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**Moritz Fröhlich—Morris Gay**  
**A German Refugee in the United States**

Peter Gay

WASHINGTON, D.C.

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I want to talk to you about what I will call, for short, unfamous refugees. We will all agree, I think, that famous refugees, scientists like Albert Einstein, philosophers like Ernst Cassirer, filmmakers like Billy Wilder, have had ample and often admiring attention. They found their disciples in this country, they found their biographers. So have outstanding professionals, whether architects or psychoanalysts. Laura Fermi, the wife of the great physicist Enrico Fermi, knew quite a few of the new settlers in this country and she did research on a great many more such men and women whom she did *not* know. When she wrote a book about these individuals she called it *Illustrious Immigrants*. Indeed, in the late 1960s, two Harvard historians, Bernard Bailyn and Donald Fleming, published a bulky collective work that tried to report on the careers of German and Austrian refugee architects, sociologists, psychologists, scientists, psychoanalysts, art historians, and others who had managed not just to flee Hitler's Europe, but also to make a difference to American culture.

There really were not many of such stature, but their impact was so spectacular that they have engrossed the attention of historians. The art historian Erwin Panofsky, for example, landed at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton and, never tired of teaching, volunteered to train art historians at the Institute for Fine Arts in New York. He also would train thousands of others with his witty, pioneering publications. And again, there were the sociologist Paul Lazarsfeld and political scientist Franz Neumann at Columbia, who exercised considerable influence on their graduate students and junior colleagues, and over their chosen professions. And it mattered that these two had been trained in Europe. Franz Neumann, for example, a left-wing German lawyer, was not my doctoral advisor when I worked on my dissertation on the German Revisionist Eduard Bernstein, but I often sought his generous and well-informed counsel. And, more important (speaking more generally) he brought news of European scholars of whom we had heard at most the names—like the German sociologist Max Weber—or of whom we had not heard at all, like the philosopher and intellectual historian Wilhelm Dilthey, whom we began to read simply because Neuman had recommended him. I should add as a personal note that my lifelong interest in the uses of psychoanalysis for the historian was kindled as early as 1950 or 1951, when word spread that the Marxist Franz Neumann, in company with his wife and their common best friend Herbert Marcuse, was starting to study Freud. It occurred to me that if Neumann was reading Freud, perhaps I should too.

But what of the unfamous Jews—the small businessmen and bank employees, lawyers and physicians, and others like them, driven out to a new land, a new world? The Germans have just begun to study these refugees whose numbers must run easily to more than 200,000. For example the Berlin historian Wolfgang Benz, who holds a chair in anti-Semitism, has published a collection of short essays, an anthology that he called *Das Exil der Kleinen Leute*, (The Exile of the 'Little People'). And yet there is a great deal of work to be done in this sphere, and I hope that this talk may be a spur to this necessary scholarship.

I take my cue from an episode reported in *Gewalt und Gedächtnis* (Violence and Memory), an exceptionally interesting brief monograph published in 1994 by a German ethnologist, Franziska Becker. A peasant community in Swabia, Baisingen was distinguished from most other such villages by being what was then called a "Judendorf"—a place, in short,

that was home to a number of Jews, enough of them to permit them to support a small synagogue and an equally small Jewish school. This also meant that the Jews of Baisingen lived among a Christian population, cheek by jowl. They—Jews and gentiles—were acquaintances, some of them even friends. At the very least, virtually all of the Christians knew Jews and dealt with them. Now, with the questions Becker asked in Baisingen she tried to elicit local memories of Kristallnacht, the confiscation and auctioning off of Jewish property, and the deportation in 1942 of the few local Jews who remained. As a good ethnologist, she asked questions and kept her opinions to herself, however strongly tempted she was to express dismay, even horror, about what she heard.

"As a rule," writes Becker, "I was received cordially; most of those I interviewed turned to 'the topic' without circumlocutions, but they were sometimes stubborn enough to pay no attention to my inquiries. Thus I met in front of what had once been the synagogue a man supported on crutches, who told me: 'We were compelled to suffer as much as the Jews.' This was the overture to a half-hour long monologue about his experiences in the war and his wounds." Becker simply records this episode without comment and lets it do its work on the reader.

