

Jewish Heritage within the European Heritage

by George Konrád

What is heritage after all? It is a body of texts, together with an intellectual current that runs through them, something that allows of many interpretations. Our various heritages spill over into one another. European Jews have a double identity, or perhaps a multiple one; no one is guarding the borders between identities. The people of Europe—Christians, Jews, and those of all faiths—create their own heritage from reading, from memories, and from experiences. This abstract wealth can be called Jewish, or Hungarian, or anything at all, but this would be no more than a superficial label.

I am part of the Jewish heritage, just as it is part of me. Someone who, due to providence, is born of two Jewish parents recognizes who he is and can assemble his own personal version from everything that he knows about Judaism, including the family's own storehouse of memories. Should he choose to accept himself as he is from birth, accept his parents and other ancestors, their life stories and decisions, as his own historical heritage, perpetuating those elements he understands and approves of? Or should he choose to break free of his community and its affiliation—in other words, choose to be a Jew no longer?

In my profession, I produce and shape sentences every day. My paternal grandfather, aided by his assistants and apprentices, produced water pitchers, buckets,

and washtubs in his workshop as a tinsmith every day, until he later moved into retail commerce, selling goods produced in factories. He went down to the workshop every morning and worked until the early evening in the company of his men. This was his answer to the events of every day, and to the demands of his customers, who would always have a good close look at his goods. Just as the flour ground from their wheat was deemed good, so the galvanized water can was good—and this referred to more than just the object itself: my grandfather was a part of the can, just as the farmer was in the flour. The artisan was part of the vessel as the peasant was of the bread. They produced their works, into which they had put themselves completely, and would guarantee the quality of the goods they traded. A Jewish tinsmith and a Christian farmer exchanged their work, which constituted a close human relationship, particularly if it lasted.

The Jews have been in such a relationship of exchange with their environment all over the world, including Europe, for several thousand years. They provided monotheism, the Torah, the Chronicles, Psalms, and Prophets. The Christians of Europe never said they did not want this; they needed Jewish goods, and they needed the Jewish Jesus. With him, they came to need everything that he had learned: the law that came into being according to his pronouncements, and the Jewish fishermen, carpenters, and other tradesmen around him, becoming apostles for his message. What was needed from the Jews was Christian culture's foundation.

They needed the notion of the Eternal One to be a source of holiness, so the line could be drawn between sacred and profane, between workday and holiday, and so that a divine blessing could be conferred on dwelling, food, drink, love, birth, and death. The mercy of the one God was required in life's outstanding moments, so life itself could

have its scale of illumination, from darkness to splendour, from emptiness to completion, and so humanity, which had entered into a covenant with the creator, could become a true collaborator in the work of creation, and be capable of hearing the invisible voice that emanates not from stone, or a tree, or a bear, or a star, or the sun, or any natural phenomenon, nor from another person, mortal like ourselves and limited in his knowledge, but only from within, from mind and spirit, always something larger than a man himself, and thereby intangible. This was a bold supposition indeed.

Mind and spirit, knowledge and memory—in other words, the things that make us human—tie us to our ancestors. This bond is not exclusive. Since the God the Jews spoke to belongs to every person, to all of humanity, so praise is due to all, Christian and Moslem alike, who have transmitted and disseminated this truly transcendent concept of god, modifying it through the lens of their own interpretation.

The concept of human charity includes more than just the love of the living; it is with love that we think of our parents, siblings, relatives, neighbours, and friends after their death as well, be it natural or violent. We generally look with kindness on babies merely because they were born human, and look upon the past and present of our race with an involved sympathy: a wise and insane creature of which we are one. If, in passing moments, I can look back thousands of years to greet my ancestors, then I know something about continuity.

Tradition says that I am a descendant of Moses' brother Aaron, from the lines of both of my grandfathers—of that Aaron whose job it was to formulate the flaming vision into words. His descendants have the distinction, and obligation, of watching over the Ark of the Covenant. They, the Cohanites, are the guardians of the Holy Writ, the Torah,

and it is their privilege to this day to remove it from its cabinet, carry it around the synagogue, and offer the parchment rolls to anyone desiring to touch them, wrapped in their ornamental velvet and topped with a crown. The Chasidic masters, transported in ecstasy, would lead it in a dance of love. Love of the Ten Commandments perhaps? The mortal embraces the eternal, hoping to be embraced in return.

The lettered, and priests, and those who govern might come to an agreement about the Ten Commandments. The Holy Scripture was the Jewish offering, which the peoples of Europe, among others, adopted for themselves. It was quite attractive to them. They had had no success in having their own gods accepted by other peoples—gods who resembled themselves, derived from nature, or gods of their own tribes and states; these were too human, so human in fact that their dynasts sooner or later had themselves proclaimed as gods.

