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ERNST GOMBRICH With a preface by Emil Brix

On the occasion of the seminar Fin De Siècle Vienna and its Jewish Cultural Influences

17 November 1996

Preface

The following article by Sir Ernst Gombrich is part of a controversy. When the Austrian Cultural Institute was preparing a Festival of Austrian Jewish culture, I asked Sir Ernst to participate in a seminar on the topic 'Fin de Siècle Vienna and its Jewish Cultural Influences'. He was invited to speak about the Jewish influences on the visual arts. His answer was one of restrained fury. He questioned the very concept of a specific Jewish influence in the fin de siècle Vienna and warned against prolonging the idea that there existed a separate Jewish culture in Europe. I was glad that Sir Ernst finally accepted the invitation, for the sake of an open discussion on this difficult topic.

The seminar took place on 17 November 1996 in the London Liberal Jewish Synagogue. It was chaired by Rabbi David Goldberg. The speakers included Norman Stone, Martin Roth, Edward Timms and Steve Beller.

In recent years a growing amount of scholarly writing about Austrian culture and the extraordinary intellectual splendour of Vienna around 1900 has concentrated on the Jewish background of many of Austria's intellectuals. The Anglo-American historian Steve Beller's work highlights the ethical and educational influences of the Jewish enlightenment tradition. He interprets the phenomenon of 'Vienna 1900' as a reaction by Jews to partially failed attempts to integrate and to assimilate into Viennese intellectuals, but that the crisis of identity felt during the late Habsburg Monarchy can mainly be traced back to the experience of Jews caught in the dilemmas of assimilation.

Ernst Gombrich challenges this position. His lecture questions the relevance of the concept of Jewish identity to the cultured Jews of the turn of the century. He rejects any kind of collective 'national' myth.

Born in 1909, in Vienna, Ernst Gombrich grew up in an assimilated Jewish family and educated in the traditional German humanism.

The discussion which followed his lecture brought Gombrich's insight into contact with contemporary concerns, not to say anxieties, about the issues of identity and difference. It evoked the question of whether it is possible to assume a collective identity (be it Jewish, Austrian or British) without claiming the superiority of that identity over other, and of the role of intellectuals in the 'invention' and perpetuation of the 'national myths' which have so often in history led to disaster. I think Gombrich is

right when he points out that collective identity and the feeling of superiority cannot be separated. But there may be strategies of controlling the negative consequences of 'national' myths.

Ernst Gombrich belongs to an intellectual tradition which regards historiography as worth the effort in so far as it is capable of resisting the sway of myth. Argument will no doubt continue as to what that tradition owes to humanist, Jewish or Viennese culture.

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I think I should tell you at the outset that I am generally not a person who enjoys giving offence. I am afraid it was actually my reluctance to give offence that prevented me from declining the invitation by the Director of the Austrian Cultural Institute to give this Seminar. I fear I should have chosen the comparatively minor evil, because, I find to my regret, that much of what I shall have to say today is likely to cause a good deal of offence to members of the audience if they expect me to extol what our programme calls 'Jewish Culture'. Of course I know of many very cultured Jews, but, briefly, I am of the opinion that the notion of Jewish Culture was, and is, an invention of Hitler and his fore-runners and after-runners.

My brief is, of course, to talk about the so-called Jewish Culture and the Visual Arts, a problematic topic at the best of times. It so happens that I have a relatively easy point of entry into the topic, for when I was in Vienna in October 1994, I noticed that the Jewish Museum, which was still in temporary quarters, had arranged an exhibition of the artist Broncia Koller, whose maiden name was Pinles.

I still remember Broncia Koller as a flamboyant personality. In her early days she was a friend of my mother, and actually designed my mother's ex libris. A pleasing coloured woodcut of a farmhouse hung in our entrance hall. I also remember her very beautiful daughter Sylvia, who had been a pupil of Egon Schiele. I enjoyed the exhibition of Broncia Koller's work that is somewhat uneven, but obviously gifted, and I took home the catalogue, edited by Tobias Natter.

