

AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS A SOURCE FOR THE STUDY OF GERMAN JEWRY IN ITS HOMELAND AND IN DISPERSION

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From the end of the eighteenth century onward, and with steadily increasing frequency in the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth, autobiographical writing became one of the primary ways in which German Jews expressed themselves and sought to describe and preserve their world. The nature of this literature and the intentions of its authors, who wrote with an eye to posterity, make it one of the most interesting sources for historians focusing on the study of this particular Jewish community. This kind of personal writing, which is often quite intimate, naturally yields insights unavailable in more public sources such as communal records, the statutes of organizations, Jewish newspapers, etc. These personal details, and the necessarily subjective vantage points from which they are described, were once thought to be of little significance and perhaps even problematic by historians who focused on the political history of Jews, on their struggle for emancipation and afterwards also on the demise of their world in the Nazi era. But since the 1970s Jewish

autobiographies have been recognized as highly valuable sources for the history of German Jewry.

The rise of the autobiographical genre among the Jews of Germany was inextricably bound up with the fact that the majority of them

became part of the German middle class and consequently tended to identify with an ethos that emphasized the value of the individual. The central importance of family values in bourgeois culture also contributed to the composition of autobiographies intended for

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family purposes (some of them were even written as family chronicles), many of which were written by women. Apart from these factors, which were characteristic of the German bourgeoisie in general, the uniqueness of German Jewish autobiography stems from the variety of ways in which the writers grappled with the formation of their identities as German Jews facing the challenges of emancipation, anti-Semitism, and the decline of traditional Judaism as well as the difficulty of sustaining a meaningful Jewish life in the modern era. The last wave of German Jewish autobiographies, and perhaps the

largest of all, was produced by hundreds of Jews who left Germany as emigrants, refugees, and even survivors of the Nazi regime. These autobiographies, written as early as the 1930s, continued to be produced throughout the twentieth century and have not yet come to a halt. They have appeared in German as well as in the different languages of the countries of emigration (English, Hebrew, Spanish, etc.) and constitute the last stratum of the heritage of German Jewry.

The Nazi regime's violent destruction of German Jewish life, in addition to inspiring many German Jews to record the story of their lives, was also an impetus to more institutionalized efforts to foster this kind of writing, collect it, and place it at the disposal of future researchers. I will give two examples of this.

In August 1939 the *New York Times* published a small notice announcing an essay contest on the subject of "My Life in Germany Before and after January 30, 1933." The initiative was undertaken by an interdisciplinary

research team operating out of Harvard University (a historian, a sociologist, and a psychologist) and yielded a total of 180 full-length autobiographical narratives (almost a third of which were, incidentally, written by women). This collection has since served no small number of scholars of twentieth-century German Jewry and its offshoots. In recent years, a team of German researchers centered around Detlef Garz has been busy publishing selected manuscripts from this collection and pursuing research based on the rich materials it contains.

Another, more comprehensive collection of German Jewish memoirs began after the establishment of the Leo Baeck Institute in 1955. In the middle of the 1950s several people affiliated with the Institute in Jerusalem began to collect family memoirs and autobiographies written by German Jewish émigrés and even to encourage the writing of additional ones. At the end of the 1950s the center of this project shifted to the New York branch of the Leo Baeck Institute, where it was directed by Max Kreutzberger. As Miriam Gebhardt has recently shown, the New York collection quickly became the world center for German Jewish autobiographical heritage. More than three hundred autobiographies were included in the “Kreutzberger catalogue” that was published in 1970. The total number of writings included today in the collection has reached around 1,200, most of which were written by German Jewish émigrés in the United States after 1945.

An important landmark in the study of these autobiographies and in the effort to make them accessible to the public was the work of Monika Richarz, who, in the course of the 1970s, assembled 126 autobiographical excerpts from the life stories collected in New York and published them in German (partial editions were subsequently published in English and Hebrew). Richarz marked the beginning of an effort to go beyond collecting the material to the systematic use of it in reconstructing the social history of German Jewry. In addition to providing material pertaining to the assimilation of German Jews into German society, their intellectual creativity, and anti-Semitism, these autobiographies offered a most important source for scholars

investigating questions relating to social life, family structure, and gender. Scholars relying on the autobiographies in these ways generally approached them from a positivistic standpoint—they assumed that despite their subjective point of view, the descriptions embedded in them were fundamentally accurate and could be used to reconstruct history “as it really was.” Illustrative of this



Julie Braun-Vogelstein writing at desk, 1916.
Courtesy of the Leo Baeck Institute, New York.

tendency are the books of Marion Kaplan on home and family life and on developments in the realm of gender among German Jews in the imperial period and in the Nazi era. The volume Kaplan has recently edited on the everyday life of German Jewry is likewise based on extensive use of autobiographical sources in this manner.

