

A German-Jewish Response by Emil Lehmann

("Emil Lehmann Addresses Leipzig Jews on the Anti-Semitic Movement," April 11, 1880, translated by Erwin Fink; *German History in Documents and Images*, volume 4, German Historical Institute, Washington, D.C.; germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org)

...Finally, a strict National Liberal Professor [Heinrich von Treitschke] appeared on the scene and announced to the German people in more refined phrases, in more moderate language, that the Jews are Germany's misfortune. Thus, the struggle has broken out in all corners. The extreme Right, the party of the court preacher [Adolf Stöcker], the Center Party, National Liberals of the most orthodox bent, ultra-radicals—all have voiced the battle cry against the Jews.

In all three directions—the religious, political, and social—this hostile literature is used to agitate against us, and with the most contradictory reasoning at that. One group affirms that they are not against the religion and the persons *per se* but against the tribe. The others attack the religion, especially the Talmud, and even the Old Testament...

If there is any truth in the saying *calumniare audacter, semper aliquid haeret*—slander boldly and something will always stick—then this is certainly the case with the Jews. The roots of aversion run deep. They are tied to the earliest school memories; the spark smolders in the souls of the indiscriminating and the prejudiced and is nurtured by inflammatory writings like these...

By no means are these writings innocuous or harmless. Still, I deem those diatribes that already reveal themselves in their tone as pure products of hatred, envy, and the basest passions, or even as pure speculation, as proportionately less dangerous... They founder on their own exaggerations. Even their intended audience, the great majority, still has, despite all prejudice, enough feel for justice and good sense to tire of this agitation eventually.

The situation as regards the position represented by the frequently mentioned historian [Treitschke] is both different and worse. It is precisely in his chosen polemics—which fell on such fertile ground here—that he fails to prove his worth as a historian. For what he says about the difference between Portuguese and German Jews—about the outstanding efficiency and performance of today's Portuguese Jews, about the Polish heritage of German Jews—is unhistorical; also unhistorical is his claim that the German nation is a Christian nation; illogical is his distinction between the Christian state, which he rejects, and the Christian people, to whom he believes the Germans belong. But this designation does not take the religious point of view into account [Protestant versus Catholic]—and even includes non-believers.

Incidentally, how can one explain the fact that the historian in question sees fit to make such satisfactory references to French and English Jews? Because they have, for many decades, enjoyed the rights we were granted only relatively recently. Thus, as even advocates of his position admit, the kind of arrangements one wishes to challenge in the

transitional phase in which we find ourselves here have proven themselves over a longer period in those places.

As distorted and refutable as his claims may be—we must be clear with ourselves about one thing: They are not the claims of a single person but express the mood of many people who can only view life—at least the life of the Jews—from a bureaucratic perspective. The Christian-Germanic state and Aryan pride have played a role in many academic writings. I scarcely need to recall the authors, poets, and composers still alive today who added prefaces and individual tracts against the Jews to their works... Anyone who wants to take the effort, year in and year out, to compile all the hostile statements that have been made against Jews in writing (and in academic works at that), in journals, that have been expressed by the educated in educated circles, and at social gatherings—this person will end up with a very extensive collection of shadowgraphs on the cultural history of humanity... The frequently mentioned historian...has, as he himself admits, expressed his aversion toward the Jewish character for a decade already—namely in his lectures. His three most recent essays are not a novelty for him, and in this respect they are not astonishing. The only thing that endowed them with significance and the advantage of manifold refutation was the fact that they had to be regarded as the expression of a prevailing mood in educated circles. They were the outlet through which the existing ill humor poured forth.

They reflect especially the view of those chauvinists who, just as the Romantics once did, fantasize about ancient German purity of blood and thus express that which they accuse us of: racial arrogance. That historian, though, admits that he himself knows Jews whom he considers exceptions, and this is how all of these gentlemen proceed. They exempt the Jews they know or befriend but condemn the great bunch unknown to them, which means that any Jew faces bias so long as he has not found favor in their eyes.

It is not “over-sensitivity”—a charge leveled by that historian against a colleague who refuted him—that has forced the more outstanding among us to speak out against him. It is a sense of justice. We have not yet arrived at the point where Jewish scholars are on equal footing with Christian colleagues in terms of offices and appointments. And even if improvements have been introduced in recent years, it was different a few decades ago. For that reason, it would not be surprising if—as that historian thinks—the achievements of Jewish scholars were taking second place to those of Christian scholars. This is not the case, however. The third-rate writers of whom he speaks can be found among the adherents of all religions. And of course the second and first ranks also include writers of Jewish spirit and origin. As refutable as those arguments are, the polemic is nevertheless worth heeding, even for us.

We have to take things and people as they are, not as they ought to be, and we have to reckon with them. This modern vivisection of Jewry, this cutting of our living bodies by our adversaries, has—like everything God sends—a positive side to it. Along with the old rabbi, we say, gam su letaubo, even that has a positive side. For just as an agent of disease that collects in the body for a long time will finally be discharged in the course of the disease itself, and will thus bring about the subsequent recovery, this polemic also serves to

cause the substance of the morbus antijudaicus, the hostility toward Jews, which has been present in the German body for a long time, to break out and thus lead to recovery.

