The Personal, the Historical, and the Making of German-Jewish Memory
“NO MORE MR. NICE GUY”
Questioning the Ideal of Assimilation

ALAN POSENER

As far as I know, my father never visited a concentration camp. He rarely talked about what we now call the “Holocaust,” a word he never used. He had watched and despised the U.S. TV series that introduced the term to the German public. Born in Berlin in 1904 into a rich family of assimilated German Jews, none of whom had to work for a living, Julius Posener had left Germany in 1933 and returned in 1961 to the city of his birth with an English wife and three Christian children.

Julius Posener’s autobiography—Fast so alt wie das Jahrhundert (Almost as old as the century), first published in 1993—is very discreet about the extermination of the Jews. The fact that his uncle Alfred, his aunt Mathilde, and the widow of his uncle George, Margarete, were deported and murdered is not mentioned in the memoir and was never mentioned in family conversation. The only thing I knew about Alfred, for instance, was that he had been “rather soft in the head” and rode around Lichterfelde on his bike greeting everyone with a polite “Heil Hitler,” and that the surviving family members had received compensation for his apparently very valuable stamp collection that had disappeared with him during the war. Indeed, I suspect my cousins in Israel and their children and grandchildren don’t even know Alfred, Mathilde, and Margarete ever existed, and I only bothered to ask myself what had happened to them after my father had died. It is almost as if the family were ashamed to admit that this kind of thing had happened to them, too, the way families used to be ashamed of cancer, as if somehow it was their fault.

I’m not sure how typical this voluntary amnesia was for families such as the Poseners, but I have a feeling that it was fairly widespread. Possibly this had to do with the fact
that many assimilated German Jews had refused to believe what was really happening in Germany; it was their country that had perpetrated these horrors. After all, they were, or had been until 1933, Germans first and foremost and Jews more or less as an afterthought. “Trotzjuden,” my father called them, Jews by defiance who refused to convert to Christianity or abandon the Jewish community, not out of sympathy for the Jewish religion or—God forbid—Zionism, but because they did not want to bow to the antisemites.

My father often told anecdotes about the Yekkes, the German émigrés in Palestine, many of whom had fought in World War I for Kaiser and Fatherland and who could hardly suppress their admiration for Hitler’s victory over France. My father, on the other hand, had spent the first years of exile in France, loved the country, and joined the British Army in 1940. He claimed to have been “the first Palestinian to cross the Rhine” into Germany. Yet even he writes to his brother Ludwig in Jerusalem on August 2, 1945: “Strangely enough, I had a Nazi ideal of Germany in my head . . . that made me sure we would find every house in Germany a fortress, every morsel of food poisoned, as Hitler said. This is not the case, and that is disappointing. I have encountered . . . so much servility, denunciation, profiteering, complaining that it sometimes makes me sick.”

To his sister-in-law, Lotte, he writes a few weeks later: “During the war, I had refused to believe that more than a tenth of the things that were reported were true. And that tenth was bad enough. Now it is proven beyond doubt that everything is true.”

Over and above this refusal to believe the worst about one’s own country and people, I believe my father and quite a few German Jews like him felt a certain patrician pride in not complaining too much about their own fate. It simply wasn’t done. To quote my father’s letter to his brother—an ardent Zionist—again: “It is not about forgiving and forgetting, but about pity, which has nothing to do with forgiveness. Whoever tells me I should save my pity for my own is wrong and cannot be more wrong. I made myself guilty of this wrong . . . when a poor devil told me in the first days [of the occupation, A.P.] that he had seen his young wife die in the ruins of their house. I answered that Jews had experienced worse things. But you cannot trump the worst with worse. All that remains is pity.”

