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ON GERMAN *GEIST*

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Abstract. This essay first argues that *Geist*, in the connex with “German”, can be translated, following N. Hartmann, as “Spirit”. Elements stemming from J. Lotman, J. Locke, and J.W. v. Goethe are added, resulting in the meaning of German Spirit as specific moments in Germans at a given point in time. The one moment which today determines German identity is argued to be the Holocaust. This is confirmed, aided by the *polis*-theory of L. Strauss, by an analysis of the 1986 *Historikerstreit*. The essay then proceeds to argue that for contemporary Germany, assuming that a sound national identity is the best safeguard of a pluralistic-democratic country, this is only an option if one can see National Socialism as somehow un-German, which is claimed to be possible. Following the argument of Count Krockow, this then leads to the realization that German Spirit is actually to a large extent German-Jewish Spirit.

“Germany: See also Berlin; Hitler, Adolf; Nazi party”. (Manchester 1992, Index:734–735)

What is German *Geist*?¹ First of all, why is it something almost any German would be greatly hesitant to talk about? Mainly, I think, because just the invoking of something called “German” is, and I think this is so exclusively as regards Germany, something that *a priori* and necessarily bears the connotation of illegiti-

¹ This essay was first presented as an invited lecture in the University of Tartu Institute of Semiotics Spring Term Lecture Series in April 1994. While the text has been shortened and modestly updated in later 1996, the lecture style has been retained. The update material derives from a seminar presented to the Department of Sociology at the University of Lund, Sweden, in September 1996. I am grateful to Messrs. Igor Černov and Göran Dahl for their very kind invitations at Tartu and to Lund, respectively; to Messrs. Jüri Allik, Hans-Peter Folz, Rainer Kattel, and Peter R. Senn, I owe considerable gratitude for their reflections on these lines. However, much of their good advice I rejected, so that they must not be held accountable for what follows.

macy. But the topic is also problematized by the fact that the subject is too “large” or too “high”, always in danger of becoming a Sunday-speech or a fraternity toast.

Yet, there lies a chance in talking about too large a topic for one’s own boots as well. This chance results from the insight that the scholarly universe is Postmanian these days as well, and that the key to scholarship must be selection, rather than acquisition of information. These days, those scholars who deny that they simply cannot read even everything good even within their own special area also do select, just because life is finite; their selection is that of pure accident. This attitude requires a break with a scholarly history of over 2,000 years and is therefore most difficult to accomplish; yet, I do not see another option. And to me at least it is easier to select rather than acquire in a field where I *know* that I do not even have the chance to be all-encompassing. This gives me the privilege, rather: the right not to have to know everything.²

Finally, in any attempt to discuss German *Geist*, I, as I presume any German, and this may perhaps be a manifestation of German *Geist* itself, am heavily tempted to heap quotes upon quotes and references upon references, so that Martin Heidegger – in himself certainly a symbol if not symptom of the problems of German *Geist* – would have interjected, “*viel zu gelehrt*” (much too scholarly, much too educated; Jonas 1987:14). In addition, it was the late Jurij Lotman who emphasized the futility of quoting which necessarily obliterates the author’s intended meaning,³ as far as an artwork, especially a poem, is concerned. (1970:19) I think that similar things could be said about a scholarly text, which in our days often must be an artwork, as essential points are not anymore expressible within the scholarly discourse. Nonetheless, what follows will be occasionally close to a cut-and-paste work; an assembly of quotations, something almost akin to Umberto Eco’s description of fake-museums in California in his “Travels in Hyperreality”. (1986)

What is German *Geist*? The definition of “German” can be left pleasantly vague, and as all vague definitions, it is going to be much stronger for being so. It means roughly, German geographical borders; roughly, German national culture; roughly, German language. Not race, of course, there is no German race; and not citizenship, either, although it could be that; that problem will be, if very briefly, addressed below. I think that “German” is a word most readers can place somehow. In a famous caricaturesque scene in Hermann Kant’s *Die Aula*, a traveling salesman for prunes sums up the pseudo-positive, nationalistic clichés of “German” as follows:

² As an aside: because of this, we are at liberty to disregard all those authors who we find either boring or problematic, because there is enough good writing by good people we have to neglect. If authors are any good, and if we are any good, they will come back to us in good time almost automatically anyway, and if not, why bother?