I confess I was both surprised and gratified to open it and read the introduction, because the sentiments and opinions it expresses happen totally to coincide with my own, about which I warned you at the outset. It is a letter written by Sergei Sabarsky who, as Dr Brix tells me, was an art dealer, much concerned with Egon Schiele's oeuvre. I should like your permission to read the whole text in translation, because, as I said, it relieves me of the necessity to explain my attitude, and reassures me that my stance is wholly an isolated one:

Dear Dr Natter

Some time ago you invited me to write an essay about Jewish patronage of art in the Vienna of the turn of the century. I tried to explain that, unhappily, I could not meet your wishes, and so we agreed that I would write you a letter to explain the reasons from my refusal. I was born in Vienna, a child of Jewish parents, in November 1912 - that is, after the turn of the century - but I am old enough to serve as a witness of the age. Among the c. 180,000 Viennese Jews, there was a number of very well-to-do families - though far fewer than is generally assumed nowadays. The overwhelming majority of the Jews of Vienna belonged to the middle classes. They were small businessmen and employees and certainly did not belong to the patrons of art in question. The patrons themselves were members of old-established Viennese families, who nearly all shared one characteristic: they felt themselves fully as Austrians and never thought of distinguishing themselves from their non-Jewish compatriots. They did not regard their traditional religion as a reason for differentiation. Since many of them were not

religious, this sense of belonging was facilitated. In fact they felt themselves to be cosmopolitans of Austrian nationality. Even those of them who thought most clearly never accepted the fact that this attitude was considered erroneous by their non-Jewish compatriots. They did not know, or did not want to know, that regardless of their Christian neighbours as Jews. Their world had at first to be fully annihilated in the Nazi millennium to convince the few survivors of their mistake.

Whether this attitude of the Austrian Jews (which, of course, existed equally in other European countries, most of all in Germany), was morally or ethically correct is not the issue. I do not want to report, and I have tried to do that in the present framework as simply as possible, even at the risk of obscuring, through this simplification, what I wished to clarify.

What has all this to do with the requested article about Jewish patrons of art in Vienna at the turn of the century? The patrons referred to never was themselves as Jewish patrons, and, if you will allow me for a moment to be melodramatic, they would turn in their graves if they knew of this classification, however well-intentioned. The division of Austrians, Germans and other Europeans into Aryan and non-Aryan citizens - and this need hardly be proved any more - rests on a racist attitude that was to find its final solution in the holocaust. To make a distinction between Aryan and non-Aryan human beings belongs, nolens volens, to the theory of the Nurnberg laws, even if it is done ever so philosemitically, and all the more if it is. But in order not to be misunderstood, and knowing full well that I am repeating myself, I am not asked to judge, only to report.

One does not do a favour to the wealthy lovers of art, who happened to be Jewish, by calling them 'Jewish patrons of art'. No more than when, with equally good intentions, one represents the great members of families, some of which had settled in Austria centuries before, the prominent representatives of literature, music or science, as having been different.

Let me close with a personal note. When I read German publications, such as the Stern or the Spiegel, headlines like 'The Germans and the Jews', I like to ask my German friends: 'What was Heinrich Heine - a German poet or a Jewish one? - Or Max Liebermann - a German painter or a Jewish one? It depends on the answer to this question whether my intervention will be understood or not. I hope that my declaration will meet with your understanding, and I remain yours.

Sergei Sabarsky

This, of course, is the crux of the matter. How do you define a Jew? In pre-Hitler days the term generally referred to a person's religion, and this definition seems to me still appropriate in the place of worship. From this point of view Heinrich Heine was certainly not a Jew, for he was not a believer; even less so was Felix Mendelssohn, who had, of course, prominent Jewish ancestors, but who was a devout Christian. I do not know about Max Liebermann, whom I still saw at the opening of an exhibition in Berlin, and who certainly looked exactly like his wonderful self-portraits, and undeniably Jewish, though I frankly know nothing of his religious outlook.

