

**“Suspicious Comrades: German Communists of Jewish Origin between Nazism and Stalinism, 1918-1952”**

In the early 1980s Lotte Winter wrote down her life story. She described her childhood in a middle class Jewish family in North Rhine Westphalia, her membership in the communist party, the difficult years in emigration and her life in the German Democratic Republic after the war. In her memoir Winter devoted much space to reflect on her Jewishness. Judaism had played little role in her home growing up, and with embracing communism she had further distanced herself from her Jewish origin. But the Nazis persecuted her as Jewish, and they had murdered her parents because they were Jewish. Winter concluded, “my personal relationship with Judaism was forced upon me from the outside by Hitler and the Nuremberg laws.”<sup>1</sup> Anti-Semitism under Hitler but also after Hitler and the memories of persecution and genocide made it impossible for her to disregard her own Jewishness even though she primarily self-identified as a German communist.

Like Winter, many other communist Jews grappled with what being Jewish could and should mean for them in the aftermath of the Holocaust. They found myriad answers to whether and how their Jewish origin mattered. Communist Jews’ complex relationship with their Jewishness stands at the center of this research project.

I argue that Jewishness played a part in these people’s lives whether or not they actively associated with their Jewish religion or origin. Simply put, at various points in

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<sup>1</sup> Lotte Winter, *Unsere Vergangenheit, Unsere Zukunft 1933-1955*, LBI, ME 961, 4.

their lives, communists of Jewish origin were forced to confront their Jewishness, be it because others categorized them as Jews, or because their own perspective changed in response to the genocide of Europe's Jews. I ask how Jewishness mattered, even when the historical actors thought it of little relevance. Rather than seeing "Jewish" as a fixed part of a person's self-understanding, I treat Jewishness as an analytical category with shifting meanings over time.<sup>2</sup> Relying on essays, memoirs, diaries, and letters from archives in Germany, the UK, Israel and the US, I examine how German communists of Jewish origin defined and redefined themselves as Jews, as communist, antifascists, and Germans.

This study also investigates how being part of the communist movement affected Jews under Nazism, in exile and in the camps. By doing so, this research helps us understand how the experiences of persecuted Jews during the Holocaust differed according to their political affiliations. Exploring the particular experiences of German communists of Jewish origin after 1933, I ask whether their affiliation as communists and their connection with a non-Jewish community ultimately endangered or helped them.

This study begins in the aftermath of WWI when many Jews decided to join the communist movement. Many had belonged to Jewish youth movements before joining

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<sup>2</sup> For discussions on the construction of identity see Joan Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 4 (1991): 773-97; bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Denise Riley, "Am I That Name?: Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History." Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1988; Rogers Brubaker, and Frederick Cooper, "Beyond 'identity,'" in *Theory and Society: Renewal and Critique in Social Theory* (2000); Lisa Silverman, "Reconsidering the Margins," in *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 8 (2009); Leora Auslander, "The Boundaries Of Jewishness, Or When Is A Cultural Practice Jewish?" in *ibid.*

the communist party, but they did ultimately not believe these could give the right answers to the pressing concerns of their times. They searched for a place of belonging, and were drawn to communism because of its promise of community, equality and universalism. Upon joining the communist party or youth movement most broke ties with their Jewish origin. Others saw Judaism as more than a religious community and understood their political work as a necessary consequence to anti-Semitism.<sup>3</sup>

The Nazis did not care whether people understood themselves as Jewish or not. Rabid anti-Semitic rhetoric accompanied the rise of the Nazi movement though it was initially their political affiliation which most endangered communist Jews. Within weeks after they came into power, the Nazis arrested political enemies of the regime, among them many communist Jews. Werner Scholem, brother of the Kabbalah scholar Gershom Scholem and a leading member of the communist party was among the first to be arrested. He was held in custody until the Nazis murdered him in 1940.<sup>4</sup> Like Scholem, Georg Benjamin was immediately arrested though the Nazis released him from prison in December 1933. Benjamin stayed in Berlin with his wife and little son, and was again arrested in 1936. He died in Mauthausen in 1942, two years after his brother, Walter Benjamin, had committed suicide on the French-Spanish border.

Jewish communists faced double persecution: for their political beliefs as well as their ethnicity. Many died in Nazi prisons and camps. Yet their connections with the

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<sup>3</sup> Schüler-Springorum, Stefanie. « Dazugehören. Junge jüdische Kommunisten in der Weimarer Republik, » in *Deutsch-Jüdische Jugendlichen im „Zeitalter der Jugend“*, ed. Yotam Hotam (Göttingen 2009, Hebr.: Jerusalem 2007): 107-11.

<sup>4</sup> On Werner Scholem see Mirjam Zadoff, *Der rote Hiob: das Leben des Werner Scholem* (München: Hanser, 2014).

communist collective also at times enabled them to find support and hiding places. Some survivors reported that their affiliation with the communist community helped them during their imprisonment in a concentration camp, as non-Jewish comrades supported them.

