Introduction

Cornelia Wilhelm

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During the night of 9 November 1938, the persecution of the Jewish communities in Germany reached a new level with the systematic and physical destruction of property, the elimination of intellectual and business leadership, and the demolition of safe havens such as community and synagogue buildings, as well as the aid networks that spun around the synagogue. The atrocities not only destroyed important communal spaces and strongholds for Jewish communities, but also targeted German Jewry's spiritual leadership, including rabbis and other functionaries around the synagogue such as cantors, a group whose fate during these days has hence found little attention in the research into these events.

This uniquely modern Jewish elite had emerged with a distinct modern German-Jewish identity during the emancipation period of the nineteenth century, which was itself under assault during the pogrom that signalled that the concept of German Jewry as an integrated minority was to be destroyed.¹ No one represented this identity more than the spiritual leaders of Germany's Jewish communities. Arrested in concentration camps or prisons during or after the pogrom, they experienced the terrors that awaited them and their congregants in Germany. While few rabbis were driven out of the country before 'Kristallnacht', or were officially expelled from Germany, the pogrom set the stage for the mass flight of the German rabbinate that destroyed the backbone of German-Jewish communities and their proper functioning as safe havens and centres for spiritual and social renewal before 9 November 1938. While under arrest, this German-Jewish elite was offered release under the condition of immediate emigration, a circumstance that drove many of them to a hasty departure, if they could secure a visa for emigration.²

By early 1939, this mass exodus of the German-Jewish rabbinate reached an unexpected urgency and dispersed German rabbis and cantors globally, while the former centres of modern Judaism in the German-speaking world, such as the orthodox Rabbinerseminar, the Jüdisch-Theologisches Seminar in Breslau and the Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums, were forcibly closed. Only the Hochschule was able to reopen for a short time until 1941.³

Most of the refugee rabbis found a new home in the United States, where, since the nineteenth century, under the influence of the first German-Jewish mass immigration, a modern Judaism had grown, having historically a lot in common with its German counterpart, even if it had long developed its own and very American profile. This close relationship and a firm commitment to *Wissenschaft des Judentums* launched a remarkable rescue effort coordinated by the American Jewish movements in Judaism. This ultimately shifted the European centre of modern Judaism to the United States in the post-war era, as it promised especially a younger cohort of liberal rabbis a future in the profession. In the following collection of articles, Cornelia Wilhelm reveals in ‘German Refugee Rabbis in the United States and the Formation of “the Last Generation of the German Rabbinate”’ how these refugees were part of a significant knowledge transfer that embraced reflections on their role as the ‘last of a special tradition’, intense reflections of their memory and the construction of a special legacy, which resonated in post-war American Judaism, and their late returns to the country of their birth. She also introduces MIRA, a new and publicly accessible online database that serves as an analytical tool to examine this group of more than 250 refugee rabbis in more detail and connect to available research materials about them.⁴

In ‘Starting Anew: German Rabbis and Their Experiences in Britain 1939–1956’, Astrid Zajdband explores how German rabbis fled to Britain, where their legal admission was facilitated by Joseph Hertz, the British Chief Rabbi and his Religious Emergency Council.⁵ More than a hundred of the refugees were saved by an emergency visa that allowed them to leave Germany instantly and liberate themselves from the concentration camps. This literally saved their lives. While some of them stayed in the United Kingdom, others relocated to the United States or were interned by the British Home Office to the dominions. Zajdband highlights the impact this rapidly growing refugee community had on Britain and British Jewry throughout the war, but concludes that this ‘modern’ German-speaking rabbinate could ultimately not survive among Anglo-Jews in the long run, and the founding of the Leo Baeck College only constituted an ethnic-religious enclave that corresponded in a limited fashion with its Anglo-Jewish and other European counterparts while maintaining a close relationship to the Hebrew Union College in the United States, which rose to be the intellectual centre for modern Judaism in the post-Holocaust world.⁶

