Yerushalmi’s Germany

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Abstract Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi came late to Germany, but he developed a close, almost intimate relationship to it during the last fifteen years of his life. After staying in Munich for a year in 1996–97 he returned regularly. He was able to enjoy the positive responses to German translations of his works and met colleagues who engaged with his ideas. It was here that his first collection of essays appeared, and some of his publications, such as his contribution to the debate on Jewish historiography at a Schloss Elmau conference, appeared only in German. His fascination with German society was founded in his admiration for German culture and language and for such diverse figures as Thomas Mann and Sigmund Freud, as well as in his attempt to understand more deeply the causes of the Jewish catastrophe of the twentieth century.

Keywords Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi · Germany · Historiography · Sigmund Freud

In March 2008, the German-Jewish newspaper Jüdische Allgemeine published an article on the symbol of the hare in synagogues in which it referred to Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi’s Haggadah and History in a rather unusual fashion. The author, a German-born artist, did not realize that Yerushalmi was the editor of the volume and wrote: “Some Torah scholars, like Rabbi Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi in his Augsburg Haggada of 1534, saw in the hare a symbol for the Jews of the diaspora.”1 Professor Yerushalmi did not particularly like being called Rabbi Yerushalmi—but he must have smiled about being called the author of a sixteenth-century Haggadah. With his psychoanalytical skills he might have analyzed why this happened in the German context and not in the United States or France, where he spent so much time. The reception of the scholar Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi was indeed different in Germany than it was in the other places in which he moved and published.

1Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, Haggadah and History: A Panorama in Facsimile of Five Centuries of the Printed Haggadah from the Collections of Harvard University and the Jewish Theological Seminary of America (Philadelphia, 1975); Felice Naomi Wonnenberg, “Wie kommt der Hase in die Synagoge?” Jüdische Allgemeine, March 20, 2008.
Encounters with Germany

Yerushalmi hesitated to set foot in Germany for a long time. When I came to Columbia University as a graduate student in 1988, he told me of the numerous invitations to Germany that he had received but had never accepted, and during subsequent years there were quite a few of these almost-visits, which never happened because he was too sick or too busy or the weather was too bad. It was clear to me that he had a deep psychological resistance to visiting Germany—not untypical for his generation of American Jews.

This attitude changed rapidly during the mid-1990s. He first accepted an invitation to give a lecture at the University of Frankfurt, but his most influential stay was as a fellow of the Siemens Foundation in Munich in 1996–97, where he remained for a full academic year. He lived in the home of a group of Pallottine nuns who had taken him into their hearts and whom he adored. For his farewell they prepared a spectacular feast in their courtyard, where they served him salads based on recipes drawn from the Bible. Under their huge cross, Yerushalmi’s German translator, Wolfgang Heuss, crowned him with an enormous self-made doctoral cap, supposedly modeled after the one used by the University of Salamanca, which looked to some of the guests more like a type of hat worn by the Spanish inquisitors. It was indeed a bizarre scene for those who only knew Yerushalmi from Fayerweather Hall at Columbia University.

Yerushalmi returned that summer to Riverside Drive with a real honorary doctorate awarded to him by the University of Munich and with many new friendships he had made during the year. He was to come to Munich and other German cities almost every year thereafter to deliver lectures and to attend concerts performed by his wife Ophra. Once he was invited to deliver a lecture at the Siemens Foundation; another time he received the prestigious Leopold Lucas Prize of the University of Tübingen; and on still other occasions he came for purely private visits.

Yerushalmi’s professional encounters with Germany and German Jewry had, of course, started much earlier. As a scholar of Jewish history he could not avoid dealing with German topics, even if his main interests lay elsewhere. During the 1980s he embarked on the work that resulted in his book *Freud’s Moses,* which led him to intensify his research on German-speaking Jewry.2 Between 1987 and 1991 this American Jew of East European heritage who devoted his scholarship to Sephardic Jews was the president of the Leo Baeck Institute dedicated to the memory of German Jewry. As his research assistant for the Freud book, I came to realize that Yerushalmi’s German was

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