Their political awareness also made communist Jews more likely to flee when it was still possible. Because of the immanent threat of arrests, many left Germany already in 1933. They left not so much as persecuted Jews, but as political opponents of the regime. A perspective that mattered later on when they considered their return.

Experiences of emigration differed radically according to their places of exile. A number of communist Jews fled to the Soviet Union, often with help of the party. There they soon faced purges, arrests and executions. In 1936 about 2000 German communists, many of them of Jewish origin were arrested, and subsequently deported or murdered. They were executed for “participating” as it said for instance in the verdict for Leo Friedländer, “in a Trotskyite counter-revolutionary organization.”<sup>5</sup> Other Jewish communists participated in the purges like Hans Rodenberg, later the director of a well-known East German theater. During his emigration he had denounced comrades to the Soviet secret police. This research will trace different reactions to the purges and shed light on an experience of exile that is missing in most accounts of German Jewish emigration.

The majority of communist Jews emigrated to Western countries. Many initially went to France, and then after France's surrender to Germany in 1940, escaped, or tried

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.bundesstiftung-aufarbeitung.de/wer-war-wer-in-der-ddr-%2363%3B-1424.html> (19.03.18)

to escape to North or South America. Some emigrated to the UK, others to Shanghai, many moved from place to place, from Prague to Moscow, from Paris to New York. In 1936 a number of communist Jews went to Spain to fight in the Civil War.

During their years in exile some communist Jews showed renewed interest in Jewish matters, associated with other Jewish emigrants, and joined Jewish exile organizations.<sup>6</sup> Leo Zuckermann, Erich Jungmann and Rudolf Feistmann joined *Menorah* an organization of German speaking Jewish refugees founded in 1940 in Mexico. Anna Seghers, Otto Katz, and Egon Erwin Kisch, among others, founded the *Heinrich Heine Club*, another Mexican exile organization that organized readings, lectures, and concerts. The club, as well as the journal *Freies Deutschland* frequently discussed the persecution of Jews in Europe.<sup>7</sup> The journal's editor, Alexander Abusch who later became the German Democratic Republic's Minister of Culture reflected on the persecution of Jews throughout Germany history in his writings both in the journal and beyond.<sup>8</sup> The news about the Nazi crimes did not leave Jewish communists untouched. Most lost friends or family in the Holocaust, and they grieved for their murdered loved ones.<sup>9</sup>

After the war surviving Jews faced the question where to rebuild their lives. In contrast to most other German Jews who could not envision a life in the 'country of

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<sup>6</sup> Judit Bokser Liwerant, 'Über Exil, Migrationen und Kulturelle Begegnungen', in von Hanffstengel et al., *Mexiko, Das Wohltemperierte Exil*, pp. 35-6.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Chametzky, "Paul Westheim in Mexico: A Cosmopolitan Man Contemplating the Heavens" in *Oxford Art Journal*, 24 (2001): 25-43.

<sup>8</sup> Alexander Abusch, *Der Irrweg einer Nation*, 1946; *ibid*, *Die Juden von Nuernberg*, unter Pseudonym "A. Foerster", Archiv der Akademie der Künste, Alexander-Abusch-Archiv 36.

<sup>9</sup> See for instance letters from Brunhilde Eisler to Gerhart Eisler, February, 26, 1947 and March, 19, 1947, BArch, NY 4117/61.

murderers' a comparatively large number of communist Jews decided to return. They had left as antifascist resisters and returned to realize their dream of an antifascist society. Recha Rothschild a German Jewish communist who had survived the war in France waited eagerly to return home. She wanted to, as she explained, "be present when the foundation for a new and better Germany was laid."<sup>10</sup>

The exact number of communist Jews who chose to settle in East Germany is difficult to establish since most did not register with a Jewish community. About 3500 Jews returned from emigration in order to settle in the Soviet Occupation Zone (*Sowjetische Besatzungszone; SBZ*), and in total about 8000-9000 Jews lived there in the immediate aftermath of the war.<sup>11</sup>

Others stayed in emigration, though increasingly anti-communism made life difficult for those in the West, and in particular for communists living in the United States.<sup>12</sup> Gerhart Eisler, a journalist and prominent communist party member fled to the US in 1941. Six years later he was charged for refusing to be sworn in at a hearing before the U.S. Congress' House Un-American Activities Committee and for misrepresenting his Communist Party affiliation on his immigration application. He was

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<sup>10</sup> Recha Rothschild, *Memoirs 1880-1947*, LBI, NY, ME 243.

<sup>11</sup> Frank Stern, "The Return to the Disowned Home: German Jews and the Other Germany," in *New German Critique*, No. 67 (1996), pp. 57-72, p. 60; Karin Hartewig, *Zurückgekehrt. Die Geschichte der juedischen Kommunisten in der DDR*, Köln, Böhlau 2000, pp. 2-3; Ulriker Breitsprecher, "Die Bedeutung des Judentums und des Holocaust in der Identitätskonstruktion dreier jüdischer Kommunisten in der frühen DDR - Alexander Abusch, Helmut Eschwege und Leo Zuckermann," in *Jahrbuch für Kommunismusforschung* 16 (2010): 193-208, 199.

