Keepers of the Flame

Who would have dreamed that, seven decades after Hitler, I would be back in Germany, ordaining the first generation of Reform rabbis since the Holocaust?

BY WALTER JACOB

It was a cold March day in 1939 when a few friends saw my mother, my brother, and me off at the railroad station in Augsburg, and as a parting gift to them we gave away our last toys. Together with our mother, we were escaping Nazi Germany to join our father and grandfather in England.

We were the lucky ones. The others would be destined for Treblinka.

Both my father and grandfather were rabbis. In fact, it was a source of considerable familial pride that fifteen generations of my rabbinic ancestors had served in Germany. Despite their strong German roots, my father, Rabbi Ernest Jacob, had encouraged emigration since 1933, when the Nazis came to power, but stayed as long as possible to help his congregants. Neither he nor my grandfather could have dreamed that almost seven decades later, on September 14, 2006, I would be back in Germany, ordaining the first generation of Reform rabbis since the Holocaust.

On September 14, 2006, I ordained the Abraham Geiger College's first three graduates. Here I am charging Tom Kucera, 35, from the Czech Republic.

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Reestablishing the broken link of German Jewry was not an easy road, nor one which anyone could have predicted.

At the end of World War II, hundreds of thousands of Jewish Displaced Persons—the remnant of ancient Polish and Russian communities—found themselves in Germany. Not wishing to return to their former homes, most left for Israel or the United States. Some 15,000 Jews remained in Germany, joining a handful of surviving German Jews. Yearning to begin life anew, the DPs did not want to move again. They established small communities, mostly in the larger cities of West Germany.

Most German synagogues had been destroyed or severely damaged during the Nazi period. Death camp survivors, such as the Polish-born Julius Spokojny, partially restored a few of them, including the small chapel of the grand 1914 Art Nouveau synagogue in Augsburg, which survived both Kristallnacht and the American air-raids.

The Jews who settled in West Germany established families and enterprises. It was not easy; they were on their own. Jews elsewhere could not fathom—and opposed—any effort to rebuild Jewish life on German soil. The German population was focused on rebuilding, and denazification was sporadic at best.

This began to change in September 1949, with the election of the first postwar German chancellor. The Konrad Adenauer government provided major restitution funds for Holocaust survivors worldwide as well as political and financial support for the new State of Israel. By the 1980s, the government was funding the reconstruction of many synagogues and the erection of new ones—in Dresden, Frankfurt, Augsburg, and elsewhere. A massive program was introduced in German public schools on Nazi crimes against the Jewish people; Holocaust memorials were built throughout the country; and German Jews, such as philosopher Moses Mendelssohn, poet Heinrich Heine, scientist Albert Einstein, and composer Kurt Weill, were being recognized in books and monuments.

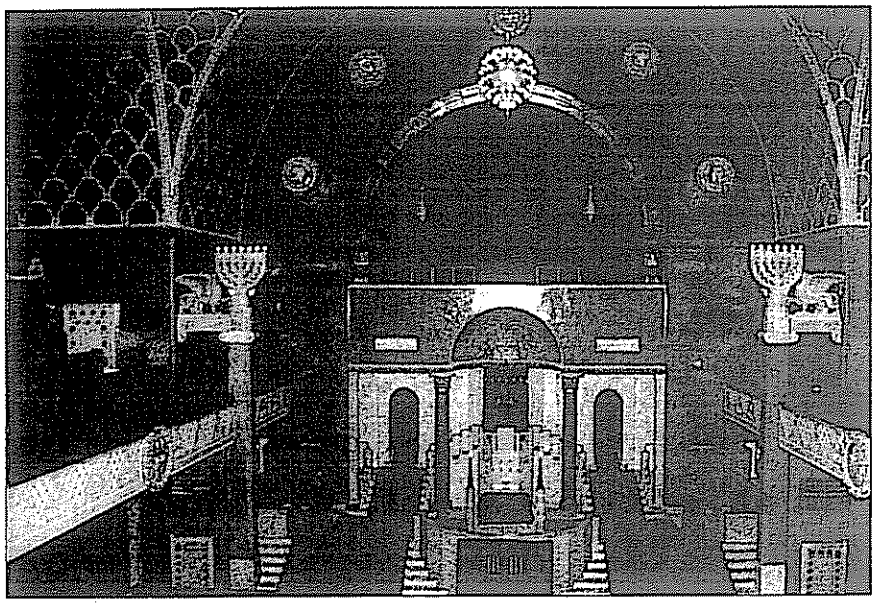
The German Jewish population nonetheless remained small and largely ignored by the broader European and North American Jewish communities until the 1980s, when Jews who'd been granted permission to leave the Soviet

