

Bernhard Weiß, “More Self-Confidence” (June 1932)

Abstract

Bernhard Weiß (1880–1951) rose through the ranks of German law enforcement after the First World War to become Vice President of the Berlin police force by 1927, a pioneering achievement that illustrated the opportunities open to Jewish citizens in the Weimar Republic. Weiß’s success, however, also made him a prominent target for antisemitic hostility.

The Nazi Party attacked Weiß with particular zeal after he started to crack down on it for inciting street violence and undermining the Republic. On May 6, 1927, under Weiß’s direction, the police banned all NSDAP operations and activities throughout the region of Berlin-Brandenburg (a ban that was only lifted eleven months later, on March 31, 1928). Officers arrested nearly 500 party members, conducted extensive searches, and confiscated weapons. Joseph Goebbels, who had assumed direction of the party’s Berlin office just six months earlier, retaliated by savaging Weiß in the pages of the Nazi press, which dubbed Weiß “Isidore” to underscore his Jewishness. Weiß, in turn, initiated dozens of successful defamation suits against Goebbels. The latter simply paid the imposed fines and went on vilifying Weiß.

As the Weimar Republic moved ever closer to outright dictatorship in the last six months of 1932, officials summarily dismissed Weiß from his duties. His removal came in the immediate aftermath of the anti-democratic “Prussian Coup” (*Preußenschlag*) on July 20, 1932, a mere six weeks after this article first appeared in print. In March 1933, just over a month after the Nazis had seized power, Weiß fled to Prague in order to escape arrest and indefinite detention.

Bernhard Weiß wrote this June 1932 appeal as a warning and a wake-up call to his fellow members of the Central Association of German Citizens of Jewish Faith (*Centralverein deutscher Staatsbürger jüdischen Glaubens*, or C.V.), in whose weekly newspaper Weiß’s article appeared. Founded in 1893, and with 60,000 members by the mid-1920s, the C.V. was the largest organization in Germany representing and defending the rights of Jews as citizens.

Weiß began by expressing his deep concern over the nearly complete evaporation of electoral support for the party of liberal-minded, democracy-supporting middle-class voters. Weiß was referring to the German Democratic Party (*Deutsche Demokratische Partei*, or DDP), of which he and many other German Jews in the professional classes had been founding members. The DDP had staunchly supported the constitution and the Republic from the beginning, and, together with the Social Democrats and the Catholic Center Party, had comprised the so-called “Weimar Coalition” that anchored the new democratic order. The DDP had also energetically supported the rights of German Jews and served as a watchdog against rising antisemitism. From a high point in 1919, when the DDP had attracted a remarkable 18.6% of the vote for the National Assembly, the party had seen its support dwindle steadily, to just 4.8% in 1928. Just before the 1930 election—in an attempt to reverse this decline—the DDP had merged with a right-wing organization to form the decidedly less liberal German State Party (*Deutsche Staatspartei*, or DStP). This move proved in vain, though, as the DStP garnered a mere 3.8% of the votes cast in September 1930. Weiß interpreted the DDP’s demise as a bellwether for the Republic itself. Some of those who had once voted for the DDP, according to Weiß, began casting their ballots for far-right parties, but others—including an increasing number of German Jews—simply retreated from open engagement in politics altogether. They hesitated to vocally defend the republican values of democracy and the rule of law, and some even criticized German Jews like Weiß who acted—openly and vocally—to protect the Republic. Weiß directed an ardent appeal and some pointed criticism at this latter group.

Weiß also referred in his article to his decision on May 12, 1932, to enter the chambers of the German

Reichstag with a number of police officers in order to arrest four Nazi parliamentarians who had earlier that day brutally assaulted the journalist Helmuth Klotz, while Klotz was dining with SPD chairman Otto Wels in the Reichstag restaurant. Klotz, a former NSDAP member, had grown deeply disillusioned with the Nazis. He later got his hands on some private letters from the high-ranking Nazi official Ernst Röhm that confirmed Röhm's homosexuality. Klotz had published these in the SPD press in an effort to embarrass the Nazis, and the four assailants had wanted to settle the score.