Anyone who has spent any time in Germany will know that this kind of denial can still be heard. When a former refugee returns to his native country and tells a German how much he or she—I mean the refugee—has gone through in exile to make his way, a favorite response is likely to be, "You were lucky!" And by this the German who uses this phrase does not mean that the refugee was lucky not to have been murdered in a death camp, but lucky because he had escaped the Allied bombings, the hungry winter of 1945, and the Russians! those Russians!

I need hardly tell an audience like this that those who "got out" (to employ the familiar phrase we used) were indeed lucky. The Jews who survived the war in Germany were a tiny handful—in Berlin, some 5,000 were hidden in the city, or successfully tried to pass, or whose gentile spouses did not abandon them, of whom some 1,400 survived. Lucky, yes, but how lucky? If there are any among you who were born in Germany or Austria, you already know the answer in full, and might well be able to add some fascinating reminiscences of your own. But those who managed to get out are for the most part elderly by now and dying off, and in many

such cases even their children, now in their forties and fifties, are likely to know very little about their parents' early experiences whether in Hitler's Europe or in the early years in the United States.

The number of stories I could tell about being lucky to get out and what happened afterwards is virtually endless. Since I published my memoir, *My German Question*, last October, I have been getting a great deal of mail, well over 150 letters, and virtually all of the writers report on their own experiences which, they will say, were much like my own or, in contrast, *not* like my own. If the letter writers are younger, they are more likely than not to thank me for bringing up a past that their parents had kept from them. My conclusion about this deeply moving correspondence, which I have tried to answer in every case, has been self-contradictory: the histories of refugees from Hitler are all unique, the histories of refugees are all alike. Both are true.

In what follows, I shall want to take both of these tacks. As a historian I am committed to the concrete, and to the individuality of each life's experience. But I think that I am also entitled to offer some generalizations from individual cases. And in the second part of my talk I shall frequently move from the individual to collective fates.

But before I do so, before I speak about my father, I want to make a general point about what I have called the unfamous refugees. Unless they had relatives abroad, preferably prosperous relatives, and unless they could count on employment, they had to look upon the prospect of emigration with dismay. A conductor like Bruno Walter could expect that he would find an orchestra, whether in Britain or in the United States, that he might be invited to lead. An impresario like Max Reinhardt could be confident that there would be entrepreneurs who would ask him to mount some ambitious production.

But those unfamous emigrants? It was not just that they had to give up what had been in the most literal sense their home, but that they really had few if any inviting prospects abroad. Most of them were middle-class businessmen without any portable skills. Most of them—and that, as I shall say below, included my father—had no languages other than German to help them get acclimated and to find a job. How were they to live? What were they to do? Ever since the great trek began, there have been charges against German and Austrian Jews, usually on the part

of Jews abroad, that they were fools (or, often enough, traitors to Judaism) for not leaving their Nazified country right away. "What were you waiting for?" "Was not everything that is happening to you already forecast in *Mein Kampf*?"—so goes the indictment.

A famous sharp version of this reproach was, of course, the bitter statement by the Zionist scholar Gershom Scholem, that Germany's Jews had always lived in an aura of self-delusion: You had loved the Germans but the Germans had not loved you. This charge was not always put quite so categorically, but at times it was even more savage: Whatever you are going through now—or whatever you went through—you really deserved.

The people who took their pleasure berating Germany's Jews forgot—to put it mildly—two things: that the "Final Solution" was literally unimaginable in the early, and even in the late, 1930s. When one looks at the minutes of the meeting that the Nazi leadership held after Kristallnacht, one sees that the assembled gangsters, led by Göring and Goebbels, thought up all kinds of "punishments" for the Jews still left in Germany. Some, like the 1 billion mark fine, were quite horrendous. Other discussions, like the debate over whether Jews should be allowed to ride on German trains, seemed comparatively trivial. But the scheme for mass murder was not broached, nor even hinted at. However predictably unpleasant the future of Jews in Germany, certainly until 1940 that future remained unclear.

