

# National Identity and Recovering Memories in Contemporary Germany

The Reception of Victor Klemperer's Diaries

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The overwhelming critical response in Germany to the publication of Victor Klemperer's journals, particularly those spanning the years from 1933 to 1945, has been a veritable sensation. Hundreds of reviews, mostly appreciations, have appeared. Klemperer's journals have also turned into big business. On October 12, 1999, the German television channel ARD began broadcasting a thirteen-episode series on the diaries in the most expensive, made-for-television program of its kind in Germany. Additionally, the English-language rights to the journals were sold to Random House for a record \$550,000, more than has ever been paid for translation rights of any German book in history. The selling of Klemperer's journals may have led to a distorted evaluation of their author's position and importance.

Now that all of the planned volumes have been published,<sup>1</sup> it is important to take stock of the reception these writings have received, not only because they have created a number of misunderstandings, but also because they have been incorporated anachronistically into the current discussion of Germany's national identity. It is helpful first to understand that Klemperer was hardly a representative figure in his own time (as most reviewers assume), and second, to appreciate that his study of Nazi rhetoric was linked in part to his inability to find his own voice. In this essay I will also assess the claim that he should be considered as the most representative chronicler of the Third Reich and examine how Klemperer's Jewish self-hatred now has reemerged as the "Ghost of Germanness Past" to feed Martin Walser's *Wunschdenken*, or wishful thinking, in the public discussion of contemporary

German identity. Walser's observations of Klemperer's memoirs are the logical continuation of his 1988 collection entitled *Nachdenken über Deutschland*.<sup>2</sup> Finally I will consider whether Klemperer's diaries should serve as an alternative to a Holocaust memorial.

## Klemperer: A Representative Figure?

A sketch of Klemperer's biography shows immediately that he was hardly representative among assimilated Jewish Germans. He was born in 1881 in Landsberg an der Warthe (Neumark)—also the birthplace of Christa Wolf—as the youngest child of the local rabbi, Dr. Wilhelm Klemperer. The family moved to Bromberg in 1884, where the father was extremely unhappy because his congregation was more Orthodox than he. In 1890 the family moved again, this time to Berlin, where the father became the second rabbi at the Reform Synagogue, a unique congregation in all of Germany, as Klemperer notes. A diffident pupil, Klemperer left the Gymnasium in Berlin, did a brief apprenticeship, and then returned to school in Landsberg to earn his Abitur in 1902. In 1902 and again in 1912 he converted to Protestantism in order to become in his own mind more German. He studied in Munich, Geneva, Paris, and Berlin, but broke off his planned dissertation on Voltaire in 1905. In 1906 he married his first wife, the pianist Eva Schlemmer. Until 1912 he worked as a journalist and publicist, in part for Jewish organizations. As shallow as much of his later scholarship is, Klemperer was undoubtedly a skillful writer. In 1912 he resumed his studies, rapidly completed a dissertation in German literature, and then quickly finished his *Habilitation* on Montesquieu in 1914. During the academic year 1914/15 he was a *Lektor* for German in Naples; from November 1915 to March 1916 he served as a volunteer on the front, and then until 1918 he worked as a censor for the German military government in Lithuania. From 1920 until 1935 he was Professor of Romance Philology at the Technical University of Dresden. During the 1920s he published numerous studies of modern French literature that earned him a modest reputation. In 1935 he was stripped of his professorship, which was restored to him in 1945. He remained in Germany during the entire period of the Third Reich, though the increasingly harsh restrictions that applied to

so-called privileged Jews (those married to non-Jewish partners) forced him ultimately to give up his house and move into various *Judenhäuser*, or segregated houses for Jews, in Dresden. From 1945 until his death in 1960, he was professor in Dresden, Greifswald, Halle, and Berlin. He was elected to the Academy of Sciences in Berlin and was awarded the National Prize of the GDR (third class). During his entire adult life he compulsively kept an extensive and highly personal diary that he claimed was not intended for publication but served to preserve his own mental sanity.

How does Klemperer compare to his contemporary Jewish Germans? After the military defeat of the Third Reich in May 1945, there were some 14,000 Jews—Jews in the sense of the Nuremberg racial laws—still living in Germany, the remnant of the 500,000 Jews that had lived in the Reich in 1933, of whom 125,000 were murdered. These individuals survived because they were married to non-Jewish Germans. Prior to 1933 Jewish Germans had been active across the entire political spectrum: whereas Friedrich Julius Stahl was the founder and leader of the Prussian and German Conservative Party, Ferdinand Lassalle and Karl Marx were prominent socialists.<sup>3</sup> By comparison, while heterogeneous in their religion, the “privileged” Jews remaining in Germany in 1945 were largely political conservatives and had once been fervent German patriots, or *deutschnational*. Most Jews who were Communists, Socialists, and Social Democrats had already left Germany within a few months after Hitler became chancellor and thus were hardly represented among these survivors. Klemperer was a fervent German patriot all his life, and without renouncing any of this patriotism he joined the German Communist Party in November 1945, a move entirely consistent with his fundamental assimilationist position. His turning anti-communist in his last years (his “opposition” was limited to diary entries on the “language of the Fourth Reich”) has been used as further support for arguments denying any legitimacy whatsoever to the defunct German Democratic Republic.

Klemperer is an extreme case in his fervent adherence to things German and in his rejection of all things Jewish. Unlike Klemperer, prior to 1933 the majority of Jewish Germans as represented in the Central Association of German Citizens of the Jewish Faith did not see being Jewish and being German as mutually exclusive. Klem-

perer, as entries from his journals reveal, was sensitive to the increase in antisemitism during the 1920s and 1930s, but he still firmly maintained his adherence to a purely German identity.

It is necessary to repeat these well-known facts for three reasons that have escaped most contemporary German observers. First, Jewish life in Germany prior to 1933 exhibited an enormous variety not captured in Klemperer's journals. Second, his diaries represent a single but hardly representative example of the many kinds of Jewish memoirs of the Shoah. Third, Klemperer's recurrent musings on German identity depend on his rejection of all things Jewish, of any possibility of a Jewish-German symbiosis, and create the central dilemma of his journals: that he is more concerned with analyzing the faulty sense of German identity held by the Nazis rather than with defining in a positive way what his own German identity is. A recent essay by Paola Traverso marks the first objective and pioneering attempt to show how German observers have frequently abused Klemperer's works.<sup>4</sup> Whereas Traverso speaks of the "double impossibility [for Klemperer] of being Jewish and German," I believe his overweening desire to be German continued after the Shoah, an event to which he devotes shockingly little space.

