

## The Abnormality of the Normal

Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews, Vol. 1: The Years of Persecution, 1933-1939* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), 436 pp.

Review by

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For many years Saul Friedländer has been on the cutting edge of the international scholarly endeavor to grapple with the phenomenon of Nazi Germany and the genocide it perpetrated against European Jews. One of Friedländer's focal points recently has been the ethical dilemmas connected to the interpretation and representation of the Holocaust.<sup>1</sup> Can the Nazi period be approached and treated just like any other period in history?

In his well-known exchange with Martin Broszat in the 1980's, Friedländer gave voice to his concern that the former's "Plea for the Historicization of National Socialism," with its concomitant emphasis on the uninterrupted normality of everyday life within the Third Reich, would necessarily lead to a marginalization and banalization of the unprecedented criminality of the regime. The present book, the first of a projected two-volume study of the Holocaust period, is in a sense Friedländer's modified—if belated—retort to the methodological challenge posed by the German historian. In constructing his masterly narrative of the pre-war Nazi period, Friedländer has incorporated with telling effect descriptions of everyday life as experienced by the victims of Nazi persecution. However, the overall effect of this excursion into *Alltagsgeschichte* is to evoke the ominous abnormality lurking beneath the deceptively normal facade of everyday life under the sign of the swastika.

The first six years of Nazi persecution, the focus of this volume, may be studied either as an antechamber to the period of the "Final Solution" or as a

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<sup>1</sup> See especially Saul Friedlander, ed., *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the Final Solution* (London: 1992).

self-contained historical chapter, with its own “logic of irrationality” and internal dynamics of radicalization. For most of the pre-war period, Nazi domination did not extend to Jewish populations outside the borders of Germany; and the operative goal of Nazi Jewish policy was not the physical destruction of the Jews but their enforced separation from the German racial community (*Volksgemeinschaft*) and emigration. In contrast to the exterminatory campaign during World War II, which began behind the lines of the Russian battlefield and under the aura of an all-out ideological war of expansion, the pre-war antisemitic persecution was conducted at home, in peacetime, and—for the most part—in full view of the world and the German populace. Thus, initially, the principal tools were not physical violence per se but exclusionary legislation, economic discrimination, bureaucratic harassment, and public degradation. From a still wider perspective, the duality of the period, the interplay between normality and exclusion, legality and illegality, can best be fathomed in terms of what Ernst Fraenkel, the German-Jewish émigré, analyzed long ago as the phenomenon of the “Dual State.” This refers to the simultaneous coexistence within one totalitarian system of the “Prerogative State” (*Massnahmenstaat*), characterized by “unlimited arbitrariness and violence unchecked by any legal guarantees,” with the “Normative State,” with its respect for the courts and the rule of law in general.<sup>2</sup>

Although Friedländer is careful not to imply any sort of linear, preordained progression from Hitler’s accession to the “Final Solution,” his historical reconstruction of the pre-war period is clearly (and self-avowedly) tilted toward emphasizing the primacy of the role played by Hitler and his peculiar brand of antisemitic ideology. Each and every early anti-Jewish measure undertaken by the regime, he argues, was not just a means calculated to an end but a symbolic statement. The symbolic significance is to be decoded in the context of what Friedländer terms “redemptive anti-Semitism.”

In spite of the superficial resemblance to Goldhagen’s thesis of “eliminationist anti-Semitism,” Friedländer’s carefully nuanced perceptions are very different in kind and quality. Where Goldhagen posits an a-historical and

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<sup>2</sup> Ernst Fraenkel, *The Dual State - A Contribution to the Theory of Dictatorship* (New York: 1969, p. 1

immutable brand of murderous anti-Semitism that apparently predestined ordinary Germans to become mass murderers, Friedländer is acutely aware of the historical complexities of the issue and wary of making any sweeping generalizations. He accepts on the whole the oft-repeated truism that pre-World War I Germany was not the most overtly antisemitic country in either Central or Eastern Europe. At the same time, he emphasizes some distinctive features of the development in Germany that predisposed German society to be a fertile breeding ground for radical anti-Semites. Thus, unlike the situation in France, for instance, in Germany there was a cleavage between the political entity of the state as such and “the idea of the nation as a closed ethno-cultural community independent of and sometimes opposed to the state.” (p. 85). This ethno-cultural community of the German nation as such—as distinct from the German economy or even German politics—remained hermetically closed to the German Jews, despite all their efforts to integrate.