I shall have to return to the ambiguity of the term 'Jewish' later in my talk, but, given my brief of discussing the visual arts in Vienna, it does not seem to me very important. I am the happy owner of a heavy tome, published in 1909, the year of my birth, entitled *Altkunst-Neukunst*, by Ludwig Hevesi, who may or may not have been a Jew. Its 608 pages provide an unrivalled panorama of the visual arts in Vienna between 1894 and 1908. The index lists nearly 600 names of artists who exhibited during that period; but, frankly, it goes against the grain to enquire whether any of them were Jews or Jewish extraction. In any case, the artists and architects who were prominent in Vienna in that era

were certainly not Jewish in any sense of the term. Among the conservatives there was the amiable water colourist Rudolf von Alt, whose topographical views are widely admired. Among the innovators, of course, Gustav Klimt was in the lead, and, needless to say, he was not a Jew either, nor was his rebellious disciple, Oskar Kokscha. Among the architects, the generation that had built the monumental building of the Ringstrasse, Theophil Hansen and Friedrich Schmidt do not qualify, nor does one of the great innovators, Otto Wagner, the designer of the Postsparkasse. Adolf Loos, whom you are more likely to know, was not a Jew either, nor were any of the creators of the distinctive version of Art Nouveau in Vienna. The so-called Secessionists and Wiener Werkstätte, Karl Moll, Kolo Mose, Josef Hoffmann and so on, down to Egon Schiele, who belongs. Of course, to another generation. Truly, I do not find this at all surprising, for whatever Jewish culture may have been, it was not a visual culture.

I hope it is not unfair of me if I here take issue with Dr Steven Beller, for the Director of the Austrian Cultural Institute sent me a Xerox of Beller's article in *Zweitgeschichte* on our topic, to appraise me of the alternative opinion, so that I might consider it at the Seminar. [1] Dr Beller's estimate of the importance of Jewish culture in Vienna reminded me of another book I have also possessed for a long time. It is the autobiography of Jehudo Epstein, who was a successful portrait painter in Vienna in my time, and actually portrayed my father's brother, though I never greatly liked his work.

I did, and do like his autobiography, called *My Way from East to West* (Stuttgart, 1929). I think it gives a fully convincing picture of life in the Jewish stetl before the turn of the century. For Epstein was born around 1870, near Minsk, so that he fully qualifies for this study of Vienna around 1900, for by that time, a stroke of good fortune had enabled Epstein to attend the Academy of Fine Art in Vienna.

I wish I could quote extensively from this moving and realistic book, which describes the milieu from which the author came with unprejudiced clarity. 'In this milieu,' writes Epstein, 'time stood still at the same spot for a thousand years, and could not resolve to progress. A whole people lay in a lethargic sleep, dreamt of nothing but the past and did not want to perceive the present. The Exodus of the Jews from Egypt, the sacrifice of Abraham, the seizure of Canaan, Nebuchadnezzar, the Pharaoh, were still topical matters, and personalities in whom one was vividly interested. For the Exodus from Egypt the Lord was thanked every day, several times; also, god was reminded of Abraham's readiness to sacrifice his son. One still discussed the biblical nations of Amon, Moab, Gog and Magog, and, in particular, Amalek, who had created many difficulties for Israel on its trek through the desert, was frequently cursed. This accursed Amalek, how I hated him in my childhood! How much trouble he had caused for the people of Isreal... When, in the synagogue, on reading a section of the Torah, the name of Amalek occurred, the whole assembly shouted eagerly: Jimach schmoi weisichroi!' (May his name and memory be erased!). They did not notice that these people, this Amalek, no less than Amon and Moab, had perished and turned to dust long ago. They were not aware of the fact that new people and new religions had risen around them.

Let me insert here that Dr Beller attaches much importance to the Jewish traditions of Talmudic learning, as an ingredient of their alleged cultural prominence. Epstein confirms that learning was held in high esteem in this community, but he also describes his experience as follows: 'I frequented schul, and obviously I disliked it much. What we were taught was monotonous and held no attraction for me. Year in, year out, it concerned the learning of the Hebrew language and its literary content. Since both were taught in conjunction, there was no real joy in learning either the text or the translations... the main interest of teachers and pupils was not centred on the narrative and its beauty, but the correct translation of the words, and their interpretations by commentators - interpretations which were frequently totally hare-brained. The further books of Moses, with their legal content, the many decrees

about the sacrifices in the temple, which contained any number of passages, unintelligible even to grown-ups, contained nothing that could enlist the interest of a child.'

Still, Epstein admits that he is grateful to be able to read the Bible in the original, 'but,' he continues, 'the language of the Talmud, the Aramaic language, I have wholly forgotten, though I learnt it later. The reason must be that I learnt it without joy, like a parrot. Of what concern was this legislation to a child? ... the question, for instance, that if a hen had laid an egg on the Sabbath, was it permitted to eat it or not? But such questions were often treated as if they were of great importance, and demanded painful translation of many pages of text.'