And then, finally, how did you live among those who had been complicit in the Nazi crimes without some form of forgiving and forgetting? My father returned to Berlin in 1961, when almost everyone he had to deal with had something shameful to hide. In 1949—the year of my birth in London—he was contacted by an old friend from student days in Berlin, Klaus Müller-Rehm, who had become a successful architect. Writing back to Müller-Rehm, my father explains why he had made no effort to contact him before: “We”—meaning we German Jews—“don’t enquire about people, unless they were very close or unless . . . we know how they got through those years. Although I often thought about you, Klaus, I wouldn’t have enquired about you. I remember a conversation we had in 1932, when you said: ‘You of all people, Posener,
will sympathise with the solution these people [i.e., the Nazis, A.P.] find when they finally have their say.' I have often wondered when you stopped sympathising with the solution. I did quite early on, but since I didn’t know how broad your sympathies were, I kept silent.” In a postscript, he comes back to the subject: “You might find my sharp memory and the consequences I drew from a long-ago conversation stupid. And they would be stupid if I were to play the judge and hold a private trial to condemn every German who ever had anything to do with that movement or some of its ideas concerning Jews. On the contrary, I still think that under the circumstances prevailing in Germany in 1931–1932 it was quite possible, indeed it was hard not to be influenced by those ideas and that movement. People like me had it easier, as we simply couldn’t—indeed, were not allowed to. All I wanted to say was that after everything that happened, people like me don’t spontaneously seek contact with people who were in that situation. And I meant this primarily as an explanation for my not trying to contact you. All the better that you found the way. Once again, many thanks.”

Twelve years later Müller-Rehm, who held a professorship in Berlin, pulled some strings and got my father, who had neither a PhD nor any other requisite academic qualification, a professorship in architectural history at his university. As far as I know, they never talked about the past. In his privately published memoirs, Müller-Rehm doesn’t even mention my father, let alone his own sympathies for the Nazis and their solutions, glosses over his years as an architect for the Wehrmacht in Crimea and elsewhere in occupied Eastern Europe, and claims in an endnote entitled “Das Judenproblem”: “When the ghosts had departed, I received letters of thanks from émigrés, although I don’t know how or whether I deserved them. Two things remain totally incomprehensible to me. Firstly, the celebrations with which an overwhelming percentage of the German people enthroned Hitler in 1933, and secondly how all the celebrators disappeared from one day to the next when the war was lost and Hitler dead.”

The Jewish émigrés who returned, thankful or not—and being, like my father, indebted to people like Müller-Rehm and his ilk for one’s job and position in society was surely not a comfortable position to be in—were thorns in the side of a Germany eager to declare that the adulation for Hitler was as “incomprehensible” as the sudden “servility” my father had complained about as a British soldier in 1945.

A bad conscience was the last thing Germany seemed to be suffering from in the 1960s. Attacking the Social Democrat candidate Willy Brandt, who had spent the Nazi years in exile, the Bavarian conservative Franz-Josef Strauß thundered during the election campaign of 1961: “We surely must be allowed to ask Herr Brandt one thing: What were you doing in those twelve years outside the country? We know what we were doing inside.” So, for many returning Jewish émigrés, keeping a low profile and not asking too many questions about the past was not only a matter of pride and pity but also made professional and private sense.
Heinz Galinski, for instance, who survived Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen and went on to be a very vocal leader of the Jewish community in Berlin and later of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, was universally despised and constantly vilified and threatened with death. In 1975 he survived a parcel bomb attack and since his death in 1992 his grave has been repeatedly desecrated. Being visibly and uncompromisingly Jewish, demanding that Germany face up to its past, supporting Jewish claims against the German state and Israel’s right to self-defense, was not a position that helped you make friends and influence people in Adenauer’s Germany or, indeed, later. For my father, Galinski was an embarrassment—the kind of “pushy” Jew he never wanted to be or to be associated with, although he realized that this genre was in essence antisemitic. (Galinski’s daughter, Evelyn Hecht, left the Jewish community and has made a name for herself as a vociferous, radical left-wing critic of Israel, tacking her father’s name onto her husband’s in order to claim his mantle for her anti-Zionist stance. The extreme Right, which was behind most, though by no means all, of the attacks on Galinski, has discovered its love for Israel, which it sees as a Western bulwark against Islam. Such are the reversals of history.)