³ Yes, I believe there is such a thing; communication with just marginal loss of meaning is at least possible.

Bismarck, Barbarossa, Langemarck, Volkswagen, Lilli Marlen, Skagerrak and Petra Krause, Charlemagne in spite of Widukind, was a misunderstanding, tragic as in Wagner, Wagner also belongs into the series, Faust, of course Faust, and the German Mark and the Made in Germany and Cologne Cathedral, Battle of Tannenberg and Battle in the Teutoburg Forest, Brothers Grimm and Ludwig Erhard, the latter is a matter of view, economic matter plays into this, that we can just leave out in this context, but the rest, for this I stand up, this is German, fundamentally German, nobody can take that away from us. (1987:58)

And *Geist*? The fact that there is, or seems to be, as my title implies, no direct English translation of this word, as, e.g., *Wissenschaft* and *Angst*, appears to imply that the concept of *Geist* alone is something profoundly and/or specifically German. The problem of translation is a decisive one in this case. I am quite at pains with the conundrum that this essay is written in English but that it requires the use of certain German words and quotes that are utterly untranslatable. But if translation is necessarily approximation at best anyway, it might be possible to find some word for *Geist* in English. For *Geist*, it would be impossible, but for “German Geist”, fortunately it is possible.

Geist is the German word for something which in English means both “mind” and “spirit”. In other contexts, it also means “ghost”, “essence”, “intellect”, “esprit”, “atmosphere” and even a kind of alcohol. Jasper Blystone, in an essay on “Nicolai Hartmann’s Homo Ontologicus” (1987:61), has solved this problem by translating *Geist* as “spiritmind”. However, it is even more productive to consult Nicolai Hartmann himself, who began his academic career at the University of Tartu a century ago.⁴

Nicolai Hartmann, in *Das Problem des geistigen Seins* (1933), offers us a treatment of *Geist* which I find most convincing. Hartmann differentiates between personal, (historical-) objective, and objectivized *Geist*. The personal *Geist* is what in English one may call the mind, or part thereof (see Hartmann 1949:460); it is the individual (spirit). The objectivized *Geist* is what is manifest in *geistige* creations, art being perhaps the best example (see 461; Bollnow 1987). What I think German *Geist* must be is, however, the objective *Geist*, which Hartmann describes as follows:

The common life of the *Geist*, which does not dissolve in any one individual, but which, historically changing, outlasts the generations, is neither an abstraction nor a *Kollektivum*, but rather a very concrete and real power in the life of the individual human being which forces him to be in a certain way; but it does not consist of individuals, but rather of moments which in them are of the same kind. Areas of the objective *Geist* are language, science, law, morality, custom and lifestyle, religion, art and technology. Nobody invents his own language, creates his own science; the individual, rather, grows into what is existing, he takes it over from the common sphere, which offers it to him. ... the *Geist* indeed cannot be willed down, it can only be *tradiert*. ... The life of the objective *Geist* thus is

⁴ On Hartmann in Tartu see W. Drechsler and Kattel 1994.

the greatest imaginable power in the life of the individual, but it also receives again from the latter [the] impulses of its historical changing. (1949:460)⁵

As Josef Stallmach makes clear,

the true *Geist* [is] nothing else but that what, taken together in historical unity, is called "*geistiges Leben*". It is the common life which any individual knows from his or her own experience, which reveals itself in all personal individuals at certain expressions, but which is dissolved in none, but which, historically changing itself, outlasts the chains of generations. ... This process-like wholeness of the always only "historical *Geist*", moved by a certain inner dialectic ... is of course something completely different from that certain process of dialectical self-unfolding of the eternal absolute *Geist* in the medium of History which displays itself in Hegel's speculative metaphysic. (1987:18)

Otto Friedrich Bollnow puts it this way:

While [the objective *Geist*] has no own substance character, but only exists by being embodied in the respective human beings, it is nevertheless a "tangible unity and wholeness" ... It is, without owning autonomous being, nevertheless real, not less so than the individual, than the subjective *Geist*. (72)

It is this that comes closest to what I think German *Geist* could be – and I think this is how German *Geist* is at least partially used – and therefore, by taking *Geist* to mean objective *Geist*, one can call it Spirit rather than mind, because this is what I think "spirit" means. Thus, what I am talking about is German *Spirit*. To sum up simplifyingly: the moments which are more or less specific or same in the individuals called Germans at a given point in time and through time are what the German Spirit would be.

