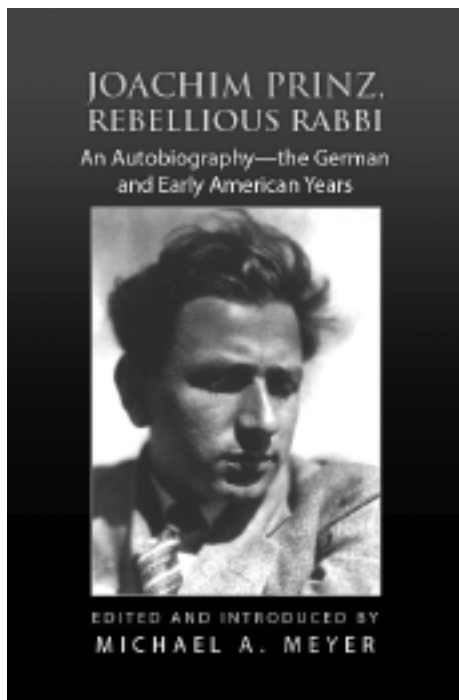


Joachim Prinz, *Rebellious Rabbi*

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When, a few years ago, it was suggested to me that I have a look at a manuscript autobiography by Joachim Prinz (1902-1988), my assumption was that, like most such writing, it would be of interest to family and friends, perhaps belonged in an archives, but was unlikely to attract a larger readership. To my surprise, I found the life story of this provocative Liberal and Zionist rabbi in Germany and later in America extraordinarily fascinating, had difficulty in putting it down, and soon resolved to prepare it for publication.

Prinz dictated his autobiography to his secretary around 1977, probably very shortly after his retirement from the rabbinate of Temple B'nai Abraham, which he had served from 1939 to 1973 in Newark, and then in Livingston, New Jersey. He began his story with his birth in 1902 and carried it forward to the death of his mentor and idol, Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, in 1949. Regrettably, he did not continue the account further, into his career as a prominent leader of American Judaism, specifically to his roles as president of the American Jewish Congress and chair of the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations. Nor does the autobiography include his relationship with Martin Luther King, Jr. and his dramatic speech at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom on August 28, 1963. However, as Prinz indicated in his remarks on that occasion, his work on behalf of African Americans rested upon his experience as a rabbi in Nazi Germany, which forms the central chapter of his autobiography. His recollections shed new light on the role of the rabbinate in a community under siege, on spiritual resistance carried on in the synagogue and lecture hall. In addition, they provide access to the personality of an unusual individual, shaped

largely by the unshackled, exuberant Weimar culture, cheeky enough to confront Nazi authorities repeatedly, and finally able to find a leadership role in American Judaism. Below are a few non-annotated adapted excerpts from my introduction to the autobiography.

Autobiography, its students agree, is a problematic genre of literature. One cannot expect it to be a balanced and wholly accurate representation. Remembering and forgetting are determined not only by temporal distance from the events described, but also by psychological factors that often unconsciously push certain recollections into the foreground and bury others. Autobiographers are explorers of the self, but they are also its fashioners. They configure the tale of their personal development and character in a manner that is both most easily acceptable to themselves and that presents the self-image that they wish to convey to succeeding generations of their family or of a larger readership. The process begins before the text is produced. Frequently told tales are reshaped, embellished, and become exemplary for the life even as others are suppressed. In addition, literary motives play their role as the autobiographer seeks to create a coherent

and intrinsically interesting narrative, omitting distractions, limiting qualifications, exaggerating importance. In a sense, the writing of autobiography is a kind of performance, a dramatization of the writer's life for the readers' entertainment. Like a film or play, its success depends on its holding the interest of those exposed to it.

The recollections of Joachim Prinz display the characteristics of the autobiographical genre. His work is focused upon the self. It fashions an imagined persona that must be differentiated from the historical person, whose character can only be determined from other sources. Although there are occasional descriptions of milieu, especially of his village childhood, the autobiography is less a memoir of his times than a relation of his own development and activity within a changing environment. The autobiography presents Prinz as he would like to be remembered: as the possessor of a meaningful and

