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The Theme of Lesbianism in  
Helga Königsdorf's post-*Wende* Novel  
*Gleich neben Afrika*

Diana Alberghini

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The first time that Helga Königsdorf broached the theme of homosexuality, even if only marginally, was in *Ungelegener Befund* (1989), an epistolary novel in which a homosexual scientist is assailed by the suspicion that his father, a well-respected doctor, might have been involved with the Nazi medical experiments on human beings.<sup>1</sup> Three years later, she tackled it again in *Gleich neben Afrika*, a novel which reflects the climate of openness brought about by the *Wende*. As the first fictional work Königsdorf wrote after 1989, it reveals the author's eagerness to exploit new themes and genres. Here Königsdorf combines the plot of a thriller with a realistic and at times ironical portrayal of life in the new *Bundesländer* after unification. She tells the story of a lesbian relationship and the identity crisis of a central character whose life resembles hers in many aspects: both had a half-Jewish father, a big farm house in the shape of a castle, and are from Thuringia, where both felt the need to take refuge after the collapse of the GDR in search of their identity; both were Party members and are writers.

In particular, Königsdorf's decision to introduce a lesbian love story emphasizes the post-*Wende* mood that characterizes the novel. The years following unification not only represented a time for reflection, but also a time in which alternatives to traditional models could be freely explored. In this novel, Königsdorf seems ready to take advantage of the new horizons now open to East German writers, who during the GDR era always had to work under strict censorship. The depiction of love between two women attests to Königsdorf's desire to experiment with subject matters that would have been problematic before 1989.

It has often been argued that the GDR, despite its claims to have created a socio-economic structure that allowed women to

achieve emancipation, remained profoundly patriarchal. This is partly demonstrated by the importance the state attached to the traditional family, as exemplified by *Paragraph I* of the constitution:

(1) Der sozialistische Staat schützt und fördert Ehe und Familie. Staat und Gesellschaft nehmen durch vielfältige Maßnahmen darauf Einfluß, daß die mit der Geburt, Erziehung und Betreuung der Familie verbundenen Leistungen anerkannt und gewürdigt werden. [...] (2) Die sozialistische Gesellschaft erwartet von allen Bürgern ein verantwortungsvolles Verhalten zur Ehe und Familie. (Herminghouse 283)<sup>2</sup>

This paragraph translated itself into several advantages for married couples who, for instance, had a better chance of being allocated a flat, especially if they were expecting a child, and could benefit from various family-friendly measures, including interest-free loans, child allowances, maternity benefits, paid parental leave, employment guarantees and institutional provisions for child care. The precarious economic situation due to the lack of human capital, which the GDR faced in the first years of its existence, explains why so much effort was put into encouraging reproduction.

It has also been observed that the support of family structures was the best way for the government to ensure it had control over the education of the new generation. The combination of viewing employment as the duty of every citizen of a socialist state while facilitating the establishment of families created an opportunity for the government to penetrate the daily life of its citizens. With the pretext of helping families in the care of their children, it could also take into its hands the ideological formation of the younger generation.

Apart from the family, often hailed as "the smallest cell of socialist society" (Kolinsky 261), no alternative forms of partnership were promoted or supported by the government, an attitude which created the impression that "heterosexuality [was] compulsory" in the GDR (Paul 227). As this was the social context of the GDR, it is not surprising that homosexuals saw themselves almost obliged to

conceal their sexuality in public. Even though homosexuality was decriminalized in 1968,<sup>3</sup> homosexuals remained virtually invisible and heavily discriminated against. The state saw them as a potential menace to the established order. To acknowledge their existence, for example by giving them permission to gather in public places such as bars, was considered a threat to the moral welfare of young people. The state made it clear that it was supportive only of those relationships that served "in erster Linie dem Ziel der Erhaltung der Gesellschaft (Erhaltung der Art)" (Paul 228).

