

German-Jewish Identities in America: From the Civil War to the Present

October 26-28, 2000

Sponsored by the

Max Kade Institute for German-American Studies

University of Wisconsin-Madison

and the

German Historical Institute, Washington, D.C.

Co-sponsors:

George L. Mosse/Laurence A. Weinstein Center for Jewish Studies

Department of German

Center for Humanities

University of Wisconsin-Madison

Within the vast literature on both German-speaking immigrants to this country and on Jews in America, relatively less attention has been paid to the intersection of these two groups, German-speaking Jews. This conference will examine the experience of this large and historically important group of immigrants from the mid-19th century into the 20th. In particular, we will focus on the creation, recreation, and negotiation of a complex set of interlocking, overlapping identities: linguistic, national, regional, religious and ethnic.

A number of senior and younger scholars contributing to this area will present papers. The conference will be firmly anchored in History, but with strong connections to immigrant, ethnic and urban studies, as well as other neighboring disciplines.

Thursday, October 26

University Club, 803 State Street, on the Library Mall

6:30 p.m. Dinner and Welcoming Remarks

Dr. Joseph C. Salmons, Director, Max Kade Institute

Dr. Christof Mauch, Acting Director, German Historical Institute

8:30 p.m. Keynote Address, University Club

Henry Feingold, Graduate School, CUNY

Director, Jewish Resource Center, Baruch College

German Jews and the American Jewish Synthesis

All plenary sessions will be held in the Memorial Union, 800 Langdon Street

The conference is free and open to the public.

Friday, October 27

8:30 - 9:00 a.m. Registration and coffee

9:00 - 10:30 a.m. I. Community Formation

Moderator: Christof Mauch

Leah Hagedorn, Tulane University

"We Allow No German Jews to Settle Among Us": Reconstructing and Deconstructing Confederate Civilian Anti-Semitism During the American Civil War

10:45 a.m. - 12:15 p.m. II. Gender

Moderator: Karen Jankowsky

Anke Ortlepp, University of Cologne

"Give to the Poor! Yourself You'll Bless!": Jewish Charities in Milwaukee 1865-1920

Karla Goldman, Jewish Women's Archive

Patterns of Philanthropy: Nineteenth-Century Women's Societies in Germany and the United States

Lunch break

1:45 - 4:30 p.m. III. Community Evolution

Moderator: Marc Silberman

Gerhard Grytz, University of Nevada

"Whose Frontier?": Experiences of Gentile and Jewish German Immigrants in Arizona during the 19th Century

Tobias Brinkmann, University of Leipzig

"We are Brothers! Let us Separate": "German Jews" in Chicago between Einheitsgemeinde and Network-Community 1847-1923

Break

Ruth Goldman, University of Wisconsin

"And These Were Jews?": A Documentary Film in Progress about the German-American Jewish Community of Cincinnati

Saturday, October 28

8:30 - 9:00 a.m. Registration

9:00 - 10:30 a.m. IV. German Jewish Institutions

Moderator: David Sorkin

Cornelia Wilhelm, University of Munich

Shaping the American Jewish Community: The Independent Order of B'nai B'rith 1843-1914

Derek Penslar, University of Toronto

Brahmin Philanthropists: The Leadership of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee

10:45 a.m. -12:15 p.m. V. Biographies

Moderator: Tony Michaels

Mitch Hart, Florida International University

A Jew Grows in Brooklyn: German Science and American-Jewish Identity

Bobbie Malone, Wisconsin State Historical Society

Russians, Race, and Reform: The Making of a Southern Zionist in 1890s New Orleans

Lunchbreak

1:45 - 3:15 p.m. VI. Theater and Culture

Moderator: Cora Lee Nollendorfs

Harley Erdman, University of Massachusetts

German Jews and American Show Business: A Reconsideration

Thomas Kovach, The University of Arizona

German Jews and Ostjuden in the American South: Alfred Uhry's "Last Night of Ballyhoo"

3:30 - 5:00 p.m. VII. Contemporary Perspectives

Moderator: Joe Salmons

Monika Schmid, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

"I always thought I was a German - it was Hitler who taught me I was a Jew: " National-socialist Persecution, Identity, and the German Language

7:00 - 10:00 p.m. Film and Discussion - Grainger Hall, Room 2120, 975 University Avenue

Moderator: Mary Devitt

Manfred Kirchheimer, Independent Filmmaker

We Were So Beloved : The German-Jews of Washington Hts., New York

ABSTRACTS

Henry Feingold

German Jews and the American Jewish Synthesis

I want to suggest, hopefully without overstating it, that the basic terms of the Jewish encounter with America -- its strategy and its modalities -- were initially set down by the rustic Bayern, Hessians and Alsatians of Jewish faith who arrived on these shores in numbers after the 1820s.

