

Emil Lehmann Addresses Leipzig Jews on the Antisemitic Movement (April 11, 1880)

Abstract

Emil Lehmann (1829–1898) was a Dresden lawyer and the first Jew to be elected (in 1865) to Dresden’s municipal council. From 1863 onwards, he practiced law and increasingly turned his attention to the struggle for Jewish rights. He was elected head of Dresden’s Jewish community [*Gemeinde*] in February 1869. Lehmann supported the assimilation of Jews into German society without the abandonment of their religious faith. His efforts had already contributed substantially to the (formal) emancipation of the Jews in Saxony on December 3, 1868—that is, before passage of the Law of Religious Freedom by the North German Reichstag (July 3, 1869). In the speech excerpted below, Lehmann comments on the “Berlin Antisemitism Conflict” [*Berliner Antisemitismustreit*]. He mocks the advocates of antisemitism, including composer Richard Wagner (1813–1883), court chaplain Adolf Stoecker (1835–1909), and Berlin historian Heinrich von Treitschke (1834–1896), all of whose names he studiously avoids mentioning. But Lehmann sees a palpable danger in the support that Treitschke received since his public pronouncement that “The Jews are our misfortune” (November 1879). He also identifies the absurdity of conceiving of Jews as “Semites.” The prospects for Jewish assimilation, he declares dramatically, are threatened by “this modern vivisection of Jewry, this cutting into our living bodies by our adversaries...” [“(d)iese neuzeitliche Vivisektion des Judenthums, dieses Heineinscheiden unsrer Gegner in unseren lebendigen Leib...”] Nevertheless, in his final lines he declares that German Jewry must bear such wounds in order to reveal its true humanity and patriotism.

Source

On the Antisemitic Movement in Germany

(Lecture delivered at the Third Ordinary Community Congress in Leipzig, April 11, 1880)

[...]

The *Kulturkampf* sparked the most recent wave of antisemitic literature. The authors of texts like the “Talmud Jew” and all those writers who exposed the Talmud and the Jews to general loathing can be found among those [Catholics] against whom the *Kulturkampf* was aimed. Written with the type of Dominican fanaticism known since time immemorial, these writings are being duplicated to this day in the form of countless imitations, especially in the capital of Silesia. Coming from another perspective (one that is different but displays an elective affinity), agrarian writers also joined the choir of “hep-hep”^[1] calls.

Third in the group were the so-called Christian Socialists, who sought to combine agrarian tendencies with Social Democratic maxims. Fourth was a pessimist, an ultra-radical who was dissatisfied with everything that had happened in Germany, who did not care for any of the political parties, and who now blamed the Jews for political and social conditions in Germany. Many other discontented persons followed this pamphleteer and peddled similar intellectual products.

Finally, a strict National Liberal Professor^[2] 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^[3], the Center Party, National Liberals of the most orthodox bent, ultra-radicals—all have voiced the battle cry

against the Jews. *Sabuni Kidevaurim*.

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. Here, it is curious that those who adhere most strictly to one confessional perspective tend to agree with those who reject all of them. In late November 1879, an central German [*mitteldeutsch*] official newspaper published the following in one and the same issue: an editorial amounting to a deep sigh against religious liberalism and a feuilleton report beaming with delight about the latest *Kulturgeschichte des Judenthums* [*Cultural History of Jewry*] and its attempt to excoriate the Old Testament and the old Hebrews from the most radical and non-denominational perspective.

[...]

In the seemingly scientific term “Semites,” people have found a new shibboleth or swear word, and it is even used by those who regard the tale of Noah’s three sons as a myth, those who dismiss the division of humanity into three classes or races as unscientific.

All this occurred under the rule of a legal code that threatens to penalize anyone who publicly incites various classes of the population to commit violent acts against each other and in this ways threatens the public peace (§ 130), and that threatens to penalize anyone who publicly insults any religious community with rights of corporation within the German territory, or the institutions or customs thereof (§ 166).

All this is punishable directly by the state, even without the filing of private charges. Nevertheless, so far no public prosecutor has officially charged the authors, publishers, or distributors of those antisemitic writings; no police authority has taken exception to those tempting signs in booksellers’ shops—“On the Jewish Question”—and the countless pamphlets that lie underneath them. As if, with the existence of legally stated equality, a Jewish question could still actually exist today!

