

INTRODUCTION

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND- *What My Personal Experience Tells Me*

MY OWN CONDITIONING

I ONCE HAD a discussion on a radio program with the head of *Likud Nederland*, the Dutch branch of former Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's party. The subject of our talk was the significance of the Israelis' so-called "targeted killings" of certain Palestinians suspected of being terrorists or preparing terrorist attacks. Sharon's government was conducting such assassinations without informing the public of the facts on which their suspicions were based. There was no fairness about these operations, nor was the public apprised of any proof. I considered them to be profoundly counterproductive because they did little more than provoke fresh rounds of suicide attacks. When I stated as much, my interlocutor suddenly said, "Mr. Meyer, you've been brainwashed." To which I answered, "You're absolutely correct, and do you know by what? By the historical events that have conditioned me over the course of my life."

The events that occurred between 1933 and 1942, in particular, were extremely intense and affected me so much that, as a result, I evaluate and interpret everything through the lens fashioned from these experiences. I was subjected to humiliating interrogations, had to undergo all sorts of collective punishment, and for many years had no access to education. I was forced to watch my proud father

be humiliated, viewed the progressive impoverishment of the Jewish community to which I belonged, and was made to feel like a social pariah. These experiences sensitized me to the discriminatory and humiliating treatment of any people who are forced to live as second-class citizens. This sensitivity has been heightened by the fact that the Jewish people are themselves currently harassing and humiliating another people—the Palestinians. Whenever I read or hear about these events or watch reports on television, memories from my formative years come bubbling to the surface. In order to make my views about the main themes of this book understandable, I must therefore say something about the key facts and experiences of my life—that is, how history conditioned me.

FAMILY BACKGROUND

There's no way around it, I am and remain what in Israel is called a *yekke*. This means that I am still conscious of being a Jew who was born in Germany. I was molded by the values that determined the course of German Jewry from about the second half of the 18th century, in the elaboration of which the philosopher of the Jewish Enlightenment, Moses Mendelssohn, played an important role. I will return to the significance of Mendelssohn, whose renown extended well beyond his Jewish coreligionists later on, but for the present I will limit myself to several observations about the social, religious, and family circumstances in which I grew up until I was fourteen.

It is important to note that there was no appreciable Jewish proletariat in Germany between the final decades of the 19th century and Hitler's seizure of power. German Jews exceeded the population as a whole

in terms of income, education, and qualifications. In my hometown of Bielefeld, Westphalia, for instance, only 2% of the population between 1870 and 1933 was of Jewish extraction, whereas the number of Jewish students attending my *Gymnasium* (high school) during that same period was 10%. This statistic indicates that the percentage of German Jews with a higher education was larger than that of the German Gentiles among whom they lived.

My family can be traced back to the end of the 17th century. Both sides of my family had lived in Westphalia since that time. When my mother was nine years old—she was born in Dortmund—her father, Julius Melchior, moved to Berlin in order to be a member of the board of directors, and eventually the CEO, of the Patzenhofer Brewery, whose brand still exists. His residence, which he built in the most exclusive section of Berlin, is still standing. My mother's four brothers all finished their studies at the university. One of them became a professor of surgery at the University of Breslau; another, after concluding his course of study in mechanical engineering, became a department head at the *Allgemeine Elektrizitäts-Gesellschaft* (AEG), the big electricity corporation founded by the Jewish industrialist Emil Rathenau. Thanks to his technical knowledge, he became an officer in the engineering division of the German army during World War I. This was one of the reasons why he survived the war in Berlin in spite of the fact that he and his non-Jewish wife were childless. (A German Jew with a non-Jewish wife was much safer during the Nazi period if he had children.) In the end, he was named house air raid protection warden,¹ even though he wore a yellow star.

My mother would have liked to study medicine, but my extremely Victorian grandmother wouldn't hear

of it. That was not a fit profession for a decent girl from a good home. The result was that my mother ran away from home at the age of 26, finished a short course in nursing, volunteered to work as a nurse in a field hospital on the Eastern front, and almost died of diphtheria, which she contracted there. Another result of her work on the Eastern front was that she met my father, who had been so severely wounded at the Battle of Tannenberg (1914) that he was unfit for front-line duty. He was made a sergeant, given responsibility for maintaining military order in the hospital, and married my mother at the end of 1916.

