

For forty years the HUC-JIR learning community has been enriched by a teacher, scholar, and mentor whose life and life's work embody the spirit and values of Jewish survival and Reform Judaism – Dr. Michael A. Meyer, Adolph S. Ochs Professor of Jewish History, at HUC-JIR/Cincinnati. In an interview with *The Chronicle*, Meyer recounted his life's journey and decades of contribution to Jewish scholarship and continuity of heritage.

historian of Reform Judaism and of the religious and intellectual life of German Jewry.

A product of the Reform youth movement, his genesis as a Jewish historian came out of a combined interest in Judaism and a commitment to Reform Judaism. After his undergraduate studies at UCLA, Meyer initially contemplated the rabbinate and completed part of the rabbinical program at HUC-JIR/Los Angeles when it was still at its

American campuses. So I was faced with a very difficult decision, because I was not a rabbi and there were precious few jobs for Jewish scholars aside from those in seminaries. At first, it seemed as if I would have to look for a job at a Hillel Foundation because at that time Hillel had some directors who were not rabbis. I had almost accepted a job at the Hillel at the University of Alabama, when HUC-JIR President Nelson Glueck offered me a position at our Los Angeles

times, he has also been a visiting member of the faculties of UCLA, Antioch College, University of Haifa, and Ben Gurion University.

Meyer's required courses for rabbinical students include medieval and modern Jewish history and the history of the Reform Movement in Judaism; during the 2003-04 academic year, he will offer electives on Jewish historiography and the intellectual history of Zionism. At HUC-JIR/Jerusalem, he teaches the Israeli rabbinical students a course on the history and thought of Reform Judaism. "I feel a special satisfaction in teaching rabbinical students, with whom I share values and through whom I can have some influence on the Reform Movement and on the religious lives of individuals. I believe in a learned rabbinate that is knowledgeable in Jewish sources. While the pastoral and practical duties of the rabbi are without question essential, I see the rabbi gaining her or his authority from knowledge of Jewish tradition and Jewish history."

Meyer has observed changes over the forty years of teaching two generations of students. "The interest in Jewish history is somewhat less today than it was 20 years ago. We were more focused then on Jewish national issues. As the rabbinate has changed, our students have increasingly stressed practical rabbinics as well as Jewish thought and tradition."

Meyer finds that this trend is reflected in the shift in emphasis of the Reform Movement's platforms. "The 1976 platform, which Eugene Borowitz largely wrote, was focused on Jewish survival, the people of Israel, and Jewish history. The more recent platform dwells upon the Jewish person, the individual,

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Born in Berlin, Meyer escaped Nazi Europe in 1941 with his parents and grandmother, arriving in the United States at 3 1/2 years of age – a scant four months before the Nazi policy shifted from forced Jewish emigration to deportation and death. "I think my awareness of being one of the *nitzolai haShoah* – those saved from the Holocaust – has deepened my commitment to things Jewish and to the study of German-Jewish history," Meyer says. Today, he is internationally recognized as the preeminent

In 1996, Professor Michael A. Meyer was awarded the National Foundation for Jewish Culture Zeltzer Scholarship Award in Historical Studies for his major influence on colleagues and students in his field.

original location on the Appian Way. He went on to work for the Ph.D. at HUC-JIR, where he studied with Ellis Rivkin in Cincinnati and Fritz Bamberger in New York.

"I finished by doctoral studies in 1964," he recalls, "before the explosion of Jewish studies on

by Jean Bloch Rosensaft

School, followed three years later with an offer to come to Cincinnati." As a pioneer in his field, he was one of the founders of the Association of Jewish Studies and served as its president (1978-80).

As a matter of fact, Meyer is one of the relatively few people who has taught at all of HUC-JIR's centers of learning. Currently, Meyer teaches at the Jerusalem School every fourth semester while simultaneously giving a graduate seminar at the Hebrew University, where he is a regular visiting professor. At various

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,"

Hebrew Union College's Rescue of Scholars During the Holocaust

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The College might have done still more. Other applicants wanted to come and were turned down. But by 1938 the refugee students made up 12 percent of the total enrollment and there was a serious question of how many foreign-born, and generally quite traditional, young rabbis the American Reform movement could absorb. Morgenstern had to consider the situation in the United States; obviously he could not know what the consequences of refusal would ultimately be. Moreover, compared to other Jewish institutions, the College was doing better than its share....