Since October 21, 1878, we have the well-known law against the dangerous activities of Social Democracy. Although a good portion of those writings only take the Jews as the occasion and starting point for Social Democratic attacks on and disparagements of conditions here in Germany, although they are mostly intended to fuel the differences between those who supposedly make an easy living and those who are supposedly exploited—the Antisocialist Law was not applied to those writings. Only one public prosecutor, the one in Bremen, has warned of the founding of antisemitic associations, pointing to those regulations stipulating punishment under the criminal code.

The Committee of the German-Israelite Congregation League has repeatedly made the question of prosecution under the criminal code a subject of its detailed deliberations. I deem it beneath our dignity to draw attention to inflammatory writings by filing private suits. It is the governments’ responsibility to take action against them on their own. And where this does not happen, a private suit will accomplish extremely little. An acquittal, weak proceedings on the part of the public prosecutor’s office to which the plaintiffs appealed—this has happened before—has a worse effect than the execution of a sentence that creates martyrs.

In the few cases in which the Committee of the Congregation League has filed a complaint nonetheless, it has partly succeeded in effectuating punishment (some time ago) and partly suffered refusals by the public prosecutor’s office (in more recent times). According to the public prosecutor’s view, writings published in the capital at the time of the elections warning of Jewish members of the Reichstag did not contain any encouragement to violent acts; in their insulting reference to Jews in Galicia he did not

detect the offence of inciting various classes of the German population, even though the writings in question were written in Germany and obviously meant only for Germans and obviously aimed only at Jews in Germany. The Jews, he continued, are not considered a religious community but a race and tribe. Mocking and sarcastic remarks are not to be confused with insulting statements.

Another public prosecutor refused prosecution of an article in which the Jews were attacked in the most ignominious way—a Jew's oath of allegiance described as business formula, the brevet of the reserve officer as an object of Jewish business speculation—because an insult lodged against the Jewish tribe did not automatically affect every member of it.

Yet we Jews can best feel how antisemitic attacks threaten all of us, affect us all. And every Christian—both the biased and unbiased—will admit that these writings do not refer to the Jew Meyer but to the majority of all Jews.

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.

Moreover, it lingers not only in the souls of the indiscriminating. If governments, if public prosecutors do not take vigorous action against these writings—even though unbiased attitudes and a sense of justice prevails among them, even though the highest authorities in the German Reich have repeatedly expressed their decisive disapproval of such diatribes—then precisely this proves the existence of reservations regarding the application of the full force of the law in the face of an overwhelmingly widespread prejudice.

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 proportionally less dangerous than those of a pessimistic, ultramontane, agrarian, and Christian-Socialist character. 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 eventually tire of this agitation.

The situation as regards the position represented by the frequently mentioned historian^[4] 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—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, one because a Jewish composer^[5] had reverently honored the manes of his brother through an overture to his tragedy *Struensee*, thus creating competition for a drama by the same name written subsequently by the plaintiff; the other one^[6]—well, everyone can read this in “Jewry in Music” [“Judenthum in der Musik”]. A third author of cultural studies finds this and that objectionable about us; a fourth one, also an historian, and a well-known one at that, doubts our ability to organize politically; then the list continues with physicians, men of science who make negative remarks about Jewish physicians, nursing, and students. Anyone who wants to take the effort, year in and year out, to compile all the hostile statements that have been made against Jews and Jewry 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 *Götterdämmerung* of humanity is still a long way off, however. The disciples of Lessing, Alexander von Humboldt, and Schleiden are few and far between—a lot of antipathy toward us remains rooted in educated circles. The frequently mentioned historian, who recently thought he heard reverse “hep-hep” shouting, 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 Germanic 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 into 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 both 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 this 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 (*Pirkei Avot*), 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, 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. And in this respect, the Committee of the Congregation League has repeatedly done its duty.

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 and the Protestant League. 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, regardless of their religious branch, 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 antisemitic 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 non-denominational way. To them, Jewry was 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.

NOTES

[1] i.e., antisemitic calls—trans.

[2] Heinrich von Treitschke—trans.

[3] Adolf Stöcker—trans.

[4] Heinrich von Treitschke—trans.

[5] G. Meyerbeer—trans.

[6] Richard Wagner—trans.

Source: Emil Lehmann, “Ueber die judenfeindliche Bewegung in Deutschland.” Lecture delivered at the Third Ordinary Community Congress in Leipzig on April 11, 1880, in Emil Lehmann, *Gesammelte Schriften*. Berlin, 1899, pp. 215–24, here pp. 217–24. Available online at: <https://sammlungen.ub.uni-frankfurt.de/freimann/content/titleinfo/856147>.

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