However, while this is our central definition of Spirit, one must not forget some further crucial connotations. After all, "*Eine Bedeutung eines Wortes ist eine Art seiner Verwendung.*" (Wittgenstein 1992:24) First, Hartmann's concept could be what I read to be Lotman's definition of "national culture" in a more all-encompassing sense (1970:15), or "culture", as defined as "a sum of non-inheritable information" (1971:167). There are contradictory definitions as well (Lotman and Uspenskij 1993:326, 328–329), but also supporting ones:

Culture in general can be imagined as a totality of texts; from the perspective of the investigator, it is however more precise to speak of culture as a mechanism which creates the totality of all texts, and of the texts as the realization of that culture. (333)

I think that to our definition of Spirit in the Hartmannian sense one must add this element as well.

Further, and for us even more importantly, this expanded definition has close ties to the concept of National Identity as well, in the Lockean sense of identity as (individual) continuous and consistent memory, at least in its consequences or

⁵ See also Bollnow:71-72; Stallmach:18.

manifestations (although this brings us close to Hartmann's objectivized Spirit), in that national identity could be said to consist of similar or same moments in everyone or at least many in the group of Germans. In that definition, *Geist* comes close to "essence".

Finally, there is one more element: *Geist*, in German, has a positive connotation: Spirit as something intellectual, perennial, good, more in the sense of "intellect" or "esprit", such as Johann Wolfgang v. Goethe, for me the embodiment of German Spirit and the creator of indeed the most sublime example of German objectivized *Geist*, *Faust I* (1971), used (generally, and late in his life) the word;⁶ this is comparable to the positive connotation of art. (Can there be bad art? No; if it's bad, it's not art.) This connotation is most applicable to individual *Geist*, but I think that it is also present in a national *Geist* in the sense of the nation's specific intellectual makeup and climate; it is what Hartmann's *Geist* is, but as a positive quality judgment.

In sum, Spirit will be used in the Hartmannian sense, but also in the sense of (that which may produce) (national) Culture, of something which is strongly linked to (national) Identity in the Lockean sense, and of something which is positively understood and in that sense a quality judgment. I will frequently oscillate between the different connotations and facets of Spirit.

After having finally said what German *Geist* may be, namely German Spirit, it would be logical to proceed to list and look at some of these moments, preferably in historical order. The danger here is twofold: first, it is difficult to say what really was or remains part of German Spirit; second, one is easily tempted to list examples of objectivized *Geist*, rather than moments that produced them.

If Spirit is the moments which are more or less specific in the individuals called Germans at a given point in and through time, is there one decisive moment which determines or is central for German Spirit today, and therefore decisively determining German identity as well? I believe there is; it is National Socialism, i.e. the time between 1933 and 1945; more specifically: the Holocaust.

Auschwitz is the lens through which everything German before and after this time is seen, although the present is, of course, unable not to (re)create history in its own image. I hope that I usually enter a debate with the recognition that "my ability to judge finds its limit at the judgment of the other and is enriched by him or her" (Gadamer 1990:158),⁷ but I find it difficult to do so in this instance. Ignorance of the fact that Auschwitz is the key point in today's German spiritual existence seems to me to be proof that whoever says so simply does not know Germany and the Germans at all.

Indeed, I would argue that the treatment of this topic is one of the constitutional elements of German society – if, that is, one accepts that values rather than conversation are a society's determinants. Let me use a (much simpli-

⁶ See Eckermann 1984:49, 76, 108, 225, and esp. 419-420.