Her mother was not exactly thrilled. My father, a jurist, attorney, and notary, was, at least at first glance, from a lower class than my mother. His father had been a horse trader, which was not a particularly respected occupation. Today, used car salesmen are held in about the same esteem. This social ‘blemish’ was compensated for in a number of ways by his wife’s personality and culture.

My paternal grandmother, Theodora, was the paradigm of a young Jewish woman of the type that emerged from the so-called court Jews and protected Jews—in her case, from the small principality of Lippe-Detmold. Such Jewish women were generally very well educated. They were versed in the literature of the classical German writers, as well as those of classical antiquity, and the most successful of them held salons in their homes in Berlin. My grandmother never did that, but she read her Greek and Latin authors in the original. In addition, in contrast to my maternal grandmother, she was a warm and sensitive woman who cared for her family of seven children with much love on a short budget. My father worshiped her his entire life, and this may have something to do with the love and attention with which he showered

my mother. One of my grandmother's brothers, Dr. Max Meyer, was the village physician in Oerlinghausen, twelve kilometers from Bielefeld.

My father had four brothers and two sisters. In contrast to the custom in my mother's family, all of the children—including the girls—were encouraged to study, but with the proviso that they graduate from the *Gymnasium* without failing even once. In addition to my father, another brother and the youngest sister met these stringent requirements. Accordingly, that daughter was also permitted to attend university. However, because the parents couldn't finance studies for three children, they had to scrape together the necessary money themselves. My father borrowed it from a well-to-do physician named Dr. Joseph, one of the pioneers of plastic surgery, who had married into the family.

Unfortunately, I never knew my father's mother. She died relatively young from worry and heartache over the fate of her five sons, who were all sent to the front during World War I. Her youngest (and favorite) son was killed during the first few weeks. But that did not mean that my father's family, like almost all German Jewish families, was not extremely patriotic.

Almost all German-Jewish families, and certainly mine, held *Bildung*, or general education, in particularly high regard. We were supposed to know about antiquity, German classicism, music, theater, and opera. "Don't you know that? That's a part of a general education!" was a comment we heard frequently at home. We were expected to know a lot, learn a lot, and care about two things in life: to get a good position so that we could contribute something valuable to society; and most importantly, to try to become and remain decent people with moral principles

and an active conscience.

JUDAISM IN MY FAMILY

The way in which Judaism was practiced in my parents' house requires some explanation. Neither of my grandparents' families was still traditional let alone orthodox. True, we knew which foods were kosher or *treife* (non-kosher), but as a child I knew absolutely no one who observed the Jewish dietary laws. It should be noted that Westphalia was the cradle of German Reform Judaism, a liberal movement whose aim was to reform Jewish religious services. No one in the Bielefeld synagogue wore a *tallit*, or prayer shawl. Only the rabbi wore a rudimentary, stylized shawl that was as wide as a woolen scarf. If someone did come into the synagogue wearing a *tallit*, which happened now and again, we'd whisper to one other, "Hey look, he's from Eastern Europe." Every once in a while we actually went to synagogue, but mainly on high holy days. Going to synagogue primarily served a social function. My father, as a well-known lawyer in a mid-sized city, and a member of a very small Jewish community consisting of two- to three-hundred families, could not afford not to make such appearances with his family now and then.

Halacha, the Jewish religious law, meant nothing to our family. Ethics, achievement, and dedication—that was the important thing. In addition, we took pride in having survived as a people since antiquity, and in having achieved so much as German Jews, particularly since the time of Moses Mendelssohn, when Jews had still been primarily traders and moneylenders.

CONTENTED, SUCCESSFUL JEWISH CITIZENS

Both of my parents had intense feelings about World War I. One brother had been killed in action. They had experienced hunger, wounds, and disease. My father's mother had died of grief, poverty compounded by inflation, and last but not least, the shame and dishonor of being part of a nation of losers—and here I mean the German, not the Jewish nation. Still, as I recall, I grew up in a harmonious and happy family up until 1933. My mother was a warm, intelligent, and upright woman, the caring soul who managed our home.