Admittedly Dr Beller claims that this tradition of Talmudic learning was transformed by what he calls the Jewish Enlightenment or Haskalah, appealing for this interpretation to a book by David Sorkin on *The Transformation of German Jewry*. I have not read that book, but I find it hard to accept the thesis that the secular ideal of *Bildung*, of culture, could be grafted on to the mental habits Epstein described. That ideal of culture which indeed replaced religion for many members of the middle class, whether Jews or non-Jews, took Goethe as its model. Not the poet, but the free spirit show had no use for established religion, and who was always open to the achievement of other cultures and to all the arts. [2]

Needless to say, in the milieu Epstein recalled, 'nothing was known of the visual arts, and nobody in our world had even heard of the art of painting... I had hardly seen any images. True, outside the Orthodox church there was an icon, surrounded by ragged towels under a roof, but we were not allowed to look - this would have been a sin - and I passed by with lowered gaze. True, I occasionally glanced at it curiously, but there was not much to be seen.'

You will understand that it was almost miraculous that such a boy acquired an interest in drawing. Apparently, he first copied playing cards, to replace ones which were worn. The copying pleased him, and he copied any image that came into his reach, much to the displeasure of his father. But he also tells us that he never thought of drawing anything from nature, and nobody in his world gave him the idea, though later in the story he acquired the skill of drawing at various institutions. We reach page 230 of his memoirs, when he tells us that he had heard that artists sometimes studied scenery. The episode that follows I have quoted in *Art and Illusion*, because it turns out that he was quite incapable of understanding that houses nearby would have to be drawn at a larger scale than the castle on the hill at a distance. It was only after a teacher had lent him a book on perspective that the truth dawned on him. I cannot tell you of all the vicissitudes and difficulties that he overcame before entering the Vienna Academy. You will not be surprised to hear that, when he first gained sight of the Imperial collections of Vienna, he was, by his own admission, quite incapable of distinguishing the quality of a Rembrandt from that of an official portrait of a general.

So much for the background of a prominent Jewish artist in Vienna around 1900. Admittedly, the example I have chosen is an extreme one. The majority of the Viennese middle class certainly did not come from the stettl, and their background was very different. To be frank, it is utterly unrealistic, not to say ignorant, to talk of Jewish culture while ignoring the distinction between Eastern Jews - such as Jehudo Epstein - and the assimilated Jews of Germany and Austria. If the truth is to be told, Western Jews despised and cruelly ridiculed the Eastern Jews for their frequent failure to understand, adopt and assimilate the traditions of Western culture. Many Jewish jokes turn on this difference, and Karl Kraus - who is now hailed as a Jewish prophet - mainly regarded it as his sacred mission to safeguard the purity of cultured German from the pollution of the Jewish jargon written by journalists from the East who were employed by the daily press. Like Sabarsky, whose letter I quoted at the outset of my