⁷ Gadamer says that "this is the soul of Hermeneutics", 1977:94.

fied) approach based on the work of Leo Strauss: let me define a *polis* by the options it has chosen to call truths.⁸ If one as much as discusses these truths, one calls them options, and the *polis* can not allow this if it wants to survive. Thus, if one would want to discuss such a topic, one would have to do so in code, or the *polis* will – and may – punish the perpetrator, who however needs the *polis* to survive at all (that, in this context, is the significance of Socrates' death). Goethe makes this point, I think, in *Faust*:

[Faust.] *Ja, was man so erkennen heißt!
Wer darf das Kind beim rechten Namen nennen?
Die wenigen, die was davon erkannt,
Die töricht gnung ihr volles Herz nicht wahrten,
Dem Pöbel ihr Gefühl, ihr Schauen offenbarten,
Hat man von je gekreuzigt und verbrannt.* (588–593)

[Mephisto.] *Was ist das für ein Marterort!
Was heißt das für ein Leben führen,
Sich und die Jungens ennuyieren?
Laß du das dem Herrn Nachbar Wanst!
Was willst du dich das Stroh zu dreschen plagen?
Das Beste, was du wissen kannst,
Darfst du den Buben doch nicht sagen.* (1835–1841)⁹

⁸ See Strauss 1988 (for his most accessible essay on this subject) together with Strauss 1972.

⁹ I am currently quite convinced that translation is often, if not generally, impossible, and that translation of poetry is usually outright wrong. Lotman has rightly emphasized that the latter is impossible in the sense that information transmitted in a certain structure cannot be transmitted outside that structure at all, i.e. that it is utterly impossible to narrate the contents of a poem. (1970:17-18) The only chance to arrive at a passable result is if a congenial poet “translates” a poem, but then it is more an interpretation than a own poem, but then it can be doubted whether this still is the original poem at all. I shall nevertheless transgress and give a translation anyway, with no excuse. There is especially no excuse because a bad translation of a poem is often not better than no translation at all, because a bad translation will shy away the more sensitive readers from just the most important oeuvres which they might access later when they have mastered the language.

This is especially so in Goethe's case, because he is particularly difficult to translate, and I still have to see translation, or if the poet, with or without the help of a colleague, translates his or her an even remotely adequate translation of *Faust*. This is, I think, because the subtlety of the *Faust* lyrics is hidden under their apparent rationality, clarity, and openness, whereas, say, the complexity of Hölderlin or Rilke is at least more apparent. (Cf. Gadamer 1984, esp. 19–20, on interpreting Hölderlin; this essay, incidentally, is fascinating because here a Hermeneutician appraises Structuralism.)

[Faust.] *O yes! They like to call it knowledge.
Who can give the child its rightful name?
Those few who gained a share of understanding
who foolishly unlocked their hearts,
their pent-up feelings and their visions to the rabble,
have always ended on the cross and pyre.* (588–593)

The belief that *everything* connected with the Nazis is automatically bad is a literally basic truth of the Federal Republic of Germany. Therefore, it can not be discussed and thereby questioned in Germany or by Germans. I am most certainly not saying that this is bad – this is an empirical, not a normative point –, but the case it is. This is the true and often overlooked significance of the famous *Historikerstreit* of 1986.¹⁰

In the *Historikerstreit*, the “battle of the historians”, the “central issue has been whether Nazi crimes were unique... ..if the Final Solution remains noncomparable ... the past may never be ‘worked through,’ the future never normalized, and German nationhood may remain forever tainted, like some well forever poisoned.” (Maier 1988, 1) It all began when a right-of-center historian published an essay in a daily paper claiming that the Nazis had just reacted to the horrors of Russian bolshevism, something that Jürgen Habermas most angrily repudiated as a cleansing of the German past. Most German historians joined in, and a large, long public debate ensued; it is probably fair to say that the “left” “won”.