My father was much more distant. He worked hard in his practice, and he had little tolerance for the noise that my two brothers and I made (I was probably the worst offender). He was successful, however, and the fact that he represented the Bielefeld city administration—a lucrative and respected client—was a source of great satisfaction to him. As a result, our family had nothing to complain about from a material perspective. Until Hitler's seizure of power, our parents kept two maidservants, who lived with us and helped my mother cook, keep house, and look after my two elder brothers and me. Our parents expected that in exchange for their loving parental care we would do our best in school, bring home good grades, and that our behavior would leave little to complain about. An atmosphere of warmth and security reigned in our home.

HITLER'S RISE TO POWER AND ITS EFFECTS ON MY FAMILY

Just how Hitler managed to become a member of government within a democratic society is the subject of innumerable books. The only thing I want to mention here

is the fact that in the last democratic election for Parliament on November 6, 1932, Hitler's party, the NSDAP, won only about 33% of the votes. How he then managed with relative ease to seize absolute power after being named Chancellor is also a chapter for the history books. Similarly, it would require a more gifted writer than I to adequately portray the sense of shock that Hitler's seizure of power triggered in my family. To those interested in such a work, I recommend *The Oppermanns* by the German-Jewish writer Lion Feuchtwanger, originally published in 1933.²

My parents' basic position was that they felt they were good Germans, and rightly so. Germany was their homeland, and they had sacrificed everything they had for it, including their health and their lives. As a result, their attitude toward the ongoing political events was ambivalent. They were optimistic and hoped that this charlatan, Hitler, would soon be exposed. However, they also recalled the era before the Jews had been almost completely emancipated in the Weimar Republic, and this was cause for concern. A warning sign came as early as April 1, 1933, when Jewish lawyers were barred from entering courthouses. Although this measure was later suspended, it was a harbinger of things to come.

I also recall another far-reaching event that affected my parents, and particularly my father, who was a legal scholar through and through, and believed firmly in the rule of law. In 1934, one of his brothers was denounced to the Gestapo by a coworker who had designs on his managerial position in a department store. According to the informer, he had told a disparaging joke about Hitler in a bar. A trial took place in Leipzig, which my father was able to watch from the gallery. My uncle, a highly decorated war veteran who had been wounded four times on the Western

front and been awarded the Silver Wound Badge and the Iron Cross, first class, was sentenced to several years in the concentration camp at Dachau. When my father returned home from this trial, which mocked any concept of justice, he was a broken man. He had lost all faith in Germany as a constitutional state, and for the first time the true nature of this regime became clear to him. Of course, he had no idea just how durable it would be.

There was every reason to prepare for the worst. And to my recollection, my parents did just that, and more often than not in exemplary fashion. The maidservants were let go, and we children did household chores from then on. They took special measures with my eldest brother, who was a somewhat shy boy, with few friends. He was a model student who always got good grades. He had just passed the intermediate school examination shortly after Hitler seized power. He was supposed to continue school until he passed the *Abitur*, or final school examination. He was also an outstanding flutist, who had just recently appeared on the radio as the soloist in a Mozart flute concert given by the school orchestra. My parents were so panicked about the ongoing political developments, however, that they pulled him out of school and got him an apprenticeship as a sewing machine technician.

The reason for my parents' behavior was that they, like many other German Jews, believed that the next generation had to distance itself from intellectual professions and take up manual ones. They thought that this would help counter the anti-Semitic stereotype that Jews were trying to take over Germany and the world. This decision had serious consequences for my brother's later life. He was a talented flutist, but not much of a technician, and suffered from this setback for the rest of his life.

A JEW IN SCHOOL WITH NAZIS

I was completely different from my brothers. I was small, agile, good at sports, and had lots of friends. At first, I didn't notice the changes that were taking place. I continued to play on my class's soccer team, and even after Hitler's seizure of power my non-Jewish classmates (with two or three exceptions) treated me as they always had. We continued to visit each other regularly. Up to the end of 1938, I had a friend with whom I built model gliders; I helped another friend (member of the nobility) work on his moped. The teachers, almost without exception, treated me fairly. Only two of them openly insulted Jews in class. I recall one teacher's disdainful reference to "the Jew Marx, who spread ruinous poison upon the German people." That was an unpleasant moment for me. Strangely, even this Nazi, who I feared would flunk me, gave me passing grades. Until November 1938, the other teachers were more interested in the welfare of their students, and any sympathies they might have had for the Nazis did not manifest itself in open anti-Semitism.

