

Recalling Werner Cahnman: On the History of Jews and Gentiles

by
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Wandering in the “great maze” of Werner J. Cahnman’s writings in German and English, one comes away with the understanding that his historical bent, his respect for the multitude of data, his sociological sensitivity and personal experience were all at work in order to enhance our understanding and knowledge of the past and more recent times. As his friend and mentor, Joseph B. Maier, put it: Cahnman’s lifework “mirrored his fate as a wanderer between worlds and cultures and as a mediator between them.”¹

When we met in the late 1970s, we had no inkling that one day we would be asked to nurse his last unpublished manuscript on the historical relationship of Jews and Gentiles into print. Our long talks and especially the lecture of some of his published and unpublished essays were revelatory. One autobiographical essay relating his short but terrifying experience at the Dachau concentration camp dealt with “life in the Camp” and showed not only his talent to espy the sociologically significant aspect but also his analytical bent—not forsaken even in an existential situation. He talks here about the morale of the Jewish prisoners with shades and grades, of course, and the fact that “on the whole, intellectuals and persons from the upper class, as well as persons from the laboring classes, stood the test better than the middle classes. . . . The petit bourgeois simply did not understand what was happening to him. . . . People from the laboring classes, on the other hand, were helped by their sturdy physique and by a culture pattern which was less individualistic and more inclined toward mutual help.” He attributes the strength of the “intellectuals and persons from the business elite” to “their inner resources and their keen grasp of the situation.”² Similarly, he observes and establishes types and characteristics even among the SS overseers. As he put it: “There was a whole range of types, from the all-out blood hound to the contemptuous sadist, and from the moral monster to the man who appeared to merely do his duty.” He is aware of the dangers of generalization though, and adds that “the exception is as important as the rule.”³

While not yet a sociologist, the young Cahnman had it in him to become the scholar who would undertake the ambitious and demanding project, to write the social history of Jews and Gentiles. Judging from several writings—published or unpublished—the intent to write a “comprehensive, yet concentrated, account of Jewish-Gentile relations” seemed to go back to the early 1930s when the unfolding social, political and intellectual crises in Germany compelled young Cahnman to engage in political and social activities and Jewish learning. His family history, lively social life and connectedness to Munich’s business, artistic and intellectual circles, his studies at Munich University and his intense community concerns aided him greatly in this undertaking. Indeed, to know about Cahnman’s early years in Germany and his life as a refugee scholar in America are important to the understanding of his life work, and, especially, his approach to this problem.

WERNER JACOB CAHNMAN WAS BORN IN MUNICH on September 30, 1902, the scion of an old German Jewish family. As recounted by him, his father’s village roots represented a rustic and folksy Judaism, sentimentally attached to community and family but no Jewish learning. His mother’s family, on the other hand, belonged to the *haute bourgeoisie*; they were bankers, jurists and industrialists, living in Munich and Nuremberg. They were patrons of the arts, interested in philosophy and literature; their Judaism was of a free-thinking sort. As Cahnman recalled in the 1970s, his mother revered Spinoza and Mendelssohn and her religion had an ethical orientation. “The main idea of my mother,” he said, “was that everybody, but especially a Jew, should promote justice in the world. She died in Piaski, in Poland, in unimaginable circumstances and in a situation of utmost injustice.”⁴

Cahnman has inherited from his father the perspective of participant observer, the emotional attachment and feelings of unquestioned belongingness to a *Gemeinschaft*. He listened to his father’s stories of village life told with historical enthusiasm; he interviewed older relatives and collected family-related data from them and from archives. Such early activities informed his 1974 typological study of “Village and Small-town Jews in Germany,” for example. Since his parents’ house was a meeting place of notables of all persuasion, he encountered Zionism and socialism, heard discussions of women’s problems and present day social problems of the Munich community. Although he was exposed to a variety of Jewish, political, and intellectual viewpoints, Cahnman claimed that on the whole,

the Jews of Munich were bourgeois liberals. Already as a teenager, Cahnman became interested in demography; he collected data and read up on baptism, intermarriage, birthrates, and generally, the growth, decline or change in the make-up of Bavarian Jewish communities. He became interested in the Palestinian settlements but when the Great War broke out, his “German patriotism” was aroused, as he said, and he stayed put. His university studies in Munich and Berlin followed where he majored in economics, history, political science and sociology, concluding with a dissertation at the University of Munich on Ricardo in 1927. There followed an absorption into Jewish learning, and Jewish political activity.

