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A Success Story and its Limits. Jewish Social History in the 19th and Early 20th Centuries

I only met Hans Rogger in person late in his life, but I had already come to admire him as the author of trend-setting works on the history of the Jews and anti-Semitism in Tsarist Russia. What particularly impressed me from the start was the fact that Hans Rogger treated Jewish history as an integral part of the history of the Tsarist Empire and that his main interest was the relationship between majority and minority, the questions of emancipation and anti-Semitism under the specific conditions of a remarkably delayed process of political and social modernisation. In this respect I had the impression that there was a kind of intellectual kinship between us, since from the 1960s on my interest in Jewish history in German-speaking central Europe focused primarily on the history of the relationship between Jews and non-Jews. Despite the different regional emphases in our fields of scholarly inquiry, there were significant points in common, and this was confirmed in the discussions we had.

I only realised very late that Hans Rogger and I also shared an aspect of biography. He was born in 1923 in Herford, a small town in the eastern part of the Prussian province of Westphalia, and went to school there till his family was expelled in 1938. I was born eleven years later, but in a village only 15 kilometres away from Herford. So we came from the same region, and in different political circumstances there could have been many similarities in our childhood and youth. The fact this did not happen, and that our destinies were extremely different, is due, as everybody knows, to the Nazi seizure of power in 1933. Incidentally, my father, a journalist and graphic artist, started his first job in 1929 at a newspaper in Hans Rogger's birthplace - but this did not last long because of the economic crisis which was rapidly sweeping through the German provinces as well as the big cities. Our family heirlooms still include some pen-and-ink drawings, lithographs and lino cuts made by my father at the time, with views of the town of Herford and portraits of some of its residents.

In the last fifteen years to twenty years there has been an extraordinary upsurge of interest in Jewish history in Germany. For a long time attention was focused almost entirely on questions of persecution, anti-Semitism and the Holocaust; but since the 1980s there has been more wide-ranging and also more intensive preoccupation with Jewish history. However, this applies only to a very limited extent to the Jewish communities in Germany, which have now grown again. At least half the present members are Russian immigrants who have arrived in the past twenty years; only a few members are still connected through their family background to German-Jewish history of the 19th and early 20th centuries. The new interest in Jewish history stems very largely from educated non-Jews - in Germany they are the main audience for the public events and publications on this theme, and most of the scholars, writers, journalists and cultural managers working in this field are also recruited from this group. Not only in the USA but also in Germany, though on a much smaller scale, the number of professorships and institutes for Jewish history and culture has risen considerably, and students' interest in these subjects continues to grow. The workshops for doctoral candidates in German-Jewish history spanning several days which I conducted on behalf of the Leo Baeck Institute from 1991 to 1999 were attended by a total of 133 doctoral candidates from 45 German and 12 foreign universities. These included - with neighbouring

disciplines taken into account - almost 110 dissertation projects in the field of modern German-Jewish history. This work is now being continued, no less successfully, by Michael Brenner, Professor of Jewish History and Culture at Munich University.

In 1992, when the exhibition "Patterns of Jewish Life in the World" was shown in Berlin, documenting the great diversity of Jewish life in European and non-European countries, it was a huge public success and indisputably one of the major cultural events in newly-reunited Germany. Since then museums on local and regional Jewish history have been established in many other places. Former synagogues and schools have been restored and are being used for exhibitions and other public events. In Berlin the City Museum's modest "Jewish Department" has developed into a major Jewish Museum whose national and international aspirations are emphatically underscored by the new building designed by Daniel Libeskind. The museum opened in autumn 2001 and already had 700,000 visitors in its first year. In 1995/96 in the renovated part of the once-magnificent "New Synagogue" in Berlin there was an exhibition which showed for the first time Jewish history in Berlin from its beginnings in the 13th century up to the present, with all its heights and depths, achievements and disasters. The four-volume work, "German-Jewish History in Modern Times", produced in the 1990s by the Leo Baeck Institute, has received considerable attention and has appeared not only in German but also in English (from Columbia University Press) and in Hebrew.

Now even writers seem to have become gripped by the fascination exerted by the particularly rich German-Jewish history between the Enlightenment and the Nazi regime. In the past year the Israeli writer Amos Elon published simultaneously in the USA and Germany a "Portrait of the German-Jewish Epoch", as the German edition is subtitled (this refers to the time between the Enlightenment and National Socialism). As he himself wrote, when preparing the book he felt "like an archaeologist" "researching a vanished, great secular culture". (The book's English title is: "The Pity of It All. A History of the German Jews, 1743-1933", Metropolitan Books.) This autumn the well-known German novelist Sten Nadolny has published a novel about the Ullstein family and the famous Berlin publishing house, Ullstein Verlag, which simultaneously tells a story and documents the history, making the "German-Jewish epoch" accessible to a wide reading public in a new way.