The second thing these critics with 20/20 hindsight forget is just how one lives in exile.

These points asserted, let me talk now about my father. I have a good deal to say about him in a memoir I published last October, *My German Question*, and I don't want to repeat much of that here. Rather I want to concentrate on the way he made his way in the United States—or did *not* make his way.

Some background is necessary. He was born in 1892 in Upper Silesia, in a village near the town of Kempen. He seems to have been a bright and independent-minded boy. As long as I knew him and could understand such matters he had been an atheist. When I asked him, it turned out that he had, quite on his own, rejected religion, all religion, including his own. And he had done so at the age of twelve. The seed for making up his own mind was sown then and there.

But his formal education ended at age 14, since the school at Kempen offered no higher grades. Then, apart from repeating the last year in Kempen, to pick up more reading, more



knowledge of the world, he had to arrange for his own learning. He was, then, mainly an autodidact, widely but unsystematically read. But one thing he never had any opportunity to acquire, naturally, was foreign languages.

His ideal of self-employment was to go into business, either on his own or as a representative of major manufacturers. There are some fine differences here between traveling salesmen, who merely try to sell what they are told to sell, and representatives, who consult with large-scale customers and manufacturers, and whose own ideas often make a major difference in the product. This is how my father entered, and stayed in, the world of business. As a young man he made his home in Frankfurt am Main, and then, after the war, in 1922, he married and moved to Berlin.

I should add briefly that he was in the war, too, and in fact greeted the declaration on August 4, 1914 with elevated patriotic feelings. These, he told me, he lost very soon—namely in September of the same year, when he saw his first corpse. In any event, the war did not last much longer for him, since in 1915 he was wounded twice—in the hand and the right arm—and was invalided out. What remained was an arm he could use but not stretch out to its full extent, and the recognition of a grateful fatherland, which bestowed on him a monthly pension, some privileges such as the right to ride first-class on a second-class ticket on trains, and the Iron Cross, Second Class (which, I should add, he happily contributed in 1942, when we lived in Denver, to a collection of metal for the American war effort).

Like other merchants, my father too participated in the vicissitudes of the German economy, and my family's economic situation was reflected in where we lived. But then in 1936, with the general improvement in the economy, we moved to our last apartment in Berlin, our most comfortable one. We did not enjoy it very long, though we lived in it until we left Germany in April 1939. But on July 1, 1938, taking advantage of then recent anti-Semitic decrees, his "Aryan" partner threw my father out of their business without a penny. We had savings and could live off them for a while, but the event was a severe blow to my father, so committed was he to taking care of my mother and me. It would not be the last blow.

By that time, for many months we had been intent on leaving Nazi Germany. But that proved to be hard, partly because my father was, through the accident of the peace treaties at

Versailles, on the small Polish quota. We did have prosperous relatives in the United States, willing and eager to help. But in the end, when we finally got out we had to go to Cuba to wait our turn, until our affidavits would be called up. Here was a second blow quite apart from being forced to leave the country that my parents considered their own, a country where my father had made, and largely kept, good friends, only one or two of whom would turn their back on him during the Nazi period.

That second blow was that he could not even try to make a living—even had he brought a saleable skill with him, which he had not. The Cuban government prohibited immigrants like ourselves from taking jobs, from opening stores, and from opening law or medical offices. This meant, of course, that we had to poach off our American relatives. And this meant in turn that we lived as parsimoniously as possible. Finally, our turn came and we arrived in the United States early in 1941. One more necessary fact: for some years, first in Germany in the 1930s and then in Cuba between 1939 and 1941, my mother suffered from tuberculosis, and so, when we were given the opportunity to enter the United States, we chose to go to Denver, because that city was, then, the Davos of America. We arrived there in May 1941, with no friends or acquaintances or family.