In 1994, Wolfgang Kraushaar of the Hamburg Institute for Social Research wrote an excellent essay in *Die Zeit*, a German mid- to highbrow weekly, about “The Left which is blind on the left eye”. He emphasizes that in the *Historikerstreit*, what happened was that the attempt to apply the Totalitarianism paradigm regarding 1933–1945 was answered with the doctrine of singularity. The concept of Totalitarianism, mainly developed by Hannah Arendt and Carl J. Friedrich, finds structural parallels between National Socialism and Stalinism, which are both said to be totalitarian systems, and, I think, rightly so – especially as this does not deny a qualitative difference between the two systems at all. Jürgen Habermas is quoted as admitting that he really never dealt with Stalinism because he was afraid that then he would have to give up or at least somehow relativize his antifascism; certainly a most worthy reason.¹¹ Yet, the position taken by Habermas and the majority of German intellectuals must be seen as actually profoundly affirmative of the Federal Republic of Germany as *polis* as it is now, or at least was in 1986.¹²

[Mephisto.] *What kind of torture chamber is this place?
What kind of life is it you lead -
a bore for you, a nuisance for your pupils.
Go, leave that to the boob next door.
Why should you plague yourself with threshing straw?
The best of what you ever hope to know
is nothing you can tell the youngsters.* (1962, 1836–1841)

¹⁰ Maier 1988 is in my opinion the best survey of the *Historikerstreit*.

¹¹ Antifascism, however, is a most problematic term, usually a Communist propaganda ploy – my apologies for this Cold War lingo – and a lying label, a wrong sign; see H. Drechsler 1995.

¹² On Habermas’ more recent attitude, which I take to be much more conciliatory, see 1994.

But has the situation perhaps changed in post-Reunification Germany? In the field of ideology, there was no such thing as a Federal German patriotism or even identity – or Federal German Spirit, if you will. There could not have been, because the underlying ideology of the Federal Republic (I am using “ideology” as a value-free term insofar as this is possible) was that she was an interim country waiting for reunification, and to the surprise of most, that is what happened. A West German identity would have been directed against reunification, i.e. against the *raison d'être* of West Germany.¹³ Now, it is possible to have again a German identity. Perhaps it is necessary as well.

It is necessary if only positive values, including those of tolerance and compassion, have the chance to survive and resist attack. Negative, relativistic “values” have the habit of welcoming the enemy from within and without with open arms. All those fighting against these values today because of alleged societal impossibilities or problems with values and virtues should consider that it is those values which are keeping them alive and happy, as without them there would be no reason for “the others” to let them have their way, and their talk, at all. “Beyond reason, there waits indeed not only creative anarchy which frees the discourses, tolerating their limitless game, but there are lurking as well the traps of being blinded and the gargoyles of cruelty for whom any means to assert domination is all right.” (Mersch 1993:149) Insulated systems which are highly normative, even religious, but whose protagonists just postulate the respective norms, be they certain kinds of openness, discourse, non-repression, or whatever, are not very persuasive. After all, why should anyone wish to change an enjoyable, rewarding discourse or (power-)structure in which he or even she dominates for an “improvement”, if the basis of the demand is just that its protagonists, now the weaker party, wish it?

Or, in Goethe’s words:

[Mephisto.] *Verachte nur Vernunft und Wissenschaft,
Des Menschen allerhöchste Kraft,
Laß nur in Blend- und Zauberwerken
Dich von dem Lügengeist bestärken,
So hab ich dich schon unbedingt* – (1851–1855)¹⁴

¹³ Peter Senn rightly cautions me that the importance of the Holocaust and the identity problem were specifically West German phenomena; the situation was quite different in East Germany. I admit here to being guilty of seeing West Germany as “the” Germany for the time of German separation, which is certainly a one-sided and highly problematic perspective.

¹⁴ And for the “translation”:

*If once you scorn all science and all reason,
the highest strength that dwells in man -
and are put to trickery and magic arts
by a spirit of dishonesty,
then I've got you unconditionally* - (1851–1855)

One does not need Toynbee – or Fukuyama – to see that fragile, complex societies are the first victims of “less developed” (in the sense of complex), more “atavistic” ones held together by a unifying ideology and purpose. Habermas’ “plea for constitutional patriotism and postconventional identity” (Maier:151) is a magnificent idea and just as utopian, alas, as are the demands for the decline of the Nation State.

But, regarding Spirit and Identity, there is an even more severe problem. “For centuries, the Germans have been regarded as an unstable and unpredictable people, even by some of their own greatest thinkers.” (Ardagh 1991:5) After all, there somehow is a German tendency towards the “less free” direction, and it seems to somehow be more German than not. Krockow postulates the fear of the German citizen of being free (1993:18–19), and there may be something in that. Heinrich Mann has made the point abundantly clear in the scathing and brilliant novel *Der Untertan*, referring to the time around 1890. (1969) There appears to many to be something innately authoritarian, non-easy-going, over-punctual, in the German mentality.