Cahnman evaluated the years of the Weimar Republic as a time when exciting things happened, teeming of intellectual and artistic fervent and controversy, but also a time when public life showed discouraging signs. In Germany, the 1920s also witnessed little hope for meaningful political action and the collectivities’ inward turn. Thus, the 1920s saw a revival of Jewish consciousness and as Cahnman noted, “Jewish themes pure and simple came to the fore.” The *Centralverein* had many new members, the Jewish *Lehrhaus* movement exploded, and publications abounded on the essence of Judaism. Cahnman read avidly the works of Leo Baeck, Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig et al., accompanied by the reading of the varied philosemitic as well as anti-Semitic literature of the time. He regarded Buber as his main guide and influence in the development of his own characteristic combination of elements in his work: historiography, Jewish ethnicity, romantic philosophy and political democracy. Thus, it may also be safe to assume that *Jews and Gentiles* had been germinating ever since.

Cahnman’s intellectual preoccupations were soon supplanted by varied activities which he called his “social work” period. He moved from being a research associate of the Berlin Chamber of Industry and Commerce and the Institute of World Economy to become the *Syndikus* for Bavaria’s *Centralverein* (1930-1934), the major defense organization of German Jewry. He then became a teacher at the *Juedische Lehrhaus* and a member of the *Kulturbund* in Munich until his escape in 1939. In the meantime, he started work on the reasons for the rise of the Jewish national movement in Austria, centered around the person of Adolph Fischhof, which he was able to finish only in the 1950s in the United States. Similarly, he started but finished only in late 1969 a study on the presence of “Three Regions of German Jewry,” which was to demonstrate that a unified and uniform German Jewry never existed. Cahnman’s activities included many clandestine missions on behalf

of his beleaguered people, undertaken in several countries. After 1934, as a “leader of an illegal organization” he was briefly thrown into the Munich police prison, giving him a first-hand experience with the “New Order.” According to Cahnman, it was his erstwhile classmate at the University of Munich, Rudolf Hess, who was instrumental in his release.⁵

After Cahnman’s escape from Germany, he entered the United States in 1940 and soon after partook in a summer seminar for foreign scholars and teachers at the Brewster Free Academy in Wolfsboro, New Hampshire. Here he first encountered the sociologist Robert E. Park, of the University of Chicago, and Herbert A. Miller who evaluated Cahnman’s background and designated him as a “race and cultural specialist” in sociology, with a recommendation for a Visiting Position at the University of Chicago. In due course, as he recalled, he became a “Chicago sociologist,” in close contact with Everett Hughes, the anthropologist Redfield, and, above all, Park, who greatly influenced his thinking. The relationship with Louis Wirth was more complicated. In spite of their common interest in things Jewish, their perspectives differed: Cahnman had a strong survivalist perspective, meaning the survival of ethnic groups from both normative and empirical viewpoints, while Wirth maintained a strong assimilationist outlook, that is, the inevitability of the absorption of the Jews, as any other ethnic group, into the mainstream of the larger society. While trying to find his place in American academic life proved to be a long and arduous process, he was similarly not too successful in finding outlets for his earlier work. From Germany, he brought with him sets of data on Jewish life and/or emigration as well as Herzl’s relation to German Jewish communities. He was adamant not to let the German Jewish communities go under “without a song” and constantly tried to place his studies—with more or less success. But he found his “home” in American Jewish life only when he was asked to join the editorial board of *The Reconstructionist* magazine. To the end of his life, he faithfully contributed to the journal and some of his articles reflect his brand of thinking, such as, “Intercultural Education and Jewish Content,” (1948), “The Tercentenary Conference on American Jewish Sociology” (1955), “Religion in Israel” (1956), “Attitudes of German Youth” (1965), “The Interracial Jewish Children” (1967) or “New Intermarriage Studies: A Critical Survey”(1967). Interestingly, a public figure, Mario Cuomo, acknowledged Cahnman’s shrewdness as participant observer and the astuteness of his analyses and called him “a sociologist friend from Forest Hills,” whose insights he made use of for his 1975 book, *Forest Hills Diary—The Crisis of Low Income Housing*. In turn, Cahnman reviewed Cuomos’s

book and some of his comments there help to explain and evaluate his concerns and writings from the 1930s. He wrote:

I am a Forest Hills (instead of Munich) resident, a sociologist who is a race and intercultural relations specialist, and I am active in Jewish life. It goes without saying that I am aware of the complexities of urban living. I believe I know of the needs [of the newcomers] as well as the aspirations of the neighbors in the midst of whom I live.⁶

Indeed, Cahnman's choice of themes—community and family history, Jewish history, Jewish leaders and thinkers, the once-existing German-Jewish symbiosis, and last but not least, Jewish-Gentile relations—attest to his deep understanding and awareness of the complexities and problems involved in such relations. As to why he devoted a considerable part of his life and scholarly work to the examination of all aspects of these themes, Cahnman's answer was that it was the times and themes that chose him.