The perception of the Jews as outsiders and intruders was exacerbated by their historical prominence as agents of modernization and their consequent association with all the dislocations brought about by modernity. However, the most fateful development by far was the institutionalization and ideologization of German anti-Semitism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Friedländer emphasizes in this context the special role played by the Bayreuth circle, though not by Richard Wagner himself, in the transmutation of the struggle against the Jews into “the central theme of world history” (p. 89). According to his analysis, Wagner’s anti-Semitism, which was the dominant obsession of his later years, had a profoundly ambivalent quality insofar as no fanatical anti-Semite would have allowed the presence of such close Jewish workers amongst his inner entourage.

No such ambiguity is present in the full-blown Nazi antisemitic ideology. Here Friedländer identifies the convergence of two distinct strands of racial anti-Semitism: the biological strand, closely associated with eugenics theories and the quasi-scientific study of race; and the visionary, pseudo-religious type, which revolved around the sacred myth of the Aryan race. It is the second type that evolved into what the author calls “redemptive anti-Semitism.” In this type of anti-Semitism, the struggle against the Jews acquires the aura of a

religious, apocalyptic war; the removal of the Jews and their alleged influence becomes a lever for cosmic deliverance. According to Friedländer's analysis, "redemptive anti-Semitism" characterized the worldview of Hitler and a relatively closed caste of hard-core Nazis. It was not shared from the outset by the mass of "ordinary" Germans, and even after six years of incessant brainwashing, it failed to infiltrate the broad reaches of German society. To be sure, anti-Semitism was ubiquitous and deeply ingrained in German society as a whole, but it lacked the apocalyptic and fanatic dimension of Nazi anti-Semitism. It was entrenched deeply enough to prevent the German rank and file from sympathizing with the persecuted Jewish minority; it was not dominant enough to make them want to harm Jews actively in any drastic way.<sup>3</sup>

During the November pogrom of 1938, says Friedländer, "a clear difference emerged from the outset between activists and onlookers on the streets of the large cities" (p. 294).<sup>4</sup> This, of course, leaves wide open the question regarding the psychological and social mechanism that could turn the indifferent onlookers of 1938 into Goldhagen's "willing executioners" during the war years. In the final analysis, Friedländer appears to be implying that the "*trahison des clercs*" (breach of trust) of Germany's professional, intellectual, and spiritual leadership was far more crucial in clearing the ground for the "Final Solution" than was the role played by popular German anti-Semitism as such. Though none of them actually shared Hitler's vision of "redemptive anti-Semitism," the liberal professions, the academic world, and the Catholic and Protestant churches—each following its own sectarian rationale—proved more than willing to go along with the racial policies of the regime.

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<sup>3</sup> For a different interpretation of the role of pre-war popular German antisemitism, see Michael Kater, "Everyday Anti-Semitism in Prewar Nazi Germany: The Popular Bases," *Yad Vashem Studies*, vol. 16 (1984).

<sup>4</sup> For different assessments of the stance of the German populace see esp. Otto Dov Kulka and Aron Rodrigue, "The German Population and the Jews in the Third Reich. Recent Publications and Trends in Research on German Society and the 'Jewish Question'", in *Yad Vashem Studies*, 16 (1984), pp. 421-425.