## Recording the Voice of the Persecutor

In Klemperer's 1947 study of the language of the Third Reich—*LTI*, or "Lingua Tertii Imperii" (language of the Third Reich)—he explained that writing his diaries had kept him sane during the twelve years of Nazism: "In those years my diary was again and again my balancing rod without which I would have crashed a hundred times ... Even if I had the intention of publishing the whole diary of this time with all its everyday experiences, which is not the case, I would give it this emblem [*LTI*] as its title."<sup>5</sup> Much of the diaries are notes on the peculiar vocabulary of Hitler's dictatorship, recorded as only a student of stylistics in the Romance languages could. The published journals are selections from the rough version of his diaries (with, unfortunately, no indication as to the content of the passages not chosen for publication). There is a clear difference between the first two volumes of his

memoirs, called *Curriculum Vitae*, written with the benefit of hindsight, and the unedited jottings reproduced in subsequent volumes.

As interesting as *LTI* is in recording Nazi lexical usage, it is hardly, as many of Klemperer's reviewers believe, a defense and illustration of the language of Goethe and Schiller under Nazi onslaught written by a linguistic purist. The work reflects Klemperer's typical passivity: he did not react to his persecution by seeking his own voice, his own language, as it were, but by recording, in something of an exercise of *Besserwisserei*, Nazi rhetoric. Its general thesis is that, on the basis of their linguistic usage, the Nazis were "un-German," thus the attraction of these journals for some contemporaries like Walser, who would prefer to "look away" from the allegedly constant parading of scenes from the concentration camps in the German media. The one notable exception to Klemperer's equation that the Nazis were un-German (which contemporary critics seem either to ignore or to be unaware of) comes in an entry full of self-reproach from June 23, 1942: "I can no longer believe in the entirely un-German essence of Nazism: it is a native German plant, a tumor of *German* flesh, a variety of cancer, just like the *Spanish* influenza."<sup>6</sup> Therefore, when one reads *LTI* in the context of the journals' larger preoccupation with German identity, it becomes clear that Klemperer preferred to study the voice of the persecutor rather than to find his own voice. He consistently took shelter in a self-delusionary and obsessive phantasm of Germanness.

By comparison, while the persecuted Jews of Europe spoke with many voices prior to 1933, in general they spoke with a single voice after 1945 as the *She'erith Hapletah* (Hebrew for "the saving or saved remnant"), as the relevant scholarship on the question has shown.<sup>7</sup> The overwhelming response of these survivors was to find their own voice, especially as a response to the silence imposed on them by their persecutors, a silence often synonymous with their status as victims. Lawrence Langer has noted the double structure of Holocaust testimonials, particularly oral ones: a public memory that is in many ways idealistic and consoling that covers private memory in which pain and grief remain inconsolable. Klemperer's journals, while private, seek consolation in an ideal of German identity that springs from Wilhelmine politics, and they record principally his pain and grief at being excluded from being German.

Klemperer's experiences were horrible, but he survived as a "privileged" Jew whereas most Jews did not. Not only are the journals being used to reauthenticate a contemporary notion of Germany, they are also being presented as the very epitome of authentic testimony, a kind of "authentic testimony" of "Jewish life in the Third Reich." I have often heard Germans over seventy say, "So that was what life was like in the Judenhäuser ..." and then list with perfect recall the addresses of the Judenhäuser in their respective cities, as though the existence of such houses as sites of Jewish life were somehow more important than the concentration camps as sites of Jewish death. There was no Jewish life in Hitler's Germany as there had been in Imperial Germany or in Weimar; there was only Jewish survival. The attempt to see Klemperer's memoirs (especially with their repeated professions of loyalty to "Germanness") in such terms is delusionary or reprehensible or both. One might recall the conclusions of Marion A. Kaplan in *Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Life in Nazi Germany* (234): "Jewish victims' accounts belie the conclusions of German historians who have failed to find antisemitism in their sources." When Kaplan notes that Jewish women "maintained their dignity amid their despair by remembering who they really were, not who their enemies said they were" (236), she accurately situates the problem in Klemperer's memoirs: in his hatred of his Jewish origins and in his exaggerated and ultimately pathological attempt to be more German than the Germans, one sees that he really did not know who he was. When Klemperer sought to maintain his dignity amid his despair, he did so by appealing to a vague notion of German identity. Typically, German reviewers have welcomed Klemperer's reflections on German identity but passed over in silence his anti-Judaism and his anti-Zionism, as though the former were independent of the latter.

## **Klemperer as the Chronicler of the Third Reich?**

Some reviewers would even like to make Klemperer *the* chronicler of the Third Reich, as the authors of the collective volume of essays published by the influential Hamburg Institut für Sozialforschung. By the same token, Ulrich Baron, writing in *Der Rheinische Merkur* on

December 15, 1996, noted, “one will hardly find a work that so comprehensively, so impressively, so clearly and so understandably illuminates Jewish (and not only Jewish) everyday life as this diary of a German cultural patriot.”<sup>8</sup> These two examples from the opposite sides of the political spectrum show how German readers nowadays identify with the victims rather than the perpetrators, which makes it easy to avoid asking difficult questions about how the Holocaust arose in the first place.

It is crucial not to attribute to Klemperer knowledge, particularly about the extent of the Holocaust, that he did not have and could not have had, and thus to use his very limited and personal observations either to validate or to discredit Daniel Goldhagen’s work. *Der Spiegel* and other journals selectively cite Klemperer’s journals to show that the Germans were really not all “that” antisemitic (whereby these reviewers beg the question, exactly how “antisemitic” must a country be to murder its Jews), not all that “willing” in their role as Hitler’s executioners (again, exactly how “willing” must individuals be to kill?). Writing in the *Berliner Zeitung*, Susanne Helm pointedly noted: “The longer the success story [of Klemperer’s diaries] lasts, the stronger the suspicion becomes that the German public loves Klemperer so much because his judgment of the Germans and their responsibility for Nazi crimes turns out to be incomparably milder than that of Daniel Goldhagen.”<sup>9</sup> Individual critics in Germany have been quick to point out that the record Klemperer gives of expressions of solidarity from individuals toward Jews wearing the Star of David “demonstrates” that antisemitism was in fact not all that widespread among the working classes, and thus by extension “disproves” Goldhagen’s thesis that eliminatory antisemitism was rampant in Germany.<sup>10</sup> This argument not only massively overstates the evidence from Klemperer but also misses the point that occasional individual displays of solidarity with persecuted Jews hardly cancels out what was done to them. This is true even though Klemperer wrote on March 27, 1937: “[I]n political affairs I am gradually giving up hope: Hitler is indeed the Chosen One of his people. I do not think that he is weakening in the least, I think gradually that his regime can hold out for decades still. There is so much lethargy and immorality and above all stupidity in the German people.”<sup>11</sup>

