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Thesis Prospectus

The Change in Identity of German-Jews in Uruguay

Research Question/Overview:

My thesis focuses on the change in identity of German-Jews who fled to Montevideo, Uruguay due to the Holocaust. First, I delineate the definition of identity that the thesis uses as criteria. I then examine the culture and values of German-Jewish families of the early 1930s in Prenzlauerberg, Berlin, in order to understand their identities prior to emigration. Next, I analyze the German-Jewish community that the immigrants formed in Montevideo, Uruguay between the 1930s and 1940s. After reviewing and contrasting the findings, I define the driving forces behind the changes found in the identity of the German-Jewish community in Montevideo.

Background:

In June 1961, the memories of thirteen-year-old Margot Pelzel had a cruel encounter with reality as she crossed the border into what she considered her city, Berlin. Margot Pelzel and her family had fled from the Nazis to Uruguay in 1937, and she had not come into direct contact with her home until she returned with her husband and three other couples in 1961, nearly twenty-five years after her forced departure. A letter she wrote to a fellow Berliner in Uruguay while on her trip traces her journey to displacement. For twenty-four years, Margot had lived in Uruguay, believing Berlin to be her home and thinking of herself as a cultured European. Her hopes for reconnecting with her roots and finding the familiarity she missed are clear throughout her writings in the group's travel journal. However, as Margot enters into Prenzlauerberg, Berlin,

her journal entries reflect the shock she feels while realizing that she no longer identifies with the Germans, and they no longer identify her as a German or even a European.

The displacement of German-Jews during the Holocaust was widespread. Between 1933 and 1941, 6,000 German-Jews fled to Uruguay (Facal, 10). Each family came from a different part of Germany and had a different story, however, they bonded to create a new culture that would unite them in new, strange lands. They created schools, lived in tight German-speaking communities, and surrounded themselves with Germany's "high culture." Some Germans-Jews, like Margot, believed that the new community in Montevideo was a "little Germany" that would allow them to keep their German-Jewish culture and values that they grew up with, and therefore, allow them to keep their identity.

Hogg and Abrams define identity as "people's concepts of who they are, of what sort of people they are, and how they relate to others" (Hogg and Abrams 1988, 2). James D. Fearon adds that the word identity has both a "social" and a "personal" sense: "it refers at the same time to social categories and to the source of an individual's self-respect or dignity" (Fearon, 2). He also assures that identity is socially constructed, which means "that social categories are socially constructed and something like peoples' sense of themselves as distinct individuals is socially constructed" (Fearon, 16). This idea emphasizes that the concept of who one is, what sort of person one is, and how one relates to others is shaped by events beyond one's control. This thesis identifies the events and driving forces that constructed the new social and personal identities of the German-Jews in Montevideo.

The idea that an identity would change after a forced departure from one's home country is not outlandish. However, after examining the letter written by Margot during her first trip back

to Germany in 1961, it is very clear that before facing their old homes, Margot and her friends did not feel that their identities, culture, or perspective had changed. The community still felt German and European, but at the same time, they felt like outsiders judging a foreign land which once had been their home.

Methodology

The thesis uses both primary and secondary sources in order to accurately depict the two societies. I use existing literature on the German-Jewish community of Prenzlauerberg in order to identify what defined its culture and how the residents achieved it, and I use primary sources to provide specific examples. A crucial primary source, a text written by Margot for the Prenzlauerberg Museum, describes the neighborhood and the community in the early 1930's. Additionally, I use letters, diaries, and stories, written by Margot and her family, to help identify the effects that the Nazis had on this culture and the people's identity. The letters reveal the views of some who remained in hiding after Margot left in 1937 and some who fled to different parts of the world. So as to capture an accurate portrayal of what life was like in Prenzlauerberg for German-Jewish families, the thesis combines the information from the primary and secondary sources.

In order to contrast the identity of German-Jews in Prenzlauerberg to that of the newly formed German-Jewish community in Montevideo, I use existing literature describing the micro community formed, the politics surrounding the new immigrants, and the culture developed there. The thesis also examine and analyze Margot's letters describing her new home and the family's

reactions to the new environment. Primary sources provide specific example to support or contrast the examples in existing literature.

The first analysis of the reconstruction of identities focuses on Margot Pelzel's family. The changes in her family serve as evidence and examples of what parts of their identities emigrants decided to leave behind, and what drove them to keep other parts of their identities. In order to further capture the changes in identities that occurred in Montevideo, I include an interview with Hanne Blitzer, a German-Jew living in Montevideo, who also grew up in the new German-Jewish community formed by the immigrants during the 1930s and 1940s. There were several different transformations that occurred in the identities of German-Jews once they reached Montevideo, two of which are exemplified by Margot Pelzel and Hanne Blitzer.

Hypothesis:

The German-Jews of Prenzlauerberg lived peacefully for years in an integrated community amongst non-Jews. However, as Margot points out in her narrations, the Nazi regime brought attention to their differences and isolated one group from the other. The German-Jewish community defined itself by means of Jewish tradition and German high culture. Music, theater, cinema, and literature were the guiding forces in every day life that united the community. The German-Jews in Prenzlauerberg possessed a cultured, integrated, German-Jewish identity that allowed them to live amongst a diverse population of Jews and Gentiles. As Silvia Facal Santiago points out, before the Nazis, many of the German-Jews were "three-day Jews" ("drei Tagen Jude") who were extremely assimilated and not very religious, only celebrating Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Hanukkah, and sometimes Christmas. (Facal, 25) The main focus of the society was on German high culture, not religious practices.

The Nazis forced the emigrating population to leave almost everything behind. The 6,000 German-Jews that settled in Uruguay took with them only their identities, their memories, and a few belongings. After they arrived in Montevideo, however, they unintentionally allowed their former identities to be taken away from them as well. A community that was once open to other ethnic groups allowed the persecution in its country of departure to turn it into an isolated and closed community in the country of arrival. Once in Montevideo, the community united in order to survive and maintain the religious culture and traditions that were still being threatened and questioned in their home country. The emphasis on religious practices created a new identity that would impede the immediate integration of the immigrants into the Uruguayan society. At the same time, German-Jews created centers of education and culture that focused on the German high culture that had previously molded them, and they unintentionally further isolated themselves from the rest of society. Although forced to relocate to a strange land, this change allowed them to feel like part of a community. Their identity, which once allowed them to assimilate into German society, became one of an elitist community. With time, however, as the German-Jewish community began to feel accepted and less threatened, they began to integrate in the Uruguayan society, but they did not attempt to assimilate. Some groups integrated earlier on, and others, like Margot, truly integrated only when making sure that their children and grandchildren were fully functional in the Uruguayan society. The first generation, however, established itself as a more religious and united group than they were in Germany (Facal, 26). In conclusion, the German-Jews ultimately changed from an assimilated community that had lost traditions in order to belong in Prenzlauerberg, to an integrated community that incorporated its religious practices and cultural background into the Uruguayan society. In this

thesis I prove that the need to survive, fear of persecution, and desire to belong were forces that made the changes in the identity of these German-Jews inevitable.

Bibliography

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