

# When Democracy Died in Darkness: German Jewish Responses to Hitler's Rise in Early 1933

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Michael Brenner

American University / Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München

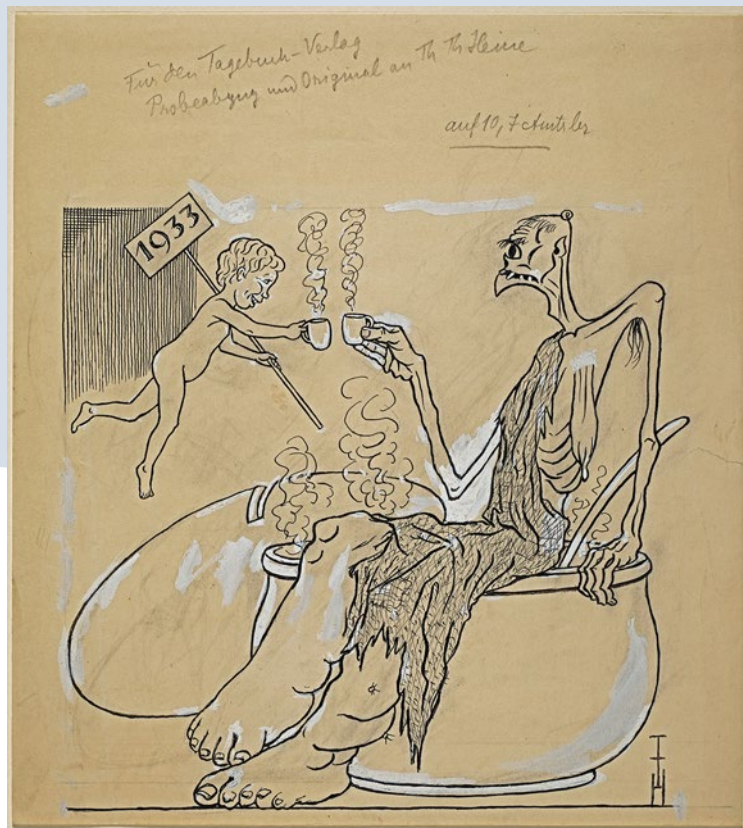
Things looked good on New Year's Eve 1932 for Berlin's bakers. They prepared ten million donuts (*Pfannkuchen*) for the night's celebration, which was an impressive two and a half donuts per every German citizen. They used 666,000 eggs, 166,000 kilograms of flour, 100,000 kilos of sugar, 50,000 kilos of butter and margarine, and 30,000 kilos of jam. The entertainment industry was happy as well. Many dance floors for the night's *Silvesterbälle* were sold out, and the sales for the opulent New Year's dinners in Berlin restaurants and hotels went well.<sup>1</sup> It seemed that the deep economic crisis that had started with Black Friday in 1929 was finally waning. Moreover, there was political optimism in the air as the new year 1933 started. Berlin's leading newspaper, the *Vossische Zeitung*, regarded the "downfall of Hitlerism as unstoppable." There was talk of a "total crisis" of the Nazi movement "that befell its head, its limbs, and its voters."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Vossische Zeitung*,  
December 31, 1932.

<sup>2</sup> *Vossische Zeitung*,  
Januar 1, 1933.

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**Figure 1.** "Prosit Neujahr 1933," by Thomas Theodor Heine, 1932. Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus und Kunstbau München. CC0 1.0.

**3** Klaus J. Herrmann, *Das Dritte Reich und die deutsch-jüdischen Organisationen 1933-34* (Cologne, 1969), 1. Herrmann mentions a quote by the *C.V.-Zeitung*, the newspaper of the *Centralverein deutscher Staatsbürger jüdischen Glaubens* from December 1932: "We welcome the new year 1933, which contains twice the lucky number 3, [and we are] confident that it will be a year of general upswing for Germany and the world – and also for German Jewry." I was not able to verify this quote in the actual paper.

This assessment resonated with many contemporaries considering the most recent political developments.<sup>3</sup> Following the economic crisis of 1929, the NSDAP had risen from a splinter party of 2.6% to become a major political player with over 18% of the vote in the 1930 elections to the Reichstag, and established itself as the largest party in the German parliament after the elections of July 1932. But then, in the November election that same year, they dropped from 37% to 33%, and for many observers, such as Leopold Schwarzschild, the left-liberal editor of the journal *Tage-Buch*, this marked "for the first time after a long period a crack in the wall of clouds" that had been gathering on Germany's political sky for some years. The poet and anarchist Erich Mühsam agreed: "They [the Nazis] will never come to power. The German proletariat will not be put down."<sup>4</sup>

**4** Hans-Albert Walter, *Deutsche Exilliteratur 1933-1950. Band 1: Die Vorgeschichte des Exils und seine erste Phase.*

*Band 1.2. Weimarerische Intellektuelle im Spannungsfeld zwischen Aktionen und Repressionen* (Stuttgart,

2017), 558. ("Die kommen niemals an die Macht. Das deutsche Proletariat läßt sich nicht unterkriegen.")