The current effort to turn Klemperer into the chronicler of the Third Reich ignores a similar phenomenon from nearly forty years ago to do the same thing with the writings of Percy Ernst Schramm, the famous medieval historian from Göttingen. Beginning in 1943 Schramm was the official historian of the General Staff of the Wehrmacht and spent several months in Hitler's company, often at the Wolfschanze. In 1963 he published his journals from this period, taking the position of the medieval chronicler Einhard to Hitler's Charlemagne.<sup>12</sup> Schramm's memoirs are undeniably important as a view from the top, illustrative of a kind of diplomatic history, just as Klemperer's journals are invaluable as a document of *Alltagsgeschichte*. Besides Schramm's memoirs, one should recall that Albert Speer's *Erinnerungen* (1969) and *Spandauer Tagebücher* (1975) were also once taken as "the" chronicle of the Third Reich. The point is that there can be no single chronicler of the Third Reich, but that the need to find such a chronicler is symptomatic of how many questions still remain unresolved. Schramm's work reflected the ambivalence of the early 1960s, completely consistent with the the Allies' collaboration with former Nazis during the cold war; Speer's memoirs weave together a history of individual ambition, helplessness, and self-inculcation—a picture of the human dimensions of the Nazi leadership that fit public taste in the late 1960s and 1970s; and now Klemperer's journals appeal to a postmodernist taste for deconstructing all historical events into the myriad mass of quotidian anecdotes, as well as to the culture of victimization.

Reviewers have largely failed to contextualize Klemperer within a far vaster body of contemporary Holocaust testimonies, not to mention the various video archives of Shoah survivors. Klemperer's journals have even diverted attention away from a more balanced evaluation of Holocaust memoirs. For example, while Emmanuel Ringelbaum's diary of the Warsaw ghetto is available in German translation, it is not widely known. The so-called *Stroop-Bericht* on the destruction of the Warsaw ghetto is available in German only in a facsimile edition printed in Poland over thirty-five years ago. The memorial books of Polish Jews (*yizker-bikher*) have not been translated into German and remain virtually unknown. I would also signal the recent publication of the first, immediate records of Holocaust survivors told in interviews from 1945 and 1946 in *Fresh Wounds*,

*Early Narratives of Holocaust Survival*, edited by Donald L. Niewyk. David H. Hirsch of Brown University has informed me of the existence of unpublished materials in Polish Government archives of audio interviews conducted with children survivors immediately after the war, the so-called Borwicz Testimonies. The extreme commercialization of Klemperer's diaries has eclipsed these other historical documents that, when taken together as a collective record, merit the same if not more scrutiny. Understanding the Shoah as an individual experience is a useful exercise in closing the historical distance to this terrible event, as the practice of issuing tickets with the names of individual victims at the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. attempts to demonstrate. But in trying to understand the Shoah, one must grasp both individual and collective experiences. The danger comes when personal history is mistaken for collective and/or national history: Klemperer's narrative is one among many histories and cannot stand for the rest. Its commercialization risks creating the impression that his experiences were typical.

At the same time, German reviewers, with a few notable exceptions, have avoided completely the issue of Klemperer's own Jewish self-hatred. The experiences of Primo Levi and Jean Améry who entered the death camps barely conscious of themselves as Jews but left them both self-conscious and proud of their Jewish heritage are the absolute opposite of Klemperer's experience. As his early diaries show, he was deeply ashamed of his Jewish origins from the beginning and remained so after 1945. His diaries lack any contemporary expression of solidarity with the victims of the death camps—as if to make up for this lack, the editors of the journals published a letter that Klemperer wrote in 1947 that speaks of the murder of the Jews.

Although Klemperer in October 1944 recorded rumors that six to seven million Jews had been murdered by the Nazis, he spent virtually no time reflecting on the dimensions of this catastrophe but continued to record the daily toll of indignities that he personally suffered. Early on April 19, 1942, he recorded dutifully but without comment the rumors about the massacre of Kiev's Jews at Babi Yar. First he wrote about the man who told his wife about it over a glass of beer, and then he noted that the same man reported that the Dutch are very hostile to the Germans ("you can't even get a glass of

water”). Just a few paragraphs later in the same entry Klemperer also wrote that there were English bombers over Germany every day:

At the streetcar stop the carpenter Lange (in his private’s uniform) spoke to Eva. She went into a restaurant with him and he chatted over a glass of beer. He had been a driver in a police unit for several months in the winter (until Christmas) in Russia. Horrible mass murder of Jews in Kiev. Small children smashed head-first on walls; men, women, adolescents in the thousands shot dead in a pile, a hill blown up and the mass of corpses buried under the exploding soil. . . . Every day (and not only nights any more) English bombers over Germany. I was very sorry in these days about the beauty of Lübeck. It seemed that an act of English revenge was behind it—nothing but the destruction of art.<sup>13</sup>

Klemperer’s wife had even heard, he wrote, that hundreds, maybe thousands of civilians lay trapped under the ruins and that some 40,000 people were now homeless. The destruction of Lübeck’s art works and the plight of the homeless there elicited more comment from Klemperer than the slaughter at Babi Yar.

### **Klemperer’s Jewish Self-Hatred, the Ghost of Germanness Past, and Martin Walser’s Contemporary *Wunschdenken***

That Klemperer’s celebration of a German identity always comes at the expense of his rejection of Jewish origins must be stressed, especially because one prominent proponent of Klemperer, the novelist Martin Walser, wants to revive Klemperer’s pride in things German for contemporary Germany, claiming that the German-Jewish symbiosis did not have to end in Auschwitz, especially since Germany now has a Jewish population of nearly 100,000. (Walser’s statements were made in 1996 when he delivered the laudation at the posthumous awarding of Klemperer with the Geschwister Scholl prize of the city of Munich, and in October 1998 at the Frankfurt Paulskirche when he himself received the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade.) Walser seems to be referring to Martin Buber’s famous 1939 essay on the end of the German-Jewish symbiosis,<sup>14</sup> though he appears unaware of the history of the polemic that began with Hermann Cohen’s 1915 essay “Deutschtum und Judentum” (“German-

ness and Jewishness”). Whether this alleged symbiosis had to end in Auschwitz is a moot point: the fact is that it did.

