

THE JEWISH COLLEGE IN EXILE

As the situation in Nazi Germany grew ever more grim, the Board of Governors of the College decided much more needed to be done. At its meeting of October 20, 1938, upon the recommendation of Rabbi Solomon Freehof of Pittsburgh, it appointed a committee to consider what HUC might do to ameliorate the plight of refugee scholars, possibly providing them with room and board in the college dormitory. In the next few weeks, an imaginative project was formulated: HUC would establish a "Jewish College in Exile" on its campus. Apparently modeled on the University in Exile, which was established in 1934 by Alvin Johnson as the graduate faculty of the New School for Social Research in New York, it was initially contemplated to provide for some twenty-five German Jewish scholars of repute during a period of two to three years.

As a result of what was happening in Europe, [HUC President Julian] Morgenstern envisioned a new role for the College. When added to its existing faculty, these new men would make HUC one of the great centers of Jewish research and scholarship in the world. With the demise of the institutions of higher Jewish learning in Germany, *Wissenschaft des Judentums* would be transplanted to Palestine and America....In November, two weeks after *Kristallnacht*, Morgenstern...asked [Elbogen] to draw up a list of names. Besieged by requests for assistance from abroad, the elder scholar was deeply moved at the news: "It is the first act of speedy and ready help after the last pogrom..." From the names which Elbogen supplied, Morgenstern eventually chose nine: Alexander Guttman, Franz Landsberger, Albert Lewkowitz, Isaiah Sonne, Eugen Täubler, Max Wiener, Walter Gottschalk, Abraham Heschel, and Franz Rosenthal. Official invitations were sent to each of them on April 6, 1939. Adding the name of Arthur Spanier...the College thus made an irreversible commitment to ten men, some with families....[Head of the Visa Division of the State Department Avra M.] Warren concluded...that HUC could bring in professors on a non quota basis only if they were appointed "as regular members of its faculty, primarily to instruct, or to confer the benefit of their knowledge upon, students thereof, and for positions of a continuing, rather than a temporary or intermittent character; provided, of course, such scholars were able to meet the requirements of the law with respect to their past vocational experience."

[HUC's rescue was complicated by U.S. State Department policy, which rejected those who had not served primarily as teaching faculty at a legitimate institution of higher learning comparable to HUC, thus disqualifying those who had been librarians (Gottschalk, Spanier), museum directors (Landsberger), or associated with Jewish seminaries which, like Berlin's liberal seminary, the *Hochschule*, had been demoted by the Nazis to that of a *Lehranstalt*, a mere institute deemed inferior to HUC's university status. Gottschalk's visa was unconditionally rejected because he had served as a librarian. Lewkowitz and Spanier, awaiting their American visas in Amsterdam, were deported to Bergen-Belsen, where Lewkowitz was selected for a prisoner exchange in 1944 and thereupon was permitted entry to Palestine, but Spanier perished. Landsberger was released from Sachsenhausen by an invitation to visit the classicist Gilbert Murray in Oxford; while in England, special intercession secured him a non-quota visa on the basis of Morgenstern's proffered position. Personal intercession by Henry Morgenthau, Jr., Secretary of the Treasury, to Under Secretary of State Sumner Welles, resulted in approval of Samuel Atlas's visa.]

From Michael A. Meyer, "The Refugee Scholars Project of the Hebrew Union College," in *A Bicentennial Festschrift for Jacob Rader Marcus*, 1976.

Michael A. Meyer: Four Decades at HUC-JIR

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even as the rabbinate has shifted from the rabbi as the one who deals with Jewish issues to the rabbi who is largely a pastoral counselor." This phenomenon relates to Meyer's next project: editing the memoirs of Rabbi Joachim Prinz for publication. "Prinz is a noteworthy example of a rabbi who was an activist for many causes and very much involved with Jewish people issues, rather than Jewish person issues."

With the inclusion of women, Meyer has also observed the greater democratization of the classroom, a development he favors. "I think that our teaching today is more interactive than it was in earlier generations." His wife, Rabbi Margaret Meyer, was ordained in 1986 and is the Rabbi of Congregation B'nai Israel in Jackson, Tennessee; they have three children and six grandchildren.

Meyer's main interest from the beginning has been Jewish identity in modernity – an interest that he has sustained throughout his scholarly career. His dissertation became his first book, *Origins of the Modern Jew: Jewish Identity and European Culture from 1749-1824* (1967), still in print and used as a textbook today. "This study was an attempt to understand what made the modern Jews different from their medieval forebears in terms of acculturation," he explains.

His interests gradually shifted to focus more specifically upon the Reform Movement, leading to a long essay in *Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of*

Religion at One Hundred Years (1976) and *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in America* (1988), his major work, of which he is most proud. His most recent books include *Judaism Within Modernity* (2002) and this year's publication of a volume of letters and unpublished or ephemeral writings by Rabbi Leo Baeck, the leading figure of Liberal Judaism in pre-war Germany, who shared his community's fate and was imprisoned at Theresienstadt during the Holocaust.

In the late 1980s, Meyer was invited to become the International President of the Leo Baeck Institute, a scholarly organization devoted to the historical study of German Jewry, with branches in Jerusalem, New York, and London, as well as a scholarly working group in Germany. He was asked to undertake a large scale, four-volume history of the Jews in German-speaking lands in modern times for specialists as well as general readers. As editor of *German-Jewish History in Modern Times*, he first assembled an international team of ten scholars from Israel, the United States, and Britain, which included men and women, Jews and non-Jews. From its inception, the project was intended to appear in three languages, and nearly all of the volumes have come out through Columbia University Press, the Beck Verlag in Munich, and Merkaz Shazar in Jerusalem.

"We tried to do some things in these volumes that had not been done to the same degree earlier,"