The 1990s witnessed the emergence of a different approach to German Jewish memoirs and autobiographies on the part of scholars influenced by the increasing

attention to Jewish collective memory (as evoked by Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi’s book *Zakhor*) as well as the constantly expanding theoretical literature produced by scholars from a variety of non-historical disciplines (literature, sociology, psychology, and anthropology) on matters dealing with social memory and life stories. For these scholars, the autobiographies served not as sources for the German Jewish past “as it really was” *despite* their subjectivity, but as sources for “the social history of memory” and for the self-consciousness of the writers precisely *because* of their subjectivity. Two studies that approached German Jewish autobiographies in this way were Miriam Gebhardt’s book (*Family Memory*, 1999), written in Germany, and my book (*German Jews in Israel*, 2004), written in Jerusalem. It is interesting to note that we worked simultaneously, on the basis of similar assumptions, and that at a certain point we made contact with each other to compare our results.

With respect to studies like these that are based on the reconstruction of the self-consciousness of the writers *at the time of writing* the question of *where and when* the autobiographies were written is of crucial

importance. Gebhardt chose, therefore, to occupy herself systematically with works written by Jews *in Germany* from 1890 to 1932. Because she was mainly interested in investigating the influence of emancipation, bourgeoisification, and integration of the Jews into the German environment on personal and family memory, she systematically omitted autobiographies written after 1933 from her sample, assuming that the rise of the Nazis to power and later occurrences had a decisive impact on the writers in their

reconstruction of their earlier past. My book is based on the autobiographies of several dozen German Jews who were born and raised in Germany during the age of emancipation but who all wrote the story of their lives after the Nazis' rise to power and in most cases also after the Holocaust. Moreover, my wish to examine the writers' formation of their memories in a definite context inspired me to focus my research only on those who made aliyah, immigrated or fled to Palestine/Israel, and composed their life stories when they were living there. With the aid of control groups I compared the ways in which these writers construed their pasts as Jews in Germany and as émigrés to a number of autobiographical writings that were written by German Jews who migrated to the United States and also to some who migrated to Israel but chose to return to Germany after the war and wrote their memoirs there.

The writer's retrospective assessment of his or her past decisively influences, it seems, what he or she chooses to remember and to put on paper and also what he or she chooses to repress

and forget. Thus Gebhardt highlights in her book writers who describe the story of the rise of German Jewry "from the ghetto to the villa" as the central—if by no means only—theme of the sources with which she is concerned. Many of the writers in Germany, she shows, sought to promote the values of the emancipation and tended, therefore, to downplay anti-Semitism or to minimize it. The writers with whom I concerned myself chose, naturally enough, different narrative strategies. Some of their autobiographies were written in order to describe the greatness of "the world that was" but also its collapse. They sometimes praised the achievements of emancipated German Jewry, but since they were writing at a much later date they were much less reluctant to display its weaknesses and tended, sometimes, to describe the anti-Semitism of the imperial period and the era of the Weimar republic as foreshadowing the later demise of the German Jewish community. Others focused their stories precisely on the story of Zionism and aliyah to Israel, while reducing the German Jewish past to nothing more than the background to these subjects. Religion, profession, gender, and

additional topics also figure in some of these autobiographies as central themes around which the reconstruction of the autobiographical memory takes shape.

Jewish autobiographies in Germany will in all likelihood persist in being a fruitful source for different kinds of research. The enormous range of sources, which may still increase in the future, the diversity of subjects they treat, and the variety of scholarly points of view from which they can be regarded—perspectives that do not contradict but rather complement one another—will continue to draw the attention of a wide variety of scholars. Their ranks will include those German Jews who bequeath their personal memoirs to posterity as well as those who will make use of these documents in the preparation of comparative studies.

Translated from Hebrew by Hanan Ben-Yehudah.

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