Out of caution, the Jews decided that the Lord does not have a human shape, does not resemble anyone or anything, but only speaks from within us, giving inspired direction to those who turn to Him, desirous to hear the word of the Eternal One filtered out from the manifold background noise of the ephemeral. Hence they could not accept the existence of any person who had an exceptional relationship with the Lord, and were unable to believe in the special nature of Jesus, emanating from God and conferring eternal life. Feeling the fear of God, they had no use for the image of a man-god, considering it a pagan notion. Nor did they believe that another man, a camel driver, could simply ride up to Him through the air. Instead, they avoided the notion that there could be representatives of God on Earth, for as soon as there are such people, worldly power can be sanctified. So what kind of relationship with God did they envision? A

continuous one, that can be taught and passed on to other generations but has to be cultivated through lonely inspiration. It is called study, and contemplation. Guests on Earth, the Jews host others in the dwelling of monotheism.

In the Diaspora, in Europe, Jews were present before the arrival of other peoples and nations that formed states on this continent. In their free time and on holidays, their task for some two and a half thousand years was the study and interpretation of scripture; this is what held them together. Anyone could be a wise man, provided he was in fact wise, as tends to be the case among writers. There are no laws or regulations that specify where a profound thought must come to light. Jewish thought may be perpetuated by any concept that other Jews who are scholars and thinkers adopt as their own over the long term. A thought becomes no better or worse for being conceived by a Jew. It makes no difference whether a poet is circumcised or what rules he chooses to live by, as long as he adheres to the basic rules of humanity. There is no human concept, or humanistic one, that I would consider irreconcilable with the putative consensus of Jewish thinkers.

The ghetto was closed off for centuries, necessitating rules for daily life and a rabbinical adherence to the dictates of the religion. Those inside it also needed to maintain this monotheism that is so resistant to any admixture, just as the Christians required a liturgically regulated prayer service. So whoever accepts, and thereby chooses, the Jew within himself, is marrying into a rather special and mixed heritage. It is all very well and good that I am a Jew, but does this mean I absolutely have to love the whole lot of them, with saints and scoundrels in the usual proportion?

Should we not instead have a free and uncommitted relationship with this heritage? Historical narrative tells us after all that most Jews have fared badly. There

have been winners among them, but even more losers. What else could you call someone who loses his life innocently, in childhood?

I am not fond of identifying Jews with the people who were shoved into the gas chambers; since childhood I have been more taken with the Maccabees and Bar Kochba, the side of Rabbi Akiba. Those who obediently stood naked on the edge of the pit waiting to be shot into it received my sympathy, but never my admiration. On the other hand, those big fellows in my family or circle of acquaintances who escaped forced labour to join the partisans, and went from there to Palestine, the infant state of Israel—they deservedly won my amazement, which has never faded. You have to exist, to protect your loved ones, to stay alive, whether assimilated or separate, transmitting a heritage that belongs to everyone who wants or needs it. But this weighs firmly on the shoulders of the Jews.

We might also imagine this heritage as a heavy sack that we have taken up. Where are we taking it? To the library of course, where heritage moves into the consciousness of those who receive it. Like it or not, I am an inheritor. I can hide away if I want to, and tell the postman bringing a registered letter that the addressee has moved away. I am not obligated to receive the news of my grandmother who was shot into the Danube. Why was it that they shot her after all? Am I supposed to forget about her for the very same reason? On the other hand, if I do not push the image of my grandmother back into the Danube, then I must bear the weight that then presses down on me; I am compelled to turn my thoughts to her and to everything associated with her.

I am a Jew in the Hungarian-speaking community in Budapest and in a small village. This is where I spend most of my time; this is where I try to feel at home. Though

I have had opportunities to leave, I never have, perhaps because of another kind of fidelity: I realized that I had something in common with all the others who spoke the same language, who were all around me the moment I stepped outside, with whom I went to school, or engaged in conversation at the same table in a café, or with whom various amorous desires have put me in various beds. In my childhood town, I attended religious services in every church, either with my governess or with our cook, and once elections were reinstated in 1947 I listened to speakers from every party. When I made the decision to become a writer about the same time, it never occurred to me to read (or not to read) a book based on the author's nationality or religion.

Given that Jews constituted one-tenth of the population of the Roman Empire, and that half of the Jews in the ancient world by then lived outside the borders of the Jewish state of that era, it is clear that Jews were already here in Europe, whether as legionaries or as traders. Then as now, they lived in the Diaspora, which is nothing particularly unusual; this was merely one of their possible choices; their wide distribution made them one of the constituting elements of the European heritage.

Once they emerged from their pre-democratic isolation and gained equal rights, the Jews absorbed European culture and came to create secular works, as individuals, relying on the imagery of their cultural background but not resisting the currents of European art. They did not isolate themselves, and probably never will. Pictures, poems, and music need to be just that; whether their creator is Jewish or not is low on the list of important considerations, important from a biographical standpoint but of no moment in aesthetic terms. Works intended for a Jewish audience alone fall into the category of

national or religious literature, where the emphasis is on 'national' or 'religious' and not on 'literature' or 'art'. European heritage is a mix.

Jews are not distinguished by the simplest line of demarcation, which is language. Jewish authors have written in many languages, and similarities between them can be felt but not defined. Jews have generally been enthusiastic Europeans. In Central Europe, they represented Western Europe, though they might in fact have come from Eastern Europe. The wider and more pluralistic a community, the more naturally Jews take their place within it.