By and large, however, the force of Friedländer's presentation lies more in the precise and multifaceted evocation of the period, rather than in the provision of any revolutionarily new explanation. Indeed, he offers no new conceptual framework that could account for the process of ideological and political radicalization before the war. Friedländer's refusal to commit himself to any one overriding conceptual model enables him to avoid the ossification and closure associated with mono-causal explanations. Drawing on a formidable array of primary and secondary sources, he appears more intent on letting the facts and the protagonists speak for themselves rather than on drawing any grand conclusions from his findings. His main tool of integration is a deliberately fractured narrative, with a constantly shifting focus of perspective. This enables him to integrate the story of the persecutors, which forms the backbone of the main chronological plot, with various themes taken from the experience of the victims. Some of the most poignant passages in the book derive their special effect from the juxtaposition of different levels of reality with its disjunctive perception by the persecutors and their victims. Thus, after citing Hitler's concluding words in his triumphal speech from the balcony of the *Heldenplatz* in Vienna on March 15, 1938— "I now report to history that my homeland has joined the German Reich"—Friedländer goes on to report dryly how on the next day the Jewish playwright and historian of culture, Egon Friedell, jumped to his death as the Gestapo came to arrest him in his Vienna apartment (p. 239). In the two last passages of the book, the pomp and pageantry of the celebrations on the occasion of Hitler's fiftieth birthday on April 20, 1939, the elation of the ecstatic crowds, the rapturous commentary accompanying the German newsreel film documenting the event, are juxtaposed with a report by the Berlin correspondent of the American Associated Press on the gala performance of J.B. Priestly's *Men at Sea* by the Jewish *Kulturbund* three days later. The British playwright's drama of twelve people adrift on a burning ship at sea becomes a metaphor for the Jewish predicament in Germany on the eve of the war.

Two individual cases of racial persecution are interwoven as independent subplots into the main chronological narrative of the book. The story of Karl Berthold, a social- benefits official from Dresden suspected of having been

conceived out of wedlock by a Jewish father, is a six-year-long tale of bureaucratic entanglements and functions as a case study of both the grotesqueness and the relentlessness of Nazi racism. Berthold's case had a happy ending of a sort when by dint of a personal decision by the Deputy *Führer* Rudolf Hess, the suspected Jewish *Mischling* was allowed to keep his job in the social-benefits office. Leopold Obermayer, a Jewish wine merchant from Würzburg and a Swiss national, had no such escape hatch. Being both a Jew and a homosexual, he was pounced upon in October 1935 by the local Gestapo chief, Josef Gerum, as a special target for his sadistic enjoyment. Brutally interrogated and maltreated and moved back and forth over the years between prisons and concentration camps, Obermayer finally died at the hands of the SS in Mauthausen in February 1943. Our sense of outrage is exacerbated by the postwar aftermath: Obermayer's chief tormentor, Josef Gerum, was arraigned before a de-Nazification court, but it set him free in 1948.

Another case study in Nazi "justice" is the story of Ernst Oberdörfer, the sixteen-year-old son of a Jewish horse dealer from Theilheim in Main Franconia, who was denounced in June 1939 for sexual harassment of a ten-year-old Aryan girl. When the local police was unable to obtain confirmation of the accusation from the alleged victim, the Gestapo stepped in and produced a statement by another girl, the boy's age, who recalled a sexual incident with Oberdörfer that had occurred some years earlier—although it was not clear whether with or without her consent. This was, however, evidence enough to frame the Jewish teenager, and he was subsequently sentenced to one year imprisonment. After serving his term, he was sent to Buchenwald as a race defiler. Contrary to Friedländer's assumption, however, the record of the International Tracing Service at Arolsen indicates that he was incarcerated in Block 22 at least until April 1945,<sup>5</sup> when the camp inmates were evacuated in the infamous death marches.