Writing in the *New York Times Magazine* on March 24, 1996, Amos Elon called Klemperer “the Jew who wanted to be a German,” thus capturing Klemperer’s dilemma: that being German meant no longer being Jewish. Elon diplomatically avoids mentioning the overweening sense of Jewish self-hatred that fills Klemperer’s diaries, an aspect that German reviewers have ignored, thus completely missing that Klemperer’s repeated celebrations of Germanness, which they uniformly welcome, all come at the expense of his rejection of being Jewish. Conveniently, Klemperer never really says what being German is except for *not* being Jewish, as for example, on May 11, 1942: “I am now fighting the hardest struggle for my Germanness. I must cling to this. I am German, the others are un-German, I must cling to this. The spirit decides, not the blood. I must cling to this: Zionism would be a comedy on my part—my baptism was *not* a comedy.” He echoes the thought on May 30, 1942: “I am German and am waiting for the Germans to come back, they have gone underground somewhere.”<sup>15</sup> Klemperer’s obsessive clinging to a German identity whose content remains undefined has a striking attractiveness in contemporary Germany where there is no clearly defined, positive sense of what being German is.<sup>16</sup> Taken as a document of their time, Klemperer’s journals are instructive and insightful; taken as a guideline for the present, they are catastrophic.

Walser in his acceptance speech for the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade connects his own efforts to trace the fate of Klemperer’s family from their eastern European Jewish origins (*Ostjudentum*) to his own (Walser’s) need to look away, to turn away from pictures of concentration camps, from reminders of Germany’s national shame. He naively yearns for normality (without asking critically what “normality” really means), and although he condemns the instrumentalization of Auschwitz for the present, he has no problems of his own instrumentalization of Klemperer’s journals for his own notion of Germany’s identity in the present.

Walser has read Klemperer too quickly and confused Klemperer’s attitude with that of the Central Association of German Citizens of the Jewish Faith. If anything, Klemperer himself was a virulent critic of the adherents of this symbiosis among his contemporaries, the

very symbiosis Walser thinks he can revive. Ernst Toller's 1934 observations are representative of the situation—in any event irretrievable for the present—rejected by Klemperer:

I thought of my terrible joy when I realized that nobody would recognize me as a Jew: of the first day of the war and my passionate longing to prove that I was a real German by offering my life to my country; of my writing from the front to the authorities to say that they could strike my name from the list of the Jewish community. Had it all been for nothing? Had it all been wrong? Didn't I love Germany with all my heart? Had I not stood in the rich beauty of the Mediterranean landscape and longed for the austere pine woods, for the beauty of the still, secret lakes of north Germany? And wasn't the German language my language in which I felt and thought and spoke, a part of my very being? But wasn't I also a Jew? A member of that great race that for centuries had been persecuted, harried, martyred and slain; whose prophets had called the world to righteousness, had exalted the wretched and the oppressed, then and for all time.... I had denied my own mother, and I was ashamed. It is an indictment of society at large that a child should have thus been driven to deception. How much of me was German, how much Jewish? Must I then join the ranks of the bigoted and glorify my Jewish blood now, not my German? Pride and love are not the same thing, and if I were asked where I belonged I should answer that a Jewish mother had borne me, that German had nourished me, that Europe had formed me, that my home was the earth and the world my fatherland.<sup>17</sup>

Toller's attitude is more honest than Klemperer's since he refuses to simplify the dilemma in which Jewish Germans found themselves. What Jewish Germans euphemistically called a symbiosis was at best a one-way street, as Gershon Scholem has observed.<sup>18</sup> Critics have been quick to point to Klemperer's comment in his *Curriculum Vitae* about his life in 1912: "Since my experiences in Vienna and Prague I was no longer convinced that Jewishness and Germanness were compatible with one another. But if it was a question in the least of making a choice, then Germanness meant everything to me, Jewishness absolutely nothing."<sup>19</sup> The differences between Toller and Klemperer could not be greater, but Walser would posit Klemperer's categorical rejection of all things Jewish as the future model of German-Jewish relations.

Although Walser understands that Klemperer's rejection of Zionism is a function of his identification with German culture, he fails to diagnose Klemperer's blatant Jewish self-hatred, a phenomenon that

Theodore Lessing examined in *Der jüdische Selbsthaß* in 1930 and Sander Gilman in *Jewish Self-Hatred, Antisemitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews* in 1986. The context in which Walser pronounced his laudation of Klemperer in November 1995 is extremely complicated. He links Klemperer's diaries to the current discussion of erecting a central monument to the victims of the Holocaust in Berlin. Walser opposes this monument, in part because he is afraid that it would be a magnet for neo-Nazi desecration, the kind of publicity he says that Germany does not need. His being awarded the prestigious Peace Prize of the German Book Trade has only lent greater credibility to his position. In his acceptance speech, Walser protested against intellectuals trying to impose their sense of conscience on Germany (Thomas Mann, please take note). Intellectuals, Walser maintains, should keep quiet on such matters of conscience, whereupon *Die Zeit* noted pointedly that Walser would himself do well to keep quiet on these matters. As Thomas Assheuer wrote in *Die Zeit*, Walser's dream of normality is reserved for the German nation and not for its victims.

