

# *An Interrupted Past*

GERMAN-SPEAKING REFUGEE HISTORIANS IN  
THE UNITED STATES AFTER 1933

*Edited by*

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# *Introduction*

JAMES J. SHEEHAN

In the opening pages of his memoirs, Felix Gilbert describes his return to Berlin in the autumn of 1945. Wearing an American army uniform and on orders from the Office of Strategic Services, Gilbert took time out from his official duties to look for the apartment in which he had spent much of his youth. Although he could discover no more than a few colored cobblestones amid the ruins, these were enough to bring back powerful memories of his childhood. In Gilbert's delicate vignette we can find many of the themes that will recur throughout this book: exile and return, America and Europe, loss and recovery. Gilbert calls his memoirs *A European Past*, a title that calls attention both to the forty years the book describes and to the new epoch in his life that began in 1945.

Since the beginnings of our culture, poets have sung about the exile's experience of loss and the struggle to return. Dante, who knew the pains of exile firsthand, wrote of the "salt taste of another man's bread, the steep climb of another man's stairs." But while exile has always represented a special kind of loss, in the twentieth century its consequences have often been particularly serious. Because we live in a world where people's legal identity and status are defined and protected by their states, to be an exile is to suffer the terrible vulnerabilities of statelessness. Exiles now lose not only their homeland and livelihood; they also forfeit their most elementary rights as human beings. Never before has the bread of others been more bitter to the taste.

The exiles with whom this book is concerned were part of that massive flood of nazism's victims whose tragic fate has left a lasting scar on twentieth-century consciousness. In many important ways, the experiences of the refugee historians were like those of millions of others who fled social, economic, and political persecution by the Nazis. All of these refugees had to face the terrible fact that the

country to which they felt deep and enduring ties was no longer theirs. All of them had to reach the painful decision to leave a familiar world for the uncertain possibilities of a new life. Since we know the fate of those who stayed, it may be too easy to underestimate how difficult it was for many to leave – and not only for the men with which this book is largely concerned but also for their wives and children, who often had to bear more than their share of the exile's anguish and anxiety.

Among refugee scholars and intellectuals, historians had some special problems. Since many of them were at the beginning of their careers, they often lacked the reputations and contacts that would have given them ready access to an international community of scholars. On a purely practical level, the historians' sources, unlike the scientists' equipment, are rarely portable or replaceable. But deeper than these tangible losses were the bonds of language, culture, and tradition that linked historians to their nation. In this regard at least, a conservative like Hans Rothfels was no different from a left liberal like Hans Rosenberg: For both men, Germany remained the political center, the main subject of their research, the primary object of their loyalty or lament.

Considering the obstacles they faced, most of the people whose lives are described in this book did remarkably well. They and their families learned a new language, mastered the complex rules of a new society, made their way in a profession quite different from the one in which they had been trained. But even those whose passage into a new career was relatively easy had to overcome formidable barriers. Almost no one retained the same rank and status that he had left. And there is no way of assessing those private costs and psychic burdens that inevitably attend exile. About such things most of the essays in this book are necessarily silent.

The essays testify, however, to the variety of experience among the refugees. A few well-established scholars, such as Hans Rothfels, found good positions rather quickly. After some initial uncertainty, Hajo Holborn, who had the advantage of ties to the Carnegie Foundation, was hired by Yale, where he spent his long and successful career. Hans Rosenberg had to make do with a few short-term positions before going to Brooklyn College and, late in his career, an endowed chair at Berkeley. Many other refugees worked in smaller schools, where they carried heavy teaching obligations and had few opportunities for research. And of course those who suffered most

from emigration do not appear in this book: Unable to find an academic job, they simply drop from our view.

That so many refugees did find academic jobs and thus could continue their scholarly work was in part due to a widespread willingness to help, among international organizations, informal networks of scholars, and various colleges and universities. American readers of this book will be grateful to those who came to the refugees' aid in their time of need. But we should be careful not to read this story as simply the triumph of American goodwill over Nazi tyranny. In some ways, the American historical profession that the refugees joined was not so dramatically different from the German profession that they had been forced to leave. Xenophobia, social snobbery, and anti-Semitism were by no means rare among American historians. That these prejudices significantly declined in the late 1930s and 1940s is, at least in part, due to the cosmopolitan influence of the refugee historians and their colleagues in other disciplines. In this, and in many other ways, the émigrés more than repaid whatever debts they may have acquired.