

"German-Jewish Symbiosis" Against The Background Of The 30's

Excerpt from interview with Professor Yehuda Bauer

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Interviewer: Amos Goldberg

Q- From a historical perspective, was the so-called "German-Jewish symbiosis" real or an illusion?

B- People talk today about a Jewish-German symbiosis that existed before Hitler. There was a love affair between Jews and Germans, but it was one-sided: Jews loved Germany and Germans; Germans didn't love Jews, even if they didn't hate them. One-sided love affairs usually don't work very well. In this case, the so-called symbiosis between Jews and Germans is a post-factum invention. It never existed. Jews participated in German life, in German cultural life, but to say that they were accepted, even if the product they produced was accepted.... They were not accepted, even if they converted.

A typical and classic case, of course, is Heinrich Heine .But there were many others as well, certainly those who didn't convert. They were taken for granted, their contribution was utilized, but they were not really accepted; there was no symbiosis, no joining. At the same time, one has to say that in an atmosphere of relative liberalism in Germany — which prevailed both during the Second Empire, until WWI, and in the Weimar Republic — Jews were not rejected. They may not have been loved, but they were not rejected.

And so you had this peculiar situation where Jews were not quite accepted and not quite rejected. But the tremendous creativity that the Jews developed once they were out of the Middle Age ghetto was taken to be part of German culture. Their contributions were not accepted by extreme antisemites, of

course, but by the rest of German society. Otherwise, you cannot explain, for instance, why there were tens of thousands of Jews in the Weimar Republic who were born Jewish, but had converted or intermarried. Their spouses and relatives, and the society around them, accepted them. They may not have loved the idea, but they accepted it. In this kind of situation, it was possible for Jews to be active in German culture and society.

Q- Against the background of the fact that Jews were part of the German elite — academic, cultural, and maybe even financial — how can you explain the ease with which they were kicked out of German society during the 30's?

B- There are certain things that we are not quite sure of as yet. Jews were participants in German society — certainly as far as the elite were concerned, and also in the lower ranges of society. They were never fully accepted, especially not by the elite. They were sometimes admired, but to say that they became part of society would be an exaggeration. There was always a reserve there.

After WWI, there was a feeling of crisis developing in Germany, that something was radically wrong with German society. In conjunction with the promise of utopia that the Nazis gave to the Germans — and especially to the German elite — there was a tendency of saying, "Well, if the price for that is to get rid of the Jews, then... let it be that way." Many Germans may not have loved the idea of treating Jews in a brutal manner, but they were prepared to accept this price for a beautiful, new society and promises of a wonderful future. The promise of utopia is crucial. They created a consensus, not against Jews, but in favor of utopia. Clearly, the Nazi utopia idea could never happen without getting rid of the Jews. This rapid switch on the part of German society, which expressed itself in pro-Nazi demonstrations and activities, drew in rapidly, though not immediately, larger and larger parts of German society.



Source: The Multimedia CD 'Eclipse of Humanity', Yad Vashem, Jerusalem 2000.