Gerhard Grytz

"Whose Frontier?": Experiences of Gentile and Jewish German Immigrants in Arizona during the 19th Century

Historical studies on Jewish immigrants in the American West are plentiful. The majority of these studies neither distinguish German-speaking Jews as a separate group nor do they acknowledge their affinity to Gentile Germans. A different approach, however, shows that Jewish and Gentile Germans, together, "transplanted" nineteenth-century social structures, cultural values, and economic attitudes to the American West. This group of immigrants, overwhelmingly consisting of Jewish German merchants and Gentile German artisans, promoted "home-style" capitalistic ideas and values. In the case of Arizona, despite being a minority, they significantly influenced the socio-economic development of the Territory as a result of their advanced economic status. Together with other ethnic groups, the "Arizona Germans" played a substantial part in creating a new and unique regional "Creole Culture" in the American Southwest that was neither the product of a Turnerian confrontation between the individual and the frontier environment nor the result of assimilation to supposedly "dominant" Anglo-American values.

Tobias Brinkmann

"We are Brothers! Let us Separate.": "German Jews" in Chicago between "Einheitsgemeinde" and Network-Community 1847-1923

After the 1840s Jews in the United States organized communities increasingly beyond the religious sphere on ethnic terms. Jewish immigrants lamented the loss of close-knit Jewish "Gemeinschaft" and praised, sometimes in the same breath, the unique possibilities in the United States to form new Jewish communities. The paper will analyze the centrifugal and centripetal forces that influenced Jewish community-building in America's fastest growing city between 1847 and 1923. While Jewish immigrants individually had close relationships with other German-speaking immigrants and helped to organize the short lived German "umbrella"-community, the Jewish community was never a part of the German community. The paper questions the bipolar model of interpreting modern Jewish history by asserting that "assimilation" led not to the disintegration but rather to the transformation of Jewish "community" into what Arthur Ruppin characterized as "new [Jewish] milieux." The paper is based on my dissertation: *"Wir amerikanisch-deutsche Juden": Jewish immigrants in Chicago 1840-1900* (TU Berlin, 2000).

Cornelia Wilhelm

Shaping the American Jewish Community: The Independent Order of B'nai B'rith, 1843-1914

Founded in 1843 by German immigrants to the United States, the Independent Order of B'nai B'rith constituted the first and largest national American Jewish organization in nineteenth-

century America, providing a platform for sociability and mutual support, a network of communication, representation and community for American Jews. Created as a fraternal lodge, it addressed a membership composed of diverse religious or denominational affiliation, ethnicity, or class, and defined a practical Judaism stressing a strong universalism and could embrace more than just one fraction of the diverse American Jewish groups. The paper will discuss how this organization helped to shape the young community structurally, for example by substituting old-fashioned concepts of "community" with a modern organizational framework, which allowed the American Jew to maintain a Jewish identity while adapting to American forms, or by balancing the economic and social situation of small and needy communities. It will explore how the organization succeeded in giving the young community a new vision of its role in America of raising the individual's self-awareness of his potential as a Jew in American society, continuously blending its mission with the general understanding of religiosity and with American Civil Religion and the limits of such activity.

Derek Penslar

Brahmin Philanthropists: The Leadership of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee

During the interwar period, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee was the most powerful Jewish philanthropy in the United States and the second wealthiest in the world (behind the London-based Jewish Colonization Association). This paper will analyze the leadership style, operating methods, and goals of the Joint. Although the Joint's hierarchical managerial style caused friction with American Zionists, the goals of the JDC and American Zionism overlapped considerably. An examination of some of the Joint's most prominent leaders - including Felix Warburg and James Rosenberg - and of the Joint's activities in Palestine and Eastern Europe, will reveal that the Joint was viscerally linked with many aspects of the Zionist project.

Mitch Hart

A Jew Grows in Brooklyn: German Science and American-Jewish Identity

Early on in the 1997 novel *The Actual*, Saul Bellow's narrator is describing his first encounter with the elderly millionaire Adletsky. "In the New World, [Adletsky's] immigrant melting-pot malnourished teeny-weenies produced six-foot sons and large, luxuriant daughters. I myself was both larger and heavier than my parents, though internally more fragile, perhaps." Bellow is reproducing here, in highly abbreviated form, a standard set of images and ideas from the scientific literature of the early twentieth century. This paper explores this scientific literature, and the theme of America as the place of Jewish physical and psychological regeneration. While American Jewish social scientists accepted to one degree or another the standard image of the modern Jew as degenerate, they sought to prove through science that the American environment would exert a meliorative effect on the Jewish body and mind. The Jew would literally grow in New York and elsewhere, if allowed to enjoy the political and social freedoms associated with the New World. The paper focuses on the reciprocity between scientific studies produced in

Germany and the United States in the first decades of the twentieth century, the role of German science in shaping a particular sort of American-Jewish social science, and the politics impelling this social science.