There’s that word: history. What does Jewish history—specifically: the Jewish past in Germany—teach us? Because what we think it means will define how we remember it. My father couldn’t face the past in all its brutality, because that would have meant not being able to face the present. Zionism was not an option—he’d tried it and realized that it wasn’t for him and certainly not for the family he had created. Living in England would have been his first choice, but jobs were hard to come by. Returning to Germany, he chose a kind of doublethink: knowing and yet not knowing.

To give an example: I was twelve when the family moved to Berlin, but my father never talked to me about what I might expect as a schoolboy with a “Jewish” name and a Jewish father. No matter that I thought of myself as British and Anglican, not Jewish, and certainly not German-Jewish: did my father really think my teachers and the parents of my fellow students wouldn’t draw their own conclusions? I remember one history lesson when we were discussing theories about the decline and fall of the Roman Empire. Our teacher, an admirer of the reactionary German novelist Erwin Guido Kolbenheyer, quoted the assertion of the nineteenth-century historian Theodor Mommsen that the Jews had been “the ferment of decomposition” in antiquity and remarked: “You, Alan, as a leader of the anti-authoritarian movement at this school, with your long hair and love of American Negro music, are a prime example of the truth of this statement”—adding that he did not mean this as criticism On the contrary, I was the best student in his class and, in his opinion, the order represented by our boarding school definitely needed some “decomposing.”

Today, Jewish schoolchildren in Germany would be happy to have to deal with this kind of more or less academic antisemitism. Many routinely experience bullying, verbal and physical abuse from fellow students, most of them of Arab or Turkish
extraction. I never experienced anything of that sort at school or later. The situation in Europe and in Germany is getting more uncomfortable for Jews, trapped between Muslim antisemitism on the one hand and the rise of right-wing populism on the other. In Western Europe, the populists have learned to deny their traditional antisemitism, knowing that it is still a powerful taboo that can ruin their chances of achieving political influence; in Eastern Europe, however, there are fewer inhibitions—and fewer Muslim migrants on whom the populists might vent their nationalist rage. How, then, should Jews read their past—and explain it to non-Jews—in order to cope with the present and the future?

The Jewish Museum in Berlin represents one answer to this question. It symbolizes the high point of German-Jewish reconciliation—or, to be more precise, German philosemitism—that was reached in the mid-nineties. The generation of the victims and perpetrators was fading from history. The big trials of Nazi war criminals were over. An end to compensation payments—“Wiedergutmachung”—was in sight. The generation that had come of age in the legendary years around “’68”—my generation—prided itself on having broken with Germany’s past and being open to “multiculturalism.” And the Jewish Museum with its postmodern architecture and liberal American director seemed the ideal flagship for the message that Germany was no longer the country my father and other émigrés had returned to in the 1950s and 1960s.

The permanent exhibition at the Jewish Museum celebrated “2,000 years of German-Jewish history” and the essential message that the Jewish Museum’s director, W. Michael Blumenthal, conveyed was reassuring: the Jews aren’t threatening anybody. The permanent exhibition reinforced this message: apart from a few dietary quirks and strange rituals, for instance for male babies, Jews are just like ordinary Germans and always have been. The exhibition said a lot about the contributions of individual Jews to German society—as businesspeople, scientists, politicians, intellectuals, and artists—and almost nothing about Judaism as a religion, or anti-Judaism as a driving force in Western civilization since the earliest days of Christianity. It also said next to nothing about Zionism or about Israel, where German-Jewish life continued after 1933 and German Jews played a key role in the formation of the Jewish state.

The museum as conceived by Blumenthal was less a Jewish Museum than a Museum of Tolerance. In the spirit of this concept, Blumenthal established an “Academy” of the museum devoted to “Jewish-Muslim dialogue.” Under a Muslim director, the “Academy” hosted discussions in which critics of Israel and its policies were often prominent, while Muslim antisemitism—a main concern of Jews living in Germany—was referred to only to be dismissed as a construction of Islamophobic and right-wing elements.