The realisation that Jewish history in the modern society of European countries - or in society in the process of modernisation - and especially in Germany, was an unusual success story up to the beginning of the Nazi regime, is still accepted only hesitantly today, if at all. Given the fact that this history ended with the expulsion and murder of the European Jews, even historians hesitate to speak of success. Researchers - and the general public - are more concerned with anti-Jewish prejudices and discrimination, social tensions and conflicts, the limits of success or, to borrow Fritz Stern's phrase, the "burden of success". The economic and social rise of individuals or families is repeatedly described, but seldom systematically researched and presented in context. Outstanding achievements by Jewish citizens for the larger community are shown at best in individual cases, but only very rarely analysed as a collective phenomenon. The path-breaking discoveries and inventions by Jewish natural scientists, doctors and technicians, the outstanding contributions of Jewish artists and artistic agents in the fields of music and the theatre, literature and fine arts, the print

media and film are known, but in general not adequately presented. As a largely unconscious overreaction to the Nazis' racist ideology, which defined the Jews in every respect as "different" and even as the "counter-race" to the Germans or "Germani", even today there is still a strong tendency to cut the Jews in modern secular society retrospectively "down to size", to make them as insignificant as possible, indeed, almost invisible. The argument goes that emancipated and acculturated Jews differ from other citizens in society only in religious matters, which are regarded as a private issue. All the special qualities attributed to them are merely inventions by anti-Semites. Economic and social historians in the second half of the 20th century hardly produced any sequels to such fundamental socio-statistical studies as Arthur Ruppin's two-volume "Sociology of the Jews", published in 1930/31 in Berlin, which presented data and analyses on the Jews as a social group in different countries, or Jakob Lestschinsky's investigations from 1929/30 on "The Resettlement and Restructuring of the Jewish People in the Course of the Last Century". There is no doubt that up to the beginning of the emancipation process the Jews in Europe constituted a minority that clearly differed from the respective majority population in terms of religion and language, lifestyle and economic activity. Even when they had lived in a place or region for many generations, they were still seen as strangers who were only temporarily tolerated. They lived on the fringe of the majority society, were unpopular outsiders, regarded as "not useful" and often also as "harmful", i.e. at least as a potential threat to the Christian population.

Under the banner of enlightenment and liberalism the attempt was then made to give the Jews equal rights to the Christians, to make them citizens and integrate them into society as a whole. Both Jewish and Christian reformers assumed that at the end of this process the Jews would still remain a religious community but in economic, social and cultural terms would no longer constitute a social group distinguishable from other members of civic society. But in fact, things turned out differently. While not a few individual Jews at the beginning of the 20th century had become indistinguishable from Christians - and atheists - this did not apply to the Jews as a whole. Instead, they exhibited a specific social profile that might not necessarily hold for all time, but was still clearly statistically evident in the 1920s. This applies in the first place to the demographic development. In Germany in the first half of the 19th century, as in most other western countries, the Jewish population was characterised by a stronger natural growth in comparison to the majority population, thanks to a higher birthrate and a lower mortality rate. Whereas this was still true for eastern Europe in the early 20th century, in Germany the Jewish birthrate began to sink both continuously and dramatically from the 1870s, so that in 1910 the figures for Jewish births amounted to only 50% of those for the non-Jewish population, and we can hardly speak any longer of a "natural" population growth. Similar figures are found in Italy and Hungary. The number of marriages among Jews in the above-mentioned countries was significantly lower than among non-Jews, and this also applies to the number of children per family. This has all been explained as due to the more modern lifestyle of the Jewish population, and in fact the Jews generally did anticipate demographic developments which would become characteristic somewhat later for the population as a whole.

What is very striking is the pronounced urbanisation, indeed metropolitanisation of the Jews. This process began around the mid-19th century and reached its dynamic peak between 1890 and 1930. In 1860 there were 41,000 Jews in Warsaw; by 1930 the figure was over 350,000. In Budapest the Jewish population grew from 44,000 in 1870 to 215,000

in 1920. In Vienna there were officially only 6,000 Jews in 1860, but by 1925 the figure had reached 201,000. In 1860 Berlin had a Jewish population of 19,000, by 1925 it was 173,000. We could easily continue with such examples. In the 1920s around 70% of all French Jews lived in Paris, in London and Vienna two-thirds of all British or Austrian Jews respectively, in Amsterdam the proportion was 60%, in Budapest over 45%, in Berlin over 30%. The saying "The Jew has become the city-dweller par excellence", coined by Karl Kautsky in 1914, would probably have been contradicted just as little by his prominent Jewish contemporaries as his claim that the much-debated "Jewish individuality" was nothing to do with "racial characteristics", but "the individuality of the city-dweller taken to extremes".

