With your permission, I will preface my remarks with two comments. I agreed to the request of my friend, Professor Yisrael Gutman, to lecture on the inter-war period in order to give some tangible illustration to the theme of the conference discussions. I was ten years old when World War I began, [and although I perhaps did not grasp the full import of these events, the tumultuous atmosphere and emotional scenes of farewell impressed me greatly. The timing of these events had a peculiarly Jewish significance, one that deeply etched itself on my memory. That particular Sabbath was Sabbath Hazon, shortly before the Ninth of Av. . . . In the meanwhile Father was taken off to the army, and he was not granted leave in honor of my Bar Mitzvah some three years later. Recollections, bearing the imprint of subjectivity, can help us explore historical events, but augment the historian's craft only as a spice can enhance food. The historian must base the essence of his remarks on contemplation of historical events and sustained historical processes. I have allowed myself to expand the theme to include remarks on what preceded the First World War, since one can assess the events that followed only by creating an analogy — a comparison.

This leads me to my second, methodological, comment. Any historical research on European Jewry, even if several generations removed from the Holocaust, is by necessity influenced by the tragic demise of European Jewry during the Holocaust. However, when we contemplate the lives of previous

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1 The late Professor Jacob Katz delivered these remarks on March 6, 1989, in the keynote lecture at the conference "European Jewry in View of Fascism and National Socialism, 1933-1939," held at Yad Vashem. The conference proceedings were not published, and Professor Katz passed away before he could rework the text for publication. We present his remarks here after light editing.

2 The author's remarks were inaudible on the recording; the editors completed them in accordance with similar comments that he published at that time. See Jacob Katz, With My Own Eyes; The Autobiography of an Historian (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 1995) (Hebrew original, 1989), pp. 19-20, 25; idem, "The Frankfort Yeshiva and Beit Breuer in the Eyes of a Hungarian Emigré Pupil," in Rivka Horowitz, ed., Isaac Breuer, Studies in His Teachings (Hebrew) (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1988).
generations, we must disregard subsequent events and reconstruct the climate of the period that concerns us. Every generation knows only whence it came; no generation knows where it is heading. Every generation experiences its life, its aspirations and achievements, its joys and hardships. By comparing its events with those that preceded them, one does not modify one’s reading of its situation. The historian can also perform the comparison with subsequent developments, but he is not allowed to project his knowledge onto the consciousness of contemporaries who knew nothing about the future. Applying this rule to the subject at hand, we must state that even if the Holocaust dwarfs the agonies and hardships experienced by those who lived during and shortly after World War I, those terrible years sufficed to drive members of that very generation to harbor messianic thoughts, just as members of the Holocaust generation did. However, the Messiah tarried then, just as he did afterward.

I believe it proper to conclude these introductory remarks with a transition from the eve of World War I, as one phase in the history of European Jewry, to the next phase.

I wish to devote a very few words to the period preceding World War I. In terms of European Jewish history, this period should be divided into two blocs. One pertains to Jews who had already been emancipated; the other deals with those not so privileged. In geographical terms, the seam runs between Russia and Rumania. Although Rumanian Jewry was granted emancipation, this was on paper only, of course. Therefore, Rumania and Russia belong to one domain. Western Jewry — from France to Hungary — had already been emancipated and belonged to another domain, so to speak. However, the fate of the two groups should be connected, since even the emancipation approved for the Jews was not total, foremost because it did not embrace all the other countries.

When emancipation was granted, both Jews and non-Jews believed this was the beginning of a process that would spread to all other countries. They expected Russia, Rumania, and perhaps, later on, other East European countries to follow Western Europe’s lead. Why? Because they aimed to prevent the emancipation countries from being inundated by emigrés from
Eastern Europe. To keep the Jews rooted in their places of residence, each
country had to integrate its own Jews; thus, world Jewry would ultimately
disintegrate. Accordingly, each country would content itself with only such
Jews as resided within its confines and would not have to admit additional
Jews. Since such a process did not occur, the results of the emancipation
became the subject of growing disillusion.

There is no doubt whatsoever that the antisemitic awakening should be
regarded as a response to the limited integration of Jews in the countries that
emancipated them. Nevertheless, shortly before World War I, an equilibrium
of sorts became visible. Antisemitism, as first manifested in the 1870s and the
1880s, did not attain its goal in the countries where emancipation had already
been granted: the rights of the Jews had been scaled down but not officially
annulled. Jews and non-Jews adjusted to this situation and did not expect
matters to become messier. In contrast, the situation in Russia and Rumania,
where emancipation had made no inroads whatsoever, was unstable — not
only in respect to the condition of the Jews but also with regard to the
foundations of the state, especially in Russia. Jews took part in the
revolutionary underground in Russia, as we know, but relative calm prevailed
there before World War I.

