a new, enormous challenge: immigration from the areas of the former Soviet Union. The communities grew very quickly from some 40.000 to some 120.000 members; material needs were (and remain) pressing and the integration of the immigrants was (and remains) complicated. Alas this development remains unnoticed by the non-Jewish Germans.

By the way : Until now I am talking about the old Federal Republic while speaking about “Germany”. Jewish life in the former GDR would require a separate lecture.

All in all, realities, symbols and gestures of a better German-Jewish understanding have come about during the last decades - and both sides have contributed to it. Some of it may be contributed to the insecurity and/or the bad conscience of the non-Jewish Germans. Most of it is serious, however.

Yet – one absolutely basic factor has remained constant over all those 1.700 years: The Jews have lived the lives of a minority. We are not allowed to explain their long history as a continuous succession of atrocities committed against them. In such a way we would neglect the periods of a more peaceful co-existence as well as the reality of the exceptional achievements and contributions of the Jews themselves. Yet – to use a word by the German scholar Julius Schöps: The anomalous has always been the normal.

Is it different today? Well, basically it is not.

As long as synagogues and other Jewish institutions in Germany have to be secured by police, as long as young men cannot wear their kippah in public quite naturally, as long as a new antisemitism – creeping up from the middle of the German society, from white supremacism and – more and more – from the wicked teachings of radical Islam: it is not.

As long as this antisemitism is not being fought with even more resolve, we have to fight for a better Germany. We have to fight for a Germany, in which people respect different religious convictions and different ideas how to live, in which people simply meet each other as human beings. This call, addressed to his contemporaries by Moses Mendelssohn some 250 years ago, remains as pressing as it was in his time.

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