Hans Schaeffer was one of Germany's highest ranking Jewish state officials and therefore, one would think, one of Germany's best informed politicians. As Undersecretary of State in Germany's Department of Finance he participated in many reparation negotiations and cabinet meetings. He also kept a meticulous diary. Just before the 1932 November elections he wrote, "I believe that we underestimate the loss of the Nazis after November 6. Each loss of the Nazis is the beginning of the[ir] end."<sup>5</sup> In his entry of December 29 he trusted Chancellor Schleicher's and physicist Max Planck's opinion "that we do not have to worry at all. The *Reichswehr* will not recognize Hitler as Chancellor. If Hitler uses violence, we can fully trust the *Reiterregiment* (cavalry) in Potsdam, which is on standby."<sup>6</sup> If Schaeffer and Schleicher were so clueless that they seriously believed that the cavalry would stop Hitler, how would the less informed German Jews know?

Werner Scholem, former communist member of the Reichstag, celebrated his 37th birthday on December 29, 1932. He went to see a cabaret show on December 30 and was part of the celebratory crowds on New Year's Eve.<sup>7</sup> The next day, New Year's Day of 1933, Erika Mann's and Therese Giehse's *Pfeffermühle* Cabaret in Munich opened with its first show. It was partly written by Erika's brother Klaus, who noted in his diary: "Great atmosphere, great audience, everyone was there."<sup>8</sup> In these first days of 1933, Hannah Arendt and Karl Jaspers exchanged letters about what constitutes the German essence [*Wesen*]. Jaspers expressed his astonishment that she "as a Jewess wants to be distinct from the Germans."<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps the most surprising event, from today's perspective, took place in Berlin's Oranienburger Straße. There, one week before Adolf Hitler was appointed Chancellor of the German Reich, German state officials and Jewish community leaders were reunited for the last time in celebrating a major Jewish cultural event. On January 24, 1933, the Berlin Jewish Museum opened its doors with a solemn ceremony. The next day, readers of the *Vossische Zeitung* learned about

**5** Hans Schäffer, *Tagebücher 1932*, October 21, 1932, Leo Baeck Institute New York (LBINY), AR 7177 Box 10/3.

**6** Hans Schäffer, *Tagebücher 1933*, January 29, 1933, Box 10/4, *ibid.*

**7** Mirjam Zadoff, *Der rote Hiob. Das Leben des Werner Scholem* (München, 2014), 200.

**8** Klaus Mann, *Tagebücher 1931 bis 1933*, ed. Joachim Heimannsberg and Wilfried S. Schoeller (München, 1989), January 1, 1933, p. 107. ("Grosse Stimmung, grosses Publikum, mit ,alles da:>")

**9** Karl Jaspers to Hannah Arendt, January 3, 1933, in Lotte Köhler and Hans Saner, eds., *Hannah Arendt und Karl Jaspers, Briefwechsel* (München, 1985), 53.

**Figure 2.** Visitors at the Jewish Museum Berlin, September 1936. Photo: Herbert Sonnenfeld. © Jüdisches Museum Berlin.



**10** Karl Schwarz, "Berliner Jüdisches Museum (Aus den Memoiren von Karl Schwarz)," Robert Weltsch Col., LBINY AR 7185, Box 10, Folder 15, p. 21.

**11** [https://www.jmberlin.de/1933/de/01\\_31\\_antwort-des-kunstkritikers-max-osborn-auf-einen-leserbrief.php](https://www.jmberlin.de/1933/de/01_31_antwort-des-kunstkritikers-max-osborn-auf-einen-leserbrief.php)

a small detail on one of the exhibit's less spectacular objects. As art historian Max Osborn pointed out, there was an ancient Palestinian clay lamp in the museum's collection, engraved with both a Star of David and a swastika. "Isn't it charming?", Osborn asked his readers.