This, I think is the necessary background to the sketch I want to paint for you. I went to high school after we had determined what courses, considering my complicated educational experience, I still needed. I was put into the senior class and obliged to take only two courses during the year so as to graduate with the class of 1942. But events intervened: in mid-year, not long after Pearl Harbor, I was compelled to leave school to take a full-time job: my mother was in the hospital and my father, who had tried to work as a traveling menswear salesman had had inadequate success. Traveling salesman, of course, was the very kind of job he had disdained in Germany. The main reason for his partial failure: his faulty English. As I noted before, he had never had any English lessons. Now almost fifty, very intelligent but scarcely a highly educated man, he had to start. He would work hard on his assignments, go to night classes in what in Denver was genially called the Opportunity School, and do all the rest so many of us newcomers were obliged to do.

And here, then, a new trauma compounded my father's already untoward situation. Just like my mother, who wanted me to become a second Walter Lippmann, he had dearly hoped that I would be able to study. And now, I could not even complete high school because he could not take care of me. I don't think it ever occurred to me—at least not consciously—to be difficult about dropping out of school. I went to work as a shipping clerk at twelve dollars a week, which was then the minimum pay at thirty cents an hour.

My father tried other things. During the 1930s he had amassed an extremely valuable stamp collection, which he managed to get out of Germany. For a time, then, he thought he might make a living as a stamp dealer. It was a laborious trade: we put together little approval packages, we held little auctions in our house, we got in touch with local dealers—it was laborious, indeed. I worked for my father at night, writing endless letters and doing whatever chores had to be done. The venture failed. We did make some money, but never quite enough. And so my father went back to selling clothes.

I was admitted to the University of Denver in 1943 with a full scholarship, but I lived at home in our tiny apartment and haunted the free Denver Public Library, and I had to continue working nights and weekends. Then my father even took on manual labor, servicing the steam press in the factory where I also worked, cutting the cloth that would be sewn together for the military caps we manufactured—it was really too much for him, physically as well as emotionally.

My father, despite it all, loved the United States, and would rail against the *Beiunskis*—the refugees who would say, "*Bei uns* in Germany was everything better." Eventually, then, not surprisingly, his health failed, and he died in January 1955, at the unripe age of sixty-two. I have said this elsewhere, and will say it again now: the medical diagnosis was calcification of the arteries. But to me it was plain that he died of a broken heart.

I have dwelt so long on my father not just because I was so fond of him and suffer with him as I speak, but also because his fate was shared by many another refugee. Businessmen, professionals without portable skills, even lawyers and doctors, had a fate they had never dreamt would be theirs. None of them could start their life over as though nothing had happened. Even

many of those who had acquired foreign languages were not that well equipped to start over immediately. They might have had Greek and Latin rather than English, or literary English instead of commercial English. I used to say that among the refugees it was the psychoanalysts who had the easiest lot: they did not have to learn any English since all they ever said was "Hmmm."

But of course it was not a humorous matter at all. A physician might have been a distinguished presence in the old country but in the United States he would be compelled to start all over again—take courses, pass examinations, work in laboratories before he might practice once again. Lawyers were quite as badly off. The law they had learned and then practiced in Germany and Austria was the Roman law, while in the United States attorneys knew the common law, imported from Britain. It was not just that the immigrant lawyers found it necessary to acquaint themselves with important Supreme Court decisions, or acquaint themselves also with a complex federal system, but that they had to start from scratch as to the very foundations of the law.

Age, of course, was a factor. Consider one profession to stand for others, that of social worker; it shows—and I will not trouble you with names—that success and failure in the new world was at least partly a matter of generations. Social work had been, in Austria and Germany alike, woman's work. A number of social workers who left Germany and Austria for the United States as refugees, however prominent and well known they had been, were simply too old to adjust or to find suitable employment. Well educated as they were, they could—and did—act as advisors to their colleagues—or, better, almost-colleagues—in their new homeland, wrote papers and their reminiscences. Others, younger than they, found employment in small philanthropic organizations and at least had a steady, if largely pathetic, income in the land of unlimited possibilities. Only the youngest among them had the opportunities they deserved.