[T]he Germans still tend to mind your own business for you, if they see you breaking the rules in however minor a way, for this gives them a sense of unease. If you walk down the street with your shoelaces undone, in France or Britain no one will notice: in Germany, you will soon have it pointed out to you, and not just for your own safety’s sake. *Ordnung muss sein*, in all ways. A German may perhaps break the law gently when no one can see him (e.g. tax evasion), but not if others are watching (e.g. at traffic lights), nor does he like to see others doing so. (Ardagh:521–522)

So do the Germans have a killer chip implanted in them? Is “the German” automatically a Nazi, was 1933–1945 just a consequence of German mentality and German history, or of – let me say it – German Spirit? One reply to this would be that if there would really be a direct road leading from Bayreuth to Auschwitz, from mid-19th Century German anti-Semitism to the gas chambers, the Nazis would be somehow and somewhat exculpated because they would have just followed a predetermined line. But I would think, and that is also said against David Jonah Goldhagen’s much-talked-about *Hitler’s Willing Executioners* (1996), that the Holocaust is due to the combination of the “phenomenon” Hitler and the general human (not specifically German) propensity towards savagery, such as the concept of the “thin veneer of civilization” indicates.¹⁵ However, I consider it out of place for me to define or make the distinction between different kinds of anti-Semitism, and this is not a good argument anyway, seeing that it merely points out an undesirable consequence.

¹⁵ How little Goldhagen can reply to this criticism becomes obvious in his interview with David Gergen, *U.S. News & World Report*, of 24 May 1996, the transcript of which is located on the internet (as of Fall 1996) at <http://web-cr01.pbs.org/newshour/gergen/goldhagen/htm> (at the end of the text).

But it appears to be clear by late 1996 that, just as the micro-*Historikerstreit* concerning Werner Sombart in 1994 which I have attempted to analyze along these lines elsewhere (see Drechsler 1996), the Goldhagen debate in Germany¹⁶ demonstrates that a majority of Germans – the kind of Germans interested in such matters, of course, which by no means is a majority – (still) agrees with Habermas.¹⁷

Yet, if one should say that a sound, critical national identity is the best safeguard of a pluralistic-democratic country against attacks from left, right, and abroad, one must come to the conclusion that for Germany, this would only be possible to achieve if one would somehow be able to see Hitler as the most un-German rather than as the most German man in history. This sounds dangerously like the instrumentalization of German history for identity purposes, but the answer to the conundrum might lie in a reversal of perspective. One could agree with that line in Sir Michael Howard's 1989 Valedictory Lecture as Regius Professor of Modern History in the University of Oxford, that

the Nazis did not belong to our culture: they consciously and deliberately turned their backs on 'bourgeois' culture – that amalgam of Christianity and the Enlightenment which still distinguishes Western civilization – and created a very different and very nasty one of their own with its own distinct value-systems. (1993:195)

Probably for a German to take this view is not permissible; but, at least in the Spiritual realm, here lies something of an answer: German Spirit is what Hitler was not.

How can one make such a claim? Is it not a forced definition? What is the German Spirit that is so un-Hitlerian? "*Undeutscher Geist*", after all, is a Nazi phrase. But that is just it: the answer is that German Spirit is German-Jewish Spirit, to a large extent – this is not ironically so but precisely so. The German Spirit is so dependent on the German-Jewish Spirit that there would be no German Spirit in our times anywhere close to what it is now, were it not for the Jewish contribution, actually: for the Jewish root.

Count Krockow, the 1994 Lucas Prize winner, author of the brilliant book, *Scheiterhaufen. Glanz und Elend des deutschen Geistes*, from which I have quoted several times already, uses *Geist* mainly with a positive connotation, our final element of the definition of Spirit. Since the 18th Century, he says, Jewish and German Spirit melted into each other. The historical reason for that was that the Jews had to compensate in the realm of the Spirit for what they were not allowed to do elsewhere: "With all their achievements which compensate[d] for the powerlessness and which seemingly triumph[ed] over discrimination, Jews [were]

¹⁶ As of Fall 1996, I think Nolte 1996 (especially on the differences between the English and the German version) and Dönhoff 1996 are the best summings-up of the fundamental flaws of Goldhagen's book.