This impression was confirmed a few years ago when I visited my old school for the first time and saw my final report card. The last entry, dated November 9, 1938, simply read, "Withdrew from school." There was not one word about the reason, which was that after the *Kristallnacht* (Night of Breaking Glass), the November 9th pogrom that Hitler carried out against the Jews, Jewish students were forbidden to attend non-Jewish public schools. Nevertheless, this cowardly omission was more than made up for by the comments about me written several months earlier, when Hitler was glorying in his power: "Overall attitude good. He demonstrates sincere effort. His physical goals are in

line with his adequate physical talents. Citizenship good; intellectual goals and overall performance satisfactory.” Only my grades in English left something to be desired. Over time, however, harassment by students and teachers under the sway of Nazi ideology increased to the point where I no longer felt comfortable going to school.

TOO LATE... OUT OF HOPE

The natural question to ask is why, under these circumstances, our family remained in Germany. First, my parents simply couldn't imagine how bad things would get. The greatest tragedy of the *Kristallnacht* was not simply the fact that it happened, but that it happened only five and a half years after Hitler's seizure of power. As a result, the true face of the regime became evident only after it was too late. Second, the Western democracies were prepared only to accept a limited number of German-Jewish refugees, if any at all. The horrifying reports by those who had managed to flee were characterized in Germany as “atrocious propaganda,” but even outside Germany they were met with great skepticism. Third, my father was simply no longer strong enough to sell neckties door-to-door as an impoverished refugee, and studying law in a foreign country presupposed language skills that he did not have and which would have taken years for him to acquire.

Thus, my parents invested their hope in their three sons, who would be able to make a go of it wherever they went. They intended to follow later, and allow themselves to be initially supported by their children. In addition, due to my father's service as a front soldier in World War I, he had permission to defend Jews in court as a so-called legal consultant, that is, without a robe and without admission

to the bar. Although this highly ambiguous position represented a considerable loss in prestige for him, it did afford him a certain amount of satisfaction. Sometimes he was actually able to help his Jewish clients. Regardless of how terrible and discriminatory the anti-Semitic laws were, the letter of the law still had to be followed. This was true even under the Nazis, at least up until the end of 1942. As a result, my father was able to make a modicum of a living.

The *Kristallnacht* threw a wrench in all my parents' plans. My eldest brother had to discontinue his engineering studies in Chemnitz, which he had begun after his apprenticeship examination as a sewing machine technician. My second brother had finished his *Abitur* and begun a course in typing and stenography at a private secretarial school. Both of my brothers had been making plans to emigrate for some time, and at the last minute they managed to get out of Germany. One of them went to England, the other to the United States. I, like my parents, however, was close to despair. The public schools were barred from admitting Jews, and the Jewish schools that I could have attended were filled to capacity. I couldn't even take up a manual trade because after November 1938, no company would hire a Jewish apprentice. This was a terrible position for someone indoctrinated in the value of education to be in. I had always been told to "make sure that you learn something, because what you've got in your head no one can take away from you." Thus, at the age of fourteen, I was convinced that my entire life would be ruined because I hadn't learned to do anything early on in life. As the saying went: What "Hans" fails to learn as a child, he can never make up as an adult. In many respects I still believe that.

REFUGEE IN THE NETHERLANDS

While Jewish schools all over Germany turned me down, word began to spread toward the end of 1938 that the Netherlands would accept about 300 Jewish children, and England about 600. Even without further details, my parents and I decided (I was actually included in the deliberations) that we had to grasp at any opportunity for me to leave Germany. In hindsight, this was a somewhat naïve assumption. Given the experience of World War I, we should have known that Holland was not exactly the safest refuge. But this shows just how panicked we were. If we had only waited two weeks longer, I would have ended up in England, and my life would have been completely different.

So, on January 4, 1939, I was permitted to leave Germany for Holland with other German-Jewish children between the ages of six and eighteen. Although my parents and I knew a Dutch family that was prepared to take me in, the Dutch government strictly prohibited this. I had to stay in a refugee center. The children there were not permitted to go to school, and to make matters worse they were transferred from one place to another. Between January and November 1939, I lived in five different refugee centers. When I finally found a blacksmith in Driebergen, in the province of Utrecht who was prepared to take me on as an apprentice, the local police picked me up after a few days. Then it was back to doing nothing in the center again.

