

A Jewish Rabbi in a Prussian Reading Circle (1880s)

Abstract

Despite the formal emancipation of Jews in the North German Confederation in July 1869, the integration of Jews into German society remained a controversial issue. Yet as the writer and later chronicler of the Nazi era Victor Klemperer (1881–1960) notes, his father, a rabbi, joined a Prussian reading circle in Brandenburg and felt thoroughly welcome there. Even the rise to prominence of the antisemitic court preacher Adolf Stöcker (1835–1909) in the late 1870s and 1880s did not immediately disrupt the integration—the sense of “intellectual belonging”—of this highly educated Jew. Clearly, his father lived within interlocking communities of local, regional, and national sentiment.

Source

Back then, Georg was already an assistant physician at Berlin’s Charité Hospital, and we lived in Bromberg. I have no recollection of Landsberg, the town of my childhood, which we left in 1884.

However, in some inherited books in my collection, such as Gustav Freytag’s *Luther* and David Friedrich Strauß’ *Voltaire*, there is a note pasted to the inside cover that has become increasingly meaningful to me over the years: “Fr. Schaeffer & Co. Reading Club, 1876. Rotation every fortnight. After circulation to all members, books are for sale.” Below that, there is a printed list of the 40 members: “Senior District Court Official Sellmer, City Councilor Roestel, State Attorney Toussaint, Dyke Warden Müller, Mayor Meydam, Captain Baron von Platow, General Petzel, Pharmacist Dr. Zanke, Dr. med. Lohnstein.” [...] It was, in other words, a collection of the small town’s notables and educated elite, including of course the gentlemen from the grammar school, Senior Secondary School Teacher Neide, and so on, as well as the clergy: the preacher Schroeter and the preacher Dr. Klemperer. The fundamental difference between the two ministers, who shared the same title, was not my father’s doctoral degree: Schroeter was a pastor, Klemperer a rabbi.

It is not the fact that my father numbered among these local civilian and military dignitaries that seems curious to me, nor that he even maintained friendly personal relationships with many of them. Before the Stoecker era, there was a long period when anti-Semitism in Germany was often quite minimal. Generally, tensions were much greater between industrialists and workers, for instance, or between Bavarians and Prussians than between Jews and Christians. And if a Jew converted to Christianity and thus stressed his willingness to be nothing but a German and not to lead a separate life within Germany, he hardly encountered any further obstacles in his own life, and his son would definitely face no difficulties whatsoever. Moreover, in this respect, the Stoecker period did not change anything. Yet what does surprise and almost touch me is the pure linguistic fact that on this printed, practically public list my father was recorded as a “preacher” and allowed to be named as such. Of course, there was no hide-and-seek in the little town; the Christians knew that he was a rabbi, and his parish knew that he let himself be called a preacher there. Obviously this was not regarded as any kind of secretiveness on the part of the Christians or treason on the part of the Jews. It was simply an expression of his will to Germanness.

He felt that he was absolutely a German, a Reich German. He was politically interested in the wars of 1866 and 1870/71 and was deeply satisfied with their outcome. He was a liberal, along the lines of the most widely read novelist at the time, Friedrich Spielhagen. In effect, this meant that he declared his support for the progressive bourgeoisie, as it was called back then, as opposed to the Junkers, but without racking his brains over the hard, all-too materialistic problems of social politics and economics.

At the time, the bookseller Schaeffer, a brilliant man with little sense for business, was publishing a moderately liberal and solidly nationalist little newspaper. My father collaborated in this project in his own way by cutting out and excerpting suitable articles from the big Berlin newspapers. He never dared to attempt any independent statements or formulations (while the twelfth-grader Georg was bold enough to write the occasional theater review). My father certainly never thought that there could be a tension between his Germanness and his Jewishness and his duty as a rabbi, at least not in Landsberg. And I do believe that the years in Landsberg were the happiest of his life, despite their meagerness.

[...]

My father considered it a kind of honor to have already been given the citizenship of the North German Confederation and to have experienced German unification as a Prussian citizen. When he wished to say something secret to his wife in the presence of his children, he might have spoken a few words in Czech. But he looked down on the Czechs with some condescension as a foreign and uncivilized people, and he also did not take the German Austrians quite seriously. On the other hand, I have heard him speak warmly of the Hungarians, whom he regarded as freedom fighters of the Revolution of 1848. He did not feel any hostility at all against any other nationalities, but the Germans were simply his own people. No one else was able to match German culture, and the actual representative of Germanness was the Reich and certainly not the confused and patchwork-like Austria. Anyone who was “over there” did not live, think, and feel quite the same way we did, regardless of being related by blood. After all, what did blood relations really mean? All that counted was intellectual belonging: that’s what distinguished humans from animals.

Source: pp. 16–19 (in excerpts)

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