¹⁷ See Ulrich 1996.

becoming a *Symbol*: a Symbol of Spirit generally. This is why they [were] hit by the hatred.” (131)

Of course, there are other definitions of German Spirit as well:

“*Geist*” ist weder leerer Scharfsinn, noch das unverbindliche Spiel des Witzes, noch das uferlose Treiben verstandesmäßiger Zergliederung, noch gar die Weltvernunft, sondern Geist ist ursprünglich gestimmte, wissende Entschlossenheit zum Wesen des Seins. Und die geistige Welt eines Volkes ist nicht der Überbau einer Kultur, sowenig wie das Zeughaus für verwendbare Kenntnisse und Werte, sondern sie ist die Macht der tiefsten Bewahrung seiner erd- und bluthaften Kräfte als Macht der innersten Erregung und weitesten Erschütterung seines Daseins. (Heidegger 1990:14)¹⁸

The late Paul de Man once informed us that “A solution of the Jewish problem would not have any further regrettable consequences for Western literary life” – an assertion quickly deconstructed as irony by Jacques Derrida. (Quoted in and see Winkler 1992.) Not to prove the contrary, which would be unnecessary, but to remind, I will arbitrarily list a few names – not by any means the result of hard thinking – just for 20th Century German Spirit, just in the realm of philosophy and social thought: Franz Rosenzweig, Erik Erikson, Norbert Elias, Max Adler, Georg Simmel, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Helmuth Plessner, Max Scheler, Karl Mannheim, Ernst Bloch, Hermann Cohen, Leo Strauss, Karl Löwith, Ernst Cassirer, Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, Hannah Arendt, Hans Jonas, Gershom Scholem, Edmund Husserl, Walter Benjamin, Franz Kafka, Siegmund Freud. There is no German Spirit without the German-Jewish, without the Jewish-German Spirit. If you take the German-Jewish Spirit away, what remains is the truly un-German Spirit, if there remains anything worth being called that.

As Count Krockow says, in a state based on power, Spirit, “that potential of critique and of enlightenment which can never be locked in, finally becomes the enemy as such, the object of aggression, of ostracization, persecution, extinction.” (109) Nazism was directed, according to Krockow, “against the European Spirit of Humanism, Tolerance, and Enlightenment, against Liberty and Justice.” (133) It “require[d] anti-Semitism. Thus the horrid ‘final solution of the Jewish question’

¹⁸ Heidegger is arguably fundamentally untranslatable, because words are given personal meanings by him, which however remain dependent on the matrix of the German language of his time; see Safranski 1994:*passim* and Drechsler 1995. A translation even of this passage, which comes from Heidegger’s most famous *public* speech (the 1933 *Rektoratsrede*, about which see Safranski:285-293), is therefore always in danger of becoming arbitrary. I am thus offering one which is primarily based on what the words Heidegger employs usually mean:

“Spirit” is neither empty acumen, nor the non-committal play of wit, nor the boundless drifting of rational dissection, nor, indeed, worldly wisdom. Rather, Spirit is origin-oriented, knowing determination to the essence of being. And the *spiritual world* of a people is not the superstructure of a culture, just as is it not the arsenal for usable knowledge and values, but it is the might of the deepest preservation of its soil- and bloodish powers as the might of the innermost excitement and widest shattering of its existence.

means in the end: the *salvation from Spirit*." (132) "This is exactly why the persecution of the Jews was meant as the destruction of Spirit generally." (144)

Here I must pause: may I at all move towards appropriating the German-Jewish Spirit, the German-Jewish intellect for "saving" the German Spirit from the legacy of the Holocaust? Probably not, but on the other hand, as the German-Jewish publicist Rafael Seligmann pointed out recently, "The identification of the Jews with the Holocaust ... would be Hitler's final triumph." (1994:93) To give to the German-Jewish intellectuals at least some hints of the credit they deserve for German Spirit is perhaps not in every context entirely frivolous.

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