Christoph Hein's *Von allem Anfang an* (1997) is an exemplary representation of the taboo character of homosexuality and the discrimination suffered by homosexuals. Hein tells of a young boy, Daniel, and his experience growing up in a small GDR town in the 1950s. Once Daniel's curiosity about homosexuality is aroused, he learns from a classmate that being *schwul* is equivalent to being "ein perverses Schwein, Tunte, Memme, Sau" (Hein 47-50). Even Daniel's father, the town's pastor, is unable to explain to him what homosexuality means and instead invites his son to show compassion towards homosexuals, since, in his view, they are affected by a "Geburtsfehler" (Hein 54). The taboo and the prejudices surrounding homosexuality are transmitted to the young protagonist who, even if he does not manage to find the meaning of homosexuality, has nevertheless been made aware that it is something negative and socially unacceptable.

As was often the case with controversial issues in the GDR, the only public forum in which homosexuality could be discussed was that offered by literature. However, despite the readiness of many GDR authors to analyze their system critically, they seldom challenged the fact that their society made heterosexuality compulsory. The case of lesbianism is only marginally discussed and mainly introduced as a means of challenging the institution of marriage. It is presented almost as a utopian alternative to the traditional family lifestyle, which was proving unsuccessful in the GDR. One could perhaps see the first references to lesbianism as a reaction to the fundamental social malaise afflicting East Germany, namely the breakdown of the majority of marriages.<sup>4</sup> Lesbianism appears therefore as one of the many possibilities beyond marriage and is considered alongside other alternative lifestyles, such as single

parenting.

Irmtraud Morgner deals with lesbianism in "Gute Botschaft der Valeska in 73 Strophen," which she wrote in response to the request of the American writer Edith Anderson, who intended to collect the best short stories composed by women writers on the subject of sex change. This story, which was not selected by Anderson, but integrated by Morgner into her novel *Leben und Abenteuer der Trobadora Beatriz* (1974), narrates the experience of Valeska who, after undergoing a sex transformation, develops a relationship based on support and solidarity with her friend Shenja. The relationship proves so strong that it even challenges Valeska's marriage. Despite the fact that the physical attraction between the two women is hinted at, they never engage in a sexual relationship because of the "Sittenstrenge, die [...] landsüblich war" (Morgner 432). Ultimately, the focus of the story remains on heterosexual relationships, in particular on the one between Valeska and her husband.

Allusions to lesbianism are also present in Christine Wolter's "Ich habe wieder geheiratet" (1976),<sup>5</sup> a short story which tells about the choice of two women to live together after the breakdown of their marriages. Wolter introduces their decision not as a rejection of heterosexuality, but rather as a way out of the role they were forced to adopt within their previous experience of traditional family life. Attention is drawn to their dissatisfying experiences as married women. The solidarity and the support which characterizes the relationship between the two central characters is contrasted with the recurring lack of understanding their husbands showed towards their needs. As they are both working mothers, they are able to create an atmosphere of harmony within their household, and to understand and help each other.

The courage to reject heterosexuality and declare oneself homosexual is a feature that is absent not only from GDR fictional literature, but from documentary literature as well. The experience of Barbara F., included in Maxie Wander's *Guten Morgen, du Schöne* (1977), a volume of interviews in which a wide range of women had the opportunity to speak freely about their lives, reflects the GDR cultural and ideological framework with regard to homosexuality (Wander 48-57). Barbara alludes to having had sexual experiences with a girlfriend; however, she quickly passes over this episode and

concentrates on talking about her relationships with men, as if in attempt to normalize her position. This example is important because it highlights the extent to which it was difficult for homosexuals in the GDR not only to live their sexuality with serenity, but above all to accept it as part of themselves.

The 1980s brought about a change in attitude towards homosexuals. Though they were not represented in the public debate by feminist and gay rights movements such as the ones in the West in the 1970s and 1980s, they nonetheless started becoming less invisible. For example, personal advertisements for same sex-partners started to be permitted and the Protestant Church began to open its doors to male homosexuals, who in turn found a meeting place there. Lesbians, however, remained largely isolated. The only sphere in which they were acknowledged was fictional literature, and even here, as the above-cited examples reveal, lesbianism was only hinted at and used strategically in the context of a deeper exploration of the male-female relationship.