Just how bad things were is demonstrated by an event of which I have a complete written record because, thanks to the courage of a non-Jewish German, all of the letters that I sent to my parents in Germany were saved.

Several weeks after my arrival in Holland, I reported that, “a man from the refugee committee came to our center and said that it might be possible for some of us to attend an “Ambach school.” At the time, I didn’t know that *ambachtsschool* was Dutch for technical school. I only understood the word “*school*,” and I wrote home, “Of course, I signed up immediately for training. By the way, what is an “Ambach school?” That I volunteered to join a school when I didn’t even know what kind of a school it might be shows how desperate I was. As far as I know, no technical schools were ever set up for refugee children.

THANK GOODNESS FOR WERKDORP WIERINGEN

If you think nothing is accomplished by nagging or complaining you are wrong. Given certain circumstances, it may be the only way to get out of a difficult situation. At least, this was true in my case. Every time one of the officials from the refugee committee visited us (which was only every couple of weeks) I complained to them about how much time I was wasting. I wanted to learn something, I told them, and it didn’t much matter what. My parents also wrote to the committee with the same request. As a result, I was eventually one of thirty lucky children permitted to go a model refugee camp in Wieringen. By now, the war had broken out and no children were permitted to leave Germany any more.

Those of us who were allowed to transfer to Wieringen were several years younger than the rest of the young refugees already there. I learned a great deal from these older people, most of them former students. Among other things, I had the opportunity to get training as a metal worker. At least as important was that at Wieringen

we learned to do heavy physical labor. Sometimes, we metal workers were called on to help bring in the harvest or hack ice in the drainage canal in the middle of winter. We had to stand in high boots with water up to our waists in order to dredge the canal. Wieringen also had a collection of books and records, so I was able to read and listen to music to my heart's content. One of the former students, who had almost completed his studies in mathematics and physics, gave me lessons almost every evening, so that by the time we were forced to leave Wieringen in March of 1941, I was able to enter secondary school again and complete it almost on time.

FINAL EXAMS, AND LIFE IN HIDING

When the German troops marched into the Netherlands, most of the Wieringen refugees were taken to Amsterdam. Again threatened with idleness, I took to nagging again and managed to be accepted into the fourth class of the strictly Orthodox Jewish high school—even though I was totally non-religious and didn't understand a word of Hebrew. Thanks to the generosity of the school directors, who made allowances for my faulty Dutch and my even poorer knowledge of Jewish culture (with the exception of history), I managed to get through. As a result of two very lucky circumstances, I was able to take the final state school examination, even though my group and I were ordered deported.

The first stroke of luck was that a former Jewish colleague of my father from Bielefeld who also fled to Amsterdam, and to whom I wanted to say my goodbyes before my deportation, reacted in a manner typical of German-Jews at the time. "What, you only have one year

to go to the exams?' he asked. He got me a position as a mailman in the internal postal service of the Jewish Council, which kept me from being deported for a year. His reasoning was that if I got deported after that, I'd at least have my school exam in my pocket. Because being a mail carrier took up the entire morning, I only had the afternoons free for school. Then there was a second stroke of luck. My future foster parents, the Emanuels, had received permission to open a private Jewish school. They managed to get the money that made it possible for me to complete my education there.

I went underground one day after successfully completing the final exam for students at private schools. My first attempt, however, failed miserably because I fell in with a notorious traitor. Luckily, I realized it in time. With the help of the Emanuels, I was able to stay out of sight for a year. They courageously hid me in their own weekend house not far from Amsterdam, which they made to look uninhabited. The house was a duplex, and their neighbor took me in. I spent a good part of the day with the Emanuels, reading and discussing subjects of mutual interest.

Except for a few scary moments when the Germans searched the house I was able to keep my head above water. The news that the Nazis were beginning to lose the war boosted my morale. In spite of the fact that we never went out onto the street and spent only a few moments in the garden behind the house, our little community, including the Emanuels, their neighbors, and occasional underground guests, got along surprisingly well.