The core of Walser's interpretation of Klemperer is, as he himself admits, a form of wishful thinking that the alleged German-Jewish symbiosis of the past can be revived for the present and future in light of growing Jewish immigration to Germany from the former Soviet Union, as though contemporary Germany with its poor record on the assimilation of its Turkish minority will assimilate Russian Jews better. It is disturbing that Walser invokes a process of symbiosis that was problematic from the start and that, when applied to the integration of other minorities, continues to be problematic, not just in Germany, but in all of western Europe. (Perhaps Walser should take a look at W. Michael Blumenthal's *The Invisible Wall, Germans and Jews, A Personal Exploration*, for a survey of the problem as seen in the history of one family.) The assimilation of Germany's Jews took place in the context of nineteenth-century cultural nationalism, a process with little or no contemporary validity that smacks of a return to a notion of a national culture that has long since been abandoned. Walser's effort comes at a time when a united Germany hardly needs to dredge up such an ideal. His *Wunschdenken* is contained in the following question:

Did the German-Jewish symbiosis, under the conditions of normally developing civic and civilizational relationships, have to lead to nothing

but the worst catastrophe? Most certainly not. I usually have little occasion for this kind of wishful thinking, but Klemperer's writings, in which eight decades of this symbiosis are captured and recounted, force one into this wishful thinking after the fact. And I let myself be taken in this direction all too gladly. Much more than in that other direction that afterwards became reality. Whoever sees everything as the one way that could end only in Auschwitz turns the German-Jewish relationship into a catastrophe of fate under all circumstances. This seems absurd to me, apart from the fact that then there could be no German-Jewish flowering in the present and the future. The immigration statistics contradict this position. Germany is, even if the advocates of the ugly German do not want to admit it, a country of immigration, even for Jews.<sup>20</sup>

Apart from the fact that the twelve years of the Third Reich are hardly a positive moment in the eight decades of German-Jewish symbiosis idealized here, Walser's wishful thinking ignores rather drastically the contemporary marginalization of foreigners in mainstream German culture and institutions. Walser cites Klemperer's comments from June 19, 1942 on a fellow resident of the Judenhaus as an example of how Jewish Germans upheld German culture in the midst of their persecution: "Frau Hirschel's position: German, emphatically non-Zionist, emphatically aesthetic, Goethe-like German—'we shall save Goethe!'—but also, probably under the pressure of the times, emphatically devout, Jewish Orthodox."<sup>21</sup> Significantly, Walser misses Klemperer's implicit rejection of Frau Hirschel's adherence to Judaism. To invoke Klemperer's diaries in this contemporary German context is not just wishful thinking, it is self-delusion. Writing in *Die Zeit* on January 19, 1996, Dietrich Strothmann asked pointedly:

Was it really more important "to save Goethe" than to save Jewish lives in Auschwitz? Was it actually braver, "more German" to hold out as a Jew in the Germany of murderers (to be sure, with a "privileged" status) than to be a frightened refugee abroad? Isn't Celan's dictum, "Death is a master from Germany" as valid as Klemperer's verdict that the "Nazis are un-German"? Mustn't one energetically answer Professor Klemperer that Zionists were not just other Nazis? Is German dreaming fundamentally worth more than German reality—a dream in Dresden more than the reality of dying in the gas chamber?<sup>22</sup>

## **Klemperer's Diaries as an Alternative to a Holocaust Memorial**

One of the extraordinary features of Walser's reception of Klemperer is that he sees Klemperer's diaries as a viable alternative to the creation in Berlin of a central monument to the victims of the Holocaust. He argues:

From Victor Klemperer one can learn how to deal with one's own conscience instead of checking up on the conscience of others. Whoever has gone through the Klemperer school of precision will feel sorry for those who make it their life mission to set up a visible monument for the victims of Nazi terror. Can there be a more pronounced contrast as that between the view that the extent of the horror must correspond with gigantic dimensions and the irresistible precision of the moments of horror captured in language? ... It would make sense that Klemperer be present everywhere, that he become an important source of information for this period of German history. I know of no communicative form that can make the reality of the Nazi dictatorship more comprehensible than the Klemperer's prose does.<sup>23</sup>

Walser has again read too quickly. He ignores the fundamental intolerance in Klemperer's position. Klemperer solemnly declares his religious principles to be those of Lessing: "I would always love Lessing's Protestantism as the purest and most German, truly as my own religious belief; but this was freedom of thought and of conscience, this had nothing in common with dogmatic Christianity."<sup>24</sup> This lip service to tolerance is fine in theory, but when it comes to practice, Klemperer is anything but tolerant. Where, for example, is Klemperer's tolerance of Orthodox Jews whom he sees in a Talmud school in Vilna in 1918? Klemperer narrates the encounter near the end of volume two of *Curriculum Vitae* in a passage composed in 1941 whose importance he even comments upon in his journal.<sup>25</sup> In the midst of his own persecution by the Nazis as a Jew, he describes the famous rabbinical school in Vilna where his own father had studied.

Vilna was a university until 1832, and the large university library was still here, I think, in the bishop's palace with its magnificent Italian courtyards ... I knew the details of Vilna's cultural offerings from pictures and I found the total effect very beautiful and very dignified. But then we went across the courtyard into the Talmud school and this repelled me like a fist. I saw three rooms of different size, one was a dark chamber, one a brighter and more spacious room, one a bright and wide salon, but the scenery and the play action was alike. Tables, banks and prayer-stands were scattered arbitrarily throughout the space, and they appeared to swim in the human waves like pieces of furniture torn away by a flood. Books lay piled in a corner, only the

Torah scrolls had an assigned place in a wall niche covered with a curtain.... On one table an old man and young boy stood in front of a Torah scroll that had been rolled open. The man read a passage loudly and quickly, and the boy sang with a high voice, gargling, warbling, snuffling long bits in a certain melody. From time to time the old man corrected a single word. A bunched group raced past them, the Torah, being carried back to its place, formed the center of action and everyone was trying to kiss it. Three men bowed over a book and barked back and forth. A group in prayer was chanting out loud with their upper bodies swaying rhythmically. Two men with white beards rolled closed a Torah scroll, the one rolled it up, the other covered it in its envelope. Individuals in prayer, in the middle of the room, chanted so passionately from their prayer-stands that the swaying of their bodies turned into a cramped shaking and twitching. Beermann strode the room with apparent satisfaction. At one time he stepped up to a table and read a passage outloud. A few times he pointed out the most devoted faces to me: "Isn't that devotion?" he asked. I nodded, I could not tell him that what he admired as devotion appeared to me to be repulsive fanaticism.... when we were standing back in the courtyard, I started to breathe as though I had been swimming under water. No, I didn't belong to these people, even if you could prove a blood relationship a hundred times. I didn't belong to them, even though my own father had studied here. I belonged to Europe, to Germany, I was nothing but a German, and I thanked my creator that I was German. No, not as a student in Geneva and Paris, not among Zionist students in Prague, not in Kovno, not even here in the Vilna ghetto had I felt this as strongly as during this half hour in the Talmud school. For a time I had had enough of the east, at least enough of every kind of religious ecstasy, of churches, mosques and synagogues.<sup>26</sup>