When a Prussian government delegation visited the museum on March 2, 1933, it already appeared much less charming and seemed rather like an epitaph to a bygone chapter of German-Jewish coexistence. Only a few blocks away from the burnt-down Reichstag, and a few days before Hitler's final election victory, the head of the visiting delegation, Ministerialdirektor Trendelenburg of the Prussian Department of Culture, still "expressed his enthusiasm about the establishment of the museum and its riches of outstanding Jewish artifacts."<sup>10</sup> Two weeks later, the honorary chairman of the Jewish Museum Association and grand old man of German Impressionism, Max Liebermann, had to resign as honorary president of the Prussian Academy of Arts. Jews were no longer allowed among its members. The Star of David and the swastika would not appear together anywhere anymore. When a reader wanted to know more about the significance of the two symbols, Osborn replied, one day after Hitler was appointed chancellor: "... for us the combination of two symbols that stand in such opposition to each other is a strange curiosity."<sup>11</sup>

Lion Feuchtwanger, whose novels were bestsellers not only in Germany but around the world, celebrated the new year far away from his fancy new home in Berlin-Grunewald, into

which he had moved just a few months earlier. He was on a reading tour through America, where he was received by celebrities from cultural and political life. On January 11 he dined with Charlie Chaplin at Albert Einstein's house in Pasadena, where the German-Jewish physicist had arrived from Berlin in December and where he was a visiting professor at Caltech. On January 25, Eleanor Roosevelt, whose husband had just been elected 32nd president of the United States, gave a dinner reception for Feuchtwanger in New York City.

And where did Feuchtwanger, who had scorned the entire Nazi leadership for many years and was one of their most hated targets, spend the very day Hitler came to power? Of all places, at a reception that the German embassy hosted for him in New York City. He noted in his diary: "What an irony that the German ambassador organizes a lunch for me exactly on the day that Hitler is appointed Chancellor."<sup>12</sup> At the beginning of his American trip, Feuchtwanger had still exclaimed: "Hitler is over!" Now, on January 31, Marta Feuchtwanger told her husband in a telegram: "You have embarrassed yourself pretty badly with your 'Hitler is over.'" A few days later Feuchtwanger reversed his assessment of the events in Germany: "Hitler means war!"<sup>13</sup> In the face of the political developments, Lion Feuchtwanger decided not to return to Germany from his trip abroad. He did not know then that he would never see his new house or the country of his birth again. Not unlike Feuchtwanger's statements, Klaus Mann wrote in his diary on January 30, 1933: "Shock: Never thought this was possible."<sup>14</sup>

Albert Einstein returned only once to German territory, and it was not within Germany's borders. Just hours after his ship from New York landed in Antwerp on March 28, 1933, he entered the German embassy in Brussels to personally hand in his German passport and renounce his German citizenship. Like Feuchtwanger, he would never again return to the country in which he was born and raised. In a letter of the same day, Einstein submitted his resignation from the Prussian Academy of Sciences, to which he had belonged for nine-

**12** Manfred Flügge, *Die vier Leben der Marta Feuchtwanger* (Berlin, 2008), 162.

**13** Lion Feuchtwanger, '*... für die Vernunft, gegen Dummheit und Gewalt*,' ed. Walter Huder, Friedrich Knilli, Herrmann Haarmann, and Klaus Siebenhaar (Berlin, 1985), 25.

**14** Klaus Mann, *Tagebücher 1931 bis 1933*, January 30, 1933, ed. Joachim Heimannsberg, Peter Laemmle and Wilfred F. Schoeller (München, 1989), 113. („Schreck. Es nie für möglich gehalten.“)

**15** *Albert Einstein: Letters to the Prussian Academy of Sciences and the Academy's Response*, in Klaus Hentschel, *Physics and National Socialism: An Anthology of Primary Sources* (Basel, 1996), 18-21.

**16** Albrecht Fölsing, *Albert Einstein. Eine Biographie* (Frankfurt am Main, 1995), 743-745.

**17** *Ibid.*, 752.

**18** [https://www.jmberlin.de/1933/de/01\\_30\\_brief-von-rosa-suss-an-ihre-tochter-liselotte-und-deren-mann.php](https://www.jmberlin.de/1933/de/01_30_brief-von-rosa-suss-an-ihre-tochter-liselotte-und-deren-mann.php)

teen years. After the academy stated that they “have no cause to regret Einstein’s resignation,” the latter replied by justifying his decision on the grounds that “I do not wish to live in a state in which individuals are not granted equal rights before the law as well as freedom of speech and instruction.”<sup>15</sup>

Already on March 10, Einstein had told an American journalist that he would only set foot in a country where political freedom, tolerance, and equality of all citizens were guaranteed. A few minutes after his interview the earth trembled. Los Angeles was shaken by one of the most severe earthquakes to occur there in the 20th century. Einstein walked back into his apartment as if nothing had happened.<sup>16</sup> The real earthquake, he knew, had happened a few thousand miles east of Los Angeles. Being excluded from a Germany that had declared itself Aryan, he found solace in the Jewish community: “After all, a few millennia of civilized past means something.”<sup>17</sup>

Most German Jews were no Einsteins or Feuchtwangers. How did they react to Hitler’s appointment as chancellor? Many probably thought more or less just as Rosa Süss from Mannheim did when she wrote to her newly-wed daughter Liselotte, who was just spending her honeymoon with her husband Manfred Sperber in Italy: “Today Hitler was made Reichskanzler, what a ‘nice company,’ well, they will only cook with water too. We’ll have to see and wait what is coming.”<sup>18</sup> What was coming was not very promising for Germany’s Jews.