World War I overturned all the conventions and norms. It took by surprise
even those who were directly involved in its eruption — leaders on all sides of
the conflict—and a fortiori the population that endured its hardships and
results. The latter included almost all European Jews, especially those who
dwelled in the theater of the fighting: historical Poland, parts of Austria, and, in
the main, parts of Russia. When the Russians invaded Galicia, the shtetl Jews
fled en masse from the terror of the Russian occupiers, with the consent, if not
the encouragement, of the Austrian and Hungarian authorities. I still have
childhood memories of dozens of Jewish families, in the traditional garb of
Galician Hasidim, who materialized in our little village one day out of the blue.
We had never witnessed such a spectacle. Hardly any of us could understand
the Yiddish that these exiles spoke. The Russians terrified the Jews of Galicia,
who, for good reason, suspected that the occupiers would apply strictures and
perpetrate pogroms. Thus, it is no wonder that escape was a mass phenomenon.

The German army was considered more disciplined and humane at that time, but it also caused much suffering as it advanced and occupied Jewish-populated districts in Russia. East European Jewry suffered its gravest agony in the last period of the war, after the Czar fell and the Pale of Settlement changed hands. It was, of course, a time of such pogroms — especially in the Ukraine — that the Jews likened it to the period of the massacres of 1648-1649 and were as terror-stricken as Jews had been then. Widows and orphans did not know what became of their loved ones; the wave of rioting claimed tens of thousands of casualties.

The historical experience shows that such spates of violence are overcome if they are an interim period after which normality is restored. The inter-war era was noted for the new political and social reality that surfaced after the storm — a reality totally different from that of the pre-war era. The most profound change took place in Russia after the Bolshevik Revolution. In the aftermath of this upheaval, the organizational [communal] structure was destroyed, and, in large measure, members of the Jewish community itself obliterated the Jews' cultural and religious accouterments. Partners in the destruction were both those elements that had long since repudiated their Jewish heritage because of fealty to socialist thinking and those who had previously sought to sustain Jewish nationhood in its Bund version or even from the Zionist perspective. They personified the rule coined by the English historian G.D.H. Cole: in times of upheaval, people may change within a few days principles and attitudes that in ordinary times they would change very slowly, over a period of decades. The Jewish Communists, both veterans and newcomers, effected a takeover of Jewish community life. They shunned Judaism in all senses, religious and national, and those loyal to any of its forms were ousted, imprisoned, or forced into the underground.

To the good fortune of Judaism, the new communist state did not include the entire Pale of Settlement of Czarist Russia. The areas of historical Poland and the Baltic countries were wrested from it, and new nation-states, such as Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia, were established. After the end of the war, the
liberation of small nations from the rule of massive empires was considered a
historic achievement of vast importance. The Austro-Hungarian Empire had
been such an entity; through it the Germans, the Austrians, and the
Hungarians had controlled the Czechs, the Slovaks, the Ruthenians, the
Rumanians, the Poles, the Serbs, the Croats, and the Italians. The war and
the revolution that erupted in its wake reduced the empire to its national
components. Thus, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and greater Rumania came
into being — and the Hungarians and Austrians had to settle for controlling
themselves alone. The principle of self-determination celebrated its victory in
that era, foremost in the establishment of Poland, Lithuania, and
Czechoslovakia. Whether this expectation has passed the test of time is
something that one may ponder at length. From the Jewish standpoint, there
is certainly reason to doubt it.

Germany, too, erupted in revolution. The kaiser was surreptitiously removed,
and the main change was not territorial, as in Russia, but in the replacement
of the regime — imperial rule giving way to the Weimar Republic. This was a
pivotal change. One may say that only then did Germany become literally
national. Although Germany had not lacked for nationhood and even
nationalism before the Empire disintegrated, loyalty to and affiliation with the
state had not hinged solely on national affiliation; they were also emblematic
of the regime to which everyone was subordinate — to which one could
pledge sole allegiance even without belonging to the German nation
specifically. The establishment of republican governance destroyed this
element; from then on, it was nationality that counted.