talk, I do not feel called upon to judge, condemn or condone this antagonism, but it is a fact that most of the assimilated Jews of Vienna felt that they had more in common with their gentile compatriots than they had with the new arrivals from the East. I just used the term 'Jews' and 'gentiles', but somewhat contre coeur. We lack a term to designate all individuals of Jewish ancestry, and thus we cannot but use basically racist terminology. In fact, I think it was precisely the diversity of language and culture among the Jews of the diaspora that left race as the only distinguishing criterion, after religion had ceased to serve that purpose. Two movements, of course, were here involved: the antisemites and the Zionists. They continue to apply this terminology, despite the fact that geneticists have meanwhile told us that race is a very shaky notion in human affairs. We all have two parents, four grandparents, eight great-grandparents, and after ten generations we should have two to the power of ten, that is one thousand and twenty-four ancestors, unless there was intermarriage. In my case, the likelihood that all my ancestors shared all their genes with Abraham seems to be minimal - all the less as Judaism only recognises matrilineal descent. It was this feeling of the artificiality of the so-called Jewish identity that prompted many assimilated Jews, including my parents, to convert, and thus to complete the process of assimilation. They often omitted to pass on to their children the little they still remembered of their Jewish origins. When my late sister, who was a violinist, joined the Israeli orchestra in what was then Palestine, her landlady told her before Passover to remove all 'sour' things from her kitchen. Whereupon she obediently removed a lemon and a bottle of vinegar, but not the bread, and was promptly shown the door! True, even the Jewish households we knew in Vienna did not observe the dietary laws. If I may continue this digression and talk about my own family: My paternal grandfather, who was born in Offenbach, was a wholesale dealer in lace who settled in Vienna with his wife, who hailed from Frankfurt. I remember him as a respected and respectable patriarch. I do not think that he was unusually cultured, unlike some of the younger members of his generation. My maternal grandfather was born in Prague, some time around 1813 - strange as that may sound - and came to Vienna as a young man. I know little about him except that his outlook was so thoroughly secular that he sent his daughter - my mother - to a non-denominational educational establishment, the Paedagogium, where she received no religious instruction. My maternal grandmother came from further East: she was born in Bratislava. I happen to be well informed about her background because of her mother - my great-grandmother - to her fiancé, have been preserved and published for private circulation.[3] She certainly was a lively and cultured young lady, and without religious preoccupation - indeed, her husband appears to have left Bratislava for Vienna because he could not stand the narrow orthodoxy of the Jews in his native city. Strangely enough, the family had wide-flung connections, and it appears that I am even collaterally related Heinrich Heine. Of my mother's elder brothers, who were twins, one became a lawyer, the other a paediatrician. Both were wholly unworldly and of formidable erudition. The Greek and Latin classics, Dante, Shakespeare and the Scandinavians such as Ibsen and Björnson were always present to their minds, but I do not recall them mentioning the Bible, let alone the Talmud, despite the fact that the lawyer acted for the Jewish Kultusgemeinde of Vienna. That is by the way. What I wish to stress again in the present context, is that these members of the bourgeoisie took it for granted that culture - or Bildung - was not a Jewish tradition, but the tradition of German Humanism. I also have the memoirs, at home, of a Frankfurt cousin of my father, Richard Goldschmidt, who became an eminent - not to say famous - pioneer of the science of genetics. [4] Looking back, Goldschmidt, who, I suppose, remained Jewish all his life, paid a moving tribute to the influence of some of his schoolmates and their homes in Frankfurt. He writes that in his parental home (his parents owned a coffee-house), he learnt little about culture, and it was only through his acquaintance with members of what he calls the 'patricians' of Frankfurt that he acquired his taste and his interest in art. In short, my own experience confirms, I hope, that there were cultured Jews, but their culture was not Jewish. And so I must return to my brief: the discussion of the visual arts in Vienna around 1900, but I hope it is clear by now that this is not a pursuit in which people of Jewish extraction predominate.

I know there was the painter, Tina Blau, to whom an exhibition was recently devoted in the Vienna Jewish Museum, and the able painter Max Openheim, who signed himself 'MOP', but this does not constitute an argument for Dr Beller's thesis. True, Dr Beller cannot but acknowledge in his article that the majority of visual artist and architects of Vienna were not Jewish, but he tries to save his thesis of the over-whelming importance of Jewish influence, by arguing that many of their patrons were, and that it was these patrons who fostered the Modern Movement.

Reading this assertion, I suddenly had a *déjà vu*: Where had I read all this before? Of course! In the Nazi propaganda of my youth, where it was constantly asserted that the Jews were behind everything, and that it was they who were responsible for what the Nazis called 'degenerate art'. Nazis, of course, were great myth-makers, and intentionally so. [5] But even if you turn a myth on its head, you do not get the truth. What I have to contend with here is clearly a kind of anti-myth which has to be exposed in the interests of truth. Among its origins I may count the statement by Stefan Zweig quoted as a motto of this Festival, in which he claims that: 'Nine tenths of what the world celebrated as Viennese culture of the nineteenth century was a culture promoted, nurtured, or in some cases even created by Viennese Jewry.' I do not know what his units of measurement were, but according to my knowledge, Beethoven and Schubert lived in Vienna in the nineteenth century, and so did Anton Bruckner and Brahms. What I know of their lives does not confirm that they were particularly associated with people of Jewish descent. But the true originator of the inverted myth was George Steiner, a man of great learning and eccentric views, who, in a lecture for television, to which I and Dr Beller were invited, propounded the bizarre idea that most of the innovations of the twentieth century were due to the Jews of Vienna. Of course, he used Freud's psychoanalysis as a paradigm which he applied wholesale to all fields. I find, to my embarrassment, that the myth has reached its farcical form on the last page of the folder published by the Austrian Cultural Institute, where I read: 'If you want to know why most of the twentieth century intellectual life was invented in Vienna, please contact us.' Here, I am afraid, I have reached a point where I cannot and must not mince words. The formulation seems to me tantamount to saying: 'If you want to know why so much of the moon consists of green cheese, please ask me.'