Needless to say, lesbians, as well as other persecuted groups, benefited greatly from the openness brought about by the *Wende*. The debate on homosexuality finally became public, as shown by the various articles that were published on the theme, as well as by the emergence of journals aimed at a homosexual readership. Lesbians were no longer invisible. The desire to explore previously prohibited topics such as lesbianism was also reflected in the sphere of literature not only by Königsdorf in *Gleich neben Afrika*, but also by other authors such as Gabriele Kachold and Kerstin Gutsche.<sup>6</sup>

*Gleich neben Afrika* tells the story of an unnamed writer who is trying to re-define her own identity in the changed atmosphere of her country after the *Wende*. The question of identity in the post-*Wende* period is the main theme of the novel and is illustrated through the difficulties experienced by a first-person female protagonist, while the issue of lesbianism at first appears marginal. The main character's companion is Maria, a woman who seems very eager to exploit the new opportunities offered by the *Wende* – she would like to visit India, for example –, but who at the same time feels disoriented.

The novel focuses on the present situation of the two characters, while their past remains in the shadows. Before living together, both

had heterosexual relationships. It is not clear whether this is the first time that they are involved in a homosexual relationship, or how they decided to be together. After a first moment of hesitation stemming from the suspicious climate of the historical period in which they met the narrator relates simply that Maria returns to her flat with the intention of staying. In recounting this episode, she does not mention falling in love; it seems more likely that the two women begin their relationship because they find shelter in each other's company from the intimidating new world which suddenly confronted them. At the same time, their decision to remain together could be seen as a reflection of the mood of the *Wende*. The narrator confesses, for example, to being unable to imagine all the new possibilities and alternatives open to her, and perhaps the decision to begin a relationship with another woman is an attempt to explore new territory: "Was da aber noch war, lag so weit außerhalb meiner Denkmuster, daß ich damals nicht darauf gekommen wäre" (Königsdorf, *Afrika* 100).

*Gleich neben Afrika* offers an extensive focus on both of these figures whose personalities appear to fit in with the (im)balance of power and division of roles typical of traditional heterosexual relationships. Thus, the narrator seems to embody the masculine stereotype: she is the breadwinner, the one who is expected to work and bring the money home, and who can concentrate on her chosen career. She is also the more rational of the pair and has a more realistic idea of the world and how it works. Maria, on the contrary, is impulsive and capricious. She wants to go to India, but relies almost completely on the writer to earn the money which will pay for the journey. On one occasion, she tries to take the situation into her own hands: she asks her partner to lend her some money, which she invests in the purchase of a merry-go-around. It is clear that only a very naïve person would have embarked on such a project, which in the end reveals itself as a fraud. Maria also has no ambitions for herself, but is supportive of the ambitions of her partner, in whom she has great confidence. The lies the narrator constantly tells her when questioned about the progress of the novel she is trying to write further indicate the imbalance between these two characters. It seems that the writer does not want to show her weaknesses to her partner, and hides her difficulties to protect her and prevent her

from worrying:

Maria hatte von Freiheit geträumt. Und nun merkte sie plötzlich, daß es eine Freiheit war, die etwas kostete. Und daß sie den Preis nicht bezahlen konnte. Ich brachte es nicht über das Herz, der reitende Bote mit der schlechten Nachricht zu sein.  
(*Afrika* 32)

While in the story "Ich habe wieder geheiratet" the relationship between the two mothers works precisely because the two women are able to collaborate on equal footing in their partnership, here it seems that the two characters stay together because they counterbalance each other. The writer's ambition, independence and strength are counterbalanced by Maria's lack of ambition, dependence and helplessness. In this way, their relationship reflects the traditional division of roles within heterosexual partnerships, in which the man is the provider, has control over his life and the chance to fulfill himself directly, while the woman depends on this provider.

The reality of the GDR showed that when both partners are pursuing self-realization, their quest can lead to a conflict of interests between the two which, in most cases, is resolved through divorce. It is not by chance that most of the divorce proceedings in the GDR were started by women, who often felt they were hindered from pursuing their personal goals by the burden of having to combine career and family. This is also the reason why in the 1970s and 1980s many women writers, such as Christa Wolf,<sup>7</sup> searched for self-fulfillment through creative writing. Since Königsdorf bases the relationship between Maria and the writer on old stereotypes, she neither adds to the discourse on heterosexual relationships, nor does she offer any significant insights into the dynamics of homosexual partnerships.