Not only rabbinical students desired the opportunity to leave Germany for the sanctuary of the Hebrew Union College. Just as urgent were the needs of Jewish scholars in Europe who sought refuge from Nazi oppression and the chance to continue with their work under conditions of freedom. They, too, hoped for a haven at the Hebrew Union College. And the College – again far more than any other American-Jewish educational institution – recognized its responsibility here as well. Beginning in 1938, and despite major political obstacles, the College succeeded in bringing no less than eight Jewish scholars to the United States and in giving employment to three other refugee professors who had managed to make their way to America by other means. [Samuel Atlas, Alexander Guttman, Abraham Heschel, Franz Landsberger, Franz Rosenthal, Isaiah Sonne, and

Eugen Täubler were brought from Europe to Cincinnati on nonquota visas. Julius Lewy and Eric Werner were already in the United States when the College offered them positions; Guido Kisch (a historian of law) was already in the United States and became a visiting faculty member of the Rabbi Stephen S. Wise's Jewish Institute of Religion in New York. Max Wiener received his appointment while still in Germany but gained entry to the United States as a congregational rabbi. Ismar Elbogen was brought to America and maintained as a research professor in New York through a joint effort of HUC, JIR, JTS, and Dropsie College.] Most of them were not men the College needed for its program of instruction, and the expense of providing for them all was considerable. The majority of them spoke English only with difficulty. Yet Morgenstern felt the College had no choice but to pluck these brands from the fire. One of the men, Abraham Joshua Heschel, later said that in this regard the HUC President was "the least appreciated man in American Jewry."

Some of those who came to Cincinnati, scholars like Max Wiener and Franz Rosenthal, spent only a short time at the College. Others, such as Eugen Täubler (Bible and Hellenistic literature), Isaiah Sonne (medieval Jewish history), and Franz Landsberger (Jewish art), remained to devote themselves primarily to research. The rest eventually found their way into

the ranks of the regular teaching faculty. Of the last group, the one to achieve greatest prominence, Abraham Heschel, chose to leave the College after teaching for five years and attaining the rank of associate professor. During the time he was in Cincinnati, Heschel had drawn to himself a small but devoted group of disciples who appreciated his talents as a teacher of philosophy and a creative Jewish thinker. But his own traditionalism made him feel uncomfortable in the College's Reform atmosphere. In his letter of resignation, Heschel wrote that the College had become very dear to him and that he wanted to be considered "a staunch friend of this illustrious institution," but, he admitted, his own interpretation of Judaism was not in full accord with the teachings of the College. He therefore accepted a position at the Jewish Theological Seminary....

The simultaneous absorption of such a large number of immigrant scholars – at one point equivalent to the entire remainder of the faculty – was not an easy process....Most of the refugee scholars were not given regular faculty status until after a trial period, and some were not given it at all....But every refugee professor felt grateful to Morgenstern for giving him a place at the College. They knew that the alternative, for at least some of them, would have been almost certain death.

Meyer describes. "We wanted to give women a proper amount of attention and also to deal more extensively with the inner history of the Jews so that we could get away from the idea that all of German Jewish history had to be understood through the lens of the Holocaust."

This study begins with a long introductory essay dealing with the Middle Ages, as prologue. The bulk of the volumes cover the 17th century through the Holocaust, with an epilogue dealing with the German-Jewish diaspora and the new Jewish community in Germany after the war.

Meyer's expertise led Michael Blumenthal to invite him to serve as an advisor for the initial planning of the permanent exhibition for Berlin's Jewish Museum, housed in an extraordinary building designed by architect Daniel Libeskind. Meyer likens this cerebral building to a work by Kafka, which allows many interpretations, and praises the museum for communicating a lost history of German Jewry to a mostly non-Jewish, German audience. He faults the permanent exhibition, however, for its tendency to see assimilation as the major theme, and wishes that the Reform Movement and Rabbi Leo Baeck would have been given more attention – suggestions that he has forwarded to the curator in charge of revisions.

As someone who escaped Hitler, how does it feel for Meyer to return to Germany? "When I first began to go back to the land of my birth for scholarly conferences, I had a good deal of ambivalence about it. And for a time, it was my practice that whenever I was invited to a conference in Germany, on that

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