While South America was an emigration destination for only a smaller number of German refugee rabbis, and these refugees did not find a similarly developed Jewish community in Brazil as they did in

the United States and Britain, individual refugee congregations, such as the Congregação Israelita Paulista (CIP) led by rabbi Fritz Pinkuss from Heidelberg, seriously impacted Brazilian society. The arrival of the refugees and the formation of their institutions stimulated emotional discourses on ‘self and other’, inclusion and exclusion, as well as the nature and goals of the new Brazilian nation. Björn Siegel highlights in his article, “‘We Were Refugees and Carried a Special Burden’: Emotions, Brazilian Politics and the German Jewish Émigré Circle in São Paulo, 1933–1957”, how Fritz Pinkuss, an experienced rabbi, developed the refugee congregation in São Paulo according to the model of the German *Einheitsgemeinde* in order to create a home for all Jewish refugees under its roof. Pinkuss was ultimately successful in easing the longings of his congregants for a world lost to them, and provided an answer to their fear of disintegration and exclusion in the congregation and the nation. In fact, his modern Judaism and a clear understanding that Jews should be part of non-Jewish society introduced a strategy that ultimately allowed his congregants to feel at home in this part of the new world.

Part of this exodus of the German synagogue was German synagogue music, an element that marked the style and aesthetics of modern German Jews and resonated strongly in its refugee communities. Judah Cohen’s examination of refugee musicologist Eric Werner in his “‘Fate Leads the Willing, and Drags the Unwilling’: Eric Werner, *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, and the Postwar Reconstruction of Jewish Music Study” reasons over the cultural displacement and difficulties Werner experienced at Hebrew Union College as a refugee musicologist. He explains how Werner tried to uphold and recreate the scholarly approach to synagogue music in which he continued to be at home even after flight and displacement, how he tried to maintain a network of like-minded colleagues who came from the very same tradition and how this affected the American cantorate.

The following articles explore the exile, the physical and intellectual displacement of this German-Jewish leadership and their emotional struggles in new environments, and underscore that their uniquely modern tradition provided them with a tool-kit for survival, and for building a special memory and legacy of a world that was lost to them. While they anticipated that they were the *last* of this modern German rabbinate, they experienced that their modern Judaism and identity were their true *Heimat*, which was portable and still resonated elsewhere. Committed to this identity and driven by the desire to break a path for their own social and professional integration, their progressive Jewish identity helped them to come to grips with their cultural displacement and the destruction of Europe’s Jewish community, their physical home.⁷

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Notes

1. Alexander Altmann, 'The German Rabbi', *LBIY* 19 (1974), 19; Alfred Jospe, 'A Profession in Transition: The German Rabbinate 1910–1939', *LBIY* 19 (1974), 51–61; Max Grünwald, 'The Modern Rabbi', *LBIY* 2 (1957), 85–97; see also Marsha Rozenblit, 'Jewish Identity and the Modern Rabbi: The Cases of Isak Noa Mannheimer, Adolf Jellinek and Moritz Güdemann', *LBIY* 35 (1990), 103–131.
2. See, for example, *An Autobiographical Sketch* by Leo Trepp: American Jewish Archives (hereinafter AJA), Small Collections (SC) 12426.
3. Jospe, 'A Profession in Transition'; Richard Fuchs, 'The "Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums" in the Period of Nazi Rule', *LBIY* 12 (1967), 3–31; Chana Schütz and Hermann Simon (eds), *Das Berliner Rabbinerseminar 1873–1938* (Berlin: Hentrich & Hentrich, 2008); Isi Jacob Eisner, 'The Berlin Rabbinical Seminary', *LBIY* 12 (1967), 32–52; Guido Kisch (ed.), *Das Breslauer Seminar Jüdisch-Theologisches Seminar (Fraenckelscher Stiftung) in Breslau 1854–1938* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1963).
4. See 'German Refugee Rabbis in the United States, 1933–1990', edited by Cornelia Wilhelm, <http://mira.geschichte.lmu.de/>.
5. Astrid Zajdband, *German Rabbis in British Exile*, Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter-Oldenbourg, 2016, 117–26.
6. Astrid Zajdband, *German Rabbis in British Exile, from 'Heimat' into the Unknown* (Boston: De Gruyter, 2016).
7. Celia Applegate, *A Nation of Provincials: The German Idea of Heimat* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); see also Max Beck and Nicholas Coomann (eds), *Historische Erfahrung und begriffliche Transformation: Deutschsprachige Philosophie im Exil in den USA 1933–1945* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2018); Hartmut Lehman and James Sheehan (eds), *An Interrupted Past: German-Speaking Refugee*

Historians in the United States after 1933 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Andreas Daum, Hartmut Lehman and James Sheehan (eds), *The Second Generation: Emigrés from Nazi Germany as Historians* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2016).