THE NEAR-END OF THE ROAD: AUSCHWITZ

As it happened, this garden turned out to be my undoing. One afternoon, the neighbor who had taken me in asked me to fetch some wood for the oven from the shed. As soon as I emerged from the house, Germans from the Green Police with weapons drawn barred my way. I was arrested and brought in for interrogation by the Gestapo in The Hague several days later. I had a poorly forged ID, and the German security officer who was interrogating me realized immediately that my name was not Wim Engeltjes. It seemed pointless not to tell the truth, so I told him that my name was Hajo Meyer, and that I came from Bielefeld.

“What a coincidence,” he responded. I’m from Oerlinghausen.”

“My father’s uncle lives there,” I replied.

“Oh, who’s that?” he inquired.

“Dr. Max Meyer,” I answered.

“What, he’s your father’s uncle?” he responded.

“Why, he’s the best doctor in the world... He saved my wife’s life!” he exclaimed.

“If he did that for you, perhaps you could do something for me,” I suggested, in turn.

The security officer was SS Master-Sergeant Koch, a man described in detail in the autobiography of Friedrich Weinreb,³ a Polish-Jewish econometrist and Talmudic scholar.⁴ The result was that I was brought next morning to the Westerbork transit camp, which was the last station in Holland for people who were to be deported to Auschwitz. For most of my life, I viewed Koch as a horrible criminal. Only recently did I realize that he could not afford simply to let me go. But what he did do was to stop interrogating me about my contacts with the underground. No pressure

was put on me, and I certainly wasn't tortured. As a result, I was never tempted to betray my illegal contacts. Perhaps that was his way of repaying my uncle. I was soon deported to Auschwitz from Westerbork.

Auschwitz was actually a complex of camps, the largest of its kind established by the Nazi regime. It included three main camps, Auschwitz I, Auschwitz II, also called Auschwitz-Birkenau, and Auschwitz III, also called Auschwitz-Monowitz, all of which deployed incarcerated prisoners at forced labor. The camps were located about 37 miles west of Krakow. Auschwitz inmates were employed on huge farms, or forced to work in coalmines, stone quarries, fisheries, and especially armaments industries. Between 1942 and 1944, the SS authorities at Auschwitz established 39 sub-camps. Some of them were established within the officially designated "development" zone. Others were located in Upper Silesia and Moravia.

In general, sub-camps that produced or processed agricultural goods were administratively subordinate to Auschwitz-Birkenau, while sub-camps whose prisoners were deployed at industrial and armaments production, mining, or quarry-work were administratively subordinate to Auschwitz-Monowitz. Periodically, prisoners underwent selection. If the SS judged them too weak or sick to continue working, they were transported to Auschwitz-Birkenau and killed. Prisoners selected for forced labor were registered and tattooed with identification numbers on their left arms. They were then assigned to forced labor at the main camp or elsewhere in the complex, including the sub-camps.

Like most other concentration camps, Auschwitz I had a gas chamber and crematorium. SS physicians carried out medical experiments in the hospital and

pseudoscientific research on infants, twins, and dwarfs, and performed forced sterilizations, castrations, and hypothermia experiments on adults. Between the crematorium and the medical experiments barrack stood the “Black Wall,” where SS guards executed thousands of prisoners. Auschwitz-Birkenau also contained facilities for a killing center that played a central role in the German plan to dispose of the Jews of Europe. It included four large crematorium buildings, each with a disrobing area, a large gas chamber, and crematorium ovens. Trains arrived at Auschwitz frequently with transports of Jews from virtually every country in Europe occupied by or allied to Germany. New arrivals underwent selection. The SS staff determined the majority to be unfit for forced labor and sent them immediately to the gas chambers, which were disguised as shower installations to mislead the victims.

A number was tattooed on my arm in Monowitz, which housed prisoners assigned to work at the Buna synthetic rubber works established in 1941 by the German conglomerate I. G. Farben. My training at Wieringen came in handy when I was identified as a skilled worker and immediately transferred to Gleiwitz. Although we first had to erect the camp itself under the most miserable conditions, here too, I benefited from the hard physical labor that I had learned to do at Wieringen. Nevertheless, I got weaker and weaker. It was fortunate that once the camp construction was well underway, I was transferred to the railroad repair shop of the *Reichsbahn Ausbesserungs Werke*, where I was able to spend the bitter cold months in a more or less warm place without having to do hard labor. This, and dumb luck, accounted for my survival, but just barely.