One of the characteristics of the relationship between the writer and Maria is that their homosexuality is not presented as a radical choice fundamental to the identity and the personal development of the two characters. It seems essentially an experiment, especially since they do not live their homosexuality as a rejection of heterosexual

life, rather as a temporary alternative. The writer is even surprised to realize that she has not had any heterosexual relationships for a long time: "Mein Gott! Wie hatte ich es bloß so lange ohne Mann ausgehalten?" (*Afrika* 74). She tries to remedy this when during her visit to her hometown she meets a man – the "Brigadier" – and arranges to have dinner with him. The reason for deciding to get to know him more intimately is the tiredness she experiences in her role of the independent woman who has to provide for herself and her partner. After making the acquaintance of the "Brigadier," she starts dreaming of a little house where they could happily live together, and fabricates in her mind idyllic pictures in which she is in the kitchen cooking dumplings, while he is chopping wood in the courtyard. She realizes that the attraction she feels towards this man, whom she even defines as a "Märchenprinz" (*Afrika* 73), stems from the awareness that, if they were together, she could slip into a more passive role than the one she has in her relationship with Maria. While playing with the possibility of having a relationship with her "Märchenprinz," she even says, "Aber das Beste war der Gedanke, nie mehr schreiben zu müssen" (*Afrika* 74). By contrast, Maria does not experience the same desire to be able to rely on a man since she is already living a traditional passive role within her homosexual relationship.

Stereotypes are present not only in the personal traits and behavior of the two women. Even though their relationship is not the central theme of the novel, Königsdorf does not manage to avoid some of the clichés surrounding the idea of love between women. While the decision to avoid making lesbianism into an issue should have given her more freedom to portray lesbian relationships less stereotypically, clichés emerge especially in the description of the love scenes. Königsdorf tends to ignore the sexual drive of the physical relationship between two women and focuses on the tender as opposed to the erotic aspect of it: "Ich mußte sie die ganze Nacht streicheln. Die Liebe zwischen Frauen besteht im wesentlichen aus Zärtlichkeit und Eifersucht" (*Afrika* 20).

One of the devices employed by Königsdorf to avoid turning lesbianism into an issue is the matter-of-fact style with which she tells the story of the love between the writer and Maria. On the one hand, this has the effect of depoliticizing homosexuality by

presenting it simply as another of the many examples of human behavior. Königsdorf puts into practice her view of the new function of literature as formulated in *1989 oder Ein Moment Schönheit* after the disappearance of the GDR's state censorship which controlled the mass-media. In post-1989 society, Königsdorf realizes that it is time for literature to cast off the task of replacing journalism:

Mit ihrer Sensibilität [der Literatur] für Erscheinungen kann sie auf alle Probleme der Welt sehr schnell reagieren. Sie kann also vorpreschen und unbequem sein. Wird sie aber als Vorhut allein gelassen, wird ihr gar alles mögliche angetragen, was ihre Sache nicht ist, gerät sie leicht in zwielichtige Situationen. (Königsdorf, *Schönheit* 78-79)

On the other hand, Königsdorf's decision to treat homosexuality with neutrality, disregarding the fact that it still remains largely taboo, confers a utopian dimension on the novel. The ease with which these two women live out their relationship, added to the general acceptance of their choice by the people who know them, offers little in the way of realism and can therefore be described as utopian. This is especially true if one considers the religious and provincial backwater in Thuringia where the writer spends some time in hopes of being able to redefine her identity and find inspiration for her new book. Here, no reactions of disapproval or even of surprise at her relationship with Maria are reported in the novel.

Though Königsdorf's decision to deal with the theme of lesbianism without regard to its political implications is certainly one of the strengths of *Gleich neben Afrika*, it is also a factor which undermines the sense of coherence of the novel as a whole. The main theme of the novel is the writer's identity crisis which leads her to analyze both her past, reaching as far back as to consider the impact of Fascism on her family, and her present, trying to come to terms with the political earthquake which has just shaken the foundations of her life. However, in this profound re-assessment of herself, she omits the consideration of her sexuality. Even if her relationship with Maria might be simply an experiment, it could be argued that to engage in a homosexual relationship, especially

for somebody with a heterosexual background, represents a radical change of perspective. Despite the writer's confusion, which causes her to swing between her desire to be with Maria and to be with a man, her sexual choice does not appear among the elements that determine her identity crisis.

