

Emil Fackenheim Recalls His Childhood and Youth in Halle, 1916-1933 (published posthumously, 2007)

Abstract

On May 24, 1924, the Hallische Turnverein 04 (HTV 04), a Jewish sports club in Germany, celebrated its twentieth anniversary with a gymnastics festival that was overshadowed by an antisemitic attack. The founder of the club, the author's father, was in charge of the event, which quickly turned from a celebration into a demonstration of right-wing violence when a group of Nazis appeared and attacked the guests with clubs. Despite the immediate alerting of the police and their confiscation of the weapons, no further legal action was taken. For Emil Fackenheim, this episode illustrated the inadequacies of the Weimar Republic, in particular its inability to confront the rise of right-wing extremism and the National Socialists, which led to a general sense of insecurity and lawlessness. The events of the gymnastics festival highlight the threat posed by the violent radical right and reflect the weaknesses of the Weimar Republic's judicial system, which was tended to show leniency towards right-wing extremist defendants.

Emil Fackenheim was ordained as a reform rabbi in 1938. Fackenheim, his parents and his younger brother fled to Great Britain in 1939. After the war began, he was deported and interned as an "enemy alien" in Canada, where he later served as a rabbi and earned a doctorate in philosophy. After living and teaching in Canada for many years, he emigrated to Israel in 1984. His older brother, who had remained in Germany, was murdered in the Holocaust.

Source

The date was May 24, 1924, the occasion: the twentieth anniversary of the "HTV 04." The Hallische Turnverein was a Jewish sports club my father had founded, or cofounded, in 1904, and of which, together with his friend Curt Lewin, he was the guiding spirit still. Nearly a decade later, in 1933, the HTV 04 was to become critically important. My father remained at the helm to the end. That end, for him and my mother, was flight to England on August 27, 1939, four days before the outbreak of the war. For Jews left behind, trapped, the end was catastrophe. My parents got out on the last plane.

The 1924 anniversary was celebrated with a *Schauturnen*, an exhibition of athletic skills and prowess by the young for the benefit of the old, such as parents—those less athletic than my father, who was a participant—uncles, aunts, others. Since the weather was clement that Sunday morning, the *Schauturnen* was held out of doors, in the courtyard of the school rented for the purpose. I still have the photograph that was taken on that occasion. My father, the perpetual *Vorturner*, is in the middle; behind him in the middle is Curt Lewin, his friend and the perpetual president, the only one in a suit. The picture shows the athletes in a *Riege*, a row, arranged, as was the German custom, according to height. My twelve-year-old brother Ernst Alexander is in the front row, close to the middle. My brother Wolfgang and I are at the end. At age eight I was the second youngest. He was the youngest at six.

The *Schauturnen* was well underway when two Nazis stopped at the gate, and one made an anti-Semitic crack. My father walked over and gave him an *Ohrfeige*, slapped him. The other Nazi ran off but reappeared shortly with about fifty others, all armed with clubs. In the turmoil that ensued everybody there for the *Schauturnen* fled helter-skelter into the school building, children, parents, others, everybody, that is, except Wolfgang and me. We had been told to stand at attention and nobody had said "at ease." I still remember the Nazi standing in front of us, not knowing what to do with his club and us kids. Our mother, having looked frantically inside the building and not found us, came running out and

pulled us—struggling, for there still was no “at ease”—to safety. The police were called, and they duly arrived. Also, no less, duly, they confiscated the Nazi clubs. That, however, was all. Nobody was arrested. No names were taken, with a view to charges in court of assault and battery. Thus I had an early experience of the Weimar Republic presenting, as philosopher Leo Strauss was to put it, the “sorry spectacle of justice without a sword or of justice unable to use the sword.”

This inability of the Weimar government to enforce justice was especially noticeable in its treatment of the Right, which included not only generals and Junkers (whose loyalty to the republic was dubious, to put it mildly) but also the street-brawling Nazi thugs, who made no secret of their intention to destroy the Weimar Republic and all it stood for. One year prior to our HTV 04 episode, Hitler, charged with sedition after his 1923 putsch, had been allowed to turn his trial into a circus. Jailed for an absurdly short time, he had been permitted streams of admiring visitors and also a secretary, the future Deputy Führer Rudolf Hess, to whom he dictated, in all the leisure and comfort prison could provide. A few years later, but still in the Weimar period, our school class used a history text in which the 1923 Hitler putsch was described. A very short time later, the Führer would destroy Weimar itself. Yet our Weimar text described him as a *Heissporn*, a “hothead”—not a traitor or a criminal but simply a chap a bit hasty to try a Good Thing.

There were other examples of such haste in my school. Once a principal declared that at least one good thing had come from the Versailles Treaty: the Weimar Republic was more united than the Kaiserreich had been; soon it would be more so—*ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer*.

[...]

Source: Emil Fackenheim, *An Epitaph for German Judaism, From Halle to Jerusalem*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2007, pp. 3–5.

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