Bobbie Malone

Russians, Race, and Reform: The Making of a Southern Zionist in 1890s New Orleans

Rabbi Max Heller was a man of both passionate conviction and inner contradiction. In his public life, he consistently sought center stage, sometimes as an agitator, and sometimes as a mediator. During his first two decades in the United States, Heller confronted some of the major social problems that dominated the late nineteenth century--emancipation and racism, nationalism and nativism, immigration and assimilation--issues that remain unresolved even today. In grappling with these issues, he found his own voice.

In his Germanized Jewish upbringing in Prague and in his rabbinical training at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, Heller had imbibed the principles of a rationalized, liberal, and universalist Judaism. From the vantage point of his pulpit at Temple Sinai in New Orleans, his perspective began to change. By the turn of the century, these ideals no longer seemed adequate guidance in a world increasingly threatened by ethnic and racial nationalism. Earlier than most, Heller realized that such nationalism would ultimately cause European Jewry to be scapegoated. At the same time he recognized that the spiritual roots of his faith were embedded in traditions casually abandoned by the Jewish reformers who had come of age at midcentury. Their sanitized Judaism now appeared sterile. As the twentieth century dawned, the coincidence of local, regional, national, and international events created an epiphany for Heller. At midlife, these events impressed upon him the profound cultural as well as religious implications of the contemporary Jewish experience. Integrating his new conception of Judaism and its mission, he became a passionate Zionist and an ardent humanitarian, a risk-taker who championed social justice and defended the underdog. This paper will discuss the precipitating incidents in this epiphany, which centered around a small group of Russian Jews who had recently immigrated to New Orleans.

Harley Erdman

German Jews and American Show Business: A Reconsideration

Many accounts of the prominent roles Jews played in early 20th century American show business -- as performers, writers, composers, directors, and producers -- ascribe the phenomenon to a kind of lower-east-side "ghetto energy," linking these entertainment forms to a rising generation of Eastern European immigrants while noting the influence of Yiddish theater in particular and yiddishkeit in general. This paper reconsiders this popular narrative, arguing

instead that many of the country's most influential and successful Jewish show business figures came from relatively assimilated German or Central European backgrounds (often from locations outside New York City). It suggests that the roots of "Jewish" show business in the United States may be more German than has been commonly assumed. The paper also considers why performing artists and historians alike have tended to "Yiddishize" the Jewish experience in American show business.

Thomas Kovach

German Jews and the Ostjuden in the American South: Alfred Uhry's Play 'The Last Night of Ballyhoo'

Alfred Uhry's Tony Award-winning play presents a family of well-to-do German Jews in 1939 Atlanta. As Hitler's armies are invading Poland to start the Second World War, the consequences of which are well known to the play's audience but unknown to the characters in the play, the family of Adolph (!) Freitag is discussing the arrival of Clark Gable et al. for the opening of *Gone with the Wind*. Thoroughly acculturated, they speak disparagingly about the "other sort" of Jews, those of Eastern European descent who live on the wrong side of town, represented in the play by the Brooklyn Jew Joe Farkas, the family firm's newest employee, who is amazed to see a Christmas tree in their home, and whose Yiddish expressions are met with blank stares by the family. In the course of the play, a romance arises between Joe and Sunny, the younger daughter of the Freitag clan, which serves to highlight the gulf separating the worlds they come from.

I will examine the play as a mirror of the tensions between the older German-Jewish families in the South and the more recent arrivals, examining Uhry's presentation in light of historical research on Jewish life in the South. However, I will argue as well that the tension between German Jews and Ostjuden represented in the play replicates to a remarkable extent the tensions between Eastern and Western Jews within Germany and Austria during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Finally, I will discuss the play's ending, a kind of wish-fantasy in which Joe, Sunny, and the whole family join in saying blessings over a Shabbat dinner, a scene inconceivable in light of the family attitudes represented in the rest of the play.

Monika S. Schmid

"I always thought I was a German - it was Hitler who taught me I was a Jew": National-socialist Persecution, Identity, and the German Language

This paper will present the findings of a study on language use and language loss of German Jews who left Germany during the Nazi regime and have lived in English-speaking countries ever since. The study of individuals forgetting a language they grew up with (first language attrition) has only been a research topic for the past twenty years, and the influence of personal

factors like age at the time of emigration, intermediate language contact, and personal attitudes is still very much in debate. This paper argues that the breakdown of a language system after sixty years of non-use or restricted use is to a large degree determined by personal attitudes.

We Were So Beloved : The German-Jews of Washington Hts., New York

A film by Manfred Kirchheimer

This unique documentary examines the experiences of German-Jewish refugees who fled their country in the 1930's and settled in New York's Washington Heights. Having assimilated in Germany, they found themselves living exclusively among Jews for the first time, and were called "more German than Jewish." Today these people who lost so much are secure and patriotic Americans. In frank conversation they discuss the trauma of leaving their homeland, the difficulties adapting to life in the U.S., the relief and remorse of having escaped the Holocaust, and the moral and emotional implications of their survival. This important film fills a gap in American social history, showing us the story of this brave group of survivors.