Whatever the case, it is true that the pronounced urbanisation in every European country decisively contributed to the "modernisation" of Jewish lifestyles. From the time Jews were granted access to the general school system and institutes of higher education, their children took full advantage of the new opportunities. This meant that at the beginning of the 20th century the educational profile of the Jewish population was very different from that of the respective majority population. In Vienna around 1900, the proportion of Jewish pupils at high schools was 30-35% (compared to a general population share of 10%), and in Berlin it was also around one-third, compared to only 5% in the rest of the population. Even in Russia, by 1880 12% of all high school pupils were Jewish. Incidentally, the difference was even greater in the schooling of girls. In 1901 in Prussia, for instance, 42% of all Jewish girls, but only 2,7% of non-Jewish girls attended a girls' high school. The trend discernible in higher school education was continued in the universities. In Russia in 1886 the proportion of Jewish students was already 14.5%, in the German Reich at the beginning of the 20th century it was around 10% (compared to around 1% for the general population), in Vienna at the turn of the 20th century 25-30% of university students were Jewish (in the medical faculties the figure was sometimes as high as over 40%). As these figures show, the average educational level of the Jewish minority was far higher than that of the majority Christian population in the different countries.

Explanations have been sought for this in terms of the Jews' traditionally high literacy quota, the multilinguality even of simple folk, and their special respect for the study of the Torah and Talmud. It is certainly also related to the fact that apart from rabbinical scholarship, for centuries the Jews had very few opportunities to develop their intellectual talents. It is clear that in the 19th and early 20th century European Jews focused on education in a way no other ethno-religious group did - on education as a means of developing individual qualities and talents in the sense of neo-humanism, but also on education as one of the most important means of upward social mobility in modern society. As is generally known, at the beginning of the emancipation process the economic activity of European Jews was fundamentally different from that of the majority Christian population. They were excluded from farming, from guild trades and from regular commerce, and thus consigned to earning their living on the fringes of economic life, especially non-regulated commerce, which for most of them meant peddling and small-scale monetary transactions. The legal emancipation of the Jews was therefore linked to the expectation that Jewish economic activity would be "normalised", that traders would become farmers and artisans. Although Jews and non-Jews made great efforts in this respect, the desired "job restructuring" hardly took place, and certainly not to the extent anticipated. With the successful establishment of capitalist economic methods and the rapidly-accelerating industrialisation, commerce remained the most important field

of economic activity for the Jews, even though in eastern Europe there were also many Jewish artisans and eventually not a few Jewish industrial workers in some regions. As late as 1925 in Prussia, which comprised two-thirds of the area and the population of the German Reich, 17% of non-Jews were involved in commerce, but 59% of Jews. The number of Jewish farmers remained extremely small, and many young men who had trained as artisans eventually turned to commerce because of the poor economic prospects in their branch, or decided to emigrate abroad.

For this reason, the important changes took place within commerce. The number of small peddlers decreased steadily, and Jews who had previously lived on the fringes of society became regular businessmen, shopkeepers and entrepreneurs; money-lenders became owners of private banks, and later also directors and board members of big joint-stock banks. In Warsaw in 1847, 17 of the 20 private bankers were Jewish; by the end of the century two-thirds of the city's 26 larger banks were owned by Jews. In Prussia in 1882 43% of all owners and directors of banks and credit institutions were Jewish, and Jews accounted for 22% of the employees of these enterprises (in Warsaw in 1882 the proportion of Jewish employees in banking was as high as 72%, in Budapest in 1900 the figure was 62%).

From the end of the 19th century the economic activity of Jews, along with commerce, was typified above all by the so-called freelance professions. In Budapest, Warsaw and Vienna around 1900, Jews accounted for more than half of all doctors, and the number of Jewish doctors was also very high in Berlin. The same applied to lawyers - in Vienna before 1914 almost half the lawyers were Jewish - and to journalists. It has recently been calculated that on the eve of the First World War in Vienna, Jews made up around 40% of the educated bourgeoisie and as much as two-thirds of the liberal citizenry.