Leaving aside Klemperer's recurrent equation of Zionism and Nazism, we see in this example how Klemperer subscribes wholeheartedly to a range of antisemitic stereotypes that could have sprung from the pages of *Der Stürmer* or *Der Völkische Beobachter*: Jewish fanaticism, its "Oriental" origins as a basis for its estrangement from Europe, the contrast between the Italianate architecture of the university library compared to the chaos and disorder of the Talmud school. Not only does this description not correspond to Klemperer's self-proclaimed adherence to Lessing's ideal of religious tolerance, but it also reveals an overwhelming insensitivity to the contemporary plight of the very Jews he was describing, since he is rewriting this scene from his original diary notes during 1941, just as Jews were being herded into ghettos across Nazi-occupied Europe. And Klemperer was prepared in fact to blame the influx of eastern European Jews for the persecution of all Jews by the Nazis: on July 5, 1942 he writes of a fellow

member of the Judenhaus: “[Dr. Katz] speaks in a very melancholy way about his failed view of life; he considers assimilation, without which he cannot exist, definitively impossible. He assigns a lot of blame—and we are of one mind here—to Zionism and a lot of blame as well to the unimpeded influx of purely money-hungry Jews from eastern Europe.”<sup>27</sup> And this is the Klemperer whose writings should replace a Holocaust memorial.

The Germany to which Klemperer felt drawn is hardly the same Germany at the end of the century, a Germany striving for transparency in all of its institutions. In his reflections on being German, Klemperer’s jottings (not necessarily Klemperer the scholar or Klemperer the man) are marvelously naive and simplistic, as is apparent in the passing remarks that Hitler’s speeches could be lifted from the pages of Rousseau and that Nazism and Zionism are both racist. In his political naiveté Klemperer is notably free of the burden of German history. Not only does Klemperer offer German readers a version of the murder of the Jews that amounts to “Holocaust light,” but the unproblematic nature of his allegiance to “Germanness” also amounts to an homogenized version of “Germanness light.”

## Notes

This essay represents a revised form of lectures held at Vassar College and Princeton University in November 1998. I wish to express my thanks to Aufbau Verlag for their help in identifying important reviews of Klemperer’s work. I also have profited greatly from discussions with my Wuppertal colleagues Hans-Heinrich Baumann and Paola Traverso.

1. *Curriculum Vitae, Erinnerungen 1881-1918*, 2 vols. (Berlin, 1996; originally published in 1989), vol. 2 [cited here as Curr. vit. I or II]; *Leben sammeln, nicht fragen wozu und warum, Tagebücher 1918-1932*, 2 vols. (Berlin, 1996), vol. 2; *Ich will Zeugnis ablegen bis zum letzten, Tagebücher 1933-1945*, 2 vols. (Berlin, 1995), [volumes cited here as Zeugnis I or II]; *So sitze ich denn zwischen allen Stühlen, Tagebücher 1945-1959*, 2 vols. (Berlin, 1999), vol. 2.
2. For an insightful analysis of Walser’s earlier pronouncements on German identity, see Peter Morgan, “A presence ... called Germany: Personal History in the

- Construction of National Identity by Post-War German Intellectuals: Three Case-Studies,” *Journal of European Studies* 26 (1996): 239-66.
3. Erich von Kahler, *The Jews among the Nations* (New York, 1967), 104-8.
  4. Paola Traverso, “Victor Klemperers Deutschlandbild—ein jüdisches Tagebuch,” *Tel Aviver Jahrbuch für deutsche Geschichte* 26 (1997): 307-44. Traverso has astutely argued that many contemporary Germans see Klemperer as the epitome of Germanness and the Nazis as essentially un-German—thus reversing the Nazis’ claim that Jews were un-German and that the Nazis best represented Germanness, and also allowing contemporary Germans to write the Nazis out of German history as being un-German. Traverso’s critical and densely documented study contrasts with the collection of appreciative articles in the journal *Lendemains* 82/83 (1996).
  5. *LTI, Notizbuch eines Philologen* (Leipzig, 1947, 1996), 17-18: “Mein Tagebuch war in diesen Jahren immer wieder meine Balancierstange, ohne die ich hunderte Male abgestürzt wäre.... Selbst wenn ich, was nicht der Fall ist, die Absicht hätte, das ganze Tagebuch dieser Zeit mit all seinen Alltagserlebnissen zu veröffentlichen, würde ich ihm dieses Signum [LTI] zum Titel geben.”
  6. *Zeugnis* II (see note 1), 140: “An das ganz undeutsche Wesen des Nationalsozialismus kann ich nicht mehr glauben; er ist ein deutsches Eigengewächs, ein Karzinom aus deutschem Fleisch, eine Spielart des Krebses, wie es eine spanische Grippe gibt.” For a wider survey of Nazi linguistic use, see Gerhard Bauer, *Sprache und Sprachlosigkeit im “Dritten Reich”* (Cologne, 1988).
  7. Abraham Peck, “‘Our Eyes Have Seen Eternity’: Memory and Self-Identity among the *She’erith Hapleth*,” *Modern Judaism* 17 (1997): 57-74. For a more nuanced and detailed discussion of the problems here see: *She’erith Hapleth, 1944-1948, Rehabilitation and Political Struggle*, ed. Yisrael Gutman and Avital Saf (Jerusalem, 1990).
  8. “Man wird kaum ein Werk finden, das den jüdischen (und nicht allein den) Alltag im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland so umfassend, so eindrucksvoll, so klar und verständlich ausleuchtet wie dieses Tagebuch eines deutschen Kulturpatrioten.”
  9. Susanne Helm, “Die halbe Wahrheit, Victor Klemperer und der Sensationserfolg seiner Tagebücher,” *Berliner Zeitung* 30/31 August 1997: “Je länger die Erfolgsgeschichte [von Klemperers Tagebüchern] dauert, desto stärker meldet sich der Verdacht, daß das deutsche Publikum Klemperer so liebt, weil sein Urteil über die Deutschen und ihre Verantwortung für die NS-Verbrechen ungleich milder ausfällt als das von Daniel Goldhagen.”
  10. Kurt Pätzhold, “Unbekümmert um deutsche Zusammenhänge, Über die mißbräuchliche Verwendung von Klemperers Tagebüchern in der Goldhagen-Debatte,” *Junge Welt, Die Ostdeutsche Tageszeitung*, 13/14 July 1996. Observers from the former GDR are—hardly coincidentally—far more skeptical of Klemperer’s concept of Germanness than western critics.
  11. *Zeugnis* I (see note 1), 340: “in politicis gebe ich allmählich die Hoffnung auf; Hitler ist doch wohl der Erwählte seines Volkes. Ich glaube nicht, daß er im geringsten schwankt, ich glaube allmählich, daß sein Regime noch Jahrzehnte halten kann. Es ist im deutschen Volk soviel Lethargie und soviel Unsittlichkeit und vor allem soviel Dummheit.”
  12. Norman F. Cantor, *Inventing the Middle Ages, The Lives, Works, and Ideas of the Great Medievalists of the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1991), 94: “The treatment that Schramm accords to Hitler subtly parallels Einhard’s method of depicting