As Cahnman put it, he had been “finally rescued for sociology,” when Joseph B. Maier, then chair of the Department of Sociology at Rutgers University's Newark Campus, brought him there in 1961; he retired from Rutgers as full professor in 1968. According to Maier, Cahnman was respected but he never became part of the “inner circle” of the faculty there on account of his being too fastidious in his ideals and standards, too set in his habits, too German, too Jewish, too much himself. He was seen by others and he regarded himself to be a “stranger,” and it is no accident that he devoted much time to the conceptual clarification of the term as used by Simmel, Brentano and Toennis. Cahnman's preference was for the term “intermediary” (*Vermittler*), not meant microsociologically as in the case of Simmel but macrosociologically in the Toennisian sense, that is, as a commercial and cultural intermediary within a social structure. The macrosociological bent was more pronounced in Cahnman's last scholarly period when there emerged a systematic concern with the historical perspective in sociology. This approach resulted in the 1964 volume *Sociology and History*, which he edited with Alvin Boskoff. With his friend, Joseph B. Maier, Cahnman was instrumental in establishing a Historical Sociology Section in the American Sociological Association, which he chaired. In his essay, “Historical Sociology: What it is and What it is Not” (1976), Cahnman showed how typological devices as well as the use of comparative materials can be

enormously useful in producing scholarly works which are sociologically oriented and historically relevant.

Cahnman's early practical and activist tendencies reemerged in the 1970s when he branched out from scholarship to promote intercultural relations and preservation of Jewish past. He called upon his peers to establish the Rashi Association for the Preservation of Jewish Cultural Monuments in Europe. He acted on his deeply felt conviction that after the obliteration of Jewish communities and institutions all around Europe, it was imperative that still remaining, visible testimonies of the past be saved. He singled out Germany as the first place of activity because the "aim of Hitler to obliterate all traces of Jewish life from German soul must be frustrated." It was just as important for him to salvage the sites and cultural artifacts as links to the future. Cahnman thought that the visible signs of Jewish continuity would have a significant educational and psychological impact: Gentiles in all these countries would be made to realize that Jewish history was part and parcel of their own, their country's history. Just as in his hometown back in the 1930s, for Cahnman community concerns, scholarly endeavors and Jewish activism always and everywhere went hand in hand. When I visited the first such enterprise helped along by the Rashi Association, the Martin Buber Institute at the University of Cologne, and saw there young German students engaged in learning Hebrew and writing papers on Jewish culture, I could witness how the vision of Werner Cahnman became reality.

The last, most philosophical and most elaborate essays of Cahnman, entitled "Friedrich Wilhelm Schelling and the New Thinking of Judaism," deals with an old theme of his: the German-Jewish symbiosis. As one appreciative critic, Selma Stern put it, the essay addresses the problem of "elective affinity," or the state of affairs when "the Jews achieved some sort of synthesis between Judaism and European culture."⁷ As the title indicates, Cahnman goes back to the early nineteenth century, after the waning of the kabbalistic beliefs due to the collapse of the carriers: the Sabbatian and Frankist movements, and their subterranean influence. He traces its re-emergence in the "garb of romantic philosophy," as evidenced in Schelling's 1815 lectures on "Philosophy of Mythology" and the "Philosophy of Revelation." The Schellingian influence on the thinking of the representatives of the second Emancipation in Germany is thus emanated from kabbalistic sources. The line reaches the twentieth century in the persons of Franz Rosenzweig and Hermann Cohen—up to the writings of Max Horkheimer and the Frankfurt

School, where Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* shows through their critique of science and technology.

For years, Werner Cahnman sought to see the publication of his last full-scale work with the provisional title, "Jews and Gentiles: The Historical Sociology of Their Relations" without success. He wrote letters and sent out the synopsis of his manuscript as follows:

I have been working on a comprehensive, yet concentrated, account of Jewish-Gentile relations for a long time. I believe that a scholarly conceived yet fluidly written account of these relations is essential for the self-understanding of the present generation. The topic of the Jewish experience among the peoples in the midst of whom Jews live is not identical, although it is overlapping, with the usual history of anti-Semitism. If the focus is on anti-Semitism, Jewish history is made to appear as if it were a record of unmitigated hostility against the Jewish people and of passivity on the part of the Jews.⁸

However, as Cahnman demonstrates in his study, Jewish-Gentile relations are far more complex. There is a long history of mutual contacts, positive as well as antagonistic, even if conflict situations continue to require particular attention. He points out that the account follows a historical sequence, but it is sociological in conception. The main question addressed is whether there are recognizable patterns, common to most ages and places in which Jewish history has been enacted. At the same time, while general patterns may be recognizable, modifications and combinations of patterns are assumed to have occurred.