I should add that academics did not always manage to land in places, and with professorships, that duplicated their careers in Europe. To be sure, anti-Semitism, even in the Weimar Republic, had kept the number of Jewish professors relatively small in the Germany of the 1920s and early 1930s. But even those who had reached the top rungs of the German and Austrian academic ladder did not necessarily find it easy in their new homeland. A major

philosopher, Ernst Cassirer, for example, after working in Scandinavia and England for some years after leaving Hamburg, arrived in the United States, was allowed to teach at Yale for three years, and then faced the prospect, at a relatively advanced age, of becoming an academic nomad: one year at Columbia and the prospect of another year at Berkeley. The Berkeley chair did not materialize because Cassirer died near the end of a year at Columbia, on April 13, 1945—the day after F.D.R. died. Others became librarians, or taught in small colleges here and there. It is not that they invariably resented their diminished stature: they were often glad to be alive, they thought mournfully of the family members who had not managed to get out, and they in any case, could do good in their limited sphere. When the full history of the emigration of the 1930s is written, it will have to include fates such as these.

That history will have to include, and prominently, something else: the role of refugee women. Their story will come as no surprise to those in this audience who have themselves lived through it. But I want to put it on record for the others, to help keep the story alive. To put it briefly, without their wives, untold numbers of refugee men would not have had an eventually gratifying career. But the surprising role of these women gave life in emigration some unexpected forms.

This prominent role had often started in Germany and Austria—even before emigration. As Marion Kaplan has abundantly shown in her impressive book, *Between Dignity and Despair*, in general it was the women who pressed for emigration often long before the men did. The reasons were several. They did not, by and large, stand in public life as did their husbands. They had not been the recipients of an Iron Cross. They had, however, often heard in detail from their children how difficult the school day had been: how fellow pupils and, often enough, their teachers, had teased and tormented them. These German-Jewish women were good Germans, just like their husbands. But they carried less baggage. They had (if I may put it this way) invested less in the country than their men, and thus did not have so many illusions to give up.

And in emigration these women proved themselves in ways that they themselves might not have found imaginable. I do not hesitate to employ an overused term to describe them: they were heroic. To recognize that this term is justified, we must imagine at least briefly their style

of life in Germany. Nearly all of them were solidly entrenched in the middle class, often the upper middle class. To be sure, some of them had professional careers, as nurses, social workers, physicians, lawyers. But the vast majority among them were housewives. They had rarely been compelled to worry over, or participate in doing domestic chores. At the least they had someone do the shopping and take care of children. At the higher reaches of German bourgeois life, they had more help than this, including, perhaps, a cook.

But in emigration, where they moved from large apartments to tiny ones and had to learn to do everything themselves, they showed themselves far more adaptable than their men. In general, there is good evidence that these women learned English faster than their husbands, and that they fitted into their new American environment with relative ease. They were not stymied in their shopping, nor were they embarrassed if they could not muster the right idiomatic expressions. My conclusions derive from having observed fairly narrow populations, but it seems to me that the very mood of the wives was more positive than that of the husbands. Much of the time, a feeling of a certain despair might overcome the men, a feeling of an almost existential uselessness. Their wives gave way to such moods far less frequently and less profoundly: they had simply too much to do.

They understood why their husbands suffered so. They had had to leave behind so much and were all too often compelled to accept the assistance of family, of friends, of philanthropic organizations. Thus, as men struggled to find a place for themselves, women often grew into the role of head of their family, not just in economic but also in psychological terms.

This held true particularly for the wives of men in licensed professions. I have already hinted at it. As their husbands studied to master that strange thing, the American law, or physicians to master American medicine, and to pass their examinations, their wives accepted jobs of a kind they would have considered virtually unthinkable before emigration. They became housemaids or nannies, waitresses, cleaning women, sales ladies, even at times factory workers. And not the wives of these professionals alone. I recall a once rich German manufacturer whom I met in the same TB hospital in which my mother was a patient. While he trained as a watchmaker—a profession he could practice at home after his cure—his wife made herself into a well-liked and successful sales clerk in a Denver department store.