The President of the Reichstag, Paul Löbe, had given Weiß and the police authority to enter the chamber, and although the constitution guaranteed parliamentary immunity for members of the Reichstag, it made an explicit exception for those situations in which members were caught in the very act of the crime, in this case assault and battery. An accelerated court trial sentenced the four Nazis on May 14, 1932, to a prison sentence of three months, vindicating the police decision to carry out their arrests.

Source

More Self-Confidence

by Police Chief Dr. Weiß, Berlin

The most recent parliamentary elections have clearly shown even the least of us: with the exception of some pitiful remnants, the so-called "liberal middle class" in Germany has disappeared from the political stage. And if we ask ourselves where those middle-class apostles of liberty who once proudly and enthusiastically followed the banner of civil and political liberty are today, the answer soon becomes evident: a segment of them have forsworn their previous dedication to liberty and democracy and swung over to the fascist camp, and the others have become "apolitical," i.e. they warily and faintheartedly avoid present political events, hiding away because they do not consider the times "opportune" to reveal their political—antifascist, liberal—views.

For us Jews, the consequences of this political development are all too obvious. Part of the liberal middle class, which once stood on the frontlines of the fight against antisemitism, has now fallen under the spell of antisemitism, and part no longer dares to raise its voice against intolerance and antisemitism; its political backbone is broken, and it has abandoned the political battlefield to the foe virtually without resistance.

And what of the German Jews, the overwhelming majority of whom belonged, socially and politically, to this "liberal middle class"?

Naturally they could not embrace fascism, whose German variant is, after all, decidedly antisemitic in character. Unfortunately, however, we must note that a certain segment of German Jews has joined the latter category of the liberal middle class, that is, has left the political area in dismay and refuses to engage in self-confident resistance, let alone to take up an offensive battle for the ideas of equality and against the corrosive spirit of intolerance and antisemitism. To be sure, it may only be a numerical minority of Jewish citizens who have succumbed to the political defeatism of our time, and the lack of self-confidence and fighting spirit may by no means be characterized as a specifically Jewish vice; the German middle class over all is politically worn down and has abandoned its old ideas in feeble timidity. Nevertheless, there are upright Jews whom all the hardships of the times and the pressure of political opposition will never rob of our inborn optimism and proud self-confidence, of the right, indeed I believe the duty, to remind that timid segment of our co-religionists of the disastrousness of their political behavior. If we German Jews feebly lay down our arms in the struggle for self-preservation, if we are inclined to make even the slightest concessions to our antisemitic opponents, we should not be surprised to find that the political equality of German Jewish citizens is a thing of the past.

In my work on the police force I recently encountered a case that may show the reader more clearly than any longwinded theoretical explanations how any sense of self-assurance has been stifled in the minds of some Jews, and how political pussyfooting, or better, political debasement, may be observed among certain Jews.