The income and property relations correspond to the job structure outlined here. In some big cities like London and Amsterdam, but also in Berlin, there were prosperous and financially influential Jewish families even before the beginning of emancipation. In addition to this, in German-speaking central Europe a small layer of "court Jews" had developed, who had become rich in the service of princes, and whose capital formed the basis of some of the great economic success stories of the 19th century. The first half of the 19th century was seen, not without reason, as the "Rothschild era", and in many countries the heyday of private banks was influenced to a significant extent by Jewish banking houses. In Great Britain before 1914, where Jews made up 0.3% of the population, more than 20% of the millionaires were Jewish, and in the German Reich in 1908 Jews accounted for 31% of the richest families (while Jews made up 1% of the population).

Of course, not all Jews were rich, but Jews owned a significant share of the large fortunes, and to give one example, in recent research the Jewish proportion of the big bourgeoisie in Berlin in the late German Empire has been calculated as at least 50%. For the year 1905 the Jewish share of tax yields has been calculated for many German cities. We know that in Berlin 30% of taxes were paid by 5% of the inhabitants, in Posen 24% by 4.3%, in Mannheim 22.4% by 2.3%, in Breslau 20.3% by 4.3%. In Frankfurt am Main in 1900 the Catholic taxpayer paid on average 59.40 Marks, the Protestant taxpayer 121 Marks and the Jewish taxpayer 427.50 Marks. However we evaluate the individual figures,

there can be no doubt that the Jews in Germany, as in many other European countries, were a relatively prosperous group in comparison to their environment, and constituted a significant part of the bourgeoisie, both economically and in terms of education.

Alongside the quantitative results we could set the astonishing achievements of Jewish artists and scholars, but time is too short to do them justice here - the famous musicians and path-breaking natural scientists, the great painters and esteemed doctors, the remarkable architects and mathematicians of genius, the celebrated actors and great directors. Within a few decades they helped not only to shape but also became widely-acknowledged representatives of European culture. We can certainly refer to the Nobel Prizes won by Jewish scientists. Up till 1933 almost one-third of all Nobel Prizes were awarded to German scientists, of whom no fewer than 30% were Jewish. Or we can point to the outstanding role Jewish patrons of the arts played for the museums. Only recently has it been calculated that between 1890 and 1933 no fewer than 80% of all foundations for the big Berlin Museums - both in terms of numbers and value - came from the Jewish big bourgeoisie.

To demonstrate the wealth of talent we can take a brief look at a big Jewish family, such as the Berlin-based Cassirer family, which came from Upper Silesia and had been resident in the Reich capital since the 1880s. They began as the founders of large business and industrial enterprises. Only a generation later came the important philosopher Ernst Cassirer, the almost equally important doctor and psychiatrist Richard Cassirer, the musician and writer Fritz Cassirer, the philosopher and leading expert on ancient Chinese art, Erich Cassirer, and finally the publishers, art dealers and art patrons Bruno and Paul Cassirer. Or the Liebermanns, a family of Berlin entrepreneurs headed by the successful factory owner Joseph Liebermann: his grandchildren who were born in the mid-19th century included the painter and president of the Academy of Arts, Max Liebermann, the historian Felix Liebermann, the chemist Karl Liebermann and the founder of the General Electricity Company (AEG), Emil Rathenau. Family members in the next generation included Hugo Preuß, the "father" of the Weimar Constitution, and the diplomat Kurt Riezler.

If we briefly summarise all the findings mentioned here, it becomes clear that this amounts to an unusually successful "modernisation" process of a minority that was very small in most places. This process, which occurred over a period of around 150 years, i.e. around five generations, displays significant retardation in some places, particularly in eastern and south-eastern Europe. It had to win out against sometimes heavy opposition stemming from old and new prejudices, but also from contradictory interests. Nonetheless, despite all the national and sometimes regional differences, the development clearly went in the same direction. In the end, so it was thought, there would be a secularised, pluralistic society on the basis of universal human and civil rights, in which there would be no need for further discussion about the legal and social position of the Jews.

But as we all know, things turned out very differently. The 20th century became a "century of extremes", whose radicalism and misanthropy reached its most extreme peak in the persecution and murder of the European Jews. When considering a success story which finally ended with a hitherto unimaginable catastrophe, it is therefore essential to ask

not only about the causes but also about the limits of success. First we should note that the economic and social rise of Jews took place in a society in transition, in which rapid and fundamental changes were happening in every area of economic, social and cultural life. This brought special opportunities for those who had hitherto been outsiders, and at the time of the establishment and development of an industrial capitalist system the Jews obviously had certain initial advantages in comparison to members of the majority society because of their experience in commerce and monetary transactions. But these advantages inevitably decreased the more the modernisation process spread through society as a whole. This was already becoming clear at the beginning of the 20th century. Thus the percentage of Jewish university students began to sink steadily - not because fewer Jews studied, but because the number of Christian students rose.