Nationality, of course, is exclusive: it bestows self-evident rights only on those
considered members of the nation. The national principle, which determined
the nature of the states in which most European Jews dwelled, placed the
Jews in a situation they had not previously known. A few Jews regarded
themselves as members of the nation in which they resided. A small number
of Polish and Rumanian Jews considered themselves Rumanians and Poles.
In Hungary, a portion of the Jewish residents deemed themselves to be
Hungarians, and ultra-orthodox Jews also felt a connection with Hungarian
culture.
Even where this identification was sincere, it was an unrequited love. In practice, the Jews were distinct because of their religion and because they relied on each other in social, familial, and occupational contexts and for sources of livelihood — even where the cultural differences between them and the population at large had become blurred. In Poland and Rumania, as was stated, only a few Jews considered themselves Poles and Rumanians, but the Jewish complexion even of this minority was undoubted, objectively and subjectively. Therefore, this minority wished to rely on minority rights that had not been assured by the new rulers but had been imposed on the rulers by the powers at Versailles.

Truth to tell, even with respect to territorially concentrated minorities, such as the Ukrainians, these leaders did not honor these undertakings to the letter; all the less did they do so for the Jews. This cast the Jews into a serious predicament. One option was to submit and accept the small gains that they could obtain by intercession, the method used by their forebearers since the days of the medieval ghettos. Such was the prescription of conservatives who adhered to Jewish tradition. The alternative was to fight for the rights promised them under the laws of the state. The secular political parties, including the Zionists, advocated this course of action.

This dilemma beset Polish Jewry throughout the inter-war period and prevented its functioning under conditions of unanimity and internal cohesion. The question of Jewish political activity was rooted in the Jews' problematic status in the nation-states, and it surfaced openly in each country to a greater or lesser degree. Everywhere the possessors of superior national rights tended to crimp the Jewish minority's steps in all domains. They were especially jealous of governmental prerogatives and were unwilling to share them with Jews. In other countries, including those of Western Europe, it was believed in certain quarters that the Jews should lower their profile and steer clear of power struggles.

Recently I came into possession of a letter in which Stefan Zweig suggests to Martin Buber that action be taken to apply this prescription — which originates in hallowed Jewish tradition — as a binding principle on both the public and individual levels. Although Zweig seemed to identify with this view, it was
connected in his case with the individualist intellectual's reluctance to enter the rough-and-tumble arena of public struggle. In fact, Zweig's opinion had no chance of gaining wide acceptance. Ever since the Jews had been integrated as equally privileged individuals in their countries of residence, they considered it their right to do their share in shaping life and to express their views on changes along with others. As we know, Jews were over-represented in the ranks of the revolutionaries in Russia, in Hungary, and in the attempted coups in Germany. Consequently, of course, the Jews' enemies blamed revolutions on Jewish influence. Thus, one may understand how the masses could find convincing the allegations in the Protocols of the Elders of Zion.

Individuals paid for this intervention with their lives — as in the pogroms that swept Hungary after the fall of Bela Kun's Communist state, the disappearance of individuals in Bavaria, and the assassination of Walther Rathenau after his appointment as foreign minister in the Weimar government. Rathenau knew he was in mortal danger; even his mother protested his acceptance of such a position. Just the same, he knowingly decided to play an active role in the state apparatus.

The non-Jewish response to the Jews' daring to participate in shaping the fate of the polity evidently stems from a tragic misunderstanding of the Jews' status within the construct of the nation-state. The audacious Jews considered themselves an integral part of the state and, for this reason, actually regarded themselves as duty-bound to help shape its future. The non-Jewish surroundings, in contrast, regarded the Jews as a separate public bloc within the state — to be tolerated at best — which had no right to intervene in shaping its life and charting its course. It is this perception that, in the national rulers' minds, justified dislodging the Jews. Since the state was now deemed a national entity in every respect, only members of the ruling nationality possessed full political privileges.

The situation in previous phases, when the Jews had penetrated modern society, was different. At first, especially in places where this development lagged — as in Poland and Hungary (countries that lacked a middle class save the Jews) — Jews were allowed to participate in the development of
industry, science, and the arts. Now, in contrast, their intervention in practical affairs was considered one of the gravest symptoms of the times. Therefore, the Jews’ standard of living was lowered and their sources of livelihood restricted. The sense of strangulation among Jews is the most salient indicator of this period from the Jews’ standpoint.

Another important point, ostensibly of external origin, should be borne in mind at this juncture. Jews had experienced hardships before World War I, but could escape them by emigrating. As we know, the millions of Jews who left Eastern Europe and left their imprint on Jewish communities in the United States and other countries overseas emigrated in the aftermath of three types of pressure — political tension, pogroms, and (most strongly) economic stress that endangered their livelihood. It is a cardinal rule in migration movements that a group that feels it has no sources of livelihood will try to move elsewhere. In the period in question here, the agony was twofold — rising economic and political pressure coupled with dwindling opportunities to escape the pressure by emigrating.