This lack of coherence assumes a further dimension in the light of the crisis suffered by the writer, as this also involves her political choices. Her journey back to Thuringia offers her the opportunity to re-examine her earlier political education as well as her reasons for adopting the socialist ideal. It seems surprising that she never sees her choice as contradicting the beliefs of the Party of which she was a member. Given the SED's strong rejection of any sexual orientation other than heterosexuality, she never asks herself, for example, how her life would have been had she entered a homosexual relationship during the GDR years. For this reason, her homosexual and political identities appear to be completely separate. On the one hand, the protagonist is portrayed as having the necessary experimental energy to embark on a lesbian relationship. On the other hand, in the re-examination of her political identity, she comes across as a conformist whose decision to embrace the socialist ideals was the outcome of the education she received. The process in which she learns to have an independent mind and be her own person is not described in the novel, thus creating a split between her identity as a Party member before 1989 and a lesbian after the *Wende*.

As a result of the contradictory nature of these identities, the main character's homosexual identity comes across as feeble and distant from reality, and does not seem to fit with her lifestyle and her way of thinking. It appears almost as if Königsdorf had decided to place her protagonist in a homosexual relationship at the very last minute. Consequently, she is a very deep and at the same time shallow and superficial character, depending on whether the focus is on her political or homosexual identity. Because of the extremes contained within the same fictional figure, the protagonist loses her moral strength and credibility.

Another aspect of *Gleich neben Afrika* shows that the credibility of the main character's homosexual identity is fragile: the utopian dimension of the novel created by the naturalness with which the relationship between the writer and Maria is accepted. Though

the depoliticization of homosexuality is one of the strengths of this work, and it should not be forgotten that the work is semi-autobiographical. Subsequently, it seems very important that the protagonist remains credible, especially since this is a work in which Königsdorf herself is trying to understand, through her fictional figure, why the GDR collapsed. The introduction of homosexuality as a utopian dimension to the novel confuses these issues and weakens the authentic sense of the crisis lived by many people in the post-*Wende* period, which is so well re-created elsewhere in the pages of this novel. In the end, the reader has the impression that Königsdorf herself is the narrator whenever the focus is on life after the *Wende* or on the political analysis of change, while she reverts to being a purely fictional character when the novel assumes the tones of a thriller or focuses on the homosexual love story.

Finally, *Gleich neben Afrika* allows some consideration of the relationship between Königsdorf as a committed writer, a term she has often used to describe herself, and her decision to present a highly controversial topic such as homosexuality in a matter-of-fact way. As she has often stressed the role of intellectuals as promoters of a critical culture, and the fact that she disregards the taboo nature of homosexuality raises the question about the most effective way to fight a taboo in a work of fiction. Instead of underlining the discriminatory attitude shown towards homosexual relationships, and transforming her characters into potential victims of the social order, she lets them live their love like any other. In this context, Königsdorf's approach to the task of acting as an advocate of critical culture is very original. Rather than losing herself in lengthy discussion of lesbianism, she sets an example of tolerance and open-mindedness for her readers to emulate. Georgina Paul has welcomed *Gleich neben Afrika* as a work marking progress towards overcoming what she defines as the inarticulacy of lesbian literature, that is the difficulty to find the appropriate language to deal with this topic, precisely because of Königsdorf's decision not to turn lesbianism into a (political) issue (Paul 226-237).

When compared to the GDR works in which attempts were made to deal with lesbianism, *Gleich neben Afrika* can without doubt be considered as innovative and progressive, chiefly for the way in which Königsdorf takes a matter-of-fact approach to the love

relationship between the two women. Nonetheless, as a consequence of the lack of coherence in the portrayal of the protagonist, who, in a time of profound self-questioning, analyzes all the elements of her identity apart from her homosexuality, Königsdorf's approach to the theme of lesbianism can appear lightweight. From this perspective, her decision to place a homosexual love story in the background of a book which focuses on coming to terms with the *Wende* arouses the suspicion that the author is just as concerned as her protagonist about the difficulty of finding a publisher in the aftermath of unification:

Ich hatte sämtliche Zeitungen, von der Prawda bis zur Frankfurter Allgemeinen, mit Artikeln beglückt. Jetzt druckte mich nicht einmal mehr das Neue Deutschland, weil die Leser meine Artikel satt hatten. Aber auch weil die Redakteure Angst hatten, sich mit mir in die Nesseln zu setzen. (*Afrika* 15-16)

Ultimately, this concern might be the reason why Königsdorf decides to include in her novel an element such as lesbianism which, by inspiring curiosity and distracting attention from the political discussion, could help to make her work more marketable. This suspicion is furthermore increased by the fact that in 1990 she resigned from her job at the *Akademie der Wissenschaften* to become a freelance writer, and therefore was entering a period of great financial uncertainty.