This tendency is particularly evident in the banking sector. Here the percentage of Jews who were owners and directors of Prussian banks fell between 1882 and 1925 from 43% to 18%, although the absolute number of Jewish owners and directors rose by about 50% in the same period. This trend affected the Jewish employees in these enterprises even more drastically. Their number doubled between 1882 and 1925, but their percentage as employees fell simultaneously from 22% to 4%. Similar developments could be observed in Warsaw and Budapest. This was not linked to any kind of economic or social decline - in fact, there was actually stabilisation at a high level - but the relative status of the Jews was clearly diminished. We cannot call this a crisis, but we can speak of the limits of success, which are revealed at the end of a long period of transition. Other limits of success become clear when we look at the social acceptance of the legally emancipated and financially successful Jews. There are many examples of successful integration. Jews took on social and political functions on many levels, they were elected - by non-Jews - to national, regional and municipal parliaments, they were invested with important honorary positions and in some cities they were even awarded the status of honorary citizens. But there were also strong counter-forces: the anti-Jewish Christian tradition was still alive, social prejudices were fuelled anew, and in the era of nationalism there was a growing tendency to regard the Jews as "different", i.e. as foreign and not really part of the nation.

Outside the camp of militant anti-Semitism the Jews were also socially excluded at specific clubs or hotels, in spas and bathing resorts and in student unions, and even governments and state administrations joined in the social discrimination by barring Jews from officers' careers or the diplomatic service and hampering their careers in the civil service. In general, radical anti-Semitism remained an outsider position until the Nazi regime, but it had some influence on public opinion and created a climate of anti-Jewish suspicion. Some authors hold the opinion that the project of integrating the Jews into modern society also failed insofar as in Germany, for instance, there were no personal social relationships between Jews and non-Jews. But this is contradicted by the dramatic rise in the number of so-called "mixed marriages" from the beginning of the 20th century. Some cities such as Copenhagen, Trieste and Hamburg had an extremely high rate of "mixed marriages", but even for the German Reich as a whole the rate was already 22% in the 1920s. Since this means that one Jewish person in four or five chose a non-Jewish marriage partner, social contact cannot have been as rare as the critics retrospectively claim. But this does show another limit of success: the group bonds within the Jewish community were becoming weaker, the identity problems were increasing.

It is striking that at the latest from the mid-19th century on in some European countries, especially France and Germany, the economic and social success of the Jews became a problem in itself. In the process of social change there were not only winners, but also losers. The social rise of many Jews was not only greeted positively. In large sections of the Christian population it also unleashed feelings of envy and other negative reactions. As early as the 1840s in France there was a lively polemic against the "financial power" of the Jews, who were attacked as "rois de l'époque" (kings of the present epoch). Wealth gained rapidly is almost always less socially acceptable than long-held property anchored in tradition. The economic success of the Jews, who had until recently been despised outsiders and often did not even enjoy full civil rights, obviously aroused particular disgust. This clearly also applied to the achievements of Jews in other fields, whether politics, science or the arts. Existing prejudices meant that these achievements were sometimes called into question, and sometimes regarded as presumptuous. As a Jewish author formulated it at the beginning of the 20th century, referring to the activities of Jews in German cultural life: "They (the non-Jewish Germans) would prefer us to achieve less". Max Liebermann made a similar comment: "I had too many enemies. After all, I was open to attack on three fronts: First, I was Jewish, secondly, rich, and thirdly, I had talent."

Finally, we should not overlook the fact that in many cases the achievements of Jews in modern society were not accepted gratefully, but perceived instead as a threat. It was precisely the particularly successful modernisation process the Jews had gone through which fitted them to be the "scapegoats" for the crises of modern society. Only on the basis of their success could the Jews be identified with the unpopular features of modernism. Thus they stood for capitalism, modern culture, liberalism and finally also revolutionary socialism. But most of all, in the eyes of their enemies they embodied power. The fact that they lived in many countries as an - often tiny - minority made them appear virtually ubiquitous. In the context of the anti-Semitic world conspiracy theory, it was thus not difficult to lay the blame on them for political and economic disasters such as wars, defeats, revolutions or economic crises, whose causes remained obscure. Of course these were fantasies that derived from the particular needs of radical anti-Semitism. But they could not have had an effect if the Jews had not achieved such an unusually successful economic, social and cultural rise in the 19th and early 20th century. Here we come up not only against the limits, but also against the fundamental ambivalence of success in modern Jewish history.