- Charlemagne—the same dispassionate perspective sprinkled with a few intimate details, the same ambivalence, the same kind of ultimately enigmatic picture.”
13. *Zeugnis II* (see note 1), 68-69: “Eva wurde an der Tramhaltestelle vom Zimmermann Lange (in Gefreitenuniform) angesprochen. Sie ging mit ihm in ein Lokal, und er erzählte bei einem Glase Bier. Er ist als Fahrer bei der Polizeitruppe mehrere Wintermonate (bis Weihnachten) in Rußland gewesen. Grauenhafte Massenmorde an Juden in Kiew. Kleine Kinder mit dem Kopf an die Wand gehauen, Männer, Frauen, Halbwüchsige zu Tausenden auf einem Haufen zusammengeschossen, ein Hügel gesprengt und die Leichenmasse unter der explodierenden Erde begraben ... Jeden Tag (nicht mehr nur nachts) englische Bombenflieger über Deutschland.... Es tat mir dieser Tage um die Schönheit Lübecks sehr leid.... Es schien ein englischer Racheakt vorzuliegen—nichts als Kunstvernichtung.”
  14. Reprinted in Martin Buber, *Der Jude und sein Judentum, Gesammelte Aufsätze und Reden*, 2nd ed. (Gerlingen, 1992), 629-32.
  15. *Zeugnis II* (see note 1), 83-84; “Den schwersten Kampf um mein Deutschtum kämpfe ich jetzt. Ich muß daran festhalten: Ich bin deutsch, die andern sind undeutsch; ich muß daran festhalten: Der Geist entscheidet, nicht das Blut. Ich muß daran festhalten: Komödie wäre von meiner Seite der Zionismus—die Taufe ist *nicht* Komödie gewesen”; and p. 105: “*Ich* bin deutsch und warte, daß die Deutschen zurückkommen; sie sind irgendwo untergetaucht.”
  16. The problems entailed in this process of identity-formation have been thoughtfully and concretely examined by A. James McAdams in his 1993 study, *Germany Divided, From the Wall to Reunification*. Charles S. Maier’s 1988 book, *The Unmasterable Past, History, Holocaust and German National Identity*, remains a useful albeit somewhat impressionistic introduction to the issue as well. Dan Diner’s essays, published in 1995 under the title *Kreisläufe, Nationalsozialismus und Gedächtnis* should also be mentioned in this context. With the parallel controversies arising from the unmasking of the double career of Hans Ernst Schneider, alias Hans Schwerte, and of Hans Robert Jauß in 1995, the discussion about German national identity shifted to a uncomfortable consideration of continuity between the Third Reich and Federal Republic, and Klemperer’s memoirs seemed to provide an antidote by showing that continuity perhaps was not such a bad thing after all.
  17. Ernst Toller, *I Was a German* (London, 1934), 280-82.
  18. Gershon Scholem, “Wider den Mythos vom deutsch-jüdischen ‘Gespräch’, und “Noch einmal: das deutsch-jüdische Gespräch,” in *Judaica II* (Frankfurt, 1970) and D. Bronsen, ed., *Jews and Germans from 1860 to 1933: The Problematic Symbiosis* (Heidelberg, 1979).
  19. *Curr. vit.* II (see note 1), 16: “ich hatte seit den Wiener und Prager Erfahrungen nicht mehr die feste Überzeugung, daß sich Judentum und Deutschtum unter allen Umständen miteinander vertragen könnten. Kam aber eine Wahl im geringsten in Betracht, so bedeutete mir das Deutschtum alles und das Judentum gar nichts.”
  20. Martin Walser, *Das Prinzip Genauigkeit, Laudatio auf Victor Klemperer* (Frankfurt, 1996), 34-35: “Hätte das deutsch-jüdische Zusammenleben unter zivilen und zivilisatorisch normal sich weiter entwickelnden Verhältnissen zu nichts als zur schlimmsten Katastrophe führen müssen? Ganz sicher nicht. Ich habe für diese Art Wunschdenken sonst wenig Gelegenheit, aber Klemperers Schriften, in