The thesis that most of the intellectual life of this century was invented in Vienna is, of course, not worth discussing. I would feel ashamed to inflict on you a string of names of influential thinkers or artists of this century who were British, American, French, Italian, Spanish or German, whether Jews or not, and whose life work may even have worn better than that of Freud. But I am compelled by the occasion to return to Vienna, which was certainly one of the cultural centres at the turn of the century, and to refer briefly to the megalomaniac claim that its culture was Jewish. As you may know, I am an art historian, and the so-called 'Vienna School of Art History' has indeed made an important contribution to my discipline. Its creators were Franz Wickhoff, Alois Riegl, Max Dvorak and my teacher Julius von Schlosser, none of them Jews. In Philosophy, the so-called 'Vienna Circle' was certainly influential, particularly in this country. It centred on Professor Moritz von Schlick, the proponent of Neo-Positivism, and its driving spirit was Rudolf Carnap. Admittedly, some other members of that circle were, or may have been, Jews, but who cares? - The answer is simple: Hitler cared.

I am back at the beginning, but perhaps I may still add a few words of reflection on the consequences of a distinction which by now looks inescapable. We tend to assume that it is the function of language to describe reality, but frequently language also creates or transforms reality, especially social reality. Remember that, in a little more than three years the world will go crazy about the fact that we have reached a new millennium. Jews should find it easier to recall that the era by which we reckon is entirely arbitrary; and so, of course, is the decadic system. But the millennium, which is the result of

our way of counting on our ten fingers, has acquired the character of a solid reality. In politics we have the strange distinction between right and left, which derives from the seating order of the Convention during the French Revolution. Most people know that the distinction has lost all meaning, but they cannot get rid of it. More tragic, indeed, horrible, is the distinction in Africa between the tribes of the Hutus and the Tutsis, apparently of little consequence before the arrival of colonial administrators, and now responsible for endless slaughter and suffering. The term 'Aryan', finally, was originally introduced by the great nineteenth century linguist, Max Müller, to designate a family of languages, but not a people, let alone a 'race'. For him it would have been not merely illogical, but absurd, to describe Chinese or Hebrew as 'non-Aryan'. But as you know, the distinction was seized upon by racialists, and ultimately led to the unspeakable campaign of expropriating and killing all so-called non-Aryans, which was supposed to mean Jews.

The point is now, that even those of us who are aware of the mythical origin of that classification cannot be accept this label.

I used to think I was a Viennese, or an Austrian, but then a large number of my fellow citizens discovered that I was a non-Aryan, and they would have treated me accordingly if I had not been out of their reach. Meanwhile, after half a century, well-intentioned people are evidently seeking to convince their compatriots that 'non-Aryans', or Jews, are not baddies, but goodies who contributed to the glory of Vienna, or actually created it.

I share the opinion of my late friend Karl Popper, that intellectuals have much to answer for, now, as in the past. We know how often they have invented and fostered collectivist myths.

If I may close with the words Popper used: 'I consider any form of nationalism to be criminal arrogance, or a mixture of cowardice and stupidity. Cowardice, because the nationalist needs the support of the crowd - he does not dare to stand alone - stupidity, because he considers himself and his ilk to be better than others.'<sup>[6]</sup>