As acting police chief of Berlin (Police Chief Grzesinski was on holiday), I was compelled on May 12 to lead a police action against National Socialist deputies in the German Parliament. Not surprisingly, the National Socialist public and its antisemitic hangers-on were not well pleased that a German citizen of the Jewish faith conducted the action. As a party and an ideology, the National Socialists oppose any "Jewish influence over the state apparatus"; they wish to see German Jews excluded from all offices in the state administration and thus find it an especially insulting sign of their political impotence that a citizen of the Jewish faith heads the police and, in this capacity, enforces the will of the state against recalcitrant National Socialists. As a consequence, it is perfectly understandable that the official measures I take against National Socialists lead to professions of displeasure in the camp of those fundamentally averse to Jews. And I am not in the least offended by their "counteractions," be they witty cries of "Isidor!", delightful defamatory or threatening letters or nasty newspaper polemics. These counteractions, as tasteless as they may be in individual cases, are expressions of political opposition, which the National Socialists, like any citizen, must conversely expect me to respond to by fulfilling my official duty, whether or not the opponent is well disposed toward my race and my person. I have not the slightest sympathy, however, when, after the police action in the Reichstag, certain German Jews attack me for leading the police action and express the opinion that, precisely because I am a Jew, I should have abstained from that action against the National Socialists... In fact, a few such voices were raised in the Jewish camp. Thus the Jewish editor of a Berlin newspaper that had previously been considered democratic and called in no uncertain terms for my dismissal after the events in the Reichstag, freely admitted, when I questioned him, that as a Jew I should not have conducted the police action in the Reichstag. And that gentleman then went on to assert to me, "At times like these a Jew must avoid anything that could bring him into conflict with the National Socialists." (I quote verbatim, according to the notes I took during our telephone conversation.) I will cite only part of my response to that gentleman here. I told him that there could be no agreement or rapprochement with an attitude like the one he expressed to me.

I believe that any reader will understand how typical this individual case is. To take the abovementioned editor's attitude to its logical conclusion would be to cancel out all the attainments of hard-won Jewish emancipation, and ultimately lead back to a political ghetto. For centuries, the best Germans—Christians and Jews alike—fought for civic equality for German citizens of the Jewish faith, so that all professions and all positions in the state might be open to them as to any other citizen. This objective has largely been achieved. I was personally fortunate enough (even before the revolution) to be the first Jew to enter the Prussian administration, which had previously been devoid of Jews. I joined the Berlin police administration not on my own initiative, but after appointment by the last "royal" interior minister. The trust of my superiors assigned me to various positions within the police. For more than four years (1920 to 1924) I served as special head of the so-called political police and there I repeatedly took the most drastic measures against radical right-wing antisemitic groups. In those days no Jew, let alone a democratic newspaper, ever advocated the standpoint that I was not allowed to adopt such measures because I was a Jew. Now, however, in 1932, people are suddenly saying that the Jew needs to back off. Do the advocates of such a pusillanimous notion not realize that their line of thought ultimately ends in the arsenal of arguments of antisemitism?... From this perspective, a Jew in the civil service must not fulfill the duties of his office if in individual cases he has to oppose fundamental antisemites. The natural consequence is that no Jew may hold a position in the state that could bring him into "collision" with the enemies of Jews. In other words, no Jew may be an administrative official, a judge or similar organ of the will of the state. Is there any stopping this political line? Are the enemies of Jews not quite

correct when, taking their antisemitic standpoint to its logical conclusion, they also seek to close other professions to Jews? I politely refer the newspaper editor I spoke of previously to § 23 of the basic demands of the National Socialist party program, which states: “All newspaper editors and employees appearing in the German language must be members of the [German] nation [Volksgenossen].“ If the aforementioned editor does not wish me to execute my office as chief of police in future, and if the attack against me in his newspaper naturally met with jubilant approval in the antisemitic press, he should make no mistake about it: Should the National Socialist program be put into practice someday, Police Chief Weiß will not be the only one to disappear from his post. He, the German newspaper editor of the Jewish faith, will equally have to look around for another profession.

I am coming to the end of my remarks. The times certainly do not look rosy for us Jews. A wave of antisemitism has rolled over our German fatherland, and it will doubtless spare not a single Jew. But there is nothing more undignified and deplorable in such a situation than to give up the fight timidly and faintheartedly, adopting the anti-Jewish arguments of our opponents even as a compromise and thereby giving the foe carte blanche to realize his ultimate demands. The more they attack us, the more vividly and powerfully we upright, self-assured German citizens of the Jewish faith will resist, but above all—despite all our opponents—we will fulfill our duty for the good of the whole people, objectively and fearlessly, each in the place assigned him by destiny.

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