Cahnman's historical account runs from Roman antiquity through the Middle Ages, into the era of emancipation and the Holocaust, and finally to the present American and Israeli scene. To be sure, as far as the "present" American and Israeli scene is concerned, the account appears unfinished as well as dated. But the basic similarities and dissimilarities throughout history are laid out and analyzed. He tests the theses of classical sociology implicitly, yet unobtrusively. For example, he traces the socio-economic basis of human relations emphasized by Marx and others, and considers Jews as "strangers" and "intermediaries." He disagrees with Max Weber in that for him Jews were not "pariahs" although he finds a remarkable affinity to Weber's

Protestantism-capitalism argument in the tension of Jewish-Christian relations emerging from the bitter theological argument over usury, where the antagonism between Jews and Gentiles took on a pronouncedly socio-economic rather than religious character. It is depicted how the nineteenth century added a nationalist dimension as well as the distortions of biology and race, with fateful consequences.

FOR WERNER CAHNMAN, THE SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY OF Jewish-Gentile relations were of importance for more than one reason. For one, he held that the preservation of past history “must serve as pillars of the new Jewish consciousness which is to arise out of the memories of the past.” And similarly to his promotion of intercultural relations that guided his establishment of the Rashi Association, he counted this time too on the psychological and educational impact of the examination of Jewish history that proved to be part and parcel of Gentile history. Finally, it attest to Cahnman’s self-understanding as a sociologist and a student of Jewish life. On the occasion of his seventieth birthday, he was asked about his approach to Jewish history. His answer? An approach from the vantage point of the historical sociologist, and a scholar who is not chiefly concerned with “isolated phenomena but with relations between phenomena.” In fact, he continued,

When I came to understand that the trader and the peasant live in symbiosis and conflict, I was relieved. . . . The Jewish people dwells among the nations, whether in Israel or in the Diaspora, and the tensions between intimate symbiosis and bitter conflict remains a guiding theme of Jewish history.⁹

In sum, for Cahnman the primacy of Jewish-Gentile relations in all their complexity and variability seemed essential for the understanding of Jewish social and political history. While it is evident that the history of post-Emancipation German Jewry and of the Holocaust aftermath has received considerable scholarly attention, the study of Jewish life in the Diaspora, or the migrational movements has been somewhat neglected; Cahnman clearly was intent to fill the gap. His research data, his personal experiences, and historical view combined resulted in a scholarly life-work that should constitute an important element in any future large-scale historical account. Reminiscing of Martin Buber, Cahnman makes a confessional statement in this regard: “I shall try to testify . . . in the belief that what I have to say

will stand for the truth which, while it becomes manifest only in personal experience, nevertheless transcends it.”¹⁰

Werner Jacob Cahnman died of cancer in Forest Hills, New York, on September 27, 1980. Beside the unpublished manuscript of *Jews and Gentiles*, he left behind an even more ambitious work on “The History of Sociology.” With all his other papers, they were preserved by Dr. Gisella Levi Cahnman, the widow of Werner, in shared executorship with Joseph B. Maier, and later, with the editors of the present study. This volume is dedicated to the memory of Cahnman’s close friend, mentor and fellow refugee scholar, Joseph B. Maier, the last member of the Frankfurt School, who died November 22, 2002.

Notes

¹ In J.B. Maier and C. I. Waxman, eds., *Ethnicity, Identity and History. Essays in Memory of Werner J. Cahnman* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1983), p. 4.

² Werner J. Cahnman, “In the Dachau Concentration Camp: An Autobiographical Essay,” in J. B. Maier, J. Marcus and Z. Tarr, eds. *German Jewry. Its History and Sociology. Selected Essays by W.J. Cahnman* (New Brunswick, NJ-Oxford, UK: 1989), p. 155.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 157-158.

⁴ Quoted in *Ethnicity, Identity and History* . . . , p. 2.

⁵ Quoted in *German Jewry* . . . , p. XIV. See also Cahnman, “Rudolf Hess; or, An Introduction to the Emergence of German Geopolitics: An Autobiographical Account,” in Werner J. Cahnman, *Weber and Toennies. Comparative Sociology in Historical Perspective*, ed. By J.B. Maier, J. Marcus and Z. Tarr (New Brunswick, NJ and London, UK: Transaction Publishers, 1995), pp. 319-336. There exists also a completed, unpublished manuscript entitled, “Rudolf Hess as a Symbol.”

⁶ See Cahnman, "The Forest Hills Experience," in *The Reconstructionist*, 12, no. 2 (March 1975): 25.

⁷ Selma Stern's statement comes from her book, *The Court Jew*, translated by Ralph Weinman (Philadelphia: 1950), p. 241.

⁸ See Cahnman's notes published in the *Newsletter* of the Association for the Sociological Study of Jewry (1975), pp. 20-21.

⁹ Quoted by Ira Eisenstein, "Werner Cahnman at Seventy," in *The Reconstructionist* (June 1973), pp. 24-33.

¹⁰ See Cahnman, "Martin Buber: A Reminiscence," in *The Reconstructionist*, 31, no. 12 (15 October 1965): 7.

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