In his treatment of the persecutors, Friedländer has an unerring eye for the more bizarre and grotesque aspects of the Nazi racial obsession. In this

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<sup>5</sup> Yad Vashem Archives, M/8, ITS, Master Index, Reel O1; Buchenwald was liberated by the Americans on April 11, 1945.

context, the cultural politics of the Third Reich receive his special attention; he appears to delight in spelling out the inner contradictions and numerous frustrations of the self-appointed guardians of “Aryan” culture. Thus, in their zeal to expunge the German cultural scene of every trace of Jewish influence, both past and present, Göbbels’ commissars came across unexpected setbacks. For example, it turned out that the librettos of some of the more important German operas—among them three of Mozart’s most popular pieces—were composed by Jews. The Nazi culture commissars decided to sacrifice the original Italian version of Mozart’s operas, composed by an Italian Jew, in favor of the German translation only to discover to their great chagrin that the standard German performing version was “polluted” by the presence of a Jewish conductor. Similarly, in the special performance of Wagner’s *Meistersinger* in the 1938 Salzburg festival, an uncharacteristic manifestation of courage by the conductor Furtwängler compelled Goebbels and his entire entourage to watch the Jewish singer, Walter Grossman, perform the key “Aryan” role in the play.

As a narrative historian Friedländer is a master craftsman. Impeccably researched and balanced in its exposition, the book also has high literary merit. The style is marked by its restraint and shies away from the inflated and the sensational. The completed, two-volume study is likely to become a classic of its kind and one of the most widely read syntheses of the Holocaust period—and justly so.

Having said as much, this reviewer would not want to seem picayune by criticizing the book’s treatment of the victims’ perspective. Illuminating and suggestive as the personal stories of the suspected *Mischling* employee from the social-benefits office in Dresden, the homosexual Jewish wine merchant from Würzburg, or the sixteen-year-old son of the Jewish horse dealer from Theilhamer may be as case studies in racial mania and persecution, they throw no light at all on the peculiar alienation of the German Jews as “revoked Germans” (*Deutsche auf Widerruf*).<sup>6</sup> That is, the unique tragedy of an ethnic minority which, after a historical process of emancipation and integration

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Hans Mayer, *Ein Deutscher auf Widerruf: Erinnerungen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988) and idem, *Der Widerruf; Über Deutsche und Juden* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1994)

lasting over a hundred years, found itself stripped overnight not only of its position in German society and culture, but also of the very basis of its collective German-Jewish identity. Nor does the book do justice to the organized effort of German Jews to cope with their predicament. Indeed, Friedländer argues in his introduction that the collective life of the victims “...after a short period of enhanced cohesion—started to disintegrate”; hence, “The only concrete history that can be retrieved remains that carried by personal stories” (p. 5).

This generalization calls for considerable qualification and refinement with regard to the different experiences of the Jewish communities in Europe. At any rate, I would argue that in the specific case of the German Jews before the war, the opposite process appears to have been at work. The Nazi onslaught did not lead to dissolution and disintegration but rather to a revitalization of collective Jewish life. The dialectics of pressure and resistance set out by Ernst Simon in his discussion of “the power and limits of spiritual resistance” touch on the heart of the matter. “For average men and average movements, placed under a sudden and unexpected pressure,” Simon pointed out in his 1956 essay on Jewish adult education in Nazi Germany, “the following maxim applies: a small and medium pressure increases the power of resistance; a stronger weakens it and the maximum breaks it.”<sup>7</sup>

Pressure, however, is not merely an external constraint but is connected to the way it is perceived by its subjects. The psychological ability of the German-Jewish community to resist the disintegrating blows of the Nazi regime in its early stages was preserved intact by its very inability to fathom the full extent of the escalation that still lay ahead. Even the most pessimistic took for granted an extended transition period in which the Jews would still be able to hold out on German soil. Hence the flurry of organizational and cultural activity and the efforts to fortify the collective stand of the German Jews in

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<sup>7</sup> Ernst Simon, “Jewish Adult Education in Nazi Germany as Spiritual Resistance,” *LBI Year Book*, I (1956), pp. 68-104. The original German version appeared in: Ernst Simon, *Aufbau im Untergang; Jüdische Erwachsenenbildung im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland als geistiger Widerstand*, Schriftenreihe wissenschaftlicher Abhandlungen des Leo Baeck Institute of Jews from Germany, 2 (Tübingen: 1957), pp. 68-75.