## NOTES

1. Steven Beller, 'Was Bedeuter es "Wie 1900" als eine jüdische Stadt zu beseichnen' in *Zeitgeschichte* vol. 23, 7/8 (1996), 274-80
2. See my address on receiving the Goethe Prize from the City of Frankfurt in 1994, published in R. Woodfield (ed.), *The Essential Gombrich*, London, 1996
3. Paul J. Diamant (ed.), *Minna Diamant, 1815-1840 - Ein Briefwechsel aus der Biedermeierzeit*, 'Olamenu', Tel Aviv, PO Box 3002
4. R. Goldschmidt, *In and out of the Ivory Tower*, Seattle, 1960
5. See my 'Myth and Reality in German wartime Broadcasts' in *Ideals and Idols*, Oxford, 1979
6. Herlinde Koelbl, *Jüdische Portraits*, Frankfurt, 1989, p. 19

The horrible fate that has befallen millions of wholly innocent people almost prevents one from seeking any other explanation apart from that of human insanity and depravity. But little is gained by such abstention, for it only favours the emergence of further noxious myths.

My main thesis is that the Jews were the victims of the transition from feudalism to capitalism, or to use Popper's term,[1] from a closed to an open society, a transition that has proved psychologically traumatic.

The ideal type of a feudal society is that of a static hierarchy, where everybody knows his or her place. In the Christian Middle Ages, the individual's destiny was almost, though not quite, determined by the accident of birth, as it is in the Indian caste system. To the modern mind this type of society that limits initiative and freedom may seem repugnant, but it turns out that it offers its members considerable benefits. It removes the burden of responsibility and encourages resignation and peace of mind. An open society - the more it approximates the ideal condition of a pure meritocracy - is bound to engender guilt feelings and jealousy among the majority of its members who fail to reach the top. It might be claimed that in the feudal Middle Ages even the Jews had their divinely ordained place in the scheme of things. Accursed as they were thought to be for having denied the Messiah, they were still the heirs of a past which was part of the history of salvation. At the enthronement of every new pope, the elders of the Jewish community in Rome had to present him with the Torah, which, being identical with the Pentateuch, he acknowledged with the words 'We confirm the Law, but we condemn the Jewish people and their interpretation', (or '*confirmamus sed non consentimus*').[2]

It is well known that the Jews had their uses in this precarious position. They were not allowed to own land (the only source of power and position), but, in theory at least, Christians were not allowed to lend money on interest, and the population increased and market economy advanced, the more their service was needed, till they functioned as a capitalist enclave within feudal society.

I must add at this point, for the sake of later developments, that the picture of that society I presented was, of course, much oversimplified. For though its mainstay was the landed aristocracy that held the reins of power, it could not have done so without two additional elements, the clergy and the clerks. The way these institutions were manned contradicted, up to a point, the static principles of feudal society, for in the hierarchies of the church and of the law, birth was not the only factor that counted. In theory, at least (though rarely in practice), a gifted country lad could rise in these hierarchies by virtue of his abilities and his schooling. It was the universities, founded in the Middle Ages, which trained the future luminaries of the church and the law who would make themselves indispensable to feudal rulers who were frequently illiterate.

The expansion of this sector through the growth of cities, and the need of the rulers for cash to pay the armies is part of the economic history. The correlating cultural history may never have been fully explored. I refer to the rearguard action of the beneficiaries of the feudal society, their nostalgia for the psychological security it appears to have offered, and the dread with which they contemplated its disintegration. However much they clung to their inherited status, they saw themselves confronted by new forces that menaced their values.

These tensions can be observed in the cultural development of all European states, even in England, the first country of Europe to undergo the Industrial Revolution, preserved traces of antagonism: the low estate of those who were 'in trade', as compared with the land owners. But England was saved from the extreme consequences of this rift in society by the system of primogeniture that secured a minimum of social mobility. Only the oldest son of a lord inherited the title, while traditionally the younger sons went into the army, the navy, the Church, or the Law, for which they were prepared at Oxford or Cambridge. Their descendants, in their turn, could then merge with the middle classes.

In parts of the continent of Europe the social structures of feudalism had survived more tenaciously - despite the French Revolution - and at least a minority regarded Jewish emancipation as a threat to their ancestral culture. They gave vent to their largely irrational fears in wild, antisemitic tirades that read in retrospect as anticipations of the Holocaust, but did not substantially affect the continuing process of assimilation.