Precisely because they were regarded as suspicious and expelled, Jews spread over the world in search of a place that would not reject them. They seek a peaceful environment, but have also learned, from their unsettling experience as minorities, that in fact that is what they are, making it no easy task for them to be a majority in a Jewish state.

Jewish heritage has been a part of the European one from the outset. If they were now told to take their things and get out of Europe, then they would have to take with them the Bible, a collection by Jewish writers about Jewish characters, and with this one stroke would leave a surprising emptiness behind them. Christianity, for example, would disappear from Christian Europe. But the loss would be just as great if they had to remove everything from Jewish heritage that they learned from non-Jews.

This all means that heritages cannot be separated from one another: they overrun, overgrow, and flow through one another, and it is only benighted pedantry that would attempt some kind of arbitrary separation. Once they had left the ghetto, Jewish authors needed more than just a Jewish audience. They did not stop at ethnic boundaries, either in

their studies or their expression. Their memories of one another are mixed, but this is true of humanity in general, and would be no different if we had remained in our isolation.

For good or ill, we have created Europe together. Europe's system of interrelationships and common values appealed to the Jews. If we look back on Christian Europe over the last millennium, you find Jews, together with others, behind the outstanding success stories: the cities, scientific developments, and artistic achievements of the period. Things developed more quickly with them, and more slowly without them. Berlin, Prague, Warsaw, Vienna, and Budapest, together with many other cities, flourished after the emancipation of the Jews, a flowering that could hardly have happened in a homogeneous and uniform environment. To keep the Jews out, you would have had to close the gates and restrict competition. Those cities where Jews were sent to their death did not become any richer for that. All functional losses can be restored sooner or later; there was nothing so tremendous in what the Jews could do. It can be learned, albeit not overnight. By the time the pit of loss is filled in, and competition is once again free and open, the peoples of Europe will be where they were before the Jews disappeared. It may even be that Jews will arrive again from somewhere.

After the Holocaust most Jews had no wish to remind themselves constantly of humiliation. After their violent separation from the rest of society, they were not drawn by the idea of voluntary separation, but rather by their own non-separation, that is, their work to create new imagined worlds together with others. But the ideology of this was rejected in Western Europe by the democratic rule of law, and in the East by the Third Reich and state socialism both: Little has been said in either region about the special situation of the Jews, about what happened to them. Local elites were sparing in their

examination of the past, in asking what was done, and what was not done, that speeded the transports on their road to death.

Those Jews who decided to stay here in Europe and not immigrate to Israel or overseas made a resolution to live together with non-Jews, on the chance that they did not actually wish for what had happened, on the chance that they understood, or had learned, what one can and cannot do to our fellow humans. Overwhelmed by the process of modernization in its Eastern and Western European versions, many Jews regarded their exceptionalness as an outmoded, folkloristic remnant of bygone days, just as assimilating Jews had done after the European emancipation. Many people thought that only the universal had value. As a result, more sensitive Jews were uncomfortable if the Christians around them emphasized their ethnic status, because this seemed to open the door to anti-Semitism. International communism or liberalism required a trans-national mode of thought. Jews were not particularly fond of ethnic nationalism, which exploded in the paroxysm that was Nazism—but if they had to take this route, then they chose Zionism: let there be a state where the special nature of Jewish identity was protected by the will of a majority state, rather than by the tolerance that is the due of a minority.

A touch of optimism leads me to expect that the situation of Jewish individuals and communities—of the Jewish people, if you will—within the European Union will prove more secure, because the Union puts nation states into a larger, international structure, compelling them to a tolerance that is thoroughly expected within a constitutional framework. Europe has rapidly become secularized: in the rush of modernity, every people's youth wish to break free of family and local ties, while religion plays a diminishing role in life for Christians and Jews alike. Pluralization is a normal

process within the European Union: let a thousand flowers bloom, and an aggregate goodwill will take care of the details. Ethnic specialness, as long as it is not used to justify an illegal or secessionist dictatorship, has an aesthetic value of its own, providing a feast for the eye and a draw for tourists. Part of globalization inspires us to seek out and value local flavour and cultural particularities. Within the large assembly of the globe, we have no choice but to see that we are all minorities, which makes the arrogance of the majority look comical.

Europeans, Jewish and Christian alike, have no choice but to see themselves and their communities from the outside as well as from within, to have a look at themselves among all the others in the group photograph. Only now does the era of comparativism truly begin. It will be difficult to say that one special attribute is the true one; all communities that are free of the desire to kill are beautiful and friendly. The Christians are good, as are the Jews, Moslems, and believers of all faiths who respect the laws of heaven and earth, without the impulse to eliminate others from their midst. As long as this holds, there will be no venom in a passionate identification with our own community.

There is no community that can regard itself as European *par excellence*, that claims the essence of europeanness for itself. Europe belongs not just to you, and not just to us. Nation states that stand alone and are not subject to outside laws have an easier time expelling Jews than the Union, whose constitution guarantees pluralism and respect for the dignity of the individual. What makes the Union possible in the first place is a democratic mentality: this is irreconcilable with anti-Semitism.