face of the common danger. The Jews, stated the Reich Representation of the German Jews in its programmatic declaration of September 1933, are allowed to pursue their own goals in “only one area,” but “it is a decisive area, that of our Jewish life and Jewish future.”<sup>8</sup> The objective correlative of this “*Aufbau im Untergang*” (reconstruction in decline) in the context of Nazi Jewish policy was the paradoxical autonomy conceded to the Jewish organizations during the early years of persecution.<sup>9</sup> While Friedländer does devote some attention to the program and activity of the Jewish Kulturbund, he largely overlooks the non-cultural aspects of this central phenomenon of Jewish self-organization under National-Socialist rule. There is, for instance, no mention of the extensive welfare activity of the Jewish organizations coordinated by the *Zentralausschuß für Hilfe und Aufbau* (Central Committee for Help and Reconstruction) and generously supported by the great philanthropic bodies of Western Jewry, the Central British Fund and the American Joint Distribution Committee. The *Reichsvertretung der Deutschen Juden* (National Representation of the German Jews), the important umbrella organization set up in specific response to the Nazi challenge, is treated only sketchily and in passing.<sup>10</sup> The same is true of the *Zionistische Vereinigung für Deutschland* (the German Zionist Organization)<sup>11</sup> and the *Centralverein deutscher Staatsbürger Jüdischen Glaubens* (Central Association of German Citizens of

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<sup>8</sup> Y. Arad et al., eds, *Documents on the Holocaust*, 1981, pp. 57 (reproduced from the *Jüdische Rundschau*, no. 78, September 29, 1933)

<sup>9</sup> See Herbert A. Strauss, “Jewish Autonomy Within the Limits of National-The Communities and the *Reichsvertretung*” in Arnold —Socialist Policy Paucker, ed., *Die Juden im Nationalsozialistischen Deutschland 1933-1943* (Tübingen: 1986), pp. 125-152.

<sup>10</sup> On the *Reichsvertretung* see Otto Dov Kulka, ed., *Deutsches Judentum unter dem Nationalsozialismus*, vol. 1: *Dokumente zur Geschichte der Reichsvertretung der deutschen Juden, 1933-1939* (Tübingen: Schriftenreihe wissenschaftlicher Abhandlungen Leo Baeck Instituts, Tübingen 1997).

<sup>11</sup> On Zionist policy toward Nazi Germany, see, among others, Daniel Fraenkel, *On the Edge of the Abyss - Zionist Policy and the Plight of the German Jews 1933-1938* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: 1994); Yoav Gelber, “Zionist Policy and the Haavara Transfer Agreement 1933-1935” (Hebrew) *Yalkut Moreshet*, 17 (1974), pp. 97-152; 18 (1975), pp. 100-123; idem, *New Homeland - The Immigration of the Jews from Central Europe and Their Absorption, 1933-1948* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: 1990); Francis R. Nicosia, “The End of Emancipation and the Illusion of Preferential Treatment - German Zionism, 1933-1938,” *LBI Year Book*, XXXVI (1991), pp. 243-265.

the Jewish Faith; misspelled in the book as *Zentralverein*). The extensive correspondence of the Centralverein, which has recently resurfaced in the Osobi archives in Moscow—possibly the most important single source material for everyday Jewish life in pre-war Nazi Germany—remains as yet untapped.

This criticism, however, cannot—nor is meant to—detract in any way from the achievement of Friedländer’s masterly contribution, the most significant synthesis of the pre-war Nazi period to appear in recent years. One can only wish him the sturdy constitution and the tenacity of will needed for the completion of the second part of his monumental task.

**Source: *Yad Vashem Studies*, Vol. 27, Jerusalem, 1999, pp. 429-439.**