February 1933 saw a Germany in limbo. Hitler was chancellor, but it was still unclear if he would lead just another short-lived government of the Weimar Republic or if his appointment meant the end of German democracy. There was still hope: hope that Hitler and the Nazis would also “only cook with water.” But there was also fear: fear that he would abrogate equal rights for Jews and persecute political opponents. Like many other Germans, German Jews, too, were not sure what to expect. Two weeks before the March elections that Hitler called for, Viktor Klemperer noted in his diary “how blind we all are towards the events, how nobody has any idea

about the real division of power. Who will gain the majority on March 5th? Will the terror be tolerated and for how long? Nobody can predict anything.”<sup>19</sup> Nobody could predict anything with certainty.

Terror was immediately felt by many Jews all over Germany. Following several local antisemitic incidents, the Krefeld chapter of the *Centralverein deutscher Staatsbürger jüdischen Glaubens* (CV) arranged for a meeting called “The Future of German Jews” and invited its president, Julius Brodnitz, to speak. The meeting took place in an overcrowded hall, and the CV leader told German Jews that “there is not the slightest cause to deviate from the principles of our association. The deep bonds with Germanness and Jewishness will help us overcome the difficult times.”<sup>20</sup>

German Jews did not react in a uniform way to Hitler’s rise to power in these early weeks and months of 1933. The more assimilated ones, for whom their Jewishness had been rather marginal and who felt first and foremost as Germans, were hit hardest, as Max Liebermann expressed in a letter to the Hebrew poet Hayim Nachman Bialik and Tel Aviv mayor Meir Dizengoff: “Like a horrible nightmare the abrogation of equal rights weighs upon us all, but especially upon those Jews who, like me, had surrendered themselves to the dream of assimilation. . . . As difficult as it has been for me, I have awakened from the dream that I dreamed my whole life long.”<sup>21</sup> And Viktor Klemperer, who had converted to Protestantism before World War I, now distanced himself from Germany as well: “When it comes to me, I will never again have confidence in Germany.”<sup>22</sup>

While Liebermann woke up from his life-long dream, others continued to dream. Hans-Joachim Schoeps, a young Berlin Jewish youth leader, represented the small group of ultra-nationalist German Jews. He received some attention, or one might better say notoriety, with the writings he published just before Hitler came to power. Schoeps was as far right as a Jew could be in those days. In 1933, he founded the

**19** Viktor Klemperer, *Ich will Zeugnis ablegen bis zum letzten* (Berlin, 1995), 7.

**20** *C.V.-Zeitung*, February 23, 1933.

**21** Quoted in Michael A. Meyer, *Jewish Identity in the Modern World* (Seattle, 1990), 54.

**22** Klemperer, *Ich will Zeugnis ablegen*, 13 (March 20, 1933).



**Figure 3.** Max Liebermann in his studio with a portrait painting of Reich President Paul von Hindenburg, c. 1927. © Bundesarchiv Bild 183-U0906-500.

**23** Hans Joachim Schoeps, "Der Jude im neuen Deutschland," in *Der deutsche Vortrupp. Blätter einer Gefolgschaft deutscher Juden*, Nr. 1 (October 1933), 3.

*Vortrupp*, a nationalist organization of young German Jews organized according to the same strictly hierarchical principles espoused by those German youth organizations that would not allow Jews as members. He demanded the "necessary separation between German and non-German Jews and the gathering of all German-thinking Jews under a unified authoritarian leadership" and an unequivocal dissociation from Eastern European Jews. As Schoeps put it, "the sick body of the German people could be saved from decay only by a radical cure."<sup>23</sup> His loyalty to Germany remained steadfast in the face of its antisemitic policies, as he still wrote in 1934: "Even when the fatherland rejects us, we remain ready, ready



for Germany.”<sup>24</sup> Schoeps tried in vain to attract Adolf Hitler’s attention and to convince him to spare the true German Jews from his antisemitic agenda.<sup>25</sup>