Rabbi Walter Jacob is the president of the Abraham Geiger College in Berlin and rabbi emeritus/senior scholar of Congregation Rodef Shalom in Pittsburgh.

Union began to settle in Germany. By the mid-1990s, some 80,000 Soviet Jews had arrived in the country. Suddenly Jewish communities were being reestablished in places where no Jews had lived for half a century, and the larger Jewish communities were expanding exponentially. The Jewish community of Berlin grew from 3,000 to 15,000; Munich from 2,000 to 8,000; and smaller communities from a few dozen to a thousand.

To assist local Jewish communities in accommodating the influx of newcomers, the Central Council of German Jews (the officially recognized governing body of the Jewish communities, through which the state funneled funds for social and religious services) expanded its government-sponsored funding. Social service needs—housing, food, job counseling—fell into place. The greater challenge was meeting the religious needs of Jewish newcomers who had lived through generations of anti-Jewish discrimination in the Soviet Union. Their knowledge of Judaism ranged from minimal to nonexistent.

In the 1980s, the Central Council generally welcomed these newcomers. Though nominally Orthodox, the Council's rabbinic leadership was practical and tolerant. A case in point: in 1985, when Julius Spokojny, by then a Bavarian senator, had succeeded in his dream of restoring the grand, 1,200-seat sanctuary of the Augsburg synagogue, I, a Reform rabbi, was invited to officiate at the rededication, and it posed no official difficulties. After all, it had been my father's former synagogue, and for a century and a half the Orthodox segment of various communities had been capably served by Reform rabbis such as my father, proof that a pluralistic and accepting atmosphere prevailed. During the 1990s, however, many of the older, more tolerant rabbis had retired, replaced by hard-line, Israeli-trained Orthodox Jews. By German law they had to provide social services to the Soviet Jewish immigrants, but when it came to synagogue life, the Central Council would admit only Jews who could document their Jewish lineage. Of course, many Russian Jews could not produce the appropriate paperwork. Thus thousands and later tens of thousands of individuals who registered as Jews and benefited from the official Jewish community's social services program were excluded from religious life. In the Soviet Union they had been discriminated against, and in Germany they were rejected. Many gave up.



In 1985, I officiated at the rededication of the grand 1914 Art Nouveau synagogue in Augsburg, my father's former congregation.

In the 1990s, a Reform—or, in the European terminology, Liberal—community slowly began to emerge, with the help of a small number of American Jews who'd settled in Germany for business reasons. Together they established congregations with modern services and religious education programs in Munich, Hamburg, Cologne, Hannover, Hameln, and elsewhere—altogether twenty cities—restoring the legacy of the prewar Reform communities, when Reform Judaism was the dominant Jewish movement in Germany.

Despite these accomplishments, the Central Council repeatedly denied Liberal groups funding and spaces to hold services, even though major sections of large communal synagogue buildings remained vacant and Liberal congregants paid the same religious tax imposed on all Germans affiliated with any religious group for the maintenance of their respective institutions. And in Munich, as in other cities, the Council forbade immigrants without documented Jewish lineage from being buried in the Jewish cemetery; the Liberal Jewish community therefore had to create and maintain its own cemetery.

The dozen revived Liberal congregations struggled alone until 1996, when Walter Homolka, a brilliant, young, London-trained rabbi who served the congregation pro bono while he was a top executive with Bertelsmann (the largest German publisher), organized the congregations into the Union of Progressive Jews. They could now cooperate and fight for their rights in a united fashion.

Austria commemorated the establishment of the Abraham Geiger College with this stamp, showing my portrait and including the words: "Rabbis for Europe."