interesting life; a breaker of taboos; a man whose life was filled with experiences that were out of the ordinary. He was not, the autobiography repeatedly impresses on the reader, a mere run-of-the-mill rabbi. The frequent instances of self-dramatization, of setting the self apart from others without qualification, create a more powerful, if not always historically accurate or carefully qualified narrative. Despite the occasional note of self-deprecation with regard to irresponsibility and insensitivity, the dominant mood is one of self-confidence and self-admiration. Although there are occasional critical reflections, the autobiography gives little evidence of inner struggle; unlike Rousseau, its mood is not confessional, but triumphant, more a celebration of self than of deeper introspection. Known as an excellent raconteur, Prinz here presents stories that must have been often told and hence most easily remembered, no doubt restructured and stylized in the

course of repeated retellings. Since the autobiography was created shortly after his retirement from a very successful rabbinical career, producing it may have been a way of coping with the crisis of retirement, which had closed off most opportunities for public display and induced an inward focus as well as the desire to leave a personal legacy.

The effort to contextualize Prinz's autobiography within his life and his changing milieu seems worthwhile because Joachim Prinz, the historical figure, was indeed a significant presence in Jewish history both in Germany and the United States. His reinterpretation of the role of the rabbinate had a broad influence and the Jewish spiritual life in which he participated has yet to be fully integrated into portrayals of German Jewry during the Nazi period. Among German Zionists, Prinz was the movement's most popular propagandist; among rabbis, his part in the spiritual resistance to Nazism is second only to that of the leader of German Jewry during the Nazi period, Rabbi Leo Baeck. His candor about his personal life is astonishing. Finally, in the United States, Prinz became one of the foremost Jewish leaders of the Civil Rights movement. Yet there has not been so much as a single critical article dealing with his life and achievements. The discovery of Joachim Prinz's autobiography provides a window into a fascinating life as well as the opportunity to assess his significance for Jewish history.

Hitler's appointment as chancellor of Germany on January 30, 1933 unleashed a crisis within German Jewry, especially among the Liberals, who had remained optimistic about the future of Jews in Germany. Increasingly driven out from the public sphere, German Jews were forced to seek psychological sustenance from within a Jewish community that hitherto had been at best peripheral to their daily lives. As their long-standing ideology of complete equality within German society lay in ruins, they

turned to the abandoned synagogue as a place of refuge where they could be among their own. Large numbers turned to Prinz as the rabbi who would dare to address their concerns the most honestly, directly, and dramatically.

Never was this more true than on Friday evening, March 31, 1933, the night before the boycott of Jewish stores that by two months followed Hitler's ascent to power. Prinz referred to the service he conducted that evening as the most memorable in his life, especially when the worshippers in a packed synagogue shouted the watchword of the Jewish faith, the *shma yisrael*, with such fervor that it drowned out choir and organ. From the recollections of Prinz's rabbinical colleague, Hans Tramer, we learn more than what is contained in the autobiography about how he chose to dramatize the crisis for the congregation. Tramer remembers that earlier that day he had met with Prinz at his home and asked his more senior colleague what he should say at the services. Prinz replied that he himself would simply read a proclamation circulated to all synagogues by Rabbi Leo Baeck and add two or three sentences about its contents. It was, he added, a time not for speaking, but for silence. That, in fact, is exactly what Tramer did in his synagogue. The next day, however, he learned what Prinz himself had done. This is Tramer's account: "Prinz entered the synagogue, called the *shammes* [the caretaker of the synagogue] and had him call up the

three oldest men in the congregation. He then removed the Torah scrolls from the ark. [The men] stood, two next to him and one in front of him. Then before the open ark he read [Baeck's] letter, had the scrolls solemnly replaced in the ark, whereupon he spoke for forty minutes or even an hour saying: 'We Jews will defend our Judaism; we have no weapons, for THIS is our weapon.' Thereupon he wheeled around and tore open the ark containing the Torah scrolls!" When Tramer later asked Prinz why he hadn't suggested something similar to him, Prinz replied innocently: "All of that occurred to me only at the last minute." He claimed to have improvised the performance spontaneously.

As Prinz had been, after Leo Baeck, the best known of the German rabbis during the Nazi years, so he later became one of the most prominent figures in American Jewry in the generation after Stephen Wise and Abba Hillel Silver. At a meeting of the Rabbinical Assembly, Arthur Hertzberg said of him to his fellow Conservative rabbis that Prinz was "an astute mind and the most distinguished and beloved of our colleagues, revered in the American Rabbinate, the man who, I think, most of us would most like to be." Perhaps that was an exaggeration, but it also possessed some measure of truth. The career of this audacious and talented German and American Jew is certainly one of the more significant in modern Jewish history.



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