Most well-integrated Jews would not try to appease the German *Führer*, but they could simply not imagine that the dream of German-Jewish co-existence would turn into a nightmare of violence, expulsion, and ultimately mass murder. On April 15, 1933, after the Reichstag was left a lifeless shell, after German democracy had eliminated itself, and after the SA mob had organized the boycott of Jewish-owned businesses, Theodor Adorno was still full of optimism about Germany’s political future. He asked his friend Siegfried Kracauer, who had fled to Paris after the Reichstag stood in flames, to return to Germany: “Here it is total calm and order: I believe that the situation will consolidate itself.”<sup>26</sup>

The Zionists, on the other side of the political spectrum, did not wake up from any dream either – in their case it was because they had never dreamed the dream of assimilation in the first place. They felt they had seen it coming for a long time. In their eyes, the Jews’ future was in Palestine anyway. As early as 1896 Theodor Herzl had written in his *Jewish State*: “Everywhere we have sincerely endeavored to merge with the national communities surrounding us and to preserve only the faith of our fathers. We are not permitted to do so. In vain are we loyal patriots, in some places even extravagantly so; in vain do we make the same sacrifices of life and property as our fellow citizens; in vain do we strive to enhance the fame of our native countries in the arts and sciences, or their wealth through trade and commerce. In our native lands where, after all, we too have lived for centuries, we are decried as aliens . . . If only we were left in peace. . . . But I think we shall not be left in peace.”<sup>27</sup>

While Herzl wrote these lines shortly after an antisemitic mayor had been elected in Vienna, the appointment of a much more radically antisemitic chancellor of the German Reich almost 40 years later caused the main Zionist paper,

**24** Hans-Joachim Schoeps, *Wir deutschen Juden* (Berlin, 1934), 52.

**25** Similarly, before the elections in July 1932 the leader of the organization of the National-German Jews, Max Naumann, had appealed to the Jewish community to understand the Nazi position, “which is the only way to enable the rebirth of Germanness, and which will hopefully reestablish the German reputation in the world.” Kurt Loewenstein, “Die innerjüdische Reaktion auf die Krise der deutschen Demokratie,” in Werner E. Mosse, ed., *Entscheidungs-jahr 1932: Zur Judenfrage in der Endphase der Weimarer Republik* (Tübingen, 1965), 371-372.

**26** Theodor W. Adorno and Siegfried Kracauer, *Briefwechsel 1923-1966: „Der Riß der Welt geht auch durch mich...“*, ed. Wolfgang Schopf (Frankfurt am Main, 2008), 308.

**27** Theodor Herzl, *The Jewish State*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York, 1970), 33-34.

**28** "Zur Lage in Deutschland: Regierung Hitler," *Jüdische Rundschau*, Monatsausgabe no. 1, January 1933, 3.

**29** Joachim Prinz, *Rebellious Rabbi. An Autobiography – the German and Early American Years*, ed. Michael A. Meyer (Bloomington, 2008), 100.

**30** *Ibid.*, 103-104.

the *Jüdische Rundschau*, to blame the Liberal Jewish leaders for having closed their eyes to imminent danger. It claimed: "The attempts of assimilation and self-denial are over!" and demanded "a Jewish community filled with unbending pride of its own peoplehood." In times of danger, the Zionist paper argued, Jews should return to Jewish values and no longer trust their old leaders who preached optimism.<sup>28</sup>

The young Zionist Berlin rabbi and future leader of the American Jewish Congress, Joachim Prinz, recalled exactly this feeling of triumph in the face of danger: "For us Zionists, the great time had come. Theodor Herzl's prediction, which he entered into his diary some fifty years before Hitler, had come true . . . The Zionist movement began to understand its great opportunity . . . We urged mass emigration to Palestine."<sup>29</sup> He also described the pride mentioned above in his account of the evening service he led on the eve of the Nazi boycott of Jewish businesses on April 1, 1933. The synagogue service on Friday night, March 31, 1933 "was an unforgettable experience. People stood by the hundreds outside the synagogue waiting for the doors to open. When they finally did open at 7 o'clock, people streamed into the synagogue until no one else could enter, for every seat and every spot in the building was taken. There was a solemnity that had very little to do with any artificial pious experience . . . There was a mixture of hope and fear, of trembling and pride. The old prayers suddenly leaped to life and had new meaning. Verses that had been written in the Middle Ages suddenly became an interpretation of what we Jews were going through . . . My Friday night service in the presence of two Gestapo men was a passionate attack on the government but, strangely enough, the Gestapo agents did not report me." The culmination was the Shema, when the choir and the organ remained quiet: "All of us cried but, nevertheless, we sang. We sang through our tears, and although it may not have been musically perfect, the singing was like a great Jewish symphony that underscored our faith – that we were going to bear it with pride and dignity, and that come what may, we would fight for our lives."<sup>30</sup>