This aside, the economic crisis that erupted in the late 1920s — the worst in the world in decades — helped Hitler accede to power. The transition from imperial to republican rule in Germany transformed the Jews’ lives in ways that were, in part, detrimental to them from the outset and in other aspects were initially beneficial but harmful later on.

The dominant phenomenon in the first years of the Weimar Republic was inflation. Most of the wealthy were portrayed as empty vessels, and the middle class, to which most of the Jews belonged, was thinned out. The disaster was later multiplied many times over when Nazi propaganda found attentive ears among members of the social class that had lost its economic footing.

The economic impoverishment of most Jews was one of the factors that explain the decline in their birth rates. Several experts even predicted that natural decrease would drive German Jewry off the historical stage. The emigration of Jews from Eastern Europe to Germany during those years had a favorable effect, as the Germans received them kindly and even used them, with the authorities’ consent, to fill vacancies occasioned by the war mobilization. The Republic, unlike the Kaiser’s regime, did not apply rules
strictly in the case of the “Ostjuden,” who, to some extent, filled the Jewish demographic shortfall.

Concurrently, however, antisemites exploited the advent of the Jews from Eastern Europe to argue that Jews were not only culturally different but were an alien implant in Germany. The Nazis augmented their hatred of the Jews with an additional cause — bringing down the republican regime — and bound the two matters together. This, in my opinion, is the secret of the success and efficacy of Nazi propaganda.

Antisemitism under the kaisers was not revolutionary. It did not aim to transform the regime; its leaders intended to use it to achieve their goal, which was to restrict the Jews’ civil rights. They failed because leaders such as Bismarck and Wilhelm II — albeit not out of tremendous sympathy for the Jews — were reluctant to tamper with the principle of formal equality under law. The Nazis set a goal that was much more sweeping — to dislodge the Jews altogether — and linked it to another one, to bring down the Republic. Each goal helped attain the other. Some boycotted the Jews wholeheartedly as a way of defeating the Republic; others pledged allegiance to Nazism mainly because they loathed the Republic and accepted hatred of Jews as the price they had to pay for the main political goal. Therefore, Nazism, unlike antisemitism until World War I, was a revolutionary movement in the full sense of the term.

Since the Germans did not have a widespread republican political tradition, the new regime was built on unstable foundations from the start. In contrast, they did have a widespread tradition of antisemitism, and the two matters intermingled and sustained each other. When the Imperial Regime was ousted and replaced by the Republic, the turnabout initially seemed “good for the Jews.” Soon, however, it proved to be the undoing of German Jewry and, indirectly, of all of European Jewry. Banning Jews from all sources of gainful livelihood now became a legal, government-sponsored plan of action in Poland, Lithuania, Rumania, and Hungary. Economic deprivation and social ostracism placed the Jewish community in a seriously inferior position and reduced the masses to outright hunger. Even these agonies, of course, pale in
comparison to the ordeal that this generation would yet face, but this future, like any future, was unbeknownst to them.

The Holocaust could not have been predicted, let alone traced as an outcome of the distress in countries other than Germany. When all is said and done, the Holocaust was occasioned not by local factors of distress in these countries but by the foreign occupier. However, there is a causal relationship between earlier and subsequent events outside Germany as well. The laws of deprivation and humiliation relegated the Jews, in the eyes of those around them, to a zone beyond the limits of human fraternity. Therefore, it is no wonder that when the German occupier arrived, most non-Jews looked on with relative equanimity as the Jews were being exterminated and, in some locations, actually assisted the perpetrators. Only a very few withstood the temptation and acted to rescue them. Again, this progression of events could not have been predicted.

Historians have the advantage of being able to state, after the fact, that the calamity was rooted in the thinking of antisemites who had openly depicted the Jews as superfluous aliens in their countries of residence. Since this view became widely entrenched, it lacked only a spark to escalate into a conflagration. After the fact, unforeseeable events look like developments that were so immanently logical that they could not but occur. The collision between the consciousness of those involved in the historical process and the knowledge of those who observe it after the passage of time, occurs in the crucible of history and general human events. We must keep this in mind when we attempt to fathom the experiences of the generation that underwent the greatest of ordeals. Let us not project our knowledge onto their consciousness. As stated, every generation — including this one — knew whence it came. It did not know where it was heading.

Translated from Hebrew by Naftali Greenwood

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