Blumenthal’s successor, a non-Jewish German academic called Peter Schäfer, went out of his way to accommodate the Muslim narrative—for instance in an exhibition on Jerusalem that failed to mention Arab pogroms and the cooperation of the Grand Mufti
with Nazi Germany in World War II. When Schäfer hosted the cultural attaché of the Iranian Embassy and seemed to endorse criticism of a Bundestag resolution condemning the antisemitic BDS movement, even the usually tame Central Council of Jews in Germany was enraged and called the museum—correctly—an “Un-Jewish Museum.” Schäfer resigned.

It remains to be seen how the new director, Hetty Berg, will deal with the difficult legacy of the museum. The new permanent exhibition, which opened recently, was conceived by the same team that had developed the exhibition that opened in 2001. While it does devote more space to explaining Judaism, it otherwise avoids divisive issues like Zionism, Israel, and the diverse forms of contemporary antisemitism: precisely the issues that for many Jews define their life in Germany.

As Muslim immigration has grown, the German image of “the Jew” has split: Israel has assumed most of the perceived negative aspects of Jewishness, whereas German Jews have begun to be seen not as “the other” vis-à-vis German society, not as an obstacle in Germany’s path to postwar normalcy, or money-grubbing profiteers of the Holocaust, but as a better sort of “other” as portrayed by the Jewish Museum: ready to integrate and assimilate, unlike the Turks and Arabs; intelligent, diligent, successful, almost more German than the Germans.

The banker and politician Thilo Sarrazin, who almost singlehandedly started the right-wing populist movement in 2010 with his book Deutschland schafft sich ab (Germany gets rid of itself), explicitly contrasted Jews and Muslims in an interview with Lettre International. Berlin had never recovered from the “bloodletting” under the Nazis, Sarrazin said, as “the banks and the retail trade had been by and large in Jewish hands.” Thirty percent of the doctors and lawyers in Berlin and 80 percent of the theater directors had been Jewish, whereas today “a great number” of Berlin’s Arabs and Turks had “no productive function whatsoever, except for the vegetable market” and their “little girls with headscarves,” who lowered the general IQ in Berlin’s schools.

Thus facts, or half-facts, that had been used against the Jews under the Nazis—their presumed dominance in the banking and retail sector, in law and cultural activities, as opposed to the Aryan concentration on producing goods in industry and agriculture—were now being used against Turks and Arabs. Quite apart from the slim factual basis (to put it mildly) of Sarrazin’s social Darwinism, the pitting of “Musterjuden” (ideal Jews) against new immigrants was calculated to promote even more anti-Jewish feeling among the Muslims. Unfortunately, some Jews have adopted this narrative, too. Possibly they feel that being praised by the goyim, even the racist goyim, is such a change from their usual lot that they might as well play along. Possibly they do feel superior to the new immigrants. Almost certainly they feel threatened by Muslim antisemitism and feel that it might be useful to have German Islamophobes on their side. As John F. Kennedy reportedly said when he appointed Lyndon B. Johnson as his vice-presidential running mate: “Better to have him inside the tent pissing out than outside the tent pissing in.”
It seems to me, however, that, as Sarrazin’s example shows, German philosemitism is often just reversed antisemitism. As my colleague Henryk M. Broder has repeatedly shown, the new German love of all things Jewish seldom extends to Israel.” It’s fine shedding a tear about the terrible “bloodletting” during the Nazi era and deploring the loss of the Jewish elite; most Germans are less comfortable when Israel does the bloodletting and proves time and again that its defense, intelligence, and scientific elite is able to ensure the existence of the Jewish state in a hostile environment. Germans have developed a taste for klezmer in recent years, but not much sympathy for Zionism.

Furthermore, while Jews may enjoy being portrayed as paragons of integration and assimilation, the fact remains that they would not exist today had they not resisted integration and assimilation for almost 2,000 years. It was not only Christian discrimination that kept the Jews in Western Europe’s ghettos or the Russian Pale of Settlement: it was their own determination not to be absorbed by the Gentiles, not to give up their religious heritage, their self-determination, for instance through rabbinical courts, and their own language, be it Yiddish or Ladino. The “parallel societies” decried by critics of Muslim immigration were for centuries what kept the Jews and Judaism alive.