Again a personal reminiscence: in the early 1960s, newly married and a new professor at Columbia, I would do my shopping for presents for my wife invariably at Lord & Taylor, then a first-class department store in New York. And why Lord & Taylor? Because management had had the intelligent idea of hiring refugee women as sales clerks, women who took an almost motherly interest in my uninformed questions about sizes, styles, and the like.

And this is the place to celebrate Franzi Grossman, now over ninety and living in a small apartment in Manhattan, in the same apartment house in which her daughter, the well-known writer Lore Segal, also lives. In Vienna she superintended a prosperous household. Her husband was an accountant at a high level of income, and Frau Grossman could indulge her considerable talent as a pianist. She was not a professional performer, though she could have been. She was also a famed baker, and for parties she performed her famous feats for her guests—feats she did not entrust to her cook. Once Austria had been taken over by the Nazis, the Grossmans, with Lore in tow, managed to get to England, where together they became domestics, servants in an English household. What they did there you can imagine; the usual chores. Then Mr. Grossman died, and after some vicissitudes, mother and daughter landed in New York. And there Frau Grossman practiced professionally what she had practiced as an amateur in Vienna: for years she worked in a bakery, and gave piano lessons as well. With skill, style, and taste, and without complaining. It was a heavy price to pay for being a "real American." We all know these stories, but, familiar as they are, they remain poignant.

Now, I have called the role of refugee women a great surprise, but I should emphasize again that surprise had, in some cases at least, been thoroughly prepared in Germany. And that brings me to another individual, my mother's eldest sister, my Tante Hedwig, universally called Hede. She had shown her impressive energy in the 1920s, in Germany, and carried that forward in the New World. She was married and had two sons, and was chief of the family from the beginning. What she wanted would be done. The haberdashery that she and her husband had opened in Berlin on the Olivärplatz in the mid-1920s and managed with considerable *éclat*, was in the main her doing. She was the one who presided over purchases, she was the first saleslady; when decisions of any importance had to be made, she was the one who made them. When their store was completely demolished in the morning of November 10, 1938—I saw it—Onkel

Samuel sat at home in an easy chair and wept. Tante Hede looked grim, but there were no tears. Her favorite phrase, one she used often whether appropriate or not, and one that characterizes her beautifully, was "Unfortunately, I am always right."

When my Tante Hede, who was unfortunately always right, immigrated to the United States late in 1940 and settled in Atlanta not far from our American relatives, she opened a store much like the one that had been vandalized in Berlin only two years earlier. And it was fairly soon a success, too. No one in my family who knew Tante Hede—and who among us did not know Tante Hede?—was surprised.

I am moving toward my conclusion. Nothing would have been easier for me than to enlarge my remarks with other instances. But I do not believe that I need to elaborate my thesis. What I want to leave with you is a research project concerning the postwar life of the émigrés. Several years ago here in Washington there was a conference on Jewish refugee women; that gathering resulted in a useful little book. There is need for several more such works, detailed texts to acknowledge that emigration was never a picnic and to understand what life in exile really meant. We know now (or, to put it more concretely: psychoanalysts know now) that Hitler's deadly hand reached far beyond the territories his armies controlled, and far beyond the year of his death. The most illustrious, the most successful, of his near-victims who did manage to get out, still suffer somehow from what was done to them so long ago.

For the past several decades, we have seen a very avalanche of writings about the Holocaust, to say nothing of films, exhibitions, courses, and museums. So much has been produced about it that seems virtually unthinkable that there still are topics that have not yet been completely explored. It is true that we have no settled views on the Holocaust, no final consensus; the fact that a sensational and sensationably misguided book like Goldhagen's could find masses of appreciative readers and also a few—though only a few—appreciative reviewers, suggests that our scholarly work on the Holocaust is not yet done. But I want, and I want us, to look beyond that, to recognize that we still need to know more about those who lived, not just about those who died.

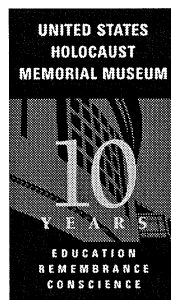


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