- denen acht Jahrzehnte dieses Zusammenlebens festgehalten und nacherzählt werden, zwingen einem dieses nachträgliche Wunschenken förmlich auf. Und ich überlasse mich ihm nur zu gern. Viel lieber als dem, was nachher Wirklichkeit wurde. Wer alles als einen Weg sieht, der nur in Auschwitz enden konnte, der macht aus dem deutsch-jüdischen Verhältnis eine Schicksalskatastrophe unter gar allen Umständen. Das kommt mir absurd vor. Abgesehen davon, daß es dann kein deutsch-jüdisches Gedeihen in Gegenwart und Zukunft gäbe. Dem widerspricht aber schon die Einwanderungsstatistik. Deutschland ist, auch wenn das die Verklärer des häßlichen Deutschen nicht wahrhaben, ein Einwanderungsland, auch für Juden."
21. *Zeugnis* II (see note 1), 135: "Stellung der Frau Hirschel: deutsch, betont nichtzionistisch, betont ästhetisch, goethedeutsch—'wir werden Goethe retten!'—, aber auch, wohl unter dem Druck der Zeit so geworden, betont gläubig, jüdisch orthodox."
  22. Dietrich Stothmann, "Ein Loblied mit falschen Tönen, Gedanken zu Martin Walsers Rede auf den Tagebuchschreiber Victor Klemperer," *Die Zeit*, 19 January 1996: "War es denn wirklich wichtiger, 'Goethe zu retten' als jüdisches Leben vor Auschwitz? ... War es ... tatsächlich tapferer, 'deutscher', als Jude im Deutschland der Mörder aus- und durchzuhalten (im Status des 'Priviligierten' wohlgemerkt) denn als angstvoller Flüchtling in der Fremde? Gilt Celans Diktum, 'Der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland' nicht soviel wie Klemperers Verdikt 'Die Nazis sind undeutsch'? Muß auch einem Professor Klemperer nicht entschieden entgegengehalten werden, daß Zionisten eben keine anderen Nazis gewesen sind? Gilt grundsätzlich deutscher Traum mehr als deutsche Wirklichkeit—ein Träumen in Dresden mehr als die Realität des Sterbens in der Gaskammer?"
  23. Walser, *Prinzip Genauigkeit*, 50-51: "Bei Victor Klemperer kann man lernen, mit dem eigenen Gewissen umzugehen, statt auf das der anderen aufzupassen. Wer die Klemperersche Schule der Genauigkeit durchläuft, wird Mitleid haben mit denen, die es sich zu Lebensaufgabe machen, den Opfern des NS-Terrors ein sichtbares Denkmal zu setzen. Kann es einen heftigeren Kontrast geben als den zwischen dem Glauben, daß dem Ausmaß des Grauens durch gigantische Dimensionen entsprochen werden müsse, und der unwiderstehlichen Genauigkeit dieser in der Sprache aufgehobenen Grauensmomente? ... Sinnvoll wäre, daß Klemperer überall gegenwärtig wäre, daß er zu einer wichtigen Auskunftsquelle über diese Epoche deutscher Geschichte werden würde. Ich kenne keine Mitteilungsart, die uns die Wirklichkeit der NS-Diktatur faßbarer machen kann, als es die Prosa Klemperers tut."
  24. *Curr. vit.* I (see note 1), 445: "Lessings Protestantismus würde ich immer als das Reinste und Deutsche lieben, wahrhaftig als meine eigene Konfession; aber das war Freiheit des Denkens und des Gewissens, das hatte mit dogmatischem Christentum nichts mehr gemeinsam."
  25. On May 27, 1941 he noted, "I am now working through the first reading of my journal pages from Vilna in November 1918. How much I have forgotten, how extremely important are the details of that time!" *Zeugnis* I (see note 1), 595. It will be interesting to see how the film version of Klemperer's diaries treats this crucial incident in Vilna.
  26. *Curr. vit.* I (see note 1), 685-7: "Wilna ... war bis 1832 Universität gewesen, die große Universitätsbibliothek befand sich noch hier, ich glaube, im bishöflichen Palais mit den prachtvollen italienischen Höfen ... ich kannte das einzelne ihrer

kultischen Ausstattung aus Abbildungen, ich fand die Gesamtwirkung sehr schön und sehr würdig. Aber dann gingen wir über den Hof in die Talmudschule, und sie stieß mich wie mit Fäusten zurück. Ich sah drei verschieden große Zimmer; eines war nur eine düstere Kammer, eines eine hellere geräumige Stube, eines licht und ausgedehnt, fast ein Saal, aber Szenerie und Schauspiel glichen sich durchweg. Tisch, Bank und Betpulte waren willkürlich in den Raum gestoßen, schienen im Menschengewoge zu schwimmen wie mitgerissene Möbelstücke in einem Hochwasser, Bücher lagen in einer Ecke wir gehäuft, nur die Thorarollen in der vorhangverschlossenen Wandnische hatten ihren festen Platz.... An einem Tisch standen ein alter Mann und ein Jungchen vor der geöffneten Thorarolle. Der Mann las laut und rasch einen Abschnitt, das Jungchen sang mit heller Stimme gurgelnd, trällernd, nälend in bestimmter Melodie lange Enden, von Zeit zu Zeit verbesserte der Alte ein einzelnes Wort. An ihnen vorüber jagte eine geknäuelte Gruppe, Mittelpunkt bildete die zurückgetragene Thora, jeder suchte sie zu küssen. Drei Männer bückten sich über ein Buch und redeten aufeinander ein. Eine Betergruppe psalmodierte, die Oberkörper rhythmisch schwingend. Zwei Weißbärtige schlossen eine Thora, der eine rollte sie, der andere streifte ihr die Hülle über. Einzelne Beter, mitten im Raum, psalmodierten vor ihren Pulten so leidenschaftlich, daß das Schwingen ihrer Körper zu krampfemg Schütteln und Zucken wurde. ... Beerman schritt mit offener Genugtuung durch die Zimmer. Einmal trat er an einen Tisch und las selbst mit lauter Stimme einen Abschnitt. Ein paarmal wies er mich freudig auf die eifervollsten Gesichter hin. 'Ist das nicht Inbrunst?' fragte er. Ich nickte, ich konnte ihm nicht sagen, daß mir als abstoßender Fanatismus erschien, was er als Inbrunst bewunderte. ... Als wir wieder auf dem Hof standen, atmete ich, als wäre ich unter Wasser geschwommen. Nein, ich gehörte nicht zu diesen Menschen, und wenn man mir hundertmal Blutsverwandschaft mit ihnen nachwies. Ich gehörte nicht zu ihnen und wenn noch mein eigener Vater hier gelernt hätte. Ich gehörte nach Europa, nach Deutschland, ich war nichts als Deutscher, und ich dankte meinem Schöpfer, Deutscher zu sein. Nein, nicht als Student in Genf und Paris, nicht unter den zionistischen Kommilitonen in Prag, nicht in Kowno, nicht einmal hier im Wilnaer Ghetto hatte ich das so stark gefühlt wie während dieser halben Stunde in der Talmudschule. Für eine Weile hatte ich vom Osten genug, jedenfalls genug von aller Art religiöser Ekstase, von Kirchen, Moscheen und Synagogen."

27. *Zeugnis II* (see note 1), 157: "[Dr. Katz] spricht sehr melancholisch von seiner gescheiterten Lebensanschauung; er hält die Assimilation, ohne die er nicht sein kann, für endgiltig unmöglich. Er gibt—und darin gehen wir zusammen—dem Zionismus viel Schuld; viel Schuld auch dem ungehinderten Zustrom des bloß geldsüchtigen Ostjudentums."