...In a transitional phase like ours, when legislation is frequently heading in new directions, when the painful consequences of enormous wars and rash business enterprises have been making themselves felt for years, when interests are more apt to be locked in grim feuds than parties, when people are venting dissatisfaction and are unable to probe for deeper sources, is it really surprising that people are striking out in a superficial way against those who have always been the target of anger when general problems arise?

For us, who are accustomed to thanking God for the good and the bad alike, for us, this polemic shall serve as a test, a warning, and a reminder.

As a test: Have we everywhere remained true to the noble ideals of morality and honesty that our Jewry (in this respect agreeing completely with Christianity) teaches? Have we everywhere applied the blessings of modern times in such a way as we should and must? Have we become loyal fellow citizens, hard-working citizens, and true sons of our German homeland, of our German fatherland?

Without fearing the accusation of “self-righteousness” hurled at us by that historian, I may answer the question in the affirmative for most of our co-religionists. These obligations are fulfilled in Jewish circles to the same extent that they are among our Christian fellow citizens. But does this suffice? Is there not perhaps a grain of truth in some of the charges leveled against us in these writings, especially as they concern individual occurrences? In particular, I would consider the following: the frivolous and joking impulse, the advertising, the pushiness, the boasting, the usury, and the penchant for effortless earning.

Frivolity is something alien to the Jew by nature. Our lofty literature and history prove it. Only with the Frenchifying Enlightenment of the previous century was this inclination imported into semi-educated circles, both Jewish and Christian. The compulsion toward joking is not an originally Jewish trait. From the Talmud, that book which is more or less unknown to all of us, we are only familiar with the maxims of the Fathers, which adorn every prayer book and are indeed among the most magnificent that aphoristic wisdom has ever produced in terms of profound ethics. It contains no trace of jokes or joking. This tendency developed only under the pressure of the ghetto. Jokes are the intellectual weapon of the persecuted. If the otherwise commendable Jewish chronicler, Professor Grätz, whom the aforementioned historian rightly accuses of sharp words against Germany (although this is understandable on account of persecution and discrimination) finds fault with the noblest and most outstanding of all German Jews, Gabriel Riesser [the pioneer of Jewish emancipation in Germany], for not writing in a humorous style—then it is high time to emphasize that we do not claim humor as a Jewish characteristic, that we regard earnestness, truthfulness, and conviction as the most valuable qualities of all.

Usury, advertising, and effortless profiteering—these evils of the times are not rooted exclusively, let alone proportionately, in Jewish ground; adherents of all religions have

contributed their share to them. Yet it is our obligation to admonish our co-religionists to avoid all that and to educate their children to pursue honorable and useful occupations...

Nevertheless, one will certainly continue to accuse us of representing—as that historian put it—a dual nationality. But that is simply untrue and unhistorical. The Jewish Germans are Germans just like the Christian Germans. With respect to Germanness, their Jewishness operates in the same manner as Freemasonry... Freemasonry is spread all over the world, but no discerning person would call a German Freemason a bad German. On the contrary, anyone who knows Freemasonry, and anyone who knows Jewry, will say that the Germans who belong to them, provided that they follow their teachings, will be among the better Germans.

These days, at a time when pessimists and materialists are engaged in a bitter struggle against everything ideal, one should endeavor to recognize and incorporate the Jews...as comrades in the quest for the ideal, the religious, instead of turning them away.

But we who are Germans, who think in German ways and feel German, will not allow these attacks to sway us from loving our German fatherland and our homeland, from working together with our fellow citizens toward the common good, and from refuting these anti-Semitic attacks by way of our lives. The best refutations of those pamphlets are not words but deeds—our lives.

The admonition of that polemic, however, is aimed primarily at Jews who now remain so only in name. They have given up on empathizing, on helping to counsel, and on helping to act with respect to all things that affect Jews. They believe the time of confessional differences is over. They were reluctant to be reminded that they are Jews. They raised their children in a nondenominational way. To them, Jewry was a viewpoint that had been overcome. Many of them had their children participate only in Christian religious instruction and were unconcerned with the ramifications. The modern polemic has hit these co-religionists much harder than anyone else. They were reminded in the rudest manner that they are Jews as well, that their isolation would not help them. The time of confessional differences is not yet over; the positive religions have not lost their significance. Jews remain Jews, as long as they do not become Christians—and even the baptized Jew is subject to aversion. Thus, these renewed attacks remind the Jews to search their souls, to enhance, strengthen, and reform their religious institutions, to foster that which Jews and Christians have in common: the religious sense, the examination of their own treasures, the consideration of the Jewish theological and historical literature in order to summon from it strength, courage, and conviction for the realization that Jewry is a religion that guides its adherents to the purest humanity, to true human kindness, to the most loyal performance of duty, that the true Jew is a good person and a worthy patriot.