Der Inhalt umfasst für das jüdische Volk die Schaffung einer ethnisch-rechtlich gesicherten Heimat in Palästina. „Jüdisches Programm.“

# Tragt ihn mit Stolz, den gelben Fleck!

Der 1. April 1933 wird ein wichtiger Tag in der Geschichte des deutschen Judentums. In der Geschichte der ganzen jüdischen Welt. Das Ereignis dieses Tages ist nicht nur ein politisches und ein weltanschauliches, sondern auch ein moralisches und rechtliches. Immer die politischen und weltanschaulichen Zusammenhänge ist in den folgenden Zeilen zu besprechen, wobei jedoch die rechtliche Seite der Angelegenheit nicht unberücksichtigt lassen darf. Auch die moralische Seite der Angelegenheit ist zu besprechen, denn es geht um die Würde des jüdischen Volkes, um die Würde des jüdischen Gottes, um die Würde der jüdischen Menschheit.

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### Theodor Herzl, „Judentum“.

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Pride and dignity, these were the cornerstones of the Zionist response, and it was represented most forcefully in Robert Weltsch's famous article that appeared a few days after the anti-Jewish boycott of April 1, 1933, "Wear it with pride, the yellow badge."<sup>31</sup> In 1933, the yellow badge of course was still meant symbolically, and even the most skeptical Zionists did not foresee that it would actually be reintroduced eight years later.

Orthodox Jews had their own way of reacting to the events of January 1933. At first, they were simply unwilling to believe

Figure 4. Jüdische Rundschau, April 4, 1933. Universitätsbibliothek Frankfurt.

31 Jüdische Rundschau, no. 27, April 4, 1933.

32 *Der Israelit*,  
February 2, 1933, 1.

33 *Der Israelit*, April 7,  
1933, 5.

34 *Gemeindeblatt  
der Israelitischen  
Religionsgemeinde zu  
Leipzig*, February 10,  
1933, 5.

35 *Bayerische  
israelitische  
Gemeindezeitung.  
Nachrichtenblatt  
der Israelitischen  
Kultusgemeinden in  
München, Augsburg,  
Bamberg und des  
Verbandes Bayerischer  
Israelitischer  
Gemeinden*, April 1,  
1933, 98.

that things would change dramatically. Immediately after Hitler's appointment, the Orthodox newspaper *Der Israelit* expressed the hope that Hitler and his supporters would not dare to strip German Jews of their constitutional rights or lock them up in ghettos; and that, even if they wanted to do so, President Hindenburg and the Catholic Center Party would certainly prevent any such act.<sup>32</sup> When things got worse, Orthodox Jews responded in the same vein in which they had responded to every catastrophe in history. In their view, what happened was a divine punishment for not observing the religious commandments. Therefore, the right thing to do in their eyes was to appeal to the non-observant Jews and return them to the faith, and in turn God would release them from danger. In April 1933, the leaders of the Orthodox associations within German Jewry wrote to the Jewish community: "We are hit by severe affliction, but according to our prophets, these are messianic sufferings and they promise future salvation. We will accept even the most severe suffering without complaining . . . Let us remain faithful to our God, then he will not refuse us his help."<sup>33</sup>

Some German Jews dared to respond more forcefully: In February, the Leipzig Jewish Community Bulletin still called for public protests against lies and defamation.<sup>34</sup> And as late as April 1, the president of the Bavarian Jewish community, the judge Alfred Neumeyer, published an open letter addressed to the new Nazi-installed Bavarian leader General von Epp, in which he not only complained about the treatment of Jews and emphasized that many had fought in the First World War, but also dared to say that his association will not accept the anti-Jewish measures.<sup>35</sup> That was the last we heard about any plans to resist Nazi discriminatory policies.

After the first waves of anti-Jewish violence and legal measures, Jewish reactions were of a different nature. In September, the *Reichsvertretung* (later: *Reichsvereinigung*) was created as the first nationwide organization representing the entirety of German Jews. The spiritual leader of



**Figure 5.** Leo Baeck, President of the Reich Association of German Jews, during a meeting of the executive committee, 1934. Photo: Abraham Pisarek. © bpk-Bildagentur / Abraham Pisarek.

German Jewry, Berlin rabbi Leo Baeck, became its president and therefore was now also the foremost political figure among Germany's Jews.

