

Remembering Joseph B. Maier: The Last Member of the Frankfurt School

by
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In 1999 a Festschrift was published in honor of Joseph B. Maier bearing the highly appropriate title, *Surviving the Twentieth Century: From the Frankfurt School to the Columbia University Faculty Seminars*. The volume was to be a celebration of “The Life of a Scholar,” or to borrow the title of the biography of Hannah Arendt, a good friend of Maier’s, of “The Life of the Mind.” It also turned out to be a reflection on the width and depth of the lifelong interests and scholarship of the man so honored, a tribute to Joseph Maier’s own range of thought and concerns. As one of his friends, Sir Geoffrey Lloyd, Master of Darwin College at Cambridge University, remarked, Maier’s personality, his enthusiasm, generosity of spirit, his sense of what really is important—in life, in education, in politics—included much more than being an academic. Indeed, not only myself as the editor, but all of the contributing scholars felt that the Festschrift constitutes a fraction of the debt we owe to his work, his care for and passionate defense of the free and unhampered cultivation of the mind.

It is by no means easy to give an account of Joe Maier’s personal and professional life, his intellectual outlook and accomplishments in detail in such a short space. Having lived through most of the 20th century, one wonders whether or not Maier had ever thought of the oft-quoted Chinese curse: “May you live in interesting times.” Indeed, those of us who knew Joe Maier well were aware that he was anything but a conventional sociologist.

Born in 1911, Joe Maier was raised and schooled in Leipzig, Germany. Although the son of an Orthodox Rabbi (albeit with a Ph.D.), his childhood friends called him a “German Jew,” which implied a certain degree of assimilation and acquisition of the German *Bildung*. Leipzig was an intellectual and cultural center with its famous University, the *Gewandhaus* with its noted orchestra, as well as the Thomas-Kirche with its Bach tradition. It was a place of divergent traditions and backgrounds which were clearly mirrored in the trends of the Jewish community’s there. On account of his parents moving to

Dresden, Maier switched from the Jewish Parochial School to a German Gymnasium with its high scholastic demands and was soon on his way to an academic career. One of his schoolmates described the imprint of German culture on their young minds as follows: there was “the Kantian philosophical idealism, the neo-Kantianism of Herman Cohen, Hegel’s dialectic scheme, and *Das Kapital* by Karl Marx.” Still toward the end of his life when the talk turned to the concept of *Bildung*, Maier displayed a depth of feeling tinged with sadness. Whenever I discuss this matter with Americans, I need to explain what the concept means and am then more often than not put on the defensive. As George L. Mosse defined it, *Bildung* is a post-emancipatory notion that includes character formation, moral education, the primacy of (high) culture, and a belief in the potential of humanity. Joe Maier called this “A Precious Legacy,” in a 1971 essay of the same title which began by saying:

Besitz and *Bildung* defined the spirit of modern German Jewry. With some important modifications, to be sure, they may be said to define the legacy of German Jews here and now. Scion of a long line of rabbinical families, I believe as firmly as I did in September 1933, when I escaped from Nazi Germany, in the synthesis of Western Judaism, the proposition that Western civilization owes as much to its Jewish heritage as the emancipation of the Jews owes to the blessings of Western civilization.

Joe Maier’s reference to his escape from Nazi Germany to the United States is a lead-in to the second stage of his long life. While parts of his immediate family had been in America since the mid-1920s, and the rest since 1930, he himself immigrated only after Hitler’s ascent to power in January 1933, interrupting his studies in philosophy, literature and sociology at the University of Leipzig. In a 1993 interview, Maier confessed that he’d never felt quite right about emigrating but since he was a “socialist, and belonged to a socialist students’ group,” he was afraid that he’d be caught with Marxist literature. After he “saw so many people disappear,” he wrote to his parents asking them to send him a boat ticket.

He continued his studies at Columbia University where he earned his M.A. in 1934 and his Ph.D. in 1939 with a dissertation, *On Hegel’s Critique of Kant* that

was subsequently published by Columbia University Press in 1966.

But around 1935, there came a crucial point in his personal and professional life when, as a member of the small German-Jewish Club of New York, he met a young woman named Alice, who was the personal secretary to Max Horkheimer, formerly Director of the Institute of Social Research in Frankfurt, which was, at the time, affiliated with Columbia University. Through her mediation he met Horkheimer and as he said, "it was love at first sight," intellectually, politically, and culturally. The world that they shared was what Joe referred to in his speech at the unveiling of the Heinrich Heine Monument in the Bronx, namely, that it was the refugees, the German-Jewish immigrants who were the real, genuine heirs of German philosophy and literature, that wonderful part of humanity which was now in danger of being destroyed by the Nazis. This view provided his linkage to the Frankfurt School. It was a fitting continuance that Joe married Alice a year later with Horkheimer's blessings.