<sup>12</sup> On the anti-communist witch hunt see : Ellen Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999.

sentenced to one and three years in prison.<sup>13</sup> Eisler managed to flee the US on a Polish ship after he had been released on bail. In June 1949, after Gerhart's flight from the US, his wife Hilde, now herself detained in Ellis Island, expressed her joy about her husband's return to a friend: "You cannot imagine how happy I am for Gerhart that he finally won this heartbreaking battle for his return home. And it is very gratifying for me to see how wonderfully he was received everywhere."<sup>14</sup> Eisler felt wanted and welcomed in East Germany.

In the beginning it seemed that communist Jews' hopes for East Germany had been justified. The Soviet authorities acknowledged crimes against Jews, supported the foundation of a Jewish state, and followed a stringent denazification policy. The writer Anna Seghers commented in a letter that, in spite of her mistrust of the German population, she could sense, that "a new world was built."<sup>15</sup>

Jewish returnees soon filled positions in the Soviet Occupied Zone's cultural and political elite, and the support of the party meant that unlike other German Jews they did not have to begin from scratch in 1945.<sup>16</sup> Alfred Dreyfuss, a dramaturge who had survived the war in Shanghai explained that after his return his heart was "filled with pride and with the knowledge that now he really belonged again."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> On Eisler see Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes*, 124-128. The Un-American Activities Committee launched also an investigation of Ingeborg Rapoport, see Ingeborg Rapoport, *Meine ersten drei Leben: Erinnerungen* (Berlin: NORA, 2002).

<sup>14</sup> Brunhilde Eisler to Gerhart Eisler, June 13<sup>th</sup> 1949, BArch NY 4117/125.

<sup>15</sup> Anna Seghers to Erika Friedländer, 11/17/1947, in Anna Seghers, *Hier im Volk der kalten Herzen, Briefwechsel 1947*. ed. Christel Berger (Berlin, 2000).

<sup>16</sup> See Nora Goldenbogen, "Leon Löwenkopf, erster Vorsitzender der Jüdische Gemeinde zu Dresden nach der Shoah, Versuch einer Annäherung," in *Zwischen Erinnerung und Neubeginn: Zur deutsch-jüdischen Geschichte nach 1945*, ed. Susanne Schönborn, (München: Meidenbauer, 2006), 98; Hartewig, *Zurückgekehrt*, 195.

<sup>17</sup> Dreifuß, *Ensemblespiel*, 222.

Yet anti-Semitic undertones surfaced in public debates about the classification of the victims of Nazism, and soon became more virulent. Those who self-identified as Jewish struggled since the regime's ideology stipulated communism and Judaism as mutually exclusive – one could be Jewish or a communist, but not both. Public anti-Jewish rhetoric became prevalent in late 1952 when the SED leadership initiated a thorough purge, directed mainly against people who had returned from Western countries, many of them Jews.<sup>18</sup> In the course of the purges, persons of Jewish origin were suspected of connections with the “Zionist movement,” the American secret service, or the “Trotzkiite-Jewish movement.”<sup>19</sup> Some fled and thus lost their home a second time. Others remained, often further distancing themselves from their Jewish origin and determined to prove their loyalty to the communist cause. Stalin's death in 1952 ended these purges and also serves as the endpoint of this study.

Between 1918 and 1952 the people at the centre of my research became communists and were persecuted as Jews. Some re-connected with their Jewishness and some, in the end, cut all ties with communism. Persecuted under Nazism and purged under Stalinism, communists of Jewish origin faced a constant challenge to their self-understanding, and many lost both their physical and their ideological home in the course of the first half of the century.

Their experiences differed both from non-Jewish communists as well as from other German Jews. Their connections with the communist collective shaped their

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<sup>18</sup> Keßler, *Die SED und die Juden*, 105; Andreas Herbst, „Großmutter im Sterben: Die Flucht der Repräsentanten der Jüdischen Gemeinden 1953 aus der DDR“ in *Helden, Täter und Verräter: Studien zum DDR-Antifaschismus*, ed. Annette Leo, and Peter Reif-Spirek (Berlin: Metropol, 1999), 27; Timm, “The Burdened Relationship,” 32.

<sup>19</sup> Keßler, *Die SED und die Juden*, 68; Herf, *Divided memory*, 107.



responses to Nazi persecution, offered them some avenues of rescue but also endangered them. Their communist affiliation influenced their exile experience – some fled to the Soviet Union where they soon faced Stalinist purges, others fought in the Spanish Civil War, or promoted anti-Fascist goals in the US or Mexico.

Communist Jews became targets of anti-Semitic persecution not only under the Nazis but also in party purges. Their Jewish upbringing, experiences with anti-Semitism, and their 'otherness' shaped their understanding of communism and anti-Fascism. This study shows how for some communist Jews, communism and Jewishness became intertwined, and how political changes severed them, pushing them to choose between different parts of their self-understanding. By including these voices on the margins of Jewish life, this project creates a more complex and comprehensive understanding of the lives of German Jews in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.