Many modern Jews—not to mention non-Jews—shudder at the sight of Mea Shearim or parts of Brooklyn, let alone at the pictures of Roman Vishniac’s “Vanished World” of the Eastern European shtetl. My father’s family certainly actively disliked the “Ostjuden,” and I remember my father’s disdain not only for the musical Fiddler on the Roof, which was a huge success in 1960s Germany, and which he considered kitsch of the worst kind, but also for Gershom Scholem, Martin Buber, and other representatives of the Jewish renaissance in the 1920s and 1930s. Writing from Jerusalem to his confidante Ursula Phillip in London shortly after his arrival in Palestine in 1935, my father describes the “devout people of the Wailing Wall” and goes on to say: “We learn (from those of us who view the Holy East with awe because their fathers spat on it) that swaying before us in the stench and mess of the Old City is a race of heroes, ecstatics and scholars. I can believe it. . . . But my first reaction is disgust.”

Neither disgust nor idealization, it seems to me, are adequate answers to the question about the past that today’s and tomorrow’s Jews in Germany need to reclaim. Instead of papering over cultural differences, a Jewish view of Jewish history needs to stress them; needs to celebrate the strangeness of being Jewish, of being the archetypical Other not only in Christian, but also in Enlightenment thought, as David Nirenberg has shown.”

Jewish assimilation was a noble enterprise, but it was doomed and, in certain moments, even my father knew that. Writing to his mother from France in February 1935, he says he intends to go to Palestine, because he “can’t always be the little man who apologises for his existence” and that he “cannot imagine passing this fate along to a child—again to love, where he is hated, and to live where he is only tolerated.”
A Jew who does not feel sympathy and solidarity with today’s immigrants who feel caught in the same bind forgets his or her own past. The German footballer Mesut Özil, a member of the national team, wrote bitterly that he was a German when they won, but became a Turk again when they went down to defeat. Indeed, what lessons should Jews in Germany be teaching the newer Germans from the Middle East and Africa? “Integrate, assimilate the way our fathers and grandfathers did!” Look how far it got them.

Young Jews, mostly from Eastern Europe or Israel, recently staged a “Disintegration Congress” in Berlin. One of the organizers, the poet Max Czollek, criticized the role of Jews “as extras in the German Theatre of Memory.” In return for “material and social recognition” they “perform the role of ‘Jews for Germans’”—all too often “kippa-wearing figures with a Shoah past.” Yet young Ukrainian Jews whose grandparents fought with the Red Army do not accept the narrative of victimhood. Nor do young Israelis. Czollek again: “De-integration also means: No, things won’t be all right again. No, I won’t light those candles with you. No, our mothers and fathers did not go to Auschwitz together. No, my biography is not available to you. No, when I write poetry it is not so that you understand everything. No, my opinion about Israel has nothing to do with you, damn it. No, you’re not going to get off that lightly! . . . This is Jud Sauer. These are the Inglorious Poets. We won the war!”

NOTES

2. Julius Posener, Ein Leben in Briefen, edited by Matthias Schirren and Sylvia Claus (Basel: Birkhäuser, 1999), 154f. In the following all translations from the German are mine (A.P.).
3. Ibid., 157.
4. Ibid., 155.
5. Ibid., 178, 181.
7. Ibid., 208.
8. Quoted in Gregor Schöllgen, Der Auftritt. Deutschlands Rückkehr auf die Weltbühne (Berlin: Propyläen 2003), 119.

12. Norman Finkelstein’s book *The Holocaust Industry* was translated into German and became a bestseller.

13. Thilo Sarrazin’s new book *Feindliche Übernahme: Wie der Islam den Fortschritt behindert und die Gesellschaft bedroht*, which was published in August 2018, became an Amazon bestseller in less than a month.