At the time, I was traveling to Germany and Austria fairly often and became part of a small group of activists determined to help the Liberal congregations develop both lay and rabbinic leadership. I began by organizing a small pilot summer program in Pittsburgh for potential Liberal German lay leaders, and working with Rabbi Homolka to initiate a rabbinic program. Our mission was to educate rabbis for Central and Eastern Europe, where a sizable Jewish population remained; a site in Germany would be central, practical, and within easy reach of student pulpits.

We decided that the best base for a rabbinic seminary in Germany was the large Jewish studies program of the University of Potsdam, which already had twenty-two full professors and 450 non-Jewish students. The university's rector, Dr. Wolfgang Loschelder, a deeply religious Catholic, was both helpful and enthusiastic, involving the faculty and administration and stating, quite often, that this would be the major contribution of his career as rector.

Our curriculum would be modeled on the successful North American Reform seminary, the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. Two-thirds of the courses would be provided through the University of Potsdam program, and the remaining one-third by our own faculty. As we had little money, we recruited part-time professors on a voluntary basis, beginning with Rabbis Walter Homolka, Tovia Ben-Chorin, Edward van Voolen, and myself. Soon we attracted Dr. Admiel Kosman of Bar Ilan University as a full-time professor of Talmud, as well as Rabbi Dr. Allen Podet of Buffalo State University, who volunteered to serve as our principal for a year, taught philosophy, and helped to establish academic relationships within the University of Potsdam. Rabbi Homolka sought to raise half the needed funds for our modest budget; I approached donors in North America to raise the other half. At first I was met with surprise and skepticism—few Jews had ever seriously considered the rebirth of Judaism in Central and Eastern Europe. But when I made the need clear, enthusiasm grew, especially

A New Reform Era in Germany

The return of Reform Jewish life to Germany, the place of its birth, has been a hard-fought battle on many levels.

From the mid-nineteenth century until the 1930s, Reform/Liberal Judaism experienced healthy growth as a Movement, with its famous Berlin seminary—the Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums—registering 155 rabbinic students at its height in 1932.

Only three students remained when the Gestapo closed down the seminary in 1942, and for decades few people even contemplated the possibility of reviving Germany's Reform Jewish community. When the Berlin Wall fell and the Soviet empire collapsed in 1989, thousands of Jews began emigrating to Germany from behind the former Iron Curtain, thanks to a refugee law that ensured them citizenship and welfare assistance.

The dramatic growth of the Jewish community, comprised largely of émigrés from the former Soviet Union, awoke the need for a modern, progressive, and egalitarian option for Jewish life. But in 1997, when the pioneer congregations of the Union of Progressive Jews in Germany (UPJ) requested official recognition from the Central Council of Jews in Germany (Zentralrat)—the body entrusted with disbursing government funds for the country's Jewish institutions—they were refused outright.

Lack of recognition and resources severely hampered the Reform Movement's outreach and growth. And thus began a nearly decade-long battle, spearheaded by the World Union for Progressive Judaism in partnership with the UPJ, Abraham Geiger College, and several leading religious and lay leaders in Germany. Legal action was filed (on grounds of discrimination), and a public awareness campaign engaged the German media, the federal government, and the Reform Movement worldwide.

Meanwhile, with support from the World Union and its European Region, by 2007 the German Reform community grew to twenty congregations, complete with adult programming, leadership training, and youth activities. In addition, Germany's Jung und Jüdisch (Young and Jewish) Reform group—affiliated with the international Zionist youth movement Netzer Olami—began sponsoring winter and summer camps and bringing young people to Israel to meet and study with their contemporaries in the Jewish state. The Reform Movement in Germany had come fully into its own.

Finally, after successive court rulings and mounting pressure, the Zentralrat had to reconsider its stand. In November 2005, two Reform regional associations were formally admitted for full membership—a historic move that was warmly endorsed by German Chancellor Dr. Angela Merkel.

More good news followed. Two hundred Jews from seventeen countries celebrated the rebirth of Reform Judaism in Germany in March 2006 at the World Union/European Region's conference in Hannover. The following month Chancellor Merkel officially received the World Union's top leadership, expressing her hope that Jewish life, with its various traditions and streams, would continue to flourish in Germany. In May 2006, the German parliament (Bundestag) approved annual funding for Abraham Geiger College, which had opened in 2001 as the country's first rabbinic seminary since World War II. And on September 14, 2006, the seminary ordained its first three rabbis, ushering in a new era for Jewish life in Germany.