As a Research Assistant at the Institute, Maier found many teachers of highly diverse interests and expertise. He was allowed to attend all of their meetings, partook in their discussions and assisted in their research. So it came that through his association with Theodor Adorno he learned all he knew about music and musicology; and from Frederick Pollock all that was to be learned about economics and the stock market; Henryk Grossman helped to deepen his knowledge of Marx, and the legal and political theory aspects were imparted by Franz Neumann and Otto Kirchheimer. Maier assisted Erich Fromm in the coding of the empirical survey material collected in Germany on the political attitudes of the German working class before Hitler's takeover of Germany, later used in Fromm's famous book, *Escape from Freedom*. He did work for Herbert Marcuse whose expertise was in intellectual history and theory and whose first American book, *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory*, was then in the making. And then there was Leo Lowenthal, whose field was sociology of literature and whose *Image of Man* is still widely used today.

In 1939, he became Research Assistant of the Princeton Radio Project and from 1940 to 1943 he was an Assistant Editor of the German-Jewish weekly, *Aufbau*. It was there that his ties with Hannah Arendt grew stronger. They wrote parallel columns in *Aufbau* (she in German, Joe in English) in the cause of establishing a Jewish Army. This was Joe's first attempt at active political involvement. Besides writing a column called "The Watchman," Joe accompanied Arendt to meetings of an organization called the Committee for a Jewish Army but later

formed their own group. After the disastrous Biltmore Conference, Joe and Arendt turned away from what they called “political Zionism.”

After the War, Maier did voluntary service in Germany and participated in the Nuremberg Trials ending up as Chief of the Analysis section of the Interrogation Division. Based on the examined documents, interrogation transcripts, and protocols, the Division evaluated the involvement of war criminals in the commission or execution of crimes, ranging from Göring’s role in the *Endlösung*, the “final solution of the Jewish Question,” or some of the German military leaders’ alleged orders to shoot allied POWs, to the German industrialists’ role in supplying, for example, poison gas to Auschwitz. I personally heard Joe recount his own interrogation of Göring or Rudolf Hess, remembering their answers—or in some cases, their silence—as if it were yesterday.

His participation and the ensuing reports were, no doubt, immensely useful to the prosecution, including Supreme Court Justice Robert Jackson. Maier witnessed Rudolf Höss, the Commandant of Auschwitz, make out a note to him which began: “Ich erkläre,” I declare, and affirming that “during my tenure in office as Commandant of Auschwitz Concentration Camp, 2 million Jews were put to death by gassing and one half million by other means.” He remarked how Hess defied classification. He appeared as a “ghastly walking corpse,” claiming amnesia and giving the same answer, “I am sorry, I don’t remember.” The masquerade of amnesia having ended, Maier recalled how Hess’s true feelings surfaced in claiming that “Hitler was the greatest son the German people produced” (never mind that he didn’t even come from Germany), and was proud of the fact that he had helped Hitler with his *Mein Kampf*.

These must have been extremely trying, painful experience but it also provided a sense of satisfaction in having participated in the final reckoning. On a much more positive level, he also found ways to help: at the request of Hannah Arendt, he looked up her old teacher, the philosopher Karl Jaspers who became one of his regular food parcel recipients, as did Marianna Weber, the widow of Max Weber, as well as many others.

Once his duties in Germany concluded, Joe entered the American academic scene in 1947 joining the Department of Sociology at Rutgers University and helped to build up the Department at Rutgers-Newark; he became its chair for

two decades until his retirement in 1980. His contribution to sociology, though, went further. When the emerging West German democracy was struggling with establishing sociology as a discipline at its universities, Maier went there in 1953 as a "Visiting U.S. Specialist of the Department of State," visiting scores of universities, participating in discussions, delivering lectures on American sociology, theory and research and participating in conferences.

Maier remained true to his "roots" in another respect: like his teachers and friends at the Institute, he retained and practiced his interdisciplinary and interdepartmental inclinations. He also maintained and acted upon his deep concern for things German and Jewish. His interdisciplinary inclinations led him to become an active participant of the weekly get-togethers of Frank Tannenbaum, the doyen of American Latin Americanists, and originator of the University Seminars at Columbia. He also became a highly visible and active member of many others, such as "Studies in Religion," "18th Century European Culture," "Latin America" and "Cultural Pluralism." Since 1973, he chaired the Seminar "On Contents and Methods of the Social Sciences," with scholars of several disciplines addressing central issues, with ensuing publications.

Maier's activities and concerns in no way diminished after his retirement; if anything, they increased and branched out. He joined his old friend and colleague, Werner Cahnman, in establishing an organization for the "Preservation of Jewish Cultural Monuments in Europe," later called the "Rashi Association," chartered in 1978 and still active today. Since 1980, he was the President of the Association working tirelessly for many projects many of which have come to fruition such as the establishment and financial support of a "Registry of Art-historically Relevant Judaica" at the Martin Buber Institute of the University of Cologne, and, more significantly, the establishment of the Institute of Judaic Studies at the University of Munich. Joe Maier's last wish was to see the publication of Werner Cahnman's manuscript "Jews and Gentiles: A Social History of their Relation." It will be realized in 2003 and the volume will be dedicated to the memory of Joseph B. Maier.