Besides the organizational restructuring, the main response to the new regime was a restrengthening of the ties with Jewish cultural heritage. The little paperbacks published by the *Schocken Library* presented German Jews with a rich selection of Jewish literature, philosophy, and religion.<sup>36</sup> According to Ernst Simon, the special arrangement of Jewish literature on the topics of suffering and consolation produced by Schocken constituted a "New Midrash" – an internal discourse among the oppressed, the full understanding of which remained closed to their hostile surroundings. This first volume of the *Schocken Library* was entitled *Consolation of Israel* and contained verses from the prophet Jeremiah, translated by Buber and Rosenzweig. In the face of their own tragedy, those lamentations on the destruction of the first Temple attained a new meaning for German Jews.

Another expression of the "New Midrash" was created on the theater stage when German Jews formed their own cultural association. As a result of the so-called "Aryanization" of German theaters and orchestras, thousands of Jewish actors and musicians became unemployed in 1933. While many of them emigrated in search of a brighter future, others were unable or unwilling to leave Germany and begin a new career

<sup>36</sup> Volker Dahm, *Das jüdische Buch im Dritten Reich*. (München, 1993), 321-365.

elsewhere. Only a few months after Hitler's appointment as Chancellor of the German Reich in July 1933, they founded the Cultural League of German Jews (*Kulturbund deutscher Juden*, after 1935 *Jüdischer Kulturbund*). The concerts, plays, and lectures of the Kulturbund were performed only by Jews and attended by an exclusively Jewish audience (besides the omnipresent Nazi agents). Thus, there arose the ironic situation that in the midst of Nazi Germany, non-Jews were not permitted to attend the performances of some of the most acclaimed actors and musicians of Germany.

So, how did German Jews react to the rise of Hitler? As we have seen, there was no unified response. The Liberal Max Liebermann, the German nationalist Hans-Joachim Schoeps, the Zionist Joachim Prinz, and Orthodox Jews showed very different reactions to the same events. Even after establishing a nationwide umbrella organization, German Jews were not a unified group with one view and one voice. There were socialist and conservative Jews, rich and poor, Orthodox and Reform, Zionists and German nationalists. Sometimes this variety of political opinions was expressed even within the same family.

As diverse as the German Jewish community was, so uniform was the fate that struck it with the appointment of Adolf Hitler as chancellor on January 30, 1933. To be sure, the signs of a catastrophe were not yet necessarily visible. Bavaria had already witnessed a wave of antisemitism, including government-planned expulsions of East European Jews in the early 1920s. In 1922, Weimar's Jewish foreign minister Walther Rathenau was assassinated. Violent antisemitic actions increased when Jews were attacked on the famous Kurfürstendamm in Berlin after leaving their synagogues during the High Holidays in 1931. An economic boycott against Jewish-led businesses was becoming palpable, and numerous German student organizations started to exclude Jews already before 1933.

In 1933, 37,000 Jews left Germany, approximately 7% of the total Jewish population. Was this a lot or was it a tiny number?

The majority believed that Hitler would disappear as so many German chancellors did before him, or that they could somehow continue to live as citizens with restricted rights. Only very few, even among the emigrants, broke with Germany as definitively as the writer Kurt Tucholsky, who wrote to his fellow writer Arnold Zweig in Palestine in December 1935: “I have nothing to do anymore with this country, whose language I speak as little as possible. May it bite the dust [*verrecken*] . . . I am done with it.”<sup>37</sup> But even Tucholsky could not continue to live so far away from his homeland. One week later he took an overdose of sleeping pills and died in his Swedish exile on December 21, 1935.

Historians have often depicted German Jews as having been blind to the danger they faced. One of many examples is Daniel Goldhagen’s bestselling *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, in which he writes: “Antisemitism was endemic to Weimar Germany, so widespread that nearly every political group in the country shunned the Jews. Jews, though ferociously attacked, found virtually no defenders in German society. The public conversation about Jews was almost wholly negative.”<sup>38</sup>

If we accept this view, we have to ask ourselves: How come that the Jews did not leave Germany earlier? Were they really so blind? I would argue that the situation was much more complex than Goldhagen or many others assume from hindsight. First of all, let us not forget that the Jews felt at home in Germany.<sup>39</sup> They often lived in places where their roots reached back further than those of their Christian neighbors. Before they were uprooted by force, Jews were emotionally tied not only to their country but also to the villages and cities in which they had grown up and lived, to the language they spoke, to the culture they were part of. In the broader time frame, the *longue durée*, many had felt a social and economic improvement of their status as compared with previous generations and regarded antisemitism merely as a temporary setback.

Seen in a more global perspective, Protestant minorities in Catholic regions or vice versa did not always fare well,

**37** Quoted in Julius H. Schoeps, *Düstere Vorahnungen. Deutschlands Juden am Vorabend der Katastrophe (1933-1935)* (Berlin, 2018), 185.