The fact that Königsdorf makes her protagonist confess that she is at a loss regarding the subject matter for her novel intensifies our suspicion. The protagonist of *Gleich neben Afrika* would like to write about life: "Der Roman, um den es mir eigentlich ging, war das Leben. Aber das behielt ich sorgsam für mich" (*Afrika* 13). However, she is aware that the readership is tired of being pushed into self-questioning and does not want to hear any more about identity crises: "Aber nicht einmal die Sintflut interessierte noch irgend jemanden. Die Leute hatten andere Sorgen" (*Afrika* 16). From Maria comes the advice that people would like to read "etwas Schönes. Ein bißchen Liebe. Oder so" (*Afrika* 96). As the main character's

life resembles Königsdorf's, the parallel between fictional and real writer is constantly evident, thus leading us to think that perhaps the introduction of the love story is nothing more than a device to mask the predominant theme of the novel and make it more acceptable and enjoyable. If this is the case, it would emphasize the creative crisis which Königsdorf was undergoing in the early 1990s, but it would also underline her lightweight treatment of a still little discussed topic such as lesbianism.

*University of Bath*

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the theme of homosexuality in *Ungelegener Befund*, see Haines. She attempts a Freudian reading of the novel based on the supposition that Dieter Jhanz suffers from an Oedipal crisis. She also discusses how homosexuality was viewed in the GDR.

<sup>2</sup> Extracted from the *Family Code* of 1965.

<sup>3</sup> With the deletion of § 174 of the *Strafgesetzbuch* (StGB). At the same time, § 151 was introduced which made homosexual relations, including lesbian relations, between persons over 18 with persons under 18 years of age a punishable offence.

<sup>4</sup> In 1987, 40% of East German marriages ended up in divorce, one of the highest divorce rates in the world. More than half broke down within three years. See Kolinsky 261.

<sup>5</sup> This story is part of the collection by Wolter *Wie ich meine Unschuld verlor*, 26-35. It is also discussed by Paul 231.

<sup>6</sup> In late 1989, Gabriele Kachold published a volume of prose/poetry, *Zügel los*. In 1991, following the example of Maxie Wander, Kerstin Gutsche compiled a collection of interviews with lesbians, *Ich ahnungsloser Engel: Lesbenprotokolle*.

<sup>7</sup> Wolf concludes *Kassandra* with the image of a utopian community, the "Ida-Berg Gemeinschaft," in which women and a few men live peacefully, without hierarchy and private property, far from the violence of patriarchal society represented by Troy and its war.

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Beyond Collective Memory?  
The Reestablishment of Jewish Life  
in Post-Holocaust Germany

Nadine Blumer

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To what extent is collective memory used as a lens through which people define their present-day reality? To what extent does communal remembrance implicate a manifestation of ideology? How do these questions specifically relate to practices of remembering and memorialization for German-Jews and non-Jewish Germans currently living in Germany? When dealing with memory as a collective enterprise, the objectivity of historical fact becomes subject to the political interests of competing groups. It is as well the variety of memories within Jewish communities that deflect off one another to create the present landscape of Jewish life in Germany. It is all of these memories, working alongside and against each other that reveal the production of memory practices.

#### A new Jewish Berlin?

In the summer of 2001, I spent six weeks in Berlin where I became familiar with the Jewish community and its members, and explored the many Holocaust-related memorial sites and museums that dot the city. When I first arrived, my intentions were to interview as many German-Jews as possible. The term German-Jew, however, has become rather ambiguous and is no longer open to straightforward definition. The destruction of Jewish life in Europe as it was known before the Second World War produced that effect. Today there are many different kinds of Jews living in Germany and no one is a German-Jew in the prewar sense of the word. There are of course those Jews born in Germany or those of German descent, but for the most part, even these individuals, their parents, or grandparents experienced the chasm imposed upon German-Judaism by the