For More Information

- Congregations and travelers can find information about Reform congregations in Germany and elsewhere – **www.wupj.org**
- World Union for Progressive Judaism – **www.wupj.org**
- Union of Progressive Jews in Germany – **www.liberale-juden.de**
- World Union/European Region – **www.europeanregion.org**
- Abraham Geiger College – **www.abraham-geiger-kolleg.de/en/index.php**

– Rabbi Uri Regev, President, World Union for Progressive Judaism

among immigrants from Germany like me and those with Polish or Russian ancestry. And eventually we received scholarships and other aid from the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture, Women of Reform Judaism, and the European Rabbinic Training Fund, along with individual contributions.

We also needed to consider the needs of our student body—German, Russian, Ukrainian, Swedish, Hungarian, and Czech Jews who varied in age, background, Jewish knowledge, and their ability to speak and understand German. Some of these issues would naturally resolve themselves—the enthusiastic and idealistic students helped each other through the difficulties.

No help was on the table from the Central Council—that is, until November 2000, when we held a major founding ceremony in Potsdam involving leading government and university officials as well as the World Union of Progressive Judaism. The German media's announcing that the seminary would be ready to admit students in 2001 put public pressure on the Council to reconsider its stance.

The remaining question was what to call our seminary. At Rabbi Homolka's suggestion, we selected Abraham Geiger College, in honor of Rabbi Abraham Geiger, the great Reform Jewish leader and thinker of the nineteenth century who'd dreamed of establishing a rabbinic seminary in Germany that would take its place alongside the university-based Protestant and Catholic seminaries of the time. His dream could not be realized in the highly anti-Semitic atmosphere of the late nineteenth century, but now it was attainable.

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In October of 2001, we opened the seminary doors to six students ranging in age from 21 to 38—Konstantin Pol (from Russia and Germany), Boris Ronis (Germany), Daniel Alter (Germany), Alice Treyger (Ukraine), Yuriy Kadnykov (Russia), and Tom Kucera (Czech Republic). Because of their varied backgrounds, some of the training was highly individualized. Mentoring was important, as the students had no rabbinic role models; simple things such as how to dress for more formal occasions had to be learned. They had never seen a Jewish wedding or funeral and never thought about interreligious dialogue. It was a new world for them, and for Rabbi Homolka (now rector of the seminary) and me (its president).

Finally, in the summer of 2006, the Central Council recognized the Abraham Geiger College, agreeing to provide some funding and embracing us as their rabbinic seminary. It had taken six years of coordinated effort—the threat of a lawsuit, North American Jewish involvement, and German government pressure through Rabbi Homolka's connections. Our success coincided with the Central Council's recognition and funding of Liberal Jewish congregations in select provinces.

We reached a great milestone on September 14, 2006: the commencement and first ordination of rabbis on German soil since the Holocaust. Three ordainees—Daniel Alter, 41; Tom Kucera, 35; and Malcolm Matitiani, 35—would soon be leading congregations in Munich, Oldenburg, and Cape Town, South Africa. The ultramodern synagogue of Dresden was packed as we marched in to the sound of trumpets. Thirty Jewish leaders from Germany, Israel, the United States, South Africa, Switzerland, and Great Britain attended the *shacharit* service. We received thoughtful good wishes and support from the German government, Catholic and Protestant leaders, and the Reform Movement worldwide. The ninety-minute service/ordination was televised live to 2,500,000 viewers throughout Europe and hundreds of thousands in Israel, North America, and Australia.

As I handed each of the seminary's first three ordainees their *semicha* (ordination certificate) and charged and blessed them with the traditional *"yoreh, yoreh, yadin, yadin"* ("teach and decide for the benefit of all"), I couldn't help but think back on how my own family had left in 1939, and now here I was, back in Germany, witnessing the rebuilding of a rabbinic tradition that I was helping to make happen. It was a wistful and joyful moment. I thanked God for "reaching this day." □