**38** Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners. Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York, 1996), 83.

**39** Peter Gay, “In Deutschland zu Hause... Die Juden der Weimarer Zeit,” in Arnold Paucker, ed., *The Jews in Nazi Germany* (Tübingen, 1986), 31-43.

40 Michael André Bernstein, *Foregone Conclusions: Against Apocalyptic History* (Berkeley, 1994).

socialists and nationalists fought each other on the streets, and the economic crisis created millions and millions of unemployed; antisemitism, thus, was for many just one of many signs of a larger crisis. When Hitler was appointed Chancellor of the German Reich by the old President and World War I hero Field Marshal Hindenburg, many Jews believed the old marshal would stand by them. They believed in the constitutional promises of equality, they proudly displayed the medals they had earned defending their country in the First World War. They trusted a humanistic tradition of a people that liked to call itself the country of poets and thinkers.

The Berkeley literary scholar Michael André Bernstein once critically referred to what he termed “foregone conclusions.”<sup>40</sup> Historians, well aware of the fate that befell European Jews in the early 1940s, must not fall into the trap of “historical backshadowing,” he wrote. While the Shoah cannot be explained without understanding the events of the preceding two decades, it was not the only possible destination for Germany and European Jewry. Other roads were still open during this period. Contemporaries imagined the worsening of their economic crisis, the revocation of Emancipation and even their relegation to the status of second-class citizens, but not their total extermination. We should always keep this in mind before rushing to any judgments about German Jews in their moment of crisis.

Let us return to the letter that the painter Max Liebermann wrote in 1933: “As difficult as it has been for me, I have awakened from the dream that I dreamed my whole life long.” Was the life of German Jews before 1933 really only a dream? And when do we know that the dream is turning into a nightmare? When do we wake up? Should German Jews have woken up on January 30, when Hitler was appointed chancellor? Or on April 1, when Jewish businesses were boycotted, or on April 7, when Jewish civil servants were dismissed? Or on April 22, when Jewish doctors lost their licenses from health insurance companies? Or perhaps on May 10, when books of Jewish and



anti-Nazi authors were publicly burned? Or with the Nuremberg Laws in 1935? Or with the November pogrom in 1938?

In many ways, it seems that Jews felt just as at home, as safe, and as integrated in Germany in the early decades of the twentieth century as they feel in the United States a hundred years later. To be sure, political radicalism, a rather weak democratic structure, and deep antisemitic traditions created different conditions for the Jews in Berlin or Frankfurt of the 1920s than in New York or Chicago today. But, without equating the events of a century ago with today's, we cannot avoid asking the provocative question in our own time and in this very place, here in America. Will there be a moment when we might have to wake up from the American-Jewish dream? And when do we know that that moment has come? When a wild mob cries "Jews will not replace us" and a U.S. President calls them good guys? When eleven people are killed in a synagogue shooting? When there is an attempted insurrection in the country's parliament and some of the rioters are wearing a "Camp Auschwitz" shirt? When Jewish students on campuses are threatened?

We do not know yet if January 6, 2021 was just a prelude to a much more systematic and ultimately successful attack on democracy in this country or if it will remain a lone episode. We do not know if the attacks against synagogues in Pittsburgh, Poway, Jersey City, and Colleyville were the beginning of a long series of tragedies. We do not know if Jewish college students will be harassed, and the Holocaust questioned ten or twenty years from now. We do not even know if the victims of a possible new wave of discrimination and harassment will be Jews or another minority group.

But what we know is that just like in Germany in the 1930s, the fate of the Jews is very much bound to the vitality of U.S. democracy and to the fair treatment of any minority. We know that when Jews become victims, usually other vulnerable groups will suffer, too, and vice versa. And we certainly know

that while historians may tell us possible scenarios from the past, it is *all of us* living today who are able to determine what our country will look like tomorrow. We know how democracies died in darkness a century ago, and if we fail today, we may witness how democracies die in bright daylight today.

**Michael Brenner** is Distinguished Professor of History, Seymour and Lillian Abensohn Chair in Israel Studies, and director of the Center for Israel Studies at American University. He also holds the chair of Jewish History and Culture at Ludwig Maximilian University in Munich and serves as International President of the Leo Baeck Institute for the Study of German-Jewish History. In 2021 he was the first recipient of the Baron Award for Scholarly Excellence in Research of the Jewish Experience. He has published ten books. His latest publication is *In Hitler's Munich: Jews, the Revolution, and the Rise of Nazism* (Princeton University Press, 2022).