The social dynamics of this process are perhaps exemplified by the situation in Eastern Europe where the feudal system survived almost intact into the nineteenth century. It would be a pardonable exaggeration to say that in the past of Hungary there were really only two classes that counted: the landowners, or magnates, and the tillers of their soil, who had barely emerged from serfdom. The Jews made a meagre living by selling spirits to the peasants and lending money to the Magnates for interest, neither activity rendering them popular. But even in these parts of Europe, the needs of the market economy made themselves felt, and so it was mainly the Jewish communities that seized the opportunities in trade and industry, the Magnates being too proud, and the peasants too ignorant for such a role.

My point is that it was in some such way that the Jewish enclave burst open, as it were, moved to the expanding cities, and began to fill the role of the middle classes as grain merchants, bankers or manufacturers. Continuing in these oversimplified terms, we may assume that, when members of the aristocracy or of the peasantry gradually woke up to these novel opportunities, they found the lucrative positions already occupied by Jews who had been there first, and who were accordingly hated as intruders: only recently had they been despised - now they were also envied.

One more element in this simplified situation remains to be considered: if, in the hierarchical society, everyone knew his place and was satisfied to follow his father's calling, there were no such restraints in the industrial or commercial sector. On the contrary, if the first entrants into the field had risen from the poverty of the Shtetl, they hoped and expected their children to do better still and to rise still higher. In other words, they really did not know their place, and opportunist upstarts, however much they may have tried not to draw attention to themselves.

To repeat: the established members of the society, whether aristocrats of bourgeoisie, tended to be secure in their social status. Newcomers had no choice but to fight for a better future for their offspring in the professions.[3] In the first instance, perhaps, to acquire useful skills in medicine or law, for though the so-called professions did not always figure very high in the social hierarchy, they, like the clerks in the Middle Ages, could still aspire to almost any more elevated position in political or social life.[4]

I think a demographic study would confirm that the sons of these members of the professions were generally determined to disregard the last traces of their social handicaps to follow their interests and become scientists or scholars. If they were successful, they were indeed able to gain entry anywhere by virtue of their achievements and reputations.

Therefore, I strongly believe it was social dynamics, rather than race or genetics, that accounted for the prevalence of Jews among the intellectuals of once conservative societies. It is also true that similar privileges were soon within the reach of less gifted newcomers in the growing world of the media and of entertainment, where they tended to forget the advice of their elders not to draw attention to themselves. They frequently saw themselves as opinion makers, and, since they had a stake in the advance towards a fully open society, they attacked the last privileges of feudalism, and were seen to lack any reverence for traditional values - thus bringing the antagonisms of which I have

spoken out into the open. It is one of the tragic ironies of this story that Jews, for reasons sketched above, were much attracted to left wing political parties, and indeed were prominent among the communists, little knowing that the utopia they fought for would be the opposite of an open society. This Jewish element in what were seen as subversive movements certainly was grist to the mill of the antisemites.

Even so, I believe that the dynamic process I have sketched would soon have run out of steam and stabilised itself, as largely happened in Germany and other Western countries, through the continued process of intermarriage and assimilation. For obvious reasons this could not, and did not happen in Austria, because Vienna was one of the first ports of call for the stream of Jewish immigrants from the East, who also desired to improve their wretched lives and to find a better chance for their sons.

Sad as it may be, it is undeniable that the established and assimilated Jews of Vienna regarded this stream with growing apprehension. They feared that the numbers would reach the critical mass that could lead to an explosion. Not that this explosion was inevitable, but it turned out that the paranoid malice of a cunning demagogue sufficed to unleash the catastrophe.

## NOTES

1. K. R. Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, London, 1945

2. Ferdinand Gregorovius, 'Das Ghetto und die Juden in Rom', 1853, reprinted in *Wanderjahre in Italien*, Fritz Schulman (ed.), Dresden, 1923, p. 286-7. According to that author, the ceremony occurred for the first time in 1119, and was last performed under Leo X in 1513. In later years it was transferred indoors to shield the Jewish delegates from ill-treatment by the crowd.

3. There are parallels among the present day immigrants to North America, for instance the newcomers from the Far East.

4. I gratefully remember an autobiographical lecture given in Vienna by a popular Jewish cabaret artist Fritz Grünbaum in which he humorously explained the pecking order in his native industrial town of Moravia, with the manufacturer on top and the workers nowhere. But, he explained, lawyers and doctors occupied a place comparable to the jolly joker in the card game; they could even aspire to marrying the daughter of the manufacturer.